

# **CROSS-CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT OF EXPATRIATES IN ORGANISATIONS**

**IN CHINA:**

## **THE NEED FOR A STRATEGIC APPROACH**

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#### **Abstract**

As organisations increasingly expand their international operations, preparing their expatriates to cross-cultural manage and maximise their performance in terms of cultural sensitivity and adaptation is a major concern. Performance in a cross-cultural sense may be defined as achieving the best results for the expatriate, the organisation and the host country in terms of adaptability and political, business, cultural and social sensitivity. Achieving such adaptability and sensitivity involves a significant amount of training on the part of organisations and commitment on the part of expatriates. China is the country for analysis in this research which examines the consideration given to training of expatriates in a nation with a large distance between home and host cultures. China is a significant site for examination of the cultural adaptability skills of expatriates as it looms large in the current and future trading and expansion plans of many Australian corporations. To-date very little attention has been given to recognising or developing the cultural skills necessary for Australian organisations to effectively operate in this demanding market. This study is based on information gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with expatriate managers in Shanghai. Results from the research indicate that despite a significant body of literature suggesting the need for cross-cultural preparation and training, training of managers for foreign postings is still very much neglected by human resource management departments.

**KEY WORDS:** expatriates, cross-cultural adjustment China.

As organisations increasingly expand their international operations, preparing their expatriates to cross-cultural manage and maximise their performance in terms of cultural sensitivity and adaptation is a major concern. Performance in a cross-cultural sense may be defined as

sending an employee to a host country operation capable of achieving the best results for the expatriate, the organisation and the host country in terms of adaptability and political, business, cultural and social sensitivity. Achieving such adaptability and sensitivity involves a significant amount of training, planning and support on the part of organisations and commitment on the part of expatriates. Clearly the financial costs and loss of business confidence resulting from expatriate failure are of major concern to organisations (Copeland & Griggs, 1985; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Punkett et. al., 1992). A failed expatriate has the high costs of returning to the home country (Milkovich & Newman, 1996) and disruption to the flow of operations in the host country in addition to the more serious consequences of damaged relations with the host country organisation and government and potentially the host market (Caudron, 1991; Harvey, 1985; Stephens & Black, 1991). As such, maximising the performance of expatriates in international postings will be an integral element of human resource management and planning as organisations enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the pace of globalisation necessitates that an increasing number of organisations must think globally and ensure that their expatriates are trained to do the same.

To-date research on expatriation has focused primarily on financial losses to organisations when expatriates return prematurely from foreign assignments or resign from organisations shortly after returning to the home country (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Black, et. al., 1991; Brewster & Larsen, 1992). However, this limited definition of expatriate failure as initially identified in the literature (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991; Nicholson et. al., 1990; Tung, 1982) insufficiently takes account of the expatriates who remain in the foreign posting and

continue with the organisation but have nonetheless failed in adapting to the host country culture. It is this lack of cultural sensitivity, as a result of being poorly trained, which leads to failure to adapt on business and social levels <sup>2</sup>. The problem of significance is not only the financial costs which organisations incur in the short-term if expatriates return prematurely or depart from their organisation, taking skills, expertise and experience to competitors (for an analysis of those at risk of premature departure, see Garonzik, Brockner & Siegel, 2000). Rather, it is the longer-term, more difficult to measure, consequences of perceived failure on the part of the expatriate him/herself herself (Grant, 1997; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998) and the damaged relations between home and subsidiary organisations and employees). Further, the literature has consistently highlighted the problems and conflict inherent where expatriates lack cross-cultural skills (Sargent & Matthews, 1998; Solomon, 1996), often as determined by perceptions local employees have of expatriates (Selmer, Kang & Wright, 1994; Thomas & Toyne, 1995; Watanabe & Yamaguchi, 1995). Hence, it is crucial for organisations as they move globally in the coming decades to ensure that their expatriates are sufficiently informed and prepared for international assignments. Moreover, it is important for researchers to assess what training organisations are providing to minimise these direct and indirect costs and provide guidelines on what is required in the future to minimise the expatriate failure of the past.

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<sup>2</sup> Poor selection (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Phatak, 1989; Selmer, 1999a; Selmer 1999b; Selmer 1999c; Selmer 1999d; Selmer & Ling, 1999; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998; Stedham & Nechita, 1994; Tung, 1981) and lack of in-post support (De Cieri et. al., 1991; Harris, 1989; Nicholson et. al., 1990) as noted elsewhere in the literature are also contributors to poor cross-cultural performance.

This research examines the need for careful attention to be given to expatriate preparation through cross-cultural. Moreover, the research intends to broaden the focus from a literature which is largely about Japanese, North American and European organisations. As yet, little research has yet been conducted examining the selection and/or support of expatriates in Australian organisations operating in Asia.

