Acculturation Matters?
Comparing the Leadership Perceptions Among Chinese Professionals in Australia and China

Xiaoyan Liang, Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China
Sen Sendjaya, Swinburne University of Technology, Australia
Leven J. Zheng, Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong*
Lakmal Abeysekera, Dr. Study Learning, Australia

ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing participation of Chinese immigrant professionals in the Australian workplace, they are still underrepresented in senior leadership positions, and their perspectives have been overlooked in management and leadership research. Drawing on the literature on acculturation and leadership, this study explores the acculturation experiences of Chinese immigrant professionals (CIPs) and in turn their leadership perceptions, relative to a comparison group of Chinese professionals (CPs) in China. The authors found that CIPs’ acculturation experiences influence their perceptions of ethics and respect for authority, but not their preference for participative decision making. The study highlights the dynamic relationship between acculturation and key leadership issues from a follower’s perspective for immigrant professionals with a Chinese background. It extends current understanding of the cognitive outcomes of acculturation and has strong implications for cross-cultural leadership competency training, talent management, and diversity and inclusion of minority workers.

KEYWORDS

Acculturation, Chinese Immigrant Professional, Leadership Ethics, Participative Decision-Making, Respect for Authority

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the increasing participation of Chinese immigrant professionals (CIPs) in Australian workplaces, they are still considered a minority in the host culture and their perspectives have been overlooked in management and leadership research. O’Leary and Tilly (2014) reported that, in practice, immigrant professionals of Asian background—Chinese in particular—find it hard to advance to senior leadership positions as they undergo the acculturation process in Australia. Hence, this study centers the voices of CIPs, and explores how their acculturation experiences in Australia may have shaped their perceptions of leadership. Ultimately, this study aims to generate knowledge
for cross-cultural leadership competencies training and international talent management from an often-neglected group of workers at the intersections of race, culture, and immigration (Ahluwalia & Merhi, 2020; Alismaili et al., 2020).

Research on acculturation has established that the experience of migrating to a new country typically involves a change of immigrants’ behavior, identity, cultural values, and attitudes (e.g., Guan & Dodder, 2001; Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002). While these studies have uncovered the multifaceted outcomes of acculturation within the boundaries of personal identity, family, and cultural values, the effect of acculturation on an individual’s professional domain remains understudied despite emerging scholarly attention to acculturation and workplace outcomes (e.g., Jian, 2012; Leong, 2001; Lu et al., 2011, 2013). Further, while it has long been established that leadership is evaluated and attributed as “effective” or “ineffective” by followers (Epitropaki et al., 2013), and studying followers’ perceptions has a direct, significant impact on workplace relationships and leadership outcomes (Lord et al., 1984), most of the leadership studies still privilege leaders’ perceptions, behaviors, and values at the cost of the followers’ perspectives. As a result, the leadership field has been criticized as having “idealized heroic performances, impoverished theories & oversimplified templates” (Sinclair & Lips-Wiersma, 2008, p. 211). Problems often occur “where a leader is too attached to a vision, and in its pursuit shows inadequate flexibility, humility and respect for followers” (Sinclair, 2007, p. 20). These problems are magnified in cross-cultural leadership situations (e.g., Suutari et al., 2002) when leadership in developed economies is exercised upon and evaluated by a growing number of international migrants as they undergo acculturation experiences in host countries. This study set out to understand how acculturation experiences might change CIPs’ perceptions of leadership-related issues in the organizational context, such as their perceptions of leadership ethics, authority, and decision-making. An enhanced understanding of CIPs’ perceptions of key issues pertaining to leadership in light of their acculturation experiences will not only bring into leadership “a heightened awareness of subordinate experiences, needs, and values, the role of followers’ perception, attribution, and evaluation of leadership behaviours” (Chen & Van Velsor, 1996, p. 289) to enable better leadership outcomes, but also generate knowledge for better talent management outcomes and inclusion of minority employees in diverse workplaces. Drawing on different strands of literature, the researchers operationalize CIPs’ leadership perceptions in relation to three proxies, namely, leadership ethics (Gao et al., 2011; Ling, 1989; Ling et al., 2000), respect for leader authority (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Farh et al., 2006), and participative decision-making (House et al., 2004; Miao et al., 2013).

This study makes several contributions. First, by integrating two constructs that have typically been studied independently (acculturation and leadership), the study extends current knowledge and scholarship in each field. Specifically, the findings enrich prior knowledge on how immigrants’ perceptual change develops and its consequences on leadership. For example, the two mechanisms the study conceptualized (i.e., normalizing the authority-challenging behavior in reference to Australian culture and shifting the locus of onus from follower to leader) shed light on the process of cognitive acculturation in perceptions of leader authority.

