

Party Time: Entering the Lifeworlds and Career Trajectories of Chinese Transnational Professionals in Africa

RAOUL BUNSKOEK 

Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, The Netherlands

AND

JANA HÖNKE

University of Bayreuth, Germany

The literature on transnational professionals (TPs) focuses on transnational structures and practices that are professionally defined. In this article, we start with the observation that Chinese TP lifeworlds in Africa diverge significantly from the ones described in the TP literature. We argue that TP lifeworlds “beyond the Anglosphere” and the practices they produce require more attention to understand the future of transnational governance in a polycentric world. The article analyzes Chinese professionals who work in state-owned and private enterprises in Africa; what is considered competent practice and how promotions occur in this context; and discusses these professionals’ limited autonomy from the state—different from a core assumption on which theories about the power of professionals and their practices in international relations are based. It shows that Chinese TPs rarely advance model practices in their field. They find themselves in expert sectors in Africa because they are made to go there, and apart from (mixed) professional credentials must demonstrate modesty, loyalty and patriotism in order to fit in and advance their careers in global China. Thus more context-sensitive theorizing is needed that considers variation in the role and autonomy of professions and their expertise in constituting community and transnational practices. Theoretically, we bring together literatures on Chinese cadres and corporate professionals with the literature on TPs for the first time. Empirically, the analysis is based on interviews with Chinese corporate professionals in Zambia and East Asia, and an analysis of secondary literature on Chinese companies and professionals operating in Africa more broadly.

La literatura sobre profesionales transnacionales se centra en las estructuras y en las prácticas transnacionales que están definidas profesionalmente. En este artículo, partimos de la observación de que los mundos de vida de los profesionales transnacionales chinos en África difieren significativamente de los descritos en la literatura relativa a los profesionales transnacionales. Argumentamos que los mundos de vida de estos profesionales transnacionales « más allá de la esfera anglófono », así como las prácticas que producen, requieren más atención para poder comprender el futuro de la gobernanza transnacional en un mundo policéntrico. Este artículo analiza a los profesionales chinos que trabajan en empresas estatales y privadas en África, así como qué es lo que se considera una práctica competente y cómo se producen los ascensos en este contexto. El artículo, también, debate la autonomía limitada de estos profesionales con respecto al Estado, la cual es diferente de un supuesto fundamental en el que se basan las teorías sobre el poder de los profesionales y sus prácticas en las relaciones internacionales. Esto demuestra que los profesionales transnacionales chinos rara vez promueven prácticas que sirven de modelo dentro de su ámbito. Estos profesionales transnacionales se posicionan en sectores cualificados en África simplemente porque se les obliga a ir allí y, aparte de las credenciales profesionales (mixtas), deben demostrar moderación, lealtad y patriotismo para encajar y avanzar en sus carreras en la China global. Por lo tanto, se necesita una teorización que sea más sensible a este contexto y que considere la variación en el papel y la autonomía de las profesiones, así como su experiencia en materia de constitución de prácticas comunitarias y transnacionales. A nivel teórico, reunimos por primera vez la literatura sobre los perfiles de estos cuadros y los profesionales corporativos chinos con la literatura en materia de profesionales transnacionales. Desde el punto de vista empírico, el análisis se basa en entrevistas con profesionales corporativos chinos en Zambia y en Asia Oriental, así como en un análisis de la literatura secundaria sobre empresas y profesionales chinos que operan en África en general.

La littérature sur les professionnels transnationaux (PT) se concentre sur les structures et pratiques transnationales qui se définissent professionnellement. Dans cet article, nous prenons comme point de départ l’observation selon laquelle les mondes de la vie des PT chinois en Afrique se distinguent fortement de ceux décrits dans la littérature sur les PT. Nous affirmons que les mondes de la vie des PT « au-delà de l’anglosphère » et les pratiques qu’ils induisent requièrent qu’on s’y intéresse davantage afin de comprendre l’avenir de la gouvernance transnationale dans un monde polycentrique. L’article analyse les professionnels chinois qui travaillent dans des entreprises publiques ou privées en Afrique, ce que l’on considère comme une pratique compétente et comment les promotions interviennent dans ce contexte, pour enfin traiter de l’autonomie restreinte des professionnels vis-à-vis de l’État. Celle-ci se différencie d’une hypothèse essentielle sur laquelle s’appuient les théories rel-

Authors’ note: For comments and helpful suggestions on earlier drafts, we would like to thank colleagues and students for participating in the Global Political Sociology Colloquium at the University of Bayreuth, the participants of the Cultivating Relationalities through/in Ethnographic Research in Transnational Organizations panel at the ISA 2024 in San Francisco, and the Transnational Professionals beyond the West panel co-organized with Nina Reinert at the EISA 2023 in Potsdam. We also thank the editors of this journal as well as the three anonymous reviewers for very valuable feedback. We would also like to thank all Chinese interlocutors in the Copperbelt Province and Lusaka for their frank conversations, time, and hospitality; Rosemary Chilufya, Robby Kapesa, and Kondwani Kapinga of the Dag Hammarskjöld Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (DHIPS) at the Copperbelt University for offering a home away from home during fieldwork; and Thomas McNamara, Li Hangwei, Qianli Ma, Armstrong Mudzengerere, and Limbani Kamanga for inspirational preparatory conversations before fieldwork. The research for this paper was supported by the European Research Council (Grant [759798] INFRAGLOB) (www.infraglob.eu).

#Both the authors contributed equally to this study, and of course, any errors are their own.

Bunskoek, Raoul, and Jana Hönke. (2025) Party Time: Entering the Lifeworlds and Career Trajectories of Chinese Transnational Professionals in Africa. *Global Studies Quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae086>

© The Author(s) (2025). Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the International Studies Association. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

atives au pouvoir des professionnels et leurs pratiques en relations internationales. Il montre que les PT chinois font rarement progresser les pratiques modèles dans leur domaine. Ils se retrouvent dans des secteurs experts en Afrique, car ils sont contraints d'y aller, et, mis à part leurs (différentes) qualifications professionnelles, ils doivent faire preuve de modestie, de loyauté et de patriotisme afin de trouver leur place et de progresser dans leur carrière au sein de la Chine mondiale. Aussi nous faut-il une théorisation plus sensible au contexte, qui s'intéresse au rôle et à l'autonomie des professions et à leur expertise dans la constitution de pratiques communautaires et transnationales. Sur le plan théorique, nous mettons en lien pour la première fois les littératures sur les cadres et professionnels chinois du privé avec la littérature sur les PT. Sur le plan empirique, l'analyse se fonde sur des entretiens avec des professionnels chinois du secteur privé en Zambie et en Asie du Sud, ainsi que sur une analyse de la littérature secondaire sur les entreprises et professionnels chinois dont les activités se situent en Afrique au sens large.

Introduction

How the People's Republic of China (PRC) affects, and will affect, transnational governance practices is a core question of our time. "China" is, however, not a singular actor. Instead, it has "highly fragmented and often quite ambiguous political-economic framework[s with] differing logics and often divergent interests [that] driv[e. . .] the central government, the provinces and the business community" (Gu et al. 2016, 24; also Jones and Hameiri 2021). Likewise, China's global expansion takes many forms, including foreign direct investment, labor exports and transnational professionals (TPs) (Lee 2017, xiv). This "global China" (Lee 2017, also Franceschini and Loubere 2022) includes different social forces well beyond the state. We thus must look beyond government and study professionals in order to understand how "global China" affects transnational governance practices.

The sociology of TPs has established that professionals matter beyond borders for the content and outcomes of global politics (Harrington and Seabrooke 2020). They are in the "machine room" of doing globalization and shaping transnational governance. However, existing studies have to date dominantly focussed on Western professionals, and professional contexts in international organizations (e.g., Hofius 2023, Dezalay and Garth 2002; Mosse 2011; Sending 2015; Seabrooke and Henriksen 2017; Goetze 2017). The problem with this is that empirical patterns and theorizations remain mostly rooted in the "Anglosphere" (Harrington and Seabrooke 2020, 411; see also Adler et al. 2024). Since they do not adequately account for TPs from other regions (notable exceptions include Bueger 2013; Nair 2019; Glas 2022; Hönke et al. 2024), they are limited in understanding professional practices in an increasingly polycentric world. To understand "fundamental aspects of social ordering in world politics," we must strive "to cover the *entire* world" (Adler et al. 2024, 9).

The article takes up this call and offers a study of Chinese corporate professionals. China's global economic expansion indeed makes Chinese TPs an important case in point. In this study, we focus on Chinese cadres (干部) and managers working for Chinese companies. Within the Chinese context, cadres and managers often conflate, co-inspire, and are co-dependent. Official state cadres are civil servants and perform a wide range of roles within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the military, business, government, and other organizations across China and abroad. In doing so, they are expected to play an exemplary function for peers and the rest of society, which is why they are often referred to as the "vanguard" of society. Nevertheless, in terms of how their performance is measured, they are also highly dependent on the extent to which they are able to promote economic development (Tsai and Dean 2014), which is why they tend

to learn a lot from corporate managers. Corporate managers in the Chinese context are in turn also highly dependent on their relationships with cadres (May et al. 2019). The more they can act like them, the easier it will be for them to build relationships. Cadres can also be appointed to become corporate managers of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and vice versa.

