

Cross-Cultural Adjustment of Indonesian Expatriates in South Korea

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Abstract

This study examines the cross-cultural adjustment of Indonesian expatriates working in South Korea. Specifically, it focuses on Indonesian expatriates' experiences and ways to adjust to the Korean workplace setting. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with nine Indonesian respondents, this study follows the adaptation model by Milton Bennet and moves beyond the antecedents of cross-cultural adjustment. It elaborates the expatriates' practices in dealing with and negotiating cultural differences in the face of Korean working culture. The findings demonstrate that adjustment entails the acquisition of new norms and modes of behaviors as well as maintenance of old practices. Further, the sense of foreignness has been found constructive for cross-cultural adaptation.

Keywords: cross-cultural adjustment, work adjustment, adaptation, Indonesian expatriates, South Korea

Introduction

With respect to the production of cross-cultural adjustment scholarship, South Korea (henceforth Korea) has been portrayed as an unpleasant and frustrating place to work.³ This study aims to explore the cultural adaptation and negotiation of Indonesian expatriates to the new cultural repertoires within the Korean working context. It examines the experiences of Indonesian expatriates in dealing

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and negotiating with cultural differences. Those experiences provide insights into the development of the adaptation process. As Korea continues to gain competitive advantage by tapping into the global talent pool, a study to address the challenge of foreign talent in negotiating cultural difference is needed particularly from the experiences of Southeast Asians.

The global war for foreign talent, a term first coined by the management consultancy firm McKinsey in 1997, has become a substantial strategy for countries to bolster their economic competitiveness.⁴ Korea however has lagged behind in global talent attraction in contrast to traditional immigrant countries such as the United States, Australia, and Canada.⁵ Even among the newly emerging developed countries in Asia, Korea ranked 27 out of 132 countries, lagging behind Malaysia (26), Japan (19), and Singapore (3), according to the 2020 Global Talent Competition Index.⁶ Korea scored quite low both in external openness (70) and tolerance to minorities (78), which denotes that the nation has struggled with cultural diversity and ethnic heterogeneity. The foreign talent inflow is significantly low at approximately 5,400 annually, which equates to 0.1 per thousand inhabitants.⁷

Further, Seoul is perceived by expatriates as an unpleasant city in which to work and live. Based on the Expat City Ranking 2020, Seoul (ranked 64 out of 65) was voted the second worst city worldwide.⁸ The city performed poorly in the categories of work-life balance, settling-in, working hours, and job security. Despite that, expatriates were satisfied with the city's public transportation infrastructure, personal safety, and medical care. Expatriates reported finding it difficult to adjust to the local culture and having received an unfriendly attitude from the locals. This correlates with past research indicating that cultural adaptation has been the main motive for expatriates working in Korea to end their job contract early.⁹ For example, Kraeh, Froese, and Park in their study of 211 foreign professionals working in Korean multinational companies point to the work culture that led to the expatriates' dissatisfaction.¹⁰ Expatriates struggle to adapt to Korean working culture with different styles of leadership, long working hours, strict hierarchy, and language problems.¹¹ Similarly, a study by Bader, Froese, and Kraeh reveals that the German expatriates in Korea were under pressure to conform to work-life integration.¹² In addition, Korean communication style, which can be characterized by indirect and ambiguous meaning, often frustrates American expatriates in understanding interaction cues.¹³ Furthermore, foreigners often experience xenophobia, social bias, and discrimination either at the workplace or in everyday life situations.¹⁴

This study is crucial in terms of providing insights and nuance, since a growing body of literature about cross-cultural adjustment has been dominated by the experiences of Western expatriates. By focusing on Indonesian expatriates in

Korea, this study provides a voice for those who are marginalized both in studies of expatriates and in the Korean context.¹⁵ Existing scholarship tends to identify the antecedents of cross-cultural adjustment, cultural intelligence, and aspects that affect cross-cultural adjustment.¹⁶ Using a framework provided by Bennet, this study contributes to scholarship on the expatriate experiences by considering the notion of foreignness, which offers new possibilities for a smooth cultural adjustment.¹⁷

Theorizing cross-cultural adjustment

Extensive literature on the expatriate community has mushroomed in recent decades. Despite the expansion of information, this field of study is relatively untheorized when compared to categories of transnational subjects such as migrant workers, both documented and undocumented.¹⁸ Within the scholarship on expatriate experiences, studies on cross-cultural adjustment have been the subject of attention due to the nature of expatriates' work, which is often centered on dealing with people in new cultural contexts. Expatriates who are able to adapt to the culture of a host country are likely to perform well.¹⁹ Cross-cultural adjustment is defined as the degree to which expatriates become familiar and feel comfortable living and working in their new host country.²⁰ Various factors are identified as antecedents of cross cultural adjustment, ranging from individual-level dimensions, such as personality traits,²¹ motivation and goal orientation,²² local language proficiency,²³ gender,²⁴ cultural similarity²⁵ to institutional-level dimensions, such as cross-cultural training²⁶ and family support.²⁷

