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## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES: AMERICAN EXPATRIATES STRIVING TO LEARN CHINESE CULTURE

### INTRODUCTION

The global economy is no longer a theory, but a reality (Ohmae 13). China, with an annual double-digit GDP growth in the past 20 years, is at the center of this global economy. Its low labor and raw material cost, a growing middle class of consumers, and a vast country space are only a few reasons that draw scores of multinational corporations (MNC) to China for overseas market expansion and outsourcing. Consequently, hundreds of business professionals are sent to China for overseas operations by American MNCs (Eisenberg and Goodall 20). As US corporations expand globally (Sanders and Madden 17), more and more American professional expatriates will be working and living in China physically and virtually. As a result, thousands of American professionals are communicating with the Chinese on a routine basis through various channels: face-to-face, phone calls, e-mails, text message, letters, and conference calls.

With so many American expatriates in daily communication with the Chinese, greater attention needs to be paid to the effectiveness of their intercultural learning and adaptation processes in the Chinese cultural context, especially for those who are physically in China. Communication is the basic substance (Eisenberg and Goodall 10) for the effectiveness of communication between (and within) global organizations, and we see that the educational need for effective intercultural communication is pressing (Cheney 95, McCain 66).

It is generally believed that cultural sojourners have difficulties adapting to a wide range of business, academic, and social situations temporarily or permanently in a new culture—the host culture (Y. Y. Kim 56; Y. Y. Kim and Y. S. Kim 9; Yoshida 710). There are certain obstacles that are particular to intercultural learning (Y. Y. Kim 33), yet there is a lack of recent research on intercultural learning obstacles of American expatriates in foreign cultures, especially in China. Reducing or eliminating these intercultural learning and adaptation obstacles will help to increase the effectiveness of American-Chinese communication, which will then minimize intercultural misunderstanding, and thus enhance the productivity of global organizations and enrich the intercultural experience of expatriates.

Building upon the existing literature on intercultural learning, adaptation, and perception (Y. Y. Kim 33; Bodnar 590; Chen and Isa 76), this qualitative study investigated and analyzed intercultural learning and adaptation obstacles for American expatriates in China. Twenty in-depth interviews with American expatriates employed in a broad range of occupations were conducted in China in August of 2005. Multiple perspectives were consulted on how American professional expatriates adapt themselves from the home (US) culture to the host (Chinese) culture and what obstacles they encountered. The interviewees vary among business owners, corporate executives, diplomats, college professors and middle school teachers, as well as nonprofit organization administrators, consultants, and secretaries. Some were distinguished diplomats, some were rich business owners, others were just young graduates fresh out of college. The interview data revealed a clear pattern of obstacles. It is found that American expatriates have to overcome three categories of obstacles to learn Chinese culture: Cognitive obstacles, Motivational obstacles, and Structural obstacles. The Cognitive obstacles include an expatriate's insufficient Chinese proficiency and his/her unrealistic preconception of China. The Motivational obstacles point to an expatriate's lack of flexibility in adaptation and his/her "comfort zone syndrome." Finally, the Structural obstacles are created by China's ingroup and outgroup differentiation and the expatriate's role definition.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTION

An American expatriate is defined as a "cultural stranger," who has left the home (American) culture and is temporarily working and living in a host (Chinese) culture. A stranger carries a culture of distant origin while in close vicinity with people of a host culture (Y. Y. Kim 20). He or she needs to learn and adapt to the local culture to survive and then thrive. "Intercultural learning" refers to the process of obtaining and understanding information on the norms and values of a host culture both prior to, and during, one's host cultural experience. "Intercultural adaptation" refers to the process of adjustment that a cultural stranger undergoes cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally in a new culture. Intercultural learning and intercultural adaptation are two intertwined processes any expatriate has to experience. To function and thrive in the new cultural environment, an expatriate has to adapt to the written and unwritten norms of the new culture concerning knowledge, emotion, and behavior. Intercultural learning is the foundation of intercultural adaptation, while intercultural adaptation shows the effect of intercultural learning. It is through intercultural learning that expatriates familiarize

themselves with the new rules, norms, and values prevalent in the new cultural context as they adapt themselves to the new language, culture, society, and people.

Misunderstanding and miscommunication that derive from cultural differences are common (Azuma 113). Certain intercultural communication obstacles exist for cultural strangers, and such obstacles can be costly for organizations as well as individuals (Church 550). Research indicates that nearly 40 percent of American expatriates return home prematurely, incurring substantial costs to the company, along with a damaged company reputation, and lost business opportunities and shares (Black and Gregersen 465; Chen and Starosta 357), a phenomenon that has been mostly attributed to poor organizational interventions (Brewster and Packard 20; Pfaendler 7), inappropriate acculturation choices (Stierle et al. 210), and the lack of spouse/partner/family assistance (Adler 5; Black and Gregersen 467; Stephens and Black 420).

