

Navigating through the Australian Workplace: Mapping the Experience of Taiwanese Working Holiday Makers (WHMs) in Brisbane

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Abstract: Given that in recent years the number of young Taiwanese coming to Australia under the Working Holiday Makers (WHMs) program has been on the rise, the aim of this exploratory study was to examine the intercultural communication issues faced by Taiwanese WHMs in the Australian labour market with regards to employment, by focusing on their post-arrival experiences. Based on in-depth interviews conducted with 13 Taiwanese WHMs in Brisbane, Australia, we found that issues of linguistic competence and living mostly in mono-ethnic enclaves affected their employment outcomes. While most were enthusiastic to interact with mainstream Australian society, their living and work environments coupled with low English language proficiency, forced them to lean towards a separatist orientation. In turn, separation from mainstream English-speaking society further impeded their English language acquisition, thereby resulting in a vicious circle. These findings are discussed in terms of Berry's acculturation theory and Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory.

Keywords: Taiwan, Australia, working holiday makers, linguistic competence, discrimination, employment

1. Introduction

In recent years, many Taiwanese youths have come to Australia under the Working Holiday Makers (WHMs) program. Australia's WHM program is a temporary migration opportunity for young adults (aged eighteen to thirty years) to legally work in Australia for up to twelve months with a possibility of further extension (Horikawa, 2002; Kawashima, 2010; Tan, Richardson, Lester, Bai & Sun, 2009), to encourage cultural exchange, thus building closer relationships between Australia and partner nations (Department of Immigration & Citizenship [DIAC], 2011). Due to the flexible nature of the WHM program in Australia (e.g., unlimited visa quota, mobility, and longer duration of stay), it is a more popular destination than other countries such as Canada, Germany, the UK etc. (Chen, Lu & Chang, 2009; Clarke, 2004). Meanwhile, by supplying a casual workforce for industries such as tourism, hospitality, and agriculture, WHMs also make a significant contribution to the Australian economy (Tan & Lester, 2012), especially to the unskilled labour market (Hugo, 2006).

In 2010-11, approximately 36 percent more Taiwanese WHMs visas were granted (13,809 total visa grants) as compared to the previous year; this is roughly 7.4 percent of the total WHMs granted in a year (DIAC, 2010; 2011). These numbers signal the rise in the number of Taiwanese WHMs coming to Australia, at a time when most of Australia has been experiencing a subtle economic downturn and an explosion of migrant workers. Seeking employment in

Australia has become relatively more difficult for Taiwanese WHMs given the cultural distance between the two cultures and recognizing that unemployment and underemployment are two significant issues experienced by migrant non-English speaking background (NESB) workers in the Australian labour market (Daly, Barker & McCarthy, 2002).

WHM visas are only valid for one/two years, and most return to Taiwan when their visa expires. Thus, WHMs can be grouped as sojourners — persons who reside in another place temporarily (Kim, 1988, p. 2001), and as sojourners, the WHMs' adaptation to life (albeit temporary) in an unfamiliar cultural setting is often marked by language problems, violation of expectations, self-doubt, cultural shock, homesickness, loneliness, limited social interaction with locals, and considerable distress (Chen et al., 2009; Clarke, 2005; Daly et al., 2002; Horikawa, 2002). Some researchers have started to investigate the conditions and circumstances surrounding the WHM experience, but it is still somewhat limited to Japan (see Horikawa, 2002; Kawashima, 2010) and Britain (Clarke, 2004; 2005; Rice, 2007), while other studies looking at employment experiences have mainly focused on international students (e.g., Brown, 2008) or migrants/refugees (Hebbani & Colic-Peisker, 2012; Lu, Samararatunge & Härtel, 2012). Thus, the aim of this qualitative exploratory study was to fill a gap in WHM literature by examining the intercultural communication issues faced specifically by Taiwanese WHMs in the Australian labour market with regards to employment.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

2.1. Acculturation

As a pioneer of acculturation research, Berry (2005) defined acculturation as, “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (p. 698). According to Berry (1997), individuals in ethnic groups are confronted with two issues of how to acculturate: a) maintaining their heritage culture, and b) maintaining a good relationship with members of the dominant group. When individuals wish to maintain their original culture and at the same time seek daily interactions with the host society groups, this indicates integration. When individuals lose their ethnic traditions without seeking relations with a new culture, this indicates marginalization. However, when individuals reject the new cultural context and assign a value to holding on to their original culture, this indicates separation. In contrast, assimilation is achieved when individuals live exclusively in the dominant host culture and have little interest in their heritage cultural maintenance. As suggested in the culture shock literature, the consequences of migration vary depending on the cultural distance between the groups and the acculturation strategies adopted (Wilson, Fisher & Moore, 2009).

Research on these acculturation strategies has demonstrated that in most cases, integration is found to be the best and most popular psychological and sociocultural adaptation, while marginalization is the least preferred, and associated with the highest risk of adaptation problems (Liu, 2007; Sam & Berry, 2010). Berry's model has been applied to studies on immigrants, refugees and indigenous people, but it does not refer to the host environment, which can also exert a strong influence on how migrants experience their acculturation process

(Kosic, Mannetti & Sam, 2005). In response to this point, Kim's (1988, 2001) Cross-cultural Adaptation (CCA) theory which takes into account host culture's attitudes is discussed in the following section as another theoretical foundation to further explore the interrelationship between the host environment and a successful WHM experience.

