

Staffing and Working Conditions of Employees in Chinese Restaurants in Zimbabwe: Justifiable?

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Abstract

This paper tests the validity of a barrage of grossly unfair labour practices levelled against Chinese investments in many African countries including Zimbabwe by extant literature and claims by ordinary citizens in the continent. The researchers noted that these labour mal-practices were mainly based on studies in the mining, construction, agriculture, transport, clothing and telecommunications sectors and was left wondering how manifest and justifiable they were in Chinese restaurant investments in Zimbabwe whose visibility had highly increased in the last decade. A survey of 9 out of 10 registered Chinese restaurants was undertaken and 54 key informant employees were the research respondents. Researcher administered questionnaires and direct observation were the key data collection methods. This research demonstrated that most of the labour mal-practices levelled against Chinese investments in Zimbabwe were actually justifiable in the prevailing operating environment in country. The research suggests that further research be carried out to determine the overall multiplier effects of these Chinese restaurants to the country.

Keywords: Chinese restaurants; Labour mal-practices; Staffing; Working conditions; Employees; Zimbabwe

Introduction and Background to the Study

China is the world's 2nd largest economy by nominal GDP and the world's largest economy by purchasing power parity [1]. The country has therefore become one of the fastest and most powerful economies in the world today. The country now dominates foreign direct investment in many economies across the globe and especially in Africa [2-5]. This increasing dominance of Chinese investments has prompted many researchers to scrutinize their operations including their labour practices. As an example, Okenda [3] in his studies of Chinese mining investments in Katanga in the Democratic Republic of Congo, concluded that Chinese companies lacked transparency and violated several norms and standards relating to corporate governance and employment codes. Taylor [2] in his studies of Chinese investments in other African countries concurred with Okenda and explained that these labour malpractices could explain why information on Chinese commercial activities in Africa was mysterious and inaccessible. In Zimbabwe, the growing trend of Chinese investments in the country has also prompted researchers such as Chakanya and Muchichwa [4] to conduct inter-sectorial analysis of Chinese investments in the country. Their analysis and other investigations by other researchers in other countries revealed serious labour mal-practices by Chinese investors which are summarized in Table 1. More references to these practices will be made in the findings and discussion section of this paper.

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Tourism and Chinese restaurant investments in Zimbabwe

Tourism is one of the key economic drivers of the Zimbabwean economy today. Currently, the industry is contributing about 10% to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). By 2020, the sector is expected to contribute more than 15% to GDP, generate up to US\$1.8 billion in foreign currency earnings and increase tourists arrivals from the current 2.5 million to 3.2 million by the end of 2015 [6]. However, a

flashback on the industry's performance reveals that, since 1964 and as shown in Figure 1, tourist arrivals to the country have been on a positive growth path though dented here and there by some negative events in the country (Tables 2 and 3).

Figure 1 further shows that the greatest dent was felt at the turn of the century, when the country's image was heavily tarnished by political and socio-economic challenges triggered by the land reform program. In the ensuing decade (2000-2010), the country's tourism and hospitality industry had a zig-zag performance underlain inter-alia, by heightened negative publicity, travel warnings, economic sanctions, stratospheric inflation, pre and post-election violence, disease outbreaks and a drastic decline in tourist arrivals from major traditional western source markets.

In response to these developments, the country adopted a "Look East Policy" in 2003 whose idea was to cultivate closer ties with Asian states such as China, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia and North Korea who also had hostile relations with the western states. Today, the "Look East Policy" and the pursuance of a 'made-in-China' future have made China, the country's number one investor across almost all sectors of the country's economy. The improved relations emanating from this trade policy shift culminated in the signing of a tourism agreement on June 15 2004 which opened doors for more Chinese nationals to travel to Zimbabwe. In the same year, China granted Zimbabwe the "Approved Destination Status," a recognition which has contributed to the 165% increase in Chinese tourist arrivals to the country recorded in 2013 [1]. According to this ZTA report, this trend is expected to continue well beyond 2020 and therefore the country expects more and more Chinese nationals to visit the country. In the words of the Minister of

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disrespect for trade union rights • Poor industrial and human resources practices • Limited local employment • Employment of mostly un-skilled or semi-skilled personnel • Poor occupational safety and health standards for employees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High labour casualisation levels • Poor employee training and development • Lack of social security for employees • Low paying jobs • Long working hours |
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Table 1: Summary of labour mal-practices levelled against Chinese investments.

