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Exploring one of the darker sides of expatriation: Chinese expatriates' experiences with petty corruption in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on institutional isomorphism and Bourdieu's concept of capital, this ethnographic study provides a comprehensive examination of how institutional pressures interact with individual capital (linguistic, cultural and social) to shape expatriates' behaviours in dealing with local petty corruption practices. We find that coercive isomorphism is often intensified by a lack of local linguistic capital, mimetic isomorphism is reinforced by uncertainty in a foreign environment, and normative isomorphism is shaped by norms and expectations originating from both the host and home countries, rather than being solely rooted in the local environment. Our findings highlight the critical role of individual capital as a moderator of institutional responses. By bridging macro-level neo-institutional theory and micro-level practices, this study deepens our understanding of how expatriates' behaviour is shaped by both broader institutional environments and the personal resources they bring to their host country.

1. Introduction

Research into expatriation has been extensive (Fontinha & Brewster, 2024), but relatively few studies have examined the 'dark side' of expatriation (Bader et al., 2019), particularly the ethical and institutional challenges that expatriates encounter (Ulusemre & Fang, 2022). The risks faced by expatriates in hostile environments have gained increasing attention in the last decade. Faeth and Kittler (2020) include in their understanding of hostile environments factors such as poor infrastructure, lawlessness, a lack of regulations and corruption. They propose a multi-stakeholder perspective, acknowledging the role of local governments in shaping expatriates' experiences. Responding to this call for a multi-stakeholder perspective, this study investigates a widespread but under-explored element of the 'dark side' of expatriation - expatriates' experiences with the petty corruption of low-level bureaucrats in the host country. It examines the dynamic interplay between structural pressures and individual resources, shedding light on how these factors impact expatriates and shape expatriates' behaviours and decision-making.

Petty corruption is a classic indicator of social relationships at and around work. It can be distinguished by the low level of bureaucrats and officers involved (Elliott, 1997). Unlike grand corruption, where

typically some form of major extortion will be initiated by corporate actors (Heath et al., 2016), petty corruption is usually initiated by low level local public officials. Petty corruption may have limited influence in economic terms as comparatively little money is involved but, even at the economic level, the aggregate effects of pervasive petty corruption should not be underestimated. On a personal and relational level, the impact can be dramatic. Over time, petty corruption is politically corrosive as it impacts more people on a regular basis (Elliott, 1997).

This study adopts an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) to explore how expatriates navigate petty corruption in their everyday encounters. Abduction allows for a flexible interplay between empirical observation and theoretical reflection, facilitating the emergence of new insights through iterative engagement with both data and theory (Bajc, 2012). To make sense of expatriates' interaction with corruption, we draw on institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) to understand how external pressures - such as local norms, social expectations, or professional standards - shape patterns of conformity or resistance. Organisations tend to become similar through coercive isomorphism driven by external pressures such as laws or societal expectations, mimetic isomorphism where they imitate successful peers to reduce uncertainty and normative isomorphism arising from professional norms, values and standards that shape organisational behaviour

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(DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Institutional isomorphism has been used to explain why organizations engage in corrupt practices (Gao, 2010; Ufere et al., 2020; Venard, 2009). Coercive isomorphism, driven by burdensome government regulations and bureaucratic red tape, has been identified as the strongest determinant of bribery among firms in sub-Saharan Africa (Ufere et al., 2020). Mimetic isomorphism reinforces corruption as firms imitate the unethical practices of competitors (Venard, 2009), while normative isomorphism influences bribery intensity, with firms more likely to engage in bribery when it is perceived as a common practice within their industry (Ufere et al., 2020).

While institutional isomorphism has traditionally been applied to examine organizational responses to grand corruption, its application to petty corruption remains underexplored. Petty corruption often arises in daily exchanges with low-level bureaucrats, where individual rather than organisational make on-the-spot decision about whether and how to comply. This suggested that the mechanism of isomorphism might operate differently at individual level. Applying institutional isomorphism at this micro level provides a novel lens to understand how individuals internalise, negotiate, or resist institutional pressures in their daily practices, thereby extending the theory beyond its traditional organisational boundaries.

However, institutional theory alone cannot fully explain the variability in individual practices and perceptions. We therefore draw on Bourdieu's concept of capital (1986) to account for personal resources and embodied dispositions that shape how individuals experience and respond to institutional pressures. We focus on linguistic, cultural and social capital, as these are most relevant for expatriates navigating petty corruption: linguistic capital enables effective communication, cultural capital informs understanding of local norms, and social capital provides access to networks and support. Highlighting these resources helps explain the variation in individual interaction with everyday corrupt practices and complements the institutional perspective by linking macro-level pressures to micro-level agency.

Although local government is a key component of the institutional framework and has been widely studied in organizational research in international business (Sartor & Beamish, 2020; Stevens & Newenham-Kahindi, 2021), it remains underexplored in expatriation studies. By acknowledging the role of local government in shaping expatriates' experiences, we respond to the call for a multi-stakeholder perspective (Faeth & Kittler, 2020), demonstrating how expatriates' interactions with local authorities directly influence their adaptation strategies and their responses to institutional pressures in the host country. The paper is structured as follows: we begin with a review of the literature on petty corruption and expatriation, providing the basis and rationale for our chosen theoretical framework. We then describe the research site and the empirical data sources, followed by an exploration of the motives behind engaging in petty corruption and the different forms of bribery demands. We present our findings and, finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for navigating petty corruption in host countries.

2. What we know

2.1. Institutional isomorphism and corruption

Corruption presents a significant challenge to existing theories of management in international business (Bahoo et al., 2020). Given its complex and multifaceted nature - spanning legal, cultural and informal institutional dimensions - Cuervo-Cazurra (2016) suggests that corruption can serve as a 'laboratory' for revisiting and refining established theories of the firm, including neo-institutional theory. Neo-institutional theory reflects a sociological perspective of institutions, which is particularly well-suited for studying petty corruption as it emphasises how informal norms, social expectations and the pursuit of legitimacy shape the behaviour of individual actors. A core concept in this theory is institutional isomorphism, which describes the process by which

organisations become increasingly similar in their practices, structures and behaviours due to pressures from their institutional environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This perspective helps explain, for instance, why firms operating in similar corrupt environments may converge in their use of corrupt practices (Venard & Hanafi, 2008). Institutional isomorphic change occurs through three mechanisms: 1) coercive isomorphism, driven by formal (e.g., laws, regulations or contracts) and informal (e.g., social expectations or peer influence) pressures that force organisations to conform; 2) mimetic processes, where organisations imitate others as they seek to reduce risk by copying successful practices; and 3) normative pressures, where shared norms, values and standards within a profession leading organisations to adopt similar practices to align with industry expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

This institutional coercion model was used to examine corrupt practices in environments with weak formal institutions (Chen et al., 2018), while mimetic isomorphism explains how a firm's behaviour is influenced by the bribery practices of others (Gao, 2010). Countries that make legislative exceptions allowing the payment of petty bribes in foreign markets create normative pressures that foster corruption (Cuervo-Cazurra, 2016). The early focus on institutions as constraining forces that limit agency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Oliver, 1991), has evolved to incorporate a more dynamic perspective (Lewis et al., 2019) allowing for exploration of how individuals navigate institutional pressures. Including this, institutional isomorphism provides a suitable theoretical lens to examine petty corruption.

