

## DECODING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHINESE MERCHANTS AND BATSWANA SHOP ASSISTANTS: THE CASE OF CHINA SHOPS IN GABORONE

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**ABSTRACT** As part of China's growing presence in Africa, many Chinese merchants have set up shops in Botswana. Due to government regulations, these merchants are required to hire locals as assistants. However, Chinese shopkeepers, who seem to be motivated by the spirit of Confucian capitalism, have work expectations that are not shared by their Batswana shop assistants. Chinese merchants view their Batswana shop assistants as having poor work ethics, whilst Batswana assistants view Chinese merchants as exploiters of cheap labor. In this research, through participant observation and in-depth interviews, the voices of approximately 90 Chinese employers and 20 Batswana assistants were recorded. The research reveals a lack of organizational commitment and interpersonal trust. Similar to the situation in many other African countries, linguistic and cultural differences have led to disputes, tension, and a toxic work environment. In the rush for investment and employment opportunities, important social and cultural orientations have been neglected and the gap has been filled by pre-conceptions and prejudice.

**Key Words:** Botswana; China; Employment relations; Interpersonal trust; Organisational commitment.

### INTRODUCTION

Botswana established diplomatic relations with China in 1975 and bilateral relations between the two countries have grown steadily over the years since then. Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) to Botswana has been a major driving force in this relationship. However, one area of Chinese FDI to Botswana that has received very little attention is that of trade, especially in the retail sector. According to the Botswana government, in 2014, there were 600 Chinese trading companies in the country, operating businesses such as cell phone shops, commercial hardware, electronics, furniture, general clothing, industrial hardware, jewelry, restaurants, etc. (Botswana Government, 2014). These merchants can be found in almost every part of Botswana.

The introduction of these China shops into the Botswana consumer market has brought relief to local consumers, particularly those in the lower income brackets or in rural areas (Bolaane, 2007: 164), as Chinese imports provide an affordable alternative to expensive South African chain stores and supermarkets, especially for clothing, footwear, and electrical appliances. The predominance of Chinese imports in the market has led to resentment from certain quarters, and accusa-

tions that China shops are saturating the local market and crowding out local businesses (Kalusopa, 2009). Some view Chinese merchants as a threat since they are seen as operating businesses that Batswana citizens could be operating (Zi, 2015b). At the same time, there seems to be a serious communication breakdown between the two parties, with Chinese merchants accusing their Batswana shop assistants of having a poor work ethic, and Batswana shop assistants in turn accusing Chinese merchants of unfair labor practices. The tensions caused by these disputes are further fueled by certain media sources that portray Chinese traders in an unfavorable light, touting sensational newspapers headlines such as “Shop assistants in Chinese stores mistreated?” (Bule, 2009) and “We are not a Chinese colony...to hell with the Chinese” (Rasina, 2013).

The purpose of this article is to examine the employer–employee relationships in China shops in Botswana, with particular focus on organizational commitment and interpersonal trust, in order to understand the root cause of these tensions. The paper begins with a review of literature on organizational commitment and interpersonal trust in the context of African countries. Next, the research methodology is described, followed by the discussion of organizational commitment and interpersonal trust as it applies to China shops in Botswana. The conclusion argues that the lack of organizational commitment and interpersonal trust in China shops in Botswana is due to a lack of shared values between Chinese merchants and their Batswana shop assistants, as well as short-term business and career plans on both sides.

## EMPLOYER-EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHINESE MERCHANTS AND AFRICAN LOCALS: THREE AFRICAN CASE STUDIES

The existing literature on relations between Chinese employers and African employees highlights differences in cultural understanding, work performance, expectation, and work habits as key issues. These differences are illustrated by research conducted in three African counties: Ghana, Uganda, and Zambia.

In the case of Ghana, Giese (2013) argues that mutual unawareness of culturally grounded expectations leads to dissatisfaction on both sides. The Chinese try to set an example for their employees by working diligently and accepting hardship in the expectation of future profit, and by prioritizing material security for their family above wages. As outsiders in a political climate often characterized by anti-Chinese sentiments, Chinese traders see themselves as operating from a position of weakness and vulnerability, rather than coldly calculating how to best exploit cheap African labor. However, Giese and Thiel (2012) stress that local employees also experience feelings of vulnerability as they are almost exclusively recruited from economically marginalized groups. Giese and Thiel (2014), however, reveal that Ghanaian employees attempt to restore equity by means of discussion, silence, retreat, or destruction. These attempts often fail due to lack of cultural understanding between Chinese employers and Ghanaian employees. Generally speaking, the relationship between Chinese employers and Ghanaian employees is based on economic exchange rather than interpersonal trust, and the

Chinese rarely get a sense of organizational commitment from the employees.

