

International Executives, Identity Strategies and Mobility in France and China

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ABSTRACT *A role of ‘company ambassador’ is allocated to a new generation of international executives in Asia whose mission will be to play an effective role as interface between head office and its subsidiaries – and between the subsidiaries themselves – once they have been suitably ‘impregnated’ with the company culture and the particular features of different markets. But nobody stays long in an internationally mobile situation without running the risk of there being strong divergence between the domestic and residential worlds, the life of the community and the world of the company. Analysis of daily socialization and interaction processes shows intercultural competence develops along four distinct immersion stages to enlightened pragmatism stemming from ‘nomadic intelligence’. The heterogeneous nature of the identity strategies of international executives give the lie to the myth of the large company as a space for the irreversible assimilation of its members.*

KEY WORDS: International transfers, ethnicity, identity strategies, intercultural confrontation, professional socialization, immersion stages, cross-cultural experience, cultural learning, nomadic intelligence

Introduction

The Badré-Ferrand senatorial report (2000–2001) shows French expatriation is on the rise as a result of ‘globalization’. In 2000, the Office des Migrations Internationales (OMI, 2001) estimated that 1.9 million French citizens were living abroad: 52 per cent in Europe and 5.6 per cent in Asia. By 2003, over 2 million French citizens were working abroad. The majority of French expatriates in Asia hold executive positions, and work in either liberal or intellectual professions. The registered French population in China has been in constant growth since 1994. These figures do not take into account the many people who ‘tried their luck’, thus reactivating the ‘Asian eldorado’ myth. More than 420,000 foreign firms have been set up over the past 15 years. More than 600 French firms (PSA, EDF, Alcatel, Michelin, Total, Rhodia, aventis, Vivendi, Saint-Gobain, Thomson,

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Schneider, Alstom, Carrefour, Ondéo, Vivendi, Danone, l'Oreal and so forth) are in China, employing around 150,000 Chinese employees in more than 1,000 establishments.

Theoretical Issues

Internationalization is a great challenge for many international groups as well as for smaller companies (Boissin & He, 2001; Piques, 2001). The human factor is a central element in any company, as it is for all human activity. In the case of expatriation, the human factor raises significant issues both on a corporate and on a personal level. Studies show expatriates have difficulty communicating and understanding Chinese reality (Jacky, 1999; *China Staff*, 2000; Verner & Aagaard Petersen, 2000). Preliminary cultural preparation should be delivered before expatriates arrive at their destination. Contrary to common beliefs, acquiring academic knowledge on Asia (as sinologists or indianists) may not prevent incomprehension in one's relation to Asian culture (Saïd, 1980). Although academic knowledge may help to understand culture better, there is no 'everything you need to know' handbook which can teach the countless subtleties of social interaction, examining everything from hospitality rituals to inhospitable behaviours, from cultural flexibility to rigidity, from developing trust to the complexity of social relations.

Expatriates' experience, as such, reveals cultural differences as encountered daily. Expatriates establish themselves in a foreign country, confident they are professionally competent although insecure about their knowledge of the historical and cultural context; they experience 'culture shock' (Oberg, 1960; Camilleri & Cohen-Emerique, 1989). Some of the most recent expatriates consider culture shock is 'all theory' and believe Chinese and French mostly think and act alike. Others experience it in terms of curiosity and challenge. For a few of them, culture shock is an ordeal. In this study, 'culture shock' refers to what happens when individuals from different cultural backgrounds meet: 'cultural mental spheres' encounter, the result being, at times, partial or total incomprehension. On a personal level, culture shock causes either fascination, confusion or even frustration when local, social and cultural signs are misunderstood.

Today's multinationals are caught in a dialectical tension between the desire for unified strategy at executive level (the headquarters) and the social realities within subsidiaries that might be termed multicultural and which have an urgent need to cooperate with a larger number of actors than at any other period (Hofstede, 1980; Sainsaulieu, 1991: 258; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1992; Adler, 1997; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004). Caught between local levels of regulation, between autonomy and centralization, managerial actions have grown in complexity (Mutabazi, 1994).

It has been observed that, since the end of the 1970s and 1980s in most companies, there has been an evolution in the way both technology and management have been transferred from the headquarters to subsidiaries. This is due to a variety of factors: greater availability of long distance travel, quota systems introduced by local administration (anxious to promote access to managerial posts for their own citizens), reduced international mobility costs and a decline in the

number of extended overseas postings for families. Within such firms, the drawing up of uniform, written budgetary auditing and reporting procedures to guide the actions of interdependent units at a global level represents only a few aspects of coordination mechanisms. These also rely on a process of socialization consisting of strengthening and developing an organizational culture by geographical mobility and career management. The international personnel system can therefore be compared, in terms of its size and the liveliness of its underground contacts outside of the formal contacts it is supposed to maintain, to a large part of the 'nervous system' of the organization. A progressive change from a classic system of expatriation (where the company looks to fill competence gaps in the expatriate area and in training in the company's business, as well as faithfully representing the interests of the mother company) can be observed everywhere. At stake is the appropriation and dissemination of complex technology, thanks to pluri-national specialists professionally dedicated to intense geographical mobility within differentiated and networked units (Pierre, 2000). For these firms, the question of the presence of racial, national or ethnic minorities (rooted in particular cultures) or of a mobile workforce (bringing with it its own view of work – expatriates and impatriates), is knowing how to ensure in a practical way the adaptation of already socialized individuals to new organizational and cultural forms. The difficulty for these organizations is one of providing a primary recognition space (Dussauge & Ramanantsoa, 1984).

Research Method

These questions are precisely what this article seeks to address, by presenting the principal results of a long study on the socialization of international executives belonging to a large French company in the field of oil exploration and production (*Alpha* in this study) (Pierre, 2000 & 2003). The essay has been written as a result of an in-depth piece of research into the way executives of a large French oil company built up their identities and as a result of a study that examines intercultural learning based on French expatriates' experience in China.¹ The results lead us to highlight a typology of five identity strategies for internationally mobile executives and to discuss the different steps and resources necessary for their integration to work in a multicultural context.²

The Diverse Sources of An Individual's Identity

The process by which international executives continue to adopt the spirit of the community to which they belong and, at the same time, identify themselves with professional roles by learning to handle them in a personal and effective manner, outside the context of their culture of origin, is a fertile area of study which has not yet been explored to any great extent. This issue has most often been evoked in terms of the mechanical assimilation of company or management values, or in terms of the dual identity which employees are unable to overcome (the infamous 'culture shock'). Far removed from this, the socialization modes of *Alpha* international executives demonstrate a type of problematic integration, which is shown through a series of experiences linked to the international context.

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Underlying the immediate 'adherence' demanded by managing bodies, a process of reflection takes place, during international mobility, which operates between the subjectivity of management, one's relationship with one's origins and the objectivity of one's social roles. Being an international executive is a unique way of living the experience abroad, or rather, several different ways of experiencing identity strategies linked to the mobilization of one's ethnicity in a context of mobility.

