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Cultural versus institutional explanations for performance management in Chinese overseas
MNCs

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**Cultural versus institutional influences on the fairness of performance management:
Chinese MNCs in developing countries**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate cultural and institutional influences on the fairness of performance management in Chinese overseas MNCs. A multiple case-study approach was employed to examine how performance management was implemented and perceived in two Chinese overseas MNCs' subsidiaries: one in Mongolia and the other in Tanzania. Research methods included both document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 33 staff members across the two subsidiaries. Our initial findings reveal how perceptions of fairness in performance management varied significantly depending on the category of staff, suggesting a complex interplay between cultural and institutional dimensions.

Track: Human Resource Management Track

Cultural versus institutional influences on the fairness of performance management: Chinese MNCs in developing countries

Introduction

There has been much discussion about HRM in the overseas subsidiaries of multinational corporations (MNCs). Moreover, this has sometimes been underpinned by debates about the degree to which HRM is influenced by cultural or institutional factors (Brookes et al., 2011). A crucial dimension of HRM is performance management, since it links various stakeholders' interests in organisations (Brown et al., 2019). Performance management is often viewed as a set of techniques used to motivate employees to work hard to ultimately enhance organisations' performance (Varma et al., 2008), and various , important elements, including target-setting, performance appraisal, feedback, training, and reward distribution, have received research attention (Aguinis, 2013). The development of performance management policies by MNCs in their foreign subsidiaries relates to organisational-level strategy, whereas their practical implementation is experienced by and can itself be influenced by individual employees locally. Recent discussions acknowledge the importance of understanding different employee perceptions of performance management (DeNisi et al., 2021), including fairness, which can relate to notions of procedural, relational and distributional justice.

This paper focuses on perceptions of performance management in the subsidiaries of Chinese MNCs. Although performance management originated in Western developed economies, the concept was transferred to developing economies such as China through HRM practices in MNCs (Brown et al., 2019; Gamble, 2006). Existing literature in the field of international human resource management (IHRM) recognises that organisations in developing economies often do not rigidly adopt all Western management practices but

instead customise these practices to suit local work and employment conditions (Siebers et al., 2015). However, it is unclear how MNCs from developing countries use performance management in their overseas subsidiaries (particularly when the subsidiary is also based in a developing country) and how these practices are perceived by both expatriates and local employees (Brown et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2018). Moreover, there is limited understanding of the extent to which the implementation of performance management can be explained by cultural versus institutional influences (c.f. Brookes et al., 2011). This research explores this important but under-studied area.

In examining performance management within MNCs, it is important to understand the perceptions of different groups of workers. Within MNCs, people's interpretations of HR policies and practices may vary due to their distinctive cultural backgrounds and organisational positions (Fee et al., 2011; Mayrhofer et al., 2019). In an organisation, employees are the basis of the management process, and line managers are bridges to connect employees and senior management teams (Kakkar et al., 2020; Mone et al., 2011; Sharma et al., 2016). Meanwhile, how they perceive performance management approaches may be influenced not only by their hierarchical positions but also by cultural and institutional factors (Alfes et al., 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate the performance management practices that operate in Chinese MNCs' subsidiaries located in other developing countries from the perspective of senior managers, line managers and employees.

Theoretical context

Performance management in Chinese MNCs

Performance management is generally understood to include a formal and regular process in which employees are evaluated by a number of raters (usually supervisors) who assess and score employees' performance against a given set of criteria/dimensions and then inform

employees of their official rating (Bernardin and Wiatrowski, 2013). It is commonly associated with training and development, as well as being closely related to reward systems. It has also been argued that the evaluation of individual performance needs to align with firms' strategies and ultimately contribute toward improved organisational performance (DeNisi and Smith, 2014; Brown et al., 2019).

