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Social Networks, Social Responsibility, and Sustainable Development of Chinese Corporations in Africa

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Abstract: Based on the questionnaire data and the qualitative data obtained in two field surveys in Zimbabwe in 2018 and 2019, this study examined local people's attitudes towards Chinese corporations. Focusing on locals' impressions of Chinese corporations and their willingness to support the sustainable development of Chinese corporations as dependent variables, and using demographic statistics, social networks, and social responsibility as independent variables, we applied multiple linear regression analysis to explore the effect of Chinese corporations' social networks and social responsibility on their sustainability. The findings showed that social networks overall help to enhance locals' impressions of Chinese corporations, but social networks have no positive impact on local communities' willingness to support more Chinese corporations. In contrast, corporate social responsibility clearly has a much greater impact on the capability of the corporation to gain support from local communities for its sustainable development. This study speaks to the need for a scholarly investigation of China–Africa links as a global hotspot issue and provides a reference value for Chinese or other corporations for how to handle the relationship with local communities.

Keywords: social networks; social responsibility; sustainable development; Chinese corporations; China–Africa links; Zimbabwe

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1. Introduction: Increasingly Emergence of Chinese Corporations in African Countries

During the past several decades, China has been actively developing international markets stimulated by the changing external environment (e.g., the deepening of globalization) and the internal environment (e.g., the deepening of China's open and reform policy). This trend is particularly evident in China's implementation of the "Going Global Strategy", which has been promoted by the Chinese central government since the 1990s. According to the Report on Development of China's Outward Investment [1], the Chinese corporations that move overseas or were incorporated overseas have maintained an astonishing growth rate with an average annual rate of approximately 15% from 2001 to 2017. In the later 2010s, China had already become the second-largest foreign investor on the global foreign investing map, on which the African continent occupies a very important position. Driven by a series of cooperative frameworks such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Chinese corporations heading for Africa are showing a vigorous growth trend. By the end of 2017, over 3400 overseas Chinese corporations had invested in 52 countries in Africa, with a coverage of 86.7% [1]. These corporations not only include the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that undertake aid or/and bidding projects but also include the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with private investments.

As Chinese corporations' visibility in Africa increased, the discussions about Chinese corporations in Africa also began to increase swiftly. The current discussions on Chinese corporations in Africa have predominantly focused on the interrelationships between Chinese corporations and host societies. For example, these discussions involve the impact of

Chinese corporations in Africa on local communities, including the effect of corporations on local economies [2], the social effects of corporations on host societies [3,4], the impact of corporations on the climate and environment [5], and the promotion of Africa's industrialization by the corporation [6]. Conversely, some studies have also paid attention to the role of African societies in the developing trajectories of Chinese corporations in Africa, including discussions on the role of Africa's social environment in formulating Chinese corporations' market strategies [7], how the African market environment challenges the development of Chinese manufacturing industries in Africa [8], and the impact of institutional differences (e.g., the difference in employment systems) on Chinese corporations' investment strategies in Africa [9,10]. This list is much longer than what we have listed here, and there are many other studies on this subject.

Although existing studies have begun to address the social aspects of the relationships between African societies and Chinese corporations in Africa [3,4,9,10], the topic relating to Chinese corporations' social connections with African societies from much more micro levels (e.g., social network, or social responsibility) still remains under-explored. This is a problematic issue worthy of reflection. In fact, Chinese corporations in Africa (or, more broadly overseas Chinese corporations) are often criticized for lack of social connections with host communities, which has a negative impact on these corporations' sustainability. For example, many studies have discussed the special economic zones formed by Chinese corporations in Africa [11,12], the existence of which has largely intensified the impression that Chinese corporations are disconnected from the host societies and thus have incurred more critiques. In this sense, our key questions are as follows: (1) Can the increasing connections with host societies provide China's foreign-invested corporations more support? (2) How should overseas Chinese corporations look at their social responsibility in host societies to deal with the challenges of their sustainable development they are facing? In this regard, the main issue in this article is to discuss the effect of Chinese foreign corporations' local social connections on their sustainable development.

