

MORE THAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: OTHER DIFFERENCES WITH MAJORITY WORLD WORKERS

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By Xiao (Howard) Wu

Xiao Wu has lived and served with his family in the Middle East for a number of years. He is a university lecturer and has both Chinese and Western heritage and experience.

Summary

Globalization of our workforce through recruitment and placement of Majority World Workers (MWWs) is seen as one important means of increasing our numbers in order to help reap the emerging harvest in the Arab World. However, the integration of these MWWs into our organization presents many challenges. Language and culture differences are obvious when working in a multi-national team setting even from just Western nations. What are less apparent are differences rooted in lifestyle, economics, national identity and models of missions that become evident as workers from non-Western nations seek to become part of our teams. These differences contribute to a 'team integration' distance that in some cases may result in more effort than benefit. Understanding these differences enables us to see the difficulty of embracing MWWs from a rural background, such as from mainland China, into our existing AWM teams. Alternative team and leadership structures should be considered, in such cases, where the integration distance is too great.

Background for this Article

This article arose in response to numerous inquiries AWM received from agents representing rural house churches in China. The possibility of hundreds of workers (not tens of thousands, as suggested in *The Heavenly Man*), from rural house churches in China, might join us in the harvest certainly stirs the heart. Yet the feasibility of working side-by-side with rural Majority World Workers (MWWs), such as these Chinese, is unrealistic in many respects. In support of those inquiries, an ethnographic study was conducted in an upper Gulf country in early 2006 to gain some understanding of what could be done to support these potential workers.

After some difficult experiences with our early placements from majority world partnerships developed by the director of Global Mobilization, AWM leadership in April 2008 decided to re-emphasize the long-standing requirement

on all incoming MWWs that they be able to function well in English. This decision, though not stating it directly, suggests that there is an implicit understanding that the MWW recruitment focus should also be on those who have a better socio-economic and educational fit with the current AWM membership.

My original study, written two years ago, focused on the vast differences between the rural house church in China and a western mission such as ours. The contrast was deliberately extreme – rural farmers with a middle school education who were trying to enter the upper Gulf where most of our workers are highly skilled professionals. I have deemphasized this extreme contrast to make this article more accessible to our broader membership. However, most of my examples from a limited number of data points come from this experience in trying to place rural house church workers from China.

I claim no expertise on this matter of globalization but report to you our observations based on our experiences working to place both partners and non-affiliated MWWs in the greater work of reaching Muslims of the Arab World.

Introduction

The premise of this article is that the distance in operating philosophy and background determines the likelihood of team integration. Another assumption is that MWWs are joining our existing teams, not a new team structure created to deal specifically with such differences. That is, until now, we are seeking the globalization of our existing organization rather than organizing ourselves to welcome a global workforce. Globalization to AWM means bringing in Majority World workers who have similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds as do our existing membership. In contrast, emergent missions movements advocate the empowerment of churches in the majority world, which strongly implies welcoming MWWs of a broader socio-economic and educational background. The rural mainland China house church would fall into the latter category while business people and professionals from the mainland China urban church fall into the former.

When comparing two cultures, we often speak of *cultural distance* to describe how much cultural differences must be bridged to effectively communicate and work together. The dimensions of cultural distance are often based on analyses such as Hofstede's *Framework for Assessing (the) Culture of a population*, which are small versus large power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance and long term versus short-term

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orientation. These are attributes of a community at large. At the operational level of a team, there are other very significant dimensions that come into play, and it is these other aspects that are the focus of this article. These differences create an operational distance among team members. This article identifies some of these differences before discussing their implications.

Operational Differences

The lists of characteristics described in this section impose operational distance as the differences on each dimension increase. The concept is that the cumulative effect of these differences creates a 'team integration' barrier. The extreme case (e.g., rural house church of China) is used for illustrative purposes as mentioned previously to emphasize the differences. These differences are more subtle when integrating MWWs from a socio-economic and educational background more similar to our existing AWM membership. Yet that similarity may often mask the inherent differences that exist. I assume these subtle differences can be bridged when we have an adequate understanding of their existence.¹

1. Language

In AWM, the language of team communication is English, and the April 2008 decision was to continue this strategic policy. This means that new MWWs will have to communicate in at least their second, but most likely, in their third or fourth language. This barrier is known. Even groups sending workers from rural China realize that English is a necessity and the training has been adjusted (and lengthened) to reflect this reality. English fluency will certainly make team life easier for us (those already on teams). Yet language fluency will inevitably be limited to select topics and most certainly will not include the deeper subjects that govern norms, behaviour and worldview.

