

Effects of Cross-cultural Adjustment of Chinese Expatriates in Thailand on Perceived Supervisor Support and Subordinates' Commitment

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Abstract

The contribution of expatriates' cross-cultural adaptation to perceived supervisor support and subordinate commitment was investigated. Survey data were collected from Chinese expatriates who held supervisory positions at subsidiaries of Chinese companies in Thailand. In order to prevent common method bias from single-source data collection, data that measured cross-cultural adaptation were collected from Chinese expatriates, whereas data that measured perceived supervisor support and subordinates' commitment were collected from Thai employees who worked for Chinese expatriates. A sample of 169 pairs of expatriates-subordinates was obtained. The results from partial least squares structural equation modeling showed that Chinese expatriates who exhibited a higher degree of cross-cultural adaptation tended to be evaluated more favorably in terms of perceived supervisor support. However, this positive contribution was only found among respondents who had longer length of work relationships. Analysis also showed that the contribution of cross-cultural adaptation to subordinate commitment was fully mediated by perceived supervisor support.

Keywords: *Cross-cultural adaptation, expatriates, multinational enterprises, leadership, cultures*

Introduction

Owing to rapid growth of international business, there is an increased demand for employees to work as expatriates who undertake overseas operations (Gullekson & Dumaisnil, 2016). Expatriates are defined as individuals who have transferred from their native country to a foreign country in order to accept employment (Edström & Galbraith, 1977). Research has shown that expatriation can benefit organizations in many aspects (Sonesh & DeNisi, 2016). However, expatriates need to confront many challenging situations when they work in foreign countries (Kühlmann & Hutchings, 2010; Sambasivan, Sadoughi, & Esmaeilzadeh, 2017). Generally, cross-cultural differences tend to create difficulties in terms of international business tasks (Salgado & Bastida, 2017), and so expatriates inevitably face difficulties due to host country norms, values, languages, and political as well as economic systems that differ from those of their home countries (Sambasivan et al., 2017). In particular, it has been reported that inability to adapt to a new environment was among the main reasons for expatriate failure (Tung, 1987). Therefore, it is crucial for expatriates to understand the cultural differences between the host country and their home countries (Sambasivan et al., 2017), and to exhibit the ability to adapt appropriately to unfamiliar living and work settings in the host country (Peterson, 2004).

In the research literature, cross-cultural adjustment has been proposed as an essential ability of expatriates to enhance their success in international assignments (Gudykunst, 2005; Liu & Lee, 2008). However, prior research mainly has investigated the benefits of cross-cultural adjustment of expatriates regarding task-related outcomes (Jyoti & Kour, 2015; Mahajan & Toh, 2014; Salamin & Davoine, 2015; Sambasivan et al., 2017; Selmer & Luring, 2016). On the other hand, the role of cross-cultural adjustment in the area of the work relationships among expatriates and local subordinates in the host country has not received as much attention in the literature (Harrison & Shaffer, 2005; Wu & Ang, 2011). Therefore, the objective of this study was to fill the gap. The research focused on the case of Chinese expatriates from mainland China who had been assigned to take supervisory positions at subsidiaries in Thailand. In recent years, many Chinese companies have expanded their trade as well as investment in Thailand (Sorndee, Siengathai & Swierczek, 2017). This study explores the contribution of cross-cultural adjustment by Chinese expatriates to the attitudes of Thai subordinates toward them in two areas: (1) supervisor support and (2) commitment to the supervisor. Nonetheless,

by considering the perspective of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the contribution of cross-cultural adjustment to the subordinate's commitment to the supervisor is proposed to be mediated by the supervisor's support. The results from this research not only will clarify the importance of cross-cultural adjustment in the area of work relationships among expatriates and subordinates, but also will provide some recommendations for multinational firms regarding the area of expatriate development that might enhance their management effectiveness in the host country.

