

Spinning and Weaving Discontent: Labour Relations and the Production of Meaning at Zambia-China Mulungushi Textiles

Abstract

The Mulungushi Textile Factory in Kabwe, Zambia, has a long association with China. New Chinese capitalist investment established the *Zambia-China Mulungushi Textiles Joint Venture Ltd.* in 1997 rehabilitating a dilapidated industrial site. This study explores how this 'new' Chinese engagement affected the lives of the Zambians who worked at Mulungushi. Using the lived experiences of ex-workers, it examines how Chinese management changed the social pattern of work, imposed strict discipline and used the factory's machinery to regulate labour. Labour costs were reduced through casualisation and working conditions diminished. Workers did not gain the modern livelihoods they had anticipated. Through labour struggles meanings and understandings of racial differences were produced. The Zambian government failed to support the wage expectations of the labour force. Workers became discontented, and a series of labour disputes, financial difficulties and increasing competition, diminished the enterprise's viability, and led to Chinese investors leaving Mulungushi in 2006. This study discusses Marxist perspectives on labour relations and illuminates how linear readings of capitalism and modernity, fail to provide an intellectual framework for this globalised site.

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Introduction

Kabwe is the provincial capital of Central Province, a large dusty town in the middle of Zambia with a population of approximately 250,000. Formerly known as Broken Hill, Kabwe was a mining centre, which declined economically and socially, as major mining activities ceased in the 1990s (Mumvuma, 2007). The Mulungushi textile factory was constructed between 1977 and 1981 with financial and technical assistance from the Chinese Government (PRC). Although associated with China since its inception, Mulungushi originally operated from 1982 until 1996, as a Zambian managed parastatal (Government of Zambia, 2006a). As the largest textile factory in Zambia, the nationally owned *Mulungushi Textiles* would have stood as an icon of modern industrial development on the Zambian social plane. The factory began to decline from the early 1990s, through mismanagement and financial difficulties, and was first forced to close in 1996, at a time when manufacturing in Zambia was badly hit by national economic crisis. Chinese investment arrived in 1997 to re-open the Mulungushi factory, when an agreement was reached between the Chinese and Zambian Governments. Qingdao, a Chinese State Owned Enterprise (SOE), rehabilitate the site (Alden, 2007). The *Zambia-China Mulungushi Textiles Joint Venture Ltd (ZCMT)* was formed, and was jointly owned by Qingdao (66%) and the Zambian Ministry of Defence (34%) (Government of Zambia, 2006a).

The factory's machinery spun and weaved once again, producing seventeen million metres of fabric, and stitching a hundred thousand items of clothing a year (Taylor, 2006a; 177), until the plant closed in 2006. Both struggles between workers and the Chinese management (McGreal, 2007), and competition from other clothing and textile sources (Koyi, 2006) arguably made the business unsustainable. Today the factory stands dormant and dilapidated. Inside an imposing four storey structure, where *Zambia-China Mulungushi Textiles Joint Venture Ltd.* is still proudly displayed, the production machinery rests purposelessly. A handful of casual security guards are stationed around factory gates, where hundreds of industrial workers recently streamed through. Day and night those workers had toiled, and as the factory's machinery weaved colourful patterned textiles, the workers were engaged with, and struggled against, a labour process transformed by Chinese management. Adjacent to the factory, is the *Mulungushi Cotton* ginnery, wholly owned by Qingdao. This operated separately from the textile factory and ZCMT purchased processed cotton from Mulungushi

Cotton. The ginnery continues to operate and export to China. It will be referred to in this paper, but this separate business was not a focus of the research.

This study seeks to understand what impacts Chinese involvement in ZCMT had on the social organisation of work and labour relations, and explore Zambians workers' unfulfilled encounters with modernity. Using a factory site and the occupational category of industrial workers, a specific relationship between African labour and Chinese management is explored. The re-organisation of work, ex-workers' experiences of socioeconomic change and their confounding encounters with cultural difference are investigated.

Chinese Relations with Zambia, and the African Textile Industry

The Chinese assistance in building Mulungushi came just after the completion of the massive Tanzania-Zambia railway (TAZARA) in 1975. TAZARA was built with Chinese aid and '...stands out as a symbol of Sino-African solidarity' (Mohan and Power, 2008; 29). Today TAZARA is reflected upon as a historic example of China's engagement with Africa as South-South cooperation. From the mid-1990s, as Chinese businesses started acquiring natural resource concerns, a 'new' era began as China's aid, foreign direct investment and trade with Africa grew rapidly. There has since been far greater Chinese economic, and increasingly, social and political engagement with Africa (Alden, 2007). The TAZARA narrative is one the Chinese Government and corporate enterprise is keen to perpetuate, as it acts to legitimise their close relationship with the ruling Zambian Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) Government. Chinese corporations have penetrated into Africa and have been able to cultivate links with national governments (Rocha, 2007). The investment that follows can be prove to be: "...volatile portfolio investment [rather] than directly productive investment." (Hart, 2002; 304). There is much questioning of China's methods and understanding in this 'new' era of engagement (see Kaplinsky, 2008; Obiorah, 2007). In Zambia, Chinese investors, particularly in the mining sector, have been criticised for offering low wage levels and poor working conditions. A frequently referenced example is an accident at the Chinese-owned Chambishi mine in 2005, where 46 workers were killed (see Alden, 2007). However, this is not to suggest that the trajectory of Chinese business activity is fundamentally more belligerent than other foreign capital. As Marks (2007; 3) argues:

“Perhaps the material distinction is not between Chinese capital and Western, but rather between the merely rapacious and the more sophisticated”.

When Qingdao reopened Mulungushi, other international investors were reluctant to commit to a declining Zambian economy (Koyi, 2006). Chinese investment in Africa is part of economic globalisation, but neither China, nor Africa, nor individual African states such as Zambia, should be viewed as coherent single actors (Mohan and Power, 2008). In this study Mulungushi will be used as a lens through which to view a brief moment in the evolving global political economy, highlighting how this particular ‘new’ Chinese involvement affected the lives of the Africans who worked for them. Increasingly, it is through such lived experiences of the African and Chinese populace that China-Africa relations will be determined, rather than by the policies of African and Chinese statesmen (Alden, 2007).

