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Chinese Expatriates Working with African Partners: Power Struggles and Knowledge Hiding

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Chinese Expatriates Working with African Partners: Power Struggles and Knowledge Hiding

Abstract

Purpose: The study explores African partners' experiences regarding Chinese expatriates' knowledge control practices in 29 Sino-African joint ventures (JVs) in 12 countries. It provides insights into power dynamics and knowledge transfer (KT) from African partners' perspective.

Methodology: The qualitative paper mobilized semi-structured interviews with Africans who worked with Chinese expatriates across Africa. The study focused on understanding the experiences of African partners when collaborating with their Chinese expatriate colleagues on assignments in JVs in Africa.

Findings: Chinese expatriates employed five tactics, as described by African partners, to control knowledge based on power, behaviors, and knowledge type. Particularly, through the lens of unofficial power, this study explains knowledge hiding tactics between knowledge-holding Chinese expatriates and host country knowledge-seeking locals. A new dimension of authority-based knowledge hiding is discovered.

Originality: The paper brings new insights to the analysis of power (official and unofficial) boundaries regarding knowledge control mechanisms in JV collaborations between employees from China and Africa. Unofficial power appeared as a major leverage for expatriates in monopolizing their strategic knowledge. The study recommends mobilizing African diaspora and repatriates from China to improve knowledge transfer for Africa.

Key Words: Power; Knowledge Transfer; Expatriate; Africa; China

1. Introduction

The importance of international joint ventures (IJV) pivots around three main points: (1) IJVs help gain knowledge and technologies from a foreign partner; (2) IJVs help add value and upgrade local companies on the global value chain; and (3) in the case of China-Africa, IJVs are expected to help Africa industrialize by developing its manufacturing capabilities and move from simply exporting commodities to trading more refined products on international markets. Policymakers and business partners in African countries expect their joint ventures (JV) with China to help develop local expertise and gradually move their industries away from expensive import dependence.

Manufacturing comprises a key part of China's currently strong economic performance, initially through low-cost manufacturing and later exports that support China's industrial growth. Learning and knowledge transfer from Chinese partners about low-cost manufacturing is a critical strategy for African countries seeking to move up the value chain away from the strenuous and low-paid jobs prevalent in agriculture and resource industries which dominate most post-colonial African economies. African partners actively seek to embrace Chinese companies as partners presenting new opportunities to access knowledge, technology, and expertise. From these JV partnerships with Chinese companies, Africans hope to develop their domestic capacities to produce sophisticated manufactured and value-added goods on the continent and enable local companies to compete more effectively on national and international markets (Beamish and Chakravarty, 2021; Hamel, 1991; Kogut, 1988; Minbaeva *et al.*, 2018).

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3 China remains Africa's top trade partner, and Sino-African JVs have increased in number since China joined
4 the WTO in 2001 (Elu and Price, 2010; Wu and Cheng, 2010; Yin and Vaschetto, 2011). Academic literature
5 on JVs in developing countries has mostly adopted the perspectives of expatriates (Maswana, 2009; Morris
6 and Einhorn, 2008; Shen, 2015), often marginalizing the perspective of local partners, especially in African
7 nations where organizational challenges are rampant (Haas and Cummings, 2015; Yan and Gray, 1994).
8 Yet, a better understanding of these alternate perspectives on JVs is particularly important for insights into
9 developing country JV contexts, such as in African countries where real benefits to organizational
10 performance can be enhanced through access to expatriates' skills, technologies and knowledge.
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13 China-Africa JVs on the continent have generally not managed to fully meet the expectations of African
14 partners in terms of knowledge transfer (Ado, Su, and Wanjiru, 2017). Many such JVs encounter significant
15 constraints in operation, hindering the process of knowledge transfer and from the perspective of African
16 partners, the expected benefits from knowledge transfer are largely unrealized.
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19 While African partners expect to access Chinese expertise and technologies through their JVs, challenges
20 related to the management of the JVs, particularly the knowledge transfer mechanisms, remain significant.
21 Hamel (1991) demonstrated that JVs are characterized by an environment of competition between partners
22 and these concerns affect both locals and expatriates. Existing asymmetries in bargaining power and
23 learning outcomes shape the understanding of JV success; in this study of Sino-African JVs, both African
24 and Chinese partners exhibit and develop different expectations and behaviors regarding knowledge sharing.
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27 Knowledge sharing between partners in JV settings is often expected although not always met. Studies on
28 how expatriates strategize to hide knowledge assets in Africa are rare, especially in the context of China-
29 Africa JVs. Multiple studies on expatriate assignments have focused on Western contexts or on subsidiaries
30 of western multinational enterprises. JVs are quite different from subsidiaries in terms of their power
31 dynamics and their relationships with their parent companies. A subsidiary is fully owned by a parent
32 company and can enjoy a stronger power base and support (Dahms, 2020) while a JV requires the foreign
33 company to associate with a local partner. This makes knowledge transfer more complicated within JVs,
34 despite the possibilities for acculturation and learning to work on new assignments in emerging regions
35 (Gonzalez-Loureiro, Kiessling, and Dabic, 2015) like China and Africa. Kamoche and Siebers (2015)
36 investigated Chinese management practices in Africa and highlighted four critical concerns affecting
37 African locals and Chinese expatriates, related to diverse investment motives and cross-cultural differences,
38 the reliance of low-cost strategies and the key role of local African managers.
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42 The dominant literature on Western JVs is still inadequate for China-Africa JVs where African partners are
43 often dependent on the Chinese partner's resources for participation in the JV. In cases such as the SORAZ
44 joint venture in Niger which is typical of similar Sino-African JVs, African JV partners borrowed money
45 from their Chinese partners to fund their equity in the JVs. This creates a significant imbalance of power
46 from the start, influencing key management decisions and particularly the knowledge transfer decisions
47 (Ado *et al.*, 2017). Such early imbalances of power are often dismissed in literature on Western JV
48 knowledge transfer. Current literature on JVs further fails to fully explain knowledge transfer contradictions
49 (Nippa, and Reuer, 2019) including how, despite having clear, mutual agreements between local and
50 expatriate partners, knowledge transfer still fails to occur. We argue that such power imbalances play a
51 much more significant role in the success or failure of knowledge transfer between locals and expatriates in
52 IJVs than the literature currently suggests.
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In general, the literature indicates that expatriates are considered knowledge holders and experts (referring to Chinese in this study) and locals as knowledge seekers and learners (referring to Africans). In JVs, the opportunities to access new knowledge from expatriates are crucial because of the strategic advantage that local partners may gain in international business (Dahms, 2019; Nippa and Reuer, 2019). Depending on whether the expatriate's point of view is prioritized or attention is paid to the local's standpoint, the dominant factors that facilitate or hinder knowledge transfer (i.e., the enablers or the barriers respectively) will differ. Such enablers of knowledge transfer must be maximized, while the barriers are minimized for knowledge transfer to occur. Table 1 presents major factors that affect knowledge transfer between expatriates and locals (from the knowledge seeker's success perspective). The enablers and barriers relate to power (dis)advantage (Nippa and Reuer, 2019; Teegen and Doh, 2002), motivation of parties (Inkpen and Beamish, 1997), language and communication, complexity of knowledge, and the competitive nature of the collaboration between expatriates and locals (Heizmann, Fee, and Gray, 2018; Minbaeva *et al.*, 2018; Teegen and Doh, 2002).

Table 1. Enablers and Barriers of Knowledge Transfer: A Knowledge-seeking, Host-country Perspective

	Enablers	Barriers
<i>Expatriates (Knowledge holders)</i>	Holding minority of power in JV Willingness to teach <i>locals</i> Knowing local languages Operational (simple) knowledge	Holding majority of power in JV Unwillingness to teach <i>locals</i> Not knowing local languages Strategic (complex) knowledge
<i>Locals (Knowledge seekers)</i>	Majority of power Willingness to learn from partner Knowing expatriate's languages Knowing the value of knowledge Strong cultural intelligence and trust	Minority of power Unwillingness to learn Not knowing expatriate's languages Ignoring the value of knowledge Weak cultural intelligence and mistrust

In this paper, we specifically adopt a power-driven perspective of knowledge transfer. We particularly, mobilize the view of Yan and Gray (1994) who consider power as the ability to win accommodations from another person or organization to achieve a preferred outcome. Throughout this analysis, we introduce power as the influence one party has over another party, resulting in an official (written in job description) or unofficial (unwritten) leverage that a person or an organization enjoys over the other party. Following this perspective, we view official power as the explicit authority or privilege directly linked to someone's official title or to an organization's ownership, while we consider unofficial power as the tacit authority or privilege indirectly linked to someone's official title or to an organization's ownership. For instance, a manager's official power vis-a-vis an employee includes the authority to ask the employee to undertake an assignment such as attending a meeting, but the unofficial power of the same manager can lead him/her to ask the employee to complete a task that is not within the employee's job description; examples include a manager asking his engineer to serve him/her coffee.

