The Ties That Bind: Identity, Emotion, and Everyday Work in Chinese Agricultural Aid—A Case Study of the China-Aided Agricultural Technology Demonstration Center in East Africa

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This paper explores the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of China's agricultural aid by an ethnographic case study of a Chinese Agricultural Technology Demonstration Center in Country W, East Africa. Moving beyond macro-level analyses of foreign aid effectiveness, it focuses on the live experiences of Chinese agricultural experts and their daily interactions with the local staff. Through intensive fieldwork, the study reveals how aid implementation is shaped not only by institutional arrangements and technical tasks but also by emotional labor, identity transformation, and cross-cultural negotiation. The narrative highlights tensions, misunderstandings, and emotional adjustments required on both sides, especially between Chinese managers and local workers such as drivers and coordinators, as they navigate through shared responsibilities and divergent expectations. These micro-level dynamics often determine the success or failure of aid projects on the ground. The study ultimately argues for a more people-centered understanding of foreign aid, one that recognizes the importance of affective relationships, informal roles, and emotional resilience in the sustainability of international cooperation.

Keywords: foreign aid interaction, emotional adjustment, cross-cultural interaction, identity transformation

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With the south-south cooperation and world development, the Chinese government has been sending agricultural technology experts to African countries to provide technical support and train agricultural technology talents for them. From the viewpoint of these specific forms of assistance, the promotion of agricultural technology demonstration centers (referred to as "the Center" hereinafter) in Africa reflects China's assistance concept of *"it is better to teach a man to fish than to give him a fish"* (Zhang & Yang 2014; Xu 2015), of which, agricultural technical experts are the main practice of assistance to Africa, and there is a correlation between their professional and technical ability, gender, age, communication and coordination ability, and language ability and the performance of assistance (Cai 2013; Ni et al. 2014). In the process of aid, agricultural technologists will first change their identity before and after going abroad, from a domestic identity to international one. In addition, in the highly uncertain environment of a foreign

country, the agronomist will face a number of difficulties, including personal, physical, psychological, and organizational ones related to the aid work. For example, they may face physical health crises with limited access to health care, emotional deprivation and depression from being away from home and family for long periods of time, and the uncertainty of the environment in which they are working. The agronomists have to deal with the tension and anxiety in a certain situation, as well as the pressure of maintaining a normal operation of the whole assistance program. All these require the agrotechnology experts to successfully complete the transformation of the "other" in their own identity and accomplish psychological adjustment under limited conditions, and to interact with the local society strategically in the course of project practice, so as to finally realize the smooth implementation of the assistance project.

Through fieldwork, it was found that a development assistance program in a foreign country require lots of support from the local community when it is implemented. The physical and psychological stress of being in a foreign country, changes in personal identity, emotional adjustment to the aid work, and rationalization of strategies for interacting with the local community are the difficulties faced by agronomists, and these form an important basis for the operation of a project. For an organization or institute, it is possible to create job positions like drivers, cooks, security guards and skilled workers, but these do not mean that they can cover all the needs of project operation. In fact, since the Center is not an "enclave" completely cut off from the outside world, but on the contrary needs to interact very closely with the local community, the creation of formal posts is not adequate in covering all the operational needs of the project. In addition to their functions, they need partners and guides on whom they can rely around the clock. The local staff of the Center is the main local partner on which the Chinese agronomists rely. This means that the Center actually has a need for local staff that goes beyond the functions of a regular job.

For the local staff working at the Center, there is no natural obligation to assist Chinese experts in fulfilling all the requirements for successful local development. From a crude relationship perspective, formal relationships correspond to the needs of the workplace, while informal ones correspond to the needs outside the workplace. For the latter to be effective, there needs to be some emotional connection and appropriate interaction between formal and informal relationships.

Building on these observations, this study seeks to explore a central research question: How do emotional interactions and interpersonal dynamics between Chinese agricultural experts and local staff influence the effectiveness and sustainability of foreign aid projects in Africa? While much of the existing literature on foreign aid focuses on institutional design, policy outcomes, and macro-level strategies, this research turns attention to the micro-level, everyday encounters that often go unnoticed. In particular, it examines how identity transformation, emotional labor, and informal negotiation shape both the practical implementation and the human experience of aid. By analyzing a specific case within a Chinese agricultural technology demonstration center in East Africa, this study aims to understand how affective relationships are formed, maintained, and sometimes strained—and what these relationships reveal about the deeper social mechanisms underlying development cooperation.

FACTORS AFFECTING AID EFFECTIVENESS AND EMOTIONAL RESEARCH

As China's national power grows, the corresponding effects of China's foreign aid have attracted extensive attention from scholars around the world. In foreign aid activities, most studies focus on the evaluation of foreign aid results, which is related to the practical nature of aid itself. By combing through the existing literature, it is found that studies on the effects of foreign aid mainly fall into two categories: the impact of the objective institutional environment on the effects of aid, and the impact of the interaction process between the two parties on the effects of aid. While these studies provide explanations, they lack to some extent an examination of the individuality of people in micro-situations, and aid activities under the framework of existing agreements are in practice highly dependent on the emotional connections and interactions between individuals, which may have positive or negative impacts on aid effectiveness. The literature on emotions provides some theoretical references and analytical perspectives for further exploring the research questions in this paper.