2.2. Cross-Cultural Adaptation (CCA)

Kim (2001) defined CCA as, "a dynamic process by which individuals upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or re-establish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments" (p. 31). The major challenge faced by strangers entering and resettling in an alien cultural environment is to learn to live with unfamiliarity and uncertainty (Kim, 2005) and "to choose their acculturation strategies" in an unfamiliar culture (Liu, 2007). Some strangers positively attempt to reduce the uncertainty by communicating with locals, by actively learning and speaking the language of the host nation and approaching the media in the host culture; inversely, others remain in-group and rarely interact with people outside their cultural community (Laroche, Kim, Hui & Tomiuk, 1997). Kim (1988, 2001) noted that migrant workers can remain in their own ethnic community to minimize their cultural adaptation pressure, and hence, this theoretical model is helpful to further explore how Taiwanese WHMs seeking employment cope with cultural and communication challenges in Australia.

Since communication is a prerequisite for successful adjustment of strangers into a new environment, Kim (1988, 2001) identified the factors related to newcomers' changes and developed a structural model of CCA (Kim, 2001): a) **Host communication competence** identified as a form of personal communication; b) **Social communication**, including host interpersonal and mass communication and ethnic interpersonal and mass communication. Ethnic social communication serves to facilitate strangers' (especially sojourners') adaptation in the initial phase of integration by allowing them to communicate within ethnic communities (though it could hinder their adaptation to the host culture in the long run); c) **Environment**, including host environment receptivity, host environment conformity pressure, and the ethnic group strength within the host environment. The host environment, in terms of its openness and willingness, poses a direct influence on immigrants' integration; d) **Predispositions** (physical and emotional), which refers to strangers' adaptation potential - preparedness for change, ethnic distance (to that of the host environment), and adaptive personality. Strangers with an open mind and clear understanding of the new language and culture have higher ability of transition, and lastly; e) **Intercultural transformation**, which is represented by psychological health and measured by loneliness and acculturative stress. **An individual can experience stress when entering a new environment where the old patterns do not work; however, with time and some efforts, he/she moves gradually toward adjustment, which is known as the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic** (Kim, 2001). CCA enables the researcher to view the adaptation process of Taiwanese WHMs from a broader perspective including the host society environment.

In sum, these two theories offer a foundation and framework to understand WHMs' adaptation processes. The following section briefly presents past literature on WHMs and migrants' employment issues and communication differences.

3. Literature Review

3.1. WHM Experiences in Australia

According to past research, potential problems and challenges presenting on arrival among WHMs in host nations mainly lay in culture, adjustment process, language, homesickness, local contacts, employment circumstance, and stress (Chen et al., 2009; Clarke, 2005; Horikawa, 2002). Clarke's (2005) study on British WHMs in Australia showed that although sharing the same language and similar lifestyle, living and working in Australia for one year or longer posed a challenge for many British WHMs. Since WHMs are young and relatively mobile, they were less welcome by some employers and seen to be as temporary, short-term workers, and lacking in commitment. Similarly, according to Chen et al.'s study (2009) exploring quite generally Taiwanese WHMs' pre-departure aspiration and on-site experience in Australia, the working holiday trips were defined to be rewarding among respondents. Furthermore, they valued such overseas working experience as a facilitator for their future careers once they returned to the Taiwanese labour market. Chen et al.'s (2009) was the only WHM study in Australia that was Taiwan-specific. However, this study did not investigate either the conditions of employment or the adaptation processes for Taiwanese WHMs themselves.

Investigating the experiences of Japanese WHMs in Australia, Kawashima (2010, p. 125) found it disappointing that most Japanese WHMs did not actually "gain much" during their stay in Australia and they were largely free from cultural shock. Indeed, the major problem they cited was issues with English language proficiency. These WHMs stayed comfortably within Japanese enclaves and showed less interest in socialising with locals. Since most of them were not fluent English speakers, they mostly found jobs within their own community with Japanese co-workers and customers.

In summarising Australia's WHM program, Tan et al. (2009) noted that high English language proficiency and higher levels of education were two key factors which facilitated WHM employment. The WHMs worked mainly in low-skilled jobs within "accommodation and food services" (e.g., waiter, cleaner) and "agriculture, forestry and fishing" industries (e.g., farm hand) (Tan et al., 2009, p. 15).

3.2. Migrant Employment

Literature on migrant employment has explored the reason why some employers in host nations prefer hiring migrant workers. From their perspective, migrants/sojourners are valued as high quality labour forces for low-waged and low-skilled work in tourism, hospitality, construction, and agriculture sectors (Orrenius & Zavodny, 2008; Tan & Lester, 2012). However, some employers were unwilling to recognize Asian qualifications (see Junankar, Paul & Yasmeen, 2004) or accept "short-term" workers (Tan et al., 2009, p. 88).