Using the case of Chinese corporate TPs in Africa, this article analyses who is implementing China's going abroad, and analyses the lifeworlds of Chinese professionals in Africa. Lifeworlds we define in line with Kraus (2015, 4) as "a person's subjective construction of reality, which he or she forms under the condition of his or her life circumstances." The article furthermore examines the structures of the professional field(s) in which managers in Chinese state-owned (国企) and private (民企) enterprises in Africa work: What type of skills and social capital do they have? What is considered competent practice in their professional field, and what makes for promotion? Based on this, the article discusses the autonomy of Chinese professionals to define competent knowledge and how this affects their courses of action.

The article demonstrates how and why Chinese professionals in Africa behave differently from peers from other parts of the world, and how this affects their limited impact on transnational governance norms and practices. It shows, first, that many Chinese professionals are in Africa because they were sent, or because they were pushed out of China. Hence, they are transnationally mobile by necessity rather than by choice. Second, practices that are considered competent and help promotion include professional *know-how*. However, necessary are much broader, politically defined skills as well, such as to be hardworking, modest and loyal, patriotic, and able to maintain harmonious relationships with everyone. Thus, this article demonstrates that professional expertise and competencies are limited in ensuring professionals' autonomy from the Chinese state.

The transnational sociology of professions has stressed professions' striving for autonomous domains of jurisdiction (Blok et al. 2018, 108), a striving for "issue control" across "linked professional ecologies" (Seabrooke and Henriksen 2017; Seabrooke and Stenström 2022). Similarly, communities of practice have been suggested as sources of "order making" in world politics (see Adler et al. 2024). However, our study of Chinese corporate TPs in Africa points to the boundaries of these assumptions and to less expert(ise)-driven professional contexts and transnational politics. Therefore, for a truly global understanding of TPs, more context-sensitive research is needed that considers variation in status and roles of professions and professionals in different places, beyond the dominance of Anglo-

American knowledge production in this field (see also [Blok et al. 2018](#), 109; [Adler et al. 2024](#), 9).

The article contributes to scholarship in several ways: first, it offers new empirical knowledge about non-Western TPs, transnational practices, and how they evolve in the wake of a rising China in a less Western-centric world. Second, it probes the scope and limitations of available research on TPs and how they shape transnational governance in international affairs (field theoretical and communities of practice approaches mostly), and points to new directions for future research. Third, the article contributes to the literature on global China and Chinese professionals. There is quite a large body of literature on Chinese cadres in China domestically (e.g., [Pieke 2009](#); [Lee 2015](#); [Ang 2016, 2020](#); [Brødsgaard and Beck 2021](#)), but there is little to date about who the Chinese professionals are who work for the Chinese state and Chinese companies abroad, nor about their practices and how they are constituted. We offer an important step in this direction and illustrate how Chinese TPs are simultaneously distinctively Chinese in their lifeworlds, but not essentialized Chinese in terms of their discursive, biographical, and professional characteristics.

Empirically, the article builds on research on Chinese company managers in Africa, with a focus on those in charge of labor management, community relations, development, and security. Apart from drawing from existing, mostly ethnographic secondary literature, we draw from fieldwork in the Copperbelt Province and Lusaka in Zambia in 2023. Zambia is instructive for many other contexts with significant Chinese investment and professional communities in the Global South. Zambia was one of the first countries to recognize the PRC in 1949 and is home to the largest early Chinese foreign aid project, namely the Tazara Railway.¹ These longstanding relations have made Zambia not only a popular destination for Chinese investments but also provide China–Zambia relations with a high level of symbolic value regarding how China–Africa relations should be conducted from a Chinese perspective. In addition, the article is informed by both preceding and later interviews with Chinese development practitioners, experts, and officials, as well as experts on Chinese cadres and professionals in Taipei, Singapore, Washington DC, Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong in 2022–2023.² We base our analysis on a combination of secondary literature, documents, online materials, over 80 semi-structured interviews and fifteen focus groups with China scholars and Chinese TPs, and participant observation. Finally, we also draw from existing ethnographic literature on Chinese companies in Africa.

The article proceeds as follows: It first discusses the existing literature on TPs and draws out its limitations to understanding Chinese TP lifeworlds and trajectories. Second, it analyzes what we can learn from the literature on Chinese professionals and cadres within China, emphasizing the unique role of the CCP in shaping Chinese TP

lifeworlds. Third, it turns to entering Chinese professional lifeworlds in Africa analyzing them along the core questions outlined. The conclusion summarizes our findings, draws out contributions to existing scholarship on TPs and transnational governance, and outlines future avenues for research.

Global China, Change in Transnational Governance, and TPs

China has been engaging with the liberal international order in quite different and often contradictory ways (cf. [De Graaff, Ten Brink, and Parmar 2020](#); [Jones and Hameiri 2021](#); [Liu and Yang 2023](#)). Moving beyond the simplicities of debates about China as “benign liberal incorporation or inevitable realist hegemonic transition warfare” ([De Graaff et al. 2020](#), 200), needed is more empirical research on “global China” and how it is made. Professionals offer a unique entry point.

Professionals are generally defined as “people bound by their commitment to a body of abstract knowledge and its associated practices” ([Harrison and Seabrooke 2020](#), 401). *Transnational* professionals work across borders and also understand themselves as engaged in the same type of work, from which they draw parts of their identity ([Harrington and Seabrooke 2020](#) drawing from [Maanen and Barley 1984](#), 287). Importantly, we do not restrict this sense to necessarily coming from being rooted in a formal profession.

The literature on how TPs shape transnational governance is huge and growing and ranges from transnationally mobile lawyers, bankers, economists and corporate professionals to humanitarian aid workers, UN peacebuilders, and private security professionals ([Dezalay and Garth 2002](#); [Mosse 2011](#); [Bigo 2016](#); [Goetze 2017](#); [Seabrooke and Henriksen 2017](#); [Shimoda 2017](#)). It has established that those who make and implement policies behind the scenes—bureaucrats, lawyers, security professionals, corporate professionals, and diplomats—make and shape transnational governance. Yet it treats TP contexts as globally integrating sphere(s): increasingly autonomous from nationally defined professions, and revolving around a shared domain of occupation, standards, and training that constitute TP communities of practice.

Different approaches to TPs put forward different theoretical emphases and questions: works on communities of practice ([Wenger 1998](#); [Sondarjee 2021](#); [Beerli 2023](#)) focus on shared practices and identities that have emerged through sharing an occupation and ways of doing things. Bourdieusian approaches to professional fields instead pay attention to hierarchies and hegemonic practices within and across professional fields and struggles among TPs ([Dezalay and Garth 2002](#); [Goetze 2017](#); [Sending 2015](#)). This existing scholarship, however, only partly resonates with the separate lifeworld of Chinese TPs in Africa.

The problem is that work on expatriate lifeworlds has mostly studied similarly educated, Western or Western-educated individuals with privileged mobility. This focus is not very surprising given the longstanding Western hegemony that privileged certain educational trajectories and mobilities over others, and to some extent homogenized cultural and professional norms in international and transnational work contexts (see, for example, [Roth 2015](#) and [Shimoda 2017](#) on such expat bubbles).³ It is limiting though for understanding the distinct social world of Chinese corporate professionals in Africa.

¹The Tazara Railway is a single-track railway linking Tanzania’s port of Dar es Salaam with Zambia’s Central Province. It was entirely funded by the PRC and built between 1970 and 1975 to terminate landlocked Zambia’s dependence on Rhodesia and South Africa, which were both ruled by White-minority governments ([Robinson and Shambaugh 1994](#)).

²We conducted fieldwork in the Copperbelt Province and Lusaka, Zambia, in June–July 2023, and conducted interviews in Taipei in April–May 2022, in Singapore in June 2022, in Washington DC in March 2023, and in Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong in November–December 2023. Due to COVID-19-related restrictions in China for 2 years, we conducted the research in Taipei, Singapore, and Washington, DC before researching in Zambia and China given the China expertise there and because many Chinese (corporate) professionals have been located and trained there.

³But see [Moore \(2016\)](#) on cultural diversity within “Western” organizations.

Hence several gaps and challenges exist with extending scholarship on TPs to professional lifeworlds in the context of global China. First and foremost, the literature empirically focuses on and/or implicitly assumes a single playing field once professionals go global in a particular domain. In other words, it emphasizes *shared* traits of TP lifeworlds. Notably, it emphasizes transnationally active “issue professionals” (Seabrooke and Henriksen 2017) or TP fields that are distinct from the external environment and integrated internally. Strikingly, there is an at least implicit assumption that professionals who cross borders and step out of bounded national communities enter a competitive but single, integrated TP field or domain of occupation with the same rules that structures competition over authority and access to promotion. A shared professional identity via training and/or shared professional routines and practices is seen as a key factor that generates a shared identity. As Seabrooke and Henriksen (2017, 12) put it, issue professionals “will seek to extend their networks through common identification with other similarly trained professionals.”

