

‘Let our emotions tell the story’: An exploration of emotion management in Chinese proactive workgroup socialization

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Abstract

This exploratory qualitative study augments extant literature in organizational studies on workplace emotion by examining emotion management in the Chinese proactive workgroup socialization process. The study sought to gain insight into Chinese newcomers' emotional experiences, the ways in which Chinese newcomers negotiated their understanding of emotion in the workplace, and the implications of emotional maturity from the perspective of Chinese employees. More importantly, this study exposed differences in proactive socialization between a Chinese bureaucratic office and western organizations. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with 22 veterans and new employees in a Chinese governmental agency. A modified constant comparative analysis revealed three primary aspects that delineate the Chinese workplace as it relates to emotion management during socialization: (i) there are three salient types of emotion that occurred in Chinese workgroups; (ii) Chinese work settings are characterized by perceptions of emotional maturity, with a cultural emphasis on a holistic mindset, an indicator of personal growth and a shared goal; and (iii) more importantly, Chinese newcomers play an active role in negotiating and modifying established cultures.

Keywords

emotional maturity, holistic mindset, proactive socialization, qualitative research

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Emotion management is an essential and inseparable part of organizational life (Ashforth and Humphrey, 2003). Scholars have generally agreed that emotion impacts employees' work productivity (e.g. Elfenbein, 2007; Miller et al., 2007). Workplace emotion influences employees' well-being (e.g. stress, burnout), shapes members' perceptions about organizational culture, and contributes to their organizational identification (e.g. Kramer, 2012; Kramer and Hess, 2002; Miller et al., 2007; Scott and Myers, 2005). Emotion management is also important to new employees' active learning – in other words, the socialization process (Kramer, 2010; Vaccaro et al., 2011). Newcomers gradually gain necessary knowledge in interacting with veterans of an organizational culture, such as knowledge of occupational expectations, communication norms and emotion regulations (e.g. Ashforth and Humphrey, 2003; Kramer, 2010; Kramer and Hess, 2002). More importantly, newcomers also actively define, label and negotiate meanings as they make sense of the acquired knowledge.

Scholars have revealed the critical role of workplace emotion in socialization, specifically within certain types of western organizational contexts. These organizational types include certain service-oriented industrial organizations, such as airline companies (e.g. Kunda and Van Maanen, 1999; Lopez, 2010; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1991; Tumbat, 2011), high-reliability organizations (HROs) such as fire stations or airline companies (e.g. Bolton, 2001; Scott and Myers, 2005; Shuler and Sypher, 2000), and health-related organizations, as seen in hospitals and care centers (e.g. Hayward and Tuckey, 2011). Although past research offers valuable insights to the work settings above, our understanding of workplace emotion in non-western office work such as government agencies and bureaucracies is limited. For instance, discussions of emotion management in western office work often include affective feelings such as 'staying positive' or 'staying joyful' (Kremer, 2013); positive emotions are usually positively related to collaboration (Miller et al., 2007). Such conclusions may not apply to non-western organizational settings owing to their distinctive cultures, people and contexts.

Managing emotion during socialization involves active communication and frequent practice of various organizational rules and norms, particularly regarding group dynamics (Louis, 1980). However, many organizational studies imply that socialization is a *top-down, passive process* in which newcomers merely absorb or take in unsolicited knowledge about emotion via institutionalized and individual strategies (e.g. Miller et al., 2007; Vaccaro et al., 2011). In contrast, *proactive socialization* (Scott and Myers, 2005) departs from the traditional top-down approach by revealing that new employees also actively negotiate understandings about workplace emotion while interacting within various subgroups. They may disagree, modify and create new meanings of information acquired from cohorts, direct supervisors and co-workers outside their departments. Newcomers' active individual and collective negotiation may then deepen or vary their interpretations about emotion management. Unfortunately, the ways in which newcomers manage emotion in their communication during proactive workgroup socialization remains unclear because of a dearth of attention to newcomers' active communication in their group dynamics (e.g. Cottrell and Neuberg, 2005; Kelly and Barsade, 2001; Von Scheve, 2012). We rarely get a glimpse into newcomers' pivotal and initiative moves to manage emotions during stages of encounter where individual transformation is likely to arise.

Therefore, the present study employs Miller et al.'s (2007) typology of workplace emotion to conceptualize emotion and further investigate emotion management in Chinese proactive workgroup socialization. More specifically, this research highlights that navigating emotion management communicatively is a crucial strategy that new members use in Chinese office workgroups. Active emotion management communication reveals how new Chinese employees actively learn about, adjust to and negotiate meanings of stories, metaphors and rituals in workgroups during their introductory or 'encounter' phase. This focus on emotion management in non-western proactive workgroup socialization with a distinctively communicative orientation advances current socialization literature. In addition, China has become the second largest world economy that influences today's business world and economic development trend. Therefore, this study's research setting is theoretically and practically convincing because it is a regular Chinese administrative agency involved in frequent international cooperation. Organizational lives in such an agency reflect both rooted and fluid aspects of emotion management in proactive workgroup socialization. The following section explains Miller et al.'s (2007) typology of workplace emotion and examines emotion management as a means for newcomers to socialize into workgroups.

Theoretical background

Communication of emotion in socialization

Conceptualization of workplace emotion in organizational studies remains vague, despite popular conceptualizations such as *expressed emotion* (Hayward and Tuckey, 2011; Kunda and Van Maanen, 1999; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987, 1991; Scott and Myers, 2005, 2010), *felt emotion* (i.e. affective state) (Barsade, 2002; Kelly and Barsade, 2001), as well as psychological and physiological *emotional experiences* (Elfenbein, 2007). However, Rafaeli and Sutton (1987: 23) pointed out: 'there is no simple match between the emotions that organizational members feel and the emotions they learn to express.' Miller et al.'s (2007: 234) typology of workplace emotion conceptualized emotion as 'a counterforce woven with rationality in the workplace.' Such conceptualization pinpointed emotion according to its relationship with work.