2. Social Variables of Corporate Sustainability

Rapid global socio-economic shifts require corporations to respond quickly to market changes; otherwise, their survival is at risk. In such a context, corporate sustainability has gradually become a topic of great concern to corporate development [13]. Before discussing the concept of corporate sustainability, we need to give it a clear definition. There has already been quite a large amount of literature addressing sustainability. The most widely adopted definition for sustainability is Brundtland's [14] definition that highlights sustainability as a kind of development "that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs". However, this definition is widely used in ecological, environmental, and other broader fields, so it seems inappropriate to define the development status of any single organization or group of organizations. When we look at sustainability from a company level, a widely accepted definition is that in the process of pursuing self-survival, a corporation must not only consider the realization of business objectives but also maintain sustained profitable growth and competitiveness to ensure that this corporation will prosper for a long time [15].

At the individual level, Evanschitzky [16] discussed the importance of resources such as financial resources, physical resources, human resources, institutional resources, service resources, and intangible resources for the sustainable development of corporations; Sharma [17] investigated the effect of managerial philosophy, institutional systems, management capability, and business context on corporate sustainability; Linnenluecke et al. [18] analyzed the value of corporate cultures for corporate sustainable development. Of course, some scholars have also discussed the significance of social networks and social responsibility for a company's sustainable development [19,20].

Compared with corporate sustainability at the individual level, the migrant entrepreneurship with traditional features and the sustainable development of these entities has received considerable attention in recent years. With the deepening of economic global-

ization, transnational flows have become increasingly frequent [21,22], and transnational ethnic economies have therefore become a unique landscape [23]. Stimulated by the rapid development of China's economy in the past several decades, especially in the context of China's arising overcapacity, China's transnational ethnic economy is particularly obvious [24]. This is where this study begins. For the operators of these ethnic corporations, they leave the space they are familiar with and come to a completely different social environment, with different politics, societies, and cultures. This also means that the social environment for these corporations plays a more important role in its survival, its ability to achieve business objectives, maintain profits, keep competitiveness, and maintain long-term prosperity.

In highly globally connected times, social network deserves more attention as ethnic economic competition is about not only the economy but also soft power, that is, attraction [25]. According to Nye's [25] definition of soft power, the more people-to-people exchanges an organization establishes, the more attraction it may gain. This is consistent with contact theory in psychology, which emphasizes that contact is beneficial to enhance the impression of members of other groups under four basic conditions: (1) the two sides of the contact have equal status; (2) the two sides cooperate with each other; (3) the two sides have a common goal; and (4) there is official recognition of the two sides [26,27]. Through interviews, we found that the time period for Chinese corporations to start increasing in Zimbabwe was mainly in the mid-2000s, which is of great relevance to Zimbabwe's looking east policy and is integral with the China-initiated Forum on China–Africa Cooperation that leads to diversified and extensive economic and commercial links between China and Zimbabwe [28]. This means that the formation mechanism of Zimbabwean employees' impressions of Chinese corporations is in line with the contact theory, so we accordingly propose this paper's first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Frequent social contacts with Chinese persons help enhance local people's impressions of Chinese corporations; conversely, fewer contacts result in less impression enhancement.*

Generally, the more social contacts with Chinese persons for the local people, the more opportunities they would have for a more comprehensive understanding of the employment opportunities and consumption opportunities provided by Chinese corporations. For the local communities, the establishment of corporations from other countries might mean more job opportunities [29] or a more competitive business environment that may promote the establishment of a healthier consumption environment for the market [30]. In this regard, the frequency of social contacts with Chinese persons is a positive channel for local people to understand this kind of employment or consumption opportunities, which means that the more social contacts they have, the more they could feel the immediate benefits of such opportunities. Thus, in this context, there would be more willingness to support the establishment of more Chinese corporations. This supply–demand relationship between the job market and transmigrant corporations is especially true in a country like Zimbabwe with an extremely high unemployment rate [31]. From this inference, we come up with the second hypothesis of this paper:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a). *Frequent social contact with Chinese persons is positively related to the locals' willingness to support more Chinese corporations established.*

Of course, the storyline may also be the exact opposite. For local communities, more social contact with Chinese persons means a much deeper understanding of Chinese corporations, which also means that local communities are more aware of the shortcomings of Chinese corporations, for example, the adaptation of Chinese corporations to local work environments, such as casual work environments [10], and the lack of social responsibility for technology transfer [32], driving local economy [33], and environmental protection [8], all of which may mean that local communities would not welcome Chinese corporations

continuing to grow. From this inference, we propose a converse version of the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2b (H2b). *Frequent social contacts with Chinese persons help locals oppose the building of more Chinese corporations.*