Recent studies have indicated different cross-cultural adjustment between the company-assigned expatriates and self-initiated expatriates, the latter exhibiting higher levels of adaptation to the host society.²⁸ Self-initiated expatriates who "relocate voluntarily to a foreign country, without assistance, and are hired under local, host-country contract" are relatively well-adapted to the new culture in comparison to those expatriates who are assigned and sponsored by their companies.²⁹ Studies by Von Borell de Araujo et al. and Froese and Peltokorpi found that the higher adjustment among the self-initiated expatriates is not surprising due to the fact they are highly motivated, less critical of the host culture, stay longer, have better language skills, and have developed social networks prior to expatriation.³⁰ The local language proficiency allows individuals with self-initiated overseas work experience to interact with host country nationals, and thus, these expatriates become more familiar with the culture.³¹ Froese and Peltokorpi suggest that language competency and country-specific work experience are more significant than general cultural competence or overseas

working experience in enhancing cross-cultural adjustment.³² Furthermore, expatriates who generally find the host culture fascinating are more likely to do better when it comes to adjustment.³³

The cross-cultural adjustment model proposed by Black has three features: general, working, and interaction adjustment.³⁴ This study focuses on working adjustment due to the fact that the Korean workplace has been reported by expatriates in the country as the most culturally difficult place with which to deal.³⁵ Working adjustment centers on the degree of adaptation of individuals in navigating the cultural differences at the workplace. Difference in beliefs, meanings, values, and behaviors may lead to disruption in the interpretation of social cues. Understanding the different business practices provides better adjustment and minimizes misunderstanding and tension. Culturally adjusted expatriates demonstrate the ability of expatriates to learn which behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate in order to mitigate job tension and stress.

This study draws upon Bennet's framework examining cultural adjustment. Bennett's model focuses on the experience of exposure to cultural differences, which he divides into two stages: ethnocentric (denial, defense, and minimization) and ethnorelative (acceptance, adaptation, and integration).³⁶ Ethnocentrism denotes a state where one's own culture is superior and central to all reality whereas ethnorelativism takes other cultures as equal to one's own worldview.³⁷ Within the ethnorelative model, acceptance to difference means an acknowledgement as well as respect that lead to behavioral changes. Individuals may become experts in identifying cultural contrasts and simultaneously embracing non-judgmental values in assessing other cultural worldviews. Bennett notes a pivotal point that cultural understanding is not sufficient if it does not generate culturally appropriate behaviors. However, it does not mean that the old culture will be completely replaced with a new one. Rather, individuals are expected to balance between the established worldview that they have asserted and the new cultural perspective. Within this state, individuals are able to assess which cultural aspect is the most appropriate and necessarily adjust their behavior in a culturally appropriate way. In this process, Bennet divides adjustment into two stages: adaptation and integration. Theoretically, the state of adaptation can be distinguished from integration, yet empirically it is challenging to detach those stages.³⁸ Bennet's framework offers valuable insights into the nature of negotiation in which the old culture is constantly being destabilized. Individuals critically examine the cultural settings and act appropriately. These individuals go through different modes of adjustment whether modifying, retaining, or providing new alternative values and practices. By applying Bennet's framework, this study argues that a sense of foreignness helps expatriates in the development

of cross-cultural competency. Their awareness includes when they have to draw the line as foreigners or conform to the mainstream. A sense of foreignness helps the expatriates to be reflexive about the distinctiveness and meanings that attach to cultural norms. Such awareness becomes a source of behavioral skills to reconcile diverse cultural environments and to secure the maintenance of self. In what follows, this study shall deal with a range of examples of how expatriates navigate unfamiliar cultural settings and develop adjustment practices when necessary and how they maintain their own self.

Cross-cultural adjustment in South Korea

South Korea has a higher expatriate failure rate. The failure rate can be seen from early terminations of working contracts.³⁹ Culture shock is the most frequent reason for declaring an unsatisfactory outcome of a Korea-based working assignment.⁴⁰ Foreigners often experience great difficulties in adjustment due to language and cultural problems.⁴¹ Korea's working environment has been identified as the most challenging for expatriates.⁴² The Korean working culture stresses strict hierarchy, devotion, loyalty, and harmony, all greatly influenced by Confucian tradition.⁴³ Among the East Asian nations, Confucianism has left the greatest imprint on Korean traditional culture.⁴⁴

The relationship between Confucianism and the Korean working culture has been rigorously studied. Scholars have long acknowledged the importance of examining the Confucian cultural values that shape Korean organizations and their workplaces into something unique, and yet Confucian cultural values have also been part of the transformation of the country into a great success.⁴⁵ Various academic projects have further confirmed and elaborated characteristic features of Confucianism that are closely related to distinctive practices in the Korean workplace. To date, however such studies reveal conflicting conclusions regarding the influence of Confucianism over Korean organizations.