In this study, we explore Chinese expatriates' knowledge control tactics as experienced and described by local African employees. The research approaches knowledge transfer from a knowledge-seeking perspective, using extensive qualitative data collected from 29 China-Africa JVs in 12 African countries. The study is based on major fieldwork in Africa during which the interviewer visited multiple sites to collect primary data. We sought to understand Africans' experiences of knowledge seeking when working with Chinese expatriates. We specifically focused on interviewing Africans working within these JVs as the

primary respondents; attempts to also interview Chinese expatriates were inconclusive. Therefore, our research questions investigated; (i). What are Africans' experiences in terms of learning from Chinese expatriates; and (ii). What role does power play in knowledge hiding? The insights gained from this strategy offer several implications towards improved knowledge sharing between expatriates and locals in emerging market IJV contexts. In the next section, we discuss the literature and theoretical perspectives informing the rest of the paper.

2. Literature Review, Theoretical Perspectives, and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Strategic and Operational Knowledge

Strategic knowledge is a major source of competitive advantage (Dahms, 2019; Hong and Nguyen 2009) and has a significant impact on how an organization functions, including clarifying the organization's business model, industry competitiveness or the firm's strategies (Park and Ungson (2001). Strategic knowledge is further associated with top managers' cognitive framework, influencing the structures and the relationships between critical organizational components. JV managers who possess strategic knowledge can often perform better and understand complex issues compared to those who do not (Hong and Nguyen, 2009). Likewise, an expatriate managing director might be better able to identify relevant knowledge in foreign activities than a local manager (Dahms, 2019). This can be due to the nature of strategic knowledge being systemic, complex, and often uncodified (Wong, Ho, and Lee, 2008), which once obtained can usually significantly affects its seeker's ability to perform at a competitive advantage.

It is often argued that gaining strategic knowledge in a JV requires a flatter structure to better articulate tacit and complex knowledge as well as decentralized knowledge-related decision-making processes. Accordingly, diffusing knowledge successfully in a JV requires greater decentralization and skilled workers acting with a high degree of freedom (Grant, 1996; Benavides-Espinosa, 2012). Such autonomy empowers employees and strengthens their personal commitment by allowing them to take learning initiatives (Nonaka, 1994). Strategic knowledge is unique because it is rare outside the organization and its possession confers a strategic advantage on the owner. It tends to be hard to imitate or substitute and as outlined in Peteraf (1993), imperfectly mobile and durable. Since it is difficult to obtain, the new holder can permanently adjust and exploit it without radical changes once its significant components are acquired. To enable the transfer of strategic knowledge, there is need to develop appropriate mechanisms for the coordination, communication, and affinity among units, individuals, and partners (Bou-Llusar and Segarra-Ciprés, 2006). This helps to make the knowledge more explicit, codifiable and available while developing a common language within the JV. However, these efforts are not always in the knowledge holders' best interests if they are unwilling to share the strategic knowledge.

Conversely, operational knowledge is knowledge required in a specific setting to effectively advance the goals of a specific task (Bransford *et al.*, 2000) and is often experiential, practical, and easy to learn and to codify. Operational knowledge is simple, routine-based, and typically more tangible than strategic knowledge. It does not require strong analytical skills and is often encapsulated and learned at lower organizational levels during hands-on tasks and physical, routine activities.

Much academic interest has focused on the types of knowledge best transferred for different JVs and in which contexts KT prospers. Seminal studies (Beamish and Banks, 1987; Geringer and Hebert 1989) highlight several important factors for JV success and knowledge transfer. The most significant factors of KT are focused on power dynamics (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977; Ingham, 2015; Ingham and Thompson, 1994; Kogut and Zander, 1992; Nippa and Reuer, 2019; Yan and Gray, 1994), knowledge type (Claus, 2001; Benavides-Espinosa, 2012), mechanisms and structure (Grant, 1996; Grosse, 1996; Inkpen, 2008a; Inkpen and Tsang, 2005), communication and trust (Hamel, 1991; Inkpen and Currall, 2004; Kwok *et al.*, 2019), motivation (Lee and Beamish, 1995; Song, 2014), and skills (Lyles and Salk, 1996), and most importantly

for cross-national projects, the influence of culture (Hofstede, 1991; Kennedy, 2018; Salk and Shenkar, 2001; Vlačić *et al.*, 2019; Yan and Gray, 1994).

More recent studies on the future of IJV research (Nippa and Reuer, 2019) revisited these findings and strongly underline the continuing significance of power as a key factor in IJV performance. Contemporary attention has gradually shifted towards emerging economies and the changing global investment trends which now link African and Chinese investment partners. Recent studies on Chinese managers in Africa (Xing *et al.*, 2016) have recognized the importance of learning and KT especially for African partners, and yet, despite the recognized specificities of Chinese practices in Africa (Cooke, 2014; Cooke, Wood, and Horwitz, 2015), very little is known about the role of power within these Sino-African engagements.

2.2 Power, Knowledge Transfer, and Expatriates in IJVs

Power Imbalance and Knowledge Transfer

Power is significant in negotiating JV arrangements (Nippa and Reuer, 2019) and is defined as the ability to win accommodations from another party towards a desired outcome (Yan and Gray, 1994). Bargaining power is sometimes presented as the power dynamic arising from the organizational structure of the JV (Ingham, 2015; Ingham and Thompson, 1994; Kogut and Zander, 1992) and can also determine negotiations around KT decisions during alliances (Inkpen, 2008b). Balancing the sometimes-unequal bargaining power between JV partners is important to facilitate learning (Teegen and Doh, 2002). This is because the knowledge holder can often select the type of knowledge to share while monopolizing the knowledge deemed non-shareable. Only when the knowledge holder is willing to negotiate, and when the knowledge seeker has a margin of maneuverability in the learning decision process, can a better KT occur (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977). This negotiation perspective suggests that bargaining power shapes JV's KT mechanism as emphasized by Yan and Gray (1994). Consequently, greater power confers greater advantage in controlling the type of knowledge at stake. Based on this perspective, to protect key knowledge, having more power around the knowledge sharing mechanisms is key since power (im)balance at organizational and individual levels makes knowledge sharing or hiding easier or harder.

Knowledge Hiding and Power Dynamic

Recent literature explores the concept of knowledge hiding generally but there remains a real need for more empirical research on the phenomenon, particularly when such hiding is an interplay between multiple dimensions that can be studied in conjunction with one another (Connelly *et al.*, 2019). Three key dimensions of knowledge hiding are briefly identified as: (1) Rationalized knowledge hiding where the knowledge holder provides a reason why knowledge is not being shared; (2) Evasive hiding where the knowledge holder provides misleading, incorrect or partial information; (3) 'Playing dumb' hiding where the knowledge holder deliberately feigns ignorance or behaves as if unaware in order to avoid sharing knowledge. There is need to explore the success factors of an individual's way of hiding knowledge (Connelly *et al.*, 2019), including whether this is through use of power differentials or by using organizational factors like the context in which the interaction is taking place. Understanding knowledge hiding therefore needs a more thorough analysis of the boundary conditions of knowledge hiding actions. Accordingly, given the complexity of knowledge hiding tactics in organizations, more qualitative studies that use new lenses like power dynamics (Heizmann *et al.*, 2018) are needed. Individuals in positions of authority can facilitate or hinder knowledge sharing; leader-signaled knowledge hiding (LSKH) occurs (Offergelt *et al.*, 2019), when leaders signal to employees that knowledge hiding is practiced, tolerated, and expected in the organization. Meanwhile, social learning theory provides the basis for predicting that LSKH encourages subordinates to hide knowledge, even when they may suffer from negative job attitudes, which ultimately results in barriers to employees' and even the company's success (Jiang *et al.*, 2019). A survey from a large Chinese knowledge-intensive organization indicated that employee autonomy affects knowledge-sharing, and that more task interdependence induced more knowledge hiding through evasive,

rationalized and playing dumb behaviors (Gagné *et al.*, 2019). This means that the internal dynamics within the organizational context play an important role in the sharing or hiding of knowledge.

