Workers' Understanding and Experiences of Labour Practices in Chinese Owned Construction Companies in Harare, Zimbabwe.

By

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DECLARATION

I, Fiona Tafadzwa Matsika, declare that this dissertation which is titled**: Workers' Understanding and Experiences of Labour Practices in Chinese-Owned Construction Companies in Harare, Zimbabwe:** is my own personal work and I am the principal author. All the sources I used or quoted are acknowledged in the reference. This thesis is being submitted to the Sol Plaatje University in partial fulfilment of an MA in Social Anthropology and has not been submitted to any other University.

Date:

Signature _____ *Fiona* _____

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all those who believed in me.

Acknowledgements

LIST OF ACRONYMS

FDI: Foreign Direct Investments

FGDs: Focus Group Discussions

FOCAC: Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

LEP: Look East Policy

MNCs: Multi-National Corporations

MP: Member of Parliament

NSSA: National Social Security Authority

PPE: Personal Protective Equipment

SMEs: Small and Medium Enterprises

SOEs: State Owned Enterprises

USA: United States of America

ZANU-PF: Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front

ZCTU: Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions

ABSTRACT

In post-2000, Zimbabwe has been engulfed by a political and economic crisis. In this context, there has been a rapid proliferation of Chinese investment that was accelerated by the country's Look East policy to strengthen diplomatic relations between Zimbabwe and China after the country faced international sanctions and isolation from the United States of America and the European Union. The increasing Chinese investments in mining, retail, construction, and manufacturing have attracted growing scholarly attention, and several studies have been conducted. However, few studies have focused on the labour regimes and practices of Chinese construction companies in Zimbabwe. This study examines the labour practices of Chinese-owned construction companies in Zimbabwe. This qualitative study is interested in how these labour practices are experienced, perceived, and negotiated by local employees working in Chinese construction companies. The study triangulates several qualitative methods of data collection such as in-depth interviews, observations, life histories, and key informant interviews among other methods. Findings in this study show that Chinese labour regimes and practices in Harare are a consequence of a complex entanglement between local circumstances and Chinese workplace cultures. The study reveals that Chinese labour practices are imported from China by Chinese employers and Chinese workers recruited from China. However, with time, such labour practices gradually adapt to local contexts. However, the researcher argues that while Chinese labour practices are perceived as despotic, authoritarian, and sometimes exploitative/abusive, the local Zimbabwean employees should not be conceived as passive victims of such labour practices. Instead, local employees creatively devise various strategies that allow them to negotiate and navigate these labour practices. In addition, the study also argues that while some labour regimes such as the compound and dormitory practices are meant to control workers and compel them to work for long hours, such spaces have also become strong affective spaces where worker solidarities and consciousness are forged and cemented, which enable collective forms of mobilisation and resistance. The study therefore draws from Giddens (1984) structuration theory, which emphasises that in as much as the structure (which in this thesis is the Chinese labour regime) is coercive and controlling, workers adapt and utilise their everyday agency to respond to such labour regimes of power.

Introduction

In post-colonial Africa, and Zimbabwe in particular, Chinese investments and construction projects have been increasing exponentially (Plummer 2019; Ofosu and Sarpong 2022). Many of these investments have been in the mining (Cooke et al 2015; Crawford and Botchwey 2017), retail (Haugen Carling 2005; Fei Peltola and Zhang 2023) and construction industries (Burke 2007; Chen, Goldstein and Orr 2009; Calabrese and Tang 2023). Although Chinese investments are increasing in Africa and Zimbabwe, there are few studies that have explored the labour regimes and practices of Chinese construction companies in Zimbabwe, especially focusing on the employees' everyday experiences and the meanings they attach to Chinese labour practices. Therefore, this study examines the ways in which local Zimbabweans working in Chinese construction companies experience and perceive Chinese labour practices in Zimbabwe. In addition, this study explores the meanings local employees attach to Chinese labour regimes and practices, as well as how they reconcile local and foreign labour regimes. However, it is important to note that despite the presence of a coercive Chinese labour regime, local Zimbabwean employees, remain active, and draw from their everyday agency to negotiate and navigate some of the challenges that emerge from the Chinese labour practices in the construction industry. The study therefore utilises Giddens (1984) structuration theory, which asserts that individuals are not completely controlled by mechanisms of power, but they act over and above the constraining structures. The study is based on an ethnography of workers' understanding of the Chinese labour regimes which they experience in their everyday life. The study focuses on two Chinese owned construction companies that are operating in greater city of Harare, the Zimbabwean capital city.

Statement of the Problem

The focus of this study revolves around the persistent issue of labour malpractices observed in Chinese-owned organisations in Zimbabwe and other African countries (Smith, 2012; Nyadzayo, 2022). Of import, there have been media reports in which local employees have been subjected to violations and even violence in wage disputes (Njanike, 2020). As Chinese labour practices are largely shaped by their Confucian culture, these practices may be unfamiliar and intricate to local

employees. Consequently, the central question arises: How do local employees comprehend, navigate, and interpret these Chinese labour practices? Media reports have shed light on the characteristics of Chinese labour regimes, including low wages, the casualization of labour, the absence of workers' committees or trade union membership, and inadequate provision of protective clothing. Therefore, this study seeks to explore and analyse the strategies employed by local employees to negotiate these precarious labour practices. Although there have been increasing Chinese investments in Zimbabwe, there has been a corresponding upsurge of media reports on controversial and unfair labour practices in Chinese owned companies in the country, especially in the construction and mining sectors (Smith 2012[1]; Mhlanga 2016[2]; Nyathi 2021 Nyadzayo 2022[3]). It is these Chinese labour practices that are the cornerstone of this study. Despite the prevalence of controversial labour practices in Chinese-owned organisations in Zimbabwe, little scholarly attention has been paid to how employees in these organisations understand, experience, perceive, and deal with such labour (mal)practices. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to scholarship on labour practices and China-Africa engagements by examining the ways in which workers within Chinese-owned organisations understand and experience Chinese labour practices.

Main Research Question

How do local employees experience and understand Chinese labour practices in Chinese owned construction companies in Harare?

The following are the specific research questions:

Secondary Research Questions

1. What are the local employees' perceptions on Chinese labour practices in the construction industry in Harare?
2. What meanings do local employees attach to Chinese labour practices?
3. What informs employees understanding of and perceptions on Chinese labour practices?

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/02/china-zimbabwe-workers-abuse
[2] https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/zimbabwe-workers-allege-ill-treatment-at-chinese-owned-mine/
[3] https://allafrica.com/stories/202203290531.html

4. How do local employees negotiate and reconcile Chinese and Zimbabwean labour practices?

Objectives

1. To examine the ways in which local employees understand and experience Chinese labour practices in Chinese owned construction companies in Harare.

2. To examine local employees' perceptions on new Chinese labour practices in Chinese owned construction companies in Harare.

3. To explore the ways in which local employees negotiate and reconcile Chinese and Zimbabwean labour practices.

Justification of the Study

Despite an upsurge of reports pertaining to controversial labour practices among Chinese-owned organisations (Smith, 2012; Njanike, 2020; Nyadzayo, 2022), academic scholarship has paid less attention to the ways in which local employees experience and understand these Chinese labour practices. As such, this study seeks to examine the subjective experiences of local employees within Chinese owned construction companies. As highlighted earlier, academic scholarship on Chinese workplace and labour practices in Zimbabwe is not only scant but rare. This is despite the prevalence of media reports on labour controversies in Chinese-owned organisations across the African continent (Chaudhury, 2021). As such, this study becomes important in addressing an important knowledge gap and potentially contributing to policy on labour disputes in Chinese owned organisations in Zimbabwe and beyond.

Background: China-Africa Engagements

China-Africa engagements and investments have been heavily debated in the media and academia. Discussions have focused on whether China should be considered Africa's new development partner or a new imperialist power. Western countries have particularly contested the intentions

behind the Sino-African relations (Abiodun 2023; Sharma, 2023). The dominant global discourse suggests that China's presence in Africa is driven by the desire to exploit the continent's abundant natural resources (Akangbe, 2011; Hairong and Sautman, 2013). However, scholars such as Brautigam (2009) and Lee (2022) challenge this narrative, arguing that China's intentions in Africa have been largely misunderstood due to a lack of transparency regarding its foreign direct investments in the region. China's reluctance to disclose the extent of its investments in Africa has caused controversies surrounding its interests on the continent. Studies show that China has emerged as Africa's largest trading partner and donor country in recent years (Akangbe, 2011). Scholars like Lee (2022) have portrayed China as a self-proclaimed leader in shaping the development agenda of third world countries.

The establishment of the Forum on Africa China Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 marked a significant milestone in China's engagement with African countries. FOCAC was designed to enhance trade, security, and investment collaborations between China and African nations. As a result, almost all African countries, except Swaziland, have received financial aid and loans from China (Brautigam, 2009). This partnership has facilitated the presence of numerous Chinese companies in various African nations. In particular, China has emerged as the leading contributor of foreign direct investment (FDI) to Africa since the early 2000s (Lee 2022; Okeke 2023). The China-Africa Research initiative at Joh Hopkins University claims that as a result of supply chain disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the value of China-Africa trade in 2020 was US$176 billion, down from US$192 billion in the previous year. However, the value rose sharply in 2021 to US$251 billion. Recent statistics also reveal that China is Africa's largest trading partner and its fourth-biggest source of investment (Okeke 2023). Official data show that bilateral trade between China and Africa totalled 282 billion US dollars in 2022 (Africa News 2023). Similarly, Statista (2023) noted that as of 2021, exports from China into Africa accumulated to roughly 145 billion US dollars.

Scholars show how FDI has the potential to greatly contribute to a country's economic growth by creating improved job opportunities and enhancing skills (Chu and Fafchamps, 2022). However, contrary to this notion, some scholars and journalists have highlighted the prevalence of unfair and exploitative labour practices within Chinese organisations operating in Africa (Lee, 2022; Zhao, 2014; Admasie, 2018). This study builds on this emerging body of research by specifically

focusing on Zimbabwe, where such practices have garnered significant media attention, yet receive little academic and scholarly focus.

Scholars like Matlay (2002) found that there are 'primitive' labour practices taking place in some Chinese organisations such as low pay and long working hours. Similarly, Lee (2022) asserts that in the public domain Chinese businesses are exploitative towards African labour. However, he argues that, in comparison to other investors, the picture looks different on the ground. Lee's (2022) study on Chinese capital in the mining sector in Zambia argues that the international media has always accused China of unfair labour practices, when in fact all private investors in the Zambian Copperbelt share the same unfair labour practices with China. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, Chinese labour practices are not entirely unique, but relates to long-standing and preexisting colonial and postcolonial labour practices. In the same vein, Brautigam (2009) quoted an investigative journalist who stated that the safety and health problem in Zambia's mines was not unique to China, but rather a shared problem among all investors in the Zambian Copperbelt.

Furthermore, in their study on labour conflict and Chinese manufacturing firms in Ethiopia, Chu and Fafchamps (2022) assert that labour conflict is prevalent in Chinese companies and is caused by many factors. In fact, they assert that Chinese organisations are more likely to experience labour conflict than other investors because of Confucian values they hold and impose on local employees such as hard work and eating bitterness, which do not resonate with Ethiopian employees. Similarly, Men (2014) argues that although Chinese companies try to localise their business strategies and engage with the local labour force, they end up reverting to their cultural, behavioural, and social norms of Confucian management techniques, which often contradict local labour regimes.

Similarly, scholars such as Wu (2020); Driessen (2019) suggested that labour conflict with regard to labour practices arises because of cultural differences between local and foreign managers and more particularly with Chinese managers. However, some scholars have started to challenge arguments that categorise Chinese managers as operating under Confucian ideas. For instance, Fang and Bautigam (2014) argue that Chinese firms are often operating in special economic zones and, as such, these incentives enable managers to impose stringent working conditions even in the face of employee resistance. Thus, it is suggested that conflicts arise between Chinese managers and local employees due to the need to get incentives.

Furthermore, Xiayoyang and Eom (2019) asserted that labour conflicts between Chinese managers and local African employees emerge in many Chinese organisations regarding work attitudes, work ethic, and working hours, among other labour issues. Indeed, many studies have confirmed that Chinese managers often complain about the attitudes of local employees to work. Chu and Fafchamps (2022) asserted that the Chinese manager viewed Ethiopians as passive and did not take the initiative to do their job without being ordered to. On the other hand, local employees hated to be told what to do or how best to do their job. Lee observed similar findings in his study in Zambia, citing one of the managers who claimed that Zambian workers are lazy and are not able to eat bitterness as the Chinese do.

Chinese investments in Zimbabwe

Like other parts of Africa, China is one of Zimbabwe's biggest trading partners. In fact, over the past few years, after the signing of the Look East Policy, Chinese foreign direct investment, aid, and projects have surged in the country (Gukurume 2019; Chipaike and Birschoff 2019; Chipaike and Marufu 2019). While the Zimbabwean government welcomes and appreciates Chinese FDI, financial aid, and loans, the operations of Chinese business regarding labour violations have angered the Trade Union community in Zimbabwe. According to a press release issued by the president of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) on October 25, 2022. Chinese labour practices have been viewed as a threat to the Zimbabwean labour movement (Chipaike and Marufu 2019). Indeed, scholars like Mbali (2018) postulate that the existence of Chinese businesses in Africa is said to be threatening the labour laws of various African countries.

Several labour practice violations were levelled against Chinese businesses by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). For example, the ZCTU charged that some Chinese companies were paying their workers' wages which are below the stipulated minimum wage and below the poverty datum set by the government. Shocking allegations have also been made concerning the health and safety of the employees in these spaces. The reports showed that the employees were working without protective clothing. In some instances where PPE clothing was provided, the cost of the PPE was deducted from the employee's basic salary.

Additionally, the president of the ZCTU highlighted that the labour practices of Chinese organisations were against the Zimbabwean Labour Relations Act Cap 28:01 which gives employees the right to have a worker's committee/ trade union membership, the right to fair labour standards and democratic workplaces. In fact, the Zimbabwean Labour Act is a legislative framework that governs the employer-employee relationship in the workplace. In this regard, specific provisions within the Act are going to be considered with the aim of shedding insights into the Chinese labour practices and how they comply or violate such provisions. Similarly, this will also be discussed in line with how they are experienced by workers in Chinese-owned construction organisations in Harare,

The Zimbabwean Labour Act, Cap. 28.01, establishes that employees have the fundamental right to join or be a member of a trade union of their choosing. Moreover, it safeguards employees' entitlement to fair labour standards. In addition, Section 6 of Cap. 28.01 stipulates that employers are prohibited from paying wages below the legally mandated minimum. Additionally, the Act explicitly states that employers cannot require employees to work more hours than permitted by law. As such, the Zimbabwean Labour Act on paper regulates the relationship between employers and employees and provides for dignified working environments and protection from unfair dismissals and other despotic labour regimes.

In response to allegations of employee ill-treatment and abuses, the Chinese embassy in Zimbabwe outright denied all allegations against Chinese companies. They argued that the accusations were baseless and that the ZCTU president did not have enough evidence to support their claims. In the same vein, as a counter to the allegations, the Chinese ambassador to Zimbabwe highlighted how they have created employment by providing 100,000 Zimbabweans with jobs. Therefore, in line with the press release by the ZCTU president and the response by the Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe, my study is anchored on the labour practice contestations in Chinese organisations as highlighted above, and focuses on the voices of those who experience them, the workers.

Conceptualising Chinese Labour Regimes

To unpack and understand how employees experience and understand new and imported labour practices in Chinese organisations in Zimbabwe, the researcher draws from the existing literature and coercive labour regimes as a conceptual framework. This will also be supported by Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, which considers the mutually reinforcing relationship between structures (Chinese labour practices) and agency (local employees and actors). The context and history of labour regimes is important in our understanding of employees' subjective experience of Chinese labour practices. In the 1990s, the manufacturing model in China was built on a despotic labour regime which relied heavily on exploiting migrant workers (Siu, 2017). According to Siu (2017), during the 1990s, management in Chinese manufacturing firms in China relied on the use of coercive power and disregard for labour laws to dominate and control workers. This was characterised by low wages, arbitrary demotions, assaults, bullying, and threats of dismissal of workers. However, the current labour regime has since transitioned from a despotic labour regime to a conciliatory despotism. Drawing from this, Siu (2017) argues that in as much as the emerging labour regime tries to appease the worker resentments, it has a combination of the old despotic regime, but adds new normative measures of soft control. This could help in explaining how China`s labour regimes in Africa are borrowing from mainland China. Jiang (2009) postulates that Chinese labour practices in Africa constitute a reflection and externalisation of Chinese labour regimes from mainland China.

This externalisation of coercive Chinese labour regimes is made possible and reinforced by preexisting violent cultures in the country. Zimbabwean labour regimes have also been historically despotic in nature. Therefore, violence in these organisations should be understood as part of a broader historical trajectory of violence that dates back to the colonial era. For example, the establishment of colonial capitalism in Zimbabwe was characterised by violent modes of accumulation, including exploitative practices towards black employees. The colonial regime recruited and dealt with local labour through violence and other coercive labour practices. For instance, scholars such as Arrighi detailed the forced labour practices called (Chiharu), which were used by the colonial capitalists in Rhodesia (Arrighi, 1967; Johnson, 2009). While Chinese labour practices are not forced labour, they operate on almost similar coercive and exploitative approaches.

