

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Effect of Host Language Proficiency of Chinese Expatriates on Host Country Nationals Support and Work Engagement in Thailand: A Social Identity Perspective

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Abstract: This research examines the benefits of host language proficiency of Chinese expatriates working in Thailand. Host language proficiency is conceptualized in terms of linguistic and communicative competence. Anchored on social identity theory, this study tests whether the host language proficiency of Chinese expatriates affects their work engagement and to what extent host country nationals (HCN) support plays a mediating role. Survey data were collected from 15 Chinese subsidiaries in Thailand. In total, 413 valid questionnaires were gathered. Partial least square structural equation modeling was used for data analysis. The results not only found a direct positive association between host language proficiency and work engagement but also confirmed that the HCN support partially mediated the linkage of host language proficiency and work engagement. The finding of this study adds a greater understanding of how and why host language proficiency can exert a beneficial influence on the work engagement of Chinese expatriates in Thailand. Based on the result, relevant practical implications are provided.

Keywords: expatriate, foreign language, social identity, social support, work engagement

摘要

本研究以中国企业外派泰国的员工为研究对象，基于社会认同理论，旨在探讨中国外派人员的当地语言流利度对工作投入度的影响，以及当地同事支持度在当地语言流利度与工作投入度之间的中介作用。本研究对15家驻泰中资企业发放调查问卷，收集有效问卷413份，并运用PLS-SEM模型对数据加以分析。研究结果表明：当地语言流利度与工作投入度呈显著正相关；当地同事支持度对该组正相关存在着显著的部分中介作用。本研究结果有益于进一步认识当地语言流利度对外派泰国的中国企业员工的工作投入度产生积极作用的过程和原因，并由此提出相关建议。

关键词：外派人员，外语，社会身份，社会支持，工作投入度

Introduction

Accelerated globalization has witnessed substantial multinational enterprises (MNEs) from an emerging market to dispatch expatriates to expand business in the global market (Ito & Varona, 2009; Saxena, 2019; Zhu et al., 2018). In particular, the number of Chinese expatriates working in Thailand has doubled in the past several years (Tu et al., 2019). However, the international mission is inherently challenging, and expatriates face multiple challenges, particularly difficulties adjusting to the culturally novel environment and building solid relationships with local coworkers in the host country's workplace (Phungsoonthorn & Charoensukmongkol, 2019; Sambasivan et al., 2017). The inability to handle such difficulties can lead to the expatriates' decreased work engagement (Rafiq et al., 2019). Because previous research has reported that Chinese expatriates tend to lack cross-cultural communication competence and have little interaction with host country nationals (HCNs) (Charoensukmongkol, 2021a, 2021b; Jackson & Horwitz, 2018; Piansoongnern, 2016), the work engagement of Chinese expatriates is a worthy concern.

Chinese expatriates successfully working in foreign countries need to possess various characteristics (Guang & Charoensukmongkol, 2020); this study focuses on language proficiency as one of those traits. According to previous research, expatriates must overcome cultural differences, including language barriers (Caligiuri, 2000). Without the ability to speak the host country's language proficiently, it is hard for expatriates to have effective cross-cultural interaction with HCNs and fulfill their international assignments, even in situations where the national cultures are similar (Reiche et al., 2017). This is because people communicate and think through language. The poor host country's language proficiency easily leads to the loss of rhetorical skills, which tends to increase misunderstanding during the interaction between expatriates and HCNs (Harzing & Feely, 2008). Moreover, the insufficient host language ability is likely to make expatriates ill-informed. The failure in getting crucial pieces of information may impede the smooth adjustment in the local workplace (Selmer & Luring, 2015). Therefore, some researchers argued that host language proficiency should be considered an independent element in terms of cultural issues

because it permeates every aspect of business activity and thus has a particular influence on the outcome of international assignments (Marschan et al., 1997). Although some research has examined how host language proficiency facilitates knowledge inflows (Reiche et al., 2017), enhances network-building (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), and promotes cross-cultural adjustment (Kim & Slocum, 2008; Selmer & Luring, 2015; Shaffer et al., 1999), less is known about the effect of host language proficiency on work engagement of expatriates. Moreover, even though some research utilized a qualitative approach to investigate host language proficiency by taking the communicative function derived from the culture-bound nature of language into consideration (Huff, 2013; Peltokorpi, 2010; Zhang & Harzing, 2016; Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016), existing quantitative studies on this topic tend to manipulate the concept in a superficial manner (Paulus & Muehlfeld, 2017; Peltokorpi, 2008; Selmer, 2006; Shaffer et al., 1999). In addition, the mechanism by which host language proficiency promotes work engagement has not been clarified in existing research.