When researching Chinese involvements in Africa it is imperative not to degenerate into racial stereotyping. Crudely demarking physical, cultural and socio-economic differences, and projecting and generalising these characteristics, confuses and rationalises the evil of prejudice and cruelty (Williams, 1976). Chinese engagement with Africa is a relatively new area of scholarly inquiry that lacks reliable sources of information. African populations have diverse perceptions of Chinese businesses, but many popular media and NGO reports provide what Obiorah refers to as crude ‘China-bashing’ (2007; 39). The negative portrayal of Chinese people in Africa in much western media often appears unsophisticated and homogenising (Mohan and Power, 2008). Breslin and Taylor (2008) even argue that Western critiques of Chinese corporations, over issues such as human rights, conceal anger over the comparative economic advantage Chinese firms often enjoy over their Western counterparts. Authors, of course, must be free to analyse and critically discuss individual Chinese actors, and be attentive to the broader trends they may be a part of, but critiques should remain free from racial stereotyping.

When Mulungushi reopened in 1997, African textile industries were exporting to markets in Europe and America, as trade agreement (such as the USA’s African Growth and Opportunity Act) gave them preferential access to northern markets (Melber, 2007). This encouraged Chinese textile firms to establish operations in Africa (Obiorah, 2007) and may have been an incentive for Qingdao’s investment in Mulungushi¹. In 2005 key textile and

¹ Koyi (2006) also noted that Qingdao’s investment allowed ‘quota hopping’ to gain preferential access to the SADC market.

clothing agreements began to expire, exposing African production to competition from cheaper imported - particularly Chinese - clothing in both home and overseas markets. This had disastrous effects for textile production across Africa (Naidu and Davies, 2006).

When China's President Hu Jintao visited Zambia in early 2007, soon after Mulungushi closed, Kaplinsky (2008; 12) notes that the closure was an: '...embarrassing incident' for Jintao, which '...was a direct result of competitive imports from China'. The changing, Chinese dominated, global textile industry was important in determining how ZCMT operated as a business. Although this study does not specifically analyse the economic reasons for the closure of Mulungushi, it does illustrate that labour disputes, and the failure of the Zambian state to support the expectations of the labour force, were believed by the ex-workers to have led to the factory closing.

This study, like Hart's (2002) research of Taiwanese and Chinese textile factories in South Africa, predominantly focuses on the workers' experiences. As Gibbs (2005), (in a study of Taiwanese managed garment factories in Lesotho) has argued, working conditions in the textile industries are a key issue in the debates that surround globalisation. International media sources (see Reuters, 2006; Goering, 2006) illustrate a history of labour disputes between the Chinese management and Zambian employees over wages and working conditions at Mulungushi. Hart argues that, through such struggles, meaning is also produced - in South Africa material struggles led to understandings of racial and ethnic differences. In Lesotho, Gibbs demonstrates how garment workers' unions have mobilised labour to strike over wages and working conditions. In Southern African states, proletariat anger has been directed towards both foreign capitalists, and local politicians who have identified with foreign capital and allegedly abandoned the working class (Hart, 2002).

Factory Labour Relations

This study investigates the relationship between Chinese managers and Zambian workers in a factory environment. Marx (1887) argued that capitalists endeavour to maximise the potential from the commodities they possess, such as the labour-power they have bought, and the machinery in their factories. This, in part, will be achieved by the suppression of wages. It is against this oppressive relationship that Marx believed the worker will ultimately rebel. In her South African study, Hart (2002) identified that there are multiple trajectories for capitalism.

Hart too believed the suppression of wages leads to workers struggling against management, but she also believes such struggles can be influenced by dimensions of difference, including race and gender, in a discussion that is less strictly economic than 'crude' Marxist analysis (Park et al. 2003).

Braverman (1974) followed Marx, arguing that under capitalism a reduction in labour costs has been accompanied by a de-skilling of workers, leading to an increase in their dissatisfaction. Technology determines the processes of work, and the social conditions within the workplace, and there is a tendency to: "...treat the workers themselves as machines." (Braverman, 1974; 173). Contrasting with Braverman, are more social theories, which argue that workplace relationships are primarily a function of social and/or cultural aspects (Gallie, 1978). Factory forms split social groups into managers and the managed. In East Asian textile factories in South Africa, this split was not merely based on the dimension of organisational structure, but also on race (Hart, 2002). At Mulungushi the Chinese served as a specialised management stratum. This cultural pattern influences the social organisation of work.

Chinese management casualised the Mulungushi workforce and changed the organisation of the working day, introducing shift patterns to increase the total amount of time machinery operates, and imposing increased discipline and surveillance. Such changes can be impeded by the barriers of human social relations, and when minimum working conditions are not met, Harvey (1982) argues, serious consequences follow. Hart (2002; 166) commented that in South Africa, Taiwanese textile factories adopted a 'panopticon' form to facilitate surveillance, but this created an air of resentment, rather than discipline amongst employees, as they felt they were treated 'just like animals'. Workers are not passive beings and have conscious means to confront those who impose regulations upon them. Foucault (1977) discussed how everyday actions, such as abandoning work early, represent small nodes of resistance for the worker. If the workers' discontent is great enough, then strikes and walk-outs are more overt, violent and severe forms of industrial action. These depend on the unified will of labour and represent workers' ultimate expression of their discontent (Grint, 1998).

