

Cross-cultural Adaptation of Chinese Expatriates in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Despite the many similarities in Hofstede's cultural dimensions between China and Indonesia, the cultural adaptation of Chinese Expatriates working in Indonesia needs to be investigated. This study takes a comprehensive, mixed-method approach to understand the issue. The first quantitative phase was conducted by distributing the Expatriate Adjustment Scale to 57 Chinese Expatriates working in manufacturing, communication, and technology companies in Indonesia. The findings from this phase indicated significant barriers in language and local friendships, which were further explored in a qualitative phase using phenomenological semi-structured interviews with seven Chinese expatriates. The results highlighted that language, particularly the influence of Chinese dialects on communication in English and Bahasa Indonesia, and difficulties in forming local friendships, are the main obstacles to successful cultural adjustment. These barriers have practical implications for job performance and satisfaction, providing valuable insights for multinational companies to enhance cross-cultural training and support mechanisms for expatriates in Indonesia.

Keywords: Chinese expatriates, cross-culture, diversity, expatriate adaptation, Indonesia, mixed-methods

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INTRODUCTION

The current phenomenon revealed that businesses are increasingly adopting a multinational approach to stay competitive, leveraging opportunities in other countries for customers and labour (Coyle & Nguyen, 2022). Multinational companies (MNCs)

are setting up subsidiaries worldwide to establish a global presence, leading to more employees being assigned abroad (Plourde et al., 2014). Globalisation has increased long-term international assignments, where expatriates, typically domestic nationals, temporarily work in another country for their parent company (Varma et al., 2023).

Studies on expatriates often assess their success through measures like adjustment (Sokro et al., 2021), job performance (Bader et al., 2021), organisational commitment (Zhang et al., 2022), and withdrawal cognitions (Pinto et al., 2017). The most common criteria for expatriate success include cross-cultural adjustment, task completion, and performance, with cross-cultural adjustment being the most extensively studied (Chenyang, 2022). It is crucial to understand that difficulties adapting to new environments can lead to failed assignments, making it imperative to delve deeper into the factors influencing expatriate success.

Previous research has extensively studied the factors that influence the adjustment and outcomes of expatriate assignments, such as the meta-analysis by Hechanova et al. (2003). According to earlier studies, the forerunners of cross-cultural adjustment can be categorised into three levels: personal, organisational, and social (Bhatti et al., 2013). Personal-level variables include individual characteristics of the expatriate, such as self-efficacy (Chang et al., 2023), language proficiency (Peltokorpi et al., 2021), and experience living and working abroad (Bhatti et al., 2013).

Organisational-level factors include organisational characteristics and HR practices, such as perceived organisational support and social support (Arokiasamy, 2021; Karunarathne, 2022). Finally, social or environmental-level factors encompass the broader social and organisational context of expatriate adjustment and work performance, such as social similarity (Fan & Harzing, 2021) and family and social support (Dang et al., 2022).

Despite previous efforts to identify factors related to expatriates' adjustment success, several gaps can be identified from the existing literature. First, although prior studies on expatriate adaptation have utilised quantitative and qualitative methods, the measurement instruments still predominantly rely on the traditional scale introduced by Black et al. (1991). This scale, although pioneering, has come under scrutiny in recent years (e.g., Kubovcikova, 2016). There is an urgent need to apply a more recently developed scale since adjustment is believed to be an ongoing process rather than a static state (Maertz et al., 2016). This study utilises the Expatriate Adjustment Scale (Hippler et al., 2014), which incorporates the person-environment fit theory, argued to be vital in understanding the expatriates' experience, and is combined with qualitative interviews to explore these experiences further. More research in this area is pressing, and this study aims to contribute to filling this gap.

Second, most studies on expatriate adjustment have focused on Western and developed Asian countries (Selmer et al., 2007).

Recent meta-analytic evidence confirms that the majority of empirical samples continue to originate from Western expatriates and developed Asian host contexts such as China, Singapore and Japan (Han, 2022). Such a pattern highlights the need for more research in under-represented regions like Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia. Expanding research to these areas would provide a more comprehensive understanding of expatriate experiences globally and explore success factors in diverse cultural contexts (Abdul Malek et al., 2015). This study aims to enhance the understanding of Chinese expatriates in Indonesia, a country with significant cultural diversity, low labour costs, and abundant natural resources, making it an attractive investment destination for Southeast Asian investors, including large Chinese multinational corporations (Zhou, 2024). Despite Indonesia's status as a favoured investment locale, research on Chinese expatriates there is limited, with only one prior study (Yan, 2021). This research could significantly impact the understanding of expatriate experiences in diverse cultural contexts and fill a crucial gap in the literature.

The cultural differences between Indonesia and China challenge Chinese expatriates to integrate and become part of the local community (Briscoe, 2015). It is crucial to consider these differences when selecting Chinese expatriates for international assignments in Indonesia. One critical factor to consider during the selection process is the employees' social intelligence level (Ascalon et al., 2008).

Social intelligence refers to an individual's ability to adapt to new social settings and operate effectively in culturally diverse situations. Therefore, selecting Chinese employees should prioritise their social intelligence to reduce inadaptability and increase their adjustment and work performance (Chew et al., 2021).

