INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICES IN CHINESE FIRMS IN LUSAKA, ZAMBIA: PERSPECTIVES OF ZAMBIAN EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the Intercultural Communication Practices in Chinese Multinational Companies (MNCs) in Zambia with a particular focus on Zambian employees' perspectives. It explores communication practices in Chinese firms in Lusaka, understanding Zambian workers' perceptions of communication with Chinese counterparts, and identifying barriers to effective communication. Employing a Phenomenological approach, two (02) Chinese MNCs in Zambia were studied: China Jiangsu International and Avic International (Zambia) Limited. Ten employees were interviewed. The findings indicate the use of interpreters, oral communication, and gestures for daily activities exchange. While some found these practices effective, others faced challenges due to intercultural differences. Barriers include lack of respect for elders, disregard for pleasantries, and impatience among Chinese employees. The study concludes that Chinese MNCs lack adequate attention to intercultural communication strategies, thus recommending the implementation of deliberate improvement measures.

Keywords: *Intercultural Communication, Communication Barriers, Multinational Companies*

Introduction: Mapping The Context

According to Mogea (2023), intercultural communication in the workplace can help diversity to thrive because when individuals from different cultural backgrounds feel understood, they can unlock their full potential freely. Effective communication is crucial for the success of multinational corporations (Klyukanov, 2020). Communication is essential for building relationships, managing conflicts, sharing knowledge, and achieving common goals (Merkin, *et al.*, 2014).

Voevoda (2020) notes that linguistic barrier is one of the most significant barriers to effective business communication. But the varying dialects and languages of different regions can lead to ineffective communication. The dialects of every two regions keep changing with every few kilometers. Also, in the workplace, different employees will have different linguistic skills. This affects the operations of the organisation. Psychological and mental issues are also barriers to effective

communication. Speech disorders, stage fears, depression, phobia, etcetera. can degrade the quality of business communication. Cultural barriers cannot be ignored. Mogea (2023) observes that because of globalisation, it is now normal to have employees from different parts of the world working in the same office. They will differ from each other in terms of dressing, food, religion, and so on. Thus, it is essential to take into consideration these cultural factors to facilitate effective communication. In several MNCs, at the orientation phases, they offer special cultural courses so that people can understand each other's cultural preferences.

Despite the barriers mentioned above, Tran (2016) argues that effective communication is crucial in bridging cultural differences and overcoming intercultural communication barriers. This can be done through active listening, respect for cultural differences, use of non-verbal communication, clear and concise language and building relationships with people from different cultures which can help establish trust and open lines of communication.

Consequently, in today's globalised world, Multi-National Companies (MNCs) have taken up a better share of the business world in the twenty first century (Shuter and Wiseman, 1994). However, one of the challenges that many Multi-National Companies operating in other countries have always faced is that of managing a workforce that encompasses people of diverse cultural backgrounds as they set base in the host nations (Tran, 2016).

Furthermore, Merkin *et al.*, (2014) contend that MNCs are dependent on effective communication in order for them to manage their operations in host nations. The operations of MNCs are usually managed by a team comprising of expatriates from the MNC's headquarters, local staff from the host nation, or even other third country nationals. Consequently, the entire management of an MNC may encounter a lot of challenges due to the varying cultural influences in the intercultural communication of the firm's employees.

For the sake of clarity with regards to the existing discrepancies between Africa and China, this article focuses on the four cultural value systems as propounded by Hofstede (1991) which includes the following elements: Individualism and collectivism, the aspect of masculinity and femininity, power distance and uncertainty avoidance. It also includes the dimensions as contended by Bond (1989) which further looked at the long-term and short-term orientation concepts which have also been widely referred to as the 'Confucian dynamism'. Hofstede is selected as he is one of the earliest proponents who set up an empirical "problem solving" approach to the topic of intercultural communication and business management.

Despite its pivotal role, Chinese-owned firms in Zambia, such as AVIC-International Project Engineering Company and China Jiangsu International Economic and Technical Cooperation Group, LTD (CJI), encounter significant challenges in intercultural communication, ranging from language barriers to cultural misunderstandings. Failure to address these challenges can have profound consequences, including strained relationships with local employees, customers, and stakeholders, as well as detrimental impacts on organisational performance and reputation.

According to research by Gadzala (2019), many Chinese firms in Zambia continue to grapple with intercultural communication challenges, including differences in communication styles, norms, and business etiquette. These challenges, exacerbated by conflicting cultural backgrounds and intra-cultural communication barriers, can lead to labour complaints, such as poor working conditions and unfair labour practices (French, 2014; Yang, 2017). Consequently, these issues may result in decreased employee morale, productivity, and retention rates, ultimately affecting the company's bottom line and sustainability.

