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Labour Dynamics in Chinese Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

Everyday Encounters and Relations in Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Over the past few years, China–Africa engagements have intensified, manifesting in an escalation of Chinese small-scale entrepreneurs investing in African countries. Nevertheless, there is little research on everyday workplace encounters, management styles and labour dynamics in these businesses. This study fills this lacuna by examining labour and management practices in Chinese-owned SMEs in Zimbabwe, and how local employees experience and perceive Chinese management styles and practices. We employed an ethnographic qualitative methodology, conducting interviews and informal conversations. Secondary data came from newspaper and civil society reports. The findings revealed that workplace regimes in Chinese SMEs are complex and ambivalent, marked by precariousness, conflict, contestation and conviviality. The findings also highlighted meagre salaries, job insecurity, long working hours and unfair dismissals. We argue that the socio-spatial context of work in Chinese SMEs in Zimbabwe is imbued with complex power dynamics driven by divergent cultural interpretations of work and being a worker.

Keywords

Chinese SMEs – human resource management – precarious employment – decent work – Zimbabwe

1 Introduction

There has been an influx of Chinese businesses in Africa, and in particular in Zimbabwe. In a context undergoing a protracted and multi-layered socio-political and economic crisis (Gukurume, 2015), the Chinese have found an opportunity and there has been an increase in Chinese investments in Zimbabwe (Gukurume, 2019). In 2003, faced with a deepening crisis, coupled with economic sanctions from the USA and European Union, the Zimbabwe government embarked on and adopted the Look East Policy. This policy foregrounded economic relationships with East Asian countries, and more particularly stronger trading ties with China. Consequently, we have seen the growth of Chinese-owned small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which have become the face of “Chinese capitalism” in Zimbabwe and Africa more broadly. Indeed, scholars like Giese and Thiel (2012) have shown that, over the years, Chinese firms have grown widely in African cityscapes, sometimes transforming a country’s commercial landscape.

In spite of the tremendous growth of Chinese-owned SMEs in Zimbabwe, and Harare specifically, very little is known about the nature of labour relationships between Chinese employers and their local employees, Chinese management styles and labour practices, and how these are experienced and perceived by local employees. Through an ethnographic examination of labour practices, management styles and everyday employment relations between Chinese employers and their employees, this article engages with debates on China–Africa relations, albeit at a micro level. Much of the research that has been done thus far on China–Africa relations has focused on large-scale or macro Chinese government-owned public enterprises. Very little has been done on micro private-owned SMEs and the everyday labour dynamics engendered by and through these micro enterprises. Therefore, our article seeks to fill this lacuna and pay particular attention to everyday micro encounters, especially the selection and recruitment of labour, training and development, employee rights and benefits, as well as labour practices within Chinese retail SMEs in Harare. We chose retail SMEs because they represent the face of Chinese SMEs in Harare (Gukurume, 2018).

2 China–Zimbabwe Engagements

China–Zimbabwe engagements flourished after the adoption by the Zimbabwean government of the Look East Policy (LEP) in 2003, and there was a rapid increase in Chinese-owned firms in the country (Alao, 2014; Ojajorotu and Kamidza, 2018). Zimbabwe had been targeted with economic sanctions by the West, and through the LEP it sought to strengthen economic and social ties with countries in the East, especially China, which Zimbabwe considers an all-weather friend. This cementing of relations between China and Zimbabwe alarmed the Western powers who had isolated the Mugabe regime as a result of its poor economic, political and human rights record.

After the enactment of the Look East Policy, Zimbabwe and China signed an economic and technical agreement in 2004, in which China committed to helping Zimbabwe in several sectors of the economy (Gukurume, 2019; Smith, DeSouza and Fang, 2020). Indeed, in 2011, the China Export-Import Bank loaned Zimbabwe USD 700 million to resuscitate the country's health, mining and agricultural sectors. Over the years, it has continued to support these sectors with loans and grants. Moreover, China constructed a state-of-the-art defence university, the Longcheng Mall, a new Parliament building in Mount Hampden worth millions of dollars, and agricultural technology demonstration centres (Gukurume, 2019). This assistance has favoured China's access to business spaces, such as the SME and retail sector, that had been set aside for locals under the country's controversial indigenisation and empowerment programmes. Similarly, many Chinese firms are exempted from the country's Indigenisation and Empowerment Act, which requires foreign organisations to cede majority ownership, specifically a 51% shareholding, to local Zimbabweans (Gukurume, 2019). The Indigenisation and Empowerment Act aimed to promote local ownership of businesses. For the ZANU-PF government, the objective of the Act was to empower black business people to invest in the local economy by requiring all companies in the country to be at least 51%-owned by indigenous Zimbabweans. However, Chinese government loans and grants sometimes come at a huge cost. For instance, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, Eximbank and CDB often exert pressure on the Zimbabwean government to offer or cede natural resources like minerals as collateral for additional Chinese loans (Kärkkäinen, 2016).

Although Harare–Beijing relations and engagements have grown and solidified since the post-2003 era, it is important to highlight that China–Zimbabwe engagements are not in any way new. Their involvement dates as far back as the colonial era, when China offered military assistance to nationalist groups. Interestingly, the current Zimbabwean president, Emmerson Mnangagwa,

received military training in China together with the current Chinese president. Consequently, China–Zimbabwe relations have been maintained in the post-Mugabe era.