Literature Review

Cross-cultural Adjustment

Cross-cultural adjustment refers to the process of one's adaptation to a new situation, and it is the perceived degree of comfort that one feels and the extent of adjustment towards aspects of the new environment (Richardson, 2018). It demonstrates the extent to which individuals are integrated into the daily life and work environment within the host context, as well as their ability to adapt to interactive aspects related to the local culture (Davies, Kraeh, & Froese, 2015). Cross-cultural adjustment is also a process of uncertainty reduction of the expatriate's uncomfortable feelings and harmonizing with a new environment (Black, 1988). He proposed two facets of expatriate adjustment—general adjustment and work adjustment. Furthermore, Black and Stephens (1989) extended the cross-cultural adjustment framework to three areas, consisting of general adjustment, work adjustment, and interaction adjustment. First, general adjustment means the degree of comfort related to the expatriate's overall adjustment to living conditions in the new environment. It refers to the basic needs, as well as activities in the expatriate's daily life. The dimensions of this aspect include food, housing, the cost of living, transportation, and shopping and health care, among others. Second, work adjustment refers to one's adjustment to the new job within a foreign environment. This aspect of adjustment involves new work roles and tasks, as well as the new work environment. Third, interaction adjustment reflects the degree of comfort when interacting with host nationals in the work situation and in the non-work environment as well. Interaction adjustment involves not only language, but also nonverbal behavior such as facial expressions, eye contact, and posture when socializing with local people.

Cross-cultural Adjustment and Perceived Supervisor Support

It is hypothesized in this study that the cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriates can determine the degree to which Thai subordinates perceive that their Chinese supervisors are supportive. The cross-cultural adjustment of expatriates is a way to understand the various aspects of host country nations and their citizens (Sit, Mak, & Neill, 2017). On this point, expatriates who become accustomed to local life tend to understand the cultural lifestyle and expectations of local subordinates in the host country (Zhu, Wanberg, Harrison, & Diehn, 2016). Furthermore, expatriates who adjust well to the cross-cultural environment tend to be more effective in their relationship development with local subordinates (Richardson, 2018). They tend to pay attention to specific cultural values, norms, and attitudes of local subordinates, and provide them with necessary resources and work incentives that match their cultural expectations (Salgado & Bastida, 2017). When local subordinates feel that their supervisor understands their culture and can effectively adjust their working style to the local culture, it can enhance the perceptions of subordinates that their supervisor is supportive. Thus, the following hypothesis was generated:

H1: The cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriates is positively related to perceived supervisor support of their Thai subordinates.

Even though Chinese expatriates who exhibit good cross-cultural adjustment tend to make Thai subordinates develop good perceptions about their supportive behaviors, this research further proposed that the positive association between cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriates and perceived supervisor support of Thai subordinates might also depend on the length of the work relationship between the Thai subordinate and Chinese expatriate supervisor. Given that the perception of Thai subordinates that the supportive behaviors of Chinese expatriates may take time

to develop throughout the length of work relationships, it is likely that only Thai employees who have worked for a Chinese expatriate for a longer period will have a greater tendency to perceive that their Chinese expatriate is a supportive supervisor. Considering this possibility, an additional hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The association between the cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriates and perceived supervisor support of their Thai subordinates is positively moderated by the length of time that Thai subordinates have worked with their Chinese expatriate supervisor.

Cross-cultural Adjustment and Subordinates' Commitment to the Supervisor: Perceived Supervisor Support as a Mediator

It was proposed that the cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriate supervisors can affect the sense of commitment that Thai subordinates develop toward them. However, it is further argued that the association between cross-cultural adjustment and Thai subordinates' commitment to the supervisor might be mediated by their perception regarding the quality of the supervisor's support for them. This argument is supported by social exchange theory, which describes the law of reciprocity (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2017). In the area of the supervisor-subordinate relationship, this theory predicts that employees will demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviors toward a supervisor when they are treated favorably by the supervisor (Charoensukmongkol, Murad, & Gutierrez-Wirsching, 2016; Tian, Cordery, & Gamble, 2016). From this theoretical perspective, Thai subordinates' perception of the supervisor's support could determine their commitment to the Chinese expatriate supervisor. This is supported by research showing that subordinates tend to demonstrate commitment to supervisors when they receive direct support from them (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Moreover, research has revealed that the supportive behavior of a supervisor can make subordinates feel obliged to make a commitment to the supervisor (Phungsoonthorn & Charoensukmongkol, 2018). Therefore, it could be hypothesized that Chinese expatriates who express supportive behaviors to their subordinates might have a higher tendency to earn commitment from them. Moreover, given that cross-cultural adjustment was previously hypothesized to affect perceived supervisor support, it could be likely that the relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and subordinates' commitment to the supervisor might be mediated by perceived supervisor support. These arguments led to the following hypotheses:

H3: Thai subordinates' perceived supervisor support is positively related to their commitment to Chinese expatriate supervisor.

H4: Thai subordinates' perceived supervisor support mediates the positive relationship between the cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriates and subordinates' commitment to supervisor.

