

Toward a Glocalized Model of Expatriate Adjustment: Evidence from Chinese Expatriates in Africa

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Abstract

The adjustment of Chinese expatriates in Africa remains an underexplored phenomenon, particularly within the project-driven construction sector. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of a *Comprehensive Onboarding Program* designed to enhance the adaptation of Chinese expatriates at Hebei Building Materials Industry Design and Research Institute's South African subsidiary. Using a quantitative pre- and post-intervention design, data were collected from 30 expatriates across three domains of adjustment: language proficiency, intercultural communication, and social integration. Standardized CEFR-based assessments indicated that 67% of participants advanced by at least one proficiency level, with 40% attaining B2 or above. Cross-cultural communication scales revealed a 76% improvement rate, while social integration indices showed positive change for 81% of respondents. Overall, 88% rated the program as highly effective, underscoring its practical value for expatriate retention and engagement. By demonstrating statistically significant improvements across all three domains, this paper provides empirical evidence for the value of post-arrival, context-specific onboarding. The findings contribute to expatriate management literature by advancing a quantitatively validated, glocalized model of expatriate adjustment, extending the applicability of Western-derived frameworks to Chinese expatriates in Africa's construction industry.

Keywords: Expatriate Adjustment, International Human Resource Management (IHRM), Chinese Enterprises Overseas, Comprehensive Onboarding Program

Introduction

The globalization of Chinese enterprises has accelerated dramatically over the past two decades, with Africa emerging as one of the most significant destinations for investment, infrastructure projects, and labor deployment. According to recent estimates, China is now Africa's largest trading partner and a leading investor in large-scale construction projects, ranging from transportation networks to energy facilities (Fei, 2022). This expansion has relied

heavily on the transfer of Chinese professionals and technical staff abroad, creating an unprecedented flow of South–South expatriation. Unlike traditional expatriate movements from developed to developing countries, Chinese expatriates in Africa often confront a distinctive constellation of challenges: profound linguistic gaps, weak cross-cultural preparedness, and limited institutional support structures. These difficulties are not only personal but also organizational, affecting project delivery, client relations, and the sustainability of Chinese ventures in African contexts.

Within this landscape, the adaptation of Chinese expatriates has become both a pressing practical concern and a fertile area of theoretical inquiry. Expatriate failure rates remain persistently high worldwide, with estimates ranging from 20 to 40 percent, and the costs of failed assignments—whether financial, reputational, or human—are considerable (Bano & Liu, 2025). For Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the construction sector, the stakes are particularly acute. Projects are frequently time-sensitive, capital-intensive, and politically visible, meaning that misalignment between expatriates and host environments can compromise organizational legitimacy as well as economic outcomes. Yet, despite these risks, scholarly attention to the adjustment of Chinese expatriates in Africa remains relatively scarce compared to the voluminous literature on Western expatriates in developed contexts.

Theoretical frameworks of expatriate adjustment have long been dominated by Western-centric models, particularly Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou's (1991) Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) model, which defines adaptation across general, interactional, and work domains. While this framework has provided an enduring structure for examining expatriation, its empirical foundation rests largely on studies of American and Japanese professionals in advanced economies. Consequently, it overlooks the realities of South–South expatriation, where cultural distance, institutional environments, and baseline competencies differ substantially (Caldwell et al., 2023). For Chinese expatriates in Africa, adjustment is shaped not only by unfamiliar cultural norms but also by structural issues such as limited English proficiency, hierarchical workplace practices, and the project-driven nature of the construction industry (Sokro et al., 2021). These contextual conditions demand a globalized interpretation of adjustment theory—one that preserves universal dimensions of adaptation while tailoring interventions to local realities.