The objective of this study is to fill in the above-mentioned research gaps by focusing on Chinese expatriates working in Thailand. In particular, this research investigates the effect of host language proficiency on their work engagement by examining the role of host country nationals (HCN) helps Chinese expatriates to feel more engaged in the Thai work context. Although the role of coworker support in a host country has been qualitatively identified as a mediator between host language proficiency and cross-cultural adjustment (Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016), there is no research that quantitatively examines the mediating role of HCN support between host language proficiency and work engagement. In particular, HCN support could be a potential mediator in the Thai work context due to the cultural characteristic of collectivism that is prevalent in Thailand (Hofstede, 2001). Given that the society, characterized by collectivism, tends to value interpersonal relationships among its members, the host language proficiency of Chinese expatriates could contribute to their ability to get along well with their Thai coworkers, thereby facilitating them to feel more engaged at work. This study contributes to the research on expatriation by probing the importance of host language proficiency through the lens of the host country's cultural characteristics. The results of this

study are expected to illuminate how and why host language proficiency can exert influence on the work engagement of expatriates during their international assignments.

Literature Review

Host Language Proficiency

Referring to the past research on language use in MNEs, this study defines host language proficiency as being characterized by linguistic and communicative competence. Linguistic competence includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency in the host language (Charoensukmongkol, 2019; Selmer & Luring, 2015). However, linguistic competency is not sufficient in cross-cultural communication because language is embedded in the culture. Individuals also require communicative competence, which refers to familiarity with non-verbal communication in a host country and the ability to communicate and interact in a culturally appropriate manner (Björkman & Piekkari, 2009; Charoensukmongkol, 2020; Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016). For expatriates, host language proficiency is crucial in cross-cultural interaction in the host country workplace (Zhang & Harzing, 2016). Ample prior studies have reported that host language proficiency facilitates successful cross-cultural adjustment (Peltokorpi, 2008; Selmer, 2006), favorable interpersonal relationship-building (Zhang & Harzing, 2016), cross-cultural communication effectiveness (Peltokorpi, 2010; Suthatorn & Charoensukmongkol, 2018), and career advancement (SanAntonio, 1987). Although some prior research combines samples of expatriates (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 1999), other studies answer the appeal for context-specific research in MNEs (Luo & Shenkar, 2006) and have been carried out within a context-specific background. For example, some focus on Western expatriates in Japan (Peltokorpi, 2010) or China (Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016); some focused on Japanese or Korean expatriates in the U.S. (Kim & Slocum, 2008; Takeuchi et al., 2002). Within different specific contexts, these studies report that host language proficiency is positively related to cross-cultural communication (Peltokorpi, 2010) or cross-cultural adjustment (Kim & Slocum, 2008; Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016).

HCN Support

HCN support is an important aspect of social support. Considering the multiple approaches to defining social support in existing literature (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020), this study defines HCN support as expatriates' perception or actual availability of beneficial resources provided by HCNs, through any type of communication and interaction, which can help them manage uncertainty and ambiguity and promote the feeling of self-control during stressful situations (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Nardon et al., 2015). Besides emotional support and caring, it also includes informational support and provision of relevant knowledge such as advice-giving (Toh & DeNisi, 2005). As claimed by Van der Laken et al. (2016), the social support delivered by HCNs cannot be replaced by other sources of social support due to its culture-specific nature and thus has been identified as the main predictor of expatriate success (Caligiuri & Tung, 1999). Past studies have found that HCN support positively predicts expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment and performance (Caligiuri et al., 2016; Fu & Charoensukmongkol, 2021; Mahajan & Toh, 2014).

Work Engagement

Work engagement is defined as a persistent positive and fulfilling mindset related to work (Lacap, 2019; Pongton & Suntrayuth, 2019; Schaufeli et al., 2002). It is a three-dimensional construct comprised of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Cole et al., 2012; Maslach et al., 2001). Vigor represents a high level of energy, a willingness to exert effort, and a resistance against fatigue in the work environment. Dedication reflects a strong involvement at work, accompanied by feelings of enthusiasm, pride, and inspiration. Absorption indicates a pleasant state of total immersion in and complete concentration on work. Previous studies have found that work engagement promotes positive work-related outcomes for expatriates (Afsar et al., 2020; Luring & Selmer, 2015; Selmer & Luring, 2016). For example, Luring and Selmer (2015) found work engagement to be positively correlated to cross-cultural adjustment, job satisfaction, and expatriate performance in a sample of expatriates working in Singapore. A second study among expatriates in China confirmed the positive relationship between work engagement and cross-cultural adjustment (Selmer & Luring, 2016). In addition, a recent study by Afsar et al. (2020) discovered work engagement to be beneficial

for the innovative work behavior of expatriates in Saudi Arabia.