Method

Sample Selection and Data Collection Procedure

The data used to test the hypotheses were collected from subsidiaries of Chinese multinational corporations that were established in Thailand. They were located in two major cities where the majority of Chinese subsidiaries are located, namely, Bangkok and Rayong. The management of the Chinese subsidiaries was contacted in advance by the researchers. A total of 48 subsidiaries granted permission for data collection at their companies. A self-administered questionnaire survey was used. Cover letters that described the research objective and ensured the confidentiality of the data were also included in the questionnaire packages. Following the recommendation of Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003), questionnaire data was collected from two sources in order to reduce common method bias. The variable that measured cross-cultural adjustment was assessed by a Chinese expatriate. In order to avoid the self-reported bias of the Chinese expatriates, the variables that measured perceived supervisor support and

subordinates' commitment to the supervisor were assessed by Thai employees who worked directly under the Chinese expatriates.

Questionnaire distribution was performed by the researchers at the companies, where the questionnaires were distributed to Chinese expatriates in person. The researchers also randomly selected one Thai employee who worked under each Chinese expatriate and sent the questionnaire package to them to complete. The questionnaires that were sent to the Chinese expatriate supervisor and the Thai employee who worked together were marked with the same running number for matching purposes. One-on-one matching of supervisor and subordinate was previously used in research that considered supervisor-subordinate relationships (Wadei, Chen, Wu, & Sampong, 2019). Questionnaires were sent to a total of 210 pairs of Chinese expatriates and Thai employees. The respondents were asked to return the questionnaires in sealed envelopes, which were then collected in person by the researchers. At the end of the collection period, 169 completed pairs of data were obtained for analysis, for a final response rate of 80.5%. Descriptive statistics regarding the characteristics of the Chinese expatriates and Thai employees are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Chinese Expatriates and Thai Subordinates

Characteristics	Descriptive Statistics
Age of Chinese Expatriates	Mean: 35.04 SD: 7.595 Min: 20 Max: 60
Gender of Chinese Expatriates	Male: 128 (75.7%) Female: 41 (24.3%)
Chinese Expatriate Job Tenure	Less than 1 year: 21 (12.4 %) 1–2 years: 40 (23.7%) 3–4 years: 38 (22.5%) 5–6 years: 24 (14.2%) 7–8 years: 14: (8.3%) 9–10 years: 10 (5.9%) More than 10 years: 20 (11.8%) Not-specified: 2 (1.2%)
Length of Work with Chinese Expatriates	Less than 1 year: 65 (38.5%) 1–2 years: 70 (41.4%) 3–4 years: 21 (12.4%) 5–6 years: 9 (5.3%) 7–8 years: 2 (1.2%) 9–10 years: 1 (0.6%) Not-specified: 1 (0.6%)

Measures

Cross-cultural adjustment was measured using the scale developed by Black and Stephens (1989). There were fourteen items measuring three dimensions of adjustment: General adjustment (7 items), work adjustment (3 items), and interaction adjustment (4 items). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from completely unadjusted (1) to well adjusted (5).

Perceived supervisor support was measured using a scale developed by Cheng, Jiang, Cheng, Riley, and Jen (2015). The scale contained three items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Subordinates' commitment to the supervisor was measured using the scale developed again by Cheng et al. (2015). The scale contained six items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Length of work relationship was measured by the number of years that the Thai subordinates had worked for the Chinese expatriate; this was measured as a continuous variable.

Control Variables

This research added control variables that might affect perceived supervisor support and commitment to the supervisor. The control variables included the age of Chinese expatriates (measured in years), the gender of the Chinese expatriates (measured as a dummy variable), the Chinese expatriate's job tenure (measured in years), and the length of time that the Thai employee had worked with the Chinese expatriate (measured in years).

Statistical Analysis

This study used partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) as a statistical technique for data analysis. PLS combines principal component analysis, a series of regression analysis, and path analysis. This method allows multiple hypotheses in the path model to be tested simultaneously. PLS-SEM requires a smaller sample size than other SEM techniques and tends to produce less biased estimation when the data are not normally distributed. PLS-SEM was appropriate for this research given that a small sample size ($n = 169$) was used in the analysis. Moreover, the test showed that none of the variables showed a normal distributed pattern. WarpPLS 6.0 was used to perform the PLS estimation in this research.

