Analysis of Work and Cultural Adjustment of Korean-Chinese and Han-Chinese Workers in Korea under Framework of ERG Theory*

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Abstract

The increased number of foreigners in Korea (now more than one million) urgently calls for understanding, analyzing and interpreting the immigration issues in order to solve the foreign workers’ social problems. This paper aims to identify the factors affecting work and cultural adjustment of the foreign workers in Korea and to investigate the differences in adaptation modes of Korean-Chinese and Han-Chinese workers. A total of 23 Korean-Chinese and Han-Chinese workers were randomly selected for interview to select the variables that best represent the research context. The variables, duly sorted by different human needs under ERG theory, were assumed to predict the work and cultural adjustment, and included Work Conditions, Power Distance, Social-Cultural Distance in the Workplace, Legal Status, Duration of Stay, Korean Proficiency, and Social Support. The sample of our respondents was 395 Korean-Chinese and Han-Chinese workers in Korea: 227 Korean-Chinese and 168 Han-Chinese. We used SPSS 12.0 and AMOS 5.0 for statistical analysis. Our study reveals useful results for the development of theories and measurements of international adjustment as well as for organizational and welfare practice. Work conditions, power distance, and social support have a significant effect on work adjustment. Duration of stay (in Korea), Korean language proficiency, and work adjustment have a significant effect on cultural adjustment. Existence needs have a bigger effect on work/cultural adjustment than relatedness needs. The two ethnic groups have significant differences in the paths of poor working conditions with cultural adjustment and of power distance with cultural adjustment. It is necessary to further develop the measurements of work and cultural adjustment in future research.

Key words: work adjustment, cultural adjustment, ERG theory, acculturation

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Introduction

The socio-economic problems of foreign workers in Korea have been an issue of relevance since the 1990s, when the number of foreigners increased dramatically due to the economic growth of Korea and the Seoul Olympic Games. Typical problems foreign workers were confronted by were illegal status, poor working conditions, and cultural misunderstanding (Lee et al., 1998; Yoon et al., 2005; Yoo, 1997).

The issue of illegal status has been the most serious among the problems of the foreign workers. Many of them stay in Korea illegally and are therefore not able to make a claim even if their employers extort their wages. They are afraid that their employers will report their status to the government. Most foreign workers suffer from poor working conditions, such as dirty and dangerous work environments, low wages, and long work hours. They also have difficulties in adjusting to Korean culture. Most foreign workers do not understand the strict hierarchy in Korean organizations which is reflected in harsh treatment (it is called “training”) of newcomers by supervisors or senior workers. Due to the lower economic status of most of the foreign workers, many Koreans look down on them and abuse them physically and emotionally.

Moreover, most Korean supervisors or coworkers have never tried to understand the cultural differences of the foreign workers and forced them to accommodate to Korean culture. Consequently, foreign workers have even more difficulties in adjusting to Korean culture (Seoul, 1999).

There are now more than a million foreigners in Korea and Korea has already stepped into a multi-cultural society. However, research in multicultural issues, such as work- and cultural adjustment, is still lacking and most Korean researchers have focused on the adjustment of Korean expatriates in other countries.

This study aims to identify the factors affecting work- and cultural adjustment of the foreign workers as well as the correlations between cultural adjustment and work adjustment. Analyzing differences in adjusting modes between Korean-Chinese and Han-Chinese workers is another objective.

This study provides practical guidelines for social workers and multinational organizations to support foreign workers’ adjustment, and it could contribute to the theory building of the work- and cultural adjustment.