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Intercultural Influences on Managing African Employees of Chinese Firms in Africa: Chinese Managers' HRM Practices

Abstract

The present paper addresses the important inter-organizational relationship between Chinese firms and local unions by investigating Chinese managers' HRM practices in managing African employees. We utilize the storytelling research method to obtain a nuanced understanding of this little-understood, yet important phenomenon. Our data was collected through in-depth narrative interviews with 32 Chinese managers (both senior and middle) with three to eight years of professional experience in African countries from 21 Chinese firms (both state-owned and privately-owned). We found that Chinese managers' crossvergence HRM practices are a blend of divergent local contextual factors and convergent cultural factors. Our findings reveal that the cultural proximity between African "Ubuntu" and Chinese Confucianism can significantly influence Chinese firm-local union inter-organizational relationship in managing African employees of Chinese firms. The crossvergence of Chinese managers' HRM practices can gradually affect the work behaviors of African employees over time. The paper identifies importance of the cross-cultural training and mutual learning between Chinese managers and African employees to enhance mutual understanding against the backdrop of Chinese firms entering Africa countries. Our study contributes to the HRM practices of emerging market multinational corporations, and has important practical implications for managing African employees.

Keywords: Chinese firms, African employees, crossvergence, local unions, culture, employee behavior

Intercultural Influences on Managing African Employees of Chinese Firms in Africa: Chinese Managers' HRM Practices

Introduction

Multinational corporations (MNCs) encounter host country organizations that embedded in different institutional environment. The multiple embeddeness of MNCs and local contexts can engender significant influence on organizational practices (Meyer, Mudambi, & Narula, 2011). For instance, labour markets as one important dimension of national institutional environments affect firm performance persistence (Chacar, Newburry, & Vissa, 2010). Amid the rise of emerging market firms venturing into both advanced economies and less developing countries, researchers began exploring the motive, process and consequence of this new emerging phenomenon (Cuervo-Cazurra & Genc, 2008; Luo & Tung, 2007). Despite under the same umbrella concept of emerging economies (Hoskisson, Wright, Filatotchev, & Peng, 2013), yet, emerging markets can vary on most significant dimensions—institutionally, economically, culturally, socially, technologically (Teagarden, 2013).

In recent years, MNCs from emerging countries have entered the African markets with tremendous momentum, especially as attested by the investments and activities of Chinese firms (Power & Mohan, 2008). Existing research on Chinese involvement in African countries has examined mainly the motives and consequences of international aid, trade, and investment through the lens of political economy (Mohan & Power, 2008). For example, Chinese aid has a positive effect on African manufacturing as far as infrastructure and technical training are concerned (McCormick, 2008). There is only scant research examining Chinese HRM practice in Africa. For example, one study analyzed Chinese hiring practices and labor conditions in Zambia, and their effect on local employment practices (Gadzala, 2010). Another recent research found that Chinese and Indian firms can continue to apply in

Africa the labor standards of their home countries (Akorsu & Cooke, 2011). To gain a nuanced, contextualized understanding of management practices in African organizations in general, and of managing African employees in particular, there is an urgent need to examine the organizational level factors (Jackson, Louw, & Zhao, 2012). The present paper fills this important gap by investigating HRM practices in Chinese firms in Africa.

The role of labor unions has been identified as an important factor affecting HRM practices in Africa (Wood, Dibben, Stride, & Webster, 2011; Wood & Glaister, 2008). Wood and Glaister (2008) described the high levels of union power and collective employee participation and involvement in South Africa. In contrast, the union in China not might bear the equivalent function as their counterpart in African countries. African unions commonly differ from Chinese unions in their independent concerns for employees' rights and interests (Ding, Goodall, & Warner, 2002). In China, the Party and state remain the dominant influence on Chinese unions (Friedman & Lee, 2010; Zhu, Warner, & Feng, 2011). Therefore, local union might pose challenges for Chinese firms in managing African employees, ranging from recruiting, to training, to employee compensation. The ability to manage local union-firm relationship can significantly affect HRM practices. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate how Chinese firms interact with local union.

The convergence and divergence debate is central to the diffusion and variation of HRM practices across country boundaries. Both arguments received empirical support: convergence to US practices among subsidiaries (Pudelko & Harzing, 2007) and divergence of HRM characteristics in Western-owned facilities in China and India (Björkman, Budhwar, Smale, & Sumelius, 2008). In the context of MNC subsidiaries in Africa, both divergence and convergence have been observed among back-office employees in the banking sector (Newenham-Kahindi, 2011). The study by Horwitz, Kamoche, and Chew (2002) on the diffusion of high-performance work practices aimed at achieving engagement between

African and Asian employees embraced the "crossvergence" view. Local cultural factors may have an important influencing on HRM practices in the area of employee relations (Klerck, 2012). Some scholars argue that there is cultural proximity between African and Asian employees, for example Ubuntu and Guanxi, and suggest that HRM practices may evolve in the direction of an Afro-Asian nexus based on various global, indigenous, and contingency factors (Horwitz, 2012). "Ubuntu" means the person is a person through other persons (Karsten & Illa, 2005; Mangaliso, 2001), whereas "Guanxi" denotes the interpersonal relationships in the Chinese context (Chen, Chen, & Huang, 2013). Our understanding of Chinese culture reveals an essential element of flexibility and adaptation (Xing & Sims, 2012) that may support the convergence argument linking Guanxi with Ubuntu. Consequently, a question arises concerning the HRM practices of Chinese managers in view of both diverging and converging factors: how does culture influence the Chinese firm-local union inter-organizational relationship?

We chose storytelling as a research method to fit the exploratory nature of our research question. Storytelling can uncover the hidden and even unconscious insights of narrators, and it is especially effective in dealing with complex and dynamic issues (Liu, Xing, & Starik, 2012; Sims, 2005). Our data were collected through in-depth interviews with 32 managers from 21 Chinese firms who have three to eight years of working experience in Africa. The Chinese firms include 14 state-owned enterprises and 7 privately-owned firms covering a wide spectrum of industrial sectors. This primary qualitative dataset enables us to explore Chinese HRM practices in managing local African employees and the influence of culture at the organizational level.

The present study makes several important contributions to both theory and practice. First, we contribute to the crossvergence literature by highlighting the role of adaptation as a prerequisite for the emergence of Chinese managers' crossvergence practices. Second, our

findings lend support to the important role of macro-level factors, in particular local contextual factors and cultural factors influencing the emergence of crossvergence of Chinese HRM practices. Third, we illustrate a process model leading from adaptation to the crossvergence of Chinese HRM practices. Chinese managers' crossvergence practices may have important implications for local African employees' characteristics, such as commitment to organization and work attitude.

The paper is organized as follows. We begin by reviewing the literature on HRM in Africa and China, and the convergence, divergence, and crossvergence debate with respect to HRM practices. Next, we focus on employment relation and cultural influences as important HRM dimensions. We then present the research methodology, including data collection and analysis. We use stories to illustrate the adaptation and crossvergence of Chinese managers' practices and the consequences of crossvergence practices for local African employees. We develop a process model from our data analysis to illustrate the dynamic mechanisms described. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of our findings for managing employees in Africa.

Theoretical background

The nexus between HRM in Africa and China

Although HRM in Africa has received increasing scholarly attention in the past decade (Jackson, 2002; Kamoche, 1997, 2002, 2011; Kamoche & Newenham-Kahindi, 2012), managing people in organizations in Africa remains a scholarly puzzle and a practical challenge, especially amid the rise of emerging-market MNCs from China and India and their interactions with African employees. Existing studies are concerned primarily with making

assumptions and theoretical arguments, with little empirical evidence. For example, a recent conceptual framework of international HRM in emerging economies is backed by one illustration of an Indian MNC (Thite, Wilkinson, & Shah, 2012). Responding to the need to consider the importance of Chinese investments in African countries and of Chinese relationships in these countries (Kamoche, Chizema, Mellahi, & Newenham-Kahindi, 2012), our study fills an important gap by investigating employee management in Chinese organizations in Africa.