Arnett (776) argues that the absence or insufficient motivation of expatriates in intercultural adaptation and the psychological consequences of globalization must be considered in expatriate training. Y. Y. Kim and Y. S. Kim argue that the inability to adjust to a foreign cultural environment, rather than a lack of technical competence, is the major contributing factor to ineffective performance and even the premature return of expatriates (10). Chen and Isa identified eight obstacles to intercultural communication in their study on Japanese sojourners in the US: English proficiency, cultural differences, improper conversation topics, interaction partners, feedback, silence, inadequate communication strategies, and pressures from ingroups (76). For example, English proficiency includes self-reported deficiencies in pronunciation, listening, speaking speed, vocabulary, connotations, and understanding of English dialects and accents, as well as different accents and tones related to the gender and age of the speaker. Still other scholars have encouraged the investigation of the possible influence of the receiving society on the expatriates' adaptation experience. Sang and Rooney proposed six key adaptation variables: stress symptoms, life satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of control, school adjustment, and behavioral problems (215). Building upon existing literature, I seek to discover key obstacles to intercultural learning that American expatriates experience in China.

#### METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

A total of 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with American expatriates working in the metro Shanghai area in August 2005. This

area is located at the heart of the Yangtze River Delta area in East China, one of the most robust economic regions in the world. While there are no exact data on how many American expatriates are currently in all of China, partly due to the mobility of this group, a conservative estimate is that there are about 8,000 to 10,000 American citizens working in the Shanghai metropolitan area, a city of fourteen million residents and seven million transient workers. In August 2005, there were about 3,400 individuals in business from 1,400 companies that were members of the American Chamber of Commerce, a branch in Shanghai that adheres to the principles of free trade, open markets, private enterprise, and the unrestricted flow of information (American Chamber of Commerce Website 1).

Twenty face-to-face interviews were conducted and tape-recorded based on an interview guide. The guide, consisting of 30 questions, was developed by analyzing existing literature and incorporating current research questions. Each interview lasted from one to one and a half hours. The participants were culturally non-Chinese American expatriates, working full time at professional, technical, and managerial positions. The participants were identified based on a snowball sampling technique derived from the author's connections with key American organizations in Shanghai, such as the Shanghai American Chamber of Commerce, Shanghai American School, the US Consulate General in Shanghai, and US-China Business Council. The interview participants, ranging in age from 26 to 55, were drawn from the fields of business, public relations, diplomacy, education, consulting, wholesale, service, and nonprofit sectors, with a ratio of 60% men to 40% women. All participants were US citizens. While 80% of the participants were white, some diversity was achieved, with one African American, one Hispanic American, one Asian American and one Indian American included. Most of the interviews were conducted at the participant's workplace, with a few in coffee houses or other public leisure spaces. All interviews were tape recorded with the participants' written consent. Interviews were arranged via individual requests at AmCham (American Chamber of Commerce) meetings, American MNCs' human resource departments' connection, and friends' referrals.

Within the broad scope of the interview guide, semi-structured dialogic interviews were conducted. The researcher paid special attention to seeking mutuality and to assuring confirmation for the humaneness of the interviewees from an "I-Thou" standpoint (Buber 2; Bohm 5). Occasionally, for the purpose of inviting reciprocal disclosure (Altman and Taylor 56), the author shared her own experience in overcoming obstacles while learning and adapting to

American culture as a Chinese student, as well as adapting back to Chinese culture during her reentry to China. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed in fall 2005, and the patterns of these interviews clearly reveal three groups of obstacles.

#### DEFINING THE OBSTACLES

The in-depth interview transcripts showed three categories of obstacles: cognitive, motivational, and structural. These three categories are each composed of two barriers. Cognitive obstacles are built upon expatriates' unrealistic expectations of China and their low Chinese proficiency. Motivational obstacles are those caused by inflexibility in learning and adaptation, or by failure of expatriates to leave their comfort zone by adhering to a social circle that excludes Chinese people. Structural obstacles are those in which the objective existence of the expatriates' social role conflicts with the collective nature of society of China. The ingroup and outgroup differentiation of the Chinese society is derived from its hierarchical structure and makes it difficult for any newcomer to become close to a particular Chinese person. Additionally, the role definition of the expatriates, especially if the role is to represent American government, hinders the degree of intercultural learning and adaptation achieved. An American expatriate must overcome these six barriers to achieve host-culture competency in China. In turn, low host communication competency may create stressful living conditions and reduce the working efficiency of expatriates and their organizations.

A 42-year-old wholesaler, Mike, presents a typical example of the effects of low host communication competency caused by these obstacles. Mike was from Chicago, and at age 40, he was quite successful as a business owner of a small wholesale company of construction materials. Discontented with the comfort of life in America, Mike wanted a challenge. He decided to join the China "bandwagon" without any knowledge of Chinese culture or language. He considered his experience in China as "absolutely miserable." He said he was basically asking China to adapt to him: "For two years, I couldn't get anything done; I couldn't deal with people; the language barrier was huge because I didn't speak Chinese at all. I didn't know anything about the Chinese culture, and I wasn't interested in learning how to handle the Chinese people. I basically was the worst person in the world you could put into this type of culture. I wasn't very flexible at the time, so it was really a poor choice." Mike noted that he became much happier once he tried to learn the Chinese language and adapt his diet to the Chinese food. By the time of the interview, Mike spoke understandable Chinese although he was still illiterate in the

written language. In his words, he learned street Chinese as he talked to the Chinese people a lot. He has since created some profitable business accounts by wholesaling home decor materials from one part of China to another, an extension of his business in Chicago.