The Zimbabwean economic landscape has experienced a burgeoning Chinese footprint. For instance, in 2017 China was the biggest export destination for Zimbabwe's tobacco. Smith et al. (2020) note that China offered Zimbabwe access to the largest tobacco market in the world, and Zimbabwe offered China a source of leaf from a region with ideal conditions for flue-cured tobacco. Indeed, Smith et al. (2020) further assert that by 2017 China had received more than 60% of Zimbabwe's tobacco, worth about USD 6 million. Similar trends can be seen in Zimbabwe's mining sector. Interestingly, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are now the leading players in the extraction of natural resources, like minerals, and agriculture and infrastructural developments in the country. Among the conditions given as a prerequisite for receiving Chinese financial assistance is that all projects must be contracted to Chinese SOEs (Burke, 2007). As such, the market control and economic output of Chinese SOEs have increased significantly over the past few years. The Zimbabwean government has, however, tried to contain the influence of the Chinese SOEs in protected and strategic mining areas, like the diamond and platinum sectors, through maintaining the 51% local ownership and control policy.

In tobacco farming, there have been cases of exploitative arrangements and contracts which have led to farmers becoming heavily indebted to Chinese contracting firms. Smith et al. (2020) revealed that the contract farming operations of Tian Ze Tobacco Corporation (TZTC) are based on a hierarchical governance that gives farmers little control over the terms of the contracts. As such, farmers and workers are always at the mercy of Chinese investors.

China's growing economic and political influence in the country has enabled it to get unlimited access to the country's natural resources and shape the country's development trajectory in several ways. As a result, some scholars view China as a new form of colonialism with selfish imperial interests in Africa (Alden, 2007; Jansson et al., 2009). Hodzi (2018) asserts that the prevailing relationships between African political elites and Chinese development partners tend to fortify existing power structures and those businesses that benefit elites, at the expense of broad-based socio-economic transformation, which benefits the majority of citizens. While all this rich scholarship offers a fascinating analysis of China–Africa and China–Zimbabwe engagements, much of it neglects the mundane and micro forms of encounters, such as those within Chinese micro, small and medium enterprises. This is the gap that our study sought to fill.

Chinese SMEs in Harare are an eclectic mixture and operate in a wide range of sectors. Many deal in retail clothing, groceries, vehicle spare parts, restaurants and fast food as well as hardware. However, a large part of Chinese SMEs are in retail clothing and grocery businesses. Over the years, there has been a steady influx of Chinese SMEs setting up in Harare, which has made the Harare SME landscape extremely competitive. Chinese SMEs in Harare compete with other foreign players, like Nigerian and Congolese traders as well as local black and Indian SME traders. Unlike the Congolese and local SMEs, which are located in downtown Harare, Chinese SMEs are largely sited at strategic locations in the middle of the city centre.

3 Chinese Firms in Africa: A Review of the Literature

Over the years China has cemented its trade relations with African countries, which has seen multiple large-scale infrastructural projects funded by the Chinese government in countries like Ethiopia (Fei, 2021; Driessen, 2016), Kenya (Plummer, 2019; Kamoche and Siebers, 2015) and Zimbabwe (Gukurume, 2019; Chipaike and Bischoff, 2019), among others. Indeed, China is regarded as Africa's biggest trading partner (Gukurume, 2019; Kinyondo, 2019). Schwab (2016) revealed that the value of trade between China and Africa rose from USD 10.6 to USD 220 billion between 2014 and 2015. The trade is driven by hundreds of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private firms, which are investing millions of dollars into African economies, which Chen, Dollar and Tang (2015) refer to as Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

However, China's engagements with African countries are controversial. Some critics argue that they are based on unequal relations and are often exploitative. For some, China is building its future, asserting its "soft power" and development through exploiting African resources and cheap labour (Naidu and Davies, 2006). Similarly, Kinyondo (2019) asserts that although there are a few gains in Sino-Africa engagements, China always takes the lion's share of the benefits. Indeed, Kinyondo (2019) further argues that the balance of trade is skewed towards China, with very little Chinese FDI flowing into African countries. Gadzala (2010: 42), writing about Zambia, highlighted that serious concerns have been voiced over the proliferation of Chinese casual labourers and traders who are increasingly displacing Zambians active in those areas. For Gadzala (2010: 41), this scenario has exacerbated the problems of unemployment and underemployment in Zambia.

In sharp contrast, some scholars view China's relations with African countries as win-win, beneficial to both parties (Alves, 2013). They have highlighted

the potential of Sino-Africa relations in economic development (Schwab, 2016; Chen et al., 2015), infrastructural development (Alves, 2013) and agricultural transformation (Smith et al., 2020; Okolo and Akwu, 2016: 44), among other sectors. For these scholars, China's investment projects have huge potential to foster a relatively equitable South–South socio-economic transformation in Africa.

While this literature is insightful in our understanding of China–Africa engagements, it does not delve into the mundane forms of everyday encounters, especially in private micro enterprises, which is the subject of our article. As such, our study contributes to and engages with this burgeoning body of research on China–Africa engagements by bringing the micro enterprise perspective into this conversation.

What has been arguably more controversial in China and Africa relations are the labour standards and relations in Chinese-owned firms. For instance, Cooke and Wang (2018) noted that the labour practices of Chinese firms in Africa have been highly contentious. Consequently, this subject has received considerable academic attention (Jackson, 2014, Kamoche and Siebers, 2015; Xing et al., 2016). Several academic and media reports have revealed the exploitative and abusive nature of relations between Chinese employers, managers and their African employees (Gadzala, 2010; Cooke and Wang, 2018). In addition, some critics have examined the preferred use of Chinese dispatched workers and expatriates at the expense of local workers, as well as the poor employment conditions for the local workers (Jackson, 2014; Yan and Sautman, 2012).