Impact of the Objective Institutional Environment on Aid Effectiveness

Some scholars have argued that China's foreign aid is in fact a unique and representative model. For example, Deborah Brautigam points out in *The Dragon's Gift: The True Story of China's Presence in Africa* that China's aid has played an indelible positive role in the development of Africa (Brautigam 2009). Chinese scholars have refined China's foreign aid model, arguing that it is different from that of developed countries in Europe and the United States, which is based on the sharing of parallel experiences (Xu & Li 2020).

Putting ideological disputes aside, China's foreign aid actually faces many objective institutional constraints in a very long period of time, having a corresponding impact on the achievement of aid effectiveness. Some studies have focused on the relatively macroscopic historical changes and institutional design of China's aid, arguing that China's foreign aid in general has manifested three stages of changes (Yu 2016; Tang 2020), in which the form of organization and the objectives of the mission have undergone major changes, such as the independence of aid agencies, diversification of aid subjects, and consultation and cooperation (Hu & Huang 2012), and that China's foreign aid has undergone major changes too (Yang 2011). In terms of policy characteristics, it embodies the concepts of non-politics, mutual benefit and pragmatism (Chen 2015). Some scholars believe that agricultural technical experts play the role of state agents in aid to Africa, showing features of non-professionalization, high politicization and depersonalization (Li, Tang, & Lu 2017), but there are certain deficiencies in the design of the system, such as a lack of continuity, limited working conditions and low treatment, so it is necessary to continue to make some effective adjustments to the system (Lu, He, & Li 2015; Zhao 2020).

Overall, many of the elements mentioned in the above have influenced the effectiveness of China's foreign aid in various ways. As an important practical endeavor to improve the community of human destiny, China's foreign aid has been diversified in many aspects. How the adjustment of these objective factors work and achieve good results needs to be further analyzed in a detailed and scientific manner.

Processes and Effects of Assistance in the Interaction

Recent scholarship on foreign aid has increasingly shifted from macro-level analyses to a more nuanced exploration of micro-level dynamics and everyday interactions. Rather than viewing aid as a unidirectional flow of resources or ideas, these studies emphasize how local knowledge, decision-making, and interpersonal relations shape the implementation and outcomes of development projects. This emerging perspective challenges top-down assumptions and reveals the complexity, contestation, and co-construction at the heart of aid practices.

Some scholars have focused on the role of micro elements in the process, and in James C. Scott's discussion of *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, the concept of "metis" is proposed, that is, in the process of implementing many large-scale projects, the existing local knowledge is ignored, whereas this king of knowledge can become the key to the success or failure of the project (Scott 2020). In *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*, economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Devereaux argue that attention needs to be paid to how people in distress make decisions based on information about what they know, and that they respond to aid programs according to the circumstances of their own lives (Banerjee & Devereaux 2011). Ben Ramalingam, on the other hand, suggests that the contemporary international aid system has become chaotic and should be analyzed using complexity thinking (Ramalingam 2013).

Interaction has become an indispensable perspective in foreign aid. Some scholars start from a perception of difference and find that there are many distinct features in value and form between China's foreign aid practice and the existing Western-oriented international development practice, which provides an "alternative development model", whose ultimate effect depends on the interactive learning process of all parties (Xu & Li 2016). In the micro-situation, Lei Wen (2018), in her field study of the China Aid Project in Tanzania, examined the spatial power relations between Chinese experts and local people in terms of the "differential gaze", and argued that the logic of "differential governance" was formed in different spatial hierarchies. If the perspective is changed, it can be found that the aid relationship is to a certain extent mutually constructed, with local African elites constructing a "consent mechanism" through

identity and monitoring strategies, and with the success of the project's output increase, consent is further internalized, and this interaction around China's development experience forms a "development conspiracy". This interaction around China's development experience creates a "development consent" (Lei, Wang, & Li 2017). Gao Liangmin and Qi Tengfei (2020) suggest that, in China-Africa agricultural interaction, there should not be a one-way export, but a two-way cultural interaction. Zhang Yue (2015) finds that in agricultural assistance to Africa, different actors need to reproduce and localize new development knowledge in order to complete a more ideal assistance practice. The concept of "affective encounter" has been put forward in Zambia's agricultural aid program and fieldwork on Chinese farms, suggesting that the actual interactions between Chinese and Africans in micro-situations take place in daily life, and that mutual understanding in terms of emotions, emotional care, and conflict of misunderstandings become the main content (Wu 2020).

The above studies have carefully analyzed the interactions between the two parties in foreign aid activities, proposed relevant mechanism explanations, and focused on the cultural and social development differences between different groups. However, most of these studies lack in attention to the more micro level of individual behavioral and emotional interactions. Wu's ethnographic study provides a good example, and also useful inspiration for further examination of the relationship between emotional interactions and aid effectiveness in foreign aid.

