Coping strategies applied by Western versus overseas Chinese business expatriates in China

Jan Selmer

Abstract Mail surveys were directed at overseas Chinese and Western business expatriates currently working on the Chinese mainland. The Western expatriates were mainly from the USA, France and Germany while the overseas Chinese expatriates were mostly from Hong Kong. It was found that overseas Chinese expatriates less often than the Western expatriates used problem-focused coping strategies, such as showing tolerance and patience and using responsible problem solving, but more often applied symptom-focused strategies, such as resorting to parent-country escapism. Especially Hong Kong expatriates were found to use fewer problem-focused coping strategies than their US and French counterparts while at the same time applying more symptom-focused coping strategies than the US and German expatriates. Obviously, that may limit the managerial effectiveness of overseas Chinese expatriates on the Chinese mainland in general, and in particular that of Hong Kong expatriates.

Keywords Coping strategies; problem focused, symptom focused; overseas Chinese expatriates.

Introduction

Recent years have seen an accelerated foreign business interest in China, culminating with its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). As the purchasing power of its 1.2 billion population rises, so does the demand for more consumer products and services. The economic growth also spurs the demand for improved infrastructure and telecommunications. Relaxing many previous restrictions, the number of foreign business firms exploring the Chinese market for new business opportunities is surging.

Western multinationals typically rely on their own expatriates to manage their subsidiaries and joint ventures in China, at least in key positions (cf. Björkman and Schaap, 1994; Selmer, 1998b; Worm, 1997). However, the employment of overseas Chinese expatriates is also a customary practice among European and US firms in the belief that the cultural fit is better for them, enabling them to cope better than Westerners (Goodall and Warner, 1998). Lately, this presumption has been called into question in the wake of emerging evidence that overseas Chinese expatriates may experience special difficulties on the Chinese mainland (cf. Björkman and Schaap, 1994; Hung, 1994; McEllister, 1998; Selmer and Shiu, 1999). The current paper aims to further explore this issue by comparing the coping strategies applied by Western and overseas Chinese expatriates assigned to the Chinese mainland.
This is an important purpose. Constituting the largest emerging market in the world of more than 20 per cent of the earth’s population with an ever-increasing purchasing power, especially in the urban areas (Rohwer, 1996), China is very important to many Western business firms. As opportunities abound, so do risks. Appropriate human resource management is essential for business success in China (Sergeant and Frenkel, 1998). Although labour costs are low, so is productivity and quality (World Bank, 1995). Skilful management by expatriates could be instrumental for success in the marketplace and recruiting expatriates who can cope with the demanding Chinese context would be crucial. The notion of coping strategies entails behavioural and cognitive attempts to control external and/or internal demands that are felt as draining or exceeding an individual’s resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). With few exceptions (Selmer, 1999), previous research on expatriate coping strategies (cf. Feldman and Thomas, 1991, 1992; Feldman and Tompson, 1993) has emphasized other topics influencing samples, methodology and findings. For example, Feldman and Tompson (1993) examined broad differences between domestic and international job changers. American domestic geographical relocators dominate their sample and the group of expatriates is not very representative. No other study has compared coping strategies of Western and overseas Chinese expatriates in China. Hence, this exploratory study may guide Western business firms planning to establish operations in China or expanding existing businesses there, informing them on some fundamental recruitment issues.

**Literature review and hypotheses**

*The cultural context of contemporary China*

The population of mainland China exceeds 1.2 billion people, or about one in five persons in the world. Most people live in the crowded river valleys and coastal areas and there are twenty-five cities with more than a million inhabitants, forming a rapidly growing and increasingly wealthy urban population. Since the introduction of the ‘Open Door’ policy, China has undergone enormous social and economic transformations, but many parts of the Chinese mainland still have the character of a developing country (de Keijzer, 1992; Warner, 1995).

China is the oldest nation in the world and has never been totally dissolved or occupied by Western powers; the culture of China is continual, homogeneous and strong in comparison with most other cultures in the world. There has been little change of the written language and Chinese can easily read works that are 2,000 years old, making the passing on of old values more fundamental in China than in the West (Worm, 1997).