Second, extant studies on follower-centered approaches to leadership either focus on one culture (Chang et al., 2020; Goyanes & Gentile, 2018; Lee & Chen, 2019; Tepper et al., 2017) or compare different cultures (e.g., Arvey et al., 2015), assuming followers’ experiences, perceptions, and evaluations of leaders’ behaviors are static and constant across cultures. This study challenges this assumption by demonstrating the extent to which CIPs’ leadership perceptions are shaped by the level of acculturation in the context of immigration, thereby contributing to the research on follower-centered perspectives of leadership from a cultural interface angle. Finally, and more practically, exploring CIPs’ perceptions in relation to their acculturation experiences in Australia generates knowledge for better talent management outcomes, and improved diversity and inclusion of minority workers in multicultural workplaces.

In the following analysis, acculturation theories and outcomes with a focus on issues pertaining to leadership are discussed. Informed by psychological acculturation theory, the researchers explore
its potential to offer insights into the leadership perceptions of acculturating CIPs in Australia, proposing three research questions during this process. The methods of the study are then presented, followed by the findings. The study concludes with a discussion of the findings and implications for future research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Acculturation Theories

As a field of study, acculturation has been traditionally understood from its initial conceptualization as a phenomenon of change brought about by groups of individuals from different cultures coming into sustained contact with each other (Barker, 2017; Volpone et al., 2018). Graves (1967) established that this change could occur in psychological and behavioral forms in the direction of the dominant cultural groups. Berry et al. (1987) suggested that the two key issues immigrants must deal with in the dominant culture are maintenance of their heritage cultural identity and maintenance of their relations with other cultural groups in the host culture. When these two issues are considered as independent dimensions, four acculturation strategies emerge: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Individuals who value intergroup relations but are relatively unconcerned about heritage culture maintenance adopt an assimilation strategy. In contrast, those who value heritage culture maintenance but are not concerned about intergroup relations endorse a separation strategy. Those who value both cultural maintenance and intergroup relations hold an integration approach, whereas those who value neither heritage culture maintenance nor intergroup relations are marginalized within the host culture.

2.2 Acculturation, Organizational Outcomes, and Leadership Perception

Scholarly attention to acculturation in the workplace has been on the increase in the past two decades. Leong (2001) found a positive relationship between acculturation and job satisfaction, and a negative relationship between acculturation and occupational stress among Asian American professionals. Similarly, acculturation was found to influence CIPs’ affective workgroup commitment (employee retention, job satisfaction, work engagement) (Lu et al., 2011, 2013). Amason et al. (1999) found that perceived social support from Anglo-American coworkers was negatively related to Hispanic employees’ emotional acculturative stress. Jian (2012) found acculturation to be positively correlated with task relationship quality with coworkers and mentoring relationships. These studies and others (e.g., Taras et al., 2013) have uncovered the multifaceted nature of acculturation outcomes related to workplaces, but research on leadership as an acculturative outcome of immigrant professionals in the developed countries is missing. After the United Kingdom and New Zealand, China ranks third in terms of the size of its migrant community in Australia. Studies on CIPs in Australia have been conducted in relation to their entrepreneurial capacities, acculturation and adaptation strategies (e.g., Lu et al., 2011), identity construction (e.g., Liu, 2017), employment situation, and career advancement and gender. In terms of their acculturation strategy, CIPs prefer separation and integration (Lu et al., 2011). A significant correlation has also been found between CIPs’ acculturation process and their job satisfaction and their affective workgroup commitment (Lu et al., 2013). Notwithstanding the above studies, there is a notable gap in the literature on the perceptions and attitudes of CIPs toward leadership issues both in Australia and elsewhere. The paucity of research in this area may be partially explained by the fact that most China-born migrants do not assume managerial positions. Nevertheless, followers’ perspectives of leadership are a valuable avenue of research. For the purposes of this study, CIPs in Australia refer to Chinese who were born in China and immigrated to Australia for the purpose of permanent residency and are working as professionals, that is, they apply theoretical knowledge or experience when performing analytical, conceptual, and creative tasks in various fields (e.g., arts,
media, business, education) according to the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

### 2.3 Leadership Perceptions of CIPs

As mentioned, very little is known about the leadership perceptions of CIPs at the intersections of societal culture, organizational culture, ethnicity, and immigration. Hence, an extensive literature review on Chinese leadership and cross-cultural leadership was undertaken to identify critical themes that inform leadership perceptions of CIPs. The authors considered Chinese heritage and role as followers in the leader–follower relationship in reviewing the extant literature. From this extensive review of the literature, three subdomains of leadership emerged: leadership ethics, power distance, and participative decision-making. The authors contend that an understanding of these three themes is critical to understanding CIPs’ leadership perceptions as they acculturate in Australia.

