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*Bielefelder Beiträge
zur Wirtschafts- und Arbeitssoziologie*

Ursula Mense-Petermann und Anna Spiegel (2016):
Global Mobility Policies, Social Positioning and the Boundary Spanning Work
of Expatriate Managers.
Bielefelder Beiträge zur Wirtschafts- und Arbeitssoziologie (bi.WAS),
Nr. 01/2016, Dezember 2016

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Abstract

This paper enhances the understanding of the *boundary spanning* of expatriate managers by showing (1) how global mobility policies of MNCs shape the social positioning of expatriate managers in the host country and (2) how in turn the management performance of expatriate managers depends on this institutionally shaped elite position. Ethnographic case studies of German expatriate managers in China and the US connect organizational and everyday life, forming the empirical basis for our inquiry into structured and structuring features of expatriate agency. Our research indicates that global mobility policies encroach deeply into the personal everyday life of expatriate managers by distancing them from local host country communities. This attenuated position undermines the expatriate managers' boundary spanning capabilities. This research opens new methodological and empirical vistas into the debate on the institutional formation of elite positions and the consequent impact on management performance in MNCs.

1. Introduction

In the transnationalization of multinational companies (MNCs)—that is, in the realization of MNCs that function simultaneously highly on global integration, national responsiveness, and worldwide innovation and learning—the functions of expatriate managers in the cross-border transfer of organizational models, work structures and best practices assume pivotal importance. In globalization within and between levels of economic development and across different cultures around the world (Kim and Tung 2013), expatriate managers are expected to facilitate knowledge exchange and worldwide integration in MNCs. They play

an important part in implementing global programs, distributing best practices, and aligning the organizational cultures of the headquarters and globally dispersed subsidiaries (Black, Gregersen, and Mendenhall 1992). The expatriate manager has thus emerged as a boundary spanner in accordance with the pioneering research of (Ancona and Caldwell 1988; Ancona and Caldwell 1991; Ancona and Caldwell 1992) with subsequent refinement later articulated for global and local forces (Au and Fukuda 2002) and in particular for MNCs (Mense-Petermann 2006).

This paper seeks to advance the understanding of expatriates' boundary spanning by relating the latter to their social positions in the host localities as shaped by MNCs' global mobility policies, as well as to the processes of social positioning by the expatriates themselves. The paper addresses the interrelated research questions of **how global mobility regimes constitute the social positioning of expatriate managers** and **how that social positioning creates repercussions for the boundary spanning capabilities of the expatriate managers**.

Toward heightening understanding of the inherent transnational complexity of the expatriate managers' setting, we begin with a particular conceptual innovation and contribution. Instead of the relatively static concept of social position, we use the more flexible concept of social positioning. This positioning derives from differentially distributed material and symbolic resources and privileges as well as distinction practices enacted in a social field by social actors (Bourdieu 1985). We introduce a multidimensional, relational concept of social positioning subsuming hierarchies and privileges in relation to various actors: immobile colleagues and family in the home country, the immobile host country population in general, host country colleagues in particular, and other expatriates in the host country. We distinguish between material resources associated with expatriate status—such as the housing, educational and home leave benefits typically awarded by MNCs' global mobility policies—and processes of negotiating the meaning of such benefits with global mobility experts, colleagues, and other expatriates and involved actors.

Toward enhancing comprehension of how expatriate managers meet the challenges of boundary spanning, we bring back in social agency by drawing on sociological theories constituting agency as both structured and structuring, such as structuration theory (for Saudi-Arabia see Giddens 1984, 324-327), the concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1985), and theories of the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967). We focus on how individual agency derives from specific organizational settings and also impacts the organization through the actions of key actors to

¹ This paper has been developed on the basis of an earlier research paper presented at the EGOS Colloquium 2014 in Rotterdam. We thank our cooperation partner, Kathleen M. Park, for feedback to this earlier paper and her support in editing the English version of the paper. This paper builds on research carried out in the project "Expatriate Manager: A New Cosmopolitan Elite? Habitus, Everyday Practices and Networks" that was funded by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft/German Research Foundation, Project Number: ME 2008/5-1) and hosted by the Institute for World Society Studies at the Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University for the duration of May 2011 to April 2015. The research team consisted of Ursula Mense-Petermann (principal investigator), Anna Spiegel (postdoctoral researcher), Junchen Yan and Bastian Bredenköter (doctoral researchers), and Gert Schmidt, Ruth Ayaß, Kathleen M. Park, and Dellvin Williams as cooperation partners.

“impose, negotiate, resist, accept or oppose certain rules of the game” (Dörrenbächer and Geppert 2006, 12). Such an approach becomes especially pertinent for studying expatriate managers, for whom the entanglement of structured and structuring agency exists as far more than a theoretical *finesse*. Through the global mobility policies—which we analyze as a type of regime governing the movement of expatriate managers—the boundaries of the organization stretch. The global mobility policies encroach into the non-work everyday lives of the expatriate managers and their families by shaping arrangements regarding housing, schooling and even gendered division of labor within the family. For no other type of employee do company policies invade into non-work life in such an all-encompassing way. This stretching of boundaries evokes a particular form of agency for expatriate managers, who must deal with, accommodate or counter the life-encroaching policies.

By asking how the mobility regimes of MNCs influence the agency of expatriate managers we critically address the “global elite” perspective. Our approach does not reflexively accept the connection between occupying a privileged position in a global company and economy and developing an open, cosmopolitan disposition as articulated in previous research on the “transnational capitalist class” (Sklair 2001) or the “world class” (Kanter 1997). Rather, this paper problematizes the relationship between increased mobility and the emergence of new “modes of managing meaning” (Hannerz 1990, 2000).