Knowledge Sharing and Expatriates' Power

The literature at the crossroads of expatriation and knowledge transfer is still developing and requires new contexts and organizations to be included with an effort toward systematic approaches (Dabic *et al.*, 2015). In African contexts, cross-cultural communication competence is one of the most crucial skills for expatriates' successful collaboration with host country nationals (Abugre, 2018), as when expatriates and locals can cooperate, knowledge transfer becomes easier. In a study of twenty (20) Australian expatriates working with twenty-three (23) Vietnamese host-country nationals, the dynamic of relationship building, reciprocal learning and knowledge co-creation through articulated communicative practices was highlighted, alongside a process of power renegotiation between expatriates and host-country nationals (Heizmann *et al.*, 2018). Power determines the nature of relationships between expatriates and locals, with expatriates often having superior knowledge and skills, thus creating a situation of a master and apprentice (Hong, Snell, and Easterby-Smith, 2006; Massingham, 2010). This imbalance in knowledge possession may come with an imbalance in power, where expatriates exercise more authority over locals than vice versa. Attitudes about knowledge sharing vary across cultural contexts, and the different ways that employees make knowledge available to others tend to differ in cross-cultural contexts. In a study of thirty (30) Nordic expatriates and eight (8) Japanese managers in Japan, Peltokorpi (2006) sheds light on how the status hierarchies create barriers to knowledge sharing between expatriates and locals. At the same time, local employees' informal openness towards expatriates facilitates the relationship while expatriates' cultural intelligence is positively related to knowledge sharing (Stoermer, Davies, and Froese, 2020). This suggests that locals may gain more knowledge when they socialize with expatriate colleagues and for this to happen, the power imbalance inherent in status hierarchies should not become an obstacle to knowledge sharing.

Table 2 describes our conceptual framework where, based on the type of power available, individuals behave in either a collaborative or uncollaborative manner to hide or share knowledge. In the framework, the expatriate is considered the knowledge holder and the local as the knowledge seeker. In this conceptualization, we consider two types of power: one is official power that is directly associated with the official title held by the expatriate knowledge holder, and the second is unofficial power resulting from the unofficial use of the title's privilege by the expatriate knowledge holder. The expatriate (as knowledge holder) and the local (as knowledge seeker) are both involved in a relationship power dynamic that is either balanced or unbalanced with one party enjoying more power. The expatriate knowledge holder can choose to share knowledge or hide it. The type of knowledge that locals seek to gain is categorized either as important (strategic) or basic (operational) knowledge. Finally, this whole mechanism leads to either the success or failure of knowledge transfer.

Table 2. Conceptual Framework

Knowledge Transfer Mechanism: From Expatriate Knowledge Holder to Local Knowledge seeker				
Power Type	Power Dynamic	Behavior	Knowledge Type	Outcome
Official or Unofficial	Balanced or Unbalanced	Sharing or Hiding	Strategic or Operational	Success or Failure

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

The study relied on in-depth, semi-structured interviews about the KT phenomenon within its real context, while spanning several investigative sites (Yin, 2010). It investigated 29 China-Africa JVs in 12 African countries: Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Niger, Nigeria, the Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Togo. The selection criteria included JVs with a minimum age of four years, which is more than the three years (recommended by Ingham, (2015); Lyles and Salk,1996) for significant learning to occur. JVs were identified through online searches using information from business newspapers, public documents, government agencies in individual African countries as well as through contacts from local chambers of commerce. We sought to access any Africa-China JV that met our selection criteria and ended up with a 29 JV sample. The 12 countries reflect the JV locations rather than a deliberate choice of those specific countries.

The African JV participants (who had at least three years of work experience in those JVs) were contacted through several channels (LinkedIn, researchers' network, etc.). During the fieldwork, JV managers sometimes introduced us to relevant interviewees. Overall, participants' work experience ranged from three (3) to nineteen (19) years, and the sample reported in this study included only African respondents.

Overall, we communicated with 86 potential African interviewees; 11 declined to participate and this was relatively expected since collecting data in African contexts is extremely challenging (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2010; Lages, Pfajfar, and Shoham, 2015). The fieldwork in Africa and data updates were completed in late 2016. We interviewed 75 consenting people and obtained contributions from the 29 JVs that met our selection criteria in 12 African countries. The interviewer met with at least two individuals from each JV. Many participants requested strict confidentiality especially because of the sensitivity of the topic and their unfamiliarity with the research protocol and interview process. Fourteen interviewees did not authorize interview tape-recording but did allow note taking. We tape-recorded and transcribed 61 interviews. For data reliability, interviewees confirmed the transcripts' accuracy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In addition to interviews, we used official JV reports as relevant information to compare with our transcripts.

For the reliability and validity of the data, we checked and cross-checked the interview transcriptions for meanings and accuracy by asking the participants to confirm key segments of their interview quotations. In cases where multiple employees were interviewed at the same JV, we cross-checked their narratives to ensure that no unexplained major discrepancy in descriptions and perceptions of their interactions with Chinese expatriates exists. The study team further included Chinese and African academics for balance and to make sense of cultural meanings from the fieldwork and broader Sino-African contexts.

3.2 Data Analysis

A qualitative approach was employed to analyze the transcripts through reduction (coding), reorganization, and elaboration strategies including comparisons across transcripts (Miles and Huberman, 1994). A precise coding scheme improved the sensitivity of the collected data based on qualitative analysis procedures (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault, 2015; Strauss, 1987). We used thematic categorization based on the discussion topics in our interview schedule with questions mainly relevant to power and behavior in KT. We were conscious of possible bias in our own cultural beliefs in interpreting the data, which prompted an iterative analysis of transcripts. This study involved three researchers from different international backgrounds, including of Chinese and African heritage, which helped to control biases in data analysis. This combination was particularly useful in increasing the reliability of interview analysis, as sometimes the behavior of the Chinese expatriates as described by Africans was hard to make sense of; the Chinese co-author was able to clarify what a specific behavior means in Chinese culture within a business context. The African co-authors brought clarification to interpreting locals' behaviors when interacting with Chinese expatriates. Every excerpt of the transcripts was read and shared by all authors and its meaning was mutually agreed. A coding scheme (main themes and subthemes) was established for

reading the transcripts to control data sensitivity. After coding, we used analytical categories to assign all single sentences (or fragments of sentences) to themes and sub-themes related to power, behavior, and knowledge type categories. Through the 75 interview transcripts, we identified 1,304 citations (coded as “observations”) of Africans describing situations where Chinese expatriates were using power in KT. Those observations were identified based on the sources of power Chinese used in these contexts.

To identify all relevant observations after reading the transcripts, we additionally used a coding approach that identified key words –for example, *share, collaborate, threaten, hide, isolate, sends me home, transfer, refuse to collaborate, marginalize, block, conspire, cheat, intervening, ban, divert, distract, manipulate, refrain, teach, abuse, reject, obstruct, oppose, lobby, improvised assignment, supervisor requests tea, irrelevant tasks, uncomfortable atmosphere, rude attitude, deaf attitude, game, not answering questions, assignments without explanations, filtered information, fired, opposition to questions, reluctance to sharing details*. We also identified sentences that described contexts involving varied uses of power; all selected interview extracts were relevant to power. We had two main data reduction approaches: 1) multiple key words and sentences cited by one respondent or 2) multiple respondents cited similar key words and sentences. Although not every respondent cited every key word or sentence, each respondent described at least one situation where their Chinese counterpart (supervisor or partner) had used or abused power.