Tourist Arrival Trend 1964 - 2011

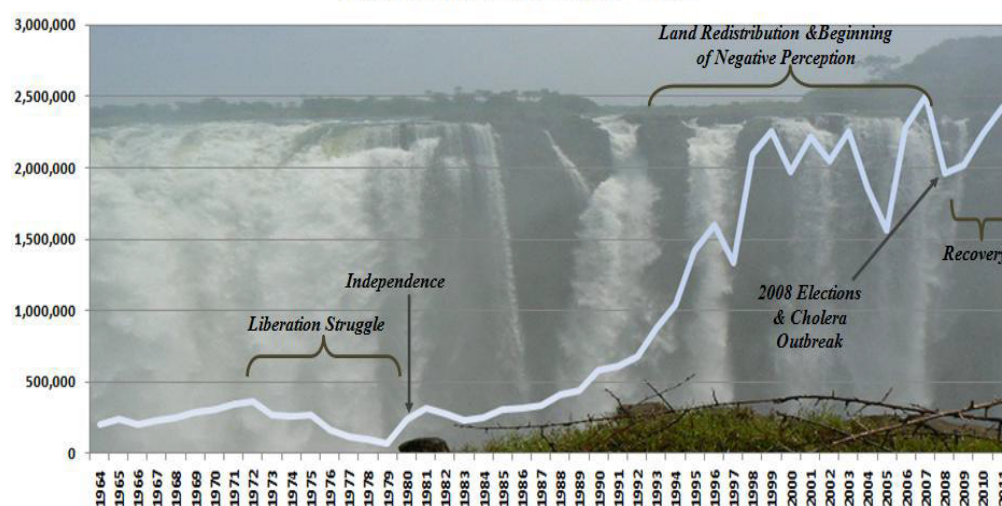


Figure 1: Tourist arrivals to Zimbabwe since 1964.

Individual level	Organizational level	National level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time management • Effective communication between co-workers • Relaxation, vacation and yoga nidra • Exercise • Clear career path and development • Laughter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear communication channels • Good workplace relations • Provision of social support to employees • Clear policies on sexual harassment and other forms of workplace violence • Good working conditions • Monitoring stress level among employees and • Stress educational awareness campaigns and counseling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conscientizing employees through workshops • Assist organizations to set up stress reduction committees, and to develop homegrown stress reduction programs and manuals at individual, group and organizational level • Ensuring good working environments for employees through appropriate legislation

Table 2: Summary of major occupational stress coping strategies (Sources: Jinsoo et al. 2013, Deery 2008).

Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents suffering from occupational stress		Percent
Sex	Males	53
	Females	47
	Total	100
Age	18-24	2.12
	25-34	22.69
	35-44	59.57
	45-54	15.62
	55-64	0
	65+	0
	Total	100
Marital Status	Married	82.98
	Single	12.76
	Widowed	1.42
	Divorced	2.84
	Total	100

Table 3: The socio-demographic profile of respondents.

Tourism and Hospitality in Zimbabwe, the country targets to host 2 million Chinese visitors every week. This explains why The Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) is encouraging local tour guides to speak Chinese (Mandarin) and tourism and hospitality training institutions

in the country are also being encouraged to include Chinese in their curricula.

Since the establishment of these conducive diplomatic ties between the two countries, a number of Chinese restaurants have sprout up mainly in Harare, the country's capital city and there is a possibility that more and more of these will be established in the foreseeable future. According to the ZTA list of registered facilities of 2014, there are now 10 registered Chinese restaurants in Zimbabwe, 9 in Harare and 1 in Bulawayo. It is interesting to note that these Chinese restaurants are increasing in number, at a time when other foreign and local restaurants are struggling and contemplating retrenchments and closures. As an example, in an audit carried out by this author in 2013, it was revealed that 15 out of the 61 restaurants in Bulawayo alone were contemplating closing down.

This increasing visibility of Chinese restaurants in the Zimbabwean Hospitality landscape and the labour malpractices alluded to in section 1.1 of this paper, prompted the researcher to undertake this study. The research is guided by the belief that the Chinese investor labour malpractices documented by extant literature and upheld by many ordinary citizens in Africa and elsewhere could actually be justifiable if contextualized to the prevailing operating environments in which they are extracted.