In Uganda, Codrin (2014) reveals how relations between Chinese employers and Ugandan employees are shaped by the former's knowledge and acceptance of the Ugandan practice of *enjwulo*, the locally embedded cultural, social, and economic notions of labor. Initially, Ugandan employees either acted in ways that their Chinese bosses deemed suspicious, or failed to do what they were asked. Over time, however, employees became accustomed to the particular styles and cultural expectations of bosses and began to adjust their behavior accordingly (Codrin, 2014: 153–154). Codrin further argues that locally grounded economic–cultural issues are not the only source of tension in China–African work relations. The Chinese employers in the study seem to lack interest in how local systems of meaning impact people's daily behavior in Uganda. The Chinese do not speak any local languages and, as they have a limited understanding of what is “proper” according to local codes of conduct, end up engaging in behaviors that were perceived to be abusive (Codrin, 2014: 155).

Lee (2009), who researched mining in Zambia and the Tanzania–China Friendship Mills in Dar es Salaam, argues that there are more profound barriers than communication between Chinese employers and African employees. The Chinese justify their demands from the workers by invoking work ethics, which they understand to include devotion to work and a willingness to make sacrifices for progress without concomitant demands for rights, rewards, or privileges (Lee, 2014: 54). The Zambian workers, on the other hand, feel exploited by the expectation that they will make sacrifices (Lee, 2009: 7–9). The Zambians think that by working in Chinese-owned factories, the Chinese owe them daily food and pay. This causes the Chinese to believe that the Zambian workers are not motivated to work hard and improve themselves (Lee, 2009: 9).

Considering the fact that Africa's manufacturing sector is known for its weak investment regimes and poor labor quality, a growing number of scholars suggest that Chinese enterprise networks can help to bridge the gaps in African enterprise development. Chinese dedication to discipline is seen as a solution to the poor work ethic in Africa. According to some scholars, African labor is characterized by a lack of skills and training, disruptions due to numerous ceremonies, and unrealistic wage expectations, which together result in serious constraints on its competitiveness in the international market (Brautigam, 2009; Gu, 2009; Meagher, 2012: 273). Can Chinese working culture bring structure and discipline to African workers? According to previous research, the reality is that African employees' lack of organizational commitment and the absence of interpersonal trust between African employees and Chinese employers hinder relations between the two parties. But what is the root cause of these deficiencies? How is the situation in Botswana different from that in other African countries?

## ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT AND INTERPERSONAL TRUST AT WORK

Organizational commitment and interpersonal trust play an important part in

the quality of working life (Cook & Wall, 1980) and contribute to the success or failure of relationships in marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). To choose a proper framework to analyze organizational commitment and interpersonal trust between Chinese employers and Batswana employees, we will briefly review the related literatures in the field of classical social psychology. Although the sources we draw on are neither recent nor built in an African context, the multi-dimensional categories they provide can still be considered adaptable to our discussion.

Generally, there are two major views of organizational commitment. One emphasizes the economic cost of leaving a current employer (Becker, 1960; Farrell & Rosbult, 1981), while the other stresses emotional ties to an organization (Etzioni, 1961; Levinson, 1965). Previous research on organizational commitment has shown that certain personal characteristics (age, income, and education) and certain job characteristics (variety, autonomy, identity, and feedback) are strongly connected to many organizational behaviors (Hunt et al., 1989). Buchanan (1974: 533), identifies three components of organizational commitment; (a) identification, defined as the adoption of the goals and values of the organization as one's own; (b) involvement, defined as the psychological immersion or absorption in the activities of one's work role; and (c) loyalty, defined as a feeling of affection for and attachment to the organization. Commitment, then, is viewed as a partisan, affective attachment to the goals and values of an organization, to one's role in relation to those goals and values, and to the organization for its own sake, apart from its purely instrumental worth. Given its applicability to organizational commitment and the moral dimension (Morrow, 1983: 487), we consider Buchanan's work suitable for our analysis.

Trust is a central component in effective working relationships (Gabarro, 1978), and considered crucial by scholars for the effective functioning of an organization. Research has found that differing mindsets (Arora et al., 2004), misunderstandings (Kankanhalli et al., 2006), and conflicting motives (Tomlinson et al., 2004) threaten the existence of trust (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998). Gabarro (1978) and Butler and Cantrell (1984) classify trust according to five dimensions, namely; (a) integrity, defined as honesty and truthfulness; (b) competence, defined as the technical and interpersonal knowledge and skills required to do one's job; (c) consistency, defined as reliability, predictability, and good judgment; (d) loyalty or benevolence, defined as willingness to protect and save face for a person; and (e) openness or mental accessibility, defined as willingness to share ideas and information freely. Butler and Cantrell (1984) find that integrity, motives (loyalty), and openness were most salient to an employee's upward trust in a supervisor. By fostering employees' trust, organizations may be able to avoid the negative ramifications of job insecurity, thus developing a workforce that is more satisfied with their jobs, more emotionally committed to the organization, and less prone to burnout and psychological distress (Jiang & Probst, 2016: 19).

In China shops, organizational commitment and interpersonal trust are closely related to Chinese culture and its family business model, which can be traced to Confucian capitalism, a term made popular by Kahn's "World Economic Development: 1979 and Beyond (1979)". The Confucianism that Kahn has in mind consists of dedicated, motivated, responsible, and educated individuals with an

enhanced sense of commitment and loyalty to institutions (Kahn, 1979: 128). Even though Confucianism is not widely practiced by mainland Chinese, it is still considered by the majority as a key influence on their business values and expectations.