Apart from this, strike violence was rife during the colonial era in Zimbabwe due to the exploitative labour practices of the colonial regime (Phimister 2009; Phimister and Tembo 2015). In fact, many of these violent strikes were also a response to the repressive colonial labour regimes against black workers. At independence, in 1980, the post-colonial government inherited a violent labour regime and culture, which has been reproduced and perfected in the post-colonial era. As such, coercive labour practices and a violent culture are very much embedded in the postcolonial Zimbabwean society with recurrent political violence, police brutality, and other forms of state sponsored violence. In fact, since the colonial period, violence has always been used by the Zimbabwean government to deal with striking workers and political critics. For example, in 1997 after the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) called for a national strike against rising food prices and the cost of living, the Mugabe regime responded through the deployment of repressive state security forces that brutalised, arrested, and imprisoned striking workers and citizens. Therefore, the manifestation of abusive labour practices against workers in Chinese companies should not be seen as new in Zimbabwe, but rather as part of a long history of labour exploitation. Similarly, as discussed above, the abusive labour practices are also reinforced by an already entrenched culture that condones abuse and violence against both workers and ordinary citizens (LeBas 2006).

This experience of coercive labour practices is not only unique to Zimbabwe but is also prevalent in neighbouring countries such as South Africa. In South Africa, there are continuities of abuse and violence against employees from the apartheid to the post-apartheid era. Scholars such as Moodie (2005) argue that workplace abuse was endemic in South African gold mines in the period 1913-1935. Moodie's study showed how white managers used violence against their black employees. For many white managers, coercion was seen as a tool that was used to induce hard labour (Moodie 2005). In his study on underground mine violence in South Africa, Moodie (2005) argued that many of the abusive labour practices occurred at the point of production largely due to the disorganisation of underground mining practices. The assault of mine workers was prevalent in underground mining shafts. These beatings were used as a form of labour control. For instance, Moodie (2005) noted that employees would get beaten for minor issues and white managers seemed to have the right to beat black workers and impose their labour practices and orders. However, Breckenridge views violence in underground mines as something that was celebrated and largely accepted as it defined masculinity amongst both black and white employees. For Breckenridge (1998) the conflict in underground mines was purely racial and racist, and assaults

were to subordinate the black workers. Similarly, the apartheid state was enabling the abusive labour practices that took place in gold mines in South Africa. According to Breckenridge (1998), white employers would have the support of the apartheid state as the law, and the police would side with the white managers. For whites, this meant that they could easily abuse and exploit their black employees without any repercussions.

Coercive labour practices were and are still viewed as a technique of labour control and disciplining 'unruly' workers. Like in Zimbabwe, there is a conspicuous continuity of coercive labour regimes and workplace violence in post-apartheid South Africa. For example, in 2012 South Africa saw the massacre of about 34 mine workers in Marikana by the police amid a long-running labour dispute and strike violence (Satgar 2012; Chinguno 2013; Alexander 2013; Cairncross and Kisting 2016; Webster 2017). It should be underscored that the manifestation of coercive labour regimes in Chinese organisations in Zimbabwe and beyond is characterised by new forms of exploitation and the reproduction of older patterns of exploitative labour practices (Von Holdt 2013).

Chapter Outline: Organisation of the Thesis

This dissertation is organised into five chapters. The first chapter of the dissertation concentrated on setting the scene and building the foundation of the study. The chapter introduced the focus of the study and provided the background that informs this study by discussing the increasing visibility and investments of China in Africa and Zimbabwe and focused on some of the investment projects in construction and other sectors. The chapter discusses China-Africa business engagements through focusing on Chinese investments in Zimbabwe. The chapter also presents the research problem and a statement of the problem that informs the study, as well as the research objectives and questions. In addition, the chapter also defines and conceptualises Chinese labour regimes and practices. Lastly, the chapter discusses the theoretical framework and, more specifically, Giddens Structuration theory, which is used in this study as an analytical lens.

Chapter two discusses the literature review in detail and starts with broader geopolitical relations between Africa and China historically. The chapter focused on studies that have been done on Chinese investments in Africa, especially those that look at relates issues such as working conditions, remuneration and the broader labour dynamics. In addition, the chapter also discusses the staffing practices of Chinese construction companies in various countries as well as the broader debates about the rights of workers, the contestations, and conflicts as well as how these are resolved. This chapter also highlights the knowledge gap in this body of work. The chapter asserts that although there are many studies that have been done on Chinese companies and investments in Africa and Zimbabwe, few studies have examined the labour regimes and practices in Chinese construction companies, especially in Zimbabwe.

Chapter three discusses the methodology and research philosophy that was used in addressing research problems and research questions. Given the nature of the study, a qualitative research methodology and multiple case study research design were used to understand the experiences of local employees working in Chinese owned construction companies. The chapter also discusses the interpretive research philosophy that informs this study and the various methods that were used to collect primary data such as semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, observations and secondary data from published articles and reports. In addition, the chapter also discusses the sampling techniques used to select participants, how the researcher negotiated entry into the field, and the centrality of networks in the process of accessing participants. The chapter also discusses the data analysis procedure and, more specifically, the thematic analysis where themes were generated from the empirical findings. Last, the chapter also discusses the ethical issues that were considered in the study.

Chapter four presents and discusses the empirical findings based on the data collected during fieldwork. The presentation and discussion of the findings is done through a thematic analytical approach based on the themes that were generated from the transcribed data. Themes focused mainly on the dormitory and compound labour regime practiced in the Chinese construction companies in Zimbabwe and this was discussed in relation to other countries and scholarly works. The chapter argues that the dormitory compound labour regime is a form of control used by Chinese employers to assert a strong control over workers. However, the researcher asserts that

while this labour regime is a structure with specific structural constraints on the lives, rights, and freedoms of the workers, the workers have also devised innovative ways of dealing with such constraints and used that very same space to mobilise and agitative for improved working and living conditions. As such, following Anthony Giddens' structuration theory and the structure-agency thesis, the chapter argues that the structure, in this case the Chinese labour regimes is not only constraining but also enabling, given that it is the structural constraints that force the workers to innovate and find a way around these constraints, as the chapter shows.

Chapter five is the last chapter and concentrates on tying the dissertation argument(s). What is critical in this chapter is that this dissertation makes an important contribution to knowledge on China-Africa engagements by focusing on the labour practices in Chinese owned construction companies in Zimbabwe. The chapter also makes some recommendations on how to ensure decent work in Chinese construction companies and reduce the precariousness of casualized work for many local employees in the construction industry.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature is to centre the expanding influence of China and Chinese companies on the African continent in a broader context, with a particular emphasis on the impact of Chinese investments within the specific context of Zimbabwe. The chapter also explores the key instruments and agreements that have been implemented to fortify the dynamics of Sino-African interactions across multiple strata. Scholars have scrutinised these agreements as integral components of China's use of soft power in its multifaceted engagements on the African continent.

Thinking with Giddens' Structuration Theory

This study will make use of Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory as an analytical lens to unpack how local employees experience Chinese labour practices and how they negotiate and reconcile them in their everyday workplace encounters. Giddens' structuration theory is analytically productive in describing the experiences of Zimbabwean workers and their understanding of the dynamics of labour relations within Chinese organisations. Giddens' Structuration theory foregrounds the complex relationship between 'structure' and 'agency'. In fact, structure and agency are the pivotal concepts in his Structuration theory. According to Giddens (1984), structure refers to the enduring patterns of social relations and systems that shape and constrain human behaviour. For Giddens (1984), structures involve the rules, institutions, norms, and resources that shape human action and mediate their choices. In this study, the Chinese labour practices, Confucian norms and values, as well as the Zimbabwean economic crisis, are regarded as the structure that constrains employees working in Chinese companies. By utilising structuration theory, this research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how social structures and individual agency interact to shape the labour experiences and perceptions of workers in this specific context. It will enable a deeper understanding of the ways in which workers navigate and negotiate the complexities of labour relations within Chinese-owned construction organisations in Zimbabwe, shedding light on the interplay between structures, agency, and the lived experiences of workers.

According to Giddens (1984), individual actions are shaped and constrained by social structures, while the agency perspective contends that society is formed through the actions and interpretations of individuals. For Giddens (1984), agency relates to the capacity of individuals

agents to act, decide, and exert their influence within the social structures they are enmeshed in. Giddens (1985) challenges this dichotomy of structure and agency by proposing that structure and agency are inseparable and interdependent aspects of social life, akin to two sides of the same coin (Ritzer, 2007). Thus, at the core of Giddens' structuration theory is the notion of the duality of structure. According to Giddens, structure is not separate from individual actions; rather, it is deeply ingrained within them. He contends that structure not only constrains individual action, but also plays an enabling role in shaping human behaviour. As such, the local workers' ways of negotiating and responding to Chinese labour regimes should be understood within the context of the structure-agency interplay.

For this study, local employees and trade unions, as well as Chinese employers, can also be viewed as rational actors with agency that helps them deal with constraints posed by structures. The importance of structuration theory is that it recognises that individuals are not merely passive victims of social structures but are also able to actively navigate and negotiate such constraints through social actions either individually or collectively. This shows that individuals can exercise agency and make choices within the constraints and opportunities provided by social structures. For this study, structuration theory is ideal in that it privileges people's agency and creativity in dealing with life situations and in how they actively circumvent structural constraints. Consequently, individual participants are not only shaped by structures, but also actively shape the structures through their everyday actions. This resonates with King (2012), who argued that structuration refers to the way individuals produce and reproduce various systems through their activities.

Chinese Investments in Africa

The presence of China in Africa is not something new (Wethal, 2017, Nielsen,2014) but spans more than half a century (Brautigam, 2009). Researchers have demonstrated the presence of the Chinese in Africa since 1658 in countries such as South Africa (Shunn and Eisanman),1963 for Kenya (Opondo and Blowfield, Priento-Carron 2007) 1950s for Zimbabwe (Alao 2014) showing that although trade relations between Africa and China have intensified recently, such relations have always existed. This is also echoed by Wasserman (2016), who asserted that China's recent business interest in Africa is built on a longer history of cooperation, which has been portrayed as

solidarity and development, rather than as aid. However, bilateral cooperation between China and various African countries has intensified over the last few years (Drogendijk and Blomkvist 2013, Oya and Schaefer 2023) with China investing in 51 African countries in 2015 (Megbowen, Mlambo and Adekunhle 2019) and contributed significantly to Africa's infrastructural development. China has also become the largest provider of foreign direct investments in Africa, surpassing the United States of America and European countries (Gukurume and Matsika 2020). As such, China has become the largest investor in many African countries such as South Africa (Drogendijk and Blomkvist 2013; Chen, Dollar, and Tang 2018) and Zimbabwe, which saw many companies leave after the controversial land reform programme and the subsequent economic crisis (Gukurume 2015). Scholars such as Osondu-Oti (2016) agree that China has become a significant player in Africa`s economic landscape and international relations. Scholars have begun to examine why China has intensified its investments and projects in Africa.

For example, the study by Chen, Dollar and Tang (2018) focused on why China is so interested in the African continent and its resources. In trying to answer this question, various perspectives have emerged and showed that China's interest in resource-rich African countries is similar to that of other superpowers, such as the USA. For example, Pannell (2008) postulates that China's interest is driven by the need for cheap raw materials, as well as the establishment of new markets and the search for new sources of energy (Wasserman 2016). In fact, there are several pull factors that have drawn China into Africa. Other scholars agree that China is attracted to Africa because it is an opportunity to benefit from resources and internationalise and assert the presence of China as a powerhouse in Africa (Alden and Davies, 2006; Drogendijk and Blomkvist, 2013). Furthermore, the extraction of natural resources and the construction of infrastructure are some of the two main activities of Chinese SOEs in Africa (Cooke and Wang 2017). The presence and influence of China in Africa has grown to an extent that some scholars have even begun making allegations of China as a neo-colonial power (Elshafei and Matewe 2021, Rapanyane 2023, Amusan and Nel 2023). Many of these scholars believe that China is deepening its neocolonial imprint and ambitions through strategic debt traps.

Indeed, China-Africa engagements and investments have been heavily debated in the media and by scholars in academic spaces. Discussions have focused on whether China should be considered

Africa's new development partner or a new imperialist power. Western countries have particularly contested the intentions of China and the implications of Sino-African relations (Abiodun 2023; Sharma 2023). The dominant global discourse suggests that China's presence in Africa is driven by a desire to exploit the abundant natural resources of the continent (Akangbe, 2011; Hairong and Sautman 2013). However, scholars such as Brautigam (2009) and Lee (2022) challenge this narrative, arguing that China's intentions in Africa have been largely misunderstood due to a lack of transparency regarding its foreign direct investments in the region. China's reluctance to disclose the extent of its investments in Africa has caused controversies surrounding its interests on the continent. Studies show that China has emerged as Africa's largest trading partner and donor country in recent years (Akangbe, 2011). Scholars like Lee (2022) have portrayed China as a self-proclaimed leader in shaping the development of third-world world countries.

Sino-Africa relations must be understood within the broader context of global geopolitics and diplomatic agreements signed to strengthen trade relations. For instance, the establishment of the Forum on Africa- China Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 and the Go Global Policy marked a significant milestone in China's engagement with African countries. Along with FOCAC, the go-global policy, as pointed out by Megbowan, Mlambo, and Adekunle (2019), was made to encourage Chinese companies to invest and be competitive in overseas markets, as well as secure their business presence internationally. FOCAC was designed to enhance trade, security, and investment collaborations between China and African nations. As a result, almost all African countries, except Swaziland, have received financial aid and loans from China (Brautigam, 2009). This partnership has facilitated the presence of numerous Chinese companies in various African nations. As highlighted earlier, China has emerged as the leading contributor of foreign direct investment (FDI) to Africa since the early 2000s (Lee 2022; Okeke 2023). Scholars show how FDI has the potential to greatly contribute to a country's economic growth by creating improved job opportunities and enhancing skills (Chu and Fafochamps, 2022).

The China-Africa Reinitiative at Joh University asserts that due to supply chain disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the value of China-Africa trade in 2020 was US$176 billion, down from US$192 billion in the previous year. However, the value rose sharply in 2021 to US$251 billion. Recent statistics also reveal that China is Africa's largest trading partner and its fourth largest

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source of investment (Okeke 2023). Official data show that bilateral trade between China totalled 282 billion U.S. dollars in 2022 (Africa News 2023). Similarly, Statista (2023) noted that as of 2021, exports from China into Africa accumulated to roughly 145 billion U.S. dollars.

Scholars like (Kragelund 2009;) pinpoint how the mere presence of China in Africa is a cause for concern among Western countries and has sparked strong reactions from the West (Woods 2008). Hillary Clinton, a politician in the United States of America, was quoted warning African countries of China that it is coming to extract Africa's natural resources, pay African leaders and leave. Interestingly, Britain's former foreign secretary Jack Straw noted that what China is doing in Africa is like what Britain did to Africa 150 years ago, which denotes how history has been repeating itself in the African continent.

Reports on Sino-Africa relations have not all been negative. Chinese investments have played a very important role in improving the economies of many African nations Khodeir (2016). For example, in a study carried out by Khodeir (2016) on the impact of Chinese direct investments on employment in Africa. He found a positive impact on employment creation brought by Chinese enterprises in Southern Africa than in Northern Africa. This resonates with a study by Mlambo and Adekunle (2019), who found that foreign direct investment from China is insignificant but positively impacts industrialisation in Africa.

The rise of China as one of the world's superpowers has made it aggressive in the search for political allies and economic opportunities globally. Notably, China is not isolated in pushing for bilateral relations between Sino-African relations. For instance, some regimes who have strained relations with western countries have begun to look east in their foreign policy. Zimbabwe adopted a look-to-the-East policy after being sanctioned by the United States of America and the European Union. Although western countries have discouraged African leaders from deepening their relations with China, many authoritarian regimes view China as an alternative to the West. This in part explains why Chinese investments and business have grown exponentially in many African countries, including Zimbabwe. Interestingly, scholars such as Wasserman (2016) discuss the differences between Chinese and Western donors in their ideologies and governance practices in Africa. Wasserman (2016) argues that western donors use different ideologies and governance

practices to hide their interests and political discourses on the African continent. For example, aid from western countries comes with conditions for good governance, democracy, and adherence to human rights. Comparatively, Chinese aid is characterised by a non-interference policy and a focus on infrastructure development. However, Osundu-oti (2016) argues that China's non-interference policy on human labour rights in its foreign policy undermines West efforts to advocate for these rights in countries such as Darfur and Zimbabwe.

Against this backdrop, Adolph, Quince, and Prakash (2017) in their investigative study delve into the ongoing debates about Chinese aid and the violation of labour rights in Africa. Their study particularly sought to determine whether exports to China have an impact on the labour practices of exporting countries. Their findings suggest that an increase in exports to China is likely to lead to a decline in labour standards, particularly in jurisdictions with higher standards than most African countries. Furthermore, some scholars and journalists have highlighted the prevalence of unfair and exploitative labour practices within Chinese organisations operating in Africa (Lee, 1999; Zhao, 2014; Admasie, 2018). This study builds on this emerging body of research by specifically focusing on Zimbabwe, where such practices have gained significant media attention, but thus far received little academic and scholarly focus in the country. As such, this is the knowledge gap that this specific study seeks to address by focusing on labour regimes and practices and how they are experienced by workers.

Chinese labour Practices in Africa

Scholars agree that, although there has been an increase in the number of Chinese firms participating in infrastructure construction projects in Africa, there is narrow research on labour relations issues concerning Chinese firms in Africa (Cooke and Wang 2017, Wethal 2017). Brautigam et al (2018) concur that much of what has been researched about China in Africa focused more on macro data of trade, investments, and aid flows. However, as much as there has been an emerging body of studies on the labour practices in Chinese firms (Arkosu and Cooke 2011, Kamoche and Siebers 2015) very little is still known about how local employees perceive and negotiate Chinese labour practices (Wethal 2017). The increasing presence of Chinese firms in the construction industry in almost all African countries highlights how China's African

commitments influence workers and daily labour regimes at work (Wethal 2017). Therefore, Plummer (2019) argues that by ignoring the experiences of workers with various Chinese actors in Africa, researchers miss the opportunity to unpack how Africans are making sense of China's new role on the continent. Among the few studies that have been done, there has been a growing debate among scholars about the working conditions and remuneration of African workers in Chinese companies. Baah and Jauch (2009) recognise that although working conditions in Chinese firms differ from country to country and by sector, there are still some common trends that are common between countries and sectors such as violations of workers' rights, poor working conditions, hostility towards trade unions and unfair labour practices (Gadzala 2010).