Embeddedness of Emotional Research and Intercultural Economic Assistance

The evolution of the sociology of emotion can be divided into three stages, and the formative period was mainly from the mid-19th century to the 1930s, which can be seen in the writings of the early classical sociologists. For example, Max Weber described the appeal of Protestant ethics to the emerging capitalists; Émile Durkheim suggested the role of collective feelings in social solidarity; and Karl Marx emphasized the damage of social class conflict to group feelings (Guo 2007). In the 1940s and 1970s, sociologists hoped to use emotional issues to discover the deep-rooted conflicts and crises in society. Sociology of emotions emerged as an important branch in Western Europe and North America after the 1970s. In her book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Arlie Russell Hochschild describes how the commercial mechanisms of market activities have embodies a manipulation of emotions and emotional labor, and puts forward the important concept of emotional alienation (Hochschild 1983), which has become an important theoretical source for the sociological study of emotions (Dan 2005), especially in sociological research on labor in sectors such as caregiving and the tertiary sector (Ma 2010; Mei 2020; Zhang & Li 2022).

According to some scholars, the current sociological research on emotion is characterized by the following five categories: emotion, as an object of sociological research, has formed a fixed research paradigm and system in the process of development; emotion itself has become a core concept in sociological theories and methods; the relationship between emotion and rationality runs through research on the diversification of emotion; the research has shifted from grand theories to daily life; and the research focuses on the relationship between modernity and emotion (Guo 2007). Thus, a useful tool is provided for understanding current social phenomena from the perspective of emotion, and the directions of exploration including how to conduct fieldwork on foreign aid from a relatively micro perspective, how to analyze the empirical material in terms of interpersonal affective interactions, and how to look at the evolution of foreign aid processes and outcomes in terms of affective interactions.

In the study of economics, there has long been the basic assumption of "rational-economic man", i.e., that in economic and social activities the behaviors followed by actors are rational behaviors seeking to maximize benefits for self-interested purposes (Smith 1937). However, this basic assumption was later challenged by many scholars, who argued that there is a great deal of irrational behavior in real-life situations, and proposed the "economic social action", which assumes that basic human behavior is not only affected by the maximization of economic interests, but also by the social institutions and norms in which it is embedded (Granovetter 1985). Along these lines, sociology was able to enter into the field of economics.

The relationship between emotions and economy is very close (Berezin 2005), as Adam Smith mentioned in the first part of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that *"*The sentiment or affection of the heart that leads to some action can be considered in two different relations: (1) in relation to the cause that arouses it, or the motive that gives rise to it; (2) in relation to the end that it proposes, or the effect that it tends to produce." (Smith 2010). In his study, Collins (1981) argued that repeated positive interactions within a group produce stable feelings and positive communication, while negative interactions weaken interactions, a theory that views the affective mechanism as a bridge between the micro and macro levels of communication. Smelser (1998) argued that starting with the psychological state of ambivalent emotions helps emphasize the importance of emotions for the social analysis of intensive interactions. Although Coleman strongly advocated the rational choice approach to sociological analysis, he also believed that emotions play an important role in action (Coleman 1990). Some scholars have made a distinction between emotions, culture and norms, which are easily confused, arguing that emotions are not culture, and culture is not emotion, and that emotion and culture are related to each other, but need to be distinguished when analyzing them. Culture, norms and values influence the expression of emotions but are not the original face of emotions, norms or values (Shweder et al. 1993). According to the model of social action proposed by Weber, Berezin proposed that the structure that connects emotion and action is identified, and it is argued that the path of analysis should be "emotion-cognition-action" (Berezin 2005).

Emotions arise from interactions between people and occur in the specific context of the relationship. For both parties in an emotional interaction, each interprets, understands, and responds to the emotional actions of the other. In cross-cultural contexts, such emotional interactions can be complicated by different factors such as identity, cognition, life course, role expectations, etc., and may ultimately lead to outcomes that are far from expected; and changes in emotions will also have an impact on behavioral strategies in the interactions, which in turn will have an impact on the effectiveness of the assistance. This process is often not linear or fits into a structured narrative, but is relatively complex. Borrowing from ethnography, therefore, helps to provide detailed field narratives that depict the micro-emotional flows of the two parties outside of the formal relationship, and to show how different types of emotional relationships are produced and evolve in the real aid process, how they take shape, and how they affect the interaction and its outcomes.

