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Culture shock in China? Adjustment pattern of western expatriate business managers

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Abstract

Currently working on the Chinese mainland, Western expatriate business managers, mainly from the USA, France, Germany, Australia and Great Britain, participated in a mail survey regarding their degree of adjustment which was then mapped over time. The results showed that while the three dimensions of sociocultural adjustment; work adjustment, interaction adjustment and general adjustment, all showed a clear U-curve pattern indicating a typical culture shock experience, no such pattern was displayed in the case of psychological adjustment as measured by their subjective well-being. Implications for Western expatriate business managers on the Chinese mainland and for companies assigning Western expatriates there are discussed. © 1999 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

There has recently been a tremendous surge in foreign direct investment on the Chinese mainland, resulting in a substantially increased number of foreign business persons working in Sino–foreign joint ventures, foreign representative offices, foreign wholly owned subsidiaries and branches of foreign firms. These expatriate business managers have to make things work in the new setting. Given the notorious lack of cross-cultural training, this could be a stressful experience. The academic literature on international adjustment has since long discussed the concept of the U-curve hypothesis which suggests that the adjustment of sojourners can be described

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as a succession of phases or stages of which an initial sudden drop in the degree of adjustment is referred to as a culture shock. However, this view is heavily contested and recent empirical studies have not given much support to the U-curve hypothesis and the culture shock concept.

Western expatriate business managers (WEBMs), in particular, have to deal with a very different way of life on the Chinese mainland than in their own country and they have to perform in an unfamiliar work context. The purpose of this paper is to examine the time pattern of adjustment of WEBMs on the Chinese mainland in order to establish whether there are any signs indicating a culture shock experience. In that respect the current study can be regarded as a test of the U-curve hypothesis.

This piece of research is important for several reasons. In academic terms, more research is needed about international adjustment and culture shock concerning business expatriates. Despite an abundant literature on sojourner adjustment in general, empirical studies on expatriate managers are not very common in this literature. Elsewhere, the popular business press is brimming with anecdotal stories about the dangers of culture shock for international managers but, with some notable exceptions (cf. Feldman & Tompson, 1993; Janssens, 1995), few rigorous empirical investigations have dealt with the culture shock of business expatriates recently. This study deals with the encounter of two very different cultural realms, where one would expect expatriate managers initially to experience a U-shaped adjustment process tantamount to culture shock, if at all. From an applied point of view, given the large and rising interest in doing business in China among foreign firms, this study could shed some light on the extent and nature of adjustment hazards WEBMs are exposed to on the Chinese mainland as well as indicating how to deal with such potential problems.

2. International adjustment

2.1. The U-curve hypothesis

The traditional view of international adjustment is that it can be described as a succession of phases or stages. Oberg (1960) described four stages of adjustment: honeymoon, crisis, recovery and adjustment. Adler (1975) saw the adjustment of the sojourner as a transitional experience implying a movement from a low to a high state of self- and cultural awareness. The adjustment process includes five phases: contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and independence. Also three-stage and nine-stage similar adjustment processes have been proposed (Jacobson, 1963; Lesser & Peter, 1957; Garza-Guerrero, 1974).

Grove and Torbiörn (1985) and Torbiörn (1982) have offered an explanation of adjustment from a perspective of cognitive and motivational psychology. This proposition is empirically supported in some crucial aspects by a large-scale study of Swedish expatriate managers (Torbiörn, 1982). The process of adjustment follows the four phases: the tourist phase (a period of euphoria, often experienced by people immediately after they enter a new culture), the culture shock phase (mental and

physiological stress resulting from over-stimulation and overuse of the body's coping mechanisms), the conformist phase (progressive recovery from culture shock), and the assimilation phase (completion of the adjustment process).

Most of the above-mentioned stage or phase theories of cultural adjustment presume some kind of a U-curve to depict the stages that individuals go through. This curve indicates the change over time in the degree of adjustment to the alien environment. The U-curve of adjustment depicts the initial optimism and euphoria in the host culture, the subsequent dip or trough in the level of adjustment, followed by a gradual recovery to higher adjustment levels. Previously, the U-curve was usually connected to some kind of subjective adjustment, measuring satisfaction and well-being, which gradually declines but then increases again. Other studies have extended the U-curve to cover trends in attitudes and social interaction patterns and favourability of images of the host culture. The U-curve has also been extended to a W-curve, indicating the re-entry shock that sojourners often undergo when they return to their home culture and which is similar to what they experienced abroad, making up two consecutive Us, that is a W (cf. Church, 1982; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1962; Lysgaard, 1955).

2.2. Culture shock

The concept 'culture shock', like that of 'jet-lag', is now part of the popular vocabulary. Both terms are used to explain, or at least label, some more unpleasant consequences of travelling. However, being more of a generic expression, it connotes much, but signifies little.