Every time a respondent described a use of power situation, we requested them to describe the type of knowledge at stake. We then discussed their answer and classified the knowledge at stake as either operational or strategic. We had initially provided the respondents with our criteria of classifying knowledge as operational or strategic based on our definition and theoretical perspective presented earlier. Table 3 describes examples of corresponding behaviors, type of knowledge at stake, category, and power source.

Table 3. Behavior, Knowledge, Action, and Power Sources

Behavior	Knowledge	Action	Power from
- Threatening to leave the JV	Strategic	Threat	Resource control
- Controlling and favoring Chinese suppliers to JV			
- Hiding details in initial stages of JV creation	Operational	Isolate	Location and soft power
- Offering turnkey plants			
- Changing training content arbitrarily	Strategic	Divert	Language
- Holding key meetings in China			
- Not speaking English and local languages	Operational	Isolate	Experience
- Translating only limited documents to English or French			
- Sifting knowledge	Strategic	Block	Lobbying
- Banning interaction of locals with parent company			
- Informally contacting local officials/influencers	Operational	Isolate	Position
- Interfering in local political appointments			
- Expatriates isolating locals during technical tasks	Strategic	Block	Shares
- Chinese partners voted for restricted access zones			
- Defined job description with more power to Chinese			

For instance, transcripts described a Chinese supervisor sending his African subordinates to fetch him tea or pencils during important practical tasks requiring access to complex equipment, which the African respondents labelled as a Chinese tactical use of unofficial power to limit their learning opportunities. Some respondents described this tactic as a tactical abuse of authority in the workplace. We categorized this as unofficial power where the sending of skilled colleagues (engineers) to fetch tea or pens was misuse or an abusive extension of the supervisor’s official power and not part of any qualified engineer’s job description as officially described on the organizational chart we had access to. Additionally, the African employees explained that they had no choice but to obey the Chinese unofficial use of power in such instances because respondents believed the order was coming from their “superior.” Similarly, African employees reported

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3 being unexpectedly asked to leave work and go home during the workday or not come to work on a specific
4 day or time; this usually coincided with the days or times when a complex or technical task would be
5 completed by the Chinese expatriate staff; respondents labelled this as common tactic to prevent learning.
6

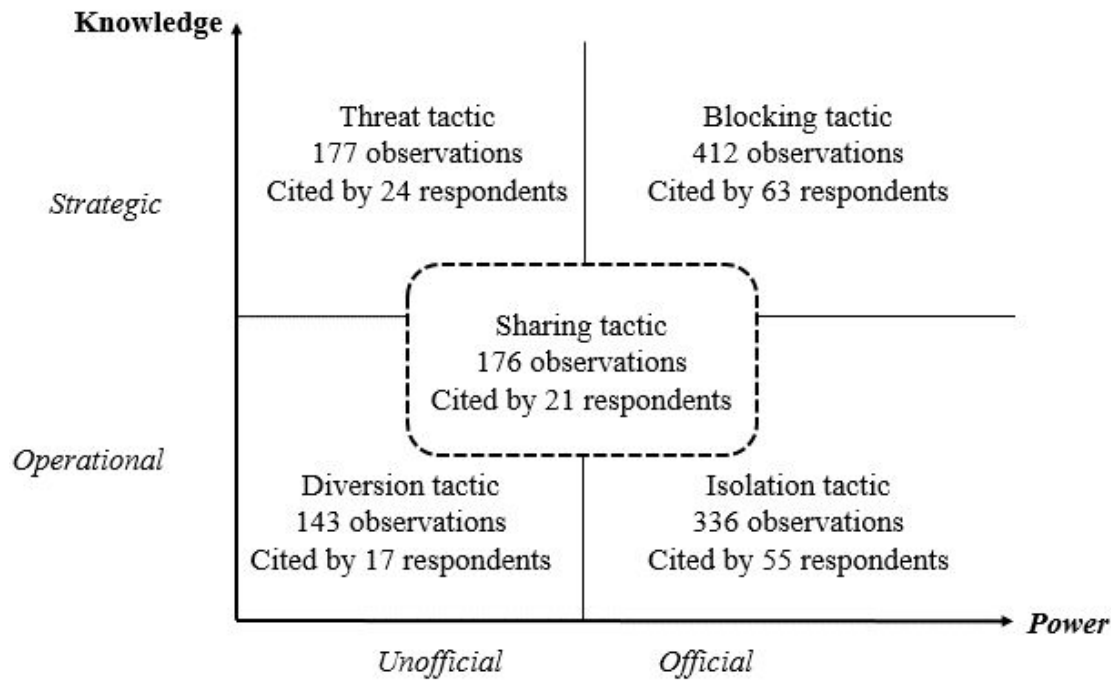
7 Official power was clearly documented in, for example, the supervisor's job description such as their
8 authority to schedule shift times, or to authorize access to certain documents, manuals, or resources within
9 the company. Identifying instances of official power use (mainly based on position control and share
10 ownership) was relatively easy during this codification because respondents had a clear understanding of
11 their official organizational chart, hierarchy, and bylaws. Most respondents placed an emphasis on scenarios
12 where use of unofficial power was obvious to them and where the frontier of official power was unclear.
13 We organized our data following this differentiation in power (official vs. unofficial) and knowledge
14 (operational vs. strategic). Five typologies of tactics empirically emerged from the data. For clarification
15 and text simplification, references to Chinese behaviors or tactics in the following sections relate to the
16 Africans' descriptions and perceptions from the data, and not necessarily what the Chinese expatriates
17 themselves attested to, as their direct views are not included in these interviews. This clarification is
18 important as this study presents the African respondents' perspective of learning from expatriates.
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21 22 **4. Findings**

23 Despite initial commitments to mutually agreed knowledge sharing agendas for the JVs, our analysis found
24 that the Chinese partners exhibited a range of tactics, as perceived and described by Africans, to control
25 both strategic and operational knowledge. The five tactics identified comprise four hiding tactics (blocking,
26 isolating, threatening, and diverting) and one sharing tactic. All tactics emerged empirically from our data,
27 showing the use of both official and unofficial power to hide knowledge. We propose an empirical matrix
28 that categorizes the typologies of tactics employed by Chinese partners to control knowledge.
29

30 The interview section about the JV's "achievement of objectives" showed that most African JV partners did
31 not believe they had achieved their initial learning objectives, indicating that the identified Chinese tactics
32 were mostly effective. The interview segments we cite here were identified in line with the theoretical
33 framework and the empirical matrix that we used to organize our data. As part of the selected qualitative
34 approach, we prioritize flexibility and presenting our findings in a meaningful and interesting theorized
35 storyline (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007) that reflects the main patterns of data without being overly
36 methodical (Gendron, 2009). Figure 1 presents a matrix of the five tactics in relation to the type of
37 knowledge at stake and the power mobilized by Chinese partners.
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39 **Figure 1.** Knowledge Control Tactic Matrix
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In total, we identified 1,304 observations but the matrix (which has 1,244 observations) did not include marginal observations. Altogether, our data had 60 observations that escaped the dominant pattern reflected in our empirical matrix. Those observations include situations where Africans described: 16 instances where Chinese used diversion tactics to protect strategic knowledge; 12 instances of isolation tactics to protect strategic knowledge; 12 instances of threat tactics to protect operational knowledge; and 20 instances of blocking tactics to protect operational knowledge.

Overall, the matrix illustrates a mobilization of power, both official and unofficial, by the Chinese expatriates to control key knowledge. Nurturing those tactics required maintaining an advantage with regards to the sources of power, both official and unofficial.

4.1 Blocking Tactic

When the knowledge was of strategic importance, African partners described that the Chinese expatriates often leveraged official power through what we coded as a blocking tactic. Overall, 412 instances (observations) of blocking tactics were identified in the data. The Chinese expatriates blocked host country nationals from gaining knowledge because they controlled key decision spheres and occupied top management positions. Authoritative and obstructive behaviors were evident among Chinese expatriates.

They are a little dictatorial. If he wants something, it is that or nothing ... it is his view that dominates ... whether he is your colleague or superior, it is the same story, I experienced both situations ... Because they already come here with a professional-superiority complex, they always favor their own point of view. [Benin I-49].