Apart from social networks, other social indicators may also have a certain impact on the sustainable development of corporations from other countries. Existing studies have found that corporate social responsibility, including the work environment provided [34], as well as the abovementioned technology transfer [32], the promotion of local economic development [33], and the protection of the local ecological environment [8], may encourage local communities to support the sustainable development of corporations from other countries. Under the premise of controlling social network indicators, we therefore put forward the third hypothesis to test the impact of social responsibility on the sustainable development of corporations:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Under the condition of being satisfied with the working environment provided by Chinese corporations, or recognizing that Chinese corporations have a positive impact on the local environment and economy, despite the lack of social contact with Chinese persons, locals will still support the building of more Chinese corporations.*

3. Data and Method

3.1. Sample

This study uses a comprehensive method that adopts both quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. The data for this study come from the authors' two rounds of field surveys in Zimbabwe in 2018 and 2019. First, the quantitative data comes from questionnaire surveys. During the two rounds of fieldwork, 360 questionnaires were distributed to Zimbabwean employees of 18 randomly selected Chinese corporations in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. A total of 20 questionnaires were randomly distributed to each corporate for investigation. Here, it is worthwhile to further explain the representativeness of the sample. According to the statistics of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, there are around 70 Chinese corporations in this city, including state-owned enterprises and small and medium-sized private enterprises, each of which has 20~2000 employees, with an average of around 100 people. Thus, the whole scale of Chinese corporations in Harare is around 70, and the total number of their employees is estimated to be around 7000, while we randomly selected 18 corporations and 360 employees among them as our samples. The sampling rates at the scale of corporation and surveyed individual employees are approximately 25.7% (18/70) and 5.1% (360/7000), respectively. Finally, a total of 323 questionnaires were collected, with a recovery rate of 89.7%. Excluding those invalid questionnaires that lack key information or contradict each other (according to the check items designed in the questionnaire), 279 valid questionnaires were finally determined fit for analysis. The questionnaire validity rate was 86.4%. Considering Zimbabwe's high literacy rate of over 80%, this recovery rate and validity rate are trustworthy. Second, our qualitative data mainly come from two aspects. (1) Fieldwork observation: we conducted participatory observations on the production processes of 18 Chinese corporations and made initial contact with main actors in these corporations. (2) In-depth interviews: we used the snowballing method to interview 29 Zimbabwean employees (Table 1) who were working in Chinese corporations via three gatekeepers. All three gatekeepers are Chinese and were familiar with the local context. The first is a friend of the researcher who has been engaged in international trade in Zimbabwe for 7 years, the second is a distant relative of one of the researchers who has operated a wood processing plant in Zimbabwe for more than 25 years, and the third is from the same place as one of the authors and is now the secretary of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Zimbabwe. These relationships allowed us to overcome the barriers and uncertainties we encountered in fieldwork. In the processes

of fieldwork and report writing, we considered the necessity of anonymity and performed relevant processing.

Table 1. Interviewee information.

Descriptive Indicators	Information	
Total number of interviews	29	
Interviewee's age	18~50 (years old)	
Duration of each interview	15 min~1 h	
Gender	Male 21	Female 8
Working position	Leader 5	Others 24

3.2. Dependent Variables

This study focuses on the local Zimbabweans' impression of Chinese corporations and their willingness to support more Chinese corporations as two important indicators to evaluate the effect of local communities on Chinese corporations' sustainability in Africa. Therefore, in this study, the results of the two indicators, "the impression of Chinese corporations" and "the extent of support for building more Chinese corporations in the future" in the questionnaire survey, are used as dependent variables to measure local African's impressions of Chinese corporations (Y1) and their support of more Chinese corporations (Y2), respectively. The questions corresponding to the two indicators are: "What is your impression of Chinese corporations?" and "Do you support more Chinese corporations developing in Zimbabwe?" In the survey, a five-point Likert scale was adopted to rate the impression of the structure of Chinese corporations (from 1 to 5, 1 stands for very bad and 5 stands for very good) and the degree of willingness to support more Chinese corporation development in Zimbabwe (from 1 to 5, 1 stands for "strongly opposed" and 5 stands for "strongly supportive").

3.3. Independent Variables

This study used several independent variables from the questionnaire, which can be roughly divided into three categories. The first category is demographic characteristics, which include: (1) age (X1); (2) gender (X2); (3) marital status (X3); (4) years of education (X4); (5) number of children (X5); (6) length of work (X6); (7) job position (X7); and (8) source of this job (X8).