2. Culture

Hofstede's cultural dimensions are only the start. Honour versus shame culture, and all the ramifications that come with this cultural contrast, also come into play. Honour and shame are concepts inherent to many Asians, even those who are many generations removed from their motherland. Hierarchical societies and the views on leadership also come into play. There are of course vast differences amongst cultures with respect to shame and to which areas of life it may apply.

1. The presumption is that globalization brings additional resources to bear in fulfilling our church-planting mission. Left unanswered in this article is the question as to whether MWWs bring skills and gifts that don't already exist in our teams (i.e., complementary role) or whether they just add additional resources with skills similar to ones that exist. Also left unanswered is the question of the future role of existing members in a globalized organization. If the goal set by David Lundy at Interface is met, the doubling of our field workers in the next five years is likely to include a very large number of MWWs (though probably not from rural areas).

For example, we generalize to say that the Arab concept of 'wasta' is the same as Chinese 'guanxi'. While both are vastly different from Western 'networking', there are significant differences (ask me, and I will send you an academic paper that spells them out).

However, the general parameters are known to those knowledgeable in cross-cultural studies and need not be repeated here. Teams can be trained to work on communication skills that help bridge these cultural dimensions including what to expect from those who grew up in a shame culture. Remember that those who grow up in a shame culture may find it difficult to articulate what for them is second nature and oftentimes unaware that they exhibit such behaviour.

3. Educational Background and Life Experiences

In the case of rural cross-cultural workers from China, it is not just the ramifications of a middle-school education compared to the multi-degree background of workers from western agencies like ours, who work in the upper Gulf. Life experience plays a big part. Most have not left their villages let alone travelled internationally. They have little experience within a multi-ethnic society and don't have experience navigating amongst different cultures. Those from the mono-cultural Midwestern United States probably have culture shock when going to multi-ethnic Los Angeles. Imagine the shock of a rural Chinese evangelist moving into a Gulf country.

4. Problem-Solving Approach

While Asians may be known for the cautious and consensual decision-making of the past, times are changing. Asian cultures, such as in Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and now, mainland China, are increasingly exhibiting fast-paced adaptation. They live busy lives representing to some degree the fast-paced economic conditions in which they have grown up. They want to move quickly and expect quick answers. The 80/20 rule applies: Learn the bare minimum as quickly as you can and adapt when you get there. Many Korean workers demonstrate this ethos (e.g., get to the field and then figure out how to get a visa and educate their children). They are to be admired for their zeal but how do Westerners cope with such uncertainty and a lack of a plan?

Planning is a western paradigm. We need to budget accurately to raise the necessary support. We need to have a language school in place before making a new city an entry point. Our strength today is certainly *not* in being pioneers. Our cautious approach (e.g., risk averse) can be seen as resistance to change (and maybe it is).

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There are exceptions to this fast-paced mindset such as Japan and Asians in North America that are sheltered somewhat from the economic impact of globalization. Japan, at least in the business world, is a consensual community.

North American Asians move cautiously making sure they have a plan in place. The message is that one can't assume that Asians are all the same, since they certainly do not approach problems in the same way.

5. Inter-Ethnic/National Rivalry

While we are all brothers and sisters, some are more outspoken or prejudiced concerning ethnicity or nationality. We need to be aware of perceptions between workers of different background especially based on stereotypes such as ethnicity. For example, the potential for conflict between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese is quite high given their political and economic tensions, but a Westerner may see both as just being Chinese. Less apparent are the way mainland Chinese and overseas Chinese see each other (e.g., both would prefer to work with Westerners than each other). Not all Asians are alike and no doubt, those from different countries in Africa and in Latin America are just as different.

6. Model of Support

The Western model of support is to provide for needs of an individual over the length of their service. This might be because very few individuals are coming from the West so the pool of resources can support all those sent (more or less).

The majority world churches have the potential of sending many more who are willing to go, and thus of exceeding their capacity to support them. This means that after supported language learning and a transition period, self-supporting is their model – at least for their living expenses. This drives them to live as simply as possible. We are seeing this among the rural Chinese who are coming. They practice tentmaking, as the Apostle Paul apparently did, in that they must live off their vocation. This is in contrast to tentmakers from a Western background who can choose their vocation to be just a platform or to be the basis of their ministry. Western tentmakers often have secondary incomes (e.g., support) such that their vocation doesn't have to cover expenses or the business they open doesn't have to be profitable.

One of the questions frequently asked of me during language school was how I could afford to live without a job. I could offer a plausible answer (though not all that true) that after working for twenty years as a professional, I had the resources to take an extended time for study. A single person straight out of college can also provide a plausible answer that her family wants them to live internationally before going to work. What plausible answer can someone from a rural background (e.g., a farmer) use to explain to their local community why they don't have to work during two years of language study?