Parallel to this, debates in international human resource management (IHRM) have increasingly highlighted the limitations of pre-departure cultural briefings and generic orientation sessions. While pre-departure training may build awareness, emerging evidence suggests that post-arrival, context-embedded interventions exert greater influence on long-term expatriate success (Gyensare et al., 2025). Post-arrival programs, particularly those that integrate language learning, intercultural communication, and social integration, address the lived challenges expatriates encounter daily. Such interventions also resonate with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory (SLT), which posits that adaptation is acquired not only through instruction but also through observation, modeling, and reinforcement in real-world social settings. By aligning theoretical constructs with context-specific realities, organizations can design interventions that are both empirically grounded and practically effective.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the effectiveness of a Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP) designed for Chinese expatriates at Hebei

Building Materials Industry Design and Research Institute's subsidiary in South Africa. Unlike conventional approaches that prioritize pre-departure preparation, the COP was explicitly structured as a post-arrival intervention targeting three interrelated domains of adjustment: English language proficiency, intercultural workplace communication, and social integration. A quantitative pre- and post-intervention design involving 30 expatriates was adopted to measure progress across these domains. Standardized CEFR-based assessments, intercultural competence scales, and indices of social integration were employed to ensure methodological rigor.

This research contributes to expatriate management scholarship and practice in three ways. First, it extends the theoretical applicability of the CCA model by glocalizing its dimensions to the South–South mobility context, thereby addressing longstanding concerns about Western-centric bias in expatriate studies. Second, it integrates Social Learning Theory as a mechanism that explains how adaptation occurs, emphasizing experiential and socially mediated learning processes. Third, it provides rare quantitative evidence from the African construction sector, offering empirical validation of onboarding as a strategic HRM intervention. By situating Chinese expatriate adjustment within broader debates on glocalization, international mobility, and post-arrival training, this study not only fills a critical gap in the literature but also offers actionable insights for organizations seeking to enhance expatriate retention and project performance in culturally complex environments..

The Comprehensive Theoretical Basis

A solid theoretical framework is indispensable for moving the study of expatriate adjustment beyond descriptive accounts of obstacles. This research employs two complementary perspectives. The first is the Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) model developed by Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou (1991), which delineates the principal domains of adaptation. The second is Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory (SLT), which explains the mechanisms through which adjustment is learned and reinforced. When considered together, these frameworks provide the foundation for the Comprehensive Onboarding Program, positioning it as both theoretically robust and practically relevant. The integration of CCA and SLT thus supports the development of a glocalized model of expatriate adjustment, tested and validated through quantitative evidence.

Expatriate Adjustment Theory

Expatriate adjustment has long been regarded as a decisive factor in the success of international assignments. Among the available frameworks, the Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) model proposed by Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou (1991) remains the most widely applied. The model conceptualizes adjustment as a multidimensional construct encompassing general adaptation to daily living conditions, interactional adjustment in building relationships with host nationals, and work adjustment involving job tasks and workplace culture. Its robustness has been confirmed across various contexts, and it continues to serve as a theoretical anchor for expatriate management research (Caldwell et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the model is largely rooted in Western experiences, with its empirical foundations built on studies of American and Japanese expatriates in advanced economies.

This raises concerns about its applicability to South–South mobility contexts (Bano & Liu, 2025). For Chinese expatriates in Africa's construction sector, adjustment is not only

influenced by cultural distance but also by structural conditions such as limited English proficiency, hierarchical management traditions, and the project-driven nature of the industry (Sokro et al., 2021). These realities call for a glocalized reading of the CCA framework—one that preserves its universal dimensions while incorporating locally relevant factors such as targeted language training, workplace communication support, and structured pathways to social integration.

Social Learning Theory

Although the CCA model identifies the domains in which expatriates must adapt, it offers limited insight into the processes by which adaptive behaviors are acquired. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory (SLT) offers a complementary perspective by emphasizing that learning occurs not only through direct instruction but also through observation, modeling, and reinforcement in social environments. In the context of expatriation, this implies that expatriates cultivate adaptive skills by interacting with host nationals, observing workplace practices, and applying communication strategies in real-life settings (Sokro et al., 2021).

The emphasis on experiential and socially mediated learning is particularly relevant to post-arrival onboarding programs. Unlike pre-departure training, which often relies on abstract cultural orientation, SLT highlights the value of situated opportunities that allow expatriates to practice adaptive behaviors within the host environment. For instance, workplace-based language instruction enables expatriates to acquire both technical terminology and pragmatic communication skills, while intercultural workshops conducted with host-country colleagues create reciprocal learning opportunities (Du-Babcock & Chan, 2025). In this way, SLT provides the behavioral mechanism through which the CCA domains can be effectively operationalized and strengthened in practice.