Results

Validity and reliability tests of the latent variable were examined before conducting the estimation of the research model. First, factor loading values were used to examine the convergent validity to examine how well indicators accurately measured their constructs. Each value of the factor loading was above .50, which met the minimum requirement suggested by Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson (2009). Second, the discriminant validity test was examined by comparing the square root of average variance extracted (AVE) of the latent variable with other correlations. The results shown in Table 2 revealed that the discriminant validity was satisfactory, since the square root of the AVE of each variable was higher than that of other correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Third, the reliability test was examined by using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and the composite reliability coefficient. The reliability test was conducted to assess how consistent a measure was of a particular element between different participants. In particular, the questionnaire items that measured the same reflective latent variable should be consistent with one another. The results shown in Table 2 confirmed that questionnaire items possessed satisfactory reliability, as the values of all coefficients were higher than .70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 2. Correlation among Variables and Square Roots of Average Variance Extracted

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient	Composite Reliability Coefficient	CCA	PSS	CTS	GEN	AGE	JT	WRT
CCA	.927	.927	(.718)	.101	.110	-.077	-.075	.007	.149
PSS	.938	.938		(.943)	.653***	.040	.031	-.108	-.096
CTS	.640	.887			(.800)	.074	-.079	-.104	-.049
GEN	n/a	n/a				(1)	.286***	.139	.045
AGE	n/a	n/a					(1)	.342***	.107
JT	n/a	n/a						(1)	.394***
WRT	n/a	n/a							(1)

Note: *** p -value $\leq .001$

The values of square root of AVE are presented in parentheses. CCA = cross-cultural adjustment; PSS = perceived supervisor support; CTS = commitment to supervisor; GEN = gender of Chinese expatriates (1= male, 0 = female); AGE = age of Chinese expatriates; JT = job tenure of Chinese expatriates; WRT = length of work relationship with Thai employees

Additionally, the full variance inflation factor (VIF) was used to examine the multicollinearity problem. The results displayed that the full VIF values ranged from 1.055 to 1.825. This indicated that there was no serious multicollinearity problem, since the maximum value of the full VIF was below 3.3 (Kock & Lynn, 2012).

The results from PLS analysis are displayed in Figure 1. In hypothesis 1, it was proposed that cross-cultural adjustment is positively related to perceived supervisor support. The data indicated that the association was positive ($\beta = .123, p \leq .05$) and was statistically significant. Hence, hypothesis 1 was supported. In hypothesis 2 it was proposed that the relationship between the cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriates and perceived supervisor support is positively moderated by the length of time that Thai employees had worked with Chinese expatriates. The moderating effect was tested by adding the interaction between cross-cultural adjustment and length of work relationship in the model estimation. The results indicated that the beta coefficient of the interaction was positive ($\beta = .104, p \leq .05$) and was statistically significant. This result confirmed that the length of the work relationship positively moderated the link between cross-cultural adjustment and perceived supervisor support. Therefore, hypothesis 2 was also supported.