This study aims to assist Chinese multinational corporations (MNCs) in selecting suitable expatriates and providing them with the necessary support to enhance their well-being, work performance, and family integration during international assignments in Indonesia. The study will investigate how these elements impact Chinese expatriates' adjustment and work performance by exploring the influence of individual, organisational, and environmental factors. Additionally, the study will examine the role of cross-cultural adjustment and its relationship to these factors using a mixed-methodology approach. The findings will offer valuable insights for Chinese MNCs in developing effective strategies to support their expatriates' successful integration and performance in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The ability of expatriates to successfully perform their duties during international assignments is crucial for multinational organisations to gain a competitive edge and succeed (Selmer et al., 2007). Unfortunately, most expatriates face severe challenges during their global assignments due to difficulties adapting and performing well in a foreign environment (Smith, 2019).

This discrepancy indicates that the current approach for understanding expatriate adjustment success may not be adequately tailored to address specific cultural nuances. Therefore, it is essential to study the impact of Chinese expatriates' adjustments on their performance and to identify the factors that influence their cross-cultural adjustments.

The challenges of cultural adjustment could be explained from several theoretical lenses. From the cultural lens, Den Hartog et al. (1999) described the non-universal attributes of the characteristics of effective leadership styles worldwide, where the cultural background will strongly affect the perceiver's interpretation of the social environment. Thus, knowledge about culture and its influences can be helpful for executives operating in multicultural business environments (Javidan et al., 2006). This argument was developed into Implicit Leadership Theory (House et al., 2004, p.16), stating that "individuals have implicit beliefs, convictions, and assumptions concerning attributes and behaviours that distinguish leaders from followers, effective leaders from ineffective leaders, and moral leaders from evil leaders." Implicit leadership serves as a standard idea about the traits and behaviours of leaders in general, consisting of individual perceptions of organisational variables. People from different cultural backgrounds have varying criteria for an ideal leader, primarily influenced by their culture of origin. Consequently, an expatriate may face significant adjustment challenges due to differing implicit beliefs—both their own

and others'—about appropriate behaviour in their home country compared to their host country.

From the expatriate study literature, the differing implicit beliefs could be best explained using Theories of Fit (Chatman, 1989; Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Holland, 1997; Schneider, 1987), specifically person-environment fit (P-E fit). The ability of expatriates to function in their work and social lives, as well as their physical health and satisfaction in life, reflects a harmonious P-E fit (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The relocation process in international assignments disrupts the existing P-E fit, making expatriates readjust and find a fit in the new environment. Unfortunately, the previous instrument, primarily used in cross-cultural adaptation, introduced by Black et al. (1991), does not consider the P-E fit aspect. The P-E fit was later introduced when Hippler et al. (2014) introduced the Expatriate Adjustment Scale utilised in the present study.

Toh and DeNisi (2005) highlight some important considerations regarding the fit between expatriates and their environment. They emphasised the importance of gaining acceptance from local staff. As part of their job, expatriates share new management styles, technologies, and knowledge with the local staff. However, the local staff will only adopt these new practices if they see that it leads to better results in their work. If expatriates are not accepted by their local colleagues, they are less likely to perform well or feel satisfied with their work relationships (Toh & DeNisi, 2005).

Furthermore, if expatriates lack local knowledge and support from local staff managers or fail to become part of the social network, they risk losing credibility and acceptance (Toh & DeNisi, 2005). From a cultural perspective, Indonesia is a highly collectivist society (Hofstede et al., 2010a), meaning Indonesians prioritise their group over others. Despite being in the same Asian region, China and Indonesia may have different beliefs, religions, tribes, attitudes, and values, not to mention the fact that Indonesia is the largest Muslim nation in the world. At the same time, China is the most prominent Communist nation, which makes it difficult for Chinese expatriates to integrate and become part of the local community (Kwartanada, 2020). For Chinese expatriates to incorporate into the local community, they must know and understand Indonesian culture to adapt effectively.

Based on these facts, it is essential to consider these differences when selecting Chinese expatriates for global assignments in Indonesia. During the selection stage of Chinese expatriates, the focus should be on the level of their social skills. Social skills refer to a person's ability to adapt successfully to new and diverse social settings and operate efficiently and effectively in situations characterised by cultural diversity (Wang et al., 2017). When selecting Chinese employees for global assignments, their social skills should be emphasised to reduce inadaptability and increase their adjustment and work performance.

The next challenge related to expatriate adaptation is the language issue between home and host countries. Nowadays, many expats are expected to be proficient in English in the global economy (Huff, 2013; Li et al., 2020), but this is not always the case in the host country. Like the results of the Noman et al. (2020) study in Pakistan, Chinese MNCs with subsidiaries in Indonesia may face language barriers when communicating with Indonesians due to a lack of proficiency in the Indonesian language. Therefore, Chinese expats' proficiency in the Indonesian language should also be considered by MNCs, in addition to their proficiency in English.