Although contemporary Chinese mainland culture has been influenced by almost fifty years of Communist rule, it is a very short time span in comparison with the ancient history of the country. As a predominant ideology of China for thousands of years, Confucianism still has an essential influence on the Chinese mentality. Confucianism is a belief system that has provided the Chinese with great stability and resilience (cf. Redding, 1990: 48; Tan, 1986). This system is basically authoritarian, stressing hierarchical principles and status differences. It guides the correct and best way of handling interpersonal relationships and is accepted at all levels of society (cf. Bond, 1991; Bond and Hwang, 1986; Yang, 1986).

Not surprisingly, a largely autocratic managerial style is common in China today (Chen, 1995). The delegation of power is restricted, with most power held by the managing directors or a small group of top managers and party officials (Chen, 1995;
Typically, the loyalty of managers to the Communist Party in general and to the top executives in particular has been crucial for their promotion and well-being (Chen, 1995). Communication is mostly top-down (Worm, 1997). Despite the centralized leadership style, managers’ individual responsibility for their authoritarian decisions is insufficient, which is probably one of the greatest weaknesses in Chinese management (ibid.).

Chinese employees have problems adapting to a market economy where initiative, customer focus, diligent application of new skills, information sharing and co-operation are required (Child, 1994). Reluctance to share information within organizations has been reported even in cases where it was necessary to overcome obstacles that slowed or stopped production (ibid.).

Based on the extended family, Chinese collectivism regards out-group members with distrust. Confucianism has resulted in affiliation with smaller in-groups, anti-social attitudes, networking, face consciousness, indirect communication, etc. (Worm, 1997; Selmer, 1998a). Chinese gain protection in an unfriendly and hierarchical society through the establishment of interdependent personal relationships, guanxi, based on exchange of services. This type of personalization results in social habits such as nepotism, corruption, cliques, use of middlemen, etc. Consequently, in organizations, cultural values may strengthen modes of behaviour that restrict improvements in quality and productivity (Sergeant and Frenkel, 1998).

This cultural environment is new and different for many Western expatriates and may also feel quite strange to some of the overseas Chinese. To get by, both groups of expatriates may resort to various mechanisms to handle the situation in the mainland cultural context.

Coping strategies

The literature typically makes a distinction between problem-focused and symptom-focused coping strategies, although using differing terminology (cf. Folkman et al., 1986; Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). While Long et al. (1992) operate with engagement vs disengagement, Billings and Moos (1981) use approach vs avoidance strategies. The latter type of coping strategies, symptom-focused (avoidance/disengagement), intend to regulate stressful emotions and the purpose of the former coping strategies, problem-focused (approach/engagement), is to change the problematic person–environment relation that is perceived as the cause of the stress felt. Consequently, with symptom-focused coping strategies, individuals attempt to minimize anxieties through physical or mental withdrawal from the situation or by avoiding the problem. In applying problem-focused coping strategies, a person tries to face the problem in order to change the situation (Folkman et al., 1986).

Invariably, problem-focused coping strategies have been found to be associated with positive outcomes, while symptom-focused coping strategies have been related to negative outcomes (Billings and Moos, 1981; Long, 1988; Parasuraman and Cleek, 1984). It is typically believed that active attempts to change the environment could lessen or eliminate the cause of the stress, while passive efforts to handle negative consequences of stress may drain a person’s energy without affecting or eliminating the source of the problem (Feldman and Tompson, 1993). Research has also shown that a person can apply both problem-focused and symptom-focused coping strategies at the same time in the same context (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980, 1985). However, it is
probable that problem-focused coping is more commonly resorted to in situations where individuals believe that the source of stress can be affected. On the other hand, individuals are more likely to use symptom-focused coping when they think that the situation must be tolerated and cannot be changed (cf. Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; McCrae, 1984). Furthermore, symptom-focused coping strategies could create a vicious circle which adds to the direct effects of stress to increase the discomfort even more (Sandler et al., 1994).