3.3. Language Proficiency

Many scholars have emphasized the importance of local language proficiency in helping

migrants' adjustment at their destination (Brown, 2008; Janta, Lugosi, Brown & Ladkin, 2012). The close relationship between host language proficiency and migrants' labour market success is also well-documented (Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003; Hebbani & Colic-Peisker, 2012). Past research tells us that literacy and fluency in the dominant language is likely to be a decisive element for migrant workers; however, these people are often disadvantaged by their limited language proficiency, and limited basic "soft skills" of Australian cultural knowledge such as having good communication with customers and good relationship with co-workers (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007, p. 17; Shih, 2002, p. 104).

Dustmann and Fabbri's UK-based study (2003) demonstrated that language acquisition had a positive effect on employment probabilities and social integration, leading to higher earnings. Specifically, local language proficiency helped with obtaining job information and facilitating job search strategies. Moreover, even though many jobs in certain industries such as hospitality required good communication skills, Wright and Pollert (2006) claimed that it was quite possible for migrants to enter back-of-house jobs within such industries with hardly any knowledge of the host language, albeit admitting that deficiencies in language capabilities often forced migrant workers to undertake low-grade and low-waged jobs.

3.4. Social Networking

Migrants' social networks, in addition to linguistic competence, are vital to access jobs in countries of destination (Poros, 2001; Raghuram, Henry & Bornat, 2010). Social networking here refers to both physical and virtual networks. It is suggested that the potential and actual resources in the social networks are to be seen as a form of social capital which enables migrants to acquire employment opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986). Relatively impoverished social capital and attenuated networks are noted as barriers among migrant workers in daily interaction and work (Portes, 1995). Generally, these networks involving "strong ties" within a socially bounded group and "weak ties" with members from other social groups are used by migrants to socialize, obtain job opportunities, gain emotional support, and learn English (Ryan, Sales, Tilki & Siara, 2008, p. 686). Results from Janta et al.'s study (2012) revealed that migrants upon arrival, found that networks within their cultural community were helpful in settlement, but it was non-migrant networks that were crucial for accessing jobs and shaping employment outcomes (Raghuram et al., 2010).

Thus, past research showed that language proficiency and social networking were closely interrelated (Janta et al., 2012). On one hand, host networks and contacts were evidently valuable as a precondition for improving language competence in the workplace (Brown, 2008), forcing migrant workers inevitably to learn and engage in communication activities (Janta et al., 2012). But on the other hand, in-group communication would block flows of information and limit cross-cultural sojourners' chances to develop their linguistic ability (Kim, 2001). However, problems in host socialisation would be exacerbated, and ghettoization would be reinforced if migrants consolidated ties with their original country network and continued working and/or living in enclaves enjoying mono-ethnic communication (Brown, 2008).

4. Methods

Data for this study were collected from a target population recruited through snowball sampling by the Chinese author through Taiwanese friends/acquaintances at work and/or university in the Greater Brisbane region, in Australia (see Clarke, 2004; Horikawa, 2002). Snowball sampling can be defined as, “A technique for finding research subjects. One subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third and so on” (Vogt, 1999, as cited in Atkinson & Flint 2001, p.1), thereby promoting trust in the researcher as referrals are made by acquaintances of peers rather than more formal methods of recruitment. The “chain of referral” may imbue the researcher with characteristics associated with being an “insider” and aid access to respondents (Atkinson & Flint, 2001, p. 2). The researcher being a Chinese female had an “insider” status in terms of “familiarity” sharing a common language and cultural context, which is an important aspect of qualitative research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 55). Having an awareness of possible problems meant that the researcher was particularly careful to self-evaluate during all phases of the research, to listen carefully to respondents, and remain open to new learning.

Contact was first made by face-to-face interaction and some participants were later contacted via social media. Through snowball sampling, a total of 13 participants were recruited. The primary data for this study was collected through two in-depth focus group interviews and six individual in-depth interviews conducted with Taiwanese WHMs in Brisbane, Australia in September 2012. Since this group moved across Australia from time to time (working while having a holiday), although participants were in Brisbane during the data collection, most participants had experiences from working/living in different parts of Australia.

4.1. Data Collection

All participants completed a short demographic survey that asked for participants’ demographic information, in addition to their current English language proficiency, length of residence in Australia, their current suburb, and employment status. In the interests of data consistency, the interview protocol was the same in the individual interviews and the focus groups. The first few questions mainly focused on the incentives, expectations, and post-arrival feelings of Taiwanese WHMs while the rest of the questions were focused on the cultural differences and communication differences associated with participants’ employment experiences.

The interview schedule was first pilot tested on one participant to identify any flaws, limitations, and/or other weaknesses, following which, the wording of several questions was changed to improve clarity. Based on the principle of, ‘what they wanted to tell us as opposed to just what we wanted to know’, additional questions related to discrimination and English proficiency were added; this revised schedule was tested again on two participants (interview protocol see Appendix A).