2.2. Corruption and expatriation

Weak institutional settings, in fragile states, create opportunities for corruption. In such environments, multinational enterprises (MNEs) can actively engage in dubious strategies through their subsidiaries (An et al., 2024). Studies typically view expatriates as agents of MNEs, often overlooking the possibility that corruption can occur at the individual level as well (Greppin et al., 2017; Malik & Froese, 2022). Few studies have investigated corrupt behaviours from the perspective of expatriates, with one notable exception being the study by Greppin et al. (2017), which examines how US expatriates navigate ethical dilemmas in countries characterised by pervasive corruption. The study identifies three categories of expatriate responses to corruption: zero tolerance, succumbing to extortion and proactively engaging in corrupt practices. Each response is shaped by different social norms, including individual ethical beliefs, social expectations and institutional rules within the host country.

By linking expatriates' demographic and experiential characteristics to their corruption responses, this study provides an important foundation for understanding individual variation. Extending this line of inquiry, Mulumba and Walugemba (2024) highlights the importance of expatriates' personal background and prior experiences. Their study finds that expatriates from countries with strong formal institutions often express frustration with informal practices and are more likely to reject them, whereas those from countries with weaker institutional frameworks tend to adapt more readily to local norms. Together, these studies suggest that interactions with corruption are shaped not only by external social norms but also by internal dispositions. Building on this perspective, our study explores how expatriates mobilise various forms of capital to navigate corrupt environments, offering a more agentic and situated understanding of expatriate behaviour. In doing so, we acknowledge the differences between responses to petty corruption (reactive behaviours to external demands) and engagement in petty corruption (proactive initiation or participation), using the term interaction to capture both dimensions of expatriates' lived experiences.

Compared to grand corruption, the experiences of expatriates with petty corruption - typically involving relatively small sums of money (Bardhan, 2006), low-level bureaucrats (Yoo, 2008) and ordinary citizens (Transparency International, 2009), and marked by its routine and frequent occurrence in everyday transactions (Bardhan, 2006) - have

received less scholarly attention. Existing research on this topic is limited to just a few sociology studies (Sheridan, 2019; Wang, 2024), with little engagement from the field of IB. This underrepresentation reveals a significant gap in IB/IHRM scholarship, especially given that petty corruption often constitutes the most direct and pervasive form of corruption encountered by expatriates in their daily professional and personal lives.

Petty corruption involves bribing officials to speed up processes and decision-making, or to overlook violations such as speeding, smuggling, expired passports or overstays in a country (Jancsics, 2019). It is typical in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, for drivers to encounter police, gendarmerie or customs officers at various checkpoints on the roads where these officials request payment in the form of 'coffee money' or 'beer money' as a condition for allowing drivers to continue their journey (Blundo & Olivier de Sardan, 2006; Foltz & Li, 2023). Sheridan (2019) shows that Chinese migrants in Tanzania navigate a complex position in which their ability to pay bribes reflects economic privilege, while their exposure to arbitrary detention by local authorities reveals political vulnerability rooted in limited state protection and ambiguous diplomatic influence. Similarly, Lam (2015) found Chinese expatriates in Ghana perceived themselves as the targets of extortion by Ghanaian officials and they were unhappily surprised by the levels of corruption relating to everyday micro-administrative procedures.

While Chinese expatriates in Africa often rely on *guanxi* (personal connections) to navigate interactions with local bureaucracies, traditional *guanxi* practices do not always translate effectively in contexts where corruption is more overtly transactional. Consequently, building localised connections with local associates - such as colleagues and business partners - can better enable expatriates to manage petty corruption (Wang, 2024). Additionally, research indicates that higher levels of education, international experience, a well-established local identity (e.g., through long-term residence) and fluency in local languages tend to reduce the likelihood of expatriates facing extortion or engaging in corrupt practices (Greppin et al., 2017; Lam, 2015).

2.3. Expatriates and capital

Bourdieu's concept of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) has been widely applied to examine the experiences of international workers in host countries (Haifang, 2018; Haslberger & Brewster, 2009; Peltokorpi & Xie, 2023; Wang & Chen, 2024). Social capital, for example, particularly weak ties, tends to discourage petty corruption by fostering broader networks and connections with diverse individuals, thereby promoting transparency and trust across different social groups (Hanoteau et al., 2021). Scholars have also found that communities and organisations play a pivotal role in facilitating smoother integration for migrants by providing collective resources spanning economic, political and career-related areas (Breton, 1964; Portes et al., 2008): establishing collective ties with institutionalised organisations of other expatriates from the home country may serve as an important form of social capital for expatriates navigating life in a foreign country. The previously noted linguistic capital (local language proficiency) and cultural capital (practical knowledge gained through experience) are also crucial in shaping how expatriates interact with corruption in their host environments (Greppin et al., 2017; Lam, 2015).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research site - Tanzania

Petty corruption exists everywhere and is widely documented in many African countries, where weak institutional frameworks and bureaucratic inefficiencies contribute to its persistence (Foltz & Li, 2023; Lam, 2015). Tanzania offers a particularly relevant and revealing context for examining how expatriates interact with petty corruption. The country presents a complex institutional environment marked by

infrastructural challenges, inefficient bureaucracy and pervasive low-level corruption, all of which pose practical difficulties for foreign businesses (United Nations, 2005). Government departments tend to be slow and inefficient. Corruption and taxation are identified as significant weaknesses restricting investment in the country. Petty corruption, in particular, is a pervasive problem among low-level bureaucrats, leading to significant inefficiencies and delays in business operations. The UN reported that "corruption is not a problem on anything like the Kenyan scale, but petty corruption is persistent at various levels" (United Nations, 2005: 3). Since that report was published, during the presidency of the late John Magufuli (2015–2021), there was a crackdown on corruption (Rahman et al., 2019), though it remains unclear how effective this was. The investment guide published by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (2021), identifies governance as a major issue. Judicial remedies in Tanzania are relatively weak, law enforcement officials lack adequate skills and legal enforcement is not properly executed. The guide specifically recommends that Chinese enterprises should prioritise the education and management of their expatriate workers, with a particular emphasis on requiring them to improve their understanding and knowledge of local laws, regulations and codes of conduct. This combination of persistent petty corruption, ambiguous enforcement environments and targeted governmental advice for expatriates makes Tanzania an empirically rich setting for studying how foreign workers interpret and navigate institutional pressures.

3.2. Research approach

Petty corruption emerged as a central theme during the fieldwork of the first-named author as she explored the lived experiences of Chinese expatriates. Initially, this was not the primary focus of study, but it increasingly drew attention through observation and in-depth interviews, which generated rich, thick data. However, as a relatively underexplored topic, we found that it was difficult to make sense of these complex and context-dependent experiences by relying solely on inductive interpretation, which, without theoretical guidance, risks producing fragmented or purely descriptive findings (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Locke, 2011). Therefore, we adopted an abductive approach, which allowed us to move iteratively between empirical data and relevant theoretical frameworks. This process enabled us to refine our research focus from a broad ethnographic question - *what are the lived experiences of expatriates dealing with petty corruption?* - to a more theoretically informed one: *how do institutional pressures and individual capital shape expatriates' responses to local petty corruption?* This abductive reasoning not only helped us make sense of emerging patterns but also allowed us to refine and extend existing theoretical perspectives in light of our empirical findings.