#### 2.3.1 Leadership Ethics

Indigenous Chinese leadership studies have emphasized the role of morality as an important component of effective leadership in the conceptualizations of Chinese followers. Ling (1989) reported that moral character that includes righteousness and self-control appeared in Chinese people’s assessment of a leader. Ling and Fang (2003) proposed the three-factor CMP model, with C representing character, M representing maintenance, and P representing performance. Studies on Chinese implicit leadership theories (Ling et al., 2000) have identified personal morality as one of the four trait factors in the conceptualizations of an effective Chinese leader. Through a textual analysis approach using term papers of MBA students, Gao et al. (2011) found that Chinese managers valued virtuous leadership the most.

Conceptualizations of Chinese leadership with a moral character are also acknowledged in the prominent leadership style indigenous to Chinese culture—namely, paternalistic leadership—found to be prevalent and effective in Asian business contexts (Aycan et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2004). Deeply embedded in the Chinese hierarchical structure and family-like culture, moral leadership has the largest effect for subordinate compliance out of the three elements of paternalistic leadership (Cheng et al., 2004). Hui and Tan (1997) attributed the high emphasis Chinese people place on the moral integrity of a leader partially to the influence of Chinese political ideology, a point echoed by Fu and Tsui (2003). As demonstrated, moral/ethical leadership is consistently identified as an important component of leadership conceptualized by professionals with a Chinese heritage.

Hofstede’s (1980) seminal study of “cultural relativism” in work-related values pointed out that the meaning of ethics in work and organization management is culture-bound. Miller and Bersoff (1992) noted that different types of moral values exist and reflect the meaning systems of that cultural group. Moreover, Tan and Snell (2002) demonstrated that moral reasoning reflects wider cultural heritage and is not merely a function of corporate culture and individual moral development. Several studies (McDonald & Pak, 1996; Vitell & Patwardhan, 2008) have found that Chinese tend to be relativistic decision-makers who often reject absolute moral philosophy by focusing more on situational concerns. Based on these findings, CIPs’ conceptualization of ethics or morality in effective leadership presumably reflects their Chinese cultural heritage. However, according to acculturation theory, these conceptualizations might change as the CIPs acculturate to a culture substantially different from their own. Therefore, a timely research question is: How (do) CIPs’ acculturation in Australia influence their perceptions of ethics in leadership?

#### 2.3.2 Respect for Leader Authority

Cross-cultural value studies have long established that China is a high power distance culture and Australia is a low power distance culture (Hofstede, 1980); therefore, followers from different cultures have different levels of respect for hierarchical order and a leader’s authority. China’s cultural emphasis on hierarchy means that Chinese are likely to be more submissive to the authority of a leader (Farh
Australian culture, on the other hand, is dominated by the values of egalitarianism and individualism, and Australians have developed a disdain for authority and bureaucracy since the earliest colonial days (Ashkanasy et al., 2000).

The cultural differences in terms of the varying levels of respect for authority are reflected in a few cross-cultural leadership studies. For example, Casimir and Waldman (2007) compared Australian and Chinese employees’ perceptions of 18 effective leadership traits and found that, consistently with their higher power distance orientation, the Chinese rated traits that attenuate leader–follower power differences (e.g., communicative, friendly, humorous, participative and respectful) lower than the Australians did. In a cross-cultural study of Chinese and US managers, Fu and Yukl (2000) reported that the major influence tactics preferred by Chinese managers were coalition tactics, upward appeals, and gifts. These tactics are grounded in the Confucian values that emphasize hierarchical relationships, avoiding losing face, avoiding damaging guanxi and interpersonal relationships.

For CIPs who have relocated to Australia, as they acculturate, do they retain their level of respect for the hierarchical order and leader or do they shift their mindset and modify their behavior? A previous study has shown that Hong Kong Chinese managers adapted to lower power distance between supervisors and subordinates once they immigrated to Australia (Mak, 1998). Is this also the case with CIPs? This leads us to the second research question: How do CIPs’ acculturation experiences in Australia influence their levels of respect for hierarchical order in relation to a leader?

### 2.3.3 Participative Decision-Making

Participative decision-making refers to leaders who deliberately seek and make use of employees’ information and input when making decisions (e.g., Arnold et al., 2000; Srivastava et al., 2006). It is a major indicator of participative leadership, a process in which leaders share some or all of their influence among individuals who are otherwise hierarchical unequal (Wagner, 1994). The endorsement of participative leadership is reported to vary between cultures, and Australia has a higher endorsement of participative leadership. For example, in a study by Den Hartog et al. (1999), Australian middle managers perceived participative leadership as more important for outstanding leadership than did middle managers from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Jogulu (2010) found transformational leadership to be preferred and effective in Australia because of its traits of individualism, egalitarianism, participative, consultative, and co-operative decision-making.

Studies on participative leadership styles in a China context, although growing in number, have not reached a consensus on the applicability and effectiveness of a participative leadership style in China. The point of contention is whether participative styles of leadership are desired and deemed effective by followers. According to the more traditional researchers, China is a cultural context characterized by high power distance in which authoritarian and command-based leadership is practiced, and the role of employee involvement is not stressed (Cheng et al., 2004; Tsui et al., 2004). In the GLOBE Project (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Project), China is included in the Confucian Asia cluster, where participative leadership ranks very low (House et al., 2004).