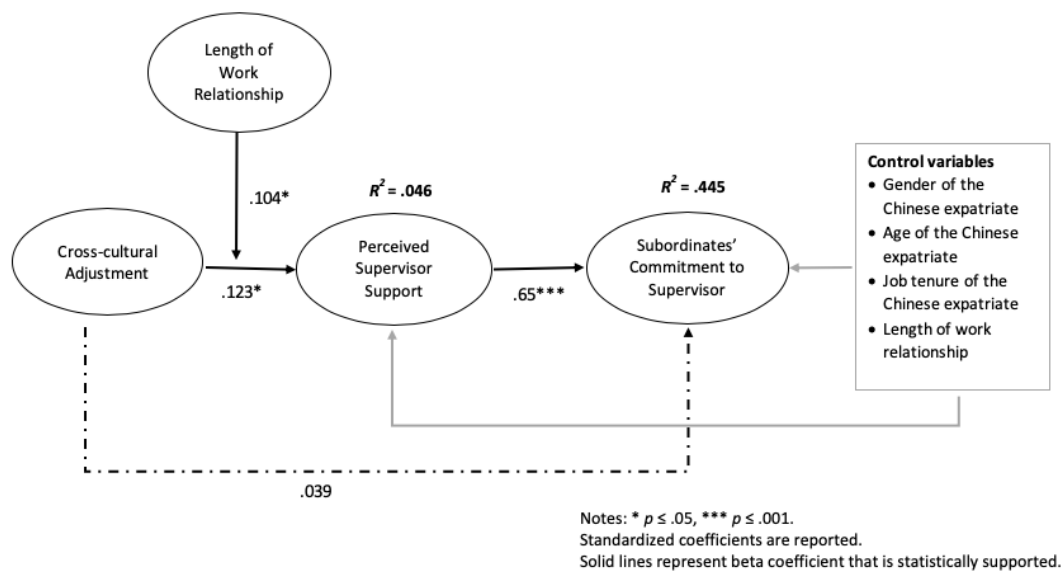


Figure 1. Partial Least Squares Results

Aiken and West (1991) suggested that it can be advantageous to present data in the form of line graphs to highlight the moderating effects. This is shown in Figure 2. The line graph indicates that the positive effect of cross-cultural adjustment on perceived supervisor support existed only for Chinese expatriates who worked for a longer period with their Thai subordinates.

In hypothesis 3, it was proposed that perceived supervisor support is positively related to commitment to the supervisor. The results demonstrated a positive association between them ($\beta = 0.650, p < .001$). This positive relationship was also statistically significant. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported. Finally, in hypothesis 4 it was proposed that perceived supervisor support positively mediates the relationship between the cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriates and commitment to the supervisor. The test of the mediating effect was performed using the method suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2004), and the results statistically supported the mediating effect ($\beta = .08, p \leq .05$). Given that the direct relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and commitment to the supervisor was not statistically supported ($\beta = .039, p = .266$), the mediating effect information suggested that perceived supervisor support fully mediated the association between cross-cultural adjustment and commitment to the supervisor.

In the case of control variables, the results confirmed that Thai subordinates' commitment to the supervisor was negatively related to the age of the Chinese expatriates ($\beta = -.118, p \leq .05$).

Perceived supervisor support was negatively associated with the Chinese expatriate's job tenure ($\beta = -.013, p \leq .05$) and length of work relationship with the Chinese expatriates ($\beta = -.104, p \leq .05$). The effect of the other control variables was not statistically supported.

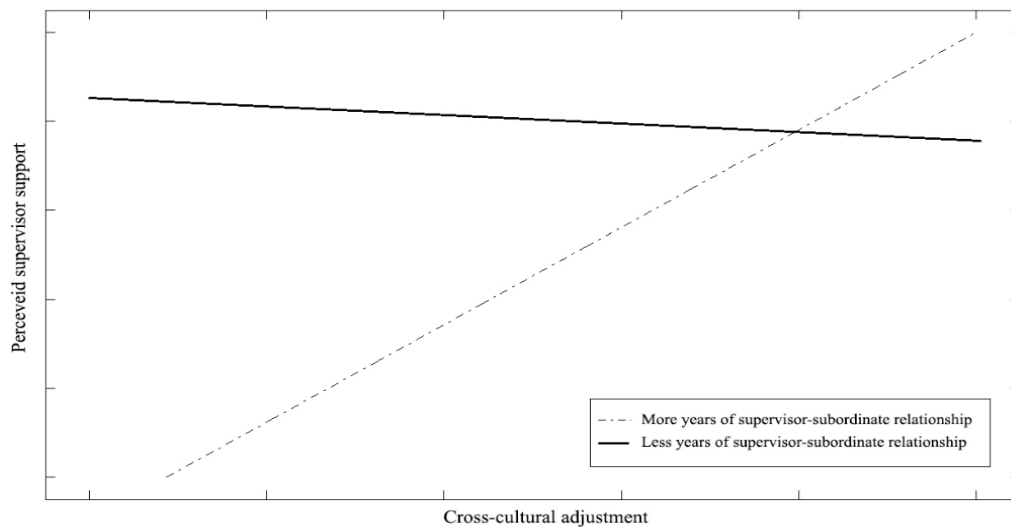


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship Length

Discussion and Conclusion

General Discussion

This study investigated the contribution of the cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriates in Thailand to the quality of perceived supervisor support and subordinate commitment as rated by Thai employees. The results indicated that Chinese expatriates with a high level of cross-cultural adjustment in Thailand were more likely to be regarded as supportive supervisors by Thai subordinates. This is consistent with prior studies which suggested that expatriates who adjusted effectively in a cross-cultural context tended to have a better understanding of cultural values, lifestyles and expectations of local subordinates (Puck, Holtbrügge, & Dölling, 2003; Shay & Baack, 2006). This finding agrees with the study of Harrison and Shaffer (2005), who showed that expatriates with effective adjustment to new environment tended to have high potential to build good relationships with their subordinates. For Chinese expatriates, a higher level of cross-cultural adjustment in Thailand would help them understand many aspects of Thai culture and the work nature of their Thai subordinates, and this could enhance the perception of Thai subordinates that their Chinese expatriate supervisor was supportive. Additionally, this study showed further evidence that the relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and perceived supervisor support was significantly moderated by the length of time that the Chinese expatriate had worked with their Thai subordinate. This finding suggests that perceived supervisor support tends to take time to develop due to the time taken for cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriates.