Some executives believe they can feel at home anywhere in the world – they are the living representatives of a species en route to professional development: those referred to by the economic press as 'the new inter-cultural practitioners' and which we need, today, to distinguish from working-class immigrants, stateless persons, political refugees and even foreign students when articulating diverse sources of identity.

Faithful members of religious confraternities in the evening, speaking in local dialect and wearing traditional dress to express their animist faith, some oil executives of the *Alpha* group participate actively in the economic and political life of their country. They speak English and French with colleagues, training other members of staff in management techniques from the United States, taking on – not without certain tensions – another social role. Depending on the situation and the interviewee, there exists with the individual a cut off principle (Bastide, 1955) between those moments when they express themselves publicly using a 'native style' (compare the Congolese context where, during the course of a drilling training session at *Alpha*, the actions of each participant were expressed as a proverb or in the style of a writer from his own country). At the same time, they need to show an ability to judge industrial projects in a rational manner, and organize their work according to western timetables, entering into contact with colleagues using relationship codes acceptable in a 'modern' rationale. These international executives seek to develop strategies that answer the question 'who am I in the other's eyes?' They try to respond to any possible identity malfunction by anticipation and correction, in which shame (the nakedness one wishes to conceal when exposed to the public gaze, and which one cannot flee from lack of affection) and envy (what one would like to be and fears one is not) play a fundamental part.

Because an international career means having to make repeated choices about education for the children, a place to live, the type of housing, the partner's work (all of which in totally new legal and social environments), it is viewed as a search for a kind of equilibrium between diverse interests, a coming to an accommodation between professional and personal spheres of life. For many *Alpha* international executives, though well prepared thanks to training in the specificities of intercultural management of the host country, geographical mobility involves detaching the self from its community of origin. These executives need to interiorize rapidly a new kind of specialist knowledge – professional knowledge and roles being rooted in the division of labour within the firm – comprising vocabulary and procedures and driving an idea of work that might differ considerably from the cultural world of their origins.

'The strange happiness that I sometimes feel' recalled an American financier during one of our interviews,

is that of finding myself experiencing a journey, seeing a hidden part of myself appear, a part that I was looking for back home in my country. Living with foreign colleagues allows me to be, or not, someone other than myself. Managing in an international context is first of all a school for humility, where you can re-discover yourself, realising that good management is above all understanding precisely that cultural basis of all decision-making and behaviour which seems at first sight incomprehensible.

Constrained to adopt the tastes and habits of a new environment, some international executives decide, partially and locally, to convert a part of their mental landscape in order to preserve an intimate link with what they consider to be the truest part of themselves. Finding themselves in numerous incongruent registers, in situations that are not always codified and foreseeable, international executives explain and justify themselves and step back. Between several communities and several value systems that are attractive but sometimes irreconcilable (culture of origin, culture of the host country and culture(s) of the company and so forth), such cultural shocks survived will cause, 'a problem of consistency between the new and the internalised' (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 192).

I'm from Gabon when nobody speaks to me. I'm from Gabon only when no one wants to recognize me, when it's only French society that is speaking, outside the company where I'm recognized. In reality, however, my work, my studies in Paris, in the Netherlands and the United States, with my postings and mobility, mean that I'm the only one who knows who I really am. In the midst of several cultures. It isn't easy! It causes a lack of understanding within my family and amongst my friends because, quite simply, I don't want my value to be reduced to the colour of my skin and country of origin (which was colonised by the French), or even to my social identity, which is that of a person with money and power within the firm where I have been working for more than sixteen years.

The remarks of this *Alpha* financier, the son of a member of the French armed forces, who was born in Gabon and lived as a child in the South of France, illustrate clearly this constant search to contradict the identities imposed on him and the image he has of himself.

When the channels inherited from the past and the primary socialization are not enough to have a favourable influence on social and professional transactions, some international executives try and play the ethnic card, within certain limits as defined by the social constraints of the host society. It is because the objective information (transmitted by a name, by bodily ease or its absence, by facial appearance, skin colour, voice – accent or pronunciation – clothes, brands worn and also body – moustache, beard, hair and so forth) is often insufficient that the actors consciously supply complementary information that might allow them to control, to some extent in the eyes of the other, the mental picture of a specific

ethnic Me (Poutignat & Streiff-Fénart, 1995: 166). In this incessant battle of perception and classification, of manipulation of mental representation, executives are prepared in different ways, and may often be understood via several types of identity, presenting varied modes of resistance or acceptance of the ambient cultural milieu: from a radical and hermetic falling back on their culture of origin to quasi-total penetration by the host culture and the signs of an identity conversion (Lipiansky *et al.*, 1997). The exercise of a profession that has social worth leads to diverse uses of ethnic categorization and interactive behavioural skills – outside their original cultural context – that we can identify through five strategies of identity (conservative, defensive, opportunist, transnational and converted).

In contrast to a static conception of ethnic groups defined (from without) by culture, this article deliberately takes a constructivist view of ethnicity. It is that of the work of F. Barth (1963), for whom the area of study defined by the concept of ethnicity is one of variable processes by which actors identify themselves – and are identified by others – on the basis of cultural traits supposedly derived from a common origin and highlighted – consciously – in social interaction.

The Five Identity Strategies of International Executives

Conservatives

One group of the executives studied, which we have called Conservatives and which forms 10 per cent of our population, is driven by the desire to minimize any social or emotional engagements that might result from interaction at work with colleagues of a different national origin. These executives seek to satisfy the most immediate demands of the host society while making at the same time a great effort to maintain their own cultural codes in the private area of primary relations.

A financier from Gabon transferred to Paris for two years observes, during the course of an interview,

Between foreign and French executives this can work well but there will always be a temporary period of adjustment. It will always be difficult to forget that we are foreigners in the world outside the company and this often impinges on our families and us.

To reassure oneself and others, daily work is seen by Conservatives as a task to be undertaken in a highly constrained emotional climate but one made bearable by the remembrance of the original motivation for mobility. The career ambitions of these executives are not defined in terms of the *Alpha* Group but rather in terms of their own subsidiary or original country. International mobility will help them reach, after a programmed return, more prominent positions.

The weight of obligations towards family and friends remains in the country and underlines the density of relationships constantly maintained during their period of mobility. During their stay abroad, Conservatives divide their social world into two halves and live an ‘inside’ (usually home and family), where they try to keep ways of thinking inherited from their original culture intact, and an

'outside' (mainly the world of the company) where they adopt models of the minimum behavioural adaptation required by the world of work.