Our study was conducted from an emic perspective, using ethnography, combining multiple data-collection methods such as participant observation (diary entries), in-depth interviews and casual conversation. Ethnography is valuable in business studies for contextual orientation and emic positioning (Ladner, 2016). The context of Chinese expatriates in Africa is unusual. By adopting an emic perspective - examining phenomena from the standpoint of the actors themselves - researchers are better positioned to uncover subtle, often invisible, dynamics that may be overlooked in more detached approaches. This is especially important in the context of ethically sensitive issues such as petty corruption, where participants may be reluctant to fully disclose their experiences in one-off interviews (Myers, 2013). Participant observation allows researchers to experience and witness firsthand the unwritten rules and informal practices - such as how bribe requests are made and negotiated - that structure daily interactions. Semi-structured interviews enable a deeper exploration of expatriates' personal perspectives and reflections, uncovering how they perceive, interpret and interact with instances of petty corruption in their everyday lives. Meanwhile, casual conversations (informal interviews) create a relaxed environment where spontaneous and honest insights emerge, revealing

subtle social norms and unspoken attitudes toward corruption that might not surface in more formal settings. Table 1 summarises the purpose and contribution of each data collection method used in this study.

3.2.1. Data collection

The fieldwork was conducted in Dar es Salaam from March to October 2020. The first-named researcher received formal approval to conduct ethnographic observation from the president of the Overseas Chinese Service Centre (OCSC), who also served as the gatekeeper for access to the Chinese community. During the research, full transparency and informed consent were ensured, and the researcher's identity and role were clearly communicated both within the OCSC and across the wider Chinese community. The OCSC president remained a supportive contact throughout and after the fieldwork, maintaining communication and staying informed about the research progress and reporting.

As part of this arrangement, the researcher undertook multiple roles within OCSC - including secretary, administrator and interpreter - allowing for both close engagement and participant observation. Established in 2017, OCSC is a non-governmental organisation committed to 'maintaining the unity and harmony of the Chinese community, safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese nationals in Tanzania, and helping them integrate into the local community' (Li & Gao, 2017). Since OCSC provides services to the broader Chinese community, including self-employed individuals, employees from private firms, and those working for state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the first-named researcher had the opportunity to engage with a wide range of community members. However, it is important to note that while OCSC's official mission is to support all overseas Chinese in Tanzania, in practice, their efforts primarily focus on self-employed expatriates and those employed by small private firms. Employees of SOEs and large multinational corporations typically receive strong political and financial backing from their organisations, reducing their need for OCSC's support. As a result, OCSC often functions as a representative for the more marginalised segments of the Chinese community, serving as a bridge to facilitate communication with higher-level authorities in both China and Tanzania.

Throughout the day, the first-named researcher fully immersed herself in her role as an OCSC staff member while informally documenting key observations, using a laptop when in the office and a mobile phone when outside. In the evening, she shifted from a

participatory to a more observational mode, revisiting the notes and initial reflections recorded throughout the day. These rough sketches were then expanded into fuller diary entries, enriched with critical reflection and analytical insight. In doing so, she adhered to 'step in' and 'step out' principles (O'Reilly, 2009), alternating between immersion in the field and distancing herself to reflect on the ethnographic exercise. The observation encompassed both work and non-work domains. In the work domain, alongside her daily administrative duties at the OCSC office, the researcher frequently visited the immigration office to handle passport issues for Chinese expatriates. She also represented OCSC in meetings with the Chinese embassy and local agencies. Due to her Chinese identity and fluency in English, some business owners asked her to assist with business negotiations or serve as their interpreter during meetings. This gave her extensive exposure in the community. Although she clearly introduced herself as a researcher at the outset, upholding ethical transparency, her consistent involvement in organisational tasks and public-facing activities led the community to gradually perceive her more as an OCSC staff member than an academic observer. Meanwhile, she lived in a three-bedroom apartment in the city centre, a modern residential building arranged by the OCSC, which she shared with two other Chinese expatriates. This living arrangement extended her fieldwork beyond formal workspaces into the intimate and informal domains of everyday life. By not only participating in expatriates' professional activities but also sharing their domestic routines, social networks and personal conversations, the researcher became deeply embedded in the community she was studying. Her dual role as both a participant in and observer of the expatriate experience enabled a more nuanced and empathetic account of life in the field (Spradley, 2016).

By the fourth month of fieldwork, the researcher began to observe signs of data saturation, as her daily observation notes increasingly revealed recurring themes and patterns (Guest et al., 2006). At this stage, she transitioned to focusing on semi-structured interviews to further explore and clarify emerging insights (Bryman, 2016). By this point, a total of 106 diary entries comprising fieldnotes and personal reflections had been compiled. Owing to her sustained engagement and embedded position within the community, interview recruitment proceeded smoothly. Initial invitations were extended to expatriates or locals who had demonstrated interest in sharing their experiences, followed by snowball sampling (Noy, 2008). In total, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted, held either at participants' workplaces or in cafés of their choosing to ensure comfort and informality. As shown in Table 2, the interviewees included 17 expatriates from private firms or self-employed, six from SOEs and three local employees.

The average length of each interview was approximately 100 min. In line with the principles of semi-structured interviewing, a flexible guide was developed as a checklist of core topics to be explored. These included prompts such as: "Have you ever been asked for money by government officers?", "How did you experience that situation?", "Why do you think it happens?", and "How did it make you feel?". To maintain a natural conversational flow, these questions were not posed in a fixed order or at predetermined points, but were introduced organically as the conversation unfolded (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Additional questions were used to probe further into participants' responses or to pursue emerging themes in greater depth (O'Reilly, 2009). Interviews typically began with broad, open-ended questions such as "How's everything going in Tanzania?" or "How long have you been here?" which helped establish rapport and build trust. This strategy allowed participants to shape their own narratives and created opportunities for unanticipated insights to surface (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Another common type of interview employed by ethnographers is the informal interview (Fetterman, 2009), referred to in this study as a casual conversation. These interviews typically arise organically during participant observation (Spradley, 2016) and are characterised by their unstructured and spontaneous nature. In this study, we collected audio recordings of 11 casual conversations that took place in a variety of everyday settings, including informal chats in the transportation,

Table 1
Purpose and contribution of each method.

Method	Purpose	Contribution to Study
Participant Observation	To document how expatriates interact with local officials and navigate bureaucratic procedures in real-time, everyday settings.	Enables the researcher to witness informal exchanges, non-verbal cues, and subtle forms of bribery or pressure that participants may not openly admit; reveals how corruption is embedded in routine practices and shaped by social context.
Semi-Structured Interviews	To elicit detailed personal narratives about how expatriates experience, interpret, and interact with petty corruption.	Provides access to expatriates' justifications, dilemmas, and rationales for engaging or resisting corrupt practices; uncovers how personal values, institutional support, and resource access influence their coping strategies.
Casual Conversation (Informal Interviews)	To capture spontaneous reflections and reactions in informal social settings.	Reveals participants' off-the-record views and emotional responses to corruption, offering authentic insights into everyday experiences and attitudes.

Table 2
Informants and Interview information.

