



Cultural misunderstandings can leave immigrant professionals feeling overwhelmed and burned out. www.shutterstock.com

The Chinese proverb – “the fish does not know the existence of water until it is taken out of it” – will resonate with some Chinese immigrants in the Australian workplace. Significant cultural differences often make their working lives (and those of their colleagues) more difficult.

We interviewed a pool of 70 Chinese professionals working in Australia and China, across different industries. Our research found that Chinese professionals are accustomed to their work and personal lives being intertwined.

Read more: [Four cultural clashes that are holding East Asian employees back](#)

These employees are used to having diverse duties in the workplace and agreeing with whatever managers set out for them. This can leave them unprepared for Australian workplaces where boundaries are more defined, duties are more specific, and tasks are subject to negotiation.

Cultural misunderstandings can leave immigrant professionals feeling overwhelmed and burned out, it also opens them up to ridicule and chastisement. It can also confuse and frustrate their Australian colleagues.

Always say “yes” to your manager

Chinese professionals are influenced by the Confucian values of [respect for authority and confrontation aversion](#). This means they are uncomfortable with refusing tasks or questioning directions, unlike their

Australian counterparts. We found their other colleagues were comparatively accustomed to being involved in making decisions and resisting excessive demands.

One of our interviewees found herself constantly acquiescing to requests from leadership despite being overloaded. When one of her other colleagues took holiday leave at her expense, she imploded.

Yet her manager was unaware of her predicament until they approached her, wanting to know why she had noticeably changed her behaviour. However, even when encouraged to raise her concerns, she still found it hard in practice.

Identity and conflict

Chinese professionals' personal and workplace identities are often strongly interdependent. [Echoing previous research](#) results, we found both leaders and followers tend to take disagreements over professional work personally, and so generally avoid confrontation.

Conversely Australian leaders and followers tend to detach the two, so disagreement over work need not affect personal relationships. As one interviewee noted, managers and employees can have heated discussions but, soon afterwards, converse amicably on other matters – this is rare in China.

Further blurring identity and task, Chinese professionals tended to view and handle negative events in a more interconnected, continuous manner rather than as an isolated incident. As one interviewee noted:

Bygones will not remain bygones in China, the big boss usually talks about your new oversights in the context of your past mistakes whilst you just knew it would not happen in Australia.

At the managers' beck and call

Personal boundaries can be lost in translation for Chinese professionals in Australia

Written by The Conversation

Chinese managers frequently ask their followers to run personal errands – getting lunch, buying contact lenses, making tea – and require work and client entertainment beyond office hours. Employees feel obligated to remain at work later than the manager, whether or not they have work to do.

Reciprocally, Chinese employees often use work time for personal activities like social media and online shopping. In contrast most Australian workplaces have an understanding that personal life outside working hours shouldn't be disturbed by professional demands.

Beyond the workplace, typical Australian manager-employee relationships often becomes less formal and more social. While gestures for the leader – holding elevator doors, calling taxis – are appreciated, they are not required. However, during working hours most Australian workplaces expect professional resources not be abused in any form.

Because Chinese professionals are less familiar with these dynamics, they may find it difficult to separate workplace and personal disagreements. We found they also find it difficult to treat leaders on a more equal footing and to assert themselves when their boundaries are infringed upon. This can lead to escalating conflicts, the disruption of workplace relationships, undue work demands and exhaustion.

Read more: [Six effective ways to have that difficult conversation at work](#)

Given our results, cross cultural training is a must for any business. This starts with both immigrant professionals and Australian managers learning about each others' relevant cultural differences. For their part, Australian managers can prevent difficulties by creating a safe and encouraging environment.

We found that genuine and repeated requests for honest opinions can be effective, as emphasised by one interviewee:

Personal boundaries can be lost in translation for Chinese professionals in Australia

Written by The Conversation

Gradually, my supervisor would encourage me to share what I truly think. “Please tell me, we can discuss. You are allowed to tell me you cannot do it, or need extra support or resources”, she would keep encouraging me to speak my mind...Yes, I will speak my true thoughts now, something I could not do in the past.

Conversely, many we spoke with recommend immigrant professionals gain clarity over their needs and acquire and practice assertive communication skills. These professionals appreciate they need to separate their work and personal lives and push for reasonable limits on workplace demands.

Mutual understanding can enhance the productivity of the multicultural workplace, capitalising on – rather than conflicting with – diversity. It can help to better unlock value that might otherwise be lost in translation.

The authors do not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and have disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/personal-boundaries-can-be-lost-in-translation-for-chinese-professionals-in-australia-82744>