

Cultural Mirror: Cognitive Conflicts of Malay Employees in Chinese Enterprises toward the “Solo Expatriation” Culture

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Abstract

In the context of deglobalization, ethical conflicts in cross-cultural management have increasingly become a central challenge for enterprises involved in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Based on focus group interviews with 42 employees in Chinese-invested firms in Malaysia, this study finds that Malay employees interpret the Chinese practice of “solo expatriation” as a moral transgression signifying the rupture of family bonds. This interpretation stems from divergent cultural norms of family presence between China and Malaysia, amplified by religious narratives. Furthermore, the study highlights the asymmetry of interpretive power behind such symbolic misreadings: Malay employees draw upon religious and historical metaphors to dominate local discourse, forcing Chinese staff into a position of “defensive self-justification”. Theoretically, this research transcends the workplace-centric paradigm of cross-cultural management by underscoring the extension of family ethics from the private into the public sphere, and by proposing a distinction between flexible and rigid collectivism. Practically, it constructs a “cultural immune system” along three pathways: 1) institutional-cultural coupling (e.g., tiered family visitation allowances), 2) symbolic capital reconstruction (e.g., metaverse-based family cohabitation), and 3) institutionalized buffer zones (e.g., certified cultural mediators). These mechanisms provide both theoretical innovation and practical support for enhancing the cultural adaptability of Chinese enterprises in Southeast Asia.

Keywords

Deglobalization, Malaysia, Family Presence, Cross-Cultural Management, Symbolic Conflict, Belt and Road Initiative

1. Introduction

In the context of deglobalization, multinational enterprises are encountering unprecedented challenges in cultural adaptation. Although global flows of foreign direct investment (FDI) have declined significantly—particularly under the combined influence of geopolitical tensions and economic slowdown—Chinese investment in ASEAN countries, and especially in Malaysia, has demonstrated strong resilience. According to the 2023 report of the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA), China ranks among the most important foreign investors in Malaysia. This phenomenon reflects that, despite the transformation of globalization, regional cultural differences and mutual trust remain critical factors in sustaining international cooperation.

The cooperation between China and Malaysia is not only driven by economic interests but also relies deeply on cultural understanding. Although both belong to the broader Asian cultural sphere, Malaysia's mainstream culture is rooted in Islam, which differs significantly from China's Confucian tradition in aspects such as family ethics and social responsibilities. Under the momentum of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), cultural trust has gradually become a decisive element in transnational collaboration. In this process, cooperation between China and Malaysia continues to advance through both the clash and the convergence of cultural differences.

Within this background, the present study focuses on Chinese manufacturing enterprises in Malaysia and identifies a specific phenomenon of cultural conflict: the career practice of “solo expatriation” by Chinese employees is often interpreted by Malay workers as a form of “moral deficiency”, namely the rupture of family bonds. Fieldwork conducted in 2024 revealed that 92% of surveyed Malay employees attributed this practice to what they perceived as a “lack of family responsibility in Chinese culture”. Such perceptions not only mirror the tensions of cross-cultural communication during a period of global transformation but also highlight the symbolic significance of family ethics in building trust across cultures.

Current studies on cross-cultural differences have mostly approached the issue from the perspective of workplace values, while the role of family ethics in trust construction remains underexplored—particularly against the backdrop of intensifying globalization shifts and cognitive polarization. By examining Malay employees' interpretations of the “solo expatriation” culture in Chinese enterprises, this study investigates how family ethics extend from the private sphere into the public sphere and, within specific sociocultural contexts, generate misreadings and conflicts. The central research questions are as follows:

- 1) How are family-cultural differences reconstructed as symbolic markers of conflict in the deglobalization era?
- 2) In what ways do religious ethics and institutional blind spots escalate cultural misinterpretations?
- 3) How can Chinese enterprises strengthen cultural resilience in cross-cultural

cooperation through interpretive strategies?

Adopting focus group interviews with 42 employees, this study aims to provide Belt and Road enterprises with culturally sensitive and practically effective adaptation frameworks. In particular contexts, the findings may serve as a supplementary and mitigating mechanism for cross-cultural management.

2. Literature Review

Cultural Conflict under Deglobalization, Expatriation Policies of Chinese Enterprises, and the Cultural Mediation Role of Local Chinese

In the context of deglobalization and rising geopolitical tensions, cultural symbols have become increasingly sensitive, and cross-cultural interactions are more likely to be scrutinized through a “biased lens”. [Park \(2013\)](#) points out that host-country employees’ perceptions of foreign enterprises are often shaped by historical memory and political discourse. For example, colonial memories continue to cast shadows in some Islamic and African countries, where foreign powers once brought exploitation and religious conflict. Such collective memories may lead local employees to analogize the behavior of foreign enterprises with past colonial rule, thereby reinforcing mistrust.

Similarly, [Weng et al. \(2024\)](#) demonstrate that in cross-cultural online communication, linguistic and contextual differences frequently result in mistranslation and misunderstanding, which can escalate into conflict. Cultural disputes arising in Belt and Road projects, once amplified by social media, often intertwine with nationalist sentiments and generate public pressure against Chinese enterprises. Moreover, when host countries experience the pressures of great-power rivalry, cultural frictions at the enterprise level become even more complex. [Liu, Zhu, and Liang \(2021\)](#) argue that in the context of the BRI, cross-cultural conflicts have become a major challenge for Chinese enterprises: trade frictions and the rise of nationalism fuel suspicion about Chinese motives, while everyday cultural differences are easily politicized. For instance, [Gong \(2020\)](#) observes that following the escalation of the U.S.-China trade war in 2018, the “neo-colonial” imagination of Chinese enterprises intensified in Mexican media discourse. Likewise, [Xie \(2018\)](#) found that the majority of Algerian employees perceived China’s expatriation policies as violating the sacredness of the Islamic family. Such misreadings of cultural symbols may become a trigger for trust breakdown between Chinese enterprises and Muslim employees, exacerbating cultural confrontation in the era of deglobalization.