The impact of Confucianism has been seen as negative, manifesting especially in human resource management models of interpersonal relationships, but the impact has also been seen in communication style. In the Confucian ethic, human relationships are regulated through social status, gender, age, and position, and every individual has to observe the basic principles.⁴⁶ Women's roles are defined as inferior or defective under the influence of Confucianism and as argued by Son, Korean women are at risk of being forced to fill positions as subordinates.⁴⁷ Top positions in Korean organizations are commonly distributed to those individuals who have long service and distribution favors male rather than female individuals. A work by Pak and Sohn found that the Korean leadership style is highly

authoritative and decision making is primarily made by the top management level.⁴⁸ Subordinates are obliged to accept the decisions made by their superiors without question. In Korean multinational corporations, human resources management is approached by control in order to stimulate desirable behavior, instead of motivating the workers as in American companies.⁴⁹ Maintaining harmony or *kibun*, a preferred state where individuals are expected to submit to authority and pay respect to superiors, is encouraged within Confucian ethics, and traditionally, Korean firms reward employees who are obedient and conform to the organizational culture of the company.⁵⁰ Additionally, lifetime employment is an embodied management practice that can be found in the largest Korean companies as an incentive for loyalty and high levels of commitment.⁵¹

Turning to the work-life balance, Korea has been known for its very long working hours. A number of researchers have noted the despair, stress, and disadvantage among the professionals who work overtime and participate in various bonding activities.⁵² For example, a study by Kang and Wang reveals that Korean women are victims of work-life imbalance, which leads to a reduced level of career advancement as they have to juggle between motherhood and career prospects.⁵³ To improve work-life balance, the government has recently reformed the maximum working hours from 68 to 52 in total per week between 2018 and 2021.⁵⁴ The new regulations are intended to put an end to an extremely long work-hours culture and provides legal reassurance for workers seeking harmony between their work and family life. Working very long hours has been normalized. As revealed by Lee, Chang, and Kim, long hours are not seen as intrusive to personal life nor a conflict with work-life balance, because in collectivist societies the separation between family and work is not recognized.⁵⁵

Alongside the negative aspect of Confucianism that shapes Korean organizations, several researchers draw attention to the positive effects of Confucian tradition for organizational culture. Kim, in his article on Confucian ethics, refutes the assumption that the modern workplace is not compatible with the values of Confucianism, given the fact that workers' rights are discouraged and group harmony is prioritized.⁵⁶ His argument lies in leveraging the use of rights in order to enhance a harmonious relationship, a manifestation of Confucian moral ideals. Kim and Park note that Confucian values, such as emphasis on diligence, loyalty, and education, are believed to be the key behind the remarkable success of Korea's capitalistic modernization.⁵⁷ The country exemplifies an alternative model of economic development that relies on collectivist norms and authoritarian leadership and management, a contrast to Western capitalist countries with their individualistic values and institutions.⁵⁸ In regards to gender-based Confucian culture, Koh contests the tendency in mainstream discourse to essentialize the

relationship between male and female in Confucianism and to make the broad assertion that Confucian ideology has no room for gender equality.⁵⁹ She suggests that the Confucian canon exhibits aspects that position women as equal to men, yet it is the male-dominated interpretation of them that produce gender injustice and sexual bias.

In contrast to the previous work examining the positive and negative dimensions of Confucianism, this study goes beyond this binary perspective. In addition, previous studies on differences in working culture rooted in the legacy of Confucianism are constituted through a binary representation contrasting Asian and Western people's experiences. This study, however, considers how Korean working culture is experienced by professionals coming from Southeast Asia countries and therefore offers new insights on ethnic and racial differences between migrants and local populations. While Confucianism provides the cultural basis for Korean society, the religion of Islam has become a significant cultural identity, particularly among Muslim Indonesians. Yet, both countries share similar norms and moral values such as respect for elders, a high sense of collectivism, and the avoidance of or hesitation in giving direct criticism.

Methodology and data generation

Existing studies in cross-cultural adjustment have been generated through a quantitative approach in which participants were asked how they would behave given different sets of situations.⁶⁰ This study employs a qualitative approach in order to discover cultural encounters and gain a sense of how expatriates fit into the workplace. Qualitative methodology offers more detailed and insightful information to capture and understand human behavior and experiences.⁶¹ Semi-structured interviews were used to provide greater flexibility for the subjects in responding to the questions posed by the researcher.⁶² Questions were asked around the theme of expatriates' characteristics, migration history, working experiences, job responsibilities, cross-cultural encounters, Korean language competency, and working environment.

