The relationship between acculturation strategy and job satisfaction for professional Chinese immigrants in the Australian workplace☆

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A B S T R A C T

Based on Berry's seminal work on the acculturation process, this study investigates the individual differences of professional Chinese immigrants (PCIs) in terms of their attitudes toward acculturation strategies, and the relationship between acculturation strategies and job satisfaction of PCIs in the Australian workplace. Our survey of a sample of 220 PCIs reveals that PCIs have a predominant preference for maintaining their home culture and that the impact of the acculturation process on their job satisfaction is significant. PCIs adopting the *assimilation* strategy report the highest level of job satisfaction, while those who embrace the *separation* strategy have the lowest level. This study provides valuable information for managers and organizations in managing immigrant employees via effective acculturation programs.

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1. Introduction

Australia aspires to being a knowledge economy, yet it is experiencing acute skill shortages in critical areas such as engineering, accounting and medical and allied health science, amounting to a shortfall of 240,000 skilled workers by 2016 (Rudd, Swan, Smith, & Wong, 2007). In response to this crisis, the Australian government decided to increase the intake of skilled labor from overseas to bolster Australia's economic and social development (Birrell & Healy, 2008; Rudd et al., 2007). The result was 52,705 skilled permanent arrivals during the period 2007–2008, of whom 14% were born in China (DIAC, 2009). In 2010, China ranked as the third-largest source country for skilled immigrants to Australia (ABS, 2010), placing more than half of all permanent arrivals from China in the skilled category (Hugo, 2007). These are strongly concentrated in the top occupational groups, with 54.6% working as *professionals*.[1] These marked demographic changes and the policy agenda have stimulated our focus on professional Chinese immigrants (PCIs) in Australia.

Scholars repeatedly argue that diversified immigrants, like a rich ore, contain a large pool of potential resources in terms of expertise, connections, creativity and innovation capacity (van De Ven, Rogers, Bechara, & Sun, 2008). It is believed that, to a great extent, the successful adjustment of these immigrants may explain, and will translate into, economic success and social development in host countries (van De Ven et al., 2008). In reality, however, immigrants find it very difficult to

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 [1] *Professionals* are individuals holding a minimum of a bachelor degree qualification and able to perform analytical, conceptual, creative, and intellectually challenging tasks via the application of theoretical knowledge and skills in a particular field (ABS, 1997). Occupations include professors, accountants, engineers, auditors, medical doctors and the like.
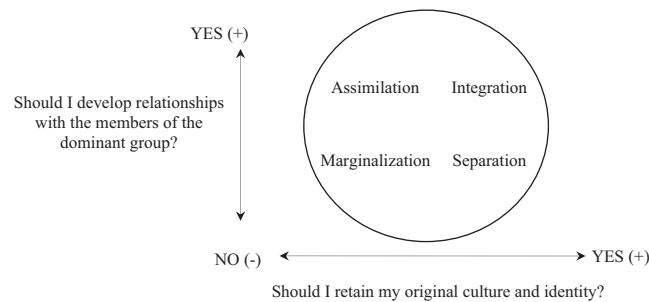
Source: adapted from Berry, 1997

Fig. 1. Acculturation strategies of immigrants.

Adapted from Berry (1997).

adjust to Australian workplace culture (Boyd & Thomas, 2001; Härtel, Alam, & Samaratunge, 2008), leaving a significant gap between employers and immigrant employees (Liebig, 2007).

Without successful adjustment, these PCIs will not turn into a source of global competitive advantage that can benefit Australia (Lu, Samaratunge, & Härtel, 2011). A better understanding of immigrant employees' acculturation strategies is an indispensable precondition, since an extensive review of the literature reveals a critical link between immigrants' acculturation and their adjustment to the host country (Berry, 1997). Although a wealth of research exists on immigrants' choice of acculturation strategies in the workplace, especially in the USA (e.g., Au, Garey, Bermas, & Chan, 1998; Ea, Griffin, L'Eplattenier, & Fitzpatrick, 2008; Leong, 2001; Leong & Chou, 1994), very few studies have been conducted in the Australian context (Lu et al., 2011). There is an urgent demand for more empirical evidence to understand immigrant employees' acculturation strategies and the nature of the relationship between acculturation strategies and job-related outcomes, such as employee performance, job satisfaction, commitment, interpersonal communication, and level of conflict (Lu et al., 2011). This is particularly important for countries with a multicultural society such as Australia, because migration is a part of its national heritage (Fujimoto, 2004). This study aims to fill this void in the literature by building on the previous work of Lu et al. (2011) on PCIs. To do so, we first address a specific dimension of acculturation in the Australian workplace by investigating the relationship between individual characteristics and the choice of acculturation strategies of PCIs. Then we examine the impact of different acculturation strategies of PCIs on the level of employees' overall job satisfaction, which is a key predictor of work behaviors such as organizational citizenship (Organ & Ryan, 1995), absenteeism (Wegge, Schmidt, Parkes, & van Dick, 2007), and turnover (Saari & Judge, 2004).

The paper is organized as follows. We start with a theoretical framework, which highlights the relevant hypotheses based on different acculturation strategies and individual characteristics of PCIs. In the next section, we discuss the research design, including sampling and measurement. In the third section, the key findings and their implications for both PCIs and Australian employers are presented. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of limitations and a future research agenda.

1.1. PCIs' preferred acculturation options

In multicultural societies, ethnic groups and their individual members, in both dominant and non-dominant situations, must deal with the issue of how to acculturate by resolving two issues: *cultural maintenance* (to what extent cultural identity should be maintained) and *contact and participation* (to what extent good relationships with members of the dominant groups should be developed) (Berry, 1997; Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989). When individuals do not want to maintain their original culture and aim at complete absorption into the host culture, they are adopting an *assimilation* strategy (Berry, 1997, 2003). By contrast, if individuals strongly retain their cultural identity and view relationships with the host cultures as unimportant, they are adopting a *separation* strategy. When people are interested in maintaining their original culture during daily interactions with the host cultural groups, an *integration* strategy is their option. Finally, when individuals lose their original culture without establishing ties with the new culture, *marginalization* has occurred (Berry, 2003) (Fig. 1).

Despite the fact that Berry's model (1997) is not without its critics (Rudmin, 2003), it fits the Australian context well. The model assumes that societies advocate multiculturalism and immigrants have the freedom to choose how they want to engage in intercultural relations (Berry et al., 1989). It is, therefore, a suitable model for examining Australian immigrants, since Australia is a country advocating cultural diversity and multiculturalism (DIMIA, 2003).

Empirical studies targeting the immigrant population other than China-born groups have revealed that immigrants usually have a strong desire to adopt an *integration* strategy in a multicultural society (Berry et al., 1989; Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998). In line with previous studies, we assumed that most immigrants tend to believe that it is important for them to have contact with the majority group in their host country so as to master the new environment (van Oudenhoven et al., 1998). Keeping contact with one's own ethnic group is an efficient way of relieving the stress associated with immigration and acculturation. Immigrants are thus more likely to retain a tie with their traditional culture if the host society allows them to do so (Berry, 2006). Australia's policy and societal ideology in regard to immigration advocate building up a culturally