

# Chinese Workers and Their “Linguistic Labour”: Philippine Online Gambling and Zambian Onsite Casinos

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**ABSTRACT:** Our paper examines the relationship between Chinese gambling capital, workplace exploitation, and labour migration. Focusing on Philippine online gambling and Zambian onsite casinos, we argue that the gambling sector’s capital accumulation relies on the “linguistic labour” provided by Chinese workers to facilitate online or onsite communication between the players and the firms. Chinese-funded gambling firms continually need to import Chinese workers through a combination of legal and illegal channels. After migrating, workers are disempowered from seeking outside remediation due to connections between the firms and the host state’s elites, and because of gambling’s illegal status in China. Firms can unilaterally increase working hours and impose unfair workplace arrangements on Chinese workers. Gambling capital’s reliance on the linguistic labour of workers and the industry’s murky legal status open up avenues for exploitation and multiple sites of extraction for Chinese capital.

**KEYWORDS:** China, gambling, labour, exploitation, Philippines, Zambia.

The capacity to exercise language has been a central issue in workplace exploitation. In the context of Chinese firms overseas, the literature has often focused on Chinese firms, particularly on the firm’s relationship with the Chinese state, linkages with host state elites, or effects on the host country’s economic development. While there is an increasing number of studies on Chinese labour overseas, the literature has underexamined the relationship between language and workplace exploitation, with a few exceptions. For instance, Ivan Franceschini (2020) argues that linguistic barriers and the perception among Cambodian workers that their Chinese colleagues are better off due to their ability to effectively communicate with the managers create artificial divisions, undermining the potential solidarity between the two groups and disempowering workers as a whole. Examining Ethiopia, Miriam Driessen illustrates that Chinese and Ethiopians were able to collectively strategize and communicate using signals as a proxy for language (Driessen 2020). Both works illustrate the dynamic interplay between language, power, and workplace exploitation (Franceschini 2020; Driessen 2020).

Our paper contributes to the relationship between language and power by analysing Chinese-funded gambling firms, workplace exploitation, and labour migration. We argue that Chinese gambling capital is inherently reliant on the “linguistic labour” provided by imported Chinese workers. Chinese workers possess the linguistic proficiency necessary to facilitate online or onsite communication between the players and the firms. Without an understanding between the firms and the players, the transaction falls apart. Firms therefore need to constantly import Chinese workers due to the

host state labour population’s lack of linguistic capacity. Because gambling occupies a murky legal status in the eyes of the Chinese and the host state, it is extremely difficult for Chinese workers to seek help when exploited. This situation enables the firm to increase working hours, reduce payments, and impose other mandatory arrangements. The gambling sector’s fluidity across jurisdictions opens avenues for exploitation and generates multiple sites of extraction for Chinese capital. While Franceschini and Driessen find that the ability to speak Chinese shapes workplace exploitation in different ways (Driessen 2019; Franceschini 2020; Driessen 2020), our article illustrates that Chinese-speaking ability is the crux of workplace exploitation in the gambling sector because of how accumulation works and because of the sector’s legal status.

Empirically, we focus on the Philippines and Zambia. Since Rodrigo Duterte’s (2016-present) administration, the Philippines has become Asia’s online gambling’s capital,<sup>1</sup> contributing up to 1.5 to 3 billion US dollars (USD) in yearly taxes and 180 million USD in license fees with operations proliferating across major cities (Camba 2018).<sup>2</sup> Online gambling firms do not receive direct investment from mainland China or

1. Cliff Venzon, “Duterte Hits the Jackpot as China Fuels Online Gambling Boom,” *Asian Nikkei Review*, 9 July 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Media-Entertainment/Duterte-hits-the-jackpot-as-China-fuels-online-gambling-boom2> (accessed on 5 September 2020).
2. Alvin Camba, “The winners and losers in Duterte’s China play,” *South China Morning Post*, 30 September 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/economics/article/2166070/winners-and-losers-dutertes-china-play> (accessed on 6 October 2020).

Hong Kong. Instead, capital passes through holding companies in offshore financing centres – Cayman Islands, British Virgin Islands, and many others – before being established in the Philippines.<sup>3</sup> As firms target a largely Chinese-speaking market, online gambling firms need Chinese workers because they are native speakers of Mandarin or other Chinese languages. The workers mainly come from mainland China because they cost less than their Taiwanese counterparts.<sup>4</sup> Taiwanese and other Southeast Asian Chinese are recruited mainly for their proficiency in Chinese dialects. Chinese workers use a combination of tourism and smuggling channels to work in the Philippines. After Chinese workers have migrated, gambling firms exploit them by reducing their payments, increasing their work-related responsibilities, and using violence to discipline them. Due to the Chinese government's strict policies against online gambling and the Duterte government's pact with online gambling firms, workers lack legal remediation to improve their working conditions. Firms exploit the indifference that the Chinese and Filipino workers have toward each other, using the context-specific skills of Filipino workers to facilitate the exploitation of Chinese workers.

In Zambia, while onsite casinos have customers who play in English, Chinese workers are necessary for other functions, such as dealing with Chinese-speaking customers or managing tasks that firms cannot delegate to host state workers due to a lack of trust. Chinese workers migrate illegally through smuggling routes or start off by pretending to be tourists. Firms exploit workers by holding their passports or delaying payment of wages. Due to the unclear legal status of the workers, they can seek aid neither from the Zambian government, whose elites have shares in the casinos, nor from the Chinese state that vacillates in its stance on gambling. As relations between China and Zambia improve, and China's role in Africa grows, there is a constant inflow of Chinese workers that will, for at least several years, continue to move and live in Zambia. Here, fuelled by a new environment, the migrant worker's desire to experience a holistic life and participate in luxurious consumption generates the drive to partake in the casinos. As such, Chinese-funded onsite casinos rely on Chinese labour migrants to capitalise on Chinese workers brought by major Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOE) and private firms.

Our paper draws from more than 50 semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders, comprising workers, senior managers, and staff of Chinese online gambling firms and onsite casinos, together with Philippines and Zambian government officials and Chinese community leaders.<sup>5</sup> We also interviewed Chinese embassy staff in both countries, Filipino-Chinese investors in the Philippines, and members of the Economic and Commercial Counsellor's Office in Zambia. We also had many informal conversations with investors or gamblers in both countries.

