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# **IMPACT OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ON CHINESE EXPATRIATES' ADJUSTMENT TO OVERSEAS ASSIGNMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

With the emergence of Chinese multinationals, an increasingly large number of Chinese expatriates work overseas. However, little research has been conducted to investigate Chinese expatriates' adjustment to overseas assignments. Drawing on prior studies in the areas of linguistics, communication, and business, the current study examines the impact of the English-language proficiency on the Chinese expatriates' adjustment to overseas assignments. A Chinese multinational in the information technology industry, Company ABC, was selected as a subject company. A quantitative research method was adopted. The quantitative data were collected through a survey of 190 Chinese expatriates from Company ABC. Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was performed to examine the relationships between English-language proficiency and variables related to the Chinese Expatriates' Adjustment to Overseas Assignments. The findings show that English-language proficiency was found to enhance Chinese expatriates' adjustment moderately. Moreover, further analysis indicates that different type of English-language proficiency affects different aspect of Chinese expatriates' adjustment.

*KEY WORDS:*

Chinese expatriates, adjustment to overseas assignments, English-language proficiency

## **INTRODUCTION**

With the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, research interest has shifted in the past decade from Western multinational companies (MNCs) in China to China-based MNCs. This change is described as “a huge step forward for the macro economy in China and individual Chinese companies” (Wang, 2004, p. 3). The statistics from the Ministry of Commerce of China (Zhang, 2009) show that the accumulative direct overseas investment has exceeded US \$170 billion by the end of 2008, that Chinese MNCs employed over 300,000 local people, and that Chinese expatriates in various categories have exceeded 4.6 million. The issues of expatriate adjustment are rarely discussed in domestic studies of Chinese MNC even though extensive research on expatriates from Western MNCs confirms that expatriation failure due to maladjustment results in huge costs to the companies (for example, the cost of a failed expatriate assignment is US\$50,000 to US\$150,000). Additionally, such issues regularly cause damage to corporate reputations and results in loss of business opportunities (Black & Mendenhall, 1990). Current research in Chinese MNCs usually addresses macro-level issues such as corporate development trends, industry analysis, internationalization strategies, global operations, and the political environment (see, for example, Deng, 2004; Li, 2002; Liu & Shi, 2003; Wang, 2004; Wang, 2006), which may have laid important foundation for this line of the research, but presented limitations in providing practical guidelines for individual Chinese MNCs’ overseas operations. Consequently, in-depth research in Chinese expatriate adjustment is urgently needed.

According to the survey by Chinese Council for Promotion of International Trade (2009), lack of understanding of local market and limited understanding of Chinese brands by local consumers rank among top five difficulties facing Chinese multinational companies. It is expected that complicated intercultural communication activities of Chinese expatriates all over the world are unavoidable when they cope with the two challenges mentioned above and adjust to their international assignment, in which process English-language proficiency plays an important role since English is well known as the language of international business (Crystal, 2003). Like their Western counterparts who report the language barrier is one of the most

challenging factors in expatriate adjustment (Adler, 1991; Goodall, Li, & Warner, 2006; Selmer, 2006; Tung, 1987, 1988), Chinese MNCs also recognize English is a huge roadblock ahead (Wu, 2008), although the standard of English proficiency is rising in China (Selmer, 2006).

In view of the importance of English-language proficiency to Chinese multinationals, and the perceived moderate English-language proficiency of Chinese employees, the impact of Chinese expatriates' English-language proficiency on their overseas assignment adjustment is the focus of the present study.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

To investigate the interrelationships between Chinese expatriates' adjustment and English-language proficiency, this paper first reviews the multi-dimensionality of expatriate adjustment related to Chinese MNCs; second, it explores what specific English-language proficiency is required by Chinese expatriates to adjust to their international assignment from previous studies.

### *EXPATRIATE ADJUSTMENT*

Expatriate adjustment has been widely recognized as a multi-dimensional process (Aycan, 1997; Black, 1988; Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999). The findings of these expatriate studies suggested four variables that are likely to be determining factors for the success of expatriate adjustment: job satisfaction, ability to cope with stress, interaction with headquarters, and relationships with locals.