Furthermore, Li (2011) highlights that the increasingly diverse workforce and complex customer relations further compound these challenges, leading to inefficiencies in internal communication within multinational environments. Without effective intercultural communication practices, Chinese firms operating in Zambia risk experiencing higher turnover rates, reduced customer satisfaction, and damaged relationships with local communities. Additionally, the lack of attention to intercultural communication can hinder innovation, decision-making processes, and overall organisational effectiveness, as indicated by Abugre and Debrah (2019).

Therefore, it is imperative to address the identified intercultural communication challenges within Chinese-owned firms in Zambia. By examining the specific communication practices and cultural dynamics within AVIC-International Project Engineering Company and CJI, this article aims at providing actionable insights into strategies for enhancing cross-cultural communication effectiveness and fostering positive workplace interactions. Through comprehensive analysis and practical recommendations, this article seeks to contribute to the development of sustainable intercultural communication frameworks that promote harmony, productivity, and success within these organisations and beyond.

Brief History of China's Operations and Investments in Zambia

According to Lubinda and Jian (2018, pp. 207-209a) in their study titled China-Zambia Economic Relations: Current Developments, Challenges and Future Prospects for Regional Integrations, the 'Sino-Zambia relations' date as far back as pre-independence times when actually China provided support to Zambia in order for the country to consolidate its efforts towards political independence against the British Colonia masters. However, the Zambia-China diplomatic relationship was made official in October, 1964 (Mwanawina, 2008a). The two countries bilateral relations have taken a gradual evolution process into the modern times while taking a milliard of issues ranging from political, trade relations and economic and technical cooperation, as well as cultural interactions, health, and education (Lubinda and Jian, 2018, pp. 207-209b). The Sino-Zambia bilateral relations actually led to the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Rail Line (TAZARA), which was constructed by the help of China in order to cement the relations between the two countries (Lubinda and Jian, 2018, pp. 207-209b).

Due to the growing Chinese economy over the past 40 years, the Republic of China has also developed a growing interest to continue investing in Zambia's

economy. Research on Zambia and China bilateral relationship also shows that the modern Sino-Zambia relationship actually emerged from the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the CCP policy which was guided by the Mao's theory of the Third World (Mwanawina, 2008b). Although the initial Sino-Zambia bilateral relationship was mostly based on political lines in the formation of alliances against the colonial rule, a relationship which was sparked by the shared colonial history against the west, over the years, has continued to shift its post by moving more towards the economic interests among the two countries based on mutual economic benefits and common developments (Mwanawina, 2008c). The recent Sino-Zambia/Africa relationship is based on the recent Forum, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Mambwe, 2023), with the most recent one held in Dakar in 2021. This, therefore, presents a new position of the China-Zambia relations. In addition, there are instances where both parties agree to upgrade from a new strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership (Lubinda and Jian, 2018, pp. 207-209c). Furthermore, the historical ties between Zambia and China have undergone significant deepening in recent years, encompassing various forms of collaboration, including diplomacy and trade. Both nations have elevated their partnership to new heights, with China playing a vital role in Zambia's nation building endeavours since its early days of independence (Hamusokwe, 2023).

China and Employment Creation in Zambia

China has continued to increase its Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) towards Zambia in the past two decades, and it can be seen that this continued interaction between the two countries has led to some impact on the Zambian labor force (Zhou and Sinkala, 2014a). Furthermore, research has shown that between the period 2000 and 2012, China created a total of 76,000 jobs in Zambia with the manufacturing industry accounting for 20 per cent of the total number of jobs created in the labor force, while the construction industry accounted for 12 per cent, and the Tourism and Service Industries accounting for 10% per cent each, and finally the least of them being in the mining sector standing at 9 per cent (Zhou and Sinkala, 2014b). However, despite this investment commitment shown by China towards Zambia, research shows that China's investment in Zambia's labor force has had a somewhat very negative impression due to many reports that have shown that China has not performed so well with regards to employment creation in Zambia (Leslie, 2016). For instance, in 2011, a comprehensive study on Chinese MNCs operating in Zambia revealed that the worst human rights violation incidents occurred in Chinese companies operating in the mining sector in Zambia (Human Rights Report on Zambia, 2011).

Another study done by the Policy Monitoring and Research Centre (PMRC) on 37 Chinese Multi-National Companies (MNCs) in Zambia in 2018 indicates that of the 37 MNCs sampled, about 30 of them representing 82 per cent of the study population had no presence of a worker's union (Policy Monitoring and Research Centre, 2018a). However, trade unions can be very important to working