Integrating Theories for a Glocalized Model

The integration of CCA and SLT offers a robust foundation for the current study. CCA identifies the what of expatriate adjustment (the domains requiring adaptation), while SLT explains the how (the processes by which adaptation occurs). Together, these theories justify the design of a Comprehensive Onboarding Program that simultaneously addresses multiple dimensions of adjustment through experiential, socially embedded interventions (Scott & Manning, 2022).

This integrated perspective also advances the notion of glocalization—the blending of global frameworks with localized practices. For Chinese expatriates in South Africa, universal adjustment constructs (general, interactional, work) must be operationalized in ways that account for specific barriers, such as English language deficits and culturally distinct communication norms. By tailoring interventions to these realities, the study demonstrates how global theories can be extended and recontextualized to non-Western mobility pathways.

Quantitative Validation of Theoretical Constructs

An additional contribution of this research lies in the quantitative validation of expatriate adjustment constructs. Much of the existing literature has been dominated by qualitative case studies and narrative accounts, which, although valuable for their depth of insight, often fall short in terms of generalizability and precision when tracking changes over

time (Scott & Manning, 2022). Recent reviews have therefore called for more rigorous quantitative assessments of expatriate interventions, especially in emerging-market contexts where empirical evidence remains limited (Zhu et al., 2017).

Responding to this need, the present study employed standardized measures—including CEFR-aligned English proficiency tests, intercultural communication competence scales, and indices of social integration—to evaluate adjustment outcomes before and after the onboarding intervention. Such methodological rigor has been similarly encouraged in international HRM research to strengthen causal links between training initiatives and expatriate performance (Kongsuwannakul, 2020; Tatzali et al., 2025).

The findings, which indicate statistically significant improvements in language proficiency, workplace communication, and social integration, lend empirical support to the integration of the CCA model with Social Learning Theory. More broadly, they underscore the argument that post-arrival onboarding should be viewed not as a supplementary practice but as a theoretically informed, evidence-based intervention that can advance the field of expatriate adjustment.

Synthesis of Literature

As summarized in Table 1, The literature reveals that while the CCA model (Black et al., 1991; Caldwell et al., 2023) remains foundational in defining the domains of expatriate adjustment, its Western-centric origins limit its applicability in South–South contexts such as Chinese expatriates in Africa (Bano & Liu, 2025; Sokro et al., 2021). Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977; Du-Babcock & Chan, 2025) offers a mechanism for adaptation through observation, modeling, and interaction, yet it has been underutilized in expatriate research, which continues to rely heavily on qualitative approaches (Scott & Manning, 2022). Recent calls for quantitative validation (Zhu et al., 2017; Kongsuwannakul, 2020; Tatzali et al., 2025) underscore the need to evaluate interventions with standardized measures. Addressing these gaps, this study proposes a glocalized model of expatriate adjustment, integrating CCA domains with SLT mechanisms, and operationalizes it through a Comprehensive Onboarding Program that is quantitatively assessed across language proficiency, intercultural communication, and social integration.

Table 1

Key Theoretical and Empirical Contributions to Expatriate Adjustment Research

Author(s) & Year	Focus of Study	Theoretical Lens	Key Findings	Identified Gaps / Relevance to Present Study
Black, Mendenhall & Oddou (1991)	Conceptual model of international adjustment	Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) Model	Identified three domains: general, interactional, and work adjustment	Western-centric model; limited testing in non-Western–non-Western expatriation
Caldwell et al. (2023)	Expatriate management in global mobility	CCA framework	Confirmed multidimensionality of adjustment and organizational outcomes	Still largely applied in Western contexts; limited African/Chinese validation