However, some recent empirical studies have presented evidence of the effectiveness of participative leadership in China in different enterprises (Huang et al., 2006) and even in the Chinese government. Miao et al. (2013) provided evidence for the dissemination of participative leadership practices in China’s new civil service system characterized by highly centralized structures and significant levels of bureaucracy (Chan & Suizhou, 2007). Liden (2012) attributed these seemingly incongruent findings to China’s economic reform, which has led to an influx of Western management ideas changing the cultural and working values of the Chinese workplace. If the influx of Western management ideas helps Chinese employees to endorse a participative leadership style, CIPs immersed in the Australian culture are likely to embrace a participative leadership approach as they acculturate to the sociocultural environment of the country. Therefore, a third research question is proposed: How do CIPs’ acculturation experiences in Australia influence their preference for participative decision-making?
3. METHODS

3.1 Procedure and Sample

Purposeful sampling was used in this study, supplemented by snowball sampling (Li et al., 2019; Tuckett, 2004; Zheng et al. 2021, 2022). Although culture operates at different levels, national culture has been the assumed dominant category for cross-cultural leadership research (Brodbeck & Eisenbeiss, 2014; Lonkani et al., 2020; Zander & Romani, 2004). The current study is concerned primarily with national cultural differences and how they relate to leadership perceptions. CIPs were chosen for their shared Chinese cultural background. Those belonging to the CIP group were China-born immigrants aged between 25 and 40, working as professionals in Australia for at least one year, who received their primary education in China prior to their immigration. In the acculturation literature, it is the norm to use year as the single unit for the duration of the stay. Hence, the minimum duration of stay in this study was one year. Seventeen interviewees also held managerial positions, but they were still asked to speak from a follower’s perspective in line with the study’s follower-centered approach. A comparison group of Chinese professionals (CPs) was included in the research design to enable greater depth. CP profiles are similar to those of CIPs. In short, two groups of CPs, immigrant (35) and non-immigrant (35), from various industries (e.g., banking and financial services, consultancy, IT, marketing) were involved in the study. Detailed descriptions of the demographic characteristics are available as Table 1 and 2.

In semi-structured interviews, the interviewees were asked about their acculturation experience (applicable to CIP group) and leadership experiences from a follower’s perspective (applicable to both CIP and CP groups). Three vignettes built around the research questions were then presented, followed by further probing questions (see Appendix A). Vignettes within a qualitative paradigm are defined as “concrete examples of people and their behaviours on which participants can offer comment or opinion” (Hazel, 1995, p. 2). Vignettes are most suitable for research that seems to generate rich data since they “elicit perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes from responses or comments to stories depicting scenarios and situations” (Barter & Renold, 1999, p. 2). Following Jenkins et al. (2010), each vignette was semi-structured, brief, and deliberately vague, leaving room for participants to raise questions and define the situation in their own terms. The interviews with the CIPs typically lasted

Table 1.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>CIPs</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age upon arrival</th>
<th>China working</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Years in Aus.</th>
<th>Ownership of organization</th>
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<td>25-29</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>B.A. in Australia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>1-3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>30-34</td>
<td>24-34</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td>M.A. in Australia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Banking and financial</td>
<td>10 above</td>
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<td>7-9</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIP31</td>
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<td>18-24</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>M.A. in Australia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Consultancy</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>Chinese owned</td>
<td>1-3</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Citizenship</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>10 above</td>
<td>Chinese owned</td>
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</table>
between 60 and 90 minutes. The comparison group interviews typically lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Data collection concluded when the point of saturation was reached (Strass & Corbin, 1998).

3.2 Data Analysis

All the transcripts were entered into QSR NVivo 10. The analysis comprised three key stages. The first stage of analysis commenced with the first-level open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By using interviewees’ words as foundations of analytic induction, data-driven concepts were coded inductively on the topic of CIPs’ acculturation experiences. For example, first-order concepts of CIPs’ acculturation experiences such as “absorb the essence, discard the dross” and “bicultural” emerged. In the meantime, following Schreier (2012), the analysis used deductive generated approaches to coding. In line with scholars arguing for the multidimensionality of acculturation (Birman et al., 2005), the coding organized CIPs’ acculturation experiences (Lu et al., 2011) through literature-based categories such as language use and preferences, living habits, social affiliation, cultural identity, and attitudes toward heritage culture and host culture. The second stage brought the data under a conceptual framework (Dey, 2003), using Berry’s acculturation model (Berry et al., 1987) and classified the CIPs into two subgroups: integrated CIPs (more acculturated) and separated CIPs (less acculturated). Adding the comparison group of CPs (no acculturation) as the third subgroup, the analysis proceeded to code their respective leadership perceptions following similar procedures (inductive first-order preceding the second-order themes). Iterative attempts at reshuffling the codes and categories were undertaken until alternative interpretations were exhausted and the analytical framework accounted for the full set of data. The third stage made connections and comparisons of second-order themes among the different subgroups (Dey, 2003), which resulted in aggregate themes. The data structure is presented in Figure 1. Following the advice of Lincoln and Guba (1985), the techniques of peer debriefing, member checks, and reflective memos were used to ensure the rigor of this qualitative study.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