Scholars have highlighted several concerns that have been levelled against Chinese firms in Africa such as violating international labour standards and not adhering to national labour laws (Isaksson and Kotsadam 2018). African governments turn a blind eye to the social and environmental irresponsibility's of Chinese firms through their non-interference foreign policy (Opondo, Blowfield, and Prieto-Carron, 2007). With all the negative publicity about China's African labour relations, there is still little academic research on labour relations issues in Chinese firms in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa, which is the gap that this specific study seeks to address (Cooke and Wang, 2017).

Oya, and Schaefer (2019) highlights that the Chinese in Africa are accused of bringing Chinese employees rather than locals. This is a widespread concern in Africa, where Chinese companies mainly employ Chinese workers in positions that could be filled by local African workers. This is further worsened by their limited efforts to train local workers (Gadzala 2010). Furthermore, the working conditions in Chinese companies are often substandard and exploitative (Chipaike and Marufu, 2019). However, scholars such as Oya and Schaefer (2019) argue that the evidence on working conditions in Chinese firms is patchy and largely anecdotal. Therefore, this study will make an original contribution both empirically by nuancing the empirical evidence and analytically by unpacking the ways in which workers experience and navigate Chinese labour practices in Harare.

Scholars like Matlay (2002) found that there are 'primitive' labour practices that are taking place in some Chinese organisations, such as low pay and long working hours. Similarly, Lee (2022) asserts that in the public domain, Chinese companies are exploitative toward African labour. However, he argues that, compared to other investors, the picture looks different on the ground. Lee's (2022) study on Chinese capital in the mining sector in Zambia argues that the international media has always accused China of unfair labour practices, when in fact all private investors in the Zambian Copperbelt share the same unfair labour practices with China. In the same vein, Brautigam (2009) quoted an investigative journalist who stated that the safety and health problem in Zambia's mines was not unique to China, but rather a shared problem among all investors in the Zambian Copperbelt. In a study done in the Ghanian construction industry on labour practices, Greco (2016) observed that there are discrepancies with regard to labour practices in Chinese firms and what the Ghanian labour Act stipulates. These discrepancies were particularly around minimum wages, working hours, overtime payments, and health and safety.

Gadzala (2010)'s study on the presence of Chinese in Zambia highlighted the implications that the hiring of Chinese expatriates has on the employment, as well as the formal and informal sector of the country. His main argument was that the employment of expatriates consolidated substandard labour practices in Chinese mines on the Zambian Copperbelt. Consequently, this led many Zambian workers to enter the informal sector of the country. Against this backdrop, Gadzala (2010) argues the need for the Zambian Government to reconsider some of its labour laws and put in place measures for strict adherence to those laws to ensure that Zambia gets the maximum benefits from its engagements with China. In Zambia, Negi (2008) asserts that there is a growing anti-Chinese sentiment, which in part is due to the controversies that implicate Chinese businesses in the country.

Importation of Chinese workers and labour Practices

In many African countries, including Zimbabwe, China is accused of importing Chinese labour practices into African soil. In a study in the Kenyan garment industry, Opondo, Blowfield, and

Prieto-Carron (2007) observed that Chinese managers in Kenya have been accused of gross violations of workers' rights, especially marginalised workers such as those from rural areas, women, old people, and migrant workers. The abuse of migrant workers is a common feature of the despotic labour regimes in mainland China. Opondo, Blowfield and Prieto-Carron (2007) further argued that the concerns about importation of Chinese labour practices into the African continent demonstrates the weaknesses of African governments who are supposed to ensure that Chinese firms operating in their countries adhere to the stipulated social, labour, and environmental responsibility standards.

Furthermore, China's importation of its labour into the African continent is strengthened by sending Chinese-dispatched workers who come to work in Africa from China. Cooke and Wang (2017) argue that by dispatching labour, Chinese firms also export their labour management practices to Chinese firms in Africa. Consequently, Jackson (2017) also notes that working conditions in Africa are poor, but comparable with those of local firms and generally lower than those of western firms.

Similarly, some reports also show that the occupational health and safety of employees who work in Chinese firms across Africa were compromised (Lei et al 2018). In a study conducted by (Gadzala 2010; Akorsu and Cooke 2011) the safety and health of employees working at the Chambishi mine in Zambia were at stake. The findings of these studies illustrated how employees would perform their duties without protective clothing as they were expected to pay for their safety equipment, which they were unable to. Gadzala's (2010) study seems to suggest the fears of African workers if the safety standards of Chinese mines in the Zambian Copperbelt are followed. This was also echoed by (Kurtenbach 2006) who noted that Chinese firms in Africa tend to make use of dormitories for their workers and these arrangements have questionable safety standards.

Similarly, Greco (2016)'s study on labour practices in Chana's construction industry established that the health and safety of employees seem to be a concern in many Chinese construction firms. The study revealed that although the Ghanaian Labour Act clearly stipulates that the employer is responsible for providing protective clothing at no cost to the employees, some Chinese employers did not provide protective clothing to their workers. Consequently, many employees ended up

using their own safety shoes whilst working. This was worsened by the fact that some Chinese companies would bribe inspectors to avoid having their construction site routinely inspected, thus compromising the health and safety of employees.

According to Gadzala (2010), workers in Chinese factories were commonly short-changed on their wages, and some had their health benefits withheld, while others were exposed to dangerous machinery. In some instances, scholars show how workers are often forced to work 12 hours a day for as little as USD120 a month. This shows that some Chinese employers disregard the labour laws of the country in which they are operating within the African continent (Baah and Jauch 2009; Ofosu and Sarpong 2022). Similarly, Gadzala (2010) argues that if such unfair labour practices seem to be tolerated in China, it should however not come as a surprise if the same practices are being reproduced in Chinese firms in Africa or elsewhere. In fact, because China is a one-party state, companies are discouraged from forming trade unions or any form of organising. This undermines workers' rights and the ability to express their concerns.

Labour Conflicts

Without the voice to speak or express themselves, workers often resort to other ways of expressing themselves, which generate conflicts. In a study on labour conflict and Chinese manufacturing firms in Ethiopia, Chu and Fafchamps (2022) assert that labour conflict is prevalent in Chinese firms and is caused by many factors, such as cultural clashes. They assert that Chinese organisations are more likely to experience labour conflict than other investors because of the Confucian values they hold and impose on local employees such as hard work and bitterness over eating, which do not resonate with Ethiopian employees. Similarly, Men (2014) argues that although Chinese companies try to localise their business strategies and engage with the local labour force, they end up reverting to their cultural, behavioural, and social norms of Confucian management techniques, which often contradict local labour regimes.

Similarly, scholars such as Wu (2020); Driessen, (2019) asserted that labour conflict concerning labour practices arises because of cultural differences between local employees and foreign

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managers. These may not have the same way of understanding work arrangements and the duration of work. However, some scholars challenged arguments that categorise Chinese managers as operating under Confucian ideas. For instance, Fang and Bautigam (2014) argue that Chinese firms are often operating in special economic zones, which enable managers to impose stringent working conditions even in the face of employee resistance. This suggests that conflicts arise between Chinese managers and local employees due to competing interests and conflicting cultural norms on the job.

Furthermore, Xiayoyang and Eom (2019) asserted that labour conflicts between Chinese managers and local African employees arise in many Chinese organisations with respect to work attitudes, work ethic, and working hours, among other contested labour issues. Indeed, many studies have confirmed that Chinese managers often complain about the attitudes of local employees to work. Chu and Fafchamps (2022) claimed that the Chinese manager viewed Ethiopians as passive and did not take the initiative to do their job without being ordered. On the other hand, local employees hated being told what to do or how best to do their job. Similar findings were observed by Lee (2009) in his study in Zambia, he quoted one of the managers who asserted that Zambian workers are lazy and are not able to eat bitterness as the Chinese do (Corkin 2012).

Casualisation of Labour

According to Cooke and Wang (2017), construction firms in China are largely dependent on contingent labour or sub-contracted workers. Baah and Jauch (2009) agree that African workers are often employed as casual workers, which ends up depriving them of the benefits that they are legally entitled to. Casualisation is the main form of employment for locals in Chinese construction firms in Africa (Corkin 2012; Cooke and Wang 2017), largely because the employees themselves have limited commitment to work (Lee, 2009). Arkosu and Cooke (2011) also found that casual employment was mostly used in Chinese firms to lower labour costs. However, the issue of casualization being used as a tool for lowering costs seems to exist in most of the studies that have been reviewed see (Lee 2009, Fei, Samata, and Liao 2018). Most of the workers were casual workers without benefits such as paid leave. In the context of their study, Arkosu and Cooke (2011) found that of a population of 250 employees, 142 were casual workers. The Ghanaian Labour Act

stipulated that after six continuous months of working as a casual worker, an employee should become entitled to the benefits of a permanent worker if the situation on the ground was portrayed otherwise. The findings of this study indicated that several workers have been employed casually for several years.

Although there is consensus among most scholars on the rampant casualization of labour in Chinese firms as a cost-cutting strategy. Lee (2009) argued that casualization emerged due to the privatisation of the Zambian Copperbelt and Tanzanian textiles. Therefore, casualisation as a strategy stems from a capitalist drive for accumulation and is not exclusively a Chinese problem. Based on his study among the people in the Copperbelt, Lee (2009) questions whether Chinese capital differs significantly with the capital of other countries. In addition to his findings, he noted how other international miners in the Zambian copper belt also make use of casualization and subcontract a larger portion of their core operations to external firms. For instance, he refers to a wild strike that took place in an Indian firm.

Similarly, Corkin (2012) contends that the working conditions in Chinese firms in Africa are generally poor. However, due to high unemployment, many young people are forced to take precarious positions in Chinese companies. Indeed, Lee (2017) African countries have gone through decades of structural adjustment and waves of liberalisation and privatisation, which weakened labour institutions and brought mass informalisation and casualisation of labour. For this reason, Lee (2017) posits that casualisation on the Zambian Copperbelt is an industry wide phenomenon and is found in many local and international companies.

Salaries and wages in Chinese companies

Furthermore, Chinese firms have also faced allegations of not paying their African employees decent wages. In Mozambique, the Chinese have a bad reputation of paying the lowest wage to their workers in the construction industry (Nielsen, 2014). In a study conducted by Opondo, Blowfield, and Prieto-Carron (2007) that examined the influence of Chinese companies on corporate social responsibility in Kenya's garment industry, it was observed that Chinese

companies paid inadequate wages, which subsequently impacted their corporate social responsibility efforts.

On the contrary, the study by Oya and Schaefer (2023) showed serious wage disparities between Chinese firms. The results of their study challenge the notion that Chinese companies consistently pay lower wages compared to their non-Chinese counterparts. They posit that attributing wage variations solely to the national origin of firms is insufficient. Instead, they advocated for a nuanced analysis of individual worker characteristics, sector-specific factors, and firm attributes to explain wage differences. Empirical studies available, indicated that some Chinese state-owned enterprises tend to adhere more closely to national minimum wage regulations compared to competitors within the same sector (Oya 2019). Nevertheless, Oya et al (2018) argue that it is unfair to accuse Chinese firms of paying lower wages as the available empirical evidence lacks comparative, quantitative rigour.

Conversely, Tang (2016) asserts that Chinese wages often fall below those of competitors within the same sector. This discrepancy can be attributed to various factors, such as constrained initial profitability following substantial capital investments in contexts such as Zambian mines. The study also highlighted narrower profit margins for small and medium companies grappling with intense global competition as a reason why Chinese employers in such sectors pay low wages. For example, the predominant conditions observed within Zambian mines can be predominantly attributed to the crisis and reforms initiated in the 1990s, which were influenced by the nationality of foreign firms operating in the sector.

Interestingly, Cooke and Wang (2017)'s study of dispatched workers in the Chinese construction industry highlights that wage-related conflicts are not so much confined to local employees and their Chinese employers. Disputes over wage payments also emerge as a primary catalyst for labour disputes involving Chinese dispatched workers and construction companies. However, there are gaps in protections and representational opportunities for Chinese dispatched workers more than for local workers. This discrepancy is largely due to the reduced likelihood that Chinese workers are represented by trade unions from the host country. As a result, Cooke and Wang (2017) argue that there are gaps in legislative protections and representational opportunities for Chinese

dispatched workers in African construction projects. While all this work is fascinating, it does not focus on how employees experience, perceive, and navigate Chinese labour regimes. This is the gap that this study will address by focusing on local employees.

Trade Union Membership

Some studies focused on Chinese companies operating in Africa have highlighted a consistent pattern in terms of freedom of association in Chinese companies. Chinese managers are reluctant to have their employees participate in trade union activities (Arkosu and Coorke,2011). The concept of collective agency among employees through trade unions is absent or extremely weak within Chinese organisations (Fei, 2020). Similarly, in Chinese development initiatives funded through Chinese aid in Africa, workers are also discouraged from engaging with trade unions at the local level (Fei, 2020). This means that many employees in Chinese-owned firms lack representation even at firm level. Workers' committees are sometimes not permitted.

In fact, several scholars concur that Chinese firms pose a new challenge to the established role of trade unions because of the relationship between the industry and the state in their home country (Williams et al 2021; Corkin 2012). Scholars have alluded to the absence of trade unions in mainland China itself. Indeed, Williams et al. assert that workplace unionism in China has become collective bargaining instead of becoming an independent voice for workers. In cases where workers are allowed to unionise, the organisations are strictly controlled and monitored. Consequently, scholars have started discussions on whether Chinese companies are adopting the labour practices prevalent in their country of origin (Cottle 2014). Due to poor labour standards and controversial Chinese labour regimes, there have been clashes between local trade unions and Chinese companies, as well as some government officials (Cottle 2014). This was echoed by a study conducted in Ghana by Wethal et al. which showed that Chinese managers have antagonistic relations with trade unions, although there are instances where Chinese entities are willing to acknowledge unions and engage in discussions with worker representatives at the workplace level.

A study by Cooke and Arkosu (2011) that examined the implementation of labour standards in Chinese and Indian companies operating in Ghana yielded similar results. The authors showed that

employees had the freedom to express their opinions by joining trade unions without encountering opposition. However, in contrast within the Indian system, employees faced discrimination as executive members of trade unions were denied promotions purely due to their affiliation. Although both companies allowed freedom of association, collective decisions, particularly those concerning occupational health and safety, upholding them remained a huge challenge. There are affinities with regard to workers being denied the chances of representation by their Chinese employers across the continent.

The main argument of the study was that while Ghana`s political and economic environment was favourable for attracting Multinational Companies (MNCs), it was less conducive to raising labour the standards of employees. This was attributed to the governments lack of commitment to intervene and enforce labour standards for fear of antagonising investors. Similarly, due to the scarcity of employment opportunities, workers would rather be illtreated while they have a job in Chinese firms. Cooke and Orkosu argued that multinational companies exhibited similar characteristics in developing countries as they operated in, regardless of their country of origin. This uniformity emerged because developing countries often lacked effective national monitoring and enforcement of labour standards.

It should be underscored that all this is not unusual, as China as a nation has not adhered to key ILO conventions, including freedom of association. Chinese firms within China have been hostile to trade unions. This was also echoed by Baah and Jauch (2009) who revealed in their study that how Chinese companies operate in Africa is a carbon copy of how they operate in China. For them, workers who decided to join a trade union risked losing their jobs. Workers are given short-term contracts or work without contracts and can be easily dismissed without any consequences from the host countries. Williams et al. argue that the enforcement of labour laws in Chinese firms is largely dependent on the governments of host nations, trade unions, and pressure exerted by external pressure groups.

On the contrary, evidence from research conducted in Ethiopia by Fei and Liao (2018) shows that Chinese companies in the high-tech sector had unionised due to pressure from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. However, while the Ethiopian government was successful in its

interventions, the evidence from the study illustrates that Chinese companies had adopted tactics to restrict union power in their companies. In fact, not only are Chinese firms in Africa against Union power, but they are strongly influenced by China where trade union activities are minimal. Shen (2007) asserts that the negative attitudes of senior managers toward unions in host countries were mainly influenced by the industrial relations system in their home country.

Similarly, Wethal (2017) in his study on Sino-Mozambican construction projects observed that workers unionised in the early stages when the project was beginning after several negotiations with the Chinese, the workers felt their images were being tarnished just by being in the worker's unions, and that other employees would see them as traitors since the negotiations were proving unfruitful. His main argument was that unions operating in Chinese organisations face many operational challenges and participation is risky. To be safe, union members must align with Chinese employers and undermine fellow workers. Union leaders in these organisations largely depend on support from their fellow employees, which they do not have and cooperation from the Government, which they do not receive (Wethal 2017; Corkin 2012). In a study in the Kenyan garment industry, Opondo (2009) asserts that 54% of unionised workers believe that union leaders are unable to perform their duties in a free environment because they are constantly being monitored and intimidated by management. This is not only peculiar to Kenya, but is the case in most studies conducted on Chinese Labour practices in African countries.

In their article on Chinese construction firms in Zimbabwe, the study by Chipaike and Marufu (2020) established that Chinese have been exploiting the opportunities created by high unemployment rates in the country. Chinese also take advantage of Zimbabwe's desperation for foreign direct investment as an isolated sanctioned state. As such, the state largely supports Chinese capital and businesses at the expense of local workers. Consequently, trade unions must fill the gap to improve working conditions in Chinese construction companies in the absence of government support. Indeed, Chipaike and Marufu (2020) agree that China has become Zimbabwe's political and economic saviour, and as such Chinese companies are treated differently and enjoy the privilege of violating their workers. Furthermore, some Chinese businessmen have become politically connected, which compromises the operations of government officials who are supposed to monitor and ensure the compliance of the country's labour laws.