In the case of Chinese TPs, this could be the case where literature has shown the integration of Chinese issue professionals with existing professional networks. That is where China has supported and aligned with international structures, policies and norms, such as in several areas of trade (De Graaf et al. 2020). Yet a recent study by Qiao-Franco (2024) shows the opposite for a case in which the Chinese government seeks to strategically create a community of practice (here of Global South politicians and professionals on cyber security) to counter an existing, Western-led approach to an issue. Little seems forged here by professional knowledge and practices from below. None of the above applies to the Chinese corporate professionals in Africa we have studied.

In the following, we will show how the lifeworlds of professionals implementing Chinese investment in African mining and infrastructure have distinct characteristics, starting with the fact that Chinese mine managers, diplomats, engineers, cadres, community relations officers, and security personnel occupy interlocking occupational domains and coalesce around Chinese social networks. Considering an increasing number of Global South and especially Chinese transnational companies and agencies, we hold that there is a need to better account for the entangled yet also distinct character of TP lifeworlds and the practices of governing their nurture.

Entering Chinese Professional Lifeworlds and Career Trajectories in Africa

To do this we start from three sets of questions drawn from the existing TPs’ literature. The *first* is who the TPs working for Chinese companies in Africa/Zambia are and how they got into their positions? What is the link between prior life/occupation and transnational career? What is people’s position within their broader professional field? The idea in the literature is that to be part of a (transnational) profession requires to engage in similar types of work and to draw one’s identity significantly from work; it also requires social and cultural (educational) capital (Harrington and Seabrooke 2020, 401). The amount of social and cultural capital at individuals’ disposal structures their options and choices. Another angle concerns how much professional expertise and skills matter to get a position abroad (we know that it is a basic selection criterion in strong professional fields with their own domain of jurisdiction, such as

in medicine or law, and less so in weakly institutionalized, diverse occupational domains such as humanitarian aid). In fact, it cannot be taken for granted that professional expertise matters, or grants autonomy, or that professionals share the same potential to control and reproduce a certain order, or powerfully stir transformations.

The *second* set of questions is about what is considered competent practice and hence recognized as such within a certain frame of reference. This question follows a definition of practices as “socially meaningful patterned actions that, performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 6). While some argue that they are anchored in professional communities of practice (which define what is considered competent practice (Adler and Pouliot 2014, 7), others emphasize shared practices as ontologically prior and constitutive of emerging communities of practice (see, e.g., Bicchi 2024). Importantly, power can be unequally distributed to define what is competent or good practice in the first place (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014).

So, what is recognized as a competent practice among groups of Chinese professionals working abroad? To what extent does the profession, or area of occupation define such across borders? These questions offer a good entry point to understand whether professions are sources of practice alignment and have the power of their own to affect how issues are governed abroad. It also guides us to analyze how national professional contexts, or global professional fields, determine what is considered a success or best practice, and who gets rewarded by promotions or other means.⁴ At the bottom of these questions is a concern with how professional expertise and meritocracy matter and serve as a base for professional authority to determine practices of transnational governance, and how they “compet[e] with the power of states and the firm” (Harrington and Seabrooke 2020, 400).

The *third* set of concerns is about the autonomy of TPs to affect transnational practices. Some studies in the sociology of TPs have highlighted influential individuals who transgress national and professional boundaries to affect change (e.g., Seabrooke 2014; Reiners 2021; Sondarjee 2021). Evetts 2003 in Harrington and Seabrooke 2020, 400) has identified professionals who work across borders as wielding “independent social power on par with [...] that of states and marked-based organizations.” This is the case for individuals working outside and across national institutions and different corporations. Able to work across borders and the state and non-state, TPs acquire strategic importance through offering issue-specific ideas that transgress national and organizational boundaries (Harrington and Seabrooke 2020, 2–3). Their power derives from their ability to exploit specialist knowledge, at times from several professional contexts, to affect change through setting agendas or establishing new practices (Seabrooke 2014; also Reiners 2021). Others, especially Bourdieusian studies in international relations, have shown how a shared occupation defined by a common stake defines the lifeworlds of TPs through constructing shared rules, epistemic codifications and bureaucratic techniques (Pouliot 2016; Goetze 2017; Beerli 2023). Chinese professional lifeworlds stand out, we will show, as they follow distinct rules and have distinct competencies valued. Therefore, they are defined far more broadly—beyond

⁴Some define communities of practice more independently from professions and point to shared narratives, techniques and practices as an essential starting point as starting points (e.g., on Somali pirates Bueger (2013), on the making of humanitarian professionals out of individuals with diverse occupational careers Beerli (2023).

professional criteria rooted in ethnically and culturally defined identities. In opposition to other TPs, they also have limited autonomy from the (party) state. Living within their own bubble, Chinese TPs working for Chinese entities⁵ also remain distant from other international peers. Their impact on transnational practices therefore remains limited to date.

In the following, we use the three core concerns introduced above—who the TPs are, what are considered competent practices and successes in a given professional domain, and how much (professional) autonomy is possible in the context of an authoritarian party state gone transnational—to analyze Chinese corporate professionals in Africa. This is necessary to broaden our knowledge about TPs and how they shape transnational practices. In doing so, we draw out varieties of transnational practices in the same occupational context, but also push the boundaries and rework the theoretical toolbox we work with.

TP Lifeworlds and the CPP Party State Abroad

First though, we begin with the literature on Chinese professionals and Chinese cadres in China to delineate a basic skeleton of distinct features of Chinese professional lifeworlds that transpire transnationally. An important starting point overall is to not treat China as a monolithic entity (Jones and Hameiri 2021), nor to assume that Chinese professionals follow or implement a unitary “China Model” abroad (Tang 2020; Bunskoek 2024). Chinese transnational work contexts also differ across countries. A recent study by Pieke and Graaff (2022) of Chinese companies in the Netherlands finds, for example, that “the management of Chinese companies in the Netherlands usually consists of a combination of Chinese, Dutch and other, mostly Western, nationalities. These managers usually have considerable autonomy regarding operational matters and the implementation of company strategies” (Pieke and Graaff 2022, v). That said, “[t]he management of *state-owned enterprises* tends to consist of more Chinese expats who also occupy the most influential positions” (Pieke and Graaff 2022, v; emphases added). Observations in Africa also show some autonomy but conversely, much less of a mix of Chinese and local actors in the management of Chinese private *and* SOEs.

Because of the distinct nature of the Chinese political and economic system, furthermore, one needs to be careful with strong assumptions about a distinction between state and non-state actors. Yet whether state-owned or not, companies are subject to state-direction. This direction may vary however in form and degree (De Graaff 2020, 219). Above a certain size, also private companies operating abroad tend to have party secretaries (党委书记) integrated into their organization. In addition to the presence of the party state “in person,” de Graaff finds “a constant checking during board meetings of how decisions would align with what ‘the board above the board’ wants. The latter, of course, refers to the Party line” (De Graaff 2020, 220). In terms of strategy and funding, Chinese companies tend to rely more than others on the party (state) in that they seek to follow official guidelines. There are also widespread and deeply embedded “revolving door” dynamics (Grünberg and Drinhausen 2019; Pearson et al. 2022). In China, shifts between party and non-party roles, between business and state are com-

mon. Hence, TPs from SOEs and private corporations tend to nurture close personal connections (May et al. 2019).

Based on evidence within China, the establishment of close personal connections between different hierarchical ranks in the party system happens, for instance, through party school training. Pieke (2009, 148), for example, points out that “[s]ocializing with people outside one’s class often takes place on the basis of common area of origin or ethnicity” (Pieke 2009, 148). Moreover, he underscores that

[c]adre training is an experiential realization of belonging to the party or state apparatus. It is thus a form of socialization and exercise in community formation in which even boredom and wasted time serve a function: it makes cadres feel they are different, set apart from the public, and are special in their belonging to something most people are excluded from. (Pieke 2009, 150)

This feeling of specialness makes it highly natural for cadres/Chinese TPs to operate in a sphere that is elevated above broader society (after all, they should serve as the “vanguard” of society), a situation that has been exported abroad with the going abroad of communities of Chinese TPs.

However, such party-building activities are often impossible abroad. Therefore, in 2016, the CCP Central Committee published a “leading opinion” on party building work abroad (Pieke and Graaff 2022). This “opinion” acknowledges that overt party activities tend to be difficult or even impossible, particularly when the body of employees is constituted by a mixture of Chinese and other colleagues. Furthermore, countries often forbid CCP activities. This, therefore, requires covert party activities, for which digital methods or social media are used even more often than in China. These activities do, however, “take place on the basis of ‘the principle of the ‘five non-disclosures’”: the non-disclosure of party organization, internal party positions, party member status, internal party documents, and internal party activities in overseas party building activities” (Pieke and Graaff 2022, 56).