Industry and Modernity in Kabwe

Labour relations have previously been analysed from Marxist perspectives in a foreign textile manufacturer in Kabwe. In 1971, Kapferer published a detailed study of labour relations at *Narayan Bros.* a small Indian managed textile factory. This Indian factory has long since closed, but there were parallels between the experiences of employees of *Narayan Bros.* and *Mulungushi*. One of the broad themes that ran through Kapferer's study was the inter-relationship between social behaviour on the factory floor and broader external processes that influenced the internal factory system. As Long (1977) later discussed, in reference to Zambia, social actors are not mere pawns in the structural inter-play of the forces of capitalism. The workers at *Narayan Bros.* found means to confront exploitation, through small everyday actions, and organised strikes. Government labour policy and trade union activity all impinged: "...on management and worker negotiations over wage and work improvements." (Kapferer, 1971; 25). In the Zambian post-independence era there was also the wider social context of the imaging of the nation as a state moving forward, following a 'myth' of modernity (Ferguson, 1999). Industrial workers anticipated a linear path towards a modern life. Kapferer's study showed that working in the factory gave people prestige and they attributed meaning to their position. In this period, and when construction of *Mulungushi* began (1977), there was optimism that Zambia was moving towards a model of industrial society (Ferguson, 1999). Zambia has not since followed this pathway, and the subsequent national economic crisis has been accompanied by a parallel crisis of meaning. Communities have become fractured by the economic and political order of post-colonial Zambia (Crehan, 1997) and the myth of modernization has broken down and left people unable to imbue their life experiences with significance and dignity (Ferguson, 1999). In Kabwe the decline in industrial and mining activities in the 1980s and 1990s brought problems of unemployment and social dislocation, which have since been compounded by the closure of ZCMT (Mumvuma, 2007).

Qingdao's investment in *Mulungushi* was welcomed; it offered a fresh, localised opportunity for social transformation and modernity. Thomas Muwowo, secretary of the Kabwe Chamber of Commerce (KCC), is quoted by Goering (2006) as saying: "We are very impressed with the Chinese investment. We need it. We have no option if this town is to survive". Yet this early optimism, contrast with the fear of Chinese neo-colonialism that was a central tenet of opposition leader, Michael Sata's, unsuccessful populist campaign in the 2006 national

election. There has been little research in Zambia, into popular attitudes towards the effects of ‘new’ Chinese engagements (Larmer and Fraser, 2007). This study explores the effect on former ZCMT employees, and examines the social divisions between Chinese managers and Zambian workers. Hart argues that such divisions are ‘produced’ (2002; 30). She found in South Africa that social cleavages between East Asians and Africans were grounded in their material conditions. As Hall (1980: 341) earlier discussed race became: “...the modality in which class is ‘lived’, the medium through which class relations are experienced”.

Field Research

The production of meanings of racial difference were investigated, along with labour relations and the experiences of ex-workers, through twenty-one interviews with Zambian former Mulungushi employees, in Kabwe between 12/05/08 and 24/05/08. A local research assistant was employed to facilitate the interviews and assist with translations. A snowball sampling technique was used, as Ferguson’s (1999) and Potts’ (2005) studies have illustrated that retrenched Zambian urban workers often ‘retreat’ from large settlements, therefore locating ex-employees was anticipated to be problematic. Initial informants identified other people with the same target characteristic; being an ex-employee of Mulungushi. In order to avoid getting caught in one specific social network, four different initial informants were used to start the snowball sampling. Two of these snowball samples were initiated in the Mulungushi Residential Area and Lukanga, blocks of modern housing built alongside the factory. These mainly housed long-serving Mulungushi ex-employees. Two snowball samples were carried out in the Kamshang Compound, an area of informal settlement that housed many casual workers.

The sampling methodology was successful in locating research participants with different occupational experiences of the factory. Most Ex-workers had actually remained in Kabwe, and were waiting for compensation payments or opportunities for re-employment at Mulungushi, or had alternative livelihoods. There was a gender bias in the sample. The factory had a roughly equal mix of female and male employees. Despite having two female and two male initial informants for the snowball sampling, the field research comprised of sixteen male and five female interviews. This may have been because research participants chose to refer the male researcher (and accompanying male research assistant) to other males,

in a society where women have lower status in contemporary urban contexts (Taylor, 2006b). There was an intentional weighting of the sample towards long-serving ‘permanent’ staff as these ex-workers had experience of the changes initiated by the Chinese management.

This study investigates the Chinese engagement from the African perspective, it explores Zambians’ experiences and this is an acknowledged positionality. An obvious, yet irreconcilable limit to the study is that with the factory being closed, primary observation of labour relations was impossible. There is then what Giddens (1987; 19-20) has termed a ‘double hermeneutic’ that represents the gap between lived experience and communication. The results and analysis presented in this study are an interpretation of the ex-workers interpretation of (their) reality. It is acknowledged that the interviewer and interviewees (and to a lesser extent, the research assistant) jointly created this knowledge. Through the dynamic of forming and asking questions, the researcher frames the interviews, in this instance to provide an understanding of Zambian workers’ lived experience.

When the research was designed it was envisaged that there would be interviews with Chinese managers, to provide further perspectives. However, the Chinese people who had been associated with the Mulungushi factory had left the area. The absence of Chinese participation means a particular perspective is not presented and discussed. This is regrettable, but unavoidable. To discuss the broader socio-economic landscape two additional interviews were carried out. A supervisor at the Mulungushi Cotton ginnery [name withheld] gave his perspective on Qingdao’s continuing economic involvement in Kabwe, and Thomas Muwowo, Secretary of the KCC, discussed the local economy and the involvement of Chinese business in Kabwe.