environments in the sense that they help with the collective bargaining between the workers and the employers thus, giving the workers a greater chance to negotiate their concerns with their employers. This phenomenon can, however, also partly be attributed to the low union density in Zambia, This can also to an extent be attributed to the high rate of informal employment and the provision of the Industrial and Labor Relations Act in the country which has provisions that exempt an organisation that has less than 25 employees from having a worker's trade union (Policy Monitoring and Research Centre, 2018b). Another study conducted by Frazer and Lungu in 2007 reported that out of 2,100 employees at Chambeshi Copper Mine, only 52 of the workers were employed on a permanent basis and belonged to a worker's union thus representing 2.4% of the then Zambian workforce at the mine. The rest of the work force at the mine was neither on medical nor pension benefits, yet the available 180 Chinese employees at the mine were all on permanent employment contracts. Subsequently, there was only one Zambian employee who was working as part of management.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Hofstede's Model of Cultural Dimensions
The theory which was the focus of this study is the Five Cultural Dimensions Theory. The five cultural value systems or rather the Five Cultural Dimensions Theory is a cultural dimension model propounded by Professor Geert Hofstede. Professor Hoftsede was born in 1928 and has had a long-standing career in Management, Organisational Anthropology and International Management (Panacova, 2020a). Hoftsede is the one who took a pioneering step in the study of cultures across modern nations (ibid). Currently, he still works at Masstricht University as Professor Emeritus, although he is not active due to old age.

During the 70s, Hofstede accessed a huge questionnaire database which sought to understand the various values of individuals from over 50 countries across the world. These data were emanating from individuals who were all working for a single Multinational National Company called IBM. It is from these data that he developed his theory on the dimensions of cultural differences. Consequently, in 1980, while doing his research analysis, he discovered four main varying cultural value dimensions, which indicated how various cultures differed from each other (Panacova, 2020b).

Intercultural Communication and Language

There is a very important nexus between culture and language. This can be observed in how people from across the globe express themselves in the way they communicate. All form of expression either non-verbally or verbally is influenced by some aspects of a particular people's culture who are utilising the form of language to express themselves. It is actually noted that various existing languages have their own peculiar interpretation of the world around them (Yuan, 2009a). Actually, it is also true that there is no person who can claim to perceive the world

around them completely free of impartiality (Yuan, 2009b). This is because there is always a certain cultural bias influencing people's interpretation of the world (Yuan, 2009c). Consequently, an observed phenomenon by two or more individuals of different cultural backgrounds may not be interpreted the same unless if they do share the same language (Yuan, 2009d). This, therefore, shows the complexity that exists in accurately conveying information in an intercultural community, and it is, as a result of this that the language used in interrelationships and the cultural values really depict a very significant aspect of business.

Samovar (1981), alludes that language exists as a symbol of communication, however, not all intended messages are able to pass through the 'language barriers', It is for this reason that it becomes very important for one to understand how people assign meaning to messages, as well as the 'conditions' and even 'directives' through which messages may not be interpreted. Furthermore, considering that communication (characterised by both verbal and non-verbal language) is the backbone of culture, it does have a significant effect on "cross-cultural management". Additionally, some scholars have argued that the most prominent observed characteristic shared between Africa and China is in the way that they both conceive thought and go about handling situations (Miahouakana, 2008).

Africa and China Through The Lens of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Now Africa and China are different and similar in many ways with regards to their political, economic, and social systems; their values and the laws. For instance, Hofstede (1998) sets out the differences as follows; initially he describes the differences in terms of 'power distance'. Although China has shown some tendency of decentralised power, it is highly centralised, whereas Africa is decentralised. Mbigi (1994) contends that high power distance societies normally exhibit the tendency to entrust so much power in a single individual's position within hierarchy. This is observed in how they hold very strong dependency on each other for instance in the relationship between a leader and a subordinate, or children and parents. Those that hold higher positions in society are accorded a higher status and are very much respected. It is quite common in China that a subordinate would not respond to a client's query on behalf of the organisation as that is the work of their superior. On the other hand, low power distance societies exhibit power tolerance tendencies where subordinates can assess authority to evaluate their 'rightfulness'.

Furthermore, China and Africa display a collectivist inclination. Collectivist societies are societies that show much respect to the needs and interests of the group, they put priority to group over individual interests. Beamer (2003) contends that in collectivist societies, individuals regard themselves as belonging to the larger group to which they are to remain indebted and the group then rewards them for being so loyal to it. However, this is not the same with individualistic societies, where the interest and needs of the individual are prioritised. In individualised societies, ties among people are very loose such that each member of the society is expected to take care of his or her needs and that of his or her 'immediate family' (Hofstede, 1997).

The other dimension is that of masculinity and femininity. Robert (2004) posits that Africa as compared to China is highly masculine. The masculinity-femininity dimension brings into play aspects of the extent to which preference towards "traditional male orientation of ambition and achievement are preferred from the traditional female orientation of nurturance and interpersonal harmony." In other terms masculinity and femininity could be looked at from the view of how a society perceives the role of men and women. Indeed, different cultures attach different roles to males and females, therefore, depending on the cultural orientation there is always varying motivation with regard to the goals that one must achieve. For example, in cultures that are more masculine in nature, assertiveness is highly predominant, they exhibit more aggression towards the achievement of material possession; money, cars, houses, lavish lifestyle. In a masculine-oriented culture, members of society are more competitive and ambitious; thus, 'wealth accumulation and material possession are always prioritised and valued' (Usunier & Lee, 2005).