### **Chinese capital, labour, and gambling**

Three strands of literature connect Chinese capital and overseas labour. First, political economy of development examines Chinese labour as a subset of the Chinese firm (Brautigam 2011). Taking on a macro-economic angle to craft policies, this research trajectory has since examined sectoral variation, within-firm training, and regional concentration of Chinese workers. For instance, Kevin Gallagher and Roberto Porzecanski differentiate China's impact on Latin America using the host country's economic position, share of natural resource exports, and host labour usage (Gallagher and Porzecanski 2010). Second, sociologists and anthropologists have built ethnographic literature on Chinese labour. For example, Ching Kwan Lee's

research on "eating bitterness" reveals how Chinese firms often hire workers who circumvented visa restrictions (Lee 2018). By examining Chinese road builders in Ethiopia, Driessen argues that China's hopes of sharing development with the developing world have turned into "bitterness" through the experiences of these workers (Driessen 2019). Finally, literature by anthropologists and historians have focused on Chinese labour migration and gambling. For instance, James Warren analyses the Chinese rickshaw drivers in British Singapore, noting their struggles, aspirations, and vices (Warren 2013). In another work, Warren examines how the Thai state has regulated and kept gambling under control alongside Chinese labour migration (*ibid.*). In recent years, China's contemporary capital exports and gambling investments have also overlapped (Hall 2019). For instance, Pál Nyíri demonstrates that Chinese firms package gambling investments as development and modernisation projects, specifically in Cambodia and Laos (Nyíri 2012).<sup>6</sup>

Despite these advancements, these works generally overlook the interface between workplace exploitation, labour migration, and language. While the first strand largely focuses on Chinese firms, the second and third strands somewhat encompass labour and migration. Exploitation partly depends on the host country's willingness to protect its workers (Camba *et al.* 2020: 1062). For instance, Malaysian and Indonesian labour working in the Chinese-funded Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP) and the Indonesia-Morowali Industrial Park have sought the help of their regencies or state governments to enforce labour laws. Both parks have paid monetary compensation and monitor abusive work clusters due to the local governments.<sup>7</sup> How the Chinese firms treat their workers also matters. At times, there is a formal contract that protects Chinese workers from abusive firm practices. As Yu Zheng and Chris Smith finds in Chinese manufacturing investments in Europe, "[firms] have found more space to negotiate with existing institutional players (national states, trade unions, employment agents) to develop divergent employment practices" (Zheng and Smith 2017: 31). In contrast, Aaron Halegua's research in Saipan notes that a construction sector investment by a Chinese provincial SOE and private firm led to labour exploitation (Halegua 2020) in which Chinese workers with formal contracts were treated the same as those without. As explained in the introduction, with the exception of Franceschini and Driessen, these works often occlude the relationship of power and language in the workplace. We develop a framework to explain workplace exploitation in Chinese gambling firms.

3. Chinese online gambling firms are notoriously difficult to track. In analysing the Philippine Security Exchange Commission database, all the firms have majority investors from offshore financial centres. For example, Golden Dragon Empire comprised investors – names of companies or people – from the British Virgin Islands, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in 2018. However, the managers and board of directors appear to be Fujian-domiciled Chinese nationals. The SEC registration system requires managers, the board of directors, and investors (when registering as people) to include their address and citizenship. Unfortunately, it is not possible to acquire data in the OFCs since they do not give shareholder information or any data on their firms. See Camba (2020).
4. As the Bureau of Immigration (BI) shows, mainland Chinese citizens comprise 80% of the new foreign workers in the Philippines. In 2018 alone, 200,000 Chinese nationals applied for the Alien Employment Permit pass.
5. Fieldwork in the Philippines and Zambia occurred from fall 2018 to 2020. Most of the interviewees have been anonymised to protect their identity.
6. Nyíri in other works examines Chinese historical migration in Eastern Europe, noting how gambling and opium dens existed in the early twentieth century (Nyíri 2007).
7. Interview, MCKIP Floor Manager, Kuantan, 22 February 2019; Interview, IMIP Smelter Foreman, Morowali, 27 April 2019.

## Marxian theory of exploitation, gambling, and linguistic labour

Linguistic labour has previously been used to denote a “division of labour” and “proximity” (Adsera and Ferrer 2015; Williamson and Chen 2019), stressing how firms need workers who can engage in verbal and non-verbal forms of communication to generate a shared understanding between customers and workers. In the China-in-Africa literature, there is a growing recognition that the linguistic barrier between Chinese investors and Africans creates certain issues (Park and Chen 2009; Eom 2018). Implicitly, these works examined the relationship between language and the meanings that individuals map onto the world (Kelemen 2003), a phenomenon that Marxist theorist György Lukács calls “the organ and medium of the continuity of social being” (Kelemen 2014).

We complement these works by developing the concept of “linguistic labour” differently, explaining why gambling firms inherently need to import and eventually will exploit Chinese workers. We root linguistic labour in Marxist political economy’s theory of exploitation. This school of thought conventionally defines capital and labour in an antagonistic relationship in which capital exploits labour in order to profit (Tucker 1978: 308). Marx explains how capital produces commodities using the concept of exploitation, which differentiates between necessary labour time and surplus labour time. The former is defined as the amount of time needed to produce a commodity or service, whereas the latter is the amount of extra labour in the production process (*ibid.*: 309). Marx argues that capital generates profit by simultaneously increasing the amount of surplus labour, while decreasing necessary labour time. In order to do so, capitalists engage in one of the following methods: mechanisation, pauperisation, despotism, a reserve army of labour, and many others (*ibid.*: 311).

Among these strategies, the reserve army of labour is an important mechanism to increase surplus labour and decrease labour time (*ibid.*: 312). When operations become too costly, firms relocate to another state in order to access a new reserve army of labour and cheaper inputs (*ibid.*: 313). However, relocation will only make sense if potential workers already possess or could easily learn the skills necessary for the firm’s principal operations. Here, gambling’s principal activities require workers to constantly communicate with players in a commonly shared language.<sup>8</sup> Without this basic level of communication, the transaction falls apart. Language also generates an effect that leads to a feeling of familiarity, making the environment conducive for transactions. However, gambling firms cannot easily train potential workers in the host country in exceptionally difficult languages because language acquisition takes a long time and can be costly. In other words, firms cannot directly resort to relocation to access the reserve army of labour. In contrast, investment in other sectors – small-scale mining or assembling in manufacturing – consists of other responsibilities that require minimum communication or easily transferable skills, which means firms could resort to relocation easily. In these sectors, exploitation focuses on non-linguistic work.