Research of Chinese investment in Africa has been conducted primarily through the lenses of international trade and political economy (Kaplinsky & Morris, 2009; Mohan & Power, 2008). The first cause for Chinese investments in Africa are natural resources as the government needs natural resources to supply economic growth (Shoham & Rosenboim, 2009). Furthermore, China's rapid development can affect industry activities and industrialization in Sub-Saharan Africa (Kaplinsky, 2008). China can facilitate African development beyond international aid and trade (Bräutigam, 2009, 2011). For example, the special economic zones in Africa resemble the Chinese experimental approach of building a platform for the mutual benefit of China and Africa (Bräutigam & Tan, 2011). But there is sparse empirical evidence concerning the HRM practices of Chinese companies in conducting business in Africa at the organizational and community levels (Jackson, 2014). HRM in China has undergone a transformation that echoes the development trajectory of China's economic and social reform in recent decades (Cooke, 2009). Traditional Chinese values exert an important influence on contemporary Chinese HRM practices (Warner, 2010). For example, the high level of resistance by Chinese managers to adopting sophisticated performance metrics may be attributed to Chinese labor market factors and cultural norms (Cooke & Huang, 2011). Arguably, HRM practices in China are still too recent to be able to claim a paradigm shift away from Western models (Warner, 2012; Zhu, Thomson, & Cieri,

2008). We believe that our study can offer some important insight into Chinese managers' HRM practices in Africa by exploring organizational-level factors.

Adaptation and crossvergence

In the era of internationalization and globalization, cultural and institutional differences across country boundaries require that MNCs display flexibility and adaptation (Hitt, Keats, & DeMarie, 1998; Miller, 1992). In the field of marketing, the debate on standardization versus adaptation has been intensively researched (Jain, 1989; Theodosiou & Leonidou, 2003). On the one hand, standardization argument viewed markets as increasingly homogeneous and global in scope and scale and believed that the key for survival and growth is a multinational's ability to standardize goods and services (Levitt, 1983; Yip, Johansson, & Roos, 1997). On the other hand, adaptation argument indicated difficulties in using a standardized approach (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 2009), and therefore MNCs are required to implement market tailoring and adaptation to fit different international markets (Vrontis, 2003; Vrontis, Thrassou, & Lamprianou, 2009).

HRM practices may either converge or diverge in the course of the adaptation process (Shipton, Budhwar, & Crawshaw, 2012; Von Glinow, Drost, & Teagarden, 2002). Empirical studies show no consensus in this matter (Brewster, Wood, & Brookes, 2008). The convergence argument received support, in, for example, subsidiary practices appearing to converge to the dominant US practices (Pudelko & Harzing, 2007). By contrast, divergence can be observed in cross-country studies, for example, in the clear differences between HRM characteristics in Western-owned units in China and in India (Björkman et al., 2008). A comparative study of Chinese and UK manufacturing organizations embraced the divergence view by elucidating cross-cultural variations in employee involvement (Hirst et al., 2008).

Management of human resources in country-specific headquarters of MNCs require adaptation and a high level of freedom to develop and implement HR policies and practices (Budhwar, 2012).

Convergence vs. divergence provides an important theoretical lens in studying the HRM practices of MNCs (Rosenzweig & Nohria, 1994). Several studies have examined the convergence of employment practices across countries in Western Europe (Tregaskis & Brewster, 2006). A more recent study, comparing employment practices among firms operating in the emerging economies in the EU and non-EU blocs, found that there was no divergence between firms in the two blocs of countries (Sahadev & Demirbag, 2011). The convergence argument was challenged, however, by several studies exploring HRM practices in Africa. These studies argued that HR practices in Nigeria tend to become a blend of transplanted and indigenous methods owing to the joint influence of universal convergence factors, namely globalization and technology, and locally divergent factors, such as nepotism and bribery (Azolukwam & Perkins, 2009). Consistent with this argument, scholars studying the diffusion of high-performance work practices called for more effective engagement between Africa and Asia based on the notion of "crossvergence" (Horwitz, Kamoche, & Chew, 2002). Crossvergence theory advocates that the combination and dynamic interactions of sociocultural and business ideology influence value systems among individuals (Ralston, 2008; Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung, & Terpstra, 1993). To be explicit, at the level of the individual, the influences of national culture and economic ideology combine to produce a value system that is fully aligned with neither culture nor ideology. For an Afro-Asian nexus in HRM that takes into account both the Asian influences and contextual factors in Africa, a recent study proposed a six-factor typology consisting of (a) converging of African HRM practices with East Asian influences, (b) indigenous thoughts, (c) diffusion of HRM practices, (d) implementation factors, (e) talent management, and (f) contingency factors (Horwitz,

2012). To advance this line of inquiry, we explore how crossvergence of Chinese HRM practices occurs when Chinese managers are managing African employees.

Employment relations and unions

Labor union plays an important role in African countries (Wood & Dibben, 2006). In South Africa, research documented union members' regular participation in union affairs, democratic accountability, participation in collective action, and a strong commitment to the labour movement (Wood & Dibben, 2008). Furthermore, Wood and Glaister (2008) described the high levels of union power and collective employee participation and involvement in South Africa. According to a nationwide survey of Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) members, trade unions enjoy mass support (Buhlungu, Brookes, & Wood, 2008). The survey demonstrated the diversity of African countries and the differences between various characteristics of trade unions. The exploratory case on the role and impact of trade unions in Mozambique reveals progress on employment rights and engagement with the informal sector (Dibben, 2010; Dibben & Nadin, 2011). In a relatively fragile country dominated by informal employment, such as Sierra Leone, unions work with civil society to influence government while building a workplace organization (Stirling, 2011).

When Chinese firms enter African countries, they must recruit and develop local employees both for the purposes of their own business operations and in response to the requirements of local government. Employment relations constitute an important component of Chinese managers' HRM practices (Jackson, 2012) in Africa because it is important to secure business continuity for Chinese companies in African countries. In contrast to Africa, in China, the Party and state remain the dominant influence on Chinese unions (Friedman & Lee, 2010; Zhu et al., 2011). At the 16th National All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU)

congress in October, 2013, the Communist Party of China (CPC) urged Chinese unions to play a greater role in safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of the working class (Xinhua, 2013). Although there are differences between unions in different African countries, from the perspective of Chinese managers, African unions commonly differ from Chinese unions in their independent concerns for employees' rights and interests (Ding et al., 2002). Therefore the encounter of the Chinese managers' HRM practices with African employment relations and unions can be generalized to most Chinese managers in Africa, and the managers' perceptions of union and employment relations in Africa may affect their HRM practices. Hence, we posit the following:

Proposition 1. The difference in the role of labor union between China and Africa is likely to a drive the divergence of Chinese managers' HRM practices in Africa.

The influences of culture and Confucianism on HRM

Research shows that foreign direct investment (FDI) can create local employment and bring capital to Africa, at the same time improving the skills of local employees (Dupasquier & Osakwe, 2006). As reported by Brautigam (2011b), China shows clear commitment to providing training to 15,000 Africans over three years and to training 1,500 principals and teachers, as well as 1,000 doctors, nurses, and health sector managers in thirty countries. Chinese MNCs in Africa can influence local industry activities by promoting mutual learning between the MNCs and the local communities (Alden & Davies, 2006). Jackson (2014) suggested that "Chinese firms could do more in contributing directly to skills development, engaging with communities, mutual learning and looking at how employment conditions might be improved in some areas."