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7. Living Standards

Conflict between western team members already exists, that revolves around living standards (e.g., who is being a good steward). This conflict plays out every time a conference is planned, for example. But it is more than just about how one lives, especially in status-bound cultures of the Arab World. One should assume there are no secrets in one's neighbourhood. So how can you visit an MWW co-worker in a lower status area (or have them come visit you) without affecting your own status in the community?

A related area is mindset. Most western workers come from a higher lifestyle and see themselves as living down when they move to the Arab world. Those from a rural background will need to live up to their role in Arab society (e.g., hired help is still a higher role than a farmer). Even then, they may not be living at a standard close enough to yours to avoid feeling uncomfortable. We see this amongst our own members. Who would not have a tinge of jealousy when one team member lives in a spacious villa (e.g., an oil company professional) and the other in a cramped apartment (e.g., a teacher)?

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8. Role-Status Relationships

One element in our current follow-up model is that a more experienced team member is brought along when additional capacity to answer questions is needed (e.g., better Arabic or more respected in community). How does a team cooperate in follow-up when status relationships in their host society prevent their association with team members at presumably lower levels?

There are at least two different situations. The first is not being allowed to participate. A Western (e.g., Caucasian) professor is not allowed to go into the labour camps of the Gulf. Sometimes even the Chinese pastor is questioned when visiting Chinese labourers in the camps. The second is that status does not permit it. While a Western professor could go to visit someone in a lower income area, this could effectively limit their associations with any of their peers if it were known. We see this on our university campus where the Shi'a (generally poorer) don't say where they are from so they won't be ostracized from the more well to do Sunni and Christian Lebanese students.

Another example would be our relationships with our own household help that happen to be believers. As a Westerner, we are all brothers and sisters so it is natural to let them fellowship with us. Yet this would be seen negatively by neighbours in most Arab countries. My neighbour does not want to be associated with someone who spends free time with his or her maid. And even if our

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neighbour doesn't mind such behaviour, because they know us, her friends probably would, thereby putting limits on our relationship.

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9. Member or Employee

The Western mission model has independent units, who are more or less equals, coming together as teams. The team members have similar backgrounds, and even if there are status differences in education, they are not as important in Western culture (e.g., PhD vs. BA/BS). Working with many MWWs brings in a new dimension that involves both educational background/life experiences and role-status relationships.

MWWs can use our assistance in getting them residency. They might come as a cook for our restaurant or to work in our factory. This places them in an employee-employer relationship-and they do not see themselves as equals. While from a Western perspective this may not be a big deal, it may well be with MWWs who come from cultures where jobs are scarce so the dynamic with the employer is different. For example, knowledge sharing in Arab culture is driven by fear of employer while in the West from an environment of collaboration (at least sometimes). The MWW may not be able to draw a distinction in their social life between the employer in the workplace, and the friend or colleague who happens to be one's boss.

There may be a difference in mindset perhaps reflecting socio-economic background. A colleague that is starting a small restaurant wants a worker (on full support) who cooks. The sending group wants people to come as cooks (e.g., earn a living) so they can 'work'. How could someone from a rural background have obtained the capital to invest as a 'business partner'? Role legitimacy is the issue. This area needs further investigation especially as the socio-economic distance increases.

10.Receiving Model

The groups in China sending out their initial waves are primarily looking for someone to provide them services to help their workers get settled. This is partly due to their lack of a receiving infrastructure but also due to constraints on

setting one up, because it requires collaboration with others. I have run into numerous cases where they want help to set up their workers but without any sense of ongoing obligation.

Our Western agency model is different. If we accept you into our circle, it is because we see you as family. That means we help you as we would a family member but also expect you to act as a family member. We are too busy to provide just a service and the fee that could be paid is not likely worth our time.

Those who represent groups in China are a bit surprised by this. They just see us as unwilling to help. What they don't understand is that accepting a family member comes with great responsibility. For example, a MWW gets sick and the few thousand dollars provided for emergencies won't cover the hospital bills. What do we do? Let them die because the money runs out or pay out of our own pocket? This is but one example.

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11. Partnering Model

At least for rural China, a lack of trust that pervades society is manifested in the ways that ministry is done. This is partly why we see a desire amongst them to work independently. This works in China where the house church network allows an itinerant evangelist to go village to village and have their needs taken care of. I would argue that this is a different model from what you have in the field where the infrastructure for independent itinerants does not exist.