The role of expatriate companions is crucial for the expatriate and the success of international assignments. In general, companions are more involved in the local environment daily to ensure their families can continue their normal activities (Abdul Malek et al., 2015). However, Chinese companions in Indonesia may face challenges in their daily lives, such as unorganised facilities, difficulties with the local language and culture, and a lack of social support. These challenges can negatively affect the adjustment of the expatriate and can also lead to the spillover of stress from the companion to the expatriate. Therefore, the adjustment of the companion can significantly impact the adjustment of the expatriate (Andreason, 2008).

METHODS

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach based on Creswell's (2021) methodology.

Initially, a quantitative study is conducted, and its results are explored more deeply through a qualitative phase. This design is common in fields with a strong quantitative focus, starting with quantitative research and then delving deeper through interviews with purposively selected participants. Although effective, this approach may pose challenges in determining appropriate sample sizes for each phase. The researcher collects quantitative data and uses qualitative methods to explore and interpret the results in greater detail (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

In the quantitative phase, an online survey was conducted with 57 Chinese expatriates working in Chinese multinational companies (MNCs) in Indonesia's Telecommunication and Technology sectors. They were selected based on specific inclusion criteria to ensure that only eligible expatriates were involved. The inclusion criteria were: (1) Chinese nationals currently on full-time work assignments in Indonesia, (2) having at least worked for 6 months in Indonesia to ensure cultural adaptation experience, and (3) capable of understanding English to complete the questionnaire. Access to Chinese expatriates in Indonesia was challenging due to their limited social interactions and preference for engaging with others from the same linguistic group or region. Cultural and linguistic differences between Chinese expatriates and Chinese Indonesians further complicated access. To overcome these challenges, the study employed network sampling to reach this "hidden" population (Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017).

One researcher with experience in Chinese-owned companies in Indonesia leveraged her network to facilitate data collection.

The quantitative data collection starts by identifying a small number of initial participants – the “seeds” – 12 individuals, so they could recruit others who matched the criteria. All the “seeds” were the network of one of the researchers during her working period in a Chinese MNC in Jakarta. Communication with the “seeds” was conducted via WeChat, a popular social media platform for Chinese nationals worldwide. In total, 57 responses were obtained during the data collection period from March to June 2022 through an online survey. Sample size of approximately 50 participants is adequate for detecting medium effect sizes in behavioural research. The final sample of 57, therefore, meets this recommended threshold, particularly given that the quantitative phase of this study relied on descriptive rather than inferential analysis. Initially, respondents were obliged to fill in and give responses to all questions, including the demographic information, but this made the response very low since only 18 responses, including responses from the seeds, were collected by mid-April. Some potential samples explained to the seeds that they lost interest in completing the questionnaire due to its length, which consisted of 35 items of the Expatriate Adjustment Scale / EAS (Hippler et al., 2014), and two questions for the willingness of the respondents to participate in the qualitative interview, in which they should copy the consent statement and leave their

contact number. Furthermore, there was a concern about disclosing their identity even though the cover letter already explained that data collection is for research only and no information will be published in the research publication. Based on the condition, the researchers concluded that the items for the EAS instrument should be reduced to attract potential samples, and demographic information related to the samples was deleted to ensure complete anonymity.

The original Expatriate Adjustment Scale (EAS) consists of 35 items across ten dimensions, and previous validations have shown acceptable to high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.74 to 0.89 (Hippler et al., 2014), meeting the commonly accepted reliability benchmark of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ (Nunnally, 1978). Given the challenges in accessing Chinese expatriates in Indonesia and the concern about questionnaire length, only the items most relevant to the Indonesian context were retained. Hippler et al. (2014) also note that using the full content domain is not always practical in applied field settings. Therefore, a shortened version of the EAS was used to preserve conceptual coverage of key adjustment domains while reducing respondent burden and improving completion rates. This adaptation is consistent with practices in earlier cross-cultural adjustment studies (e.g., Hippler, 2009; Shaffer et al., 1999). This decision aligns with the principle of mixed-method design, where the "pragmatism" principle in mixed methods is the main aim of the

present study to understand how and what factors contribute to Chinese expatriates' adaptation to the culture of Indonesia. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) stated that pragmatic research is primarily concerned with generating practical and actionable knowledge, allowing more flexibility to adapt the research design according to the aim of the study. The retained items from the EAS are presented in Table 1 with slight modifications to reflect participants' perceptions of their current life in Indonesia. Examples of the modified questions are "I rate my family cohesion as satisfactory during my stay in Indonesia," "Indonesian workers working in my company have good attitudes," and "I have opportunities to practice my hobby while working in Indonesia."

Since English is not the first language for Chinese expatriates working in Indonesia, there is a need to ensure that the respondents understand the modified instrument well. The final version of the instrument was checked by international students from non-English speaking countries currently enrolled at Universitas Diponegoro to follow the back translation process suggested by Brislin (1970) and Behr (2017). The researchers work at Universitas Diponegoro, and access to international students was easy, although participation in the back-translation process was voluntary. The process involved seven international master students from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, China, and Timor Leste to check whether they understood the meaning of each item and the instructions

given in the questionnaire. They were selected since they originated from non-English-speaking countries. Yet, they could demonstrate their English proficiency by being accepted as international students with English as the language of instruction. No revision was made since all students clearly understood the items. Lastly, it was decided that some statements in the questionnaires were reversed. There has been controversy regarding whether to include a reverse item or not in the research instrument (Vigil-Colet et al., 2020); nevertheless, based on the pragmatism paradigm, this study decided to utilise such a technique since it could enhance the accuracy of response since the respondents need to pay closer attention and to reduce the probability of careless answering (Józsa & Morgan, 2017; Weijters et al., 2013).