*Cognitive Obstacles: Limited Chinese Proficiency and Biased Perception*

My investigation of job searching obstacles for the foreign-born Chinese in the US suggests that increased English proficiency substantially reduces almost all job-seeking obstacles in the United States for foreign-born Chinese (178). Higher proficiency in English reading, writing, and speaking builds a strong bridge to job-search success for Chinese jobseekers in the US. Given similar credentials, a foreign-born job-seeker fluent in written and spoken English gains a critical advantage over competitors for job search success. Likewise, when American expatriates travel to China, their abilities to read, write, and speak the Chinese language appear critical to their success concerning intercultural learning and adaptation processes.

About half of the interviewees who participated in this research could speak and understand oral Chinese moderately or fluently, but only a small fraction of them could also write Chinese characters well. Chinese proficiency was, indeed, a factor in the preparation of those who worked in nonprofit and foreign service sectors. These expatriates are usually screened and tested for Chinese proficiency by their employers before their appointment to positions in China. Frank, a 43-year-old diplomat, assessed his Chinese level as acceptable: “In foreign service, we rate foreign language ability on a scale of zero to five. Zero being no ability at all, five having a college professor’s command of the language. On that scale I’m about a two plus, which means that I’m fluent enough to make myself understood most of the time in China. In sophisticated conversations, I get lost; watching TV or listening to the radio I kind of get lost, so that’s about where my ability is.”

On the other hand, for those who worked in the private sector, Chinese proficiency was not a prerequisite for careers in China. Helen, a young lady from Kentucky in her late 20s with an MBA from the Spanish branch of a US university, spoke almost no Chinese and expressed no determination to learn the language. Discouraged by the tight job market in Spain after getting her MBA there, she followed many young Europeans and headed to China. She confessed that she experienced frustration with the Chinese society everyday. For example, she would give Shanghai taxi-drivers unclear or wrong directions in her broken Chinese. She added: “It has been frustrating

for me to find a job here because I don't speak the language. My first job with that small company formed by a few young Europeans was not good because they were not making any money. Then, I had a few part-time jobs here and there and it is kind of embarrassing to talk about these jobs. It has been a really tough year for me. Also, when I first came here, I just couldn't stand the Shanghainese food, it is so heavy and oily. It took me some time to learn to order the food I like." When asked about her current Chinese level, she said: "I speak none. I learned about twenty words before I came, and I haven't learned any more since. I know enough about where I am going.... I think that language is the hardest thing for me... there is so much more you can understand when you are able to speak the language."

Similarly, the 34-year-old middle school counselor Allen recalled that his first year in China was very difficult: "I did not know how to go about things, and I spoke no Chinese. It was very stressful just to run basic errands. I did not know how long it was going to take to do anything. It was stressful." He went on to emphasize the importance of the Chinese language for American expatriates to China: "Learn the language as soon as you can, and make an effort to try to reverse the attitude. A lot of Americans come over and gripe about Chinese people not speaking English. Well, if you can put the shoe on the other foot, and they come over to our country, of course you would expect them to speak English; then, you know maybe you should learn some Chinese. Until they let go of some of their ego about being Americans, they could be the center of the universe."

Janet, a foreign service official, agreed with Allen in her interview: "I think the most important thing for expatriates coming to China to grasp is some knowledge of the Chinese language. I think that is true of any country. If you come to China without any knowledge of Chinese language and the cultural tidbits, you're going to have a really hard time. You're going to get cheated, you're going to get left out of decisions, and you're not going to know what's going on. You're going to feel even more isolated than you already do as a foreigner if you don't know any language at all. Plus, it also shows a sort of respect to your host country if you have learned some Chinese before you come for basic communication."

Marcus, a 52-year-old African American diplomat in China, speaks fluent Chinese. In fact, his Chinese fluency tops that of all the other participants in this study. He was born and raised in the Caribbean and came to the US for his college education. After discovering an interest in the Chinese language, he applied for study abroad opportunities and spent one year in Taipei and one year in Xi'an. He declared that not only did his fluent Chinese help



him tremendously in the workplace, it also saved him many times in social situations: “If I wouldn’t be able to speak the language ... I would be very suspicious of everybody who might be talking about me. Being able to communicate in Chinese absolutely makes a huge difference.”

Carl, a 29-year-old nonprofit organization employee, stressed that low Chinese proficiency limited an expatriate’s professional and social spaces: “If you don’t learn the language, then you are just always going to be on the outskirts; you’ll never know what is going on. It’s a severe disadvantage. People don’t have the time to explain everything to you, and it’s a big problem, but I think that’s true if you go to any country, not just China.”

