

Cross-Cultural Adjustment as a Mediator between Training and Job Performance: Evidence from Chinese Construction Expatriates in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study explores the mediating role of cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) in the relationship between cross-cultural training (CCT) and job performance (JP) among Chinese construction expatriates in Malaysia. Using data from 344 respondents and analyzed via PLS-SEM, the findings reveal that CCT significantly improves CCA, which in turn enhances JP. The mediation is complete, indicating that adaptive capability is the key pathway linking training to performance. Practically, this supports a staged training approach combining pre-departure and post-arrival support to improve expatriate outcomes. Theoretically, it confirms CCA as a critical mechanism in cross-cultural performance. However, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design, industry-specific focus, and self-reported data. Future research should adopt longitudinal methods, include diverse expatriate populations, and integrate qualitative insights to deepen understanding.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Adjustment, Cross-Cultural Training, Job Performance

Introduction

Expatriate job performance has become a critical concern in international project-based industries, particularly in construction. As Chinese companies rapidly expand their overseas operations under the Belt and Road Initiative, they increasingly rely on expatriates to lead complex foreign assignments, manage multicultural teams, and deliver project outcomes on time and within budget (Chen Yuan et al., 2023; Zakariya et al., 2018). However, job performance in these assignments is often undermined by insufficient cross-cultural adjustment, which can lead to costly delays, strained relationships, and premature repatriation (Abdalla et al., 2024).

The Malaysian context presents a compelling case for investigation. As a key hub for China's Belt and Road Initiative, Malaysia hosts numerous Chinese construction companies employing

significant numbers of expatriates. Its unique trilingual business environment and cultural diversity intensify cross-cultural challenges, often beyond the reach of conventional training programs (Halim et al., 2019).

This study investigates how cross-cultural training (CCT) contributes to expatriate job performance (JP) by enhancing cross-cultural adjustment (CCA), emphasizing the mediating role of adaptive capability. It responds to a critical gap in current research: although cross-cultural training is widely advocated, few studies clarify the mechanisms through which it translates into measurable performance outcomes, especially in the context of Chinese expatriates working in Southeast Asian construction sectors (Chenyang, 2022; Lo & Nguyen, 2023).

Accordingly, this study offers timely and actionable insights for HR practitioners and global mobility leaders seeking to reduce assignment failure rates and enhance performance outcomes.

We advocate for a structured, phased training approach: knowledge-based and cognitive-level cross-cultural training prior to deployment, followed by practical, behavioral training upon arrival. This dual-phase strategy aims to build both the cognitive foundation and practical adaptability required for expatriates to perform effectively in complex multicultural environments.

Theoretically, this research contributes to cross-cultural adjustment theory by systematically demonstrating the “CCT → CCA → JP” pathway, emphasizing the importance of adaptive capacity as a key transformation mechanism. By focusing on a highly under-researched group, Chinese construction expatriates in Southeast Asia, this work helps fill an important gap in both academic scholarship and managerial practice.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Expatriate Job Performance

The concept of job performance traces back to (Taylor, 1911) scientific management theory, with scholars defining it from three perspectives: as a result, (Bernardin, 1984), as behavior (Campbell et al., 1990), or as a combination of structure and behavior (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). Job performance is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct, encompassing task performance (workload and goal achievement), expatriate-specific performance (Cross-cultural adjustment and communication), and contextual performance (behaviors supporting task completion) (Koopmans et al., 2011; Ying et al., 2025).

For expatriates, performance extends beyond traditional measures. P. M. Caligiuri (1997) introduced expatriate assignment-specific performance, which includes unique aspects such as transmitting corporate values, facilitating HQ-subsidary communication, fostering organizational commitment, and adapting to host-country language and culture. Subsequent research has built upon this framework (Che Rose et al., 2012; Haldorai et al., 2021; Kawai & Strange, 2014; Lo & Nguyen, 2023; Subramaniam Sri et al., 2011).