The blocking tactic required Chinese expatriates to mobilize greater power. In several instances, the Chinese partners declined to establish language trainings that would help locals to learn Mandarin and understand JV operational manuals. Such language initiatives had to be approved by the JV's top management, but it was indicated that the Chinese expatriates blocked such propositions, making communication among the JV employees difficult. This was exacerbated by the inability or unwillingness of Chinese expatriates to communicate in English, the JV's official language.

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3 *They bring us a supervisor who does not speak English, so you cannot really approach him, you only*
4 *observe ... There was a Chinese management officer, and we were told to never ask him questions or*
5 *communicate with him directly. [Nigeria I-22].*
6

7 *In the meeting, they tend to periodically consult each other in Mandarin in our presence. We are*
8 *there, we understand nothing. When we, locals, consult each other, they fully understand. It is really*
9 *unbalanced; they have the advantage in the communication side ... The main language of exchange,*
10 *according to the contract, is French but they continue sending us documents in Chinese or in an*
11 *unprofessionally translated English, a Chinese English! [Niger I-8].*
12

13
14 Even when the language programs were provided, some Chinese expatriates refused, without penalty, to
15 attend the management-approved English language training. Also, some locals stated that they were initially
16 very motivated to learn Mandarin, but this had waned as they perceived the Chinese expatriates were
17 uncollaborative. Moreover, because the Chinese expatriates regularly exercised their power, locals began to
18 refer to their Chinese colleagues as ‘masters’, who they must unquestioningly obey. Such power enabled
19 the Chinese expatriates to impose autocratic management rules, for example setting strict personnel
20 transport schedules that forced host country nationals to leave the office at specific times. African employees
21 who had wanted to use their free time after work to learn by watching or practicing had no power to staying
22 longer in the JV facilities.
23

24 *Sometimes, if I write down something I learned, the Chinese master asks me why I am interrupting*
25 *my work; that I must stop writing... We are just receiving orders... They impose our work*
26 *conditions... Chinese have power over our work. [Cameroon I-58].*
27

28 Respondents raised concerns over the use of overly authoritative and military-like communication by the
29 Chinese expatriates, alongside what was viewed as the unjustified refusal to answer questions. Additionally,
30 respondents reported that the Chinese CEOs who also acted as the technical directors were responsible for
31 granting access to certain physical and digital zones; the locals complained that only Chinese expatriates
32 could access the passwords granting access to restricted areas. As a result, locals felt they could only learn
33 what the Chinese expatriates were willing to share, rather than the knowledge required for the effective
34 operation of the sites envisaged in technology transfer agreements. A Chadian engineer emphasized:
35

36 *Once, I asked the chief supervisor to show me how to start a heat exchanger. He told me he did not*
37 *have that document. And, out of curiosity, I searched in his office and ended up finding it. I even*
38 *filmed the document ... the attitude of the Chinese is that we will learn what they want us to learn, not*
39 *what we want to learn. [Chad I-44].*
40

41 The Chinese expatriates were also observed to block local initiatives to establish trade unions that would
42 negotiate and defend KT. Key decisions, particularly those concerning training, remained exclusively under
43 the auspices of the Chinese partners’ headquarters.
44

45 *Since this company was established, we have not been able to create a single labor union. There has*
46 *always been interference by the JV with our attempts to create a union. Currently, there is no union,*
47 *only fake delegates of staff. [Chad I-47].*
48

49 With respect to the communications barrier, the Chinese expatriates frequently refused to translate key
50 Chinese documents into English, making codified knowledge unavailable in English, a language which the
51 local partners could access. This led to inaccurate translations and unclear contract terms that encouraged
52 Chinese opportunistic behaviors. Additionally, local partners cited the restricted number of Mandarin
53 translators to ease communication, resulting in ineffective face-to-face communication. On several
54 occasions, local engineers stated that Chinese expatriates would arbitrarily limit the internet access for locals
55 on site which affected access to information.
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3 *The Chinese, to discourage further research on our part, slowed the Wi-Fi connection. So, we search*
4 *online using our own mobiles to clarify and widen our knowledge. [Chad I-44].*
5
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7 This was particularly frustrating since many of the local engineers and employees reported reliance on online
8 searches for information when their Chinese expatriates were unable to provide information or refused to
9 answer questions.
10

11 **4.2 Isolation Tactic**

12 When the knowledge was of operational importance, Chinese expatriates leveraged their power, often
13 official, through isolation tactics to prevent KT. Overall, we identified 336 observations of isolation tactics.
14 One recurrent isolation tactic was the sending of local engineers away from the JV sites for so-called
15 trainings, offering generous incentives to encourage the attendance of African engineers. Usually, this
16 occurred during periods when knowledge-intensive activities needed to be completed on site, leaving the
17 sites clear for Chinese expatriates only to complete the more sensitive or technical activities involving
18 significant operational knowledge.
19

20 Chinese expatriates carefully controlled the opportunities for knowledge sharing with the local contractors.
21 For instance, outsourcing and maintenance involved only Chinese expatriates and contractors. Additionally,
22 the use of physical restrictions such as ‘no-go areas’ for locals or ‘corporate special Chinese zones’ were
23 regularly used within JV sites to physically keep locals away from strategic areas and limit opportunities
24 for knowledge access. As reported in JV sites by engineers in Ghana and Chad:
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26

27 *There are many rooms labeled ‘authorized personnel only’ and often, only Chinese are authorized to*
28 *enter. So, if I do not belong to that club, I cannot access even though I am working for the*
29 *company...the Chinese do not give us such learning opportunities. [Ghana I-52].*
30

31 *When a Chinese colleague needs to do important work, they ask you either to go home ... or he asks*
32 *you to fetch something. Meanwhile, he does what he has to do. [Chad I-47].*
33

34 These situations proved even more challenging as key machinery and software used in the JV sites were
35 programmed only in Chinese characters. Therefore, in addition to not understanding the language, and with
36 very limited opportunities to access the machinery and develop expertise in its operation, African engineers
37 within the JVs were at a significant disadvantage in terms of learning at work. This situation often
38 demotivated Africans who then left the JV.
39
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41 For JVs that operated in technology-intensive sectors, Chinese expatriates often encouraged their African
42 colleagues to take breaks and to pray during normal working hours; during their absence, the Chinese
43 expatriates continued to work and completed the technical tasks. Such opportunistic behavior was also
44 evident during weekends and local holidays when Chinese expatriates continued to work while locals were
45 absent. Additionally, at several JVs such as those in Ghana, local employees were not involved in the key
46 initial stages of the JV setup, such as the equipment installation. Besides, the African culture of not working
47 at night was advantageous for Chinese expatriates as stated by a respondent:
48

49 *The activities that are a bit unusual are done at night. For every 24 hours, the Chinese generally*
50 *work three times eight while our local monitoring missions work two times eight, even one times eight*
51 *sometimes ... But the Chinese perform the most technical activities at night as we often do notice*
52 *huge progress in the morning. [Congo I-42].*
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54 The Chinese expatriates demonstrated very hard-working attitudes, which were viewed as an advantage for
55 them as they often arrived at work much earlier or left work much later than their African counterparts. In
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3 many cases, Chinese expatriates could easily return to work later because they resided within the company
4 perimeter and could also work remotely, which was not the case for Africans who had to commute offsite
5 to their homes. Partly because of the Chinese expatriates' ability to arrive earlier or stay at work later, the
6 African employees viewed this to be a deliberate ploy by the expatriates to perform strategic tasks before
7 the locals had arrived or after they had left the office. In notable cases, African engineers recognized that
8 heavy project advancement occurred after they had been away on weekends or returned from a holiday or a
9 strike, suggesting that Chinese expatriates exploited the locals' absence to perform strategic tasks.