English has become a global *lingua franca*,<sup>1</sup> and it is a required foreign language for most of the 200 million K–12 students, and for most college students in China. In fact, there are more people in China studying English today than Americans speaking it (Krieger 36). Many Chinese are, in fact, English-speaking bilinguals, if they have a high school education or beyond. Most expatriates interviewed reported that very often Chinese people would walk toward them in the street and try to practice their English.

However, to expect all Chinese people to speak understandable English is simply unrealistic. After graduating from high school and college, many people’s oral English skill falters due to a lack of practice. Thus, not all educated Chinese speak English, and only a limited number of them speak it fluently. In fact, among the older generation and in less economically

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<sup>1</sup>A *lingua franca* is any language widely used beyond the population of its native speakers. The de facto status of *lingua franca* is usually “awarded” by the masses to the language of the most influential nation(s) of the time. Any given language normally becomes a *lingua franca* primarily by being used for international commerce, but can be accepted in other cultural exchanges, especially diplomacy. Occasionally the term “*lingua franca*” is applied to a fully established formal language; thus, formerly, it was said that French was the *lingua franca* of diplomacy. The term “*lingua franca*” was originally used by Arabs to name all Romance languages, and especially Italian (Arabs used the name “Franks” for all peoples in Western Europe). Then, it meant a language with a Romance lexicon (most words derived from Latin which then evolved into early forms of Spanish and Italian) and a very simple grammar, that until the end of the nineteenth century was used by mariners in the Mediterranean Sea, particularly in the Middle East and Northern Africa (Wikipedia Website). The current de facto *lingua franca* used for international trade, conference, and research is English, partly due to the heritage from the UK and the contemporary cultural, economic, political, and military influences of the US. Some futurists predict that Chinese will be the next *lingua franca* on the Internet within a decade (Krieger 36).

developed areas, to possess English speaking and listening skills for an ordinary Chinese person is quite uncommon. Although some people from the older generation, the generation equivalent to the US Baby Boomers, did learn a foreign language in the 1950s and 1960s, that language usually was Russian. It was taught in Chinese colleges during the Cold War Era as a major foreign language, supported by the USSR, then the “big brother” to China.

Michelle, a 37-year-old corporate manager, explains that English is not commonly spoken: “But more people in China don’t [understand English]. It depends on what your expectations are. If you want to know what is going on in your world, you have to learn Chinese, unless you can accept only being spoken to in English and not knowing whether what they are telling you is true. With no language ability, you can’t read; you can’t pick up on basic signs, you can’t go to places that you have heard about, because you don’t know the characters for it or you can’t pronounce it. If you can accept that, then it’s fine. Some people can. I know people who have been here for ten years and still don’t know a word of Chinese. I speak Chinese, but not fantastically; my reading comprehension is not that great, and I am only semi-literate. I imagine it would be a challenge if I were semi-literate, living in the US.”

In summary, the interview data reveal that the Chinese language is an indispensable tool to understanding Chinese culture, which is contained, interpreted, and recorded in the Chinese language. A mere trial of attempting to learn the Chinese language by an expatriate could well serve as an icebreaker for relationship building with the Chinese people. Low linguistic skill in the Chinese language is the first obstacle for most expatriates. Moreover, biased perceptions of China as seen through dark or rosy glasses form another cognitive obstacle.

The perception of China in the mind of an expatriate prior to visiting China creates a cognitive foundation for his/her experience in China. Research data shows that such a perception is usually biased, due to the fact that some expatriates view China too pessimistically, while others see it too optimistically. The incongruity between an internal mindset and external reality in a cultural context results in various degrees of culture shock and emotional stress that usually jeopardize the intercultural adaptation process. Strangers must deal with the fact that many of their “beliefs, taken-for-granted assumptions and routine behaviors are no longer relevant or appropriate” for their everyday social interactions in the new environment (Y. Y. Kim 405). If “the imagined China” is different from the experienced China, surprises, disappointment, or doubt might stimulate curiosity for intensive learning or create fear of cultural differences. If the “imagined China” in an expatriate’s

mind is drastically different from the “real China” that he/she is experiencing, an expatriate might feel disappointed and develop symptoms of learning resistance. Ling Chen and Masako Isa, for example, found that the sources of surprise for Japanese students in America were varied, but mostly came from mundane, even trivial, aspects of a daily routine (78).

The interview data of this study reveal that expatriates were surprised by various cultural facets and phenomena of Chinese life. Distorted images of China, the Chinese concepts of time and space, the free market economy in China, the dynamism of regional differences, and a globalized younger generation topped most expatriates’ list of surprises in China. Some of them were even surprised by everyday living conditions in China, such as bathing methods and child-rearing traditions. For example, some expatriates had imagined a communist China with an iron-fist government that keeps its citizens political prisoners. This image was perhaps influenced by the Western media’s coverage of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident.<sup>2</sup> Others imagined an artistic China with every Chinese person possessing poetry writing skills, which according to the interviewee, comes from reading too many Tang and Song dynasty poems.