Confucian ethics have been crucial in shaping scholars' understanding of the economic successes of Chinese diaspora all over the world. However, Cha (2003: 492) argues that the Confucian virtues (such as frugality, diligence, education, order, and discipline) are usually created by capitalist mechanism of selection and elimination. In response, Yao (2002) contends that the discourse on Confucian capitalism is not only misleading, but also serves ideological and political interests. When adopted by East Asian leaders such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, the invocation of Confucian capitalism helps to legitimize state paternalism, the quashing of labor movements, denial of individual rights, and divestment of the state's responsibility for social welfare onto the family (Carruthers, 2003: 595). Yao basis his critique on an ethnography of a small group of Chinese traders in a tiny, remote township in Malaysia, where he investigated how Chinese immigrants fare in terms of social and economic marginality. His study reveals a world of tedium, anxiety, disappointment, resentment, self-interest, exploitation of kin, and failed interpersonal relations, all of which are absent from the optimistic view of Confucian capitalism.

According to Yao, in China shops in Malaysia, *kan dian* (minding the shop) is considered something that "useless old men" do to pass the time. However, the underlying motivation is to always have a family member present, as the owners may not trust their employees. These employees are often the young sons of poor relatives, who have been sent to make a living and learn how to run a business by serving as an apprentice or shop assistant. While the practice may be about ensuring that employees work efficiently, it also makes the employees feel they are not trusted because they are not "one of the family." Yao emphasizes that *kan dian* communicates distrust (Yao, 2002: 93–94). It appears that Chinese companies in Africa have brought with them the same culturally based work ethics and labor practices.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH SITE

Previous research on organizational commitment and interpersonal trust mainly employed questionnaire surveys to establish multi-dimensional scales (Buchanan, 1974; Butler & Cantrell, 1984; Gabarro, 1978). However, these did not provide insights into and the context of commitment and trust. In this paper, we have chosen the anthropological research methods of participant observation as well as in-depth and informal interviews in order to delve into the root causes of tensions in employment relationships in China shops. Furthermore, the majority of the existing research in other African countries has been conducted by Western scholars doing short-term field research. In this study, from 2011 to 2015, a native Chinese researcher spend three months almost every year living with Chinese merchants and visiting their shops regularly, in order to build enough

**Table 1.** Survey data (sample size)

| Number of visited shops           | n  | Number of visited Chinese merchants (CM) | n  | Number of visited local assistants (LA) | n  |
|-----------------------------------|----|------------------------------------------|----|-----------------------------------------|----|
| China shop in Gaborone            | 47 | CM in Gaborone (who has shops)           | 90 | LA in China shops (75)                  | 20 |
| China wholesale store in Gaborone | 13 |                                          |    |                                         |    |
| Total                             | 60 |                                          | 90 |                                         | 20 |

trust to delve into the sensitive topics we wanted to explore. We adopted the scales offered by Buchanan (1974), Butler and Cantrell (1984), and Gabarro (1978) as our categories of analysis. Although this research is more anthropological than psychological, adopting a psychological framework can stimulate us to think from a multi-disciplinary perspective.

This research was conducted in Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana, between November 2011 and September 2015. There were around 100 retail and 100 wholesale China shops in Gaborone, and approximately 300 Chinese employers and 600 Batswana shop assistants operating these businesses. Data were collected from 60 different shops. Through participant observation as well as in-depth and informal interviews, the voices of 90 Chinese employers and 20 Batswana assistants were recorded (Table 1). Botswana (Fig. 1) is a landlocked country, bordered by South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. In Gaborone, China retail shops are mainly located in shopping malls and on the sides of streets, selling clothes, shoes, handbags, and miscellaneous goods (e.g., tools, electronics, etc.). The shopping malls that accommodate a comparatively large number of

**Fig. 1:** Botswana

China shops are located by main roads and in high-density areas near the center of the city. Small China shops usually hire one or two local assistants, while the largest hires as many as 10 local assistants. Researchers went to chat with Chinese merchants and their local assistants using semi-structured interview questions, at the same time observing the interactions between merchants and assistants. In some cases, shops were owned by a Chinese couple or by several Chinese. In such cases, only one informant was recorded, especially if the merchants happened to share the same opinion. The life stories of the merchants were compiled from conversations and in-depth interviews, but only a limited number of local shop assistants were interviewed in-depth. Even after obtaining permission from Chinese merchants to interview their assistants, most of the assistants were still afraid to talk openly in the presence of the Chinese merchants. Some made disparaging remarks, but would not say anything substantive. Such remarks were neither recorded nor counted as interviewees. In-depth interview data was mostly gathered from the Batswana shop assistants who were interviewed during their lunch breaks, or while the owners were absent. Mandarin was used when communicating with the Chinese merchants and English was used when interviewing shop assistants. In addition, key informants in the Chinese Embassy, the editor of a Chinese newspaper in Botswana, and some Botswana government officials (City Council and Police Station) were interviewed. The research also relied on secondary data from government publications and newspapers.