Around schools, shops, churches and meetings, contacts with compatriots during their period of international mobility contribute symbolically and materially to create a sort of ethnic space created within the host society. There are many international executives who are quite willing to travel thousands of miles to follow events in the countries they have left and who expend considerable energy in getting hold of newspapers and filmed events relating to their home countries. In a complex process of idealization, these international executives imbue their nation of origin with a magnified personality. Conservatives also have a tendency to exert strong cultural pressure on wives and children to ensure that they retain all the strength of their *original* culture and *avoid the menace of acculturation*. The spouse is often entrusted with the mission to undertake whatever practical adaptations might be needed to live in a new cultural environment that is perceived as menacing. Faced with the constraints of local administration and the problem of bringing up children, she has to be capable of *managing on her own, being modern and smart* while still retaining the distinctive qualities called upon in her society of origin.

In the home that shelters them for the duration of their stay, father and mother show off furniture and personal objects with history and specific meaning, which aim as much as anything to reduce the imaginary importance of geographical space to the limits of a family circle that *reminds everyone of their origins*. Conservatives say that they are worried about the transmission of their language to their children (often also supra-linguistic elements such as accent). In the context of relationships at work, they speak alternately French and English with no desire to learn the language of the host country. At home, they are scrupulously careful to speak nothing but their mother tongue. They also take care to respect religious practices, *which if ignored might, they feel, fade away with the move*, and try therefore to remove themselves physically as far as possible from the dominant group.

While cultural resistance is never openly expressed, the behaviour of Conservatives sites the problem of protective retrenchment against existential difficulties in the context of something perhaps more archaic: ethnic identity. The importance of the Conservatives' defence mechanisms also highlights an important conclusion: individuals do not integrate into a host society unless they can find a guarantee of security equivalent to that furnished by their ethnic culture, a guarantee that might at least counterbalance the desire of finding again in their original community the warmth of personal relations and the secret of a significant history.

Defensives

If Conservatives try to protect themselves from outside contacts, Defensives, not content with appearing different, often enjoy their status as foreigners and cultivate it. Unlike Conservatives, Defensives (estimated to be 20 per cent of our population) have no sense of inferiority with regard to the society that welcomes them. Identified as managers with potential within the company, they

define themselves clearly as foreigners and organize a representation of their original universe in ways that can be understood by the society in the host country.

'In Paris I am a bit special, I am an American and everyone takes care of me. In America I am just one American among others, speaking the same language as everyone else, there is nothing to differentiate me from the others', explains a financier born in Houston, who says that he likes the state of 'social weightlessness' of the foreigner. International mobility in the company has awakened in Defensives the consciousness of local belonging and the social mix has sharpened the sense of a cultural claim. From praise for the benefits of the local food compared to the annoying uniformity of dishes served in inter-continental hotel chains or the oddities of French cuisine (*oysters and snails and so forth*), to lectures on the beauty of the country one has just left and the legendary hospitality of one's compatriots, a whole range of behaviour comes to systematize, in various degrees, a strategy of over-affirmation of the depreciated self (Camilleri, 1989: 383).

'I'm a new style of immigrant. Man in the twentieth century is born adventurous. Despite my nomadic behaviour and the journeys linked to my job, I try to remain natural, that's all', a Congolese executive explains during our interviews and admits he has 'a system of thought within the company that is, at one and the same time both instrumental and animist'. It is Defensives that best illustrate the experience of stigmata accepted, in the sense that individuals, faced with an image of themselves drawn up by the majority society from the signs of difference that are found within them (a name, a skin colour, a marriage custom and so on) try to evade it and live their own lives. By contrasting one or more elective homelands with a native homeland and claiming the right to multi-citizenship,³ the behaviour of Defensives shows the choice of a distinctive type from a set of possible social and professional interactions.⁴

During training sessions in the subsidiary in the country of origin, sessions aimed at executives in the company as a whole, we noticed that Defensives tend to become living ambassadors for their country. Wearing traditional dress, 'it's easier than a suit to wear in town', people from Gabon might be more likely to write a report on the training in the form of a poem or in the style of one of the great writers of their country; Scottish people may well linger over a careful description of all the stages necessary for the preparation of the culinary specialities served to the participants of the training session. This assuming of roles is made easier by the exceptional and temporary nature of the training session; it acts as a visiting card for international executives; their discourse, manner and accent, which are the products of acculturation (folklorized), present them as they wish to be perceived (Vasquez, 1997: 167).

Defensives therefore symbolize an evolution in the customs of *Alpha*, as underlined by a Norwegian executive: 'When internationalisation of staff first began, the executives from subsidiaries felt they had to act like the French in all things when they went to France, but today they prefer to act more selectively. We no longer have to give up our customs to succeed.' A Congolese financier who has lived in France for three years on behalf of *Alpha's* American subsidiary explains that,

Things are changing radically. For France it's a bit like the end of Jacobinism, and for the Group's subsidiaries it is the beginning of internationalisation. The company as a whole can no longer think about its development in terms of subsidiaries catching up technologically with the centre. Expatriates have to face a different relationship model, and gradually recognise our cultural specificities or risk challenge or confrontation.

Defensives, when questioned, do not hesitate to claim their subsidiary's autonomy from the Group's headquarters. 'Companies who do not understand about the prominence of minorities understand nothing. People naturally want independence. Liberty, equality, fraternity: I only ask that the principle be extended to all countries', demands a man from Gabon who has progressed in France in a Human Resources department and who notes that, in Gabon, there is 'a change in mentality, increased freedom of the press and the desire on the part of staff to be treated equally in the development of the country and the subsidiary'.

The duality of particular and transnational identification means that, at the end of professional life, two types of Defensives emerge: an elite, that might be described as modernist, which chooses to remain within the multinational firm to the end of their careers, and one that is looking forward to returning to their country of origin. As part of this traditionalist elite, who are at the end of their working lives after ten or 12 years of intense mobility, a number of Defensive Nigerian, Scottish or Congolese executives after living for a long time in the United States or in Europe on behalf of the *Alpha* Group, wish to return to their own country and 'symbolically ward off the fluidity of the time that is passing and which is passing elsewhere' (Simon, 1995: 210).

Their professional careers seem suddenly less important in the long term, and as one of these managers put it, 'one's roots become more important than sparkling professional success abroad'. The vision of the world as *member of a world organization* gives way to that of an *entrepreneur*, where what is required is to put one's individual experience at the service of a new chosen community. Entering into politics in one's motherland, taking responsibility in a non-governmental organization, creating a new business are several concrete possibilities in a *return to self*, integrating during 'this latter part of my life' social and family life and a sense of roots into a harmonious whole.

The return to one's country is not without difficulty, and international executives often discover that years spent far from one's native land have, at one and the same time, transformed both their perception of themselves and that of their origins. To reintegrate themselves, former international executives need to undergo the same kind of social re-apprenticeship that they had previously undertaken, repeatedly, when they had to make the considerable effort to find a place within the social contexts imposed upon them by their careers.