Miller et al.'s (2007) typology examines five categories. First, *emotional labor* refers to certain types of *inauthentic* emotion required for organizational benefits and goals, such as flight attendants or bill collectors demonstrating a happy or intimidating demeanor. Emotional labor may require surface acting (i.e. a mask) and/or deep acting (adjusting inner feelings to match expressed emotion). A disconnect between felt and displayed emotion (i.e. emotional dissonance) may occur consequently (e.g. Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987, 1991). Second, *emotional work* is usually required of teachers, ministers or social workers in that *authentic* emotions are critical in their jobs (e.g. Kanov et al., 2004; Way and Tracy, 2012). Third, *emotion with work* (emotional moments from interactions) centers on positive or negative workplace relationships with peers, co-workers and supervisors (e.g. Barsade, 2002; Tjosvold and Su, 2007). Fourth, *emotion at work* (emotion happens in workplaces, but pertains to other life aspects) focuses on tensions from intersections of work and life (e.g. Kirby and Krone, 2002). Fifth, *emotion*

toward work (general affective state toward work) includes general emotions such as workplace satisfaction. The five types of emotion are not mutually exclusive, nor does one type predominate in certain organizations. Miller et al.'s (2007) typology highlights the complex nature of emotion and, more importantly, the various work contexts and interactions in which emotions may occur. In this study, emotion management is examined within the context of workgroup socialization.

Workgroups serve as a main work context in which employees acquire and make sense of necessary knowledge (Louis, 1980) related to workplace emotion. Group socialization is an important *research context* in which new Chinese employees learn emotion expression and regulation as a critical part of necessary knowledge. Therefore, 'socialization' in this study adopts Anderson et al.'s (1999) conceptualization, recognizing the interplay between the collective (in this case, Chinese workgroups) and newcomers. The process is typically presented as involving four phases: (i) Antecedent (newcomers carry previous experience) / anticipatory (newcomers form expectations prior to joining the organization); (ii) Encounter (the first weeks and months when newcomers begin to acquire cultures); (iii) Assimilation (the time when individuals consider themselves insiders); and (iv) Exit (the time when an individual leaves the group). This study focuses on the newcomers' encounter phase, during which they work and collaborate with a number of people in formal and informal group interactions (Louis, 1980).

Scholars have revealed that communicating workplace emotion plays a key role in western employees' socialization. New employees acquire interpersonal validation of appropriate emotions and regulations in group interactions (Von Scheve and Ismer, 2013). Groups' ways of talking about and managing emotions also impact newcomers' role negotiation, job performance and workplace relationships (e.g. Cottrell and Neuberg, 2005; Morris and Feldman, 1997; Seymour and Sandiford, 2005). For instance, the 'humble booter' (Scott and Myers, 2005: 81) is a phrase that implies new firefighters in a fire station were expected to remain positive while being treated like 'garbage.' Newcomers acquire role identities while learning about emotion management. Failure to manage emotional dissonance or exhaustion often leads to reduced job satisfaction, performance or a lack of role identity (Cottrell and Neuberg, 2005; Elfenbein, 2007; Morris and Feldman, 1996).

Furthermore, new employees adopt various communication strategies to make sense of their experiences in socialization (e.g. Gallagher and Sias, 2009; Ge et al., 2010; Korte, 2010; Scott and Myers, 2010). In addition to unsolicited knowledge provided by employers, newcomers also actively make sense of daily communication through five communicative information-seeking strategies at the individual level (Kramer and Miller, 2014): (a) interactive strategies include asking overt or indirect questions and disguising conversations; (b) active strategies include third-party inquiries from someone; (c) passive observation and surveillance; (d) testing involves breaking organizational norms and evaluating responses; and (e) cognitive efforts incorporate appraisal and reappraisal of information. Newcomers acquire knowledge of emotion management through information-seeking during socialization, such as newcomers' observation, inquiry about and appraisal of daily routines. They can also (more easily) break current norms of emotion management and then evaluate co-workers' responses (Kramer and Miller, 2014). Communicative messages received in individual information seeking,

such as metaphors (e.g. 'humble booter'), stories, rituals or the portrayal of role models (heroes), are manifestations of emotion knowledge that explains organizational culture (Kramer, 2010).

Emotion in Chinese proactive workgroup socialization

The review of extant literature exposed several theoretical gaps. Much of the reviewed literature perceives socialization as merely a top-down management process. This perspective ignores the interplay between the collective and newcomers described in Anderson et al. (1999). Therefore, *proactive socialization* is introduced to emphasize newcomers' collective meaning-making of emotion in workgroups and individuals' active negotiation of emotion management. More important, the current literature is driven by western-oriented workplace philosophies, which may not apply to non-western cultural contexts.

First, *proactive socialization* highlights not only individual, but also collective meaning-making of the reality about emotion in Chinese workgroups. Newcomers collect understanding of emotion through sharing, commenting and labeling information in various groups, in addition to conducting individual information-seeking strategies. Group dynamics as the major socialization context must not be overlooked (Louis, 1980). Communication allows employees to account for the same experiences or events both individually and collectively, ranging from extremely similar to distinctive. In proactive socialization, newcomers' meaning-making can align gradually with a collective consciousness of 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' emotion. For instance, group members are found to cope with negative emotion jointly. Common strategies of emotion management in socialization include neutrality (Miller et al., 2007), defensiveness (reluctance to accept) (Brown and Starkey, 2000) normalization (make extraordinary ordinary) (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002) and affective forecasting (predicting negative emotion) (Elfenbein, 2007). New Chinese employees, for example, may align with veterans in redefining and normalizing the frustration of dealing with foreign clients (i.e. normalization). In other words, they accept and reflect actively on the existing shared culture that prescribes norms for emotion management. Unfortunately, new employees' communication of emotion in Chinese workgroups has not been a particular focus in the extant literature. The few studies on emotion management in Chinese organizations have focused on top-down institutional socialization strategies (i.e. management practices), organizational identification and organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g. Chen et al., 2011; Chu and Chu, 2011).