Interviewees have been coded and anonymized in order to protect their privacy and interests. The codes represent the following information about the informants:

| Code | Representation            | Code        | Representation                                             |
|------|---------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| C    | Chinese business          | c           | Chinese individual                                         |
| B    | Botswana business         | b           | Botswana individual                                        |
| F    | Foreign business          | i           | foreign individual besides Chinese; ex. Indian; Zimbabwean |
| T    | Trade                     | o           | owner                                                      |
| E    | External service provider | m           | manager                                                    |
| G    | Government informant      | e           | employee                                                   |
| S    | Scholar informant         | f           | family member                                              |
| P    | Pilot interview informant | 0,1,2, etc. | differentiates between respondents of the same affiliation |

## ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT AND INTERPERSONAL TRUST: A CASE STUDY OF BOTSWANA

Chinese merchants in Botswana are mostly from Fujian and Jiangxi provinces in China.<sup>(1)</sup> Some have been in Botswana since the beginning of the construction boom in the 1990s, while others moved their business over from South Africa more recently. As merchants established themselves in Botswana, they brought more people from their provinces—a phenomenon known as “chain migration.”

These recent migrants are predominantly Fujianese who has no more than a middle school education and a limited grasp of English. Some of them were born in fishing villages, and survived by working on short-term construction projects or running small businesses before moving to Botswana. Due to their background, some migrants do not have the means to go abroad and start a business and needed to borrow money in order to do so. Since their main reason for staying in Botswana is then to send remittances to their families or to save for future business investments, many migrants live quite frugally. In most African countries, Chinese prefer recruiting other Chinese as employees rather than locals. This makes a lot of sense, considering that language can be a major barrier. The Chinese in Botswana are no exception, but due to governmental policy, every China shop is required to hire Botswana assistants (CEco158, 2014). Compared to the recruitment process for big chain shops from South Africa (e.g., Ackermans, PEP), the process in China shops is less strict. The former usually requires candidates to submit educational documents and go through an interview process in order to screen employees (FTbm73, 2014). China shops, in contrast, simply put a job notice on their door to attract workers (CTco12, 2013; CTco20, 2013). Previously, in order to avoid procedure fees and simplify the hiring process, some Chinese employers would hire local employees without signing a contract (CTco74, 2011; CTce79, 2011). In recent years, however, as government regulations have grown stricter, most China shops follow the required legal process for recruitment, signing contracts with employees before the start of employment (CTco74, 2014a). Some Chinese even go through job agencies to find workers, so that when they find employees stealing they can ask the agency to replace the person without incurring additional costs (CTco23, 2011). Even so, the recruitment process in China shops is still one of the simplest in Botswana.

The majority of Botswana employees working in China shops are high school graduates or dropouts, according to the merchants we interviewed, who do not seem to take their work seriously. Rather, they consider it a temporary solution while they look for something better. From the interviews, it appears that most of the employees want a job that will give them skills or better terms and conditions than the China shops (CTbe3, 2013; CTbe4, 2013). There is a high employee turnover in China shops, and it is rare to find an employee who has been working in the same shop for more than two years. Many assistants work in the shops while looking for other employment or further education. When they find a better option, they leave (CTbe3, 2013). Theft and pregnancy also contribute to the high turnover rates (CTco74, 2014b), as well as a number of Botswana shop assistants who are fired for what their Chinese employers deem to be poor work ethics. If they are dismissed without receiving one month's salary in lieu of notice, Botswana employees frequently sue their former employers (CTco1, 2011; CTcof2, 2014; CTco74, 2011). The majority of Chinese merchants offer a salary that is only slightly above the regulated minimum wage, which draws many complaints from their employees, particularly with the rising cost of living in the country. The following section examines the conflict between Chinese merchants and their Botswana shop assistants from their respective viewpoints, with a particular focus on interpersonal trust and organizational commitment.

## I. Organisational commitment

When it comes to organizational commitment, almost every Chinese merchant we interviewed complained about their shop assistants. Drawing on Buchanan's framework for organizational commitment (1974), this section discusses employment relations in China shops with respect to the components of identification, involvement, and loyalty. These measures were developed in a Western context; however, they are adaptable to our study as they help to subdivide "organizational commitment" into several intuitive dimensions.

Identification is defined as adopting the goals and values of an organization as one's own. Many Chinese employers reported that their shop assistants were nice enough while they were still learning all the different tasks in the shop, but after a few months became "cunning and disobedient" (CTcof21, 2013; CTco55, 2014). One employer described how she had told her shop assistants not to text during work, but they had refused to comply and even tried to argue over this request. According to the merchants, the Batswana shop assistants do not feel the need to listen because the Chinese are outsiders in Botswana (CTco104, 2014a). The Chinese merchants usually have hectic schedules, particularly when running a larger shop, and they expect their local shop assistants to be active and helpful, as if working for their own business. However, due to their attitudes towards work, shop assistants are more likely than other employees to cause employment conflict, especially compared to Chinese assistants who tend to be more submissive (CTco8, 2013; CTce85, 2013). As a result, when things are not going well, shop assistants are the first to be fired. This helps to explain why most shop assistants do not work longer than two years in China shops. A veteran local assistant who has worked in the same shop for eight years observed that China shops usually hire young women who lack maturity and do not take their jobs seriously (CTbe139, 2014a). In addition, she said that there is no pride in working for a China shop because they only sell "cheap" merchandise. Although Chinese employers expect their shop assistants to adopt the goals of the shop as their own, the shop assistants find it difficult to do so, only considering themselves helpers to assist the business.