The expatriation policies of Chinese enterprises are shaped jointly by government regulations, managerial practices, and international market demands. According to the *Country (Region) Guide for Outbound Investment and Cooperation* issued by the Ministry of Commerce in 2023, expatriates are generally divided into long-term assignments (3 - 5 years) and short-term postings (3 - 12 months). Long-term expatriates are typically managers or technical specialists, while short-term assignments mainly involve project execution or market development. Although firms generally provide housing, children’s education allowances, and cross-

cultural training, the implementation and effectiveness of these policies vary significantly across regions. Under deglobalization, these expatriation policies face greater challenges, especially in terms of cultural adaptation and employee welfare, manifesting in three notable fractures:

Institutional fracture. Islamic scholars argue that forced separation of work and family directly contradicts the ethical requirement in Islamic culture that family migration must remain indivisible (Abi-Hashem, 2011). In Islamic societies, the family is the core of life, and any separation generates ethical conflict, posing serious challenges for cross-cultural adaptation.

Spatial fracture. This is reflected in the cost-shifting of housing policies, the cultural consequences of family separation, and the commodification of living space. According to Mercer's (2023) Global Mobility Policy Survey, 89% of Chinese enterprises adopt the "single apartment + self-paid family housing differential" model, whereas 72% of Western firms provide full family housing subsidies. Research by Benuyenah (2023) indicates that Chinese expatriates in Gulf countries experience significant psychosocial costs, with solo workers reporting higher risks of isolation and mental stress compared to those accompanied by families. Similarly, the Jakarta case shows the emergence of a "family economy circle" around Chinese industrial parks, where landlords subdivide housing units to collect high rents, creating a form of secondary exploitation of expatriate families (World Bank, 2022). These issues not only affect expatriates' well-being but also provoke cultural tensions in host societies.

Symbolic fracture. Current cross-cultural training programs often focus narrowly on religious taboos (e.g., Ramadan etiquette) while neglecting the translation of other family-related symbols (Junxuan et al., 2025). Misinterpretations of such symbols across cultures can trigger conflicts and undermine enterprises' long-term development. In the deglobalization era, these fractures in institutions, spaces, and symbols are further amplified.

Local ethnic Chinese employees (i.e., Malaysian Chinese or bicultural staff) are often regarded as bridges between Chinese enterprises and host cultures. Brannen and Lee (2014) describe such employees as "cultural interpreters" within organizations, capable of translating behaviors and expectations across cultural boundaries. However, serving as cultural translators poses significant challenges: it requires constant role-switching between two cultural frameworks, generating heavy cognitive and emotional burdens. When ethnic Chinese employees themselves face identity dilemmas—such as seeking to protect the interests of Chinese enterprises while simultaneously integrating into the host mainstream—their effectiveness as mediators is constrained. Moreover, language proficiency does not guarantee the resolution of deeper cultural identity differences. The role of cultural translator can lead to burnout and role ambiguity, placing natural limits on its contribution to conflict mediation.

Family Dimensions in Cross-Cultural Management

For a long time, research on cross-cultural management has been trapped in a

“workplace-centered” cognitive bias, neglecting the profound impact of family culture on cross-cultural interactions. Hofstede’s (2011) six-dimensional cultural framework, although addressing collectivism, reduces the family to a subsidiary variable of “group loyalty” and fails to probe the essential differences between the Confucian notion of differential association (chaxu geju) and the Islamic concept of sacred trust. Such simplification might have been tolerable during the period of globalization and expansion (1990-2010), but with the intensification of deglobalization, cultural conflicts have become more salient, exposing the limitations of this framework.

Popli, Akbar, Kumar, and Gaur (2016), analyzing a sample of 167 Indian firms, reconceptualized cultural distance in the context of cross-border mergers and acquisitions, and highlighted the role of cultural experience reserve as a mitigating factor. They argued that accumulated cultural experience can help buffer conflicts arising from cultural differences and increase the likelihood of successful mergers.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognized the strategic value of the family dimension. Schwartz (2012) introduced “family security” as a new cultural value dimension in his framework. However, his measurement instruments presuppose the Western nuclear family model, which inadequately captures the complexity of extended family structures prevalent in Asia. In the context of cross-cultural management, insufficient attention has been paid to how such family structures shape work behaviors and managerial practices.

Wu (2014), in her doctoral dissertation, examined the everyday lives of Chinese migrants in Zambia, exploring how they constructed identities through emotional and social interactions, with particular focus on solo expatriates who were perceived locally as exhibiting “moral indifference”. Wu analyzed how such cultural perceptions affected both social integration and work efficiency. Yet, most existing studies have centered on European and African contexts, leaving research on Islamic cultural spheres relatively underdeveloped. Further exploration is therefore needed to understand how family ethics influence cross-cultural management practices across different cultural contexts.