We wanted to explore not just what WHMs thought but to attempt a more in-depth analysis discovering why participants thought as they did. Focus groups have the potential to foster group interaction by encouraging participants to assist each other in elaborating thoughts, generating new ideas and encouraging self-expression (Clapper & Massey, 1996). Since the

nature of the WHM population often means high levels of mobility across time and place, pragmatic concerns associated with, for example, irregular duty rosters of a large number of employed WHMs made it difficult for a group of participants to be in the same place at the same time. Thus, depending on participants' availability/convenience, there were five participants in the first focus group, but only two in the second one, while another six participants were individually interviewed. Focus group interviews were conducted in Sunnybank and Kangaroo Point while the individual interviews were conducted mostly in cafés as it was convenient for participants.

The consent form and information sheet were in Mandarin. Evidence suggests that in research studies involving "minority language users 'rigor' is enhanced when the researcher(s) share a common language and culture with participants" (Irvine, Roberts & Bradbury-Jones, 2008, p. 35). Considering the sample group's limited English proficiency and to minimize possible social desirability bias (Nederhof, 1985), all participants were interviewed by the Chinese female researcher in Mandarin.

4.2. Participants' Profile

The sample was overwhelmingly female (11/13) with only two male participants. Anecdotally, this gender imbalance may be due to the compulsory one-year military training for all male Taiwanese; hence, there are far more female Taiwanese WHMs in Australia than male. Most participants (8/13) were aged between 24 -26 years, followed by 27-29 years (3/13), 21-23 years (1/13), and 29-31 years (1/13). The average length of stay in Australia was 10 months, with the shortest stay being two months, and the longest stay being 24 months. According to the Australia and New Zealand standard classification of occupations (2009), other than one male participant who was listed in Category Two as Manager, all others (12/13) were listed in Category Eight with four waitresses, three massage therapists, two housekeepers, two farm and factory workers, and one kitchen hand. The majority of participants were living in Sunnybank (5/13) and Kangaroo Point (3/13), which are suburbs known to have a predominantly Asian population.

4.3. Data Analysis

All data from the digital audio recordings were translated and transcribed into English by the bi-lingual Chinese researcher who re-checked the transcript for accuracy – this was the first phase in the thematic analysis. A long table approach was used to summarize opinions and to manually sort and rearrange the transcript material (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The transcripts were individually coded by both researchers looking for emergent themes, and then discussed jointly. Through this process, it was identified that both researchers were consistent in coding as all themes were found to be in common. These themes were coded under headings, namely pre-departure incentives and experiences, perceived discrimination, mono-ethnic enclaves, and English proficiency.

5. Results

5.1. Pre-departure Incentives and Expectations

There were many reasons why participants came to Australia under the WHM program such as the desire to learn English, popularity of WHM program in Taiwan, experiencing a different way of life/culture abroad while young, earning and saving money, travelling while gaining working experience, etc. Factors that attracted Taiwanese WHMs to choose Australia included easy information regarding Australia's WHM program, ease in finding a job, low threshold (easy to get the visa), unlimited visa grants, strength of Australian currency, and Australia being an English speaking country which was relatively close to Taiwan. Participants wished for their life in Australia to be relaxed, simple, slow-paced, and interesting; they expected to save money, improve their English language skills, and make many Australian friends.

Free and frequent information sharing sessions held by agencies in Taiwan constituted the largest information resource for WHMs (10/13) followed by the Internet, social media, books, friends, TV programs, and newspapers. Participants said that "online resources were very informative and communicative". Information about backpacker forums (e.g., bbkz.com) was abundant while information on Facebook was more up-to-date.

Different people obtained information in different ways; people wished to obtain comprehensive, accurate, and objective information regarding the WHM program, including both positive and negative accounts from other travellers. Some argued that in hindsight, finding jobs, earning enough money, and making friends with Australians was not easy at all. Before coming to Australia, the participants hoped to find jobs as wait staff, factory/ farm workers, or other labouring work. Working as wait staff (5/13) in a restaurant or café was the most popular job since their English could be improved in this way. It was noticeable that 4/13 participants planned to work on a farm because, "Actually your English proficiency is not that important in finding jobs since you can work in farms or factories which probably require no English," according to Susie (27 years, female), who spoke basic English.

Among 13 participants, only 7 found jobs that matched their expectations. Those people who failed to obtain their "dream jobs" stated the reasons as "insufficient working experience in Australia", "limited English", having "Asian faces" and being "in urgent need of having a job."

5.2. Perceived Discrimination

Though Australians' politeness and enthusiasm were highly praised by most participants, some participants experienced unpleasant interactions when it came to work. Perceived discrimination existed in daily life not only for Huaren (i.e., people from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao or other predominantly Asian countries, whose parents are Chinese and who adopted Chinese culture and language when they were young; for example Malaysian-born Chinese, Singapore-born Chinese, or Australian-born Chinese), but also for other Asians. Most participants (9/13) had encountered various forms of perceived discrimination during their stay in Australia when it came to job seeking and working. Lisa (26 years) and Nikki (24 years)

were both working in Brisbane CBD as waitresses:

Discrimination starts in job seeking when managers know that we are WHMs. You know WHMs are short-term workers and were considered by some managers to be unstable and unreliable workers with only limited English, so many places do not want hire WHMs at all.