China has been chosen as the country for analysis as it is currently the world's largest recipient of international foreign direct investment and is worth \$U80 billion in 240,000 foreign-funded and joint venture agreements. Having thus far escaped much of the economic chaos besetting the rest of Asia, China looms large in the current and future trading and expansion plans of many Australian organisations (Kabanoff & Holt, 1996). Yet, despite the obvious worth of this country to Australian organisations very little attention has been given to recognising the cultural and social knowledge required to do business effectively in this expanding market (Fish & Wood, 1994; IRIC, 1995). Clearly if China is a major target market for Australian organisations, then the HR departments of these same organisations should be more carefully considering how they prepare their expatriates to enter such a lucrative market and ensure that the expatriates are not doing irreparable damage to future relations between the two markets.

In order to examine the issue of training of expatriates, this paper begins by reviewing the literature on expatriate training, especially in relation to Australia, China and Asia. Training practices are explored by studying Australian organisations operating in China. After outlining

the methods for undertaking interviews with expatriate managers of these companies in China, we analyse the results and identify implications for practice and theory.

### **Expatriate Training**

The need to meet the demands of selecting, training, and supporting expatriates to achieve high expatriate performance is affecting increasing numbers of organisations as the pace of internationalisation suggests that in order to survive, many organisations must become internationally focused (Goldsmith, 1996; Hirst & Thompson, 1995; Piore & Sable, 1994; Steiner & Steiner, 1994). In so doing, they need to consider the political, economic, cultural and social influences of the host country environment which that entails (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1990; Bedi, 1991; Dowling & Schuler, 1990). Literature has consistently highlighted the problems and conflict inherent where expatriates lack cross-cultural skills (Sargent & Matthews, 1998; Solomon, 1996), and in some cases this has been determined by perceptions local employees have of expatriates (Selmer, Kang & Wright, 1994; Thomas & Toyne, 1995; Watanabe & Yamaguchi, 1995). Literature has highlighted the need for acculturation and adaptation (Bird et. al., 1999; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999), the need to make sense of, and understand other cultures (Osland & Bird, 2000; Osland, DeFranco & Osland, 1999) and to adapt managerial styles and to interculturally adapt (Hammer et. al., 1998; Osland, Snyder & Osland, 1998).

In a survey of Asian managers, Australian managers were ranked poorly in terms of their adaptability skills, cross cultural skills and leadership skills (IRIC, 1995). In the Report of the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills (Karpin Report 1995, 69) carried out for the Australian Government, it was suggested that Australian managers might suffer from one of two things. First, that they have limited exposure on the global market, and second, that international best practice may not be widely pursued in Australian enterprises or in management development. In reviewing the Karpin Report, Edwards, O'Reilly and Schuwalow (1997) argued that it has been demonstrated that 'International' knowledge and skills are directly related to success in international business. Their paper focused on the link between language proficiency and export success but acknowledged that the need for broader 'international' skills was not well accepted among Australian managers and that this lack of cultural knowledge and language ability was retarding Australian business penetration of Asian markets. Yet despite these arguments having been made, little research has been conducted on expatriates in Asia and even less on Australian organisations. Clearly, in order to address these claims, there is need for research to be conducted on Australian managers in Asia to determine just what training they have received.

### *The Need to Provide Training*

The need to provide preparation, training, support and repatriation to expatriates is clearly noted in the literature that examines expatriate failure (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991; Caudron, 1991; Mendenhall, Dunbar & Oddou, 1987; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Tung, 1988). The problems associated with expatriate failure have been characterised as relating to

both the work environment and the inability of an expatriate to adjust personally to the host country environment. Following on from her earlier study, Tung (1990) examined the failure of United States' expatriate managers and highlighted five reasons for poor performance internationally, including: inability of a spouse to adjust; managers' own inability to adjust; other family reasons; managers' maturity levels; and inability to cope with larger overseas responsibilities. Accordingly, some significant attention has been given by organisations to adjusting expatriates to the demands of foreign operations, specifically, disruption stresses, transition stresses and adjustment stresses, as characterised by Harvey (1985). Further attention has been given by others to the need to also involve spouses and families in the expatriate adjustment process given that family stresses or inability to cope with the new environment can be one of the major reasons for expatriate failure (De Cieri, Dowling & Taylor, 1991; Stephens & Black, 1991).

Expatriate satisfaction or success in the foreign posting is also, in part, dependent upon avoidance of cultural shock, which are feelings of frustration and alienation in adapting to a new and different culture (Furnham, 1990; McEnery and Desharnais, 1990; Oberg, 1960). Indeed, Black, Mendenhall & Oddou (1991) convincingly argue that five factors contribute to international adjustment for the expatriate employee, including: predeparture training; previous overseas experience; organisational selection; individual skills; and other factors, such as family adjustment. Clearly, the organisation has a very important role to play in the provision of training which will make the transition to the international environment much more successful



for the expatriate and the organisation (Baliga and Baker, 1995; Desphande & Viswesvaran, 1992; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998; Mendenhall, Dunbar & Oddou, 1987; Tung, 1989).

