UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Exploring the Influence of Cultural Intelligence on the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese Expatriate Workers

Benuyenah, Vic ; Mustafa, Mona

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Exploring the Influence of Cultural Intelligence on the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese Expatriate Workers: A Phenomenological Analysis

Vic Benuyenah and Mona Mustafa

Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Dubai/UK

vbenuyenah@bham.ac.uk
m.mustafa@bham.ac.uk

Abstract: This study delves into the experiences of a small section of Chinese expatriate workers in the UAE, investigating the roles of Guanxi and cultural acclimatisation as critical adjustment factors. Using a phenomenological technique, we explore the influence of cultural intelligence on the cross-cultural adaptation of workers in the construction sector. As part of a more extensive study, the initial findings suggest that Chinese migrants resort to reconnecting with their families back home to mitigate the linguistic and cultural challenges faced whilst abroad. At the same time, feelings of isolation and loneliness were dealt with through recreational activities and building social capital.

Keywords: Cultural adaptation, Migrant workers, UAE labour market, Filial responsibility, Guanxi, Translanguaging

1. Background and Literature

Since its inception in 1971, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has seen stratospheric levels of development in almost all its sectors, particularly the building and construction, tourism and hospitality, renewable energy and the financial sectors. The exponential growth in the country has called for external labour to be drawn in from other countries, especially India, Bangladesh and China. Chinese workforce, however, is unique in terms of competence, culture and linguistics skills, and therefore, their participation in the GCC labour market draws research interest. The uniqueness of Chinese cooperative culture, often linked to the principles of Guanxi, has been previously studied and linked to organisational citizenship behaviours and cultivating social connectedness (Guo et al., 2018; Lin & Ho, 2010).

In contrast to the scant available studies on cultural adjustment in the UAE, researchers have shown more interest in the transition of the Chinese economy over the years into what some have called an emerging economy (Jonnalagedda & Saranga, 2019; Popkova, 2017). Equally, Chinese work overseas has attracted attention among academics, primarily because of the contrast between the Confucian values within the Chinese community (Benuyenah, 2021) and Western and other cultural values (Chen et al., 2002; Zhang & Yin, 2020) yet, not much research has been explicitly reported about the interaction between Chinese culture and work values in the GCC region. Such a low interest in scholarly work on this subject may partly be because most of the economic development in the GCC is relatively recent (Matsumoto, 2019). Despite this, Zhang (2023) reports that the total number of Chinese living in the UAE has jumped from around 7,000 in 2000 to 400,000 in 2023. This sudden jump in Chinese presence in the UAE is not met with the required volume of research that can help practitioners understand the influence of culture, its assimilation and the adjustment experiences of the migrants. As both China and the GCC continue to play a vital role in the expansion of global trade, research into how human interaction in the labour force of both regions becomes even more dire. A crucial aspect of such interaction is embedded in the principles of Guanxi and the cultural preferences in some Gulf cities such as Dubai and Doha.

Although various interpretation of Guanxi exists, what is common among most of such definitions is the principles of personal connections, trust and reciprocity, which helps hold the cultural fabric together among the Chinese population both at home and abroad (Charoensukmongkol, 2021; Xian et al., 2019). Another essential aspect of the Chinese culture is filial responsibility which can be either authoritative or reciprocal (Wang et al., 2023). According to Wang et al. (2023), filial responsibility refers to children's ethical and cultural expectations towards their parents' upkeep. Whereas filial duty may diminish when working children migrate overseas, once in their new work environment, it is Arabic values that tend to define the workplace culture and labour market operations in the Gulf region (Aarthi & Sahu, 2021; Elbanna & Fatima, 2022); although bigger cities tend to have a growing presence of other cultures, mainly from Southeast Asia, Africa and Europe. The contrast between Chinese traditional values rooted in Confucian ethics (Benuyenah, 2021) and the Arab culture, morphed by Islamic values, presents an exciting mix of hypotheses to be examined by contemporary researchers. Yet only a few studies have examined the confluence of Sino-Arab relations (Yao, 2014) especially

migrant employees and their cultural adjustment in the Gulf region. In this study, we use in-depth interviews to explore the experiences of Chinese migrant workers in the UAE. To do so, we espoused two research questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese migrants adapt culturally while living abroad, and what does this mean for their identity and sense of belonging?

