

# *An ethnographic study of Chinese business expatriates in Tanzania*

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## Dissertation

# An Ethnographic Study of Chinese Business Expatriates in Tanzania

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## AIB Insights

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This ethnographic study investigates the motivations and experiences of Chinese business expatriates in Tanzania, focusing on their life management, language proficiency, and engagement with petty corruption. Chinese expatriates' motivation for expatriation is often pragmatic, prioritizing family-oriented well-being over individual well-being. Language proficiency is shown to mediate power dynamics and reduce information asymmetry, while petty corruption is a strategic investment to navigate bureaucracy and secure benefits, despite an imbalance in reciprocity. This study enhances our understanding of the cross-cultural experiences of Chinese expatriates in Tanzania and offers valuable insights for effective International Human Resource Management (IHRM) practices.

## BIG QUESTION

Why do Chinese expatriates go to Tanzania and how do they manage their lives there?

## INTRODUCTION

One critical aspect of China's presence in Africa that intrigues international human resource management scholars is the role of Chinese labor. Chinese SOEs have been criticized for employing large numbers of unskilled Chinese workers, potentially limiting job opportunities for local employees. In general, Chinese expatriates in emerging markets have a high tolerance for hardship at both the operational and management levels (Rui, Zhang, & Shipman, 2017). Cost-effectiveness could be considered as their competitive advantage, as they work for less money than their Western peers but may have higher levels of productivity compared to locals. Additionally, Chinese expatriates are often characterized by discipline, adaptability, obedience, and flexibility in their roles. Companies, particularly state-owned enterprises (SOEs), frequently implement integrated management strategies that emphasize strict discipline, centralized control, and collective support. In SOEs' foreign locations, expatriates commonly reside in compounds with regulations that restrict their movement, further reinforcing these management practices.

But who are these Chinese expatriates in Tanzania? Why do they choose to work there, despite the challenges of separation from families and facing hardships? How do they

manage their lives there? Through immersion in the Chinese community for seven months in Tanzania, the researcher was able to explore Chinese expatriates' backgrounds and motivations, and to highlight two key issues that are relevant yet often overlooked: language and petty corruption. In IB, there have been broad-brush examinations of the "China in Africa" issue (Cooke, 2014; Cooke et al., 2015), but these sometimes risk aggregating many different contexts and accepting some dubious social assumptions. This study addresses a gap in understanding individuals who choose to work and live in Africa, amid the broader discourse of China in Africa (Benfratello, D'Ambrosio, & Sangrigoli, 2023; Gilpin, 2023).

## BACKGROUND OF CHINESE EXPATRIATES IN AFRICA

Chinese business expatriates in Tanzania are a heterogeneous group. Three dimensions have been found critical to understanding the background of Chinese expatriates in Tanzania: family, education, and personal. Chinese expatriates in private firms often come from less affluent families or less-developed regions of China. The responsibilities and burdens of supporting their family become a key factor that pushes them to seek international opportunities. This group is often less educated, which disadvantages them in the highly-competitive job market in China. In line with a low level of education, there is a concern regarding inadequate English proficiency. Another issue related to education, as identified by the expatriates themselves, is the

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perception of “low quality”, which is reflected in socially inappropriate behaviors such as poor communication skills, lack of professionalism in workplace interactions, and a tendency to disregard local customs and norms. In contrast, SOEs have a more rigorous selection process for expatriates, and their employees generally have higher levels of education and English language proficiency. SOEs also tend to have more comprehensive pre-departure training. Expatriates from SOEs are portrayed by locals as more “exposed” – they have encountered diverse experiences that enable them to more effectively navigate cross-cultural communication.

The future anchor of Chinese expatriates in Africa, the younger generation is viewed as more educated, exposed, and individualistic. Growing up in a more open and inclusive environment, they are typically more willing to embrace cultural differences and see new things from a more positive perspective. Their families tend to be more supportive of their African journey and less dependent on their financial gain.