Opportunists

The identity group that we call Opportunists consists mainly of young executives aware of the fact that, while they do not possess any of the diplomas that are highly

esteemed by the organization, they have, while doing the job, revealed themselves to be considerable specialists, and who wish to make up for *this lack of initial training* with great enthusiasm and over-activity. Aged on average about 40, Opportunists who have already had two or three career moves abroad, 'preferably in subsidiaries where one is not treading in another's footsteps', very rarely in positions of great responsibility but in posts that nonetheless require technical expertise (such as geologists, information technology specialists or logisticians). The Opportunists (25 per cent of the population) viewed this experience of mobility as the main source of potential job satisfaction. For these individuals the professional world is a space in which they will try to maximize the chances of favourable events with a series of individually identified actions and appropriate identities. Opportunists tend to apply a no-risk alternation of cultural codes, taking special care to adapt their behaviour as well as their ethnic visibility when speaking to different people.

They employ polite and familiar forms according to the situation and choose themes for discussion particularly suited to a particular culture; they use a repertoire of Anglo-Saxon gestures during public presentations and those gestures associated with their country of origin during conversation with their compatriots, making it easy to discern, in certain international executives, a highly developed capacity to play the game of 'the right social distance in the right circumstances' (what anthropologists have called 'the situational use of ethnicity'). These international executives often benefit from a home environment that accepts opportunist manipulation of cultural models and allows, by so doing, for the removal of any possible guilt about such arrangements with oneself and with one's past. Subjects do not have to hide their strategy from those close to them. The mask is dropped at the front door, so to speak, which differentiates them from certain executives who need to maintain a traditional way of being for aged parents, young cousins or friends who have stayed at home as well as with the modern world of the work situation, relations with management in the host country or at the children's school. The Opportunist's way of life is, therefore, more often based on a firm cut off principle between family and professional life and by the practical difficulties of reconciling the two.

Most Opportunists say that they find a new zest for life in a foreign environment. Maintaining a playful front internationally, they seem to have a bulimic attitude to new sensations, unusual images and work situations that are constantly being renewed. They are like certain other French expatriates in that what is important to them is to live change with unceasing mobility between the subsidiaries of the Group, and who feel that their return to France, to the headquarters, is a loss of liberty. Geographic mobility meets what seems to be a physical need, and the language of determinist biology is often used to explain it: 'I get itchy feet before I leave' and 'travelling is in my blood'.

For older Opportunists, after the 'adventure of work' consisting of many ports of call, material insecurity is not a problem. What worries these travellers, who have constantly renewed their professional identities and fought above all to adapt to their environment, are the repercussions of breaks with the groups they formed part of, the ever-present gap between the means of self-affirmation and the ability to obtain collective stable recognition (Sainsaulieu, 1985). We find in the ranks of

these executives the best guardians of the social order that gave them space to grow and still honours them today.

Although they only remain within the bounds of a frame of reference until the time comes to build a new one, it would be foolish to consider Opportunists as empty ethnic and cultural subjects. All facade identities need the behaviour that goes with them to be mastered and imply minimal apprenticeship to a certain cultural capital as well as to a register of available identities (Berger & Luckmann, 1996: 233). Being able to act in several registers involves the incorporation into oneself of several parts of another culture, which takes time. One thing that is certain is that, in these conditions, authentic cosmopolitan behaviour consists at first of suffering and a feeling of being a stranger to others and oneself.

Transnationals

Transnationals perceive the most acutely the existence of a dominant culture within *Alpha*, 'a culture of engineers, first and foremost rational, not just of French origin but one which borrows many elements from Anglo-Saxon managerial techniques'. In the eyes of Transnationals those who do not share this heritage cannot succeed on a professional level.

The largest part of our population (35 per cent), they were sufficiently self-confident and sure of being able to play along; for Transnationals, reassuring and being reassured consists of abolishing the otherness within themselves and always calling 'on human reason when making choices within the company'. Transnationals admit 'they attach more importance to the person over and above passports, place of birth and societies encountered'. 'Willpower, the most widely shared attribute in the world', should be able to halt racial discrimination and the discourse of a number of the executives calls on a 'necessary plurilingualism', on *free enterprise* and the building of a *cosmopolitan* spirit within the company. Transnationals are, for example, the keenest on the development of cross-cultural training sessions, and say that they maintain with the languages they speak 'an instrumental type rapport which does not enter into the field of their consciousness'.

Each move constitutes a milestone in the process of a vertical rise during which the extra-professional life is pushed back for later, on retirement. Subjects continually adjust their way of life to their career and inversely after a certain age.

Transnationals also represent a family unit that has great plasticity of form. It is within this population that we find the strongest phenomenon of the voluntary restriction of family size and managers most inclined to harmonize, while abroad, the size of their family unit with that which is prevalent in the host country. There are many cases where the working wife continues with her activities, while one or two children are sent to good schools (sometimes abroad) during the husband's expatriation until they have attained the necessary qualifications.

In Transnationals, personal identity tends to merge with certain elements of the global company. In the same way that companies find names for their business that will be acceptable everywhere to describe their business, some international executives will give their children a first name that will 'be immediately recognisable and accepted' wherever they are in the world. Transnationals

undertake studies far from home early on outside their country of origin within university establishments that welcome students of all national origins. In this way, they are able to apply within the company behaviour adapted and learnt, in a tactical game, honed within relatively constraining educational establishments, similar to the world of the company and where there is also 'a need for results, regular systems of individual evaluation, work on the resolution of problems undertaken in English and in small teams'.

Just as it is an environment where linguistic diversity is taken for granted, therefore making the subject truly bilingual, international culture is better transmitted because it forms an integral part of the family's history and its recognition markers, and the test of international mobility is perceived as the accomplishment of an old and mature arrangement, not as a temporary uprooting on behalf of the company.

Similarly, there are differences of prestige between commercial and engineering schools at a national level; the upper echelons of internationalization distinguish themselves from those lower down. The most efficient Transnationals, the inheritors of international mobility in whom career management is mixed with pre-existing abilities, differentiate themselves from local executives who see their move to a foreign country as an end-of-career reward for work well done.

Converted

Originating mainly from the Gulf of Guinea, the Middle East and Eastern Europe, these are the *Alpha* executives most anxious to melt into the background of the host country, those that can no longer find links with their country of origin and have 'renounced their membership and nationality to take up the destiny of the French'. Wanting to remain permanently in France, the Converted are also those whose home environment has little in the way of resources and who, on the professional side, have ceased to be international to mature in an exclusively national context (France). To reassure and be reassured, these executives will force themselves to be, as often as possible, in the company of those they consider to hold the reins of power in the organization, the French executives and directors. One of the practical consequences of being with the company is the choice of naturalization as the most sought after and successful outcome following a career entirely built in the country of adoption, France. Certain ostensible manifestations are: a religious conversion, the shortening or changing of the family name, the choice of first names for the children and languages that will or will not be handed down, all of which indicate a desire to assume definitively the societal model of the host nation. Although most international executives reveal, through their choice of first names for children born while they are abroad, a fidelity to their national or religious origins (this even at the risk of ethnic visibility, which the carrier will bear), the Converted will make the opposite choice.