Family Symbols in Islamic Culture

In Islamic culture, the family possesses strong presence across temporal, spatial, symbolic, and institutional dimensions (Abd al Afi, 1982; Webb, 1993; An-Na’im, 2002). For example, family members collectively participate in religious activities and major life events, reinforcing temporal intimacy (e.g., daily prayers, Ramadan). Spatially, co-residence strengthens intergenerational ties and mutual respect, as extended families often live together. Symbolically, family identity is represented in religious texts and traditional objects. Institutionally, Sharia law governs responsibilities and obligations in matters such as marriage and inheritance, shaping the overall functioning of the family.

The implications of family presence differ across cultures. In Chinese culture, collectivism is relational and flexible, often guided by guanxi and Fei Xiaotong’s “differential association” (chaxu geju), where obligations vary by relational close-

ness (Herrmann-Pillath, 2016). This allows Chinese enterprises to metaphorically frame organizations as “big families”, with employees willing to flexibly sacrifice personal or family interests for collective benefit. By contrast, Islamic collectivism tends to be categorical and rigid, where family responsibilities are prescribed by religious norms and social expectations and are less likely to yield to work demands. For instance, Noman et al. (2020) show that in conservative Muslim societies, prolonged absence from the family is viewed as neglect of familial responsibility, often attracting moral criticism. While Chinese enterprises often interpret solo expatriation as a spirit of dedication, host-country employees may regard it as a form of disrespect toward family and faith.

Cultural symbols also embed power relations. In cross-cultural contexts, dominant symbolic systems dictate what is considered “normal” or “deviant”. For example, in religiously infused organizational environments, the presence or absence of family becomes morally charged, often placing Chinese managers in a passive and defensive position.

Cultural Metaphor Theory and Cultural Dimension Theory

Steers, Nardon, and Sanchez-Runde (2013) proposed cultural metaphor theory as a powerful analytical tool for cross-cultural management. The core idea is that each culture can be represented through one or more distinctive cultural metaphors—symbols, practices, or phenomena that encapsulate core values, beliefs, behavioral patterns, and social norms. By analyzing these metaphors, managers can gain deeper insights into cultural essences and operate more effectively in global business environments. The practical value of this theory lies in its dual function: it helps managers understand what a culture expresses (the surface) and why it functions as it does (the underlying logic). In this way, managers can enhance cultural sensitivity, avoid ethnocentric judgments, and optimize global team management by tailoring incentives and conflict-resolution strategies to symbolic characteristics of each culture.

Hofstede’s cultural dimensions framework identifies six dimensions: power distance, individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence-restraint. For the purposes of this study, the individualism-collectivism dimension is particularly relevant to the phenomenon of solo expatriation. While China is broadly collectivist, its enterprises increasingly emphasize individual effort and career mobility, framing expatriation as a normal career path and even a duty. Many Chinese employees willingly accept solo assignments as a means of career advancement. By contrast, although Malaysia is also a strongly collectivist society, family, community, and religious networks exert a much stronger influence on individual choices, and employees often prefer stable careers with robust community support.

This divergence generates cognitive conflict: Malay employees may struggle to understand why their Chinese colleagues embrace solo expatriation, whereas Chinese employees may regard it as an inevitable and responsible career move. These contrasting cultural expectations shape mutual perceptions and can hinder cross-

cultural understanding.

Qualitative Research Methods and Case Studies

In recent years, a growing number of SSCI/SCI journal articles have employed focus groups, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork to explore the cross-cultural management challenges faced by Chinese enterprises abroad. For example, [Noman et al. \(2020\)](#), through semi-structured interviews with 30 Chinese expatriates working in Pakistan, found that cultural differences and language barriers constituted the most significant challenges to adaptation. Similarly, [Ankrah, Nkansah, and Annor \(2024\)](#) found that, in a case study of a Chinese enterprise in Ghana based on interviews and thematic analysis with 18 Chinese and Ghanaian employees, revealed that differences in interpreting politeness and communication hindered cooperation; their study highlighted the importance of regular multicultural training to reduce cognitive gaps.

These studies demonstrate that qualitative methods can yield nuanced insights into symbolic meanings and subjective experiences of cultural conflict, which are often overlooked by quantitative surveys. Methods such as focus groups and ethnography capture subtle dynamics, revealing the interpretive processes and lived realities of employees in cross-cultural workplaces. As such, they provide vivid empirical grounding for theoretical development in cross-cultural management research.

3. Methodology: Design and Implementation of Focus Group Discussions

This study employs the focus group discussion (FGD) method, selecting 42 Malay employees from five Chinese-invested enterprises in Malaysia across diverse industries (construction, manufacturing, services, information, and finance) as the sample (see [Table 1](#)). The participants were recruited through company-assisted convenience sampling, whereby enterprise managers helped identify and nominate available employees for participation. The purpose was to stimulate expressions and collisions of cultural attitudes through group interaction, thereby exploring the cognitive logic and dynamic evolution of their interpretations of the Chinese practice of “solo expatriation”.

Table 1. Composition of focus group participants (N = 42).

Group	Participant Profile	Number of Groups	Participants per Group	Duration
Malay employees	Management/technical/frontline (gender-balanced)	3	8	120 min
Chinese expatriates	Project managers/engineers/HR (1 - 5 years of work experience)	2	6	100 min
Ethnic Chinese staff	Bilingual employees/with experience in cultural mediation	1	6	100 min

The analysis focuses not only on the content of verbal exchanges but also on the symbolic generation and transformation occurring within the interactional context. At the same time, the research team triangulated the interview data with enterprise archival materials, including information on participants' job backgrounds, family structures, and expatriation experiences, in order to enhance cultural interpretability and contextual authenticity. This methodological design balances cultural sensitivity with organizational context, helping to uncover implicit cognitive conflicts and institutional misunderstandings embedded in everyday workplace interactions.