The second category relates to social network, which is measured through the following question, "how often do you interact with your Chinese co-workers, such as going to bars, visiting their homes, eating in a restaurant, or chatting?" (X9). A five-level Likert scale was adopted to evaluate this variable (1–5 points from "very often" to "never").

The third category of the independent variables is social responsibility. Three related variables were included: (1) satisfaction with the working environment (X10); (2) the impact of Chinese corporations on the local economy (X11); and (3) the impact of Chinese corporations on the quality of the local environment (X12). The three variables were all evaluated using a five-level Likert scale as well.

Table 2 shows the definition and statistical description of variables. Both dependent variables and independent variables included.

Table 2. Variables and statistical description.

Variables	Value of Variables	Mean	SD
Dependent variables			
Impressions on Chinese corporations (Y_1)	Continuous variable: 1~5 points	3.398	1.204
Willingness to support more Chinese corporations (Y_2)	Continuous variable: 1~5 points	3.814	1.067
Independent variables			
Age (X_1)	Continuous variable	32.85	8.685
Gender (X_2)	Male = 0; Female = 1	0.179	0.384
Marital status (X_3)	Unmarried = 0; Married = 1	0.774	0.419
Years of education (X_4)	Continuous variable	10.16	3.862
Number of children (X_5)	Continuous variable	2.756	1.143
Length of work (X_6)	Continuous variable	40.36	41.10
Job position (X_7)	Ordinary worker = 0; Leader = 1	0.168	0.375
Source of this job (X_8)	Chinese friend = 0; Relatives or non-Chinese friend = 1; Media = 2; Labour market = 3; Other = 4	2.312	1.545
Social frequency with Chinese (X_9)	Continuous variable: 1~5 points	1.724	1.028
Satisfaction of working environment (X_{10})	Continuous variable: 1~5 points	3.219	1.153
Corporations' economic impact (X_{11})	Continuous variable: 1~5 points	3.423	1.169
Corporations' environmental impact (X_{12})	Continuous variable: 1~5 points	3.423	1.151

Note: SD = standard deviation.

3.4. Analysis Strategy

In this paper, the dependent variables "impressions on Chinese corporations (Y1)" and "willingness to support more Chinese corporations (Y2)" are continuous variables, so multiple linear regression models are used for analysis. We used Stata to model the obtained data and performed a robust regression. Before conducting multiple linear regression analysis, the original data were processed through centralization, and the values of some independent variables were converted to fall between 0 and 1, in order to eliminate the impact of different orders of magnitude to avoid collinearity. To test whether there is an interactive relationship between the interaction frequency and satisfaction with the working environment and the variables of "frequency of social interaction with Chinese persons (X9)", "satisfaction of working environment (X10)", "corporations' economic impact (X11)", and "corporations' environmental impact (X12)", the overall model also considers the possible interactions among these variables. In this way, this study comparatively analyses the different characteristics between social network and social responsibility variables on the sustainable development of Chinese corporations in Africa.

4. Results

4.1. Social Network and Zimbabweans' Impressions of Chinese Corporations

The macro background of the economic ties between Chinese corporations and Zimbabwe is the 'Look East Policy' (LEP) proposed by the Zimbabwean government in the early 2000s. The LEP was proposed in a complicated socio-political context, the most important of which came from the crisis caused by Western sanctions due to the Mugabe government's forceful acquisition of land from the white population, massive economic mismanagement, and the so-called widespread violations of human rights [35]. Although the Mugabe government claimed that the LEP was not a desperate move under Western sanctions, as claimed by the Western media, but rather a direct consequence of the failure of the land reform guaranteed by the British colonial government in 1979, the undeniable fact was that Zimbabwe's rapid split from the Western economy was an unavoidable reason for its implementation of the LEP [36]. The direct result of the LEP is that the Zimbabwean government changes the scope of its foreign policy by prioritizing its links with Eastern countries such as China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, and Singapore [28]. This external environment provides favorable conditions for Chinese corporations to enter Zimbabwe.

This external environment of Chinese corporations in Zimbabwe is more vividly manifested in the historical inflation in Zimbabwe since 2008 that was caused by the financial crisis of 2008. Under the impact of the 2008 financial crisis, the high unemployment rate in Zimbabwe has fallen again. In this scenario, the entry of Chinese corporations should be beneficial to local communities. However, given that Zimbabwe did not have large-scale Chinese corporations before the 2000s, locals lacked a detailed understanding of the internal environment of Chinese corporations, especially from the perspective of everyday life. In this regard, the social interaction between local employees and Chinese (both bosses and employees) in Chinese corporations provides a more detailed understanding of the structure of Zimbabwean society's impression of Chinese corporations.