No.	Informant (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Nationality	Type of firm	Type of assignment	Position	Length the of interview
1	Lisimba	Male	69	Tanzanian	Private firm	Local	Interpreter	59 mins
2	Xiao	Male	25	Chinese	Private firm	AE	Supply Chain Trainee	122 mins
3	Yin	Male	51	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	CEO	145 mins
4	Zhou	Male	34	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	Manager	160 mins
5	Wang	Male	37	Chinese	Private firm	AE	Sales manager	110 mins
6	Qi	Male	29	Chinese	SOE	AE	Representative Assistant	122 mins
7	Kai	Male	44	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	Manager	55 mins
8	Quan	Female	28	Chinese	SOE	AE	Manager	72 mins
9	Kissa	Female	27	Tanzanian	Private firm	Local	Administrative staff and sales	141 mins
10	Lu	Male	34	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	Business owner	62 mins
11	Zang	Male	45	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	Business owner	154 mins
12	Ling	Male	41	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	Business owner	65 mins
13	Shu	Female	31	Chinese	Private firm	AE	Administrative manager	75 mins
14	Cai ²	Female	35	Chinese	Self-employed	SIE	Freelancer	82 mins
15	Zu	Male	26	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	Manager	68 mins
16	Feng ³	Male	46	Chinese	Self-employed	SIE	Owner	120 mins
17	Yu	Male	41	Chinese	SOE	AE	Regional CEO	114 mins
18	Li ⁴	Male	44	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	Sales director	88 mins
19	Ming	Male	39	Chinese	SOE	AE	Manager	126 mins
20	Zhang	Male	36	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	Business owner	142 mins
21	Jun	Male	31	Chinese	SOE	AE	Manager	106 mins
22	Hai	Male	33	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	Business owner	74 mins
23	Zhen	Male	47	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	Business owner	31 mins
24	Yang	Female	27	Chinese	Private firm	SIE	Manager	63 mins
25	Xi	Male	32	Chinese	SOE	AE	Managing director	114 mins
26	Nayo	Female	29	Tanzanian	Local law firm	Local CEO		66 mins

² Cai used to work for a private firm, then ran her own factory. She works as freelancer after becoming a mother.

³ Feng used to work for both a SOE and a private firm. He had resigned when I met him in Tanzania, and he is now running a restaurant and hostel there.

⁴ By the time I left, he had started his own business in Tanzania.

discussions during site visits and conversations embedded within meetings. Rather than following a predetermined set of questions, these interactions emerged naturally from the context, allowing the researcher to gain insights into participants' perspectives in a more relaxed and authentic manner. Table 3 presents the details of the casual conversations included in this study.

Although data collection took place during the pandemic, the relatively relaxed restrictions in Tanzania allowed the researcher to move around and interact with the Chinese community, albeit with some protective measures. The pandemic also led the OCSC to organise numerous support activities - distributing supplies, extending visas and arranging chartered flights - which gave the researcher valuable opportunities to engage with and observe various segments of the Chinese population living and working in Tanzania. However, the pandemic also had a negative impact on fieldwork. While the local Tanzanian

Table 3
Casual conversation information.

No.	location of conversation	Informant
1	Site visit in an SOE in Zanzibar	1 Chinese employee
2	Site visit in an SOE in Zanzibar	3 Chinese employees
3	Office meeting	2 Chinese employee
4	Site visit in a factory	1 Chinese business owner
5	Meeting in Tanzania Private Sector Foundation (TPSF)	2 local staff
6	Tea room	4 Chinese business owners
7	Tea room	1 Chinese business owner
8	Site visit in a factory	4 Chinese employees and 2 business owners
9	Office	4 Chinese business owners
10	Café	1 local immigration officer
11	Transportation (car)	1 Chinese business owner

community was generally less concerned about COVID-19, the Chinese community, particularly employees of SOEs, adopted strict precautions. Many SOEs, often located in remote areas and governed by disciplined management, became even more isolated. Expatriates were not permitted to leave the compounds, and visitors were strictly prohibited, which significantly limited the researcher's ability to conduct on-site visits and gather data from these groups.

3.2.2. Data analysis

Guided by an abductive approach, this study combined empirical observation with theoretical reflection in an iterative process of data analysis. Rather than beginning with a fixed hypothesis, we moved back and forth between the field data and existing theoretical frameworks to explore how expatriates navigate petty corruption. The analysis followed the general structure of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) - open coding, axial coding, and selective coding - but was shaped by a continuous dialogue between emerging patterns and relevant theoretical concepts (see Fig. 1). In the open coding phase, we identified a range of behaviours and rationales behind expatriates' interaction with petty corruption, along with the resources they drew upon in these encounters. As we moved into axial coding, constant comparison allowed us to cluster codes into six categories that illuminated the broader conditions influencing these interactions. During this stage, three forms of capital - linguistic, cultural and collective social - emerged as recurring and analytically significant resources. This prompted further theoretical engagement with Bourdieu's concept of capital and institutional theory. In the selective coding stage, we refined these findings into higher-order concepts, ultimately theorising that institutional pressures shape expatriates' interaction with petty corruption, while different forms of capital moderate their capacity to respond and adapt. Further details are provided in Tables 2, 3, and Fig. 1.

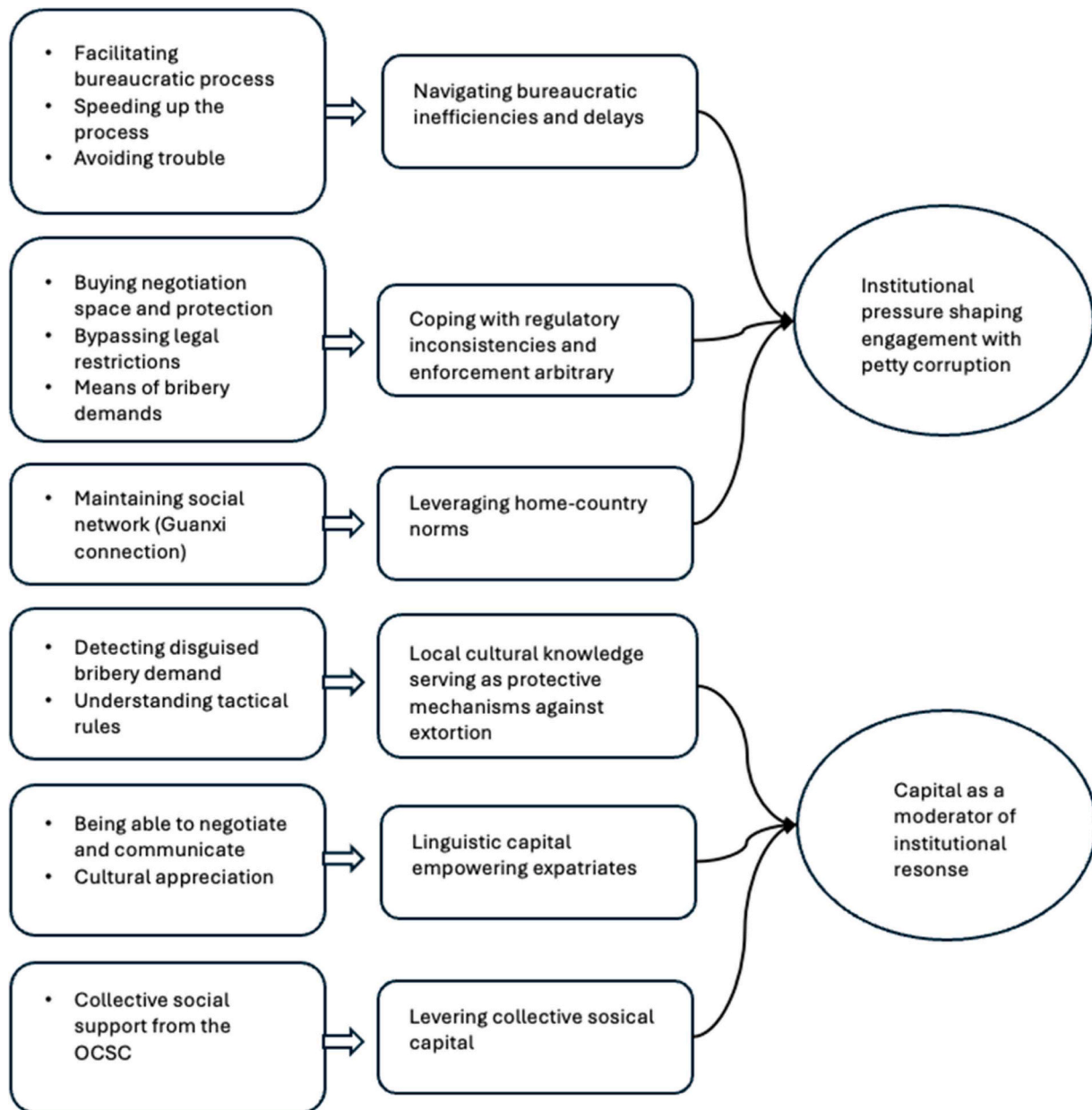


Fig. 1. Coding map.