Hypotheses Development

Effect of Host Language Proficiency on HCN Support

Expatriates must routinely interact with HCNs. In the workplace, communication is essential so that work-related information can be exchanged and problems can be solved (Puyod & Charoensukmongkol, 2019). Communication is also crucial for expatriates to thrive in social settings and assimilate into the culture (Ladegaard & Jenks, 2015). Nonetheless, communication must take place through shared language (Harzing & Feely, 2008). Expatriates with poor language proficiency tend to experience high levels of uncertainty and anxiety in the workplace (Gudykunst, 2005). Lack of host language proficiency also increases the chances of misunderstanding and difficulties building trust with coworkers (Kodish, 2017; Seriwatana & Charoensukmongkol, 2020). Consequently, insufficient host language proficiency has reportedly resulted in problems with building interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Harzing & Feely, 2008; Sargent & Matthews, 1998). Alternatively, host language proficiency equips expatriates with an unfettered ability to interact with their coworkers, promoting the effectiveness of their communication with HCNs (Peltokorpi, 2010). Additionally, host language proficiency enables expatriates to understand cultural differences, allowing them to behave properly in the workplace (Selmer & Lauring, 2015).

Theoretically, the benefits of host language proficiency for expatriates when working with employees in the host country can be explained through the lens of social identity theory (SIT). SIT posits that individuals tend to categorize themselves and others into groups and derive their self-concept through these memberships (Tajfel et al., 1979). This theory addresses the central role of the process of this categorization, which involves the psychological accentuation of differences between groups and the attenuation of differences between members within groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). SIT also proposes that the desire to seek a positive self-concept drives the comparison between in-groups and out-groups, and that individuals' social identity is generally clarified through this comparison.

Further, this theory elucidates that social identity can be derived from a wide variety of social categories, such as organizational membership, age cohort, and sex. When social identities are salient, the social differentiation results in individuals' favoritism for in-group members and stereotypes against out-group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

According to SIT, language is identified as a major category, even more important than cultural values (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Fundamentally, Giles (1978) stated that language provides important cues for individuals to categorize the social environment. Giles and Johnson (1981) further argued that language tends to be more powerful than ethnicity in the social categorization process because it can be acquired. Prior research has found that ethnolinguistic group members identify with people who speak their native language more closely than those who share their cultural background (Giles, 1977; Taylor et al., 1973). In light of this, Giles and Byrne (1982) stated that language differences might create significant functional and psychological barriers to social interaction and thus trigger individuals' process of inclusion or exclusion. To cope with the risk of being excluded, the linguistic and cultural minorities tend to learn the language of the majority to develop a shared identity. For example, research by Kanazawa and Loveday (1988) among Japanese immigrants to Brazil found that the third-generation Japanese-Brazilians became monolingual in Portuguese.

In the expatriate context, host language proficiency provides a shared social identity. Expatriates with high host language proficiency identify more strongly with the host country's culture, which facilitates their impression management (Paulus & Muehlfeld, 2017). As a result, these expatriates are more likely to be categorized as in-group members by the HCNs and have more opportunities to build relationships with them (Ratasuk & Charoensukmongkol, 2020). Moreover, high host language proficiency enables expatriates to exchange information more accurately, allowing them to acquire information that they need (Mahajan & Toh, 2014). For example, Zhang and Peltokorpi (2016), using a qualitative method, found that Western expatriates with high proficiency in Chinese obtained more support from Chinese HCNs in the local workplace.