According to Gu (2011), Chinese the private firms that invest in Africa are predominantly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These firms have transformed the SME landscape in many countries, Zimbabwe included, yet very little is known about the ways in which Chinese merchants relate to their employees or their management and labour practices. Given the proliferation of Chinese-owned SMEs in Africa, studies have begun to focus on this subject (Gukurume, 2019; Kerman, 2010). Some have explored employment relations between Chinese employers and their African employees in these SMEs (Akoru and Cooke, 2011). Cooke (2014) writes on how Chinese human resource (HR) practices are continuously evolving depending on the context in which the firms are operating. But research on and about HR practices in Zimbabwe has largely focused on large bureaucratic organisations (Chipaike and Marufu, 2020). Much of this body of research has targeted the complex nexus of HR practices and organisational performance (Wagar and Rondeau, 2006; Gyensare and Asare, 2012; Ogunyomi and Bruning, 2016). Consequently, some scholars argue that there is a strong correlation between the appropriation of HR

practices and the performance of such organisations (Zheng, O’Neil and Morrison, 2009; Paauwe, 2014; Becker, Huselid and Ulrich, 2001; Ogunyomi and Bruning, 2016). For these scholars, HR practices, like training and development, tend to improve employee skills and knowledge, which by extension improves their performance at work. Similarly, Sels et al. (2006) also asserted that there is a strong and positive correlation between the appropriation of HR management practices and the profitability of micro, small and medium enterprises. Interestingly, in SMEs, the conditions of work for both local and dispatched workers is largely poor, leading to high turnover. Following this, some scholars have also explored the nexus between HR management practices and staff turnover at the organisational level (Eriksson, Qin and Wang, 2014).

4 Conceptual Framework

This article relies on Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus and social capital as its conceptual and analytical framework. Bourdieu developed these concepts in his theory of practice. These concepts are productive in helping us to understand how the Chinese SME owners’ “habitus”, operational “field” and employees’ “social capital” (re)shape their management and human resource practices. For Bourdieu (1990), habitus refers to:

... structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures that is, as principles that generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.

BOURDIEU, 1990: 53

Habitus also relates to the deeply ingrained system of dispositions, skills, habits and knowledge that people accrue and internalise through their lived experience and years of socialisation. Over time, the habitus becomes an embodied mental and corporeal schemata of perception and conception which operates unconsciously. Consequently, the habitus becomes a way of being and a habituated state of being. In this article, we assert that the Chinese management styles, sensibilities and practices are shaped by their culturally ingrained Chinese habitus.

The habitus is produced and constructed in what Bourdieu calls a ‘field’. The field is a structured arena of contestations and power struggles by several competing actors. The field is inhabited by actors who dominate and actors who are

dominated based on their strategic location and access to capital. The field is marked by contestations and relationships of inequality, which simultaneously become a space through which actors struggle for transformation or preservation of the social field.

Within the field, each actor has a unique set of rules, norms, values and knowledge about the most appropriate and best ways of doing things—in this case, management styles. Similarly, these actors are actively competing for various forms of social capital imbued in the social milieu in which they operate. In this article, we frame the labour relations landscape as a field with various actors, like Chinese SME owners, local employees, trade unions and labour courts, among others, who have varied and sometimes conflicting interpretations of the best way of managing and remunerating employees. The field thus becomes a social space in which interactions, negotiations, transactions and conflicts occur.

Against this background, actors draw on and deploy their capital to lay claims within particular socio-economic domains. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 119) defined social “capital” as: ‘the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’. For many scholars, social capital refers to ties, networks and relationships of conviviality with significant others (Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988). In Chinese SMEs, social networks are an important resource and valuable asset which mediates access to and retention of jobs as well as the ways in which employees are treated.

5 Labour Law in Zimbabwe

At independence in 1980, Zimbabwe inherited racially unequal labour legislation that favoured and advanced the interests of white neo-liberal capitalists at the expense of the black working class. Consequently, the newly independent and socialist-aligned government sought to redress these colonial racial inequalities and injustices through the promulgation of inclusive labour laws and policies. In 1980 the government enacted a Minimum Wage Act, which also involved labour in the negotiation of wages. Further, this Act sought to provide a fixed minimum wage and enforce compliance. This was followed by the Employment Act of 1980, which provided for the protection of the rights of workers. This Act also empowered the Minister of Labour with absolute power in industrial relations. Through this Act, arbitrary dismissal of workers was prohibited and unwarranted retrenchments were forestalled.

In 1985, the government established the Labour Relations Act (LRA). This Act strongly reflected the socialist ideologies of the state and saw the heavy involvement of the state in labour issues, including collective bargaining, and allowed employees to join trade unions and workers' committees (Raftopoulos, 2001). However, from the early 1990s, the government shifted from a socialist to neo-liberal ideological orientation, influenced by the Bretton Woods institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). The state began to roll back on labour issues and adopted a laissez-faire, open-market policy. For instance, the state stopped the enforcement of the minimum wage and empowered capital at the expense of labour through its Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes (ESAP). These economic restructuring initiatives saw massive retrenchments, state deregulation, privatisation, and the removal of state subsidies for basic needs. These changes were made through the Labour Relations Amendment Act of 1992.