Black's (1988) empirical study examined three factors of overseas adjustment by American expatriates working in Japan, focusing on "the degree of psychological comfort with various aspects of a host country" (Black & Gregerson, 1991, p. 463): adjustment to work roles, general adjustment to the living environment, and interaction with host country nationals. To measure work adjustment, respondents were requested to indicate how they felt about their jobs and responsibilities, and how they felt about workplace interactions with Japanese peers as well as subordinates. In terms of adjustment to everyday life, respondents were asked to report how they felt they had adjusted to general living conditions including transportation, food, shopping, weather, and entertainment. As for the adjustment to interactions, respondents were invited to indicate their degree of adjustment to working with Japanese individuals outside their company and their perceived adjustment to interacting with Japanese people in general everyday situations.

Although Black and Gregerson's (1991) study has provided a useful guideline in examining the expatriates' overseas adjustments, the three identified factors seem inadequate to capture the essence of Chinese expatriates' adjustments. For example, in work adjustment, Black's (1988) findings did not disclose on what basis work adjustment could be achieved and did not relate the fit between work requirements and the needs of expatriates. Job satisfaction, which includes both task satisfaction and emotional satisfaction (see, for example, Breiden, Mohr, & Mirza, 2006), could be a better variable to denote the outcome of the fit between an employee's work abilities and the requirements of a particular job. Shaffer and Harrison (1998) found job satisfaction acts as negative predictor of expatriates' withdrawal cognition, which means expatriates with higher job satisfaction presented lower reduced inputs to work, such as absenteeism, lateness, inattention or neglect of basic duties, poor performance, and even substance abuse, and poor physical and mental health. It is expected that higher job satisfaction leads to better adjustment, hence job satisfaction acts as an indicator for Chinese expatriates' adjustment to overseas assignments.

The adjustment to the living environment is challenged by the changing overseas assignment practices of Chinese MNCs. First, more and more Chinese expatriates are taking their overseas assignments based on projects rather than undertaking long-term service in just one country. In this case, these Chinese expatriates also need to adjust to the stress from working in a new environment in addition to adjusting to living conditions. Second, previous research showed that a spouse's adjustment to the general living environment often is the factor that most affects the adjustment of Western expatriates (Aycan, 1997; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Caligiuri, Hyland, & Joshi, 1998; Harvey, 1997; Herleman, Britt, & Hashima, 2008; Takeuchi, Lepak, Marinova, & Yun, 2007). While a majority of Chinese expatriates do not take their families with them due to the cost consideration, they may spend more time adjusting to the stress brought by family separation rather than by the general living environment. Third, expatriation is a stressful event because it involves substantial changes in both social and professional life (Aycan, 1997). Coping with stress has been discussed in existing expatriate studies. Grounded in the acculturation literature, Aycan's (1997) process theory of expatriate adjustment includes psychological adjustment (i.e., maintaining good mental health and psychological well-being) as one of the critical dimension of expatriate adjustment. Using a social network perspective, Wang and Kanungo (2004) found that expatriates' psychological well-being was associated with their network size, network cultural diversity, and contact frequency. Based on their meta-analysis, Hechanova, Beehr, and Christiansen (2003) concluded that adjustment reduced the strain experienced by expatriates (see also Takeuchi, Marinova, Lepak, & Liu, 2005; Takeuchi et al., 2007).

In the stress-management approach to expatriate adjustment, a number of studies have demonstrated the usefulness of a problem-focused — as compared with a symptom-focused — way of coping, especially for those who hold lower power positions in the local unit or who work in culturally distant countries (Selmer 2002; Stahl & Caligiuri 2005). Expatriates' ability to cope with stress in general, therefore, can be a significant predictor for adjustment.

Another aspect that was neglected in Black's (1988) study was expatriates' interactions with headquarters. His research, together with previous similar research, assumed expatriate adjustment was an isolated process taking place in the host country. However, expatriates play multiple roles in the interplay between headquarters and local unit, such as “agent of direct control, agent of socializing, network builder, transfer of competence and knowledge, boundary spanner and language node” (Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2008, p. 92-95). Obviously, fulfillment of all these roles requires effective interaction between expatriates and headquarters. Meanwhile, compared to their Western counterparts, most Chinese MNCs centralize resources and power at headquarters in the initial stage of internationalization.

The problem with measures of interaction adjustment is that they assume that the way expatriates interact with local people who are not involved in their work will be different from the way expatriates communicate with their host country colleagues at work. But Chinese communication makes a clear distinction between insiders (*zijiren*) and outsiders (*wairen*), which is called the insider effect. The insider effect helps Chinese position themselves in established hierarchical and role relationships (Gao, Ting-Toomey, & Gudykunst, 1996). Host country nationals, whether in a workplace or not, are usually not considered insiders, but rather as outside the Chinese expatriate community. Therefore, the expatriates' relationships with locals in general, not simply locals in non-work scenarios, need to be more precisely identified in order to measure how well the Chinese expatriates get along with local people.