For the instruction filling the questionnaire, participants were asked to rate their experiences of living, working, and interacting in a culture different from their own on a 0-100 scale. The questions in the instrument cover three areas that are critical to the adjustment process: (a) general adjustment, (b) work adjustment, and (c) interaction with host nationals, as suggested by researchers on expatriate studies (Peltokorpi & Froese 2014).

After obtaining quantitative results from the questionnaire, the study proceeded to qualitative interviews with questions developed from the same instrument. The qualitative research involved case studies and interviews with seven millennial Chinese expatriates aged between 25-40 years old. According to phenomenological

research guidelines, in-depth exploration of lived experiences typically involves a small number of participants, with 3-10 individuals recommended (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This range is also consistent with evidence that data saturation in homogeneous groups often emerges within the first six interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Most of them were Chinese expatriates with experience living, studying, and working in Indonesia for a few years and represented various job roles to capture diverse perspectives on adaptation. Most had previously completed the quantitative questionnaire. Invitations to participate in the study's second phase were distributed via the "seeds." The final participants for the qualitative phase mainly consisted of the "seeds" since by October 2022, only two participants outside the "seeds" were willing to participate in the interview. Despite the condition, the sample size for the qualitative phase was considered sufficient, and the fact that most of the interviewees were part of the "seeds" brings advantages since gaining trust and building rapport were much more accessible. Trust and rapport are essential in qualitative interviews since the interviewee is more likely to cooperate and be willing to provide accurate, comprehensive details and information (Abbe & Brandon, 2013).

The interviews were phenomenological by nature since they asked participants to recall their experience upon hearing about their assignment to Indonesia, their first few days in the country, things that surprised them about the way things worked, their experiences of culture shock, their relationships with co-workers, the barriers to

working in Indonesian culture, and how they utilised their previous skills while working in Indonesia. Referring to van Manen (1990), phenomenology involves deeply exploring how people perceive and make sense of their everyday experiences—valuing individuals' lived experiences. Interviews for all the participants were completed by December 2022 since they needed to be conducted at the convenience of both the participants and the interviewers. The interview questions are presented in Table 3.

Following data collection, this study adhered to the data analysis guidelines by Miles et al. (2019). The themes and subthemes were developed through an inductive thematic analysis following the same framework. Although the interview questions were informed by the Expatriate Adjustment Scale, the analysis was not tied rigidly to the scale's categories. Instead, the patterns that appeared in the interviews were interpreted using the person-environment (P-E) fit theory and the cross-cultural adaptation framework, which help explain how expatriates understand and respond to different cultural and organisational demands. Through this theoretical lens, the emerging themes represent various forms of person-environment interaction, with Workplace Dynamics and Hierarchies capturing how expatriates negotiate expectations and social structures in their work environment.

The data analysis followed three concurrent activities: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification (Miles et al., 2019). Data reduction simplifies, focuses, and transforms

raw data from field notes, guided by the researcher's conceptual framework and research objectives. The study then presented the Expatriate Adjustment Scale (EAS) results alongside qualitative findings from seven participants. Triangulation was achieved through mixed-method protocols and investigator triangulation (Denzin, 2009), where each researcher independently analysed interview transcripts and emerging themes. Additionally, member checking was conducted by presenting the final draft of findings to interviewees for verification, ensuring the accuracy of their stories and interpretations. This process validated the conclusions, preventing them from being solely determined during data collection (Miles et al., 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative study sampled 57 Chinese expatriates working in various organisations in Indonesia, including 13 males and 44 females. Only 16% (9 participants) brought their spouse to Indonesia, while the rest are single. The sample was drawn from 12 manufacturing, telecommunication, and technology organisations. Most participants have worked in Indonesia for less than four years, with around 20% (11 participants) having worked for more than five years. A significant challenge in collecting responses was establishing trust that the data would be used solely for research purposes, despite a formal statement in the cover letter from the Head of the Education institution where the researchers work. The quantitative data results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Average scores of each of the dimensions of the scale