As such, Chinese gambling firms still need to tap the origin country’s reserve army of labour by importing Chinese workers.<sup>9</sup> However, importing Chinese workers to work in the gambling sector increases potential backlash in the host state due to the limited investment spillover of the sector. Gambling firms then need to rely on Chinese workers to take quasi-legal or illicit migration routes to circumvent social tensions. Chinese workers become dependent on the firm in the host country. This dependence in addition to the cost of importing labour leads to the firm’s exploitative practices by

increasing the number of working hours, holding workers hostage, or policing workers through a coercive apparatus. The potential backlash in other sectors may not be as apparent because Chinese labourers are temporary or replaceable and the host country government can justify the development ramifications of those investments in other sectors (Camba *et al.* 2020).<sup>10</sup> For instance, Chinese infrastructure projects have a timeline for completion, which means that the workers will eventually leave. In some situations, the host country mandates the firm to slowly train host country labour to replace Chinese workers.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, it is far more difficult and expensive to train a host country worker to speak Chinese than to import a worker from China. In other words, because of the way accumulation occurs – workers facilitating transactions through language – in gambling, there is a permanent need for Chinese workers and their linguistic labour. The sector’s murky legal status also means that workers are constantly caught between firms that need to exploit them and host country governments that do not want them.

Our formulation of “linguistic labour” parallels Aihwa Ong’s flexible citizenship, where she describes Southeast Asian Chinese as “cultural brokers” for new Chinese migrants (Ong 1999), and Jan Padios’ work on Filipino call centres, where she demonstrates how American firms rely on the colonial English-speaking heritage of Filipinos (Padios 2018). However, in contrast to theirs, our formulation focuses on the mismatch between firm relocation and reserve army of labour in the host state, which generates the need to import Chinese workers who will never get the full protection of the host state government. The combination of these processes leads to exploitation, as we will demonstrate in the empirical subsections.

## Comparing Philippine online gambling and Zambian onsite casinos

We forward three reasons for selecting our cases. First, we selected gambling because it reveals another dimension in the relationship among Chinese labour migration, workplace exploitation, and language use. Although exploitation happens across sectors and even in those deemed to be approved by the Chinese state, an issue that Aaron Halegua demonstrated in Saipan (Halegua 2020), we note that exploitation in the gambling sector unravels differently because of the sectoral nuances of accumulation and the murky legal status of the sector. In the construction sector, Franceschini and Driessen illustrated that linguistic capacity shapes the workplace site in different ways, sowing discord in Cambodia and empowering some workers – through minimal communication – in Ethiopia (Franceschini 2020;

8. This is a fieldwork finding. Although slot machines and low-end bets can be done automatically, mid- to high-end games in online and onsite settings – baccarat, blackjack, and pai gow poker – require the dealer to communicate with the player. In online gambling, the web-based nature of the transaction always necessitates the dealer’s mediation through customer service agents.
9. Hypothetically, gambling firms can import labour from Taiwan as well, but according to our fieldwork, those workers are more expensive. Several Chinese managers of gambling firms we interviewed also told us that it is difficult to build trust with Taiwanese due to political sensitivity between mainland China and Taiwan. Thus, it is rare to see Chinese gambling firms hire Taiwanese. Additionally, most of the online and onsite gambling firms comprise current or former Chinese nationals, which means their labour brokerage networks are in China. No literature has demonstrated the relationship between language, labour, and gambling firms, but our fieldwork demonstrated that language can create affinity in the gambling sector. For onsite casinos in Zambia, our fieldwork observes that Chinese gamblers feel more comfortable speaking Mandarin or their hometown dialects than English to dealers or other players.
10. This is not to deny that backlash often occurs against Chinese-funded projects. However, host country governments can justify new infrastructure projects more easily than gambling-related investments.
11. We recognise that in other host countries, the government does not mandate the Chinese firm to train host country workers. Additionally, the local governments are bribed to look the other way. In these cases, exploitation can occur.

Driessen 2020). This argument makes sense since in construction, the mode of accumulation – fixed payments by host countries – and actual work – construction labour, i.e. digging, welding, retrofitting – do not depend on language use. In contrast, the mode of accumulation in gambling relies on the workers directly communicating with customers in a series of games. In this case, linguistic proficiency is necessary to facilitate online or onsite communication between the player and the workers, with the latter representing the firm. As we argued, Mandarin usage becomes the vector for firms to exploit workers. Additionally, the amorphous legal status of the gambling sector across states emboldens the firms to exploit the workers. Since gambling is illegal in mainland China and gambling firms know that they have a good relationship with host state elites, firms know that workers cannot run to the Chinese or host country governments for remediation. This inconsistent legal status that discourages Chinese workers from seeking help may not be the case in other sectors.

Second, we demonstrate that similar patterns of labour exploitation occur at two types of gambling subsectors, which are aptly represented by the development trajectories of both countries. The Philippines' service-sector economy (Cardenas 2020), which constitutes the country's main economic engine, has attracted enormous Chinese online gambling capital. The size of online gambling in the service sector makes it possible to analyse the intensity of labour exploitation due to the magnitude of capital-intensive investment. Studying online gambling in countries where the sector has been banned makes the analysis of processes less tenable. In the past two decades, Chinese migrants in Zambia have built onsite casinos. Zambian onsite casinos represent a gambling sector that thrives in an economy that relies on manufacturing and extractives. We analyse two countries with diverging development strategies, demonstrating that similar exploitative practices occur in both online and onsite gambling settings.