Despite the general unwillingness of organisations to invest significant funds into expatriate training, researchers continue to argue for its necessity based on empirical studies of the failure of expatriates where such training is not provided. In their study of European organisations, Oddou and Derr (1992) found that firms need to equip expatriates with different skills, and a comprehensive understanding of a different world and language. Tung (1981), in a study of European, North American and Japanese organisations, focused on the need to provide background knowledge of the host country, cultural assimilation programmes, language training, sensitivity training and field experience prior to overseas posting. Considerable research has also focused specifically on cross-cultural training and development (Black & Mendenhall, 1989; Brislin, 1979; Derderian, 1993; Earley, 1987; Hogan & Goodson, 1990; Wyatt, 1989).

Moreover, in recent years, literature in this area has highlighted the necessity for skills in cross-cultural adaptation (Bird et. al., 1999; Osland & Bird, 2000; Osland, DeFranco & Osland, 1999; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999), and to adapt managerial styles (Hammer et. al., 1998; Osland, Snyder & Osland, 1998). Further, recent literature has begun to focus on Hong Kong and Mainland China (see Selmer, 1999a; Selmer 1999b; Selmer 1999c; Selmer 1999d; Selmer & Ling, 1999). Some of the most useful research to-date has been done in participant observation in longitudinal fieldwork (Yee-Man Siu, 1996) in which observers gather

information about the daily interaction of individuals and the organisation. Indeed, in such proximity, the observer is able to make a genuine assessment of the expatriate's adaptation to the foreign posting and ability to minimise loss of business confidence and promote cross-cultural understanding through the host country operations.

### ***Cross Cultural Training and Development***

Much of the literature has defined expatriate failure in terms of the expatriate's own dissatisfaction with the international posting and tendency to return home early or leave the organisation shortly after returning to the home nation (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991). Expatriate failure, for our purposes, is defined in terms of inability to adjust to the intercultural demands of the international assignment and consequent financial and non-financial costs which result from failure to establish and maintain effective working relationships with the host nation workforce. These negative consequences may include voided business deals, loss of valuable employees, breakup of joint ventures and poor relations with the host government (Fatehi, 1996:312). Successful performance is defined as responsiveness to the uniqueness of the host nation and the ability to respond to cultural requirements of the nation as assessed by the local workforce.

Research has indicated a positive link between the provision of cross-cultural training (CCT) and increased cross-cultural relationship skills and cross-cultural adjustment and job performance (Black & Mendenhall, 1989). Further studies suggest that where CCT is provided, expatriate failure rates are reduced to approximately five percent (Kohls, 1985).

Approaches to CCT include: self-awareness training; cognitive training; attribution training; behaviour modification; and experiential training (Brislin, 1979). An expanded version of this was later provided by Shames (1986). He suggested that intercultural training programmes need to include development of expatriate staff in the following attributes and skills: self-awareness; cultural reading; multiple perspectives; intercultural communication; cultural flexibility; cultural resilience; skills in building interpersonal relationships; and intercultural facilitation skills (Shames, 1986).

Cultural training should include preparation not only for the individual expatriate but also for his/her family and should entail pre-departure training in addition to in-post support and monitoring of stress and performance. Following culture-general training (focused on cultural sensitivity awareness), culture-specific training should be provided (Fatehi, 1996:312-18).

### ***Expatriate Training and Asia***

Despite the breadth of research into the need for expatriate training, it has overwhelmingly focussed on North American and European cases and ignores the adjustment process for Australian managers. In recent work on expatriate adjustment, Selmer (1998) excludes 18 Australian expatriate managers from a sample of 154 expatriates leaving a group comprising exclusively Western European and North American managers. From the growing literature on business management practices and policies in Asia, one may speculate that Western expatriate managers assigned there would have to make considerable sociocultural adjustments to their roles at work (Child, 1994; Goodall & Warner, 1997; Selmer, 1997).

However there are actually very few studies dealing with the work adjustments of expatriate managers in the Asian region. Bjoraman & Schaap (1994) discuss some problems encountered by expatriates in Chinese-Western joint ventures and suggested practical ways to handle these issues. While making some quite pertinent observations about cultural differences, particularly in attitudes to employee work ethics and dispute resolution the study had little relevance to the Australian situation. Bjorkaman & Schaap (1994) emphasised the importance of language competence and also indicated some problems particular to female expatriates in China. Davidson (1987) examined effective intercultural interaction in Sino-US joint ventures, where American and Chinese board members and top managers must work together to run the company. Weldon & Jehn (1996) studied intercultural conflicts in US-Chinese joint ventures and Rimmington (1996) examined the management process of developing a Sino-British joint venture. These studies tended to focus on the very top level of executive engagement, conflict resolution and memoranda of understanding. They offered little in the way of guidelines applicable to Australian expatriate selection.