The ability of Chinese expatriates working in Thailand to communicate effectively in Thai plays

a crucial role in their Thai coworkers accepting and treating them more favorably. This role is particularly important given that Thai society values collectivism. According to Hofstede's cultural classification, Thailand has an individualism/collectivism score of 20, which is considered quite high (Hofstede, 2001). Collectivists are generally "we-conscious," and their self-identity is based on the in-groups to which they belong. Members of a collectivist society emphasize interdependence, cooperation, and close ties with members within their society (Hofstede, 2011). Therefore, the categorization of in-group and out-group members can be further accentuated in a collectivist society. Similarly, Hofstede (1993) classified China as a collectivistic society with the same score as that in Thailand. To a certain extent, Chinese expatriates may benefit from this cultural similarity when they come to work in Thailand. However, despite the cultural similarity, the language difference between Thai and Chinese can create an obstacle for relationship building between Chinese expatriates and Thai employees. In particular, a collectivist society is more likely to accept and support expatriates who can communicate effectively in the local language. Collectivist societies often rely on context in their communication styles (Gudykunst et al., 1988). Typically, high-context collectivists use implicit, indirect messages wherein real meanings should be inferred within specific contexts (Hall, 1976). Verbally, collectivists may use various linguistic codes to highlight role identity and social status among interactants (Neuliep, 2017). For example, Thai language users must choose among 17 first-person pronoun forms and 19 second-person pronoun forms, depending on the degree of politeness and intimacy, as well as the status of people with whom they are communicating (Knutson et al., 2003). Additionally, high-context collectivists usually display less assertiveness and are cautious of their word choice to avoid face-threatening. In particular, some competent communicators are adept at using silence to show disapproval, disagreement, embarrassment, or truthfulness (Lebra, 1987). Nonverbally, high-context collectivists tend to exhibit self-control, the ability to conform to the situation or speaker, decorum, and proper behavior (Gudykunst, 2003). At the same time, they are more sensitive to the context and put more emphasis on listening and interpreting communication based on factors such as facial expressions, gestures, roles, and relationships (Singelis & Brown, 1995). This

sensitivity stresses the importance of being a listener and mind-reader who can show empathy for effective communicators in the high-context collectivistic society (Park & Kim, 2008). Applying SIT to this context, Chinese expatriates who are proficient in the Thai language and also have the ability to adopt a high-context communication style to match Thai culture are more likely to be regarded as in-group members by their Thai coworkers; consequently, it can also increase their likelihood to receive support from Thai coworkers. Therefore, it seems logical to propose the following hypothesis:

- H1: The level of host language proficiency of Chinese expatriates in Thailand is positively correlated to HCN support.

Effect of Host Language Proficiency on Work Engagement

Not only does host language proficiency contribute to HCN support, but it can also directly enhance expatriates' work engagement in the host country. Specifically, host language proficiency protects expatriates from negative feelings, such as anxiety and frustration, induced by language barriers (Neal, 2016), making them energetic and enthusiastic about their jobs. Additionally, previous empirical studies have found that host language proficiency facilitates expatriates' work adjustment (Takeuchi et al., 2002), which is critical for work engagement. Taken together, it appears rational to formulate the following hypothesis:

- H2: The level of host language proficiency of Chinese expatriates in Thailand is positively associated with their work engagement.

Mediating Effect of HCN Support on the Link Between Host Language Proficiency and Work Engagement

In addition, this research proposes that the direct linkage between host language proficiency and work engagement can be mediated by HCN support. First, the direct linkage between HCN support and work engagement can be expected. In particular, HCN support plays a crucial role in promoting work engagement because it helps expatriates experience less uncertainty stemming from being unfamiliar with the culture of the work environment in the host country (Caligiuri et

al., 2016). The perception of or actual availability of support delivered by local coworkers promotes their willingness and confidence in expending an effort toward completing assignments (MacDonald et al., 2019; Mahajan & De Silva, 2012; Xanthopoulou et al., 2008). Either through evoking intrinsic motivation, like a feeling of belonging, or extrinsic motivation, like the fulfillment of assignments, HCN support tends to help increase the likelihood of expatriates' work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Therefore, the third hypothesis is proposed:

H3: HCN support is positively associated with work engagement of Chinese expatriates in Thailand.

Finally, it seems that expatriates who can communicate with HCNs using the local language are more likely to demonstrate a higher level of work engagement than those who cannot. In this regard, host language proficiency enables expatriates to have more in-depth and productive communication with HCNs (SanAntonio, 1987), thereby facilitating expatriates' engagement. Accordingly, HCN support can be a mediator that explains the effect of host language proficiency on work engagement. Taken together, given the proposed positive relationship between host language proficiency to HCN support, as well as the positive influence of HCN support over work engagement, it can be expected that HCN support may serve as an intermediate to transfer the effect of host language proficiency to work engagement. Hence, the fourth hypothesis is postulated:

H4: HCN support mediates the positive association between host language proficiency and work engagement of Chinese expatriates in Thailand.