Methodology

Chinese restaurants are a recent phenomenon in Zimbabwe as most of the restaurants were introduced in the last decade. This study was therefore exploratory in nature as very little is known in this area of study. The study populations consisted of all the 10 registered sit-in Chinese restaurants in the country and their employees. 9 out of the 10 restaurants constituted the actual study units as one of the restaurants, Kimfu Restaurant could not be accessed as it had relocated to an unknown physical address (Tables 4 and 5).

Judgemental sampling of the key informant technique was used to choose the 54 study respondents. At each of the 9 restaurants, 6 key informants were chosen and these included; 1 manager/supervisor, a chef, 1 waiter, 1 cashier, 1 kitchen porter, 1 guard and 1 maintenance person or gardener. These respondents represented the key job specifications in these restaurants.

Researcher administered questionnaires were used to collect 80% of the data from the respondents. The rest of the data was collected through direct observation especially for data relating to employee

uniforms and working environments. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research instruments, a pilot test was undertaken with employees at the Village Lodge Chinese Restaurant in Gweru. The main limitation to this research was the Chinese language barrier. However, this was only experienced in seeking initial permission to carry out the research from the owners of the restaurants. Thereafter, permission was granted to speak to the employees. Most of the employees were quite conversant in English (Table 6).

Findings and Discussion

Chinese restaurant business formats

This research revealed that 7 out of the 9 Chinese restaurants under study were small family-owned businesses. One was a partnership between Chinese nationals and locals while the remaining one (Shangri-La) was a multi-national Chinese restaurant. This scenario is not unique to Zimbabwe as worldwide, the restaurant industry tends to be dominated by a few large players and several small establishments. This observation is supported by Jang who noted that most overseas Chinese restaurants were family-owned and family members constituted part of

Occupational Stress indicator	Yes			No			Rank
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	
Frequent headaches	24	40	64	50	66	76	6
Frequent stomach upsets	27	20	47	46	47	93	9
Abuse of alcohol	10	0	10	50	70	120	12
Chain smoking	8	0	8	66	66	132	13
High Blood pressure	13	28	41	61	38	99	11
Excessive worrying	43	45	88	31	21	52	2
Dry throats	26	20	46	53	41	94	8
Sweaty palms	21	25	46	53	41	94	10
Forgetfulness	42	40	82	32	26	58	4
Lapses of concentration /presenteeism	37	49	86	37	17	54	3
Hostility towards co-workers	21	28	49	53	38	91	7
Sleep deprivation	47	44	91	27	22	49	1
Feelings of hopelessness and depression	29	37	66	45	29	74	5

Table 4: The Occupational Stress Indicators' prevalent in the respondents.

Percentage	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	Total
Frequency	15	9	8	16	25	12	17	30	8	0	140

Table 5: The contribution of workplace stress towards stress related ailments.

Stress coping strategies	Yes			No		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Laugh at yourself and accept your imperfections	40	33	73	34	33	67
Have other activities to look forward to after work	62	62	124	12	4	16
Leave your work at work most of the time	35	34	69	39	32	71
Network of friends and relatives to socialize with	49	58	107	25	8	33
Have a positive mental attitude	57	62	109	8	13	21
Prioritize your daily tasks	58	58	116	12	12	24
Work with a diary to record your activities	43	49	92	27	21	48
Seek advice from professional people like doctors	25	8	33	62	45	107
Believe that you have more power over stress	38	42	80	36	24	60
Exercise regularly	21	12	33	62	45	107
Avoid work over lunch and tea breaks	16	29	45	58	37	95
Self-reflection and meditation when stressed	30	25	55	44	41	85
Avoid discussing work over lunch and tea breaks	25	12	37	49	54	103
Eat adequately	54	49	103	16	21	37
Take time to relax	39	29	68	35	37	72
Take any drugs to relieve stress	17	4	21	57	62	119

Table 6: Occupational stress coping strategies.

the workforce. In a study by Jang conducted in Finland, 1 out every 5 Chinese restaurants was in a partnership: a trend that was also emerging in Zimbabwe. These business formats are revealed now as they have a bearing on the staffing and working conditions of employees in any organization. In this research, business formats will partially assist the readership to better comprehend, interpret and explain the research findings.