In this image trade, our research has shown that the rule is to give a good impression, even gain prestige, by demonstrating a normal appearance, namely showing that one is respecting the norms. The Converted are playing a delicate game in the image trade, where it is necessary to control the presentation of self to benefit from an improved social image, a construction all the more difficult for

certain stigmatized nationalities (from developing countries) where belonging to a cultivated elite is not automatic.

The Converted believe in the possibility of living anywhere, in any country, the same lifestyle and do not want to leave room for cultural factors in the management of businesses. When asked to define themselves, they talk of a community of age that brings them closer to their other colleagues, a community of skills and of social status that makes them managers.

Common sense says that the French, German or English are not the same. They don't think or work the same way or eat the same breakfast. If we look at things closely we can see that the executives of the Group who travel internationally form a separate group and have more points in common between themselves than between their respective compatriots. (a Norwegian geologist married to a French woman for six years)

These international executives share with Conservatives the characteristic of being the most likely to declare themselves objective when it comes to appreciating the characteristics of France and its people. They are the quickest to link purely descriptive elements with value judgements. The tone and strength of their convictions is only slightly modulated when faced with different contexts (in public or not, in their original context or not, placed exclusively with their compatriots or not, and so on).

Trying above all to 'be appreciated for themselves alone', the Converted find themselves torn between being members of an original (rejected) population that allows others to designate them as members of a more general category (nation, skin colour and so forth) which they are no longer part of, and belonging to a group which, by the introduction of their own characteristics, has difficulty accepting them. Foreigners are constantly at war with themselves, finding out to their cost that the sense of belonging that others offer does not simply stem from a capacity for keen thought, a consummate art of detachment and tireless work on oneself. Behind the stereotyped figure that they try to espouse, foreigners constantly risk being betrayed by the presence of the rejected other that they are not always able to master fully. The Converted best illustrate the fact that assimilation is something that can never be achieved, and that ethnicity is not a state but a process of social construction. The dominant direction in the behaviour of the Converted sheds light on a concept introduced by E. Erikson, namely negative identity, which covers all the traits that an individual learns to isolate and avoid. In an ever-imperfect process of de-culturation, the Converted provide examples of individuals hoping to reject a part of their past in an effort to personally rewrite the history that underpins their troubled phase of opposition and the search for new identities.

Different Steps of Integration for International Executives in China

Expatriates' initial experience of Chinese realities stems from western images they inherited. One is subject to collective memory rooted in a powerful collective

imaginary (Castoriadis, 1975) which structures the way one views the world. French people experience China through the filter of dominant ideas; such bias eventually dictates behaviours. Interpretations of Chinese reality rest both on the traditional 'Them and Us' duality and on the notion of 'another world' perceived to be radically unknown, that is physically and mentally inaccessible. Such interpretation oscillates between two attitudes: attraction and rejection, and eventually 'love and hatred' (Cartier *et al.*, 1998). Long-standing positive and negative biases actually produce opacity. Expressions such as 'it's Chinese to me!' suggest something is rationally inconceivable according to western logic. Opacity has been a recurring theme from antiquity to the Middle Ages with the image of the 'real stranger' (Le Goff, 1991: 36–37), as well as in the most recent centuries. Pascal, the philosopher, mentioned opacity when he wrote about China (Schlegel, 1998) while Montesquieu doubted one could actually be Chinese! Today such bias is still common among French expatriates as shown in the following statement: 'Chinese society is culturally opaque'.

The way one perceives Chinese otherness unfolds based on the powerful images one inherits and on one's actual experience of reality. Our study shows images of China stem from three different sources: value, media, and experiential imaginaries (Fernandez, 1999, 2002). Briefly, value imaginary refers to oriental wisdom, spirituality, respect towards ancestry, solid traditions and a stable social structure led by a Mandarin, idealized as an enlightened guide. Media imaginary comprises images of poverty and/or eldorado, the 'yellow peril', infanticide, a totalitarian and covert society, the gigantic Chinese population and territory. Experiential imaginary results from what has been experienced, read and narrated. It supports identification processes for the one who relocates and also regulates value and media imaginaries. E. Said (1980) describes it as a 'textual attitude'. In terms of experience, some expatriates also mention strong family images based on one's childhood in Asia while others follow in the path of the family's globetrotter, missionary or adventurer legendary figure.

Required Intercultural Competencies

The required competencies and qualities transcend necessary technical knowledge. Expatriates mention various institutional, professional and personal competencies needed when working and living in China. Institutional competence refers to a company's 'institutional credit' based on recognition of its corporate image. In this regard, trust is granted as a matter of principle. However, collected data suggests technical skills and corporate image often play a minor role compared with interpersonal relationships. One must develop personal competencies and qualities.

Living in China means developing culturally specific competencies. Such competence is not a given and pertains to Chinese social organization (hierarchy), institutions and work processes (sense of responsibility, delegation, professional logic). In fact, beyond G. Hofstede (1980), who overlooks subjective experience and the complex value interaction, encountering China is a test for most expatriates as it involves socialization rituals and developing a sense of relational 'rhythm'. Hence, intercultural experience is first and foremost about breaking with a number of biases

and certainties so as to become familiar with a social atmosphere. Only then does immersion become possible. 'Immersion' is about one's choice to immerse in a social and cultural environment perceived to be radically different. Beyond adjustment, often thought to be a key operational concept for global mobility (Lysgaard, 1955; Black, Mendenhall *et al.*, 1991; Cerdin, 2002: 18), immersion covers a wider interpretative realm and considers other stages of intercultural experience in terms of comprehension and integration (Fernandez, 2002).

First Step: Immersion-Adjustment: Touching, Feeling, Seeing, Listening and Tasting

In the immersion-adjustment stage, expatriates discover their professional environment.