In 2002, the government renamed the LRA the Labour Act and introduced the Labour Court to preside over labour disputes and safeguard the rights of employees. This Act was further amended in 2015 after a court case that allowed companies to terminate employees' contracts after serving a notice through common law. These and other regulations also applied to foreign investors, like the Chinese. However, over the years, desperate for investments, the government has allowed Chinese investors to flout these labour laws.

6 Methodology and Data Collection

Data for this article comes from a bigger qualitative study on Chinese businesses in Zimbabwe; we utilised both primary and secondary data. The article is based on longitudinal in-depth ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Chinese-owned small firms in Harare from December 2017. We deliberately selected Harare for this study because this is where the Chinese presence is most pronounced and where there is a high concentration of Chinese SMES. Data was collected from Chinese employers and their local employees, and largely focused on their interpersonal relationships as well as human resource and labour practices. We collected primary data through participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and key informant interviews. We triangulated the primary data with secondary data drawn from newspaper articles on Chinese employment relations with their local employees. Reports from local labour relations organisations were also used, among other sources of secondary data. Triangulating several methods of collecting data enabled us to develop a nuanced understanding of Chinese

labour practices and relations between Chinese employers and their employees. In-depth semi-structured interviews were ideal for this study because they enabled us to probe for clarity while giving participants the freedom to detail and narrate their experiences and perceptions of the issues under discussion.

We conducted thirty semi-structured interviews with Chinese employees in Harare and six key informant interviews with Chinese employers and three officials of unions and labour associations in Harare. Although we would have preferred to interview more Chinese employers, some could not speak fluent English and others refused to be interviewed. We purposively selected a few Chinese who were able to speak English. The interviews largely focused on employment relationships, remuneration, working conditions, selection and recruitment, as well as dismissal and packages, among other issues.

The interviews were done with Chinese employers and their employees, to provide a balanced understanding of their experiences and perceptions. Thus, in this article, we present perspectives from both employers and employees working in Chinese small firms in Harare. This approach differs significantly from a number of earlier studies on labour relations in Chinese-owned firms, which focused on either Chinese employers or local employees. Informal conversations with local employees working in Chinese firms were particularly rich and illuminating and offered what Geertz (1973) referred to as 'thick descriptions' of employees' everyday lives, experiences and perceptions of the human resource practices and employment relations in Chinese-owned firms in Harare.

Ethical considerations were key in this study. As such, we sought informed consent from all our participants before conducting interviews. Similarly, given the sensitive nature of our study, the identity of our participants was anonymised to ensure confidentiality and reduce potential harm. As such, instead of using the real names of our participants, we use pseudonyms throughout the article.

7 **Friending, Labouring and Recruitment**

Scholars argue that one of the key features of Chinese management styles is the idea of human-centredness, which foregrounds human relationships (Lee, 1996; Menkhoff, 1993). Notions of friendship, trustworthiness and loyalty are central to this style of management. Unlike large-scale Chinese SOEs and MNCs, which can afford to bring expatriates from China, Chinese SMEs largely

rely on family labour and local employees. Interestingly, our findings revealed that selection and recruitment in most Chinese SMEs in Harare was based on internal advertisement as well as referrals by current employees. In selecting and recruiting new employees, hardly any formal interviews were held for filling shopfloor posts. In the few cases where interviews were conducted, they were largely informal. Chinese SME employers relied on their existing employees' personal networks in recruiting new employees. In fact, most of our interlocutors (local employees in Chinese SMEs) noted that they recommended the recruitment of their friends and relatives. Likewise, all except one Chinese employer acknowledged that they recruited their employees through existing employee networks based on kin and friendship ties. This was echoed by Joseph, one of our interlocutors, who said in an interview: "Our employer sometimes put job adverts on the shop notice board, but usually, it's just a formality because they ask us to recommend or friends or relatives."

Indeed, most of the vacancies were advertised internally within the company. This resonates with observations made by Fei (2021) in Ethiopia, where jobs were advertised and recruitment was often done internally. It also emerged during interviews and conversations that this approach of referrals was the most efficient way of recruiting what Chinese employers referred to as 'committed' and loyal employees. For Chinese employers, workers recruited through their internal networks were less likely to be troublesome. Joseph told us that recruiting through kin or friendship networks is also a strategy that the Chinese use to create a relatively passive workforce. "If say I get a job through my brother who is working there then I will have to be as well behaved as I can to avoid tarnishing my brother's image who would have recommended me". He further asserted that even if such workers were ill-treated they were less likely to complain because they were indebted to their friend or relative who helped them get the job. Indeed, some of the local supervisors in Chinese SMEs told us that they recommended the hiring of friends and relatives because they were easier to work with and control.

Personal networks and ties were a critical resource and mediated the ways in which employment was negotiated and accessed in Chinese SMEs in Harare. Through the recruitment of kin and close acquaintances, the workplace often morphed into an affective space marked by intimate socialities and solidarity and a sense of family and community. For some employees, that feeling promoted commitment and the forging of trusting relationships. This resonates with Fei (2021), who noted that in Ethiopia Chinese telecommunications companies often recruited local employees through recommendations from their workers. Fei (2021) asserted that local employees recruited through personal networks were considered to have strong ties to the company and less likely

to be lured by other competitors. In the Chinese Confucianist culture, *guanxi*¹ networks play an important role in the everyday management of businesses and the recruitment of employees. For instance, Bian and Ang (1997) asserted that in China and Singapore jobs are channelled through strong ties more frequently than through weak ties.