Within this paper, we focus on performance management in Chinese MNCs which set up their overseas subsidiaries in other developing countries. Prior research identifies that Chinese organisations have adapted and modified Western HRM practices to incorporate a more relationship-driven management style which is common in Asian and African organisations (Warner 2011; Xian, et al., 2019). These modified practices are likely to be used in overseas subsidiaries of Chinese MNCs (Gamble, 2006). Because of the complexity of personnel in MNCs, it is important to consider fairness of performance management according to the perceptions of different groups of employees (Jackson and Horwitz, 2018; Sumelius et al., 2014).

Perceptions of fairness in performance management

An effective performance management system is one that is widely accepted by employees and managers, and these participants should also perceive that the system is fair (Bauwens et al., 2019). Participants' perceptions are the best way to see if a performance management system is considered to be fair (Aguinis, 2013).

Most of the extant research on the perceived fairness of HRM/performance management is centred on three main areas: (1) perceptions of distributive fairness, which are related to the performance appraisal results for different staff (Chang and Hahn, 2006); (2) perceptions of procedural fairness, referring to the process of performance evaluation and distribution of rewards (Salleh et al., 2013); and (3) perceptions of interactional fairness,

which is about how employees or managers feel they are fairly treated in the performance management process (Rubel and Kee, 2015).

In the existing literature, research on perceived performance management has mainly revolved around employees' views of the fairness of particular performance management activities such as appraisal and rewards (Harrington and Lee, 2015; Park and Sturman, 2022). However, performance management is a cycle, and each stage is closely linked to the other. Thus, it is important to examine the perceptions of fairness in performance management for employees from a holistic perspective. Moreover, much of the existing research is based on the public sector; there is more limited research on the perceived fairness of performance management in MNCs (Harrington and Lee, 2015; Rubel and Kee, 2015). Importantly, most of the performance management perceptions research is from the perspective of employees only (Bauwens et al., 2019; Salleh et al., 2013). However, senior managers and line managers also play an important role in the performance management process and thus it is also important to understand their perceptions of performance management fairness.

Institutionalist versus culturalist influences on the fairness of performance management

There is an acknowledged need to examine different employee perceptions of fairness in performance management in diverse socio-cultural contexts (Sharma et al., 2016). In MNCs, home-country and host-country staff's perceptions of whether the policy is implemented in a fair way might be impacted by their national backgrounds; individuals from different cultures may perceive the fairness of performance management differently (Ma and Trigo, 2012). For instance, if line managers tend to evaluate employees according to their personal relationships (friendship), employees who are not part of the friendship group may perceive that their performance is evaluated unfairly. Therefore, this study takes into account the

organisational positions of staff as well as different home and host country institutions and cultures.