Involvement concerns the psychological immersion or absorption in the activities of one's job. Due to the high turnover rate, the majority of China shops lack experienced shop assistants. As a result, some veteran shop assistants are required to work overtime, especially during busy seasons. This causes some of the shop assistants to complain about "selfishness and a lack of consideration" on the part of the Chinese employers. Even so, they do not leave the job because they have families to feed (CTbe10, 2013b). Meanwhile, Chinese merchants judge the attitudes of their Batswana shop assistants according to Chinese values. CTbe10's boss said, "People here are not like Chinese, who would be thankful for the job opportunity. Even now, I still need to beg her (CTbe10) to come to work, even though she has been here for seven years" (CTco8, 2013). Thus, CTbe10 expected more time off after so many years of hard work, while her employer expected her to be more committed on account of her years of experience.

Chinese shopkeepers' views are that local shop assistants are not passionate

about their work. To them, the only exciting day of the month is payday. Even during busy seasons, such as the end of the month or around Christmas, most local employees would, given the opportunity, abandon work to go have fun instead. Their Chinese bosses are baffled by this lack of dedication, witnessed not only in new shop assistants but also in veterans who are expected to be more invested in the management of the shop (CTco22, 2014; CTco46, 2014). Speaking from 10 years of business experience in Botswana, CTco22 (2014) concluded,

For so many years, only on payday can I find all of my shop assistants at work. During Christmas, they will tell you that their mother died in order to get leave from work. Some of their mothers have died several times.

After being absent, female shop assistants often return to work with new hair-styles, freshly manicured nails, and new clothes, and it is clear that they have spent their time off shopping. Although the Chinese employers see the business as their number one priority and expect the same of their assistants, the shop assistants are more interested in enjoying the results of their work rather than the work itself. This difference in expectation creates a rift between the two sides.

Loyalty in employment relations is defined as feeling affection for and attachment to an organization. Research shows that there is evidence of a close link between loyalty and salary complaints. As stated above, the majority of Chinese merchants offer a salary that only slightly exceeds minimum wage. Narrow profit margins, a poor economy, employee theft, and a rising cost of living all contribute to frugality on the part of the Chinese. Meanwhile, the rising cost of living in Gaborone is difficult for everyone. One shop assistant reported that she receives 800 pula each month, but spends around 350 pula on transportation and another 500 on feeding her family (son, grandmother, aunt) (CTbe11, 2013). Issues such as this lead to a lack of trust between employers and assistants. Another shop assistant reported that her boss would not share her timesheet with her. As a result, she was suspicious that her boss was paying her less than what she was owed and wanted to go to the Department of Labor and Social Security to complain (CTbe179, 2015). Most Chinese merchants admit that the salary they offer to shop assistants is not good. However, they continuously stress that the salaries are in line with government regulations. Moreover, many do not think the shop assistants deserve better pay. They believe that the poverty of the shop assistants is due to laziness and wasteful habits (CTco46, 2014).

Some Chinese merchants also feel emotionally affronted by their former employees. One merchant recounted, "Even though I paid them a good salary and bonus, they sued me through the Department of Labor and Social Security after they left the job. They thought once they sued me they would get more money" (CTco182, 2015). Many Chinese that we interviewed have experienced being sued by their shop assistants, either for unlawful dismissal or their claims that they are paid too little. During the interview process, the majority of Chinese merchants expressed concern for the living situations of their shop assistants and was willing to lend them money without charging interest. When CTco34 (2013) complained about the rising cost of living, she added: "We have to raise our

assistant's salary next week. She has been with us for seven years. With such a high living cost how can she get by?" Most Chinese employers believe they treat their shop assistants fairly and that the assistants are heartless or complain too much. On the other hand, the assistants suspect that they are being exploited, and try to secure their rights through legal means, such as reporting their employers to the Department of Labor and Social Security. The Chinese bosses consider this a form of betrayal.

It is worth mentioning that the Chinese merchants themselves are sometimes tentative in their commitment to the remaining in Botswana when the business environment changes. As mentioned previously, the Botswana government has initiated projects to encourage entrepreneurship among local people. The fierce competition and tighter regulations that accompany these initiatives compel the Chinese merchants to view their businesses as "better than nothing," and they are hesitant to invest too much in their shops. When their business permits expire, they look for other markets or prepare to return to China (Zi, 2015a). Thus operating in survival mode, the merchants want to invest as little as possible in their shops, and keep salaries low.

In summary, the Botswana consider working in a China shop a last resort, and do not commit themselves to the job. They expect lighter workloads and more pay. While Chinese merchants may try to be kind to their shop assistants, they do treat them according to a Chinese value system, and keep salaries low, a choice motivated by financial limitations and the short-term nature of their business. At the same time, the lack of commitment from shop assistants must be considered when discussing the outlook of Chinese merchants on their businesses.