On the basis of the themes that emerged, CIPs’ acculturation experiences were classified into two groups: separated CIPs (10) and integrated CIPs (24). One outlier excluded from the analysis fit the
assimilation group. No respondents fit the marginalized category—understandably, given that the validity of marginalization as an acculturative approach has been questioned and criticized (e.g., Del Pilar & Udasco, 2004), especially among a sample of well-educated professionals.

4.1 Separated CIPs Versus Integrated CIPs

This study has followed previous studies (e.g., Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2007) in conceptualizing acculturation as a multidimensional construct that is manifested in language use and preferences, social affiliation, social media, and psychological indicators of cultural identity and attitudes. The separated CIPs were characterized by the predominant use of Chinese language at work and at home, and the use of Chinese social media platforms. Their social networks consisted of people with similar cultural backgrounds. They tended to identify as Chinese with Westernized behavior, open-minded Chinese, or Chinese immigrants. Their acculturation experiences demonstrated maintenance of heritage cultural values without much efforts expended in host country intergroup relations; hence, they were categorized as separated CIPs. In contrast, the integrated CIPs valued both cultural maintenance and intergroup relations. They showed more inclination toward use of English at work. They had a balanced use of Chinese and English languages across different life domains, including in use of social media, and their social networks consisted of both Chinese and Australian nationals. They identified themselves as half Chinese and half Australian, bicultural, or very Westernized Chinese. The separated CIPs were conceptualized as less acculturated, and integrated CIPs as more acculturated, and their counterparts in China as no acculturation group.

4.2 Influence of Acculturation on CIPs’ Leadership Perceptions

4.2.1 The Role of Ethics in Leadership

Participant responses to the ethical leadership vignette indicate that their stance toward ethics was shaped by their approach to acculturation. When evaluating matters pertaining to ethics in leadership, more acculturated CIPs clearly indicated adherence to the moral principle of honesty and integrity as a frame of reference in their decision-making. This view judges the role of ethics in an effective leader as adhering to a rule or principle, thus corresponding to “Kantian ethics” or “deontology” (Lefkowitz, 2003). For example, CIP 16 in marketing held the view that “no matter what he does,
honesty comes first.” Similarly, CIP 29 in IT deemed the issue “a matter of principle,” and CIP 19 argued that “wrong is wrong.” In contrast, the views of separated CIPs and CPs were dominated by a context-dependent view of leadership ethics. CIP 28 believed “still an effective leader if his way works,” and CIP 9 described the behavior as “clear and pragmatic.” Both views typify an ethical reasoning of “the ends justify the means.” Then CIP 8 neutralized the ethical overtones by affirming the primacy of group interest: “if his intention is to benefit the department, then it is OK.” This sentiment was echoed by many CPs (without the acculturation). At the risk of oversimplification, more acculturated CIPs’ views can be represented by CIP 19 when he said, “In general, if it is unethical, it (leadership) cannot be effective.” Less acculturated CIPs’ typical responses can be said to be “would he get caught?” Typical responses of CPs without acculturation can be said to be “As for the importance of ethics to effective leadership, I think it depends. Accepting bribery for example, it’s not acceptable ... But flexibility in operation of business is a must. Otherwise, you would not survive in the Chinese business environment.” (CP 15).

These findings reveal that CIPs who have moved to Australia tend to adopt a more principle-based view in lieu of a context-dependent view of the role of ethics in their conceptualizations of effective leadership. The level of acculturation seems to enable this perceptual change. CIP 29, a 26-year-old male employed in the IT industry who has been residing permanently in Australia for 7 years, observed regarding cultural differences in ethical awareness “I would say Australia is quite unequivocal when it comes to ethics. No discrimination, no deception, no abuse of public resources, etcetera. China does not have this level of conscientiousness.”

Theoretically, the state of current knowledge on the importance of ethics to a perceived effective leader is very limited (Treviño et al., 2003). This study demonstrates that despite ethics being perceived as important to leadership conceptualization in China (e.g., Gao et al., 2011; Ling et al., 2000), what is considered ethical leader behavior is culture-bound, and acculturation has an enabling effect on this perceptual change of ethics in leadership. CIPs with no acculturation experiences and less acculturated CIPs tended to reject absolute moral philosophy and focus on contextual factors, in alignment with previous studies (e.g., McDonald & Pak, 1996; Vitell & Patwardhan, 2008). However, the more acculturated CIPs tended to adopt a principle-based view.