If there is a medical or illness analogy for culture shock, the common cold is probably the best malady to consider. Like the common cold, there is no way to prevent culture shock and one can 'catch it' over and over again. Each time we adjust to another culture or readjust to our own culture, we go through culture shock. (Weaver, 1986)

Culture shock originates with the anthropologist Oberg (1960) who referred to the distress experienced by the sojourner as a result of losing all the familiar signs and symbols of social interaction. He mentioned at least six aspects of culture shock: (1) Strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adjustments. (2) A sense of loss and feelings of deprivation in regard to friends, status, profession and possessions. (3) Being rejected by and/or rejecting members of the new culture. (4) Confusion in role, role expectations, values, feelings and self-identity. (5) Surprise, anxiety, even disgust and indignation after becoming aware of cultural differences. (6) Feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment.

This concept has generated a substantial research interest since it was introduced by Oberg. Juffer (1986) scrutinized more than 35 definitions of culture shock found in research literature and categorized the prevailing definitions, causes and effects of culture shock as follows: (1) Culture shock is caused by confronting a new

environment or situation. (2) Culture shock is caused by ineffectiveness of intercultural or interpersonal communication. (3) Culture shock is caused by a threat to the emotional or intrapsychic well-being of the sojourner. (4) Culture shock is caused by the need to adequately modify behaviour to regain positive reinforcement from the new environment. (5) Culture shock is caused by growth experience.

Most researchers since Oberg have viewed culture shock as a normal process of adjustment to cultural stress, involving such symptoms as anxiety, helplessness, irritability, and a longing for a more predictable and gratifying environment. Anxiety may result in such behaviour as excessive preoccupation with the drinking water, the food, minor pains, excessive fears of being cheated or robbed, fits of anger toward or avoidance of local people, and the desire to be with home nationals (Furnham, 1993; Juffer, 1986). Others have attempted to improve and extend the original definition and concept of culture shock. Hence, the following phenomena related to, but not identical with, the concept of culture shock have been suggested: culture fatigue, language shock, role shock, pervasive ambiguity, transition shock, uprooting (cf. Ball-Rokeach, 1973; Byrnes, 1966; Guthrie, 1975; Smalley, 1963; Zwingmann & Gunn, 1983). More recently, Anderson (1994) further underscored the normality of the culture shock experience by pointing out the striking resemblance between the distress reactions humans display whenever confronted with major disruptive changes and the culture shock syndrome. She argues that far from being culture specific, culture shock is simply a frustration reaction symptom. Being alive at home or abroad means having to cope with disruptive events, and real life adjustments involve working toward a fit between person and environment.

However, to get through the culture shock phase of adjustment could be very painful for many sojourners, so painful for so long that some of them simply never get through. Some of them adopt an extremely hostile and critical attitude towards host nationals ('fight'), others retreat to the safety of an expatriate community or even prematurely return home ('flight'), and yet others rapidly and uncritically abandon their former identities and try to imitate host nationals in every possible way ('going native'). These coping patterns, as well as various psychological symptoms of sojourners like rationalization, projection, withdrawal, over-identifying, and other defensive mechanisms; should necessarily not be regarded as harmful. Although they distort reality, they may be functional to the newcomer, enabling him to cope. These mechanisms slow down the entry of cognitive elements from the host culture and support the strength of cognitive elements brought from the home culture, inhibiting an abrupt collapse of the frame of reference. All of these defensive coping mechanisms require substantial mental efforts, which explains why culture shock should be understood as a type of exhaustion. From a clinical psychological point of view, the coping mechanisms of culture shock become a serious mental health problem only to the extent that they come to dominate the sojourner's interaction with the environment, or when they completely break down and leave the individual susceptible to extreme anxiety, psychosomatic disorders, alcoholism, drug abuse, etc. (Grove & Torbiörn, 1985).

Countering the problem-oriented view presented above, an alternative approach

to culture shock is to regard it as an experience of intercultural learning and growth. This view is outlined as follows:

Culture shock is thought of as a profound learning experience that leads to a high degree of self-awareness and personal growth. Rather than being only a disease for which adaptation is the cure, culture shock is likewise at the very heart of the cross-cultural learning experience. It is an experience in self-understanding and change. (Adler, 1987)

Consequently, the culture shock process is viewed as fundamental in that the sojourner must somehow confront the social, psychological, and philosophical differences one finds between his or her own cultural perceptions and that of the new environment. Hence, the cross-cultural learning experience is regarded as a transitional experience, improving one's own self- and cultural awareness (Adler, 1987). The concept of cultural learning has been further elaborated and extended by several researchers. These models regard cross-cultural exposure as a learning experience and, instead of therapy for the sojourner, they prescribe programs of preparation, orientation and the acquisition of culturally appropriate social skills (cf. Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Bochner, 1986; Furnham, 1993; Furnham & Bochner 1982, 1986; Klineberg, 1982). The models imply that the major task facing the sojourner is not to adjust to a new culture, but to learn its important characteristics. There are many examples in life when it becomes necessary, or at least advisable, to learn a practice, even if one does not approve of it, and then abandon it later when circumstances change. Consequently, people who acquire and selectively utilize behaviours, attitudes, and values of a second culture add to themselves, just as people who learn a second language add to themselves. It is important to note that this is in sharp contrast to the traditional anthropological assumption, which often takes for granted the loss and replacement of a person's first or traditional culture, when that person is exposed to and starts to use a new culture's ways. The traditional culture is thought to be 'subtracted' from the individual's repertoire as the new one is mastered. But, according to the analogy between language acquisition and developing new cultural skills, bilinguals do not give up one language to learn another; they add a second language to the first and learn to use each appropriately. Given the close links that have been shown to exist between culture and language, there seems to be important parallels between the acquisition of a second language and becoming a multi-cultural individual (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Saltzman, 1986).