The data of this study was generated from in-depth interviews with nine Indonesian highly skilled migrants in South Korea. Of these, six were males and three were females who had worked for more than six months in Korea. The interviews were conducted from April to December 2020 and consisted of face to face and Zoom video interviews due to social distancing guidelines in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Zoom video interviews allow the researcher and subjects to interact just like in-person interviews, yet the Zoom video interviews offer the opportunity to save travelling time. The interviews took one to two

Expatriates' Profile

Name	Gender	Age	Education	Length of stay in Korea	Type of industry	Length of work (current company)	Type of expatriates
Marie	Female	29	Bachelor's, Indonesia	3 years	Clothing	7 years	Company-assigned
Linda	Female	24	Bachelor's, Korea	5 years	Foreign talent	6 months	Self-initiated
Talitha	Female	25	Bachelor's, Korea	6.5 years	Medical aesthetic	2 years	Self-initiated
Andrew	Male	26	Bachelor's, Korea	7 years	Broadcasting	1 year	Self-initiated
Hery	Male	35	PhD, Korea	8 years	Engineering	3 years	Self-initiated
Iwan	Male	33	Master's, Korea	10 years	Pharmacy	7 years	Self-initiated
Rudy	Male	49	PhD, USA	3 years	Academia	2 years	Self-initiated
Atib	Male	27	Bachelor's, Korea	8 years	Digital comic	3 years	Self-initiated
Rio	Male	25	Two-years Diploma, Korea	5 years	Law firm	2.5 years	Self-initiated

hours and in-person interviews were conducted in local café shops suggested by the participants. These interviews were audio-recorded with their consent and transcribed in their entirety. The data was then analysed using grounded theory through the process of coding, categorization, and identification of patterns and relationships.⁶³

Research subjects were recruited through personal networks and all the interviews were done in the Indonesian language and the participants were selected based on their profession. The expatriates in this study are defined as individuals whose profession required higher degree credentials.⁶⁴ Within the scholarship on expatriates, it has been noted that migrants who had graduated from university frequently experienced underutilization of their skill set or downgrading of occupations available to them.⁶⁵

Findings and discussion

All the participants were of Indonesian nationality and held various visa categories, e.g., F-2 (residential visa), E-1 (Professor visa), and E-7 (specialist). They have been living in South Korea for quite some time as most of them came to Korea as students. Once they completed their studies, they decided to develop their career path in the country in a way that reaffirmed previous studies that found that international students become the source of foreign talent.⁶⁶ All these participants were stationed in Seoul and its surrounding area. They worked in various industries including pharmaceuticals, medical aesthetics, universities, broadcasting, digital comics, clothing, law firms, recruiting foreign talent, and engineering. The size of the industries was middle-size up to chaebol enterprises, which have Indonesian or Southeast Asia-focused interests. Participants were all employed by Korean companies or institutions with various roles such as business consultant, IT specialist, lecturer, and researcher. These institutions were mostly emerging onto the global market and the Indonesian expatriates' role was to help the companies connect with the global market. The participants said that their workplaces had become more aware of the importance of recruiting foreign professionals, which would enhance the company's performance and minimize uncertainty when dealing with the international or home country market. Yet, the number of expatriates was still limited and many of them were the single foreign professional in the workplace. Eight out of nine were classified as self-initiated expatriates as they landed jobs from the local labor market. One participant was transferred from a Korean company based in Jakarta, Indonesia.

The participants were university graduates and included two PhD holders, one with a Master's degree, and six Bachelor degree holders. One possesses a Diploma

of Higher Education. The two PhDs had no Korean language competency, and the rest were relatively fluent in speaking the language. All the participants could speak English, which gave an additional advantage for the companies, particularly for those who were trilingual speakers. They could communicate across borders, understood the local, home, and global market and thus could support the expansion of the company, given the fact that many of their Korean colleagues were unable to speak English. Seven out of nine were still single and two were married to Indonesian women. Most had graduated from Korean universities and only two graduated from non-Korea universities: one completed in Indonesia and the other gained his degree in the USA. The majority of the participants were in their early careers and passionate about developing their career trajectories in South Korea.

Korean working culture: navigating cultural differences

Work–Life Balance

Generally, all participants expressed a sense that they valued segregation between work and personal life. According to them, this boundary was implemented in their workplace. Working hours were quite regular. There was no pressure, either from the company or from supervisors to prolong their working hours at the workplace. They enjoyed a personal autonomy given by the companies to balance their professional and personal life. They had five days a week and nine hours each day to work. Weekends were the time that they usually spent doing something they enjoyed, such as spending time with friends, shopping, sleeping, cleaning their apartment, and many other things. They did not find any trouble taking their vacation as long as they had informed their supervisor. This included taking leave due to sickness. When on vacation, they were rarely interrupted to do office work.