Work Experiences at Mulungushi

The Chinese management transformed the social organisation within the Mulungushi factory, implementing new work patterns and casualising, disciplining and increasing the size of the workforce. This fundamentally changed how long-serving labour experienced the factory, and introduced a new cohort of industrial workers to a factory environment that was found to be oppressive and exploitative. For the ex-workers interviewed the relationship between employee and manager were experienced through a new social cleavage of race. The actions of Zambian supervisors and the perceived failings of the Zambian state also contributed to

their discontent. When Chinese investment first arrived in Kabwe there was optimism amongst both the long-serving and new employees. They were: ‘excited’, ‘grateful’, ‘felt good’ and ‘very happy’. People were desperate for gainful modern formal employment and were promised good salaries and working conditions. To these individuals it looked as if they would be following a pathway to modernity. But, employment at ZCMT did not meet their expectations: “The way we are seeing there’d be a future, but what happened is a hell.” (Weaving Machine Operator)

The workforce had totalled approximately 600 under Zambian management (pre-1997). The Chinese expanded to 1200-1800 employees, and divided them in to two occupational categories ‘permanents’ and ‘casuals’. There was a large difference between the monthly pay of casual (60-120,000Kwa (16-33 US\$)) and permanent (180-350,000Kwa (50-97 US\$)) workers². Most permanent employees also had substantial modern housing provided. When the factory reopened, in 1997, there were 600-700 Zambians employed on permanent terms, these were mainly ‘long-serving’ Mulungushi Textiles employees re-employed by ZCMT, and there was also approximately 1000 workers employed on a new casual basis³. The workforce would become increasing casualised as the Chinese managers gradually retrenched permanent employees. There were only around 300 permanent workers left in 2006.

The casual/permanent divide was an influential cleavage in how labour experienced work. The superior pay, modern housing and employment conditions of permanent employees meant their experiences of work were generally better than their casual counterparts; even though, in some instances, they performed the same work activities. Kapferer’s (1971) study had also earlier documented different categories, but it can be argued that there are no true ‘different’ types of proletariat worker. Braverman’s (1974) analysis of work suggests that divisions such as casual/permanent are disingenuous and are socially constructed by capitalists. The two ‘different’ types of worker only came to exist when the division of labour by the Chinese management created them. Such a distinction will only survive as long as it is advantageous to capital. For example one ex-worker interviewed had been permanently employed as a skilled Engraver at Mulungushi, but when a new work process was introduced,

²All approximate US Dollar values calculated using 2006 exchange rates.

³ A report by the Government of Zambia (2006a) shows that in 2004 there were 1,819 employees of ZCMT (168 management, 650 permanent, 1001 casual and contract).

he was transferred to an unskilled job on casual terms. He chose to leave work as his expectation of continuing in modern employment disappeared.

Casual workers found their wages alone were not enough to sustain their livelihoods:

“...the salaries, that was too low for us to sustain our working...It was like slavery. It was just survival of the fittest...in Zambia there is unemployment. If you left this job you would not get work elsewhere that’s why you would keep doing this work.” (Casual Machine Operator)

Marx saw tendencies at work within capitalism that would drive wages down to, and even below, a physiological minimum. Employees at ZCMT would seek alternative means to supplement their wages, such as undertaking ‘piece work’ or running small market stalls. Harvey (1982) discusses how the labour power of the whole family becomes substituted for that of the individual labourer, as capitalists push towards extracting *absolute* surplus value from labour. Mulungushi salaries were a reliable part of household’s livelihood survival strategies, and not the sole means of support. The casual conditions of employment also neglected the social wage. Casual workers would lose money for days taken off for illness and could be fired without notice, for not reporting for work or for getting pregnant. Employees spent up to ten years working on casual terms. They recognised their status was illegal, as was stated in a report on ZCMT by The Zambian Ministry of Defence following the closure: “The Law allows somebody to be employed on casual basis for a period not exceeding six months” (2007; 1). All the permanent ex-employees interviewed were also very unhappy about the wage levels: “No it [pay] was very little compared to the work I was doing.” (Permanent Office Secretary). Permanent and casual workers also complained about wages being delayed and overtime going unpaid. As well as suppressing wages, surveillance and target setting were used to increase profits at ZCMT. Foucault (1977) discusses how disciplining the workplace enforces respect for regulations and increases speed and output, generating greater profit. Social environments are determined by managers and exert a moral influence over behaviour. Mulungushi workers existed in a strictly disciplined environment. They had to get permission to visit the toilet, and resented being treated like ‘school children’ or ‘slaves’.

The majority of casual workers were machine operators performing low skilled and highly repetitive jobs, operating the factory’s weaving and spinning machinery. This was the major occupational category and mainstay of the manufacturing processes. Workers disliked these activities; ‘It was boring’, ‘The work was very hard’ and ‘It was difficult to cope with the machines’. They used to work ‘under pressure’ and often ‘the [targets] margins were too

wide'. Their movements and actions were severely restricted. Machinery and supervision dictated the physical activities of the workers' bodies. They were not allowed to 'talk', 'stand up', or 'malinge'. The work in these sections was harder and more oppressive under Chinese management than it had been under Zambian control. The casual machine operators did not find that work met their expectations of formal employment. It did not imbue their lives with dignity: "I would even hide it [the job at Mulungushi] from my friends" (Casual Weaving Machine Operator).

The work activities of machine operators, and their lived experiences, were at the heart of the collective Mulungushi labour body. Marx (1882) discussed how the mechanical automation of factories becomes the dominant subject acting on the reflexive object of each worker's mind and body. The control of labour becomes inscribed in the mechanics of the productive process itself, as workers become appendages to machines. Braverman followed Marx believing there is a tendency to: 'treat the workers themselves as machines' (1974; 173). At Mulungushi, Zambian 'Machine Operators' had their work experience 'Operated' by machines:

"The workers were very obedient and hard workers...you really sweat...When you work for the Chinese you become like a machine. You can't take a rest. Only when the machine has [a] fault can you take a break." (Production Supervisor)