Finally, China has inconsistently enforced laws on Chinese gambling firms outside China. While the state bans Chinese citizens from gambling inside China, the Chinese state does not often punish Chinese tourists for activities deemed legal or quasi-legal in the host state. Nonetheless, the Chinese embassy has taken a hard-line stance against online gambling in the Philippines, calling on the Philippines government to ban online gambling and discouraging tourists from working in the sector.<sup>12</sup> Across Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, online gambling firms have played cat-and-mouse games with the Chinese government. For instance, due to lax capital controls and gambling legislation, Fiji was once the capital of online gambling (Presterudstuen 2014). However, pressure from the Chinese government eventually forced the firms to relocate to Palau, a country without formal diplomatic ties with China.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese embassy in Zambia continues to protest against these casinos.<sup>14</sup> However, there seem to be fewer objections on the part of the Chinese state, illustrating some degree of passive acceptance or "the politics of permissibility." Despite the difference in the Chinese government's approach, we show labour exploitation across both subsectors.

## Online gambling capital in the Philippines

Boasting more than 25 onsite casinos, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's administration (2001-2010) built a multibillion-dollar gambling industry that attracts thousands of wealthy players per week. In partnership with foreign nationals, Filipino capitalists own most of the onsite casinos while their partners take up a minority stake (Camba 2020). During Arroyo's tenure, onsite casinos flourished while online gambling remained little more

than an afterthought. By 2010, gambling technology eventually caught up, developing parallel IPs, covert payment systems, and a plethora of gaming platforms (*ibid.*). In 2013, the global online gambling market reached 700 billion USD, of which 100-120 billion USD belonged to the East-Southeast Asian economies (Banks 2016). Due to the potential of online platforms to launder money, China also began tightening its grip on gambling firms in Hong Kong and Macau. The changing sectoral, technological, and regulatory environment became painfully obvious to a key segment of Filipino elites, who realised that they were missing out on a massive opportunity to accumulate capital.<sup>15</sup> Key Filipino elites – some already onsite casino owners and many not – mobilised to support Duterte's candidacy and placed themselves in the position to benefit from online gambling capital. When Duterte became president, online gambling experienced a significant policy reversal. PhilWeb's contract, which was signed in 2003 during Arroyo's term, was terminated.<sup>16</sup> In October 2016, PAGCOR regained its powers to sell licenses, establishing the "Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators" (POGO) investment scheme that gave online gambling firms the right to establish firms in Philippine cities and receive substantial investment incentives.<sup>17</sup>

Online gambling uses web platforms to link the firm representatives and the players through computer-mediated communication or new electronic media facilities. In one part of the world, customers gamble through their smartphones, tablets, and computers. Elsewhere, employees of the firm facilitate the transaction, ranging from customer service and marketing to payments. These platforms inherently compress *time and space*, which constitute the need for onsite casinos to house the players and the firm in close physical proximity. However, compressing time and space is necessary but insufficient for online gambling operations. What is inherently crucial is the shared language between the player and the representative. Firm operations, such as customer-specific emails, advertisements, video consultation, chats, and billing need to be in the shared language. In other words, the operations of online gambling firms are tied to the ability of the firm – in the form of the platform or service provider – and the player to communicate with one another.

For large online gambling firms, workers are recruited nationally through a large network of brokers. Smaller online gambling firms disproportionately hire through family-based connections and *laoxiang* 老鄉.<sup>18</sup> Chinese labour becomes an absolute necessity for online gambling firms to facilitate capital accumulation for several reasons. First, as accumulation is tied to fluency in

12. Cliff Venzon, "Duterte Hits the Jackpot as China Fuels Online Gambling Boom," *Asian Nikkei Review*, 9 July 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Media-Entertainment/Duterte-hits-the-jackpot-as-china-fuels-online-gambling-boom2> (accessed on 5 September 2020).

13. Martin Williams, "Palau nears Approval for Online Casino, Sports Betting," *Gambling Compliance*, 19 May 2020, [https://gamblingcompliance.com/premium-content/insights\\_analysis/palau-nears-approval-online-casino-sports-betting](https://gamblingcompliance.com/premium-content/insights_analysis/palau-nears-approval-online-casino-sports-betting) (accessed on 15 June 2020).

14. "中國領事保護和協助指南" (Zhongguo lingshi baohu he xiezhu zhinan, Guide to Consular Protection and Services Outside Chinese Territory), *World Knowledge Press* (世界知識出版社), 2018, <http://cs.mfa.gov.cn/lsbhz/P020181207363467982595.pdf> (accessed on 10 October 2019).

15. Interview, Filipino-Chinese oligarch, Singapore, 17 November 2018.

16. PhilWeb, a private firm owned by Filipino oligarch Roberto Ongpin, acquired a 13-year contract with Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation or PAGCOR, as a government owned and controlled corporation, to sell these licenses outside the special economic zones. Since PhilWeb holds the monopoly in major cities, online gambling firms were only allowed in the various Investment Promotion Agencies (IPAs), which were autonomous sub-agencies designed to give favourable terms to foreign investors in order to generate capital stock, revenues, and employment. Duterte's victory created the additional POGO scheme.

17. There are 60 online gambling firms registered in the "POGO" scheme and 68 registered in various IPAs. Sixteen firms are registered in both POGOs and the IPAs. However, because IPA officials often alter the investment and firm data in the registrations, there could be far more hidden online gambling firms. See Camba 2020.

18. This refers to the people from the same hometown.

Mandarin or another Chinese language, there is a trade-off between capital mobility and linguistic fluency. Conventionally, firm relocation generates windfall savings due to the lower cost of labour, land, and operations than that of the original location. Additionally, firms can bargain for better terms because capital-deficient states compete against each other for firm relocation. In this case, the Philippines gives online gambling firms cheaper real estate. Philippine cities experienced a real estate glut due to decreasing call centre investments because of automation compared to other Southeast Asian states.<sup>19</sup> Apart from higher real estate cost, religious regulations in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have made these states less tenable. The Philippines also exercises relative autonomy from the Chinese government, which states at the lower end of the development spectrum – Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar – have not sufficiently demonstrated in foreign policy matters. One interviewee, a Hong Kong investor in the online gambling firm, points out:

[T]he Philippine government is often portrayed to be a lackey of China, but your politicians are mercenaries. Manila is not only cheaper than other cities, but many of your bureaucracies have a system in place: how to bring in workers, to register them for taxes, to get them fake passports... and you know this because you're Filipino. Filipinos know how to do business.<sup>20</sup>