In the remainder of this paper, we first provide a literature review analyzing the strands of debate about (1) the conceptualization of expatriate managers as a new global elite and the alternative conceptualization of social positioning, (2) global mobility policies as mobility regimes governing the transnational movement of expatriate managers, and (3) expatriate managers as boundary spanners. The methodological part of the paper next presents our research design, data collection and analysis. We investigate the research questions with a sample comprised of German expatriate managers in the US and China respectively. We highlight two selected cases from the sample that are best suited to exemplify the typical features of expatriates’ positioning and boundary spanning in their respective host localities: one German manager assigned to the Chinese subsidiary of his company, and one German manager assigned to the US subsidiary of his company. In the discussion section, we discuss how the expatriate managers and their families position themselves within these social spaces and what individual agency responses they develop—making sense, accommodating or countering—in dealing with the material and symbolic resources at their disposal by

virtue of their expatriate packages. We also reprise the issue of how this specific agency in turn acts upon expatriates’ capabilities to serve successfully as boundary spanners across the subunits of the MNC. The conclusion summarizes our findings.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

The literature on expatriates and global assignments has grown with the globalization of the economy and the expanded reach of MNCs. Several intertwined strands emerge as especially important for our investigation into the social positioning of expatriate managers at work as well as in their wider localities of assignment: (1) the debates centering on expatriate managers as a new cosmopolitan elite, (2) the literature on the global mobility policies of MNCs as regimes governing the transnational movement of expatriates, and (3) the literature discussing the boundary spanning role of expatriates.

2.1 Expatriate Managers as a New Cosmopolitan Elite?

In the international business and management literature, the number of publications arguing for the emergence of a new world class of transnationally mobile and inter-culturally knowledgeable managers has been increasing. From a functional perspective, these managers emerge as a new type of economic actor, possessing the indispensable characteristics for managing networks across national and subunit borders within MNCs and assuring competitiveness in global markets (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1990; Black, Gregersen, and Mendenhall 1992; Kanter 1997; Bossard and Peterson 2005). Far from formulating cosmopolitanism only as a necessary management prerequisite, this perspective depicts cosmopolitanism as an already achieved quality of globally active managers. The members of the “world class,” as argued by Kanter (Kanter 1997, 23), already “lead companies that are linked to global chains. Comfortable in many places and able to understand and bridge the differences among them, cosmopolitans possess portable skills and a broad outlook”. The members of the “global class” (Dahrendorf 2004) practice both a global professional culture and a global private lifestyle equating modernity with mobility (Urry 2007). In addition, expatriates are said to acquire the breadth and depth of knowledge to foster effective management of myriad intercultural factors in the multi-local networks reflecting both global and local influences in MNCs (Berthoin 2001). From a Marxist politico-economical perspective (Altvater and Mahnkopf 1996; Sklair 2001), the view arises of a new globalizing elite of corporate executives who “project images of themselves as citizens of the world as well as of their places of birth” (Sklair 2001, 21). Furthermore, in anthropological approaches on cosmopolitanism, “the privileged, bourgeois, politically uncommitted elites”

(Vertovec and Cohen 2002, 6) form the natural prototype of the cosmopolitan (Hannerz 2000; Caglar 2002; Chan 2002; Hiebert 2002; Sennet 2002). Instead of constructing strong symbolic boundaries between themselves and cultural “others,” the cosmopolitan business elite develops a fundamental intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences and the willingness to appropriate selected practices into their everyday life (Hannerz 2000, 105).

Despite theoretical and methodological differences, these studies all advance the view that mobile elites such as expatriate managers evolve a cosmopolitan habitus—that is representations and everyday practices—and networks—spanning national, organizational and cultural boundaries—which their immobile counterparts do not develop. They put forward, first, that expatriates can adapt to replace old ethnocentric outlooks with cosmopolitan ones; second, that expatriates can learn to smoothly integrate mobility into their life plans and everyday practices. They develop a distinct lifestyle of living, eating, consuming, which they share with other expatriates notwithstanding different national origins. And third, that expatriates can create “powerful, border-spanning networks” (Kanter 1997, 23) and move easily within multiple social spaces through these dense trans-local and transnational networks. These three features will be further addressed later in the paper as analytic categories to analyze our case study findings in the context of broader conceptualizations of agency and social positioning as already introduced.

2.2 Global Mobility Policies as Mobility Regimes Governing the Transnational Movement of Expatriate Managers

In MNCs, global mobility divisions regulate international placements through highly formalized *global assignment* programs based on a core of global mobility policies. In the following, we analyze these global mobility policies as “mobility regimes”, governing the work of transnationally mobile specialists and executive staff in MNCs (Kesselring and Vogl 2010). Global mobility policies contain basic rules and regulations for international assignments in MNCs (Moeller and Harvey 2009). They regulate (1) how much an expatriate earns while being abroad (this includes regulations for taxation, insurances, as well as for supplementary allowances and bonuses); (2) which other *financial benefits* the expatriate gets, such as moving, housing and mobility allowances; (3) which other *services* the company offers the expatriate and his/her family, such as so called ‘*Look-and-See-Trips*’ prior to the assignment, the organization of the relocation, and the processing of the tax declaration by an external

provider, and finally (4) which services and benefits the company offers to accompanying spouses and children such as meeting the costs for language classes, tuition fees, offering day nursery facilities and specific programs for spouses etc. (Bonache, Brewster, and Suutari 2001; Phillips and Fox 2003; Moeller and Harvey 2009). Together with the *Global-Mobility-divisions* that are in charge of the concrete handling of the international assignments and the applied formalized assignment procedures, global mobility policies’ form a mobility regime, enabling the company to administer and process numerous assignments within a limited time-frame (Moeller and Harvey 2009).

As a mobility regime, global mobility policies shape the social positions that expatriate managers and their families occupy in the localities, where they are assigned to, to a considerable extend: They define the material and symbolic resources that they can dispose of and pre-define in a very much standardized way the decisions regarding in which area and surrounding to rent a house or a flat, what kind of house or flat to rent, what school or kindergarten the kids to send to, where to shop and to obtain everyday supply, how to move within the new surrounding (in terms of means of transportation), which services to use, and last but not least what leisure activities to follow. By this, the global mobility policies intervene in a far reaching way into the everyday life of the expatriates and their families, thereby stretching the boundaries of the organizations to a large extend. The global mobility policies, however, do neither determine specific everyday practices and lifestyles, nor do they pre-describe specific habitus reformations. Instead, the expatriates and their family members have to deal with these pre-defined conditions in order to *position themselves* within the new social context. Hence, we shift our focus from the rather static concept of *social position* to the process of *social positioning*.

2.3 Expatriate Managers as Boundary Spanners

In recent studies, expatriate managers in MNCs have been increasingly discussed in their role as “boundary spanners” (Au and Fukuda 2002; Mense-Petermann 2006; Park and Mense-Petermann 2014). However, the notion of the ‘boundary’ is not uniformly used and needs further clarification. The uses range from organizational boundaries between the company and its environments, intra-organizational and spatial boundaries between HQ and subsidiary, to intercultural boundaries.