4. Findings

4.1. Institutional pressure shaping interaction with petty corruption

4.1.1. Navigating bureaucratic inefficiencies and delays

The most common reason for expatriates to pay money they believe, or even know, is not legally required is 'to help get things done'. Much of this is presented under the rubric of 'tipping':

"I think the starting point of "tipping" is to get things done. If you can get things done, no matter if it is money or something else, it is fine" (Interview 15, Zu).

Some of them rationalise the giving of 'tips' as a justifiable hardship allowance (Interview 20, Zhang), acknowledging the assistance of or preferential treatment by local officials, a reciprocal obligation in the exchange. So 'tips' expedite the bureaucratic process. Chinese expatriates often acknowledge that formal procedures will eventually be completed if followed through, but many feel they cannot afford to wait

due to the potential cost of delays. Business operations, visa renewals or project deadlines can be severely impacted by bureaucratic delays. As a result, they choose to offer tips to accelerate the process, viewing it as a necessary measure to avoid greater losses or missed opportunities.

If something gets stuck and isn't moving forward, giving a small tip can get things moving quickly and the matter will be resolved. But if you're unwilling to give that little tip and the issue stays stuck for months, the loss you end up facing is far greater than the cost of that tip. (Interview 15, Zu)

Another frequently mentioned reason for petty bribery is to avoid trouble or uncertainty. As the Chinese saying goes, *duoyishi buru shaoyishi* (the less trouble the better). Some Chinese, especially the *xin tansang* (newcomers or those who are not very familiar with Tanzania), give money frequently to avoid as much trouble as possible. The lack of foreign language proficiency puts many Chinese in a disadvantageous position, without an ability to communicate correctly and unable to explain or defend themselves even though they may have done nothing

wrong. In these circumstances, giving money is the easiest way to avoid risk and trouble. Mr Jiang (Fieldnote, 80) was stopped by a police officer at a checkpoint. He did not understand anything he was asked. But then the officer took out his phone and typed the number '150,000'. Now Mr Jiang understood he was being asked for money and typed '100,000' on the phone to negotiate the price. When he was asked why they had asked him for money, he said he did not know, but he knew he would be OK if he paid a tip. And he was right.

4.1.2. Coping with regulatory inconsistencies and enforcement arbitrary

Tips can create room for negotiation and offer a degree of protection. Expatriates complain about the tipping culture but at the same time, they admit that it also gives them some flexibility. Miss Yang said, *"Sometimes the rules are too rigid and there is no flexibility, so many things cannot be done over here"* (Interview 24, Yang). Some businesspeople tip local authorities regularly to secure protection. One owner of a private firm explained that if the government cannot find any tax problem, they might 'look for trouble' during quality inspections. His company pays a local bureau a 'salary' every month in order to make sure the products pass the inspection and enter the market successfully (Fieldnote, 104). On the phone one day the first-named author heard a Chinese businessman ask a colleague *"did you pay the protection fee? Come on, it is what you must pay. No wonder they charge you so much"* (Fieldnote, 69).

Bypassing legal restrictions, some Chinese expatriates seek assistance that extends beyond the formal duties of local authorities. Nayo, a local lawyer, complained that even though she already reminded her Chinese client that they were not allowed to import a specific machine, they still paid someone to get it done. Every time someone came to check they paid again, until one day one of the shareholders was arrested (Interview 26, Nayo).

Arbitrary enforcement by local authorities in Tanzania often takes the form of both direct and disguised requests for money. In some cases, officials explicitly demand bribes, while in others, they hint at or subtly imply that payments are necessary to facilitate smooth operations, reflecting the pervasive and entrenched culture of corruption in regulatory practices. For instance, one Chinese investor frequently asked a local immigration officer to assist him with visa services for other Chinese expatriates: he had gifted a mobile phone to that officer. When the phone experienced a battery issue, the first-named author was in the office when the officer directly requested a replacement, specifically asking for a Huawei phone (Fieldnote, 43).

Both direct and disguised bribery demands are frequently encountered at police checkpoints, particularly by street officers, where expatriates are instructed to stop their vehicles for inspections. Local officials typically check the identity documents of the driver and passengers, as well as conduct a security check of the vehicle. An issue may be identified, and a bribe is often requested but, most of the time, disguised as a formal fine. The amount requested is lower than the official fine would be. Some Chinese expatriates are unaware that these payments go straight into the officer's pocket. However, many of those who are aware still choose to pay in cash, for convenience. Even if no violations are found, officials may still ask for small sums to buy food or coffee, with the unspoken implication that issues could be found with a closer inspection. During the pandemic, the Chinese were commonly asked for medical supplies: masks, gloves and sanitisers. Since protecting the population from COVID-19 also benefited the Chinese community in the country, generally this led to few objections.

Requests may also be framed as 'taxation'; negotiable taxation. Initially, firms are given a surprisingly large amount to pay. Those who lack experience in the host country will be scared. Experienced expatriates know that the number can be negotiated:

"The common thing they will do is to give you a hat (accusation) first; if you do not have any problem you can negotiate with them. Yesterday Mr Zu came to our house and said they would be fined hundreds of millions for tax. But they will talk with them and usually,

it will be several million at the end. He said it was normal. They did it every year. What they want is money." (Fieldnote, 104)

Petty corruption can happen in a more subtle way. In the construction industry it is common that completed projects are not approved by the consultant engineers the first time, or will be approved but with minor problems. A 'tip' eases the approval (Interview 5, Wang). More difficult for the Chinese to accept is when the Tanzanians come "looking for trouble". Labour conflict is one entry point:

"They made very beautiful tax returns but still they were fined. If the government wants to find trouble ... they will use the conflicts with local workers and then intervene" (Fieldnote, 30).

and

"In fact, the biggest cost over here is to pay taxes, but you can negotiate it in Tanzania. You give some tips, they lower your taxes." (Interview 15, Zu)

It is easy to create labour relation issues and the Chinese find them difficult to deal with. They believe the local authorities encourage and then use such cases as a starting point enabling them to 'dig deeper' and ask for money. Each act of enforcement seems reasonable in itself, but together they legitimise the 'tipping' requests:

"...it is very difficult to fire a local worker, even after you gave him some money, he will then go to the Ministry of Labour and sue you. And those departments like the locals suing the Chinese very much. Once the Chinese are sued, no matter what, they will be arrested and bail will be requested. To put it bluntly, bailing out is a matter of paying money. If you still cannot go, and you do not want to put it off year after year, you can only find some middlemen to send money to them." (Interview 19, Ming)

The expectation that Chinese expatriates will offer money has shaped local interactions, leading to preferential yet exploitative treatment by officials. Nayo, a local lawyer, shared an incident that illustrates how Chinese expatriates are seen as lucrative targets by local officials. One day, her car was hit by another driver who fled the scene. She managed to record the vehicle's plate number and track down the driver's information. Later, when she returned to the police station to express gratitude for their assistance, she casually mentioned that the driver was Chinese. Upon hearing this, a police officer immediately responded, *"Chinese? I will give you the money to fix your car. Just give me the name of the Chinese."* Reflecting on this exchange, Nayo explained to the first-named author, *"Why? Because they know they will turn it into a bigger case and get more money. Take advantage. Yeah. But anyways, I didn't give it"* (Interview 26, Nayo). This perception of Chinese expatriates as financially exploitable extends beyond individual cases. Several locals complained to the first-named author that when groups of people visit local offices, Chinese individuals are often prioritised - not out of courtesy, but because officials anticipate they will offer bribes or financial incentives.