## MOTIVATION FOR WORKING IN AFRICA

The heterogeneity of Chinese expatriates – e.g., socioeconomic backgrounds and ages – leads to different motivations and behaviors. The study shows that Chinese expatriates in Tanzania generally see their overseas experience as an “investment” that, above all, seeks to maximize economic efficiency. They usually prioritize family-oriented well-being over individual-oriented well-being. It is, to some extent, associated with their backgrounds characterized by less-affluent families and lower levels of education.

Those who invest for career advancement are usually working in SOEs. The expected return on investment is a broader platform in which to sharpen their skills and the possibility of faster career progression. Those who expect money as a return on investment are usually more tolerant of adverse circumstances. The asceticism that they must practice overseas is the price they pay for financial gain. Their choices and behaviors revolve around the principle of whether or not it is beneficial to their investment (e.g., which language to learn, which social network to maintain). They value material rewards more than lifestyle. In contrast, the younger generation tends to romanticize their expatriation. Growing up in improved living conditions in China, they are less likely to be driven to Africa by purely material goals; instead, they seek spiritual exploration and rich experiences.

## NAVIGATING PETTY CORRUPTION

Petty corruption is a fact of life for expatriates in countries with weak institutions. It involves bribing officials to speed up processes and decision-making, or to overlook violations such as speeding, smuggling, expired passports, or over-stays in a country (Jancsics, 2019).

Petty corruption is a constant headache for Chinese expatriates in Tanzania, who face an intriguing paradox: their economic privilege coexists with political vulnerability.

While their high economic status makes them targets for local authorities seeking financial gain, it also grants them the power to “buy” preferential treatment in micro-politics, such as expediting administrative processes for visas. Chinese expatriates engage in corrupt exchanges, viewing them as an investment to maximize benefits or mitigate risks. They trade economic capital for political advantages: timesaving, express service, social connections, protection, and negotiation space. Although seemingly insignificant, these “tips” yield substantial gains, securing political favor in personal and business matters.

While reciprocity is a universal principle for the exchange, it may not hold the same value for all individuals. This is supported by the observation in this study that expatriates do not always find the reciprocity they expect. Tanzanians generally have a low exchange orientation and are less concerned with fulfilling their obligations, while the Chinese culture places a high emphasis on exchange orientation, particularly through *guanxi*, and individuals tend to be meticulous in monitoring their obligations and keeping score. As a result, there is an imbalance in the exchange, with local officials giving more weight to economic exchange, while Chinese expatriates expect, in addition, an element of social exchange.

In such scenarios, two factors drive Chinese expatriates’ dependence on local officials, creating a power imbalance. First, their strong investment in petty corruption – offering small economic capital for significant benefits – stems from anxiety about foreignness and the desire to avoid trouble. Second, challenges related to foreignness (language skills, legal awareness, and social connections) lead them to rely more on corrupt relationships. In these situations, a lack of proficiency in the local language is thought to contribute to petty corruption, as expatriates are unable to effectively explain, negotiate, or defend themselves. Offering “tips” becomes a common strategy to avoid potential troubles.

Interestingly, power dynamics within these relationships evolve. Initial interactions may exploit expatriates, but repeated encounters lead to familiarity. Over time, “exchange” replaces coercion, challenging the perception that petty corruption is solely extortion initiated by officials.

## LANGUAGE MATTERS: BALANCING POWER DYNAMICS

Language plays a pivotal role in the daily interactions of Chinese expatriates with locals in Tanzania. Swahili and English serve distinct purposes: Swahili connects people at the grassroots level, while English serves as a gateway to broader opportunities and international communication. The Chinese expatriates’ preferences reflect the idea that their investment in language is shaped by both their internal needs and external environmental requirements.