George, a 28-year-old Harvard graduate who works for an international organization in Shanghai, confessed that his mental images of China prior to his arrival were totally wrong. Images from the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989 had stayed with him and made it difficult for him to accept the freer China that lay before him. He was also surprised by the dynamism of changes prevalent in the country: “[American] people think of Chinese culture as fireworks and dragon dances and other traditional things, but if you look at young Chinese people today, a guy growing up in Shanghai is probably as close to an American kid as he is to a ‘Chinese kid’ — much closer than he is to his parents. I mean he plays the same on-line games; he goes to an Internet bar and watches Taiwanese soap operas or Hong Kong dramas, or Hollywood movies. He listens to Western music, and most likely, he probably thinks hip-hop is cool ... I mean you are looking at people who are radically different from their parents. There’s a lot of individualism, there’s an immense amount

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<sup>2</sup>1989 Tiananmen Square Incident: This was a democracy movement spearheaded by young college students in 1989 following the death of Hu Yaobang, the former reformist Prime Minister of China. The students urged a fifth modernization—democracy for China. The Chinese government stopped the movement, symbolized by the violent clash on June 4 at Tiananmen Square, a critical area in central Beijing where some students were having a hunger strike.

of personal freedom here that didn't exist in the past .... This is something that I think the world has never seen before.”

Helen, a 55-year-old high school math teacher at an international school in Shanghai, wondered if “communism” remains an accurate label for modern-day China: “I was told it was a communist country, but I don't really feel it here, but it is in a sense, I guess.” In fact, many futurists consider China to be a capitalist country in its rawest form (Ohmae 15).

Lea, a 35-year-old diplomat, had a different mental image of China. Instead of an iron-fist communist country, she had envisioned China as a country of romantic poets, well educated and well mannered. Upon arriving in China, however, she was shocked by the impolite and uncivilized manners of people in the street. Most of them, who might occasionally spit, are migrant workers coming to Shanghai from rural areas, working in construction or textile industries. Lea said: “I have always been fascinated by this culture. I thought if people can create art and poetry like that, they are very intelligent. I mean it's amazing.... I see people pushing and spitting. When shopping, people would point to me and shout '*Lao Wai, Lao Wai*' (“Old foreigner!”). That was hard.” Amy felt extremely disappointed with the “un-poetic” manners of the ordinary Chinese. Instead of seeing the altruism demonstrated in ancient Chinese poetry, she realized how practical and selfish some Chinese could be.

Marcus, an African American diplomat who was in China ten years ago as a Chinese language student, recalled that his initial experience in Xi'an was full of anxiety. He narrated a story about taking a legendary bath in China: “[At the time,] I didn't even know what toilets were like in China. I didn't know how to bathe in China. They told me to go down the hall [of the foreign student dorm] and take a shower. I stepped down to the men's urinal and proceeded to take a bath. I did. I said maybe it is a very small bath, but maybe this is what showers were like in China. But it was on the wall, and I stood there and collected a little bit of water and started to wash myself. When I came out, the *Ayi* (female janitor) pointed to the shower place by making dramatic hand motions. When I later told other students about my story, they shouted ‘No, we have real showers. You should have walked down to the second door!’”

Marcus was discouraged by the lack of opportunity for direct interaction with the Chinese people, seemingly built on government control or fear: “A lot of my professors [in the US in the late 80s] discouraged me from going to Xi'an and studying Chinese. They told me some African students were being beaten up in Beijing for dating Chinese women. And they gave me books to

read about dangers in China. I skimmed them, but I still went. I decided to go. I went to Xi'an and met a lot of really interesting people there. But we were segregated by residence. We were in the foreign students' dormitory. There were a lot of Korean and Japanese students, one Canadian student, and maybe one or two American students from Boston. So we were segregated from the other (Chinese) students. Our doors were locked at night, but we learned how to sneak out of the windows of course. Despite all that, I had a wonderful time in Xi'an. I met a lot of people, but did not make a lot of Chinese friends, which was regrettable." Marcus did not reach out based on a misconception formed by some of his American professors.

Jim, a 47-year-old cultural consultant mentioned the importance of going to China with no assumptions: "Do not form opinions too quickly. When you come to China, when you first see things, you really have to say that it happens at this place this time. China is not one country; it's many countries, both in time, space and in social class. It is not three-dimensional; it's probably seven dimensional. You have to deal with each situation individually as it comes."

Frank, a diplomat, agreed that biased perceptions create learning obstacles. He said: "To some extent, I think a lot of Americans do come here with unrealistic expectations. One of the things that we do as US Consulate Officials is that we take care of Americans who get themselves into trouble in China. We see a lot of Americans who come here, and see Shanghai as a new city of opportunity where they can make a life for themselves. They come here and they have no idea how difficult it really is. They get themselves in trouble, lose all of their money and we have to get them back to the US."