On average, full-time employees in Korea work nearly five hours longer than employees in OECD countries.⁶⁷ The Korean government has been serious in reducing the long working culture, which is reflected through Marie's narrative. Marie, who worked as an IT specialist, stated how her workplace was committed to achieving balance between work and personal life.

The regulation states that workers are only allowed to work a maximum of 52 or 55 hours per week. I forget the exact maximum number of hours. The work-life balance, if I am not mistaken, was legislated by the Korean government in 2018, but I am not sure. The government demanded that all companies follow the new regulation. Companies who are not in compliance with the law will be fined and my workplace takes necessary steps to observe the regulation. In the

beginning, many people did not take seriously the labour standards specified by the law. They kept working very long hours. So, the company posted the names of the people who worked more than 52 hours on the company website. They were also given a penalty. Many people were scared and they followed the regulation.

Marie's narrative illustrates that her company takes a major role in the promotion of work-life balance. Traditionally, Koreans regard long working hours as something positive for their job performance and professional career.⁶⁸

All participants understood that at certain periods they had to work beyond the regular office hours, particularly when projects were due or the company had a higher volume of workload. Yet they found the overtime was still acceptable as they did not have to overwork every day. One participant, Rudy, who worked as lecturer reflected that his workload was doable if compared to working at the university back home. In Indonesia, he explained that he faced greater challenges with day-to-day responsibilities that included teaching, administration, and research projects. Professional tasks were relatively similar between Korea and Indonesia, and yet he was burdened with administrative duties that made his workload significantly greater in Indonesia when compared to Korea.

During periods of excessive workload, it was not necessarily that the Indonesian expatriates had to stay back in the office. Some companies had regulations for overtime pay, which encouraged them to do the extra work in the office. Other business enterprises that did not recognize overtime pay offered flexible work options. Employees were free to choose whether they wanted to spend extra hours after work in the office or bring the work home. Such a mechanism provides the employees an opportunity to independently manage their time and thereby create a culture supportive of work-life balance.

Hoesik Culture

Hoesik (company dining out) practice has been identified as one of the work-life imbalances about which foreign employees have been complaining.⁶⁹ It involves both dining and drinking at different bars. Sponsored by the company, the *hoesik* practice is an important workplace culture for Korean organizations.⁷⁰ It provides a platform for employees to develop solidarity and maintain social relationships since business enterprises are perceived as an extension of family institutions.⁷¹

Hoesik practice also helps to break the coldness of the working environment among the employees. It is the place where employees have a chance to socialize, share valuable information, and even articulate whatever he or she wishes while relaxing beyond the workplace setting.⁷² The Korean workplace landscape, based on the participants' narratives, can be best described as a high level of power

distance, seriousness, and alienation. Linda, a BA holder who could speak Korean fluently, shared her observation of the Korean workplace that she encountered:

In Indonesia, the workplace is a place where we can work and make friends. Sometimes, we can even joke around with our boss. Here, the relationships are very rigid. Very formal. I do not talk a lot in the office, because my Korean officemates are also not chatty. We just completely stay quiet for the whole day except just saying *annyōng haseyo* when we meet in the morning or simply smiling. They behave like that not because they do not like foreigners or me personally but rather, it is naturally their character. Koreans do not develop relationships with someone that they perceive has no direct connection with their job roles, despite that we shared the space together. We meet everyday; we may sit next to each other, but our interaction is formal and superficial. In Indonesia, such a workplace situation would be considered weird. Regardless of our job roles, we may chit chat and perhaps nurture our relationship into friendship. (Linda, female, recruiting foreign talent)

Similarly, Marie shared her cultural encounter once she was transferred from the Jakarta-based Korean company. She found a dramatic cultural contrast between Jakarta and Seoul daily working life. She said that the working style of Indonesians was more relaxed, which brought more human interaction, compared to the Korean style of working. Her morning routine started with having breakfast and drinking coffee, engaging in conversation with co-workers, sharing gossip, or just random talking. This was followed with day-to-day tasks on the job.