As a salient and important factor, national culture affects international organization in a variety of ways, such as national culture influences expatriate deployment of multinational subsidiaries (Brock, Shenkar, Shoham, & Siscovick, 2008). From a comparative perspective, the difference of societal cultural attributes can explain the regional disparity (Malul, Shoham, & Zolotoy, 2011), as well as linguistic gender making on the subsidiary boards of MNCs (Santacreu-Vasut, Shenkar, & Shoham, 2014). Chinese managers brought their own values, assumptions, management styles, and attitudes to Africa (Jackson, 2014). Scholars have suggested that Chinese culture, for example statement concerning humanness in Confucianism, may have an affinity with the African Ubuntu (Jackson et al., 2013). Ubuntu, in the translation of the Xhosa expression "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," means the person is a person through other persons (Karsten & Illa, 2005; Mangaliso, 2001). Confucius similarly articulates a person's reflexive demeanor taking into account other persons and "treating others as you would like to be treated; never imposing upon others what you dislike yourself" (The Analects, Chapter Lord Wei Ling), stressing a person's immediate connection and obligation to other persons. Ubuntu is a typical African conception of personhood. The term Ubuntu, or an equivalent for it, has currency in the entire population of Sub-Saharan Africa, where "there is a family atmosphere, that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa" (Karstern & Illa, 2005: 612). Similarly to Ubuntu, Guanxi is established on the basis of five types of cardinal relationships of Confucianism (the five "Lun" are the ruler and subjects, the parents and offspring, husband and wife, siblings, and friends). The fundamental ethics behind these cardinal relationships is based on sincerity, loyalty, and obligation. Under the influence of Confucian heritage (Chen & Chen, 2004), Guanxi represents direct particularistic ties between two or more individuals (Chen et al., 2013).

Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucianism, has an important influence on Chinese HRM practices (Warner, 2010). For example, Chinese managers can leverage traditional culture to affect employee loyalty (Aryee, 2007). Confucianism advocates four virtuous principles for conducting personal relationships and social intercourse, namely Ren (benevolence), Yi (righteousness), Li (propriety), and Zhi (wisdom). In particular, leaders who display the virtue of benevolence, treat their subordinates as their own children or siblings, and care about their welfare, are obeyed by their subordinates and earn their loyalty (Ling, Chia, & Fang, 2000). The conceptual proximity and basic assumptions of African Ubuntu and Chinese Guanxi can serve as the foundation for the convergence of cultural influences. Through the notion of "*Confucianism* HRM" (Warner, 2010) we can juxtapose Ubuntu and Guanxi to explore their cultural influences on Chinese managers' HRM practices in managing African employees. Hence, we posit the following:

Proposition 2. The cultural influences of African Ubuntu and Chinese Confucianism have the propensity to drive the convergence of Chinese managers' HRM practices in Africa.

Proposition 3. The cross-cultural influence, especially the cultural proximity of African Ubuntu and Chinese Guanxi, carries the likelihood to moderate the influence of labor union difference on Chinese managers' HRM practices in Africa.

Furthermore, Chinese firms experienced an evolving trajectory from the dominance by state-owned enterprises to a more diverse ownership structures, including private and entrepreneurial firms (Walder, 2011). The state-owned enterprise reform was promoted by the Chinese government (Hassard, Morris, & Sheehan, 2002), that in turn has important influence on workforce and HRM practices (Hassard, Morris, Sheehan, & Yuxin, 2006) State-owned firms tend to have hierarchical structure and less efficiency (Boisot & Child, 1996; White, 2000), whereas privately-owned firms are more entrepreneurial in the pursuit of wealth creation (Peng, 2001). The strategic orientation and difference in the ownership

structure[1], as well as the nature of Chinese investments in Africa countries could have an impact on the strategy of these Chinese companies, including HR strategies and practices in the host countries in the African continent. We suggest this, in turn, can further influence the handling of the local employee relationships by Chinese managers. Hence, we posit the following:

Proposition 4. State-owned enterprise and privately-owned enterprise may manifest variations in interacting with labor union and consequential Chinese managers' HRM practices due to the difference of ownership of Chinese firms in Africa.

Research Methodology

Narratives and the storytelling method

The exploratory nature of our research determined our choice of the qualitative research method, with particular focus on storytelling (Gabriel & Connell, 2010), which is well-suited to reveal the nuances of an emerging phenomenon (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Scholars embraced using qualitative method in researching inter-organizational relationship (Cartwright, Teerikangas, Rouzies, & Wilson-Evered, 2012), such as hybrid organizations (Jolink & Niesten, 2012), and international business in general (Birkinshaw, Brannen, & Tung, 2011; Doz, 2011; Piekkari & Welch, 2006). We rely on a biographical narrative study (Wengraf, 2001), with an emphasis on storytelling method which enables leaders to tell a story (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Storytelling has been used to study cross-border M&A (Søderberg, 2006; Vaara & Tienari, 2011), post-merger integration (Almor, Tarba, & Benjamini, 2009), and intercultural collaborations (Gertsen & Søderberg, 2011), among others.

Narrative approaches to cultural analysis have particular appeal in their ability to capture the richness and complexity of cross-cultural encounters in the organizational life such as strategic alliances, joint ventures, and mergers and acquisitions for their capacity to go beyond what can be assessed through more traditional sources of data, such as surveys, structured or semi-structured interviews (Czarniawska, 1998). In addition, as Søderberg (2006) pointed out, the narrative analysis has potential not only in organization and management studies in general, where it has been widely acknowledged, but also in international business studies, where a narrative approach is almost untried. For instance, in the in–depth examination of a cross-border merger, Søderberg and Holden (2002) reached the conclusion that the narrative approach may be seen as a means by which organizational members create the social reality that frames their sense of who they are, and it also underscores the significance of the managers' and employees' comprehension of the organizational reality that finds its reflection in descriptions of the acquisition–related events. Finally, the narrative approach enables the researchers to grasp the interviewed managers' and employees' different sense-giving and sense-making efforts in the organizational setting (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Weick, 1995).

Our research question aims to explore the inter-relationship between Chinese firms and local union, and its implication on HRM practices. Storytelling is beneficial in shedding important light on the linkage between the macro-level factor and micro-level manifestation (Mirc, 2012). Storytelling has the advantages in studying complex and dynamic organizations and management topics (Liu et al., 2012). Given these advantages of storytelling and our research objectives, we decided to utilize this research method. Consequently, the present study follows a logic of discovery rather than one of proof (Diesing, 1971).

Data collection and analysis

We obtained our data through in-depth interviews with 32 Chinese managers from 21 Chinese firms. The managers had rich working experience in Africa. Contacts with the Chinese managers were made through the first author's professional and personal relationships, and the sample was based on a snowball approach. Government organizations, such as the China-Africa Development Fund, provided valuable connections with potential participants. Our main criterion in choosing participants was at least three years of working experience in Africa. Long-term residence in African countries provides Chinese managers with rich personal and professional experience, which can offer in-depth understanding of African employees and communities in African countries. The 21 Chinese firms include 14 state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and 7 privately-owned firms covering a wide spectrum of industrial sectors such as construction, mining, engineering, wood industry, aerospace, automotive, and telecom. Participants had three to eight years of working experience in African countries. The African countries covered in our sample include Ghana, Ethiopia, the Gabonese Republic, Algeria, Sudan, South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Zambia, Botswana, Guinea, and Congo. The interviewees were senior and middle managers occupying such professional positions as CEO, CFO, vice president, HR director, HR manager, project manager, sales director, research manager, etc. Access to primary data represents a significant obstacle in investigating HRM practices in Chinese firms in Africa. Our dataset is therefore uniquely valuable in exploring our research questions. All the interviews took place in Beijing over a ten-month period, in two phases. The first phase consisted of 22 interviews, and the second phase of 10 interviews. Most of the interviewees, referred to here as "managers," were senior and middle managers aged between 35 and 50. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese, recorded, and

transcribed. Details about our sample are shown in Table 1, which follows a role-matrix by industry sector and manager position.

Insert Table 1 about here

Our data are not about the work practices of African employees but about the Chinese managers' interpretation of their experience of managing African employees. We conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews to obtain the managers' biographical accounts of their managing experience in Africa (Wengraf, 2001).