This does not mean that companies or individual Chinese professionals are puppets of the party or the state. Conversely, professionals, especially at higher levels, can have significant agency in (re)shaping policies. This is, for instance, highlighted by the fact that in the recruitment processes of cadres, cadres are judged on the extent to which they undertake difficult tasks *on their own initiative* (Tsai and Tian 2023 76; emphases added). Successful own initiatives tend to be then learned from and are clearly rewarded. This causes a situation in which if (local) leadership changes, the new leader will rather relinquish an initiative introduced by their predecessor than continue it because introducing a new initiative is seen as more beneficial for their career (Ma 2017, 594). This highlights that there certainly is room for individual agency, and that it can promote a career.

Most of the research on professionals and career trajectories in Chinese companies is on cadres (干部 *ganbu*), due to the vast cadre system the CCP maintains and extends to SOEs. Yet, even in private corporations the term “cadres” is used to refer to higher level, leading professionals. The cadre system of the CCP involves the institutions and methods used by the CCP to train, organize, appoint, and manage personnel to fill an extensive range of civil service-type roles in party, state, business, military, and other organizations throughout the country. The system comprises several million full-time, professional staff, the cadres (47 million in 2005 according to Ang 2012). This comprehensive

⁵Not all “Chinese” are culturally homogeneous, nor are party training and extent of control in any organization organized in the same way. Thus, note that we focus on Chinese TPs working with Chinese companies in this paper. Empirical findings would differ for Chinese professionals with international careers working in non-Chinese MNCs.

system is so important because *all* appointments to governance institutions are managed through it, meaning that “[t]he recruitment and deployment of cadres is one of the most important ways in which the party-state integrates itself with society and guides and directs the project of socialist transformation” (Pieke 2009, 29–30). Moreover, “individual cadres move freely from posts in government to party positions and appointments in legislative and united front branches” (Pieke 2009, 29–30).

Party schools have a key function as gatekeeping organizations in making this system work since “performance during training classes [. . .] linked to cadre evaluation” (Lee 2015, 63). Schools measure performance, for instance, through assessing student’s “attitude and performance (*taidu he biaoxian*), grasp of political theory and policy, job-related knowledge, and cultural knowledge” (Central Organization Department 200, 122–35; Ministry of Personnel 2006: Section 7 in Lee 2015, 63). To secure high scores, it is necessary to “both discussing the particularities of the issue at hand and demonstrating broad understanding of overall political conditions, as well as laying great emphasis [. . .] on the importance of key issues such as political stability and harmony” (Kou and Tsai 2014, 167).

These particular relations between party state, companies and cadre system in China are critical for understanding the lifeworlds of Chinese professionals and transnational practices abroad.

Making a Career Abroad? Lifeworlds of Chinese Cadres and Corporate Professionals in Africa

In this section, we discuss the type of skills and social capital those have who are in leading positions in Chinese firms in Africa. What is considered competent practice, and what makes for promotion for them? Looking at professionals in leading positions in Chinese SOEs and private companies in Africa, their trajectory, their networks, and their practices, allows us to offer important new insights into Chinese professional lifeworlds and the factors that make a career in “global China” and shape transnational practices in the context of a rising China.

Who Are the Chinese Professionals in Africa? Professional Fields and Life Choices

While there are a few similarities, career trajectories of transnational Chinese professionals differ significantly from other, more widely studied TP trajectories. First, whereas the existing literature on TPs focuses on Western corporate elites with privileged mobility and careers, the choice to move abroad is often not voluntary for Chinese TPs (interviews in Taiwan, Singapore, and Zambia; Jin et al. 2022). Instead, corporate managers as cadres would usually be called upon by the Central Organization Department, the human resource department of the CCP. They would be asked whether they were available for a given deployment, and it is nearly impossible to refuse. Others pointed out that they were democratically and unanimously chosen within their respective SOEs back in China to be the right person to be sent out (SOE interviews in Copperbelt Province, Zambia).⁶ Accordingly, many professionals working in SOEs in Zambia had not come there by their own choosing. They reported

that actually, nobody wanted to go to Zambia—because life was good working for SOEs in China, and promotion was considered easier closer to the center. Therefore, situations such as not (yet) having families to take care of, or not (yet) being married are brought forward as reasons to send someone abroad. These employees could then be motivated by more attractive salaries, often to buy a house and marry back in China later. In fact, several younger SOE employees, mostly engineers, had volunteered to come to Zambia, because they were looking for a challenge after university, but also due to difficulty finding a job in China and higher wages abroad.

These findings differ from the few other studies on Chinese TPs, such as in the Netherlands, where Pieke and Graaff (2022, 45) found that “[m]obilizing staff from the parent company to serve a stint abroad has become more difficult as salaries and standards of living in China have risen and a career is often better served by staying within sight at the parent company”. Foreign experiences have become seen as less important in China. In fact, they are increasingly perceived as even detrimental for someone’s career because one might be seen as less familiar with the Chinese context (and particularly, have worse local networks), and as, potentially, less loyal and patriotic. Our findings thus point to the need for careful differentiation in regard to TPs and “China.” In Africa, many employees of SOEs are from inland and hence poorer regions in China, such as Gansu, Yunnan, Henan, Hubei, and Jilin. They have less career opportunities and choices domestically and are hence more open to a transnational career. They are also more willing to suffer the hardships (i.e., eat bitterness吃苦) of being away. This shows the importance of paying attention to social stratification, here to social class hierarchies within TP communities.⁷ One might expect that TPs would seek to return to China at a certain moment of time (e.g., because they have family back home, life is hard in Africa etc.), but high-level managers mostly did not return to China. Many had already been in Zambia for 15–20 years when we met, were embedded in the local contexts and lived married (mostly with Chinese partners) in Zambia. They spoke about how they felt entirely at home and even did not want to be sent back to China. They also have most of their networks in Zambia rather than in China, where competition is much more intense and their chances limited, and where workloads can be even higher, deteriorating health and well-being. They also stressed an additional point: they felt very “free” in Zambia. Indeed, freedom (自由) was a recurring theme for many of the Chinese professionals in Zambia, as party scrutiny is far stronger in China domestically and competition is much more intense.⁸ This corresponds to Lam’s (2017) finding that SOEs become increasingly independent from the Chinese state the more they become embedded in the local societies.

TPs working for Chinese private corporations (民企) in Zambia chose to move to Africa. Still, often this was the case because their businesses had not been (or were no longer) profitable in China itself; or they had debts in China they were unable to repay without earning more (and spending less). As Xu Yi-Chong (2014) puts it, often they were also “forced out” of China (逼出去的). Furthermore, several

⁶This corresponds to the literature on collective democracy in China too, where first a consensus needs to be reached amongst all people involved (through collective participation), a process which can be quite intense, and then someone will be chosen/announced (Shih 1999).

⁷A strength in Bourdieusian work (see, for instance, Goetze 2017). See also a recent call for integrating intersectional feminist and decolonial approaches to theorize positionality and structural differences in international practice theories (Chezzé and Sondarjee 2024).

⁸The word often used by interlocutors in Zambia was “involution” (内卷), meaning essentially that competition both at the macro- and micro-levels became so extreme that it became detrimental to people’s well-being.

former SOE employees had come to work with private enterprises in Zambia after retirement (usually at 60 in SOEs) for business opportunities and/or to finalize their careers with a final 5-year stint in Africa.⁹ Factors such as kinship connections and common regional and/or ethnic identity are decided over the specifics. For instance, many Chinese professionals in the Zambian Copperbelt are from Hubei, the origin of copper mining in China, as well as from Henan, the province that has been sending doctors to Zambia for decades. This is reminiscent of the pattern *Pieke* (2009, 148) describes for party schools in China more generally, where “[s]ocializing with people outside one’s class often takes place on the basis of common area of origin or ethnicity” (*Pieke* 2009, 148). In other words, it highlights a tendency for Chinese of common area of origin or ethnicity to stick together. Nevertheless, whereas Chinese cadres within party schools meet by coincidence, they arrive one after the other in the Zambian context because of these relationships.

Overall, rather than drawing their identities from their work, as the TP literature assumes, Chinese professionals draw their identities more from their overarching “Chinese” and (sub-)provincial ethnicities. Being able to speak local dialects together as well as share local foods nurtured social ties, and facilitated communication and sharing practices at work. And in contrast to the prevalence of highly educated individuals and professions with elevated and specific social and cultural capital, many of the Chinese corporate professionals in Zambia do not have high education levels. On the contrary, they have come from all walks of life (e.g., having been miners, cooks, translators, karaoke bar hostesses, or supermarket employees) and had worked themselves up through the ranks. They were often only able to speak Chinese, and hence could frequently not communicate with local people.