Hofstede (1997), argues that feminine-oriented cultures exhibit more priority and value on the quality of life. It is for this reason that feminine cultures value the quality of relationships too. Therefore, China as opposed to Africa as a continent is considered more feminine. Cultures that are feminine are more of the passive goal type, and they value social relevance and the welfare of others (ibid). It is also likely that employees from a masculine-oriented culture would make assertive decision-makers, as they place belief in factual information as opposed to group discussions (Newman and Nollen, 1996). Yet Hofstede (1997) further assets that employees from a feminine cultural background, on the other hand, are more "intuitive as compared to being decisive for consensus". Thus, they pay particular attention to what is suggested by the group.

Uncertainty avoidance is yet another dimension that has been explored by many scholars. This dimension is concerned with how a particular culture approaches uncertainty. Some cultures usually avoid ambiguity, uncertainty or circumstances that are new to them. Thus, depending on how a group of people perceive uncertainty they can either be ranked as high or low uncertainty avoidance cultures (Prime, 1994). For instance, the Chinese and African people are both regarded as high uncertainty avoidance people (He and Liu, 2010). Indeed, while cultures that are considered as high uncertainty avoidance would rather prefer structure, order and consistent routine of doing things in fear of uncertainty, the low uncertainty avoidance cultures prefer to dare into the face of uncertainty and face new challenges and new opportunities (He and Liu, 2010).

China and Africa also differ with regard to their perception of the future, present and the past in terms of time orientation. This dimension of societies is referred to by Hofstede (1997) as the 'long-term - short-term orientation'. In his arguments, Hofstede states that a particular society's time orientation determines the relevance that the members of that society will attach to the future, the past and present. For instance, societies that have a long-term oriented culture, exhibit a temperament of "persistence", ordering relationships by status; they also value carefulness and sense of shame. On the other hand, in short-term oriented cultures, value is placed

towards the exchange of greetings, personal steadiness and stability, and securing one's face; there is also so much respect for tradition and the reciprocation of favours and gifts (ibid).

In comparison to China, Africa is short-term oriented while China is long term oriented. For example, the Chinese may start planning for a project to be achieved in fifty years, time ahead, which is also referred to in other terms as the "Confucian Dynamism". The long-term short-term orientation is a concept that focuses on a society's capacity to exercise and practice delayed gratification. The Chinese may also save money and show lots of patience in realising the results of their savings, African countries on the contrary exhibit short-term gratification with a high degree of wanting to maximise the current rewards. Mostly, they are relatively less likely to practice in the habit of saving and anticipating long-term rewards (McCoy, 1995).

Methodology

The study employed a case study approach. The case study research is an investigation and analysis of a single or collective case, intended to capture the complexity of the object of study (Stake, 1995). Qualitative case study research, as described by Stake (1995), draws together 'naturalistic, holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological, and biographic research methods' in a bricoleur design, or in his words, 'a palette of methods' (Stake, 1995, pp. xi-xii). The study was conducted in the interpretivist paradigm, and the sample was purposively selected using the non-proportionate quota sampling as described by Etikan and Bala (2017). This sampling technique was found appropriate for this study as the researcher was interested in race as the major control variable or characteristic of the population. Whereas the inclusion criteria included; hierarchy, duration of service or experience (for this study employees who had been employed for more than 6 months were considered), and position at company. It is important to note that the industry or classification of the business practiced by the selected MNC was not considered in the inclusion criteria because the researcher was only interested in evaluating the staff interaction or communication process among staff in the selected Chinese MNCs.

Further, as described above, the use of quota sample, which leads to stratification of a sample (for example, Chinese and Zambian employees, Middle and Lower Management levels), allows the researcher to more easily compare these groups (strata) (Sharma, 2017).

Based on the nature of the study, the sample included 14 Zambian and 4 Chinese nationals working for the selected Chinese firms operating within Lusaka city in Lusaka Province of Zambia with whom the in-depth interviews were conducted. Despite the focus of the research being on Zambian nationals, it was important for the researcher to include the perspectives of the Chinese nationals in order to enrich the findings. Precisely, nine (09) employees were selected from each organisation. The selected employees included; seven (07) employees of Zambian descent and two (02) Chinese nationals from each of the organisations.

FINDINGS:

Common Communication Practices in Chinese MNCS Operating in Zambia

Chinese MNCs that have Chinese nationals who are conversant with the English language exhibit improved verbal communication between the Chinese and their Zambian workers despite the fact that only a few of the Chinese nationals could be able to fluently express themselves in English language. Conversely, English proved a little difficult for most Chinese to be able to fully express themselves verbally to their Zambian co-workers. As such, the use of written communication via text messaging and emailing were found to be more appropriate communication strategies. Based on this fact, it was reported that the WhatsApp social media platform was highly utilised where employee groups were formed in a bid to reduce communication challenges. Hence, large volumes of work-related text could be conveyed between Chinese and Zambian employees via WhatsApp.