The distinction between problem-focused and symptom-focused does not include all potential coping strategies. For example, it excludes defensive or unconscious strategies (Aldwin and Revenson, 1987). However, these two modes of coping may be general enough to cover many circumstances confronting business expatriates in China.

Coping in China

Western expatriates Based on the rapidly developing literature on management practices and policies on the Chinese mainland (cf. Child, 1994; Warner, 1995), one may surmise that Western managers assigned there would have to undertake significant adjustments at work as well as in their non-work life to cope with their expatriate assignments. The emerging empirical studies dealing with the adjustment of expatriate managers on the Chinese mainland offer a similar view. Davidson (1987) studied effective intercultural interaction in Chinese–US joint ventures, where American and Chinese board members and top managers experienced problems in working together to run the company. Björkman and Schaa (1994) deal with problems encountered by expatriates in Chinese–Western joint ventures and suggest practical ways to handle them. Weldon and Jahn (1996) examined intercultural conflicts in bicultural teams in US–Chinese joint ventures and Rimington (1996) investigated the management process of developing a Sino–British joint venture. Kaye and Taylor (1997) explored the occurrence of culture shock in expatriate managers working in joint-venture hotels in Beijing, finding a strong inverse relationship between intercultural sensitivity and culture shock. Sergeant and Frenkel (1998) underlined the importance of individual learning and the application of knowledge of cultural differences to manage foreign-invested enterprises in China. Other recent studies (cf. Selmer, 1998a) confirm many of the issues Western business expatriates have been reported to experience on the Chinese mainland: China presents a demanding cultural environment for Western expatriates where they have to cope with stressful and difficult situations.

Overseas Chinese expatriates Few empirical studies have dealt with overseas Chinese expatriates in China. Selmer and Shiu (1999) interviewed Hong Kong Chinese expatriates on the Chinese mainland and found that the anticipated cultural similarity seemed to build up expectations of easy and quick adjustment, which could, if it was not accomplished, result in frustration, resentment and withdrawal. As reported by Björkman and Schaa (1994), overseas Chinese expatriate managers lamented that they did not have as much authority on the Chinese mainland as their Western counterparts. Worse, it appeared that mainland Chinese employees despised their fellow Hong Kong and Singaporean ethnic Chinese expatriates or envied them their high income and freedom. McEllister (1998) also reported very demanding circumstances meeting overseas Chinese expatriates on the mainland, as, for example, Taiwanese managers in Guangdong Province, ethnic Chinese Singaporean expatriates in Zhejiang Province or Malaysian Chinese in Wuxi.
The significant adversities which overseas Chinese expatriates may have to cope with in China could be due to selective perception. The theoretical underpinnings and empirical observations of this concept constitute a focal point of this study.

**Selective perception**

To avoid being inundated by a torrent of information, a person designs simplified mental representations to give shape and meaning to their environment. Such structures have been called belief structures, cognitive maps, schemas, scripts, etc. (Fiske and Taylor, 1984). In the literature, perception is often treated as a process in which the blocking of the perception of some stimuli results in greater attention to others (Beyer et al., 1997). Notions like perceptual filters (Starbuck and Milliken, 1988) and blind spots (Zajac and Bazerman, 1991) have been used to describe how more attention is directed to some stimuli than to others. Typically, it is argued that stimuli attracting more attention are those that are consistent with existing schemata (Day and Lord, 1992; Hambrick and Mason, 1984). Hence, a person will tend to ignore, forget or discount information that is not consistent with existing beliefs (Kiesler and Sproull, 1982). Beyer et al. (1997) have called this process selective *imperception*: why people may fail to perceive. There may be many situational reasons why perceivers may ignore certain information, including that the category into which the information seems to fall may be inconsistent with what they are looking for (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990). In his classical experiment, McGinnies (1949) introduced the concepts of perceptual vigilance and perceptual defence to explain the findings, implying that interests and threats can affect perception. Dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) predicts that people prefer information congruent with their attitudes and behaviour, i.e. individuals are biased towards data that reinforce their beliefs (Fiske and Taylor, 1984).