They become acquainted with a different notion of work and encounter cultural and social diversity. Some will try to speak in rather rudimentary Chinese, though convincingly enough so as to develop social links. One opens up to other ways of proceeding: the starting point of a 'different way of thinking'. One has to abandon preconceptions initially thought to be correct but which may prove to be inefficient in intercultural situations. Intercultural exchange rests on behaviours and skills developed *in situ* (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985: 39–47) As an expatriate points out, exchange thus requires effort: 'It's a different world. I tiptoed in and tried to do my best'. Adjustment stems from cognitive activity in the course of which actual experience interfaces with awareness of such experience. In ethnological terms, expatriates engage in participant observation and discover Chinese social integration rituals. They experience hospitality and symbolic exchange rituals specific to China (*Mianzi* or face, *guanxi* or social relation, *Hanxu* or implicit communication). This leads to constant *bricolage* similar probably to the Greek *Métis* (Détienne & Vernant, 1974), that is playing around with one's own mental categories to understand what is initially unfamiliar. Based on this, intercultural learning is about developing attitudes and abilities from spatial, olfactive, visual, auditive and gustative intelligence (Gardner, 1996). One savours the social atmosphere as much as the food. One is sensitive to odours and humidity, and listens to a new 'social tone'. One moves around in dense social settings, mobilizes different orientation logics, touches, observes, and so forth. In the end, one is open to surprise and goes down the sometimes difficult path of intercultural exchange. Such intercultural exploration results in an ability to accept what is improbable and what is unpredictable, and is bound to arise in most intercultural encounters.

At the threshold of the first immersion stage, expatriates may decide to go beyond than adjustment, thus entering an immersion-comprehension stage. Let us note that adjustment may itself be measured on the basis of one's level of involvement. The first degree of adjustment results in superficial relations; China is seen as a country like any other and expatriates carry out their assignment perceived as a career opportunity, financial gain or sanction. The second and third degree of involvement eventually lead to successful immersion-accommodation: biases disappear gradually and Asian reality is actually experienced. We did interview general managers who said: 'it takes at least 10 months to one year and half to understand clearly your professional and cultural environment'.

Second Step: Immersion-Comprehension: Acquired Competencies

Immersion-comprehension occurs as one realizes ‘intercultural mediation’ is possible, that is one may develop social relations while taking into account eventually opposing cultural logics. Intercultural competence develops from a feeling of congruence between self and Asian reality. Expatriates engage in a genuine learning process; they are less categorical and recognize Chinese complexity. Intercultural practice turns into experienced knowledge leading to a better understanding of the multifaceted Chinese reality. M. C. Piques concurs:

It is not sufficient to say working in China is difficult. First and foremost, one may say China is not a familiar ground. One has to empty one’s mind, get rid of one’s thinking habits, and forget about familiar industrial or economic constraints. We have to try to get back to the basic physiological functions our environment led us to neglect: sensations, feelings; to pick up on information given to us, to grasp what it means. It is very difficult for us! It may happen if we are humble, sensitive and open minded. However, if we remain narrow-minded and keep on applying Cartesian logics; if we want everything right away, in a society where time does not have the same value as in western society, we are bound to fail. (Piques, 2000: 16–17)

This immersion process develops human qualities such as patience, humility and trust. In this sense, ‘comprehension’ is about working ‘together’ as its Latin etymology *comprehendere* specifies. This experiential threshold is also a time of ‘reversed exoticism’, that is, one does not focus on the Other’s strangeness but on his own peculiarities: ‘Funny, I don’t think the way he does!’. This learning process is not without strain as one acquires specific knowledge. On a personal level, intercultural experience is as much about understanding China better as it is about experiencing ‘tension’. In our study, we can emphasize five sensitive areas of tension:

1. Tension between ‘social relation and loyalty’. In fact, the quality of social and professional relations depends mainly on the passing of time. One actually has to settle in the country, not just pass through, and accept the fact that long-lasting ties with local partners develop over time. The loyalty principle appears to be a major factor in professional and personal success. Many people think that you need at least one year to understand your cultural environment.
2. Tension between ‘immersion and psychological strength’. Immersing means adjusting one’s point of view, habits and behaviours, thus taking the risk of losing one’s own cultural references. Hence, immersion requires psychological strength so as to distinguish what is tolerable from what is not, what is constant from what is unique. Personal effort is required.
3. Tension between ‘immersion and patience’. Within negotiations, contract signing or daily intercultural relations, patience appears to be the most strenuous effort one makes. Some expatriates believe Chinese ‘consume time so as to wear out Westerners’. Notions of time, efficiency and results

are often culturally specific and may sometimes rest on contradictory logic. However, it is once more on an interpersonal level that one must be patient.

4. Tension between 'listening and respecting others'. Finding one's place in China requires developing listening skills and respect towards others, as both qualities are highly valued by Chinese people. Listening implies one remains humble. However, French people have a reputation for 'arrogance' (Piques, 2001: 18), which may prove to be somewhat of an obstacle for dialogue. Nevertheless, humility should not prevent honesty. One must say what one has to say in a respectful manner, making sure the Chinese counterpart does not lose face (Huon de Kermadec, 1989; Bond, 1991; Zheng, 1995). By the same token, this may mean one has to take a detour (Jullien, 1996; Liang Shuming, 2000), namely, get round a difficulty, as frontal attack often means failure.

Thus, beyond the obvious language barrier, other difficulties arise in everyday life. Social customs and habits as well as a feeling of 'opacity' may lead one to believe Chinese culture is inaccessible. One has to take the necessary means to understand better what is taking place. This is why the immersion-comprehension stage rests on a major question expatriates have to tackle: how does one interpret what one believes is outside the realm of familiar thought? In other words, how can one understand what one does not feel? Some obstacles regarding cultural perception of time, friendship and trust may turn out to be paradoxical, eventually resulting in a 'double bind'.

'Cultural' time is a major difficulty. French expatriates have trouble integrating ambiguities concerning the fact Chinese perception of time rests on duration, rhythm and rituals, while Chinese counterparts actually focus on short-term results when involved in a specific contract. Some believe facing this paradox is an intrinsic part of being initiated to China. Perception of friendly relations is ambiguous as well. Some expatriates note Chinese insist on the importance of friendship while easily breaking off professional and non-professional ties. Others consider friendship in professional settings to be 'a marriage preprogrammed for divorce'. Most of them however believe developing friendship with Chinese partners to be a sign of a successful interpersonal relationship. Trust is essential (Fernandez, 2003) and rests on the aforementioned qualities. China trusted foreigners as it opened up to foreign investment and accepted increased partnerships. However, concern about skill appropriation and counterfeiting cause French expatriates to remain suspicious of their Chinese counterparts. This immersion-comprehension level lasts from one-and-a-half years to four–five years.

Third Step: Immersion-Integration: Enlightened Pragmatism

The two previous stages may eventually prolong and reach another immersion level: immersion-integration. How is it distinct from the foregoing stages? Far from being opposed, integration directly results from previous immersion stages. Each stage concerns a different level of acquisition. However, this interpretative model is not to be understood as a mechanical replica of reality. In fact, immersion processes involve both personal transformation and fairer knowledge of

intercultural experience. In other words, comprehension is about a choice, that of going beyond and refusing to reduce the Chinese counterpart to what E. Saïd (1980: 53) describes as academic 'essential knowledge'. This model allows us to deal with misrepresentations. Although chronological and cultural time do not cancel each other out, individuals do not perceive them the same way. Furthermore, intercultural time and experience refer to strong idiosyncratic perceptions.