Marx's and Braverman's analysis suggests that technology expresses social relationships. Braverman (1974; 229) states that machines are: "...viewed as an independent participant in human social arrangement", but Braverman's narrative alone is insufficient to account for the Chinese transformation of the labour regime. At Mulungushi the technology implemented to transform the labour regime in the weaving and spinning machine sections, had already existed. Qingdao did not bring new manufacturing techniques to these sections, technology cannot therefore be the major independent participant in determining the new social arrangement for machine operators. Gallie's (1978) alternate theorising for explaining workplace labour regimes, gives an illustrative example of how different social regimes introduced by variable cultural structures (with technology being constant) have determined different arrangements of labour relations. The experiences of the machine operators contrasted with the experiences of the, mainly permanent, employees who had more skilled jobs. This included engravers, fitters (who repaired and maintained machinery), supervisors, and office workers. These individuals, rather than being repetitively engaged with machinery,

had stimulating work activities. Neglecting their complaints over wage levels and working conditions; many of these individuals enjoyed their actual *work activity* and found their work 'very interesting'. A Metal Fabricator was: "happy with the job, very, very happy". In terms of work activity, employment at ZCMT met their expectations of modern formal employment. But although as the experience of the Engraver mentioned previously, illustrated, these positive experiences could be fleeting, and only persisted as long as their labour provided the most profitable surplus for capital. The distinct cleavage between the mundane experiences of machine operators and the more positive work experiences of other occupational categories, illustrates that the technology used by workers did exert some influence over the labour conditions they experienced, this does not comfortably fit with Gallie's (1978) theory. Grint's point then that: "...the use and consequences of...technology emerge unpredictably from complex social interactions" (1998; 277) resonates with the experiences at Mulungushi.

A new shift system was also introduced for machine operators. The Chinese ran the factory twenty-four hours a day, with three consecutive eight-hour shifts. At the end of each six-day working week machine operating employees would swap shifts. The workers employed away from operating production machinery tended to have a more amenable working day, usually 08:00-16:00 (although sometimes they were required to perform overtime, as were machine operators). The three-shift system was very unpopular; and the Chinese management's desire to have their machines running twenty-four hours a day came to dictate the rhythm of workers lives. Machines lose value whenever they are not in contact with living labour, and the shift system increased the rate at which machines transmitted value to their products. The workers were not exploited by extending the working day, as discussed by Marx (1882) and Harvey (1982). Instead it was more advantageous to have multiple shift workers. The relative portion of each shift in which the labourer reproduced the cost of their labour-power must have been low and allowed for what Braverman terms (1974; 56): '...the greatest useful effect of labour'. With the new shift patterns the number of hours worked was not 'extended' at an individual level, but through low casual wage levels, there was great exploitation acting collectively upon the 'community' of Zambian workers. Exploitation did not end when workers left their machines. Shift workers had to travel back-and-forth to the factory at night and reportedly got injured in traffic accidents and 'attacked by thieves'. The dangerous commute was a serious issue for ex-workers, and should be regarded as part of the work experience. It may not lie within the phenomena of weaving textiles, but it was a lived

experience and part of the context that supports the work activity, and work cannot be divided from the social context which supports it (Grint, 1998).

The Chinese management also exploited workers by creating an unsafe working environment. Interviewees complained about having to work without adequate safety equipment and training. There were industrial accidents that caused injuries and disabilities. In the worst instances work ruined future livelihoods. A casual machine operator who lost his lower right forearm in a machinery accident was interviewed:

“I was involved in an industrial accident [after the accident] the Chinese, visited the hospital and made some promises to ensure my wellbeing...Unfortunately after I was discharged it was a different story...I went back to the hospital for a review and found that my file disappeared...The management at the company contrived with the hospital to destroy or hide the file...Without this information it is very difficult for the doctors to make recommendations or certify [a claim]. It will be difficult for me to be compensated in the future...maybe the company wanted to run away from its responsibility...”

After the accident the worker was re-employed in the human resource department and continued to receive casual wages and have his medical treatment paid, but he never received any additional compensation payments. When ZCMT closed, his salary and medical fees were terminated. He is now unable to find employment, or even ‘piece-work’ elsewhere: “I have become a beggar...it’s like I’m doomed. My future life has been completely cut off or shattered.” This illustrates one of the most extreme instances of exploitation at Mulungushi. Here illegal actions were undertaken to ensure profit would not be depleted to provide compensation for a horrific injury.

To expand production and suppress costs, Chinese management used technological and social systems to produce a new social work experience. The factory’s weaving and spinning machines did not determine the stricter patterns of labour control, the new shift system, or the poorer safety standards, but this existing technology did provide an *option* for greater control and discipline of machine operators in order to increase profitability. This realised the ‘fixed capital’ embodied in the machinery. The casual conditions of employment and three-shift system had not been implemented by the previous Zambian management. The parastatal regime represented a frame of reference (even if they had not worked under Zambian Management) for workers’ struggles to make sense of their experiences. When Mulungushi was built, as an icon of modernity, the factory may have had a strategic effect, symbolising a new vision for Zambia. From 1982 to 1996 the ‘modern’ livelihoods at Mulungushi - with their secure employment, reasonable salary levels, company housing and medical care - had

been as much a part of the factory's industrial landscape as the clatter of weaving machines and the reams of colourful African fabrics that were produced. It can be argued that the cultural stimulus for organisational change was not then locally present, and inertia in decision making did not allow radical reforms. The Zambian parastatal management may have been unable to envisage an expanded and casualised workforce, or for the machines to run twenty-four hours a day. Long-serving workers believed there was a dereliction of a cultural, or moral restraint on the part of the Zambian State. This had, prior to the arrival of Chinese investors, dictated a less aggressive form of capitalism that did not allow them to take up the *option* for greater capital accumulation offered by the factory's existing technology. The new working culture was brought by a new cultural group that did not subscribe to the same vision of 'modern' industrial society; instead they saw an opportunity for capital accumulation offered by the specific locational advantages of this site, in an archetypal example of economic globalisation.

Ex-workers identified how the Qingdao Corporation's investment failed to deliver local economic growth and had not brought them material benefits. As a result of the wage levels and working conditions, in the workplace and wider society, Chinese people became coded as 'bad' and 'racist' by the workers as they attempted to make sense of their relationships with them. Interviewee's complained that the Chinese ZCMT staff were: 'not proper investors', and that 'they should go back to their own land'. The work environment was dominated by the social cleavage of race. The workers experienced being employed in the factory not as modern dignified wage earners but as an oppressed and racialised social body, that was thought to be uneducated, and was subjected to oppressive workplace practices.