Shell (31 years) and Bella (24 years) reflected that many Australian shops preferred Western faces, so when they dropped their resumés into Anglo-owned Aussie shops, normally they were told there was ‘no vacancy.’ Alternatively, the managers might take their resumés, but did not follow up on them. Interestingly, participants not only felt discriminated against by Australian bosses, but also with Asian/Huaren bosses while looking for a job. Shell mentioned that many Asian restaurants would offer work trial and training for WHMs without pay or a very low training pay. The salary would be increased according to people’s performance later on; however, it was still much lower than the minimum wage.

After securing a job, some participants perceived discrimination from customers. Nikki, Avy (27 years) and Lisa used to serve some local [Australian] customers who they thought used advanced vocabulary purposely to embarrass the Asian staff and “insisted on correct pronunciation and kept asking the same thing again and again.” Some local customers even questioned Nikki: “Can’t you even understand English?” when she had some difficulty understanding them. Bella used to work for an Indian boss, but she quit after four days because of what she perceived as unfair and unequal treatment between Taiwanese workers and Indian workers. Bella was yet to be paid for the work she completed. Similarly, the chef in Lisa’s workplace was really harsh and did not treat her fairly, “Maybe because I cannot speak and understand Cantonese and I am just a WHM.” In a seemingly more subjective instance, Daisy complained that her rental application was rejected by a real estate agency without any valid reason when three girls (two Taiwanese and one Australian) wanted to room together, which left her with ill feelings and disappointment:

I told my [Australian] friend that maybe they don’t like Asian people so they don’t want us to live there. My friend said she agrees with me as well. Maybe they can’t give us the reason like “you are Asians”, so they gave us no reason instead.

Some WHMs felt they were victims of deceit (5/13) while working on farms. Normally, WHMs were lured in and deceived by the “staff wanted in farms” ads online, but when they arrived on the farm, they found there was no vacancy. Still, they had to pay for their “expensive” accommodation in the workplace though they had no income. The supervisor kept convincing them and giving them hope that “the high season will come soon” and “you will have plenty of work soon”.

5.3. WHMs’ English Proficiency

In order to find a job, WHMs (8/13) first undertook English language-training courses. Some

of them found it very useful since it created a good English speaking environment for them to speak out; it also helped them to adjust to different accents and job seeking, and making friends from whom they could obtain more job information. Conversely, other participants raised concerns that the courses were of little value since, as Maria (23 years) said, “Once you finish the course, your English level [writing and reading] would revert back to its original state,” said Maria (23 years), and as mentioned earlier, a few participants (4/13) planned to work on farms as such a job would require little/no English proficiency.

Participants adopted a range of strategies when looking for a job. Introduction through Huaren friends (10/13) either pre-departure or post-arrival was noted as the simplest, fastest, most effective means by which to secure a job. In addition, advertisements on Huaren websites and job information on Facebook groups were regularly updated and it was much easier to find a job in Huaren shops – in most of the cases, managers of these shops preferred staff from within their community since Huaren employees were much easier to communicate with and were prepared to accept lower wages.

The top three difficulties in seeking for a job listed by participants included limited English proficiency, limited work experience in Australia, and the comparatively short-term nature of the WHM visa. In line with past research, English language difficulties presented the greatest obstacle in obtaining a job. Michelle (25 years) complained that the language barrier stopped her from seeking a job with Australian bosses, while Nikki confessed that her limited English made her feel nervous, unconfident, and timid, when looking for a job. However, Daniel (26 years) had a different point of view, “Actually, many Australian bosses like Asians since we are hard-working, motivated, and we obey the rules. But since many WHMs did not spend enough time and effort on improving their English, there is nothing for them to complain about.” Miscommunication and insufficient knowledge of English expressions in the workplace when talking with local customers or co-workers bothered a few participants (4/13). Bella voiced her concerns, “When communicating with the customers, I want to talk with them to show my care, but I don’t know how to talk so they won’t feel offended (...).”

Since it could sometimes be difficult for Taiwanese WHMs to understand Australian accents, and due to a limited vocabulary and lack of common topics, some participants (3/13) indicated that they rarely spoke with [Anglo] Australians. Maria, the only participant living in an English speaking environment, said:

Taiwanese are somewhat more introverted and will hide their thoughts, while foreigners are more extroverted, and will freely speak their minds. But it is stressful when talking with Australians since it takes time for me to think how to respond and how to answer but they do like to start the chat. It’s mainly because of the language and topics. Many of their topics are local news and they are quite different from ours.

Similarly, Bella stated, “Since English is not my first language, it is hard for me to understand Australians’ tones and what they actually want to express. Even though they are very friendly and say hello, we cannot engage in a deep topic.”

Participants chose various strategies to overcome difficulties in communicating with Australians in English such as asking people around for help (12/13), using body language

(7/13), trying to speak slowly with simple English (5/13), asking interlocutor(s) to repeat (3/13), or checking their electronic dictionary (3/13). Carl (26 years) was one of the only two male participants and the only participant who did not want to seek help from others since the other friends around him were also at the same English proficiency level. Also, Shell, Daniel and Daisy emphasised that they preferred “solving the problems on their own since only in this way could they memorise it, and make progress [in learning English]”.