In addition, this finding supported the positive linkage between perceived supervisor support and commitment to the supervisor. These results suggested that Thai subordinates who perceived that their Chinese expatriates were supportive supervisors were more likely to develop a sense of commitment to them. Moreover, the results from the mediating effect analysis confirmed that perceived supervisor support fully mediates the effect of cross-cultural adjustment on commitment to the supervisor. Again these results suggested that the cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriates does not directly influence the sense of commitment of Thai subordinates; however, the influence of cross-cultural adjustment could explain subordinate commitment indirectly through perceived supervisor support. This implies that effective cross-cultural adjustment of Chinese expatriates could possibly make them be perceived as supportive supervisors, and this positive perception would allow the supervisors to gain a sense of commitment from their Thai subordinates.

This result is consistent with prior research that emphasized the role of supportive supervisor behavior in gaining trust and commitment from subordinates (Cheng, Jiang, & Riley, 2003; Kalidass & Bahron, 2015; Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). From a theoretical perspective, these results are in accordance with social exchange theory in the work context, which suggests that employees are likely to have positive attitudes toward supervisors when they are treated well by them (Haar, 2006). When Chinese expatriates are effective in their cross-cultural adjustment, they seem to understand the nature of Thai employees, and can adapt their work styles to meet Thai subordinates' expectations. This favorable characteristic of Chinese expatriates could make Thai employees view them as supportive leaders and be more willing to make a commitment to them. This scenario is in line with the law of reciprocity suggested by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964).

Research Contribution

This study provides additional contributions to cross-cultural adjustment research. First, it provides additional support concerning the benefits of cross-cultural adjustment by Chinese expatriates in Thailand, which is an area that has not received solid evidence from previous research. Additionally, the results have presented new findings regarding the moderating effect of the length of work relationships, which was a conditional factor that influenced the effect of cross-cultural adjustment. Moreover, this study contributes theoretically by using social exchange theory to explain the mechanism by which expatriates can gain commitment from subordinates in a host country by effective cross-cultural adjustment. This clarifies how cross-cultural adjustment plays an important role in helping expatriates to effectively manage subordinates in a host country.

Limitations

In spite of the contributions mentioned, there are some limitations to consider. First, the data were collected from only two cities in Thailand, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Second, the results were obtained from cross-sectional data and the analysis was performed using a correlational method. Therefore, causality may not be confirmed from these results.

Managerial Implications

The findings also provide recommendations for multinational companies on expatriate development. Considering that expatriates may face difficulties in dealing with challenges during their international assignments, it is crucial for them to have the ability to adjust effectively to the host country's environment, particularly in the workplace context. This research suggests that cross-cultural adjustment is essential for expatriates because it allows them to understand the cultural characteristics of employees in the host country, and permits them to adapt to the work style there in order to match the cultural characteristics of local employees. Generally, the ability of expatriates to manage employees effectively tends to depend on the positive attitudes of employees toward the expatriate supervisor. Therefore, expatriates with good cross-cultural adjustment might be able to treat local employees more favorably, thereby allowing them to be perceived as supportive leaders, and to gain commitment from local employees as a result. These benefits of creating effective cross-cultural adjustment might be critical for expatriates in achieving satisfactory work performances in their international assignments. As a result, it is necessary for multinational companies to make sure that their expatriates possess adequate levels of cross-cultural competence, which is required to enhance their chances of success in managing local subsidiaries in host countries. In this regard, this research suggests that cross-cultural adaptation training should be considered by multinational companies to improve their expatriates' adjustment ability in foreign countries. Companies could offer pre-departure training and post-arrival training (Bennett, Aston, and Colquhoun, 2000; Okpara & Kabongo, 2011). According to Bennett et al. (2000), pre-departure training programs can be conducted three to five weeks before expatriates' departure, and post-arrival training programs can be offered eight to twelve weeks after expatriates reach the host country. These training sessions are essential

to help expatriate supervisors deepen their cross-cultural knowledge, awareness, and management skills, which are crucial if they are to become more effective in cross-cultural management.

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