The Chinese social engagement with Mulungushi was transient, and their interactions with Zambian employees were limited. Chinese supervisory staff changed every 3-6 months, and were even sent back to China if they mixed socially with Zambians. When the Chinese supervisors inspected work Zambians would be told they were 'too slow' and would 'have to pretend to work harder'. Businesses do not thrive on the minutiae of such control though, because control has an economic cost. Management decides if control systems are facilitative or inhibitory to the accumulation of profits (Grint, 1998). Chinese staff supervised overall production, and dictated a strict regime, but most of the immediate supervision was done by Zambians, who received far lower wages than Chinese staff (Government of Zambia, 2006a). Some factory workers blamed these Zambian supervisors for their immediate harsh treatment: "The Chinese were OK; the problem was with our Zambian managers." (General

Worker/Fitter). However, others recognised that: “Our fellow supervisors were put under pressure by their Chinese bosses, so that pressure also affects us.” (Machine Operator).

A Zambian Production Supervisor talked about the difficulties he had disciplining labour:

“...it was a headache supervising people, and when it [production] goes down you are in trouble. Yes it was very hard...You have to make sure people are working and meet the target they [the Chinese] want. Yes, there was a lot of pressure. Normally I was supposed to enjoy the responsibility of being in charge of people. But people get very little money at the end of the month so how are you meant to get people to work hard? And I also get little money. I was very demoralised.”

This former production supervisor struggled to make sense of his experiences. His supposedly privileged permanent job supervising machine operators should, he felt, have brought pride and respect, but it became a social burden.

The closely supervised machine operators struggled to imbue their lives with dignity. Urban work in the developing world is frequently not a lived process which gives meaning to life, but an activity that makes life possible, a means to glean something from a hostile environment (Grint, 1998). Marx believed that those low on the occupational status scale derive little conscious meaning from their work beyond the pay and security it offers. At Mulungushi the economic benefit was so limited, that those workers who felt that their work activity had lost its relationship to meaning, and who could afford to, voluntarily left employment. A casual Machine Operator, recognised that in retrospect: “working there was worse than not having a job, ‘cause of low pay.”

There were though employees, who worked away from the mundane machine operating, who gleaned greater meaning from their employment. Bourdieu (1979; 42), believed that work activity is identified with social function and not merely by material gains, work can also provide: ‘fictitious satisfaction’. This creates a degree of self-respect, and pride in one’s job. For some employees the Mulungushi factory created a fictitiously satisfying modern working environment. Fictitious because the workplace was highly disciplined in a manner that engendered resentment; the worker was always angry with his/her remuneration and low status. The inferiority of their experience was reinforced through a racial cleavage in the factory’s organisational structure. Beyond the factory gates workers attributed meaning to their work and positioned themselves within the broader community as successful formally employed individuals. As a permanent Security Guard, commented: “I was just very ok, I was enjoying it...I was proud” but this satisfaction was shallow and the experience was undermined because: “My salary was too low to support my family.”

The tense Chinese/Zambian racial division at Mulungushi superficially appears to be an entrenched difference, but this racial schism was not inevitable, it had to be socially produced. It was a function of the social and economic relations that demarked the work experience. Hart (2002) has illustrated how racial dimensions of difference were constructed through the actions of East Asian managers and the lived experiences of workers in South Africa. In 1997 the future Zambian workers welcomed the arrival of Chinese investors at Mulungushi, but only later constructed a negative image, when they as proletariats had sold their labour power, and experienced an exploitative relationship. The interviews showed how race had become a mode through which class was lived and exploitation was experienced. As cotton was spun and fabrics were woven, social meaning was produced through Mulungushi.

In Hart's study gender was also an important dimension of difference. To divide labour by gender is to imply that individuals interpret their work life through this lens, but fieldwork illustrated that gender was not an important social cleavage at Mulungushi. There were gender differences in some occupational categories, but both females and males worked the main occupational category of machine operator. Both genders had comparable complaints over working conditions and pay, and participated in a similar manner in the struggles against their exploitation. Independent of gender, the Chinese management wanted a docile workforce. The repetitive and mundane machine operating did not require highly skilled or educated employees. The evolution of modern industry deskilled and cheapened labour, and through centralising technical knowledge wrests control from the workforce to management (Grint, 1998). This was demonstrated as occurring in some instances at Mulungushi. However, many long-serving employees said they were highly knowledgeable of the mechanics of the factory's operations, and regarded the Chinese as lacking technical skills. The main production processes were not then independent of the knowledge of Zambian workers. The Chinese management altered the organisational structure for the production process, whilst using the same weaving and spinning machinery. There was pragmatism and not teleology at work. Chinese ambitions extended along the axis of increasing profit accumulation, and not the dependent variable of deskilling the labour body.

Labour Disputes at Mulungushi

The research explored if workers struggled against exploitation. Ex-workers were asked if they challenged their low wage levels and poor working conditions through small-scale nodes of resistance, as Kapferer (1971) had earlier identified. A typical employee's response was that: 'Unfortunately there was nowhere to run too'. The labour regime at Mulungushi did not afford opportunities for individual conscious actions, but workers did collectively organise to struggle against the Chinese management. Permanent employees were formally represented by the official *Zambia China Mulungushi Textiles Union*. This trade union tried, unsuccessfully, to negotiate for improvements in pay and conditions. As casual workers were not involved they would also attempt to organise and meet with Chinese managers. These negotiations did not improve labour conditions either. Ex-workers complained that labour leaders were intimidated in negotiations, they lacked power, and the worker organisations did not effectively unite the labour force. Workers would take part in strikes 'every year' involving both permanent and casual employees, but it was the collective will of individual workers which united them rather than dynamic organisation:

"There were times when we formed strikes and everyone was together for the idea. If you went inside [the factory gates] the Zambian workers would stone you. We stuck together with the mob." (Casual Machine Operator)

These strikes were important demonstrations of workers' discontent, but up until 2006, these sporadic labour disputes had little material effect: "There was a strike; we really fought hard to rectify the problems. Nothing happened in the processes." (Casual General Worker/Fitter). Labour would return to work, as the working body was unable to forcibly challenge the management regime, and the livelihood needs of the workers would compel them to resume their employment. Labour was never highly organised in formal structures to the extent which is documented by Gibbs (2005) in Lesotho, or Hart (2002) in South Africa. At Mulungushi it was only through an independent externality, when the state introduced a national minimum wage, that the legal and moral frame, within which the factory operated, was sufficiently altered that the workers were able to voice their discontent. Just as Kapferer had noted in 1971, external factors were influencing the internal labour regime.