The two other sociocultural adjustment dimensions, 'interaction adjustment' and 'general adjustment' have attracted a substantial amount of research over the years and is very well reviewed in the literature on sojourner adjustment (Church, 1982). However in this body of literature, only a few authors have dealt with expatriate business managers. Lee and Larwood (1983) investigated the cultural socialisation of U.S. expatriate managers in Korea and found that when they adjusted their attitudes to the host culture it resulted in more work satisfaction. Mendenhall & Oddou (1985) also supported the significance of non-work roles by analysing

and pointing out the importance of expatriate acculturation gained through effective interactions with host country nationals. Selmer (1992) and Selmer & Leon (1989) found that Swedish expatriate managers in South-east Asia regarded non-work socialisation difficult, due to the high language and/or cultural barriers, and of little importance, resulting in them gaining a low degree of socialisation in the host society. Again the focus of research in non-work related adjustment has been based on the experiences of North American or Western European expatriate managers. Apart from some anecdotal reports no research addressing this issue from the Australian manager's perspective could be found.

### ***Chinese Culture and the Need for Expatriate Training***

Certain Eastern cultural values need to be accepted and, indeed, respected by organisations operating in these environments. In particular, the major Confucian values underlying China is the relational orientations (Yau, 1987) of respect for authority, interdependence and group orientation. Moreover, whilst Hofstede's comparison of Chinese and Western values is not without its detractors, the study does correctly define the Chinese-dominated societies as collectivist, feminine, having high power distance and a high degree of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede & Bond, 1988). (See also, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997, 8-9) for their seven bases of cultural difference. Given that Australia was ranked closer to the other end of the spectrum as being individualist, masculine and having lower power distance and uncertainty avoidance, a considerable degree of adaptation is required of Australian expatriate managers working in China.

Specifically, in terms of business practices, this Eastern approach translates into considerable workplace hierarchy, emphasis on hard work, risk taking and abstract goals. The Western manager therefore is promoting and rewarding workers based on performance related to effort, stability and interpersonal skills - all of which are perceived by local workforces as abstract concepts and invariably lead to communication difficulties between expatriate managers and local employees. Communication is further hindered by the expatriate managers expectation that subordinates will interact on an equal level with his/her supervisors - an expectation far removed from the experience of cultures acquiescent to authority. Additional cultural differences related to understandings of quality of life bring Western managers into conflict with eastern employees over expectations on the part of Eastern employees that the employer should respect family time and responsibilities. The masculine values of assertiveness, aggressiveness and materialism valued by the expatriate manager will not necessarily lead to desired outcomes on the Eastern employee (Ralston et. al., 1995, 74-82).

The challenge for the expatriate manager, and specifically for the organisation in regards to the development of effective training for expatriates, is to understand the bases of cultural differences but to move beyond awareness of cultural differences alone, to developing respect for cultural differences. Ultimately, ensuring the success of the expatriate, the organisation and relations with the host country, demands the ability to reconcile cultural difference.

## **Methods**

The information on which this study is based was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with expatriate managers in Shanghai, China in April, 1999. Qualitative interviews were conducted with the expatriates with the aim of hearing in detail and complexity how they describe and contextualise why their companies selected them for this international assignment, the nature of the training provided to them, and the in-post support offered by their organisations. Thus, the authors were able to ascertain not only *what* is happening, but also *why* organisations make the choices they do in relation to selection, training and in-post support.

### **Procedure**

From databases of Australian organisations operating in China maintained by the China Secretariat in Australia and the Australian Consulate and Austrade in China, 24 organisations were selected for study. Organisations were selected provided that they met two conditions: that they had 500 or more employees and had operations in China for at least five years. These conditions were established for the following reasons. First, it was felt that, given their size and financial resources, large employers would be more likely to have developed some form of cross-cultural and expatriate training programme. The cut off point of 500 employees for large firms was selected based on previous research (e.g. Morehead et al, 1997). Second, it was reasoned that organisations which have had operations in China for at least five years would be more likely than more recent investors to have developed a host nation profile and be acquainted with the cultural demands of operating within this nation. Organisations were

also chosen across industries to avoid the possibility of industry-specific training obscuring the findings.

Of the 24 organisations that met the criteria, 22 organisations agreed to participate in the research. The high response rate was attributed to two factors. First, a belief that the need for training of expatriates is increasingly considered to be of vital importance to organisations with an international profile. Second, because of the fact that one of the authors had insider status with a number of the expatriate managers as a result of having spent several years studying and working in China.