1) Interview Design

The focus groups were designed to capture the diversity of positions and cultural perspectives within Chinese-invested enterprises in Malaysia. Participants were recruited from management, technical, and frontline levels, ensuring gender balance and representativeness. In addition, two groups of Chinese expatriates (project managers, engineers, and HR staff with one to five years of overseas experience) and one group of ethnic Chinese employees (bilingual and with prior experience in cultural mediation) were included to provide triangulated perspectives.

The group discussions were semi-structured, progressing from broad, open-ended questions (e.g., "How would you describe your impressions of your Chinese colleagues' family arrangements?") to more specific and structured topics (e.g., "What improvements do you think enterprises should make in their expatriation policies?"). This stepwise questioning strategy was intended to elicit spontaneous cultural attitudes, facilitate comparison across groups, and highlight symbolic interpretations embedded in workplace practices.

Special attention was given to the interactive dynamics of each group, enabling the identification of implicit conflicts, symbolic metaphors, and negotiation processes that might not be evident in individual interviews.

2) Implementation Process

Pre-research stage:

The research team analyzed company archival materials to identify typical cases of cultural conflict and designed customized stimulus materials for the interviews (e.g., anonymized samples of Chinese expatriates' family remittance slips and video-call screenshots). Two bilingual moderators were trained to master cross-cultural communication skills and conflict mediation strategies.

Interview execution:

In July 2024, the research team conducted the focus groups on-site in the selected enterprises. A stepwise questioning approach was adopted: starting with open-ended questions (e.g., "Please describe your impressions of your Chinese colleagues' family choices".) and gradually moving toward more structured issues (e.g., "What changes do you think the company should make in its policies?"). The thematic framework of the discussions is summarized in [Table 2](#).

Data triangulation:

Two authors served as core coders and cross-validated thematic consistency across groups. In cases of disagreement, an external senior professor with over 20

years of research experience was invited to arbitrate until consensus was reached.

Table 2. Thematic framework of focus group discussions.

Thematic Level	Core Question Examples
Family concept differences	“How do you view the fact that your Chinese colleagues often live apart from their families? In what ways does this differ from your own family ethics?”
Cultural symbol conflicts	“Which behaviors of Chinese employees are most difficult for you to understand? What do these behaviors symbolize in your culture?”
Impact of deglobalization	“How have recent international developments influenced your views on Chinese colleagues’ family choices?”
Conflict resolution strategies	“If the company were to explain the reasons behind Chinese colleagues’ family choices, which approaches would be most acceptable to you, and why?”

Thematic Coding Process:

The qualitative data were analyzed using a grounded and iterative thematic coding procedure. First, two researchers independently conducted open coding to identify recurrent ideas, metaphors, and emotion-laden expressions from the transcripts. Second, through axial coding, these codes were clustered into conceptual categories such as “moral obligation”, “family role ethics”, and “professional sacrifice”. Finally, selective coding was employed to integrate these categories into overarching themes that explained the cognitive conflicts and symbolic meanings underlying participants’ interpretations of “solo expatriation”. Discrepancies were discussed until full agreement was reached, and an external expert reviewed the final coding schema to enhance analytical validity.

Ethical and validity safeguards:

Member-checking was employed at each stage, with feedback loops to refine interpretations (four corrections in total). In addition, the design of group diversity (see **Table 1**) helped control for potential biases arising from ethnicity, job position, and gender. All procedures received institutional ethics approval, and informed consent was obtained from every participant prior to data collection.

4. Findings: Cultural Cognitive Conflicts in Group Interactions

1) Divergent Family Conceptions

Through six rounds of focus group discussions, it was found that Malay employees’ cultural conflicts with Chinese family practices are deeply rooted in differing ethical understandings of family presence (see **Table 3**).

Key Findings:

(1) Religious filter effect: 92% of Malay participants (22/24) cited Qur’an 4:34 to criticize the physical absence of Chinese colleagues; among them, 68% (15/22) viewed “virtual reunions” as “blasphemous self-consolation”.

(2) Technological mediation paradox: Although 87% of Chinese expatriates (10/12) reported making daily video calls with their families, only 9% of Malay

colleagues (2/24) were aware of this practice, revealing a lack of symbolic visibility due to its private nature.

(3) Historical empathy gap: Ethnic Chinese employees often invoked family migration histories to justify dispersed families, which significantly reduced the intensity of conflict.

Table 3. Contrasting perceptions of family presence.

Dimension	Core Perspectives of Malay Employees (N = 24)	Chinese Expatriates (N = 12)	Ethnic Chinese Mediators (N = 6)
Spatial presence	Families must co-reside physically; otherwise, it represents a betrayal of Allah’s trust.	Video calls create a form of “virtual reunion”, equivalent to being at home.	Dispersed families are a historical tradition in Chinese culture; mutual understanding is needed.
Symbolic presence	Remittances are merely financial transactions and cannot replace a real embrace.	Each remittance is labeled for a specific purpose, serving as quantified proof of family responsibility.	Malay colleagues should recognize the emotional weight behind remittances.
Institutional presence	The company’s lack of family housing shows an implicit encouragement of family separation.	Expatriation policies must balance costs; they should not be judged simplistically.	Enterprises should make transparent the socioeconomic constraints behind policy-making.

2) Cultural Symbol Conflicts

During group interactions, the interpretation of cultural symbols revealed significant asymmetries of power (see **Table 4**).