While capital mobility allows online gambling firms to acquire real estate and state protection, Chinese labour shares the language crucial to make transactions compress time and space. Chinese workers – fluent in Mandarin or another Chinese language – enable the online gambling firm to connect to customers all the time.<sup>21</sup> Fluency in Chinese is tied to a broader economic context. In East-Southeast Asia, most customers are located not only in China, but also in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. All these states have experienced some degree of economic mobility. Among these states, China provides the greatest number of customers due to its massive population and the domestic legal ramifications of gambling. An interviewee who is a marketing associate of an online gambling firm indicates that, “though the PRC customers gamble far lower amounts than that of Chinese in other places, the number of gamblers more than compensates.”<sup>22</sup> The associate said, “Most Chinese customers play poker, or mahjong, or sometimes engage in sports betting. Our most popular service is a high-end baccarat where players place proxy bets in high amounts. They need to place their bets in *yuan*, which will be transferred within China, but they choose the currency of their winnings.”<sup>23</sup>

Second, Chinese labour is used for a variety of functions that fit in the online gambling “multiple operations,” which utilise Chinese for web-based labour, whereas Filipinos perform place-specific labour. A gambling firm consists of several divisions: (a) a marketing division, which targets the email addresses and landlines of Chinese populations around the world in order to induce them into playing; (b) the gaming division, composed of Chinese workers pretending to be players in the game to entice players into playing more; (c) training that teaches the protocols for working in the firm, living in the host country, and dealing with the host state actors; and (d) operations, which combines programming, accounting, and financial transfers.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Filipinos are crucial to most kinds of auxiliary labour. Associated firms, which are owned by the local partners or co-investors of the online gambling firm, bring their Filipino workers for auxiliary labour, such as accountants, security, and administration.<sup>25</sup>

One crucial aspect is that online gambling investors – Chinese and Filipino

elites – exploit the difference between Filipinos and Chinese. Indeed, because of the sheer number of Chinese workers, there is a need to employ Filipinos to police the Chinese workers.<sup>26</sup> Filipino security police the building, but also impose force on Chinese workers who disobey the online gambling firms. From making sure the workers do not overuse their bathroom breaks to monitoring cell phone usage in the breakrooms,<sup>27</sup> Filipino labour provides the coercive apparatus that the online gambling firms need to maximise the web-based labour that the Chinese worker performs. Chinese workers who cannot be disciplined are handcuffed to a chair, a pipe in the basement, or on the terrace.<sup>28</sup> Workers are also threatened with a unilateral pay reduction. An interviewed Filipino security guard points out:

I know their customers are Chinese gamblers. This place makes sure that their customers gamble, gamble, and gamble. Because of our customers, we keep this place open 24/7, and those Chinese workers often need to be on time for work in order for operations to proceed. If they are not on time, we would be given penalties by management and the company will reduce our pay. So we make sure they go to work – they're the ones who went to the Philippines to work and they get paid more than us anyway. So, we make sure they work and there are times we resort to violence.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, Filipinos deal with issues that may arise from a specific context that could derail web-based operations. For instance, in dealing with the acquisition of permits from the local government or registration processes, the online gambling firms hire the top law firms in the country.<sup>30</sup> When some Chinese workers get into trouble with the police, the online gambling firms use these same Filipino lawyers to keep workers out of jail. Those who move around cities to bring bribes to the police or local politicians constitute the Filipino staff of the firm, demonstrating place-specific labour.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, since most of the imported Chinese workers are men due to the disparity in braving migration and grey area operations, it is necessary to employ Filipino “show girls” as a means of soliciting customers. Specifically, Filipino women often play the role of “show girls,” who appear in front of the

19. Alvin Camba, “Why is the Philippines the home for Chinese offshore gambling,” *The Diplomat*, 22 November 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/why-is-the-philippines-the-home-for-chinese-offshore-gambling/> (accessed on 14 June 2020).

20. Interview, Hong Kong investor, Hong Kong, 3 July 2019.

21. Interviews, eight Filipino Chinese managers, Makati, 21 February 2019 and 17 September 2019. Interviews were conducted on two different occasions during the visit to the online gambling firms.

22. Interviews, several marketing associates, online gambling firm, Makati, 18 September 2019.

23. *Ibid.* It is important to note that Matthew Campbell's research in Saipan found that VIP rooms use this same method, which they called a “junket.” See: Matthew Campbell, “A Chinese Casino Has Conquered a Piece of America,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 15 February 2018, <http://bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-02-15/a-chinese-company-has-conquered-a-piece-of-america> (accessed on 12 June 2020).

24. Visits at the Golden Dragon Empire, 6 November 2018, and Swanton Asia, Inc., 19 September 2019.

25. Auxiliary labour refers to work done in service of the sector's principal production or activity. These sometime include professional accountants, lawyers, and brokers who facilitate the firm's transactions with the Philippine government. Multiple interviews, Filipino Chinese shareholders, Makati and Quezon City, 20-22 February 2019.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Several interviews, Filipino security guards, online gambling firm, Manila, 17-18 September 2019.

28. Gilbert Felongco, “Chinese worker's death in Philippines investigated,” *Gulf News*, 13 August 2019, <https://gulfnnews.com/world/asia/philippines/chinese-workers-death-in-philippines-investigated-1.65791633> (accessed on 22 May 2020).

29. Interview, Filipino security guard, 18 September 2019.

30. Interview, Associate lawyer, Romulo Law Firm, Manila, 16 September 2019; corroborated by interviews with another lawyer from ACCRALAW on the same day.

