**The Interactions of a Chinese MNE with Local Institutions in Sub-Sahara Africa and the Implications for Workforce Management in the subsidiary**

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**Abstract**

The unique nature of China’s interactions with Africa has been professed to respond better to the continent’s developmental and labour needs than the colonial and post-colonial engagements with western countries. This has also been an impetus to the calls for more research on the implications for the institutional environments and management approaches of Chinese companies in Africa. This paper examines how a Chinese state-owned MNE interacted with the evolving and complex institutional context in Cameroon to manage its workforce. Evidence from a case study showed that the Chinese MNE actively disrupted the ‘rules of the game’ as it championed the adoption of local work and employment practices and promoted newly-defined government priorities. In so doing, the Chinese MNE garnered a reputation of being a good employer and actively engaged in the maintenance and creation of new institutions of the country’s labour market. This research contributes to revealing the linkage between the underpinnings of the Chinese state investment motives and the contextual exigencies that shape, and in turn are influenced by, HRM policies and practices within their MNEs in Africa.

**Keywords**: Chinese Multinationals, Cameroon, HRM, Formal and Informal Institutions, Institutional Work and Institutional Logics.

**Introduction**

The conspicuous presence of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) through its multinational enterprises (MNEs) in Africa has sparked research interest on ‘their’ nature and implications for host institutions (Cooke, 2014. p17; Fu, Buckley and Fu, 2020. p15) and management, including human resource management (HRM) in organisations (Kamoche and Siebers, 2014). While there is more research evidence at the level of African governments regarding China’s model of modernisation that responds better to African needs (Jackson, Louw and Zho, 2013. p2517), there are calls for more thorough investigations of Chinese MNEs’ practices in specific industries (Dibben et al., 2017. p2534). There is also a dearth of knowledge on how the newly arrived Chinese MNEs engage with the evolving and complex institutional context in Cameroon to manage their workforces (Nguepjouo, 2017; Fambon, 2013). Studies (Jackson and Horwitz, 2018; Cooke, 2014) of Chinese MNEs in Africa revealed that their HRM approaches are shaped, to a greater extent, by the prevailing institutional contexts and the underpinnings of their investment motives. This implies that ‘nationality’ may have a weak influence on how Chinese firms operate in Africa (Fu et al., 2020; Lee 2017).

The works of Aloumedjo (2018) and Jackson (2004) in Cameroon also concluded that the evolving institutional context played a key role in shaping the behaviour of firms and their people management approaches. This paper further develops this scholarship to address these empirical questions: How does a Chinese MNE, from an emerging economy and relatively inexperienced in internationalisation encounter the complex and evolving institutional context in a developing country: Cameroon? How does the MNE navigate or respond to such an institutional context, mindful of the underpinnings of its investment motives? How do the exigencies of the institutional context in Cameroon moderate work and employment practices in the MNE? Addressing these research questions, the objective was to understand how the Chinese MNE interacted with the fluid Cameroonian institutional context that is also experiencing geopolitical flux to manage its workforce and to pursue its investment motives.

The features of Cameroon’s political economy are unique, challenging with prevailing strong informal and weak formal institutions as well as plagued by high unemployment, shortage of skilled individuals and ineffective work practices (IMF, 2015). The country is rich in natural resources, particularly oil and gas, which generate more than two-third of its foreign earnings. Cameroon is also witnessing geopolitical flux whereby the availability of alternative sources of investments from emerging economies, mostly China, is lessening the age-old dependence on investments from its colonial masters: France and Britain (Nguepjouo, 2017; Cabestan, 2015). Therefore, MNEs operating in Cameroon have to cope with particular challenges when managing their workforces. This in turn makes any understanding of the interplay between Cameroon’s specific institutions reflected in its political economy and the HRM responses of MNEs vital for the corporate world and intriguing from an academic lens.

This paper contributes to recent calls to consider the link between the motives of Chinese investments, the characteristics of the institutional context and MNEs’ HRM practices in Africa (Jackson and Horwitz, 2018; Xing, Liu, Tarba and Cooper, 2016). The findings of this study strengthen the conjectures in literatures that Chinese investment in African resources is exploitative. However, unlike investments from western countries, it is a subtle ‘*socio-politico-economic balancing act’* which provides real benefits to the local population and national economies (Asongu and Aminkeng, 2013). This is a marked departure from the approaches of most western firms which exploit African resources with little regard for local communities, the environment and for not alleviating poverty in the host countries (Bräutigam, 2011a; Moncrieff, 2012). This paper starts by reviewing relevant literatures and the host context before presenting the research methods, findings, discussion and conclusions.

**Literature Review**

Studies of Chinese FDI in Africa have been conducted through two dominant perspectives: international trade and political economy (Abodohoui, Su and Da-Silva, 2018). These have shed light, more, on the unique type and motives of Chinese FDI. Jackson et al. (2013) noted that the motives of Chinese FDI in Africa fall into three main categories: political seeking to aid China’s aspirations to global influence; resources-seeking to fuel China’s development goals; and market-seeking to sustain its growing economy. Lee (2017) emphasized that Chinese FDI is also distinctive not because of its nationality, but because it is a characteristic form of state, rather than private, capital which pursues “profit optimization” instead of “profit maximization”. As such, profit-making is part of the broader objectives of building political and diplomatic influence with foreign governments and securing steady flows of strategic raw materials to China.