With the exception of Mavis, all the other participants (12/13) agreed that their social network had expanded after being employed mainly within Huaren or Asian community. Other changes in life included improvement in living standard (13/13), improvement in English ability (10/13), improvement in skills and confidence (3/13). Shell and Maria both agreed that English in the workplace was quite different from the language school because no one in the class was Australian, but there are many Australian customers in the workplace. Daniel used to work both in a Mandarin speaking environment and an English-speaking environment, and pointed out that only when one worked in the English speaking environment [with an opportunity to communicate in English] could one improve one’s English. With the exception of Mavis, all other participants (12/13) were working with either Huaren managers or co-workers. “English and Mandarin” were marked by 5 participants as their main workplace spoken language and “Mandarin” was chosen by 6 participants. Only two participants primarily spoke English in their workplace. With the exception of Daniel, half of all participants spoke English at work as they were working with managers and co-workers who spoke Mandarin, while customers were mainly Australians. Conversely, Daniel spoke Mandarin to his customers and English to his co-workers. It was noticeable that Mavis and Julia, who were both working as housekeepers, only spoke English in their workplaces. Mavis explained this was because “all the co-workers around me are Koreans, so I have to talk in English,” while Julia said, “it is required by the manager since he does not want to hear people talking bad behind him using another language.”

5.4. Mono-ethnic Enclaves

Other than Maria who was living with Indians, all the other participants (12/13) were mainly living within the Huaren Community. But Shell, Daisy, and Michelle showed a strong desire to mix with local Australians whenever they could. As previously mentioned, participants felt stressed when talking with Australians owing to limited English vocabulary and knowledge about common topics. Living within the Huaren community and sharing the same language was more convenient and also resulted in reduced cultural difficulties. Also, as previously indicated by Lisa, an absence of social activities with locals contributed to why Taiwanese people preferred to socialise within their own group. It is interesting that many of them explained that although they didn’t have many Australian friends, they had plenty of Asian friends. As Nikki elaborated:

I guess it is easier for Asians to live together with less cultural shock. We used to live with a Japanese girl and we got along with each other quite well but not with another European girl. Even those local friends I have, most of them actually are Australian-born Chinese [Huaren]. I guess it’s mainly because of the cultural differences and our

ability to speak and understand English. When we talk with them we feel stressed and don't know what to talk about. On the contrary, I feel more relaxed and uninhibited when talking with Asian friends since we talk in simple English and we all make the same language mistakes.

Similarly, Carl said:

Before coming to Australia, I was naive to think that I would make a lot of Australian friends and only talk in English with them. But realistically, I spent most of my time within the Taiwanese community and hardly made any Australian friends. Occasionally I talk with some Australians in the workplace, but it's only limited to working conversations. And when I was working on the farm, I talked with some foreigners in English just for a while and it was only basic conversations. It's totally different from what I thought it would be, like going to clubs with many crazy local friends after work or having dinner /going to party in their houses. Actually it is quite hard to mix with them and depends heavily on your personality attributes and ability to communicate in English.

6. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the intercultural communication issues in the employment context of Taiwanese WHMs working in Australia. The findings offer some insights about the inter-relationship between English language proficiency and host country environment on employment outcomes amongst Taiwanese WHMs in Australia. Overall, the employment experience was affected by the nature of their stay in Australia, low English proficiency, and perceived discrimination; as a result, most found jobs within the Huaren community and/or stayed within their own mono-ethnic enclaves. This was a vicious cycle - such 'ghettoization' and reduced opportunity for English language practice hampered their English proficiency and reduced opportunities for social communication with Australians, and thus in turn affected their employment opportunities with Australian employers.

Prior to arriving in Australia, participants were keen on establishing host social communication and improving their English proficiency; however, upon arrival, a mismatch occurred between their expectations and reality. Taiwanese WHMs became dependent on their mono-ethnic group members to receive job information, settlement assistance, and emotional support, which provided them with essential sources to obtain employment. Ethnic communication played a crucial role during the initial phase of Taiwanese WHMs' cross-cultural adaptation. However, if such heavy reliance on exclusive ethnic communities continued, it would in the long run only impede their adaptation to the host society (Kim, 2001).

During the interviews, participants felt dissatisfied with their communication attempts to integrate into the Australian society either in non-migrant networking or employment context. After experiencing failures with Australian employers, Taiwanese WHMs began to assume that it was less likely that they would be hired by local Australian employers, since English fluency and cultural understanding were likely to be considered as decisive factors.

Though many of them attended language training courses, it only resulted in slight progress in the ability to speak English and its effectiveness in job seeking was still noted as being limited. Living with two languages and cultures, meant increased possibility of cross-cultural miscommunication (Zhang, 2002). Due to diverse expression styles and an absence of English vocabulary, participants experienced upsetting situations such as miscommunication, topic avoidance, and message abandonment between the conversations with their co-workers and customers. The job seeking and on-site socialisation process with locals led to acculturative stress due to their inadequate English causing them to feel nervous, stressful, unconfident, and timid. In comparison, they felt much more relaxed and comfortable when talking English with people from an Asian background due to the cultural and English level similarity. So, Taiwanese WHMs started to minimize interactions with locals in a bid to avoid feelings of embarrassment, frustration, and anxiety. Thus, we see to some extent participants displaying separatist tendencies in terms of Berry's (1997) acculturation dimensions.