The overseas Chinese expatriate assigned to China does not detect cultural differences as he or she is not looking for them since they are not expected. Consequently, succeeding problems that may occur are not attributed to cultural differences but to other circumstances such as doubts about one’s own leadership abilities, subordinates’ ‘laziness’ or ‘stupidity’ (Selmer and Shiu, 1999).

The phenomena of selective perception are of course not exclusive to expatriate managers, since host nationals will be affected by the same mechanisms. A Western expatriate, conspicuously equipped with a very different cultural background, may be given the benefit of a doubt and allowed a wide latitude of conduct without evoking any adverse reactions. Even small and insignificant attempts to accommodate to local customs and norms would most likely render them encouragement and appreciation from host-country nationals. On the other hand, in an extremely high uncertainty avoidance culture like that of China (cf. Lai and Lam, 1986), where uncertain and ambiguous situations are avoided through a host of societal norms and rules, deviant persons and ideas are little tolerated (Hofstede, 1980: 184). An expatriate with a similar, or presumed identical, cultural and ethnic background could encounter scant patience and be given little leeway for deviant social behaviour. Ignoring any possible cultural differences, misbehaviour of ethnically and culturally close individuals will most probably be counted against them, as Hung (1994) remarked: ‘A Hong Kong Chinese may be judged by different standards and more harshly than a foreigner for any mistake made because he is presumably knowledgeable about Chinese etiquette and manners and would be expected to fully understand the appropriate social protocol and behave accordingly.’ This contention has some empirical support. A number of studies have found significant differences in the managerial values and styles of overseas Chinese
and mainland Chinese managers (cf. Hung, 1994; Ralston et al., 1992, 1993; Tung, 1988). Unanticipated managerial behaviour may produce adverse reactions and Leung et al. (1996) found that mainland Chinese employees working with overseas Chinese expatriate managers experienced less job satisfaction than did those who worked with Western expatriates and that this lower level of satisfaction seemed to be caused by a lower level of perceived performance-based and comparative distributive justice. In other words, the mainland subordinates were less content since they felt unfairly treated by their overseas Chinese bosses. Additionally, Westwood and Leung (1993) reported that mainland Chinese employees complained about the arrogance of overseas Chinese expatriate managers and Hung (1994) mentioned that mainland Chinese perceive Hong Kong Chinese business people to be insolent and contemptuous.

Selmer and Shiu (1999) reported that the predicament of Hong Kong Chinese expatriate business managers, assigned to Beijing and Shanghai, closely resembled the worst experiences of expatriate managers as reported in the literature. At work, they generally refrained from adapting their managerial style to local expectations. Instead, they insisted, often in vain, that subordinates adopt parent-country standards and behaviours, typically resulting in frustration and feelings of detachment on the part of the expatriate manager. Outside work, they avoided socializing with host nationals, instead living in the vicinity of and seeking the company of and social interaction with other parent-country nationals.

Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework on selective perception, generalizing these observations to overseas Chinese expatriates in general, Hypotheses 1 and 2 explore their presumed differences in applying problem- and symptom-focused coping strategies compared with their Western counterparts. Realizing that China is a very different cultural context than their own and encountering a positive and encouraging attitude from locals, Western expatriates may tend to try to alleviate the stressful situation by active and direct attempts to deal with this alien environment. For the same reason, they may tend to avoid passive attempts to handle the stress. On the other hand, overseas Chinese expatriates expect cultural similarity in China and hence do not detect cultural differences. They may experience impatient or even hostile reactions from locals typically leaving them frustrated and not attributing their ordeal to cultural differences. Unable to tackle the cultural issues directly and actively, they resort to minimizing their anxiety by physical or mental withdrawal from the stressful situation.

Hypothesis 1: In China, overseas Chinese expatriates apply fewer problem-focused coping strategies than Western expatriates.