Regardless of the motives, Chinese FDI in Africa have multi-faceted impacts, particularly on host institutions and HRM, and there are debated views of their contentious political and economic nature (on which, see Abodohoui et al., 2018). Management approaches in Chinese firms abroad are varied but are essentially interactive outcomes of (a) influences from institutional actors in China, notably the government; (b) often difficult and sometimes pragmatic negotiations of interests between the MNEs and a variety of host country’s institutional actors; and (c) the constraints and choices the Chinese firms face (Zhu, 2018). Thus, the nature of the current Chinese state investment compels it, in reality, to be more open to political negotiations and concessions in responding to Africa’s developmental and labour needs (Lee, 2017).

In International Management literatures, the shape of employment practices in MNEs has been an issue of debate. The dominant discourse points to *institutional theory* which relates to whether MNEs’ HRM is influenced by the country-of-origin, host country or dominance effects (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper and Shea, 2016). These studies suggest that significant implications for international HRM emanate from the specific configuration of the macro-environment in which an MNE operates, such as the relative positions of the home and host countries in the global economic hierarchy and the levels of institutional maturity within such countries (Zhu, 2018). Generally, institutional scholars have long recognized the dilemma experienced by MNEs facing multiple and contradictory institutional demands: the so-called institutional complexity (Jackson and Deeg, 2019). Thus, the institutional context has been noted as a key influence on the nature of employment practices in MNEs (Cooke, 2017; Kostova, Roth and Dacin, 2008). While previous conceptualizations of institutional theory: *old and new institutionalism*, in the study of MNEs focused more on the constraints and opportunities of institutions on HRM (Munir, 2020), institutional theory is currently viewed from two popular strands: *institutional logics* and *institutional work* (Luo, Wang and Zhang, 2016).

*Institutional logics* is traditionally understood as an idea related to an organizational field that shapes organisational practices, which in turn, influence the former (Thornton, 2004). Institutional logic is a configuration of a set of institutions grounded in norms and rules aiming at achieving a specific desired state in a society or a group, which is aligned because of a logic grounded in basic values and accepted among enough actors or actors with enough agency to exist (Scott, 2008). This leads to consistency across the normative, regulative and cognitive institutional levels. There are seven institutional orders (family, religion, market, state, profession, corporation and community) with a central logic that guide the organizing principles and provide social actors with vocabularies of motives and a sense of self-identity (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012). Here, the focus is not only on homogeneity and irrationality as popularly posited by previous conceptualisations of institutional theory but also on organizational heterogeneity, rationality, stability and change in individual organizations (Kraatz and Block, 2017).

Generally, the institutional logic perspective integrates four key components; agency and structure, material-practice-based with the cultural-symbolic aspects, pays attention to the historical contingencies of institutions and provides a multilevel view to institutions (Zilber, 2013, p80). This suggests that organisations face incompatible prescriptions from different institutional logics leading to complexity in the structures and practice of organisations and, experienced by social actors within them (Kraatz and Block, 2017). Complexity does not only pose a challenge but also creates opportunities by enhancing organizations’ agency through their choice of logics (Thornton et al., 2012). That is, it can form the basis of strategic opportunities and drawn upon to justify and legitimate an action. Regarding MNEs’ HRM, the work of Geary and Aguzzoli (2016) showed how institutional complexity relates to agency. They reported that the heterogeneity of institutional constituents enabled MNEs to engage in political advocacy and build coalitions to support their HRM policies across borders. However, complexity is also seen to exist within domestic settings. For example, Zhu, Zhang, and Shen (2012) studied HRM in China and found that there was heterogeneity due to the institutional complexity which came about as a result of the societal change from paternalistic socialism to market socialism.

Institutional logics perspective also captures the link between higher social levels (e.g. society, industry and organization) and micro-level actors (e.g. groups or individuals) and therefore, is a socialized context to understand the complexity of micro-level action (Zilber, 2013). When individuals are immersed in institutional logics, “their attention is shaped, their sense-making is directed, and a criteria for decision making is provided” (Thornton et al., 2012). As such, there exist the potential for agency on the part of HR actors amid institutional complexity whereby different approaches and norms may be applied (Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke and Spee, 2015). For example, underscoring merit may be necessary in one situation while focusing on equity may be significant in another instance. Thus in organisations, social actors faced with institutional complexity will try to delay action or may engage in *institutional work* (Zilber, 2013).

*Institutional work* looks at the dynamics between social actors in organisations and the institutional environment in which they are embedded. It is defined as the “purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at maintaining, creating, and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p215). Institutional work also bridges the gap between structure and agency, but mostly in a bottom-up manner. In the field of HRM, institutional maintenance, creation and disruption are mainly carried out by professionals (Lawrence, Leca, and Zilber, 2013). For example, HR managers generally have the opportunity for agency and influence on their operating institutional context. They are seen as agents who initiate and actively participate in the implementation of changes that emanate and/or diverge from existing institutions. Institutional maintenance also relates to how organisations internalise modes of representation in the form of myths, rationality or cognitive frames in host contexts. In this regard, organisations are perceived as ‘rule-takers’ (Streeck and Thelen, 2005).

Institutional creation relates to the enactment of new institutions or modification of existing ones through overt political work (e.g. advocacy and lobbying), the reconfiguration of belief systems (e.g. constructing identities and public relations), and the alteration of abstract categorizations and other meaning systems such as educating and consulting (Edwards, Schnyder and Fortwengel, 2018). In this regard, MNEs are perceived as ‘rule-makers’ when they endeavour to shape the design of institutional settings in their favour by actively lobbying and influencing policy-makers (Streeck and Thelen, 2005).