Employee staffing levels and demographics

All the 9 Chinese restaurants in the country employed less than 150 people as they were mostly family-owned small establishments. Only 21.9% of the employees were part-timers and there was a preponderance of male employees (66%) in these restaurants. The key reasons advanced for this gender disparity were the need to avoid paying maternity leave benefits and the health problems associated with pregnancy which negatively affected productivity. These reasons mean that gender disparity was going to exist ad infinitum in these Chinese restaurants. One wonders whether this also applies to the rest of the Chinese investments in the country. However, this gender disparity was also confirmed by a human resource audit carried out for the country's tourism and hospitality industry in 2013-2014. This audit report revealed that the industry was male dominated (63% males). However, while trends in the industry can justify the gender disparity, the reasons forwarded by the Chinese restaurant owners for this disparity were and are still questionable and debatable.

This research revealed that 90% of the employees recruited in the Chinese restaurants were recruited through head-hunting and referrals. These staffing methods are justified by Chan [7], Young-Thelin [8] and other researchers who argue that these are the most expeditious and cost effective methods of employee recruitment and selection.

All the surveyed Chinese restaurants employed young, low qualified and inexperienced workers and reasoned that they could not afford the high salaries demanded by more qualified and experienced personnel. As most of the Chinese restaurants were newly established, most employees had less than 10 years' experience at their organisations as shown in Figure 2.

Employee spread by job description, academic and professional qualifications

81% of the employees had ordinary level as their highest qualification. 74.2% of the employees without any professional

qualifications were Zimbabweans who were mostly employed as chefs, waiters and kitchen porters. Their Chinese workmates were mainly employed as cashiers and supervisors. 5 out of the 9 managers revealed that the Chinese employers trusted their female Chinese counterparts to do cashiering. Given the prevailing reported levels of corruption in the country today, the Chinese restaurant owners were only being risk averse in employing one of their own to handle their finances.

For most of the family owned Chinese restaurants in the country, there were no clear job descriptions and employee appraisal systems. Admittedly, this was in sync with the prevailing tourism and hospitality industry wide revelations as revealed in the 2014 human capital audit report.

Employee remuneration and other working conditions

75% of the employees in the Chinese restaurants under study were Zimbabweans who were being paid salaries of between US\$150 and US \$300. The remaining 25% were Chinese workers and were mostly employed as cashiers and supervisors who were earning US\$400 or more as shown in Figure 3.

The fact that 75% of the fulltime employees in these Chinese restaurants were Zimbabweans clearly demonstrates that these restaurants were seriously engaged in value addition and beneficiation as encouraged by the country's 'Agenda for Socio-Economic Transformation Program' (ZimAsset). In terms of remuneration, the above findings were in sync with industry wide revelations in the country where 98 % of the organisations in the country were paying National Employment Council (NEC) rates for non-managerial posts. Further investigations with the National Employment Council of Zimbabwe revealed that these salaries were within range and were commensurate with the job specifications and the employee qualifications and experiences in these restaurants. These salaries were being reviewed annually as per NEC recommendations. The NEC did not have rates for management positions.

Employee training and development

78.1% of the respondents indicated that they had never attended any formal training programs ever since they joined their organisations. What they only had was a one week induction conducted by the most senior employee at the restaurant. Other than this, most training was in-house and 'reactive' in nature. The position taken by the Chinese restaurants in this regard is again justifiable as business was quite low

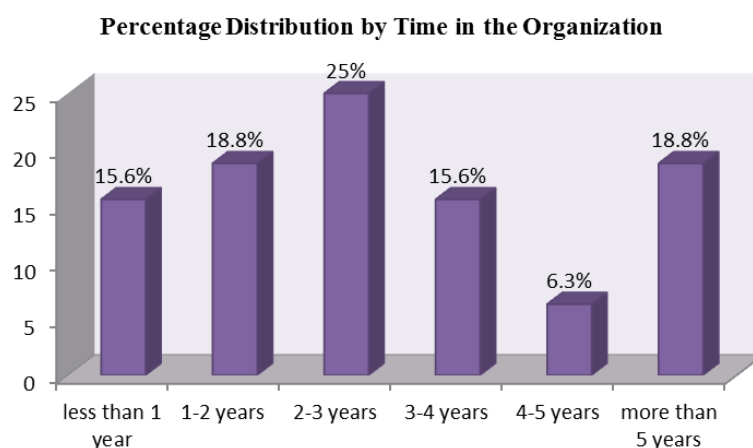


Figure 2: Employee experience in the Chinese restaurants.