RQ2: How do Chinese migrants balance family expectations from their home country with their new life abroad, and how does this impact their well-being and family dynamics?

2. Methodology and Initial Analysis

We adopt a phenomenological approach by conducting in-depth interviews with 19 Chinese migrant workers. All the respondents were working in the UAE and belonged to the same organisation at the time of the study.

A critical step of identifying and recruiting the respondents was considered. As an inductive study, we aim to construct meaning from the respondents making sense of their own lived experiences whilst working abroad; therefore, only workers with good spoken English abilities were recruited. The first author used her connections in the region to identify 19 respondents through snowball sampling in line with the constructionist convention (Saunders et al., 2012). Snowball sampling allows for trust and confidentiality when dealing with an exclusive, hard-to-reach population, particularly when the topic is considered sensitive. According to Biernacki and Waldorf (1981), snowballing, also called referrals, has long historical roots in phenomenology. This practice was endorsed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) more than five decades ago and used by phenomenological researchers ever since; but more significantly by Zhong (2016), who recently used the technique in the study of migrant workers having previously been recommended by Wenzel (1981).

The coding process was inductive and based on the reflective thematic analytic approach, as Braun and Clarke (2006) described. The analysis began with a deep immersion into the interview transcripts to familiarise with the data. After this, the first set of codes was developed inductively, with the researchers giving labels to groups of texts and sentences in the interview transcripts.

To analyse the interview data, we identified three prominent themes relating to how the respondents coped with their working life in the UAE: (1) Language and Cultural Integration, (2) Building Social Capital and Guanxi, (3) Family Support. These initial themes were derived from the preliminary coding structure presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Sample of the Initial Codes and Corresponding Interview Extracts

Interview Extracts	Initial Coding
When I arrived, the company sent a colleague from the HR department to pick us up.	Airport Pickups
Actually, she didn't like the life here when she came here. First the weather, and also because of the family issue. But now she's adapting a lot here.	Quick Adaptation
Now I have so many friends outside. I'm doing procurement. Every day I'm contacting so many market people.	Guanxi and People Connection
They were very worried about it. In 2012, just four colleagues came here. My parents weren't happy.	Unhappy Parents

Notes: As this is an initial study, the final paper will be presented with fuller analysis, tables, and Nvivo generated graphs and models.

3. Results and Discussion

We combine the results and discussion session, as is often the case in qualitative research, because this allows for narrative flow and a more precise interpretation of the data but also, more importantly, with an intent to develop a pattern (Creswell, 2003 p.18). Rooted in phenomenological tenets, the study's findings revolve around the two research questions presented in the earlier section.

3.1 Research Question 1

To explore the first research question: "*How do Chinese migrants adopt culturally while living abroad, and what does this mean for their identity and sense of belonging*?", we conducted a thematic analysis to identify common

phrases (See Figure 1 for a summary). Chinese migrants in the UAE face a number of challenges in relation to the culture and language variations compared with the homogeneous environment where they emigrate from. First, they faced communication barrier as it was difficult to communicate in Arabic. They also reported difficulty in learning the Arabic language that would have enabled them to be able to communicate with the locals and other Arabic-speaking comrades. Similar challenges were reported among Chinese students studying programmes in English-speaking countries (Ma, 2020). Besides the difficulty in learning and speaking Arabic, those who could speak English reported that the accent variation among team members limited effective communication between fellow workers. The participants also reported being culturally isolated while working in the UAE, as it was challenging for them to integrate their culture with the prevailing culture in the UAE. It is unsurprising that both culture and language have been reported as temporary challenges among the migrant workforce as often, language skills can help in integrating societies. The language issue in Figure 1 can particularly be linked to translanguaging, a phenomenon often faced by migrants (Dryden et al., 2021) and earlier studied among students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Fang et al., 2022). Translanguaging is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that refers to the dynamic and flexible use of multiple languages by communities to convey meaning (Rosiers et al., 2018); and is often common in countries such as the USA and, recently, the United Arab Emirates. It is common among migrant workers in the UAE to *translanguage* as they navigate their daily work life, resulting in different forms of English but all conveying identical meaning to the users of the versions of the English language. Earlier work on the importance of linguistic harmony among employees in the hospitality sector was presented by Fan et al. (2021), resonating with the current observation by Participant 5 who reflected on the consequences of translanguaging:

> *LINGUISTIC DISSONANCE: I think the culture. Even though I've been here 10 years, I can't say almost anything in Arabic. Even though this is an Arabic-speaking country, we have very limited opportunity to speak Arabic. Number two is the culture. Even though we're here, it's like we're still living in a small Chinese village, or a small Chinese town. That's the difficulty for Chinese people, I think. – Participant 5*

> *TRANSLANGUAGING/LINGUISTIC RELATIVITISM: Everyone here speaks English, but everyone speaks a different English...I think their pronunciation is very strange. I cannot understand it. – Participant 2*

Linguistic relativism is a common phenomenon that has links with migrant identity, acculturation and integration (Sáenz- Hernández et al., 2020); therefore, it is vitally important to view the comments '*I think their pronunciation is very strange*' as a way of identifying a group of other migrants (perhaps clients) whose English is unintelligible. As communication at the workplace is a two-way channel, it is possible that other employees may not also understand Participants who reported linguistic difficulties; such constraints may not only be limited to socialisation but potentially also to productivity.
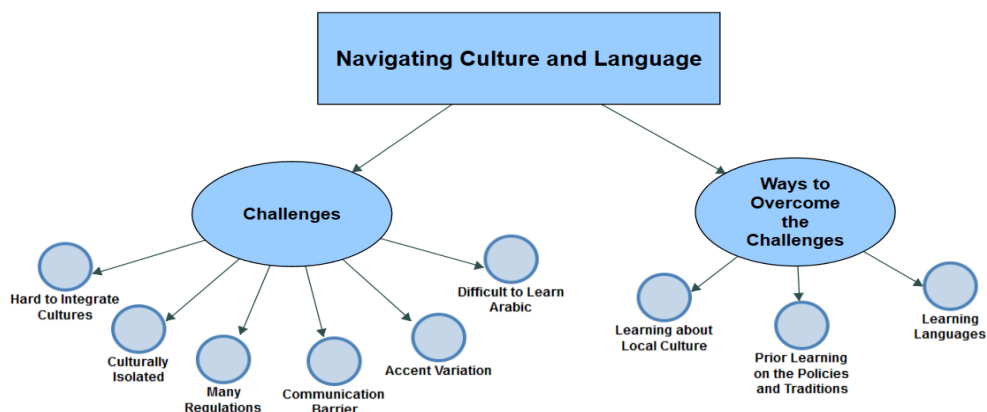
Figure 1: Nvivo Concept Map on the Experience with UAE Culture and Language

To navigate the cultural terrain while within the UAE, the Chinese migrants resorted to learning the local language and about the local culture in the UAE. Others reported that they had learnt about the culture and tradition of the UAE prior to travelling to work abroad, indicating how central the Arabic culture and language are for a vast number of respondents (See Figure 2)
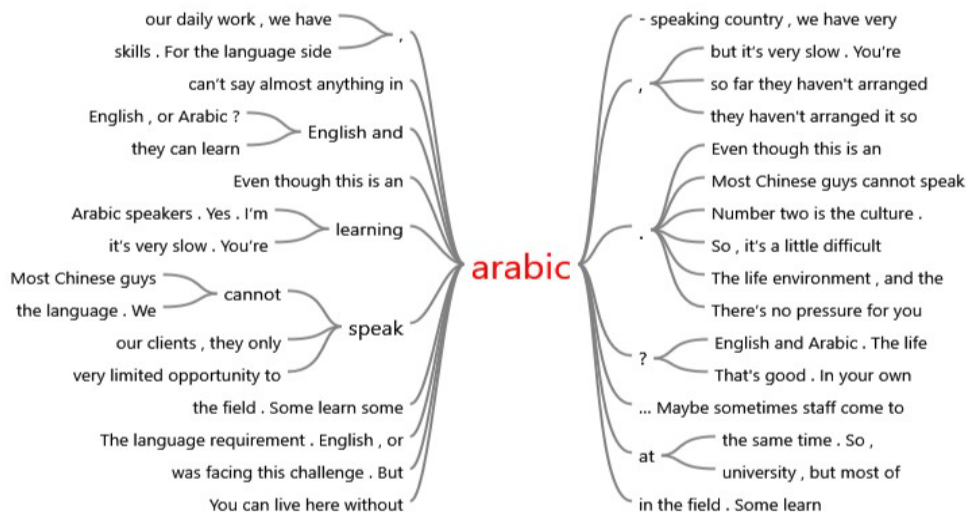
Figure 2: Word Tree analysis of Arabic Language as being central to working in the UAE