Ancona and Caldwell had developed the concept of boundary spanning in order to describe the multiple ways in which group leaders in organizations managed the knowledge flows between the inside of their own group and a diversity of outsiders (Ancona and Caldwell

1988, 1992). From their empirical material they identified different boundary spanning roles for contexts with solid group boundaries, such as (1) ambassador (persuading, lobbying and informing actors at different hierarchical levels in the within-firm or between-firms network); (2) task coordinator (discussing ideas, assimilating feedback, and harmonizing activities across network actors); and (3) scout (scanning the networks for ideas and information). In addition, they identified the roles of immigrants, captives and emigrants for contexts with permeable group boundaries. The group boundaries became permeable through individuals who had transgressed group boundaries and were thus managing knowledge flow between their group of origin and their new group. Interestingly, in later research on expatriates by Au & Fukuda (2002) these types of boundary spanning between different groups in the same organization initiated by mobile individuals were fully neglected. Their research was based on the assumption of clear cut organizational boundaries between the company and its environments, and thus focussed exclusively on the specific tasks of expatriate managers in steering the knowledge flow between their company and the local environment.

Expatriate Managers are also analyzed as *intercultural* boundary spanners and as culture carriers (Björkman and Lu, 2001; Harvey, 1996; Hofstede, 1997, 2001; Javidan and House, 2001; Kanter, 1995), effectively implementing practices of their home organization. In addition, the literature on knowledge exchange has convincingly demonstrated the necessity of translating—that is, disembedding and re-embedding—the crucial knowledge (Mense-Petermann 2005b; Czarniawska 2012; Becker-Ritterspach and Raaijman 2013). For expatriate managers, it is argued, it is of eminent importance to successfully act in their intercultural everyday work contexts where they engage in intercultural interactions with local staff on a daily basis (Park and Hollinshead 2011). Kanter (1997) highlights their sensitivity and success in dealing with the encountered differences and portrays expatriate managers as cosmopolitan, experienced in multiple and distinct geographic and social spaces, and sensitive for conceiving and mediating differences among actors. Both the intercultural everyday work context and the diversity of spaces they simultaneously move in, enable them to create influential, networks across national and cultural boundaries (ibid.). The boundaries which are addressed by these authors with the term boundary spanners are clearly those of imagined national and cultural communities.

Taking up the notion of dual membership of expatriate managers and permeable group boundaries we argue for a more sophisticated concept of boundary spanning, taking into account multiple and interconnected cultural,

as well as organizational and spatial boundaries which are negotiated in the everyday work context. In organizational sociology, expatriate managers have been addressed as “servants of two masters” (Black and Gregersen 1992; Minssen 2009a). According to this organizational perspective, the expatriate manager finds himself in a very peculiar situation as he ambivalently belongs to the headquarters and the local organization at the same time. According to Minssen (2009b), the central challenge of global assignments thus becomes the micro-political situation of the expatriates. Headquarters have endowed the expatriates with an official authority, but the expatriates must still contend with the reality that local employees in the subsidiary usually control the central interfaces with the external environment as well as the intra-organizational information channels. The locals have considerable power resources at their disposal, and their power can be only partially offset by the headquarters imprimatur (Mense-Petermann 2013). Thus the expatriates must call on their boundary spanning capabilities to exploit their own power resources at the nexus of subsidiary and headquarters (Wagner 2006; Mense-Petermann 2013). We also assume that the process of intercultural boundary management is much more complex than suggested by authors like Kanter and others, as several authors have already stressed the problems of intercultural communication and transnational co-operation connected with this function (Mense-Petermann 2005a; Klemm and Popp 2006a, 2006b; Kotthoff 2006; Wagner 2006; Dörrenbächer and Geppert 2007; Schmidt and Minssen 2007; Kotthoff and Wagner 2008; Mense-Petermann 2008; Gottwald and Klemm 2009; Kels and Vormbusch 2009; Mense-Petermann and Klemm 2009; Minssen 2009a, 2009b).

Finally, the extant literature has focused predominantly on the *professional* side of global assignments. The broader worldviews and dispositions, everyday practices and personal networks of expatriate managers have not been as fully conceptually and empirically addressed. However, our research findings as well as our actor-centric theoretical framework demonstrate that the social positioning of expatriates, at work and in the wider context of their assignment locations, considerably influences their performance as boundary spanners.

In this section, we have discussed three different bodies of literature shedding light on expatriate managers and their transnational mobility from different angles. Yet, all three literatures have their weaknesses and gaps, and – most importantly - they do not relate to one another. Therefore, in this paper we are seeking to connect these different perspectives and relate the social positions as constituted by MNCs’ global mobility policies, as well as the processes of social positioning, i.e. of dealing with

these pre-structured conditions, by the expatriates themselves, with their agency as boundary spanners. By this, we aim at advancing and differentiating the understanding of expatriates' boundary spanning capabilities and performance.

3. Research context, methods and methodology

Our data on which this paper is developed form part of a larger research project aiming at exploring the "global everyday" of German and American expatriate managers in China and Germany/the US respectively. The aim of the project is to shed light on new arrangements of professional and personal life that emerge in the context of increased transnational mobility of highly skilled migrants.

Being part of an overall comparative research design of the project, covering on the one hand expatriate managers from two different national business systems—German managers and US American managers—and on the other hand different socio-spatial arrangements of the locality of assignment², this paper concentrates on two of the subsamples, namely six in-depth ethnographic case studies of German expatriate managers in China and eight in-depth ethnographic case studies of German expatriate managers in the US. The emphasis of this ethnographic approach was thus not on representativeness backed up by a huge number of cases, but rather on a detailed extrapolation of complex logics and rationalities on the basis of in-depth case analysis. In addition we have so far carried out seven expert-interviews with employees of the global mobility divisions either at the headquarters or the local subsidiary of the respective MNC.

For researching the "global everyday" of expatriate managers we opted for an ethnographic approach based on a systematic entanglement of different methods, namely semi-structured and narrative interviews, informal conversations—not only with the expatriate in our respective focus, but, where it was feasible, also with family members, colleagues and friends—network analysis and participant observation at work, at home, and at leisure places. What made the ethnographic approach especially fruitful for ethnography of the everyday life of expatriate managers was that it clearly revealed the entanglement of work,

leisure and family spaces. Interviews and conversations were, if possible recorded with the consent of the research participants; if not possible they were objectified in form of memory protocols. Observations were put on record in detailed field notes and observation protocols. For the analysis, the audio files were transcribed and later on coded with the help of ATLAS.ti, a software supporting qualitative data analysis.