Since the 1950s, China's foreign aid has evolved from assisting neighboring countries to establishing strategic global partnerships, particularly with Africa. Through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China deepened its involvement in African agriculture by sending experts and setting up Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers. One such center was established in Country W, East Africa, where agriculture remains the primary livelihood despite limited arable land and widespread poverty. In the 1980s, Professor L in China developed a sustainable mushroom cultivation method—using grass instead of wood—which became the basis for the "Juncao" technology. Initially used for domestic poverty alleviation, it was introduced to Africa in 2003 and later promoted under China's official aid framework. From 2020 to 2021, the author worked closely with Chinese agricultural experts in Country W, assisting in daily operations and community outreach. Amid COVID-19 travel restrictions, the experts faced both logistical and emotional challenges. Through shared meals, field visits, and informal conversations, the author gained a deeper understanding of how foreign aid was shaped not just by policy, but by the complex human relationships that developed on the ground—between experts, local staff, and the communities they serve.

IN THE PASSENGER SEAT: FIELD NOTES ON EMOTION, AUTHORITY, AND BELONGING

This section describes an unexpected conflict that occurred during a routine work trip, offering a glimpse into the emotional undercurrents and interpersonal complexities within the daily operations of the Center. What seemed like a simple navigation error turned into a tense confrontation, revealing the mounting pressure Mr. Zhang Shan faced in balancing multiple responsibilities, as well as the unspoken expectations placed on local staff like the driver. Through this encounter, I began to observe more closely

how authority, trust, and communication were negotiated in practice—and how small disruptions could reflect deeper challenges in the management and execution of foreign aid on the ground.

The driver hadn't expected Mr. Zhang Shan to lose his temper so badly this time over simply taking a wrong turn. After working together for several years, he believed he had come to understand Mr. Zhang's temperament well — he knew that Mr. Zhang could be a bit impatient at times, but this particular outburst took him completely by surprise. At 10 a.m., the driver took us in the Center's SUV to a bus station on the outskirts of the capital. Unlike previous journeys, Mr. Zhang Shan didn't take a detour but chose to continue straight ahead. However, unexpectedly, we ran into a massive traffic jam—something we had never encountered before. A stretch of road that would normally take just five minutes to pass ended up taking a full hour. Mr. Zhang's facial expression began to darken. He was growing anxious about the morning's schedule: on one hand, he needed to deliver the mushroom cultivation bags to the embassy before the staff got off work; on the other hand, he also had to rush to a hospital in the eastern suburbs of the capital — built with Chinese assistance — to get his second dose of the vaccine before the Chinese medical team finished their shift.

We left in a hurry in the morning, and although Mr. Zhang Shan had a plan in mind, he had forgotten to explain to the driver in advance the sequence of these two events. When we reached the next intersection, the driver did not go straight, but turned left into the next intersection, which led to the Chinese Hospital. Mr. Zhang Shan was so agitated when he saw the car turning in that direction that he suddenly lost his temper and kept scolding the driver by slamming the door of the car. The driver was also very aggravated and tapped on the dashboard and responded loudly, "why don't you tell me before?" But now that the car was stuck in a traffic jam, with stalled cars and pedestrians crossing the road at the front and rear, it was useless to lose his temper. The driver had no choice but to drive on down the road and make a detour to the embassy first and then to the vaccination center.

The situation seemed a bit awkward to me. In order to break the deadlock and calm nerves, I asked Mr. Zhang Shan why he had to go to the embassy first, as the vaccination seemed to be more urgent, and his answer was, "I go to the embassy first to deliver mushroom tubes, mainly to catch up with them before they close; if I go late, I won't be able to see them, for this time I want to meet the secretary there, to ask about the recent policy of backing China. I have heard that it is very troublesome and it is only convenient to talk about certain matters in person. If you go back in the afternoon, it may affect the time of your return. Recently, the whole country has introduced a curfew, under which people cannot pass between urban areas after certain hours and will be stopped by the police. If you cannot get out of the city in time, you may be stuck in the middle of the road with no place to stay. If we cannot come back in time, the Center will be deserted and it will be really unsafe. Recently, the economy here has been very bad, so we must go back to keep going, or else we won't be able to find out what's missing. Regarding the vaccine, you can call and communicate with the medical team and ask them to wait for a while. This is the responsibility of Secretary Li of the Commercial Affairs Department; I have her number. If you can't make it today, there should be another chance in a few days. Last time, I heard from the president of the Association of Overseas Chinese that the vaccination of Covid-19 campaign will last for almost half a month."

However, Mr. Zhang Shan did not argue much about his forgetting to tell the driver in advance about the order of things to be arranged, and I guess he was more or less aware of his own fault. After finishing the two issues in the morning, I was going to go to a place I used to before. Mr. Zhang Shan decided to go to a nearby supermarket to buy some food, but when he arrived at the supermarket, the driver did not want to get out of the car. Mr. Zhang Shan said: "Don't worry about him, I have already given him lunch money, he'll take care of himself."

When we returned from the supermarket, we found that the driver was still lying on the front flat seat, playing with his cell phone. On the way back in the afternoon, the driver didn't talk much to Mr. Zhang Shan, who was obviously in kind of bad mood. By the time we got back to the Center, it was already dark, and the driver parked the car, threw down the keys in the conference room and went straight home. When he went to work the next day, he watched the Champions League match in the conference room for half a day because he had no business trip, and his mood did not seem to be as tense as yesterday's. This is the kind of atmosphere which he enjoys in his daily work. And this is also a special benefit he enjoys in his

daily work - as long as he does not have to go on a trip or be assigned to a job, he can move freely around the Center's yard.