Investing in Swahili allows investors and employees of private SMEs to gain insight into local customers and penetrate local markets. The convertibility function of capital enables expatriates to transfer linguistic capital into social capital. Speaking Swahili facilitates direct access to local authorities, customers, and clients, through which a solid

social network can be established. Furthermore, this linguistic capital also grants expatriates symbolic protection, safeguarding them against bullying and deception. This protection operates through two mechanisms. The first is *identity transformation*. Speaking Swahili transforms expatriates from outsiders into individuals who have immersed themselves in Tanzanian culture. They become familiar with the environment and local customs, bridging the gap between themselves and the community. They know how things should be done in this context. The second is *cultural appreciation*. Consistent with existing research, this study reveals that locals view expatriates who speak the local language more positively. Trustful relationships are more likely to develop when expatriates demonstrate cultural appreciation through language proficiency.

Investing in English, the medium of higher-level communication in Tanzania, enables expatriates to use language as a criterion to segment their customer base, since English-speaking customers are considered high-quality clients, enhancing the value of maintaining long-lasting customer relationships. The status of English as a medium of instruction in Tanzania, along with its dominant power as a *lingua franca*, gives it considerable capital value that expatriates believe will bring both short- and long-term benefits.

These findings highlight the mediating role of linguistic capital on the power balance between local officials and expatriates. Previous studies have illustrated that language proficiency could reduce the effects of liability of foreignness and therefore contribute a more balanced power dynamics between expatriates and locals. Our study delves deeper into the mechanisms through which language navigates power:

1. *Activating defense mechanisms*: proficiency enables expatriates to communicate, negotiate, and assert themselves effectively in daily interactions – both at work and in personal life.
2. *Diminishing psychological distance*: language competence reduces communication anxiety, especially when dealing with local bureaucracy.
3. *Reducing information asymmetry*: mastery of the local language provides direct access to authentic information – unfiltered and unexaggerated.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study offers insights into the lives of Chinese expatriates in Tanzania, highlighting their diverse backgrounds, motivations, and the strategic roles that language proficiency and engagement with petty corruption play in their daily lives and business activities. It enhances our understanding of the multifaceted role of language in IB (Brannen, Piekari, & Tietze, 2017) and provides an exchange perspective of petty corruption (Heath, Richards, & De Graaf, 2016).

The practical implications of this research for IB, particularly within the domain of IHRM, are multifaceted:

1. *Understanding motivations*: The heterogeneity of Chinese expatriates in terms of socioeconomic backgrounds and ages leads to different motivations and behaviors. While some are driven by economic necessity and practice collective asceticism, the younger generation tends to romanticize their expatriation and seek a balance between work and life. IHRM should recognize these differences and tailor their approaches to managing and supporting expatriates accordingly.
2. *Managing petty corruption*: The study reveals that petty corruption is an unavoidable aspect of life for Chinese expatriates in Tanzania, offering insights applicable to other countries with similarly weak institutions. They engage in corrupt exchanges as a survival strategy to navigate local bureaucracy and secure benefits. IHRM can benefit from this insight by developing strategies to help expatriates understand these challenges and provide organizational support to assist them in navigating the complexities of local bureaucracies and ethical dilemmas they may face.
3. *Language proficiency as a strategic asset*: The study emphasizes the critical role of local language proficiency in negotiating power dynamics between expatriates and locals, particularly in contexts characterized by institutional voids. This has direct implications for IHRM in terms of selecting and preparing expatriates for overseas assignments, emphasizing the value of language training as a critical component of their preparation.

In conclusion, the study provides valuable insights into the lives of Chinese expatriates in Tanzania, offering practical guidance for IHRM in selecting, training, and supporting expatriates to enhance their effectiveness and well-being in international assignments.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Chengcheng Miao** is a Lecturer in IHRM at Henley Business School, University of Reading, where she also earned her PhD. She has extensive industry experience in HRM across various organizational types, including consulting firm, higher education institution, and start-up company. Her research is centred on expatriation management, with a particular emphasis on the cross-cultural experiences of expatriates. She also holds a keen interest in IHRM studies within the context of ‘China in Africa’.

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