Consequently, a distinction can be made between psychological adjustment and sociocultural adjustment (cf. Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Ward & Searle, 1991). Although conceptually interrelated, the former deals with subjective well-being or mood states (e.g. depression, anxiety, tension, and fatigue). The latter relates to the ability to 'fit in' or to negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture as measured by the amount of difficulty experienced in the management of everyday situations in the host culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1996). The concept of psychological adjustment is based on the problem-oriented view of culture shock discussed above focusing on attitudinal factors of the adjustment process. The sociocultural notion

of adjustment is based on the cultural learning approach to culture shock and highlights social behaviour and practical social skills underlying attitudinal factors. This distinction is consistent with the separation of attitudinal from behavioral acculturation as recently discussed by Jun, Lee and Gentry (1997).

2.3. Little empirical support

There is not much conclusive or generalizable empirical support for the culture shock experience as indicated by a U-curve process of adjustment. Not all sojourners start out with a 'honeymoon phase' or with a period of euphoria and optimism, and although depression occurs with some frequency, it is far from universal. A few substantial literature reviews have examined the existence of culture shock as suggested by the U-curve hypothesis (cf. Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Church, 1982; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Church (1982) argues that support for the existence of a culture shock phase in international adjustment must be considered weak. Furnham and Bochner (1986) also fail to support the U-curve hypothesis and argue further that this hypothesis is too vague and too generalized to be of much use. Based on a review of eighteen studies, Black and Mendenhall (1991) conclude that, due to the lack of methodological rigour in many of the investigations, it is not reasonable to either accept or reject the U-curve hypothesis. More recently, Janssens (1995) did not find any evidence of culture shock. Based on the relationship between intercultural interaction, one of the dimensions of sociocultural adjustment, and length of time spent in the host country, he found that the overall pattern of intercultural interaction over time in the host country was mostly linear and increasing. This indicates that the longer the expatriate managers stayed in the host country, the more knowledgeable they became about the new culture and the more local friends they made. Similarly, Ward, Okura, Kennedy and Kojima (1998) studying a sample of Japanese students in New Zealand were unable to find any support for the U-curve hypothesis in either psychological or sociocultural adjustment.

2.4. Dimensions of international adjustment

Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) argued that the degree of cross-cultural adjustment should be treated as a multidimensional concept, rather than a unitary phenomenon as was previously the dominating view (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1962; Oberg, 1960). In their proposed model for international adjustment, Black et al. (1991) made a distinction among three dimensions of in-country adjustment: (1) adjustment to work; (2) adjustment to interacting with host nationals; and (3) adjustment to the general non-work environment. This theoretical framework of international adjustment covers sociocultural aspects of adjustment and it has been supported by a series of empirical studies of U.S. expatriates and their spouses (Black & Gregersen, 1990; Black & Gregersen, 1991a,b; Black & Stephens, 1989). McEvoy and Parker (1995) also found support for the three dimensions of expatriate adjustment.

The theoretical concept of subjective well-being, corresponding to the psychologi-

cal aspects of international adjustment, has been well developed, especially in relation to work and work environment characteristics (cf. Kornhauser, 1965; Caplan, Cobb, French, Van Herrison & Pinneau, 1975; Karasek, 1979). In connection with the adjustment of expatriate business managers, the concept of subjective well-being has been applied in several instances (cf. Arnetz & Anderzen, 1992; Aryee & Stone, 1996; Nicholson & Imaizumi, 1993).

2.5. Adjustment to the Chinese mainland

From the growing literature on business management practices and policies on the Chinese mainland, one may speculate that Western expatriate managers assigned there would have to make considerable sociocultural adjustments to their roles at work (cf. Child, 1994; Goodall & Warner, 1997; Selmer, 1998; Warner, 1995). This is also supported by the emerging literature dealing with work adjustments of expatriate managers on the Chinese mainland. Björkman and Schaap (1994) discussed some problems encountered by expatriates in Chinese–Western joint ventures and suggest practical ways to handle these issues. Davidson (1987) examined effective intercultural interaction in Chinese–US joint ventures, where American and Chinese board members and top managers must work together to run the company. Rimington (1996) examined the management process of developing a Sino–British joint venture and Weldon and Jehn (1996) studied intercultural conflicts in bicultural teams in US–Chinese joint ventures. Recently, Sergeant and Frenkel (1998) interviewed expatriate managers about managing people in China. The findings touch upon problems in recruitment, training, rewards, retention, performance management, management–employee relations, and expatriate management relations. Their conclusions echo other researchers in this area (cf. Selmer, 1998) finding major challenges in motivating employees, specifically in the design of performance management and reward systems and that the management of expatriate relations could be considerably improved. The expatriates received little training in business customs and practices in China. Managers at headquarters did not see the need to modify expectations of the expatriate managers to a different business environment where establishing and maintaining personal relationships are salient, the lack of a common language may be a serious impediment as could bureaucratic obstacles. The final impression was that the expatriate managers were more or less left to their own devices and most organizations did not capture, systematize, disseminate and update the knowledge gained by their expatriate managers in China (Sergeant & Frenkel, 1998).