A semi-structured interview was designed to be of one hour duration. In practice, interviews were between forty minutes and two hours in duration. The interview notes were transcribed and, where necessary, returned to the interviewees for clarification and further comment. At the interviewees' request, interviews were not audio-recorded. At all stages throughout the process expatriates were assured that all information provided was given on a purely voluntary basis. Moreover, they were reminded that their names, their employees' names and the names of their organisations would not appear on any data collected and would be kept strictly confidential.

### **Sample**

The sample of 22 Australian organisations and expatriates were drawn from a multi-industry background of organisations operating on a joint-venture or direct foreign investment basis



with the proviso being that senior management of the organisations must be non-Chinese. The ethnic background of the participants was primarily Australian Anglo-Saxon. The majority of respondents were male, although efforts were made by the researchers to seek interviews with fairly equal numbers of males and females by requesting to interview female managers. For biodata on the expatriates interviewed and surveyed, see Table 1. For confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms for organisations are used throughout.

*“Insert Table 1 about here”*

The table highlights the nationality and gender of the respondents. The respondents’ industry placing, years of experience in China and as an expatriate elsewhere are noted in the table. Their language proficiency (in addition to English) as well as their education in Chinese culture is also noted. Of the respondents, the majority held the position of CEO or Senior Manager in the Chinese operation. Of the 22 respondents, 5 were married and the remainder single. The ages of the respondents ranged from 25 to 45 with the average age being 33. Expatriates were selected by the organisations contacted. As noted the majority of the interviewees held the most senior positions in the host nation operation and hence were the first point of contact in the targeted organisations.

### **Measurement**

The interviews with expatriates asked them about types of training provided, cultural training, language training, practical training, executive briefing, and notice of posting. The questions

were developed on the basis of the areas identified in the literature of training provided or that needs to be provided by organisations sending managers on expatriate postings. Questions were specifically adapted to the cultural and business practices of China.

## **Results and Discussion**

One of the key findings of this study is that despite a significant body of literature suggesting the need for organisations to adequately prepare their prospective expatriate managers for the cross-cultural demands of managing internationally, still very little attention is given to training. This suggests that organisations are still not prepared to invest resources (both monetary and time) in preparing their expatriates, but at least acknowledge the demands of operating in a foreign environment are quite different from that of the home environment. Hence, they are recognising that there is a necessity to choose people who already possess some of the skills to make them more successful than managers who do not have these cross-cultural skills and knowledge.

### **Training**

With respect to training, expatriates were questioned about types of training, cultural training, language training, practical training, executive briefing, and notice of posting. Despite convincing argument in the literature highlighting the importance of training to cultural

adjustment, and hence success for the expatriate and the organisation, the organisations in this study are still providing very little training.

### ***Training and problems***

Of the twenty-two interviewees, only six claimed to have received formal training prior to arriving, or during their assignment, in China. The majority of the interviewees argued that some training is essential to maximise the expatriate experience. One manager did, however, suggest that

I have done some consulting on other Chinese societies - Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. So, I did not need so much training. I had only a week's notice of this posting - but I did move back and forth between home and China for a few months. (4Elec-X-EF).

Significantly, the vast majority (18) claimed to have encountered problems on a business and/or social level, many of whom argued that could have been at least partially avoided had they received some, or more, training than they did. Most of these problems are consistent with transition stresses and adjustment stresses and are exhibited at a work and non-work level.

Responses to this question included comments such as

Numerous examples - where to find things, how to shop, different food styles. Social needs have to be met before you can get on with doing business (6Hosp-X-AM).

There are vast differences in practices and logistics. It's hard to define. How can you educate about this? Previous managers left China suddenly so there was no changeover period (17Bac-X-AM).

Everything [was a problem] - I had to live in a hotel at first until I could find an apartment. I had no idea how to get around, how to order food. I could not even speak to my staff without an interpreter (19Bac-X-AM).

All interviewees who had experienced problems in their adaptation to living in China and operating in a different business environment argued that the problems would have at least partially been alleviated had they received some cultural training. Though a number argued that training can never fully prepare you for a new culture until you experience it, most did suggest that some training would have given them some preparation for what to expect. As one expatriate argued

no matter what you learn, you will not experience it until you are here. It a matter of degree how you will cope, but certainly some preparation is vital (8Food-X-AM).

The major problems faced included social issues of knowing where to find food and services they were accustomed to at home, and business issues relating to differing cultural practices. The majority of interviewees expressed feelings of alienation and frustration consistent with cultural shock. Two of the major business issues mentioned were loss of face and dealing with customers. As one respondent argued

for me the hardest issue is how to deal with a customer. How to handle contacts. Understanding of issues like competition between companies and relationship problems. (2Re-X-AM),  
definitely the most difficult thing to deal with is loss of face. Even if people are not performing, it is difficult to reprimand them. (7Hosp-X-AM).