31. *Ibid.*

camera and are then dubbed over in Mandarin. Because Filipino appearances span from “white” to “East Asian” and “Polynesian,” an abundant selection of affordable “show girls” are available for hire.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, though the working hours vary across firms and divisions, online gambling firms generally exploit the Chinese workers. Workers are promised a set amount of wages. This would be substantially or marginally diminished after arriving in the Philippines. Passports are withheld from some workers, in particular those who had to use the firm’s “travel arrangements” and housing. According to a Filipino manager, a Chinese customer service labourer works 10-14 hours a day, earning an average monthly salary of 600 to 1,000 USD.<sup>33</sup> Those who speak Mandarin earn at the lower end of the wage scale, while other Chinese speakers earn higher wages.<sup>34</sup> Some firms provide customer service employees with a studio apartment for four to five workers in a building rented or owned by the firm.<sup>35</sup> Trusted engineers, programmers, or financial analysts are paid 1,500 to 2,500 USD monthly as well as being given the right to rent an apartment in Makati or another more affluent city. Their payment is deposited in their foreign bank accounts.<sup>36</sup> But Chinese workers have the option to receive a portion of their wages in Philippine pesos. At present, the online gambling industry in the Philippines has a workforce conservatively estimated at 250,000-300,000 people. This estimate exceeds the number of Bureau of Immigration-approved labour permits.<sup>37</sup>

In an interview, a Chinese worker in an online gambling firm said:

We work six days a week, around 12 hours a day. Our salaries are fixed for those 12 hours, but we can get paid more, especially when there is a demand for overtime. Some workers also need to work every day since they borrowed money from the company to pay for some expenses in China. It is tough since we have to be up at four or five in the morning to get ready for the six-a.m. shift. We have to work because they can reduce our pay. They often reward us with higher pay if we work more.<sup>38</sup>

Online gambling firms disproportionately determine the working conditions of their workers. The Philippine government, which is only accountable to wealthy Filipinos, only answer to the online gambling firms due to their connection to the Duterte government. Company abuses, ranging from exploitative working conditions to sexual harassment, will be left unchecked.<sup>39</sup> For instance, a Taiwanese worker who appeared in a Philippine Senate Hearing relayed her experience that the medical and security staff of the online gambling firm sexually harassed her. Another former online gambling worker corroborates the Taiwanese worker’s experience, noting that in their office, worker dormitories are connected to the firm.<sup>40</sup> The firm workers could enter the rooms of the workers unannounced and could unilaterally inspect their belongings. She could not tell anyone because she relied on the firm to live, only speaks Chinese, and did not trust other workers. She was only able to tell her story when she met several Taiwanese tourists in the Mall of Asia, who then introduced her to a Filipino acquaintance who worked for an opposition Philippine Senator.<sup>41</sup> In other words, Chinese workers have no recourse, since the Philippine government, the police, or any associated agency will not help them.

Moreover, Chinese nationals face an additional dilemma if they seek aid from the Chinese government. Specifically, Chinese nationals caught working for an online gambling firm can be jailed for three to 10 years. In an interview with a political attaché of the Chinese embassy,<sup>42</sup> we asked why China has been unable to crack down on or stop these firms, the workers, or customers from within China. The attaché said, “There are so many of them...

We are doing the best we can. There are many police operations across China, but we are limited in places like the Philippines.”<sup>43</sup> His views have been confirmed by a Chinese police officer, who argued, “China needs to pay the local police for them to do anything.”<sup>44</sup> He points out that the Philippine National Police helped arrest 360 Chinese workers in the online gambling firm in exchange for monetary compensation.<sup>45</sup>

## Zambian onsite casinos

While no dataset documents the number of firms or onsite casinos in Zambia, our fieldwork shows that the casinos are primarily owned by foreign investors, such as Chinese, South Africans, and Russians. We documented 35 casinos located across the country, composed largely of greenfield investments. While most firms are solely owned by Chinese nationals, others are joint partnerships between Chinese and other foreign nationals. Greeks, Indians, Sri Lankans, and Russians have become partners in these firms.<sup>46</sup> For instance, the first Chinese gambling firm was the Great Wall Casino, a joint venture between a Chinese and Greek national that has been around for 20 years, attracting Chinese and non-Chinese customers to the sites.

Fujianese-owned Chinese gambling firms have been rising in Zambia in the past five years. Currently, more than 10 Chinese gambling firms are owned by Fujianese, or more specifically by investors from Fuqing, a county-level city in Fujian province. Half of these firms were initially operating in South Africa; they relocated their business to Zambia to escape the worsening crime rate in South Africa and the depreciation of the Rand. In addition, because of China’s grand campaign against special criminal syndicates (*saohei chue* 掃黑除惡), several owners had to relocate their business from China. Since gambling is illegal in mainland China, those involved in the gambling business are often considered criminal syndicates or “local mafia.”<sup>47</sup> Due to China’s anti-corruption and anti-gang crime campaign, many of the Fujianese who were involved in the gambling business in China cannot continue their business in mainland China. As three Fujianese owners explained to us, they were originally involved in the gambling business in Fujian, but after their relatives were arrested owing to similar business, they decided to relocate

32. Interview, Hong Kong manager, online gambling firm, Manila, 19 September 2019.

33. Interview, Filipino-Chinese manager, Makati, 22 February 2019.

34. During our fieldwork, we encountered different Chinese languages and dialects. The most commonly spoken ones are Cantonese, Fuzhou dialect, and various iterations of Hokkien, Taiwanese, and Sichuanese. One of the authors has a working proficiency in Filipino Hokkien. The other author speaks fluent Mandarin and can fully understand Taiwanese/Sichuanese as well as understanding basic Cantonese.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. This is based on an official document on Tourists and Special Work Permits from the Bureau of Immigration, Department of Justice, Philippine Government. One of the authors acquired the document during fieldwork at the Bureau of Immigration Head Office in Manila in October 2019.

38. Interview, Chinese online gambling worker, Manila, 23 February 2019. Interviews corroborated by two other Chinese national online gambling workers.

39. Aika Rey, “Rescued Taiwanese worker tags a ‘Michael Yang’ as POGO protector in gov’t,” *Rappler*, 12 February 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/251668-rescued-taiwanese-pogo-worker-tags-protector-government> (accessed on 15 June 2020).

40. Interview, former online gambling worker, 13 February 2020.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Interview, PAGCOR official, 5 November 2018.

43. Interview, two Chinese embassy staff members, Manila, 6 November 2018.

44. Interview, Chinese security delegate, Manila, 10 October 2019.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Interviews, Chinese community leaders and managers from Chinese-owned casinos, Lusaka, April 2019.