Given the casual and low-skilled nature of jobs in the Chinese SME sector, recruitment of an unskilled workforce is rife and preferred by Chinese employers. Child and Marinova (2014) remind us that Chinese firms are in a constant state of adjusting to their prevailing socio-economic and political environment, including labour productivity and regulatory frameworks. As such, the localisation of recruitment should be understood as an adaptive strategy by Chinese merchants. Interestingly, some Chinese employers told us that this was also a cheaper way of recruiting employees because they paid hardly anything for adverts in the newspapers or using advertising agents. Mr Zhao, one of the Chinese employers we interviewed, noted:

I particularly prefer to get new employees through referrals from the employees I already have. Most of my employees were introduced to me by other workers. That way it is a cheaper way of selecting and recruiting and that also helps to create workplace stability because workers know each other and work for each other.

Mr Zhao's narrative was echoed by other Chinese employers we interviewed who concurred that recruiting new employees through existing employee networks is a cost-cutting strategy. Indeed, social networks akin to the Bourdieuan social capital and personal relationships like friendships are key in accessing jobs in Chinese SMEs in Harare. Similarly, Mr Wuan told us that he preferred to recruit through friendship.

I like workers introduced to me by friends already working for me and this is our habit; even my business partners do the same. There is a guarantee that they will stay long, otherwise, I may have to keep on looking for employees and some stealing from me and that will affect my business.

Mr Wuan's narrative revealed that selection and recruitment practices in many Chinese SMEs are also mediated by notions of trust, reliability and networking. For Mr Wuan, personal relationships are a valuable asset for workplace solidar-

1 *Guanxi* refers to a Chinese system of relationships and social network.

ity and harmony. Indeed, the valorisation of personal relationships, workplace harmony and discipline in the workplace in Chinese SMEs is an intractable part of Chinese Confucianist workplace norms and values. In addition, Mr Wuan's concern about theft and losing his goods highlights the importance of workplace trust. For the Chinese, trust is a key issue in determining the success of their businesses. As such, we assert that selection and recruitment processes in Chinese small firms are mediated by and through social capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Putnam, 2000; Granovetter, 1985). The Chinese preferred to place locals in positions where they could interface with the customers and take advantage of the employees' social capital in recruiting new workers and attracting more clients. Our findings are consistent with other scholars who have argued that the Chinese normally rely on informal criteria when recruiting new employees in their firms (Gadzala, 2010; Kidd and Richter, 2004; Willemse, 2013). In his study in South Africa, Willemse (2013: 110) noted that Chinese-owned shops in Johannesburg employed family members and friends, and *guanxi* networks were sometimes utilised to recruit employees through informal arrangements.

In our interviews with key informants from trade unions, many of them were critical of the Chinese norm of co-ethnic hiring—a scenario in which Chinese SOEs and MNCs as well as private family-owned SMEs bring out expatriate employees from China to work for them. For trade union officials, co-ethnic hiring pushed many locals out of employment and made the few who remained vulnerable to exploitative work arrangements. For instance, Mr Gora, one of our key interlocutors, bemoaned the co-ethnic hiring practice in some Chinese-owned firms in the country by saying:

The Chinese have a tendency to employ other Chinese and very few locals are employed by the Chinese. Those that are employed consistently complain of abuse and harassment.

Co-ethnic employment hiring practices were reported in several other African countries with similar implications for local employees (see Gadzala, 2010). In his study in Zambia, Gadzala (2010: 47) asserted that co-ethnic hiring and or employment is one of the key features of overseas Chinese investments, both at the level of large SOEs and SMEs. Although some Chinese businesses have justified the recruitment of expatriate labour from China based on the lack of local skilled labour and skills transfer, critics have dismissed this argument. For instance, Gadzala (2010) argued that skills transfer is limited because many Chinese expatriates tend to stay in secluded and gated communities where they have limited interactions with local employees (Gadzala, 2010). This was

also echoed by Fei (2021), who noted that Chinese expatriates in Ethiopia lived a life that limited opportunities for interactions with their local counterparts. For instance, the expatriates lived in a wealthy suburb in Addis Ababa and had their meals at a Chinese-exclusive canteen. The Chinese expatriates were also shuttled between their residential compounds and the workplace in private vehicles.

8 Training and Development of Local Employees

In Chinese-owned SMEs, the training and development of employees is not only scant but also rare. Our interlocutors noted that training is not prioritised. The little training provided is informal and on-the-job. Chinese bosses and supervisors often do the training themselves.

The concept of training in the field of human resources is broad and complex. For some scholars, training relates to all experiences through which employees increase or improve their job-related knowledge and skills (see Kitching and Blackburn, 2002). Ashton et al. (2005) have conceptualised training as planned and formal skill-enhancing activities prescribed by professional trainers, which often lead to formal certification. Scholars have argued that training in SMEs tends to improve employee job satisfaction and productivity (Pajo, Coetzer and Guenole, 2010; Sung and Choi, 2014). However, our findings reveal that there are very few opportunities and little space for training and development within Chinese SMEs in Harare. This finding resonates with findings by earlier researchers, that SMEs are largely reluctant to provide formal training to their employees (Kotey and Folker, 2007; Panagiotakopoulos, 2011). This is not to suggest that there is no willingness among Chinese employers to train and develop their employees, but many viewed it as a costly investment which they were not prepared to consider. We observed that one of the reasons was due to high turnover rates in some Chinese SMEs. For instance, Mr Zhao noted:

I know the benefits of training employees, but if I train them most of them will leave and I will have to train new workers. That becomes very costly and that does not make business sense.