Methods

Sample and Data Collection

This study collected data from Chinese expatriates working at Chinese subsidiaries in Thailand. Fifteen companies constituted the sampling frame; they were in two industries: manufacturing and construction. According to the information from a brief interview with the management personnel of these companies,

only a few Chinese expatriates received Thai language training. We initially contacted these companies to acquire permission to collect data at their firms. After the management granted permission to conduct the survey, we went to these companies at the arranged date and time. The hard copy questionnaires were distributed to the Chinese expatriates, with clear information about the survey's objectives and commitment to keep highly confidential and anonymous any information submitted by the respondents. The survey was conducted over two months, and at the end of data collection, 413 usable questionnaires were gathered, with a response rate of 73.2%. The respondents' demographic and work-related characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Measures

Host language proficiency was measured by combining two scales that represent the linguistic and communicative components of foreign language proficiency. The linguistic component was measured using a 5-item scale developed by Takeuchi et al. (2002). Each statement regarding host language was tailored to the present research context: "I feel confident in (a) using Thai language in general, (b) writing in Thai language, (c) speaking Thai language, (d) reading and understanding Thai language, and (e) listening to Thai language." The communicative component of foreign language proficiency was measured using a 5-item scale developed by Ang et al. (2007), intended to assess behavioral dimensions of cultural intelligence. This scale reflects the "capability to exhibit appropriate verbal and nonverbal actions when interacting with people from different cultural background" (Van Dyne et al., 2015, p. 17). It evaluates flexibility in utilizing a wide variety of linguistic elements such as syntax, grammar, and speech to convey intended messages like requests, apologies, refusals, approvals, and feelings of gratitude appropriately based on local standards (Bowe et al., 2014; Charoensukmongkol & Pandey, 2020); paralinguistic elements such as tone, pitch, volume, and speed; as well as extra-linguistic elements such as gestures and movements to suitably cater to the cross-cultural situation (Selmer, 2006; Van Dyne et al., 2012). Sample items included: "I change my verbal behavior when a cross-cultural interaction requires it," and "I vary the rate of my speaking when a cross-cultural situation requires it." Respondents were anchored on a 5-point Likert-Scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Although the self-report

Table 1*Respondents' Demographic and Work-related Characteristics*

Demographic Factor	Descriptive Statistics			
	Number	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age			30.73	4.757
Sex				
Male	259	62.7		
Female	154	37.3		
Marital Status				
Single	157	38		
Married	256	62		
Educational Level				
High School	23	5.6		
College	49	11.9		
Bachelor	272	65.9		
Master/MBA	59	14.3		
Ph.D.	10	2.4		
Assignment Tenure				
Less Than 6 Months	65	15.7		
7-12 Months	105	25.4		
1-2 Years	155	37.5		
3-4 Years	61	14.8		
5 Years or More	27	6.5		
Job Position				
Junior Staff Workers	71	17.2		
Senior Staff Workers	137	33.2		
Lower-level Managers	124	30		
Middle-level Managers	61	14.8		
Senior-level Managers	20	4.8		

of host language proficiency could be susceptible to response bias, it remains the most popular choice in research on common language use in MNEs (Akhil & Liu, 2019; Selmer & Luring, 2015). In particular, Crampton and Wagner (1994) proposed that the general concern about self-report measurement has been found to be exaggerated. In particular, Shaffer et al. (1999) stated that the response bias is unlikely to be a serious problem for some variables, such as language fluency. In addition, the scale of host language proficiency used in this research has been validated in prior studies (Jyoti & Kour, 2017; Pandey & Charoensukmongkol, 2019; Presbitero, 2017).

HCN support was measured with a 6-item scale developed and used by Sokro and Moeti-Lysson (2018). Each statement regarding the national origin of coworkers was tailored to the present research context and included: "My Thai coworkers are very willing to provide when needed," and "They are cooperative and provide useful information." Respondents were asked to score on a 5-point Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).

Work engagement was measured with a 9-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006). The sample items included: "At my work, I feel bursting with

energy,” “My job inspires me,” and “I am immersed in my work.” Respondents were asked to score each statement on a 5-point Likert Scale (1=never to 5=always/every day).