Staffing practices and dispute resolution

Cooke, and Wang (2017) examined key industrial relations practices in Chinese construction firms, namely, staffing practices and dispute resolution focusing on dispatched workers from China who come to work in Chinese firms in Africa. Their findings highlighted that staffing practices and labour relations in the Chinese construction industry in Africa are largely shaped by the state of home and host offices. This is because the Chinese government encourages Chinese companies to create jobs for rural Chinese workers to ease pressure on unemployment in the host country. Thus, staffing and labour practices can be said to be influenced by the sending state, in this case the Chinese government. In many studies, it has been observed that Chinese import workers come and work for them in Africa. Cooke and Wang (2017) assert that Chinese construction firms prefer to use dispatched workers for many reasons. For example, Chinese employees exhibit more skills than local employees and are also very easy to control due to reduced language and cultural barriers because they live in dormitory accommodation of the company. However, the practice of Chinese companies bringing workers to work for them has been a bone of contention among scholars and journalists alike.

Alden and Hughes (2014) assert that to create a harmonious environment in Chinese firms, Chinese managers need to comply with local rules and regulations, and thus will intensify their consideration of the perspective of their African employee, which differs from HRM in China. In addition, Hughes (2017) also echoes similar arguments that Chinese managers need to adapt to the local culture of Ubuntu, as well as incorporate Chinese Confucianism with the local culture. The merging of the two cultural perspectives will promote a sense of belonging for the local employees, thereby increasing their commitment to the organisation.

Chinese workplace regimes

A workplace regime is created through a web of policies and labour practices that mediate how work is organised and how people relate to each other. In Mozambique, Wethal (2017) illustrates that Sino-Mozambican workplaces are characterised by strong division both spatially and

metaphorically, indicating how there are two workplace regimes, one for Chinese and one for local Mozambican employees. As part of his findings, Wethal (2017) found that there is a spatial separation of employees between Chinese and Mozambican, which ends up promoting two different workplace regimes and a them and us approach. The evidence of this study indicates that the safety and health of Chinese workers are more important and prioritised. This is shown by how better dormitories are provided for them to stay closer to the workplace. Wethal (2017) argued that this spatial separation of employees encourages two separate workplace regimes between locals and Chinese workers. Such divisions ultimately lead to resentment and tension in Sino-Mozambican relations and, more especially, among workers. Similar findings were observed by Fei and Liao (2018) in their investigation of Chinese workplace regimes in Ethiopia. All Chinese expatriates lived in large houses rented by the company and commuted by private cars and shuttle buses, which contrasts with the lifestyle of the Ethiopians. Fei and Liao (2018) argue that the enclaved lifestyle of Chinese expatriates not only imply a personal interest in getting involved with local communities but is partially structured by the ways the Chinese Cooperate in Ethiopia.

 The use of dormitories is given a different meaning of safety in Wethal's study (2017), which contrasts with the findings of Cooke and Wang (2017), who found that Chinese dormitories are used for spatial control where the employer can always control the employee's whereabouts so that they can also provide their labour as and when needed. This corroborates arguments made by several scholars who assert that dormitories are used as a form of labour control in Chinese factory firms (Ngai and Smith 2007; Pun and Yu 2008; Fei 2020; Goodburn and Mishra 2023).

Chinese investments in Zimbabwe

Like other parts of Africa, China is one of the biggest trading and development partners of Zimbabwe. In fact, in recent years, after signing the Look East policy, Chinese foreign direct investment, aid, and projects have surged in the country (Gukurume 2020; Chipaike and Bischoff 2019; Chipaike and Marufu 2020). Chinese businesses have a growing presence on Zimbabwe's markets. Although the Zimbabwean government welcomes Chinese FDI, financial aid, and loans,

Chinese business operations regarding labour violations have angered the trade union community in Zimbabwe. According to a press release given by the president of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) on 25 October 2022, Chinese employers are violating the labour rights of their employees. Consequently, scholars have argued that Chinese labour practices have been viewed as a threat to the Zimbabwean labour movement (Chipaike and Marufu 2019). Several labour practice violations were levelled against Chinese businesses by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). For example, the ZCTU claimed that some Chinese companies were paying their workers' wages, which are below the stipulated minimum wage and the poverty datum line set by the government. Shocking allegations have also been made concerning the health and safety of the employees in these spaces. The reports showed that the employees worked without protective clothing. In some cases where PPE clothing was provided, the costs of PPE were deducted from the employee's basic salary.

Furthermore, the president of the ZCTU highlighted that the labour practices of Chinese organisations were against the Zimbabwean Labour Relations Act Cap 28:01 which gives employees the right to have a worker committee / trade union membership, the right to fair labour standards and democratic workplaces. Indeed, the Zimbabwean Labour Act is a legislative framework that governs the employer-employee relationship in the workplace. In this regard, specific provisions within the Act are going to be considered with the aim of shedding insights into Chinese labour practices and how they comply with or violate such provisions. Similarly, this will also be discussed in line with how they are experienced by workers in Chinese-owned construction organisations in Harare.

The Zimbabwean Labour Act, Cap 28.01, establishes that employees have the fundamental right to join or be a member of a trade union of their choosing. Moreover, it safeguards employees' entitlement to fair labour standards. Furthermore, Section 6 of Cap. 28.01 stipulates that employers are prohibited from paying wages below the legally mandated minimum. Additionally, the Act explicitly states that employers cannot require employees to work more hours than permitted by law. As such, the Zimbabwean Labour Act, on paper regulates the relationship between employers and employees and provides for dignified working environments and protection from unfair dismissals and other despotic labour regimes.

In response to allegations of employee ill-treatment and abuses, the Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe outright denied all allegations against Chinese companies. They argued that the accusations were baseless and that the ZCTU President did not have enough evidence to support their claims. In the same vein, to counteract the allegations, the Chinese ambassador to Zimbabwe highlighted how they have created employment by providing 100,000 Zimbabweans with jobs. Therefore, in line with the press release of the ZCTU president and the response of the Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe, my study is anchored on the labour practice contestations in Chinese organisations, as highlighted above, and focusses on the voices of those who experience them, the workers.

Chinese Labour practices in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has benefited from Chinese business investments, including creating employment opportunities for locals and earning much needed foreign currency (Chipaike and Bischoff, 2019). Indeed, China was responsible for shielding Zimbabwe politically and economically in the 2000s during the Mugabe era, when Zimbabwe was sanctioned by the West (Brautigam, 2018). Bhebhe, Chakanyuka and Takaindisa (2020) established that in spite of the massive economic contribution of the Chinese Investments in the country, major concerns have been raised against their labour practices. Human rights abuse in Chinese companies is alarming and continues to be a key challenge in African countries, including Zimbabwe. In this regard, Sibanda a labour consultant cited in Bhebhe et al (2020) has advocated for the need for a comprehensive investigation on labour standards in Chinese run enterprises in the country.

In Zimbabwe, Chinese labour practices are not unique, but relate to long-standing and preexisting colonial and postcolonial labour practices (Brautigam 2009). Bhebhe et al. (2020) in their study sought to examine the compliance of Chinese firms with the labour Act, which aims at protecting employees' rights to fair labour standards. Their study found that compliance with the Labour Act as a legal provision is a major challenge, as employees continue to experience unfair labour standards in many Chinese enterprises in Zimbabwe.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Introduction

This chapter discusses how the multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Harare to examine the complex labour and workplace regimes in Chinese owned construction companies. Similarly, the other main thrust of this chapter is to outline and highlight the research journey of the researcher, from negotiating access to participants, establishing rapport, and conducting interviews with local employees working in the Chinese construction landscape. As such, the

chapter details the ways in which the study was conducted in terms of its methodology. In addition to reflecting on the complexities of the methodological journey into the Chinese construction sector in Harare, the chapter also outlines the data collection methods and techniques that the researcher used to collect, analyse, and interpret the data and why specific methods and techniques were chosen for this study. In addition, the chapter also discusses the research design, research instruments, validity, reliability, reflexivity, data analysis, and ethics that were considered in the study. At this point, it should be highlighted that given the nature of the study and the key questions that are asked, a qualitative research approach was ideal and, therefore, used to obtain data on the experiences of loyal employees working in the Chinese construction sector. A qualitative research methodology was ideal because it allows in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study and therefore helps to generate what scholars like Clifford Geertz call ethnographic 'thick descriptions', which are detailed and nuanced, giving us a broader picture of the questions being asked.

Methodology

Due to the nature of the study that sought to understand the subjective experiences of local workers in Chinese construction companies operating in Harare, the study is premised on a qualitative methodology. This methodology was appropriate for the study because it allowed the researcher to capture the stories, narratives, and perceptions of the participants about how they experience Chinese labour practices from their own perspective. By adopting a qualitative approach, the study aimed to delve into the personal worldviews and subjective workplace encounters between Chinese employers and their local employees. Furthermore, this research builds on the previous research by the researcher on employee training, development, and collective bargaining within Chinese organisations in Zimbabwe. Through the researcher's previous work among the same participants, the researcher had established and maintained rapport and a mutual relationship with numerous employees working in Chinese construction organisations in and around Harare. Consequently, accessing participants for the study was facilitated by my pre-existing connections with certain individuals working in Chinese organisations, including construction companies, who were part of my previous study. It is important to note that the research was conducted outside the companies' premises. In fact, all interviews were usually conducted after work or during

participants' free time, especially on weekends. This decision was based on the researcher's previous experience studying employees within Chinese organisations, where it emerged that workers were more open and free to discuss work-related matters and challenges outside the immediate work environment. In fact, from my previous study, I noticed that the data I collected through home interviews were incredibly rich and insightful compared to those done at and close to work. Therefore, the researcher made the deliberate decision to organise interviews in the homes of the participants where they were free to express themselves. Conducting interviews with participants in places where they felt comfortable was essential for them to open up and share their personal and sensitive experiences and perceptions about Chinese labour practices in detail without fear.

Research Design

According to (Creswell 2014) a research design refers to a plan that is adopted in conducting the research process. The research design used in this study is a case study design, and, more particularly, multiple case studies. According to Yin (2009:18), "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear". According to Yin (2009), a case study research methodology is more suitable when the researcher asks how and why questions with little or no control over events. This study sought to investigate how employees perceive and experience labour practices in Chinese organisations, thus making the case study research design more ideal. This study employed a multiple and multi-sited case study research design (Yin, 2011). This research design was particularly suited to the study's objective, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the subject within its specific context. The logic and rationale for conducting multiple cases is that multiple case studies improve the robustness of the overall study by producing identifiable patterns of behaviour (Yin, 2009:46). In this study, the case study research design enabled the researcher to get extensive knowledge rand a broad understanding of the labour relations dynamics in Chinese Organisations in Harare. Furthermore, the rationale behind a multi-sited research design was so that the researcher would be able to make some comparisons of the cases in Harare. In addition, multiple cases allowed the researcher to compare similarities and differences in the way employees working in Chinese organisations

exercised agency in response to the labour relations practices they encountered on a day today basis. Data were collected from employees working for three Chinese-owned organisations in the construction industry in Harare, Zimbabwe. The selection of these three organisations was based on strategic and pragmatic considerations.

Scholars emphasise the value of multi-sited ethnography in enhancing the rigour and reliability of data collected from different locations (Yin, 2009). Because the study relied on multiple data sources through the multiple case study, the validity and reliability of the research findings were enhanced. The researcher was able to see whether the employee perspectives differed from amongst the chosen organisations. The organisations selected were familiar to the researcher, who had already established a strong rapport with the employees through previous studies. Building on personal relationships, as suggested by scholars like Amit (2000), will facilitate meaningful conversations and yield insightful findings.

Although the researcher's earlier studies did not specifically focus on labour relations dynamics, the issue of unfair labour practices emerged during previous research conversations. However, these concerns were not pursued further as they were not within the scope of the previous study. Therefore, for this current study, cases were deliberately selected based on reported instances of unfair labour practices occurring within the workplace.

Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, life histories, and informal conversations. In-depth interviews were conducted with employees of the two selected Chinese-owned construction organisations in Harare. These interviews sought to explore the participants' understanding of, experiences with, and strategies for negotiating labour practices in Chinese-owned organisations.

Field Connections and Encounters

Most of the interviews with workers working in Chinese-owned construction companies were conducted through the researcher's social networks. However, some of the interviews and data were collected through what the researcher calls 'chance encounters' in the field. Chance

encounters can be understood or framed as casual and coincidental encounters that occur unexpectedly. In the Chinese construction industries, chance encounters were an everyday reality due to the nature of recruitment regimes where prospective employees do what is called *'Kuforera basa'*, which means waiting for a job at the company gate on an everyday life experience. This is a scenario in which prospective employees arrive at Chinese construction companies very early in the morning with the hope of finding a job; something which does not always happen. As such, these prospective employees spend hours outside the premises talking to each other and sharing stories (*katura nyaya*). Some discuss sports and political issues while playing a game they call 'draught' akin to a game of chess. *Kuforera basa* is a precarious labour regime that has a long history and is not unique to Chinese construction companies, but is more pronounced within the contemporary Chinese construction landscape. The practice of *Kuforera basa* will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4 as a precarious labour regime that gained traction in the post-2000 Zimbabwean crisis, which has seen the country's unemployment rates skyrocket to alarming levels.

After a couple of weeks visiting some Chinese construction sites in Harare with one of my key informants, Mashoko, I realised that after failing to get daily work at the construction site, not all prospective employees leave. Instead, many stay with the hope of getting something even piece rate hourly work in the construction project. Interestingly, some begin to sell a variety of consumables outside the site, including cigarettes (*midzanga*) to workers and other people. To establish rapport with the participants, the researcher often stayed for hours talking to them and often bought fruits from some of the participants. This strengthened the rapport to such an extent that when the research does not go to the same site for a few days, some of the participants called to check if I was fine and if I was coming to the site. These became my key informants and often introduced the researcher to other potential participants who worked in the Chinese construction industry. It was through these encounters and 'hanging out' or 'hanging around' Chinese construction workspaces that the researcher accessed some data through informal conversations, participant observation, and negotiated for interviews.

Scholars have shown the centrality of personal connection in negotiating the complexity of the 'field' and accessing participants who might not have been otherwise accessible to the researcher. As will be discussed in the section on sampling, snowballing became one of the key techniques

through which the researcher recruited participants into the study. For instance, Mashoko had worked with the Chinese for over 4 years, albeit on a renewable temporary basis. In spite of his growing experience with the Chinese, Mashoko still had to resort to *kuforera basa,* although he would occasionally get two-month verbally agreed contracts. Mashoko and my uncle (sekuru), who worked in the security department at one of the Chinese companies, were important entry points into the lives of my participants. They introduced the researcher to many people who worked for Chinese companies, including some who left but had worked for Chinese companies.

Data Collection Instruments

This study used both primary and secondary data. As part of the research design, the primary data in this study were collected using various qualitative data collection methods. The main purpose of triangulating data collection methods was to ensure that the data collected were as reliable and valid as possible. Similarly, by employing multiple methods in the collection of data, the researcher can verify and validate some information, and therefore enhance the trustworthiness of the data that are given by the participants during the interviews. In addition to that, corroborating data gathering tools helped ensure that gaps left by one data collection tool were covered by another, thereby ensuring all the important information is adequately captured.

In-depth interviews

In this study, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with employees working in three selected Chinese construction companies in Harare. An in-depth interview can be defined as a research tool that is used in qualitative research methodology to explore people's perspectives on a particular topic of concern. Boyce and Neale (2006) defined in-depth interviews as a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, programme, or situation.

Similarly, an in-depth interview has been framed as an open-ended, discovery-oriented method that is used to solicit detailed information about a particular phenomenon of interest to a researcher. According to Boyce and Neale (2006), in-depth interviews are vital when one wants to explore information about a particular issue in depth. In this study, the researcher interviewed workers to examine their understanding of and experiences with as well as how they perceived Chinese labour practices. This might not have been possible if the researcher had used questionnaires that have a set of structured questions that do not allow deep exploration. Scholars such as Fontana and Frey (2005) noted that in-depth interviews are widely viewed as important data collection techniques in studies that are interested in people's subjective experiences, inner perceptions, attitudes, and feelings of reality. Indeed, the non-standardised, in-depth, and semi-structured nature of in-depth interviews resonates with the objectives of this research to approach the social reality of workers in Chinese organisations from below.

In-depth interviews were always conducted where participants felt comfortable sharing their experience. For example, the researcher would sometimes conduct interviews in the car and at the participants' homes to ensure privacy during the interview process. Most of the interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. Some were done in the city while the employees were on their way home after work and sometimes in open spaces in the neighbourhoods where the participants lived. The rationale for choosing in-depth interviews was that the researcher wanted the participants to feel free to share information about their experiences in as much detail as possible. Individual in-depth interviews were ideal in that participants can share information that they might not have otherwise shared while in a group. Therefore, it was vital to use in-depth interviews in research of this nature where a person may not be comfortable sharing information in a group for fear of being victimised or dismissed by their Chinese employers. In addition, in-depth interviews were also ideal for this study because the researcher was able to probe and ask follow-up questions to enrich the nuances of the data. In-depth interviews focused on the ways in which local employees experience, perceive and negotiate Chinese labour practices and regimes. During the interview process, the researcher deliberately steered the interviews around specific themes central to the study and its research objectives and questions. This helped the researcher to conduct interviews that are focused and driven by the objectives while leaving room for interesting narratives to emerge.

Observations

One of the key methods that was used to collect primary data for this study was systematic observations conducted at various spaces, including at the construction sites. Observations are an ethnographic method of data collection, which relies on the gaze of the researcher and all five human senses in the field. For some scholars, observations relate to a way of gathering data by watching participants' activities, events, and activities in participants' natural setting. Observations in the field were particularly rich and offered the researcher an opportunity to observe phenomena as they unfolded in their real-life context. For example, the research was able to observe prospective employees queueing for jobs (*kuforera basa*) and how they were recruited, how they worked, and interacted with fellow employees and Chinese managers, among other interactions. After a few observations, the researcher developed a checklist on what to observe during fieldwork visits. According to Hammersley (2007), the strength of observations is that the researcher gets to experience the phenomenon first-hand, as it unfolds in its 'natural setting'. Thus, being there where things happen allows for many ethnographic possibilities, and the researcher always took her fieldwork notebook to write detailed notes about what was observed in the field.