Hypothesis 2: In China, overseas Chinese expatriates apply more symptom-focused coping strategies than Western expatriates.

Method

Sample

The data set for the present investigation was created by two surveys of business expatriates on the Chinese mainland. One questionnaire was mailed to a total of 790 Western expatriates, of which 154 usable questionnaires were returned. Subtracting thirty-six returned undeliverable mailings due to change of address, etc., a response rate
of 22.7 per cent was attained. Although marginally higher than some other studies of business expatriates (Birdseye and Hill, 1995; Gregersen and Black, 1990; Naumann, 1993), the effective response rate could be much higher. Available directories and listings of expatriate managers on the Chinese mainland are at best updated annually and many of the mailings must have been addressed to expatriates no longer on the Chinese mainland, of which only some were returned.

The second questionnaire was directed to overseas Chinese expatriates assigned to the Chinese mainland. As there are no specific sources identifying this target group, the same business directories that were utilized to identify the Western expatriates were made use of again and this time all listed executives with Chinese names were selected. Initial screening questions in the questionnaire were used to determine whether the respondents belonged to our target group and should complete the rest of the form. Chinese ethnicity is defined patrilineally (cf. Wee, 1988; Wu and Wu, 1980) and only respondents who answered ‘yes’ to the question ‘Is your father Chinese?’ were retained. Furthermore, all respondents born on the mainland and/or currently mainland citizens and/or had been living on the mainland for ten years or more were screened out. Of a total of 1,205 mailed questionnaires, 344 usable returns were received back, representing an overall response rate of 28.5 per cent. However, only fifty-nine of those fit into the target group of overseas Chinese expatriates. Unfortunately, the technique used here does not allow for a calculation of a particular response rate for the overseas Chinese target group.

The average age of the 154 Western expatriates was 43 years (SD = 9.6) and they had spent an average of four years in China (SD = 3.6) and had lived abroad for an average of 8.9 years (SD = 9.2), including the current assignment. On average, the overseas Chinese expatriates were only one year younger (42 years; SD = 9.1), and they had spent the same length of time in China (four years; SD = 2.8) but had lived abroad slightly longer than the Western expatriates (10.1 years; SD = 7.9). The US managers were the largest nationality group among the Western expatriates (35.1 per cent). French (18.2 per cent) and German (15.6 per cent) expatriates were represented by smaller groups. Half of the overseas Chinese expatriates were from Hong Kong (50.9 per cent). Much smaller groups came from Taiwan (10.2 per cent) and Singapore (5.1 per cent). The rest of the overseas Chinese expatriates were from various other Asian or Western countries. The size of the operations where the expatriates were employed, measured by the mean of the number of employees, were almost identical (Western expatriates = 291; SD = 840/overseas Chinese expatriates = 281; SD = 729) and both groups of expatriates worked for parent organizations with long histories of international operations (Western expatriates = 41 years; SD = 35/overseas Chinese expatriates = 52; SD = 35).

As depicted by Table 1, consistent with other investigations of business expatriates, most respondents were male and married, with very little difference between the two samples. However, although the 13 per cent share of female Western expatriates and 17 per cent share of overseas Chinese expatriates in our sample is on the high side compared to other studies (cf. Adler, 1995), it is also surprising considering that China in many instances would be considered as a hardship posting to which companies are reluctant to post female expatriates. For both groups of expatriates, most of the respondents were CEOs or occupied other managerial positions, whereas only a few respondents were non-managerial staff. Also, the type and scope of operation were quite similar between the two samples. Although the differences between the two samples appear to be minimal, univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to confirm that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups of
business expatriates on any of the background variables. Furthermore, another ANOVA was applied among the nationality groups of the two sub-samples. Due to the small size and structure of the overseas Chinese sample, the Hong Kong group was compared with a group consisting of all other overseas Chinese respondents. In the Western sub-sample, the above mentioned five nationality groups were compared, including a group of others. Again, no statistically significant differences were found on any of the background variables.