Dimension (indicators)	Average Score (n=57)
Work Environment	
Indonesian workers working in my company have good attitudes	83.51
My Indonesian co-workers are reliable	79.14
I have issues with the way my Indonesian co-workers discuss work-related matters (R)	80.88
Language	
I have no problem in understanding the language used in my work environment	69.82
It is hard for me to communicate with my Indonesian co-workers in a non-work environment (R)	74.82
I could understand the written Indonesian language	72.89
I could express myself in the written Indonesian language	70.96
Job Characteristics	
I have freedom in decision-making at work	82.37
I have a professional responsibility at work	80.98
I have autonomy in organising and structuring my tasks at work	81.32
Leisure Time	
I could play sports I enjoy	80.88
I am satisfied with the way I spend my leisure time	83.68
I have opportunities to practice my hobby while working in Indonesia	76.40
Urbanity	
I could tolerate the street traffic in Indonesia	70.61
My local environment is beautiful	84.04
Indonesians are very punctual	72.72
Work-life Balance	
I could balance my professional life with my home life	81.40
My working hours allow me to maintain a work-life balance	82.28
Living Quarters	
I am satisfied with the size of my house or apartment	82.63
I am satisfied with the accommodation that I have here in Indonesia	82.02
Family Life	
I rate my family cohesion as satisfactory during my stay in Indonesia	85.00
I have a harmonious relationship with my spouse or partner during my stay in Indonesia	84.74
Local Friendships	
I have good number of friends from Indonesia	68.95
My friendship quality with my Indonesian friends is satisfactory	71.23
Contact to Those Left Behind	
I maintain frequent contact with my friends back in China	81.49
I maintain frequent contact with my relatives back in China	80.18

The survey results indicate a generally positive experience for expatriates in Indonesia, especially in areas vital to their professional and personal well-being. High scores in work environment indicators, such as coworker attitudes and reliability, suggest strong support and respect in the workplace. Expatriates also report significant autonomy and responsibility, reflecting a conducive organisational culture for expatriate success. Additionally, positive feedback on work-life balance and living conditions highlights overall satisfaction, suggesting that expatriates find a favourable balance between work and personal life. This supportive environment is crucial for maintaining high morale and productivity, benefiting the host companies and the broader economy. The adjustment score for Chinese expatriates is summarised in Figure 1.

Despite the positive experience, the survey and adjustment scores reveal challenges that could affect expatriates' long-term satisfaction and integration. Language barriers, reflected in lower scores

for understanding and communicating in Indonesian, hinder effective communication outside work and limit deeper social interactions with local colleagues and friends. Additionally, while expatriates maintain strong ties with their home country, difficulties in forming local friendships suggest potential social isolation, which could lead to loneliness or cultural detachment. Although the professional environment is well-managed, targeted interventions like language training and social integration programs are needed to address these challenges and ensure a more holistic and fulfilling expatriate experience in Indonesia.

Following the quantitative results, the qualitative investigation was conducted through interviews with seven Chinese expatriates who participated in the quantitative study. The background of the qualitative participants is provided in Table 2.

The qualitative interviews with participants explored Chinese expatriate responses to the questionnaire, revealing 18 sub-categories, nine categories, and five themes.

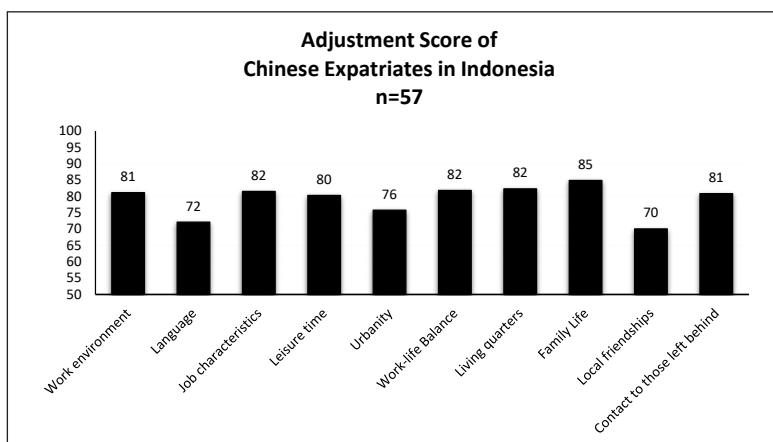


Figure 1. Adjustment score of Chinese expatriates in Indonesia (n = 57)

Table 2
The background of participants of the qualitative study

No.	Name	Background
1.	Maji	Maji worked in Indonesia for 3 years and was curious about the country. She was surprised that most Indonesians pray 5 times a day. The most difficult thing she faced was misunderstandings with colleagues due to cultural differences.
2.	Zhao	Zhao worked in a global tech company in Indonesia for 5 years. He had many questions before coming to Indonesia, such as whether Indonesians are friendly to Chinese and whether he can eat pork. He found the infrastructure to be poor, but locals to be happy. His English skills improved.
3.	Huang	Huang worked in Indonesia for 10 years, including at a Chinese global phone manufacturer. He was excited but also afraid when he learned he would work in Indonesia. Communication in a religious culture was a big challenge. The most difficult thing was making others understand his ideas.
4.	Wenqi	Wenqi learned the Indonesian language and culture for 4 years and has worked in Indonesia for 2 years. She found the culture shock to be praying multiple times a day and washing in the toilet before praying. She acts as a key communicator between HQ and the Indonesian branch.
5.	Jack	Jack worked in Indonesia for 2 years without knowing the language. He was excited to experience a new culture and found the locals to be kind. The culture shock was praying multiple times a day. His duty was to report market conditions and get support from HQ.
6.	Wenxin	Wenxin can speak Indonesian and has worked in Indonesia for 8 years. She was curious but didn't feel good at first due to language barriers. She found locals to be laid-back and shocked that they celebrate birthdays with pizza or martabak.
7.	Aaron	Despite being a Chinese national, Aaron spent his childhood in Australia and managed to interact with some international students from Southeast Asia during his youth. Although he already had some understanding of Southeast Asian culture, he became confused in understanding Indonesians, as people coming from different parts of Indonesia have their own distinct values and behaviour. He has been working in Indonesia for 2 years.