Bano & Liu (2025)	Expatriates in non-Western host countries	CCA critique	Argued for context-specific adjustment models	Called for <i>glocalized</i> adaptation frameworks
Sokro et al. (2021)	Chinese expatriates in African construction	CCA and SLT	Found language and cultural barriers as major adjustment stressors	Highlighted need for structured interventions targeting communication and integration
Bandura (1977)	Social behavior and learning	Social Learning Theory (SLT)	Learning occurs via observation, modeling, and reinforcement	Not widely operationalized in expatriate adjustment research
Du-Babcock & Chan (2025)	Intercultural workplace communication	SLT in expatriate training	Showed peer interaction and situated practice accelerate adjustment	Advocated post-arrival, context-embedded learning designs
Scott & Manning (2022)	Methodological approaches to expatriate adaptation	Integration of CCA and SLT	Highlighted potential of combining frameworks for expatriate learning	Most studies remain qualitative; weak quantitative testing
Zhu et al. (2017)	Expatriate training outcomes in emerging markets	HRD/Training perspectives	Identified need for rigorous intervention evaluation	Scarcity of longitudinal quantitative studies in non-Western contexts
Kongsuwannakul (2020)	HRM and expatriate performance	Quantitative HRD measures	Emphasized linking training to measurable performance outcomes	Limited application in construction/Chinese SOEs
Tsatzali et al. (2025)	Expatriate development programs	Quantitative HRM	Found structured onboarding enhances retention	Called for broader testing in diverse cultural environments

Method

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Comprehensive Onboarding Program, this study employed a quantitative, action research design situated within the South African subsidiary of Hebei Building Materials Industry Design and Research Institute (HBM). The methodological approach was chosen to both address practical adaptation challenges faced by Chinese expatriates and provide empirically robust evidence for expatriate adjustment scholarship. By combining structured intervention with standardized measurement, the study ensured that outcomes could be assessed with rigor, reliability, and contextual relevance.

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative action research design to evaluate the effectiveness of a Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP) for Chinese expatriates in South Africa.

Action research was chosen as it integrates organizational problem-solving with scholarly inquiry, offering both practical improvements and theoretical contributions (Aloyzius, 2020). The study followed a two-step cycle: (1) diagnosis of adjustment barriers through baseline assessments, and (2) implementation of a targeted onboarding intervention followed by post-intervention evaluation. Quantitative methods were prioritized to ensure objectivity and statistical (Moura et al., 2025). Pre- and post-intervention questionnaires were administered to all 30 expatriates to assess baseline competencies and evaluate program-induced changes across the three domains of adjustment. The instruments, adapted from validated scales in language proficiency, intercultural communication, and social integration, were aligned with CEFR standards and established intercultural competence frameworks. Each questionnaire consisted of 12 Likert-scale items (see Appendix A), ensuring comparability between pre- and post-measurements. This design enabled the systematic capture of both initial conditions and subsequent improvements, thereby enhancing the validity of the intervention evaluation

Sample Size

In the social sciences, a sample size of 30 is widely regarded as the minimum threshold for conducting parametric statistical analyses such as t-tests and ANOVA. This convention is grounded in the Central Limit Theorem, which posits that the distribution of sample means approaches normality when $n \geq 30$ (Field, 2018; Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012). On this basis, the present study engaged 30 Chinese expatriates working at the South African subsidiary of the Hebei Building Materials Industry Design and Research Institute (HBM). Participants were purposively selected because of their involvement in technical, managerial, or administrative positions that were integral to project delivery. The sample comprised predominantly mid-career professionals, with an average age of 37.5 years and limited prior international exposure. This demographic profile closely mirrors the expatriate workforce typically deployed by Chinese SOEs, thereby enhancing the contextual validity of the findings.

Intervention Plan

The Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP) was implemented over a six-month period (June–December 2024) as an integrated response to diagnostic findings that highlighted expatriates' challenges in language proficiency, intercultural communication, and social integration. The intervention was organized into three interrelated phases, each designed to build upon the preceding stage and provide a structured pathway for progressive adaptation.

The first phase emphasized diagnosis and individualized planning. Participants completed CEFR-aligned English proficiency tests (Council of Europe, 2020), intercultural sensitivity scales (Chen & Starosta, 2000), and workplace adaptation inventories (Shaffer et al., 2016). These assessments provided a quantitative baseline of adjustment difficulties and informed the development of individualized learning plans. Each plan identified concrete goals—for example, advancing one CEFR level, improving confidence in workplace communication, or expanding local social networks—and created a personalized roadmap for participation. This diagnostic stage ensured that the onboarding process was responsive to specific needs rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach.