Specifically, the impact of social networks on Zimbabwe's local communities' impression of the structure of Chinese corporations is mainly felt in two areas. The first area is the emotional level. In workplaces with transnational features, a certain degree of social boundary is often easily established among different ethnic groups. In the working environment of Chinese corporations in Africa, this rule is an exception. Such a social boundary could be tangible. For example, in terms of physical spatiality, the living and working spaces of almost all Chinese employers and employees are isolated from the living and working area of local laborers, namely, a "Chinese compound" [5]. Conversely, such a boundary could be intangible. For example, during our fieldwork, we found that Chinese employers and employees over the age of 40 usually only speak a little English, and it is more difficult for them to communicate with local young employees with strong accents. These boundaries, whether they are physical boundaries or language barriers, have more or less weakened the sense of belonging and emotional attachment of Zimbabwean employees to these Chinese corporations, despite their ability to obtain relatively good salaries. However, this emotional barrier can be effectively improved through after-work social interactions. As mentioned by one of our local respondents (in a leader position) who has close contact with Chinese colleagues, through in-depth communication with Chinese employees, he felt that his corporation was like home:

> *In the beginning, I was afraid of communicating with my boss out of work. Later, I noticed that he might need some local help, so I stood up and asked the boss if he needed help, and I got a positive response. He was very happy and invited me for dinner. Then, I began to know a little about Chinese culture and have more Chinese friends. Later, I became my boss' manager, and now I often go out for dinner with my boss. I love this job, just like home.*

Second, the influence of social networks on the impression of a corporation is also felt at to cultural level. Specifically, a multinational working environment also means large cultural differences. In this sense, the management model and corporate culture of a corporation may also mean misunderstandings for employees of different cultural backgrounds. For example, a Chinese factory we visited encouraged local employees to take raw materials home for production and to settle wages in the form of exchange, which is viewed by Chinese employers as an ideal way to improve work efficiency while encouraging employees but is considered to be time exploitation by local employees. This perception of institutional cultural differences, to a certain extent, can also be alleviated through informal social communication. Our interviews also confirmed that a certain frequency of social activities can improve local employees' understanding of Chinese corporate culture, just as one local interviewee's comment:

> *I think we [Chinese and locals] think in totally different ways! The corporation lets us continue to work at home. Of course, I don't want to. Some of us even sued the corporation to the Labor Union to protect their rights. But soon, I realized that this is a cultural difference. Paying according to production volume is very popular in China. Their [the corporation's] starting point is not exploitation, but to increase production, and even our salaries. I think we should enhance our chances of understanding each other's culture.*

Overall, we find that social networks have played a positive role in improving the local communities' impressions of Chinese corporations in Africa, which demonstrates that H1 is accepted. This is also confirmed in our regression analysis results (Table 3). We used a multiple linear regression model to analyze the influence of social networks (X9) on local communities' impression construction of Chinese corporations (Y1). The result is 0.073 ($p < 0.1$), indicating that the two variables have a significant correlation; that is, frequent social contacts with Chinese help to enhance local people's impression of Chinese corporations. Hence, H1 can be verified. From this finding, it can be seen that, only when there is enough social communication between the locals and the Chinese, the working and living environment of the corporation is no longer an objective physical space but has evolved into a place full of subjective experience and emotional attachment, and it is only under this premise that locals can have a better impression of Chinese corporations.

Table 3. Multiple regression model of factors affecting corporate social sustainability.