The two other sociocultural adjustment dimensions, ‘interaction adjustment’ and ‘general adjustment’, have attracted a substantial amount of research over the years and is reviewed in the literature on sojourner adjustment (cf. Church, 1982). However, only a few authors have specifically dealt with expatriate business managers. Lee and Larwood (1983) investigated the cultural socialization of US expatriate managers in Korea and found that when they adjusted their attitudes after the host culture it resulted in more work satisfaction. Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) also supported the significance of non-work roles by analyzing and pointing out the importance of expatriate acculturation gained through effective interactions with host country

nationals. Selmer (1992b) and Selmer and de Leon (1989) and Selmer & de Leon (1989), studying Swedish expatriate managers in south-east Asia, found non-work socialization to be difficult, due to high language and/or cultural barriers, and of little importance, resulting in a low degree of socialization in the society.

Although subjective well-being has been used in connection with outcomes of expatriate adjustment, no such study is known from the Chinese mainland. In a large-scale, longitudinal study of Swedish expatriates worldwide, examining both medical/physiological and psychological outcomes of living and working abroad, the expatriates subjective well-being was measured (Arnetz & Anderzen, 1992). Nicholson and Imaizumi (1993) studied the adjustment of Japanese expatriates in the United Kingdom and made a distinction between their work related and non-work related well-being. Aryee and Stone (1996) investigated the psychological well-being of expatriate employees in Hong Kong as represented by a quality of life concept and found that the expatriates expressed an average positive degree of quality of life well above the mid-point of the bipolar scales used. However, despite a common cultural heritage, there are considerable societal differences between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland (Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung & Terpstra, 1992; Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung & Terpstra, 1993; Selmer & Shiu, 1999), and this finding may not be generalizable beyond the border.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

The data set for the present investigation was extracted from a larger study of WEBMs on the Chinese mainland. This study investigated diverse topics of expatriation such as careers, motivation and adjustment. The data used for the current article was drawn from the adjustment part of the instrument. The questionnaire was mailed to a total of 790 WEBMs based on a convenience sample of available business directories, and eventually, 154 usable questionnaires were returned. Subtracting four non-Western respondents and 32 returned undelivered questionnaires due to change of address etc, a response rate of 20.4% was attained. Although equivalent with other studies of expatriates (Birdseye & Hill, 1995; Gregersen & Black, 1990; Naumann, 1993), the effective response rate may be considerably higher, since available directories and listings of expatriate managers on the Chinese mainland are at best updated annually. Taking into account that the average period of assignment for expatriates is between three to five years (cf. Selmer, 1992a; Selmer & Lee, 1994; Tung, 1988), many of the questionnaires must have been addressed to expatriates no longer on the Chinese mainland, of which only some were returned to us.

Of the 154 respondents, the average age of the respondents was 42 yr (SD=9.6) and on the average, they indicated that they had spent 3.5 yr on the Chinese mainland (SD=3.6) and had lived abroad for 8.9 yr (SD=9.2), including the Chinese mainland. The overwhelming majority of the respondents were male and married. This is consistent with other investigations of business expatriates, although the 13% share of

women expatriates in our sample is on the high side compared to other studies (cf. Adler, 1995) and is also surprising considering that the Chinese mainland in many instances would be considered as a hardship posting. The largest nationality group were the US expatriates (38%). French (17%), German (16%), Australian (12%), and British (11%) expatriates made up distinctive, but much smaller groups. Most of the respondents were CEOs or occupied other managerial positions, whereas only a few respondents were non-managerial staff.

3.2. Instrument

Sociocultural adjustment was measured using the scale developed by Black (1988) and Black and Stephens (1989) (Appendix A). This is a validated instrument especially developed to study business expatriates and previously applied in a number of such studies (cf. Black & Gregersen, 1990; Black & Gregersen, 1991a,b; McEvoy & Parker, 1995; Taylor & Napier, 1996). Options of this scale range from (1) ‘very unadjusted’ to (7) ‘completely adjusted’ in response to the question to what degree respondents were adjusted or not adjusted to the 14 items concerning their life on the Chinese mainland. Principle component factor analysis with varimax rotation produced the three previously identified dimensions of expatriate adjustment: seven items on General Adjustment ($\alpha=0.89$), four items on Interaction Adjustment ($\alpha=0.86$) and three items on Work Adjustment ($\alpha=0.79$).

Psychological adjustment was measured by the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) (Goldberg, 1972) (Appendix A) consisting of 12 items ($\alpha=0.84$). Although it is a widely used measure of minor psychiatric symptoms, this instrument has been used by Munton and West (1995) investigating domestic job relocations in the United Kingdom and by Arnetz and Anderzen (1992) in their longitudinal study of Swedish business expatriates world wide. The GHQ-12 asks the respondents to think about how they have been feeling over the past few weeks and the response categories vary from (1) ‘not at all’ to (4) ‘much more than usual’.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for the four adjustment variables are provided in Table 1. A review of that table reveals that all mean scores for the

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1 General adjustment	5.00	1.20	1.00			
2 Interaction adjustment	5.16	1.29	0.59 ^a	1.00		
3 Work adjustment	5.52	1.05	0.60 ^a	0.62 ^a	1.00	
4 Subjective well-being	2.81	0.43	0.22 ^b	0.25 ^b	0.33 ^a	1.00

^a $P < 0.001$.