Further, the other reported complementary strategy to the written communication strategy was the use of the email. Emailing especially for wholly formal communication needs. These strategies were reported to have had enhanced the communication process in that they enabled both parties to fully understand each other with less communication barriers as opposed to verbal communication. In relation to this, Oetzedl (2005) elucidates well on the impact of technological advancement in MNCs communication practices in a globalised world today. He states that globalisation has resulted in increased interaction of people from multinational cultural backgrounds (Oetzedl, 2005).

Under globalisation, international joint ventures and global business teams, multinational companies operate completely in a virtual environment through technological electronic communication (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999). Further, Louhiala-Salminen (1996) found that the fax was the most used channel for exchanging messages in English, and an increased use of e-mail, which was replacing mailed business letters in the Finnish business community. In another study conducted in China, it was revealed that the internet had economically impacted business communication such that the e-mail was reported as highly utilised virtual communication platform that Chinese intellectual's preferred when communicating among themselves and with the West (Liu, 2000).

In some instances, the use of interpreters was considered to be a more convenient method to communicate among employees in the sampled MNCs. It was revealed that Chinese MNCs employed interpreters to help them convey information to the rest of the company employees especially in the case where most Chinese employees could hardly express themselves in English language. In the selection of interpreters, priority was given to local or Zambian nationals who were fluent in Chinese language. The interpreters helped to bridge the communication gap between the Zambian employees and their Chinese co-workers. However, although the interpreters helped reduce the communication asymmetries that exist due to language barrier between employees of Zambian and Chinese descent, it

was observed that it did not bridge the cultural gap between Chinese and Zambian employees in the selected MNCs. Hence, despite finding various means to reduce communication gaps perpetuated by the language barrier, there were hardly any reported efforts in the study that were targeted at bridging the cultural gaps between the two cultures in the sampled MNCs. This further showed that Chinese were more comfortable in maintaining their language and culture as opposed to learning the host country's culture, as long as they were able to ensure that business was being conducted as usual.

This is contrary to the assertions given by Lui (2005) who contended that English has become an international business language under globalisation and that after adopting an open-door policy in 1978, the Chinese are making tremendous efforts to learn English and now use English very widely for business purposes. He stated that using English seems to be an essential part of the professional competence required to secure a job in multinational enterprises or joint ventures in China. Further, the findings of this study still stand contrary to the description given by Berns (2005) regarding the advancing and thirstiness of the use of the Queen's language in the Chinese society. He stated that a popular motto is 'know English, have work, and earn money' learning English for money (Berns, 2005, p. 87). In China, teaching and learning for native-like 'mastery' has been replaced by teaching and learning English for communicative competence, providing 'learners with the wherewithal to locate themselves in the real world as bona fide users of English' (Berns, 2005, p. 87).

Further, the use of gestures while communicating among Zambian and Chinese employees was also utilised. Although without application of any professional sign language skills, gestures were found very appropriate during conversations especially in instances where there was lack of words to express oneself during a conversation. For example, if one (Chinese) wanted to agree with someone (Zambian) they could nod their head up and down or point at an object whose name they could not pronounce properly to their colleague. Actually, the study revealed that gestures necessitated quick communication flow, especially that over time employees were able to even generate colloquial communication strategies which were largely comprised of gestures, and pseudonyms. However, this form of communication proved to be difficult in some instances due to the fact that different cultures read gestures differently. Therefore, sometimes one could interpret a gesture differently resulting into miscommunication and in worst case scenarios work environment wrangles among employees.

Hall's (1976) sentiments, when he first coined the terminology 'Intercultural Communication', also suggested that 'high context' cultures employ implicit methods such as facial expression, body language or symbolic objects to interpret messages as opposed to more explicit 'low context' cultures. However, as small and insignificant as it may seem, non-language code has the power to 'make or break' efforts in business settings to some degree. For example, Chinese business women may unwittingly leave a negative impression on negotiators from another country

due to their lack of eye contact and firmness of handshake resulting from adherence to the long established tradition of Three Obediences and Four Virtues for Women. In accordance with the imposed behavioural norms of feudal society, Chinese women were expected to practice Three Obediences: obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her sons in widowhood; and Four Virtues proper which include virtues, speech, countenance and conduct (Rogers *et al.*, 2002).

While somewhat obsolete, these codes still exert an insidious effect on the behaviour of Chinese female professionals, investing in the Chinese women with docile personalities and negative views of aggressiveness (Hall, 1976). Consequently, Chinese businesswomen are subconsciously inclined to avoid direct gaze. Hall (1976) further states that this is often misread by Americans who culturally consider eye contact and a firm grasp as connoting honesty, confidence and trustworthiness. A doubtful and suspicious atmosphere is, therefore, created even before a negotiation occurs. The outcome and the interests of the two parties is very likely to be further jeopardised (Rogers *et al.*, 2002).