The second phase focused on structured training and workshops. Weekly two-hour English language classes, delivered by certified instructors, addressed both technical

vocabulary relevant to the construction industry and functional expressions for everyday workplace interactions. To ensure contextual relevance, instructors incorporated case scenarios drawn directly from participants' professional experiences, linking linguistic learning to real work situations. In parallel, bi-weekly intercultural communication workshops employed simulations, role plays, and problem-solving exercises based on actual cross-cultural incidents reported by participants. Grounded in Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977; Du-Babcock & Chan, 2025), these sessions emphasized observational learning, peer modeling, and iterative feedback as mechanisms for reinforcing adaptive behaviors. By combining linguistic and intercultural training, this phase targeted both technical competence and relational effectiveness, which are essential dimensions of expatriate adjustment.

The third phase concentrated on social integration and relationship-building. Recognizing that effective adjustment extends beyond the workplace, monthly activities were organized to facilitate interaction between Chinese expatriates and host-country colleagues. These activities included team-building exercises, cultural excursions, and joint community service projects. Such initiatives were intended to reduce social distance, foster informal interaction, and provide expatriates with opportunities to engage directly in South African cultural practices (Takeuchi, 2010; Stoermer et al., 2020). By situating learning in authentic social contexts, this stage reinforced earlier lessons while encouraging expatriates to embed adaptation strategies into everyday life.

Throughout all phases, as summarized in Figure 1, the program incorporated continuous mentorship and structured progress reviews. Senior expatriates and HR managers acted as mentors, holding monthly one-on-one sessions to monitor progress, provide developmental feedback, and ensure accountability to the goals set during the diagnostic stage. These sessions also encouraged reflective dialogue, prompting participants to critically assess their adjustment trajectory and strategize further improvements. This feedback loop not only sustained engagement with the program but also aligned individual development with broader organizational expectations.

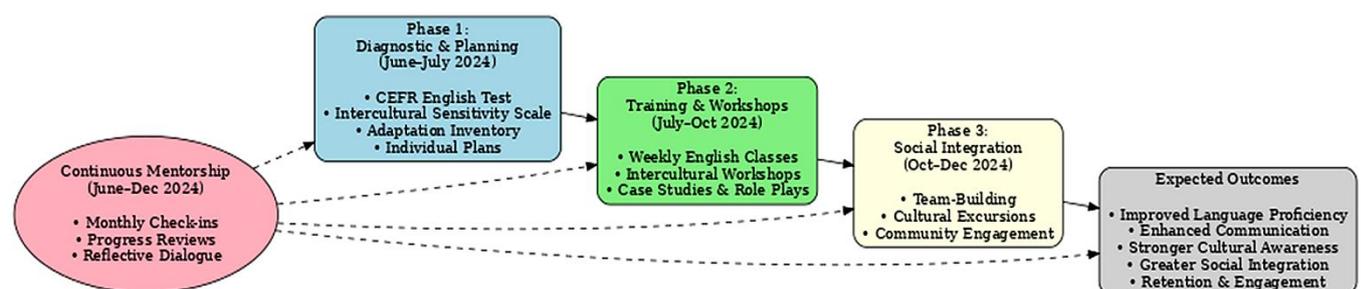


Figure 1. Flowchart of the Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP)

Data Collection, Analysis, and Research Rigor

Data for this study were collected using a pre- and post-intervention survey design. Adjustment outcomes were measured across three domains: language proficiency, assessed using CEFR-aligned English tests (Jiang et al., 2024); cross-cultural communication, measured with a Likert-scale instrument adapted from intercultural competence frameworks (Ang et al., 2007); and social integration, evaluated through indices of workplace interaction and informal relationships (Gencheva-Vasileva, 2025).

To ensure reliability, all datasets underwent a rigorous cleaning process. Missing values were addressed using appropriate imputation methods (Alam et al., 2023), and outliers were examined through box plots and Z-score analysis. Internal consistency was tested with Cronbach's alpha (threshold $\alpha > 0.75$). Quantitative comparisons between pre- and post-intervention scores were conducted using paired-sample t-tests, complemented by effect size calculations (Cohen's *d*) to evaluate the magnitude of change (Lakens, 2013).

The research adhered to strict ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymization and secure storage of data. Ethical approval was granted by the hosting academic institution. To mitigate researcher bias in the dual role of practitioner and investigator, reflexive practices and member-checking were applied throughout (Jamieson et al., 2023).