The research was conducted by 'mixed research teams' regarding the nationality of the researchers. A mixed team consisted of one researcher originating from the same home country as the expatriate, and one researcher originating from the host country. As the process of data collection, also the process of data analysis was carried out as team work. First, a joint coding scheme was developed combining both inductive and deductive procedures. Second, once the coding scheme had been developed, the coding of the concrete cases of the four subsamples was carried out. Third, on the basis of the coding scheme and the jointly coded material, detailed case studies were written. The case studies fulfilled a double task: They enabled us to work out the intricacies of every single case, which are often neglected in the conventional coding oriented procedures of analysis in favor of disaggregated text passages and codes. At the same time they played a crucial role for the case comparison, as the already written cases informed our perception of the new case studies to be written.

For this paper, we have selected two exemplary case studies from our sample: one German expatriate assigned to China and one German expatriate assigned to the US. The selected cases represent different types of social positioning within the localities of assignment.

4. The Cases: Social Positioning of Expatriate Managers

4.1 Mr. Meier³

Mr. Meier was 44 years old when visited during his assignment in China. He began his current position as managing director of the Chinese subsidiary of a medium-sized Swiss MNC four years ago. He made his career in a German MNC, including a prior three-year assignment to another South East Asian metropolis. He is married to a Japanese woman, whom he got to know on his frequent business trips to Japan during his prior assignment to Asia, and has two children. His contract entails very attractive financial as well as 'social' benefits, which have greatly enhanced his financial

² The complete project sample consists of 4 sub-samples: American managers in China, American managers in Germany, German managers in China and German managers in the US. The countries of assignment were chosen on the idea that they significantly differed in the everyday discourses on cultural differences between home country and host country. The comparison is targeted on the one hand towards the effects of the national origin of the expatriate managers on their ways of dealing with 'alterity' and cultural difference - being part of different organizational contexts and national business systems - and towards the effects of the locality on the other hand.

³ All names have been anonymised.

situation and general quality of life. His case exemplifies the typical resources and privileges granted to expatriate managers by the global mobility policies of MNCs, as well as the most important features of the everyday life and of the management practices of expatriates posted in China.

Resources: Mr. Meier and his family live in a gated community with the telling name *World Class Gardens*⁴. It is a private and relatively exclusive compound equipped with a 24-hour management and security service, tennis court, indoor swimming pool, gym, coffee shop, a playground for smaller children and other indoor sports facilities such as table tennis and snooker. The compound has large integrated green spaces and water areas. A lake and narrow canals run through the compound, dividing the land into small islands on which the relatively big villas are located. The villa has about 350 square meters—sizable yet still one of the smaller villas in the compound—and a big garden. For Mr. Meier and his family, the compound represents a safe haven within Chinese surroundings that they describe as dirty, dangerous and hostile. Moreover, the Meiers have a gardener who comes once a week, a domestic worker who comes five days a week and a personal driver, who is at their permanent disposal. Mr. Meier visibly enjoys his new position as “lord of the manor,” which he never would have been able to afford in Germany. He enjoys being driven to his business appointments without having to search for parking, and he enjoys “sitting on the porch on Sunday for breakfast and watching the gardener sweep the leaves.” Mr. Meier emphasized that he and his family enjoy the calm in the compound, far away from the hectic and loud city environment. He perceives the difference to such a degree that when we together drove into the gated community, he commented, “And now we are leaving China.”

Boundaries in everyday life: Beside the fact that his housing situation markedly contrasts with the typical housing of the local Chinese population, the phrase of being ‘outside China’ also refers to the fact that the compound is not inhabited by wealthy Chinese, but exclusively by other expatriates. The compound thus represents a spatially segregated social space separate from the local Chinese population. This segregation from the local population continues in all other areas of the Meiers’ everyday life. Their children attend a German School, where children with Chinese nationality are not admitted (and indeed children with Chinese passports are not eligible to attend any of the international schools in the country). Besides the other

German parents, the Meiers’ most important friends are either other Japanese expatriates or other expatriates who the Meier’s got to know through their activities in an international evangelical denomination with a U.S. American pastor and an exclusive expatriate congregation. Also here, Chinese passport holders are not admitted. The majority of the congregants come from the US and Europe, with minority representation from other Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong.

If Mr. Meier comes into regular contact with local Chinese, they are nearly always in a subordinate position. Within the compound, local Chinese appear only in the role of domestic helpers, like the gardener and the domestic worker. Although he has started weekly Chinese classes, he does not speak any significant Chinese that would be relevant for his working context. In his personal and home life, his wife assumes the roles of translator and boundary spanner, speaking in Chinese with cab drivers, salespeople and waiters at restaurants; whereas we could observe that he does not take up any interaction with them.

In many respects, the Meiers are very conscious of the privileged lifestyle enabled by the expatriate package Mr. Meier receives from his company, and they happily embrace it. However, at a closer look, there exists a persistent discomfort with the social positioning with respect to the local context and a feeling of not really fitting into that institutionally shaped space. In order to balance the disconnection to local cultural others, they actively seek integration into a at least not only German but international community. They have deliberately opted for a compound not entirely German, so that their children have some exposure to cultural differences. They do not attend a German dominated church, but an internationally oriented Church with a mixed Asian-Anglo-Saxon congregation. To better understand and reduce the distance to the local Chinese surroundings, Mrs. Meier takes “Shanghai Walks” with her group of expatriate wives. Together they stroll around to get a glimpse into “real Chinese life.” In contrast to other German expatriates with solely German networks, the Meiers maintain international social networks not restricted to Western expatriate circles. Following the line of reasoning of Mr. Meier, as it seems neither possible nor desirable for them to “live in China,” they try at least not to “live in Germany”.

