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Context matters: Acculturation and work-related outcomes of self-initiated expatriates employed by foreign vs. local organizations



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ABSTRACT

Research on various outcomes of foreign assignments has seldom involved the specific organizational context. This study examines the acculturation of self-initiated expatriates in local and foreign-owned organizations. Based on the choice-within-constraints framework in new institutional theory, we propose that self-initiated expatriate academics in local organizations are better adjusted to general life and interaction with host country nationals than their counterparts in foreign-owned organizations. We also suggest that, due to limited available human cognitive capacity, the adjustment of expatriate academics with regard to general life and interaction in the two types of organizations has different consequences for work-related outcomes. Specifically, we hypothesize that for expatriates in foreign organizations, general adjustment is positively associated with work-related outcomes while, for expatriates in local organizations, interaction adjustment is instead positively associated with their work-related outcomes. Based on 210 self-initiated expatriate academics in China and Taiwan, our findings generally provide support for these hypothesized relationships. By demonstrating the role of organization type in expatriate adjustment we contribute to the use of social learning theory in this area) arguing that acculturation should not be perceived to occur in a vacuum. Rather the adjustment patterns of expatriates are affected by the social and institutional context.

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1. Introduction

While a number of studies have focused on whether local or expatriate top managers are more effective in subsidiaries (e.g. Colakoglu & Caligiuri, 2008; Gaur, Delios, & Singh, 2007; Gong, 2003; Sekiguchi, Bebenroth, & Li, 2011; Tseng & Liao, 2009) very little research has examined the role of expatriates in local versus foreign-owned organizations. With a growing number of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) (Tharenou, 2013), this theme is becoming increasingly important because they can be employed in both types of organizations.

Local organizations have traditionally been more reluctant to employ foreigners due to trust issues and to their unfamiliarity with local conditions that could lead to adjustment problems (Harzing, 2001). This has not least been noted for Asian organizations (Arp, Hutchings, & Smith, 2013). Durnin (2014) stated that 85% of expatriates in China are employed by

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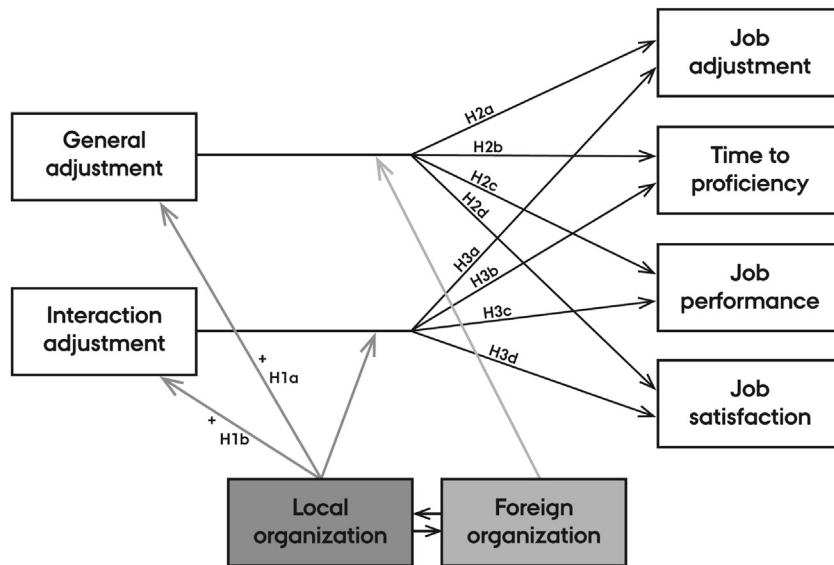


Fig. 1. Hypotheses.

foreign companies and that expatriates find it hard to get a position in locally-owned companies and universities. This is despite official government policy to attract global talent within state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and Chinese universities' strive to gain international world-class status (Wang, Liu, & Wang, 2011)¹. Although local Asian organizations have been found reluctant to hire foreign employees, global competition has reached a level at which local organizations, regardless of concerns about loyalty and control, are joining the marketplace for global talent. However, it has been argued that more research is needed to understand this development (Arp, 2013; *Arp et al.*, 2013).

SIEs differ from traditional expatriates in that their relocation is not facilitated by a parent organization (Andresen, Al Ariss, & Walther, 2012). Rather they seek employment abroad on their own initiative and are part of an international competition for jobs and for talent (Arp et al., 2013; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). According to Cerdin and Selmer (2014), SIEs are generally distinguished by four concurrent criteria: (1) self-initiated international relocation (2) regular employment (intentions), (3) intentions of a temporary stay, and (4) skilled/professional qualifications.

In this study, we focus on SIE academics. A number of studies have recently explored expatriate academics, their adjustment (Froese, 2012; Selmer & Lauring, 2009) and their motivation to relocate (Richardson & McKenna, 2002; Selmer & Lauring, 2010, 2012). It has been speculated that academic work is relatively autonomous and that it may be conducted in a similar fashion across different countries (Froese, 2012). As such, university employees looking for work abroad can be characterized by having a high non-firm specific capital which makes them particularly mobile in the international labor market (Tece, 1998).

In this study, we set out to investigate how the type of organization (local or foreign university) may impact SIE academics' acculturation in the form of general and interaction adjustment. We also explore how these two facets of adjustment are associated with work-related outcomes of expatriates in the two different types of organizations. By investigating the potential effect of the organizational context rather than that of individual characteristics, such as, for example, personality traits (Selmer & Lauring, 2013; Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006) or early intercultural experiences (Tarique & Weisbord, 2013), we contribute to the scarce but growing literature focusing on how expatriate adjustment is shaped also by the surrounding environment (see for example Schütter & Boerner, 2013; Takeuchi, Wang, Marinova, & Yao, 2009). This is a relatively under-studied area in extant expatriate research, and more work is needed on how the organizational context and adjustment to this context may affect expatriates. We aim to show that context matters in expatriate adjustment. Thereby we hope to further theory development linked to social learning theory in expatriate management as seen basically as an individual level process detached from the surroundings.

¹ In our study, the argument that there are more expatriates in foreign-owned universities than in locally-owned universities is substantiated by there being, on average, almost ten times as many responses from expatriates in foreign universities (23 per university) compared to local universities (2.5 per university).

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