47. However, it does not mean that the gambling business completely disappeared in China. Rather, it is hidden and closely linked to China’s domestic corruption.

their business to Africa. They chose Zambia because gambling is legal here, and they heard the country is relatively safe compared to other African countries such as South Africa and Nigeria. Furthermore, competition in the gambling business is not as fierce as in South Africa.<sup>48</sup>

Stronger relations between Zambia and China, as well as loose structures on labour, led to an increase from a mere 3,000 Chinese migrant workers in the 1990s to 30,000-50,000 in 2019 (Li and Shi 2020). Chinese onsite casinos receive no financial incentives from the policy banks, central or provincial government, or other state-oriented programs. All the Chinese-funded casinos are privately-owned. Around two-thirds of these casinos are in the Zambian capital of Lusaka, where approximately 20,000 Chinese nationals live and work, while the other third are in the Copperbelt region, where a large population of Chinese miners are located. In these firms, we found evidence that Chinese state-financed construction firms have been involved in the gambling sector. For instance, the Golden Peacock Hotel in Lusaka, an establishment owned by Anhui Foreign Economic Construction (Group) Co. (AFECC), houses a newly-built onsite casino.<sup>49</sup> According to the company's documents, total investment in the Lusaka-based casino is 100 million *yuan* (approximately 14 million USD).<sup>50</sup> AFECC was a majority state-owned enterprise that transitioned into a mixed-ownership enterprise in which most of the capital became private.<sup>51</sup> Although state capital or Chinese loans did not directly go into the onsite casinos inside the Golden Peacock, state capital indirectly becomes involved in the gambling sector by owning shares in a hotel that houses a casino.<sup>52</sup>

As for Chinese workers in the gambling firms, we estimate a small number of Chinese workers in onsite casinos who were previously traders and peasants from small counties, towns, and villages.<sup>53</sup> Exploitation happens in several ways. First, as most of these gambling firms are family businesses, the owners tend to hire either their relatives or *laoxiang*. Most of the owners believe that it is easier to “control” their *laoxiang*. The owner of one Chinese gambling firm in Kitwe explained:

It is easier to manage family members and someone from my hometown. They will not run. We have a permanent relationship, so we don't necessarily need to sign contracts with them. It could be weird, and we trust each other. Because it is family business, so we are close to each other, and we rely on each other.<sup>54</sup>

This family-business model can lead to a labour hostage situation and further exploitation in some casinos. As explained earlier, many of the Chinese workers are relatives or *laoxiang* of the owners. Many of the workers enter Zambia illegally or use tourist visas as an entry point. Some of the firms pay those who do not have hometown ties only annually or twice a year to better control labour. In some cases, owners indefinitely hold passports to keep the workers in the firm or to prevent them from going back to China. We have spoken to several Chinese and Zambian workers who previously worked for a Chinese casino. In some cases, owners did not pay or have only partially paid the workers because the casinos have shut down due to financial mismanagement. Owners have left without fulfilling their obligations.

Second, Chinese workers are crucial to attract Chinese customers. Most workers in the firm are Zambians, who often become guards, bartenders, cashiers, and surveillance officers. While Zambian salaries range from 150 to 300 USD per month, Chinese workers could earn from 1,500 to 2,500 USD.<sup>55</sup> A senior manager explains the big difference in terms of salaries and hiring preferences as being because “most customers are Chinese and migrant

workers. They are not that educated and do not speak English. Therefore, it is important for us to make sure we have hired Chinese managers that can serve them and make them feel at home.”<sup>56</sup> Eighty to ninety percent of the customers in these casinos are Chinese.<sup>57</sup> A senior manager in a Lusaka-based Chinese branch, who also had working experience in the casino in Macau, explains that “most Zambians here are poor... We are targeting the Chinese, especially businessmen and the labour force of private companies. They like to visit casinos and spend some money, as there are not many places to go in the city.”<sup>58</sup>

Chinese nationals largely occupy higher or mid-level positions due to their linguistic capacity and the firm's inability to trust locals with more important matters.<sup>59</sup> Most of the Chinese workers have limited education and speak very little English, but they can speak the owners' dialect, such as Fuzhou dialect or Hokkien. In their daily communication with the owners, they tend to speak their local dialect or Mandarin, limiting the ability of non-speakers to hear the conversation. Specifically, casinos deal with cash transfer and tax evasion. These are hidden and sensitive issues. Here, Chinese owners prefer to give these sensitive duties to their compatriots, particularly to *laoxiang*, whom they know and with whom they can communicate well. Furthermore, as many of the Chinese workers have entered the country illegally, there is a mutual hostage situation that keeps the workers from reporting the owners. In contrast, owners are afraid that Zambians might collect evidence, such as recording and photocopying – and blackmail them.<sup>60</sup>

Third, firms have a relationship with Zambian state elites and Chinese gangs, which discourages workers from seeking help from the host state government. In our fieldwork, many managers of Chinese-owned casinos boasted of their close connections with the Zambian state, but they all refused to expose the specific names of officials.<sup>61</sup> Following is a quote from a manager of a Fujianese-owned Chinese gambling firm in Lusaka:

48. The Fujianese, or more specifically the Fuqing gang, also smuggled slot machines from China and South Africa to Zambia. We found many slot machines in casinos in cities and small towns during our fieldwork. Zambian officials have pointed out that these machines have been illegally smuggled without proper licenses and can be found across the country.
49. AFECC has also built several Golden Peacock Hotels in African countries such as Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique.
50. “安徽省外經建設集團有限公司公司債券2016年半年度報告” (Anhuisheng Waijing jianshe jituan youxian gongsi gongsi zhaiquan 2016 nian banniandu baogao, 2016 semi-annual report of Anhui Foreign Economic Construction (Group) Co., Cooperation Bond), 安徽省外經建設集團 (Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Group Co.), 2016, [http://pdf.dfctw.com/pdf/H2\\_AN201608310017415380\\_1.pdf](http://pdf.dfctw.com/pdf/H2_AN201608310017415380_1.pdf) (accessed on 10 June 2020).
51. The remaining 9.72% is state capital owned by the Anhui Municipal State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission. 安徽省外經建設集團債券違約 (Anhui waijing jianshe jituan zhaiquan weiyue, The Defaulting of Anhui Foreign Economic Construction (Group) Co., Cooperation Bonds), 中國經濟網 (Zhongguo Jingjiwang), 21 July 2019, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1639622571011832548&wfr=spider&for=pc> (accessed on 10 June, 2020).
52. Halebua similarly finds that a Chinese provincial SOE has been involved in constructing a hotel that houses a casino.
53. Multiple interviews, managers from Chinese-owned casinos in Zambia, Lusaka and Kitwe, July 2018 and 2019. The number might have been reduced due to the Coronavirus pandemic.
54. Interview, owner of Chinese-owned casino, Kitwe, 25 July 2019.
55. Multiple interviews, staff members from Chinese-owned casinos in Zambia, Lusaka and Kitwe, July 2019.
56. Interview, senior manager, Great Wall Casino, Lusaka, 22 July 2019.
57. Estimate from interviewing 10 Chinese casino managers in Lusaka.
58. Interview, senior manager, Galaxy Casino, Lusaka, 23 July 2019.
59. Unlike the large number of Chinese workers in the Philippine case, we estimate hundreds of Chinese workers in the casinos.
60. Interviews, multiple owners of Chinese-funded casinos in Zambia, Lusaka, April and May 2019.
61. Interviews, multiple Chinese community leaders. As businessmen who have been living in Zambia for more than 10 years, they told us that some of these Chinese-owned gambling firms have given shares to the family of the Zambian president's wife, Esther Lungu. However, we were unable to find any actual documents as they are highly confidential. Disputes between the Chinese workers and the casinos are mediated informally by the Chinese business association leaders.