3.2 Research Question 2

The second research question framed around Guanxi (Buckley et al., 2006) and Confucian philosophies (Benuyenah, 2018) attempted to explore how Chinese migrants balance family expectations from their home country with their new life abroad and how this impacts their well-being and family dynamics. Depending on the participant, the family could be considered supportive or concerned and against the migrants' move to work in the UAE. For instance, the parents of some of the migrants did not want their children to move to a foreign country as they did not want to miss their children. Participant 9 commented; '*My parents were very worried about it. Because this is my first time going overseas, to work in another country, and this is my first work. They were very worried about it. In 2012, just four colleagues came here. My parents weren't happy.*'

Besides being worried about their child moving to the UAE, respondents also indicated that their parents were concerned about loneliness. Loneliness has to be interpreted from a slightly different context, as China had a one-child policy until very recently, magnifying the essence of filial responsibility and parental love (Wang et al., 2023). Despite the noted concerns, other parents who did not bother so much about filial affection or collectivist bonds were supportive of the career and life choices made by the migrants to seek work abroad.

FILIAL AFFECTION: '*…they didn't want me to come here because I'm alone in my family.*' – Participant 3

COLLECTIVIST DECISION: '*I talked to my parents and my wife. My family supported me. They thought perhaps I can learn a lot of knowledge in Dubai.*' – Participant 4
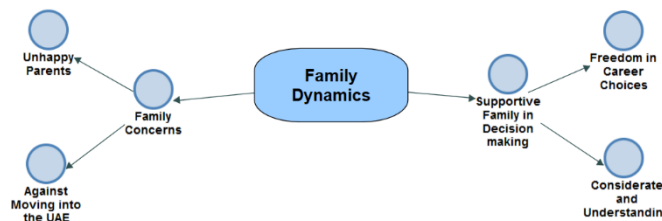

Figure 3: Family Dynamics as experienced by the Chinese migrants in the UAE

An important discovery in this study is how migrant workers navigate the terrain of family dynamics. Two main perspectives emerged among interviewees regarding family concerns and how some perceive their families as being supportive (see Figure 3). Those who indicated family concerns further specified that their parents were either unhappy with or opposed to their move to the UAE. Conversely, those who felt supported in their decision to move to the UAE indicated that they were given freedom and choice or that their families were considerate.

While in the UAE, the migrants reported facing emotional difficulties like homesickness and loneliness. Others were affected in significant ways, indicating that they could not keep in touch with their loved ones regularly or provide support to their loved ones back home.

FILIAL AFFECTION: 'I think it's very difficult for us. I'm the only one in my family. I'm an only child. Sometimes I feel homesick, and I miss them.' – Participant 1

Some respondents reported that despite knowing they would be posted overseas, they were unaware of the exact location (UAE).

BUILDING RESILIENCE: 'Yeah. But I didn't know the country…Yeah. I think the UAE is a better country. Most of the countries are in Africa… In all construction companies, the work environment is very hard for some of the other countries, especially in Africa.'- Participant 7