Actually, integration implies one learns to speak the lingua franca. Integration would thus come full circle: one integrates and is integrated into cultural (codes and logic) and intercultural (tension and interaction in thought processes) configurations, and eventually acquires specific cultural competencies. On a personal level, immersion-integration is about embarking on a profoundly humble journey, or as J. Guillermaz writes regarding his experience of China, going on 'a relentless quest for inaccessible perfection' (1989: 27). The notion of integration refers to an accomplishment which deeply affects a personal identity, and as such conjures up J. M. Belorgey's (2000) description of a 'defector' identity.

Integration indicates that one immerses oneself in the Asian symbolic realm. Expatriates now know exactly what to do and what not to do. For example, one will spontaneously know chopsticks should not be placed vertically in one's rice bowl as such gesture is part of funeral rituals. One will behave according to hospitality rituals and will stand aside in the presence of an elder (consistent with the global social hierarchy). Such ability does not rest solely on cognitive processes as it involves attitudes, discreet manners, and relevant body language: cultural codes are put into practice. Successful intercultural exchange sometimes requires behaving in a particular manner so as to be perceived as culturally *authentic*. One discovers a new facet of experience as one looks at one's self and appreciates the transformation one has gone through. Actually, the Chinese counterpart is often the one who notices this change. One is no longer the same, intercultural empathic connivance is established. One recognizes integration has been achieved and for some, involvement goes beyond, into the private realm of mixed marriage and extended families. Immersion-integration is revealed by way of two indicators: the mediator figure and cultural *métissage* via intercultural alteration.

The mediator figure has a long history. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the mediator was the *compradore*, a term derived from the Portuguese language (Brossolet, 1999). Today, the mediator may be an interpreter, either a French expatriate who is familiar with China or a Chinese individual living abroad, in Hong Kong or Taiwan, who is familiar with the western world. Mediators, whether an engineer, a lawyer, a technician, a journalist or an interpreter, assist in creating a balance between French and Chinese individuals. They play a major role in weaving the necessary social links for intercultural exchange. The right balance may be hard to reach as Chinese notions of harmony and actions are not individually defined. Other factors such as family, local, regional or political features also affect actual exchange, either implicitly or explicitly. In both professional and non professional settings, mediators act as an 'intercultural blacksmith' (Fernandez, 2002: 205–206) who not only knows which cultural key may unlock understanding but may even mould new keys to resolve conflict (Kamenarovic, 2001), and, in fine, build new bridges between

Asian and western cultural logics. They will take into account the fact that specific dates are more favourable for a meeting (numerology and astrology), and will consider the supernatural as a serious matter, and so forth. Although intercultural mediators tend to clear up Chinese and French (for the Chinese!) opacity, they may face difficulties as trust also rests on individuals' professional competencies and moral qualities.

Implications for Theory Development and the Human Resources Departments of Companies in Asia

Our typology around five identities shows that, far from being reduced to a unique process of socialization within an organization, prolonged experience of international mobility is not in contradiction with the mobilization of cultural and ethnic elements in social competition. We cannot, moreover, conduct research using managerial literature which values the profile of the transnational manager as hyper-adaptable (Peters & Waterman, 1983; Pucik *et al.*, 1993; McCall, 1997) following the path of mechanical and accelerated assimilation into the values of the company.

On a personal level, qualities such as patience, hospitality, trust, humility, discretion, silence and appropriate timing are not acquired easily, but are essential to bridge building in intercultural relations. A 'nomadic intelligence' combines two distinct processes for managers. On one hand, it builds on an existential topography: a quest for Other, knowledge and self. On the other hand, it means becoming acquainted with an intercultural space-time configuration. Hence, nomadic intelligence is not about throwing oneself into imitation, believing one could actually become Chinese (Boulet, 1988). Given that one cannot experience another's life, an intermediate space has to develop. This singular space configuration is a fertile ground for cultural *métissage*. However, intercultural exchange rests on a tenuous link; it can be unlocked or locked with a single key.

This is why nomadic intelligence is not a purely cognitive process nor can it be reduced to righteous mechanics and synaptic connections. It lets itself be taken in and be surprised by events. It is driven by constant curiosity; it embraces unpredictability and overcomes fears of the unknown. It is intelligence as it always looks to the future and rests on past experience. One recognizes knowledge may stem from the unexpected; that ignorance is potentially fertile. Knowledge is no longer about absolute truths. It often becomes experienced knowledge as intuition and 'sensitive listening' (Barbier, 1997) develop.

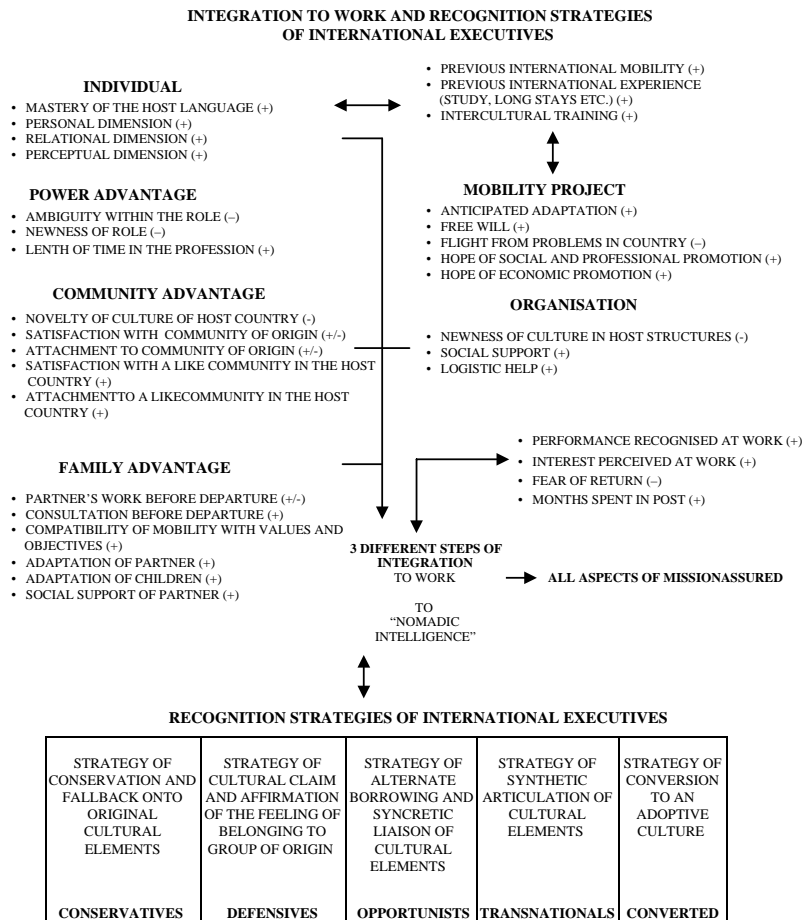
Conclusion

In the global company where the stakes are increasingly not just those of simple acceptance of workers from different cultures within the system (which eradicate any differences), but those of long-term collaboration, national identification (including regional and micro-local) has by no means disappeared. It is perhaps the main thrust of this article to underline in Asia and in France different steps of integration, without mechanical relation, and the complex double movement by which international executives continue to appropriate the spirit of the original community to which they originally belong ('primary socialization' harking back

to a subjective importance of ethnicity) while, at the same time, identifying themselves with professional roles by learning to play them in a personal and effective way outside of the context of their cultural origins.