Furthermore, past studies fail to recognize newcomers' active role in both information-seeking and interpreting meanings of collected information. As another component of socialization, newcomers' active meaning-making can align, yet also deviate, or be slightly different from the established culture, defined as individualization by Jablin (1987, 2001). Employees exhibit individuation when they attempt to change work routines to fit personal needs. More specifically, new employees may modify, negotiate or deviate from established cultures (Von Scheve and Ismer, 2013) in communicating emotion. For instance, new employees often communicate within their cohort to disclose frustration, and complain about, vent on or reevaluate emotional moments and veterans'

behaviors. Such collective interpretations influence new employees' perception toward existing culture and further shape their emotion management choices later (Von Scheve and Ismer, 2013). However, individuals' influences on organizations via modification or individualization remain unclear in proactive socialization (Kramer, 2010).

More importantly, western theoretical perspectives appear to dominate literature on workplace emotion in socialization, especially in high-reliability organizations, but little is known about the emotional lives of bureaucratic workgroups in China. A western-centered lens tends to overlook or overgeneralize the influence of Chinese culture. For instance, western studies often find positive emotion and respectful attitudes to be highly valued (Eid and Diener, 2001) in maintaining workplace relationships and self-images (Kramer and Hess, 2002). In collectivistic cultures, however, collective conformity (Hofstede, 1991) to emotional rules and communal goals is more critical. The Confucianism perspective – another dominant Chinese cultural philosophy – also argues that Chinese employees may even restrain emotions for relational maintenance (e.g. Chang and Holt, 1991; Krone and Morgan, 2000). Using this reasoning, Chinese people are less likely to display emotions in certain work contexts, contra US-based studies. Therefore, whether and how Chinese new employees display emotions in proactive socialization is in question.

Along the same lines, western perspectives may overlook the cultural implications of some seemingly traditional emotion management strategies. For instance, a traditional perspective (Kramer and Miller, 2014) defines observation as a passive socialization strategy, which may actually be seen as strategic and skillful in non-western organizations where nonverbal communication is highly valued (e.g. Fu et al., 2008). Similarly, Chinese people may perceive expression and interpretation of emotion as more strategic. Scholars found that remaining silent when experiencing anger demonstrated strategic avoidance and damage control in Chinese organizations (Guo and Cionea, 2017), rather than 'giving up' considered by the western world. In emotional conflicts, however, Eastern leaders can release emotion overtly, just as westerners, instead of withdrawing or being passive (Deutsch et al., 2011). Thus, emotion management in Chinese bureaucratic workplaces may depart from conclusions derived out of western-based studies and require more investigation.

This study gains purchase in Chinese organizational settings. In this study, Chinese employees worked for a provincial diplomatic department (like state diplomatic departments in the USA), where business, political and cultural exchanges occur at both international and local levels. New employees actively made sense of emotions that emerged from both work and department interactions. Guided by Miller et al.'s (2007) five types of workplace emotion, this study aimed to first identify the types of emotion experienced in the Chinese workgroups and then reveal the complex nature of emotion displays in the encounter phase. Further, as newcomers learn about established cultural practices, they also actively negotiate, modify or deviate from shared interpretations in both individual and collective meaning-making. The second goal, therefore, examined how newcomers adapted and negotiated in proactive group socialization, if at all. To achieve these two goals, three research questions were proposed:

Research question 1: What emotions do Chinese government employees report experiencing in their government workgroups?

Research question 2: During the encounter process, how do Chinese newcomers in government workgroups adapt to or negotiate an understanding of appropriate emotion management, if at all?

Research question 3: During the encounter phase, how do Chinese newcomers communicate to, adapt to or negotiate managing emotion in the government workgroups, if at all?

Method

Setting

A Chinese governmental agency was selected via the researchers' personal networking. Employees worked as diplomatic representatives for a provincial government (i.e. state government in the USA). The agency had two sub-offices with distinct responsibilities. Each sub-office consisted of two to three departments. Each department had five to 10 employees.

Participants

With IRB approval, four departments with 15 new members recruited in the past year were selected. Twenty-two Chinese employees in the four departments were contacted by the researcher (10 veterans and 12 new employees). In general, two to three veterans and three new employees from each department joined the study. The veterans interviewed worked as senior interpreters, officers, administrators and program coordinators, and their years of working ranged from 3 to 4.5 years. These veterans were the employees who interacted closest with newcomers on a daily basis. Therefore, they provided representative experience of working with new employees, besides knowledge of emotion management. New employees were entry-level, such as department assistants, and their periods of employment ranged from 1 to 9 months.

Volunteer veterans and newcomers were first divided into six focus groups: three groups of veterans and three groups of newcomers. Focus groups were conducted to gather stories, comments and conversations that demonstrated a shared understanding of emotion management. Focus groups foster a "group effect" through complementary interactions (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011), as participants are open to share, comment on and add to experiences. Each veteran group comprised three to four participants, ranging in age from their late 30s to mid-50s, including six males and four females. Each newcomer group comprised three to four participants in their mid-20s, including four males and eight females. Each focus group discussion lasted 60 to 90 minutes in a 'neutral' and private conference room (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011).

Following the focus groups, individual interviews were conducted with 10 newcomers to understand their socialization experiences and elicit more in-depth stories or conversations based on their focus groups' interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes. Personal interviews were arranged based on participants' availability and preferences. All focus group and individual interviews were audio-recorded, with permission from participants.