The above account compares work in the UAE with similar jobs elsewhere in terms of difficulty. This comparison seems to suggest that although respondents were missing home, they distorted such emotion by reasoning that their current situation could have been worse. As noted earlier, most migrant workers seek social opportunities in an attempt to combat loneliness, however, in this instance, the tool used by Participant 7 is building resilience to help overcome the challenges faced in the UAE. Earlier systematic work pointed to the link between the concept of resilience and psychosocial interventions among migrant populations.
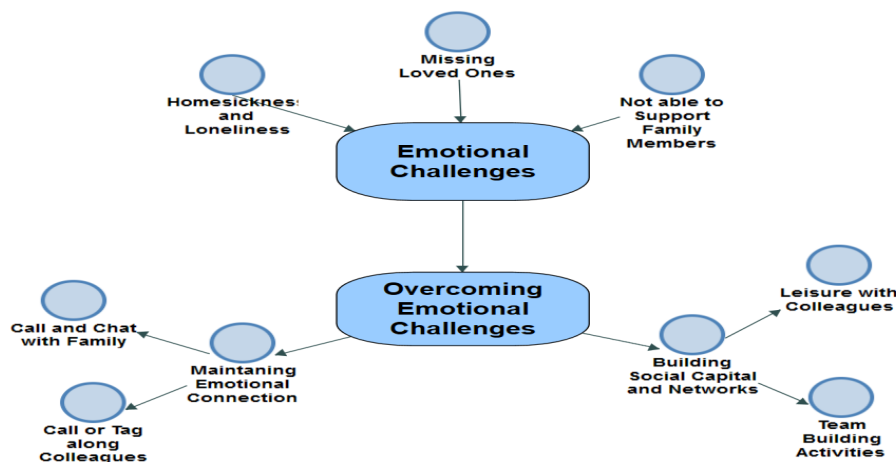
Figure 4: Overcoming Emotional Challenges by Chinese migrants in the UAE

A common theme across the interviews is the emotional pressure linked to homesickness and loneliness – See Figure 4. These pressures are common among migrants who travel to other countries particularly where their native language is not spoken. As per the account of most of the migrants, language and residential location were barriers to overcoming some of the highlighted challenges (*i.e., missing loved ones, not able to support family and loneliness*)

To overcome these emotional challenges, the migrants maintained emotional connection with their loved ones and family through consistent communication. Additionally, the migrants decided to build social capital within the UAE by making friends from work colleagues and the locals – see Figures 4 and 5.

Despite the attempt to mitigate respondents' loneliness by making new friends, such efforts were not enough to fix the attachment gap they were experiencing. See an extract from Participant 1's account below:

ATTACHMENT THEORY: 'I will call them three times per week. And when the weekend comes, I will chat with them online. We see each other face-to-face.' – Participant 1

It appears that the Arabic language being a more forceful barrier to making local friends in the UAE, as illustrated earlier in Figure 2, compounds the emotional challenges summarised in Figures 4 and 5.
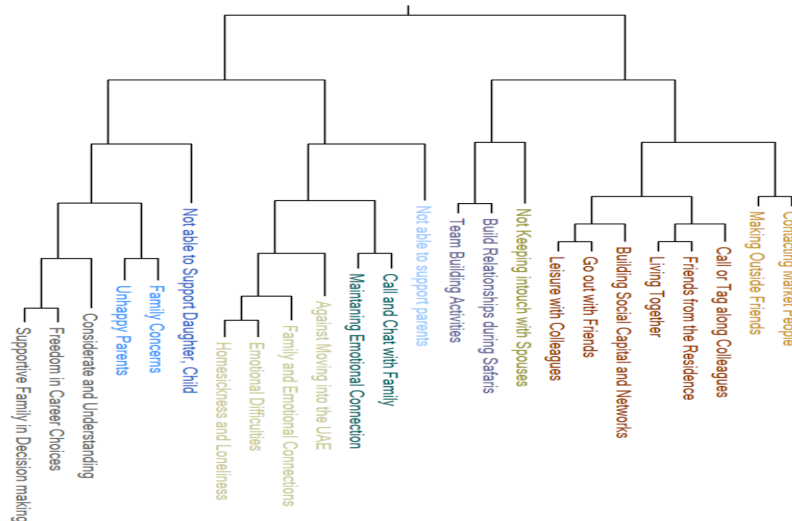
Figure 5: Nvivo word cluster of challenges and coping strategies

Thus, respondents cannot speak the language of people closest to them at the workplace in the UAE and, therefore, have to resort to calling home and chatting with families at the weekend instead.