4.1.3. Leveraging home-country norms to build long-term relationships through bribery

For many Chinese expatriates, bribery is not simply a tool to resolve immediate issues but also a strategic investment in social relationships. They view bribery as a way of establishing or maintaining *guanxi* with local officials, thereby ensuring that they are treated favourably in the future. One expatriate explained, *"I consciously consider establishing a certain relationship with local officers so that, next time, they won't manipulate me"* (Interview 11, Zang). This illustrates how bribery functions as a form of social capital, where expatriates aim to build reciprocal relationships that provide protection and smoother interactions down the line. Mr Wang (Interview 5, Wang) is friends with an officer from the immigration office, whom he often invites for dinner and gives tips. In return, the officer simplifies and accelerates the visa application

process for Mr Wang and his colleagues. But it does not always work. Mr Kai (Interview 7, Kai) believes things have changed in the past few years where there is less *renqing* (human emotion in social relationship) and it is all about transactions. According to him, social connections nowadays will not bring you greater 'competitive advantages' (Interview 7, Kai). You may get more chances to explain yourself, he said, but in order to get things done, you still need to give money.

4.2. Capital as a moderator of institutional response

4.2.1. Local cultural knowledge

Some Chinese expatriates generally manage reasonably well and demonstrate the ability to resist extortion or even to reshape the nature of these interactions. Success tends to be tied to different forms of capital - cultural, linguistic and social - which equip the expatriates with strategies to navigate these challenges effectively.

Familiarity with the host country's cultural norms and bureaucratic practices serves as a protective umbrella enabling expatriates to resist exploitation. The concept of "Old Tanzanians" (*lao tansang*) refers to Chinese expatriates who have spent a significant amount of time in Tanzania and acquired local linguistic and cultural knowledge. This cultural capital allows them to manoeuvre through corrupt encounters more effectively:

"If they stop you, and you communicate with them in Swahili, they will think you are *lao tansang*. After the communication, he would let me go, if nothing particular" (Interview 19, Ming).

Cultural know-how - understanding how things function in the host country - equips expatriates with the skills to engage strategically in corrupt exchanges or, in some cases, reject them outright. As previously mentioned, experienced expatriates are more likely to detect disguised bribery demands:

There are many things with the government that can be negotiated. For example, if the tax authorities issue a fine, you can talk to them and find a solution. Through negotiations, we gradually built closer relationships, formed friendship and, in the end, maybe offered a small token of appreciation (Interview 20, Zhang)

So, local knowledge allows expatriates to successfully navigate potentially exploitative situations by negotiating and engaging in discussions, rather than passively accepting exploitation.

4.2.2. Linguistic capital

Proficiency in local languages significantly enhances expatriates' ability to navigate the power dynamics inherent in corrupt exchanges. Those who can communicate in English or Swahili - the national languages of Tanzania - often gain greater confidence and bargaining power, enabling them to push back against unfair demands. Younger expatriates, in particular, tend to show lower tolerance for petty corruption, and their greater language skills empower them to resist exploitation. Moreover, speaking the local language conveys cultural respect and appreciation, which can foster goodwill among locals and further reduce the likelihood of being targeted for corrupt practices:

Why did I enrol in the Swahili class? One reason is to deal with traffic police ... [who are Tanzanians]. If you speak Swahili, they very much welcome you, because they think it is very good, is cordial (*qinqie*). It is like a foreigner in China who can speak Chinese. (Interview 19, Ming)

4.2.3. Collective social capital

Beyond individual resistance, Chinese expatriates also rely on their collective social networks to navigate corruption. Establishing alternative networks reduces dependence on government officials, providing expatriates with additional resources to contest corrupt demands. The collective social capital in the Chinese expatriate network offers

individual expatriates resources or networks far beyond those they could access through their individual capacity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese nationals were stranded in Tanzania, unable to return to China, but with expiring visas. In response, the OCSC facilitated a collective solution by gathering the passports of local Chinese nationals and submitting them directly to the head of the immigration bureau for visa extensions. The organisation's direct engagement with senior officials minimised personal contact between expatriates and local authorities, reducing opportunities for exploitation. The example highlights the importance of *guanxi* (social connections) as a form of capital that expatriates can leverage to avoid or mitigate corruption. Those embedded in strong expatriate networks can seek assistance and alternative solutions, reducing their susceptibility to exploitative demands.

5. Discussion

5.1. Institutional pressures and the normalization of petty corruption

Institutional isomorphism, explaining why and how organisations adopt similar practices, structures and behaviours (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), has been widely applied to the study of corporate corruption (Chen et al., 2018; Gao, 2010; Ufere et al., 2020). Our findings suggest that institutional isomorphism also offers a nuanced perspective on why and how individual expatriates engage in corrupt practices (Fig. 2). Rather than viewing petty corruption as solely a matter of personal ethics or opportunism (Sheridan, 2019), institutional isomorphism helps explain how coercive pressures, social learning and normative expectations shape participation in petty corrupt exchanges.

5.1.1. Coercive isomorphism

Bureaucratic inefficiencies and regulatory inconsistencies often compel expatriates to comply with bribery demands. In a foreign environment, expatriates may feel uncertain and are more likely to succumb to extortion or engage in corruption (Greppin et al., 2017). Several studies have documented the prevalence of petty corruption in sub-Saharan African countries (Baez-Camargo et al., 2020; Sheridan, 2019; Wang, 2024), highlighting the challenges faced by expatriates there. These challenges are particularly pronounced among new arrivals in Tanzania (*xin tansang*), or those unfamiliar with the local context, making them more vulnerable to exploitation in such environments (Wang, 2024). Petty corruption through direct bribery demands may be easier for expatriates to confront or reject, as the exchange is more transparent and overt; but corruption disguised as law enforcement or regulations becomes more difficult to identify and resist due to the perceived legitimacy of the demand, the authority of the official or the fear of legal consequences. This subtle form of corruption, making it challenging to distinguish between legitimate practices and corrupt behaviour, often exploits the expatriates' lack of familiarity with local legal nuances.

Sheridan (2019, P. 19) notes that requests are often conveyed jokingly, attributing misunderstandings to "the ambiguity of these exchanges between Chinese and Tanzanians [which] contributed to both the amiability of joking relationships but also reinforced Chinese stereotypes about a presumed local propensity to make demands". This study cannot definitively determine whether these requests were intended as jokes. However, what is clear is that in interactions between Chinese expatriates and local authorities, the power imbalance created by differing political statuses can lead to jokes being interpreted as authoritative commands, particularly when language barriers impede further clarification.