The social context at Mulungushi changed in June 2006 when the MMD Government implemented a new labour law that required all employers to pay a minimum monthly wage

of 268,000Kwa (74 US\$) (Government of Zambia, 2006b). ZCMT did not operate within this new legal framework, and wages of less than 268,000Kwa were paid to casual employees in July 2006. Ex-workers discussed how the Government was reportedly unwilling to force ZCMT to pay 268,000Kwa. However, the recognition of their new legal right gave the workers new incentive to strike aggressively against a labour regime now formally coded as exploitative. A strike on a much greater scale than previous disputes was organised. This was more violent and combustible than any previous labour unrest. The workers blocked the Great North Road outside the factory, igniting petrol fuelled barricades. There were pitched fights with police: “We had made [a larger strike]. It was beaten by the police. They came with tear gas when we had organised that strike” (Casual General Worker). The protests extended beyond complaining about the Chinese management, to directing anger towards the perceived failings of the Zambian State and MMD politicians. To appease the strikers the Chinese management made payments of 268,000Kwa and reopened the factory, but attempts to suppress wages continued. Unjustified deductions were made from their new salaries⁴. Workers felt they were being cheated, labour protests were reignited, and the factory became increasingly crisis ridden. Mulungushi ceased production in December 2006 and workers were retrenched between November 2006 and February 2007.

The Closure of Mulungushi and the Role of the State

The low wage levels paid to casual employees had offered one specific locational advantage, when this deteriorated and the minimum wage ‘artificially’ removed the labour surplus (the pressure of a reserve army acting to suppress wage levels) Mulungushi’s status as an island of relative locational advantage diminished. The Chinese ZCMT managing director, Che Ming, is reported by the *Africa Business* website (2007) as saying that ZCMT had problems paying the minimum wage of Kwa 268,000, and that this led to the closure in January 2007. The published sources reviewed (such as Kaplinsky, 2008) blame the difficult macroeconomic climate, which made ZCMT uncompetitive, for forcing the factory to close. However, the ex-workers believed the factory had been operating highly profitably under Chinese

⁴ A casual employees’ wage slip showed deductions of 164,923Kwa from a 268,000Kwa salary, made for ‘Absentism’ despite not missing any shifts.

management: 'they made a lot of profit' and that it was: 'The strike [that] led to it shutting down'. The closure of Mulungushi was likely due to a combination of factors; market forces, financial difficulties, the new higher levels of wages, and the violent discontent of workers. The exact explanation remains unknown, but it is perhaps telling that when the Secretary of the KCC was asked, he responded that: "We don't even know what went wrong, even as a Chamber we do not have an insight as to what caused the closure." The Secretary of the KCC and the Mulungushi Cotton Supervisor, and several interviewees, thought Mulungushi may be reopened by Qingdao in the future. The Secretary of the KCC said: "The impact [of closure] is very onerous...The effect has been very bad". His opinions affirm the view of Mumvuma (2007) that the closure of Mulungushi has contributed to the broader decline of Kabwe.

Many ex-employees have since struggled to find formal employment, or sustain their livelihoods. A Security Guard who is now collecting wood from the bush and burning charcoal, finds that he is unable to adequately provide for his children, and an Office Messenger said: "I'm not doing nothing, just roaming about now". Some of the ex-workers who have managed to secure an alternative means of subsistence have found that life is better. A former casual worker now working at a market stall said: "For my family as of now I'm better than I was before." Whereas for others it is not that a change in employment has brought a greater wage, but rather that a new work activity is more stimulating: "It's just ok. Life is better I don't make more money, but I'm more interested in the work here, and I eat every day" – said a former Metal Fabricator now running his own metal workshop. Not working at Mulungushi has even left ex-workers feeling a sense of liberation from exploitation "It is very different. I'm free now. I was suffering too much." (Casual Weaving Machine Operator).

When ex-workers were asked how they felt the exploitative work experiences had developed, many of them believed the State was ultimately responsible. As a partner in the ownership of Mulungushi, the Government was seen as culpable for the workers' discontent: "Since it's a joint venture between Chinese Government and Zambian Government, when anything was decided it was said that the Zambian Government agreed, meaning they treated us unfair." (Office Secretary). The state was seen as being co-opted by capital: "Instead of winning the confidence of the employees, the Chinese action was to win the politicians confidence." (Zambian-era Manager). This 'confidence' was an enabler for the Chinese exploitation of labour; the employees felt the MMD government would not intervene on their behalf:

“Anyhow our government also were not fair we would complain...but they could not respond...With the Chinese, I cannot blame too much, but our government also, maybe if the Chinese came now they would bring good conditions.” (Metal Fabricator)

The actions of these Chinese investors were seen by this Metal Fabricator to be a function of Government policy. This demonstrates how a negative view of the Chinese management was socially produced, and was not inevitable. Ex-workers felt let down by the State. There was optimism when the government embraced Qingdao’s investment in the site; hope that the Chinese would resurrect and develop a landscape that had decayed in the face of financial difficulties. The workers believed they would follow a pathway to modernity. Instead of providing workers with modern meaningful jobs, they were exploited and left discontented.