Table 4. Divergent group interpretations of cultural symbols.

Behavioral Symbol	Malay Employees’ Metaphors (frequency)	Chinese Expatriates’ Self-Descriptions	Symbolic Power Asymmetry Index (0 < a < 1)
Long-term solitary living	“Broken kite” (15), “blasphemer” (9)	“Professional sacrifice” (10), “family honor” (2)	0.83
High savings rate	“Economic vulture” (12), “selfish gene” (8)	“Risk aversion” (7), “family responsibility” (5)	0.76

Note: The Symbolic Power Asymmetry Index (SPAI) was calculated as the ratio of the proportion of negative metaphors used by Malay employees to the proportion of positive interpretations offered by Chinese expatriates (range = 0 - 1, higher values = greater asymmetry).

Key Findings:

(1) Stigmatization spiral: When one Malay participant (FG2M05) likened Chinese colleagues to “economic vultures”, others in the same group quickly echoed and escalated the metaphor to “economic colonizers”. This demonstrates how group pressure accelerates symbolic polarization.

(2) Defensive self-justification: Chinese employees frequently displayed WeChat transfer records (FG4C03) and family medical certificates (FG5C07) during discussions in an effort to counter stigmatization with material evidence. However, 73% of Malay participants (16/22) interpreted such acts as proof that “Chinese employees commodify familial affection”.

3) Catalytic Effects of Deglobalization

When geopolitical stimulus materials (e.g., news reports on the U.S.-China trade war) were introduced during the focus group discussions, Malay employees displayed heightened feelings of estrangement and unease toward the Chinese practice of solo expatriation. The findings can be summarized in three dimensions:

(1) Cultural mirror in investment perceptions: tension between cooperation opportunities and expatriate isolation

A total of 71% of Malay participants (17/24) believed that Chinese investment in Malaysia served the same purpose as American investment—economic colonialism. One respondent (FG3M11) stated: “China brings infrastructure and jobs, while the U.S. brings technology”. The State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey Report shows that 76.5% of Malaysians regard China as the most economically influential country in the region, and 75.5% prefer China over the U.S. when forced to choose. While this reflects recognition of economic cooperation, it also coexists with a sense of cultural distance. Malay employees perceived solo Chinese expatriates as a form of “mirror”: they admired their efficiency yet simultaneously felt alienated by their independence. This contradictory perception reflects the tension between the benefits of investment and insufficient local integration.

(2) Historical trauma and contemporary comparisons

Older employees’ historical lens:

Participants over 45 years old tended to analogize the “solo expatriation” culture with colonial history. They recalled that colonial powers once introduced large numbers of foreign laborers who disrupted local communities. In a similar way, solo Chinese expatriates were perceived as outsiders—efficient workers but socially detached. One respondent (FG2M08) remarked: “When the British came, they brought many outsiders and made our villages chaotic. Now these single Chinese workers feel similar. They work fast but are like shadows—difficult to connect with, almost like strangers”. This illustrates Malay sensitivities about community stability.

Younger employees’ modern perspective:

Participants under 30 interpreted the phenomenon through the lens of digital culture. They acknowledged the economic advantages of solo expatriation but criticized its emotional detachment. One respondent (FG3M15) commented: “On TikTok they look impressive, but without family around, it feels like they have no soul. We Malays could never live like that. It makes us uneasy—what if we also end up running everywhere like this?” These views reflect the ambivalence of younger generations: while open to opportunities brought by globalization, they remain deeply anchored in family- and community-centered lifestyles, struggling to reconcile with

individualistic work patterns.

(3) Selective information processing

Even when economic rationales for expatriation policies were presented (e.g., “family visa costs account for 32% of total expenses”), 83% of Malay employees (20/24) insisted on essentialist cultural explanations (e.g., “Chinese people are inherently less family-oriented”).

Similarly, when ethnic Chinese employees suggested inviting Chinese expatriates to participate in Eid al-Fitr celebrations, half of the Malay participants (12/24) rejected the idea, citing the need to protect “religious purity”, while the other half expressed acceptance.

4) Effectiveness and Boundaries of Buffer Mechanisms

Within the focus group discussions, ethnic Chinese employees demonstrated a certain capacity for cultural translation, serving as bridges between Chinese enterprises and Malay employees. Two strategies proved especially effective: historical analogy and religious metaphor conversion.

For example, some ethnic Chinese participants recounted their ancestors’ migration histories, such as stories of grandfathers who left home for years to work in mining, sustaining family connections only through letters. These narratives reduced Malay employees’ sense of estrangement toward Chinese colleagues by normalizing dispersed family arrangements: “My grandfather left home in the 1960s to work in the mines. He didn’t return for five years, and our family relied on letters to stay connected”. Such analogies enabled Malay participants to recognize that long-term family separation was not unique to Chinese expatriates.

In addition, reinterpreting Chinese filial values through Islamic frames also enhanced acceptance. For instance, presenting the Confucian notion of “being filial to one’s parents while loyal to the company” as “dual loyalty—to both the enterprise and Allah” helped Malay employees better understand the values underpinning expatriation policies.

However, the effectiveness of ethnic Chinese employees as cultural translators was limited by language thresholds and identity tensions. Linguistic nuances often hindered accurate communication: while fluent bilingual mediators could clearly convey concepts such as *xiao dao* (filial piety), less proficient speakers risked causing confusion—for example, mistranslating “举案齐眉” literally as “lifting the tray to eyebrow level”, which puzzled Malay colleagues.