Here in Korea, people are heavily preoccupied with their job tasks. They come to work. That's it. They rarely talk to each other. Just work, work, and work. My office room is super quiet. I can even hear the sound of people typing. I felt lonely and isolated despite sharing my office space with other IT-ers. In the beginning of my employment in Korea, I used earphones, since I found the office vibe was too serious. I felt headaches whenever I heard people talking in Korean and my Korean was still pretty basic at that time. We work as support for IT systems so sometimes clients often call us to fix their IT issues. Yet, my style of using earphones was perceived negatively. My IT team people said wearing earphones while working showed that I was not serious with my work. It was not only about seriousness but also about being impolite by using earphones. While working, I should concentrate and give my full attention. Back in Indonesia, using earphones was not an issue. (Marie, female, clothing industry)

Linda's and Marie's narratives demonstrate that Korean working life involves a high level of absorption that led to limited interaction among the employees during office hours. Their depiction of the Korean workplaces is also commonly expressed by other participants. One participant, Atib, had experienced an even worse workplace before he landed his job in a digital animation company. He

explained that his previous workplace was horrible, since people were working during deadlines. He felt like a machine. Interaction in the workplace was limited as people only talked when necessary. There was no meaningful conversation nor deeper connection with co-workers. The everyday working life created a feeling of tension, stressfulness, and anxiety. The *hoesik* practice, according to the Indonesian participants, provides opportunities to develop closer relationships with colleagues.

Based on the narratives of Indonesian expatriates, the *hoesik* practices were not organized frequently but rather occasionally. Usually when they had just completed a project or during the year end, *hoesik* practices were a small celebration for a team's achievement. They said that their workplaces were not the type for organizing *hoesik* quite often and thus, most of them felt acceptable with a once-in-a-while get together for dining. For the Muslim participants, they usually joined the dinner and expressed their concern regarding food restrictions. They usually ordered non-pork meals as halal food was not widely known among the general Korean society. Halal food consumption was not practical for the Muslim participants, because they needed to negotiate with the given situation where halal-certified restaurants or halal-friendly restaurants were still limited. In addition, pork was the most popular meat, which meant that many Koreans people loved to eat it. Due to its affordability, nearly all restaurants in the country provided a culinary experience that included various elements of pig meat. To find eateries that only provided non-pork cuisine was arduous, so most of the time, the Muslim participants just chose any meal that had no pork or pork-related ingredients. For Koreans, seeing their Indonesian colleagues abstain from pork cuisine was compelling. Yet, the Koreans respected such dietary restrictions and did not push them to eat pork in order to experience authentic Korean cuisine.

The abstinence from pork-related products also applied to alcohol as *hoesik* entails liquor or beer consumption. For the Muslim participants, many of them would just leave and return home after dining together. Yet, some could not avoid alcohol. Talitha, who worked in medical aesthetics, could not avoid the drinking sessions. She had to join even though she was uncomfortable. Her reluctance not only derived from religious prohibition but also the atmosphere and interaction in the drinking sessions. Abstaining from alcohol was acceptable for her Korean supervisors. However, during drinking sessions, she was expected to pour alcohol for her superiors, sit intimately among them, and flirt with them. She found such socialization demoralized her as a Muslim and as a woman. She did not like the way they treated her as if she was a prostitute.

Despite the fact that she had been willing to attend the *hoesik* activities, her refusal to behave as they desired far outweighed her intention to adapt to the

organizational culture. The *hoesik* practice was the most devastating, which drove her to quit the job as soon as she completed her project. At this time, she just had to survive and compensate by performing well.

Talitha's narrative confirms the report issued by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family indicating that workplace sexual harassment often happened in the after-business hours (*hoesik*).⁷³ Women are likely to be more vulnerable to gender discrimination and sexual assault in the workplace due to a lack of legal enforcement and the strong acceptance of such cultural traditions. Like the Japanese women in the studies conducted by Villa and Freiner, working women in Korea are perceived as individuals who are not capable of delivering the job well, since their presence is simply for the purpose of entertaining males.⁷⁴ While evidence from the Confucian canon show that women are as capable as men, the continued stories of sexual harassment or gender discrimination experienced by women in the Korean workplace has helped to perpetuate a patriarchal image of Confucianism.⁷⁵

Hierarchy

Job titles present in every organization demonstrates where one's role and responsibilities sit within its structure. An entry-level individual may know his or her position in the organization and to whom she or he has to report. In the Korean context, a job title also generates a strong hierarchical interpersonal relationship where a subordinate has to be mindful of his or her performance as well as behaviors against the colleagues who are even slightly higher rank. A job title functions as a way of addressing each other as individuals. People do not refer to their colleagues or superiors by their first name. This applies to both in-person and written communication. In the Indonesian context, hierarchical workplace culture also exists where everyone should display a degree of respect, especially to those who are in power, but there are differences with Korea. The use of gender honorific forms such as *Bapak* (Mr.), *Ibu* (Mrs.), *Mas* (elder man), and *Mba* (elder woman) is an example of displaying respect for job hierarchy and seniority, but job titles in Indonesian organizations are barely used.