^b $P < 0.01$.

three variables measuring sociocultural adjustment were above the mid-level point, at or above the scale point depicted as ‘somewhat adjusted’, indicating a certain degree of comfortableness with the Chinese mainland context. Also the mean score of the subjective well-being variable was above the mid-level point. Further, there are statistically significant and positive correlations between subjective well-being and general adjustment ($r=0.22$; $P<0.01$), interaction adjustment ($r=0.25$; $P<0.01$), and work adjustment ($r=0.33$; $P<0.001$) as indicated in Table 1 acknowledging the above discussed relatedness between psychological and sociocultural adjustment.

The cross-sectional data for the three dimensions of sociocultural adjustment and of the subjective well-being of individual respondents were mapped over time and to analyze the trend, the data were smoothed by the technique of moving averages (Picconi, Romano & Olson, 1993). Moving totals containing $k=20$ observations of the original series of data were used to attain a sufficiently smooth trend. The results are shown in Figs. 1–4. As can be seen from Figs. 1–3, for all three dimensions of sociocultural adjustment, there seems to be a U-curve pattern starting to appear after 17–18 months’ stay on the Chinese mainland, indicating a typical culture shock experience. After that, a generally increasing trend is noticed (discounting very long assignments due to infrequent observations). In comparison, there is no such clear U-curve of the time pattern of psychological adjustment as measured by subjective

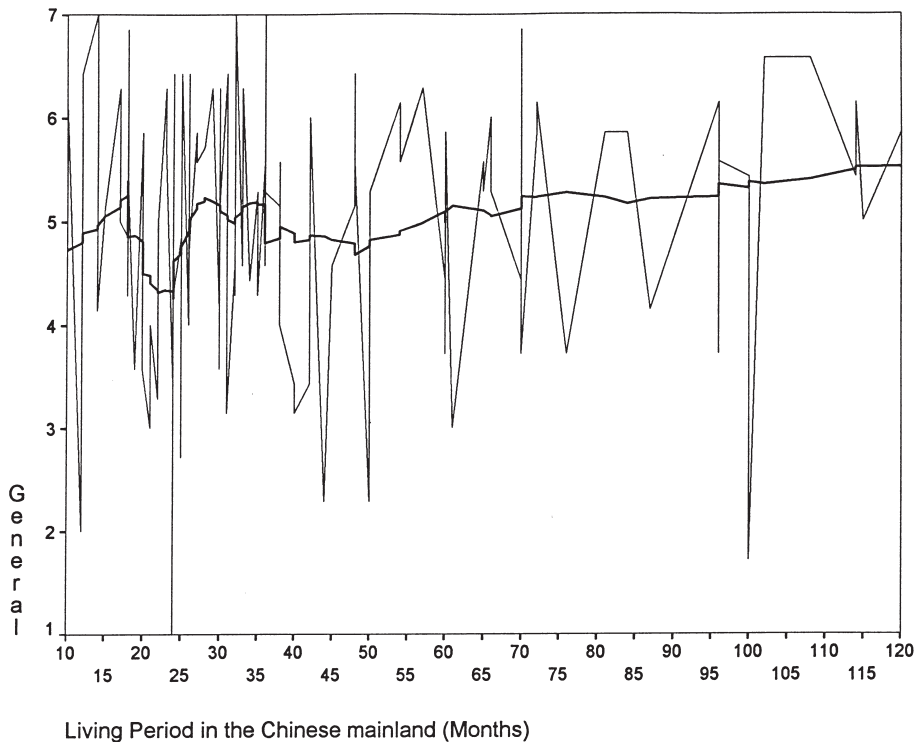


Fig. 1. General adjustment over time: original data and trend.