Key Informant Interviews

To corroborate information collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and observations, the researcher also used key informant interviews. Key informant interviews can be defined as qualitative techniques for collecting primary data from people who are in positions of authority or are knowledgeable about a particular phenomenon. These experts who are referred to as key informants are recruited based on their in-depth understanding and knowledge of the issues being studied. They either have first-hand experience or a deep understanding of the issues. In the context of this study, key informants were drawn from trade union organisations, local authorities as well as some workers with leadership positions such as foreman and supervisors. The researcher used her previous connections from the previous study on Chinese SMEs to access potential key informants, including dispatched Chinese workers who operated as supervisors and foreman in the two companies under study. The advantage of key informant interviews is that the researcher was

able to get the official or semi-official perspective and was able to reconcile the worker narratives with the supervisors and the trade union perspective to develop a holistic and broader understanding of Chinese labour practices and regimes in Harare. The key informant interviews were predominantly qualitative and open-ended which allowed the experts to share their insights, perceptions, and experiences in as much detail as they wished. This gave them the freedom to express themselves and the leeway to respond to some of the claims made by workers under their supervision.

Life Histories

In line with the above, in-depth interviews are mostly concerned with asking a set of semi-structured questions. The in-depth interviews and observations discussed above will also be complimented by life histories to understand the reconfiguration of labour regimes and practices in Chinese organisations in Harare. These life histories were done only with employees who had worked in Chinese construction for more than three years and not with all participants. As such, the life history was not broad but focused on the work life history from the time the participants were recruited to the present. This included how positions occupied have changed over time, how working conditions have changed or not changed, among other important issues that could be discussed historically. Bowie (1981) defines life history as a data collection tool that allows one to see how a person in relation to their history can be influenced by the religious, social, psychological, and economic trends present in this world. In this study, the selection of life histories as a data collection method served a crucial purpose. By employing life histories, the researcher aimed to provide a platform for individual participants to reflect on the journey working for the Chinese and what they think about all the transformations of work and the workplace. By allowing them to share their stories, beliefs, and values, meaning and knowledge is constructed from below. Through this approach, the researcher was able to delve into the unique personal meanings that individuals attached to their experiences. In addition, the use of life histories fosters a sense of trust and relationship with participants, as their experiences are acknowledged and validated.

Secondary sources of data

In addition to in-depth interviews, observations, and life histories, the researcher also used secondary sources of data. According to Punch (1998) secondary sources of data refers to data which would have been collected for another purpose and then later re-analysed for something else. The researcher found secondary sources of data to be rich with data on Chinese labour practices in Zimbabwe and other African countries. Secondary data was particularly drawn from newspaper reports, published articles, circulars, trade union statements, and other sources. These secondary data sources helped to enrich the data collected through other methods, such as in-depth interviews and observations. Triangulating methods for collecting primary and secondary data is important in enhancing the rigour of the data collected.

Researching Precarious Employees

As someone who had done research with employees working in Chinese organisations before, my research journey started by revisiting my contact list. These were the phone numbers of people who had participated in my previous study on human resource practices among Chinese SMEs in Harare. I was fortunate enough that some of them still knew me and agreed to participate in this new study that I was now doing. I had maintained contact with some of them through WhatsApp messaging. However, I could not rely solely on all of these, as I had narrowed my study to Chinese organisations in the construction industry in Harare. Luckily for me, one of these old participants also happened to know someone who was working at one of the construction sites that I was interested in. Thus, my initial entry into the field was through these initial contacts that I had gathered over the years, including my uncle (*sekuru*) who worked as a security guard at one of the Chinese construction companies that was selected as a case study.

Furthermore, I purposely visited the construction organisation that I was interested in visiting for this study. The reason for doing this was to take advantage of the lunch break periods to have casual conversations with the employees and other people close to the construction sites. Fortunately, at one of the construction organisations that makes bricks I could tell that the employees were under the impression that I wanted to purchase bricks possibly because of the way I was dressed and because of my being a woman in a male-dominated industry. Some of them did

not think of me as a researcher and I explained to them that I was not looking to buy any bricks but to understand their work arrangements and their experiences at work. Regular visits to such spaces enabled the researcher to cement rapport with the participants. My life was made easier when I met an old woman (Mbuya Zack) who operated a makeshift canteen outside one of the sites. She was very popular with many of the workers who had worked there for several years. Mbuya Zack sold tea in the morning and *sadza* (paap) with beef, chicken, and sugar beans for lunch to most of the employees.

I started helping her waitress with her young daughter waiter for food. It was through this temporary and voluntary role that I was able to initiate casual conversations with employees working at one of the Chinese construction firms. After telling Mbuya Zack about my study, she helped arrange interviews for me. When conducting interviews at construction sites, I did not ask sensitive questions when other people were present. This was to ensure that all my interviews were private and confidential. In some cases, especially where workers had a busy schedule to talk, I would request for their phone numbers. Of course, the looks on their faces showed shock, why would a woman ask for phone numbers from strangers. However, I took this as an opportunity to explain my study and that I would appreciate if they were able to participate. These participants were followed up for interviews at their homes and places that were convenient for them. Although at some sites, workers continued to work even during weekends, some participants did not work, and I would do some interviews during this time so that they could feel comfortable in a familiar and relaxing environment. This was not an easy task, and I could sense that they were sceptical. Fortunately, I had a consent letter explaining my research and authenticating my study.

Sampling Techniques

To select the actual participants, the researcher triangulated purposive and snowballing sampling technique. According to Kumar (2011), sampling is a process of selecting a few (sample) from the larger group (the sampling population to become a basis for estimating the prevalence of an unknown piece of information or situation regarding the larger group.

Snowballing technique

According to Babbie and Mouton (2001), the snowball sampling technique entails collecting data from a few members of the population and then asking those individuals to suggest other individuals who meet the same criteria. Initially, the researcher leveraged on her pre-existing contacts within Chinese organisations, which were established during a previous study conducted among Chinese employees. These initial contacts were specifically chosen as participants in this study. Subsequently, after conducting interviews with these initial contacts, the researcher requested them to refer her to additional colleagues who are also employed in Chinese organisations. Thus, snowballing as a technique enabled progressive growth of the sample size as the researcher got introduced to more and more participants through a chain referral approach. The rationale behind the snowball sampling technique in this study was that in sensitive research of this nature where it could otherwise have been difficult to get consent from Chinese organisations to allow their employees to participate in my study as an organisation, the researcher could only rely on initial contacts to recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. By utilizing the snowballing chain referral approach (Goodman, 1961; Noy, 2008), the researcher aimed to build a pool of potential participants.

Purposive Sampling

To ensure a targeted selection of participants, the researcher applied a purposive sampling technique (Etikaan et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2020), which involves purposefully selecting individuals based on the specific objectives of the study. Greener (2008) postulates that purposive sampling is using your own judgement to select a sample, and it is often used with very small samples and populations within qualitative research. This approach allowed the researcher to focus on information-rich cases, prioritising workers who have extensive experience within Chinese organisations and have in-depth knowledge of Chinese labour practices. Apart from this, the other reason behind selecting was to select participants who will enable the researcher to answer research questions.

The addition of snowballing and purposive sampling techniques facilitated the creation of a diverse and heterogeneous sample, which contributed to the richness of the study findings. It is important to emphasise that qualitative research thrives on the rich and nuanced data collected, ultimately

reaching a point of data saturation, which occurs when the researcher has gathered sufficient data to replicate the study (Fuss and Ness, 2015).

Data Analysis

The collected data was analysed using thematic data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun and Clarke 2019). As Hatch (2002) asserts, data analysis means organising and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, develop critics, and generate new theories. In this study, data from in-depth interviews was recorded using a voice recorder, and notes were taken during field work. This data was transcribed and coded to enable the researcher to see predominant as well as recurring themes. The codes and categories that were dominant from data. Themes were then developed on the basis of their frequency and recurrence in the transcripts. Therefore, the frequency of recurring concepts and ideas then became themes in this study. In this regard, themes were used to make meaning and interpret the data that had been gathered.

Validity, Reliability and Trustworthiness

In this study, addressing validity and reliability concerns was of paramount importance as it served to mitigate bias and establish the trustworthiness of the research (Golafshani, 2003). Validity, within the realm of qualitative research, refers to the accurate capture and measurement of phenomena or data. Similarly, reliability refers to the accuracy of the instruments and the information provided by the participants. To ensure the validity and reliability of the phenomenon under investigation, the researcher employed a triangulation approach.

Triangulation, as defined by Creswell and Miller (2000), is a validity procedure in which researchers seek convergence among multiple sources of information, thereby enhancing research rigour. It involves the use of multiple strategies or techniques to obtain reliable and valid information. Within the context of this study, the researcher triangulated data collection tools and techniques, research participants, and other research approaches. Data was collected not only from

employees working in various Chinese organisations, but secondary sources of information were also used.

This approach allowed for comparison and cross-verification of information gathered from different sources, ensuring accuracy and limiting potential misinformation, disinformation, or narrative exaggeration. Furthermore, data was collected from two different organisations rather than focusing solely on a single organisation. Drawing participants from multiple organisations enabled the exploration of the complexity and diversity of experiences related to the research topic. This broader perspective enhances the comprehensiveness of the findings.

Reflexivity

It was important to reflect on how the researcher's positionality and some personal factors could have implications on the findings and biases on how such findings were interpreted and analysed. Several scholars foreground the importance of reflexive ethnographic research (Bourdieu, 1990; Cohen et al 2011). Reflexivity is the concept and process that researchers should be able to acknowledge and disclose the potential influence and bias brought by the intersecting identities and positions of the researchers. Researchers themselves are expected to be reflexive in their research as a way to try to understand the influence the researcher brings to the research process. It is important to discuss how to consider how the researcher's identity, background, and relationship to the research setting, and even participants, may influence the research process and outcomes (Bourdieu Hellawell, 2006; Giwa, 2015).

Therefore, in the context of this study, the researcher is a Zimbabwean researcher who is conducting research in Zimbabwe on the experiences of Zimbabwean workers with Chinese labour practices. Therefore, the researcher may be considered an 'insider' due to her Zimbabweanness, while simultaneously inhabiting the identity of an 'outsider' because she is not an employee of or in Chinese owned organisations. She may also be considered an outsider because she is a university student at a South African university. All these intersecting identities and positionalities have implications for the ways in which the researcher reads, collects, analyses and make sense of the data and the research process more broadly. However, knowing the research context and field can

be both an advantage and a limitation. It can be a resource in that it will enable the researcher to develop a nuanced and holistic understanding of labour practices in Chinese organisations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics, as defined by Fouka and Mantzorou (2011), are moral judgments that guide our decision-making and behaviour in various situations. In the realm of Social Science research, they play a crucial role in safeguarding the rights and well-being of study participants. Consequently, in the context of this study, the researcher is going to give utmost importance to addressing ethical concerns. There are several important ethical issues that are considered in this study and below is a detailed discussion of the key ethical issues that informed this study.

Informed consent

Because the researcher was involved in research that involved human participants, obtaining informed consent and providing comprehensive details about the purpose and nature of the study were crucial (see Annex 2 below). According to Amiger (1997), informed consent entails that a person consciously, willingly, and intelligently in a clear manifest way gives his consent. Therefore, in this study, the researcher sought the informed consent of all interview participants prior to their participation. The researcher ensured that all relevant information about the study was disclosed, enabling the participants to make informed decisions about their willingness to participate. In fact, all participants were informed about the study and that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. This was done to ensure that they made an informed decision about whether or not to participate in the study.

Protection from harm

Furthermore, the researcher ensured that participants were not subjected to any form of harm. This was done to protect the wellbeing of the participants and minimise their risks. To uphold this ethical principle, several ethical issues were used as measures to reduce the likelihood of any form

of harm to the participants due to their participation in this study. This includes seeking an informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity.

Confidentiality

In addition, confidentiality was strictly adhered because it was and ethical issue of paramount given the sensitive nature of this study. As Kaiser (2009) defines it, confidentiality involves the deliberate and accidental avoidance of disclosing any information acquired from an interviewee in a manner that could lead to the identification of the individual. Taking this into account, strict measures were taken to safeguard the confidentiality of all participants. To ensure utmost confidentiality, the researcher utilised pseudonyms instead of real names for all participants. This means that the actual names and designations of the respondents were not used in any context, thereby protecting their identities throughout the study. This assurance of confidentiality encouraged open and honest responses from participants, contributing to the overall validity and integrity of the research findings.

Privacy

Similarly, the preservation of privacy was of paramount importance in this study. Before any interview, explicit consent was sought from each participant for audio recording. This informed consent provided participants with a clear understanding of how their responses will be used and assured them that their privacy would be carefully protected throughout the study. The researcher fully respected the participants who wished to speak off-record during an interview, and in such instances detailed field notes were taken.

In this study, the researcher recognised the potential impact that research can have on individuals' private and personal lives; therefore, special care was taken when conducting interviews which included conducting interviews in the confinement of a car to ensure privacy. However, conducting the interviews in the car was not forced on the participants. It was a choice that they had to make. All interviews were conducted in spaces chosen by the participants themselves to ensure that they

felt comfortable and at ease during the process. Moreover, these spaces were selected with both the participants' comfort and the researcher's safety in mind.

Anonymity

Anonymity refers to the assurance that participants are not individually identified by disguising or withholding their personal characteristics (Lewis Beck et`al 2004). Maintaining anonymity will also help protect participants from any form of physical or psychological harm that may arise from their participation in the study. To achieve this, some of the data is going to be anonymised so that they cannot be traced back to the participants. In addition, pseudonyms will be used with respect to the three Chinese construction organisations under study, as well as the names and positions of the participants.

Deception

Deception is a critical ethical principle in social science research. Deception refers to any deliberate misrepresentation of the purpose of the research, of the identity or qualifications of the researcher,, and the consequences of the research (Beauchamp et al., 1990). It deprives participants of the opportunity to give their informed consent, thus becoming an ethical issue. To avoid deception in the context of this study, the researcher was truthful and open to all participants. This was achieved by fully disclosing the nature and purpose of the research. All participants were told beforehand that the study was purely academic and that no consequences would come after participating in the study.

Data Storage

In any research study, especially on sensitive issues, there is a need to store the data meticulously. The collected data should be stored and handled safely to avoid data being lost or falling into wrong hands. There are various ways in which the data collected can be stored securely. In this

study, all the data gathered was stored on the researcher's laptop with a password to the folder where all the interviews done were kept. This is so because only the researcher has access to this laptop, and hence the data collected are kept confidential. In addition, a study folder was created in which all collected data was stored securely. This will ensure that even if the laptop gets stolen or lost, no one will be able to access the folder without the password, and hence information collected through interviews will still be kept private and confidential.

This chapter discussed the methodology that informed this study and the interpretive research philosophy that influenced the approach to data collection and analysis. The chapter unpacked the reasons why a qualitative research approach was appropriate to address the research problem and the research questions that are asked in the study. In addition, the chapter also discussed the politics of negotiating access to the participants and how social networks were key to dealing with gatekeeping issues and accessing participants in their respective spaces. The chapter also discussed the data collection methods that were used, as well as the sampling techniques that facilitated the recruitment of participants to the study. Apart from this, the chapter also unpacked issues of reflexivity and positionality and how these shaped the research process. The chapter also discussed in detail the ways in which data were managed and the ethical implications and considerations that were important for this study.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In the early hours of a cloudy Monday morning in 2023, outside the Xiang construction company in Harare, a chaotic scene unfolded. As rain droplets started falling, hundreds of hopeful job seekers jostled, attempting to secure employment at the Xiang[4] construction company's main gate. The security came out and calls for order and people quickly stopped pushing and shoving. I straddled my way from where I was seated with Mashoko, one of my key informants to move closer to the gate. I had asked Mashoko if we could understand what was going on by the gate. Amidist this frenzy, Mashoko, my key informant, remained calm and collected. I asked him why he was not pushing to move to the front of the gate like everyone else was trying to do. Mashoko's confidence stemmed from a familial connection: the company supervisor, his cousin, who had assured him a spot. His name was already written on the list. 'Having a relative or a friend working for the Chinese is an advantage because the Chinese prefer referrals from their current employees to get new casual and semi-casual employees', Mashoko explained to me during our conversation. Indeed, in Chinese companies like Xiang, referrals from existing employees held significant weight, a practice deeply rooted in the Confucian principles of *guanxi,* emphasising relationships, mutuality, and social networks.

We started a conversation with other prospective employees outside the gate and many of them looked pensive and uneasy. Everyone seemed desperate to get an opportunity to be picked and get a job at this Chinese construction company that was doing a mega construction project on the outskirts of the capital city Harare.

After about an hour of informal conversations with the prospective employees queueing outside the gate of the Chinese company, we notice some movement inside, and in no time two Chinese and one local black supervisor, wearing helmets and work suit overalls emerged from one of the makeshift buildings inside the premises. Upon noticing this, everyone sprung up and the pushing and shoving restarted and this time even more vigorous than before. 'They are coming now to get the workers they need', Mashoko whispered to me while walking towards the jostling crowd. The local men walking towards the gate was Mashoko's cousin brother, I was told and was holding a

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[4] This is a pseudonym and all the other names unless specified, are also pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of both the company and the participants.

small book. The gate remained shut but was now feeling the pressure of the people pushing each other, it was almost bending backwards and the security wearing a black uniform ordered people to move back away from the fence and gate. People could only move an inch backwards, but the pushing continued. "We only want 25 people today just 25 people, the black supervisor (Mashoko's cousin brother) shouted'. The two Chinese that accompanied him could barely speak English or any local language. They only signaled to the supervisor and the security for people to move back so that they could unlock and open the gate for the recruited people to get in.