Interview procedures and instruments

Focus group interviews. The first open-ended interview protocol was designed for the focus groups with veteran employees to provide light guidance. The protocol focused on how they aligned to a shared understanding of emotion management before new members joined the organization, and how they continually socialized new people in the proactive socialization process. The questions concerned: (i) identifying types of emotion in each workplace; (ii) recalling experiences of appropriate emotion management in the departments; and (iii) describing experiences of socializing new members to understand appropriate emotion management.

The second open-ended protocol was designed for focus groups with newcomers, emphasizing their understanding and experiences of being socialized into the groups' workplace emotion management norms. The questions concerned: (i) newcomers' understanding of appropriate emotion management prior to joining the departments; (ii) their experiences of learning about managing workplace emotions after joining; and (iii) their current understanding about emotion management. Demographic information for both groups, including gender, age, positions and tenure in the departments, was collected after the focus group interviews.

Individual interviews. In-depth personal interviews were conducted with 10 newcomers, using a similar semi-structured interview questionnaire to the one for the newcomer focus groups. Newcomers further expanded and clarified stories and comments. They provided potential divergence from the groups that had been reluctant to share in group discussions.

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. The researcher transcribed and then translated data into English for analysis, which resulted in 176 pages of single-spaced text for focus groups and 72 pages of single-spaced text for individual interviews. All participants' identities were protected by pseudonyms.

Data analysis

A modified version of constant comparative analysis was adopted to foster the search of contextualized knowledge and social dynamics in data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Suddaby, 2006). Stories, metaphors, comments, instances or examples that demonstrated knowledge about appropriate emotion management and newcomers' experiences of socializing into groups were first identified and separated from the initial data for the purpose of data reduction (Bisel and Barge, 2011). Such messages consisted of repetitive stories, metaphors, phrases and descriptions of role models (Bormann, 1969, 1983) in emotion management. Messages pertaining to managing group workplace emotions were retained and read repeatedly. An open coding process was conducted to identify emergent and recurrent patterns. The researcher reread, compared and coded all the messages into mutually exclusive themes. Then, in a process of focused coding, all the codes were separated into categories, such as themes or rituals shared by veteran groups, newcomers or departments. The researcher checked codes for categories to ensure appropriateness. The same procedures were also performed on the data of individual interviews to acquire appropriate categories, and then compared with focus groups' data to consolidate categories. Categories that originated during focused coding were examined in order to provide possible explanations for

potential interrelationships (Charmaz, 2000). At the end of the coding, all data were accounted for comprehensively by at least one of the categories.

Member checking and peer reviews were conducted as validation strategies for this study (Creswell, 2012). One veteran and one newcomer who each spoke both English and Chinese were invited to examine a first draft of the analysis and provide alternative interpretations. An experienced communication scholar in organizational socialization and small group research evaluated the data analysis and results for the quality of this study.

Findings and interpretations

Research question 1: Three types of workplace emotion

In response to research question 1, three types of emotion were first identified in both veterans' and newcomers' interviews: emotional labor, emotion with work and emotion toward work.

Emotional labor. Both veterans and newcomers in this study clearly differentiated their true feelings from displayed emotion (i.e. mask; inauthentic emotion) required by the job. Both veterans and new employees mentioned two layers of meanings in their job: 'serving' worldwide delegations as the organizational goal, and 'representing the government' as diplomats. To achieve the organizational and occupational goals, 'you need to act out "neither haughty nor humble" and treat delegates like customers in the service industry,' a senior supervisor commented. Other veterans in discussions resonated with the analogy. One member shared a story of declining a foreign delegate's unreasonable request:

He was so mad and yelled at us loudly, too rude as a diplomat [frowning]. Were we mad and annoyed? Yes! But I always keep in mind that I represent the government, and the delegate was our customer. Wearing the 'mask' is a must-do at every moment.

This representative quote showed that 'neither haughty nor humble' was surface acting. This occupationally and institutionally defined emotion expression triggered emotional dissonance, also confirmed by newcomers' focus groups. A new young supervisor stated that, 'Delegations are "God", a little bit of an exaggeration, but true. I used to be mistakenly blamed by delegates and actually feel annoyed, but I have to put on my face of "neither haughty nor humble".' Similarly, others also emphasized the philosophy of 'serving' and 'image building' in stories about delegations, which frequently involved emotional adjustments. The philosophy of *service* then prescribed an organizationally desired emotion ('neither haughty nor humble'), yet signaled emotional dissonance. Emotional labor seemed woven into external interactions with foreign delegations in the workplace.

Emotion with work. Emotion with work was situated in workplace relationships. Most veterans described the departments and the agency as 'a family.' 'Co-workers who usually work together for over 8 years barely leave' and 'people know others in their department very well.' Veterans created relational intimacy by 'disclosing private issues such as family issues,' as one interpreter explained. The family-like relationships also gave newcomers an easy entry as they were treated as 'children.' Such intimacy also brought privacy

concerns, in addition to 'caring' and 'closeness.' 'People know about you, your family, marriage, etc., and they care. Sometimes I struggle to keep my life private,' a senior director commented. The privacy concerns seemed to add additional emotional burden to the new crew who are at the bottom of hierarchy, as the young interpreter best described:

The family relationship is somewhat 'fake' and really needs strategic management. I became frustrated when given a time-consuming task but was requested to rush. As a newcomer, it is too hard to refuse, not only because I'm new, but also because I don't want to ruin the relationships, and my image.

Similar themes came from other newcomers' stories, as seen in challenges of 'arguing as a new one' or 'maintaining submissive and likeable.' Relational intimacy, although seemingly positive, triggered emotional burdens, such as privacy violation and impression management. Thus, positive and negative emotions with work intertwined in this agency.