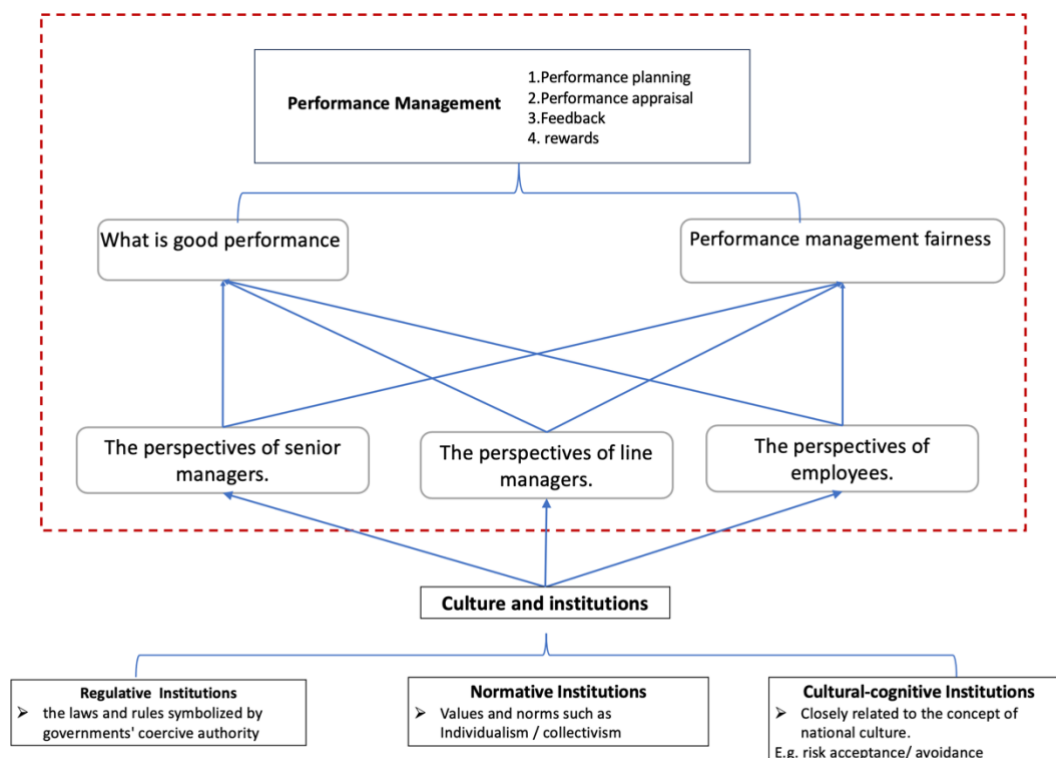
This paper draws on Richard Scott's three institutional pillars (Scott, 2013), to explore how institutions impact employees and managers' perceptions of performance management in MNCs and their overseas subsidiaries. Scott (2013, p. 52) developed an integrated model of institutional constraints that identifies and consists of three pillars – regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive institutions – which relate to "legally sanctioned", "morally governed", and "recognisable, taken-for-granted behaviors" respectively.

Extant research has indicated that performance management might not be applied in the same way in developing economies as it has been applied in Western ones. One of the institutional factors is related to employment relations systems. Trade unions play a major role in the performance management of employees in Western societies (Festing and Barzantny, 2008). For example, because of union demands, companies in Western countries such as Germany tend to place greater emphasis on objective results and fairness in their performance appraisals (Festing et al., 2012). However, in countries where legislation for labour protection is weak or where trade unions have a low presence, there is a risk that practices are used to exploit employees, e.g. pressurising employees to work longer hours to meet unreasonable targets (Wang et al. 2020). Another institutional factor is regulation on training. For example, in France, there are laws that require companies to put effort into the professional skills and future development of their employees, and the government also contributes with financial support (Aguinis, 2013). While performance management is often development-oriented in Western countries (Festing et al., 2012), this is not necessarily the case in developing countries which depend on low-skilled sectors (such as agriculture or low-skilled manufacturing).

In terms of cultural perspectives, it has been argued that performance management in Western contexts is often rooted in an individualist perspective. Companies in developed Western countries such as the USA place more emphasis on individual contributions and rewards (e.g. performance-based pay) and less on collective contributions from the team, although they also realise the importance of team performance (Hwang et al., 2003; Varma et al., 2008). This raises questions about whether Western practices might be applied differently in collectivist cultures (e.g. Asian and African countries) which might place greater importance on maintaining harmony, sharing resources and building social relationships at work. Although some limited work has considered cultural influences on performance management within research organisations based in Africa (Natukunda, 2021), this is still a research area that is ripe for development.

The potential influences on the fairness of performance management in the host countries are summarised in the conceptual model outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework



Methods

This paper has two key research questions: 1) To what extent do different groups of staff in the subsidiaries of Chinese MNCs perceive performance management to be fair? 2) To what extent is fairness in performance management influenced by cultural or institutional factors?

This research was qualitative in nature, to provide an in-depth investigation into how country-specific culture and institutions shaped performance management in specific contexts, by learning about the experiences and perspectives of research participants (employees and managers from different countries).