> *COLLECTIVIST GAP: 'I try to bridge the gap by calling them regularly and spending weekends chatting online. But it's just not enough to fill the void of not being there in person to fulfil my filial duties.' - Participant 4*

According to Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1997), communitarian cultures (China) prioritise the group over the individual and perceive constant connection with the group as the bond that holds society together. Distance from loved ones, therefore is a poor antidote for societal and family cohesiveness, as exemplified in the voice of Participant 4.

Overall, migrants' accounts of their lived experiences can be summarised into the challenges they faced and the solutions they crafted to deal with them. The challenges relate mainly to cultural incompatibility, linguistic challenges, parental disapproval and fear of filial disconnect. The accounts suggest that respondents could deal with some of the issues through cognitive distortion by rationalising their condition, learning the new language and reconnecting with families back in China.

4. Limitations and Future Directions

The homogeneity of our sample, comprising mainly of Chinese migrant workers, mitigates the generalizability of the findings at this stage. As a very progressive labour market, the UAE has millions of workers from across 193 countries in the world, therefore, it is impossible to suggest that the challenges mentioned by our respondents are the same for other workers in the region. For example, a vast majority of workers in the construction industry from the Middle East and, to some extent, India and Pakistan may speak or understand Arabic, therefore, are not likely to face the same challenges as their Chinese counterparts. Future studies can consequently explore the experience of other nationals in the region with much more extensive coverage across different industries.

As a qualitative exploratory study, this paper has limitations regarding making predictive claims. Our objective is not to construct a theory or imply causal effects; instead, we aim to gain insight into the lived experiences of a segment of the labour force in the UAE. Therefore, any comments or interpretations presented in this paper should be understood as contributing only a partial perspective to our understanding of Chinese cultural adaptation and organisational behaviour. Subsequent studies can build on the current findings by formulating hypotheses that test the relationship between filial responsibility and individual performance or the mediating role of linguistic competence and performance in overseas job settings.

5. Conclusion

This study provides initial findings on the experiences of Chinese migrant workers in the UAE. Two research questions relating to Chinese migrant workers cultural adaptability and how they balance family expectations were explored to help understand the lived experiences of the sampled participants. The findings suggest that

for those respondents who experienced cultural and linguistic challenges, reconnecting with family in their home country was an effective coping mechanism. In contrast, team-building activities and recreation provided hope and alternative happiness for those who experienced emotional difficulties.

References

Aarthi, S. V., & Sahu, M. (2021). 'Migration Policy in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States: A Critical Analysis'. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 8(4), 410–434. https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989211028748

Benuyenah, V. (2021). 'Face-saving and Seasonal Gifts : Analysis of Cultural Exchanges in the Confucian Market Place'. *International Review of Management and Marketing*, 11(2), 59–66. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.11202

Benuyenah, V. (2018). Economics of Social Proximity – Measuring the Deadweight Loss of Tet Gifts. IAFOR Journal of Psychology & the Behavioral Sciences, 4(1). https://doi.org/10.22492/ijpbs.4.1.01

Biernacki, P. and Waldorf, D. (1981) 'Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling'. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 10, 141-163.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Buckley, P. J., Clegg, J., & Tan, H. (2006). 'Cultural awareness in knowledge transfer to China-The role of guanxi and mianzi'. *Journal of World Business*, 41(3), 275–288. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2006.01.008

Charoensukmongkol, P. (2021). 'How Chinese expatriates' cultural intelligence promotes supervisor-subordinate Guanxi with Thai Employees: The mediating effect of expatriates' benevolence'. *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*, 21(1), 9–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470595821996735

Chen, C. C., Peng, M. W., & Saparito, P. A. (2002). 'Individualism , Collectivism , and Opportunism : A Cultural Perspective on Transaction Cost Economics'. *Journal of Management*, 28(4), 567–583.