## II. Interpersonal trust at work

Interpersonal trust is closely related to organizational commitment (Nyhan, 1999) and, in this section, interpersonal trust at work will be examined according to Butler and Cantrell's dimensions of integrity, competence, benevolent motives, and openness (1984). This framework was created in a Western context; however, it is adaptable to our research as it helps us to subdivide the abstract concept of interpersonal trust into several measurable dimensions.

Integrity, defined as honesty and truthfulness, is a frequent point of contention between Chinese employers and Botswana shop assistants. Comments such as "everyone here steals whether they are rich or poor" are common among Chinese merchants. Most Chinese shops have security cameras not only to catch shoplifters but also to check for employee theft. Few Chinese merchants trust their shop assistants since the majority of them have had merchandise stolen by employees. One employer, CTco74 (2011), revealed that she even locks up the shop and makes her shop assistants wait outside when she goes to the bathroom. Because of the high rates of employee theft, many Chinese merchants have low opinions of the local community as a whole and wonder why the locals seem so unashamed of the problem (CTco145, 2014; CTco12, 2012).

Interviews with managers of South African chain stores such as Ackermans and Style revealed that the salary offered by the chains is significantly higher

than that of the China shops. One manager asserted that shop assistants at these stores rarely steal for fear of losing such a good job. Botswana is a small country with few job opportunities and finding a job with similar benefits would be difficult (BTbm101, 2014). However, the Chinese merchants we interviewed insisted that raising salaries does not necessarily contribute to theft prevention. For them, it depends on whether they are lucky enough to find a good assistant. Generally, assistants demonstrated the tendency to steal, regardless of whether this was from China shops or South African chain stores. The latter are prestigious shops respected more by the local people.

In Chinese shops, many of the Batswana shop assistants we interviewed were aware that some of their colleagues steal, or they knew of former colleagues who had done so. One veteran shop assistant revealed that, when she was watching the shop, her friends would encourage her to steal things, telling her that the Chinese were there to destroy the country (CTbm61, 2015). It seems that in addition to salary issues the negative perception of Chinese businesses contributes to the shop assistants' willingness to steal from them.

Competence is defined as the technical and interpersonal knowledge and skills required to do one's job. Many Chinese felt that the local shop assistants are neither passionate about their work nor intelligent enough to handle the job. If not for local regulations, most Chinese would prefer not to hire local shop assistants. As one merchant said:

They are too lazy to move the goods from stock to the shelves. Once an item on the shelf has run out, they will tell customers that there are no more instead of unpacking new stock. The local government encourages us to hire local people instead of bringing Chinese over, but locals cannot do one tenth of the job that a Chinese can (CTco22, 2014).

Once a local is recruited as a shop assistant, Chinese merchants expect them to be diligent, respectful, and humble as they learn from their employer and do not believe that they live up to this expectation. While the Chinese merchants do not expect the Batswana assistants to be as skillful as Chinese assistants who do not face barriers of language or culture, they expect them to contribute to the business without reluctance.

Benevolence, a willingness to protect and save face for another person, also deserves attention when analyzing interpersonal trust relations. Many local shop assistants said that their Chinese employers were "rude" to them. Others complained about their bosses being so irritable that, on days when business is down, being with their employers feels like walking on eggshells (CTbe10, 2013a). The shop assistants are not comfortable with the strict rules laid out by their employers, for example forbidding shop assistants to chat with each other at work. Some shop assistants only feel comfortable talking to each other when the boss is not around (CTbe66, 2013).

Talking to the merchants, it is clear that they are under a lot of pressure. Sometimes they feel they cannot help taking their stress out on their shop assistants. It is evident that much of the perceived rudeness is grounded in the language

and culture of the Chinese employers. Many locals reported that their bosses embarrassed them in front of customers. “Our boss scolded us until she made us cry. She kept saying things like ‘do this, do that’, and ‘why don’t you do this?’” (CTbe66, 2013).

Chinese merchants usually have fairly large shops, some in excess of 100 m<sup>2</sup>. Because the merchants want to be in charge of the cash register, they do not typically leave the checkout counter. When communicating with their shop assistants, therefore, they may shout so that the assistants can hear them from anywhere in the shop. If there is background music playing, they need to shout even louder. The assistants find this harsh and off-putting. If an assistant makes a mistake, most Chinese merchants will not walk over to talk to the shop assistant privately if they can simply shout from where they are standing. Furthermore, most Chinese employers will freely reprimand their shop assistants regardless of the presence of customers. The assistants reported feeling ashamed when scolded by their bosses, especially if the customers are other Botswana (CTbe139, 2014a; CTbe179, 2014). These differences in understanding result in the Chinese seeming insensitive to the feelings of their assistants, whom they in turn judge as “not being humble enough to receive correction.” While some Chinese have developed an understanding of Botswana pride, others may not even realize that there is a problem until their shop assistants confront them or break down crying (CTco34, 2011; CTco35f, 2011; CTco38, 2011; CTco73, 2014).