4.2.2 Respect for Leader Authority

For CIPs who have relocated to Australia, as they acculturate, it appears that they shift their mindsets regarding the supremacy of the hierarchical order and collectively exhibit a significantly reduced level of respect for authority. This is in line with Mak’s (1998) finding that Hong Kong Chinese managers adapted to a smaller power distance once they immigrated to Australia. This mindset shift for CIPs is displayed via two means: normalizing the authority-challenging behavior in reference to Australian culture and shifting the locus of onus from follower to leader (i.e., the onus is placed on the leader rather than the follower to do the right things). For example, CIP 1, who worked in IT in Australia for 2.5 years, considered his supervisor an equal, someone who he could speak up to, and surpass to report if he deemed the situation necessary: “This is very normal behavior, if you are unsatisfied, you can report up, because in Australia, your supervisor is equal. If I have a problem, I speak up. If you do not accept it, I can surpass you to report up.”

CIP 30 in banking reaffirmed this normalization: “Very normal behavior in (Australian) banks. I endorse this behavior. If I were the CEO, I would like to see less hierarchy. The hierarchical system is very strict in China. It’s much less in Australia comparatively speaking.” This view is in stark contrast to that of CPs in China, who predominantly considered challenging their leaders’ authority via skipping a level to report as “outright contempt,” “useless,” “a despicable act,” and “a bad reflection on a person’s character.” CP 9 gave a grim breakdown of why this is not normal behavior:

Skipping levels to report is an outright contempt and challenge to your supervisor. If you want to skip a level to report, make sure you wipe your bottom clean (your supervisor can never
know that you skipped him). The sad truth about skipping level is all bureaucrats shield each other. If problems occur, your supervisor’s leader will stick up for your supervisor instead of you, a nobody.

Apart from normalizing authority-challenging behavior, CIPs also demonstrated a reduced level of authority via a shift of the locus of onus from follower to leader. CIP 25, a 38-year-old who spent over 7 years working in finance in Australia, argued that a follower is entitled to a voice and the onus is on the leader to listen:

Because if the team leader thinks it’s not important, he should sit down and explain why, and convince Xander [follower in vignette] … I think the fault lies with the team leader … Xander needs to have his voice heard.

CIP 18 deemed the leader “short-sighted” if he ignores an important problem pointed out by the follower. These viewpoints reveal the locus of onus residing in leaders rather than followers. CIPs expect effective leaders to be egalitarian and open-minded and to listen to followers. Failing to do so will give CIPs legitimate cause to challenge their leader’s authority. In contrast, CPs predominantly identify followers as the locus of onus. Among them, CP 33 with 5 years’ experience in pharmaceutical sales, condemned leader-challenging behavior:

It’s a matter of “Guiju,” meaning “rules.” As the saying goes “nothing can be accomplished without rules.” I always believe in “your rear determines your head,” that is, your level of position determines the kind of decisions you can make. When you are not in that position, you won’t think in a comprehensive manner.

The mindset of “your rear determines your head” legitimizes and reaffirms the importance of hierarchical order. CPs expect and assume that effective leaders will be authoritative and superior, and thus put the onus on followers to be compliant. Though, collectively, CIPs exhibit a reduced level of respect for authority as they acculturate to Australian culture characterized by the values of egalitarianism and individualism (Ashkanasy et al., 2000), there was no evidence that the more acculturated CIPs viewed this issue in a starkly different way from that of the less acculturated CIPs.

In other words, the influence of acculturation on CIPs’ level of respect for authority did not appear to depend on the strategy of acculturation. Integrated and separated CIPs exhibited similar respect for authority. This is counterintuitive but, at the same time, illuminating. On the one hand, the findings present evidence for the effect of acculturation on the leadership values of CIPs in a subdomain (i.e., respect for authority), causing it to move from the heritage culture to the host culture. On the other hand, the findings suggest that the extent to which that value is changed is not determined by the strategy of acculturation. This leads to speculation that other individual or contextual factors are at play.

4.2.3 Participative Decision-Making

Despite research demonstrating that participative leadership is not expected in a high-context collectivist culture (Cheng et al., 2004; Tsui et al., 2004), interviewees indicated otherwise. Participative decision-making was deemed desirable for a leader to be effective by most of the CPs, regardless of their acculturation experiences. CIP2 explained this well: “even if the follower’s opinion is not adopted, followers still have the feeling of engagement, and feel respected and valued.”