5.1.2. Mimetic isomorphism

This type of isomorphism often occurs in situations of significant uncertainty or ambiguity about what constitutes appropriate behaviour (Deligonul et al., 2013). However, imitation can also happen when

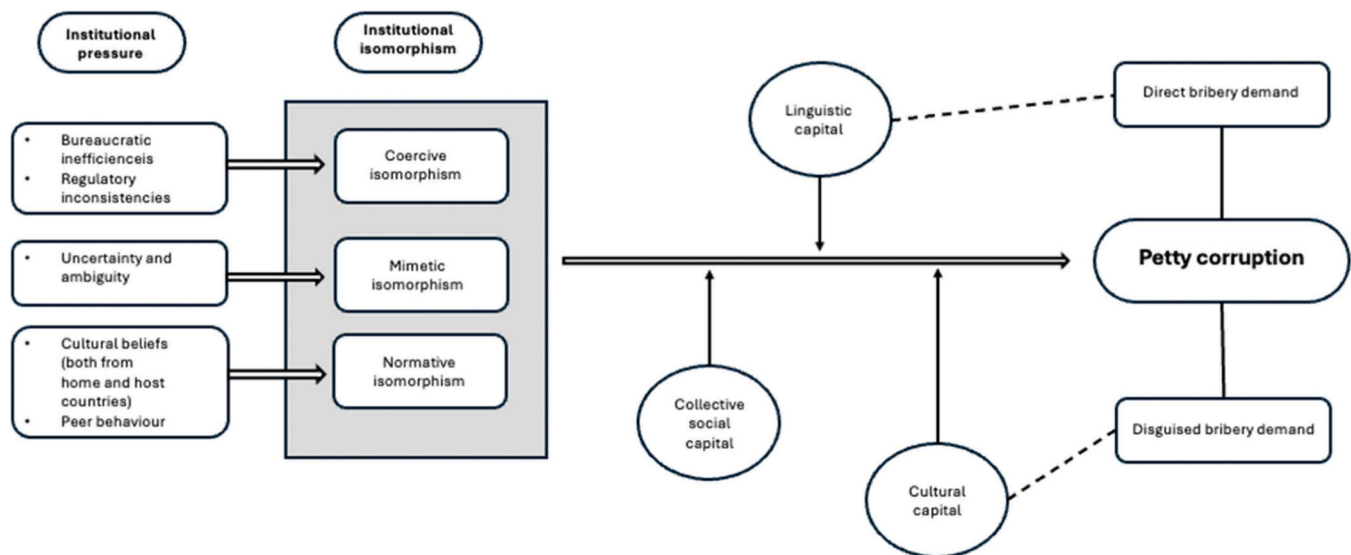


Fig. 2. An integrated framework illustrating how institutional pressures and personal capital shape expatriates' interaction with petty corruption.

individuals or organisations uncritically follow established practices that are taken for granted as the 'normal' or expected way to act. While existing literature explains mimetic isomorphism at the organisational level as a response to market competition and institutional survival (Hannan & Freeman, 1977), our findings extend this logic to the micro level: individuals under power asymmetries also mimic behaviour as a coping strategy to navigate uncertainty and assert agency in constrained environments. Power asymmetries, compounded by limited language proficiency and insufficient local knowledge, heighten the likelihood of mimetic isomorphism among expatriates. In contexts marked by pronounced power differentials, such as interactions with local bureaucrats, Chinese expatriates often experience heightened uncertainty, particularly when they lack familiarity with local norms and institutional arrangements, and so become more likely to emulate observed local behaviours that appear effective in navigating the system, even if these practices conflict with their own ethical standards or institutional expectations. Thus, mimetic isomorphism emerges not merely from normative pressure, but as a strategic response to perceived vulnerability and the urgent need to adapt. The urgency to cope with bureaucratic demands often overrides considerations of right or wrong, shifting the focus solely to what gets the situation resolved.

5.1.3. Normative isomorphism

Sundström (2019) found that the beliefs and behaviour of peers also plays a significant role in influencing individuals' involvement in corruption. When the Chinese businessman suggested to his peer, "*it is what you must pay. No wonder they charge you so much,*" it highlights the normalisation of corrupt practices within a peer group, pressuring individuals to comply with such demands. Among some Chinese expatriates, legitimising bribes by reframing them as 'service fees' or 'hardship fees' functions as a form of cultural rationalisation, reinforcing the acceptability of these shared practices within their social group. In some countries, legislative exceptions allow the payment of petty bribes in foreign markets, thereby creating normative pressures that foster corruption (Cuerpo-Cazurra, 2016). Petty corruption is socially embedded in Tanzania (Sheridan, 2019), a finding that our field observations and interviews have confirmed. Expatriates have come to accept that corruption is simply a part of life in Tanzania and feel compelled to follow the rules of the game.

Moreover, maintaining social networks through petty corruption is also normalised behaviour, shaped not only by shared experiences but also by peer expectations that are not necessarily rooted in the host country's culture, but rather transferred from the expatriates' home

country. In nearby Ghana, petty corruption is deeply embedded in the bureaucratic system, with officials frequently requesting 'small money' (Wang, 2024). Smart (1993) argues that when formal systems, such as bureaucracies and regulatory frameworks, are perceived as inefficient, inconsistent or arbitrarily enforced, individuals often turn to personal relationships as a more reliable means of navigating their environment. Rather than relying on institutional trust, businesspeople build *guanxi* by giving gifts or tips, establishing informal networks of trust and reciprocity. This serves as a substitute for formal safeguards, helping to protect their investments and reduce the risk of unpredictable interference from government officials. Engaging in petty corruption not only reflects the normalisation of such practices within the host country, but also reveals how Chinese expatriates import the 'rules of the game' from home, expecting that maintaining social networks will yield long-term preferential treatment. However, such expectations are not always met, as differing cultural understandings of reciprocity can lead to disappointment and misalignment (Sheridan, 2019).

Nevertheless, Chinese expatriates often carry this mindset with them, continuing to offer money as a means of maintaining interpersonal networks. This normative isomorphism compels them to reproduce behaviours consistent with home-country practices. Even when such actions may be deemed unethical or less efficient in the host context, expatriates conform to the social and professional expectations of their peer group, underlining the powerful influence of culturally embedded norms. While IB studies have traditionally treated institutional environments as locally grounded (e.g., Bahoo et al., 2020), our study illustrates how home-country norms such as sustaining *guanxi* through 'gifts' shape how expatriates interpret and interact with corruption abroad. In doing so, we add a transnational layer to normative isomorphism, demonstrating that institutional environments are shaped by multiple sources, not confined to the host country alone.

5.2. The role of capital in navigating petty corruption

Chinese expatriates in Tanzania navigate petty corruption by leveraging various forms of capital - cultural, linguistic and social. Cultural knowledge provides them with insider strategies to handle corrupt encounters, local linguistic skills empower them to challenge unfair demands, and social networks serve as protective mechanisms against extortion. These findings illustrate how expatriates actively adapt to the host country's socio-political landscape, not only complying with corruption when necessary, but also resisting it when they possess the resources to do so.

Our findings support existing studies which shows international experience, a well-established identity (e.g., having lived in the local country for an extended period of time), and fluency in local language(s) tend to reduce the likelihood of expatriates facing extortion or engaging in corrupt practices (Greppin et al., 2017; Lam, 2015). To navigate petty corruption, linguistic capital is important in coping with both direct and disguised petty corruption. Faced with corrupt demands, linguistically capable expatriates are able to explain the situation, communicate information and negotiate; other expatriates may feel frustrated that they did nothing wrong but not know how to argue or defend themselves (Zi, 2015). Śliwa and Johansson (2015) highlight the symbolic power of language in enabling individuals to advance their interests while aligning with audience expectations and broader social norms. Our findings build on this by showing that linguistic capital enhances expatriates' symbolic power - positioning them not only as culturally appreciative foreigners, but also as experienced insiders rather than naïve outsiders. This sophisticated identity, conveyed through local language proficiency, acts as a protective mechanism that reduces expatriates' vulnerability to deception and intimidation during corrupt exchanges.