10
11 Within multiple JV sites, Chinese expatriates and African employees tended to use separate restaurants and
12 lived in separate residences, a situation which further limited the opportunities available to socialize between
13 JV workers. Fraternizing between the Africans and Chinese in several JVs was actively discouraged, which
14 affected the pace of learning and engendered suspicion and mistrust. For those workers keen to integrate,
15 this was less than optimal. Several African employees reported feeling isolated and frustrated with the pace
16 of learning, particularly as they were qualified, competent fast learners, many of whom were fluent in
17 Mandarin or had studied in top Chinese schools. Two employees, including one who graduated from China's
18 Tsinghua University, stated:

19
20 *They are afraid of us because they know that the more we are in the company, the more they are*
21 *exposed. Therefore, they try to evict us and work with locals who do not know them nor understand*
22 *their language so that they reign ... China does not trust the Africans it trained because once you get*
23 *your degree and come back here, the Chinese still doubt your skills. [Congo I-33].*

24
25 *The Chinese are not allowed to come into town ... as soon as they leave the plant, they head directly*
26 *to the airport for China ... They are much more suspicious of us than we are of them ... they perceive*
27 *gifts as means of corruption and favoritism. They refuse our gift. [Chad I-47].*

28
29 Africans respondents highlighted a variation to the isolation tactics employed by their Chinese counterparts.
30 Following a Sino-African two-party meeting, Chinese expatriates resorted to organizing parallel meetings
31 to which only Chinese nationals were invited. Several the African respondents reported their acceptance of
32 these isolation techniques as they felt they had limited choices and had to accept the Chinese management
33 styles, since they were the few investors interested in the projects.

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37 *There are meetings that you cannot attend because it is between them... it is a government movement,*
38 *not an individual's. It happens that I am not allowed to attend a meeting, and I do not mind, it is*
39 *confidential ...because the business is controlled from Beijing. ... Our local laws and policies are so*
40 *weak for them that they tend to exploit every single loophole. [Ghana I-34].*

41
42
43 *We need foreign investment, and Chinese are the only investors who show interest in textiles ... That*
44 *is why they rule in here ... they are very meticulous... they have no administrative orthodoxy ... in*
45 *terms of transparency, they still have a long way to go ... But the reality is that the Chinese do not*
46 *transfer knowledge easily, we should be patient. [Benin I-48].*

47
48 The viability of local spin-offs was reduced by the deliberate isolation of the supervisors from the local
49 control missions that were supposed to closely monitor the JV's work. Local government officials stated
50 that their Chinese partners categorically refused to have Africans as controllers, in favor of Chinese
51 controllers. Further, because the Chinese partners were major shareholders and had veto power, it was
52 common for the JVs' boards of directors to impose a range of organizational restrictions on locals. Africans
53 at several JVs were prohibited from directly interacting with their African parent company. Furthermore,
54 Chinese expatriates who interacted with or occasionally taught locals were sometimes transferred back to
55 China; the locals speculated that this could only be because they had shared more knowledge with Africans
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3 than they should have. These isolation tactics reduced knowledge transfer opportunities and created a high
4 turnover among talented Africans who dealt with difficult knowledge sharing and working conditions.
5 African respondents who resisted the isolation tactics or requested improvements, for example through
6 requests for pay rises, became further isolated and eventually left the JV for better paying jobs elsewhere.
7 As one engineer noted:

8
9 *The Chinese do not value your work enough ... and when the 'expected promotion' does not come,*
10 *you lose motivation ... After three years, I did not progress, plus I was not ok with my director. And*
11 *as soon as I had the opportunity, I left. [Democratic Republic of Congo I-40].*
12

13 14 **4.3 Diversion Tactic**

15 When knowledge was of operational importance, African respondents noted that Chinese expatriates used
16 their power, often unofficially, to support what we coded as diversion tactics. Overall, 143 observations of
17 diversion tactics were identified in the data. For this tactic, a lack of clarity in the rules, particularly among
18 workers, blurred the decision hierarchy and benefitted the Chinese partner. The diversion tactic was less
19 obvious to detect. Common practices included the running of training programs as these were mandated in
20 the joint agreements, but staffing them with inexperienced, fresh Chinese graduates rather than the expected
21 technical experts. Africans described this practice as problematic, because the Chinese partner did not make
22 use of the parent company's experts with relevant knowledge from the JV, but external people who lacked
23 practical experience and training skills. Several respondents reported that Chinese expatriates were
24 unqualified for their positions and could not interact in either English, French or African languages. A local
25 officer commented:

26
27 *Our Chadian engineers complain regularly that they are even more qualified than their Chinese*
28 *supervisors. So, they argue that Chinese engineers came to Chad just to get a good job and enjoy*
29 *higher wages. Sometimes, even the person who should give you the information is not allowed by his*
30 *direct supervisor. Then, it becomes a chain that hides information. [Chad I-36].*
31

32 Conversely, when training programs were arranged and particularly when these were conducted in China,
33 many Africans complained that their Chinese partners would unilaterally select or arbitrarily change the
34 names of the training beneficiaries who could attend the training programs. In extreme cases, respondents
35 stated that the Africans selected to participate in these trainings in China were sometimes neither qualified
36 for, nor particularly interested in the training skills to be offered.

37
38 *We went to China, 50 people, for training. I saw the Chinese refinery once. It is clear to me that they*
39 *had carefully planned their version of the training because we left Niger with a program and, once*
40 *in China, we noticed that the content had been significantly changed. [Niger I-54].*
41

42
43 At several JVs, training programs were rare, and the content would often be unilaterally changed by the
44 Chinese partner once the African trainees had arrived in China. On occasions, the Chinese executives
45 designated preferred or favored African employees as trainers, even when their local colleagues described
46 them as unqualified. Local employees questioned why the Chinese partners refused to lead the training in
47 favor of controversial or unsuitable African trainers.

48
49 A related approach in this diversionary tactic was through inconsistent hiring methods, where preferred
50 African locals were placed in positions for which they lacked the required skills and qualifications. One
51 military officer described this irony, noting that *"the Chinese hire you as a car cleaner when you have a*
52 *degree in preparing tea."* Local employees who began to learn, develop, and master key knowledge were
53 transferred in an unexpected and arbitrary manner. Respondents noted that they had tried in vain to assert
54 their educational qualifications to claim an appropriate position. This was a recurrent comment from African
55 partners; the view was that Chinese managers preferred not to attract or to retain highly qualified Africans.
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3 Local employees stated that they were sometimes promoted without clear explanations or justification,
4 (leaving a position with learning opportunities to move to a higher pay position but with less learning
5 opportunities); similarly, they reported being discredited and then deliberately removed from a position that
6 was technically strategic for knowledge gain. This was an interesting insight into the display of diversion
7 tactics which at first appeared to be a positive move for the individual worker. African managers therefore
8 expressed their concerns on not being regularly consulted within the JV.
9

10 *Even as a director, I cannot decide anything ... The Chinese CEO holds important meetings without*
11 *involving our local deputy CEO ... It is total opacity. [Niger I-8].*
12

13
14 At several JVs, the rhetoric employed by the Chinese partners often differed significantly from the practice.
15 Their African partners, particularly government representatives, often accused Chinese expatriates of
16 employing diversionary behaviors to avoid training their workers as outlined in the official JV agreements.
17 One government official from Benin commented, “*When a Chinese employee tells you he is going right,*
18 *actually, in his head, he is going straight.*” Similar inconsistencies were also reported in relation to what the
19 Chinese partners stated within the JV versus the extensive lobbying techniques they employed directly with
20 government officials. This was described by a respondent:
21

22 *As soon as we set certain rules, they tell our authorities that we are looking for money, that we are*
23 *slowing down the work progress ... it becomes a pretext to bring in more Chinese by arguing that*
24 *what an African does in four days, a Chinese does it in two days. [Congo I-42].*
25

26 Differences in power and in culture were also evident in this tactic. Locals described their Chinese
27 colleagues as soft diplomats. When Africans asked for an explanation on a specific expertise, Chinese
28 expatriates would often avoid a crude ‘No’ by, for example, answering ‘Next time.’
29

30 *The Chinese do not categorically refuse; it is more ‘I do not know, or I do not understand,’ but not ‘I*
31 *refuse’ or ‘I’m not telling you.’ They are a little bit like politicians. They have a polite and diplomatic*
32 *way to get rid of you if they think you are annoying. [Rwanda I-61].*
33

34 *The harsh Chinese worker might just tell you ‘Do not worry, I will do it.’ In that case, he does not*
35 *want you to learn that specific skill. But the intermediates will say, ‘I’m busy, later,’ and later he does*
36 *not teach you. [Nigeria I-50].*
37