Renee, a 57-year-old elementary school art teacher, has been in China since 1987. Having lived in Beijing, Wuhan, and Shanghai, she witnessed China's transformation in the past 20 years with her own eyes. She suggested: "You need to be ready for an adventure and be open-minded, observe and try to understand a lot of things that are different but not necessarily wrong. There's going to be a lot of things that assault your senses coming from America—the smells, the sights. For people coming from the States, it is very romantic for the first few weeks, and then all of a sudden comes the 'How can they be like that' attitude. [To] be willing to explore a new culture and accept people for who they are without judging is necessary. It's hard for the first couple of years; you keep saying 'but in America, that's how things are done.'" In short, a lack of linguistic proficiency in the Chinese language and a distorted image of China prior to a trip to China form the first category of intercultural learning and adaptation obstacles—the Cognitive Obstacles.

*Motivational Obstacles: Lack of Flexibility and Failure to Leave Comfort Zone*

Other than cognitive obstacles in Chinese language and biased perception, the research results show that motivation—namely, willingness and flexibility of expatriates to adapt themselves to the Chinese culture by observing cultural norms, respecting Chinese cultural values, and accepting Chinese behaviors—serves as a prerequisite for any meaningful intercultural adaptation. Interview data show that expatriates can be divided into two groups based partially on their motivation factor: those who went to China willingly—the “Willing”—and those who were sent by their employers to China because of a career requirement—the “Sent.”

Indeed, George, a 28-year-old Harvard MBA holder, differentiated the two kinds: “There are the expats [expatriates] who are shipped over by the companies that cost a lot of money and have a hard time adjusting. Even more so, their spouses have a harder time adjusting, because they didn’t want to be here in the first place—and they can’t communicate with Ayi<sup>3</sup> and other people. And then you have this other group, like me, who are sometimes more interested in China than they are in the industry *per se*. We want to live in China and we have to find a job. I think that those people are more willing to put up with things because they want to be here. A lot of it is just attitude.”

Allen agrees with this analysis: “There are two different types of expatriates in China. The first kind are those who wanted to come to work in China and study Chinese language, culture and history and then found a way to do business in China, and the second kind are those that are industry experts who are sent here by their companies. I am the first kind. I studied Chinese history, language and culture at the university. When I finished my Master’s in 2000, I wanted to come to China to work. So I just came here and started to look for a job.”

Mike observes that Americans tend to be much less adaptive than most other foreigners in China. Scott, CEO of a communication firm in Shanghai concurs: “Traditionally, Americans don’t travel [abroad] so much. Europeans know early if they are suitable for foreign assignment or not, for all they have to do is to drive for two hours and they are in a different place. Some people hate that experience and they stay in their village and others think that it’s

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<sup>3</sup>Ayi: This is the pronunciation in Chinese of “aunt,” a nanny who does house chores, and may live with the host family. Since labor cost is reasonable in China, many expatriates employ one or more Ayi at home for cooking, cleaning, and child rearing.

great to seek out opportunities for cultural interaction.” With only Canada and Mexico as neighbors, the relative geographical isolation of the US contributes perhaps to the ethnocentric attitude of some American expatriates. A “let China adapt to me” syndrome is in fact evident among the less adaptable expatriates according to John, a 45-year-old corporate executive: “I’ve met some people here who are constantly irritated and frustrated, and they can’t understand why China is not more accommodating to Americans. Every interaction with Chinese people is an exercise in frustration with them. That to me is a product of the wrong attitude about things. I still think those types of people are in the minority but they’re certainly here....” For some, it is humility that makes learning and growth possible. Mike, for instance, acknowledges that pride in one’s homeland can take the form of arrogance: “There is a benefit in being proud.... I came from America, an advanced country, ... and once I got rid of that pride, I learned to adapt and grow.”

As motivation is a key factor in the success of intercultural learning and adaptation, many participants suggest going to China with an open mind and a strong desire to adapt to cultural differences. Scott, who considered his first two years in China “absolute hell” because he was expecting everybody to speak English to him, provides the following advice: “Don’t expect China to adapt to you. You need to figure out how to negotiate with China, not the other way around.” Marcus echoes the admonition: “You need to come almost with a blank slate, not have preconceived notions about what you are going to find. Be flexible. Be willing to make friends. Be willing to talk to people. Don’t be suspicious of everybody you meet. I was when I initially got here. I was told that every Chinese woman wanted to get married to you and get a visa.... By the time I left China, I regretted not making some Chinese friends, but it was too late.... The people who struggle the most are those who try to make China the US.”

John, a 45-year-old executive said: “I think the only way to really be happy in a foreign culture is when you really love the people and want to learn their culture. If you were the type of person who prefers to stay in your comfort zone, I wouldn’t recommend working overseas.”

A personal comfort zone gets in the way of adaptation. Indeed, the comfort zone syndrome—namely, the tendency to stay in an American bubble in China—is a second motivational obstacle. Not all expatriates choose to interact with the local Chinese, and the global city of Shanghai makes it possible for them to live among other Americans in a pseudo-American environment surrounded by American symbols. In metropolitan Shanghai, where American business operations such as Starbucks, Wal-Mart, McDonalds, KFC, Pizza

Hut, and even Hooters are prevalent, and where many people speak English, an American expatriate can keep the American life style, work in spacious American corporate office spaces, shop in American-style grocery stores, interact only with other expatriates and thus live a manageable “American life” in China. Additionally, with the convenience of high speed Internet, MSN messenger, phone calls, and e-mails, expatriates can virtually live with their family and friends in America.