### *ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND EXPATRIATE ADJUSTMENT*

As a worldwide business language, English has been recognized as important to multinationals. Asuncion-Lande (1998) commented that English has developed its own momentum, aided by information technology and growing interactions in the world economy that no other language has achieved a similar status in the world. The International Research Foundation (TIRF, 2009) for English Language Education reported, “Proficiency in English as a second- or foreign-language in particular, matters greatly in the

global economy, and they matter [*sic*] to employers as well as to individuals” (p. 4). This increasing requirement of English-language proficiency poses salient challenges for Chinese MNCs (Chen, 2004; Ma, 2004). It could be inferred that English-language proficiency affects Chinese expatriate adjustment when they participate in international business activities.

It is noted that the term of English-language proficiency needs to be carefully defined because the displayed English-language proficiency of expatriates in different scenarios may vary. The scenario specific language use finds its theoretic basis in *genre* studies. Bhatia (1993) defined genre as “a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs” (p. 13). Du-Babcock (2007) applied genre studies to re-interpret management work in her research into business and organizational communication. She noted how the techno-structure, service staff and middle-line managers develop distinctive professional genres that vary in form among the different organization types. She argued that language can be categorized as *language for general purposes* (LGP) and *language for specific or professional use* (LSP). According to this categorization, English-language proficiency consists of competence in general English and in professional English.

Likewise, Chinese expatriates may be able to articulate technical problems with fluent professional English, but they may not be able to carry out effective small talks with clients at dinner table to foster a personal relationship. Another term is needed to describe English-language proficiency in social situations that involve the exchange of ideas about history, economy, the political environment, and the culture of a host country. As a supplement to the use of *English for general purposes* (EGP) and *English for professional purposes* (EPP), we also propose a term that captures the use of English for social interactions, and call it “Social English” or English for Social Purposes (ESP) to distinguish it from EGP in common social life and English use in high-end social interaction.

Since general English-language proficiency builds Chinese expatriates’ confidence in communicating with host nationals (Xu, 2007) and facilitates their exposure to local culture, their anxiety and uncertainty could be reduced in the initial stage of their expatriation (Gudykunst, 2004). Chinese expatriates with higher proficiency in using professional English are expected to fulfill their tasks, avoid frustrations, and achieve higher job satisfaction. Professional English-language proficiency might also increase Chinese expatriates’ associations with host nationals, both in workplace and at social occasions.

English for social purpose could foster Chinese expatriates’ relationships with host nationals, especially with their clients, because extensive social interactions help build positive images of expatriates

in the perceptions of host nationals, facilitate mutual understanding, and expand the personal link from workplace to household.

### *HYPOTHESIS*

Based on the related literature review, a major hypothesis is put forward to examine the overall relationships of the English-language proficiency of Chinese expatriates and their adjustment to overseas assignments. The sub-hypotheses were also developed to examine how and whether general, professional, and social English proficiencies affect Chinese expatriates' adjustment to their overseas assignments.

***Hypothesis:** English-language proficiency is positively correlated with Chinese expatriates' adjustment to overseas assignments.*

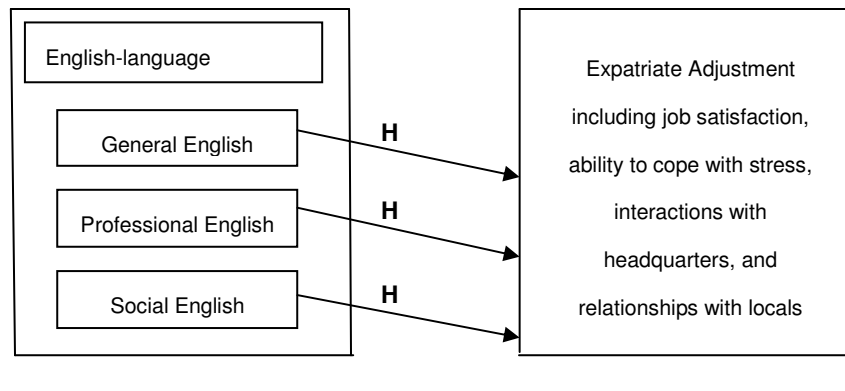
***Ha:** Chinese expatriates with a higher level of general English-language proficiency have better adjustment to their overseas assignments.*