Control Variables

Control variables included age, sex, marital status, educational level, assignment tenure, job position, and previous international experience. *Age* was measured by the actual age of the respondents; *sex* was measured using a nominal scale (male=0; female=1); *marital status* was measured as a dummy variable (single=0; married=1); and *educational level* was measured using an ordinal scale (1=high school; 2=college; 3=bachelor; 4=master/MBA; 5=Ph.D.). *Assignment tenure* was measured using an ordinal scale (1=less than 6 months; 2=7-12 months; 3=1-2 years; 4=3-4 years; 5=5 or more years); *job position* was measured using an ordinal scale (1=junior staff workers; 2=senior staff workers; 3=lower-level managers; 4=middle-level manager; 5=senior-level managers); and *previous international experience* was measured by asking respondents to estimate the total number of foreign countries in which they have worked.

Statistical Analysis

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used in this study to test the proposed hypotheses. PLS-SEM allows us to apply many statistical methods such as simple and multiple regression analysis as well as path analysis (Hair et al., 2017). Moreover, PLS-SEM requires a small sample size while still displaying stronger robustness than other SEM techniques when the data is not distributed normally (Hair et al., 2019). Because this study involves such requirements and concerns, it seems appropriate to select PLS-SEM for the data analysis. PLS-SEM estimation was performed employing WarpPLS version 7.0.

Results

Prior to PLS-SEM analysis, the test of validity and reliability were conducted. The convergent validity was confirmed by inspecting whether all variables had factor loadings over the threshold of .5 (Hair et al., 2011). This test satisfied the minimum criteria. The discriminant validity was confirmed by comparing

Table 2

Correlation Among Variables and Square Root of Average Variance Extracted

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient	Composite Reliability Coefficient	HLP	HCS	WE	AGE	SEX	MS	EL	AT	JP	PIE
HLP	.837	.872	(.640)	.501**	.415**	.001	.002	.080	.221**	.056	-.014	.003
HCS	.868	.901		(.777)	.527**	.035	.035	.132	.216**	.062	.045	.090
WE	.833	.871			(.656)	.004	.042	.052	.112*	-.053	.010	.046
AGE	n/a	n/a				(1)	.002	.488**	-.079	.297**	.282**	-.030
SEX	n/a	n/a					(1)	.067	.059	-.038	.136**	-.013
MS	n/a	n/a						(1)	-.053	.215**	.255**	.033
EL	n/a	n/a							(1)	.215**	.258**	.056
AT	n/a	n/a								(1)	.326**	.065
JP	n/a	n/a									(1)	.045
PIE	n/a	n/a										(1)

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$

Square roots of average variance extracted are shown in the parentheses.

HLP=host language proficiency, HCS=host country national support, WE=work engagement, AGE=age, SEX=sex (male=0, female=1), MS=marital status (single=0, married=1), EL=educational level, AT=assignment tenure, JP=Job Position, PIE=previous international experience.

whether the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) of a specific latent variable was greater than other correlations involving that latent variable (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results in Table 2 show that all latent variables met that requirement. The construct reliability was confirmed using Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability coefficients, which are recommended to be over .7 (Nunnally, 1978). The results, as shown in Table 2, confirm a satisfactory level of construct reliability.

The concern about multicollinearity was checked employing full variance inflation factor (VIF). The threshold of full VIF is below 3.3. Additionally, the full VIF test can be used to check common method bias (CMB) in the structural model (Kock, 2015). The results of VIF values of all latent variables range between 1.021 and 1.665, signaling that neither collinearity nor CMB is of serious concern in the analysis.

Hypothesis 3 proposes a positive association between HCN support and work engagement. The analysis demonstrates that this association is positive and statistically significant ($\beta=.410$; $p<.001$). Hence, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Hypothesis 4 proposes that HCN support mediates the association between host language proficiency and work engagement. The mediating effect was tested using the method suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2004). The analysis shows that HCN support positively and significantly mediates the effect of host language proficiency on work engagement ($\beta=.214$; $p<.001$). Hence, Hypothesis 4 is supported. Considering that the direct association between host language proficiency and work engagement is significant, the mediating effect of HCN support is deemed as a partial mediation.