Emotion toward work. Emotion toward work referred to participants' general feelings about work, which appeared different between veterans and new employees. Most senior employees defined their job as a procedural-based governmental occupation. They agreed on the diplomatic significance of this job, referring to metaphors such as 'bridge,' and 'the government's mouth.' However, after 'learning about all rules and working repetitively with similar delegations,' they considered the job 'normal and lacked a sense of achievement.' A senior secretary stated in the focus group, 'We are just a normal bureau as others, not "fancy and enviable" as outsiders thought.' Newcomers, however, perceived their jobs as 'meaningful and distinctive.' The secretary's new assistant explained, 'I gain a true sense of achievement. We (the new crew) gain strong technical skills (e.g. interpretation), and are connected with diverse influential figures. You don't have these in common bureaus. So this is a great learning platform for a professional.' Participants agreed on the diplomatic significance of this job. However, veterans displayed negative emotions toward work because of repetitive routines. Newcomers, in contrast, maintained positive emotions because of their perceived access to various learning opportunities. Compared to veterans, new employees remained curious and passionate about their work. These differences further emerged in their negotiation of emotion rules.

The identified three types of emotion reflected participants' emotion experiences not only in, but also across, the departments. In proactive socialization, new employees engaged in active meaning-making to draw similar or different conclusions from veterans. Veterans obviously impacted newcomers' perceptions toward emotional labor. However, newcomers also assigned new meanings to workplace relationships and work values. Such alignment and negotiation also emerged in discussions of understanding emotion and emotion management.

Research question 2: Aligning with and negotiating workplace emotion

Group stories, metaphors, heroes and collective rituals emerged in both focus group and individual interviews. Newcomers drew on, labeled and defined communicative activities to understand workplace emotion. Two workplace assumptions appeared to define emotional security in this Chinese office. As the newcomers engaged in proactive socialization,

they not only learned about the shared taken-for-granted assumptions in workgroups, but they also negotiated the meanings of these assumptions in cohort interactions.

Adapting to emotional maturity. Both veteran and newcomers' group interviews reflected two taken-for-granted assumptions: suppression of emotion and silence on emotion, which defined emotional maturity. Newcomers acquired the taken-for-granted assumptions through interpreting and labeling their observations from and interactions with veterans.

Suppression of emotion. Veteran focus groups brought up the '5/10 scale' that indicated 'emotionally grown-up working adults.' The 5/10 scale meant keeping emotionally neutral. 'Just like room temperature water,' further clarified by a senior interpreter. In one story, a junior project assistant displayed anger in an official meeting with obvious facial expressions and vocal tone. After the meeting, people began politely to avoid him, as they started 'shortening the conversation time with him' or 'avoiding sitting with him in the cafeteria.' Veterans perceived this junior member as 'immature' and an 'outsider.' One coordinator said that 'I empathized with him, but getting mad was not what a grown-up working adult should do here, it's ... childish.' Another senior supervisor agreed in the discussion: 'Adults should not let their feelings affect others around; always keep it at 5 on a 10-point scale.' The 5/10 scale represented a stable state of emotion expression for veterans. Veterans also considered positive feelings like 'excited' and 'happy' as being the same as 'depression' and 'anxiety.' Both positive and negative emotions were 'contagious', expected to be withdrawn in the agency.

Interestingly enough, newcomers aligned with suppression of only negative emotions in their discussions. Two memorable stories portrayed their role models: a senior supervisor Wang and a veteran employee Dong. One new interpreter witnessed a senior administrator throwing a notebook at Wang in a meeting because of some errors in Wang's report: 'I was petrified, "Oh, my goodness, now what?"' Impressively, Wang maintained his '5/10' in and even outside the meeting without complaints or frustration. 'He is a really good. You won't catch him leave 5 in any cases, even in that awful situation [thrown notebook], or worse.' The story was labeled as 'classic,' and was shared alongside a similar story of another veteran model, Dong: 'We get panicked easily when delegations encounter troubles, like missing a flight. Dong always keeps his cool – amazing,' newcomers commented. Newcomers portrayed these two model veterans to 'imitate and follow,' because the models exemplified 'maturity' by suppressing negative emotions. Newcomers agreed with veterans that suppression of negative emotions defined an appreciated employee. However, they later further negotiated positive emotions in the 5/10 scale.

Silence on workplace emotion. Another assumption was avoiding communication about emotion, which reflected a holistic consideration of workplace relationships. Veteran members reported being cautious about talking or exchanging emotions at work. Conversations about both positive and negative emotion signaled 'inexperience and lack of big picture thinking.' A supply officer explained:

The full picture is important. Complaining or expressing worries is awful to impression management, and the whole group. If you are happy or excited ... most likely due to praise

from leaders, also be careful you aren't provoking envy or being disrespectful for others ... not a wise move. Just stay low key. That's the culture.

Clearly, silence on emotion represented holistic thinking in emotional maturity. Avoidance in emotion communication was not a passive management norm; instead, it reflected consideration of relationship maintenance (e.g. network management), face-work (e.g. being respectful) and cultural values (e.g. low key). Notably, newcomers only supported muting negative emotions for 'impression management.' They agreed that complaining was 'babies' attributes.' However, similar to their discussion about suppression of emotion, active negotiation of positive emotion also occurred.

Therefore, adapting to emotional maturity revealed two sub-themes: suppression of emotion and silence about emotion. These two sub-themes emerged from veterans and newcomers' meaning-making: labeling metaphors and phrases, naming negative characters and portraying heroes. New employees aligned with veterans regarding suppressing and remaining silent on *negative* emotions in routines and dramatic events (e.g. thrown notebook). They, however, negotiated on expressing *positive* emotions with and toward work, as discussed below.