The themes were developed inductively and interpreted through the person-environment fit and cross-cultural adaptation frameworks. The first theme focused on cultural and religious adaptation, encompassing society's dominant religious practices and workplace cultural norms. The second theme highlighted communication challenges, including language barriers and difficulties in understanding Indonesia's indirect communication style. The third theme centred on workplace dynamics, addressing social hierarchies, team interactions, and perceptions of Indonesian culture.

The fourth theme concerns personal and professional growth, discussing the benefits of international assignments and skill development. The final theme emphasised the importance of pre-departure training, covering participants' expectations versus reality, preparation for cultural integration, and the role of organisational support. These themes and categories emerged from interviews where participants described their experiences as Chinese expatriates in Indonesia, with the conversation flowing naturally and supported by follow-up questions outlined in Table 3.

Table 3
Expatriate interview questions

No.	Questions
	Main question: Please describe your experience as a Chinese expatriate working in Indonesia.
1	What is your name?
2	How long have you been working in Indonesia?
3	What did you think when you first heard you were going to Indonesia?
4	What were the first few days like?
5	Were there things that surprised you about the way people thought or worked?
6	What was your first “aha” (culture shock) about the culture?
7	How did people of that culture (Indonesia) see you?
8	Can you describe your relationship with your co-workers?
9	Can you describe your relationship with your home organisation?
10	What are the most difficult things you faced when working in Indonesia?
11	Do you get to use the skills you acquired abroad in your current job?

Theme 1: Cultural and Religious Adaptation

All the respondents in our study experienced culture shock when adapting to Indonesian culture, particularly in religion. In Indonesia, religion plays a significant role in people's lives, with most of the population being Muslims who pray five times a day. Muslims perform two of their daily prayers at work during lunch breaks and before work hours end in the evening. This practice was unfamiliar to Chinese expatriates, especially when meetings had to be rescheduled or planned at inconvenient times to allow Muslim employees to perform their prayers. Aaron shared his experience regarding this issue:

For the midday prayer, I'm okay with that. But sometimes, I found that my staff also take up to 30 minutes for the afternoon prayer. It's just 2 hours before the end of work, yet they intentionally take an extra break for this reason. During

my early months, I also noticed that they often came late to meetings or left early, using prayer as an excuse. (Aaron)

Most participants agreed that Indonesians tend to avoid confrontation and are forgiving of errors and failures. However, for Chinese expatriates, such values are seen negatively as they could lead to complacency, contrasting with the Indonesian cultural tendency to avoid conflict. Huang, one of the Chinese participants, noted that preventing conflict is unnecessary since conflicts are unavoidable and still occur in the workplace. He argued that foreign workers might need to adjust their communication style to be more indirect, as most Indonesians often use body language, facial expressions, or tone of voice to convey their feelings rather than expressing themselves directly. Understanding this indirect communication style is vital to ensuring effective communication.

Theme 2: Communication Challenges

Jack shared his experience of communication challenges due to language barriers and cultural misunderstandings when interacting with his team on work-related issues:

You know that my job is to send reports to company HQ multiple times daily, right? During my first few weeks, I couldn't speak Bahasa Indonesia, and when speaking in English, my Chinese accent made it difficult for Indonesians to understand me. One day, I asked my team about a sales report, but it turned out that he went to perform prayer. When he arrived, I asked, 'Where were you?'—perhaps due to my facial expression, tone of voice, or language barrier—he took it as if I was scolding him. But my full message was that if he was going to pray, please send me the necessary data first because the report needed to be delivered on time. I didn't know how to say it properly, and I know that if you come here not knowing Bahasa Indonesia and rely on broken English, things will be very hard. (Jack)

In Jack's case, this challenge motivated him to learn Bahasa Indonesia and improve his English to increase communication effectiveness. Similarly, Zhao highlighted the importance of understanding indirect communication:

When we talk fast and loudly, they (Indonesians) thought that we were angry. (Zhao)

Understanding this indirect communication style is essential for effective communication in Indonesia. Zhao highlights that Indonesian-style communication needs a high tone of voice, which is considered rude. However, he realised this quite late, almost a year after arriving in Indonesia. Reflecting on his early days as an expatriate, Zhao initially hesitated to adjust his communication style to suit the local workers. When one of the Chinese managers mentioned that Zhao had gained a reputation as a hotheaded person, he began to reflect on whether his behaviour was effective. Zhao recalls that he initially thought his Indonesian co-workers were friendly and obedient. However, after noticing some behavioural changes when they interacted with him, Zhao concluded that it was due to the indirect communication style of the Indonesian workers, who are uncomfortable confronting others in the workplace.