In addition, of the seven control variables, the data analysis reveals that only assignment tenure ($\beta=-.085$; $p=.041$) and job position ($\beta=.111$; $p=.011$)

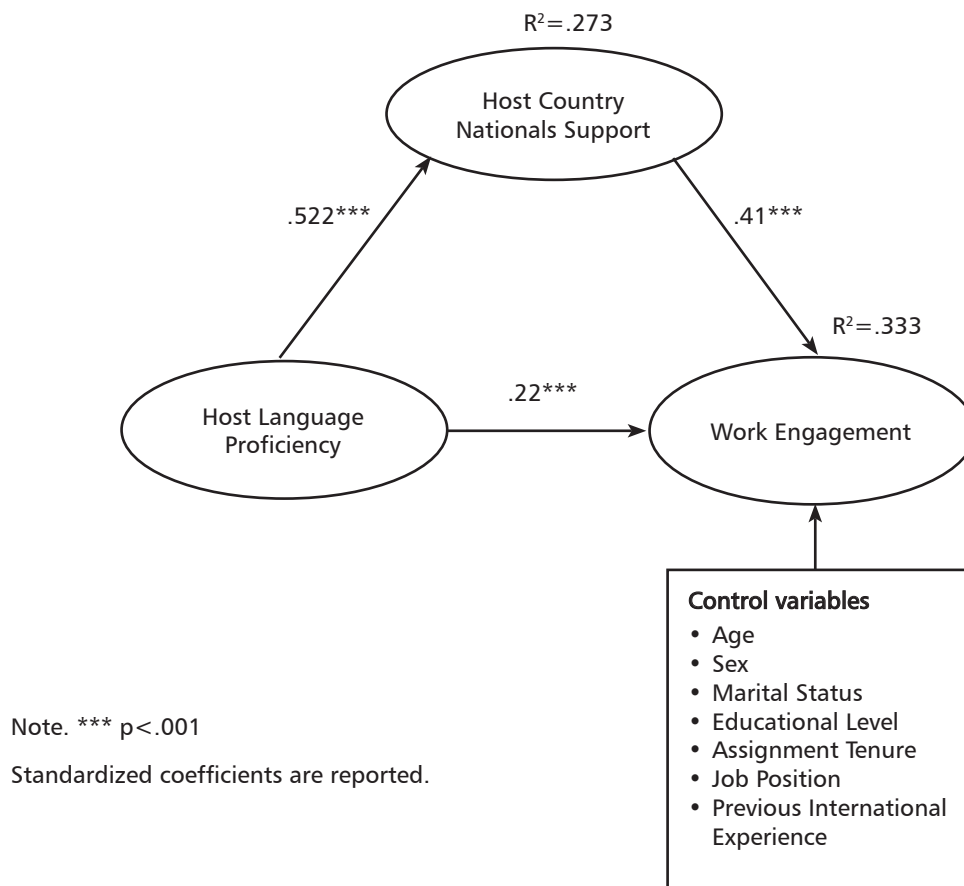


Figure 1. Results from Hypotheses Testing Using PLS-SEM

are significantly related to work engagement. Although the negative correlation between assignment tenure and work engagement is surprising, this result can be explained by the study of Wright and Bonett (1997), which showed that more tenured employees might become increasingly more tired and less motivated; this may possibly make them have low work engagement. Lastly, the positive correlation between job position and work engagement can be explained by the nature of employees in higher positions who generally have a high level of authority and autonomy in the workplace (Zhang et al., 2017). Because prior research found that job autonomy is a factor that positively determines work engagement (Alzyoud et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2017), this logic supports why expatriates who hold higher job positions tended to show a higher level of work engagement.

Discussion

The objective of this research was to investigate the effect of the host language proficiency of Chinese expatriates working in Thailand on the level of HCN support and work engagement. By considering the cultural characteristics of Thai society in terms of collectivism, this research proposed that HCN support could mediate the link between host language proficiency and work engagement. From the data analysis, the mediating role of HCN support on the linkage of host language proficiency and work engagement is testified. This result implies that Chinese expatriates with a high level of host language proficiency can obtain more social support from Thai coworkers; subsequently, the social support delivered by Thai coworkers can help expatriates remain engaged in their international assignments. The benefit of host language proficiency in acquiring HCN support is consistent with the study of Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999), which shows that common language competence facilitates the establishment of a broad social network with coworkers. It is also in line with the study of Zhang and Harzing (2016), which found that Nordic expatriates with a high level of Chinese language proficiency develop harmonious relationships with local coworkers that can increase their access to HCN support. The result regarding the mediating role of HCN support is congruent with the previous study of Shaffer et al. (1999), which revealed

that coworker support facilitates expatriates' work adjustment. In the context of Thailand, where people also value collectivism, Chinese expatriates who were proficient in Thai communication could establish close relationships with Thai coworkers; they could rely on those developed social ties to keep a positive and fulfilling state of mind while working in Thailand. Overall, this finding adds empirical support for the similar framework established by Zhang and Peltokorpi (2016) using a qualitative approach, which asserted that HCN support mediates Chinese language proficiency and cross-cultural adjustment.