Boundaries in the realm of work: The paradox of being socially outside China while physically within the borders of the country continues in the working life of Mr. Meier and influences how he acts as a boundary spanner. Mr. Meier creates a non-Chinese working space: socially and symbolically. Socially, Mr. Meier scarcely interacts with his Chinese colleagues, neither

⁴ The name of this gated community has been changed for the sake of anonymity, but the original name also contains the allusion to a privileged Western space.

informally, for instance while walking through the plant premises, nor formally in meetings. During the two days job shadowing, Mr. Meier communicated mainly in German: on the phone with the HQ in Switzerland, with German speaking expatriates in subsidiaries in other host countries, in meetings with his German and Swiss expatriate colleagues and visitors from headquarters, and in problem solving with German speaking expatriate managers from supplier or client companies. His boundary spanning capacities to the local coworkers are restricted due to his limited language competences. He says:

“A lot just goes more easily between us expatriates in German, you know, just off the cuff, but this of course has the disadvantage that we settle a lot of things directly among us and our colleagues do not get it. And then we are sometimes surprised that the local colleagues don't know things, but in the end it is not surprising at all.”

Information is mainly exchanged among the group of German speaking expatriates in the company and local colleagues are excluded from these knowledge flows. He also talks about the problems that arise from his not speaking Chinese for getting information and collecting knowledge from his local staff:

“The other difficulty is to hold the wire and keep an ear to the rail to really get how things are going and how the colleagues are doing. I really miss a lot of things because of the language issue. If there is a big bang, of course I do get it, but the problem is to have an ear to the rail, to understand what makes them tick, to know whether everything is ok. So, I always have the feeling that I don't get it and that I can't control it.”

In addition to being socially disconnected from local coworkers in his everyday professional space, Mr. Meier actively works on symbolically transforming the local company space in such a way that Chinese influences are pushed back and the European way is made more present:

“We do try to keep up the European way of doing things, also in order to make clear the standard of the machines and everything. Of course you know in a day to day level we are also a bit Chinese in a way, out of question. Because the Chinese have not turned into Europeans, only because they work in a Chinese ... excuse me ... European company.”

In this passage, Mr. Meier makes a clear statement about the aspired cultural identity of his company. However, the Freudian slip in the end of this passage is telling for the complexities and resistances in defining the cultural identity of a Swiss MNC subsidiary in China. Whereas formally it is a European company, for Mr.

Meier working there indeed feels sometimes like working in a Chinese company. For example, Mr. Meier is frequently confronted with local employee's intents to practice Feng Shui at the office space. In the beginning he just ignored these local place making practices. When the management moved into a new office building, one employee had picked the best place for his desk according to Feng Shui standards in the evening before officially moving into the new office, and had thus provoked envy and protest among another colleague, who wanted to sit at the same place. Based on this experience Mr. Meier reflects about his position regarding these local practices and makes clear his lack of understanding for these conflicts:

“Ok, I made a mistake, because I did not call him back. I did not tell him: 'Look, take a look at the new office tomorrow morning together and then...' But this as well would have caused blood and thunder... that would have been a problem as well. But these are things, where we say, we totally do not care a pap for it, whether he sits there or somewhere else. Because, you know, he's not sitting in a bad place anyway.”

Mr. Meier describes this incident as a conflict that arose because in the beginning he had tolerated the local practices and had clearly underestimated the conflict potential of these local place making practices. Although he partly admits that it was a mistake not to intervene earlier he describes the local practices as endangering the social coherence in the office space and as leaving him no real room for manoeuvre of managing such conflicts. In the end, by defining what is a good place to sit according to his own standards and not according to the local employees' standards he legitimizes his non-intervention through a de-legitimation of the local practices. However, it becomes clear in the interview that Mr. Meier has changed his attitude towards local place making practices after this event from ignoring local practices to actively keeping local practices out of the corporate office space. This becomes clear when he talks about the request of another employee:

“One of my employees asked me, he would like to arrange some kind of vases and a mirror and stuff like this, because this prevents from bad Feng Shui. But I tried to talk him out of this, and I was successful until today. So thank God, he did not come again with this idea.”

In this incident he clearly used his management position to convince the employee not to use local Feng Shui practices in the office space. This position of keeping Chinese practices out of the office space is also reflected in an informative movie which Mr. Meier had produced for newly employed personnel at the

company. In this movie, issues related to the German concepts of “Order and Tidiness”, as Mr. Meier explains:

“So, when they just start here, they get training about how A-company thinks that things should work. We even made a short video. It is about how to behave, about tidiness [...]; so that you should not be spitting and that you do not just dump the tea leaves into the toilet. Because after some time this look really awful. Things like this. So, these things like order and tidiness, you have to keep digging and rub their noses into this continuously.”

Once again this interview quotation shows how Mr. Meier works on transforming the office space into a non-Chinese space. Spitting and disposing used tea leaves in the toilets are mentioned as Chinese practices that endanger the quality of the place and that need to be kept out of the office.

To conclude, in both his professional and private everyday life Mr. Meier works on establishing non-Chinese spaces. Whereas in his private life he also rejects a clear German space and looks for spaces neither German nor Chinese, in his professional life the dominance of German or German speaking networks is not questioned but actively pursued by Mr. Meier.

4.2 Mr. Schwarz

When we visited Mr. Schwarz during his assignment in the US he was 46 years old. Mr. Schwarz works for a German MNC and came to the US three years ago, when a new plant was to be built up and he was offered to take over the task to establish a new department for the new plant. Now that the new plant has started production he is responsible for ongoing production control in the local plant. Before coming to the US, he had been recently promoted to the lowest of three management levels in the company. During his assignment to the US he has been promoted to the level of General Manager, which, however, only has the consequence that he is entitled to receive better benefits according to the benefit scheme of the local subsidiary, but without any consequences for his salary and management level upon his return to Germany. The initial duration of Mr. Schwarz’ contract was of three years, however he was asked by the local subsidiary management to prolong his contract for another two years which he happily accepted. He is married and has two children. Before the assignment, his wife, who at the moment is a house wife, worked for the same company and now after the prolongation of the contract intends to take up work at the local subsidiary.

Ressources: All expatriates from our sample posted in the US have been provided with a generous housing budget that allowed for living in significantly bigger and more expensive houses than at home. Most expatriates

live in villa or mansion like houses in upper class subdivisions. Mrs Schwarz refers to this kind of housing standard by explaining that most of the average expatriate houses are so big that they have “a real echo in the living room”. In contrast to the expatriates in China these subdivisions are not exclusively inhabited by expatriates, but mostly by local upper class families and a very few expatriate families.