### ***Cultural training***

None of the expatriates interviewed had received any specific training on Chinese culture and cultural sensitivity. This is despite the fact that since the early 1980s experts on expatriation have been calling for organisations to equip their expatriates with the requisite skills for coping in foreign postings by providing them with cultural assimilation and cultural sensitivity training . One expatriate commented that,

There was not really any, but I do not think it matters. You need to experience it for yourself. I am glad I did not have training - it made much more sense to me when I lived it, (4Elec-X-EF).

However, the vast majority of respondents said there was a very real need to have some knowledge of the culture before they arrived. Whilst it has been noted that many of the expatriates had already had some formal education in Chinese culture and were likely to have been chosen on this basis, there still seems to be a need for organisations to provide some additional training related to its own needs in China. One interviewee noted,

not as such did I receive training in culture. There is a mentor provided. When I looked for help, I was told, 'Do what you can'. I was not aware of time constraints. One needs to be very self-sufficient here. Informally, you have to seek your own support, and this can pose difficulties. (2Re-X-AM).

The associated issue which tends to have been neglected by organisations, though, is that whilst an expatriate may already have formal knowledge of China, their family probably will not. As one expatriate commented,

I received some basic communication techniques, but my family received none and it is my wife who is out there in the marketplace trying to get by on a social level from day to day. (18Bac-X-AM).

Importantly, as has been consistently argued in the literature, a spouse or family's inability to adjust can also result in expatriate failure, even in cases where the expatriates themselves have managed to adjust.

### ***Language training***

Language training was somewhat better accommodated by organisations with ten expatriates claiming that their organisation provided them with some language classes or would do if there was the requirement. Of those, six said there was also the facility for some training in multicultural communication as part of the language course. However, all argued that the training is not really sufficient and only provides the most rudimentary skills – a significant oversight of organisations given the noted importance of language for adjustment at work and non-work levels. One expatriate did suggest however that language skills were not as important as the ability of an individual to adapt and take a “big picture” view. As she said,

I had three weeks [language skills] but have had no time to follow up since.

However, I do not see this as a problem. We have had people with language training but no company knowledge. This does not work. You want to convey company knowledge to locals - systems need to be implemented. The task is to train up the locals. We are meant to train as international managers, not as China experts. (4Elec-X-EF).

More specifically, she cited the need to have on-going assistance. As she said,

you need someone to ask once questions arise. However, it is difficult to take in knowledge. There is a need to become involved or you feel isolation and loneliness in the expatriate community. Attitudes to men and women are quite different but this needs to be expressed to expatriates. Denial of cultural difference and difficulties does not help. (4Elec-X-EF).

Moreover, the onus is usually placed on the expatriates themselves to follow-up their language skills either through practice or providing their own study. Issues of intercultural communication are also virtually ignored by organisations, although some language courses do provide some training in areas of knowledge of attitudes to flexibility and resilience. Again, it is noted that no organisation in this study had made language classes available to families.

### ***Practical training***

Of all the areas of training examined, it is practical training which is given most attention by organisations, although it should be noted that this is very much limited to financial and practical assistance with relocation. All but one of the expatriates had received some assistance with relocation or said it would be made available by their organisation even if they had not availed themselves of it because they were already situated in the Asian region or China itself. Relocation generally covered financial assistance with the move for the expatriate and family, if required. One expatriate argued that the assistance she had received in this regard was very comprehensive. As she said,



It was perfectly organised from hotel accommodation to an orientation program to medical assistance and regular trips home. I am also able to meet with someone from the company and discuss problems when at home. (4Elec-X-EF).

In some cases organisations also provide assistance in helping expatriates to settle in to their new environment by providing information about shopping, medical facilities, schools, social activities and clubs. One interviewee is actually employed by her organisation to serve just that purpose and acts as an on-going liaison consultant to expatriates.

Not one of the expatriates interviewed in this research project had been sent on a short visit to China prior to commencing their posting, although a number of them had been to China previously whether on short-term work visits with other organisations or as language students. Almost all interviewees argued, however, that it was most desirable for an organisation to send expatriates on such a visit to ensure that they would have some prior practical knowledge of the country in which they would live and work. Clearly, having such experience would assist expatriates in their awareness of the country in which they will be living and hence make it easier for them to cope in terms of non-work socialisation. This is an aspect which is often more difficult to adjust to than the work environment and the area which actually may be such a negative experience that it results in expatriate failure at a work level. One expatriate said,

no, I was not sent on a short visit, but I would have liked it. I only received two weeks notice of this posting – more preparation would have given me a better understanding of China’s culture and what I would be exposed to and would have assisted my transition greatly and made me more effective as a manager in China. (15Law-X-AF).