In a few minutes, Mashoko's cousin brother started calling out names from his small notebook. Some people looked unimpressed and started shouting *'huwori, huwori, huwori'* (corruption, corruption, corruption,). Mashoko's name was fifth on the list and he waved me goodbye as he walked into the premises to begin a day's work. Only 10 names were called out and the rest were physically identified from the jostling crown outside. They seemed to prefer tall and masculine, physically fit men. All 15 who were selected were clearly physical men-all men, although there were a few women in the crowds who also hoped to get employed. The Chinese construction sector has a very clear gender bias and male employees are given priority. This gendered nature of the workplace regimes will be discussed in detail as the chapter unfolds.

After the selected 25 men went in, the security guard closed the gate and locked everyone outside. A sizeable number of people left, but a few remained and were hopeful that they still stood a chance to be called in during the day should the need arise due to more work demands. 'They sometimes come back around break time or lunchtime to get more workers, I have benefited from that a couple of times', Andrew explained after I asked him why he was still waiting outside when the 25 workers needed had already been selected and the door has been shut for other prospective employees. Andrew explained that he would patiently wait to get called and also to forge friendships with some workers, including the security. This was a rational strategy, given that friends and relatives tended to get preferential treatment when it came to recruiting, and easily entered the supervisor's small notebook by recommendations from fellow workers.

The vignette which begins this chapter was drawn from the researcher's field notes. It details the forms of everyday recruitment practices by a Chinese construction company located on the outskirts of Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city. The vignette is critical in what it reveals about the ways in which workers are recruited in Chinese construction companies in Harare, but most

importantly, about the contested and precarious nature of employment within this Chinese construction company. Interestingly, it also reveals the centrality of networks, what Bourdieu calls 'social capital' in accessing employment within Chinese construction companies. The Chinese Confucianist principles foreground relatedness and networking in businesses and recruitment, a practice they refer to as *guanxi*. This section of the chapter focuses on the everyday recruitment strategies and practices of Chinese construction companies and the precariousness of daily jobs in the sector. The aim is to reveal how the labour regimes of Chinese construction companies are mediated by values of Confucianism and the prevailing unemployment crisis in Zimbabwe. Scholars estimate that Zimbabwe's unemployment rate is way above 80% (Morreira 2015). Although the unemployment statistics are contested and unreliable, there is a consensus among various scholars and stakeholders that Zimbabwe has one of the highest unemployment rates. This deep structural unemployment crisis was exacerbated/worsened by the country's protracted economic and political crisis which led to massive deindustrialization, company closures and downsizing of the workforce (Raftopoulos 2006; Hayakawa 2017). Considering the high unemployment rates, many people are forced to compete for fewer jobs, as was the case at the Xiang Construction company. Consequently, such a scenario not only guarantees a continuous supply of cheap labour for Chinese companies but also makes the position of local employees highly precarious.

The deeply rooted sense of desperation for jobs, where demand for jobs exceeds supply, makes workers and potential workers exploitable. The exploitability of local workers is exacerbated by the fact that many Chinese firms both State Owned Enterprises and private enterprises, have strong relations with political elites who provide some form of protection in events of labour disputes. Unlike in Ethiopia Chu and Fafchamps (2022) where workers instrumentalise labour laws to advance their interests, findings in this study show that Zimbabwean labour laws are hardly weaponised for the interests of workers because there is no state support in the enforcement of such laws. This echoes the argument advanced by Chipaike and Bischoff (2019) who argued that ZANU-PF's desperation for legitimacy, support and international isolation explains why the government embraced China. Many large-scale construction projects in Zimbabwe are conducted by Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) which are engaging in mega infrastructural projects through the loans provided by the China Exim Bank's loan facility. This study focused on relatively smaller projects spearheaded by private and quasi-state-owned construction companies

which are autonomous and semi-autonomous from the state. These companies were owned by Chinese business tycoons (contractors) who had strong political networks with political elites within the ruling party ZANU-PF as well as the Chinese Communist Party. Such powerful political connections (political capital) enabled them to access the tender to engage in construction projects on behalf of both governments as part of their bilateral agreements. Chipaike and Bischoff (2019) noted that such bilateral arrangements are marked by unequal power dynamics where the country's agency is limited and at best circumscribed. The two companies that were selected for this study had a mixture of expatriate workers brought in from China and some local employees. Most of the local employees are recruited in middle management and as semi-skilled as well as unskilled casual labour, while the expatriates are the supervisors and managers.

In Angola, Corkin (2012) asserted that Chinese firms have been forced to use Chinese expended workers in senior management positions due to artificially inflated prices of skilled Angolan labour. Given the huge number of Chinese expatriate workers in Chinese-funded construction projects in Zimbabwe, during my fieldwork, there were debates about the nature of jobs created for locals and the possibilities of localising labour, including management in the construction sector of these projects. As such, a key part of the Chinese labour regime in the construction industry in Zimbabwe is the importation of Chinese expatriate workers or dispatched labour in top managerial positions (Yang 2021). The findings in this study resonate with observations highlighted by Yang (2021) who argued that that Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) operating within the African continent operate as transnational social organisations that actively promote Chinese expatriate workers' migration to Africa creating patron-client relationships between the enterprises and the workers.

Complex Worker Perceptions of Chinese Labour practices

Data show that workers' perceptions and experiences of Chinese labour practices and regimes are complex and varied. Some of the participants who were interviewed were happy that Chinese construction companies have created employment for them regardless of working conditions. In fact, one of the participants for whom the research calls Thomas noted that he does not see much difference between the labour practices of Chinese owned construction companies and other construction companies that have worked for before. Thomas explained,

I think there is no huge difference, most of the arrangements are the same except for a few things that the Chinese are very strict and want you to work most of the time, we start early and finish late.

Thomas' views were shared by a few other participants who felt that Chinese labour practices are comparable to other local and international construction companies. Mashoko, one of the key informants, had worked for the Indians and local contracting companies and felt that the labour practices in the construction industry are largely the same with a few exceptions. Mashoko told me that he does not have any problem with the way he has worked with the Chinese. For Mashoko, Chinese labour practices are not unusual or unique but have strong affinities with other construction companies in the country. However, Mashoko's perceptions may have been shaped by his strong networks with the supervisor at the Chinese construction company.

On the contrary, most of the participants perceived Chinese labour practices and regimes as exploitative and violated local labour laws and workers' rights. This narrative was widespread in the private media and among the trade unions in the country. Most trade unions accused Chinese employers in and beyond the construction industry of being largely abusive and labelled their labour practices as some form of modern-day slavery. For instance, in 2022, the country's leading trade union association, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions accused the Chinese of abusing their political connections to subject local employees to slavery like working conditions (ZCTU 2022).[5] Interestingly, scholars assert that the Chinese Communist Party does not take human rights seriously. Consequently, this is the same approach that Chinese owned companies take when they are operating in Zimbabwe and other African countries. Similar conditions have been reported in mainland China where rural workers who work in construction projects are systematically exploited and underpaid. As will be discussed below (under externalisation of Chinese labour practices), it is important to put Chinese labour practices in context and from where the companies are coming from for us to have a better understanding of Chinese labour regimes and practices. This was echoed by other participants who noted that ordinary dispatched Chinese workers are treated the same way as ordinary local workers and there is hardly any difference in their working and living conditions in the compound dormitories.

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[5] http://www.zctu.co.zw/publication/subject-chinese-labour-violations-existential-threat-labour-movement-zimbabwe

Many participants complained about the poor working conditions in Chinese construction companies in Harare. Similarly, some of them noted that there are hardly any skills transfer from the Chinese to the locals because of the nature of work assigned to the locals which is rather casual and menial. It emerged that there is very little or no opportunity for on-the-job training in Chinese construction companies, making it difficult, if not impossible, for skills transfer.

Interestingly, some participants' perception of Chinese labour practices is ambivalent and highlight both the positives and the negatives. One of the participants, Tendai, noted that the expectations and work ethic of Chinese employers are too high. Although many local Zimbabwean workers are used to an 8am to 5pm work regime, the Chinese tend to extend the working hours without necessarily paying for over time.

The politics of recruitment and recruitment through politics

One of the interesting findings from this study on Chinese construction projects was the influence of 'politics' in shaping the politics of recruitment. Local politicians often politicised local casual labour recruitment processes and demanded or negotiated with the Chinese to recruit casual labour from the local community. Members of Parliament (MPs) and local councillors, especially from the ruling ZANU-PF party, used the employment opportunities created by and through Chinese construction projects to establish and cement patronage networks and to reward their political supporters. For instance, Mashoko described this politics of employment by asserting that

> When we started ZANU-PF politicians usually brought their people and demanded that they be considered for menial jobs at the construction site. I remember in the first week, a ZANU-PF chairman brought 15 young men and told the Chinese managers that they should get jobs if the company wanted to continue operating. Initially, it was demands, but later the Chinese started engaging local politicians and offering job opportunities to their friends and relatives as a form of protection.

Mashoko's story is interesting in how Chinese employers were related to local politicians but, more importantly, agencies on the part of politicians and Chinese to protect and advance their interests. In Zimbabwe, the promise of jobs by politicians is often used as a campaign strategy

during elections, and in most cases, such promises are hardly delivered. As such, in the event of large-scale Chinese projects especially in the construction sector, local politicians take advantage of these to try and fulfil prior promises for jobs, especially to the youth voters who are seen as vote banks and foot soldiers for the politicians in question and the party more generally.

As such, it should be asserted that politics played an important role in mediating access to employment opportunities in the Chinese construction companies in Harare. This was corroborated by the secondary sources consulted, especially newspaper articles which reported how senior government officials and ZANU-PF senior members corruptly negotiated jobs for their political ends. This corroborates Lee-Cooke, Wang and Wang (2018), who noted that Chinese companies in Africa often face insurmountable pressure from the host countries to employ the local people. For instance, a newspaper report in the Herald of 1 November 2023 asserted that the Chinese enterprises in Zimbabwe including those in the construction industry are creating jobs for local Zimbabweans.[6] This finding resonates with Oya (2019) who also echoed the same sentiments by noting that construction projects have created a huge number of non-agricultural jobs across African economies. However, the jobs that are created are few and causal because of the high number of dispatched workers from China who displace locals by taking some jobs that could be done by locals.

This finding of more dispatched workers might be because the study focused on private Chinese-owned companies. This contradicts findings by other scholars who noted that in state-owned Chinese enterprises, there is a high localisation of labour and fewer dispatched workers due to bilateral agreements and compliance with local labour legislation. The findings in this study contradict Mc Kinsey (2017) whose work showed that private Chinese enterprises tended to have more local workers than dispatched workers with 92% local labour in private companies and 87% local labour in state-owned enterprises respectively. Dispatched workers are defined by Cooke et al (2018) as workers recruited in China and sent abroad to work, often via state-sanctioned employment agencies. Therefore, Chinese construction companies are often criticised for their use of Chinese-dispatched employees at the expense of local workers and for poor working conditions for the local workers (Jackson, 2014; Yan and Sautman, 2012).

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[6] https://www.herald.co.zw/chinese-enterprises-create-job-opportunities-for-locals/
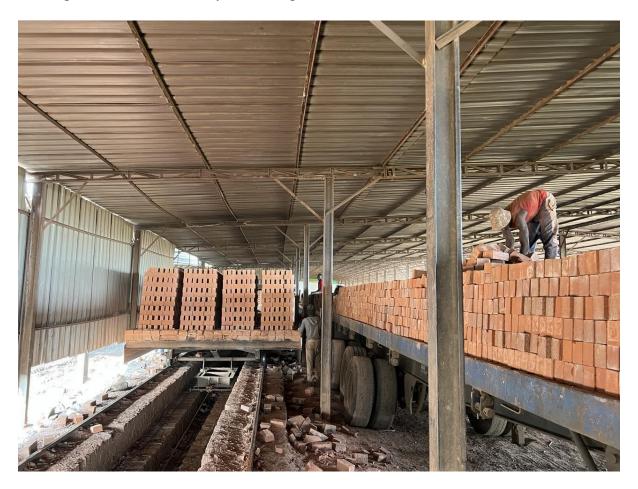
However, in response to this criticism, many Chinese employers cite a critical lack of appropriate skill in the local labour force as a justification for importing Chinese dispatched workers to work on their construction projects. Proponents of local employment argue that China's continued importation of dispatched labour diminishes the incentive for Chinese companies to train local workers to increase their employability over time. As such, they advocate a ratio where skilled Chinese dispatched labour which should constitute about 40% of the labour force invests in training locals to take up technical and managerial positions in the company. Scholars show that there is an increase in the number of Chinese-dispatched workers in African countries from about 47,000 workers in 2001 to around 227,000 workers in 2016 and the numbers peaked to more than 263,000 in 2015 (Oya 2019).

It emerged that some of the equipment and technologies used by Chinese companies cannot be operated by locals because they lack the requisite skills to do so. Such a scenario means that the local workers must be adequately trained to use sophisticated equipment and technology, and this might be expensive in terms of both time and resources. Against this background, for Chinese companies, investing in training is a costly initiative and importing skilled labour from China is less expensive. Consequently, they argue that the low technical skill level among the locals compels them to import skilled labour from their home country. From the interviews, it was clearly articulated that there is a strong preference for dispatched Chinese labour because of their familiarity with Chinese labour regimes, language, and culture as well as due to their real or perceived technical dexterity as compared to the local workers who must be taught and adjust to Chinese labour practices.

However, some scholars refute this claim and assert that the recruitment of dispatched Chinese workers is a deliberate Chinese strategy to ease its unemployment problems back home (Alden, 2007). In this study, it emerged that comparatively the quality of employment for local workers in Chinese construction companies was largely poorer than that of dispatched Chinese workers. Workers often worked without protective clothing which exposed them to injuries and fatalities as was the case with Mashoko's friend Amos. Amos worked in the brick-making workshop of the company and was injured while loading a truck to take bricks to the construction site. After his injury, Amos was hospitalised for a week. While the company paid part of his medical expenses, upon his return the manager refused to pay him his full salary. Instead, he deducted some money

for the week he was away from work even though he was injured while doing his duties at work. This led to a heated altercation that led to a fistfight between Amos and the Chinese supervisor. From the researcher's observations, it emerged that most local workers working in the Chinese construction companies did not have proper and adequate health and safety equipment, including clothing. This exposed them to various forms of diseases and injuries as was the case with Amos, who fell off the truck while loading bricks. Amos' friends told the researcher that if Amos had a helmet and proper safety shoes, he might not have been injured. Although it is a key requirement in the construction industry that all workers work with protective health and safety equipment due to the high risk in the sector, such requirements are sometimes ignored by Chinese construction companies. However, many of them work without health and safety equipment.

Below is a picture of the brick workshop of one of the Chinese companies and local employees working without helmets, safety shoes, or gloves.

Source: Researcher (Fieldwork): 2023

In an interview with Peter, one of the workers at a Chinese construction company, it was clear that Chinese employers use their political connections to violate provisions of the country's labour laws. Regarding health and safety issues at Chinese construction companies, Peter explained:

> The health and safety officers from NASSA sometimes come to inspect the construction site and our various workshops where we work, but nothing has improved. I think they bribe the officials and sometimes intimidate them into believing that the company works with some high-ranking politicians in the ruling party. So, they get away with this without any sanctions even if people get injured at work nothing much is done.

The Compound dormitory Labour Regime and Chinese construction projects

One of the fascinating Chinese labour regimes employed in their construction projects in Zimbabwe is that of compound dormitories. Chinese construction companies prefer compound dormitories for their workers because all the employees are fixated in place and therefore, they can work late into the night or start working very early in the morning. As Mashoko explained, the logic of a compound labour regime. Mashoko explained that after recruiting new employees for the construction project, the Chinese recommended that they set up cabins (makeshift wooden houses) at the site. The core project workers were expected to stay at the compound to expedite the work while support staff would be recruited daily. Concerning the compound, Mashoko said,

> We cleared the ground and erected a fence and the next day we brought the wooden panels from the carpenter and installed them. We were told we would stay for three weeks and take one week off, but that didn't happen. We usually woke up around 3 AM to start working and finish late into the night, sometimes as late as 8 PM. The Chinese people do not believe in working hours like starting work at 8 in the morning and finishing at 5. They want the work to be finished in the time you agreed.

Mashoko's narrative above was also shared by several other participants who took part in the interview. In the compound regime, the organisation of production takes a traditional work organisation mode through which workers must be available to engage in construction works at a specific time and in a particular place. For the Chinese construction company as articulated by one supervisor, the rationale behind the dormitory compound regime is the capacity to control the workers' movement to secure labour supply for production where and when this is needed because

workers are bound or fixated on the construction site where the work is being done. Smith (2003) cited in Cooke, Wang and Wang (2017) asserted that the dormitory labour approach also protects workers and enhances their safety while simultaneously providing an efficient way of labour power reproduction through everyday practices such as communal catering, collective social life and reduced shuttling for work. In fact, it should be underscored that the dormitory compound labour regime also controls workers' social spaces by regulating their non-work life. Interestingly, Smith argued that a dormitory labour regime system further empowers the management to exert normative control over the workers in various aspects of their daily lives. For example, company management can control workers' working behaviour and social activities through elaborate dormitory regulations. Considering the foregoing, such labour arrangements and regimes were sometimes contested and resisted by some of the workers, especially the local ones who felt that this labour regime infringed on their rights and freedoms. Andrew, one of the key interlocutors, described the dormitory and compound labour regime as,

> It is like a mini prison, and you don't even have control over your own spare time. There are a lot of rules and regulations about what time people sleep, wake up, eat and what to consume. So, you have no control over yourself and the labour process and social life. During peak times when work is too much, you can work overtime and sometimes be denied the opportunity to visit your family for the holidays.