Each interview consisted of two parts. In the first part we asked about the informants' work experience as managers in Africa, from the beginning to the present. For example, "We would like you to tell us about your work experience in Africa, all the events and experiences that have left a deep impression and are important for you as a manager to this day," or "We want you to tell us about your work experience from the time you worked in Africa to the present." As the stories were being told, we wrote down important topics covered in the narration and identified points that we wanted to clarify or expand on later, such as how they handled employee conflicts, interactions with labor unions, the influence of Chinese culture in managing African employees, and cooperation between Chinese and African employees. The first part ended when the interviewees indicated that they had no more to say. In the second part, we reminded the interviewees of some of the points they had raised and asked for clarifications. In the second phase of data collection, we focused mainly on Chinese managers' perceptions of unions and cultural influences.

We ensured the quality of our data by triangulating on publically available information, and performed a rigorous analysis of our data to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008; Pratt, 2009; Siggelkow, 2007). We adopted the comparative coding method of Strauss and Corbin (1998) to analyze the narrative data. During the first, open

coding stage we identified 12 types of HRM practices of Chinese managers in Africa. In the second coding stage, we classified the Chinese managers' HRM practices into four categories: (a) adaptation to local unions, (b) adaptation to local labor force, (c) culture proximity leading to crossvergence, and (d) employee engagement leading to crossvergence.

Findings

Adaptation as a prerequisite for managing employees in Africa

Contrary to the argument that "MNCs from emerging economies adopt predominantly an 'exportive' or 'ethnocentric' approach to managing their subsidiaries in other emerging markets" (Thite et al., 2012: 254), Chinese firms tend to adapt their HRM practices to the local environment in Africa rather than diffusing their HRM practices. Because of the lack of familiarity with the local business environment (market knowledge, government relations, etc.), and distinct characteristics stemming from cultural differences, Chinese managers must adapt to the local environment in order to manage local employees in Africa. Employees of all firms in our sample stressed the fact that adaptation is of significant importance in managing African employees, for example, adapting to local unions and to local labor force, which influence the work behavior of local employees.

Adapting to local unions

In dealing with employment relations in Africa, Chinese managers had to contend with local unions. Labor union plays an important role in African countries (Wood & Dibben, 2008)

which differs hugely from their counterpart in China. African employees turn to local unions when they are not satisfied with their employer, in particular for dealing with compensation and salary issues. Because labor union has important bearing to the society in African countries, Chinese firms largely choose to comply with African laws and regulations and cannot easily censure or lay off employees. Manager H, HR director of a Chinese state-owned firm, had five years of experience managing African employees in South Africa. He believed that local unions are a significant force influencing African employees:

> *The union is very powerful in Africa, in particular in negotiating salaries, working time, and days off. The head of the union can behave like a politician, organizing the employees to strike in order to protect them. Our firm employed about 6,000 Chinese people and 1,000 local African people. In 2010, we couldn't run the normal business because the union organized the employees to strike. The head of the union did nothing but read the labor protection laws. It is difficult to deal with the unions, because it is so different from our unions in China that mainly concerns the stable development of whole organization under the control of head office. (Manager H)*

From the Chinese managers' perspective, local union functions as an independent organization. Interacting with local union cannot be avoided for Chinese firms. African employees have high awareness of unions and actively seek protection from them. Manager R shared the following observation:

> *The thing that impressed me most is the power of the unions in Africa. When an African employee started working for a firm, he would join the union. If the employee performs badly and the employer wants to lay him off, the union will interact with the employer on behalf of this employee. The outcome will be either that he will continue working in the firm or that the union will negotiate for him a large amount of*

compensation for being laid off. You would not imagine such things happening in China, but our firm encountered this type of challenge in Africa. (Manager R)

This narrative illuminated the interaction between local union and Chinese firms with respect to employees' benefits and employee lay-off practices. As an independent organization, the union can challenge Chinese firms in order to protect African employees. The importance of the unions is felt across the African continent, both in strong countries (Buhlungu et al., 2008) and in relatively fragile ones (Stirling, 2011). Our analysis confirms the overall prevalence of unions in African countries and shows that unions play a significant role in employment relations affecting the perceptions of Chinese managers and Chinese HRM practices in Africa.

Constructive interactions with the unions can produce mutual benefits for both local employees and Chinese firms. Our analysis indicates that building good relationship with local unions assist Chinese firms in managing African employees. This collaborative approach enables Chinese managers to work with the unions in their attempt to cope with less cooperative behavior on the part of African employees. Manager L shared the following experience:

I used to manage a steel manufacturing facility as general manager. My factory had almost 2,000 employees, consisting of over 700 Africans, about 300 Chinese brought from China, and the rest about 1,000 temporary workers. I managed African employees through the union. For example, one African employee didn't follow the rules of discipline, so I first talked to the union and asked the union to solve the problem. When an African employee wants a salary increase, he first talks to the union. The union then talks to managers to solve the problem. Therefore, if you can have a good relationship with the union, the African employee will not strike or

demonstrate anymore. So, it is very important to know and leverage the unions. (Manager L)

For Chinese managers, the union exerts a great deal of external pressure that can result in management difficulties in the daily operation of the firm. To avoid and mitigate confrontation, Chinese firms choose to adapt to African rules and to resort to the local unions to defuse conflicts. This intensifies the Chinese managers' sense that they need to consider the situation from the perspective of the African employees.

Based on our analysis, Chinese managers perceived collaborating with local unions as a crucial component in managing African employees. The Chinese managers' willingness to conform to existing local unions' rules and regulations requests the adaptation of Chinese managers in their HRM practices. The differences between the perceptions of Chinese managers about the role of the unions lend the support to the thesis according to which HRM practices in Africa are different from those applied in China. We observed the contradictions and tensions that emerged as a result of the diverging views on unions of Chinese managers and their effect on Chinese HRM practices in Africa.

Adapting to local labor force

Many Chinese managers indicated that African employees lack time management skills, are used to postponing tasks and refuse to work after work time. Therefore they learn to adapt to African employees' work behavior in order to pursue sustainable development in Africa. They also adapt to local customs and give African employees religious holidays and show respect to them. In our interviews, our Chinese managers admit that they complain these frustrations in managing local employees at the beginning, but gradually they started to

respect and adapt to it, moreover, they recognize the local employees' seriousness and truthful attitude toward work and optimistic attitude towards life. Manager H, with four years of African experience, shared his involvement in building and managing a manufacturing firm in East Africa:

> *African employees receive their salary per finished unit and are encouraged to earn more by working more. But they will not sacrifice quality even if it is the number of units that determines their income. For example, while ironing, they will follow the guidelines trictly as told. Although they tend to have low efficiency, they have good implementation abilities. If you ask a Chinese employee to iron, he may just iron twice over a fabric if it becomes smooth, and he might iron a couple of more times if the fabric was severely wrinkled. But the African employees will just iron ten times, no matter whether the fabric is smooth or not. They strictly follow the rule of ironing ten times. This is their virtue. (Manager H)*

By interacting socially with African employees, Chinese managers recognize the good characteristics of local employees, and based on these, Chinese managers can possibly develop a sustainable relationship with local employees to improve their work efficiency.

Crossvergence in the HRM practices of Chinese managers

Culture proximity between African culture and Chinese culture

Dealing with the challenges associated with the work behavior of African employees, Chinese managers tend to adapt to African approaches. But rather than adapting entirely to the local unions, Chinese managers appear to draw on their own cultural resources and produce a crossvergence of Chinese management and African culture. The cultural influence

of some shared proximity between local and Chinese culture help managers leverage the African people's need for belonging, which is underpinned by Ubuntu.

Recent research found that Ubuntu and Chinese Confucianism share some common ground (Jackson, 2012). Ubuntu emphasizes family relationships and recognizes the existence of kinship in the workplace (Mangaliso, 2001). These concepts resonate with the argument about reciprocity and loyalty that is present in the concept of Guanxi, influenced by Confucianism. Our findings reveal the similarities between Ubuntu and Guanxi. Below we juxtapose these two concepts to illustrate how Chinese managers blend Confucianism with Ubuntu to manage African employees (Table 2).