Institutional disruption is the de-institutionalization of some practice, structure, or order (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). This involves organisations possessing the means to ‘bend’ host institutions to their favour either by engaging in institutional ‘layering’ or ‘drift’ in ways where their managerial practices are different from the ‘ideal pattern of a rule’ as originally enacted by policy-makers (Ferner, Edwards and Tempel, 2011). Disruption neither involves the creation of new arrangements nor does the creation of new arrangement require disruption. It can also be a discursive process wherein individuals use rhetoric to undermine institutional order (Maguire and Hardy, 2009). Focusing on MNEs’ HR practices, Fortwengel and Jackson (2016) emphasized the role of inter-organizational networks in influencing the cognitive, normative, and regulative pillars of host institutions as European apprenticeship based training were transferred to the United States.

Fortwengel and Jackson (2016) showed how a particular vision of workforce training was created, support gathered, and an institutional ‘enabling work’ activated the creation of rules to facilitate apprenticeship practices. These included “embedding and routinizing the new practice by actively infusing the normative foundations in the participants’ day to day routines by hiring, a social norm against poaching to support firm-specific investments in apprenticeships, sharing of expertise in specialised training classes outside the prescribed curriculum, deterring potential breaches through norms of reciprocity and interdependencies, and support between firms beyond training” (McGaughey, Kumaraswany and Liesch, 2016). Thus, the MNEs engaged in changing the normative associations of school leavers such that apprenticeships were seen as a viable alternative. In this paper, however, emphasis is also placed on the notion that the presence of relatively weak and evolving institutions in developing countries is likely to offer ‘active’ gaps for institutional work by MNEs (Cantwell, Dunning and Lundan, 2010). In such contexts, MNEs may even engage in experimentation, rather than negotiations, to operate effectively.

In sum, while institutional logics allude to the multilevel dynamics, complexity and agency, institutional work explores how embedded social actors maintain, create and disrupt the institutional context to shape practices in organisations (Amis, Mair and Munir, 2020; Thornton et al., 2012). Institutional logics are mostly conceptualized as a top-down process with relatively less emphasis accorded to the corresponding bottom-up process. Institutional work is more apt at exploring how logics of ‘everyday work and interactions’ of social actors can traverse organisations to the field (Smets et al., 2015). Notwithstanding, the linkage between multiple contradicting institutional pressures and organizational responses that take into consideration social actors’ ability to ‘work’ institutions at multi-level settings in evolving contexts has seldom received sufficient systematic empirical attention (Hennekam, Tahssain-Gay and Syed, 2017). A salient feature of studies in MNEs operating in Africa is the surprising absence of the deployment of the institutional logics and institutional work perspectives as has largely been the case in research in emerging and developed economies. Hence, and in line with Lewis, Cardy and Huang (2018), combining institutional logics and institutional work as a framework to examine the Chinese MNE in Cameroon’s oil industry provides a vantage point to understand how institutions and HR practices are reconciled, adopted, maintained and disrupted iteratively.

**The Host Context – Cameroon**

Cameroon is one of the 54 African countries that are heterogeneous in terms of their economic development, human capital, natural resources, institutional and political environments (UNCTAD, 2017). African countries also have common features such as history, geographical location, culture, religion and language. However, Cameroon’s institutional arrangements mirror in many respects established western models, but they are based on and underpinned by local socio-cultural norms and behaviours (Dzimbiri, 2009, p62). Following independence, in 1960 (French Cameroon) and 1961 (British Southern Cameroon), public institutions were designed through the consolidation of the French and British cultures of public administration (Agbor and Mbaku, 2012). While formal institutional features regarding industrial relations, education and training, the labour market, financial and corporate governance, laws and courts exist on paper, a serious lack of implementation is observed in practice (UNCTAD, 2017). There is also a severe shortage of skilled workers and unemployment is estimated at around 45% in Cameroon.

Personal relationships and political networks dominate Cameroon’s political economy. For example, business contracts and employment opportunities are often won or lost based not on what a person knows, but on whom s/he knows (Dickerson, 2007). These informal institutions include (a) personal relationships, whereby authority is based on personal trust between peoples; (b) clientelism as a form of protective relationship of mutual benefit between persons (patron) occupying a higher place in the social hierarchy; (c) corruption which is the misuse of public office for private gain; and (d) ‘Big-Man’ presidentialism whereby regardless of constitutional arrangements, power is personalised around the president (Forje, 2008)). These dominant informal institutions interact with and sustain the weak formal institutions (on which, see Bratton, 2007).

The Cameroon Ministry of Mines and Energy (2016) noted that oil production began in 1976 and it is now considered as a key source of growth and employment. Finances derived therefrom have facilitated a rapid expansion of investment and growth in the non-oil sector. The oil sector provides the largest formal employment numbers after the public sector. Upstream activities consist mainly of off- and on-shore oil exploration and production and pipeline services for the transit of oil (circa 200,000 bpd) from landlocked Tchad. Key players in the oil sector are local companies and foreign-owned MNEs from the USA, UK, France and China. From the 1970s to the mid-2000s, Cameroon was dependent upon the resources and expertise of oil MNEs from its former- and neo-colonial masters of the West (Fambon, 2013). This dependence diminished on foot of the availability of alternative and cheaper Chinese investments (Nguepjouo, 2017).