Although Mr. Zhang Shan had a long experience in foreign aid, he had not taken on the role of manager independently for most of the time. In the last year and a half, he had to take on the role of a manager, which has been a great challenge for him: not only in terms of the number of tasks, but also in terms of the change in his identity, meaning that Mr. Zhang Shan is not only a simple agricultural technology expert, but also needs to be as good at handling all kinds of complex relationships as a "leader" who should be flexible in his or her various management tasks. However, when he encountered things that were easy to get into trouble or mistakes made, due to his lack of experience, he would get caught up in the tension and emotion, and his inner anxiety would easily show to the outside world; even though those around him were familiar with his nature, they would easily feel disturbed, and it would be difficult for them to get close to him.

As noted above, the tasks of an aid organization working in a foreign country depend on a great deal of local support, and much of this cannot be determined through the creation of specific positions. For example, in the case of Center, the chauffeur is not only a driver, but also a dedicated local guide and assistant. In fact, the driver at the Center does wear several hats. In addition to his daily driving duties, he often takes on the role of interpreter for communication between the Center and the local administration after the departure of the previous interpreter because of his high level of education and his knowledge of English and the local language. In addition, he has a wealth of experience in local life, as he had driven motors and cabs for several years in the capital and nearby cities before joining the Center. These skills and experiences have made him a much valued member of Center and a strong "right-hand man" for Mr. Zhang Shan.

However, this trip made the driver feel aggrieved. On one of my subsequent trips with the driver, we met a coordinator assigned by the Agricultural Board to the Center, and the driver talked to her about Mr. Zhang Shan's temper tantrums. Both of them spoke in the local language and seemed to be dissatisfied with Mr. Zhang Shan's behavior in the last traffic jam. I told the driver what I thought: "Mr. Zhang Shan is a very cautious and nervous person. He has been alone in the Center for the past year or so, so he is very concerned about making mistakes and about not getting things done. But he doesn't really know how to deal with his emotions in a better way, because he is always very cautious and nervous." After listening to what I said, the driver did not say anything and continued to drive. It seemed that he was used to the bad temper of the "boss".

CLAIMS FOR SALARY INCREASES IN THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

During my stay at the Center, the issue of staff compensation gradually emerged, as a source of tension—particularly between Mr. Zhang Shan and the driver. What initially appeared to be a simple salary dispute soon unfolded into a more layered conflict, revealing underlying questions about authority, trust, and emotional investment in the workplace. Through several conversations and small incidents, I came to see that the driver's dissatisfaction was not only about money, but also about recognition, communication, and his evolving perception of Mr. Zhang Shan's leadership. This section documents those moments of negotiation and misunderstanding, capturing how economic strain and shifting power dynamics shaped everyday interactions at the Center.

The driver expressed growing dissatisfaction with his salary, despite earning the highest among the local staff. He attributed his frustration to the rising cost of living caused by the ongoing economic downturn, pointing out that even basic items like tapioca and bread had become noticeably more expensive. Although he repeatedly asked Mr. Zhang Shan for a raise, he was consistently told that such a decision required approval from the project leader in China. After several unsuccessful attempts, his request was ultimately rejected on the grounds that the Center itself was facing financial difficulties. When I later brought up the driver's complaints with Mr. Zhang, he seemed unsurprised and responded matter-of-factly. According to him, while there were indeed reasons for dissatisfaction, the real issue was not the price of daily goods, but the structure of the driver's compensation, which included both a basic salary and a travel

allowance. In normal times, the frequent business trips taken by Agricultural Board staff meant that the allowance portion of the income was substantial. However, with recent suspensions of travel for technical guidance, this part of the driver's income had dropped significantly. Mr. Zhang believed that once travel resumed, the driver's earnings would rise again—and with them, his satisfaction.

Not long after that, the driver came to me again. He complained, only this time in a different way. He began to calculate the income of the Center's operation recently from the output, cost and sale of bags to the expenses, with the final conclusion that the Center had a certain amount of surplus each month and that the employees should be paid better. In addition, he had come up with his own opinion about Mr. Zhang Shan from the matter of salary adjustment. He felt that although Mr. Zhang was now in charge of the affairs of the Center, he did not have enough power to make adjustments to paying the staff, which made him a bit disappointed. And this disappointment lay not only in the fact that the drivers' demands had not been met, but also in that Mr. Zhang Shan seemed to have not considered them or fought for them in this matter.