38 In terms of face-to-face interactions or during meetings, the Chinese expatriates favored Chinese translators
39 over African translators, even when locals might have preferred the latter as more qualified. Locals
40 described these diversions through instances such as the internet-slowness strategies used in many cases.
41 Respondents also mentioned that African employees were sometimes so distracted by free internet access
42 onsite that they were not actively focused on learning at work. They indicated that the Chinese expatriates
43 tended to manipulate and exploit their emotions through what they perceived as “racist behaviors” that
44 caused them to lose focus in learning contexts or during joint training. For example, several employees
45 noted they were sometimes upset when Chinese expatriates behaved as though they could not understand
46 Africans who spoke Mandarin fluently. As employees stated:
47

48 *If you ask questions, there are some Chinese who get irritated. Now, when one of them says you are*
49 *a troublemaker, his whole entourage will consider you as such ... Once you have a problem with one*
50 *Chinese, he tells his other friends that you are a problem guy. [Niger I-55].*
51

52 *Among the Chinese, whether you have a PhD or not, it is not their problem. Even a simple Chinese*
53 *worker makes fun of you because he feels that his country mates consider him more than you, in all*
54 *regards ... and transparency is not his priority. [Congo I-24].*
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3 These appeared to be deliberate tactics by expatriates of demotivating locals by treating them prejudicially
4 and displaying signs of collective mistrust of Africans or collective prejudice. Such discouraging behaviors
5 tended to lower the Africans' self-esteem and limit their motivations for learning. These tactics also
6 contributed to a lower promotion rate among host country nationals, leading to poor employee retention
7 rates and inconsistent career plans with few to no financial incentives for learning.
8

9 **4.4 Threat Tactic**

10 A fourth tactic employed was the use of threats, hostility, or intimidation. When the knowledge was of
11 strategic importance, Africans perceived more repeated use of unofficial power by the Chinese expatriates
12 through what we coded as threat tactic. Overall, 177 observations of threat tactics were identified. For
13 instance, Chinese expatriates repeatedly cited the project deadlines which required them to increase the
14 speed of execution, thus served as justification to import additional Chinese expatriates into the JVs as
15 Chinese workers were considered more disciplined and productive than their African counterparts. The
16 Chinese partners argued that African employees were slower and caused delays that increased project costs.
17 The threat of project overruns and contract costs increased pressure on the African partners to consent to
18 the decision to bring in more Chinese expatriates to meet tight project timeframes. Chinese expatriates
19 executed tasks with rapid speed, meeting the set targets but limiting opportunities for the locals to learn.
20 When host country nationals suggested hiring more qualified Africans instead of Chinese expatriates for the
21 gaps, stringent conditions were imposed including the threat of shorter guarantees and high maintenance
22 fees on the projects if local labor was recruited. Faced with such threats to the projects, local partners often
23 relented as they had few options and minority power. As indicated by an administrative officer:
24

25 *They come with their own ideas about the cooperation and that's something that you either take or*
26 *leave... because they already had their discussions back home... you have no choice but to submit to*
27 *their way of doing business. [Ghana I-34].*
28

29
30 Another common tactic which prevented locals from accessing learning opportunities included coming
31 under pressure to resign on their own. Consistent with this tactic, Chinese managers discouraged the
32 formation of unions or collective bargaining arrangements and threatened employment termination for
33 agitators attempting to create a union; potential union leaders or agitators were quick to be fired. Chadian
34 managers specifically stated that Chinese expatriates had retaliation measures used as a source of constant
35 threat to locals who defied the status quo.
36

37 Respondents reported several instances where locals who asked too many questions were fired from their
38 employment. Several African interviewees stated that they had adapted to this situation by drastically
39 reducing their curiosity at work, as being curious risked negative job consequences. Learning usually
40 involves curiosity and an adventurous demeanor. At many work sites, Africans expressed their personal
41 desire to learn new skills by venturing out of their assigned job zone during break time. This was however
42 actively discouraged in certain JVs by the Chinese expatriates, as this was viewed as risk-taking attitudes,
43 even when locals justified it by a desire to simply watch and learn.
44

45 As Chinese owned most of the shares in the JVs, expatriates were able and willing to mobilize radical tactics
46 such as threatening to leave the partnership, which could potentially create serious repercussions for African
47 partners. As a result, the bargaining power dynamic favored the Chinese expatriates due to their relatively
48 stronger financial position. A director who negotiated several Chinese partnerships stated:
49

50 *We cannot win against the Chinese because they give us conditions that are so favorable that we are*
51 *very eager to sign. So, sometimes we do not even go into the details of the agreement to require*
52 *measurable knowledge transfer ... Which bank can give you a loan at one percent (1%) interest in*
53 *the world except Chinese?... When the Chinese give you a loan to pay for your own shares, how can*
54 *you impose knowledge transfer conditions? [Benin I-45].*
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This behavior demonstrates the highly unequal power between the partners within the selected JVs. Local partners reported that during business meetings, Chinese directors behaved like diplomatic representatives by threatening to contact local and Chinese officials over whom they wielded considerable influence.

4.5 Sharing Tactic

At the crossroads of the four tactics, respondents reported that Chinese expatriates used what we coded as a sharing tactic (176 observations) which was also depicted by respondents as a chameleon or camouflage tactic, mostly within the operational knowledge zone. This tactic was identified in relation to the 1068 total observations (for the four previous tactics) because it was often used to temper a poor working context generated after one or more of the four fundamental tactics led to discontent or protests among the host country nationals. To address these protests, the Chinese expatriates therefore exhibited a more collaborative attitude by selectively teaching new skills, mostly operational, to Africans. The tactic involved a hide-and-seek dynamic between the Chinese and African partners. The Chinese expatriates typically decided to share more operational knowledge, learned through hands-on work. The Chinese expatriates, therefore, shared mostly the knowledge that did not pose a threat to the balance of power and their competitive advantage.

The Chinese sift the information they give you; it is really for a certain end. So, when they say come and plug in this here, the information needed to plug in here is all that they will give you, not even about to how to unplug it, even if you ask. [Ghana I-52].

Furthermore, in training contexts, Chinese expatriates often answered questions only after they had consulted their Chinese supervisors. Therefore, Chinese expatriates transferred only the knowledge necessary at the lower level for the JV to function based on local employees' exact duties. Generally, most African partners described the trainings, regardless of location, as too rudimentary and focused on generalities that did not help them to understand entire technologies or provide specific, in-depth details. Chinese tactics were therefore customized to the type of employee and context. This made it harder for Africans to predict their Chinese partners' behaviors. Based on whether the knowledge was strategic or operational, the Chinese expatriates determined what to share by mobilizing their official and unofficial power.

5. Theoretical Discussion

Drawing from the results, the Chinese expatriates engaged more in knowledge hiding than in knowledge sharing. According to the host country nationals, Chinese expatriates often acted as barriers to knowledge transfer rather than enablers, especially when those expatriates held more powerful positions such as managers. Connelly *et al.*, (2019) summarized three dimensions of knowledge hiding: rationalized knowledge hiding, evasive knowledge hiding, and playing dumb knowledge hiding. We found that all the three major theoretical categories of knowledge hiding were mobilized by Chinese expatriates to hide knowledge within the JVs. Additionally, in extending these categories our study suggests a fourth dimension that we identify as *authority-based knowledge hiding* where Chinese expatriates, because they enjoyed more power over locals, simply refuse to justify why they decide not to share knowledge. One interesting point is that Chinese expatriates regularly mobilized unofficial power to nurture their authority-based knowledge hiding. Not only does this finding shed new light on a fourth dimension of authority-based knowledge hiding, drawing on the power perspective of Crozier and Friedberg (1977), but it also extends the knowledge hiding theory to include the more informal and unofficial types of power mobilized by expatriates. This is a major contribution toward closing the gap identified by Nippa and Reuer (2019) within the niche of the KT literature from the expatriates' and locals' power standpoints.