In sum, Cameroon’s institutional environment is characterised by the coexistence of strong informal and underdeveloped formal institutions. In practice, the demarcation between the operation of the two institutions is often blurred (Forje, 2008, p2). So, neither the colonial nor the pre-colonial system has displaced the other; rather, there is a meshing of the two systems that influence organisational practices in Cameroon.

**Methods**

This paper forms part of a wider study, from 2010 to 2016, of employment practices in MNEs in Cameroon’s oil sector. This research proceeded by way of a case study because it is appropriate for examining patterns and practices that are under–investigated such as those herein (Yin, 2018). It is a case study of a subsidiary in Cameroon, denoted as CCORP, of a Chinese state-owned oil MNE headquartered in Beijing. CCORP arrived Cameroon in the late 2000s, acquired in early 2011 significant operations (80% interests in a US oil MNE subsidiary in Cameroon) and became the 2nd largest oil producer in the country in 2013. Thus, choosing to study CCORP was intriguing due to the sheer size of its investment in Cameroon and the Chinese ‘superior’ economic power, ranked 2nd in the world (Gu and Nolan, 2017). Cameroon was selected as a good example of a larger set of developing countries that are relatively inferior in terms of economic success (Benis, 2017). As such, its institutions were ostensibly weak thereby likely to pose little constraints to the diffusion of MNEs’ HRM practices (Smith, McSweeney and Fitzgerald, 2008).

***Data Collection.*** Data was mainly collected qualitatively through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGD), supplemented with documentary evidence such as archives, newspapers and publications by CCORP, governments, trade unions and NGOs. Informants were purposefully selected following Eisenhardt (1989) argument that a random selection for a case study is not preferable. The selection was based on informants’ experience, at least 10 years in CCORP or in the oil sector and the extent to which they could provide rich data about the topic.

The study involved a total of 26 informants who took part in forty interviews and one FGD. The informants were: (a) 12 in CCORP including corporate directors in Beijing, subsidiary’s senior, middle and frontline managers in the human resources, finance, operations, marketing and communications departments and trade union shop stewards, (b) 4 officials of trade unions in the oil sector, (c) 4 government officials of the Ministries of Mines and Energy, Vocational Training and Labour, and Social Security, (d) 2 local Chiefs in the localities harbouring CCORP’s facilities, and (e) 4 officers of NGOs and community groups involved in advocacy in the natural resources sector. The first phase of 26 interviews was carried out in 2010 with 12 informants in CCORP and 14 external stakeholders (government, NGOs, community groups, trade unions and local chiefs). In 2013, one FGD took place with 9 informants in CCORP. In 2016, 14 interviews took place with the previously interviewed informants: 8 in CCORP, 2 government officials, 2 local Chiefs and 2 officials of NGOs.

Interviews and FGD were conducted at informants’ office buildings during formal field trips. Telephone interviews were conducted with informants based in the MNE’s headquarters. Interviews lasted for between 43 and 71 minutes and the FGD lasted for 55 minutes. The interviews and FGD only ended when the saturation point was reached and no new information was being gained from the informants. The informants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity of the information they provided. Lauth (2000) emphasized that research involving informal institutions is more often than not very difficult, so ensuring anonymity was crucial.

This study examined recruitment, training, payment systems and industrial relations which are usually identified as practices that mostly come under the influence of host institutions and as ‘fulcrums’, in that they bear closer links with other areas of HRM (Geary and Hunek, 2019). The questions asked were both deductive (working from the theory that institutions shape, and are in turn influenced by, HR practices) and inductive (to understand why the processes and structures that created particular HR practices in CCORP might/might not have occurred). Further questions asked involved other relevant topics as brought up by the interviewees.

The interviews and FGD were tape-recorded in English and French. As a bilingual researcher, the data were transcribed and analysed in the recorded languages to avoid the problems associated with translation (on which, see Chidlow, Plakoyiannaki and Welch, 2014). However, the findings are presented in English for the target audience.

***Data Analysis Technique***. The collected data were systematically analysed following the approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967). The process started with devising open codes for relevant categories of information in the transcribed interviews and FGD. It was time-consuming and no software was used. Each code represented either a concept from the literatures or an abstraction of potential interest. For example, how each HR practice was conceived, implemented, adopted, monitored and evaluated mindful of the contextual exigencies. The process resulted in each transcribed interview and FGD having between 32 to 45 codes. This was followed by the identification of similar phrases, relationships between patterns, themes and common sequences in the coded texts. Finally, small sets of generalizations that covered the consistencies discerned in the texts were elaborated following the research questions. This resulted in three related key themes: (a) personal relationships and political networks, (b) normative and regulatory pressures, and (c) CCORP’ response to the interplay of the exigencies of the host context. Preliminary conclusions were continuously interrogated and verified as the analysis was carried on, by going back to the collected data, and elaborately considering their interpretations and validity vis-à-vis the literatures.

**Findings**

CCORP entered Cameroon in the late 2000s and thereafter, was granted oil fields production licences by the Ministry of Mines and Energy in quick succession. It operated on 11 oil blocks/fields, all of which were concentrated in and around the offshore and onshore Cameroon’s border region with Nigeria. In Cameroon, CCORP directly employed 265 staff and another 650 workers through contracts. Cameroonians made up around 90% of workers at managerial and lower-skilled levels as well as roughly 72% of technical and engineering grades.