We found that low English language proficiency and perceived discrimination were somewhat inter-related. A feeling of "being welcomed to be integrated" into the host society is significant in migrants' transformation process (Liu, 2007, p. 771). Australia, known as a multicultural society with high host receptivity, has provided strangers with opportunities to participate in the local cultural and communication processes with its WHMs program. Nevertheless, participants perceived various forms of discrimination in their workplace. Similar to Colic-Peisker and Tilbury's study (2007), Taiwanese WHMs were often underprivileged and treated unequally in the job market because of their temporary working status, limited English proficiency, low social skills, and limited Australian communication codes (such as establishing good communication with managers, customers, and co-workers).

In addition, they found their Asian appearance and accent was also disadvantageous when accessing jobs in Australian-owned shops. Noticeably, even in Asian shops, they had to accept a below minimum wage (normally the minimum is \$AU10 an hour). To some extent they felt accused, excluded, disrespected, and unequally treated in certain situations; for instance, as mentioned by the participants, in the leasing and farm deceiving cases. This mirrored a certain degree of host conformity pressure in that they could sense the presence of discrimination, disapproval and prejudice against them once they failed to meet natives' normative communication codes (Kim, 2001).

Participants could not be too fussy when choosing jobs since they were in need of money to pay their own living expenses. Locating themselves in/near the Huaren job market (mostly Heigong - Heigong refers to jobs with their salary under minimum wage, and without insurance and superannuation covered by the employers. Employees don't need to sign anything for it and are being paid in cash without paying tax), it appears that managers in the Huaren community were willing to offer WHMs job opportunities regardless of their English proficiency – this was an easier and faster way to gain employment except for the open secret of illegally giving low wages with no job security. From participants' perspectives, they were hired by Huaren managers as they were 'cheap labour' and more obedient, and easier to communicate with.

Still, some participants with an adaptive personality and prepared-to-change attitude showed a purposeful desire to improve English via job selection. Though orientated to work in the Huaren community, they chose certain occupations (e.g., waitress, sales, or cashiers)

which could increase their English communication with Australians – this finding is in line with Kim (2001). Most participants claimed that their English ability had improved during their stay; only two participants working in an English-only speaking environment viewed that their English had not improved as they were working as housekeepers, which didn't require intensive workplace communication, although they were required to obey the English-only speaking rule. Furthermore, 12/13 participants were working with either Huaren managers or co-workers and 6/13 participants spoke less than 50 percent English in their workplace. Working with either Huaren manager/co-workers enabled them to reduce workplace miscommunication and most importantly, they were sometimes helpful in offering “back-ups” such as interpreting and translating with English speaking customers. As Kim (2001) recommended, trial and error are actually natural in transforming personal communication patterns and achieving greater host communication competence. Taiwanese WHMs would benefit in the employment context if they put aside the thoughts of “losing face” and strive to develop their language skills by increasing interactions with English-speaking locals.

Analogous to the literature review, individuals' linguistic competence and social networking were largely interdependent on each other and living/working within the Huaren community did not facilitate them with the local society's normative communication codes and rules which is vital to their adaptation process and employment context. Such a vicious cycle, however, served to keep sojourners in an observational and passive role in their employment context and deterred their acculturation and adaptation process (Brown, 2008). Similar to Liu's study (2007), perceptions of discrimination coupled with communication issues such as low English proficiency and differences in cultural codes, resulted in most adopting a separation orientation. Bourdieu (1991) also cited language and culture as a power play and communication processes as a social situation structured along the lines of power. Needless to say, as a growing source of temporary migrant labour to Australia, the workforce supplied from Taiwanese WHMs for industries such as tourism, hospitality, and agriculture is significant. Thus, the Taiwanese WHMs face challenges in the Australian employment context due to differences in culture (collectivism values), race (perceived discrimination), and speech (English deficiency) – as Australia becomes an increasingly multicultural society, hopefully such tainted narratives will diminish.

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Please note that the findings of this study are tempered by several limitations such as a small sample which predominantly consisted of female WHMs living in Brisbane. Future studies can take a longitudinal approach to track participant experiences from the pre-migration stage to the time of return to Taiwan. The before, during, and after interventions would also provide a range of interesting possibilities in both theoretical and methodological terms.

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Author Note

Fan Peng has a Master's degree in Communication from the School of Journalism and Communication, The University of Queensland, Australia. Her experience of studying and working in Australia and Sweden has led to her developing a strong interest in intercultural communication. During her time in Australia, she had much contact with Taiwanese WHMs due to her work circle and this exploratory study was set up to put a focus on this special sojourner group as part of her thesis.