Negotiating emotional maturity. New employees also attempted to negotiate rules of positive emotion expression, despite of their identified alignment. They disagreed with suppressions and silenced positive emotions. More specifically, '5' in the metaphor '5/10 scale' was a stable *state* to veterans while it served a *threshold* to newcomers. Veterans supported withdrawing obvious feelings and the philosophy of room-temperature water. Newcomers, however, considered that only negative feelings should be kept. Positive emotions served 'seasoning of work lives.' A new office supplier said in the personal interview: 'Why should we wear a poker face for years? The workplace could be lively!' In focus group discussions, they considered 'a sense of pride for small success motivating.' Newcomers, therefore, modified interpretations of positive emotions in the '5/10 scale' metaphor within their cohort. Similarly, new employees also negotiated on muting emotions because 'positive vibes foster collective cooperation.' They preferred to convey a willingness to act out positive emotions, in 'mild jokes, teasing, and laughter.' Such mild deviations implied newcomers' active negotiation on workplace norms through collective meaning-making.

Not surprisingly, veterans labeled newcomers' negotiation as 'immature' and 'inexperienced': 'These kids add fresh air with their happy faces, but this also shows that they are still kids.' Veterans deemed the ability to maintain the 5/10 *state* a critical standard to judge whether a newcomer had grown up. Their discussions revealed that a mature employee is expected to: (i) maintain a state of room-temperature water from inside out in both exhilarating and depressing cases; and (ii) master big-picture/holistic thinking with ingenious self-management (e.g. consider people and context). Veterans' definition for emotional maturity entailed a grown-up, ideal stage of an employee. This notion also reflected Chinese cultural assumptions (e.g. relational maintenance, face, hierarchy), and a holistic self-training in socialization. Workplace maturity captured deeper meanings than 'neutrality' (i.e. masking negative emotions) defined in western-based studies (e.g. Kramer and Hess, 2002).

Negotiating value of work. In the preceding discussion, newcomers deviated from veterans in perceptions toward work value with positive interpretation of *service*. To new

members, the mask (i.e. 'neither haughty nor humble') could be frustrating, but was necessary for *service*: 'We are diplomats. The mask is embedded in this job. You either do it or leave. Some people just don't have the courage to leave although they can't bear it anymore,' a young coordinator explained in the focus group. Moreover, comments such as 'striving for excellence' and 'self-achievement' captured newcomers' positive feelings toward their jobs. Newcomers 'embraced the frustration and sought for growth.' They further highlighted the easy access to various professional development opportunities and abilities acquired at work. Satisfaction with individual achievements was evident in their negotiation of positive emotions toward work.

Veterans further disagreed with newcomers' emphasis on 'self-achievement.' A junior supervisor further explained their emotional struggles in the focus group: 'Ultimately, our work is very procedural, and we eventually just work with problematic variations from the rules. No direct contributions to GDP, no footprints in the history, unlike the transportation bureau.' The comparison to other departments demonstrated that veterans' work expectations shifted from representing the government and self-growth to direct economic growth of the city. Negative emotions reflected the unmet expectations and work goals.

Therefore, veterans and newcomers communicated and negotiated positive emotions regarding emotional maturity, emotion toward work and distinctive work goals in cohorts during proactive socialization. They picked up linguistic tools created and shared in their own groups. Veterans made sense of emotional dissonance, shifted work goals (i.e. economic growth of the city), and occupational differences collectively in their organization. They developed shared discourse in meaning-making of metaphors, phrases and stories, which prescribed emotional maturity. Also, according to Anderson et al. (1999), veterans have passed the 'honeymoon' stage of work and moved into full assimilation with high task proficiency and familiarity. The unmet job expectations and high task proficiency contributed to their negative emotions with work. In comparison, new employees also engaged in collective meaning-making to reduce uncertainty in the encounter phase (Kramer, 2010). The younger generation exchanged, labeled and compared their knowledge of emotion maturity. A collective recognition for expressing positive emotions emerged in this meaning-making process. Moreover, the newcomers came from colleges directly to the agency with youthful curiosity and a zest for knowledge. The job fulfilled their learning needs and then enhanced their positive emotion toward work. In addition, these Chinese millennial-aged workers appeared to demonstrate stronger needs for individual achievements (*People's Daily*, 2014). These characteristics speak to newcomers' negotiation of, and willingness to express, positive feelings, despite veterans' doubt.

Research question 3: Developing and adapting to emotion management strategies

Routinization of negative emotions. Participants took on two major strategies to routinize emotional dissonance from emotion labor, as well as negative emotions with and toward work: (i) normalization and (ii) collective mealtime buffering. New employees collectively managed emotion within their cohort and with veterans in proactive socialization.

Normalization. During proactive socialization, new employees conducted active information-seeking and meaning-making within their own crew. Normalization means they internalized negative emotions in emotional labor into their jobs. New employees labeled emotion exhaustion and dissonance as ‘order in chaos’ or ‘stamping on files.’ A new member at the International Exchange Department explained: ‘Receiving delegations is ordered, yet full of chaos. You may have frequent breakdowns of reception plans, ridiculous delegates, medical emergencies, or quick-tempered leaders mad at you. Your nerves are always racing.’ Similarly, other newcomers used ‘stamps on files’ to define that ‘frustration, worries, or fear is *normal* daily *disorder*’, unique to this agency. Negative emotions did not ‘counter to rationalization’ (Miller et al., 2007: 232), but appeared to be internalized to foster rationalization.

Interestingly, newcomers also identified their own ‘hero’ within the cohort – Ting, a young female who first came in as an intern. She was labeled as ‘a good exemplar’ and ‘an inspiring cohort’: ‘Amazing. You just can believe that there is always a way out when working with her. She deals with frustration just like a piece of cake, no big deals,’ a female newcomer laughed. A newcomer brought up a moment in the focus group to describe Ting’s ‘magic’. A delegation was scheduled to leave in 6 hours, but the Chinese customs withheld his suitcase. Rookie employees panicked, but Ting looked ‘calm, persistent, and confident’:

She says ‘it [the trouble] is what we do, solving problems. Let’s try again. It will be fine.’ Without breaks, she kept working very hard till the midnight. Then we thought, ‘Right, it’s just a normal case as usual!’ She just can always make it.