The use of unofficial power by expatriates to divert or threaten host country nationals is in line with what Boisot (1998) has described as eliminating the "physical co-presence" of the other party. According to this logic, to learn new skills, the knowledge seeker requires a physical co-presence of the knowledge holder. Often, expatriates obstructed KT through tactics designed to eliminate physical co-presence in the JVs. In this study, locals highlighted instances where expatriates did not promote such co-presence and where they

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3 did so by exercising power that encouraged isolating, blocking, diverting, and threatening the knowledge
4 seekers. This is consistent with the insights by Hedlund (1994) who argues that transferring knowledge
5 requires intimacy and permanence between knowledge seekers and knowledge holders. Here again, the
6 expatriates' behaviors tended to create conditions that disturbed such intimacy and permanence, leading to
7 increased knowledge hiding.
8

9 Hiding knowledge can also be achieved by disempowering employees from learning initiatives (Peiro and
10 Melia, 2003; Song, 2014). Participants indicated that Chinese expatriates used dissuasive tactics to
11 discourage host country nationals from being curious and entrepreneurial regarding learning opportunities.
12 While studies (Lee and Beamish, 1995; Lyles and Salk, 1996) have shown that learning involves curiosity
13 and adventurous demeanor, in our study we find that Chinese expatriates deterred such types of behavior.
14 The expatriates generally held more power than locals in our investigated JVs, and despite argument by
15 Heizmann *et al.*, (2018) that there is always power renegotiation dynamics between expatriates and locals,
16 we find that in certain JVs, the decisions about KT mechanisms were not in host-country nationals' hands.
17 This indicates that if expatriates decide to adopt a knowledge hiding strategy, it will be likely to be
18 implemented across the JVs. When the power holder exercises authority over the implementation of the KT
19 mechanisms (Wong *et al.*, 2008; Yan and Gray, 1994), it becomes harder for locals to gain knowledge. This
20 is even more the case when the expatriates' power makes knowledge hiding decisions easier, in line with
21 the views of Yan and Gray (1994). Powerful expatriates can threaten their JV partners without suffering
22 major consequences, as we demonstrate in this study, especially when a leader-signaled knowledge hiding
23 (LSKH) tactic is being promoted among expatriates as highlighted by Offergelt *et al.*, (2019). This indicates
24 that power is at the center of knowledge hiding tactics and our analysis strongly supports this statement in
25 the context of China-Africa JVs.
26
27

28 This paper shows that unofficial power, often resulting from opportunistic extensions of official power, has
29 become common rather than an exception in knowledge hiding behaviors among China-Africa JVs. Such
30 opportunistic power boundary spanning behavior is generally present among Chinese businesses in Africa
31 especially in the construction industry (Cooke, Wang, and Wang, 2018). Likewise, in our sample, unofficial
32 power was key to protecting knowledge assets within the China-Africa JV context. While the literature
33 argues that various types of power affect JV success (Salk and Shenkar, 2001), we demonstrate that Chinese
34 expatriates extensively used several types of unofficial power, ranging from extensions of executive position
35 power to cultural, linguistic and soft power to hide knowledge. Overall, unofficial power appeared
36 particularly effective for knowledge hiding in this study.
37
38

39 **6. Practical Implications and Research Avenues**

40 Our findings help JV knowledge-seeking partners understand why failure to gain significant knowledge is
41 better understood through the perspective of unofficial power than official power. The study exposes the
42 potential opportunities that host country partners may have to gain knowledge through first addressing
43 expatriate partner's opportunistic exploitation of blurry power boundaries. This means that local partners
44 must address gaps in potential opportunistic behaviors by expatriate JV partners, by clearly drawing the
45 official power boundaries. These boundaries need to more clearly addressed within JVs' initial policy and
46 human resources procedures, to help weaker JV partners to gain additional procedural power and thereby
47 take advantage of learning opportunities without running the risk of being isolated, blocked, threatened, or
48 diverted by powerful or opportunistic expatriate knowledge-holders.
49

50 Another practical implication is that, from a KT perspective, instead of sending numerous Chinese
51 expatriates to run Sino-African JVs, local partners could encourage Chinese partners to appoint more
52 African managers and engineers who have already worked in China (as repatriates). This is notwithstanding
53 the insights from Cooke *et al.*, (2018) who highlighted that some Chinese construction firms in Africa still
54 prefer Chinese expatriates over Africans. African JV partners are increasingly turning to the hiring of
55 African repatriates from China and initial signs indicate that repatriates appear to learn faster and more
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collaboratively than non-repatriates who may have limited prior experience working with Chinese co-workers (Ado *et al.*, 2017). However, Chinese partners may need more encouragement towards this approach, possibly by mobilizing those African employees who have worked in their headquarters office in China. Increasing the proportion of African repatriates over Chinese expatriates within the JVs may be even more consequential if both African and Chinese partners deeply commit to collaborative hiring policies where KT is pursued. In this study, a range of African respondents perceived Chinese expatriates within the JV to have promised one thing on paper (they would transfer knowledge within the JV) and doing another thing in practice (actively resisted sharing knowledge). This led to heightened mistrust and perceptions of cunning or duplicitous behavior. The recommendation to encourage the hiring of more African repatriates to support Sino-African JV knowledge transfer is a serious alternative to consider by both Chinese and African partners. With increased trust, honesty, and commitment to knowledge sharing, Chinese expatriates in Africa may no longer remain in a knowledge hiding informal posture but gradually commit to a formal knowledge sharing practical posture.

In order for sustained KT to occur within Sino-African JVs in any meaningful way, three major conditions would need to be addressed: (1) Africans partners negotiating JVs that engender transparency and enhanced honesty between expatriates and local partners; (2) Chinese partners committing to practically share agreed knowledge and not obstruct KT processes once JV agreements have been finalized; (3) Increasing the hiring of African repatriates by both Chinese and African partners to enhance the KT performance. This combination of three key factors could bring enhanced results regarding KT. Amir, Okimoto, and Moeller's (2020) arguments support the deploying and hiring of African repatriates as a way to reduce cultural distance and manage the power struggles that arise when locals seek to gain knowledge from expatriate managers within unequal JV power contexts. Many repatriates have generally developed crucial multi-cultural skills and a global mindset useful for international KT (Gonzalez-Loureiro *et al.*, 2015; Vlačić *et al.*, 2019). Thus, repatriates present China-Africa JVs with potential opportunities to improve KT outcomes in such contexts by reducing the cognitive and power gaps in IJVs.

One way our study informs future research is by suggesting the further exploration of how unofficial power is developed and legitimized within JVs. This is particularly important considering the recent growth in the number of Chinese expatriates in Africa, and their evolving experience working within these new contexts. It is crucial to research the ethics surrounding the use of unofficial power in collaborations between expatriates and locals, particularly in instances where the latter alleged misuses of such power. Better understanding of these concerns can inform the new forms of IJVs in Africa, especially considering current controversies and heated debates surrounding China-Africa cooperation (Ado, 2020; Ado and Su 2016). This study presents early-stage research on the perspectives of African partners working with Chinese expatriates; future research is needed to better understand this under-explored, but culturally rich JV context.

An additional research avenue is related to how African repatriates can improve knowledge transfer more broadly between Africa and Asia. In recent years, Africans have increasingly emigrated towards Asian countries (Ado, Chrysostome, and Su, 2016) like India, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Turkey. As these Asian countries gradually increase their investments in Africa through JVs, it is important to consider how such engagements can benefit from African repatriates regarding knowledge transfer. This is important for African partners who seek knowledge from expatriates. Finally, there are opportunities to explore the complex connections between KT theory, expatriation/repatriation choices, official/unofficial power boundary spanning, and the success of JVs for knowledge-seeking partners.

7. Conclusion

This study finds that Chinese expatriate partners mobilized significant unofficial power to prevent knowledge transfer to African nationals within Sino-African JVs. Chinese partners used their superior power advantage in varied contexts to apply five specific tactics of knowledge control. The study highlights how

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3 opportunistic boundary spanning of power within international joint ventures nurtures knowledge hiding
4 tactics and limits knowledge transfer. Chinese predominantly used informal, unofficial authority to navigate
5 blurred power boundaries to hide knowledge and technologies. The study introduces a new authority-based
6 knowledge hiding dimension to the three traditional dimensions in knowledge hiding literature. Our findings
7 accordingly contribute to the expatriate/local knowledge transfer literature by providing new insights to
8 current understanding of the significance of unofficial power in knowledge hiding, and the implications of
9 opportunistic behavior in the struggle for knowledge control. This study helps JV knowledge-seeking
10 partners to understand why it can sometimes be challenging to gain knowledge from expatriate knowledge
11 holders and how to improve knowledge transfer.
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13 14 15 **8. References**

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