Turning to the management approaches in CCORP, the Beijing headquarters (HQ) kept tight control over its activities in investments, exploration and production, budgeting and development in Cameroon. The HQ maintained a lower level of control over CCORP in the areas of industrial relations, staff interactions with local stakeholders and local institutions influencing subsidiary activities. A Beijing resident corporate director in charge of oil and mineral resources in the Sub-Sahara African region noted thus:

There are areas such as financing, investments, output, research and development … those that are critical for realising our objectives where the HQ takes care of, closely, throughout our group of companies in all countries. Other areas requiring operating units to stay within local rules and norms are more or less left to the subsidiaries and regional managers to devise strategies in that respect. (Interviewee 33-Cc)

The HQ coordinated and monitored CCORP’s activities so that they aligned with the corporate strategy. Various formal and/or informal control mechanisms such as budget setting, performance reviews, and regular meetings between the subsidiary, HQ executives and government officials of both countries also took place. The HQ team in China normally came to Cameroon to align subsidiary operations with the HQ’s objectives and to set the right priorities for CCORP. This was significant in the sense that some HR policies from CCORP’s HQ were influenced by the involvement of the Cameroon government in these talks with their Chinese counterparts. The contents of such meetings have always been kept secret (Cabestan, 2015).

***Personal Relationships and Political Networks***. The management of CCORP’s workforce was largely shaped, directly or indirectly, by informal institutions in Cameroon. With regards to recruitment, applicants were mainly from potential hires connected to people within the oil sector and from students attending educational institutes that were training Cameroonians for jobs in the extractive sector. Also, access to educational institutes was mostly based on personal relationships and political networks (Benis, 2017). A recruitment manager in CCORP remarked that ‘people just came and deposited or e-mailed their CVs. However, unsolicited applications were rarely replied to except in cases where the candidates were sent or recommended by a local or national politician. A senior officer in a government Ministry and a local chief in a village where one of CCORP’s production facilities was located noted, respectively, as follows:

Some of the privileges of working in this Ministry is that you can make requests to companies that you treat their files to employ someone. Even, the Chinese are very understanding in this regard. (Ministry, Interviewee 18-Go)

When a company is based in our area, it is there for the local population, first. ……they can train them as they have been doing, even if they are not qualified. I have told managers in the company that if they don’t continue to take on local people from here that we send to them, the population may become hostile to their operations. (Interviewee 04-Lc)

The above two interviewees held the view that using personal connections and political leverage to secure employment for someone related to them was ‘normal’ in Cameroonian society. CCORP’s recruitment initiatives were particularly targeted at the localities in which the company carried out its activities. There was a low level of labour turnover in the company and existing employees were incentivised to recommend potential hires from their networks.

The payment system in CCORP was informed and accelerated by the ‘Cameroonisation of Employment’ policy of the government. This policy encouraged the adoption of local work practices such as recruiting mainly Cameroonians and paying local rates and benefits by foreign firms in the country. The policy was mostly pursued informally by the government to tackle the problem of massive unemployment in the country. Although the National Commission for the Cameroonisation of Employment (NCCE) was created in 1977, its policies were promoted and monitored to no avail until the marked arrival of CCORP. CCORP effectively implemented the NCCE policies, including the offer of family-friendly benefits, after informal talks between Chinese officials and their Cameroon counterparts. A director in the Ministry of Labour and Social Security confided thus:

CCORP was willing to include Cameroon specific allowances and benefits to its payment system following talks between the government and the Chinese. The government has adopted a ‘personal’ approach to it. (Ministry of Labour, Interviewee 17-Go)

CCORP employees were well paid by Cameroon standards but were amongst the lowest paid in the oil industry. While base pay and some allowances were regulated by legislation and the sectoral wage agreement, such relatively low rates were accounted for by the large proportion of Cameroonian staff hired by CCORP. The firm voluntarily used other rewards schemes such as sponsoring employees’ keep fit activities, employee desired training, longevity of service award ceremonies, time off for family occasions, employee loans and sponsorship of employee selected community projects. CCORP also constructed solar fish dryers in Ndian areas where its production facilities were located for locals who were not able to get employment with the company. CCORP and NGOs publications noted that years of unethical oil exploitation by Western MNEs greatly damaged the environment on which the local people depended for their livelihood.

Informal institutions also played a role in industrial relations. The sole trade union in CCORP was weak when acting on its own. It usually influenced management decisions in core issues of pay and working conditions by calling on the assistance of external actors. When dealing with contentious employment issues, the trade union called on the services of the labour inspectorate and well-connected political elites to put pressure on CCORP’s management. In mid-2013 for example, the labour inspectorate and a local parliamentarian were called in by the workers representatives when management refused to consult with trade unions on handover procedures for workers on shift work. CCORP management succumbed to the pressure from these external actors and invited employees’ representatives for talks which yielded an acceptable procedure for handover at the end of shift work. Trade union officers in CCORP also confirmed that they sometimes resorted to notifying the media and NGOs of their plight. NGOs were usually very quick to publish such information in various media outlets, particularly on electronic platforms. A mid-level manager and trade union officer remarked as follows:

Trade unions used the labour inspectorate and politicians to put pressure on us. They also use past cordial relationships with senior managers here as a persuasive way to get what they want. (HR Department, Interviewee 16-Cc)