Mr Zhao's concerns about expenses and turnover were echoed by other Chinese SME owners whom we spoke to, who gave the same reasons for not investing in the training and development of their employees. The Chinese were also worried about investing in training for competitors who might lure their

employees. As such, there was hesitancy to train and develop employee skills. Interestingly, some local supervisors we interviewed also noted that there were high turnover rates in the firms. This was confirmed in our interviews and conversations with some local employees who stated that they did not see a future for themselves in the organisations. In fact, there was a significantly large number of employees with the intention to leave, which points to high turnover intention in some Chinese SMEs in Harare. In an interview, a supervisor at one Chinese SME asserted:

People come and go, I have worked with many colleagues who have since left to pursue other things. Some were not happy with the wages or the working conditions, so they stayed for a few months and left.

During interviews, it emerged that turnover intention was particularly high among young and especially recent graduates from high school, college or university compared with mature and elderly employees. Most youthful employees used Chinese SMEs as a springboard to work for a bigger organisation. Some of the young employees told us that they wanted to get experience and would leave as soon as they had adequate experience to compete for better jobs in bigger organisations. Some Chinese employers were well aware of these intentions among some of their employees, which in part contributed to their unwillingness to train them.

Additionally, some Chinese employers noted that business was slow and they were not making good profits. Investing in training would most likely deplete the little profits they made. This finding resonates with Marlow et al. (2005), who noted that in many SMEs, training is largely regarded as a cost than an investment. This is particularly the case in circumstances where there are fears of real or perceived high staff turnover, as was the case in some Chinese-owned SMEs in Harare. Indeed, a growing body of research shows that high staff turnover in SMEs demotivates SME owners in prioritising the training and development of employees (Admiraal and Lockhorst, 2009). Our findings also revealed that the little training that was provided in most Chinese retail SMEs in Harare had to do with basic till (cash register machine) operation. Some of the employees were recruited without any skills and this till operation and supervision training was done on the job, mainly by experienced employees who had some experience in operating tills. Interestingly, some local employees were grateful for this training and felt empowered, saying that even if they left they would leave with some skill gain which would enable them to find a job in other retail shops. One of our interlocutors, Moses, told us that when he was employed he served as a security guard at the entrance checkpoint. As a

result of his hard work, the Chinese boss started to train him to operate a till. In no time he was elevated to become the shop supervisor. Similarly, Amon told us:

When I started here it was the Chinese at the till, they didn't trust anyone with money at the till, but I was fortunate to be the first to operate the till after they trained me. For me, this is a resource because I can use this skill even after leaving this shop.

Indeed, we observed that the few Chinese-owned SMEs that offered some form of training to their employees tended to provide informal training on the job and without any formal certification at the end. For Chinese employers, informal, on-the-job training is cheaper and allows workers to learn while working simultaneously. In fact, it emerged that many Chinese employers wished to minimise lost working time due to training away from the workplace. One employer noted:

The training has to be done here at work to avoid loss of work hours. So we cannot afford to let them leave the workplace for training, all the training has to happen here while everyone is working.

It emerged from our interviews that some Chinese employers intended to provide training for their employees but faced several economic constraints to do so. Indeed, since the late 1990s, Zimbabwe has faced a protracted economic and political crisis that has been marked by record hyperinflation (Gukurume, 2015). This economic status coincided with the increase in the establishment of Chinese SMEs in the country. Thus, the economy undermined the capacity of some Chinese SMEs to provide training and development to their local employees. This finding is consistent with Cunningham (2010) and Li, Rees and Branine (2019), who noted that SMEs are unlikely to undertake training and development activities because of factors such as associated costs. Indeed, in an environment marked by protracted economic instability, the costs of training tend to be overwhelming for many SMEs and deter them from offering training and other services. This is particularly the case for some Chinese SMEs in Harare whose motive is to maximise profits and repatriate them back to China (Dobler, 2005). Therefore, training—for them—would increase the cost of doing business and erode their profits. This was echoed by a number of our participants, who noted that the Chinese regard training as an unnecessary burden which would wipe out their profits. Ticha, one of our interlocutors, stated:

We have 3 retail branches in Harare and all the employees at these three branches have hardly been trained. I once engaged my boss (Mr Huang) to train some workers and equip them with basic skills like customer care, but the boss flatly refused and said this will reduce his profits.

Ticha's quote above shows how training is viewed in some of the Chinese SMEs in Harare. Ticha had worked for Mr Huang for almost eight years and was managing one of the retail branches in Harare, but had never received any formal management training. He told us that he rose to that position through hard work and his quick grasp of computer skills. Before getting a job at the Chinese shop, Ticha had completed a certificate in basic IT and he believed that those skills acquired before being employed were useful in getting him promoted to the managerial position. Ticha told us that his boss asked him to use his computer skills to train all the till operators who were working at the company. One of the participants we interviewed, Romeo, noted:

We only did induction when we joined and nothing else. This was done by the senior employees who had been at the company for a number of years. The bosses said they do not have the budget for formal training.