Monge and Contractor (476) state that *homophily*,<sup>4</sup> the selection of others who are similar to ourselves, is one major predictor of the diversity in one’s personal networks. People tend to associate with others who are similar in race, ethnicity, culture, social status, occupation, gender, age and interest. “Similarity (in communicator demographics) is thought to ease communication, increase predictability of behavior, and foster trust and reciprocity” (Brass 51). Indeed, for Frank, a diplomat in charge of cultural exchange, the US enclave constitutes a comfort zone: “Some people wouldn’t make it here without their family. They have their wife and kids and that’s their whole world. They don’t get out much; they don’t really interact much with the Chinese people. They’re living in a little patch of America here.... They very much stay in a comfort zone.”

Tom, a young graduate newly arrived in China said that some, primarily young singles, reject the comfort zone idea: “But some others are never in their comfort zone, they’re always out mingling with the Chinese people ... I like being out there and experiencing and learning about the culture on my own.” Tammy, owner of a small consulting firm, agrees with these assessments: “There are a lot of expats here who don’t want to be in the inner group of the Chinese people. They hang out with expatriates only, and they stay in their comfort zone. Partly because they know that they are going to be gone in a couple of years or in a year. And the ones who do make an effort and want to be more friendly with Chinese acquaintances or local colleagues, they will just make an effort to become friends.”

Blocked by linguistic and cultural barriers, reaching out to the local Chinese people takes exceptional motivation and effort on the part of the American expatriates, particularly in less-developed areas of China where

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<sup>4</sup>Homophily: (i.e., love of the same) is the tendency of individuals to associate and “Human bonding” bond with others who are similar. The presence of homophily has been discovered in a vast array of network studies. Homophily has been studied on the basis of similarity in age, gender, education, prestige, social class, tenure, and occupation (Monge and Contractor 476).



American support systems are hard to find. It may also take longer to gain trust from the local Chinese people, who are less exposed to the outside world. But the effort would be well worth it, according to Scott: “If you stay in your comfort zone, you are missing out on learning about China. It is vital to have these kinds of exchanges. China is the future of the world; the US and China should understand each other better.” In summary, the motivational obstacles include two barriers for some expatriates: lack of flexibility in adaptation and the comfort zone syndrome. Next, a third group of obstacles is analyzed: the Structural Obstacles.

*Structural Obstacles: The Social Structure of China and Expatriates’ Role Definition*

Chinese culture is a collectivist culture (Hofstede 78), in which almost all people are divided into two groups: the ingroup and the outgroup (Gao and Gudykunst; Y. Y. Kim 20). An ingroup member is somebody whom one needs to maintain a reciprocal relationship, and an outgroup member is simply an acquaintance. As a cultural stranger, it is only natural that an American expatriate is seen and treated as an outgroup member by local Chinese. There are strategies, however, that outgroup members can adopt to transform themselves into ingroup members, such as third-party referral, *guanxi* (relationship) cultivation (Gao 213), and benefit sharing. However such a transformation process takes a long time and there is no guarantee that a local Chinese person will reward the expatriates with an ingroup membership. An ingroup membership usually implies high trust and a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship. To get things done in China, one usually needs to be an ingroup member with the key persons in power regarding business transactions.

The interview data suggest that Americans need to be aware, before they embark on a Chinese experience, that this ingroup-outgroup distinction creates a structural obstacle for intercultural learning and adaptation. Such an obstacle, derived from the collective quality of the Chinese society, creates frustration and anxiety for the expatriates, who sometimes must become an ingroup member in order to get things done. Scott recalls that in his first two years in China, the Chinese people appeared to be too proud to be close: “It just seems that pride is very important in China. I grew up in a very small and poor neighborhood in Chicago. With pride you would get beaten up, so you couldn’t have any pride. It just seems that pride has a very high level of importance in China. It is hard for me to make any friends here.”

Janet, a 47-year-old professional, confirms that being accepted by the Chinese as an ingroup member is a slow process that requires much patience: “It just takes a long time and lots of effort to foster friendships in China. Even for my Chinese students who are U.K. passport holders, it takes a long time for them to open up to Westerners. You just have to be patient.”

Despite the seemingly time-consuming process of relationship cultivation with the Chinese, some expatriates participating in this study did succeed in gaining the trust of their Chinese counterparts, moved into their inner circles, and made learning and working more efficient. Melanie, an Indian American, shared her strategy of slowly moving into the inner circle of some of her Chinese friends: “I made an effort to express my love and kindness to people and my ability to say ‘I care for you. I will do whatever it takes,’ which is a good quality they enjoy obviously.”