Insert Table2 about here

Our findings show that the similarity between Ubuntu and Guanxi is apparent at three levels: relationships with others, time, and productivity. These similarities enabled Chinese managers to recognize and integrate local culture into their HRM practices. One director of a state-owned enterprise in the transport industry described how he was influenced culturally in managing African employees:

> *We treat local employees as brothers. For instance, the construction site is very hot in the summer. We distribute sweet mung bean soup to them. Although they don't ask for it, we still give it to them. Gradually, they look upon us with a sense of brotherhood. When you need help, they place themselves in your shoes. For example, in China drivers are not responsible for car maintenance. But my African driver took responsibility for the repair and care of my car. And he thought that I didn't trust him when I asked someone else to repair the car, because he treated me as his brother. After I realized this, I give my driver full responsibility and trusted him to maintain the*

car. From this experience I learned that if you respect and trust him, he will treat you as brother. (Manager Z)

The notion of Guanxi is derived from Confucianism. It refers to the benefits gained through social connections, and it usually spreads out from the extended family. Chinese people are accustomed to cultivating Guanxi relationships. In Ubuntu culture, people also regard relationships as an important factor in their working career. Their perceived relationship with their employers may affect their attitude toward work. If people believe that they are treated with respect and dignity, they respond by showing greater commitment to organizational goals (Mangaliso, 2001). Similarly, Chinese Confucianism believes that the leader's relationship with employees should resemble a family relationship; the leader must win the employees' trust and loyalty. Therefore, Confucianism Chinese HRM (Warner, 2010) may be accepted by African employees. At the same time, the African employees' behavior, strongly influenced by Ubuntu, can benefit from the understanding and support of Chinese managers.

Under the assumption of Ubuntu, time is not a finite commodity to be used efficiently or a tool to be utilized productively, but it is to be experienced without much advance planning.

Manager F explained his understanding of African employees' attitude toward time and work:

African employees' work efficiency seems not high. They tend to go to a bar or drink coffee after work. They spend a lot of time meetings with friends. I had worked in Europe for years, but I prefer African employees' relaxed lifestyle and work-life attitude. This is quite similar to us actually; we also socialize with colleagues after work in Beijing. These activities [go to bar or drink after work] help us build good relationship with local employees.

A behavior of African employees commonly observed by Chinese managers is that work constitutes only part of the African employees' life, and that community life and family are more important. This is a manifestation of the Ubuntu principle of treating others as your brothers and sisters. "I belong, therefore I am." This emphasis on relationships shares a common ground with Guanxi, as they both extend the concept of the family to the professional sphere (Chen et al., 2013). Developing and nurturing Guanxi also demands time. For Chinese managers, spending time to establish Guanxi with their employees is well worth the investment. Therefore it is common for Chinese managers to visit their employees and their families, bringing gifts. Manager F shared the following insight:

> *During the holiday season, we bring gift packages to the employees and their families, and this makes the employees' families understand and support their work. For instance, during traditional Chinese festivals, the Spring Fest, the Moon Fest, Dragon Boat Fest, we also give local employees little red envelopes with money. We also pay particular attention to the employees' family members. For instance, we bring footballs and pencils from China and give them to their kids because there is a lack of such resources in the local community. One employee told me he intended to send his child to China to attend a Chinese university and obtain a good education in the future, and he hoped that his child could start learning Chinese now. During our language training for the local staff we invited him to bring along his child. He was deeply touched. He has been working with us for five years. Many employees have stayed with our firm for a very long time. I believe that mutual understanding, respect, and trust help a lot. (Manager F)*

In the Ubuntu culture, people emphasize social wellbeing and value peaceful and harmonious relationships. Followers of Ubuntu believe that people take care of each other, which can lead to solidarity, community wellbeing, and social harmony. Chinese managers' concern for

African employees and the support they extend to the wellbeing and education of their employees' families win the employees' trust and long-term loyalty and enhance productivity in the long term.

Based on our analysis, cultural influences at the macro level can affect HRM practices at the organizational level. The similarities between Ubuntu and Guanxi can help converge Chinese HRM practices in Africa. But there is a need for both Chinese managers and African employees to show mutual respect and learn from each other's cultures.

Contextualized employee engagement

With respect to the work behavior of African employees, Chinese managers first adapt to the local environment, then leverage cultural influences to gradually activate employee engagement and inculcate a sense of belonging of African employees to the organization. Below we describe the Chinese managers' crossvergence in HRM practices and its implications for promoting African employee engagement.

As discussed, African employees' attitudes toward work and life are highly influenced by indigenous culture, such as Ubuntu. Chinese Confucianism shares some basic assumptions with Ubuntu, which provides a common ground for mutual learning and understandings through social interactions between African and Chinese employees. Our findings show that it is possible to cultivate African employees' behavior while showing respect for their attitude toward work and commitment to the organization.

By interacting socially with African employees, Chinese managers recognize the good characteristics of local employees, and based on these, Chinese managers can develop a sustainable relationship with local employees to improve their work efficiency. Chinese

managers can improve the work efficiency of employees as a consequence of helping them feel sense of achievement and promoting their enthusiasm for work. Manager N, director of a research center, explained how to motivate local college graduates using performance evaluation:

> *Our locally recruited college graduates have a good basis in terms of overall quality. Every year we award an outstanding employee prize based on performance evaluation. This practice has been well received by our local employees. (Manager N)*

To manage African employees, Chinese managers must first adapt their methods of management to local conditions. Instead of being motivated by long-term career expectations or a corporate vision of prosperity, African employees may prefer immediate incentives. Our interviewees introduce a short-term monetary motivation of local employees which has important implications for the design of incentives. Manager M, HR director of a large engineering company in Africa, said:

> *Incentivizing African employees is very different from what you do in China. In China the working environment is highly competitive and it is not even necessary to guarantee promotion based on good performance. The boss will not promise you a promotion if a particular job is well done. In managing African employees we must tell them that there is room for improvement, then articulate explicitly to what extent he can increase his salary. With a clear goal in mind, he will do his best in his job. (Manager M)*

Thus, the explicit communication of short-term benefits to local employees can motivate them in the workplace. Our findings lend empirical support to the argument that appropriate managerial incentives can facilitate knowledge flow between subsidiaries within MNCs (Shoham, Yaari, & Brock, 2003). Our findings extend those of a recent study in Nigeria by

suggesting communication as a mechanism for motivating African employees and evaluating their success (Ituma, Simpson, Ovadje, Cornelius, & Mordi, 2011). Enjoying the benefits of their professional success in their individual lives may bring a sense of achievement to them and promote their work enthusiasm as well as engagement. Manager H tells an interesting story of how he motivated local African employees's enthusiasm for work:

> *Some local employees behave careless, because they don't like or are not suitable for the position. For instance, one local salesman did not perform work task seriously. By accident, we realize his strength and passion in advertising. We recommend him work in the corporate communication department to interact with local media, such as local TV and newspapers. He is now doing a very good job.*

Motivating African employees to accept performance-related pay, adapting Chinese culture so as to cultivate the employees' sense of responsibility for the family promoting employees' enthusiasm for work – all these show that Chinese managers adopt a long-term strategy to circumvent and influence the African employees' work attitude and behavior. As Chinese managers acknowledged, to achieve this strategy they were willing to understand and adapt to the African employees' ways of working, trying to avoid conflict with the locals.