In addition to the above constraints, one key challenge that undermined Chinese SME owners' capacity to provide training was the language barrier. Most Chinese SME owners in Harare hardly spoke English or any local languages. With such communication challenges training became difficult if not impossible to implement. One SME owner, Mr Wuan, told us in an interview that when he established his shop, he initially hoped to hire and train all his workers, but could not do so due to language differences. He sought the services of interpreters but realised that this would be a costly venture. Consequently, Mr Wuan abandoned his intention to train workers. He then decided to recruit a local employee with some management and computer literacy so that he could train other local employees. For Mr Wuan, this was a relatively cheaper way of training his employees. This finding corroborates observations made by Cunningham and Rowley (2008), who noted that due to resource constraints and time limitations SMEs tend towards informal HRM approaches in their operations.

9 Union Representation: Overtime and Job Insecurities

Many employees of Chinese-owned SMEs highlighted that they had no job security. Similarly, almost all the employees of Chinese-owned SMEs we interviewed told us that there were hardly any employee benefits for them. Some of our participants told us that they were working without written contracts and the few who had contracts had short-term three-month-long contracts. These short-term contracts were regularly renewed for some employees based on their real or perceived performance. We observed that the low levels of job security tended to demotivate many employees in Chinese-owned SMEs. This was exacerbated by the fact that Chinese employers did not permit workers to join workers' unions or establish workers' committees. Simon, one of our interlocutors working at one of the Chinese SMEs in Harare, noted:

They do not allow us to join or form unions. If you do and they know that, then you will be told that your job is gone. You will be fired like yesterday. There are a number of workers who tried that and they are gone, so people know that they should not even try that.

Indeed, Simon's narrative was shared by several other employees who told us stories of how their colleagues had lost their jobs for joining unions or attempting to organise workers to demand better wages or working conditions. Consequently, the majority of workers in Chinese SMEs in Harare were non-unionised and lacked formal representation, which heightened their job insecurity and vulnerability. Apart from this, some of the employees we interviewed accused their employers of underpaying and overworking them. For instance, Simon told us that they worked very long hours, seven days a week. These issues were also reported in the secondary sources.² Some told us they often worked overtime hours without being paid for them. Simon said:

We do not have any free time. We open very early in the morning and only have short tea and lunch breaks. During peak periods we also do overtime and we are not always paid on time. If you go and ask for overtime money you can lose your job. The problem is that there are no contracts so there is no job security at all.

Most of our participants echoed Simon's views and bemoaned the lack of written and binding contracts. "The Chinese do not offer any contracts, you just

² <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2014/04/zimbabweans-agony-harsh-grip-chinese-slave-drivers/>

work and if they do not want you any more they will just tell you they cannot continue with you”, Simon asserted during an interview. The issue of ill-treatment, underpayment and long working hours has been reported in many other studies (Park, 2009; Gadzala, 2010; Gukurume, 2019). For instance, some of the female employees we spoke to told us that they were not paid when they were on maternity leave. When they came back from giving birth their jobs were not always guaranteed. Participants told us stories of some women who had become pregnant and lost their jobs after their child’s birth. Even though women are entitled to paid maternity leave under the country’s Labour Act, many Chinese employers do not pay this. Indeed, they don’t pay workers who are absent from work due to illness or any other form of incapacity. For instance, in our follow-up interviews during the COVID-19 lockdown, employees who were told to stay away were also told that they would not get paid over this time. They would be paid only when they returned to work. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the precariousness of their work and livelihoods. This was also confirmed in several secondary sources that we reviewed. For instance, in 2018, *Newsday* carried a story about the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), which had criticised the Chinese for violating the country’s labour laws (Chadenga, 2018;³ Moyo, 2013⁴). The reports showed that many Chinese firms disregarded the country’s labour laws and often ill-treated their employees.

In light of the foregoing, we thus theoretically frame the Human Resource and Management landscape in Chinese SMES as a contentious field marked by conflicts and contestations between various stakeholders, such as workers’ unions, Chinese employers, employees and the state, among other critical actors. These contestations are a consequence of contradicting cultural “lifeworlds” and workplace “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1984). For Bourdieu (1984), the habitus is marked by a patterned set of embodied practices that are the result of internalised rules, regulations and norms and values of a particular space. Likewise, the “field” (Bourdieu, 1984) should be understood as a battleground in which various agents/actors—in this case Chinese employers, employees, workers’ unions and the state—compete for various forms of capital to assert their interests, influence and positions. As such, the conflicts in the “HRM field” in Chinese SMES should be understood within the context of competing interests and conflicting cultural lifeworlds. Within the Zimbabwean context, employees in Chinese SMES seek to advance their interests in terms of better

3 <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/05/zctu-slams-chinese-violation-of-labour-laws/>

4 <https://www.thezimbabwean.co/2013/01/zctu-slams-chinese-violation-of/>

wages and improved working conditions and welfare, and are often backed by trade unions. In contrast, their Chinese employers advance their interests of maximising profits and often have the support of state and political officials. Such connections with politicians and support from the state (political capital) enable some connected Chinese investors to violate labour laws and employee rights without any consequences.