Yet there is a dilemma. Do we bring them into our fold (way we do things) or do we adapt to the strengths they bring (e.g., being able to reach the poor)? The former seems to be prevalent partly because we haven't explored other structures. The emergent mission movement probably would advocate a third approach – that we be the facilitators of their efforts (e.g., help establish them in a Bedouin community).

When just getting them to accept an MOU is an achievement (after much effort I might add), can we realistically expect them to become one of us? Even if there were mutual agreement that our existing teams would be assigned to prepare a basis for ministry for incoming MWWs, can our supporting churches accept this? What do you do? Well I no longer do front-line work – I am in a support role.

12. Evangelism Model

The focus of Western workers is on one-to-one sharing and at some point one-to-one discipling. Our MWWs may come from community-based models of evangelism and follow-up (e.g., conversions of families). That the Holy Spirit may work among Muslims in a communal fashion should not be discounted.

Visions and dreams of Jesus are commonplace among individuals according to field reports. There is no reason these signs can't be communal. Perhaps this is where we will begin to see some significant synergy and let our MWWs take the lead.

Implications

The AWM demographic has traditionally consisted of the more educated working in skilled tentmaking roles. AWM as an organization strives to place people in every country of the Arab World. When our numbers increase, we encourage newcomers to push towards outlying areas. Therefore, our teams don't have an infrastructure that needs to be maintained by co-workers. Yet infrastructure support is the logical place in which less educated MWWs could play a role. There are few opportunities to place in our ministries a handyman or hospitality people in support roles in a guesthouse or in a school or hospital. I don't think we recruit people with these skills either. This is not a value judgment – just the reality of whom we recruit. This is also why we can't do Business as Mission (BAM) internally because we have few people involved in small business nor do we seek to recruit them. Our national offices don't try to recruit sales people who could work in a Dubai supermarket (nor would they be hired). Yet these lower roles are the positions in which a greater number of Majority World people can be brought in.

It would be difficult for AWM to integrate rural MWWs (not just from rural China but also through any of our partner agencies) for the characteristics discussed above. These kinds of differences create operational distance that makes integration difficult. From my experience with partners from Asia, I believe that we should focus on integrating partners who are like us, whom we tend to recruit, at least in the near-term. Yet, despite the socio-economic and educational similarity of such MWWs to our team members, and the resulting lessening of operational distance, field leaders report that there still have been challenges. There is still much to learn but it may be more to do with 'language and culture' that we are more accustomed to dealing with. That said – other organizations (e.g., emerging mission movement) may have less 'distance' to cross than we do with respect to rural MWWs.

We certainly need to pay attention to what is going on in Yemen as our international partners begin deploying people there who have greater operational distance than those joining us in the rest of the AP. There are greater socio-economic differences and fewer financial resources, and therefore increased operational distance.

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New Models of Integration

I don't think it is practical to think that we can convert our existing people to work on integrating or assimilating rural MWWs. There is special gifting in this and a specific calling. So for example, if we want to play a greater role with rural MWWs from house churches in China, then we need to recruit those who have a burden to reach the house churches, who also speak Mandarin Chinese. Even within the overseas Chinese church, not all see a calling to help the mainland Chinese. The express role of these recruits would be to integrate themselves into AWM with the purpose of working with rural MWWs (who would be less likely to be integrated into AWM).

Several years ago, I had a chance encounter with an English teacher who had served in China for many years. These would be the ideal recruits to AWM for such roles. Many have been working to train house churches and could continue this role but in the Arab World and for the express purpose of helping the house church in China send missionaries. Overseas Chinese business people would be good candidates as well for our company. They could create businesses that hire MWWs (not just Chinese). One of course runs into a dilemma. The same lower skilled positions that a rural MWW might fill are the ones local believers could fill as well. Who then should one hire?

While some would disagree, I see that our higher-level relationships (on a social basis) are beneficial to facilitating the entry of rural MWWs. This might be through establishing businesses or building relationships with local authorities. I see us as a mission augmenting our front-line work by taking on new roles that can't be done by MWWs (e.g., Westerners don't face the discrimination of Asians or Africans), but that could enable MWWs to share in the blessing of service in the Arab World.

Conclusion

Working with MWWs (or for that matter our partner agencies) is more than language and culture. Some of these differences are inter-twined (e.g., role relationships and employee-employer relationships) and some are at the core of who we currently are as a mission. There seems to be a general lack of awareness within the company of what it takes to bring in our own majority world partners and even more so working with non-affiliated MWWs (such as workers from the rural Chinese church). The hope is that some light has been shed on these issues by looking beyond language and culture, and thereby putting us in a better position as a mission to advise teams on how to receive a MWW of background X and vocation Y. The mission's response can take into consideration some of the potential areas of difference raised in this article.

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