Variables		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
		Y_1	Y_2	Y_2	Y_2	Y_2
X_1	0.015 **	0.006	0.007	0.006	0.006	
	−0.007	−0.78	−0.9	−0.76	−0.77	
X_2	−0.061	0.215	0.253 *	0.213	0.216	
	−0.103	−1.57	−1.86	−1.56	−1.58	
X_3	−0.164	−0.089	−0.075	−0.094	−0.093	
	−0.108	(−0.61)	(−0.52)	(−0.64)	(−0.63)	
X_4	0.005	−0.023 *	−0.023 *	−0.023 *	−0.024 *	
	−0.013	(−1.73)	(−1.73)	(−1.71)	(−1.74)	
X_5	−0.034	0.011	−0.005	0.011	0.011	
	−0.05	−0.16	(−0.08)	−0.16	−0.18	
X_6	0	0	−0.001	−0.001	0	
	−0.001	(−0.33)	(−0.49)	(−0.38)	(−0.35)	
X_7	0.155	0.391 ***	0.436 ***	0.402 ***	0.401 ***	
	−0.133	−2.69	−3	−2.73	−2.71	
X_8	−0.047 *	0.048	0.044	0.048	0.048	
	−0.026	−1.4	−1.32	−1.41	−1.41	
X_9	0.073 *	−0.098 *	−0.08	−0.094 *	−0.092	
	−0.042	(−1.83)	(−1.48)	(−1.73)	(−1.64)	
X_{10}	−	0.231 ***	0.231 ***	0.231 ***	0.229 ***	
	−	−4.02	−4.08	−4.02	−3.98	
X_{11}	0.580 ***	0.360 ***	0.334 ***	0.354 ***	0.357 ***	
	−0.073	−5.09	−4.73	−4.91	−4.99	
X_{12}	0.267 ***	0.025	0.029	0.026	0.024	
	−0.07	−0.38	−0.43	−0.39	−0.36	
$X_9 \times X_{10}$			−0.119 ***			
			(−2.65)			
$X_9 \times X_{12}$				−0.023		
				(−0.50)		
$X_9 \times X_{11}$					−0.019	
					(−0.40)	
Constant	0.221 **	−0.146	−0.128	−0.14	−0.14	
	−0.108	(−0.96)	(−0.84)	(−0.91)	(−0.91)	
Observations	279	279	279	279	279	
R−squared	0.672	0.405	0.42	0.406	0.405	

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$ in a two-tailed test.

Next, we examined the impact of social networks (X9) on Chinese corporate social sustainability in Africa (Y2). We have verified H1 through Model 1, which shows that the more frequent the social interactions between locals and Chinese, the better the locals' impression of Chinese corporations. In general, a positive corporate image represents the local communities' favor and support for such corporations, which should help to increase the local's willingness to support more Chinese corporations to settle in. However, when

we used the multiple linear regression model to analyze the influence of social networks (X9) on locals' willingness to support more Chinese corporations (Y2) by controlling other variables, we found the result from Model 2 is -0.098 ($p < 0.1$). This result reflects that frequent interactions with Chinese people have a significant reverse suppression effect on local support for more Chinese corporations, which rejects H2a and verifies H2b. Why does frequent social networking have a positive impact on the enhancement of the Chinese corporate impression structure but a negative impact on the willingness of locals to support more Chinese corporations? From interview materials, we found two important reasons related to this finding.

The first relates to the economy. Although the presence of Chinese corporations has, to a certain extent, improved the economic situation of local communities at the individual level, if we raise the level of understanding of "economic situation" from individual condition to the local economy, we will find that local communities would never believe that the presence of Chinese corporations will have a positive impact on local economic development. This phenomenon becomes more salient as the social interaction between locals and Chinese increased. For the locals, frequent social interaction with Chinese means that they would have a better understanding of the business strategies of Chinese corporations and corporate managers, while such experience accumulation would not make them think that these strategies would have a positive effect on local economic development, despite that they personally gain some economic benefits. For example, one of our local respondents told us a story of a Chinese corporation in which he described how this mineral water corporation beat its local competitors:

> *The company first put the new product [mineral water provided by Chinese corporation] on the market at a relatively low price, but when it defeated its competitors and occupied a certain market share, it smartly raised the price to the market price. I believe most Chinese companies have taken similar business tactics. This kind of business does not like technology-based business, and it does not make sense for the development of local economy.*

Another reason is related to corporate environmental awareness. According to the report [1] and our observations, most Chinese corporations in Zimbabwe are trade- or/and raw materials-based, such as manufacturing, agriculture, mining, and engineering industries. This also means that the environmental impact of these industries is greater than in other industries. As the environmental impact is often invisible, the local talent begins to develop concerns about environmental awareness of Chinese corporations along with their increasing social interaction with the Chinese. For example, a local lawyer in a Chinese mining corporation mentioned the environmental awareness of Chinese corporations:

> *I think there is not so much difference between Chinese corporations and Western corporations in the field of environmental protection because I have realized that both of them do not pay much attention to environmental repair with the increasing understanding of the Chinese.*

To recap, through the regression analysis in Model 2, we found that social interaction does not have a positive impact on the sustainability of Chinese corporations in Africa but, in sharp contrast, has a negative impact. To investigate the reason related to this phenomenon, we find that corporate social responsibility (e.g., local economic development, and environmental awareness) seems to play a more important role in maintaining corporate sustainability than social networks. To verify the impact of social responsibility on corporate sustainability, the following regression analysis is carried out.