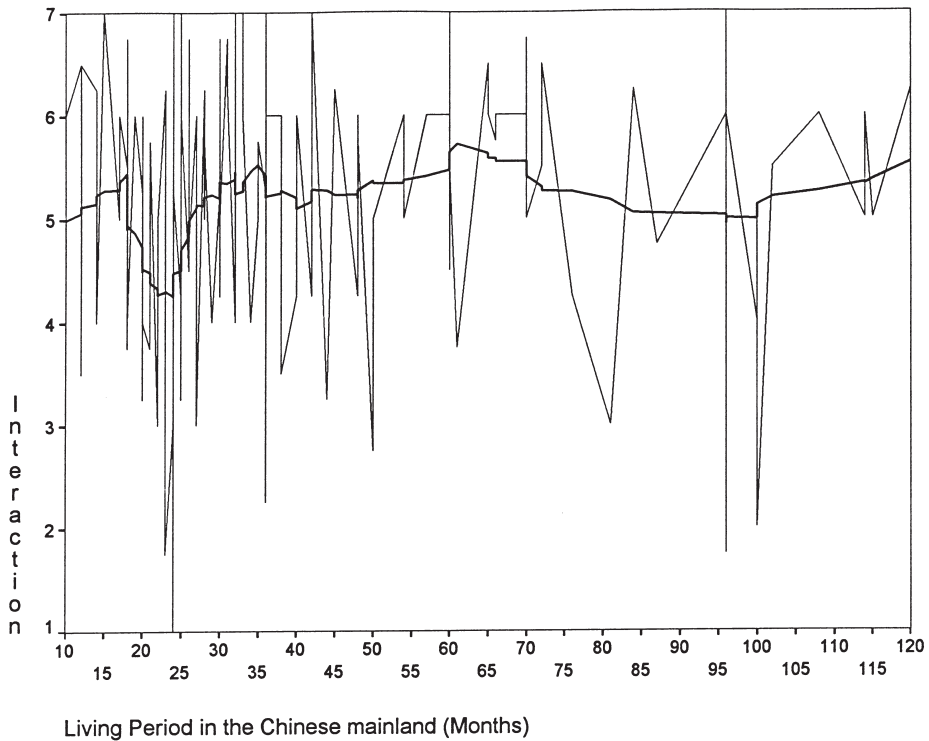


Fig. 2. Interaction adjustment over time: original data and trend.

well-being. This trend has instead two initial lightly accentuated troughs after which an almost constant level appears.

5. Conclusions and discussion

Surprisingly, given the abundant evidence to the contrary, the WEBMs felt, on the average, at least ‘somewhat adjusted’ to the Chinese mainland in the sociocultural aspects of adjustment; general, interaction and work adjustment. Plotted over time however, there was clear evidence of a U-curve pattern in all the three dimensions of sociocultural adjustment, indicating a typical culture shock experience. Also in terms of psychological adjustment, as measured by the mean score of subjective well-being, the WEBMs displayed a certain degree of positive feelings towards their current situation on the Chinese mainland. However, contrary to what was the case with their sociocultural adjustment, no clear U-curve pattern could be found corresponding to culture shock.

The differing trends of sociocultural and psychological adjustment are not unexpected. It may be speculated that the adjustment of psychological variables are more difficult to achieve than sociocultural adjustment, since the former involves more

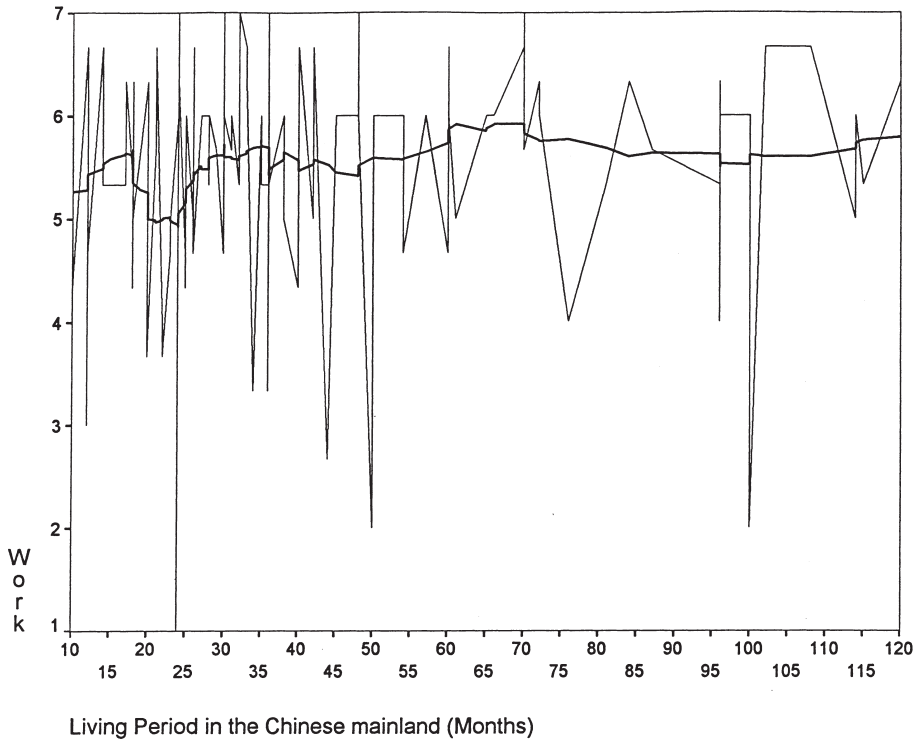


Fig. 3. Work adjustment over time: original data and trend.

fundamental and deeply held attitudinal structures than the latter. Also, progress in sociocultural adjustment, as far as social skills are concerned, does not necessarily mean that the expatriate has to develop more positive attitudes at the same time (Tsai, 1995). Very much like the new language acquisition analogy discussed above, the new social skills need not become part of a permanent repertoire of the expatriate and will not be used when they are not functional, as for example when the person is among fellow nationals or after repatriation (Bochner, 1986; Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

Although there is little empirical support for the U-curve hypothesis and the occurrence of culture shock as mentioned above, our results concerning WEBMs assigned to the Chinese mainland seem to differ from the few other studies that have identified a culture shock phase. The time period before culture shock sets in is generally longer than previously reported. In a large-scale study of Swedish expatriates worldwide, Torbiörn (1982) found that the U-curve pattern starts to appear already after 0–3 months and in their substantive literature review of the U-curve hypothesis, Black and Mendenhall (1991) depicts the culture shock phase to start already after 0–2 months. Likewise, Ward and Kennedy (1996), investigating Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand, report a drop in both psychological and sociocultural adjustment already after 1 month. As reported above in our study, the expatriates