Workers were also disillusioned by the agreements the State had made with the Chinese actors. Qingdao was allowed to export ginned cotton to China and in exchange imported spare parts for the textile factory on a duty free basis. However, other goods such as bicycles, television sets and clothing were covertly imported from China and sold in Chinese owned shops that used the Mulungushi name. The export of cotton and import of goods angered ex-employees. There was also a serious incident that reportedly occurred in 2006. A truckload of ginned cotton leaving Mulungushi Cotton, had large quantities of cash (in US dollars) and ZCMT company documents concealed within it. A Zambian employee informed local authorities and police stopped the vehicle, discovered the smuggled cargo and impounded the truck. Chinese managers reported this to their embassy, who petitioned the Zambian Government, which subsequently ordered the local police to release the vehicle, money and documents. It is alleged by interviewees that this decision was made by the MMD Government in order to maintain their close relationship with the Chinese Government. The new capital investment strategies and illegal imports and exports carried out through ZCMT and Mulungushi Cotton developed new structural means for surplus extraction. They were used by the Chinese management to extract profits out of Zambia to the parent Qingdao Company.

The context within which Mulungushi operated was influenced by the Zambian State, and specifically the MMD Party, both as a (largely silent) partner in the ownership of ZCMT and by dictating the legal framework within which ZCMT operated. In China, State Owned Enterprises (SOE) operate in a regulator environment that requires them to support a greater part of the ‘social wage’ (Hart, 2002) than was paid at Mulungushi. Ex-workers believed the Zambian state did not support such an environment. Although, through the minimum wage

the State played a role in challenging the structural inter-play of the forces of capitalism (as Long had identified with rural actors in Zambia in 1977), the 'power' of the state was limited. Similarly, Gibbs (2005) has shown how in Lesotho, that legal guarantees for textile workers' labour conditions were not enforced, because the government also had a close relationship with foreign investors. The Qingdao Corporation had won the confidence of actors within the MMD and was able to influence a government that the employees' felt was corrupt and unable, or unwilling, to work in their interests.

Conclusion

The overriding feature of the work experiences at Zambia-China Mulungushi Textiles was discontent; workers were disillusioned with their experiences. There was unanimous disappointment with the wage levels and factory conditions and anger over uncompensated industrial accidents. Although some workers, mainly employed away from the mundane operating of machinery, had attributed meaning to their work activity and status as formally employed industrial workers, these individuals still recognized their experiences were shallow, as they lacked material reward. The bewilderment expressed by all the ex-workers, through labour disputes and the anger they directed towards the MMD government, demonstrated how they struggled both to influence, and understand their work experiences. To extend Ferguson's (1999) arguments, in this patch of Zambia, a new pathway towards modernity did not provide the expected way forward for livelihoods. In 1997 the workers at Mulungushi had thought they had an opportunity for modernity, they welcomed the Chinese investment. Workers' anticipated that the new jobs would improve their household income, as well as bringing meaning and dignity to their lives. Instead, inside the factory the Chinese management took up social and technical *options* to enhance profit accumulation, and the workers entered an oppressive working environment that brought few material benefits, did not imbue their lives with purpose and, at best, provided the employees with 'fictiously satisfying' work experiences.

Mulungushi is/was a highly globalised site. Globalisation exists precisely because there is great spatial difference within the global economy; differences in both the geography, and the divergent social planes, that dominate disparate landscapes. This specific Chinese investment brought a new management culture to the Mulungushi factory site which, through new

capitalist practices, such as the typically neoliberal casualised labour regime and the system of shift work, transformed the social organisation of the workplace. These changes initiated by Qingdao, show how the direction of capitalist enterprise can be altered. The social cleavages that emerged at ZCMT (such as casual/permanent and Zambian/Chinese), and the influence of the state on the context in which ZCMT operated, demonstrate how the organisation of Mulungushi was affected by a foreign culture and national politics. The Chinese managers were pragmatic in their social organisation of the factory, they used machinery to influence labour regimes. The critical analysis of the technological and socially deterministic theories presented here demonstrates how such theoretical standpoints do not, in isolation, explain how and why workers experienced the Mulungushi factory as they did.

Ferguson (1999) followed Long (1977) in arguing how linear teleologies can fail to explain the political economy of Zambia. Economistic theories neglect cultural influence over the direction of capitalist enterprise. Park et al. (2003) have noted that radical revisions to Marxist theory (and they include Hart (2002) in this bracket) have argued against what is viewed as the homogenizing of ideas of economic theory. This study argues 'crude' Marxist analyses do not provide an adequate analytical framework for explaining the labour struggles at Mulungushi. Structuralist arguments, such as Harvey's (1982) that if minimum working conditions are not met serious consequences will follow, prove too narrow to explain the labour relations. There were struggles at Mulungushi, prior to 2006, but these did not transform the work experience. As Hart (2002) illustrated in South Africa, the labour struggles were as much symbolic as material. Truly serious labour disputes only arose when the social context that surrounded work was altered. In the final months of the factory's operation, the social context was influenced by changes to the wider political economy. As Kapferer (1971) found with Narayan Bros., political developments affected how employees perceived their work experiences.

This study has presented a specific Chinese engagement with a distinct Zambian community. It illustrates how meanings of racial difference were produced. Chinese people became negatively viewed by Mulungushi workers, these attitudes primarily resulted from their work experiences. However, ex-workers also discussed how they had welcomed the Chinese intervention, and some appreciated that with a different economic, and especially political, context a more positive relationship could have developed. Chinese and Zambians are diverse, this study can not illuminate what form China-Zambia relations have taken, or will take, in other contexts. It does though demonstrate how Chinese investment can transform

workplace experiences and introduce exploitative methods for profit accumulation that were not developed by local cultural groups.

When Qingdao withdrew from ZCMT, following both labour unrest and financial difficulties, it did not completely disinvest from Kabwe. The *Mulungushi Cotton* subsidiary continues to gin away, separating valuable cotton fibres from the sticky oily chaff of seed pods. All the ginned cotton is now exported back to China. This valuable resource extraction was always separated from the social mechanics of textile production on the neighbouring factory floor, where the seeds of discontent struggled to the surface, night and day. The production of profits from the ginning of cotton is not accompanied by the same production of meaning that arose from the spinning and weaving of textiles. The immediate social impact of Chinese investment on the local social landscape has dramatically diminished, but the decade-long experiences of discontent among the Zambian workers, have left many struggling to make sense of their encounters with globalisation.

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