Openness, defined as a willingness to share ideas and information freely, was also found to be lacking in the employment relations in China shops. As foreigners in Botswana, most Chinese feel vulnerable when they are starting up their businesses (Zi, 2015a). Many of them reported feeling looked down upon by local shop assistants on account of their poor English (CTcof7, 2013). Some claimed that there are shop assistants who will pretend they do not understand their employers’ English rather than comply with the employers’ request (CTco43, 2011). This may be related to the negative portrayal of Chinese people in local media, who are stereotyped as “dog eaters” (Sb171, 2014). On the flip side, Chinese people stereotype the locals as HIV-infected, and they seldom take the local bus or use the public toilet for fear that they will become infected as well. Many Chinese also criticize the local women for giving birth out of wedlock. These linguistic and cultural differences form crucial barriers.

When cooperation does occur, it is limited by the lack of openness between Chinese and Botswana. CTbe139 has worked for a China wholesale shop for eight years. She taught her boss English and provided a lot of constructive advice on management and sales throughout the years. She and her boss have good relationship, even “treating each other like family.” However, when asked if there was a possibility that the two of them would become business partners in the future, she replied:

I want to cooperate with my boss to do some business, but she has been taken that lightly. Even in the shop, she keeps the accounting to herself. There are many things that we can help her with, but she tends to keep

her “secrets” to herself. There is a trust limitation between us. (CTbe139, 2014b)

On the Chinese side, merchants are afraid that local partners would squander any money invested due to differing business values. The Chinese are interested in planning for long-term goals, and believe the local people to only be interested in short-term gains (CTco104, 2014b).

To sum up, as foreigners with broken English, Chinese merchants feel it is difficult to gain the respect of their Batswana shop assistants. Although most Chinese merchants would not consider themselves to be racist, it might take a great deal of time for them to overcome cultural barriers and accept the habits and values of the Batswana people. As a result, it is difficult for Chinese employers and Batswana shop assistants to have open conversations with each other, and Chinese employers are hesitant to entrust local shop assistants with finances or share information about the business.

## DISUCSSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has examined the employment relations between Chinese merchants and Batswana shop assistants, with particular focus on organizational commitment and interpersonal trust at work. We also examined the cultural backgrounds of the merchants and shop assistants, as well as the recruitment process in China shops. We found there is a lack of identification, involvement, and loyalty (factors that measure the organizational commitment of Botswana assistants), a low level of integrity, competence, benevolent motives, and openness (elements that measure interpersonal trust between Chinese merchants and Batswana shop assistants). By adopting these psychological frameworks, we managed to look at multiple dimensions of organizational commitment and interpersonal trust. However, since the research is qualitative rather than quantitative, their contribution is limited to offering a new angle on analysis. Furthermore, the dimensions were developed in a Western context, and so they may not be a perfect fit in the African local context. Further research will be necessary to identify the differences between organizational commitment and interpersonal trust in Western and African contexts.

The main conclusion of our research is that linguistic and cultural differences between Chinese merchants and Batswana shop assistants have led to disputes, tension, and a harmful work environment, an observation that parallels the findings of other researchers in other African countries (Codrin, 2014; Lee, 2014; Giese, 2013). Chinese merchants accuse the Batswana shop assistants of having poor work ethics, a lack of commitment, and laziness. On the other hand, Batswana shop assistants accused the Chinese of unfair labor practices, and of being ill-tempered and rude. On several occasions, Chinese merchants have even violated Batswana employment regulations. The Chinese also think that Batswana shop assistants disrespect them because they are foreigners, while the Batswana shop assistants think that their employers disrespect them because of their poor social

status or low levels of education. It can be argued that all these problems are rooted in communication breakdowns and cultural differences, primarily differences in business practice. Chinese businesses practices, which are influenced by Confucian values emphasizing frugality and hard work, contrast greatly with Batswana shop assistants' desires for "instant gratification."