**Instrument**

Informed by Dunbar (1993), coping strategies were measured by a self-developed fourteen-item scale. Following Folkman et al. (1986), the response options ranged from (1) ‘not applied/not relevant’ to (4) ‘applied a great deal’. The scale entailed items implying both problem- and symptom-focused coping strategies. Factor analysis with varimax rotation forcing a two-factor solution, resulted in a division of the scale where the first factor included six items and the second factor had eight items. Three items were eliminated to improve factor reliability and conceptual coherence. One item was excluded from the first factor making it possible to label that factor problem-focused coping strategies (five items, \( \alpha = .76 \), sample item: ‘I try to solve culture-related problems or mis-understandings I have had with host country persons’). Two items were deleted from the second factor, which was labelled symptom-focused coping strategies (six items, \( \alpha = .61 \), sample item: ‘I remind myself that one day I’ll be living back in my home country as a way to feel better about the current assignment’).

**Results**

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for all variables are provided in Table 2. As can be seen there, the two factors are not significantly correlated. Furthermore,
although both mean scores were below the mid-level point, the mean for problem-focused coping strategies was close to the point depicted as ‘applied quite a bit’ whereas the mean for symptom-focused coping strategies was close to the point represented as ‘applied somewhat’. A t-test showed that there was a statistically significant difference ($t = 15.98; p < .001$) between the two overall mean scores confirming that problem-focused coping strategies were more frequently applied than symptom-focused coping strategies.

Differences in coping strategies between categories of the expatriates were examined via a $2 \times 2$ MANOVA separating overseas Chinese from Western expatriates. Table 3 displays a significant overall effect for the two categories of expatriates ($F = 15.48$, $p < .001$) and univariate $F$-tests indicated statistically significant between-category differences for both problem-focused coping strategies ($F = 17.60$, $p < .001$) and symptom-focused coping strategies ($F = 9.43$, $p < .01$). Overseas Chinese expatriates had significantly lower mean scores than their Western counterparts for the problem-focused coping strategies indicating a less frequent use of these strategies. On the other hand, for the symptom-focused coping strategy, overseas Chinese expatriates had a higher mean score than the Western expatriates, indicating a more frequent use of the symptom-focused coping strategies. These results support both H1 and H2.

To explore differences between the main groups of origin of the expatriates further, a $2 \times 4$ MANOVA was applied involving the Hong Kong, US, French, and German expatriates. As shown in Table 4, there is a significant overall effect for the four expatriate groups ($F = 4.65$, $p < .001$). Again, univariate $F$-tests indicated statistically significant between-group differences for problem-focused coping strategies ($F = 5.94$, $p < .001$) as well as for symptom-focused coping strategies ($F = 3.05$, $p < .05$). A post hoc analysis using multiple range tests revealed that the Hong Kong expatriates had significantly lower mean scores than their US and French counterparts for the problem-focused coping strategies.

Table 2 Means, standard deviations and correlations among the variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Problem-focused coping strategies</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Symptom-focused coping strategies</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 MANOVA and univariate $F$-tests for coping strategies by expatriate category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping strategies</th>
<th>Overseas Chinese mean (SD)</th>
<th>Western mean (SD)</th>
<th>Multivariate effect</th>
<th>Univariate F-ratios</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$N = 59$</td>
<td>$N = 154$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-focused coping strategies</td>
<td>2.65 (.62)</td>
<td>3.03 (.58)</td>
<td>15.48***</td>
<td>17.60***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptom-focused coping strategies</td>
<td>2.25 (.57)</td>
<td>2.02 (.48)</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.43**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$
focused coping strategies, indicating that they used these strategies less frequently. However, Hong Kong expatriates had a significantly higher mean score than the US and German expatriates, indicating a more frequent use of the symptom focused coping strategies.