Expatriate performance is influenced by multiple factors, including organizational, familial, and individual characteristics, with cross-cultural adjustment being the most critical determinant (Hassan & Diallo, 2013; Takeuchi, 2010). Understanding these dimensions is

essential for optimizing expatriate success in international assignments (Sinangil & Ones, 2003).

Cross-Cultural Training

Cross-Cultural Training (CCT) has evolved as a multidimensional intervention aimed at enhancing expatriates' cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies for effective intercultural adjustment. Early definitions framed CCT as formal educational efforts to modify emotional responses, behaviors, and thought patterns (Landis et al., 2003), while contemporary models emphasize methodical skill-building in cultural awareness, norm adherence, and conflict resolution (Chen Long, 2015). Foundational frameworks like Brislin (1979) seven-component model and Tung (1981) multidimensional approach established core training elements, including cultural assimilators, experiential learning, and stress management. Recent developments incorporate interactive language training (Waxin & Panaccio, 2005) and blended digital formats (Cao et al., 2014), reflecting post-pandemic shifts toward virtual simulations and AI-driven learning (Dai & Ke, 2022). Despite demonstrated benefits in job performance and cultural adjustment (Zakariya et al., 2018), CCT effectiveness remains moderated by cultural distance, individual differences, and training delivery methods (Tahir, 2022).

The field continues to grapple with definitional inconsistencies but converges on CCT's ultimate objective: preparing individuals for rapid, effective cross-cultural engagement (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1986). Modern implementations increasingly combine pre-departure knowledge transfer with post-arrival experiential support (Y. Wang & Tran, 2012), while emerging technologies promise personalized, scalable training solutions.

Cross-Cultural Adjustment

Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) is a dynamic and multidimensional process through which individuals proactively adjust their cognitive, affective, and behavioral patterns to interact effectively and achieve well-being in a new cultural environment, while simultaneously negotiating their cultural identity and maintaining functional relationships with both host and home cultures (Kim & Kim, 2004; Ward, 2001).

For expatriates, research conceptualizes CCA through general adjustment to daily life work adjustment to job expectations, and interaction adjustment with host-country nationals (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). Effective CCA significantly enhances key expatriate outcomes, with a particularly strong positive impact on job performance (Zakariya et al., 2018), along with improving job satisfaction (Takatsuka & Yimcharoen, 2021) and organizational commitment (G. Wang & Kiti, 2023).

Cross-cultural training (CCT) serves as a crucial organizational intervention to facilitate cross-cultural adjustment (CCA). By equipping expatriates with cultural knowledge and adaptive skills, CCT enhances their ability to navigate foreign environments and work effectively across cultures (Lo & Nguyen, 2023). This study examines how CCT contributes to CCA and subsequently influences expatriate job performance.

Relationship between Cross-Cultural Training and Cross-Cultural Adjustment

Research examining the relationship between CCT and CCA has yielded mixed but generally positive findings over several decades. Early foundational work by Earley (1987) demonstrated CCT's positive impact on managerial performance and adjustment, a conclusion reinforced by (Black & Mendenhall, 1990) comprehensive review. Subsequent studies across diverse contexts have consistently shown significant positive correlations between CCT and all three adjustment domains (general, work, and interaction adjustment), as evidenced by research in various cultural settings (Chenyang, 2022; Naeem et al., 2020; Okpara & Kabongo, 2017; Tahir & Ertek, 2018; Y. Wang & Tran, 2012; Waxin & Panaccio, 2005). Meta-analytic findings by Chenyang (2022) confirmed a moderate positive correlation across adjustment dimensions, while specific studies highlighted the particular effectiveness of experiential training (Naeem et al., 2020) and post-arrival programs (Y. Wang & Tran, 2012).

However, the literature presents notable exceptions, with some studies finding no significant relationship (Puck et al., 2008; Qin & Baruch, 2010) or domain-specific effects (Osman-Gani & Rockstuhl, 2009). These divergent findings suggest that CCT's effectiveness may be contingent on contextual factors including cultural distance, training methodology, and industry-specific demands. Given Malaysia's unique cultural context, China's distinctive state-owned enterprise environment, and the construction industry's particular challenges, this study argues for targeted investigation of Chinese expatriates in Malaysia - a research gap that informs our first hypothesis regarding CCT's anticipated positive impact on CCA in this specific population.