Indeed, as the driver said, the Center did have a certain amount of revenue left over each month. When I asked Mr. Zhang Shan again about the driver's wage claim, he told me: "It is true that the Center has some surplus each month, but our expenses are not always at the level as told by the driver: from time-to-time new situations arise, such as when Chinese companies in the capital come to visit us. It is necessary to spend money to receive visitors; the vehicles of the Center need to be overhauled and maintained from time to time, and the prices of spare parts here are several times higher than those in China, all of which cost money and are not fixed. There is also another large amount of expenses: the Center is currently independent of the domestic headquarter separate accounting, some domestic experts travel to the Center on mission, etc. need to be paid through the Center's own revenue, so I, as a proxy operation manager, do not dare to be sloppy and careless, and have to be careful with the budget. However, I have not explained this relatively complicated economic situation to the driver, and I don't think he needs to know so much about it."

Those arguments based on different standpoints and perspectives incur the driver's complaints about Mr. Zhang. On the surface, it seems to be related to the salary, but on the deeper level, it is about whether the subordinates receive enough care from their superiors. Before Mr. Zhang, it was Mr. Cheng who had been the leader of the project for a long time, and the driver told me that when he was the leader of the team, it was much easier to communicate with him on many matters. After Mr. Zhang became the Acting Team Leader, the driver originally thought that Mr. Zhang would be able to take care of the staff's needs just like his predecessor. However, it was obvious that Mr. Zhang had his own considerations, and often used the former project leader, who was not present, as a "shield" to deal with the staff, and the "wage increase" was a case in point. It wasn't long before the driver told me that he had already made his next move: "After Mr. Zhang Shan's return to China, only one Chinese, Mr. Renjie, is left in the Center to replace him. Mr. Renjie is new one and doesn't know his surroundings well enough; for example, he may not know how to go to the hospital when he suddenly falls ill; some activities of the Center need to be communicated with local government departments, such as taxes, electricity, customs, and so on, and I need to help Mr. Renjie with all these things. If the Center does not consider giving me a salary increase, I will resign and continue to work as a driver for the Agricultural Board next door, or drive a big truck in Tanzania, which is on the border with our country or change to work with my friends as a border trader, to wholesale some clothes and shoes from Tanzania and sell them in my own country."

At this point, the driver began to make a statement like a threat. However, this approach did have an effect. Before I returned to China, I asked Teacher Renjie—who would be staying behind—about the upcoming plans and how they intended to respond to the employees' demands for a pay raise. He said that salaries would be adjusted slightly as appropriate, and that this would be discussed with the project team leader. As for the driver, he emphasized that they had to find a way to keep him; otherwise, many things on the ground would be difficult to hand over and manage smoothly.

BEING A "BOSS" FOR THE FIRST TIME: PERCEIVING STRESS IN A DIFFERENT SITUATION

If, in the case of the salary, Mr. Zhang Shan did not take care of the driver's demand as he thought he should, and the driver was unable to understand the difficulties of a first-time manager, leaving both parties in an awkward situation; then the next outsourcing assignment made the driver begin to realize anew the importance and complexity of managing a team. According to the driver's previous resumé, it can be found that before joining the Center, he had been a freelancer with no experience in managing a team; after joining the Center, although he was in a formal team and often assisted Mr. Zhang Shan with some tricky tasks, he did not have any experience in managing a team. On the family front, he had a son with his girlfriend in his early years, who later went to Canada to study for a degree, leaving his son to be raised by his parents. He worked outside and went home once a month, and seemed to have an attitude of "living for the moment" in his daily life. This self-feeling based on his experiences became one of the underpinnings of his interactions with Mr. Zhang Shan and the other managers, and an event that was about to happen next gave him new experiences and feelings.

In September 2021, Mr. Zhang Shan received a call from headquarters requesting assistance with a new task: helping a Chinese businessman, Mr. Yang, procure 500,000 Juncao grass seeds. Although Mr. Zhang agreed, he was frustrated, as the task brought no benefit to the Center and would add pressure to his already heavy workload. Mr. Yang, representing a company shifting from real estate to livestock farming in East Africa, had lost a shipment of grass seeds due to improper storage and sought replacements from the Center. Since the required quantity could only be sourced from the local Agricultural Board, Mr. Zhang coordinated the logistics but delegated the labor-intensive part to the Center's driver. Mr. Yang agreed to pay the driver $100—a month's salary in one job—for organizing workers, cutting, bagging, and loading the seeds. Motivated by the generous pay, the driver accepted the task enthusiastically.

Although he had no previous experience in organizing and leading employees to complete a task on his own, the driver felt that his past experience in managing casual workers for the Center, sometimes producing fungus bags, and helping Mr. Zhang Shan with piecework and payroll, should be enough to complete this task. In addition, as a local, he knew many people in the neighborhood, many of whom worked part-time for a living, so it was easy to find workers. As for organizing the cutting and bagging of the grass and loading the trucks, it was easy physical work for the local farmers engaged in agricultural work all year round. After taking over the job, the driver was confident that he could finish the work on time. But within a few days, he told me that it was not as simple as he thought.