Importantly, it was argued, expatriate failure could be somewhat minimised by allowing expatriates to have some exposure to China prior to being posted. Several expatriates argued that it was difficult to have an understanding of China just from theory alone and that being able to spend even just a short term in the country would allow people to know what they were “getting themselves into”. As one expatriate commented,

many people will know immediately on setting foot in the country whether they would be able to live here for two or three years. It should save companies a lot of lost money if they would invest more in the initial stages of expatriation. (19Bac-X-AM).

Further, as a manager in the hospitality industry suggested in relation to short visits

I think this is vital. The company needs to find people with a good China attitude who are looking for a challenge and a cultural experience and this could be ascertained from a short trip. (6Hosp-X-AM).

### *Executive briefing*

Contrary to expectations very few organisations fully prepare their expatriates about the nature of their organisation's business in China. Less than half (10) of the expatriates had received an executive briefing on their organisation's operations in China. Of these, the majority had been fairly comprehensive covering the economic environment in China, the organisation's specific long-term strategies in China and the role that the given expatriate was to play in this process. As one expatriate said,

My briefing was fairly comprehensive. It was one month's familiarisation in Sydney about organisational changes in China. (14Law-X-AF).

However, other expatriates claimed that whilst they had received an overall strategic outline, there probably was more need to have a sense of how the subsidiary operation actually worked on a daily basis. One expatriate (12Rec-X-AM) said that he has been briefed by the local manager and that this was probably more beneficial than having received the information from headquarters in Australia. Another expatriate commented along similar lines,

Yes, my company was very hands-on. However, they could not really provide me with the amount of information that I would need about the subsidiary office. (10Educ-X-AF).

### *Notice of posting*

The majority of interviewees argued that they had received very little notice of their posting to China and hence there was little time for their organisation to fully train and prepare them for the demands of the new environment. Two of the expatriates had received three months notice, one had received six weeks notice, and eleven had received one months notice. One expatriate had received three weeks notice, four had received two weeks notice, and three expatriates had received only one weeks notice of their posting to China. As would be expected, the majority of expatriates complained that they had not had enough time to organise themselves for the move or prepare themselves emotionally, much less to have received adequate training to allow them to cope socially and in a business setting in their new posting. As one expatriate summarised the experience of many others,

I had very little preparation. I was simply given some information about production and performance in China and the like and expected to read it myself. (16Trans-X-AM).

Or as another commented,

I was just asked if I was willing to live in China for two years and then sent on a one-day language course. I arrived in China two weeks later. (21Man-X-AM).

Most believed that they had in effect received no training, and certainly not training which would prepare them culturally for the demands of the new environment. As one expatriate lamented,

The only training I can really say I received was about company specific briefs in relation to China and the product's market. Training is certainly a very neglected part of this company's preparation for foreign postings (18Bac-X-AM).

## **Conclusions**

### **Implications for Practice**

Current research suggests that expatriate training is rarely provided and, where it is, tends to be very much ad hoc in nature. It is evident then that expatriate training or preparation and consequent repatriation needs to be improved in a number of important aspects. There is a clear need for expatriates to be fully briefed prior to being sent on overseas postings and that these would be more effective if they included goal-setting, performance expectations, awareness of socio-cultural limitations of operating from a business and social perspective in the host environment. It follows then that the more country specific the training, the better. However, generalist training, particularly in reference to knowledge of culture shock and

reverse culture shock would also be desirable aspects to incorporate into the training programme.

Arguably, the major area in need of improvement is cultural training. Where training of this nature is provided it tends to be rather ad hoc and in response to problems that have arisen rather than being provided as a preventative measure. While some organisations do provide preparation for their expatriates, many organisations still provide little or no cultural and language training or executive briefing. Those that do not risk not only severe emotional consequences for their employees but also major problems of adjustment and operation for the subsidiary workplace. Moreover, the lack of attention given by organisations to providing training for expatriate spouses and families can be a major factor resulting in expatriate failure in host country operations. It has been clearly documented that providing the family with the skills and knowledge to deal with the new environment can be a major contributor to the success of the expatriate.