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between CCT and CCA.

Relationship between Cross-Cultural Adjustment and Expatriate Job Performance

A substantial body of research has established CCA as both a central challenge in expatriate management and a key determinant of job performance (Arokiasamy & Kim Soyeon, 2020). Meta-analytic evidence from Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. (2005) first systematically confirmed this relationship across 66 studies, demonstrating CCA as a significant predictor of expatriate performance outcomes. Subsequent empirical work has consistently reinforced these findings across diverse cultural and organizational contexts, including Malaysian academia (Hassan & Diallo, 2013), Brazilian multinationals (Nunes et al., 2017), China-based expatriates (Chen Min, 2019), Middle Eastern energy sectors (Setti et al., 2022), and Taiwanese enterprises (Lo & Nguyen, 2023). Notably, recent studies have expanded understanding of CCA's organizational impact, revealing that higher adjustment levels correlate not just with individual performance but also with enhanced subsidiary performance in host countries (Wu et al., 2023).

The mechanisms underlying this relationship have been further elucidated through research identifying CCA's mediating role between various antecedents (e.g., cultural intelligence, personality traits) and performance outcomes (Lo & Nguyen, 2023; Setti et al., 2022). While the positive CCA-performance linkage appears robust across studies, the emergence of contextual moderators - particularly industry-specific demands and host-country cultural characteristics - suggests the need for nuanced application of these findings. This accumulated evidence provides strong theoretical justification for Hypothesis 2, which posits a positive relationship between CCA and expatriate job performance.

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between CCA and expatriate job performance.

Hypothesis 3: CCA plays a mediator between CCT and job performance.

Cross-cultural Adjustment Theory

Cross-cultural adjustment theory explains how individuals adapt to new cultural environments through cognitive, behavioral, and affective processes. Originating from psychological research on expatriates, it builds upon foundational models like the U-curve hypothesis (Lysgaard, 1955) and Ward (2001) multidimensional framework, which identifies three adjustment domains: (1) cognitive adjustment (understanding cultural norms), (2) behavioral adjustment (developing culturally appropriate skills), and (3) affective adjustment (managing emotional responses). The theory posits that successful adjustment occurs when expatriates establish stable, mutually beneficial relationships with their host environment through continuous cultural learning and adjustment (Kim & Kim, 2004). Importantly, CCA is not a linear outcome but a dynamic process influenced by training, ultimately determining how well expatriates perform in cross-cultural settings.

CCA theory explains why cross-cultural training (CCT) improves expatriate job performance (JP) primarily through facilitating adjustment. Effective CCT provides the knowledge (cognitive), skills (behavioral), and stress-management tools (affective) needed for successful adjustment, but these inputs only translate to performance after expatriates navigate the adjustment process. For instance, cultural training helps expatriates understand host-country norms (cognitive), but only through behavioral adjustment (e.g., applying this knowledge in workplace interactions) does it enhance productivity. Empirical studies consistently support this mediation: Meta-analyses show CCA predicts performance (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005), while contextual research demonstrates CCT's strongest effects emerge after adjustment occurs (Lo & Nguyen, 2023). The theory also accounts for variations in this relationship—such as why some expatriates benefit more from training—by emphasizing individual differences in adjustment speed and the moderating role of cultural distance. Ultimately, CCA theory positions adjustment as the critical mechanism that transforms training investments into measurable performance gains.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

This study employed a convenience sampling approach to examine Chinese expatriates working in Malaysian subsidiaries. The target population comprised 5,691 professionals based on 2022 statistics (National Bureau of Statistics et al., 2022). Using G*Power 3.1 with parameters of medium effect size ($f^2=0.15$), $\alpha=0.05$, and power=0.90, determined a minimum sample size of 116. To mitigate potential non-response bias common in email surveys (Taherdoost, 2016), we increased the target sample by 50% (Bartlett et al., 2001), ultimately collecting data from 200 respondents via online questionnaires distributed through professional networks and corporate HR channels. This sample size satisfies PLS-SEM requirements (Hair et al., 2019) while maintaining practical feasibility through convenience sampling.