Boundaries in everyday life: Most of the German expatriate families in the US reported that although they lived in the subdivisions together with local families and also sent their kids to local schools, the contact to local families was difficult, because most of the neighbors and the families at school belonged to a local elite who tended to exclude expatriates, because they were perceived as only temporary neighbors from lower social status. Despite spatial proximity to local families through dwelling arrangements expatriate were still socially disembedded from local social spaces. The Schwarz family is partly an exception here, because they have consciously opted to live in a rather small and relatively newly built subdivision with an unpretentious middle class character and their house costs much less than the company pays them with the monthly housing allowance. The Schwarzes have opted for this relatively small and cheap house in order to save money and time for travelling in the US. However, they are still typical for the social positioning of German expatriates in the US.

First of all, even though the Schwarzes live in an American neighborhood where they are not spatially segregated from the local population, their everyday life takes place nearly exclusively in the German expatriate community and all of their closer friends are Germans from the same company. Although they have indeed highlighted the social and ethnic diversity of their neighborhood, they are only in contact with other German expatriates living in the subdivision. To the question whether they have friends in the subdivision Mrs. Schwarz answers as if she would have been asked if there were other company people living in her subdivision: „Oh yes, over there lives Katja and there are two other single women over there.” After a while it becomes clear that these are all German expatriates from the company. The fact that she did not even think that it was necessary to mention that these were German expatriates highlights how self-understood it is for them to only move in the expatriate community and to only consider other expatriates as potential friends. Also at the local gym, which the Schwarzes attend, they only participate in the same classes together with their German friends, on weekends they meet with other German families and their children, e.g. at German oriented pubs and restaurants in the region, if they look for support they exclusively approach other expatriate families. Due to the fact that there is a stark fluctuation

of expatriates in the company, the Schwarzes tell me that they go to farewell parties nearly every weekend. These parties are spaces where the expatriate community constitutes itself as a distinct social group with a strong identity. The Schwarzes reflect self-critically about this fact and say that they know “alarmingly few Americans”. However, there are no attempts to change this situation.

Second, despite of their more modest housing situation, also the Schwarzes cultivate a touristic perspective to their host country. Mrs. Schwarz says that for her it is like being on a constant holiday. Whereas other families realize this exceptional feature of their assignment through living in big villas with swimming pools and other sports facilities, the Schwarzes have been able to finance a remarkable travel program in the US (California, Las Vegas, ski vacations, beach vacations, regular weekend trips) and other countries in the region (Mexico and Costa Rica) with the money they have saved from the housing budget. In addition, they have been able to cultivate a very leisure time oriented and body conscious lifestyle. Mrs Schwarz goes to the gym every day for working out and other sports classes, she looks tanned and is in an extremely good shape. On the weekends, Mr. Schwarz joins her for working out and after that the family relaxes at the pool for the rest of the day.

Boundaries in the realm of work: In contrast to the everyday work life of Mr. Meier that was characterized by distance to his Chinese co-workers, Mr. Schwarz' work day is characterized by social and spatial proximity to local co-workers. His work day is the sum of numerous formal and informal interactions with local co-workers, either from his direct team or from other divisions all held in English. Despite the huge number of German expatriates in the local plant, they do not play a major role in Mr Schwarz's direct working context. The complete team that Mr. Schwarz had hired and trained consists of local employees.

On the one hand, Mr Schwarz relates to his co-workers in a very causal way, downplaying hierarchies of knowledge and nationality. He makes clear that he sees himself as an employee of the local subsidiary:

“First of all I am an employee of this plant. Whether I am an expat or a local this does not matter for me. I am an employee of this plant. I represent the interests of this plant towards the headquarters and the different company and brand boards. For me, this is self-understood.”

We could observe many situations, where he took a protectionist attitude towards his local colleagues in the sense that he did not communicate problems directly to the headquarters, but pushed for first solving the

problems locally. In many conversations and interactions between Mr Schwarz and his local co-workers we could feel that there was a latent fear among the local co-workers regarding the reaction of the headquarters to possible problems in the local plant. Most characteristic for Mr. Schwarz everyday work are numerous informal and very casual work related conversations going on between him and the members of his team. Throughout the day, Mr Schwarz repeatedly and very casually calls his team members into his cubicle to delegate work or to ask for information. And team members repeatedly approach Mr. Schwarz in a very casual manner, too, just dropping by his cubicle to approach him with urgent questions. For many of these conversations Mr Schwarz and his co-workers just lean over the cubicle wall or they just shout questions and answers from cubicle to cubicle. In between the formal work related talk, there is a lot of joking and laughing.

These intensive working interactions with local co-workers result in very complex reflections of differences in working and management practices and how to deal with them. On the one hand Mr Schwarz says that it has been necessary to adapt his management practices to the local ones, in the sense of taking over a management style based on very intensive and detailed “micro-management” as he calls it. We could observe that he discussed work assignments very much in detail, sitting in the co-worker's cubicle for half an hour going through all the details and possible problems in this task. On the other hand, when he talks about changing the local colleagues' working practices, he is in most cases very hesitant to use national-cultural frames, but highlights the complexity of possible differences within an MNC:

“In this initial phase of building up the plant, it is necessary to bring people on board, technically, but also into our company world. And I think, besides the technical issues, this is the most challenging thing for the people to understand that our company has its own way of doing things. For me this is normal, I have not worked anywhere else, only in this company. I have incorporated it. And then it is difficult of course to recognize where things are not normal at all for the others. Because if it is so normal for me, then why do I have to explain it, it's just so normal. So to constantly reflect how another person who does not know this world and who has only seen is from outside, approaches things, is hard [. . .]. How can I meet people where they are and say 'Well, look, we are completely different from our competitors.' And also on an emotional level between the headquarters and the subsidiary. So it's good that I know this. I have been in a German subsidiary and I know how it feels to be far away from the headquarters, so this is the same here.”

In his everyday work, Mr Schwarz discursively deconstructs national difference between him and the local co-workers at various levels. Drawing on his past employment in a subsidiary in Germany and not in the headquarters, he constructs a common identity of “subsidiary employees” regardless their national origin as opposed to the headquarters. In addition, he emphasizes differences in terms of ‘newcomers’ and ‘established’ in a specific organisational, but not national culture. He thus clearly challenges the perception of fixed boundaries between different cultural blocks and opens room for alternative interpretations.