It is worth highlighting that although participative decision-making is desirable and expected of an effective leader, some CIPs and CPs introduced a type of “conditional participative decision-making” style, meaning the leaders need to have largely made up their minds prior to consultation with followers. CIP 6, who spent 7 years in IT in Australia, compared the participative decision-making process to shopping with her friend:

She must have already wanted to buy it; therefore, she asks me of my opinion. It’s as a matter of fact her business ... as a follower or a peer, I cannot provide any opinion, unless it is just dead ugly on her. So asking other’s opinion is to avoid the fatal flaw. Therefore, I expect this of my leader, and I would do so if I were the leader.

In the minds of CPs such as CIP 6, the purpose of leaders engaging followers is not to seek input to help with their decision-making, but to seek validation or find fatal flaws using followers’
opinions and advice as a confirmatory or disconfirmatory mechanism. The onus is largely on the leaders, which suggests a decision-making style that tilts toward autocracy.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the influence of acculturation on the leadership perceptions of CIPs in three subdomains. By detailing the effect of acculturation on leadership ethics, level of respect for authority, and participative decision-making, the findings highlight the multifaceted and complex process of psychological acculturation immigrant professionals experience in the cognitive domains of leadership. Practically, the findings have strong implications for talent management and diversity, and the inclusion of Chinese minority workers in the Australian workplace.

In answering the first research question, the study found an enabling effect of acculturation on the change of CIPs’ perceived leadership ethics from a contextual approach to a deontological one, subject to the CIPs’ levels of acculturation. This finding contributes to current knowledge on the importance of ethics to a perceived effective leader (Treviño et al., 2003) from a cultural interface angle, and highlights the impact of international migration on people’s view of leadership ethics. In particular, it captures the direction and dynamics of change in a subdomain of leadership (i.e., ethics in leadership) when professionals emigrate from China to Australia. Practically, relationships between ethical leaders and their followers are built upon social exchange and norms of reciprocity (Brown & Treviño, 2006). If organizational leaders in Australia aim to cultivate a culture in which followers evaluate their leaders’ effectiveness with a deontological ethical view, they will have to acknowledge the diversity of ethical views among followers with different acculturation levels and devise and implement acculturation programs.

In answering the second research question, the analyses show that CIPs’ acculturation experiences in Australia reduced their level of respect for authority relative to that of CPs in China, regardless of their levels of acculturation. This counterintuitive finding could be explained by the existing literature that claims that psychological acculturation is a matter of personal choice or preference (Huynh et al., 2011). Another possible explanation lies in the variation of the speed of change among individual CIPs. Research suggests (e.g., Costigan, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2010; Yoon et al., 2011) that the process of acculturation could proceed at various rates across dimensions. Hence, when immigrants are bicultural or integrated in one domain, it does not necessarily signify that they are also such in another domain (Schwartz et al., 2014). Future research is encouraged to explore and identity the relevant factors. The idea that immigrants go through perceptual changes in their behavior and value orientations in the direction of host country is not novel, but this study provides more nuanced insights into how this perceptual change manifests itself in the domains of leadership. The two mechanisms the study conceptualized (i.e., normalizing the authority-challenging behavior in reference to Australian culture and shifting the locus of onus from follower to leader) have shed light on how cognitive acculturation in one domain of leadership takes place. The study enriches the stream of theories on psychological acculturation and cognitive acculturation outcomes. Practically, organizational leaders in Australia should be cautious when subscribing to the cultural stereotypes of Chinese followers being deferential and submissive, and exercising an authoritarian leadership style over their CIP followers. They also need to be aware of the shift of the locus of onus from follower to leader when enacting leadership behaviors.

In answering the third research question, the findings indicate that immigrants’ approach to acculturation does not have any bearing on the predominant preference of participative leadership. This result is not surprising because participative decision-making tends to bolster employee engagement and firm performance (Yoerger et al., 2015). This study contributes to the debate in the participative leadership literature by providing evidence of its perceived effectiveness from an angle of cultural interface. However, a closer examination of the data suggests a unique pattern of participative decision-making preferred by some CIPs that diminishes their own contribution; that is, followers ought to
be used only as a confirmatory or disconfirmatory mechanism, to validate leaders’ preconceived ideas or to identify fatal flaws. The authors speculate that this is so because the preference toward participative decision-making and leadership in fact strengthens followers’ need for leadership (De Vries et al., 2011). Nevertheless, this is an intriguing issue that warrants future research attention.

Taken together, this study makes important contributions. First, it contributes to the field of leadership from a follower’s perspective by incorporating Chinese ethnicity into the understanding of leadership theories in an immigration context, hence making leadership theories more inclusive (Chin, 2010). Second, this study is one of the few to explore the complex, dynamic, and intriguing aspects of acculturation’s impact on the cognitive outcomes of immigrant professionals. Much of the psychological acculturation process remains implicit, and this study contributes to the under-researched cognitive outcomes of acculturation literature (Yoon et al., 2011) and helps to shed light on this process by explicitly mapping outcomes along different subdomains of leadership.