As reflected in our interviews, many Chinese employers found the local employees' frequent turnover and lack of a sense of loyalty to the organization to be a common challenge in managing employees in Africa. They attributed the frequent turnover of local employees to the confrontation between the Chinese employees' willingness of working overtime under the Chinese employers' high expectation of their work commitment and the local employees' relatively low efficiency and lack of commitment. However, to some managers, this contradictory may turn out to be an opportunity to improve local employees' work attitude. They call it "peers' social interaction" between Chinese and African employees which is

regarded as another strategy to increase local employees' engagement. Manager G shared his experience as follows:

> *African employees who spent time in China recognize Chinese people's "Today task, today done" attitude. African employees tend to think they can continue today's unfinished task in tomorrow. After interacting with Chinese employees, local employees started to value the hardworking spirit and to some extent emulate Chinese employees' behavior.*

Similarly, one of the largest Chinese telecom companies in Africa reported on the encouraging effect of Chinese employees' hardworking influencing local employees and on their subsequent improved engagement with the organization. The country manager P, said:

> *When we undertook the concrete steel project in Sudan, Chinese employees won't stop working. But the local employees would never work overtime. However, over long time, there is the possibility for African employees to be moved by Chinese employees' hardworking spirits and to change their work attitude gradually. In particular, in some less developing countries local people want to improve their quality of life. Later on, we saw some cases the local employees voluntarily asked for extra work and to work overtime.*

To summarize, we display our empirical evidence guided by theoretical argumentation in Table 3. Local union and local labor characteristics manifest the adaptation mechanism, whereas cultural proximity and employee engagement underpin the crossvergence mechanism. Chinese managers HRM practices are elucidated by selective empirical evidence to illuminate the crossvergence effect.

Insert Table 3 about here

Chinese SOE and POE's crossvergence in HRM practices

The above analysis indicates the commonality in managing African employees from Chinese managers' perspective. Although our focus in on cultural influence from national perspective, as our sample consists of both state-owned enterprise (SOE) and privately-owned enterprise (POE), our findings reveal interesting insights with respect to the ownership difference. We found out there exists different HRM practices between SOE and POE. Two distinctive dimensions to characterize ownership effect are organizational culture and organizational structure. Table 4 illustrate the ownership difference and its implications on Chinese HRM practices in Africa.

Insert Table 4 about here

Our data analysis reveals that SOE carries a strong Communist Party organizational culture. Overseas subsidiaries of Chinese SOE established Party Committee. Corporate cultural training was offered merely to Chinese employees. Only task-related training for the job was provided to African employees. In contrast, POE emphasizes integrating African employees into the enterprise culture with the same approach to Chinese employees. Furthermore, SOEs normally present a hierarchical structure that requests employees' respect to authority. Despite both SOE and POE attempt to localize managers, they adopt different approaches. SOE tends to localize middle-level managers while keeping hierarchy in high-level management. On the contrary, POE is inclined to use flat organizational structure to cultivate a brotherhood atmosphere while diminishing the sense of hierarchy. We enlist examples and empirical evidence in Table 4. Therefore, we argue that state-owned enterprise and privately-owned enterprise may manifest variations in Chinese managers' HRM practices due to the ownership of Chinese firms in Africa.

Discussion and conclusion

A process model of Chinese managers' HRM practices

Based on our findings, we propose a process model to illustrate the Chinese managers' crossvergence in HRM practices and its consequences for African employees' work behavior (Figure 1). Initially, Chinese managers are forced to adapt to the local environment, such as local unions and the African employees' work attitude and behavior. To adapt to local unions, Chinese managers diverge their management to comply with local rules and regulations, thus intensifying the Chinese managers' consideration of the African employees' perspective, which differs from HRM practices in China. To cope with the African employees' work attitude and behavior, Chinese managers adapt to the local Ubuntu culture and mix Chinese Confucianism with local culture. Together, the two make possible the Chinese managers' crossvergence in HRM practices in order to promote local employees' sense of belonging to the organization. Crossvergence practices can be conducive to further affect the adaptation process by recognizing the common ground that exists for cultural training and mutual learning from a cross-cultural perspective. Thus, Chinese managers' crossvergence in HRM practices may affect local employees' behavior, specifically their commitment to the organization and their work attitude. Our findings suggest that these outcomes may require time and patience.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Implications for theory and practice

The present paper makes important contributions to both theory and practice. Our study is one of the first to offer a nuanced, contextualized understanding of Chinese managers' HRM

practices in managing local employees of Chinese firms in Africa. Theoretically, we contribute to the crossvergence framework in international business literature (Ralston, 2008) by investigating the Chinese managers' HRM practices in Africa. Our findings expand the duality argument of human resource management policies of MNCs (Brewster et al., 2008). Neither convergence nor divergence but crossvergence can be observed in Chinese firms' HRM practices in Africa. Importantly, we identify the antecedents of crossvergence effect on HRM practices: The role of local union drives divergence and cultural proximity leads to convergence. Furthermore, we bridge the adaptation literature with crossvergence framework by articulating adaptation as the prerequisite for the emergence of crossvergence in the context of the Chinese managers' HRM practices in Africa.

Second, with respect to the inter-organizational relationship literature, our investigation on the interaction between union and Chinese firms offers a contextualized understanding of labor union and firm and its consequences on HRM practices. Our findings suggest that managers' consideration of individual employees' benefits is strongly influenced by local unions, but at the same time Chinese managers promote a strong sense of belonging to the organization by means of cross-cultural influences. Hereby, cultural influence plays a significant role affecting such an inter-organizational encountering. Furthermore, our empirical evidence reveals that ownership can have an important bearing on the crossvergence HRM practices. Due to the difference of ownership of Chinese firms in Africa, state-owned enterprise and privately-owned enterprise manifest variations in interacting with labor union and consequential Chinese managers' HRM practices. Importantly, we contribute to the crossvergence literature by adding the ownership perspective. The cross-cultural influence on HRM practices is more complicated, and our study offers a nuanced understanding of both national and organizational culture in explaining HRM practices and thereby developing our current comprehension of crossvergence literature. Our study offers

the first step to explore ownership difference in cross-cultural influence on Chinese firms in less developing country in the context of inter-organizational relationship in general (Baraldi, Gressetvold, & Harrison, 2012), and crossvergence HRM practices in particular (Huo, Huang, & Napier, 2002).

Third, our study contributes to a fine-grained understanding of the influence of institutional-level factors on organization by illuminating the interaction effect between local union and cultural factors. Interestingly, our findings suggest a moderating effect of convergence effect on divergence effect. The conceptual proximity of Ubuntu and Guanxi influences act as the converging force while facilitating the emergence of crossvergence in HRM practices. Our findings significantly contribute to the current understanding of HRM policy and practice at organizational level in the context of China in sub-Saharan Africa (Jackson, Louw, & Zhao, 2013). Furthermore, our conceptual process model is a multi-level framework, consisting of institutional-level factors, namely labor union and cultural factors, and organizational-level implications, HRM practices in particular. Our findings can serve as a stepping stone to further explore the important phenomenon of Chinese in Africa at the organizational-level.

As far as practical implications are concerned, our study provides empirical evidence of HRM practices used by Chinese managers based on their perceptions of African macro-level factors, such as unions and indigenous culture. Specifically, our findings shed important light on managerial implications of HRM practices when Chinese firms interact with local union in Africa countries (Dibben, 2010; Wood & Dibben, 2008). The emergence of crossvergence in HRM practices reveals the possibility of blending local contextual factors with cultural influences. In so doing, the HRM practices may bring mutual benefits to both African employees and Chinese firms. We distinguish the more rigid and regulated factors, such as labor unions, from the more flexible ones, such as employees' work behavior, which may change gradually. Furthermore, we offer managers a practical toolkit for managing African

employees from a process perspective, adaptation being the first step needed to cultivate understanding, with subsequent change affecting organizational performance, including the African employees' work attitude and commitment to the organization. For MNC activities in Africa, our findings suggest that they should be adapted to local practices and norms.

Furthermore, cross-cultural training, mutual learning, and understanding are a fundamental necessity for managing employees in Africa. The operation and management of MNCs in Africa needs to be complemented by a cross-cultural perspective beyond the economic objectives. The cultural factors can have profound influence on management practices, such as HRM practices. Hence, we argue MNCs need to consider indigenous cultural factors seriously while designing HRM policies and implementing HRM practices. Culture influence can be subtle yet fundamental that resonates with individuals' value orientation and belief systems. Governmental agencies, HR consultant, and educational institutions may play an important role by providing support and ancillary services on cross-cultural understanding. In so doing, there is the opportunity for a win-win situation by engaging multiple stakeholders for MNCs' activities in Africa countries and working with African employees. In sum, this article suggests practical ways for developing and cultivating crossvergence in HRM practices for managers to explore.

