

# Raw Encounters: Chinese Employers Meet Botswana Employees in China Shops

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Place of fieldwork: Zambia and Botswana

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- Research background

Since the 1990s, the number of China shops<sup>1</sup> has increased in Botswana, and they have expanded from the cities into the rural areas. The boom of China shops has created jobs for Botswana citizens and provided cheaper goods for the local people. However, the shops are not only criticized for flooding the local market and for their involvement in numerous conflicts with local people regarding employment and service issues, but they also face strict regulations in an increasingly hostile climate in recent years.

According to a statement by the Chinese Embassy (Feb. 1, 2008), Sino–Botswana trade relations have improved at a rapid rate over the past several decades and have led to several interactions between China shops and the local society. Kalusopa (2009) states that the boom of China shops created approximately 5,000 jobs for Botswana citizens and provided cheaper goods for the local people. However, the shops face strict regulations in an increasingly hostile climate in recent years (Mmegi Online Newspaper, Jan. 27, 2009). As mentioned above, the local newspaper, Mmegi Online Newspaper (Nov. 13, 2009) reported that Chinese merchants were involved in numerous altercations with the local government and people on various issues such as legal friction regarding trade permits with the government, communication and employment issues with local assistants, and service and quality issues with local customers.

- Research purpose and aim

In recent years, negative news stories regarding labor issues concerning Chinese companies have been reported by local media. Articles such as “Shop assistants in Chinese stores maltreated?” (Bule, 2009) and “We are not a Chinese colony...to hell with the Chinese” (Mmegi Online Newspaper, Nov. 13, 2009) attracted a significant amount of local attention and created a bad reputation for the Chinese community. However, the few academic studies on this topic are limited to the work of Kalusopa (2009), which is based on a few cases regarding China shops and relies primarily on local news.

Previous research involved conducting interviews and making observations on the relationships between Chinese merchants and the local people in order to explore the reasons for the employment conflicts. Some examples of the conclusions of this research include the following:

1. Theft by local assistants informs Chinese bosses that the salary is too low to sustain their living standard and confirms that they must give themselves a small “bonus” in order to survive.
2. The majority of local people do not commit to their jobs in China shops due to the negative image and

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<sup>1</sup> Both the local population and the Chinese merchants operating in Botswana employ the term “China shop” to describe their businesses. Approximately 99 per cent of China shops in Botswana are Chinese-owned and generally sell goods made in China to African customers.

the lack of transferrable skills available through such jobs. Local people take such jobs for survival but do not consider it their career.

The purpose of this research is to examine the employer-employee relationships in China shops with particular focus on the organizational commitment of employees and interpersonal trust between employers and employees.



Fig. 1. China shop in a town



Fig. 2. View of a large shopping mall

- Results and conclusions of the fieldwork

Through gathering the opinions of Chinese pioneers and Batswana veteran employees regarding trade and employment relations between the Chinese merchants and local people, I objectively analyzed the reasons behind the conflicts.

Regarding organizational commitment, I found that few Batswana employees commit themselves to hard work. Similar to what was found in previous research, Batswana employees do not commit to the work, because they only consider themselves assistants in a Chinese business. Due to the limited salary, Batswana employees are searching for jobs with higher salaries even while working in China shops. On the other hand, Chinese merchants are aware of the fact that the salaries they pay to the employees are not attractive. However, they refuse to pay a higher salary, because they are convinced that higher pay does not motivate employees to work harder. Many Chinese employers have been sued by their employees even though they pay higher salaries and treat their employees like family members. Many Chinese employers have experienced this kind of “betrayal” and are therefore disappointed with their employees’ moral. Furthermore, some veteran Batswana employees revealed that young employees working in China shops are fiercely affected by consumerism. They are only excited about getting paid and are not at all interested in working.

When tracing the interpersonal trust between Chinese employers and Batswana employees, I found that theft is the biggest factor that destroys trust. A majority of the Chinese employers do not want to trust their

Batswana employees to gather cash while they are not in the shop. “Even if they themselves do not steal, customers will encourage employees to steal goods for them.” One Batswana employee revealed that when she was managing a China shop, many of her friends went to the shop to ask her to steal goods for them. “I worked for my Chinese boss sincerely and they treated me very well. However, many Batswana think the Chinese came to destroy us, and so they encouraged me to steal things from their shop.” Therefore, behind the theft, there is kind of hatred toward Chinese people. Because the government of Botswana has been encouraging local people to own their own businesses, to some extent, Chinese merchants could be considered their rivals. On the other hand, as foreign merchants in Botswana, Chinese shop owners are more suspicious here than in other countries, particularly with the deteriorating social security in Botswana. When a Chinese citizen is robbed or if a serious theft occurs in a China shop, the bad news travels fast through the Chinese community, which then brings nervous complaints to the local society. As one Chinese expressed regarding the uneasiness of running a business in recent years: “Security is getting worse and worse. Most of us have experienced being robbed. We get little profit in the business as if we are selling cabbage but are so worried on a daily basis, it’s as if we are selling heroine.”

I also presented at a conference entitled “Southern Africa beyond the West” in Livingstone and received many comments after the presentation. During my stay in Botswana, I managed to meet Professor Mogalakwe from the department of Sociology at the University of Botswana and we agreed to work together on a co-authored paper on the employment relationships between Chinese employers and Batswana employees.

- Implications and impacts on future research

The voices of local governments and large South African retail chains helped me understand the relationship between Chinese employers and Batswana employees from a different perspective. In my future research, I would like to gather more data concerning the employment relations between other ethnic shops (e.g., Indian shops) and local shops. In order to understand the conflict factors between employers and employees in China shops, comparative research on the relationships between other ethnic shops and local shops is necessary.

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