Ting’s normalization of troublesome situations spoke to Ashforth and Kreiner’s (2002) description of ‘make extraordinary ordinary’ in HROs. Normalizing undesirable feelings occurred through collective meaning-making in a regular Chinese office setting.

Collective mealtime buffering. Participants brought up a setting theme that demonstrated a collective dispersion of negative emotion, despite the norm of silence on emotion. Veterans and newcomers gathered for a monthly dinner, the sole setting and timing that allowed emotion-related conversations. People joked, teased or complained about emotional episodes in workplace. A senior member recalled: ‘We complained about the *service* slogan by calling ourselves “city servants” in a sarcastic sense ... We always picture other jobs that could have made us an *owner*, like start-ups.’ These themes came out frequently at dinner among present veterans. They evaluated frustration to ‘seek comforts.’ Attendees conducted joint efforts buffering emotional dissonance and negative feelings.

However, attendees shared the norm of silencing about the conversations once the dinner was over. ‘The dinner is among close friends. Don’t mention it somewhere else, or with outsiders, that is a big no-no,’ a male junior interpreter explained. It was a shared ‘tacit agreement.’ The mealtime allowed members to talk about frustrations or anxiety, but also constrained ways of sharing and communicating workplace emotion. The notion of collective mealtime buffering also partially spoke to Hochschild’s (1979) front stage (e.g. public life) and backstage (e.g. personal life) in managing emotional labor. Arguably, employees’ front stage–backstage is dichotomized in emotional labor, meaning that

employees separate front stage and backstage clearly (e.g. Goffman, 1963; Tracy, 2000). Collective mealtime buffering was assigned a symbolic significance that indicated a clear boundary between managing front stage (i.e. mask for *service*) and backstage (i.e. non-organizational activities).

Thus, normalizing and collective dispersing of negative emotions reflected participants' ways of thinking and talking within and outside the workgroups. Newcomers developed their own tactic to rationalize negative emotions at work while adapting to established emotion management strategies (e.g. collective mealtime buffering). Communicating emotion reflected new employees' active meaning-making and negotiation of cultural practices in workgroups.

Discussion

The findings answered proposed research questions by first presenting three major types of workplace emotion that occurred to a Chinese bureaucratic office. Participants recognized emotional labor, emotion with work, and emotion toward work intertwined in either their similar or slightly different meaning-making of communicative interactions. The second research question identified newcomers' adaptation to and negotiation of emotional rules in proactive socialization. New employees adopted shared cultural expectations for emotional maturity in stories (e.g. role models), phrases (e.g. 5/10 scale) and labeling (e.g. antagonist). They also negotiated meanings of cultural assumptions (e.g. 5/10 scale, positive emotion toward work) in collective discourse within their cohort. The third research question revealed newcomers' participation in group emotion management such as collective buffering, and normalized negative emotions with their own storytelling.

These overall findings contributed to current literature in four ways. First, the findings recognized the complex nature and salience of emotion, particularly emotional labor in a regular Chinese government office, not limited to HROs in western literature (e.g. Scott and Myers, 2010; Thornton and Novak, 2010). Chinese veterans and newcomers each provided discourse toward emotional labor – the organizationally and occupationally desired emotions (e.g. 'service,' 'neither haughty nor humble'), reflecting a distinctive emphasis on job expectations and work goals. Veterans struggled with emotional dissonance and exhaustion in the long-term, procedural-based work. They seemed to encounter fewer task challenges over time with increased task proficiency and familiarity with organizational rules. Also, veterans' discourse emphasized participating directly in urban economic development like other bureaus, rather than simply serving as 'city image builders' or 'bridges' in international business. This comparison then seemed to trigger veterans' shifted job expectations, unmet in repetitive work routines, which enhanced emotional exhaustion and negative emotions toward work. Therefore, veterans focused more on macro-level collective goals. By contrast, newcomers acknowledged emotional labor: they embraced emotional dissonance during the 'honeymoon' phase of proactive socialization. Newcomers labeled the mask as the 'nature of the job' in both uncertainty reduction and collective meaning-making (Kramer, 2010). Arguably, as new Millennials and fresh graduates, newcomers' youthful curiosity and zest for knowledge drove them to further explore possible professional development opportunities. They

adopted similar learning and personal growth themes in daily discourse. This discourse emphasized individual growth as their job expectation, instead of urban development, which explained newcomers' positivity in emotional labor and emotion toward work. Therefore, veterans and newcomers' collective meaning-making foster two different discourses, respectively, at their own socialization stages.

Along this line, emotional labor, emotion with work, and emotion toward work intertwined, providing cultural insights to positive emotion with work in Chinese organizations. Positive emotion with workplace relationships, contra Miller et al. (2007), triggered privacy concerns, frustration and work-related challenges (e.g. difficulties of negotiation). Positive and negative emotion with work was dialectical in such cases. Emotion with work and veterans' emotional dissonance in emotional labor also contributed to their general feeling toward work, say lack of job satisfaction (emotion toward work). Workplace emotion interplayed holistically. The findings of negative emotions with work departed from traditional cultural preference for strong group intimacy and relational maintenance (Hofstede, 1991).