For instance, *sekuru* (uncle) who worked at the construction site as a security guard told the researcher that such arrangements and regimes were the key drivers of conflicts between local and Chinese employees with their Chinese employers and managers. In the context of this study, the researcher frames the compound dormitory system employed by the Chinese construction companies as a 'semi-total institution'. Just like total institutions (Goffman 1962), semi-total institutions represent architectural forms of power and control. Goffman (1962) defines a total institution 'as a place of residence and work where like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. Goffman (1961) shows that total institutions in this case tend to be characterised by elaborate control procedures of punitive character ('mortification processes') which might have damaging effects on the worker's sense of being. The Chinese compound labour regime is not exclusively 'total' in the sense that the workers are not 'totally' cut off from the wider society or surrounding communities.

Instead, there is a reciprocal relationship between the compound geography and the local community in that workers are often dependent on the goods sold by petty traders from the community who come to open canteens and small businesses close to construction sites for their livelihood.

Although many of the workers interviewed were critical of the dormitory compound labour regime, the researcher observed that it also had what Giddens (1984) referred to as 'unintended consequences of intended action' in that fashioned a communal space for the workers to forge social networks, share information and grievances, which in turn helped them to informally organise and mobilise collectively in their attempt to advance their common interests. Thus, while the compound labour regime can be viewed as a structure which constraints workers' freedoms, it also offers opportunities for creative and agentic action to circumvent the challenges posed by dormitory compound labour arrangements. This gives credence to Anthony Giddens' (1984) assertion that, while the structure is constraining, it is also simultaneously enabling, and this speaks to the idea of agency. Interestingly, in this study the affordances of the dormitory and compound labour regime allowed networks to be forged beyond racial and ethnic lines. For instance, some local workers interviewed noted that they formed convivial friendship relationships with some Chinese dispatched workers that they worked and stayed with, and such networks (social capital) allowed collective solidarities where some Chinese shopfloor workers sided with their black local counterparts to advance common interests around improving working and living conditions within the compound and workplace broadly. While the intention and rationale for setting up dormitory and compound labour regimes is to have unlimited access to and control of labour, there are also unintended consequences as shown above, where workers spend more time together, forge friendships, and organise subtle and covert ways of subverting despotic labour practices of the Chinese managers and employers. Against this background, Giddens (1979) reminds us that human beings are actors, and, in the context of this study, local workers can also be viewed as rational actors who are not passive victims of the despotic labour practices imposed by their Chinese employers, but reactive and proactive agents who have the capacity to bypass the structural constraints imposed by the labour arrangements. As such, despite the challenges caused by the Chinese labour practices, local workers devise ways of negotiating the challenges which is an exercise of their individual and collective agency (Giddens 1984). The picture below shows the construction site workshop of a Chinese construction company.

Source: Researcher

This construction site reveals the nature of workplace practices in Chinese construction companies in Zimbabwe and the kind of jobs created for local employees. On a tour of the construction site with one of the Chinese supervisors, the researcher noted that local employees manually transfer bricks from one sire to the next through trolleys. In the picture are some of the employees with trollies loading bricks. At the extreme end of the picture are the compounds and dormitories where local employees stay.

Chinese construction sites and dormitory compounds are gendered spaces. It emerged from the interviews and conversations with participants that Chinese construction companies preferred to hire male labour. This could be due to the nature of jobs in the construction industry which are predominantly labour intensive. For this study, only a few women were participants because there were less than 10 women in the two organisations that were sampled for the study. There were two who were part of the security, two cleaners, and four cooks. The cooks prepared food for the

workers while they worked at the construction sites. The construction sites on which the researcher focused followed typical and traditional gender norms and division of labour where female workers were assigned duties that are traditionally associated with femininity, such as cooking, cleaning, and washing workers' clothing. This was echoed by Mary, one of the interlocutors who explained:

> There are not many women workers around, the Chinese prefer male workers because much of the work needs hard labour, and they think that women cannot do it even though some would want to try. Most of us just do the cleaning and cooking work and there are few in the security.

Findings in this study parallels arguments made by other scholars such as (Pun and Yu 2008) who argues that the dormitory labour system represents a gendered form of labour which fuels Chinese state capitalist projects in Africa. The researcher observed that there if a general preference for male labour at the companies that were sampled. This could be due to the nature of the industry and jobs available in construction which have traditionally been male dominated. Interestingly, some women who were interviewed noted that they do not even bother to look for jobs at the construction site because they know there the chances of getting a job are almost non-extent, especially if you are not related or known to the local supervisors and foreman. Therefore, the researcher asserts that the Chinese construction site is a predominantly androcentric space which is however not unique to Chinese construction companies but mirror most of the construction companies in the country.

The Externalisation of Chinese Labour Regimes

It is important to highlight that, for us to fully understand the labour regimes in Chinese construction companies in Zimbabwe, there is a need or necessity for us to look at Chinese labour practices in China itself. From a review of the literature, it became apparent that Chinese labour practices and regimes at Chinese construction companies in Harare are not unusual. They are a replica of Chinese labour regimes back home. As such, what Chinese construction companies do is to externalise and reproduce similar labour regimes from those back home. For instance, Corkin

(2012) asserted that Chinese construction companies in Africa operate the same way they operate in China. Indeed, Corkin (2012) noted that in all mega projects, if a Chinese company in the city of Guangdong wins a big project in the capital Beijing or any other city for that matter, that company will recruit almost its entire labour force for that project in Guangdong than in Beijing. As such, for Chinese companies including construction companies that engage in construction and infrastructural projects in Africa, this is a common and normal practice. This in part, possibly explains why many Chinese construction companies operating not only in Zimbabwe but in many other African countries have a general lack of enthusiasm to hire local labour for their construction projects (Corkin 2012). Chinese construction companies also do the same when it comes to the procurement of construction materials and labour practices at the workplace. However, scholars assert that China is simultaneously exporting its sub-standard working conditions and poor labour practices (Baah and Jauch, 2009; Shelton and Kabemba, 2012).

The picture below shows a dispatched Chinese worker working together with a local on a construction site.

The externalisation of Chinese labour regimes is made possible by the dispatched workers who are brought from China and have previously worked in China. Most of these dispatched workers are given supervisory and management roles and their management is largely shaped by the Confucianist-based labour regime that functions in China. This finding was echoed by Cooke, Wang, and Wang (2022), who argued that by exporting labour from China, Chinese construction firms also export their labour management practices, sometimes aided by other institutional actors such as the employment agencies.

This resonates with Jiang (2019) who asserted that Chinese labour practices in Africa mirror the labour practices in mainland China itself. Chinese industrialisation has thrived using what Burawoy (1983) called a 'despotic labour regime' which is characterised by authoritarian arrangements where workers have little to no control over the way work is organised, including how long they work and how much they are paid (Jiang 2019). Coercion and orders are important strategies for enforcing decisions and labour compliance under despotic labour regimes. Although some scholars assert that local labour control is asserted through a combination of coercion and consent, in Chinese construction companies under study, labour control is enacted predominantly through various forms of coercive practices, which often undermine the rights of workers. Interestingly, the ways in which labour is organised in Chinese-owned construction companies in Harare are akin to despotism because local employees lack a voice and only work on orders from Chinese supervisors at the workplace. Scholars such as Witt and Redding (2014) described Chinese labour regimes as some form of authoritarian capitalism. This was also echoed and reinforced by scholars such as Ofosu and Sarpong (2022), who argued that Chinese labour regimes and practices in Africa border on abuse via casualization of labour, lack of compliance with local labour laws, and low remuneration.

Similar claims are also widespread in secondary sources that the researcher used, such as newspaper reports and trade union documents and reports that reveal that there are widespread cases of abuse of workers in the Chinese construction, mining, and retail sectors. The researcher asserts that such exploitative labour regimes are ignored by law enforcement agents in Zimbabwe because of the strong diplomatic relations between Harare and Beijing, where China is viewed as an all-weather friend and key investor. Consequently, the government is prepared to forego not only the rights of its citizens and provisions of its labour laws, but also the environmental laws for

Chinese investments and financial support. As such, it is important to highlight that local politicians are implicated in the production as well as the reproduction of Chinese labour regimes in the construction sector in Harare. This finding echoes an argument advanced by Kelly (2002) who asserted that local labour control regimes should be understood as the consequence of a political context extending beyond the politics of labour conventional relations.

This finding also resonates with observations made by Corkin (2012) among Chinese construction companies in Angola that friction is common in Chinese construction companies in that country. Similarly, Oya (2019) notes that for us to properly understand labour practices and relations of Chinese companies in Africa, it is key to know the nature of capital that moves, the sectors it moves to and the ways in which these companies adapt to the host nation's economic and political contexts. The researcher asserts that Chinese labour practices do not necessarily assume a life of their own, but rather evolve through the prevailing economic and political realities in which they operate. For instance, in the Zimbabwean context, the labour laws, the strictness of their enforcement, the massive unemployment, and the pool of cheap labour all coalesce to shape Chinese labour practices in the construction sector.

There are various modes of remunerating workers in the Chinese construction sector in Zimbabwe. It merged from fieldwork that the salary payment for locals, especially casual employees, is based on a day's work, while others are paid at the end of each week. For instance, one of the participants, a cement mixer at some construction site explained that wages are paid every day for one-day labourers and weekly for some. Tichaona explained in his own words,

> I am usually paid at the end of the week because I am a cement mixer and I work without a contract. Some people are paid at the end of the day and if you lose any tools such as shovels, the money is deducted from your weekly salary and sometimes you end up getting very little of nothing.

Tichaona's experience was a common narrative among the casual and semi-casual workers that the researcher interviewed who concurred that they either get daily or weekly salaries. Those who get monthly salaries are usually skilled employees who work with some short-term or long-term contract, both material and psychological contracts. The idea of working without a contract is part of the casualization of labour, and such labour regimes are deliberately used to exploit cheap labour in the country. In fact, the researcher asserts that such logic of employment and payment does not

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only produce but also reproduce precariousness in the Chinese construction industry in Harare. This resonates with the observations and findings discussed by some scholars elsewhere. For instance, scholars such as Whethal in Mozambique and Gadzala in Zambia have shown the ways in which local employees in Chinese companies are precariously employed. Others have also shown how the precariousness of the labour in Chinese companies in Africa is racialized (Ma 2022; Sautman and Hairong 2016).

Labour Practices and Conflicts in Chinese Construction Companies

Findings in this study show that labour-related conflicts are not only rife, but also widespread in Chinese construction companies in Harare. During interviews and fieldwork, it was not uncommon to hear participants talking about conflicts which sometimes turned violent at the workplace. Participants explained that most of the conflicts emanated from conditions of work, labour practices, and remuneration disputes. In an interview with one of the key interlocutors Mashoko explained that conflicts regularly occurred especially due to non-payment and delayed salary payments. Mashoko asserted,

> Conflicts were a common occurrence; the Chinese do not give you time to rest and if they see you talking and not working then they begin to shout at you and threaten to fire you. When it comes to salaries, they sometimes delay payments and deduct some money unfairly for minor things. This often leads to violent confrontations. One of my friends fought with the Chinese supervisor because he deducted money for the day he went to the hospital after getting injured at work.

Several participants shared similar stories about the drivers of labour disputes and conflicts in Chinese construction companies. The findings in this study corroborate observations made by Lee-Cooke, Wang and Wang (2018) who noted that of all the issues, wage payments represent the biggest cause of labour disputes involving workers and construction forms. In addition, another key cause of labour disputes was the nature of the labour practices employed by Chinese employers. Many participants complained that they were hardly given enough time to rest and yet they were not paid overtime for working after hours. As such, the failure to be paid for overtime often led to quarrels and conflicts. This resonates with Chu and Fafchamps (2022), who

highlighted that Chinese-owned firms in Africa report high rates of labour conflicts due to conflicting labour expectations and cultural differences. Other scholars such as Tang (2016) and Sautman and Yan (2016) have also reiterated that these conflictual relations have also been caused by the real and perceived reluctance of Chinese employers to accept unions at work, as well as communication barriers.

It emerged that most of the Chinese including the dispatched workers could hardly speak any English, let alone local languages such as Shona and Ndebele, while the locals did not speak any Mandarin or any other Chinese language variants. Consequently, communication was often a nightmare for the locals, Chinese supervisors, and employers. Therefore, communication breakdown was a daily reality and often led to conflicts. This was also echoed by Corkin (2012), whose study in Angola revealed that communication between Angolan workers who spoke Portuguese and their Chinese employers with no linguistic competence in Portuguese was severely constrained and affected productivity. In the event of labour disputes, dialogue to resolve labour disputes always proved difficult. This was articulated by one of the participants, Aaron, who said;

> Some of the fights we have here with the Chinese are due to communication challenges. The Chinese supervisors might think that you are undermining them, or you are being stubborn but, in most cases, people simply do not understand the language and instructions are therefore not followed strictly. This is where the problem is.

Following this, some participants highlighted that Chinese employers sometimes interpret the non-fulfilment of assigned tasks as deliberate disrespect rather than ignorance (Chu and Fafchamps 2022). Interestingly, during fieldwork, cultural and linguistic differences between Chinese and their employers were apparent and the researcher observed struggles to communicate, which compelled both groups to resort to sign language for communication. Liu (208) spoke of cross-cultural misunderstandings and how they generate tension in the workplace which often degenerate into heavy conflicts.

Although this study focused particularly on labour-related conflicts between Chinese officials and local employees, it should be underscored that labour disputes and conflicts in Chinese construction companies in Harare are more complex. Indeed, such conflicts were also rife among Chinese managers/supervisors and Chinese dispatched workers on the shop floor, as well as among the workers themselves. For instance, it was common to see Chinese shopfloor workers quarrelling

with their Chinese counterparts and local employees could also fight amongst themselves over disagreements during work. This was confirmed by one of the key interlocutors Mashoko who explained:

> Although many newspapers write about the conflict between the Chinese and their local employees, there is more that happens. Locals also argue and fight, and some Chinese workers also fight against each other, so the disputes always happened and involve a lot more people than what is often reported.

Mashoko's admission is important in highlighting the complexities of labour conflicts in Chinese construction companies. Mashoko's experience challenges us to rethink essentialist and dominant arguments of scholars who present locals as victims of abuse by Chinese employers. This victimhood framing of local workers ignores the agency (Giddens 1984) of local workers to resist and subvert exploitative labour practices. For instance, while it was discouraged for local workers to join unions and organise for collective interests, some of the participants informed the researcher that they secretly formed informal structures and affiliated themselves with some trade unions and often engaged lawyers in the event of unfair dismissals and other despotic labour arrangements. Such practices relate to what Giddens (1984) refers to as worker 'agency'. Drawing from Giddens' theoretical ideas, the Chinese labour practices/regimes can be viewed as some form of structure which constraints workers' interests and rights. However, it is the very same constraining structure which triggers innovative ways to circumvent structural constraints. This gives credence to Giddens' overall argument that the structure is not only constraining but also enabling. In this case, the innovative worker agency discussed above is a direct consequence of the exploitative and constraining labour practices adopted by Chinese employers in Chinese construction companies in Harare. This shows how local workers are not merely passive victims of Chinese labour practices, but also active actors who can organise and confront the source of their grievances and challenges. Some workers push back, as was the case with Amos who challenged his Chinese supervisor after having his salary deducted unfairly for missing work due to illness which had occurred at work (workplace accident). In such cases, workers often protested collectively, a scenario which disempowered the Chinese employer, who could not fire or dismiss all the local workers. Such rational and calculative actions are an exercise of worker agency and enable them to bargain for

better salaries and conditions of work without the risk of victimisation since protest actions are done collectively.

The picture below shows the construction site at a Chinese construction project in Zimbabwe.

Source: Secondary Source 2023

The above picture shows a typical construction site for Chinese owned companies in Zimbabwe. The shopfloor workers are closely monitored by the Chinese foreman. This picture demonstrates the division of labour at the construction site where local workers are largely given casual jobs like

mixing cement, water and sand and ferrying construction equipment as shown by the local worker behind the Chinese foreman. Close to the structure are some local workers conducting semi-skilled and un-skilled jobs under the close supervision of the Chinese supervisors. This speaks to the challenge of the nature of jobs created for local workers through Chinese construction investments and the labour practices introduced by the Chinese employers which have attracted widespread global attention and controversy.

Low piece-rate salaries and long working hours

Interview data reveal that Chinese construction companies in Zimbabwe generally pay low wages but require workers to work for very long hours. As discussed earlier, remuneration and working hours were some of the key drivers of labour conflicts between Chinese employers and their local employees. In this section, the focus is on the deployment of piece-rate and casualisation of workers as an important labour practice for Chinese construction companies. The findings on remuneration echo Corkin's (2012) observation that local Angolans are not interested in taking up employment in Chinese-owned companies due to the perception that Chinese employers pay their workers very low wages. Oya and Schaefer (2023) disagree with the view that Chinese firms in Africa pay their workers low wages. Instead, through their studies in Angola and Ethiopia, they argued that Chinese firms do not constantly pay less than comparable firms. However, although Chinese construction companies do not necessarily pay less in comparison to other local and foreign companies, the workers working in Chinese-owned construction companies are often expected to do more and work more hours and have little freedom at the workplace. For instance, shorter or no break times and few opportunities to socialise or speak to colleagues while at work. This is in keeping with Lee (1999) and Lerche et al (2017) who asserted that Chinese construction labour practices are marked by strong labour segmentation as well as low-wage and insecure employment. This is cemented through the *hukou* system (household residential) Chinese labour regime/practice discussed above, which produces and maintains a low-wage regime.