Identity conflicts further complicated the mediation process. Despite long-term integration into Malay communities, some ethnic Chinese employees were still questioned: “You’ve already been assimilated by China, haven’t you?” Such doubts undermined their credibility and reduced their effectiveness as mediators.

Overall, enhancing the language proficiency and cultural legitimacy of ethnic Chinese employees is essential for strengthening their role as cultural translators. Yet even with these improvements, their buffering function remains constrained by broader sociocultural boundaries.

5) Group Preferences for Conflict Resolution Strategies

Through role-playing tasks, the study identified variations in how different groups evaluated the effectiveness of managerial interventions (see **Table 5**).

Table 5. Group evaluation of conflict resolution strategies.

Strategy Type	Support Rate among Malay Employees	Support Rate among Chinese Employees	Effectiveness Gap	Typical Objections (Malay Group)
Family Open Day	50%	83%	-33%	“Allowing Chinese colleagues into family spaces threatens cultural purity”.
Cultural White Paper	42%	67%	-25%	“Written explanations cannot erase essential differences”.
Family Visitation Allowance	75%	92%	-17%	“Monetary compensation insults religious ethics”.
Metaverse Co-habitation Experience	63% (37% over age 45; 79% under age 30)	58%	+5%	“Virtual presence may be more dangerous than physical absence”.

Note: Metaverse Co-habitation Experience refers to creating a virtual sense of living together for geographically separated family members through metaverse platforms such as VR or AR virtual spaces. In this environment, expatriate employees and their families—though residing in different countries—can share everyday moments within a simulated family space, such as eating meals together, watching TV, celebrating festivals, or participating in religious rituals.

Key Findings:

(1) Family Open Day: Most Chinese employees supported the idea of participating in Malay cultural events and inviting Malay colleagues into their family spaces, but only half of the Malay participants reciprocated this openness.

(2) Cultural White Paper: Approximately 42% of Malay employees supported the idea of a bilingual policy explanation document, showing partial willingness to learn about Chinese family practices, though skepticism about cultural “essences” persisted.

(3) Dual nature of financial incentives: While the visitation allowance received high approval, 63% of Malay employees (15/24) suggested renaming it a “religious responsibility fund” rather than a “compensation allowance”.

(4) Generational divide in technology acceptance: Younger Malay employees (<30) showed significantly higher support for metaverse-based cohabitation (79%) than older employees (>45), at only 37%. This suggests that technology-mediated solutions require age-sensitive design. The metaverse-based cohabitation concept refers to the creation of a virtual sense of living together for geographically separated family members through immersive metaverse platforms such as VR or AR spaces, enabling shared experiences like meals, celebrations, and daily interactions despite physical distance (Oh et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2024).

Overall, the focus groups revealed that in the deglobalization era, cultural conflict is essentially a contest over interpretive authority. Malay employees leveraged religious discourse to construct counter-narratives, while Chinese expatriates were trapped in cycles of defensive self-justification. Meanwhile, the buffering capacity of ethnic Chinese employees was constrained by linguistic limitations and identity tensions.

5. Discussion: Mechanisms of Cultural Conflict and Rethinking Cross-Cultural Management

1) Dialogue with Family Culture Studies: From the Private to the Public Sphere

Traditionally, family culture studies have primarily focused on ethical practices within a specific society or nation. This study, however, demonstrates how family ethics extend from the private sphere into the public domain within transnational workplace settings, generating conflict in cross-cultural interactions. For example, Chinese expatriates symbolically transformed remittance behavior from private filial piety into a public display of responsibility, by labeling transfers for parental medical expenses or mortgage payments. Yet the privacy of video calls led Malay colleagues to misinterpret such acts as indifference toward family, highlighting the dual role of technological mediation—both sustaining kinship and deepening alienation.

The expatriation policies of Chinese enterprises further expose the blind spots of cultural insensitivity, echoing earlier findings of institutional, spatial, and symbolic fractures. Chinese employees framed solo expatriation as a contribution to the nation and the enterprise, but in Malaysia's strong religious environment, this behavior was interpreted as moral coldness or even blasphemy. The attempt by enterprises to depoliticize and deculturalize family issues instead intensified symbolic misinterpretation by host-country employees, underscoring the deep tension between institutional design and cultural expectations.

2) Dialogue with Cross-Cultural Management Theories: Beyond Workplace-Centrism

This study reveals that under deglobalization, family ethics are not merely private cultural variables but serve as critical mediators in the construction of cross-cultural trust. This finding suggests that traditional cross-cultural management theories, with their workplace-centric focus, must be broadened to encompass wider sociocultural dimensions.

For instance, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory conceptualizes collectivism as a single, homogeneous framework (Hofstede, 2011). However, this study differentiates between **flexible collectivism** and **rigid collectivism** to capture intra-cultural variations in moral expectations and family practices. Drawing on Yan (2016), **flexible collectivism** in the Chinese context allows kinship and filial obligations to be maintained symbolically—through remittances, virtual communication, or ritualized expressions of care—when spatial constraints prevent physical

proximity. In contrast, **rigid collectivism**, conceptually aligned with Gelfand et al.'s (2011) notion of tight cultures, emphasizes physical cohabitation and continuous face-to-face caregiving as the ethical basis of legitimacy. This distinction suggests that collectivism manifests in more complex and context-dependent forms than Hofstede's model originally assumed. Moreover, the framework shows limitations in addressing the heightened religious sensitivity and normative rigidity emerging in the deglobalization era, indicating that its applicability requires further refinement under new global conditions.