Dryden, S., Tankosić, A., & Dovchin, S. (2021). Foreign language anxiety and translanguaging as an emotional safe space: Migrant English as a foreign language learners in Australia. System, 101(July). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102593

Elbanna, S., & Fatima, T. (2022). 'Quantifying people in the GCC region: the uses, challenges, and efficacy of the quota system policy'. *Human Resource Development International*, 00(00), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2022.2116260

Fan, A., Van Hoof, H. B., Dou, X., & Serrano, A. L. (2021). 'The impact of linguistic style on customer satisfaction: a cross-cultural empirical study in Ecuador'. *International Hospitality Review*. https://doi.org/10.1108/ihr-04-2021-0028

Fang, F., Zhang, L. J., & Sah, P. K. (2022). Translanguaging in Language Teaching and Learning: Current Practices and Future Directions. RELC Journal, 53(2), 305–312. https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882221114478

Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for Qualitative Research. Chicago: Aldine.

Guo, Y., Rammal, H. G., Benson, J., Zhu, Y., & Dowling, P. J. (2018). 'Interpersonal relations in China: Expatriates' perspective on the development and use of Guanxi'. *International Business Review*, 27(2), 455–464. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2017.09.012

Jonnalagedda, S., & Saranga, H. (2019). 'To Adapt or Design: An Emerging Market Dilemma for Automakers'. *Production and Operations Management*, 28(3), 550–569. https://doi.org/10.1111/poms.12932

Lin, L. H., & Ho, Y. L. (2010). 'Guanxi and OCB: The Chinese Cases'. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 96(2), 285–298. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-010-0465-6

Ma, J. (2020). 'Supporting practices to break Chinese international students' language barriers: The first step to facilitate their social adjustment'. *Journal of International Students*, 10(1), 84–105. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i1.773

Matsumoto, A. (2019). 'Literature Review on Education Reform in the UAE'. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 28(1), 4–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/1056787918824188

Popkova, E. (2017). 'Use of methodology of "underdevelopment whirlpools" with analysis of problems and perspectives of economic growth in Asian countries'. *Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies*, 9(1), 97–107. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEEE-07-2016-0027

Rosiers, K., Van Lancker, I., & Delarue, S. (2018). Beyond the traditional scope of translanguaging: Comparing translanguaging practices in Belgian multilingual and monolingual classroom contexts. Language and Communication, 61(April 2017), 15–28. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2017.11.003

Sáenz- Hernández, I., Lapresta-Rey, C., Ianos, M. A., & Petreñas, C. (2020). 'Identity and linguistic acculturation expectations. The attitudes of Western Catalan high-school students towards Moroccans and Romanians'. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 75, 10–22. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2019.12.001

Saunders, M. N. K., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2012). 'Research Methods for Business Students'. Pearson Education UK.

Trompenaars, F., & Hampden-Turner, C. (1997). 'Riding The Waves of Culture', Second Edition. Nicholas Brealey Publishing. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/baa5/8e86493834d21459cba14437d8900542d666.pdf

Wang, Y., Wan, G., & Gu, Y. (2023). 'Consistency and Transformation of Filial Responsibility Attitudes in China: Evidence from Panel Study of Family Dynamics of 2004 and 2017'. *Journal of Family Issues*, 44(2), 315–337. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X211048475

Wenzel, A. (1981). 'Snowball Sampling'. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Abnormal and Clinical Psychology*, 10(2), 141–163. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483365817.n1278

Xian, H., Atkinson, C., & Meng-Lewis, Y. (2019). 'Guanxi and high-performance work systems in China: evidence from a state-owned enterprise'. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 30(19), 2685–2704. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2017.1332670

Yao, K. (2014). 'China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in the Last Decade'. *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* (in Asia), 8(4), 26–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/19370679.2014.12023253

Zhang, X (2023) 'The 400,000 Chinese expatriates' community in the UAE: What makes them build lives in the UAE', *Gulf News*, May 11

Zhang, Y., & Yin, H. (2020). 'Collaborative cheating among Chinese college students: the effects of peer influence and Individualism-Collectivism orientations'. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(1), 54–69. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1608504

Zhong B-L, Liu T-B, Huang J-X, Fung HH, Chan SSM, Conwell Y, et al. (2016) 'Acculturative Stress of Chinese Rural-To-Urban Migrant Workers: A Qualitative Study'. *PLoS ONE* 11(6): e0157530. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0157530