On the other hand, Mr. Schwarz very much enjoys being in a powerful position that he had not had before in Germany and very demonstratively performs this power. He exhibits a high level of activity and a high velocity in all his work processes, decisions, and demands. When Mr Schwarz introduces the researcher to his team, one of them says jokingly that she would need running shoes to follow Mr Schwarz. Another co-worker, holding his hand high over his head, adds: „He works this high and we all try to catch up“. On the end of one of the job shadowing days when the researcher was chatting with the same co-worker about the intense day that she had experienced he says: “Yeah, this must have been a fully packed day. In the normal curve of distribution of how much people work, he is on the higher edge, he is just an extreme case, most of the people are in the middle, some are here [moves his hand a bit to the right] but he is here on the outer edge, he is just sooo speedy. But not in a bad way.” His whole working habitus is one of pushing his co-workers and accelerating the pace of the work processes. The following remark with which Mr Schwarz commented on a meeting where a supplier who initially said that he could not deliver more parts finally agreed to increase the number of delivered parts stands for this pushing habitus: “Yeah, sometimes you just have to rough them up a little and then they’ll do it.”

However, this accelerating and power over-performing habitus produces serious irritations for instance with his immediate superiors. Our research has shown that although Mr. Schwarz is only at the third level in the local formal management hierarchy, he is able to push his perspectives also against the concerns of both higher ranking local and non-German expatriate managers due to strong informal networks which he maintains with the German CEO of the plant. How this works, we could observe at a meeting where a very sensitive issue concerning production planning is discussed. Although Mr. Schwarz held a position that neither his Italian line manager nor the other higher ranking local managers shared, he was able to push them into his direction. When it became clear during the meeting that the problem had to be discussed with the CEO, it is Schwarz who immediately is asked to take

over the communication with the CEO, both by his higher ranking Italian line manager and the higher ranking local American managers. Mr. Schwarz directly wrote some SMS and later called the CEO on his private cellphone. The conversation which we also could overhear was in an extremely familiar and colloquial tone, and Mr. Schwarz was able to present his view of the things and also makes very clear how strongly he disapproves the position of the local American managers. The CEO then takes a decision which goes more into the direction of Mr. Schwarz’ position. When he presents the result of the phone call to his Italian line manager a few hours later, it became clear that although the line manager uses Mr. Schwarz’ direct contact to the CEO, he is at the same time very concerned about being excluded from important decisions. He came to see Mr. Schwarz and told him rather annoyed: “No, no, no, you are a bit too quick. I’m a guy, I want to see things, I want to go over it”, and made clear that he wanted to be informed more in detail about Mr. Schwarz’ work. Our complex data show that Mr. Schwarz is able to capitalize upon his informal networks based on the shared expatriate status, and that the divergence between formal and informal networks leads to tensions with both higher ranking local and non-German expatriate managers, because they feel sidelined in important decision processes.

The accelerating habitus and over-performing of power is also found in Mr Schwarz’ communication style. Mr Schwarz is physically very present in the office space, He talks very fast and decisively and when he communicates with his co-workers across the cubicle corridors he does not lower his voice, but talks to them with a firm, strong and decisive voice that can be heard in the whole office, thus auditively claiming the dominion over the office space and declaring the office his territory (Goffman 1971).

5. Discussion

In the following section, we will discuss our case study findings through the lenses of the three categories extracted from the global business elite literature: (1) Everyday practices and lifestyles, (2) networks, and (3) dispositions of expatriate managers. Going through these categories, we will also address the question of how the social positioning of the expatriates impacts on their ability to successfully act as boundary spanners.

5.1 Everyday practices and expatriate lifestyle

Our findings challenge the notion of expatriate managers as belonging to a relatively stable elite, and clearly show how they are instead constructed as a privileged group through the global mobility policies of the dispatching MNCs only for the limited period of their stints. For both groups—expatriates assigned to China and expatriates assigned to the US—our empirical

material indicate the transitory nature of this privileged position (Fechter 2007):

First, the social positioning in the host country is in stark contrast to their everyday practices and lifestyle, but also their professional responsibilities, before the assignment. Mr. Meier and Mr. Schwarz occupied middle management positions before the assignment and can be categorized as belonging to the German middle classes with a respective middle class lifestyle. During their assignment they were enabled by the global mobility policies of their companies to develop an affluent, and in developing or emerging countries like China even a neo-colonial lifestyle. Most expatriates from our sample inhabited mansions or flats that are much bigger and more affluent than their own houses at home. They enjoy facilities like swimming pools, health clubs, as well as tennis and golf courts in their compounds or country clubs, and employ service staff like home makers, gardeners, security staff/doormen, and drivers. They send their kids to elite private schools or international schools, and their trailing spouses get language courses organized and paid by the company, or opportunities like university study programs offered. Or they, as the Schwarz case illustrated, maintain a lifestyle oriented towards leisure and touristic activities, which is so attractive, exactly because it is so different from what they were able to do at home. Second, this position is transitory, because neither Mr. Meier nor Mr. Schwarz will be able to maintain this lifestyle when returning to Germany after the assignment. This refers both to the everyday dwelling, schooling and leisure practices, as well as to their professional status and responsibilities. All of them are very concerned about this downgrading after the assignment.

However, as we have witnessed in our cases, it is not self-understood that the expatriates smoothly accommodate the material and symbolic resources connected with their expatriate status. Instead, it is a demanding task for them, as well as for their families, to develop attitudes towards and practices of dealing with the social position they are put in by the global mobility policies: They actively have to position themselves within the new context.

German Managers in China: For the German managers and their families in China, as exemplified by the Meiers, it can be said that even though assigned to China they are 'living outside China'. We want to argue, that this feeling of 'living outside China' is a common way of framing the experience of living a privileged, even 'neo-colonial' lifestyle, by which expatriate Managers are set apart from colleagues, family and friends in their home country, from host country population in general and host country co-workers more specifically, as well as from other expatriates, for

instance from SMEs without similarly generous expatriate packages (Bonache 2006; Moeller and Harvey 2009). 'Living outside China' has also a socio-spatial dimension. The managers and their families mostly live in gated communities with either a narrow national German or a more international expatriate community separated from the local Chinese population and a local Chinese surrounding that is mostly perceived as dirty, dangerous and hostile. The entrance to these gated communities is strictly controlled by guards and security services, they offer additional infrastructure such as community clubs, fitness clubs and shopping facilities (for Saudi-Arabia see Glasze and Alkhayyal 2002, 324-327; for Indonesia see Fechter 2007, pp.63-67). Also the employment of personal servants, such as gardeners, house maids, nannies, and drivers is typical for this neo-colonial life style.