Competent Practices and Making Promotion Abroad

The recognition of practices as competent has been argued to be decisive for being part of a professional community and for being successful in a given professional field (*Adler and Pouliot* 2011). Hence what is seen as competent practices and gets someone promoted in a transnational career between China and Africa? Overarchingly, the literature on Chinese cadres within China shows that they are judged based on the extent to which they are able to generate development while maintaining social stability (*Tsai and Dean* 2014). Social stability means in this context not to “lose face” and hence Chinese agents and projects should not attract negative news or protests. Our interviews and observations find a similar logic at work abroad. This also implies that it is not distinct *professional* expertise or skill that decides success in field. Professional backgrounds are highly mixed among Chinese cadres and managers in Zambia, and corporate sector and state/party bureaucracy overlap and interrelate a lot.

In this context, the following characteristics are seen as desirable and signal competent practices, and we use an interview with an SOE director-general/chairman (总裁) from China on an inspection trip (考察) in the Copperbelt Province, Zambia (Interview 26; June 30, 2023) to summarize them: (1) they are hardworking and do the work they

are supposed to do well (干好你的事); (2) they have to be modest (谦虚) about their achievements; and (3) they have to maintain good relationships (关系) with everyone. Only in such a way it will lead to a situation in an SOE where everyone agrees that you are the one who can make promotion.¹⁰ A director general and party secretary from Beijing on another inspection trip in Zambia confirmed the need to be hardworking (努力工作), but also emphasized the need to be (4) loyal (忠诚) and (5) patriotic (爱国).

Participating in the daily lives of Chinese TPs in Zambia confirms these requirements. Perhaps the most striking about their lives, they nearly work constantly or at least stand on standby for 7 days a week. The hardworking element is omnipresent. This ability to work hard and “eat bitterness” (吃苦), as *Driessen* (2019) also highlights, is highly respected, profitable, and leads to promotion. The only time off is on national Zambian holidays and weekends, but even then, they tend to work. Even seemingly leisure activities like having dinner, singing karaoke, playing mahjong or golf, are often interrupted by work-related calls or part of work, in the sense that the topics discussed are mostly work-related. Essentially, their life consists of working and sleeping.

The second element, modesty (谦虚), is also striking. A core element of modesty is to never show off about achievements. In fact, people regularly even de-emphasize the greatness of their achievements. For instance, at the start of dinner meetings attended in Lusaka and Kitwe, in the Copperbelt Province, the host who had invited everyone and would pay later, over the first three toasts thanked everyone for joining, emphasized how honored they were by their presence, and underlined how much they had helped him/her with reaching their current position. Essentially, they used to praise everyone’s achievements while saying that they themselves had not achieved much yet. Similarly, President Xi Jinping was praised for being a very “modest” person. One of the businesspeople exploring business opportunities in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia always shared stories about his modesty when he had met him when still (Vice-)Governor of Fujian (between 1999 and 2002).

The third element, the ability to maintain good relationships with everyone, was also highly visible. Since who makes promotion is decided democratically within SOEs, and everyone needs to agree on who is the right person to be promoted, it is essential to build and maintain good relationships with others. This becomes visible, for instance, during dinner meetings in which both SOE as well as managers from private enterprises were present, which were organized very frequently and of which we attended five within 3 weeks in Zambia. One of the ways to maintain good relations is through treating other bosses and employees to lunches and lavish dinners, serving food alongside expensive alcohol such as Chinese Baijiu or whiskey, successive karaoke sessions, and hostesses. In China domestically, SOE employees, let alone high-ranking ones, are not allowed to participate in such activities as part of anti-corruption measures. However, in Zambia, they are essential for relationship-building and they hence do participate. Only there is a hierarchy in who leaves when: SOE cadres left shortly after the karaoke sessions started—with the higher ranking employees leaving first, and the lower ranking ones not long after, leaving the professionals working in private enterprises to stay until the end. The latter indeed referred to SOE employees

⁹Former SOE employees often said that after retiring from their respective SOEs at 60, they had made it back to China but either felt bored, alienated from their families or wanted to make some more money for their families, which is why they decided to come back to Africa to work for private enterprises.

¹⁰For details on how this “democratic evaluation” (民主测评) takes place for grassroots cadres in China, see *Tsai and Dean* (2023, 74–6).

as acting “according to standards” (正规): to “give face” to the hosts by joining in the fun for a short period of time, but also acknowledging official guidelines by leaving early. Other relationship-building methods include tea drinking, cigarette sharing, golf playing, and, most importantly, helping other corporations with specific tasks such as copper smelting, transportation, construction, mining explorations, and introductions to politicians.

The fourth element, loyalty, is closely linked to the maintenance of good relationships. In Zambia, we spoke to several bosses who had originally started out as employees of other bosses and who now, in addition, ran their own businesses. They always spoke well of their bosses and how good and supportive they had been to them, and they in turn spoke highly of the loyalty and hard work of their (former) protégés. There is a lot of solidarity (团结) among the Chinese who work in the Copperbelt Province, and individuals and companies help each other out a lot.¹¹ A key force behind this densely knitted social fabric of a quite diverse professional ecology is a number of highly influential chairpersons who have been in the Copperbelt Province for 17–30 years (i.e., pioneering individuals). Having built and maintained dense social networks, they generously integrate high-performing newcomers in the area.

The fifth element, patriotism, is also apparent. Frequently, for instance, when one director at the mentioned lunches and dinner meetings would say something in line with the party line, others would affirmatively exclaim “director x really loves his country.” Often this happened when a director said, for instance, that he would not just do business for his own self-interest, but for the greater good of China (and usually added secondly: of the local population). Furthermore, it was frequently acknowledged that Taiwan was an internal part of China at the beginning of conversations before an in-depth conversation about other themes could begin.¹² Hence patriotism needs to be apparent in people’s practices as a precondition for career advancement. Nevertheless, it should be noted that patriotism could be merely a kind of role performance in front of certain audiences.¹³ Chinese corporate professionals often first need to fulfill official state policies, before they can think about profit (Interview with a Chinese expert in Taipei; May 23, 2022); in contrast, Western managers need to think about corporate profit maximization first, before they can pursue broader interests. As Hoffman (2010, 6) argues, in post-Mao China, a new ethics of “patriotic professionalism” has emerged that combines “individual professional development with national projects of state-strengthening.”

The above shows that, other than the usual emphasis on professional skills in the TP literature, Chinese TPs need to have a broad array of skills, including social and intellectual skills and political loyalty. Neatly dressed, with excellent social and individual skills, and approachable, the SOE directors in Zambia also were seen to embody the “moral guide-

lines” stemming from Beijing. This goes far back and has some of its roots in the fact that Chinese cadres are considered the “vanguard” of society, or, in Pieke’s (2009, 1) words, “[a]s the embodiment and chief instrument of the party’s leading role in society, cadres are to be leaders, managers, moral exemplars and faithful servants of the party at the same time.”

Professional Autonomy within the Chinese Company–Party Nexus

Whereas in the sociology of professions, striving for independent jurisdiction and autonomy from the state (even though state-protected) is considered a key feature of how professions have gained importance on their own in transnational politics, in the Chinese case, party representatives (cadres) and managers, representatives of SOEs and private company leaders intermingle frequently, in line with the conception of China as adhering to state-permeated capitalism (Nölke et al. 2020). These coordinated networks of individuals on the ground in specific localities are connected to broader networks in China and in other developing countries. It is them who (re)produce how business–society relations are handled around Chinese projects, rather than distinct professional fields or Chinese laws and party doctrine.

In addition, all Chinese professionals interviewed operate and interact *across* professions. Overall, there are dense interconnections between a wide and diverse range of Chinese cadres and professionals abroad and between them and China domestically. In the Copperbelt Province and Lusaka, Chinese professionals employed in the mining industry are from many different walks of life work and “hang out” together as well as with other Chinese from different occupations, e.g., transportation, construction, chemicals, public administration, or finance. This is furthered by the fact that Chinese actors conduct development projects in Africa in “bundles” (一揽子) or through “coordinated investment” (Chin and Gallagher 2019), hence nurturing cross-cutting connections across projects transnationally, and at the micro-level.

On the flip side, these professionally diverse groups integrate very little with other TPs in their respective domain in the region; neither professionally to share work experience and expertise as members of the same internationalized professional community, nor to socialize and share their lifeworld in the “expat bubble” (e.g., Roth 2015, 136–42). Despite working in the same occupational domain, parallel professional lifeworlds prevail. This is reinforced by the fact that most Chinese TPs in Zambia are unable to (fluently) converse in English let alone in local languages such as Bemba, Nyanja, or Lamba, which reinforced the sticking together with co-nationals or even along the lines of shared regional dialects.

