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# Predictors of post-migration growth for Chinese international students in Australia



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## ABSTRACT

The current research focus in acculturation study has been shifted to a resilience framework. Post-migration growth is one of the positive adaptation outcomes in cross-cultural adaptation. The objective of this study was to investigate post-migration growth and its predictors among Chinese international students in Australia. A total of 227 Chinese students were recruited from universities in a big Australian city, for a cross-sectional survey study. It was found that Chinese students developed a moderate level of post-migration growth in their adaptation to Australia. Hierarchical regression analysis showed (a) that duration of residence in Australia, challenge appraisal, sense-making coping and meaning-in-life were significant positive predictors; and (b) that acculturative hassles and threat appraisal were significant negative predictors of post-migration growth for Chinese international students in Australia. Theoretical implications for resilience research in acculturation and practical implications for resilience-based and meaning-oriented intervention for Chinese international students were suggested.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Current research focus in acculturation study

As indicated by [Berry \(2006\)](#) in his model of acculturative stress and adaptation, adaptation outcomes may vary from very negative to very positive. The current research focus in acculturation has been shifted to a resilience framework ([Ehrensaft & Tousignant, 2006](#)). Recent acculturation research has shown that many migrants can overcome unfavorable conditions and successfully adapt to their host societies (e.g. [Bhugra, 2004](#)). Unlike the psychopathological perspective, resilience framework emphasizes positive adaptation outcomes and their contributing protective factors ([Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990](#)). Guided by the resilience framework, acculturation research should identify various risk and protective factors, and investigate how these factors interact with each other to promote positive outcomes in cross-cultural adaptation ([Pan, 2011](#)). Positive adaptation outcome does not necessarily imply lack of psychopathology; it may also indicate positive aspects of well-being and mental health, such as happiness, life satisfaction and personal growth. As “few studies have specifically targeted the process of resilience” in acculturation ([Ehrensaft & Tousignant, 2006](#), p. 470), this study used a resilience framework to investigate the phenomenon of post-migration growth and its risk and protective factors for international students. As the

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participants in this study were international students, migration refers to temporarily moving to another country or region for study.

### 1.2. Post-migration growth as an indicator of positive adaptation outcome in acculturation

Post-migration growth is the positive changes that occur in the process of migration. It is one of the positive adaptation outcomes for migrant groups. Personal growth has been examined in a variety of populations who encounter traumatic and stressful life situations, but it has been seldom studied in migrant groups. According to the literature on trauma/stress and growth, when facing negative life events, people do experience distress, but they can also experience stress-related growth (SRG) (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), such as enhanced relationships, altered views of self and a changed philosophy of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The concept of SRG is also applicable to the context of migration for the following reasons: (1) migration is a stressful life experience which may cause distress; and (2) re-settlement challenges create an excellent opportunity for personal growth (Montuori & Fahim, 2004). Empirical studies have demonstrated that post-migration growth does occur among international students, including mastery of host language, improved interpersonal and communication skills, personal development and academic success (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010).

### 1.3. Model of stress-related growth and its application in acculturation research

A close review of the theoretical models of SRG shows that the cognitive processing of meaning-making plays a central role in most SRG models (Park, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Joseph, 2009; Schaefer & Moos, 1992; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Park and colleagues (Park, 2010; Park & Ai, 2006; Park & Folkman, 1997) proposed the most integrative SRG model of meaning-making. According to Park and colleagues, there are two levels of meaning: global meaning and situational meaning. Global meaning includes one's beliefs (about the world, self, and self-in-world), goals, and subjective sense of meaningfulness; and situational meaning derives from finding meaning in a specific situation or experience. When encountering a potentially stressful situation assessed by stressfulness appraisal of threat and challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), people assign an initial situational meaning to the event (Park, 2010). The discrepancy between global and situational meaning causes distress, and this causes the meaning-making process to reduce this discrepancy by either modifying the situational meaning to make it consistent with the global meaning or changing the relevant global meaning to accommodate the situational meaning (Park, 2010). These two types of meaning-making effort result in SRG (Park, 2010). Meaning-making is also central to the process of resilience in acculturation (Ehrensaft & Tousignant, 2006).

Stressfulness appraisal was revealed to be an important component in the occurrence of SRG (Armeli, Gunthert, & Cohen, 2001; Linley & Joseph, 2004). Challenge appraisal has been consistently demonstrated to be positively related to SRG in various stressful situations, such as caregiving (Jones, Winslow, Lee, Burns, & Zhang, 2011), transition to motherhood (Taubman & Shlomo, 2009), the workplace (Harrowfield & Gardner, 2010), and exposure to terrorism (Dekel & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2009). However, the effect of threat appraisal on SRG is inconclusive in the literature (Park & Fenster, 2004; Dekel & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2009; Taubman & Shlomo, 2009). Thus, the role of threat appraisal in SRG should be investigated by more empirical studies, especially in the context of migration.

Sense-making coping is a way of developing and changing situational meaning. It is the cognitive coping strategy of developing an understanding of an adverse event and its implications (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998). Growth may occur as a result of finding meaning in uncontrollable environmental events (Mahoney, 1982). Empirical evidence shows a significant association between sense-making coping and SRG (Thombre, Sherman, & Simonton, 2010; Park et al., 1996). Finding and recreating meaning in adversity is also central in the process of migration (Ehrensaft & Tousignant, 2006). It was found that the negative effects of acculturative stressors were reduced for those migrants who perceived them as necessary and indispensable (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Qin, 2006). Thus, future acculturation research should examine whether sense-making coping is protective to successful adaptation for migrants (Gudino, Nadeem, Kataoka, & Lau, 2011).

Meaning-in-life is one aspect of global meaning (Park, 2010). It refers to a sense of significance felt by individuals regarding the nature of their being and existence (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Finding meaning-in-life in the aftermath of confronting hardship is the key to adaptation and positive functioning (Zika & Chamberlain, 1987). The acculturation experience provides new freedom for people to engage in a quest for meaning-in-life (Wong, 2007). For Chinese migrants, making life meaningful and setting goals for new life are two major factors contributing to their survival in the host country (Wu, Terry, Shih, & Huang, 2006). Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that the attainment of meaning-in-life is positively related to positive dimensions of psychological well-being, such as positive emotion (Fleer, Hoekstra, Sleijs, Tuinman, & Hoekstra-Weebbers, 2006) and life satisfaction (Zika & Chamberlain, 1987). On the other hand, the lack of, or a low level of, meaning-in-life has been proved to be related to negative dimensions of psychological well-being, such as negative emotions (Fry, 2000; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). The positive relationship of SRG and meaning-in-life has been well established in traumatic contexts (Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 2010; Triplett, Tedeschi, Arnie, Calhoun, & Reeve, 2011), but has been less investigated in relation to non-traumatic stress (Halama & Bakosova, 2009). As the experience of personal growth varies across different types of stressful situations (Zahorova & Halama, 2011), this relationship should be tested in non-traumatic situations, such as in the context of acculturation.

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