Theme 3: Workplace Dynamics and Hierarchies

Indonesian workers tend to adhere to social hierarchy, and using titles is essential when addressing someone senior. This practice creates boundaries between foreign workers (superiors) and local workers (subordinates), hindering the team bonding process. Subordinate workers usually do not question their superiors and follow requests without any response, behaviour driven by the desire to please their leaders. Additionally, Indonesians still adhere to stereotypes, and subordinates typically

do not challenge what their superiors ask. Wenxin commented on this issue:

We can show our full team potential only if everyone is willing to participate, be open to each other, and be critical when we know the best method has not been used. But if they only say ‘yes’ and ‘OK’ all the time, then everything will come back to me to decide. There’s no use in having a team if team members cannot contribute. (Wenxin)

The work environment and office type can also affect mood and productivity. In Indonesia, the work environment varies, and foreign workers may encounter attitudes different from what they are used to. Productive workers are vital to achieving business goals. Still, Indonesians working in a multinational company tend to separate their personal and work lives, making it difficult for Chinese expatriates to befriend Indonesian employees. Zhao further illustrated this challenge:

When we talk fast and loudly, they (Indonesians) thought we were angry. When we invited them for dinner, they were afraid the food would contain pork. I thought of this issue before coming to Indonesia and prepared myself for the adjustment. But sometimes it takes trust and cooperation because now we are in the same boat, and we want to move forward together. I think the company agrees to employ Indonesian Muslims because they know that people will start to work together when they have a

common goal. Time has proven that we can work together—but the cooperation and trust could be better. (Zhao)

Maji also supported the statements from Wenxin and Zhao. Maji highlighted that the Indonesian workers maintain some distance from the Chinese employees at her office. She was surprised to learn this, as it contradicted what she had previously understood: that a collectivist society would be more open to personal relationships. She concluded that this distance might be due to various factors such as religion, culture, and political views. Additionally, she noted that her office did not prioritise fostering synergy between the host country and home country employees. Quoting her response, she mentioned that ‘in the end, everything was up to the company’—implying that such synergy would never happen without the company’s effort to cultivate good relationships.

Theme 4: Personal and Professional Growth

Despite the many adjustments that Chinese expatriates have had to make, they also acknowledged the benefits of their international assignments. For example, Jack’s language challenges motivated him to learn Bahasa Indonesian and improve his English to communicate better with the local staff.

Despite challenges in adjusting to Indonesia’s culture, all participants in the qualitative study agreed that Indonesians are friendly. Cross-cultural adjustment is crucial for building relationships between

Chinese expatriates and the local culture, helping to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts, thereby enhancing performance and achieving goals. Participants noted that working in Indonesia improved their understanding of global business practices, enhanced their soft skills, and boosted their language proficiency through daily interactions. Wenqi highlighted that as the world becomes more interconnected, multinational corporations increasingly value international experience. It provides professional and personal rewards and offers a competitive advantage in the job market, demonstrating an ability to tackle new challenges, making it highly appealing to employers.

Theme 5: Importance of Pre-Departure Training

Interestingly, some participants shared their experiences with pre-departure training before coming to Indonesia. Wenxin, for example, learned about the dos and don'ts in Indonesia, but most of the information highlighted stark cultural differences. She was surprised by the distinctiveness of the Chinese Peranakan culture—a blend of Chinese and local indigenous cultures in Southeast Asia, especially in language, customs, and food, compared to mainland China. She also found that many Indonesian foods in Jakarta were familiar to her and was surprised to learn that a significant proportion of Indonesians are not Muslims. The following is her statement:

I know... they should tell us about it, right? All we know is that we are going

to work in a culture that is very different from where we come from. (Wenxin)

Many expatriates may not be familiar with foreign locations, and most organisations do not offer cultural adaptation training, particularly in culturally complex countries like Indonesia. Despite this, most respondents acknowledged the importance of cross-cultural adjustment for their future work. This adjustment enhances soft and hard skills, improves language abilities crucial for effective communication, and helps build essential relationships in new environments.

Chinese expatriates recognised the benefits of their international assignments despite the challenges. Living and working abroad allowed them to immerse themselves in new cultures, learn languages, and develop life skills. Although adjusting to new places and cultures was initially challenging, working abroad offers unique personal and professional growth opportunities. A critical aspect of pre-departure preparation is understanding how Indonesians handle conflict. Indonesians tend to avoid direct confrontation and are forgiving of mistakes. Expatriates unfamiliar with this approach may need to adapt. All participants agreed that Indonesians prefer to avoid conflict, with Huang's observation highlighting how personal characteristics influence adaptability:

If the expatriate has high openness to new experiences and is willing to take criticism and feedback, adjusting to the new working culture will not be too difficult. (Huang)

CONCLUSION

Interviews revealed that working abroad significantly deepened respondents' understanding of global business practices and enriched their vitae with valuable experience and skills. It also provided a valuable opportunity to develop soft skills, such as effective communication with diverse backgrounds, and unexpectedly improved their English and Indonesian language proficiency. Despite adjustment challenges, working abroad was a highly positive and transformative experience.

The survey results highlight a generally positive experience for Chinese expatriates in Indonesia, particularly in areas vital to their professional and personal well-being. High scores in work environment indicators, such as coworker attitudes and reliability, suggest strong support and respect in the workplace. Expatriates also report significant autonomy and responsibility in their roles, indicating that Indonesia's organisational culture is conducive to expatriate success. Additionally, positive feedback on work-life balance and living conditions underscores overall satisfaction, suggesting that expatriates find a favourable balance between work and personal life. This supportive environment is crucial for maintaining high morale and productivity, benefiting host companies and the broader economy.