As China’s economy shifts toward an outward direct foreign investment mode, CIPs are gradually taking on leadership roles when bridging cultural and business gaps. It has become increasingly important and timely to explore and understand the effects their acculturation has on their leadership perceptions. Findings from this study serve as a starting point for cross-cultural leadership competency training and development in Australia. They also have important implications for future studies exploring the effect of acculturation on values and practices of leadership. If acculturation is a matter of personal preference (Huynh et al., 2011) such as immigrant professionals in this study who knowingly decide to “absorb the essence, discard the dross” of both cultures through self-agency, it is important to disentangle the multiple dimensions of the issues, because it is likely that the acculturation outcomes vary on different dimensions. If future studies were to examine how acculturation influences immigrant professionals’ transformational leadership styles or servant leadership styles, because of the multidimensionality of these leadership constructs, the effect of acculturation should be explored along each dimension of the leadership constructs. Through integrating two fields, this study indicates a direction for future research contextualized by an increasingly mobile and culturally diverse organizational workforce.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Section I: The purpose of this section is to learn something about your life as an immigrant in Australia. [Questions 2–10 are applicable to CIPs only]

1. First, could you please give me some background information about yourself? How many years ago did you immigrate to Australia? What is your citizenship status? If you don’t mind, which age range [Age ÿ 25–29, ÿ 30–34, ÿ 35–40] are you? What is your education in China and Australia respectively? How many years of experience do you have in total? How long have you been working for the current organization? Briefly, what do you do in your current job?

2. Could you please tell me something about the situation of your language use in Australia? (Do you use English or Chinese with your spouse/children and close friends? What is the estimated percentage? What language do you use with your boss and colleagues? What is the estimated percentage? What language do you prefer to speak? Why?)

3. Could you please tell me something about the cultural backgrounds of your friends with whom you hang out often in Australia? (If there are Chinese, Australians, and immigrants of other countries, what are the estimated percentages?)

4. What social media do you use? (Do you use WeChat and Facebook in the same way?)

5. What do you usually do for fun? Do you watch Chinese TV shows, movies, or news as you do Australian ones? Do you attend Chinese community activities in Australia? Do you watch Australian footy or political news?

6. What kinds of festivals (Chinese or Australian) do you love celebrating in Australia? Why?

7. How would you identify yourself? Do you feel you are more Chinese or Australian? Do you feel proud to be Chinese?

8. Is it important for you to maintain your Chinese cultural identity?

9. Is it important for you to integrate into the mainstream Australian culture?

10. Are you satisfied with your integration experience so far? Why? How can it improve?

Section II: The purpose of this section is to understand how you perceive effective leadership based on your experience. Share your response to these questions and scenarios. Remember there are no right or wrong answers. [Applicable to CIPs and CPs]

1. How important is ethics to an effective leader? How have your ethical views in relation to a leader changed? Think of a hypothetical scenario (which you may or may not have experienced) in which your direct supervisor does something unethical, but not illegal, in order to preserve group interests, for example, exaggerate the real expenditure of your department in order to maintain the level of funding for the next year. Would you say or do something? What would you say or do? What would you think of him/her? Is he/she still an effective leader in your eyes? Why?

2. What do you think of challenging a leader’s authority? If you were working in a team on a key project, one of your colleagues, Xander, discovered a potential problem and reported it to the team leader. The team leader did not think the problem was important enough to worry about, thus asked Xander to keep working on the project. Later the team leader learned that Xander had gone behind his back and reported the matter to management. What do you think of Xander’s action? Why?

3. What do you think is the relationship between involving followers in decision-making and a leader being perceived as effective? If your direct supervisor has been asked to fix an organizational problem, as followers, should you be a part of the execution of the plan? If your direct leader actively involves you in the process of problem solving before a decision is made, do you perceive this behavior to be effective and preferred? Why?
Xiaoyan Liang is an Assistant Professor at International Business School of Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China. She received her Ph.D. in Management from Monash University in Australia in 2017. Her research interests include Chinese immigrant professionals and leadership, business ethics, sustainable HRM. Her research has been published in Asia Pacific Journal of Management and Non-profit Management and Leadership.

Leven J. Zheng (PhD) is an Assistant Professor in Management at Department of Global Business and Marketing, Hong Kong Metropolitan University. Leven was awarded a Ph.D. in Management Studies from the Management School at the University of Liverpool. His research examines entrepreneurship and innovation at both privately entrepreneurial and newly public stages of entrepreneurial firms, with a particular focus on new product development and firm growth. His research appears in some good-quality international journals such as Journal of Business Research, Technovation, Technological Forecasting & Social Change, and Asian Business & Management. He uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods in his research.

Lakmal Abeysekera is an Educational Consultant at Dr Study Learning. Prior to moving into Dr Study Lakmal worked in the Australian Higher Education sector as an academic for over 15 years. He specialises in the areas of work-family conflict, cross-cultural communication, and flipped classrooms.