4.2. Social Responsibility and Chinese Corporate Sustainability

As has been mentioned above, Chinese corporations, to a certain extent, have helped the development of Africa's economy, but it is undeniable that some corporations have indeed caused some damage to the local economy or local environment [37]. In this regard, the sustainable development of Chinese corporations can only be achieved under the

premise that these corporations themselves assume some common social responsibilities and reduce adverse impacts on local communities. Here, the common social responsibility mainly refers to the obligations that corporations or corporate operators should undertake in the host society, the core of which involves the corporation's commitment to enhancing stakeholders' living standard and condition and its responsibility to the development of the local economy and the improvement of the local environment [19]. Taking these possible indicators into account, we tested the impact mechanism of three responsibility-related factors (i.e., a, satisfaction with the working environment (X10); b, the impact of Chinese corporations on the local economy (X11); and c, the impact of Chinese corporations on the quality of the local environment (X12)) on local communities' willingness to support more Chinese corporations (Y2) through the regression analysis in Model 2 (see also H3). The results are 0.231 ($p < 0.01$), 0.360 ($p < 0.01$), and 0.025 ($p > 0.1$), indicating that there is a strong correlation between locals' satisfaction with the working environment (X10), the influence of Chinese corporations on the local economy (X11), and their support of more Chinese corporations (Y2), but there is no obvious correlation between X12 and Y2. This result verifies H3, which shows that the local community is more concerned about the working environment provided by foreign-funded corporations and their promotion of the local economy but pays relatively little attention to the environmental responsibility of foreign-funded corporations. The aforementioned local lawyer also confirmed this finding in his interview:

> *Most foreign corporations developed extensive economies, including Chinese corporations. They almost never pay attention to environmental issues. What is annoying is that locals also rarely pay attention to the environment, even the elite, they care more about job opportunities and economic development. But there is no way out. Our country is too poor!*

To test whether there is mutual influence between the various independent variables, we have also tested the interaction effects among them. The interaction effects here can be understood as the changing effect of one independent variable on the dependent variable due to the change of another independent variable [38]. To test whether there are interaction effects between "frequency of social interaction with Chinese persons (X9)" and "satisfaction of working environment (X10)", "corporations' economic impact (X11)", and "corporations' environmental impact (X12)", we added the interaction items "X9 × X10", "X9 × X11", and "X9 × X12" into the original variables of Model 2 and, on that basis, obtained Model 3, Model 4, and Model 5 (Table 3). The fitting degrees of the three models are roughly equal, which shows that the three models have good fitting effects.

From Model 3, we find that after adding the interaction items, the influence of the frequency of social interaction with Chinese persons (X9) on locals' willingness to support more Chinese corporations (Y2) is not significant any more (the result is -0.080 ($p > 0.1$), and the result in Model 2 is -0.098 ($p < 0.1$)). Interestingly, there is a negative correlation between the interaction item "X9 × X10" and "Y2", the result of which is -0.119 ($p < 0.01$), and the influence of other independent variables basically remained unchanged. This shows that, compared with locals who have high satisfaction with the working environment, the negative impact of frequent interaction with Chinese on the willingness of locals with low satisfaction to support more Chinese corporations is more significant. This means that, for locals who are not very satisfied with their working environment, the more frequent the interaction with the Chinese, the lower their willingness to support more Chinese corporation settlement in Zimbabwe. This leads to a discussion of the internal group relations of the corporation and the social environment it creates, verifying whether the corporation truly assumes the common social responsibility. The implication of this result is that if Chinese corporations want to sustainably develop in Zimbabwe for a long time and obtain support from local communities, these corporations need to work harder to improve the working environment; otherwise, their influence will not only be limited to their own corporations but to a much wider effect on other corporations with Chinese ethnic features.