Finally, methodological rigor was reinforced by combining triangulation of instruments (tests, surveys, feedback), iterative monitoring through monthly mentor reports, and the use of standardized tools to enhance comparability. By embedding the intervention within an action research cycle, the study ensured that findings contributed simultaneously to organizational learning and theoretical advancement.

Results and Discussion

Findings were derived from comparative analysis of the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires (Appendix A), which systematically measured language proficiency, intercultural communication, and social integration. The results demonstrated clear improvements across all domains, confirming that the structured onboarding intervention effectively addressed the barriers identified during the baseline assessment.

The Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP) demonstrated measurable effectiveness in enhancing expatriates' adaptation across three key domains. Language proficiency showed the strongest quantitative gains, with 67% of participants advancing by at least one CEFR level, 33% reaching B2 proficiency, and 17% attaining C1. This improvement significantly reduced dependence on interpreters and increased expatriates' ability to independently engage in technical discussions and project briefings.

Similarly, cross-cultural communication competence improved among 76% of participants, with role-play simulations and reflective debriefings cited as particularly transformative. Respondents highlighted increased awareness of nonverbal cues and cultural norms, with one participant noting, "I no longer interpret silence as disagreement—it's a cultural difference I've learned to recognize and adapt to"

The most notable shift was observed in social integration, where 81% of respondents reported greater engagement with local colleagues. Structured activities—such as soccer matches, cultural excursions, and community projects—helped foster informal friendships, with more than 70% of expatriates reporting at least one meaningful relationship with South African colleagues

Collectively, these improvements incorporated into Figure 1 substantiate the hypothesis that targeted onboarding can accelerate adjustment by addressing interlinked barriers of language, communication, and social belonging.

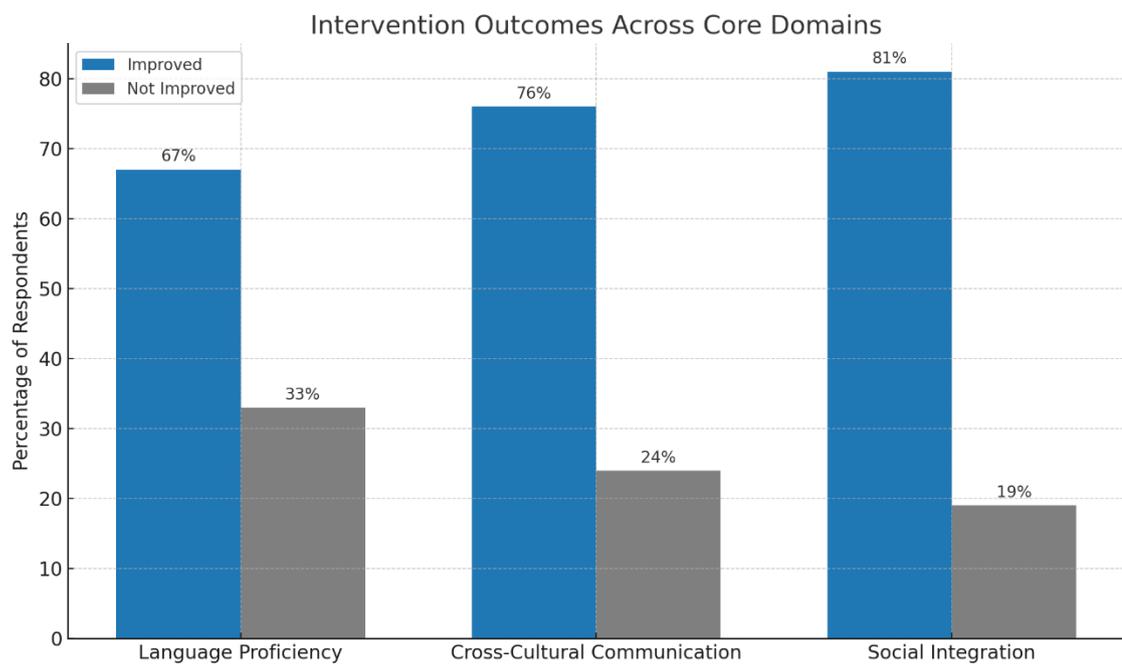


Figure 1. Improvements Across Adjustment Domains Following the Intervention

Holistic Perceptions of the Onboarding Program

The majority of expatriates regarded the program as highly beneficial, with 88% rating it as “very effective” or “extremely effective” and 92% recommending its continuation for subsequent cohorts. Participants consistently identified the integrated design—combining diagnostic testing, structured training, and social immersion—as the program’s principal strength. They emphasized that the COP offered not only technical and cultural knowledge but also enhanced their sense of belonging and psychological safety within the host environment.