A core question that remains in light of the above discussion of competent practices concerns the autonomy of Chinese professionals in order to play a meaningful role in struggles over what expertise counts transnationally today and how things are competently done abroad (e.g., the management of business–society relations or the transnational workplace). From an angle that portrays the Chinese party state as completely authoritarian, Chinese professionals may not be expected to individually shape transnational practices and affect change, and to rather implement orders from above (Ang 2018). Any agency beyond the state, it could be expected, needs to be exerted silently behind the scenes and hence would remain invisible. But in fact, while

¹¹Multiple interlocutors told us that there existed more solidarity amongst the Chinese TPs in the Copperbelt Province than in Lusaka, and this could be noticed in Lusaka too. The reason was most likely that most TPs working in the Copperbelt Province focused on copper mining and related industries, whereas in Lusaka the diversity of industries present was much higher.

¹²This is reminiscent of the Chinese way of doing diplomacy: Chinese diplomats prefer to agree on basic principles before holding substantive negotiations [, a process that . . .] is known as “negotiating through principle” (Zhang 2021, 365). Yet with the baseline met, there can be a lot of flexibility.

¹³This is underscored by the fact that often after having said strongly patriotic things in front of larger audiences, individuals would later come to us directly stating that they knew situations were more complicated.

official policy guidelines crafted domestically in China define broad goals, we find significant leeway when it comes to making decisions and shaping practices on the ground. The party line serves as shaping the parameters of possibility within which cadres function as agents of stabilization. However, there remains room for individual agency, amongst others because the parameters created by official policies are so broadly (and indeed vaguely) defined (Bunskoek and Shih 2021), as essentially “social stability” and the creation and maintenance of a “good image” of China abroad. To achieve this, having long-term and stable relationships with local actors is a core guiding principle (i.e., a “balance of relationships,” see Shih et al. 2019); but it is exactly this emphasis on relations, that creates room for improvisation and individual agency in African work contexts.

In Zambia, Chinese professionals mostly improvised. The only party-line guidelines of relevance on the ground were to make economic development happen while maintaining social stability, to avoid any bad image of China. So, people work hard to make a profit and follow opportunities. Instead of focusing on strategic resources or sectors only, building a network and coordinating different activities—in the Zambian context copper mining, transportation, construction, smelters, and a whole ecology to support the Chinese in Zambia (e.g., Chinese restaurants, Chinese stores, karaokes, hotels, casinos, etc.)—is an expression of that. Improvisation is indeed expressed in this “coordinated investment approach” (see Chin and Gallagher 2019) transplanted to the local level. A single Chinese company would not be able to make this work or, let alone, profitable, but all companies combined stand a chance. Building up such linked professional ecologies as in Zambia depends on “pioneering individuals” who have a vision for the development of such networks and who have the right networks. As one of them reported, there were only very few Chinese in Zambia in 2002, when he first started exploring business opportunities there. Many TPs in Zambia today have been introduced to the country by this person (Interviewee 15; June 29, 2023).

Another indicator of a certain autonomy from political influence is that the higher ranking SOE chairmen we interviewed were highly educated and intellectually capable of understanding the broader political picture “demonstrating broad understanding of overall political conditions” (Kou and Tsai 2014, 167). It is easily possible to discuss weaknesses and limitations Chinese enterprises face abroad with them, as well as complications in the relationships between the West and China. They were also aware and open to discuss the meaning and effects of their companies’ local practices. Further research will show, how this openness to learn and adapt in various ways accounts for significant variation in Chinese corporate practices abroad.

At the same time, the CPP has a strong presence abroad and the cadre system has been expanded across China’s borders to ensure a certain level of control. As also discussed above, some Chinese professionals seek to outperform each other in demonstrating their loyalty to the party to secure promotion. In social gatherings and meetings we attended in Zambia, some outcompeted each other in acknowledging hierarchies defined by the party state. Mostly younger cadres were very vocal in their love for the party—to an extent that it almost seemed out of place even to their Chinese peers in Lusaka or the Copperbelt Province who would sometimes smile at such performances. Such display of political loyalty was often also visible in the profile pictures the same people used on WeChat, where they portrayed themselves with

the Chinese flag and other national symbols. Such behaviors resembled the “over-performances” known from Chinese diplomats, who—in certain cases—displayed rude, harsh behavior in the international arena in recent years. These were the so-called “wolf warrior” diplomats, who “act[ed] proactively and harshly” to demonstrate loyalty to their superiors, out-compete their colleagues and, potentially, secure promotion (Duan and Liu 2023).

Conclusions

This article broadens and diversifies knowledge about TPs by entering the lifeworlds and career trajectories of Chinese corporate professional in Africa. Understanding these professional logics and lifeworlds pushes TP research beyond its current state built on Western-dominated professional fields and communities of practice. Such broadening is essential to understand transnational practices and their evolution in an increasingly polycentric world. In the wake of a rising China, we have shown how and why Chinese professionals¹⁴ behave differently from peers from other parts of the world. That shapes how they affect transnational governance norms and practices, which has implications for theories about TPs in global politics.

The article has shown, first, that the lifeworlds and careers of Chinese professionals, while sharing a number of similarities, differ significantly from other, more widely studied TP lifeworlds. Few of the Chinese TPs in Zambia chose their transnational career on their own but were chosen by their peers. Others were forced out of China by intense competition and lack of market opportunity domestically. Most of them do not display high amounts of cultural capital in the form of high educational degrees or highly specialized *professional* skills.

Second, what is considered competent practice among Chinese TPs, and how promotions are obtained, differs. In contrast to the existing literature on TPs, which emphasizes professional skills belonging to a particular occupational field, in the case of Chinese professionals, these are only aspects of their evaluation among others. They equally need to demonstrate modesty about their achievements, patriotism, and loyalty to their superiors, the party and the state. Of particular importance, they must maintain good relationships with everyone within and without their corporations, a logic that is fundamentally different from competitive individualism. This focus on relations, combined with the fact that there are many different—yet coordinated—Chinese projects running in the same region, means that there are frequent inter-professional relations and interactions. How individuals function and perform in this broader social and professional ecology matters significantly for how they work and make a career.

There is little evidence, third, of Chinese professionals striving for control over a subject matter or professional domain on the grounds of their distinct professional expertise or know-how, coined as jurisdiction by Abbott (1988). Rather, Chinese professionals work and interact across different occupations, and many have shifted between professional domains during their careers, but also between corporate world and Communist Party. There is also limited autonomy from the state. Yet while the party state shapes the parameters of possibility within which professionals act, there is room for individual agency. Parameters created

¹⁴We focussed on TPs who have been educated and socialized in China and work for Chinese companies abroad.

by official policies are so broad and vaguely defined that they allow for relational adaptation and improvisation on the ground. This is illustrated, for example, by the “co-ordinated investment networks” that pioneering individuals create at the micro level to ensure profitability. At the same time, while promoting relational harmony and historically having thrived on “directed improvisation” (Ang 2016), the Chinese government has also come to observe such agency with caution. It fears that adaptation to local expectations, or to global standards of conducting business–society relations rooted in liberal global governance, could increase autonomy from the Chinese state too much—i.e., the fear for an excessive “retreat of the state” as Lam (2017) put it. Such concern shows in the constant inspections (考察) to ensure that practices remain within the parameters of the official party line and state policies, while they simultaneously serve to learn from successful practices on the ground.

These findings contribute to a differentiated understanding of the power of TPs in international relations and how they shape transnational governance practices in an increasingly polycentric world. First, researching Chinese TPs reveals implicit assumptions about TPs in the existing literature that do not travel. The assumed differentiation of functional spheres, and a (growing) autonomy of professions and their knowledge from the state, apply much less in the context of “global China.” Rather, connections between and cooperation across occupational fields, and across state and market abound. Facilitated by the party state, people switch between different positions across professions and domain (e.g., from party function to state function, or from mayor to SOE leader, etc.). To be successful, Chinese TPs indeed require comprehensive traits and skills that go way beyond specialized expertise and competencies defined professionally. At the same time, the autonomy from the state is limited. Therefore, the case of Chinese TPs reminds us of the need to carefully situate claims about the power of professionals to compete with the power of firms and states. Taking the TP research agendas’ core conceptual tools and questions to China–Africa relations not only broadens our empirical knowledge. It also demonstrated the specific historical and cultural situatedness of some of the assumptions and arguments put forward in most of the literature about TPs and communities of practice.

Furthermore, the article highlights the segregation of transnational work environments. The Chinese TPs studied did, with few exceptions, not integrate beyond their Chinese bubble. This limits the impact the rise of Chinese FDI has on transnational practices. Self-contained labor camps, a 24/7 hierarchical work culture, and an emphasis on pragmatic relation-building characterize Chinese project sites and work practices. However, they do not amount to a predefined, fixed “countermodel” (Bunskoek 2024) or “principle-based” standards (Chen et al. 2024) of how companies should manage community relations or labor. While there is political control, in practice we find limited guidance and oversight of professional practices, or attempts to spread them, on the part of the Chinese state. In addition, Chinese TPs on their own rarely interact and exchange with other, non-Chinese professionals in the same domain of occupation. Hence, the impact on broader transnational norms and practices through “practice diffusion” (Fuchs and Eaton 2024) is limited.