Allen, accompanied by his wife, rents an apartment from Chinese landlords in downtown Shanghai. He reflects on the time and effort involved in gaining the trust of his landlords: “I don’t have any Chinese friends except my landlords. My landlords are sort of our friends; they work for the Chinese government. They are very Chinese with no real Western influence. I felt like I had to earn their trust after many months of living there. They have this strange image of whether I, as an American, will do or sell drugs. They probably got that concern from other people who rented to Westerners. It reminded me of being in the South—that one has to make efforts in earning trust from the locals, as the locals would say, ‘You are not from around here, are you?’”

Americans, coming from an individualistic society, face many obstacles in dealing with group-oriented Chinese. First, *the group* is of primary importance in the collectivist Chinese society (Hofstede 78). Everyone’s behavior is governed by reciprocity in benefit sharing and obligations (Gao 212). Americans, who most of the time split a restaurant bill among themselves, might find it difficult to have to pay for everybody after a dinner. Second, prestige, determined primarily by group attitudes, enforces reciprocal behavior. One simply has to pay more respect to elders, professors, political leaders, and managers. Americans, coming from a horizontal or low hierarchy society (Hofstede 55) might find it hard to adjust to such behavior and attitude. Finally, the pre-eminence of the group determines the importance of harmony among individuals within the group. The tension between collectivism and individualism makes it confusing for an individualistic American to form a collective identity in Chinese society.

Aside from the ingroup-outgroup distinction, another structural obstacle could be an expatriate's occupational role assignment. Many US diplomats in China, for example, declare that it is almost impossible to become an inner group member of the Chinese people because the Chinese see them as representatives of the US government, rather than individual persons. Jennifer, a visa officer, comments: "My life as a diplomat is sort of like in a bubble, I have a nice apartment, and it is very convenient. And my office is within walking distance." Paul seconds the "bubbled life" for a foreign service officer and many US government officials: "Working as a diplomat here, you're sort of in a bubble. People tend to treat you in a certain way ... it's not easy to go native, so to speak, and get into Chinese culture." And Jennifer concurs: "It is very difficult as a diplomat to plug into Chinese society. It is possible to have some close contacts, but it is virtually impossible to have friends. There is always a barrier ... particularly from the Chinese side there are restrictions. People can still get in trouble for communicating with foreigners. And we're very aware of that, so we don't want to get people in trouble. There is a line that neither side wants to cross."

Chinese culture demonstrates a high score on Hofstede's power distance index (90). People show much respect to government officials, which include American foreign service officials. According to Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relational dialogue theory (58), when one is considered to be much higher than the other, it is difficult for that person to be considered a potential friend because friendship requires equality and mutuality. Additionally, some diplomats interviewed stated that they intentionally stay away from Chinese people because they might be asked to give a favor when the Chinese apply for American visas. The Chinese *guanxi* concept requires a reciprocal relationship (Gao 212) that implies easy visa assistance from the diplomats; and this hinders the friendship initiation of a diplomat, especially for a visa officer.

Jennifer gives future expatriates her advice: "I think that Americans who come to China, have to really be very open-minded. They have to be able to accept that things are different and may have to lower their expectations. Just have a sense of humor and just take the culture in China as it is. It is a learning opportunity to develop yourself after all."

## CONCLUSION

For Americans working at various professional positions in China, most of the familiar American cultural schemata are left behind (Y. Y. Kim 18) on entering the new Chinese cultural environment. Learning Chinese culture and adapting to Chinese cultural norms is not an easy undertaking. This study indicates that American expatriates have to overcome three categories of obstacles to learn Chinese culture: the *cognitive obstacle* (insufficient Chinese proficiency and an unrealistic preconception of China), the *motivational obstacle* (lack of flexibility in adaptation and the comfort-zone syndrome), and the *structural obstacle* (China's ingroup and outgroup differentiation and the expatriate's role definition). Facing economic, political, and cultural globalization, development of intercultural understanding, and host communication competence have become an essential part of human life and national competitiveness. Awareness of these obstacles will enhance the expatriates' intercultural learning and adaptation effectiveness in China. Possible intercultural training can be conducted for Americans before they go to China based on the Five Golden Rules: the COPAL model suggested below. Future research in strategies for overcoming and reducing the intercultural learning obstacles are suggested. The current research can also be replicated in other cultural contexts with American expatriates.

This study suggests the following Five Golden Rules of Intercultural Learning and Adaptation for American expatriates heading toward China (see fig. 1).

**Gao's Golden Rules of Intercultural Learning and Adaptation  
for American Expatriates in China (COPAL):**

- 1. Chinese language:** Try to learn Chinese; it will make life so much easier.
- 2. Open-mindedness:** Be open-minded and get ready for an adventure.
- 3. Patience:** It takes a long time to build mutual trust between you and your Chinese friends.
- 4. Appreciation:** Do not try to make China the US; learn to appreciate the difference.
- 5. Learning:** Use all communication channels to learn Chinese culture: printed materials, on-line sources, observation, and face-to-face interaction, while overcoming all obstacles: Cognitive, Motivational, and Structural.

Fig. 1. Gao's Golden Rules of Intercultural Learning  
and Adaptation for American Expatriates in China

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