For the Indonesian expatriate participants, the use of formal address terms by job titles was curious, despite the fact that they shared similar concepts of politeness and respect for job positions and organizational practices. In the Korean workplace, job titles such as *sawŏn* 사원 (regular staff), *chuim* 주임 (manager), *taeri* 대리 (assistant manager), *kwajang* 과장 (section chief), *ch'ajang* 차장 (deputy head of department), *pujang* 부장 (department head), and others were not only an expression of organizational structure but also a cultural practice. Job hierarchy

governs which speech styles are used to convey politeness, respect, power distance, and degree of relationship. The Indonesian expatriates who spoke Korean were aware of such practices and certainly followed the social conventions. They had to memorize the name of the person as well as his or her title, a display of courteous behavior in the Korean context. Those who did not speak the language were relatively freed from the hierarchical working culture.

However, several participants stated that their workplaces started to adopt an egalitarian way of addressing people, an influence of Western norms. The job title was removed and personal names were used. Nevertheless, the practice was not easy and was adapted to Koreans customs. The Koreans felt awkward, especially when addressing superiors. In Korean culture, the usage of given names is only applicable for people who are in the same age and have a close relationship, or given names are used by an older person to address a younger person. This practice was similar to Indonesian working culture. To overcome these cultural hurdles, the Koreans adopted Western names or used their three syllable names as their given names, which created an impersonal and sense of distance from Korean culture. The novel form was effective to mitigate feelings of impoliteness, embarrassment, and rudeness.

The notion of hierarchy was also reflected in the decision-making process in which some participants often felt frustrated with the mechanism. One participant expressed that his feedback to improve the company performance was often overlooked merely because he was at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy. Another participant said that her workplace was eager to receive criticism from all levels of employees; however, the process was time-consuming. Business meetings were set to gather employees from the same rank, and yet the meeting's outcome was often annulled at a higher management level. She believed that if the meeting practices were aimed to bring together all the stakeholders, the meeting would be effective and productive. Other workplaces gradually moved to adopt global standard practices by promoting egalitarian values. Business meeting practices were organized to pull together the best ideas and solutions for the organization. Hierarchical relationships in the meeting were observed but not as strictly so that all employees were free to raise their thoughts on the decision making of the senior management.

Celebrating cultural difference: "the joy of being a foreigner"

Generally, all the Indonesian participants have relatively adjusted well to the Korean working environment. Indonesia and Korea share similar values and

norms, such as respecting elder people, collectivism, and politeness, yet those behaviors that are deemed as disrespect, impolite, and individualistic can be different between Korea and Indonesia. One participant, Andrew, who worked in broadcasting was once shocked when he was given change with the left hand in a mini market. While Korean and Western culture may consider such behavior as normal, Indonesian people deemed it rude and impolite.

Several participants with whom I talked had gone through more stressful phases which led to depression. They reflected that their professional life was much better compared to student life, particularly when they were studying in a Korean university. Physically and mentally exhausted, they suffered from a lack of sleep as they had to struggle with the heavy academic load and high demanding supervisors. One of them had even nearly decided to quit his study, because he could not endure the amount of stress and desperation. Once they completed their studies and secured jobs, these expatriates felt that they had more time to enjoy life.

As time progressed, the Indonesian expatriates became more culturally competent. They followed the rhythm of Korean work-life culture and learned which behaviors were appropriate and inappropriate for certain cultural contexts. Their acquisition of culturally appropriate behaviors was shaped through a series of experiences that entailed observation and reflection. They observed which behaviors were deemed culturally conflicting between Indonesia and Korea and developed more tolerance and empathy to the differences. They adapted or renegotiated when necessary. Cultural mistakes and misunderstandings often happened and observation of Korean cultural norms was sometimes not sufficient, because deep cultural differences were not easy to spot.⁷⁶ The participants often had to learn the hard way when inappropriate behaviors were corrected by their Korean colleagues. Yet, they reflected that the Korean people were more tolerant of the foreigners even if they were culturally inappropriate, which demonstrated that the success of cross-cultural adjustment was also supported by the flexibility and tolerance of the locals.

The Indonesian expatriates have been undergoing cultural transition, recognizing the similarities and differences between Korean and Indonesian cultures and successfully blend both cultures. Writing on migrants' mode of incorporation, Tambiah notes that as migrants integrate successfully in terms of economic circumstances and education, their cultural and religious distinctiveness are asserted and celebrated.⁷⁷ Markers of difference become more visible and the Indonesian expatriates learned how to appreciate the local culture and navigate through cultural terrain. They became more flexible in their adaptation to the local culture

and simultaneously understood when they have to detach from Korean cultural demands.