The above suggests several future research avenues. One is to further open up TP research beyond the to date most studied bubbles of Western-dominated TPs. Rajak and Stirrat (2011) once referred to them as “parochial cosmopolitans”—seeing themselves as cosmopolitan citizens

of the world but cultivating exclusive socialities attached to an idealized home in the Global North and the idea of privileged expertise. It will be crucial to further examine TP lifeworlds globally beyond these bubbles.

Another research avenue is to examine the variations within and across Chinese (and other) professional lifeworlds beyond the West. Far from being homogeneous, it will be interesting to compare the social groupings of Chinese TPs working with SOEs and private companies with Chinese overseas students and other professionals. This would carve out distinctive cultural and educational preparations before going abroad that breed an intimacy embedded in shared language, diet, and national identity, but also a shared migrant status. At the same time, such research could capture individual agency and diversity by those alienated from the described Chinese bubble to different degrees. Furthermore, cadre attitudes may vary and could be compared between domestic SOEs and SOEs in Africa, for example. Both groups are indebted to the traditions of socialist practices, but such research could demonstrate non-Western features as well as TP autonomy and agency with regard to crafting “freedom” from domestic control to be enjoyed at different sites.¹⁵

Our research also contributes to an emerging research agenda on multiple and diverse processes of world ordering through practices (see the special issue by Adler et al. 2024 in this journal). According to Adler (2019, 3), “social orders develop, spread and maintain metastable when communities of practice establish themselves, when their background knowledge diffuses and becomes selectively retained, and when their members’ expectations and dispositions preferentially survive”. While we found no evidence in our cases for “Chinese” norms and practices being injected into other TP fields or communities in the same issue area, it is important to understand how “not engaging” is organized and wields effects. Yet future research should investigate, under which conditions and how Chinese (and other culturally distinct) professional groups *overlap* and *interact* with others. Recent suggestions of approaching such processes through a focus on boundary work between communities of practice, or on field overlaps, offer promising starting points in such a direction (Liu 2021; Sondarjee 2021; Hofius 2023; Lesch and Loh 2022; Bueger et al. 2024). Such endeavors should not be restricted to communities of practice with shared expertise, craft and identity but include differently constituted “communities” and lifeworlds. This will allow to better understand transboundary work across not only functionally but also culturally differentiated professional fields and communities of practice.

Finally, in addition to stratification along ethnic and national identities, it is crucial to pay more attention to the role of class, race and gender among TPs. Intersectional hierarchies affect access to TP communities, and the ability to defining competency and what is mutually recognized as good practice in and between transnational TP communities.¹⁶ A pressing issue for future research is thus to understand how such inequalities affect social relations within and between experts and professionals in international relations, and how they shape political outcomes. In order to do so, Chezzé and Sondarjee (2024) usefully call for more engagement of TP research with post/decolonial, feminist, and intersectional theories to account for such hierarchies

¹⁵We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.

¹⁶Other work that stresses intersectional hierarchies in inter/transnational work contexts in MNCs, IOs, and issue-specific fields includes Fechter and Walsh (2010), Mosse (2011), Huju (2023), and Oksamytna and von Billerbeck (2024).

and how they affect whose practices count more in world ordering. Research on TPs in the Global South shows that linguistically, socially, and culturally isolated expat lifeworlds notoriously lead to frictions, disconnected practices and, eventually, policy failure (Autesserre 2010; Rajak and Stirrat 2011). Our research in Zambia showed Chinese professionals as largely disconnected from local society, and with limited interest in learning about local culture, seeing it as inferior to their own (see also Visser and Cezne 2023).¹⁷ Paying more attention to such identity work (also Glas and Martel 2024, 10) and the effects of racialized hierarchies is crucial for international relations in general, but also for understanding contemporary transformations of transnational practices in an increasingly polycentric world.

References

ABBOTT, ANDREW 1988. *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

ADLER, EMANUEL 2019. *World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ADLER, EMANUEL, AND POULIOT VINCENT. 2011. "International Practices." *International Theory* 3 (1): 1–36.

ADLER, EMANUEL, NIKLAS BREMBERG, AND MAÏKA SONDARJEE. 2024. "Communities of Practice in World Politics: Advancing a Research Agenda." *Global Studies Quarterly* 4 (1):ksad070.

ADLER-NISSEN, REBECCA, AND VINCENT POULIOT. 2014. "Power in practice: Negotiating the international intervention in Libya." *European Journal of International Relations* 20 (4): 889–911.

ANG, YUEN YUEN. 2012. "Counting Cadres: A Comparative View of the Size of China's Public Employment." *The China Quarterly* 211: 676–96.

———. 2016. *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

———. 2018. "Autocracy with Chinese Characteristics: Beijing's Behind-the-Scenes Reforms." *Foreign Affairs* 97 (3):39–46.

———. 2020. *China's Gilded Age: The Paradox of Economic Boom and Vast Corruption*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

AUTESSERRE, SÉVERINE. 2010. *The Trouble with the Congo. Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BEERLI, MONIQUE. 2023. "From Opposites to Birds of a Feather: The Transnational Making of Humanitarian Security Professionals." Unpublished manuscript presented at the EISA Annual Convention, 9/2023, Potsdam, Germany.

BICCHI, FEDERICA. 2024. "Cultivating Communities of Practice: From Institutions to Practices." *lobal Studies Quarterly* 4 (1): ksad076.

BIGO, DIDIER. 2016. "Sociology of Transnational Guilds." *International Political Sociology* 10 (4): 398–416.

BLOK, ANDERS, MARIA DUCLOS, MARIE LINDSTRÖM, LETH MEILVANG, AND INGE KRYGER PEDERSEN. 2018. "Trans-Local Professional Projects: Re-Scaling the Linked Ecology of Expert Jurisdictions." *Journal of Professions and Organization* 5 (2): 106–22.

BRØDGAARD, KJELD ERIK, AND KASPER INGEMAN BECK. 2021. "Big Business and Cadre Management in China." *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 39 (2): 53–76.

BUEGER, CHRISTIAN. 2013. "Practice, Pirates and Coast Guards: The Grand Narrative of Somali Piracy." *Third World Quarterly* 34 (10): 1811–27.

BUEGER, CHRISTIAN, MAREN HOFIUS, AND SCOTT EDWARDS. 2024. "Global Ordering and the Interaction of Communities of Practice: A Framework for Analysis." *Global Studies Quarterly* 4 (1):ksad079.

BUNSKOEK, RAOUL, AND CHIH-YU SHIH. 2021. "'Community of Common Destiny' as Post-Western Regionalism: Rethinking China's Belt and Road Initiative from a Confucian Perspective." *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 18 (70): 85–101.

BUNSKOEK, RAOUL. 2024. "Beyond the 'China Model': Towards a Relational Understanding of Development Practices in China–Africa Relations." In *Africa's Global Infrastructures: South–South Transformations in Practice*,

edited by J. Honke, E. Cezne and Y. Yang, 29–48. London: Hurst Publishers.

CHEN, ZHUO, BRYAN TILT, AND SHAOZENG ZHANG. 2024. "Internationalizing Chinese Standards through Infrastructure Experimentation: Engineering a Pumped Storage Hydropower Project in Israel." *China Information* 38 (2): 202–22.

CHESSÉ, ALICE, AND MAÏKA SONDARJEE. 2024. "A Feminist Critique of International Practices." *International Studies Quarterly* 68: 2.

CHIN, GREGORY T., AND KEVIN P. GALLAGHER. 2019. "Coordinated Credit Spaces: The Globalization of Chinese Development Finance." *Development and Change* 50 (1): 245–74.

DE GRAAFF, NANA. 2020. "China Inc. Goes Global. Transnational and National Networks of China's Globalizing Business Elite." *Review of International Political Economy* 27 (2): 208–33.

DE GRAAFF, NANA, TOBIAS TEN BRINK, AND INDERJEET PARMAR. 2020. "China's Rise in a Liberal World Order in Transition—Introduction to the FORUM." *Review of International Political Economy* 27 (2): 191–207.

DEZALAY, YVES, AND BRYANT G. GARTH. 2002. *The Internationalization of Palace Wars: Lawyers, Economists, and the Contest to Transform Latin American States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

DRIESSEN, MIRIAM. 2019. *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

DUAN, XIAOLIN, AND YITONG LIU. 2023. "The Rise and Fall of China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy." *The Diplomat*, September 22. Accessed November 13, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/the-rise-and-fall-of-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy>.

EVETTS, JULIA. 2003. "The Sociological Analysis of Professionalism: Occupational change in the Modern World." *International Sociology* 18 (2): 395–415.

FECHTER, ANNE-MEIKE, AND KATIE WALSH. 2010. "Examining 'Expatriate' Continuities: Postcolonial Approaches to Mobile Professionals." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36 (8): 1197–210.

FRANCESCHINI, IVAN, AND NICHOLAS LOUBERE. 2022. *Global China as Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

FUCHS, DANIEL, AND SARAH EATON. 2024. "Practice Diffusion in China's Two-Pronged Engagement in Global Technical Standardization." *China Information* 38 (2): 157–79.