Views on the Effectiveness of Communication Practices in Chinese MNCS

There appears to be some contradicting views regarding the effectiveness of the communication channels used in Chinese MNCs. One angle suggests that the communication strategies are quite effective, whereas the other one suggests that they are not effective. Most of the study participants held the view that the communication practices were quite effective. Indeed, despite the intercultural communication barriers experienced when communicating with their Chinese co-workers, Zambian nationals contended that the communication practices utilised at their work environment either improvised by employees themselves or legitimate communication mechanisms utilised by the company, were still effective because they could still manage to operate and carry out their daily duties as intended. Therefore, this meant that depending on the context in which the communication practice was being utilised, if at all it managed to help the workers carry out their duties regardless of the communication challenges experienced, it was still regarded as an effective communication practice. This also showed that the Zambian nationals were actually aware of the existing cultural differences between them and their Chinese colleagues and thus they were able to understand the communication challenges and the devised communication practices by their Chinese colleagues. Rozkwitalska (2013), who looked at effective cross-cultural relationships in foreign subsidiaries of multinational corporations in Poland, revealed that the employees were aware of the existing barriers to cross-cultural relationships, and these were categorised as follows: 'cultural distance imbedded barriers, organisational barriers, and individual rooted barriers'. For the first category, over 60 per cent of the participants indicated to having observed 'national culture influenced behavioural differences'in colleagues of a different culture (foreigners), which they felt were a source of problems in their interactions.

Conversely, in instances where some employees faced consecutive communication challenges which they felt needed to be attended to, it did not matter whether they still managed to execute their duties as instructed. Therefore, these regarded the communication practices as non-effective. Hence, despite them managing to communicate, they felt there was still need to make amendments to ensure improved and effective communication with less barriers. Thus, it can be deduced that to some extent some of the Zambian nationals were not content with the communication practices that were being practiced by their Chinese colleagues. Further, this also showed that in the long-run, these communication practices were weighing negatively on the local employees (Zambians). Hence, they felt there was still need to find better ways to improve the communication process in their working environment.

Xing *et al.* (2016), through in-depth narrative interviews and a story telling methodology, looked at the intercultural influences on managing African employees of Chinese firms in Africa. Their study concluded that in the long-run, the crossvergence of the Chinese human resource management style in the African soils would affect the working behaviour of the African employees hence, the need for the 'cross-cultural training' and 'mutual learning' between the two groups to enhance effective intercultural communication between the Chinese and African employees working for the Chinese MNCs that are operating in Africa.

Barriers To Effective Communication Between Zambian And Chinese Employees

A milliard of culturally related barriers affect the effective intercultural communication process among employees of Zambian and the Chinese decent in Chinese operating in Lusaka, Zambia. For instance, despite the Chinese society, just as most African societies, upholding the collectivist and high-power cultural characteristics where power is mostly attained due to one's position in society, respect for the elderly in society is expected to be one of the fundamental aspects of society. On the contrary, it was revealed that the Chinese employees did not seem to consider the aspect of age and respect towards the elderly Zambian employees. Perhaps, this could have been due to the work environment context where one's age does not normally matter more than their commitment to meeting their assigned duties and responsibilities. Chinese employees did not seem to give respect to their elderly Zambian co-workers because they could call them by their first names and even treat them without respect despite the age difference. For example, a 24-year-old Chinese worker could treat a 50-year-old Zambian co-worker as an equal disregarding their age differences. However, this sometimes affected the communication process. The revealed phenomenon is, however, contradicting the assertions of Mbigi (1994) who contends that high power distance societies normally exhibit the tendency to entrust so much power in a single individual's position within hierarchy. This is observed in how they hold very strong dependency on each other for instance, a leader and a subordinate, or the relationship between children and parents. Those that hold higher positions in society are accorded a higher status and much respect.

Similarly, exchanging pleasantries which is highly regarded as a mood determining factor in most African societies that are collectivists and communal in nature was not being observed or regarded as an important communication factor by the Chinese employees in the selected MNCs. It is important to note that in most African societies that are highly collective in their set up, greeting members of the same community or strangers is considered as an important aspect of the socialisation and communication process. In Zambia, for instance, exchanging pleasantries, especially when you first meet an individual in the day is considered a very important aspect of the communication process, which to a higher extent determines the kind of mood an individual may have. Chinese employees did not consider greeting the first time they meet a co-worker in the day as an important aspect of the communication process. These findings reveal that Zambian employees were more oriented at maintaining good rapport with the each other whereas the Chinese workers did not see that as a significant factor in the intercultural communication process.