### Conclusions and discussion

Overall, problem-focused coping strategies were more frequently used than symptom-focused coping variables. This is a promising sign, as it has been reported that few expatriates in China have received cross-cultural training and most of them have to do without much support from their parent companies (Sergeant and Frenkel, 1998). Although they are more or less left to their own devices, it is encouraging that expatriates under such circumstances are willing to approach problems directly to try to change their situation. Research on both expatriate and domestic job transfers have found that active attempts to change the work environment are usually positively related to expatriate adjustment, while psychological withdrawal mostly has a negative association with adjustment (Feldman and Brett, 1983; Feldman and Thomas, 1991, 1992; Feldman and Tompson, 1993; Selmer, 1999).

The main findings of this exploratory investigation are that overseas Chinese expatriates used problem-focused coping strategies less often than the Western expatriates but applied symptom-focused strategies more often. Hong Kong expatriates especially were found to use fewer problem-focused coping strategies than their US and French counterparts, while at the same time applying more symptom-focused coping strategies than the US and German expatriates. Obviously, that may limit the managerial effectiveness of overseas Chinese expatriates on the Chinese mainland in general, and in particular that of Hong Kong expatriates, especially since they appear to be despised or envied by mainland Chinese employees (Björkman and Schaan, 1994).

This investigation has certain limitations to be considered in evaluating its results. Since only a few business expatriates occupying non-managerial positions are included in our sample, the results would primarily be applicable to expatriate business

### Table 4 MANOVA and univariate F-tests for coping strategies by expatriate group of origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjustment</th>
<th>Hong Kong mean (SD) N=30</th>
<th>US mean (SD) N=54</th>
<th>France mean (SD) N=28</th>
<th>Germany mean (SD) N=24</th>
<th>Multivariate effect</th>
<th>F-ratios</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem-focused coping strategies</td>
<td>2.65&lt;sup&gt;dc&lt;/sup&gt; (.66)</td>
<td>3.17&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt; (.55)</td>
<td>3.13&lt;sup&gt;ac&lt;/sup&gt; (.51)</td>
<td>2.88&lt;sup&gt;ce&lt;/sup&gt; (.64)</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.94***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptom-focused coping strategies</td>
<td>2.30&lt;sup&gt;cd&lt;/sup&gt; (.51)</td>
<td>2.01&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt; (.45)</td>
<td>2.09&lt;sup&gt;bc&lt;/sup&gt; (.40)</td>
<td>1.98&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt; (.51)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.05*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

1. Means with totally different superscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$ (Multiple Range Test: LSD).
2. * $p < .05$
3. ** $p < .01$
4. *** $p < .001$
managers. Additionally, as the only means of data collection was a questionnaire, single
method variance could have affected the findings of the study. Although the sweeping
condemnations of self-report methods have been found exaggerated (Crampton and
Wagner, 1994), to lessen any potential problem in this regard, all items were assigned
to the instrument in random order to make it less easy for the respondents to give
uniform answers.

There is also a possibility that a differential propensity for response acquiescence
between the two groups of expatriate managers could have introduced some bias in our
results. However, since the overseas Chinese could be suspected of some self-restraint
in responding to extreme items, following the Confucian norm of harmony and
moderation (cf. Kirkbride et al., 1987), the results reveal otherwise as they indicate
more coping difficulties for the overseas Chinese than their Western counterparts.

The coping strategy scales used here implicitly assume (as do most other scales of
coping strategies) that ‘more coping is better coping’, ignoring the fact that solving
problems with minimal effort may be preferable (Aldwin and Revenson, 1987).
Furthermore, the approach of this investigation is cross-sectional and the results cannot
describe the process of coping, which often occurs over an extended period of time (cf.
Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). It is conceivable that the use, and even the effect, of
different coping strategies varies over time (cf. Feldman and Thomas, 1992; Scheier
et al., 1986) but such time patterns can be examined only by a longitudinal research
design. The present findings can be interpreted in terms of a vicious circle (Sandler
et al., 1994), where overseas Chinese expatriates who use fewer problem-focused
coping strategies generate a fair amount of adjustment problems, making them indulge
in parent-country escapism to try to relieve their stress. This in turn reinforces the
despairing and contempt of mainland Chinese, leaving the overseas Chinese even more
frustrated and withdrawn from the situation. Although the findings could be seen as
supporting such a scenario, only a longitudinal study can conclusively test the relevance
of such a process.