We usually consider walk outs especially when the grievances concern a large portion of the workers.…we would liaise with community organisations to publish our ‘story’, and that puts pressure on management, you know….. (Trade union, Interviewee 19-Tu)

There had never been a strike in the history of the company and management attributed this to their proactive and accommodating (where possible) approach to addressing the grievances of employees and their trade unions. Trade unions acknowledged that they called on external actors’ intervention on internal grievances only when the company acted, unilaterally, without due consideration. However, there have been situations whereby the company had acted alone without pre-notifying the trade union. This was the case in the decision to reduce staff headcount in 2013. Unions were simply told that some staff had to go, and the departments from which such reductions were to take place. The long working relationship with particular managers in facilitating the implementation of practices in the past also enabled trade union officers to bargain for better working terms for their comrades. In 2014 for example, trade union officers were able to extract a concession from management on the requirement that sick employees should not have to submit a certificate on the first day. This was waived for seriously sick workers to three days.

***Normative and Regulatory Pressures***. Normative pressures, as noted earlier, were represented through the increased objections, through activism, to unfair practices and unilateral managerial actions in CCORP. The objections were transmitted through the political postures of political representatives, local chiefs, NGOs, and local activists (Tchakounté, 2013). These actors were adept at using both traditional and new social media outlets to expose the MNEs’ wayward practices. Regulatory pressures were also evident in that the Cameroun government reached an understanding, through the operating licence, with CCORP to enhance the local content policy. As such, CCORP also advertised job vacancies through public recruitment agencies and newly created institutes to train workers for the oil sector. CCORP advertised difficult to fill job vacancies through the firm’s website and with the National Employment Fund (NEF) which is a government-run recruitment agency. A director in the Ministry of Vocational Training explained as follows:

When the Chinese arrived, the government had an understanding with them to use public recruitment agencies and training centres to look for their workers. They have been very good in this regard. (Ministry, Interviewee 12-Go)

CCORP, through the direct influence of the government of Cameroon, engaged in a collaborative training framework with specific education establishments to develop the required skills for the extractive industry in the four training centres of Banjoun, Douala, Maroua and Garoua. Closing the high skills gap was advanced as part of the reason that CCORP was partnering with higher education institutions to train such competencies. CCORP further engaged in promoting itself as an employer of choice by stressing that it was the only company in the oil sector with more than 80% of its workforce as Cameroonians. Through CCORP, the Chinese government also donated specialist training equipment to two universities in Cameroon. An operations director in CCORP who doubles as the liaison person with the training centres narrated as thus:

“........we soon realised that part of the problem was that no dedicated school existed to train workers in the oil industry. Our operations aim to give back to the community, and this is the reason we have been donating equipment to the schools when the need arises. (Interviewee 02-Cc)

In terms of employment legislation, the Labour Code (enacted since 1992) stipulated that at least 80% of all foreign MNEs’ employees must be Cameroonians. CCORP maintained and slightly surpassed this quota in its workforce composition. The same labour code reserved the right to the Cameroon President to dictate and/or stop certain types of recruits for companies in strategic sectors such as the oil industry. Forje (2008) noted that high personalities at the presidency have used this provision for their personal gains.

Another instance of contextual pressure on CCORP was evident in its payment system. The majority of the payment schemes in CCORP were broadly in line with the July 2014 collective agreement which was concluded following talks between the state, oil firms and trade unions. However, parts of the pay and benefits system contained in the collective agreement were already operational in CCORP. CCORP’s representative at the negotiations noted as follows:

It was fine for us to fully implement the collective agreement because we had been using most of its provisions. We pushed this, negotiation, from the start…..we take local values and norms seriously. (Interviewee 11-Cc)

The key features of the new payment system in the oil industry that became fully operational as from 01/01/2015 included among others, a series of social protection measures such as an allowance for the in-house trade union representative, recalculation of termination pay benefits with a significant increase of 5%, and a 5% increase in severance and retirement pay. Several other socially responsible initiatives included the management of workers with HIV/AIDS and the provision of personal accident insurance to workers assigned to high-risk jobs. These changes to the reward system addressed the realities of Cameroonian society where social protection for workers is very low and health risks persist.

***CCORP’s response to the interplay of contextual exigencies***. In terms of recruitment, managers in the subsidiary had the sole authority to recruit for all staff categories but were required to follow HQ’s guidelines. An NGO official and A CCORP director summarised the role of the subsidiary in the recruitment process as follows:

The Chinese appreciate and use our people more than the ‘colonial oil companies’ that have been here for a very long time. (NGOs Interviewee 23-Ao).

There is flexibility. We control HR guidelines from sourcing, recruiting to benefits and termination. (Interviewee 06-Cc)

Moreover, CCORP regularly received informal requests from elites and Chiefs to sponsor certain community projects such as the construction of bridges, patronising cultural festivities and offering scholarships to students in local schools. CCORP’s managers and government officials agreed that through such initiatives, CCORP developed the community while acquiring local natural resources. In so doing, the Chinese investment motive in the country was being demonstrated. A middle manager in the operations department as follows:

Sometimes, we get requests from politicians and tribal leaders to carry out specific initiatives within the community. We do, and where possible offer ‘alternatives’ …… for our mutual benefits (Interviewee 09-Cc)

Regarding recruitment and selection, the subsidiary established workforce plans and the HQ approved the filling of new or existing vacancies. Once candidates were offered a job, CCORP deployed an acculturation scheme. In this process, CCORP inducted new recruits to the Chinese ‘way’ of hard work. CCORP also provided partial support for its Cameroonian workers who wished to learn Chinese at the Confucian Institute in Yaoundé. This Institute has already graduated approximately 96,000 students in its eleven years history in Cameroon.