For the sake of long-term development, we have to give some shares to senior government officials. Otherwise, it is impossible for us to survive here. They will keep coming to the casinos and looking for trouble... We put in their relatives' names and usually we are not directly in touch with the officials. We gave one very senior official 8% of our shares. The official did not invest anything or contribute anything to our daily management. For us, the official is our amulet (*hushenfu* 護身符).<sup>62</sup>

Fourth, Zambian workers have been unable to turn to the Chinese state. In most cases, they have resorted to the Chinese community to resolve disputes. The vice-president of the Chinese Association in Zambia explains, "We community leaders have much more knowledge about the status quo of the Chinese companies in Zambia than the Chinese Embassy and the Economic and Commercial Counsellor's Office of the Chinese Embassy."<sup>63</sup> While the Chinese embassy has a list of firms in Zambia, they do not have a record of all Chinese firms, individuals, and tourists in Zambia. Their current list covers only around 200 Chinese firms, and does not include gambling firms.<sup>64</sup> A current staff member of the Chinese embassy in Lusaka explains his sense of powerlessness as follows:

I believe if we ask the Zambian government to stop the gambling business of the Chinese, the Zambians will ask us for money, since they would be losing money. We may manage to pay back Zambia, but Africa is a continent with 54 countries(...) Nearly all the Chinese-built casinos here in Zambia were built by Chinese private firms or Chinese businesspeople, with whom we have little connection. Those private investors do not even inform us when they enter the country. Most of them only contact us when they need us, for example, when they need consular protection.<sup>65</sup>

However, the Chinese embassy has also shown some degree of "the politics of permissibility" of onsite gambling. For example, the previous Chinese ambassador Yang Youming was vehemently against Chinese casinos. At the time of the previous ambassador, many embassy events were held at the Golden Peacock Hotel. When the casino was established, ambassador Yang forbade all embassy staff from even going into the hotel.<sup>66</sup> Many other Chinese state-owned companies in Zambia also followed the Chinese embassy's rule, although it was more or less a verbal rule. A PR manager from a Chinese company shared that when they were organising an event for the ambassador, their first option "was actually the Golden Peacock Hotel as we know the managers well. But since we knew that the ambassador doesn't like the hotel because of the casino, we chose another one instead."<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Drawing from interviews and visits to the firms, we demonstrated that Chinese-funded gambling firms inherently rely on the "linguistic labour" of Chinese workers. The nature of the gambling sector necessitates the use of a common language, for the firm and players need to communicate. When the customers are connected online from East or Southeast Asia, Chinese labour in Philippine online gambling function as marketers, gamers, and operators. When most customers comprise workers from other Chinese-speaking countries, Chinese workers serve as dealers to directly interact with the players. Chinese workers also become managers to safeguard the finances of the firm or conduct quasi-legal practices that the owners do not feel

comfortable delegating to host state workers. Absent the institutionalised agreement between states, gambling firms directly deal with host state elites who are seeking to enrich themselves. Host state elites facilitate quasi-legal labour inflows, circumvent host state institutions, and remain complicit in the activities of the firms. In the Philippines, there have been several cases where Chinese online gambling workers have committed suicide because of abuse. In Zambia, Chinese onsite casino workers need to demonstrate their willingness to work as their wages are withheld for six months to an entire year. In both cases, the Chinese government has done very little to help the workers, or to facilitate their extradition back to China.

Our paper makes three possible contributions. First, we make a conceptual argument that some sectors – in this case, gambling – inherently have limited spillover potential and may be even more prone to exploitation than other sectors. Manufacturing, extractives, and infrastructure may not be as reliant on "linguistic labour" and labour migration due to the far lower training cost of some skills. In contrast, importing labour is and will always be cheaper than training host state elites to speak Chinese. These sectors also have a more pronounced role between China and the host state. These differences might at least limit labour abuse. Second, we empirically demonstrated that similar processes of exploitation occur in two very different places, and relatively dissimilar subsectors. By doing so, we contribute to an understudied sector in the globalisation of Chinese firms, and the contemporary movement of Chinese migrants. Finally, our findings illustrate that gambling must be seen by states as a development issue. While some states can regulate gambling in order to acquire additional revenue, there are unintended social consequences, such as sex work, kidnapping, and abuse. Future research could examine under what conditions and mechanisms states can use these inflows to bolster development goals and to minimise negative consequences.

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62. Interview, Fujianese-owned Chinese gambling firm, Lusaka. Phone interview, 8 June 2020.  
 63. Interview, vice-president of the Chinese Association in Zambia, Lusaka, 5 May 2019.  
 64. Interview, staff of the Economic and Commercial Counsellor's Office of the Chinese Embassy in Zambia, Lusaka, 25 April 2019.  
 65. Interview, current staff of the Chinese Embassy in Zambia, Lusaka, 22 July 2019.  
 66. However, when the new Chinese ambassador Li Jie arrived, this rule did not continue. Embassy staff and employees from Chinese SOEs were free to go to the hotel.  
 67. Interview with a PR manager of a Zambia-based Chinese company, Lusaka, 28 April 2019.

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