As the driver expected, cutting grass is technically a very easy task. To do this, a three- or four-meter-high blade of grass is cut down to the ground. The cuttings are then dragged to the side of the road, leaned against a piece of wood, and chopped into small sections with a machete to ensure that there are two buds on each section, so that the germination and survival rate of the cuttings can be more easily ensured. After chopping the cuttings into small sections, they are tied into small bundles and put into woven bags, and finally loaded onto trucks. For local farmers, who are used to working in the fields and forests all year round, this kind of work is a breeze. But technical simplicity is only one of the basics of the task: the driver soon encounters a problem he hadn't expected.

First, he realized that not all the workers he had gathered in his haste were as committed as he was. After taking some of the workers to the base and arranging for their work, the driver had to go back to the Agricultural Board without stopping to follow up the export formalities, but when he went back to the base again, he found that many of the workers were not working but chatting by the side of the fields. This "lazy" situation made him very angry, but since they were all acquaintances or introduced by acquaintances, he could not reprimand them as his Chinese boss, Mr. Zhang Shan, had done, but could only try to keep an eye on them on the spot, urging them to hurry up and get to work. The next thing that made him feel unreliable happened again: the next day when the work started, some of the workers from the previous day did not show up on time, and he called them one by one, only to find out that they were not coming.

They realized that they found the work too hard and decided not to come. A temporary strike would have delayed the work, so the driver rushed to find other people to help. When it was finally time to load

the truck, the workers began to ask for a wage increase, because they felt that carrying bags of grass seeds on the truck was heavy work and thus required additional wages. The workers' "cunning" negotiations gave the driver a headache, but in order to finish the job on schedule, he had to agree to their demands. But this obviously exceeded the previous driver's budget, he had to find Mr. Yang, let him pay extra to get on with the work.

In order to organize the working time more rationally and improve efficiency, the driver made corresponding adjustments to the sequence of grass cutting and bagging. In the first two days, he arranged all the workers to cut the grass and chop it into sections together, and then began to bundle and bag it at about 5:00 p.m., and then transported it back to the yard of the Center in a minivan. However, due to the difficulty in grasping the time between chopping grass, chopping knots and bagging, it was almost eight o'clock in the evening when the driver pulled the last truck of grass seeds back to the Center. The experience of these two days forced him to make a new arrangement, dividing the workers into two groups, with most of them responsible for cutting grass and chopping knots, and a small number packing at the field, and transporting a few trips at the end of each half-day. This "assembly line" change in the division of labor and cooperation made the work more efficient than before. In order to organize the working time more rationally and improve efficiency, the driver made corresponding adjustments to the sequence of grass cutting and bagging.

On the morning of the penultimate day, I went with the driver to see the site that was about to be completed. It was just after eleven o'clock and the workers were already coming out of the field, ready to go home. As we drove up, several of them jumped into the bucket of the pickup truck and wanted to go back with us, but the driver unexpectedly kicked them out, in complete contrast to his previous warm and generous practice of giving friends and acquaintances a ride on his business trips from time to time. On the way back to the center, I asked him why he hadn't taken these companions with him; after all, they had helped with the work and looked a bit tired. The driver seemed to be angry: "These workers are not good people, and taking them with us will do us no good."

The next day, the container truck arranged by Mr. Yang arrived at the Center, loaded up the results of a week's labor, and departed. After seeing Mr. Yang off, the driver let out a long sigh of relief and sank into a sofa in the corner of the conference room, staring blankly at his phone, visibly exhausted. I said half-jokingly, "You should have made a lot of money on this trip," but he looked up and sighed, explaining that although the original agreement was for $100, he hadn't realized that the amount also needed to cover the wages of the workers over the past few days, leaving him with very little in the end. Yet what truly weighed on him was not the money, but the mental fatigue from managing so many small, frustrating details. Despite knowing the workers personally and having worked with them before, he found it difficult to get them to take the job seriously, and this deeply wore on him. While he understood that such behavior—cutting corners or walking off the job—was common and perhaps inevitable, the fact that it now directly affected his own earnings made the experience especially painful. The feeling that undisciplined labor was slowly eroding both his income and his patience left him with a lasting sense of frustration.

After completing the tasks entrusted by Mr. Yang, the work and life at the Center gradually returned to their previous rhythm. However, the issue of the driver's salary remained unresolved, and during a business trip with Mr. Renjie, the driver once again made a request for a pay increase. After considering the matter, Mr. Renjie took a more communicative approach, explaining the broader context of the Center's financial situation. He acknowledged that although the Center was generating some revenue through the sale of fungus bags, its core identity was as a bilateral aid project, which required careful navigation between commercial sustainability and development goals. Technically, the Center had the capacity to scale up production and market its products nationwide, but doing so would undermine the original purpose of promoting technology diffusion and supporting local capacity building. Moreover, due to the absence of recent government subsidies, the Center was operating on a tight, self-generated budget. Despite appearances, the funds were just enough to keep the Center running. Emphasizing the importance of the driver's contribution, Mr. Renjie reassured him that his work was vital to the continuation of the project. After listening quietly, the driver fell silent, and Mr. Renjie turned to me and said thoughtfully, "Maybe the driver has some understanding and reasoning about our problem now."