Limitations and future research

Based on a pilot study of an Indian MNC expanding its operations abroad and managing its foreign subsidiary, Thite, Wilkinson, and Shah (2012) concluded that "in the 21st century knowledge economy where services and creative industries dominate the economic landscape that is tilting more towards developing and transition economies, the theories and practices applicable to Western MNCs that monopolized the 20th century industrial economy are slowly but steadily giving way to new economic and management paradigms" (p. 256).

The present study is exploratory in nature, and therefore our findings may not be applicable to a large population. Although we believe in the explanatory power of the model derived from qualitative data, generalizations from our findings should be drawn with caution. Our sample covers a variety of African countries. Although we acknowledge the differences between African countries, the present paper focuses on revealing the Chinese managers' HRM practices in adapting to local African employees and managing them from the Chinese managers' perspective. Therefore we did not emphasize heterogeneity among African countries.

Our study focuses on HRM practices in Africa at the organizational level, taking into account macro-level factors by exploring the influences of local unions and cultures. We believe that institutional analysis can produce additional insights into HRM practices (Wood, Dibben, & Ogden, 2013), as illustrated in studies on Chinese firms in Vietnam (Cooke & Lin, 2012), on Chinese and Indian firms in Ghana (Akorsu & Cooke, 2011), and knowledge diffusion in the African context (Kamoche & Harvey, 2006). As acknowledged, the Indian and Chinese overseas economic expansion in Africa might challenge the conventional theoretical framing and practices for existing market-based economic and geopolitical institutions (Aggarwal, 2013). Our paper offers a nuanced understanding of cultural influences on Chinese managers' HRM practices in managing local employees while encountering with local union.

With respect to crossvergence, we believe that there are ample and exciting research opportunities to advance this line of inquiry. The crossvergence in Chinese managers' HRM practices vividly illustrates the synergy potential of win-win HRM practices based on the Afro-Asian nexus (Horwitz, 2012). This nexus offers a platform for further exploration of performance implications, such as organizational performance. Given the scope of this paper, our focus is on the national cultural proximity and its influences on organizational practices. Interestingly, our findings reveal the ownership difference on Chinese managers' HRM

practices in Africa. The commonality and differences of Chinese managers' HRM practices suggests cultural influence can be more complex. When organizational culture factor is considered, there might be complicated interaction effect between national culture and organizational culture. As suggested in the inter-organizational relationship literature, both national and organizational cultural differences affect the learning and knowledge management and crossvergence process(Sarala & Vaara, 2010; Sarala, Junni, Cooper, & Tarba, 2014). Therefore, we suggest future study to further explore the ownership and organizational cultural influences on HRM practices.

We believe that increasing investment by the MNCs from the emerging markets in emerging, developing, and developed markets necessitates a greater need for scholars and practitioners to explore the ways in which MNCs from emerging economies implement their HRM practices in the target economies. Institutional voids have been prevalent in emerging economies (Mair, Marti, & Ventresca, 2012). The disadvantages of institutional voids in emerging economies may provide an opportunity for emerging market firms to develop capabilities in these locations. When firms from emerging economies enter less developed economies, they can leverage the lessons learned and turn disadvantages into advantages because they are more familiar with the phenomenon of institutional void (Cuervo-Cazurra & Genc, 2008).

We recommend that future research validate this preliminary qualitative work by conducting large-scale quantitative and qualitative empirical studies. This would enable researchers to test their theories and it would point the direction for future research on the HRM practices of emerging market MNCs. We would like to emphasize that our current research study is taking on the topic hitherto untouched and hopefully will encourage more empirical investigation of the afore-mentioned rich and still under-researched field.

Footnote

1. We thank the anonymous reviewer's suggestion in elaborating the ownership difference of Chinese firms and its impact on the HR strategies and practices of these focal Chinese companies in the African continent.

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Table 1. Sample of participants

	Construction	*Mining*	*Engineering*	*Telecom*	*Research institute*	*Other industries*[1)]
HRM						
HRM director	2	2		1		
HRM manager	4		2		1	2
Non-HRM						
Senior manager[2)]			2	1		2
Middle manager[3)]	3	3	1	2	2	2

Notes:

1 Includes power, automotive, aerospace, and wood industries

2 Includes CFO, country chief representative

3 Includes project manager, sales director, research manager

Table 2. A comparative view of Ubuntu and Guanxi

Dimensions	***Ubuntu***	***Guanxi***	***Selective empirical evidence***
Relationships with others (e.g., *family members, employers)*	Relationships are reciprocal. Individual belongs to the collective	Family, loyalty XinRen (Trust)	*It is important to treat others as members of one's own family. During festivals or holidays, we visit the employees' families and bring gifts.*
Time	Not a finite commodity	Instrumental	*Every time I inquire about the progress of the assigned task, I always receive the same response: "We are working on it." The answer is always the same, containing the phrase "we are working…" but without a concrete timeline.*
Productivity	Solidarity, social harmony	Harmony, long-term	*We care about their family members' wellbeing and the children's education, which could earn the employees' loyalty and enhance their productivity at the workplace.*

Note: Adapted from Mangaliso (2001), Chen & Chen (2004).

Table3. Adaptation, crossvergence and HRM practices

Social mechanisms	***Levers***	***HRM practices***	***Selective empirical evidence***
Adaptation	Labor union	Understand the significant difference between African and Chinese unions	Their union is powerful, very different from the union in China. The Chinese union is used to stabilize , whereas their union is to protect employee benefits
		Establish good relationship with labor unions, which helps solve conflicts	When there is conflict, local employees would contact union directly. Then union will talk with us on behalf of local people. We need to socialize with union and let them tell the truth. This leads us to recognize the weakness points from both sides. After agreement with union, we return to educate our Chinese employees. At the same time, union will communicate with African people.
	Local labor force	Chinese managers adapt to African employees' work behavior (e.g. refuse to work after work time, use excuse to take days off, hardly can meet deadlines, etc.)	African employees can drink coffee from 7 am till 11 am. Then lunch break can be around 2 pm to 3 pm. In the afternoon at 5 pm, they may need to pray. Therefore, we need to adjust working time according to their local customs. Therefore, Chinese employees need to work during the time when African people are absent.
		Recognize local employees' merits (e.g. optimistic, seriousness, truthful, etc.)	Cotton industry is labor-intensive. The quality is crucial for this industry. Cotton pick-up needs caution and seriousness at work. Chinese employees prefer 'quick and dirty' approach to get it done. When the supervisor is gone, Chinese employees might pick a bunch of cotton floor quickly. African employees will never do this. African employees are singing happily while working. They are suitable for repeated tasks and can deliver good quality without trying out tricks. Hence, local employee may be less efficient but more effective.

			Local employees would not do anything else but work during work time. Chinese employees in China might surf the internet or do other work-unrelated things.
Crossvergence	Cultural proximity	Adapt to local customs (e.g. give employees religious holidays, etc.)	In some African countries, Christianity constitutes their major religion belief. When we recruiting local employees, we need to take this into account thoroughly. We design work time allocation and respect local employees' religion. At the beginning, it is quite challenging for us. Nowadays, we harvest from doing so.
		Build brotherhood relationships with African employees	We are not able to micro-manage every local employee, hence it is important to empower the middle managers. In Africa, brotherhood is much strengthened and appreciated. We need to build strong brotherhood with local employees.
		Adopt Chinese traditional culture to create a sense of responsibility for the family	During traditional Chinese festivals, we host a variety of events to bring Chinese employees and local employees together, such as "swimming relay", "sticking bamboo", etc. Although the rewards are symbolic, such activities allow the involvement of everyone to create a sense of big family. Local employees may understand Chinese culture better and relate to their own cultural roots.
	Contextualized employee engagement	Care about the wellbeing of the employees' families	During holidays, we bring small bonus or gifts to the family of local employees. Letting the employees' family understand we care about them and what their family members do at the workplace may help gain family's emotional support.
		Tailored motivating tactics to promote African employees' enthusiasm for work (e.g. "employee award")	Some local employees behave careless, because they don't like or are not suitable for the position. For instance, one local salesman did not perform work task seriously. By accident, we realize his strength and passion in advertising. We recommend him work in the corporate communication department to interact with local media, such as local TV and newspapers. He is now doing a very good job.
		Use immediate and clear incentive method to motivate employees' engagement	To motivate local employees, for instance, you can tell him that he can go home after finishing bundling a certain number of pieces of steel. He might not be punctual. Going home earlier largely preferred. Therefore, we set up a quantity, so that earlier done equals earlier home.