***Hb:** Chinese expatriates with a higher level of professional English-language proficiency have better adjustment to their overseas assignments.*

***Hc:** Chinese expatriates with a higher level of social English-language proficiency have better adjustment to their overseas assignments.*



The correlations proposed above are projected in Figure 1 as follows:



**FIGURE 1: A MODEL OF THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ON CHINESE EXPATRIATE ADJUSTMENT TO OVERSEAS ASSIGNMENTS**

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study examines the relationships of English-language proficiency on Chinese expatriates with their overseas assignment adjustments. A large-sized Chinese multinational in the information industry, Company ABC, was selected as a subject company for this study. Company ABC imitated its international business in the mid-1990s. Nowadays the company operates in over 150 countries with approximately 6,000 employees working in the overseas markets. Over 60 percent of the international employees are local.

Quantitative research method was used. Data on informants' perceptions of their overseas adjustment and of their English-language proficiency were collected through a questionnaire survey. To avoid a low rate of response, one of the researchers took the advice given by the subject company and conducted on-site

surveys with assistance from related departments. The data were collected in early 2009 when many Chinese expatriates returned to the headquarters in mainland China for meetings and trainings.

The survey sample was comprised of Chinese expatriates who have been on their overseas posting for at least six months. One hundred and ninety (N = 190) Chinese expatriates took part in this research study. Of 190 respondents, 60.5 percent worked in countries where English is not spoken as an official language; 90 percent held professional or technical positions in human resources, finance, administration, IT, engineering, sales & marketing, and logistics. Ten percent of the subjects held managerial positions at a country level or regional level. Among the 190 participants, 57.5 percent had worked for more than two years in their overseas assignments, which indicated above half of the respondents should have experienced a needed time frame for a whole cycle of the overseas assignment adjustment (Du-Babcock, 2000).

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part measured the four dimensions of adjustment, which included job satisfaction, ability to cope with stress, interaction with headquarters, and relationships with locals. Respondents were asked to indicate their felt degree of adjustment on a 4-point Likert scale with 1 indicating strongly disagrees" and 4 indicating strongly agree. The even-numbered scale was adopted to allow Chinese participants to give a clear and specific judgment (Krosnick & Fabrigar, 1997). The second part of the questionnaire dealt with the English-language proficiency of Chinese expatriates. The Chinese expatriates were also requested to self-report their levels of proficiency in the use of general English, professional English, and social English.

To analyze the reliability of questionnaire items, Cronbach's alpha was applied. The results as shown in Table 1 state that the coefficient alpha values of expatriate adjustment and English-language proficiency are .70 and .89 respectively.

Variable	Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Expatriate Adjustment	4	.70
English-language Proficiency	3	.89

**TABLE 1. RELIABILITY OF INSTRUMENT**

According to Nunnally (1978), Cronbach's coefficient alpha=.70 is an acceptable reliability coefficient. Therefore, the proposed variables of expatriate adjustment and English-language proficiency in

this research are accepted. Aside from performing Cronbach's alpha to show its reliability, Pearson's Correlation Coefficients were also obtained to test the hypotheses.

## FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In this section, we report the quantitative results of the data derived from questionnaires. The quantitative results were analyzed to examine how and whether English-language proficiency affects Chinese expatriates' adjustment to their overseas assignments.

To answer the major and sub-hypotheses, Pearson's Correlation and Coefficient was performed to examine their relationships. Table 2 first shows the results of the overall English-language proficiency and four identified variables on expatriate adjustment, and second further shows the relationships of the three types of English-language proficiency and Chinese expatriates' adjustments.