**Table 2.** Background of interviewees quoted in this paper

| ID      | Business type | Position | Age | Marital status | Home town | Time in Botswana | Education background | Job before coming | No. of LA | English ability before |
|---------|---------------|----------|-----|----------------|-----------|------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-----------|------------------------|
| CTco1   | R             | owner    | 30  | M              | Fujian    | 2010–            | E                    | cook              | 9         | no                     |
| CTcof2  | R             | family   | 30  | M              | Fujian    | 2010–            | M                    | no job            | 0         | no                     |
| CTbe3   | R             | LA       | 20  | S              | near Gabs | 2013.5–12        | M                    | C-shop            | 0         | –                      |
| CTbe4   | R             | LA       | 20  | S              | near Gabs | 2012–2013        | M                    | C-shop            | 0         | –                      |
| CTcof7  | R             | family   | 30  | M              | Fujian    | 2003–            | M                    | no job            | 0         | no                     |
| CTco8   | R             | owner    | 40  | M              | Fujian    | 1999–            | M                    | –                 | 3         | no                     |
| CTbe10  | R             | LA       | 20  | SM             | Zimbabwe  | 2006–            | M                    | no job            | 0         | –                      |
| CTco12  | R             | owner    | 40  | M              | Shandong  | 2002–            | M                    | waitress          | 1         | little                 |
| CTco20  | R             | owner    | 20  | M              | Fujian    | 2007–            | M                    | student           | 2         | no                     |
| CTcof21 | R             | family   | 20  | M              | Fujian    | 2010–            | M                    | student           | 0         | no                     |
| CTco22  | R             | owner    | 40  | M              | Jiangxi   | 1999–            | C                    | company           | 10        | fluent                 |
| CTco23  | R             | owner    | 30  | M              | Fujian    | 2004–            | M                    | small business    | 2         | no                     |
| CTco34  | R             | owner    | 40  | M              | Fujian    | 2004–            | M                    | small business    | 1         | no                     |
| CTcof35 | R             | family   | 40  | M              | Fujian    | 2004–            | C                    | teacher           | 0         | little                 |
| CTco38  | R             | owner    | 20  | M              | Shandong  | 2007–            | M                    | student           | 2         | no                     |
| CTco43  | R             | owner    | 50  | M              | Fujian    | 2001–            | M                    | company           | 2         | no                     |
| CTco46  | R             | owner    | 30  | M              | Fujian    | 2009–            | M                    | small business    | 2         | no                     |
| CTco55  | R             | owner    | 50  | M              | Fujian    | 2006–2014        | E                    | small business    | 1         | no                     |
| CTbm61  | R             | LA       | 50  | SM             | Mochudi   | 2002             | M                    | –                 | 0         | –                      |
| CTbe66  | R             | LA       | 20  | S              | –         | 2013             | M                    | factory           | 0         | –                      |
| FTbm73  | R             | manager  | 40  | M              | –         | 1999–            | M                    | company           | 5         | –                      |
| CTco74  | R             | owner    | 20  | M              | Shenyang  | 2009–            | M                    | factory           | 4         | no                     |
| CTce79  | R             | employee | 20  | S              | Fujian    | 2009–2012        | M                    | factory           | 1         | no                     |
| CTce85  | R             | employee | 20  | M              | Fujian    | 2007–2013        | M                    | –                 | 4         | no                     |
| BTbm101 | R             | manager  | 40  | –              | –         | 2003–            | M                    | company           | >5        | –                      |
| CTco104 | R             | owner    | 40  | M              | Fujian    | 2003–            | C                    | engineer          | 2         | fluent                 |
| CTbe139 | W             | LA       | 40  | SM             | –         | 2005–            | M                    | company           | 0         | –                      |
| CTco145 | W             | owner    | 50  | M              | Jiangsu   | 2012–            | I                    | business          | 3         | no                     |
| CEco158 | C             | leader   | 40  | M              | Beijing   | 1991–            | C                    | company           | >10       | fluent                 |
| Sb171   | U             | scholar  | 30  | –              | –         | –                | G                    | –                 | –         | –                      |
| CTbe179 | R             | employee | 20  | –              | –         | –                | –                    | –                 | –         | –                      |
| CTco182 | R             | owner    | 40  | M              | Fujian    | 2010             | –                    | –                 | –         | –                      |

Business type: R-retail; W-wholesale; C-company; U-university; "–"no information.

Position: LA-local assistant.

Marital status: M-married; S-Single; SM-single mother.

Education background: I-illiteracy; E-elementary; M-middle; C-college; G-graduate school.

It takes time for Chinese merchants and Botswana shop assistants to understand each other's culture and begin to communicate smoothly and effectively. However, due to the short-term business plan of the Chinese and the Botswana's lack of job commitment, such mutual understanding is rarely achieved (Codrin, 2014). Instead, two groups just try to bear with each other, knowing they will not be together for long.

What should be the way forward? Anshan (2015) has posited that when relations deepen, more problems naturally occur, but with a relationship based on equality and mutual respect, China and Botswana should be able to work together to find a solution. To borrow an expression from Chairman Mao Zedong, the problems between Chinese merchants and their Botswana shop assistants are problems amongst the people, rather than problems between enemies. They can be resolved through more, rather than less, engagement.

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#### NOTE

- (1) The background of interviewees quoted in this paper is listed in Table 2.

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- CTbe3. Gaborone, September 5 (2013)
- CTbe4. Gaborone, September 5 (2013)
- CTcof7. Gaborone, September 5 (2013)
- CTco8. Gaborone, November 10 (2013)
- CTbe10. Gaborone, September 10 (2013a)/ September 27 (2013b)
- CTbe11. Gaborone, September 10 (2013)
- CTco12. Gaborone, December 6 (2012)/ September 24 (2013)
- CTco20. Gaborone, September 27 (2013)
- CTcof21. Gaborone, September 4 (2013)
- CTco22. Gaborone, September 22 (2014)
- CTco23. Gaborone, December 6 (2011)
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BTbm101. Gaborone, November 11 (2014)  
CTco104. Gaborone, September 6 (2014a)/ November 3 (2014b)  
CTbe139. Gaborone, September 26 (2014a)/ November 2 (2014b)  
CTco145. Gaborone, November 7 (2014)  
CEco158. Gaborone, September 26 (2014)  
Sb171. Gaborone, November 20 (2014)  
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