During my fieldwork, I was struck with the remarks from the participants saying how lucky they were as foreigners or Indonesians. They reflected that the Koreans have been more tolerant toward them compared to how the Koreans treat their fellows in regards to working culture. Studies have reported that many Korean employees have been the victims of workplace bullying, a result of a strong hierarchical system and a highly collectivized society.⁷⁸ Several participants have noticed that many Korean co-workers often cried in the office restroom indicating the struggle to bear such harsh treatment. In the following, Linda shared her experience stressing the privilege of being non-Korean:

One day, I received an email. The email was in the Korean language. In that email, actually my boss felt annoyed and he used very rude words. I did not understand it until my supervisor explained it. I could not sense his anger and rudeness. I could not notice the difference when someone displayed anger through writing. Korean is not my first language, so I did not speak and write naturally like the Koreans. However, on the bright side, I was glad I could not pick up the sense. If I were a Korean, I would be even more stressed. (Linda, female, recruiting foreign talent)

Linda's narrative helps us to understand that at a certain point she embraced her foreignness, which had helped her not to sense the rudeness. She could relax and move on with her job responsibilities. Other Indonesian participants also demonstrated foreign practices that helped them to be freed from cultural pressures and wrongdoings. For example, accounts such as the work-life balance practice that had been supported by the companies often became less relevant as the Korean employees still perpetuated the ideal type of working long hours. For the Indonesian participants, they could understand why these Korean co-workers behaved the way they did. At the same time, the Indonesian expatriates did not feel obliged to behave in the same way as the Koreans. When I further probed them whether they would be perceived as disloyal, they did not agree with such a view. For them, as long as they could perform well, the perception that they were disloyal would be ruled out. Staying late without doing any work was even worse, especially if it was only to convey the image of loyalty. This raises the importance of the sense of foreignness that contributes to the Indonesian expatriates' smooth adjustment to work. The Indonesian expatriates asserted a boundary of self as non-Koreans which supported them to reconcile various cultural norms and assessed which behaviors were acceptable for certain cultural settings. For them, the sense of foreignness became a source of comfort in workplace cultural conflicts. Their sense of foreignness helped them to harmonize superior and

subordinate relations and develop positive cross-cultural adjustments, despite many of the expatriate studies portraying foreignness in negative terms such as exclusion and feelings of isolation. The notion of foreignness opens a new possibility to interpret the unknown social cues and moderates unpleasant cultural experiences or cultural workplace conflict. The Korean colleagues, however, were unable to avoid such protocols. As much as they envied their foreign co-workers, they felt trapped by social convention and were left with no choice except to submit to their home culture for fear of repercussion and social pressure. As the Indonesian expatriates reported, the Koreans had more cultural barriers to reset norms and conventions, which had been practiced for a long time.

Using Bennet's framework, the Indonesian expatriates developed an adaptation stage where their experiences of cultural differences do not aim to transform them into Koreans and discard their cultural background. Rather, the adaptation process increases their cultural awareness and entails negotiation of behavioral changes. They became experts in navigating a world that is different from them, in accepting various cultural worldviews, and in reconciling them and performing their jobs. Kim argues that the Indonesian participants have acquired an intercultural skill that is "open-ended, adaptive and transformative self-orientation."⁷⁹

Conclusion

The experiences of the Indonesian expatriates presented here provide insight into and nuances on the cross-cultural adjustment process. Drawing upon Bennet's model, this study contributes to the cross-cultural adjustment scholarship, particularly in dealing and negotiating across cultural boundaries. It offers more than just an assessment of cross-cultural adjustment's success or failure, and takes account of the sensitivity of cultural differences, the acquisition of culturally appropriate behavior, and the strategy for work adjustment. The experiences of the Indonesian expatriates show that their cultural adjustment has been developed through continuous encounters, deep observation of cultural conventions, and self-reflection on cultural contexts as well as meanings. Their ability to shift between different cultural norms and practices reveals an ethnorelative stage where they may conform to the dominant cultural worldviews without losing their own.⁸⁰ Developing a sense of foreignness becomes experientially significant in the ethnorelative stage and is a means for celebration of cultural diversity. Foreignness appeared to be related to an understanding of home and host culture and created a more positive attitude when encountering cultural differences.

As cultural adjustment is closely linked to the expatriates' country of origin, this study hopes to develop an initial understanding of cultural adjustment practices as it focuses on a single cultural property.⁸¹ Particularly, the launch of the new "Southern Policy" by the South Korean government to build closer relationships with countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the increasing number of ASEAN students in South Korean higher education institutions may boost the opportunities for expatriates coming from Southeast Asia to work in South Korea. Considering that the sample size of this study is small, the result and implications may not reflect general trends across the Korean peninsula. Future studies may benefit by focusing on the relationship between the notion of foreignness and cultural adjustment that serves as both advantage and disadvantage.

Notes

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