	EA	JS	AS	IH	RL
Overall English-language proficiency	.179*	.057	.128*	.149*	.183**
General English-language proficiency	.223*	.122	.174*	.170*	.184*
Professional English-language proficiency	.184*	.083	.130	.159*	.157*
Social English-language proficiency	.088	-.037	.052	.078	.157*

Keys: \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$

EP=Overall English-language proficiency

AS=Ability to cope with stress

EA=Expatriate adjustment

IH=Interaction with headquarters

JS=Job satisfaction

RL=Relationships with locals

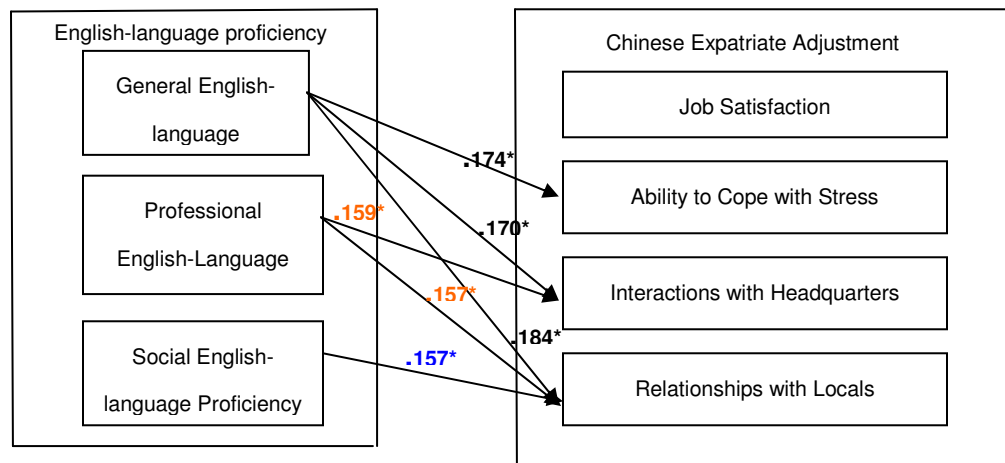
**TABLE 2. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SUB-VARIABLES OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND EXPATRIATE ADJUSTMENT**

The overall English-language proficiency was moderately correlated with expatriate adjustment ( $r=.179^*$ ) in that the overall English-language proficiency was positively correlated with three of the four

identified variables; namely, ability to cope with stress, interaction with headquarters, and relationships with locals. Hence, the major hypothesis was supported. The further analyses of the effects of different types of English-language proficiency present that general English-language proficiency was correlated with expatriate adjustment ( $r=.223^*$ ). Meanwhile, such English-language proficiency was correlated with the ability to cope with stress ( $r=.174^*$ ), interaction with headquarters ( $r=.170^*$ ) and relationship with locals ( $r=.184^*$ ). In other words, Chinese expatriates who rated higher in their general English proficiency felt that they had higher ability in coping with stress, better interaction with headquarters, and better relationships with locals. As a result,  $H_a$  was supported.

The results also show that professional English-language proficiency was positively but mildly correlated to expatriate adjustment ( $r=.184^*$ ). The finding supported  $H_b$ . In the meantime, Chinese expatriates who rated higher in their professional English-language proficiency tended to give higher rating in interaction with headquarters ( $r=.159^*$ ) and relationship with locals ( $r=.157^*$ ). However, the professional-language proficiency did not have significant impact on their job satisfaction and ability to cope with stress.

Of the three types of English-language proficiency, the results of the social language proficiency does not show conclusive finding in that the social English-language proficiency was only found to enhance Chinese expatriates' relationships with locals ( $r=.157^*$ ). Consequently,  $H_c$  was not supported. For illustration, Figure 2 below presents the correlations between different types of English-language proficiency and Chinese expatriate adjustment.



**FIGURE 2. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND CHINESE EXPATRIATE ADJUSTMENT**

## DISCUSSION

The current study examines how the three different types of English-language proficiency (i.e. general English-language proficiency, professional English-language proficiency, and social English-language proficiency) influences the Chinese expatriates' adjustment. Significant findings are discussed in this section.

Regarding the dimensions of Chinese expatriate adjustment, the results of the present study agree with previous expatriate studies that expatriate adjustment is a multi-faceted process. In particular, interaction with headquarters, although rarely discussed in expatriate studies, was proved to be a valid construct of expatriate adjustment in this study. An explanation of such adjustment need is that resource sharing within a multinational is coordinated largely by headquarters (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989). This result also lends support to Gregersen and Black's (1990) finding that commitment to the headquarters, which implied good interaction with headquarters, was a positive correlation of intent to stay in expatriates. Concerning the moderate impact of English-language proficiency on Chinese expatriate adjustment, three reasons are speculated for explanations. First, as Xu's (2007) study suggested, the most obvious impact of English proficiency on expatriate adjustment usually takes place in the first one or two months of their overseas assignment rather than throughout the whole adjustment period. Since the participants in this research have

been working overseas for at least six months, their felt importance of English-language proficiency might not have been as critical as they were at the beginning of their overseas assignments. This may explain the reason that English-language proficiency was not correlated to job satisfaction. Second, since this is a China-based company, the English-language proficiency of the participants in general was moderate and they might not have many opportunities to sense how different types of English-language proficiency affect their adjustments. Third, the small size of the sample ( $N=190$ ) in the present study might have also affected the statistical results.