In Model 4 and 5, we find that there is no significant correlation between both interaction items (i.e., X9 × X11 and X9 × X12) and locals' willingness to support more Chinese corporations (Y2), the results of which are −0.019 ($p > 0.1$) and −0.023 ($p > 0.1$), respectively. This indicates that the effect of the variable of the economic impact of Chinese corporations (X11) is stronger than the interactive effect, and it has played a critical role in local people's willingness to support more Chinese corporations. That is, if the development of Chinese corporations in Zimbabwe truly plays a positive role in promoting local economic development, the local people will have a stronger willingness to support more Chinese corporations. Only corporations with public opinion support can achieve sustainable development. The implication of this finding is that Chinese corporations must take into account their social responsibility for local economic development, actively generate benign spill overs, and contribute to the promotion of regional economic development so that they can gain more support.

5. Conclusions and Discussions

This study investigated local societal attitudes towards Chinese corporations in Zimbabwe. It used data from questionnaires randomly conducted within 20 Chinese corporations in two field surveys in Zimbabwe in summer 2018 and summer 2019 as well as the qualitative data obtained through participatory observation and in-depth interviews during this time. Focusing on local Zimbabweans' impressions of Chinese corporations and their willingness to support more Chinese corporations as two dependent variables, and using demographic statistics, social networks, and social responsibility as different independent variables, we applied multiple linear regression analysis as the method to test the effect of Chinese corporations' social network and social responsibility on the sustainability of Chinese corporations in Africa. Findings showed that overall, social networks help to enhance local people's impressions of Chinese corporations, but social networks have no positive impact on local communities' willingness to support more Chinese corporations. In sharp contrast, corporate social responsibility clearly has a much greater impact on its capability to gain support from local communities for its sustainable development.

Specifically, this study finds the differences between the various social variables that influence Chinese corporations' sustainable development in Africa, which is mainly reflected in the following four aspects. First, the frequent social contacts with Chinese have a notable positive impact on local people's impressions of Chinese corporations. This finding reinforces H1, which states that the more people-to-people exchanges an agency establishes, the more attraction it may gain [25]. Second, the frequent social contacts with Chinese persons have a significant negative effect on local people's willingness to support China's sustainable development, even though the presence of Chinese corporations, to a great extent, has improved the economic status of local people at the individual level. This finding strengthens H2b and rejects H2a. Through the analysis of qualitative data, we find that local people's willingness to support the sustainable development of foreign-funded corporations clearly depends more on their evaluation of corporate social responsibility. Third, through an extensive understanding of corporate social responsibility [19], we examined the impact of three variables—satisfaction with the working environment, the impact of Chinese corporations on the local economy, and the impact of Chinese corporations on the local environment-on local people's willingness to support the sustainable development of Chinese corporations. The result shows that "satisfaction of working environment" and "the impact of Chinese corporations on local economy" have a very significant impact ($p < 0.01$) on local people's willingness to support the sustainable development of Chinese corporations, and most importantly, this impact will not significantly change alongside with the interaction effects of other variables. This result reinforces H3 and demonstrates that the willingness of local people for the sustainable development of foreign-funded corporations mainly depends on the employment environment provided by these corporations and their driving power for the local economy. Fourth and finally, we found that local people do not have high requirements for environmental awareness in foreign-funded corporate

social responsibility, although there were occasionally some respondents who mentioned this issue during the interviews. Linking this result to Zimbabwe's terrible economic situation, it is not too difficult to understand. At different stages of economic development, the degree of social concern for environmental awareness is very different. This is also why environmental awareness is an extremely important dimension in the understanding of corporate social responsibility [19], but which, in this case study, has not played a significant role.

This study also has limitations. One of the main deficiencies of this study is that it only examines the views of locals who are working in Chinese corporations and thus lacks surveys on the attitude of a wider range of locals due to condition limitations. In addition, the consideration of the influencing factors of social variables that affect the sustainable development of a transnational corporation is never unique. Their lens might also be beyond the understanding of this study. In this regard, future studies could examine such an issue with a wider range of local groups from much wider perspective.

This study speaks to the need for a scholarly investigation of China–Africa links in an increasingly globally connected world. As Chinese corporations increase in the African region, the interaction between Chinese corporations and local communities becomes increasingly important. The regional response to Chinese corporations in Africa is very important for understanding the details of China–Africa links and for realizing the benign development of transnational corporations and African society. Empirically, this study also provides a reference value for Chinese or other foreign corporations on how to handle the relationship between local communities. Methodologically, through the use of structural variables, this study offers a unique approach to operationalizing how China's foreign cooperative frameworks are understood by local communities and the mechanism behind this.

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