Aparna Hebbani is a Lecturer in Communication at the School of Journalism and Communication, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. Her key research focus areas are: (a) refugee and asylum seeker settlement in Australia, (b) media representation of Muslims, asylum seekers, and refugees, and (c) intercultural and gender issues in the university environment. Her ability to conduct high quality research and secure collaborations are seen through her grant record and publications. She led a team which secured an ARC Linkage grant (\$124,000) investigating refugee employment and intergenerational communication.

Appendix A

Navigating through the Australian workplace with communication difference: Experience of Taiwanese Working Holiday Makers (WHMs)

Informed Consent – Interview and focus group

Completion of this consent form is an indication of my acceptance to participate in the research project being undertaken by the University of Queensland (UQ) to study employment communication issues within the Taiwanese Working Holiday Makers community. I have read the information sheet about the project titled *Navigating through the Australian workplace with communication difference: experience of Taiwanese Working Holiday Makers (WHMs) in Australia*.

I know that I can withdraw from this research at any time without penalty and that my identity from this interview will be kept confidential. It will be audio recorded and will be deleted after being transcribed.

I understand that this study has been cleared by one of the ethics committees of the University of Queensland in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's guidelines and that I am free to discuss my participation with project staff (see contact details above). If I would like to speak to an officer of the University not involved in the study, I may contact the Ethics Officer on 3365 3924.

I agree to participate in this interview.

Name:

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: / / 2012

I have explained the research to the participant and consider that he/she understands what is involved.

Investigator signature: _____ Date: / / 2012

GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Gender:

☐ Female

☐ Male

2. Which is your age? *TICK ONE*

☐ Age 18- 20

☐ Age 21-23

☐ Age 24- 26

☐ Age 27- 29

☐ Age 30- 31

3. Employment information

What job are you doing now? _____

How did you find it? _____ Where? _____

4. What suburb do you live in? _____

5. How long have you been in Australia? _____

6. What is the main language that **you** speak at home in Australia? _____

7. How well can you speak English? Tick one

On arrival

Fluent	
Very good	
Good	
Basic	
No English	

Currently:

Fluent	
Very good	
Good	
Basic	
No English	

8. How well can you write in English? Tick one

On arrival

Fluent	
Very good	
Good	
Basic	
No English	

Currently:

Fluent	
Very good	
Good	
Basic	
No English	

9. How well can you read English? Tick one

On arrival

Fluent	
Very good	
Good	
Basic	
No English	

Currently:

Fluent	
Very good	
Good	
Basic	
No English	

10. Can you make a phone call in English (for example, to make a doctor's appointment or ring the phone company to connect a phone)? TICK ONE

- ☐ Yes, with no difficulty
☐ Yes, but with difficulty (I would try only if I had no other choice or in an emergency)
☐ No (I do it through an interpreter or have someone else doing it for me)

11. Can you fill in a form without assistance (for example, could you fill in this questionnaire)?
TICK ONE

- ☐ Yes, with no difficulty
☐ Yes, but with difficulty (I would try only if I had no other choice or in an emergency)
☐ No (I do it through an interpreter or have someone else doing it for me)

Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose to take part in the Working Holiday Makers Program?
2. Why did you choose Australian working holiday program other than NZ, the USA, Japan etc.?
3. What were your expectations of life in Australia before arrival?
4. Before you came to Australia, where/ how did you get the information of job market and life in Australia? What kind of information?
5. Looking back, was the information you had correct and/or enough?
6. What kind of job did you expect to do in Australia? Did you get a job that matched your expectations?
7. What was your feeling when you first arrived in Australia? What is the feeling now? Any changes? Why?
8. Have you ever completed any training sessions (e.g. pre-departure cultural and language training, on-site English training). If any, how useful were the training session/s for you?
9. Can you tell me your opinions of the cultural differences between Taiwan and Australia?

10. What are the differences in communication with Australians? (The communication style, greetings, body language, calling by first name in daily life?)
11. What kind of difficulties have you encountered in finding a job (e.g. no working experience in Australia, no certificates, no car, no work referees in Australia)?
12. Have you experienced that you think you have been discriminated against while working or looking for a job? What kind of discrimination? Even with Asian bosses?
13. Tell me the ways you've tried in finding a job, how effective do you think they are?
14. How does it affect your life when you have a job? (E.g. social network, progress in English, living standard, confidence...) Are there any other problems you encountered in your workplace?
15. What do you reckon as the biggest obstacle in obtaining a job? Why?
16. What is your boss's nationality? What language do most of the people you work with speak? What is the main spoken language at your workplace? How much English do you speak at work?
 - For English: How did you find it? Why did you choose to work there? How do you feel about it?
 - For Mandarin: Why did you make the choice to work there? How do you feel about it?
17. If your English is not good, how do you deal with the problems when you have to communicate with Australians? Whom do you go to for support or help? (e.g. customer service, unfair treatment)
18. Which community do you mainly live with? Huaren? Aussies? International? Why?
19. Are you currently happy/unhappy with your life overall? Why?
20. Are there any extreme cases/stories you want to tell me about what you've heard about the experience/concerns of other Taiwanese WHMs?
21. Is there anything else that anyone feels we should know about but have not covered?