For many, the most immediate gains were in language proficiency. As one participant reflected, “Before, I needed an interpreter in every meeting. Now, I can explain project updates myself, even if not perfect. This gives me more confidence with clients.” Similarly, communication workshops were credited with transforming expatriates’ ability to interpret cultural signals. Another explained, “I no longer interpret silence as disagreement—it is a cultural habit here. Understanding this saved me from many misunderstandings.”

Beyond technical and communicative competencies, the program’s social integration activities were widely acknowledged as pivotal in fostering trust and connection. Informal settings such as football matches and cultural excursions helped cultivate stronger interpersonal bonds. One participant remarked, “Playing football with South African colleagues made me feel part of the team. It’s different from only working together; now we are also friends.” These reflections indicate that structured opportunities for informal interaction extended adaptation beyond the workplace and into meaningful social domains.

Overall, participants viewed the COP as a holistic bridge linking individual development with organizational support. As one expatriate summarized, *“This onboarding was not just training; it was a bridge. It helped me to live, work, and connect better. Every new expatriate should have this opportunity.”* At the same time, several participants questioned the sufficiency of a six-month program, suggesting that longer cycles would be more conducive to deep cultural learning. As one noted, *“Six months is a good start, but culture is deep. If the program could continue longer, maybe one year, the impact would be even stronger.”* These perspectives underline the importance of sustaining onboarding efforts beyond the initial adjustment period and aligning them with long-term career development strategies

Theoretical Contribution

The findings contribute to expatriate adjustment scholarship in two significant ways. First, they reaffirm the relevance of the Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) framework (Black et al., 1991) in the context of South–South expatriation, while highlighting the need for contextual adaptation. The linguistic limitations and hierarchical workplace dynamics experienced by Chinese expatriates illustrate the necessity of a glocalized approach—one that balances universal adjustment constructs with host-country specific realities.

Moreover, the study substantiates Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) as an effective mechanism for expatriate training. The demonstrated success of scenario-based workshops and mentorship-driven activities shows that vicarious learning, observational modeling, and reinforcement are powerful drivers of adaptive behavior. These results align with recent scholarship advocating for post-arrival interventions that move beyond abstract cultural briefings and instead emphasize situated, experiential forms of learning.

Practical Implications

For organizations, the findings emphasize the importance of embedding structured onboarding as a strategic human resource management practice rather than treating it as a routine orientation exercise. The COP not only facilitated immediate improvements in adjustment outcomes but also contributed to strengthening expatriates’ long-term commitment to the organization. A particularly notable feature was the role of mentorship, which served as a key mechanism linking individual learning trajectories with broader organizational objectives.

At the same time, the results point to persistent systemic constraints. Challenges such as siloed communication and limited managerial involvement suggest that while onboarding interventions can effectively support expatriates at the individual level, their long-term impact depends on complementary structural reforms. Enhancing organizational culture and leadership practices is therefore essential to ensure that the gains achieved through onboarding are sustained and translated into enduring improvements in expatriate adjustment.

Synthesis

In short, the Comprehensive Onboarding Program produced both statistically and practically significant improvements in expatriate adjustment: 67% of participants advanced in language proficiency, 76% reported enhanced cross-cultural communication, and 81%

demonstrated stronger social integration. Beyond these measurable outcomes, qualitative feedback revealed more profound changes in identity, belonging, and psychological safety. Taken together, the evidence confirms that glocalized, theory-driven onboarding programs can function not only as effective organizational interventions but also as meaningful empirical contributions to the broader field of expatriate management scholarship.