The payment system of CCORP also emanated from the interplay of corporate motives and the specificities of the operating context in Cameroon. CCORP inherited a pay system from the company’s previous owners. The system was based on employees’ competencies and output-based allowances. To re-iterate, CCORP pursued a ‘low cost’ strategy whereby the many and expensive expatriates on the payroll were replaced by a cheaper local workforce and Chinese contractors. While the low-cost strategy was a main driver for the change in the pay structure, the understandings contained in the operating contract between the Chinese and Cameroon governments called for the active pursuit of improvements in the local payment policies. Except for the CEO and a few top managers of the company, all other employees’ salaries were established through a collective agreement that covered all occupations in the oil industry. The dual rationale for adopting a new payment system was given by the head of financial operations as follows:

We have targets to meet each quarter and yearly. …………..following the directions of the HQ and the collective agreements. (Interviewee 03-Cc)

So, all these changes resulted in a lower wage bill for CCORP in three ways: 1) it employed mainly Cameroonians via apprenticeships and did away with the relatively very expensive expatriate. 2) It sub-outsourced some activities principally to firms that used mostly cheaper Chinese and Cameroonians workers. 3) It contracted more of the specialist Cameroonian oil services firms on their field installations.

In industrial relations, CCORP’s managers stressed that three important practices helped to reduce disputes with employees and their trade union. First, formal communications were used to enhance productivity by constantly disseminating information to employees on operational issues and labour policies. Second, there were exchanges of information relating to the jobs’ requirements, reporting systems, disciplinary rules, social and welfare facilities and safety rules to enhance collaboration. Third, regarding matters of serious grievances on terms and conditions of work, the trade union confederation was normally notified. The confederation acted by liaising with the company to resolve the issues or used its connections with the governing elites to handle such grievances (Secretary-General of trade union confederation, Interviewee 08-Tu).

**Discussion**

From the evidence collected in Cameroon, they were three key interdependent ways in which CCORP interacted with the institutional context to manage its workforce. First, informal institutions such as personal relationships and political networks were important channels through which HR practices were influenced in CCORP. For example, chiefs and political elites had strong connections with CCORP and within the organs and structures of the political economy of Cameroon from grassroots to the highest levels. Employees and their trade unions in CCORP had access to and were connected both personally, through community and cultural activities, and through the provision of political support in the constituencies to these local chiefs and political elites. Casson, Giusta and Kambhampati (2011) and Bratton (2007, p98) argue that such informal structures and practices are ‘stable, valued and recurring patterns of behaviour’ to which all social actors are acutely attuned. It can also be argued that CCORP’s ease of adaptation in dealing with informal institutions in Cameroon emanated from the synergies that exist between Chinese Guanxi and African Ubuntu cultures which Chinese managers are accustomed to (Jackson, 2014).

When MNEs invest in a country, such as Cameroon, which possesses weaker formal institutional constraints, they might be expected to find it relatively easy to transfer their preferred HR practices (Smith et al., 2008; Ferner et al., 2011). However, these weaknesses were compensated for by embedded informal institutions that posed serious challenges to the management of CCORP’s preferred HR practices in Cameroon. The formal institutional weaknesses provided ‘active’ opportunities for institutional work by CCORP that was predisposed and willing to engage in addressing the contextual exigencies (Cantwell et al., 2010).

Second, considering the high level of unemployment in Cameroon, CCORP replaced most of its workforce with Cameroonians and only paid the oil sector minimum salaries. This approach aligned with its ‘low cost’ strategy and the provisions of the sectoral collective agreement. CCORP embraced trade unions. CCORP gained a reputation of being a good employer and acted appropriately by championing the implementation of the ‘Cameroonisation of Employment’ policies. These practical and discursive institutional works by CCORP helped to disrupt the prevailing ‘logic’ (on which, see Kraatz and Block, 2017) that was based on exploiting local resources by foreign MNEs without regard to the local community and people. Thus, CCORP found a balance between the pursuit of its investment motives and the needs of the host context. This is supported by the findings of other studies which showed that China was not inclined to colonize Africa and that its investment motives were more animated by mutual benefits (Jackson, 2014). However, a note should be taken of the mounting Chinese debt for Cameroon and the poor human rights record of some Chinese mining firms in the country (Cabestan, 2015; Benis, 2017).

Third, While CCORP promoted itself and its HR practices as the ‘model’ to address local employment issues in Cameroon, how the government, civil society groups and trade unions joined forces to promote CCORP was of note. Through these advocacy and discursive approaches, CCORP reconfigured the belief system in Cameroon’s oil sector. This is akin to the enactment of new and the modification of existing institutions (Amis et al., 2020). Thus, CCORP engaged in institutional work thereby establishing a new logics in the oil sector in three main ways: (a) it disrupted the dominant logics by abiding by the prevailing ‘rules of the game’; (b) it helped to create new institutions such as the collective agreement, community projects and training centres; and (c) it championed the adoption and internalisation (institutional maintenance) of local work and employment practices.