Percentage Distribution by Income Bracket

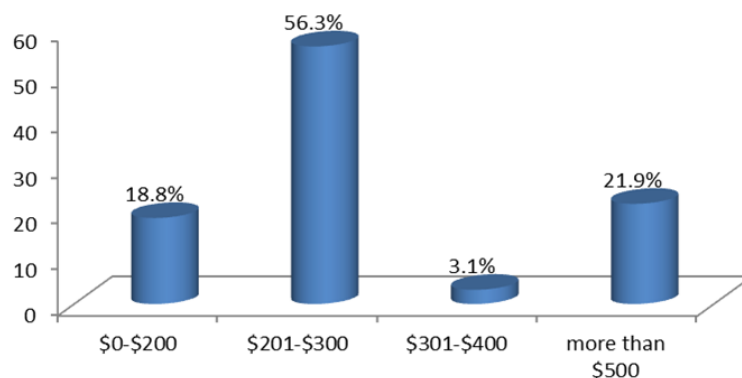


Figure 3: Salaries of employees in Chinese restaurants in Zimbabwe.

Percentage Employee Benefits

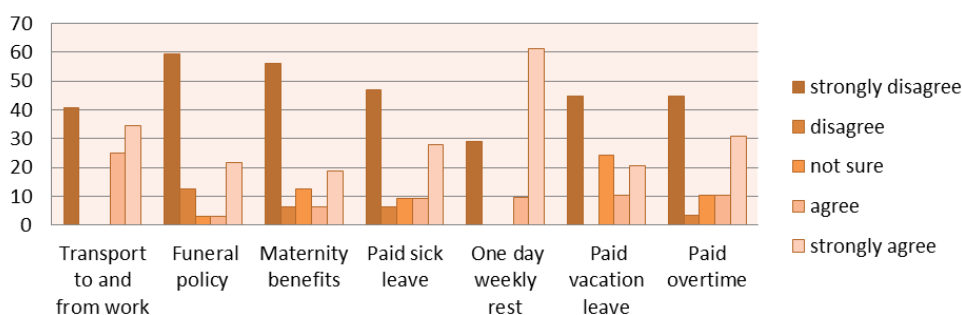


Figure 4: Employee benefits offered by Chinese restaurants in Zimbabwe.

at most of the Chinese restaurants. The restaurants were getting an average of 20-30 customers per day; with each customer spending an average of US\$10-20. Factoring in all costs, this does not translate into any meaningful profits. The restaurant owners therefore explained that they could not afford any formal training budgets.

As shown in Figure 4, employees in the Chinese restaurants were being given a weekly day off and transport to and from work. Benefits such as paid maternity leave, medical aid, paid overtime, paid sick leave and paid vacation leave were mostly not being offered in all of the restaurants. Compare this to industry wide revelations from the 2014 audit which noted that, “99% of the organisations in the industry were offering accommodation, transport, staff uniforms and at least a meal to their employees.” (Human Capital Audit for Tourism and Hospitality Industry in Zimbabwe 2014:38) (Figure 4).

Employee retention packages were almost non-existent in the industry mainly due to its low performance. In the absence of such incentives, investigations revealed that the employees remained attached to these restaurants because they had no alternative employment. Further investigations revealed that some employers were also reluctant to offer employee retention packages, taking advantage of the fact that most of the affected employees did not have relevant qualifications for their posts therefore alternative opportunities for them were limited.

Trade union membership of employees in Chinese restaurants was very poor as only 47% were trade union members. Of these 47%, 81.3% did not participate actively in trade union activities.

Trade union representatives were however allowed to freely distribute information to workers at the company and the employers also disseminated such information. The employees however did not actively participate in trade union activities for fear of victimization. They felt highly vulnerable, them being conscious of their inadequate qualifications and the existence of a large pool of unskilled and semi-skilled replacements awaiting their dismissal [9].

Concluding Remarks

This research has demonstrated that most of the labour malpractices leveled against Chinese restaurants in Zimbabwe were actually justifiable in the context of the prevailing operating environment and general industry practices in the country. The research recommends that further research be undertaken to determine the overall multiplier effects of these Chinese restaurants to the country. The idea is to find out how best these effects can be enhanced through reviewing policies and measures that effectively plug existing and potential leakages. In this way, the country's concepts of value addition and beneficiation as enshrined in the country's agenda for sustainable socio-economic transformation will have been operationalized. According to Chingarande, the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim Asset) is a government macro-economic program launched in 2013 aimed at turning around the country's economy and is expected to run until December 2018. Tourism is one of the key sectors expected to drive this agenda hence the need for this and other similar researches.

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