The above findings are in consonance with a study conducted in Sweden by Wilczewski *et al.* (2014), where they attempted to evaluate the impact of individualism, collectivism, and communal orientation on the attitudes of employees towards intercultural communication. A correlational analysis was conducted to scrutinise data that was collected from 20 Chinese nationals from an MNC, It revealed that although the collectivist employees exhibited a positive attitude towards cultural diversity, they showed very serious desire for respect towards their cultural values. Furthermore, collectivist and communally-oriented employees displayed no emotional involvement with their fellow workers from different cultures. Consequently, while the collectivist-oriented employees focused more on the norms in the working environment, the communal-oriented employees focused on maintaining and regulating relations within the employee group.

Contrary to Mattingly *et al.* (2011), who examined the extent to which the strength originating from communal orientation was a mediating factor for behaviours responsible for friendship maintenance among employees. Their study revealed that participants that displayed a communal orientation were more likely to prioritise their partners' preferences, even sacrificing their own interests over others as compared to those with 'a low level of relational-interdependent self-construal'. This study revealed that despite coming from a communal background, the Chinese employees in the selected MNCs did not show interest in maintaining friendships nor show interest to prioritising their colleagues.

Indeed, understanding cultural nuances of a host country is of great significance to the success of MNCs. For instance, Panella (1998) pointed out that 28 per cent of all executives have been successful precisely because they possessed foreign language skills or international experience. Saucede (2003), also states that 'English-only' policies cannot reflect required diversity in workplaces. He suggests that managers should learn 'friendship greetings' even calling individuals by their names and pronouncing the names in their original languages. This is

because people appreciate an honest attempt at pronouncing a name. They regard that as a sincere gesture itself; although in some instances, the pronunciation may not often be accurate, but it is a sign of good will (Slate, 1993).

Furthermore, Chinese employees do not exercise patience in the place of work. It was reported that they were workaholics and lacked understanding and patience when it comes to executing daily work activities. It was reported that the Chinese employees actually spoke much faster compared to their Zambian colleagues. This also affected the communication process because their Zambian colleagues could not easily comprehend their expressions and worse, consider their communication as a harsh confrontation. These findings resonate with Liu (2005), who described China's cultural diversity despite it being a collectivist and high-power society. He alludes that China is a diverse country with a diverse ethnic deposition. For instance, compared with more delicate southern culture, the Chinese in the North are famous for their forthright and blunt personality. Hence, automobile companies are more often located in the North whereas light industry such as manufacturing and family enterprise congregate in the south where the business atmosphere is more meticulous and detail oriented. Perhaps, due to this diversity, foreign people in Chinese MNCs who get to interact with Chinese people from Northern China would conclude that they are harsh and lack patience due to their blunt personalities (Liu, 2005).

Similarly, the inability for some of the Chinese employees to clearly pronounce English words the way they are supposed to be pronounced also acted as a communication barrier to some extent. This is because even those Chinese employees who know how to speak English language were still not clear in communicating with their Zambian colleagues due to their English language phonological challenges. For instance, phonological challenges could sometimes lead to grievous mistakes when trying to give instruction or convey a message to a Zambian employee if a particular terminology was mistaken for something else.

Li (2011), asserted that there are two respects to the linguistic challenge: semantics and context. It is important for companies to truly understand both the meaning of words and their usage context to successfully enter into another market. The best-case scenario that exemplifies these findings are the two instances by Zhang and Xu (2007). They give a couple of examples of PEPSI in China and another Chinese battery manufacturing company, which went to establish itself in a Western market. Before Pepsi established itself to China, it first conducted a market research on Chinese consumers' cultural psychology. The research revealed that Chinese people tend to purchase brands associated with auspicious meanings, given that the other qualities are similar. As a result, instead of phonetically translating Pepsi into Chinese, which is the common practice of most foreign companies, it named itself 'Bai Shi Ke Le.' which means 'everything is enjoyable' in Chinese, and consequently, became an immediate success upon its debut in Chinese markets. In contrast, a Chinese battery production company, without considering idiom or semantics, literally translated its product name into 'White Elephant.' Unlike its Chinese version, this phrase has negative connotation in English. Unsurprisingly, the name doomed the product's overseas sales from the beginning (Zhang and Xu, 2007).

Undeniably, this shows how semantics and context exist as cardinal aspects of language, understanding this is of great significance for MNCs as language is governed by these aspects, which are actually building blocks of language. Therefore, understanding how particular words must be phrased, pronounced and in what context, carries meaning which influences the receiver's comprehension capacity and if this is not followed, miscommunication is thus, inevitable.