Similarly, Steers et al.'s theory of cultural metaphors also faces new challenges. In the globalization era, high savings rates were interpreted as symbols of diligence and economic rationality (Steers, Nardon, & Sanchez-Runde, 2013). In the current context, however, they can be reframed as signals of economic expansion or even threats. The interpretation of cultural symbols is shaped by power relations: host-country employees, drawing on religious discourse, defined solo expatriation as a violation of ethics, while in the Chinese cultural framework it symbolized professional sacrifice. Compared with the globalization period, cultural misinterpretations in the deglobalization era occur more rapidly and across wider domains. These findings highlight the need to reassess and optimize cross-cultural management theories within a more dynamic framework, capable of capturing the complex characteristics of intercultural exchange in the new era.

3) Rethinking Malaysia's Multicultural Ecology

This study also reexamines Malaysia's multicultural ecology, revealing that ethnic divisions and religious faith play significant moderating roles in cultural conflict. Ethnic Chinese employees, drawing upon historical empathy rooted in migration histories, were able to mitigate conflict and improve resolution efficiency—especially between Malay employees and Chinese expatriates. By contrast, Malay Muslim employees, shaped more deeply by religion, exhibited much stronger negative judgments. Their five daily prayers, often reciting verses related to family well-being, reinforced the sanctity of family presence, making them more critical of solo expatriates than ethnic Chinese colleagues. This cognitive divergence reflects the Malay emphasis on collectivism and physical cohabitation, which starkly contrasts with the Chinese practice of solo expatriation.

The interplay between deglobalization and identity politics is clearly evident. The State of Southeast Asia 2024 Report shows that Malaysians express relatively high trust in China's economic influence (76.5%) but low political trust (19.4% confidence in China's international behavior), with 67.3% expressing concern over China's growing influence. Within Chinese enterprises, this ambivalence materializes in perceptions of the solo expatriation culture. Malay employees admired the contributions of expatriates to major projects (e.g., the East Coast Rail Link), yet their independent living and limited local engagement triggered a cultural mirror effect: while recognizing the benefits of globalization, they simultaneously perceived threats to their cultural identity and labor status.

This conflict stems not only from the tension between economic dependence

and national autonomy but also from cultural differences between Malay collectivism (*kampung spirit*) and expatriate individualism. As a cultural mirror, the phenomenon simultaneously reflects the diligence and efficiency of Chinese employees and magnifies Malay anxieties about local identity, historical memory, and future roles. The combination of focus group findings and 2024 survey data indicates that these attitudes are neither purely acceptance nor outright rejection, but rather a blend of pragmatism and cultural vigilance. Older generations viewed expatriate isolation through the lens of colonial history, while younger participants interpreted it through digital narratives, projecting potential future risks. Together, these perspectives underscore the complexity of Malay cultural identity under globalization.

6. Managerial Implications: Building a Corporate Cultural Immune System in the Era of Deglobalization

1) Institutional-Cultural Coupling Design: Overcoming the “Policy Blindness” Dilemma

Based on the triple disjunction of Chinese enterprises’ expatriation policies at institutional, spatial, and symbolic levels, this study proposes cross-cultural family support and adaptation strategies to mitigate moral and cultural conflicts arising from expatriates’ perceived neglect of family responsibilities.

First, enterprises may adopt a tiered family-support strategy: short-term expatriates (less than one year) may receive a 15% monthly home-visit allowance; mid-term expatriates (one to three years) may access a fast-track spousal visa channel (processing time ≤ 3 months, with 80% of costs covered by the firm); and long-term expatriates (over three years) may transition to localized contracts, integrating their family members into the company’s medical insurance plan and being awarded a “Cross-Cultural Family Medal” to strengthen their sense of belonging.

In addition, a cultural transparency initiative should be launched to enhance dual-language policy communication. For instance, bilingual Chinese-Malay White Papers on Expatriate Family Responsibility could be published, while Malaysia’s *kampung* (village) mutual-aid model¹ could be used as an analogy to explain China’s dispersed family patterns, thereby reducing potential cultural misunderstandings.

2) Symbolic Capital Reconstruction: From Stigmatization to Valorization

To address the trust deficit caused by symbolic misinterpretation, this study proposes a combined strategy of technological empowerment and cultural narrative intervention.

On the technological side, firms can establish “Metaverse Family Embassies”,

¹The **kampung mutual aid model** refers to the traditional village-based social support system in Malaysia, where neighborhood cooperation forms the core. When individual family members are absent, community members (or relatives and friends) collectively assume family responsibilities, such as caring for the elderly, raising children, and providing financial assistance. Social bonds are further maintained through religious activities and communal labor (*gotong royong*). This model emphasizes collective cooperation to compensate for the absence of family members, reflecting the collectivist spirit embedded in Malay culture.

enabling expatriates' family members to virtually participate in Eid gatherings or company events through VR technologies, with interaction data incorporated into performance assessments. Furthermore, a blockchain-based "Filial Piety Credit System" may be introduced to securely record remittance histories and video-call durations, generating an immutable "Cross-Cultural Responsibility Certificate" to make familial obligations more visible and verifiable.

On the cultural-narrative side, a dual-narrative mediation mechanism should be built. Through cultural decoding workshops, Malay employees can learn about the Chinese culture of dispersed family life (e.g., Spring Festival travel rush, online New Year's Eve dinners), while Chinese managers can use culturally resonant analogies—such as Ramadan reunions or Hajj pilgrimages—to communicate the moral value of expatriate sacrifice, thus fostering mutual empathy.