GLAS, AARIE. 2022. *Practicing Peace: Conflict Management in Southeast Asia and South America*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press.

GLAS, AARIE, AND STÉPHANIE MARTEL. 2024. "Boundary Work, Overlapping Identities, and Liminality in Communities of Practice: Diplomacy within and beyond ASEAN." *Global Studies Quarterly* 4 (1): ksad072.

GOETZE, CATHERINE. 2017. *The Distinction of Peace: A Social Analysis of Peacebuilding*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

GRÜNBERG, NIS, AND KATJA DRINHAUSEN. 2019. "The Party Leads on Everything." MERICS, September 24. Accessed November 13, 2024. <https://merics.org/en/report/party-leads-everything>.

GU, JING, CHUANHONG ZHANG, ALCIDES VAZ, AND LANGTON MUKWEREZA. 2016. "Chinese State Capitalism? Rethinking the Role of the State and Business in Chinese Development Cooperation in." *Africa. World Development* 81: 24–34.

HARRINGTON, BROOKE, AND LEONARD SEABROOKE. 2020. "Transnational Professionals." *Annual Review of Sociology* 46 (1): 399–417.

HOFFMAN, LISA M. 2010. *Patriotic Professionalism in Urban China: Fostering Talent*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

HOFIUS, MAREN. 2023. *European Union Communities of Practice: Diplomacy and Boundary Work in Ukraine*. London: Routledge.

HÖNKE, JANA, ERIC CEZNE, AND YIFAN YANG. eds. 2024. *Africa's Global Infrastructures: South–South Transformations in Practice*. London: Hurst Publishers.

HUJU, KIRA. 2023. *Cosmopolitan Elites: Indian Diplomats and the Social Hierarchies of Global Order*. New York: Oxford University Press.

JIN, XIANKUN, LIPING XU, YU XIN, AND AJAY ADHIKARI. 2022. "Political Governance in China's State-Owned Enterprises." *China Journal of Accounting Research* 15 (2): 1–29.

JONES, LEE, AND SHAHAR HAMEIRI. 2021. *Fractured China: How State Transformation Is Shaping China's Rise*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

KOU, CHIEN-WEN, AND WEN-HSUAN TSAI. 2014. "'Sprinting with Small Steps' towards Promotion: Solutions for the Age Dilemma in the CCP Cadre Appointment System." *The China Journal* 71: 153–71.

KRAUS, BJÖRN. 2015. "The Life We Live and the Life We Experience: Introducing the Epistemological Difference between 'Lifeworld' (Lebenswelt) and 'Life Conditions' (Lebenslage)." *Social Work and Society* 13 (2): 1–9.

LAM, KATY N. 2017. *Chinese State Owned Enterprises in West Africa: Triple-Embedded Globalization*. London: Routledge.

¹⁷Chinese managers in Zambia in fact envied Western powers for having more knowledge of "local culture and society" due to their longstanding colonial and postcolonial presence. On the coloniality of much of this knowledge, see, e.g., Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023).

- LEE, CHARLOTTE P. 2015. *Training the Party: Party Adaptation and Elite Training in Reform-Era China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LEE, CHING. 2017. *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LESCH, MAX, AND DYLAN M. H. LOH. 2022. "Field Overlaps, Normativity, and the Contestation of Practices in China's Belt and Road Initiative." *Global Studies Quarterly* 2 (4): ksac068.
- LIU, RUONAN, AND SONGPO YANG. 2023. "China and the Liberal International Order: A Pragmatic and Dynamic Approach." *International Affairs* 99 (4): 1383–400.
- LIU, SIDA. 2021. "Between Social Spaces." *European Journal of Social Theory* 24 (1): 123–39.
- MA, LIANG. 2017. "Site Visits, Policy Learning, and the Diffusion of Policy Innovation: Evidence from Public Bicycle Programs in China." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 22: 581–99.
- MAY, C, T NÖLKE, AND T. TEN BRINK. 2019. "Public-private Coordination in Large Emerging Economies: The Case of Brazil, India and China." *Contemporary Politics* 25 (3): 276–91.
- MOORE, FIONA. 2016. *Transnational Business Cultures: Life and Work in a Multi-national Corporation*. London: Routledge.
- MOSSE, DAVID. 2011. *Adventures in Aidland: The Anthropology of Professionals in International Development*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- NAIR, DEEPAK. 2019. "Saving Face in Diplomacy: A Political Sociology of Face-to-Face Interactions in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations." *European Journal of International Relations* 25 (3): 672–97.
- NDLOVU-GATSHENI, SABELO. 2023. "Intellectual Imperialism and Decolonisation in African Studies." *Third World Quarterly* 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2211520>.
- NÖLKE, ANDREAS, TOBIAS TEN BRINK, CHRISTIAN MAY, AND SIMONE CLAAR. 2020. *State-permeated Capitalism in Large Emerging Economies*. Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- OKSAMYTNA, KSENIA, AND SARAH VON BILLERBECK. 2024. "Race and International Organizations." *International Studies Quarterly* 68 (2): sqae010. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae010>.
- PEARSON, MARGARET M., MEG RITHMIRE, AND KELLE S. TSAI. 2022. "China's Party-State Capitalism and International Backlash: From Interdependence to Insecurity." *International Security* 47 (2): 135–76.
- PIEKE, FRANK. 2009. *The Good Communist: Elite Training and State Building in Today's China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PIEKE, FRANK N., AND NANÁ DE GRAAFF. 2022. "Chinese Influence and Networks among Firms and Business Elites in the Netherlands." Leiden Asia Centre Report. Accessed October 18, 2024. <https://leidenasiacentre.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Pieke-De-Graaff-Chinese-Influence-and-Networks-among-Firms-and-Business-Elites-in-the-Netherlands.pdf>.
- POULIOT, VINCENT. 2016. *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- QIAO-FRANCO, GUANGYU. 2024. "An Emergent Community of Cyber Sovereignty: The Reproduction of Boundaries?." *Global Studies Quarterly* 4 (1): ksad077.
- RAJAK, DINAH, AND JOCK STIRRAT. 2011. "Parochial Cosmopolitanism and the Power of Nostalgia." In *Adventures in Aidland*, edited by D. Mosse, 161–76. New York: Berghahn Books.
- REINERS, NINA. 2021. *Transnational Lawmaking Coalitions for Human Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ROBINSON, THOMAS W., AND DAVID SHAMBAUGH. 1994. *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ROTH, SILKE. 2015. *The Paradoxes of Aid Work: Passionate Professionals*. London: Routledge.
- SEABROOKE, LEONARD. 2014. "Epistemic Arbitrage: Transnational Professional Knowledge in Action." *Journal of Professions and Organization* 1 (1): 49–64.
- SEABROOKE, LEONARD, AND LASSE FOLKE HENRIKSEN. 2017. *Professional Networks in Transnational Governance*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- SEABROOKE, LEONARD, AND ANNICA STENSTRÖM. 2022. Professional ecologies in European sustainable finance. *Governance* 36 (4): 1271–92.
- SENDING, OLE JACOB. 2015. *The Politics of Expertise: Competing for Authority in Global Governance*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- SHIH, CHIH-YU. 1999. *Collective Democracy: Political and Legal Reform in China*. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- SHIH, CY, CC HUANG, AND Y. PICHAMON et al. 2019. *China and International Theory: The Balance of Relationships*. Oxon: Routledge.
- SHIMODA, YUKIMI. 2017. *Transnational Organizations and Cross-Cultural Workplaces*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- SONDARJEE, MAIKA. 2021. "Collective Learning at the Boundaries of Communities of Practice: Inclusive Policymaking at the World Bank." *Global Society* 35 (3): 307–26.
- TANG, XIAOYANG. 2020. *Coevolutionary Pragmatism: Approaches and Impacts of China–Africa Economic Cooperation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- TSAI, WEN-HSUAN, AND NICOLA DEAN. 2014. "Experimentation Under Hierarchy in Local Conditions: Cases of Political Reform in Guangdong and Sichuan, China." *The China Quarterly* 218: 339–58.
- TSAI, WEN-HSUAN, AND GANG TIAN. 2023. "The Recruitment Process for Grassroots Cadres in a Chinese County: The CCP Organization Department and Its Alarm Function." *Modern China* 49 (1): 63–92.
- VAN MAANEN, JOHN, AND STEPHEN R. BARLEY. 1984. "Occupational Communities: Culture and Control in Organizations." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 6: 287–365.
- VISSER, ROOS, AND ERIC CEZNE. 2023. "Racializing China–Africa Relations: A Test to the Sino-african Friendship." *Journal of Asian and African Studies online first*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231168062>.
- WENGER, ETIENNE. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- XU, YI-CHONG. 2014. "Chinese State-Owned Enterprises in Africa: Ambassadors or Freebooters?." *Journal of Contemporary China* 89 (23): 822–40.
- ZHANG, QINGMIN. 2021. "Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 16 (2–3): 358–69.