In most instances, many Chinese employees do not speak improved English language, which is the Zambian official business language of communication. Hence, the language barrier challenges in many cases hamper effective communication between the Zambian employees and their Chinese co-workers. This questions the hiring procedures utilised in employing individuals of Chinese descent in the selected MNCs in the study. The business language fluency of a host country must be priority in the hiring process of the MNCs. Indeed, communicating in English is one of the priority requirements to work in the business community (Kordsmeier, and Rogers, 2000). Johnson (2000), states that using a language and interacting with others through coherent discourse is the knowledge systems underlying appropriate use of language in professional contexts. The findings of the present study are contrary to those of Kordsmeier, and Rogers (2000) who surveyed human resource managers in United States companies to determine the foreign language needs of their companies. They found that of the 171 human resource managers responding, 78.9 per cent indicated a need for foreign language fluency at their companies. Foreign language fluency was a consideration in the initial hiring decisions of 42.0 per cent of the multinational corporations while 66.0 per cent considered foreign language fluency in making their retention decisions (Kordsmeier and Rogers, 2000).

Adding on, employees of Zambian decent do not enjoy enough capacity to contribute towards-decision making in the selected MNCs. The study revealed that when it comes to participation in the company's decision-making process, most Zambian employees did not have enough chance to voice out their views to management on how they felt some aspects of the organisational operations needed to function. For instance, in cases where an employee of Zambian decent had a chance, it was only limited and had to be approved by management before it was considered as a suggestion. Other than that, in some instances, the suggestion made by a subordinate employee of Zambian decent would lead that person to getting a dismissal if at all the suggestion made was not welcomed.

Accordingly, unwelcome suggestions resulted into punishment either through warning letters or even getting fired in worst case scenarios. This sort of phenomenon consequently affected the intercultural communication process between the local subordinate Zambian employees and their Chinese colleagues. This sort of hard or rigid management style was typical in all selected MNCs in the sample population. Therefore, the findings revealed that the selected MNCs preferred the top down as opposed to the bottom up approach in organisational management approaches. Perhaps this is also due to the Chinese cultural orientation that highly values and respects high power distance, where subordinates must receive delegation from

their superiors and not vice versa. This type of orientation disregards suggestions from subordinates and views it as rebellious behaviour among employees who voiced out their opinions.

This conforms to the theory of the cultural dimensions which posits that cultures that exhibit high power distance dimension tend to accept the differences in society and they consider them as natural; hence, the role of hierarchy in decision-making. This means that the superiors are responsible for the provision of instructions to their subordinates without consulting the subordinates. The subordinates act in line with the commands coming from their superiors, and as such, it is common for high power distance cultures to have autocratic governance systems (Hofstede, 2011c: 9).

Rozkwitalska (2013), who looked at effective cross-cultural relationships in foreign subsidiaries of multinational corporations in Poland, found that employees were aware of the existing barriers to cross cultural relationships, which were categorised as follows: 'cultural distance imbedded barriers, organisational barriers, and individual rooted barriers'. For the first category, over 60 per cent of the participants indicated having observed 'national culture influenced behavioural differences' in colleagues of a different culture (foreigners), which they felt were a source of problems in their interactions. The participants also indicated having observed differences such as; 'superior role and his/her leadership style, the approach to delegation of authority, preferences for the decision-making style, preferences for the scope and frequency of information flow from the mother company and a subsidiary, and the attitude towards women. Life priorities displayed at work versus personal life dilemma, preferences for the necessity and scope of formalisation, the importance attached to external and internal interpersonal relationships, the differences in human resource management's approaches such as hard verses soft approaches, and perception of feedback, including behavioural differences, verbal and non-verbal communication and many others' were among the differences.

Actually, Chen (2009) also holds similar sentiments as revealed in the present study where he posits that in most Western culture oriented organisations, the leadership skill is often mentioned. For instance, recruiters usually prefer candidates who are inclined to take initiative or push the status quo to change, rather than passively wait. Nevertheless, this commendable quality may not be seen as favourable by Chinese management culture, where following the prescribed order and keeping the working routine are the norm, and taking initiative to effect changes is viewed as going beyond one's duties and meddling with another's affairs. This kind of cultural atmosphere is especially apparent in Chinese governmental organisations where authoritative culture is prevalent and the leaders are at the helm, shepherding the subordinate to follow orders (Chen, 2009).

This basically shows why MNCs need to understand the intercultural aspects of communication to avoid such related communication challenges within the work place. It is vital that the cultures of the host country be studied and understood to develop measures that would reduce these challenges in the MNCs and eventually help in improving organisational efficiency and productivity.

Conclusion

As can be observed, the intercultural communication challenges that affect the Chinese MNCs operating in Zambia are quite crucial. Although this particular discourse has gotten a little stale over the recent years in the academic fora, this topic is worth the discussion and current rising issues that surround it, need a harkening ear for the benefit of both the local employees who work in these MNCs and the very MNCs. This is in the sense that the MNCs will experience optimum results from their employees while employees will also benefit from improved working conditions in their work places. Hence, the corporate communications discourse need not to throw this topic under the table. In fact, while addressing cooperate communications issues, intercultural communications must rank first, especially that it takes place even among individuals of a host country but hailing from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, addressing the intercultural differences in MNCs require a holistic yet comprehensive approach that ensures that both cooperate and individual cultural nuances are identified and incorporated into the organisational communication strategies.

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