Despite positive experiences, the survey and adjustment scores reveal challenges that could affect expatriates' long-term satisfaction and integration. Lower scores in Indonesian language proficiency highlight

significant communication barriers, particularly in non-work environments, limiting deeper social interactions with local colleagues and friends. Qualitative findings emphasise that these challenges concern language and the indirect communication style common in Indonesia. For example, Jack struggled with compelling messaging, and Zhao realised the importance of tone and volume, underscoring the need for expatriates to develop both language skills and cultural sensitivity. Additionally, lower scores in local friendships suggest difficulties forming meaningful connections, potentially leading to social isolation and impacting their overall experience.

Implications of the Study

The conclusions of this study have several theoretical implications. Regarding cultural and religious alignment, this study reinforces earlier findings by Perdhana et al. (2019), who noted that barriers to cross-cultural adjustment in Indonesia include differing social norms, language use, privacy expectations during socialisation, and time management practices. These findings highlight the need for structured pre-departure briefings tailored to Indonesia's multicultural environment. Early cultural familiarisation can benefit expatriates by helping them understand simple Indonesian phrases and fostering curiosity about Indonesian culture.

In relation to communication and language barriers, the findings of this study are consistent with previous research (e.g., Avril & Magnini, 2007; van Erp

et al., 2011), which shows that limited two-way communication and language differences hinder socialisation between Chinese expatriates and local staff. These findings reinforce previous studies. Thus, organisations should provide bilingual communication guidelines, encourage English or Indonesian language training, and establish communication norms that reduce misunderstandings. Strategies such as checking whether the interlocutor understands, practising active listening, and improving basic Indonesian or English skills can help make daily interactions smoother.

The next implication reveals that Chinese expatriates often struggle to understand Indonesian workplace expectations. This finding supports evidence from Setti et al. (2022), who noted resistance and adjustment challenges when workplace expectations differ from what expatriates are accustomed to. Therefore, leadership and cultural-competence training that focuses on Indonesian workplace culture is vital. Expatriates should also engage in relationship-building with coworkers across ranks to better understand the norms and nuances of Indonesian cultures.

This study also found that many Chinese expatriates developed resilience, confidence and problem-solving abilities while navigating cultural and workplace challenges. Their adjustment process often involved learning to manage uncertainty, adaptation to the local culture, and negotiating unfamiliar expectations from host-country nationals. These findings reflect

evidence that cross-cultural assignments can contribute to long-term professional development and the acquisition of global competencies (Takeuchi, 2010). Expatriates in this study reported that challenging situations, such as unclear communication, different decision-making processes, or adaptation to the high-context communication style of the Indonesians, strengthened their adaptability and coping strategies.

Given these challenges, it is recommended that multinational corporations conduct well-prepared cross-cultural training for employees who will be sent to countries with high cultural complexity, such as Indonesia. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Labour (Ariyanti, 2023), 52,331 Chinese nationals worked in Indonesia as of November 2022. Considering the quantitative results of this study, the primary barriers to adjusting to Indonesia's culture are language difficulties and challenges in forming friendships with local Indonesians. Therefore, cross-cultural training should thoroughly explain the differences between Chinese and Indonesian cultures, focusing on measurable, universal aspects. Cultural frameworks such as those from Hofstede et al. (2010b), the GLOBE Project (2006), Munter (1993), or Hall (1976) could be utilised to provide a clear comparison of the values of Chinese and Indonesian people. Furthermore, a diversity and inclusion policy should promote cooperative working methods within the company, particularly in the Indonesian subsidiary. A common mistake

by multinational corporations operating in Indonesia is to generalise Indonesian culture. In contrast, each Indonesian cultural group has a distinct culture that could affect work interactions and managerial effectiveness. Expatriates should prepare mentally for adjustment, seek institutional support and embrace local networks to facilitate smoother adaptation.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies

The pragmatism paradigm utilised in this study has proven effective in assessing the 'hidden' population of Chinese expatriates in Indonesia. However, the small sample size of 57 expatriates in the quantitative study could be expanded in future research. This study found that despite distributing the questionnaire through WeChat expatriate groups, responses were low due to concerns about trust. Future research could address this issue by using a trusted survey website. Furthermore, this study suggests that qualitative diary studies could significantly enrich future research with the potential to provide a deeper understanding of the fundamental challenges expatriates face in their new country of residence.

Given the significant cultural variation within China, future research should delve into the dyadic relationship between Chinese expatriates and their Indonesian peers, considering their sub-cultural origins. Understanding this relationship can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of cross-cultural interactions. Cultural values might vary by region within a country,

resulting in distinctive sub-cultural values that shape the national culture (Hofstede et al., 2010a). There is a possibility that certain Indonesian subcultures share values that are similar to Chinese cultural values, leading to smoother interactions in the business environment. This approach could help identify cultural compatibility between specific Chinese and Indonesian subcultures to expand the knowledge of expatriate adjustment in Indonesia.

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