While linguistic capital is particularly valuable in resisting direct bribery demands, cultural and social capital play a more significant role in dealing with disguised bribery, which is often framed as legitimate law enforcement. Cultural knowledge allows expatriates to distinguish between genuine legal procedures and disguised exploitation. This aligns with Wang's (2024) concept of the 'cultural toolkit,' which describes how migrants develop localised knowledge that helps them engage with officials and understand the informal rules governing corruption. Encounters with petty corruption are not standardised; rather, they are highly improvisational and interactive (Wang, 2024), often beginning with small talk or seemingly unrelated conversations. This dynamic nature privileges cultural awareness and linguistic skills, enabling expatriates to strategically navigate and respond to these situations effectively.

In societies where there is limited state effectiveness (institutional voids), social networks are a valuable resource for mitigating socio-economic hardship and institutional inefficiencies (Baez-Camargo et al., 2020). *Guanxi* is considered morally acceptable by Chinese expatriates for overcoming bureaucratic hurdles in the host country (Ulusemre & Fang, 2022). Existing research show that broader networks and connections with diverse individuals reduce the likelihood of engaging in petty corruption (Hanoteau et al., 2021). Our study highlights the crucial role of social capital in helping expatriates navigate the challenges of operating in a foreign institutional environment. Social capital reduces the expatriates' dependence on corrupt exchanges to achieve their objectives, granting them access to alternative resources, insider knowledge and critical information that can help them navigate bureaucratic hurdles and informal power dynamics. In particular, we found that the collective social capital derived from ethnic organisations (such as the OCSC in this study) functions as a collective representation, facilitating communication and negotiation with local authorities. This aligns with the literature on ethnic and immigrant community organisations, which play a crucial role in supporting migrants' adjustment and integration into the host country (Majka & Mullan, 2002; Portes et al., 2008). In the context of petty corruption, OCSC possesses valuable social (e.g., network with high-level local bureaucrats) and cultural (including linguistic capital) capital that enables them to negotiate effectively with local authorities. Such community organisations are particularly important as they offer collective strength well beyond the capacity of individual expatriates. Our data illustrates that individual Chinese expatriates, due to insufficient local language competencies and inadequate local know-how, compounded with power asymmetries, often struggle to navigate bureaucratic hurdles. However, drawing on the support and the influence of ethnic organisations, expatriates can access broader networks of contacts - often indirectly, through these organisations as intermediaries - and tap into resources that help them

lower their risk of exploitation, avoid unnecessary bribery demands, and overcome obstacles in the local context more effectively.

6. Conclusion and contributions

By applying institutional isomorphism as a theoretical lens alongside Bourdieu's concept of capital, this study deepens our understanding of expatriates' interaction with petty corruption - a pervasive yet under-explored phenomenon in weak institutional environments, which also carries significant psychological consequences for individuals (Bader et al., 2019). The integrated framework developed in this study demonstrates that while coercive, mimetic and normative institutional pressures significantly shape expatriates' behaviour, their interaction are moderated by the personal and social resources (forms of capital) they bring with them. Fig. 2 presents the integrated framework: double-line arrows indicate direct or causal effects, solid arrows represent the moderating role of personal capital, and dotted-line arrows illustrate how personal capital facilitates navigation of specific forms of petty corruption. Direct bribery and disguised bribery are connected with simple lines to indicate that they are two distinct forms of petty corruption.

Specifically, bureaucratic inefficiencies and inconsistent regulatory practices give rise to coercive isomorphism, while the uncertainty and ambiguity of foreign environments reinforce mimetic isomorphism. Internationally, normative isomorphism, rather than being shaped solely by peer influence, is informed by the interplay of cultural norms and social expectations from both host and home countries.

Moreover, the study identifies two common initiation mechanisms for petty corruption: direct bribery demands and disguised requests. Linguistic capital is particularly valuable when responding to direct demands, as proficiency in the local language enables expatriates to confront, negotiate or clarify their position during encounters with officials. In contrast, local cultural knowledge - an element of embodied cultural capital - enhances expatriates' ability to recognise and navigate more implicit or disguised forms of bribery.

Previous studies have tended to emphasise either external factor, such as social norms (Greppin et al., 2017), or personal factors, like prior experience and background (Mulumba and Walugemba, 2024), in shaping expatriates' experiences with corruption. By bridging macro-level neo-institutional theory and micro-level practices and resources through Bourdieu's concept of capital, this study offers a more integrated theoretical understanding of how individual behaviours are influenced both by the broader institutional environment and the personal assets expatriates bring with them. Incorporating Bourdieu's concepts of capital, we move beyond a purely institutional perspective by emphasising the moderating role of individual agency in response to external pressures. This expanded framework highlights the dynamic interaction between structural pressures and individual resources, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of how cultural, linguistic and social assets influence the ways expatriates engage with the institutional contexts of petty corruption.

This study also contributes to the theoretical understanding of institutional influence on expatriate behaviour by highlighting the transnational nature of institutional pressures. While normative isomorphism is typically understood as being shaped by local institutional environments in global context (Bahoo et al., 2020), such as regulations and industry practices, this research demonstrates that Chinese expatriates in Tanzania do not simply conform to the host country's institutional arrangements or informal norms surrounding corruption. Instead, they bring with them home-country cultural and social norms, such as the practice of *guanxi*, which influence their interpretation and interaction with corruption. For many expatriates, bribery is not viewed merely as an illegal act, but as a strategic means to maintain relationships and ensure long-term benefits. Thus, the study enriches our understanding of normative isomorphism by illustrating how cross-national norms and practices intersect in expatriates'

interactions with corruption, offering a more nuanced perspective on institutional isomorphism in global contexts.

7. Limitations and further research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as an ethnographic study conducted in a single national context, the findings may not be easily generalisable to other settings. Expatriates from different countries may bring varying home-country norms, values and institutional expectations when navigating new situations (Greppin et al., 2017; Sartor & Beamish, 2020). Nevertheless, we believe the conceptual framework developed here is relevant to individuals operating in environments characterised by weak institutions, where similar pressures and dilemmas may arise.

Second, due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, our engagement with expatriates from SOEs was more limited than with those from private firms. This uneven access resulted in an imbalance in the richness and quantity of data across ownership types. Preliminary observations suggest meaningful differences between these two groups: expatriates from SOEs appeared to receive greater institutional support from their organisations in navigating petty corruption, whereas those from small and medium-sized private firms were more likely to engage directly with local practices and showed higher dependency on external intermediaries, such as the Overseas Chinese Service Center (OCSC). Future comparative studies could further explore how firm ownership shapes expatriates' identity, resource access, and interactions with local authorities.

Third, this study treated the Chinese expatriate community as a relatively unified group due to fieldwork design, encompassing both assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). However, these two groups often differ in terms of motivations, attitudes, access to resources and cross-cultural competencies (Jokinen et al., 2008). Further research could investigate the distinct experiences of AEs and SIEs in relation to corruption and institutional adaptation, offering more nuanced insights into the heterogeneity within expatriate populations.

Fourth, while this study focused on macro-level institutional pressures and micro-level forms of capital shaping expatriate experience, it did not explicitly examine the role of individual motivations in shaping behaviour. Future research could explore how personal norms, perceived opportunities, and cost-benefit evaluations (Gorsira et al., 2018) influence expatriates' interaction with corruption. Incorporating these psychological and motivational dimensions would add a valuable agentic perspective to current structural accounts, deepening our understanding of why individuals choose different coping strategies.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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