3) Institutionalizing Buffer Zones: From Emergency Response to Systemic Immunity

To build sustainable cross-cultural resilience, this study recommends institutionalizing the buffering role of ethnic Chinese employees in mediating conflicts by establishing a formal Cultural Mediation Officer Certification System. Candidates should pass both HSK Level 5 and MUET Band 5 language proficiency tests, with preference given to individuals in interethnic marriages or those with study experience in China. They would receive specialized training in symbolic translation and crisis mediation to handle misunderstandings with greater precision.

In addition, enterprises could create a Geo-Cultural Resilience Fund, allocating 0.5% of project investment to address symbolic misinterpretation crises—such as misinformation or cultural controversies—through targeted public relations responses. A Cultural Conflict Case Database should also be developed to categorize incidents by religious sensitivity, economic misperception, or historical trauma, integrated with AI-assisted analytics to automatically recommend best-practice solutions for similar future cases.

Overall, in the era of deglobalization, overseas management of Chinese enterprises must shift from passive firefighting to proactive immunity. By integrating institutional-cultural coupling, symbolic capital reconstruction, and buffer-zone institutionalization, firms can establish long-term, stable mechanisms for cross-cultural adaptation. Managers should transcend a narrow cost-benefit perspective and instead treat family ethics as a new form of global infrastructure, recognizing that amid turbulence in the international political economy, only the affective bonds rooted in civilizational kinship can anchor the future of global cooperation.

7. Conclusion

1) Core Findings

By examining Malay employees' cognitive conflicts regarding the Chinese practice of "solo expatriation", this study explored how family ethics extend from the private into the public sphere, and how they generate misinterpretations and conflicts in specific sociocultural contexts. Based on focus group interviews, three key

findings emerge.

First, Malay employees interpreted Chinese expatriates' solo postings as a moral deficiency—specifically, a rupture of family bonds. This conflict is rooted in divergent ethical understandings of family presence: Chinese flexible collectivism permits alternative practices such as remote caregiving, whereas Malaysian Islamic rigid collectivism emphasizes the sanctity of physical cohabitation.

Second, the influence of religion amplifies cross-cultural conflict. Within a religious discourse, Malay employees interpreted expatriation policies as “blasphemous”, assigning unexpected moral implications to enterprise-level practices.

Third, the extension of family ethics into the public sphere exposed the cultural blind spots of Chinese expatriation policies, deepening the sense of alienation among host-country employees. Malaysia's multicultural ecology further magnified these tensions. While ethnic Chinese employees were able to mitigate conflicts through historical empathy, Malay Muslims reinforced negative interpretations through their ethical emphasis on family presence.

Finally, the resonance of deglobalization and identity politics, supported by survey data from the *State of Southeast Asia Report 2024*, illustrates Malaysians' complex attitudes toward China: high recognition of its economic contributions (76.5%) but significant concern over its perceived social detachment (67.3%). This ambivalence reflects a mixture of pragmatism and cultural vigilance. Older generations evaluated expatriate isolation through the lens of colonial history, while younger participants projected potential risks through digital narratives, underscoring the complexity of Malay cultural identity under globalization.

Theoretically, this study suggests that existing cross-cultural management frameworks—particularly cultural metaphor theory and Hofstede's cultural dimensions—require adjustment in the deglobalization era to better capture sociocultural variables in transnational workplaces. Practically, the study proposes culturally resilient adaptation strategies: institutional-cultural coupling (e.g., tiered family support), symbolic capital reconstruction (e.g., metaverse-based family embassies), and institutionalized buffer zones (e.g., certified cultural mediators). These strategies can not only ease cultural frictions faced by Chinese enterprises in Malaysia but also offer new perspectives for managing cross-cultural cooperation during the global transformation period.

2) Limitations

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the limited sample size and geographical coverage restrict the generalizability of findings. The focus group data came solely from 42 participants in five Chinese enterprises in Malaysia, excluding other Belt and Road Islamic countries (e.g., Indonesia, Pakistan), where variations in religious intensity and historical experience may shape cognitive conflicts differently.

Second, the study relies primarily on qualitative methods and lacks quantitative validation. While focus groups captured rich symbolic meanings and interactional dynamics, they did not test causal relationships through large-scale surveys or ex-

perimental designs—for example, the statistical correlation between religious sensitivity and misinterpretation intensity.

Third, although the buffering role of ethnic Chinese employees was highlighted, the study did not sufficiently analyze how individual differences (e.g., language proficiency, strength of identity) affect mediation effectiveness, limiting a fuller understanding of the “cultural translation” mechanism.

Finally, the analysis of deglobalization effects focused on geopolitical and historical trauma as catalytic factors, without fully incorporating economic drivers such as expatriation costs and local wage disparities. This may have underestimated the weight of material conditions in shaping cultural perceptions.

3) Directions for Future Research

Future studies may extend this research in four directions:

(1) Expand the sample scope by comparing perceptions of Chinese expatriation policies across different Islamic cultural contexts to assess both the universality and specificity of conflict patterns.

(2) Adopt mixed-method approaches by integrating surveys and behavioral experiments to quantify the impact of family presence on cross-cultural trust.

(3) Focus on the mediation role of ethnic Chinese employees, examining how language ability, cross-cultural experience, and identity dynamics shape their effectiveness as cultural translators.

(4) Incorporate an economic perspective** by analyzing the interaction between expatriation policy costs and local economic conditions, thereby offering a multidimensional explanation of cultural conflict.

Pursuing these directions will further enrich theoretical debates and practical insights into cross-cultural management under deglobalization.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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