Data collection and analysis

A multiple case-study approach was employed to explore how performance management was implemented and perceived in Chinese overseas MNCs (Woodside, 2010). We selected two overseas subsidiaries of two Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOE1 and SOE2): one in Mongolia (SOE1M) and the other in Tanzania (SOE2T). As larger firms with a longer history of operation in the host country might be anticipated to have well-structured HRM systems, we targeted subsidiaries which had more than 200 employees and had been operating locally for at least one year. Table 1 shows brief information about the case study organisations.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

In both subsidiaries, data sources included company documents and semi-structured interviews. Documentary evidence is considered to be a credible data source in social science research, as documents are stable (they can be reviewed repeatedly), broad (they might cover a long-term period, different events, and situations) and specific (it is helpful in know exact names, titles and other details of policies/events) (Yin, 2017). In both overseas subsidiaries, documents

collected included PM policies, procedures, aggregated records, and minutes of meetings.

Across the two case study organisations, 33 semi-structured interviews were also conducted. To capture a diverse view of performance management, our participants involved both managerial staff and employees, and both Chinese expatriates and local workers. We also recruited participants from different age and gender groups and with different responsibilities. Our final sample is presented in Table 2. An interview guide was used to maintain consistency and covered questions such as individual views about the policies on performance management, how performance management was applied, perceptions of what was understood by ‘good performance’ , and individuals’ experiences of performance management processes.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Using multiple sources of data helped to strengthen the rigor and validity of the research and contribute to more in-depth findings. A continuous data analysis process was employed. Four main approaches were utilised in the data analysis: (1) documentary analysis, (2) thematic analysis techniques, (3) within-case analysis and (4) cross-case analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted initially by the lead researcher, drawing on data from both organisations. In brief, the main themes were determined through reference to the literature review, but subthemes emerged during the process of analysis. These themes were subsequently discussed by the research team, then finalised, and the resulting insights were then used to inform the findings.

Findings

The findings of this research revealed how individuals perceived performance management in terms of fairness according to their nationality, position in the organisational hierarchy and employment contract.

Perceptions of the fairness of performance management

Responses on the fairness of performance management revolved around three main aspects: the distribution of outcomes (distributive justice); the processes followed to arrive at the distribution of outcomes (procedural justice); and fairness of communication mechanisms (interactional justice) (DeNisi & Robert, 2006).

Distributive justice

Every Chinese senior manager and some Chinese employees in the Tanzanian project branch mentioned an inequitable distribution in terms of performance rewards. The essential criterion for project performance assessment was completion of work tasks, not how much work had been completed. Those Chinese employees who were aware of this unfairness, even though dissatisfied with this phenomenon, had no choice but to accept it. This was reportedly since ‘a big pot / eating from a big pot of rice’ [Chinese colloquialism, which indicates a social phenomenon of egalitarian distribution of benefits without regard to contribution] was common in Chinese state- owned companies. However, Chinese senior managers seemed to be willing to accept the ‘unfairness’, not only because of their higher hierarchical position, but also perhaps because of the influence of Chinese Collectivist traditions.

Procedural justice

Both Chinese and Mongolian employees valued the company's top reward since it was a good opportunity to travel to China. However, when making the reward allocation, Chinese managers thought that Mongolian employees were more in need of the opportunity to go abroad (apparently ignoring the possibility that Chinese employees might wish to return to visit their families). Thus, they encouraged Chinese employees to think that the rewards should be given to local staff. Chinese managers also explained that Chinese employees should be more understanding because the latter had at least two months of annual leave each year to return to China for family reunions. Meanwhile, the award would not be allocated to the same employee for two years in a row, even if s/he had the highest performance for two years continuously.

Appeals and employee voice were also found to be important aspects of perceptions of procedural justice. In both case study subsidiaries, Chinese employees and managers stated that they did not use formal appeal channels to make their voices heard, even when they disagreed with the results of their performance appraisals. Most importantly, none of the Chinese employees complained about this procedural unfairness during the interviews. In contrast, local staff expressed dissatisfaction at not being given appropriate channels through which to express their voice.