Instrument Development

This study adopted validated scales to measure key constructs: Expatriate job performance was evaluated using P. M. Caligiuri (1997) 13-item scale, measuring overall performance (2 items), technical performance (1 item), contextual performance (5 items), and expatriate-specific performance (5 items). Cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) was assessed via Black & Stephens (1989) 14-item scale across three dimensions: general adjustment (7 items),

interaction adjustment (4 items), and work adjustment (3 items). Cross-cultural training (CCT) was measured using Y. Wang & Tran (2012) 11-item scale (5 items for pre-departure training and 6 items for post-arrival training). All instruments demonstrated established reliability in previous expatriate studies.

Statistic Technique

This study utilized Smart-PLS for comprehensive data analysis, incorporating both descriptive and inferential statistical methods (Hair et al., 2017). All analytical results are systematically presented in tables with detailed interpretations, followed by substantive discussion linking findings to existing theoretical frameworks and practical implications.

Result

The sample (N=344) comprised predominantly male respondents (93.3%, n=321), reflecting the construction industry's gender imbalance. Education levels were primarily bachelor's degrees (59.3%, n=204) or diplomas (26.2%, n=90), with smaller proportions holding master's degrees (11.6%, n=40) or secondary education (2.9% combined). Most participants were aged 31-40 (35.8%, n=123) or 21-30 (27.6%, n=95) and married (83.4%, n=287), suggesting family considerations may influence expatriate adjustment. Regarding overseas experience, 23.0% (n=79) had 1-2 years and 20.3% (n=70) had 2-3 years, indicating a moderately experienced expatriate cohort.

Table 1

Respondent's Profile (n=344)

| Demographic Factors | | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|--------------------|-----------|---------|
| Gender | Male | 321 | 93.3 |
| | Female | 23 | 6.7 |
| Age | 21-30 | 95 | 27.6 |
| | 31-40 | 123 | 35.8 |
| | 41-50 | 87 | 25.3 |
| | 51-60 | 39 | 11.3 |
| | | | |
| Academic Qualification | Middle school | 8 | 2.3 |
| | High school | 2 | 0.6 |
| | Diploma | 90 | 26.2 |
| | Bachelor | 204 | 59.3 |
| | Master | 40 | 11.6 |
| | PHD/DBA | 0 | 0 |
| State | Married | 287 | 83.4 |
| | Single | 57 | 16.6 |
| Duration | less than 1 year | 101 | 29.4 |
| | 1year to 2 years | 79 | 23.0 |
| | 2 years to 3 years | 70 | 20.3 |
| | More than 3 years | 94 | 27.3 |

Reliability and Validity Analysis

The excellent validity and reliability of the questionnaire were tested by Smart-PLS in this study. Expatriate Job Performance (EP) showed strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.923$, CR=0.925) and acceptable convergent validity (AVE=0.522), while Cross-cultural Adjustment (CCA) exhibited superior reliability ($\alpha=0.926$, CR=0.936) with satisfactory convergent validity (AVE=0.544). Cross-cultural Training also demonstrated very high reliability ($\alpha=0.915$, CR=0.917) and adequate convergent validity (AVE=0.541). Discriminant validity was confirmed through both Fornell-Larcker criterion (all \sqrt{AVE} values > inter-construct correlations) and HTMT ratios (all below 0.85), though the relatively higher correlation between CCA and EP (HTMT=0.721) suggests a close theoretical relationship consistent with existing literature. These results collectively indicate that the measurement model possesses robust metric properties suitable for subsequent structural analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2

Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and average variance extracted

| Construct | Cronbach's | Composite Reliability | AVE | Fornell-Larcker (VAVE) | HTMT (vs EP) |
|----------------------------|------------|-----------------------|-------|------------------------|--------------|
| Expatriate Job Performance | 0.923 | 0.925 | 0.522 | 0.722 | |
| Cross-cultural Adjustment | 0.926 | 0.936 | 0.544 | 0.738 | 0.721 |
| Cross-cultural Training | 0.915 | 0.917 | 0.541 | 0.735 | 0.602 |

Notes: AVE=Average Variance Extracted.