Second, Chinese newcomers' active negotiation of acquired knowledge informed individualization in proactive socialization, a finding missing from past literature. The process of proactive socialization unfolded in two directions: newcomers adapted to the shared cultural practices in active meaning-making of emotion (i.e. assimilation). Meanwhile, they also actively communicated and negotiated meanings to modify the current cultural assumptions (i.e. individualization). Instead of relying merely on unsolicited information, Chinese employees in this study adopted active labeling, inquiry, appraisal and reappraisal of heroes and emotional episodes. Their understanding of expectations and management strategies emerged from creating and practicing metaphors ('5/10 scale'), phrases ('silence on emotion'), analogy ('stamps on files'), rituals ('collective mealtime buffering') and heroic stories ('role models'). New employees learned about these linguistic tools from veterans in assimilation; however, they also actively negotiated to redefine and modify meanings of these uses of language. For instance, the new crew deviated with regard to *suppression* of and *silence* on positive emotions, two themes that departed from veterans' interpretation. Newcomers' negotiation was then reflected in their attempts to modify veterans' linguistic tools and shared discourse of emotion. Despite veterans' dissatisfaction, new employees – Millennials – have a stronger individualized need and a willingness to challenge the existing culture (e.g. expression of positive emotions). In order to lead these Millennials, senior leaders might need to compromise, adjust or reconcile their communication approach. Moving to the stage of assimilation, the new crew may take the lead in various cultural practices and create long-lasting influence on organization culture.

Third, this study identified a unique notion-maturity, a collective assumption of emotion management, and a mechanism to evaluate an employee's growth. The notion of emotional maturity embraced, yet went beyond, a control mechanism as emotion neutrality (Miller et al., 2007) and a norm as professionalism (Kramer and Hess, 2002) in western literature. Emotional maturity in this study spoke to the notions of interdependent self-construals (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) and holistic mindset (Nisbett et al., 2001). According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), Chinese with interdependent construals of self may express and experience emotions with significant consideration of others'

responses and perspectives. In turn, the Chinese typically tend to be other-focused in emotion management: others' reactions and perspectives weigh heavily in self-expression; the Chinese obtain a higher degree of self-control in emotion management to maintain desired interpersonal connections. For instance, participants' advocacy of emotion suppression and silence signaled interdependent self-construals: considering others' reactions and respectful of the big picture (e.g. surface acting for the government image, suppressing emotion to stay low key). However, western culture neither emphasizes nor values such overt attention to others and social connectedness (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Emotional maturity in western literature is then considered more self-focused (e.g. independent self-construal), with an emphasis on valuing independence and controlling one's public behaviors or states.

Related with the notion of self-construal, a holistic mindset also surfaced with great attention to interpersonal and contextual factors, such as relational maintenance, hierarchy, occupation, social boundaries, impression management and communication consequences (Kaushal and Kwantes, 2006). This holistic mindset spoke to the notion of holistic cognition and Chinese systems of thought (Nisbett et al., 2001), serving as parameters for evaluating others' mental maturity. For instance, veterans considered employees who failed to maintain a room-temperature emotional state to be mentally immature and less trustworthy. A newcomer can potentially transform to be a 'grown-up' veteran when they can suppress and silence both positive and negative emotions, as expected. Such a rooted cultural expectation may also add questions as to whether newcomers would eventually change the current cultures as they are constantly evaluated by veterans – the decision-makers. Nevertheless, emotional maturity is then an indicator of growth and an established career goal valued in this agency.

Lastly, this study advanced Miller et al.'s (2007) emphasis on situational characteristics of emotion in workgroups from a communication perspective. Chinese newcomers actively interacted within their cohort and across hierarchical groups (i.e. the veteran group) during the encounter phase. Inside the workplace, newcomers learned from veterans, identified role models and evaluated shared experiences within their cohort. Outside the workplace, during the monthly mealtime, participants buffered negative emotions – a collective ritual that highlighted group consciousness. Routinization and mealtime buffering in this study was not governed by the organization or management (e.g. Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002), but was constructed through self-coordinated communicative activities. The unique group interactions *outside* the workplace advanced current literature because past studies have highlighted institutional socialization *within* organizations, rather than collective communication coping strategies outside the workplace.

Practical contribution, limitations and future directions

This exploratory study offered important practical contributions to practitioners and leaders in the global market, especially those involved in business with Chinese bureaucratic offices. First, this study highlighted the complex nature of emotion in a Chinese organization. Findings suggested careful recognition of potential bias toward western practitioners and may help them identify a communication minefield. As Molinsky (2015) argued, the

popular term, emotional intelligence, does not fully translate across borders owing to the significant differences in meanings embedded in workplace emotion. For instance, the seemingly passive behaviors (e.g. silence or avoidance in emotional situations) identified in western-oriented literature actually involve more holistic and strategic management in Chinese culture. Second, the findings about emotion management in a collectivistic cultural and organizational setting are transferable. This study can assist practitioners further to 'read' Chinese partners' perceptions and behaviors in various types of cooperation. For instance, western practitioners could sense potential anger that hides behind Chinese employees' calm attitudes and smiles in a business argument.

This exploratory study pointed out directions for further research, potentially with more veteran participants, and diverse groups such as top management. Nevertheless, the coding of interviews reached saturation point (Bowen, 2008) and provided an in-depth understanding of emotion management in this Chinese organization. Future studies could explore newcomers' active negotiation and its impacts on the established group culture. Quantitative methods could be employed to investigate reasons for newcomers' negotiation, such as variations in demographics, work duration and generational differences. It is also questionable whether their negotiation changes or remains stable as they move into the next socialization stage, the assimilation phase. Newcomers' active negotiation could potentially shape current workplace norms, by either opening new culture discourse or triggering repression of veterans' voices. A follow-up longitudinal study could explore these possibilities. Finally, whether newcomers' coping strategies remain similar or change in the assimilation phase is open to investigation.

In conclusion, this study revealed how Chinese newcomers engaged in proactive group socialization while actively adapting to and negotiating emotion management in collective meaning-making. During the encounter phase, veterans and newcomers aligned and co-constructed a latent assumption of emotional maturity that guided emotion management and career development; meanwhile, the new crew also actively negotiated within the cohort to modify or redefine established cultural practices. This negotiation exposed the Chinese newcomers' individualization attempts in proactive socialization.

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