We also observed that none of the Chinese-owned SMEs offered any form of social security, employee benefits or welfare schemes. For instance, there were no medical and retirement packages for employees in all the Chinese-owned SMEs. In an interview with Mr Tseng, he made it clear that retirement and pension packages were a non-issue. Mr Tseng told us that he could not put in place a pension facility because he did not expect his employees to keep their jobs and continue working for him until they reached retirement age. Mr Tseng's view was shared by many other Chinese SME owners in Harare who noted that they did not see employee benefits like pensions as a necessity. In a moment of rare candour, one Chinese SME owner whom we asked about pension for his employees told us:

Why should I bother to have a pension scheme because all the workers would either leave or be fired before they reach retirement age? Workers come and go and my longest-serving worker has been here for just over a year.

This resonates strongly with narratives from the employees we interviewed, who noted that pensions are hardly discussed in Chinese SMEs partly because very few workers were aware that it was their right. Similarly, very few workers stayed with the same organisation until they reached retirement age. One of the employees, Andrew, complained:

We don't even discuss medical aid or health and safety at work, so things like pensions are not on the priority list at all. The Chinese try to minimise the costs by ignoring all these benefits.

Andrew told me that they had once approached their boss to ask for transport allowances because transport costs were skyrocketing, but were informed that they should use their salaries for transport.

10 “Unfair” Termination of Employment

Conflicts between employers and employees in Chinese SMEs were rife,⁵ and were largely due to the real or perceived unfair termination of employment and wage payment contestations, among other things. In our interviews with key informants from the Labour Court and workers’ unions in Harare, several cases of disputes between Chinese SME owners and some of their employees were revealed.⁶ This was corroborated by secondary sources, which documented widespread conflict in Chinese firms in the country. For instance, in July 2020, workers and lawyers’ associations accused Chinese firms of human rights violations and the exploitation of their workers.⁷ This accusation came after a Chinese employer, Mr Zhang Xuelin, shot two of his employees at work over work-related disagreements.⁸ He was arrested and charged with attempted murder after seriously wounding his two employees.⁹ The Chinese embassy responded by stating that:

Any possible illegal acts and persons who violate the law should not be shielded. China and Zimbabwe have long-standing friendship and cooperation. We call upon all relevant sides to safeguard it jealously and carefully.

Many of the employees from the Chinese SMEs noted that their Chinese employers made them work without any formal contract. Their employment relations were thus based on a verbal psychological contract. Such an arrangement made local employees vulnerable to exploitative workplace practices, such as unfair dismissals without any benefits. This labour arrangement reveals the precarious nature of jobs in some Chinese SMEs in Zimbabwe. It resonates strongly with observations made by Gadzala (2010) in Zambia, who noted that labour conditions maintained by Chinese firms often stand in direct opposition to the protections entrenched in the Zambian labour law framework.

5 <https://www.voazimbabwe.com/a/conflicts-escalate-between-zimbabwean-workers-chinese-employers-144388615/1461719.html>

6 <https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/zimbabwe-watchdog-accuses-chinese-bosses-of-worker-abuse-20200630>

7 <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/zimbabwe-workers-and-lawyers-association-accuse-chinese-mining-firms-of-gross-human-rights-violations-and-exploitation/>

8 <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/chinese-boss-shoots-injures-employees-for-demanding-dues/>

9 <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/africa/article/3091300/chinese-mine-companies-zimbabwe-accused-rampant-abuse-after-boss>

Following this, we argue that local employees working in Chinese SMEs could be framed and imagined as “precariat employees” (Scully, 2016; Standing, 2014, Allison, 2008). Many of the workers we interviewed complained that the verbal contract with Chinese employers was not legally binding and was constantly violated by the Chinese employer. For instance, participants complained that unfair dismissals were commonplace in Chinese SMEs. This corroborates findings made by other scholars across the African continent who have observed the high prevalence of exploitative management styles and employment relations in violation of labour rights and the occurrence of conflicts between the Chinese and their employees (Conway-Smith, 2009; Liu 2018; Akorsu and Cooke, 2011; Gukurume, 2019; Cooke, Wang and Wang, 2018). Similarly, in their study in Ghana, Giese and Thiel (2012) asserted that Chinese and Ghanaian culturally based perceptions of employment relations are contradictory and conflict-ridden.

11 Conclusion

This article explored the human resources and management practices in Chinese-owned SMEs in Harare. It particularly focused on the complex dynamics of these practices and how they are experienced, perceived and articulated within Chinese SMEs. Through an ethnographic focus on Chinese-owned SMEs, this article contributes to the debates on China–Africa engagements by focusing on labour and management practices in Zimbabwe. This is an important contribution to the literature, which has largely focused on large-scale Chinese MNCs and SOEs while neglecting the private small-scale Chinese investments that this article examined. We have argued in the article that these human resource management practices are executed within a tension between the Chinese and Zimbabwean cultural habitus (lifeworlds), fields and capitals.

We have also highlighted that Chinese SME workplace regimes are marked by precariousness for their local employees. Thus, local employees working in Chinese SMEs can be imagined as “precariat” (Standing, 2011; Scully, 2016). Although these employees work long hours, they are paid meagre wages, they lack any benefits and their jobs are insecure. Indeed, we have shown that Chinese labour relations are exploitative and characterised by a lack of decent work. The field not only lacks decent work but is also one in which actors (workers, employers, unions, government) are positioned unequally due to structural forces that endow some actors with specific forms of power within the organisational social spaces. We also argue that in spite of precarious workplace

regimes and practices, local employees are not passive victims, but respond to this precariousness in a variety of ways, like leaving their jobs, which has led to high staff turnover rates in most Chinese SMES.

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