	Effective communication improves employees' time management	They [local employees] requested for ten minutes for the job. I granted it. Afterwards, they asked for another ten minutes. Still not finished. It is not easy to let them plan the timeline and deliver on time. Therefore, I set up the timeline and communicate clearly with reasonable estimated time for the dedicated task. Communication is the key.
	Peers' social interaction between Chinese and African employees	African employees who spent time in China recognize Chinese people's "Today task, today done" attitude. African employees tend to think they can continue today's unfinished task in tomorrow. After interacting with Chinese employees, local employees started to value the hardworking spirit and to some extent emulate Chinese employees' behavior.
		When we undertook the concrete steel project in Sudan, Chinese employees won't stop working. But the local employees would never work overtime. However, over long time, there is the possibility for African employees to be moved by Chinese employees' hardworking spirits and to change their work attitude gradually. In particular, in some less developing countries local people want to improve their quality of life. Later on, we saw some cases the local employees voluntarily asked for extra work and to work overtime.

Table 4. A comparative analysis of state-owned enterprise and privately-owned enterprise on HRM practices

Ownership of firms	*Organizational structure*	*HRM practices*	*Selective empirical evidence*	*Organizational structure*	*HRM practice*	*Selective empirical evidence*
State-owned Enterprise	Communist Party culture	Divide and rule	State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC) suggested overseas Chinese SOE to establish firm party committee. In contrast to POE, I think after building up party within the firm, employees feel more comfortable and less homesick. SOE's corporate culture centers on the Communist party. We have overseas branch party committee and regularly live party organization life together. However, we don't involve African employees in this regard.	Hierarchical structure	Continue SOE hierarchical structure to ensure the leading authority of Chinese managers	Respecting the boss, as a common practice in China, shows the authority of Chinese leaders. For instance, when Chinese leaders pay a visit, there will be many cars and flags to welcome leader's visit. There will be even grand dinner. African employees can easily discern such activities are associated with China special and hierarchy. African people embrace equality and tend to build up brotherhood relationship at workplace. In contrast, our SOE has clear superior-subordinate relationship that differs from the African way in dealing with boss.
		Limit African employees to technical training	We don't offer cultural training but only task-related training for the job. Every week we will host one meeting for local employees with a focus on technical issues and safety questions.		Localize middle managers while keep senior managers' leading authority	Localization is a must in the pursuit of China Going Global endeavor. If always surrounded by Chinese, we don't understand the local context. We encourage this, and try to localize middle managers. However, how to keep the authority

			Training is largely technology and group event. African employees are offered two days block training to learn corporate guidelines and policy. Take driver for example, we will clearly specify the driving speed and road conditions. For technicians, we will allocate some budget from the project to train them carefully. We emphasize training for local employees for the job.			while delegating to local managers is a challenge, and we are still trying. Many Chinese SOEs prefer to follow a command approach that literally means, you need to follow my order. If not obey my command, I can replace you easily. In managing local employees and managers, this approach does not seem to work well.
Privately-owned Enterprise	Enterprise culture	Promoting enterprise culture to enhance local employee loyalty	At the beginning, local employee was poorly loyalty to our firm. Basically, the turnaround time is one year. Later on, we realized that local employees don't know both China and our enterprise culture. We invite local employees to visit our Headquarter in China. Gradually, local employees understood and were attracted by our big family. After several years training, their loyalty increased greatly. As far as I know, many local employees have stayed with us for over eight years. Enterprise culture and value is brought together with our investment in Africa. It is a long term undertaking. In our firm, several middle-level managers openly discuss and tend to agree with our enterprise value.	Flat structure	Frequent interaction between Chinese managers and local employees	We spend a lot of time in talking with local employees. We try to summarize experience and lessons learned. This helps us to better understand the local employees and their work behaviors.
					Establishing relationship between leaders and employees beyond workplace	We care about local employees and their family. We establish good relationship with local employees. For instance, we organize outing for local employees to bring their whole family. In addition, we try to help solving employees' difficulties beyond work. In return, employees can be emotionally motivated to contribute their efforts to the workplace.
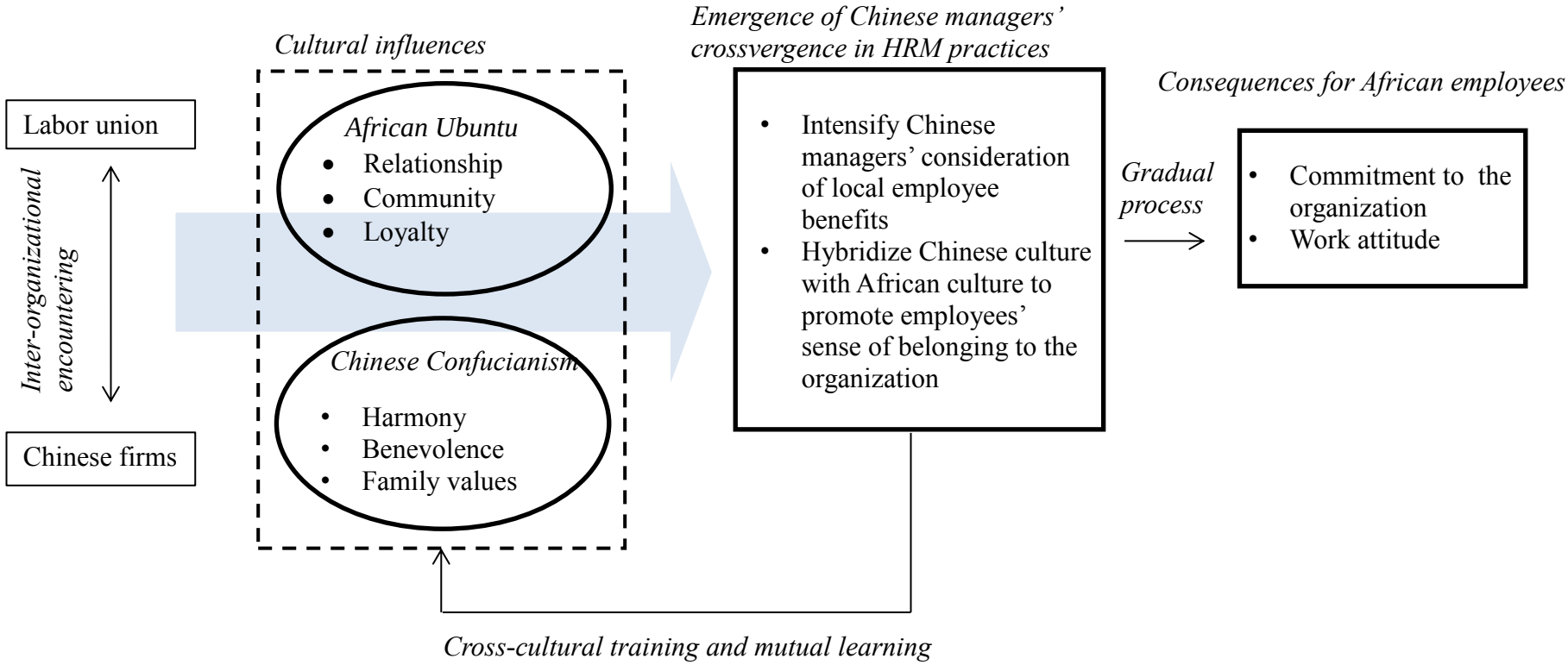
Figure 1. Dynamic process model of Chinese managers' crossvergence in HRM practices