In the context of adding to the resources held by executives to enable them to live through the effects of the modernization of large organizations, our research calls for a research of dynamic transactions of identity which does not bind them to a tragedy (obliging them to forget their roots in the name of conversion), but seeks instead to illustrate the possibilities for cultural enrichment and social distinction based on ethnicity.

Maintaining a dynamic relationship with their ethnic or cultural identifications which they seek to weave together as a life story, international executives confirm that one of the key aspects of management is face-to-face contact with this 'other' person with whom one is obliged to cooperate.



Note: (+) positive influence on integration to work; (-) negative influence on integration to work
 Table created using data from Camilleri (1990), from Black, *et al.* (1991), from Mutabazi & al. (1994), from Cerdin (1996), from Pierre (2000) and from Fernandez (2002).

Figure 1.

COMMUNITY ADVANTAGE: All the resources held by an internationally mobile actor in the arena of the like community and referring to factors linked especially to cultural belonging, to a social network that carries the collective memory, and so forth.

FAMILY ADVANTAGE: All the resources held by an internationally mobile actor in the arena of the family unit and referring to factors linked especially to the plasticity of the family organization depending on the geographical location of the posting.

ANTICIPATED ADAPTATION: Corresponds to the degree of adaptation which started or was undertaken in the original subsidiary (important role given to the reports of an experienced executive on return). With a realistic appreciation of the responsibilities and the level of performance expected, it helps to reduce uncertainty.

INTERCULTURAL TRAINING:

For R. L. Tung (1981) the training methods should be contingent on two determining factors:

- the degree of interaction between the mobile executive and the premises (length of communication);
- the similarity of the culture of origin of the mobile executive and the host culture (length of culture).

A positive correlation exists, according to us, between integration to work and intercultural training built around films, works and briefings by older employees in the area of international mobility, but equally around real situations that international executives might meet at work (role plays, short journeys and so on) The degree of participation of the family unit in this training is also very positive.

PERSONAL DIMENSION:

M. Mendenhall & G. Oddou (1985) class the capacities of individuals to adapt in three ways. In this area the personal dimension includes the abilities that allow mobile executives to maintain or reinforce their mental health, their psychological well-being and their feeling of self-worth. It is made up of the ability to face stress, technical skills and the ability to replace those activities that procured pleasure and well-being in the country of origin with similar activities in the host country.

RELATIONAL DIMENSION: Includes the capacity to enter into relationships with the nationals of the host country. Consists of the willingness to use the languages of the host country, confidence while interacting with others as well as the ability to develop relationships.

PERCEPTUAL DIMENSION: Consists of the ability to perceive and to analyse the reasons for the behaviour of foreigners and to cast aside ethnocentric opinions or behaviour.

WORK OF THE PARTNER BEFORE DEPARTURE: A traditional brake on the decision and on the success of the expatriation, the work of the partner (notably with double careers) has not in our view a systematically negative influence.

SOCIAL SUPPORT OF THE PARTNER: Concerns the adaptation to conditions of life during activities relating to the areas of housing, shopping, leisure, health care and administrative formalities and so on.

SATISFACTION AND ATTACHMENT TO COMMUNITY OF ORIGIN:

The community refers to the social fabric of origin, in a particular geographical zone, including links with friends and the roles in the community played by the international executive at the heart of a particular group with similar aims.

The question of community advantage is posed in three ways (Fisher & Shaw, 1994):

- the new culture of the host country compared with the country of origin;
- satisfaction towards the community of origin and a like community in the host country;
- the attachment towards the country of origin and towards a like community in the host country.

LOGISTIC HELP AND SOCIAL SUPPORT: Concerns help with housing, doing administrative tasks, the exploration of the host country during preparatory journeys, the schooling of children, and so forth. Can be demonstrated by the community of origin or the host community, a line manager or colleagues on the spot.

Notes

¹ Qualitative data was collected (14 interviews adding up to 800 pages once translated), together with 33 semi-structured interviews, as well as interviews of journalists and photographers working in Asia. This article is based on a thesis entitled, 'Education through travel: imaginaries and intercultural experience of westerners in Asia', as well as on research done in 1997–2000 regarding French expatriates' experience of China and more recent studies (another ongoing research project from 2001–2003).

² Carried out using full-time salaried workers, the results described in this study are based on 120 semi-directed interviews undertaken with a population of executives and managers working for *Alpha*. 86 of these interviews were conducted with 'international' executives – by 'international' we mean non-French executives who, while working for *Alpha*, are, or have been, away from their original subsidiary and are internationally mobile, whether this mobility takes place in France (the case for 70 of the interviewees) or within another subsidiary in the organization studied (for the remaining 16). The average length of service of those on long-term contracts was 11.3 years; the average number of trips abroad (of over three months) by each executive was 2.3 and the average length of the stay abroad was 2.6 years. Of the 86 international executives questioned, 5 per cent had less than 5 years' seniority, 30 per cent between 5 and 15 years' seniority, 35 per cent between 15 and 20 years' seniority and 30 per cent had been with the company for more than 20 years (these were often the directors of a subsidiary or service division). Of these 86 interviews, it should be noted that only two women were questioned. The French executives who also experienced international mobility (intra-organizational) are, in this article, referred to as expatriates.

³ A. C. Wagner, in another research context, reports the case of M. Schneider who underlines the symbolic profits of the capital brought in by his family: 'they couldn't place me'. Because he thought he had escaped the status of being a foreigner without being purebred French, he was able to define himself

as a prototype of Franco-German friendship, a social image that was particularly useful in his area of activity (Wagner, 1998: 174).

- ⁴ N. Glazer and D. P. Moynihan (1975) have illustrated the emergence of what they call a 'new ethnicity', a process of ethnic identification among the upper and middle classes of the wealthy suburbs of American cities (the Irish and St Patrick, the Italians and the annual Mulberry Street parade). The subjective identity invoked on demand during these temporary events has no influence over the rest of their social lives. M. Waters (1990) explains that the 'new ethnicity' persists as it allows the individual to satisfy two contradictory desires inherent in the American psyche: the desire to belong to a community and the desire for individuality. The new ethnicity is attractive to the middle classes because it implies a choice. It gives the impression of having a rich cultural background without the costs attached to ethnic loyalty (commitment to a group with social obligations) being high.

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