When it comes to the effects of English-language proficiency on Chinese expatriates' job satisfaction, the results show inconclusive findings in that there was no correlation between the three types of English-language proficiency and job satisfaction. Such an inconclusive result may imply that factors other than English-language proficiency, for example, the international human resources policies, affect job satisfaction.

Among the three types of English-language proficiency, general English-language proficiency was a determining factor that significantly correlates to three of the four aspects of adjustment — the ability to cope with stress ( $r=.174^*$ ), relationships with locals ( $r=.184^*$ ) and interaction with headquarters ( $r=.170^*$ ). While the first two correlations are understandable, the positive influence of general English-language proficiency on interaction with headquarters is unexpected. Such a correlation result suggests that expatriates with higher general English-language proficiency are likely to effectively bridge the communication between the headquarters and its subsidiaries.

While professional English-language proficiency was positively correlated with interactions with headquarters ( $r=.159^*$ ) as well as relationships with locals ( $r=.157^*$ ), it was not correlated with job satisfaction and ability to cope with stress. Such results may indicate that Chinese expatriates with higher proficiency of professional English tend to possess a higher level of field knowledge; consequently, forms an advantage in petitioning headquarters for support and working with local employees with their expertise.

Social English-language proficiency was found to be only significantly correlated to relationship with locals ( $r=.157^*$ ). Such a result implies that on the one hand, Chinese expatriates with higher level of social English tend to have more opportunities to interact with local people in various social occasions; and on the other hand, these Chinese expatriates who interacted more with local people in turn had more opportunities to improve their social English.

## **CONCLUSION**

The multi-dimensionality of expatriate adjustment was reconfirmed by this research, with some new variables identified, which are job satisfaction, ability to cope with stress, interactions with headquarters and relationships with locals. In this study, three types of English-language proficiency, namely general, professional, and social English-language proficiency, were found to be correlated to one or more dimensions of Chinese expatriate adjustment within the population of employees of one company. General English-language proficiency showed the strongest correlation with three of the four identified adjustment factors.

## ***IMPLICATIONS***

The current research has implication for both researchers and practitioners. For researchers, although expatriate adjustment has been widely researched, this study reveals that there still exists a need for more empirical research into language-related factors that facilitate or impede expatriate adjustment. This is supported by recent studies in international business (see, for example, Harzing & Noorderhaven, 2008; Selmer, 2006; Thomas, 2008; Welch & Welch, 2007). With better understanding of the English-language proficiency required for non-native English users in international business, more suitable English proficiency testing methods could be developed and applied.

For practitioners, this research could also shed light for expatriate management in multinationals. First, general English-language proficiency was found to exert the most influence on adjustment compared with professional and social English-language proficiency among the expatriates of one company. This finding has important implications for expatriate selection and training in the company before Chinese expatriates' departure. Second, interaction with headquarters was found to be an important component of expatriate adjustment, which implies that improvement in organizational communication could possibly facilitate expatriate adjustment. Expatriate adjustment should not be regarded as only an individual action, but a process of organizational operation as well.

### ***FUTURE STUDIES***

A few limitations to this study should be considered. First, the self-reported questionnaire data collected to measure adjustment and English-language proficiency may have been moderated by the informants' psychological reaction to the questions. Some informants may have associated their answers with the company's appraisal; therefore, they may have been reluctant to give objective information. Second, there were few informants from the sales group, and yet this population has the most exposure to locals of all the expatriates. For future research, a test is recommended to find out whether similar results could be obtained after supplemental data on sales expatriates is added to the current database. Lack of data from the sales group may have resulted in a weaker correlation between English-language proficiency and adjustment, since salespeople might be more aware of the influence of language in international business. Third, qualitative data could be included in the future so as to enhance our understanding of the correlations identified in the quantitative study. Fourth, as the subject company is in a certain stage of globalization, the data could only be used to interpret the current correlation between English-language proficiency and expatriate adjustment. With increased English-language proficiency in the organization, the correlation may be stronger, and therefore, a longitudinal research study is urged for the future.

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