This in part, explains why some local workers perceived Chinese labour practices as despotic and exploitative. From the interviews, the researcher asserts that in Chinese construction companies in

Harare, systematic soldiering (Taylor 1975) is not possible due to strict monitoring and surveillance by the Chinese supervisors, which means that the workers have little or no control over their speed of work. Fredrick Taylor framed 'systematic soldiering' as a scenario through which workers deliberately decrease their productivity at work when there is a disconnect between hard work and compensation. In Chinese construction companies, workers are compelled to be highly productive through hard work albeit without receiving a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. Such a scenario led to a largely demotivated workforce with high turnover intentions. This was clearly articulated by Mashoko who complained:

> The only problem with the Chinese is that they expect you to put in a shift and work hard all day. The supervisors are also moving around to check on who is doing what and you have no breathing space, you cannot even talk to the next person unless it is work related to say bring cement or bring this and that. You know money can be deducted if you are seen to be lackadaisical at work. But what is frustrating is at the end of the day your wage after all that hard work will still be very low.

From the narratives and stories shared by Mashoko and many other interlocutors who were interviewed, it was apparent that workers feel a sense of what Karl Marx calls alienation. The workers feel alienated from each other and also from the fruits of their labour due to the meagre salaries they get in comparison to what the companies get after completing their projects. Due to their strong political connections, the Chinese construction companies this study focused on were not compelled to comply with national minimum wage legislation and therefore often paid wages below the stipulated minimum wage without any consequences. This finding resonates with observations made by various scholars such as Baah and Jauch (2009), whose studies of Chinese companies in various countries such as Zambia, Ghana, Namibia, Angola, and South Africa revealed that in comparison to local and other foreign companies, Chinese companies paid the lowest wages in these countries. Regarding wages, participants interviewed by the researcher complained that it was not enough or commensurate to the nature of the work they were doing. Mashoko explained,

> I would not say that the Chinese pay us low wages per se because I have other colleagues who get the same amount or less for the same job that I am doing, but they do not work as

hard as we do here, and they have the breaks in between and finish on time. So, I think I would say the money is not low, but it is not enough.

Mashoko's views about the salaries were also reiterated by a few other participants who believed that the money they get is not proportionate with the shift that they put at work. This finding is consistent with Fei (2018) whose study in Ethiopia among Chinese firms' workers showed that workers were generally dissatisfied with how they were compensated for their labour services. Fei (2018) asserted that although the workers were paid wages that were significantly above the gazetted national average in the formal sector, many employees still complained that the wages were low. In this study, some participants were rather ambivalent about wages but insisted that more could be done to improve them and the general conditions of work.

From the interviews and conversations with workers in Chinese construction companies, it was observed that the companies tend to make workers work for very long hours, albeit without getting paid for overtime. This was highlighted by one of the participants, Andrew, who worked at one of the construction sites. Andrew complained:

> *Pano apa tinoshanda kunge hana* (here we work like a heart, non-stop) and you cannot complain because the moment you do so you get fired and replaced. There are hundreds of people out there every day looking for jobs (*kuforera basa*), so we just suffer in silence as long as I get something at the end of the month to feed my family. It is better than not working at all.

Andrew's quote above shows how the Chinese labour regime and practices coupled with the local unemployment crisis coalesce to weaken the workers' bargaining power and compound despotic workplace practices. This is not to downplay the agency and rational pushbacks of the workers themselves at the workplace. The issue of long working hours is not new in Chinese construction companies. It is a reality for many workers not only in Zimbabwe, but in many other African countries, where Chinese companies are engaging in mega-construction projects. For example, studies by McKinsey (2017), Rounds and Huang (2017), revealed that in addition to modest wages, there is abundant evidence in Chinese companies of poor working conditions, very long working hours, workers working without written contracts, company resistance to trade union representation, and more frequent violations of the country's labour regulations compared to other foreign companies.

Conclusion

This chapter drew on empirical evidence and data from various participants and sources to unpack the labour regimes and practices of Chinese-owned construction practices in Harare. The chapter highlighted how Chinese labour practices are externalised from China to Zimbabwe and how this is done through an elaborate and widespread labour practice of dispatched workers who help to reproduce labour practices and regimes from China. Furthermore, the chapter also discussed dormitory and compound labour practices, which are a dominant feature of Chinese construction companies in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. The chapter focused on how these practices are experienced by local employees and their perceptions of such practices, as well as the factors that inform their perceptions. The chapters argue that although Chinese labour practices are largely perceived and conceived as exploitative due to low salaries, long working hours, absence of trade unions, and unfair dismissals, local workers have not been passive victims of such exploitative labour practices. Consequently, the chapter also foregrounded the agency of local workers and discussed the strategies they use to deal with such labour practices and how they use the structural constraints posed by such labour practices to find creative tactics to mobilise and assert their voices. As such, the chapter asserts that workers are rational actors who are agentic and respond to labour practices in creative ways.

CHAPTER 5: KEY ARGUMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter focuses on foregrounding the key argument(s) of the dissertation and the conclusion of the dissertation. The chapter starts with a summary of the key ideas and issues drawn from each of the four preceding chapters and ties them together to make a thesis argument. In restating the argument, I use key thematic concepts generated from the empirical findings, the theoretical and conceptual lens drawn from the literature, and the theoretical framework that I used to understand the everyday experiences of local workers with Chinese labour practices in the construction industry. The overarching argument that the dissertation advances is that Chinese labour regimes and practices are complex and shaped by both local and Chinese forces. The dissertation also argues that while local employees are trapped in largely exploitative labour regimes and unsupportive government, they should not be viewed as passive victims of both precarious Chinese labour practices and the unholy alliance between the state and Chinese investors. Instead, the dissertation shows that workers are agents/actors who use their rationality to circumvent or negotiate some abusive labour practices they encounter while working in Chinese construction companies.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter of the dissertation tried to lay the foundation of the study by introducing the focus of the study, which sought to understand the Chinese labour practices and regimes operating in Chinese-owned construction companies in Harare. In addition, the study also examined how Chinese labour practices are experienced and perceived by the local workers and how the workers

developed creative strategies to advance their interests and deal with potential and real challenges they faced due to the appropriation of Chinese labour practices at the workplace. The interest here was to unpack how local workers reconcile Chinese and local labour practices and how they make sense of potential contradictions. As such, the chapter provided a detailed background to show how Africa-China relations grew with various agreements signed and then zeroed down to Harare-Beijing relations mediated by the adoption and signing of the Look East Policy which was signed at the height of Zimbabwe's international economic and political isolation due to sanctions imposed by the US and the European Union. Under such circumstances, China was viewed as a viable and competitive alternative. The chapter also highlighted the research problem that informed the study and presented the research questions and objectives. The chapter also briefly introduced and discussed some methodological issues around reflexivity, positionality, and data storage and handling.

The second chapter of the dissertation focused on a detailed review of related literature (literature review). The study drew on a wide range of scholarly works and literature from various disciplines and countries. The literature review was conducted in a thematic format based on key themes related to the study. This chapter also discussed the theoretical framework that is used as the analytical and conceptual lens to understand how local workers experience, perceive, and negotiate Chinese labour practices and regimes. The theoretical framework that informed the study is Anthony Giddens; Structuration Theory which looks at the complex interplay between structures (in this case, the Chinese labour practices and the local government) and agency (local and dispatched workers, and trade unions). The argument advanced through this theory is that the structure is not only constraining but is also enabling meaning that although Chinese labour practices reinforced by an unsupportive government (capital + state against labour) tend to constrain the workers' freedoms, rights and interests, it is these same constraints which enable innovative strategies devised by the workers to negotiate and sometimes circumvent the challenges brought by the Chinese labour regimes.

The core of the literature review chapter was a detailed discussion of the broader China-Africa engagements mediated by FOCAC which facilities increased Chinese investments in Africa through mega construction and infrastructural projects and other bilateral initiatives which allow Chinese investments in mining, wholesale and retail, manufacturing, and telecommunications

among other key economic sectors. The chapter engages with the debates on the rationale of Chinese involvement in Africa with some viewing China-Africa relations as mutually beneficial, while others saw it as a new form of colonialism and debt trap which benefits China and its quest for global soft power. The chapter also focused specifically on labour-related issues and engaged studies that have been done on such issues including labour regimes in Chinese companies (Wethal 2017), labour conflicts in Chinese companies Chu and Fancamps, compound labour regimes in Chinese companies (Fei 2021) and many other key issues such as wages, training and recruitment, termination of employment, and labour standards. Although this literature is complex, much of it argues that Chinese labour practices are largely loathed by local employees who feel that they are exploitative. This is consistent with the findings of this study which revealed that most of the participants in two Chinese construction companies perceived Chinese labour practices as despotic and authoritarian, restricting workers' freedoms and rights.

The third chapter unpacked the interpretive research philosophy and the qualitative methodology that informs this study. The chapter discusses what the qualitative approach is and why it is appropriate for this study and in answering the research questions posed. A qualitative methodology enabled the researchers to probe into critical questions about subjective experience, perceptions, and meanings attached to Chinese labour practices. In addition, the chapter also discusses the multiple case study design that is used to develop an in-depth and nuanced understanding of Chinese labour regimes and practices as they are experienced and perceived by local workers. A case study design was ideal for this study because it allows the researcher to study and understand phenomena in depth within its real-life social setting or context. In addition to the research design, the chapter also highlighted the specific research methods or data collection techniques that were used to collect both primary and secondary data such as semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, observations, and secondary sources of data such as trade unions reports, newspaper articles, and published work on Chinese construction companies in Africa. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to express themselves in their own words while simultaneously giving the researcher the opportunity to probe and ask follow-up questions for clarity on emerging issues from the interview. Additionally, the chapter also discussed the sampling techniques used to select participants, and the data analysis approach as well as highlighting issues of positionality and reflectivity and how these mediated the research process. Lastly, the chapter discussed ethical considerations.

The fourth chapter focused on the presentation and discussion of empirical findings based on the fieldwork conducted among Chinese-owned construction companies in Harare. The presentation and discussion of findings are done through the key themes that were generated by the researcher from the data. As such, thematic analysis is key to articulating the findings and discussing the findings as well. The key themes that emerged from the findings include the widespread externalisation and importation of Chinese labour practices and regimes to Zimbabwe, the adoption and usage of dormitory and compound labour practices by Chinese construction companies, reliance on guanxi social networking in recruiting new employees, worker perceptions of Chinese labour practices among other key themes that were adapted and used in presentation and discussion of the findings. The findings resonate with many other previous studies on Chinese organisations showing a widespread prevalence of local labour exploitation and a gross disregard for local labour laws where compliance of Chinese construction companies with labour legislation is problematic. This is due to several reasons such as protection from corrupt local political elites, kickbacks paid to labour and health inspectors as well as the influence of prior labour regimes brought from China by the contractors.

Given the labour-intensive nature of the construction sector, Chinese construction companies tend to rely on informal ways of recruiting new employees. The informalisation of labour practices tends to make local employees vulnerable to insecure and exploitative practices. Interestingly, the findings revealed that there is a propensity towards casualisation, and many local employees are working without a contract. The findings in this study are in line with scholars such as Xiaoyang, who asserts that there are strong affinities between internal dynamics in the host nation, in this case Zimbabwe, and Sino labour relations. This shows that the configuration of Chinese labour practices and regimes is shaped and reshaped by both the local context and the Chinese Confucianist cultural influence. While local employees' perceptions of Chinese labour regimes were predominantly negative, some participants felt that it was better to have exploitative jobs without decent work than not have anything at all. As such, some participants were caught between agitating for better working conditions and risking losing their jobs and living with unfair work arrangements.

Drawing from Giddens' structuration theory, the researcher argues that while Chinese labour practices could be viewed as a 'structure' which constrained local workers; rights and freedoms,

the local workers demonstrated that they are not passive victims but rather rational and knowledgeable agents or actors with the capacity to circumvent some the challenges brought by the Chinese labour practices and regimes. For instance, while some labour arrangements such as dormitory compound practices were introduced to ensure that employers have strict control over workers and enable them to work for extended periods of time, such an arrangement also afforded workers the space and time to forge networks of friendship that transcended ethnonationality and class to mobilise creatively and push for workplace concessions that helped improve their wages and working conditions. This manifested through how ordinary local and dispatched Chinese workers established relationships of solidarity which allowed them to speak with one voice in negotiating for better conditions of work.

Similarly, workers also exercised their agency through underground informal organising, in which they formed workers' committees and secretly joined some trade unions without the knowledge of their employers. In turn, the trade unions would speak openly about the labour practices of the companies without specifically mentioning the employees. Indeed, it was not uncommon for local trade unions to use the media to castigate some abusive labour practices in Chinese owned companies in the country, which sometimes compelled the companies to slightly improve their labour practices and treatment of employees. This gives credence to Giddens' (1984) argument that the structure (Chinese labour practices) is not only constraining but also enabling. The creative ways through which local employees organised and negotiated conventions were a consequence of the structural constraints of the labour practices. As such, we can speak of a duality of structural challenges and responses to these challenges in much the same way Giddens (1984) spoke of the duality of structure. Through the forging of some collective consciousness, the workers became a class in itself and a class for itself allowing them to collectively navigate the structural constraints engendered by Chinese labour practices. This should be conceived as some form of agency on the part of local workers, who can thus successfully circumvent some of their workplace concerns and anxieties individually and collectively.

This dissertation examined how local employees working in Chinese construction companies experienced Chinese labour practices. The study also explored the ways in which Chinese labour practices are perceived and negotiated by local employees. In doing so, the study also focused on the subjective meanings that local employees attached to such Chinese labour practices. The study

revealed that Chinese labour practices and regimes are complex and mediated by both the local conditions in Zimbabwe and the foreign conditions from China. Thus, Chinese labour practices in the Chinese construction companies in Harare can be imagined as hybrid labour regimes which are a consequence of an entanglement between local and Chinese flair. Similarly, Chinese construction companies tend to hold on to labour practices that they import from China because for them they are tried and tested as well as less expensive. To foreground these labour practices, Chinese construction companies tend to recruit dispatched workers from China, and by so doing they are able to reproduce labour practices back home. In addition, the connection with local political elites also allows Chinese investors to reproduce their labour practices without any penalties. Instead of being the watchdogs of the workplace regimes and labour practices in Chinese companies, local political elites and parastatals such as the labour courts, the law enforcement and some unions enter into strategic alliances with the Chinese for personal benefits at the expense of the vulnerable workers. I also argue that despite the configuration of arrangements that create a near-total dominance on everyday lives of workers, the Chinese construction compound labour practice and regime opens possibilities and spaces for collective struggle and creative forms of resistance.

In a nutshell, the study sought to shed light on the ever-changing contours of labour regimes and practices of Chinese construction companies in Zimbabwe. The student examined Chinese labour practices in two construction companies in Zimbabwe. Interested in unpacking how these labour practices are experienced, perceived, and negotiated by local employees working in Chinese construction companies, the study used a wide range of data collection including in-depth interviews, observations, life histories, and key informant interviews. Theoretically, the study is based on Giddens' (1984) insightful theory of structuration. The study found that Chinese labour regimes and practices in Harare are a consequence of a complex entanglement between local circumstances and Chinese workplace cultures. The study revealed that Chinese labour practices are imported from China by the Chinese employers and workers recruited from China. However, with time such labour practices gradually adapt to local contexts. While Chinese labour practices are perceived as despotic, authoritarian and sometimes exploitative/abusive, the study highlighted that local Zimbabwean employees should not be conceived as passive victims of such labour practices. Instead, local employees creatively devise various strategies that enable them to negotiate and navigate these labour practices. In addition, the study also argued that while some

labour regimes such as compound and dormitory practices are meant to control workers and compel them to work for long hours, such spaces have also become strong affective spaces where worker solidarities and consciousness are forged and cemented which enable collective forms of mobilisation and resistance. Given the bad press that Chinese companies have faced in Africa, this study clearly shows that Zimbabwean workers are exercising their everyday agency to respond to such labour regimes of power.

Interview Guide: Annexure 1

1. Can you briefly tell me about yourself and how you ended up working here?
2. Could you tell me about your life in working in the Chinese organization?
3. How do employees relate with the employers?
4. How do you understand the relationship between employees and employers?
5. Would you describe the working environment as harmonious?
6. How can you describe your employer or line manager at work?
7. Have you ever had a disagreement or altercation with your employer?
8. Has your organization ever had any conflicts with employees with regards to labour practices.
9. Who represents workers rights if there is a conflict with the employer.
10. Do you have membership with any Trade Union in your industry?
11. Does your employer allow Worker's committees/ Trade Union membership at the workplace.
12. Do you know anyone who had an altercation or disagreement with the employer, employees.?
13. How does the company and the employees deal with unfair labour practices?
14. Do you think your workplace is a safe working environment?
15. Are you provided with protective clothing whilst conducting your duties?
16. Do you think that workers at your company are protected from abuse and violence?

Informed Consent Letter

Researcher's Name: Fiona Matsika

Project Title: Workers Understanding and Experiences of Labour Practices in Chinese Owned Construction Organizations in Harare, Zimbabwe

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Introduction

My name is Fiona Matsika; I am an Honours Student at Sol Plaatje University. I am conducting research on Workers Understanding and Experiences of Labour Practices in Chinese Owned Construction Organizations in Harare, Zimbabwe.

The research is for the purpose of completing my Master's degree. This informed consent gives you the right to make a decision to participate in this study. I would also like to inform you that you are not obliged to answer all questions that I ask.

I would like to inform you that participation in this study is voluntary, and you will be informed on new development that might arise in this study that might affect your welfare and your willingness to participate in this study.

This research will take about 1 hour of your time to complete. You have the right to stop participating in this research at any time without penalty. I would also like to inform you that there will be no financial benefits for participating in this interview.

I would also like to inform you that information produced will be treated with confidentiality and will only be shared with my supervisor. I would also like assure you that your names will not be published unless consent is given by the participant to publish. Information obtained from the interviews will be stored electronically in my computer files with passwords. In addition, audio recording taken during this study that can identify you with the study will be used under your permission and you will be given the opportunity to listen to the audio recording and will be published upon your permission to use them in this study.

You can contact me on +263 776288902 or +27 63011 4111 if you would like ask questions about the research.

Yours faithfully

Fiona Matsika   Date...........................

Signature...

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