Given that organisations continue to post PCNs overseas, the time spent on developing effective expatriate training programmes would be money and time well invested and could substantially reduce the problems associated with having expatriate managers who are emotionally and practically ill-equipped for the demands of business and social environment in their host country operation. Whilst sending individuals and/or families on short visits to countries of expected posting involves considerable time and resources, the indirect benefits in terms of increased individual employee confidence and ability to adapt to, and respect, the

local people and environment, is probably substantial. Further, to extend the training to encompass repatriation and succession planning would provide organisations with a committed group of individuals who are suited to being transferred back and forth across international operations. Moreover, organisations that are thinking strategically in their human resource management planning for expatriates also need to build succession planning and career pathing into preparation of their expatriates. As a guide to follow we suggest that training include the factors outlined in the Table 2:

*“Insert Table 2 about here”*

### **Implications for Theory**

As noted, despite the breadth, and in some cases, depth, of research into the need for expatriate training, the focus has overwhelmingly been on North American and European cases. To this end, research examining the adjustment process for Australian managers and for expatriates in Asia makes a valuable contribution to existing literature. Within the bodies of literature that have examined Asia, the focus has been largely on top-level managers, conflict resolution and sociological interaction and general adjustment. Little attention has hitherto been given to non-work adjustment and the implications it has for work adjustment. Where it has been considered, the focus has been largely North American and European. Apart from anecdotal research conducted by the authors and mentioned briefly in other literature, no research addressing these issues from the perspective of Australian managers could be found. Importantly then this research broadens the areas of existing literature. However, whilst it has

the benefits of focusing on a developing nation with a mix of Confucian and Communist roots, it does still provide valuable implications for practice which may be generalised across the expatriation experience. This research also supports the generalisations in existing literature which may be made about China concerning the need for training (and perhaps a more significant need given its greater cultural distance than previously examined nations). Despite the convincing argument made in the literature for cultural preparedness of expatriates, organisations are still giving very little attention to providing, or developing these programs themselves, to utilise with their expatriates. Much of the onus is resting on the expatriates themselves to find their own areas of need and informally seek out assistance.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study makes two key contributions to existing literature and research. First, it examines training of expatriates for operations in China. This is a significant contribution given that the majority of existing literature focuses on North America and Europe. Second, the research establishes a model and guidelines for organisations to follow in preparing their expatriates for foreign posting to best ensure their cultural preparedness and ability to adapt and be sensitive to the local situation. However, it is acknowledged that this research is limited by being based on a small sample and the future research which is based on a larger sample would be beneficial. A larger sample could include a wider range of nationalities for the companies and expatriates examined. We further suggest that further research, could broaden this initial study to include a quantitative survey of expatriates as well as a quantitative survey of the expatriates' local employees. Moreover, literature and practice would also be better informed



by future research focused on other aspects beyond the scope of this research which do affect the ability of expatriates to adapt and be culturally sensitive. A most important factor is the influence of spouses and families, which are covered elsewhere in the literature but have not been examined in the context of China.

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**Table 1: Biodata for Expatriates**

<b>Respondent Code</b>	<b>Years in China</b>	<b>Years as expatriate elsewhere</b>	<b>Languages</b>	<b>Education in Chinese culture</b>
1 Bac-X-EM	11	2	Mandarin, German	Yes
2 Re-X-AM	1	1	Mandarin	Yes
3 Print-X-AM	3		Mandarin	Yes
4 Elec-X-EF	3	2	German	No
5 Prop-X-AM	2		Mandarin	Yes
6 Hosp-X-AM	11		Mandarin	No
7 Hosp-X-AM	5			No
8 Food-X-AM	5			No
9 Educ-X-AF	3			No
10 Educ-X-AF	6			Yes
11 Rec-X-AM	1			Yes
12 Rec-X-AM	2			Yes
12 Cat-X-AM	3	3		No
14 Law-X-AF	1			Yes
15 Law-X-AF	1			No
16Trans-X-AM	3			No
17 Bac-X-AM	2	3	Mandarin	No
18 Bac-X-AM	7		Mandarin	Yes
19 Bac-X-AM	1			No
20 Bac-X-AM	1	7		No
21Man-X-AM	2			No
22 Food-X-AM	2			No

**Respondent Codes:**

**Industry type:** Bac = building and construction industry, Re = real estate industry, Print = printing industry, Elec = electronic and components industry, Law = legal industry, Trans = transportation industry, man = manufacturing industry, prop = property industry, Hosp = hospitality industry, Food = food and beverage industry, Educ = education and training industry, Cat = clothing and textiles industry

**Nationality:** A = Australian, B = British, E = European, NA = North American

**Gender:** M = Male, F= Female

**Table 2:**  
**Factors to be Considered in Training of Expatriates for International Postings**

**Pre-departure training and information for expatriate and/or family**

*Didactic information training about host nation*

- History
- Culture
- Geography and demographics
  - Economy
  - political structure

*Language*

- classes for expatriate and family
  - self-instructional tapes
- interpersonal communication

*Cultural sensitivity training*

- social practices
- business customs
- coping with cultural shock
- norms, values, non-verbal behaviour

*Practical training*

- health, safety and medical
- food, water and shopping
- transportation, communications and mail

*Executive briefing*

- nature of company's operations
- host nation organisational strategies
- interaction with host country institutions

*Field experience*

- visits to intended nation prior to posting
- meetings with returned expatriates
- exposure to mini-cultures in home nation
  - host-family surrogate