There are several implications of the findings for expatriate managers assigned to the
Chinese mainland and for companies assigning expatriates there. First, the findings cast
some doubt on the policy of Western multinational firms which prefer to put an
overseas Chinese expatriate manager in charge of their business operations in China,
believing that such a move will prevent cross-cultural problems (Goodall and Warner,
1998). The findings presented here indicate that such a policy may be less justified from
a coping point of view, as Western expatriates seem to apply more constructive coping
strategies than overseas expatriates on the Chinese mainland. Admittedly, many other
factors are important in selecting expatriates, such as, for example, language ability and
compensation levels.

Second, business expatriates should be made aware of effective (problem-)focused
coping strategies as well as be warned about the potential detrimental outcomes of
applying symptom-focused coping strategies. This information could be effectively and
conveniently communicated during cross-cultural training. Unfortunately, although
such preparations have been repeatedly identified in the literature as being essential for
successful expatriate assignments, cross-cultural training is badly neglected by
international business firms (cf. Aryee, 1997; Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Brewster,
1995), and companies operating in China are no exceptions (cf. Sergeant and Frenkel,
1998; Kaye and Taylor, 1997).

Third, business firms assigning expatriate managers to the Chinese mainland would
benefit from careful selection of candidates. Although the empirical evidence for the
effects of personality on cross-cultural adjustment is limited (Ward, 1996; Ward and
Chang, 1997), it is plausible that certain personality traits are more likely to be associated with a preference for problem-focused rather than symptom-focused coping strategies. For example, using the personality categories of Goldberg (1992), it is probable that agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, intellect or openness and extroversion all may contribute to a preference for problem-focused coping. Agreeableness, indicating collaboration, sincerity, respect and empathy for others, may promote showing tolerance and patience as well as responsible problem solving. Conscientiousness could lead to responsible problem solving, whereas emotional stability could make it possible for the expatriate to show tolerance and patience. Intellect or openness imply intellectual curiosity, cultural acceptance, flexibility, non-judgmental attitudes and open-mindedness. Extroversion could promote a social orientation and desire to communicate with HCNs (Black, 1990; Searle and Ward, 1990). Such personality traits may promote an application of all three types of problem-focused coping strategies. Unfortunately, personality testing of candidates is seldom used in expatriate selection and recruitment (cf. Aryee, 1997, Teagarden and Gordon, 1995).

Future research on expatriate coping could try to test the robustness of the main findings of this study by expanding the collection of items depicting problem- and symptom-focused coping to include other types of strategies not covered by this study. For example, items indicating acceptance/resignation, confrontative coping, denial/distancing, palliative coping, positive reinterpretation, self-blame and self-controlling could be included in an expanded version of the instrument (cf. Aldwin and Revenson, 1987; Feldman and Thomas, 1992; Folkman et al., 1986; Scheier et al., 1986). Future studies could also try to eliminate weaknesses of this and other investigations. As discussed above, a longitudinal design is a richer data source than is a cross-sectional approach. Adding the time variable, patterns of various coping strategies and their effects could be explored. Self-reports could be combined with other data sources to lessen potential single-method variance problems and scales may be revised to test the implicit assumption that ‘more coping is better coping’. Future research on expatriate coping may also want to extend the scope of study to include coping efficacy which refers to the perception that the coping effort was successful in achieving the individual’s goals in a certain situation. This concept incorporates how well the plan for coping was designed, whether the individual was able to implement it successfully and whether it resulted in positive or negative outcomes (Aldwin and Revenson, 1987).

Another line of research may further explore whether cultural origin affects preferences for and effectiveness of coping strategies. Different cultural groups may have different inclinations towards types of coping strategies. They may also affect expatriates from different cultures differently, thus making some coping strategies better suited for a particular cultural context than others.

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References