Interactional justice

Different from distributive and procedural justice, interactional justice refers to the fairness of interpersonal treatment between supervisors and employees (Dai and Xie, 2016). This study found that host-country staff, especially the Tanzanian employees and managers, were not happy with their relationships with Chinese leaders, and also found that the organisation's communication mechanisms were not adequate. In particular, they were not satisfied with the

daily interactions with their supervisors since they did not feel that they were treated politely or patiently by their leaders. The Mongolian employees also mentioned in interviews that some Chinese employees did not fully respect their cultural customs when interacting with them at work, such as speaking too loudly and aggressively.

Cultural and institutional influences on whether performance management was perceived to be fair in the host countries

One of the possible reasons for a lack of fairness was expected to be where Chinese managers and employees relied on 'guanxi' (interpersonal relationships or favour-exchange). However, most Chinese interviewees denied that guanxi operated within the workplace, although they agreed that guanxi was important, in general terms. One possible explanation is that guanxi can imply under-the-table transactions or exchange of benefits, and people might try to avoid those negative connotations (Chen et al., 2011). However, Tanzanian and Mongolian respondents had different perceptions regarding interpersonal relationships in the context of work. For example, a Mongolian employee explained that personal relationships were not relevant to work and that having a social network was a private issue and had no impact on how performance was managed. In terms of culturalist explanations, perceptions of fairness also seemed to be influenced by collectivism. Senior managers, although acknowledging the existence of some unfair outcomes of performance management, thought that Chinese employees could understand and should accept this, but line managers and employees viewed this as unfair and unacceptable.

A further apparent influence was Confucianism. Chinese line managers persuaded their Chinese subordinates to give honorary titles to host-country staff for the sake of the overall harmony of the whole department. They considered this procedural injustice to be acceptable, while for the Chinese employees, where these honours were related to financial

income, they did not accept this practice and considered it to be unfair. It is noteworthy too that variations in perceptions were also evident according to contract types and whether these were with the Chinese headquarters, the subsidiary or (in the case of the Mongolian subsidiary, a labour agency). This is perhaps to be expected given the differences in PM approaches across these groups.

The data also revealed interesting insights into how the Chinese companies dealt with institutional constraints imposed by the host countries. An important sphere, according to institutionalist literature, is training and education (Wood et al., 2014). In the case study organisations, training was found commonly to be neglected when it came to how local staff were managed. This category of staff felt that the goals that were set were not challenging enough, that they lacked feedback on their performance, and that they were not given opportunities for development.

Discussion and conclusion

Our initial conclusions are that this study has the potential to extend the burgeoning and sometimes critical literature on how Chinese Multinationals operate in Africa. At the same time, it might offer important contributions to existing debates on how cultural and institutional factors influence performance management of multinationals in developing countries. Consistent with previous research on perceptions of fairness in relation to performance management, the findings of this study confirmed the importance of understanding employees' perceptions of fairness. However, this study has revealed interesting and novel findings. The first is in relation to how different types of staff have different perceptions of fairness in performance management; the second is regarding how cultural and institutional factors affect fairness in performance management. In terms of

limitations and directions for future research, one of the limitations is related to the emergent findings on how Chinese labour dispatched workers were treated. It was not possible to have in-depth interactions with such workers in Tanzania during the formal interviews, since the gatekeepers suggested that the management of this group of workers was basic and simple and therefore no further interviews needed to be arranged. However, as a group that is widely present in the overseas subsidiaries of Chinese companies, subsequent research should attempt to interview this perhaps 'hidden' group of workers and focus on the performance management of this particular group overseas.