Having established the psychometric soundness of the measurement instrument, the study subsequently investigated the correlations between the key constructs.

Structure Model Path Coefficients

Table 3

Path coefficients and Mediation Effects

| Path | β | S.D. | t-value | P-value | 95% BCI | Fit indices |
|--------------|---------|-------|---------|---------|---------------|-----------------|
| CCT->CCA | 0.562 | 0.036 | 15.798 | <0.001 | [0.482,0.634] | SRMR=0.038<0.08 |
| CCA->JP | 0.674 | 0.028 | 23.864 | <0.001 | [0.611,0.723] | NFI=0.925>0.9 |
| CCT->CCA->JP | 0.379 | 0.033 | 11.632 | <0.001 | [0.311,0.437] | - |

Key: Bootstrapping with 5000 resamples. NFI= Normed Fit Index BCI=Bias-Corrected Interval. SRMR =Standardized Root Mean Square Residual

The structural equation modeling results using Smart-PLS demonstrate excellent model fit and support the hypothesized mediation relationships. As shown in the analysis, the model meets established goodness-of-fit criteria with SRMR = 0.038 (below the 0.08 threshold) and NFI = 0.925 (exceeding the 0.90 benchmark), indicating strong alignment between the proposed model and observed data. The path coefficients reveal that cross-cultural training (CCT) has a significant positive effect on cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) ($\beta = 0.562$, $t = 15.798$,

$p < 0.001$, 95% BCI [0.482, 0.634]). Furthermore, cross-cultural adjustment shows a strong, significant influence on job performance (JP) ($\beta = 0.674$, $t = 23.864$, $p < 0.001$, 95% BCI [0.611, 0.723]). Importantly, the indirect effect of CCT on JP through CCA is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.379$, $t = 11.632$, $p < 0.001$, 95% BCI [0.311, 0.437]), accounting for 100% of the total effect in this complete mediation model. These results provide robust empirical support for the theoretical proposition that the benefits of cross-cultural training on expatriate performance are fully mediated by enhanced cross-cultural adjustment. The narrow confidence intervals across all paths suggest stable parameter estimates, while the large t -values indicate strong statistical significance.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide robust empirical support for the complete mediation model of cross-cultural training (CCT) effects on expatriate job performance (JP) through cross-cultural adjustment (CCA).

First, the significant positive relationship between CCT and CCA ($\beta = 0.562$) aligns with recent meta-analytic findings by Chenyang (2022), confirming that modern cross-cultural training programs remain effective for facilitating cross-cultural adjustment in an increasingly digitalized global workforce (Naeem et al., 2020; Okpara & Kabongo, 2017; Selmer, 2005; Sit et al., 2017; Waxin & Panaccio, 2005). The effect size suggests that approximately 31.6% of the variance in cross-cultural adjustment can be attributed to training interventions, reinforcing the value of cross-cultural training in today's complex international business environment.

The robust path coefficient from CCA to JP ($\beta = 0.674$) aligns closely with previous research findings, further validating the significance of this relationship. For instance, earlier studies have also indicated that CCA plays a crucial role in influencing JP (Lo & Nguyen, 2023; Roodsai et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2023). This current result not only supports but also extends the emerging theoretical perspective of "cultural agility" (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2016), highlighting that adaptive capabilities serve as the primary driver of expatriate performance. This finding is particularly noteworthy given recent debates about whether traditional adjustment factors maintain their relevance in an era of virtual global work arrangements (Nunes et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2023). The consistency between our study and prior research on the CCA - JP relationship adds to the body of knowledge in this area, strengthening the understanding of how certain factors impact expatriate performance in the context of evolving work models.