Conclusion

This study evaluated the effectiveness of a Comprehensive Onboarding Program (COP) designed to facilitate the adjustment of Chinese expatriates working in South Africa's construction sector. Drawing upon a quantitative action research design, the program targeted three critical domains of adaptation: language proficiency, cross-cultural communication, and social integration. The results demonstrated measurable improvements across all domains, with 67% of expatriates advancing at least one CEFR level in English, 76% reporting enhanced intercultural communication competence, and 81% indicating stronger integration with host colleagues. Participant reflections further confirmed these gains, revealing heightened confidence, improved workplace collaboration, and the formation of meaningful social ties.

Theoretically, the study contributes to expatriate management research by advancing a glocalized model of adjustment. While the Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) model remains foundational, its predominantly Western orientation has limited its explanatory power in South-South mobility contexts. By integrating Social Learning Theory (SLT), this study illustrated how adaptation occurs through observation, modeling, and socially embedded practices. The COP thus operationalized both the what (CCA domains) and the how (SLT mechanisms) of adjustment, validating their integration through quantitative evidence. This framework extends expatriate scholarship by demonstrating that global theories can be localized without losing analytical robustness.

Practically, the findings underscore the importance of treating onboarding as a strategic HRM intervention rather than a transactional orientation process. For multinational construction enterprises, especially Chinese SOEs operating in culturally diverse environments, structured onboarding can accelerate expatriates' adaptation, reduce reliance on interpreters, strengthen collaboration, and improve retention. Mentorship emerged as a particularly powerful mechanism, linking individual learning trajectories with organizational expectations. However, the study also highlighted constraints: uneven progress due to varying baseline proficiencies and the limited six-month timeframe, suggesting the value of tiered language support and extended reinforcement cycles.

Looking forward, the research opens several avenues for further inquiry. First, longitudinal studies could examine the sustainability of onboarding gains beyond the initial six months. Second, future work could test the COP in different sectors and host regions to assess its transferability. Third, mixed-methods approaches that integrate psychological measures (e.g., stress, resilience) with organizational outcomes (e.g., retention rates, project performance) would deepen understanding of expatriate adjustment dynamics.

In conclusion, this study provides robust evidence that context-specific, theory-driven onboarding interventions can significantly enhance expatriate adjustment in non-Western

host contexts. By combining quantitative rigor with practical relevance, it demonstrates how globalized models of expatriate management can strengthen both scholarly discourse and organizational practice.

Practical Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the necessity of rethinking onboarding as a strategic rather than transactional process. First, multinational construction enterprises should institutionalize post-arrival onboarding that goes beyond traditional pre-departure briefings. Embedding structured six-month programs that directly target language proficiency, intercultural communication, and social integration provides expatriates with in-situ resources that accelerate adaptation and enhance overall assignment success.

Second, the results highlight the critical role of language in shaping both workplace competence and social belonging. Organizations are encouraged to prioritize tiered, CEFR-aligned language training tailored to both technical and everyday communication demands. By ensuring that expatriates quickly acquire functional independence in English, reliance on interpreters can be reduced, thereby strengthening direct collaboration and project efficiency.

Third, intercultural competence should be systematically developed through workshops that are integrated into work routines rather than delivered as isolated events. Scenario-based simulations, role plays, and reflective debriefings grounded in authentic project challenges were particularly effective in this study, as they allowed expatriates to operationalize Social Learning Theory mechanisms in real-time workplace contexts.

Beyond linguistic and intercultural dimensions, structured efforts to foster social integration must also be prioritized. Activities such as team sports, cultural excursions, and community engagement initiatives create opportunities for expatriates and host-country colleagues to build meaningful relationships outside of formal work settings. Such experiences strengthen interpersonal trust and facilitate smoother collaboration within project teams.

Mentorship further emerged as a pivotal mechanism linking individual learning with organizational expectations. Pairing new expatriates with experienced mentors provides continuous developmental feedback, ensures accountability, and creates a supportive environment for long-term adjustment. Finally, the study suggests that onboarding programs should extend beyond the initial six-month cycle. Follow-up sessions and refresher workshops can serve as reinforcement mechanisms, consolidating learning and ensuring that adaptation gains are sustained over the duration of the assignment.

Collectively, these recommendations provide a roadmap for multinational enterprises, particularly Chinese SOEs operating in culturally complex environments, to transform onboarding into a strategic human resource management practice that fosters both expatriate adjustment and organizational performance.

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