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Table 1: Case-study firms

Company Pseudonym	Industry	Location	No. of employees	FDI type	Year of establishment	Ownership status
Mongolian Subsidiary	Mining	Mongolia	320	Joint venture	2001	SOE
East Africa Centre (Tanzanian Project Branch)	Construction	Tanzania	200	Wholly-owned subsidiary	2008	SOE

Table 2: Interviewee profiles

Interviewee	Mongolia (M) Tanzania (T)	Position	Nationality	Gender	Age group	Employment status (contract)	Member of Communist Party of China
SA-CSM01	M	Senior manager	Chinese	Male	50-60	HQ expatriate (MNC X1 Contract)	Yes
SA-CSM02	M	Senior manager	Chinese	Male	50-60	HQ expatriate (MNC X1 Contract)	Yes
SA-CSM03	M	Senior manager	Chinese	Male	50-60	HQ expatriate (MNC X1 Contract)	Yes
SA-CSM04	M	Senior manager	Chinese	Male	50-60	HQ expatriate (MNC X1 Contract)	
SA-CM01	M	Line manager	Chinese	Male	30-40	HQ expatriate (MNC X1 Contract)	Yes
SA-CM02	M	Line manager	Chinese	Male	30-40	HQ expatriate (MNC X1 Contract)	
SA-CM03	M	Line manager	Chinese	Male	30-40	HQ expatriate (MNC X1 Contract)	Yes
SA-CM04	M	Line manager	Chinese	Male	40-50	Directly employed worker (Subsidiary Contract)	
SA-CM05	M	Line manager	Chinese	Female	50-60	Directly employed worker (Subsidiary Contract)	
SA-CM06	M	Line manager	Chinese	Male	50-60	Directly employed worker (Subsidiary Contract)	

SA-CM07	M	Line manager	Chinese	Male	50-60	HQ expatriate (MNC X1 Contract)	Yes
SA-HR	M	HR manager	Chinese	Male	30-40	HQ expatriate (MNC X1 Contract)	Yes
SA-CE01	M	Employee	Chinese	Female	20-30	Directly employed worker (Subsidiary Contract)	
SA-CE02	M	Employee	Chinese	Male	50-60	Dispatched worker (Chinese Agency Contract)	
SA-CE03	M	Employee	Chinese	Male	50-60	Directly employed worker (Subsidiary Contract)	
SA-CE04	M	Employee	Chinese	Female	50-60	HQ expatriate (MNC X1 Contract)	
SA-CE05	M	Employee	Chinese	Male	40-50	Directly employed worker (Subsidiary Contract)	
SA-CE06	M	Employee	Chinese	Male	40-50	Dispatched worker (Chinese Agency Contract)	
SA-ME01	M	Employee	Mongolian	Female	30-40	Directly employed worker (Subsidiary Contract)	
SB-CSM01	T	Senior manager	Chinese	Male	30-40	HQ expatriate (MNC X2 Contract)	Yes
	T	Senior manager	Chinese	Male	30-40	HQ expatriate (MNC X2 Contract)	Yes
SB-CM01	T	Line manager	Chinese	Male	30-40	HQ expatriate (MNC X2 Contract)	Yes
SB-CM02	T	Line manager	Chinese	Male	30-40	HQ expatriate (MNC X2 Contract)	
SB-CM03	T	Line manager	Chinese	Male	30-40	HQ expatriate (MNC X2 Contract)	
SB-CE01	T	Employee	Chinese	Male	30-40	Directly employed worker (Regional Centre Contract)	

SB-CE02	T	Employee	Chinese	Male	30-40	Directly employed worker (Regional Centre Contract)
SB-CE03	T	Employee	Chinese	Male	20-30	HQ expatriate (MNC X2 Contract)
SB-CE04	T	Employee	Chinese	Male	20-30	HQ expatriate (MNC X2 Contract)
SB-CE05	T	Employee	Chinese	Male	20-30	Directly employed worker (Regional Centre Contract)
SB-CE06	T	Employee	Chinese	Male	20-30	Directly employed worker (Regional Centre Contract)
SB-HR01	T	HR Manager	Tanzanian	Male	30-40	Directly employed worker (Project Branch Contract)
SB-HR02	T	HR Manager	Tanzanian	Female	30-40	Directly employed worker (Project Branch Contract)
SB-TE01	T	Employee	Tanzanian	Female	20-30	Directly employed worker (Project Branch Contract)