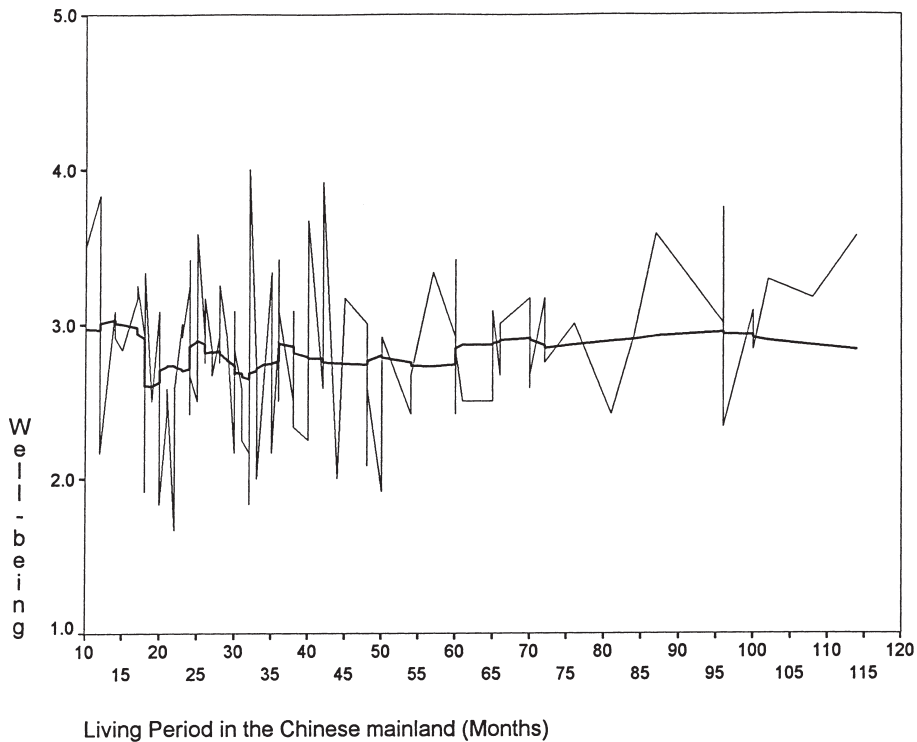


Fig. 4. Subjective well-being over time: original data and trend.

did not start to experience any culture shock until after 17–18 months, indicating a delayed effect when on assignment on the Chinese mainland. It is not evident why this discrepancy occurs, but it might be speculated that many WEBMs on the Chinese mainland are to a certain degree barred from sociocultural interactions with host nationals, thus delaying their culture shock. Few WEBMs can master the language well enough for any useful interactional purposes and they often live in virtual expatriate ‘ghettos’, as in hotels or compounds exclusively designated for expatriates (Björkman & Schaap, 1994). In fact, most sociocultural interactions with local people are probably taking place at work, which our findings also seem to support since the earliest, yet most shallow, culture shock trough occurred for work adjustment.

However, this study has certain limitations to be considered in evaluating its results. Firstly, as the data set used here is cross-sectional, the extent to which it also closely reflects developments over time is not known. In an attempt to deal with this problem, an additional survey was administered to the respondents that had been assigned to the Chinese mainland for more than the duration of any of the culture shock troughs. These managers were asked retrospectively for their degree of adjustment and extent of subjective well-being during that period. Unfortunately, although some support was gathered for the results of the cross-sectional study, a very low response rate prevented any conclusive findings to be reported from that exercise.

Secondly, single method variance could have affected the findings of the study. To lessen this potential problem, all items within the two variable categories, sociocultural adjustment and well-being, were assigned to the instrument in random order and half of the items measuring subjective well-being had reverse polarity, to make it less easy for the respondents to give uniform answers.

A general implication of our results for Western expatriate managers on the Chinese mainland and for companies assigning Western managers there are that all possible means should be engaged to facilitate the adjustment process on the Chinese mainland, since that could help them to avoid/shorten the period of culture shock. Cross-cultural training and preparations, including language training, as well as careful selection of candidates for expatriate assignments are areas identified in the literature both as being essential for successful adjustment as well as being badly neglected by international business firms (cf. Aryee, 1997; Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Brewster, 1995).

As opposed to the traditional pre-arrival cross-cultural training, post-arrival cross-cultural training has been promoted as an especially effective tool to facilitate international adjustment of expatriate managers (Selmer, Torbiörn & de Leon, 1998). For maximum effectiveness, the training should be given when the trainees are most motivated to learn. People in homogenous cultural environments, without travelling experience, may benefit little from training given prior to departure. On the other hand, people who have travelled enough, who have experienced contact with other cultures, are more likely to be aware of the need for training and hence, motivated to learn. This suggests that the timing of cross-cultural training is also connected to the needs and characteristics of the trainees. Besides, in all pre-departure training there is a general problem of relating training experiences to the frame of reference of the trainee, since his or her concept of the normal is still firmly attached to the home culture. The trainee may find the topics of the course unrealistic, exotic, or simply picturesque. At the end of the course, trainees could simply end up with a set of stereotyped ideas about the host culture. The duration of most training programs is generally too short to achieve any fundamental and permanent changes in cultural norms. Most pre-departure training programs probably resemble the experience of the very first period in the host country, labelled the tourist phase (Grove & Torbiörn 1985; Torbiörn, 1982, 1994; Triandis, 1986).