The complete mediation pattern (indirect effect $\beta = 0.379$) provides compelling evidence that challenges contemporary assumptions about direct skill transfer in cross-cultural training. Our results, with narrow confidence intervals excluding zero, suggest that cross-cultural training programs primarily create value by building adaptive capacity rather than directly enhancing job-specific competencies. This aligns with the "adjustment performance" paradigm while contradicting recent claims about the declining importance of cultural adjustment (Chenyang, 2022; Chu et al., 2018; Lo & Nguyen, 2023).

The model's excellent fit (SRMR = 0.038; NFI = 0.925) suggests strong predictive validity (Hair et al., 2019), though we acknowledge limitations including potential cohort effects and the need for longitudinal verification.

Conclusion

In summary, this study empirically validates the impact of cross-cultural training (CCT) on cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) and the influence of CCA on job performance (JP), further demonstrating the mediating role of CCA between CCT and JP. We recommend that organizations implement a phased training approach for expatriates: providing knowledge-based and cognitive-level cross-cultural training before deployment, followed by behavioral training after arrival in the host country. This systematic training framework can effectively enhance expatriates' cultural adjustment capabilities, thereby significantly improving their overseas work performance. The findings emphasize that making cross-cultural adaptability a core evaluation metric and establishing corresponding support mechanisms are critical for ensuring expatriate success.

Theoretical Implication

This study, grounded in cross-cultural adjustment theory, systematically elucidates the mechanism of "cross-cultural training (CCT) → cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) → job performance (JP)", providing important theoretical insights for the field of cross-cultural management. The findings reveal that cross-cultural training (CCT) significantly enhances cross-cultural adjustment (CCA), deepening our understanding of the transformation mechanism of training effectiveness and confirming the pivotal role of structured training in improving cross-cultural adjustment competence. More importantly, the study validates the core mediating role of cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) in enhancing job performance (JP). This discovery enriches existing theoretical explanations of the "cross-cultural training-performance" pathway, highlighting the theoretical value of cross-cultural adjustment competence as a key transformation mechanism. Additionally, the study uncovers the holistic effect of the "training-adjustment-performance" chain, providing an empirical foundation for systematic theory-building in cross-cultural management research.

Practical Implication

This study offers clear directional guidance for organizational cross-cultural management practices. First, the research confirms the effectiveness of cross-cultural training (CCT), suggesting that organizations should increase investment in structured cross-cultural training programs, with particular emphasis on cultivating employees' cultural sensitivity and adaptive capabilities. Second, the strong predictive effect of cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) on job performance (JP) indicates that organizations should establish dynamic assessment mechanisms for cross-cultural adjustment and incorporate adaptability as a core metric in talent development systems. Specifically, enterprises can: 1) Develop assessment tools for cross-cultural adjustment competence to regularly evaluate employees' adjustment levels; 2) Design targeted adjustment enhancement programs, such as cultural mentorship systems and cross-cultural scenario simulation training; 3) Integrate adjustment competence with performance management systems to create a virtuous cycle of "training-adjustment-performance". These practical recommendations hold significant guiding value for improving the management effectiveness of multinational corporations.

Limitations and Recommendations

Several limitations should be noted. First, it uses a cross-sectional design with data collected between July 2024 and January 2025, which limits the ability to understand how the relationships between variables change over time. Future research could adopt a longitudinal

design to explore the mediating impact of cross-cultural adjustment between cross-cultural training and expatriates' job performance over time. Second, the sample characteristics may limit generalizability. It's only focused on expatriates from China in the construction industry in Malaysia. Future research could expand to expatriates from other countries and industries. Third, this study relies on self-reported questionnaires to collect information, which may introduce bias since participants may adjust their responses based on social expectations. Future research could consider combining qualitative and quantitative methods to obtain more comprehensive and in-depth information.

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