Moreover, the positive association between host language proficiency and work engagement is validated, implying that Chinese expatriates who are proficient in the Thai language report a high level of work engagement. This finding is consistent with prior research of Mol et al. (2005), which showed that common language ability positively predicts expatriates' job performance. The finding is also in line with the study of Abugre and Debrah (2019), which reported that effective cross-cultural communication results in successful work operations of expatriates residing in Ghana. In particular, the finding of this research is congruent with the result of the study of Huff (2013), which found that the effectiveness of Japanese language proficiency is an important indicator of the positive attitudinal outcome of expatriates from English-speaking countries.

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the literature of common language use in MNEs. Anchored in SIT, this study yields results consistent with previous research that highlights the crucial role of host language proficiency for expatriates (Peltokorpi, 2008, 2010; Zhang & Harzing, 2016). In particular, this research confirms that host language proficiency can be a salient marker to trigger Thai HCNs' categorization of Chinese expatriates as in-group or out-group members; it also addresses that the level of host language proficiency can reinforce Thai HCNs' positive categorization or fuel negative polarization. From the perspective of SIT, Chinese expatriates with a high level of Thai language proficiency develop a shared identity with their Thai coworkers, thereby facilitating the effective interaction with and inclusion by Thai HCNs. Simply put, this research strengthens the explanatory and predictive power of SIT in terms of the dynamic relationship

between host language proficiency and shared identity. In this regard, this study advances previous quantitative research on host language proficiency to further highlight it as one of the important antecedents for desirable expatriate outcomes, such as work engagement, in the host country workplace. In addition, this study extends previous research by showing that social support from HCNs can be an important factor that mediates the linkage between host language proficiency and work engagement of the expatriates. By integrating the knowledge of collectivism in the Thai culture, this research provides novel insight into the importance of host language proficiency in facilitating Chinese expatriates' access to HCN support. Put in another way, this study uncovers answers about how Chinese expatriates can maintain a high level of work engagement in the linguistically and culturally challenging country of Thailand and why favorable interpersonal relationships with local coworkers that Chinese expatriates who were proficient in the Thai language developed can help them exhibit a high level of work engagement while working in Thailand.

Managerial Implications

This research offers some practical suggestions for Chinese MNEs who dispatch their expatriates to foreign subsidiaries. Given the critical role of host language proficiency in expatriate-local relationship building and work engagement, MNEs should pay special attention to host language proficiency, rather than ignoring it and adopting the assumption that English has become the common language in the world. Particularly, it suggests that host language proficiency be considered as a linguistic strategy when MNEs plan to develop their business in emerging markets lacking a common language or when MNEs plan to highly localize their business operations in a particular foreign country. To be specific, MNEs are advised to take host language proficiency into account, in addition to technical skills, when screening and selecting candidates. Meanwhile, effective host language training is indispensable. This training should be offered not only before departure but also, more importantly, after relocation. During language training, accurate and culturally appropriate use of the host country's language should be highlighted simultaneously, as both are critical for effective

communication. Last but not least, it is recommended that progress in host language proficiency be linked to expatriates' performance evaluations. Evaluation of language proficiency may not only motivate the candidates' active participation in language training, but it may also encourage the expatriates' language practice in the host country environment, which is conducive to their availability of HCN support and the maintenance of work engagement.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are some limitations of this study. First, the cross-sectional research method adopted by this study has an inherent weakness in that it fails to claim the causal relationship between variables. Second, this research only focused on Chinese expatriates locating in two cities of Thailand. The limited sample coverage may cause the results yielded from the study to lack generalizability to other industries or other cross-cultural contexts. Third, the self-report measures in the questionnaire may contain subjective bias from the respondent that could possibly affect the validity of the measures.

This study also provides direction for future research. To compensate for the aforementioned limitations, future research can replicate this study by collecting data among Chinese expatriates in other countries, where the cross-cultural context is different from the Chinese-Thai situation. Moreover, future research will need to integrate other cultural-related factors to investigate the role of host language proficiency. For example, previous research has found that expatriates' salient and immutable personal attributes, such as sex, may be an important marker for HCNs' categorization (Varma et al., 2011); meanwhile, at least one past study reports that males and females adopt different communication styles (Tung, 1993). Therefore, host language proficiency and sex could be simultaneously examined in future research. In addition, the organizational culture or the diversity level of the multinational enterprises may be factors worth examining in future research.

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None.

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