Post-arrival training need not necessarily take place immediately upon the sojourner's arrival, some training has maximum effect if it is delayed until the sojourner tries to cope with culture shock. Hence, such training could start about 3–6 months after arrival in the host country. Preferably, such training should focus on structures and relationships in the culture of the host country, world view, mentality, values, living patterns and social structure. The purpose being more of providing the sojourner with a 'grammar' rather than a 'vocabulary'. At that time, it can be assumed that the sojourner has a large amount of unstructured detailed information from his or her own experience, which could be patterned and given meaning by the structure offered by the training program. Providing the sojourners with interaction skills enable them to function independently without knowing all the facts about

the culture, because skills training focus on ‘learning how to learn’ in a new cultural setting (McCaffery, 1986).

It should be observed however, that pre- and post-arrival cross-cultural training programs are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. Sequential training has been suggested as the most effective starting prior to the trainee’s departure from their home culture and continued periodically during their sojourn in the host culture (Selmer, Torbiörn & de Leon, 1998).

To establish a basis for the cross-cultural training and create an organizational rationale for initiating an individual and organizational learning process, managers should continuously report to headquarters during the assignment in China and there should be a comprehensive debrief upon completion of the stay. This may involve examining problems experienced, practical solutions applied, and important lessons learned, as well as candid feedback on the process of managing expatriates. If possible, data could also be gathered from local employees how they view the outgoing expatriate manager to make new expatriate managers aware of local values and perceptions. Also, managers repatriated from China could take a more active role in managing and supporting current expatriates in China (Sergeant & Frenkel, 1998). Such experienced executives could perform a coaching/mentoring role (Chao, Waltz & Gardner, 1992) at headquarters. Using an overlap period where the expatriate predecessor and successor are both present at the location in China to facilitate information exchange could also be useful (Selmer, 1995; Selmer & de Leon, 1997). Furthermore, giving headquarters directors more exposure to China through frequent brief visits may increase their awareness of the special circumstances meeting Western expatriate business managers in that country and pave the way for a concerted learning process to deal with the problem of culture shock in China (Sergeant & Frenkel, 1998).

Looking to future research on this topic, it is useful to scrutinize past attempts in this regard. A problem with empirical studies about the U-curve hypothesis and culture shock is that most of them are cross-sectional, like the present study. Other studies are affected by other methodological shortcomings, like for example Ward and Kennedy (1996) who in their longitudinal study initially only had a panel of 22 respondents which became 14 due to attrition by the third measurement. The recent longitudinal study by Ward et al. (1998) is also fraught with methodological shortcomings such as high panel mortality (72%), doubtful scale validity, adjustment patterns confined to an expatriate enclave, and doubtful value of findings on Japanese students in New Zealand in generalizing to Western business expatriates in China. Further research about the adjustment process of expatriate business managers would benefit from a rigorous longitudinal approach from which more conclusive findings could be gained. However, such an approach poses other serious methodological challenges (cf. Menard, 1991).

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Appendix A. Scale items used

A.1. Sociocultural adjustment (Black, 1988; Black & Stephens, 1989)

It is completely normal for an individual to have difficulty adjusting to living or working in a foreign country. Please indicate the degree to which you are adjusted or not adjusted to the following items living in the PRC.

1. Very unadjusted
2. Unadjusted
3. Somewhat unadjusted
4. Neutral
5. Somewhat adjusted
6. Adjusted
7. Completely adjusted

A.1.1. General adjustment

- Food
- Health care facilities
- Entertainment/recreation facilities and opportunities
- Living conditions in general
- Cost of living
- Shopping
- Housing conditions

A.1.2. Work adjustment

- Performance standards and expectations
- Supervisory responsibilities
- Specific job responsibilities

A.1.3. Interaction adjustment

- Interacting with host nationals outside of work
- Interacting with host nationals on a day-to-day basis
- Speaking with host nationals
- Socializing with host nationals

A.1.4. Psychological adjustment (Goldberg, 1972)

Please think about how you have been feeling over the past few weeks.

1. Not at all
2. Not more than usual
3. Rather more than usual
4. Much more than usual

Have you recently

- ...felt you couldn't overcome your difficulties? (R)
 - ...felt capable of making decisions about things?
 - ...been feeling unhappy and repressed? (R)
 - ...felt that you are playing a useful part in things?
 - ...been able to concentrate on whatever you're doing?
 - ...lost much sleep over worry? (R)
 - ...been thinking of yourself as a worthless person? (R)
 - ...been feeling reasonably happy all things considered?
 - ...been able to enjoy your normal day-to-day activities?
 - ...been able to face up to your problems?
 - ...felt constantly under strain? (R)
 - ...been losing confidence in yourself? (R)
- (R): Reversed polarity

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