**Conclusion**

The objective of this study was to understand how a relatively inexperienced, in internationalisation, Chinese MNE interacted with the evolving institutional context that is also experiencing geopolitical flux to manage its workforce and to pursue its investment motives. The findings suggest that informal and formal institutions, the socio-economic exigencies and the MNE’s strategy shaped, and were in turn influenced by, work and employment practices in CCORP. The government, civil society groups and trade unions joined forces to promote CCORP to portray itself as a company that understood the socio-economic needs of the population, thereby reinforcing the ‘win-win’ underpinnings of Chinese investment in Cameroon.

***Theoretical Implications.*** Evidence from this study showed that three insights emerged from the collected data, which add to the growing body of literature on the nature of HRM in evolving institutional contexts of developing countries (Hennekam et al., 2017; Cooke, 2017). First, the new concept of ‘field champion’ as a strategic response to institutional logics is developed. This is a field-level strategy, which in the case of CCORP was supported by four interdependent tactics: alignment, discursive, internalisation and citizenship processes. Mutually reinforcing each, these tactics enabled CCORP to deal with the complex nature of the operating context (on which, see Smets et al., 2015). Also, CCORP subtly engaged in practices that projected and pursued ‘dominance’ in the oil sector (see Elger and Smith, 2005; Rolye, 2006). CCORP further carried out corporate social responsibility projects (citizenship) to disrupt and create alternative institutional logics in Cameroon’s oil sector. So, CCORP pursued its corporate motives by emphasizing a field-level strategy (Alvehus, 2017).

Second, in Cameroon, it was the crucial role in terms of cohesion and resilience of personal relationships and political networks in triggering and sustaining formal institutions (see Helmke and Steven, 2004) that determined, to a significant extent, HR practices in CCORP. Here, such findings point to the importance of informal institutions, but they also behove me to acknowledge the influence of formal institutions, and their complex co-existence and operation. In line with other studies by Williamson and Kerekes (2010) and Bratton (2007), this paper extends how informal institutions meshed with formal institutions and in so doing, shaped MNEs’ HR practices.

Third, this research augments the body of work on the crucial relationship between the underpinnings of Chinese investment motives, which are in stark contrast to those of Western nations, and the nature of HRM in Chinese MNEs in Africa (Brӓutigam, 2011a; Buckley, 2020). The ease with which CCORP espoused local employment practices in Cameroon was underpinned by the Chinese government’s ‘win-win’ investment policies which were perceived by local social actors as better than those of the (exploitative) Western countries. Thus, the underpinnings (be they exploitative, cooperative or win-win) of FDI in developing countries are a key influence on MNEs’ HRM strategies. The theoretical conjecture here is that MNEs’ HR practices are more likely to be localised where the underpinnings of their investment motives are aligned or compatible with the core values and priorities of the host country and its local actors. The underpinnings of Chinese FDI in Africa predisposed, at least in principle, their MNEs to embrace the continent’s values and development (Jackson, 2014). However, this point must be understood in the context of a divergent Africa of 54 countries with different industrial sectors wherein some studies observed negative, and others reported positive, effects of Chinese MNEs’ management approaches on local employment practices, institutions and the community (Aloumedjo, 2018).

***Practical Implications*.** The research findings have some important implications for MNEs operating in evolving institutional contexts, especially in Africa. First, it is the contention that many managers in charge of people management in organisations in Africa are not well trained to adapt home country and best practices to the local contexts. This is worrisome in that this can lead to discord between MNEs’ corporate strategy and the exigencies of the socio-economic context. This implies that organisations need to take the challenges of evolving operating contexts more seriously and that they should assist their HR managers in how they should align their HRM approaches to the requirements of evolving contexts. It would also be important for MNEs to ensure that their HRM practices are internalized by the local workforce to improve engagement and subsequently performance, thereby agreeing with Cooke (2017) and Kamoche, Amon, Kamel Mellahic and Aloysius (2012) who have argued that HRM needs to be more contextualized in both conceptualisation and practice.

Second, the findings suggest that while some MNEs are probably aware of the need to take corporate social responsibility (CSR) more seriously, they do relatively less to change this situation. A genuine commitment to CSR towards all stakeholders necessitates facing and dealing head-on with the notion of giving back, directly, to the community where MNEs establish their operations to exploit natural resources. MNEs should become more integrated and mutually reinforce capacities in initiating, implementing and evaluating projects that promote CSR from the perspective of the local community in developing countries (Banerjee, 2017).

Third, the intricacies evident in and the insights required to navigate the evolving institutional contexts in developing countries require that MNEs wishing to set up operations in these locations seriously consider recruiting experts who have worked with the governments, possess deep knowledge of the operating context or have good personal and political connections with private and public actors therein.

***Limitations and Directions for Future Research.*** This research and the data on which this paper is based do of course have some limitations. First, the inability to establish universally applicable patterns on the basis of the data from a single case study. Future research may further strengthen this by carrying out quantitative and qualitative studies of Chinese MNEs’ practices in other under-researched developing countries, economic sectors and indeed, MNEs from other emerging economies in Africa. Second, while this case study identified the strategies that the Chinese MNE used to garner support from the government and civil society and to adopt local HR practices, it would be interesting to know how prevalent and successful such strategies are for other Chinese MNEs. To do this, more studies of HRM in other Chinese MNEs in the oil sector in particular and in the country, in general, are recommended. Third, while the distinct institutional context and the professional variety of the informants mean that the case study is an intriguing one in which to investigate the interaction between institutions, employment practices and HR actors, relatively less is known of institutional evolution in developing countries. Longitudinal studies are needed to track these changes.

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