Mr. Renjie's words have actually revealed the difficult situation of the Center at present. Because of the change in the cycle of the aid program and the lack of funds, the Center is indeed in a difficult situation; however, reasonable demands from the employees should be taken seriously. Although both Mr. Zhang Shan and Mr. Renjie rejected the driver's request, there was a clear difference in their approaches: when the driver made a request to Mr. Zhang, he refused on the one hand, and on the other hand, asked the project team leader, who was far away from home, to intervene, saying that he did not have enough authority to increase the salary of the driver and the other staff members. Mr. Renjie's approach was more tactful, trying to "move people with emotion" by showing the driver the realities of the Center's operations and the difficulties of the aid program at the intersection of aid and business. Although Mr. Renjie's words did not directly address the driver's practical needs, they made the driver more or less understand the difficulty of managing the Center. In addition, Mr. Zhang Shan and Mr. Renjie talked to the drivers about salary increase in a sequential order.

In the meantime, the driver's personal feelings were mixed, that is, he took the lead in the purchase of grass seeds for Mr. Yang's business, in which the driver, as an independent project manager, felt the pressure of being fully responsible for a project in less than ten days. This unprecedented responsibility made him understand the daily workload of the two Chinese men in front of him.

When Mr. Zhang Shan and I left the country in early November 2021, Mr. Renjie kept his previous promise to the driver by increasing his November salary by 10% from the original amount. In casual conversations during the quarantine period in his home country, Mr. Zhang Shan told me that he had actually initiated this decision and agreed on it with Mr. Renjie and the project team leader in China. Although he felt that due to the economic downturn, it would not be easy to find a suitable job for the driver after he left, it was unlikely that this threat would be successful, and that he would not leave his job without a salary increase. However, considering the fact that Mr. Renjie would need the driver's support in many aspects in managing the Center for a period of time in the future, the decision was made to give him a salary increase. Why did Mr. Renjie give the driver a raise in salary? It is a common management practice to raise the salary of drivers only when Mr. Renjie is in charge. Drivers will attribute the increase in salary to Mr. Renjie, which will help to enhance their support for his work.

CONCLUSION

This study, rooted in immersive ethnographic fieldwork, has shown that the practice of China's agricultural foreign aid is far more than a top-down technical or institutional transfer. At its heart lies a dynamic and emotionally complex process of interaction between Chinese experts and local African stakeholders. The case of the Agricultural Technology Demonstration Center in Country W highlights not only the strategic ambitions of South-South cooperation but also the deeply personal and affective labor required to navigate the uncertainties, misunderstandings, and evolving relationships that characterize aid work on the ground.

What emerges is a vivid portrayal of how aid effectiveness cannot be understood solely through institutional frameworks or output metrics. Rather, it requires attention to the human dimensions of aid: emotional endurance, identity transformation, and the subtle management of interpersonal relationships. Chinese agronomists like Mr. Zhang Shan, when placed in isolated and high-pressure environments, often find themselves caught between formal managerial roles and the informal expectations of being a community member, cultural translator, and emotional anchor. Their work requires not only technical proficiency but also emotional intelligence to manage stress, build trust, and maintain morale across cultural divides.

The local driver's story—initially perceived simply as a support staff member—emerges as a powerful counterpoint. His growing involvement in Center operations, his frustrations over wages, and his eventual assumption of managerial responsibility in the grass seed procurement project all point to the expanding and often ambiguous roles local staff are asked to play. His experience underscores how aid effectiveness is deeply embedded in the everyday negotiations of roles, respect, and recognition. The challenges he faced while managing labor and logistics mirrored those of the Chinese experts, suggesting that the burden of aid

implementation is, in practice, a shared one. Moreover, these narratives illustrate how emotional misalignments—such as outbursts, misunderstandings, and unmet expectations—can fracture relationships, but also how careful explanation, empathy, and acknowledgment can mend them. Emotional interactions, when properly managed, can strengthen the collective capacity in overcoming institutional limitations. The contrasting leadership styles of Mr. Zhang and Mr. Renjie further emphasize the importance of communication and emotional strategy. While Mr. Zhang's rigidity exacerbated tensions, Mr. Renjie's tact and openness helped to restore equilibrium, even if structural constraints remained unresolved.

Ultimately, this case calls for a more nuanced understanding of foreign aid as an emotionally charged, relational process rather than a unidirectional transfer of expertise. Aid succeeds not only when technologies are transferred or centers are built but also when human relationships are nurtured with care, humility, and mutual recognition. For China's foreign aid model to evolve and sustain itself, greater emphasis must be placed on supporting the emotional well-being of aid workers, valuing local staff contributions, and designing flexible, people-centered aid mechanisms that recognize the full spectrum of human experience in development practice. By entering the emotional "heart" of foreign aid—where vulnerability, tension, patience, and understanding converge—one can better understand what sustains cooperation, what challenges it and how, ultimately, things can be improved.

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