Strategies of social positioning: Although generally embracing the privileged lifestyle, the Meiers develop countering everyday practices targeted towards avoiding living in the German 'bubble' (Fechter 2007) and towards an active entanglement with international communities in the global city they are living in. This is reflected by their decisions regarding housing, schooling of the kids, and engaging in local communities—especially in the international congregation.

Several of the expatriates from our sample posted in China—especially those with a middle-class background—expressed ambivalent dispositions towards their Chinese host localities: On the one hand, they happily embraced the elite position that the global mobility policies put them in and enjoyed the privileges granted by them, on the other hand, they distanced themselves from being perceived as 'elite' as well as from being part of the 'expatriate bubble', either by framing the stint as a kind of vacation that is limited in time, or by insisting that they are living "an ordinary live – nothing special", or indeed by rejecting the privileges granted by the global mobility policies, e.g. by riding the bike instead of accepting a company car with a driver, or by choosing residential places in Chinese neighborhoods as we could observe in one of our cases. The latter, however, is an exception to the rule that expatriates tend to 'live outside China' in gated communities, and to practice a neo-colonial lifestyle.

German Managers in the US: For the German managers in the US, the case is somewhat different. Also in the US, the global mobility policies include a generous housing allowance that makes it possible for the German managers to live in very privileged housing areas, both in comparison to the overall national but also to the local context. They typically live in so-called subdivisions with an upper-middle class to upper class character. However, the context in which the German

expatriate managers live in the US is quite different from the German managers in China. Whereas the gated communities in China were in most of the cases in stark contrast to the living and housing conditions of the local population and local colleagues, the subdivisions and neighborhoods in which the German managers and their families live in the US were typical neighborhoods in mostly suburban, very affluent areas belonging to major metropolitan cities. Compared with the medium US family income (\$37,007), the medium family income of the areas in which the expatriates of our sample live was (except for one case) always higher than the national medium (C-City: \$41,318, N-City: \$41,887) and in some cases even significantly higher (S-City: \$52,043, W-City: \$58,545, R-Town \$105,919). This is not to say that the houses the expatriates live in are the standard houses for the area, but it suggests that their lifestyle is not fundamentally different from the host locality context as it was the case for the German managers in China. Unlike the gated communities in China, these subdivisions were mostly inhabited by local and not expatriate upper-middle and upper classes.

Regarding their social positioning within this affluent context, same as their counterparts posted in China they face the challenge to make sense of the situation that they live in an area which is much wealthier than their home region and that they can afford a lifestyle which they would not have been able to conduct in Germany.

Strategies of social positioning: Mr. Schwarz and his family are equipped with an expatriate package that would have allowed for the same upper class housing that the other expatriates in our sample enjoy. However, they decided for a middle class subdivision reflecting their 'home' social positioning, and at the same time not segregating them spatially from the local middle class population. This lack of spatial segregation does, however, not coincide with a lack of social segregation. To the contrary: The Schwarzes do not interact with their neighbors, but stick completely to the local expat community which is rather large due to the newly built plant of his employer MNC. Secondly, they also distinguish themselves socially from their local middle class neighbors by their leisure activities: They make use of the material resources that the expat package offers them by traveling to attractive places in the country as well as in neighboring countries, and they become members of a gym where they practice sports activities and which is the center of the local expat community. To sum up, the Schwarzes frame their stint as a long-term vacation and develop everyday practices and a lifestyle that reflects this transitory vision of the assignment. This strategy of making sense of the ambivalent social position that the global mobility policies create for the expatriates can be observed in

most of the cases of German expatriates posted in the US, and thus represents the typical pattern of social positioning in this sample. For the expatriates in the US another feature of the global mobility policies becomes visible: although they do not set apart the expatriates in socio-economic terms as a privileged group they constitute them symbolically and socially as a social group with a particular identity based on temporariness and distinction to host country social spaces.

To sum up, the expatriates assigned to the US are not spatially segregated from the local population to the same extent as their counterparts assigned to China. Notwithstanding this spatial embeddedness into the local society they are, however, still very much socially segregated from it. This is the result of a two-fold process: self-exclusion by orientating themselves very much to the German expatriate community and positioning themselves in the 'German bubble' as exemplified by the case of the Schwarzes, and—in the case of other expatriates who opted for residential places in very wealthy sub-divisions as made possible by the global mobility policies—also exclusion by the local elites due to the transitory status of expatriates and the fact that the locals are well aware of the fact that the expatriates are 'upgraded' by MNCs global mobility policies with regard to their 'normal' social status.

5.2 Networks

Our empirical material has also revealed new insights regarding the question of how the type of expatriate managers' networks—local, translocal, national, transnational—influences their role of boundary spanners. Our findings emphasize the relevance of the company size and the management level for networking and boundary spanning activities and rather downplay the role of different host countries. Most importantly, our findings show that conceiving of expatriate managers as a homogenous group engaged in boundary spanning across cultural and linguistic boundaries is not adequate.

Delegating boundary spanning work to others: The expatriate managers in our sample actively diminish their boundary spanning work across language and cultural boundaries by building up 'chains' of boundary spanners and delegating the work of boundary spanning to others. This was particularly noticeable for higher ranking managers and for managers assigned to China. The case of the top manager Mr. Meier, whose contact to local employees was minimal, who did not speak any significant Chinese, and who in personal and work life depended on brokers and translators for communicating with locals shows very clearly, that he only acts as an intercultural boundary spanner in a limited way. In several cases from our sample, we have been able to observe that instead of acting as a first line intercultural

boundary spanner themselves, they actively built up 'chains' of boundary spanners, by delegating the 'hard' work of boundary spanning across language and cultural boundaries either to other subordinate German employees or to German speaking Chinese employees with German educational trajectory. Hence, they are not part of an interconnected global elite but of a translocal German company network. This prevents them from having to acquire local knowledge and to translate between different cultural contexts themselves.

This does not mean that they do not perform boundary spanning work at all, but that it is necessary to differentiate between distinct types of boundary spanning work: intercultural and inter-language boundary spanning on the one hand, and spatial, translocal boundary spanning between different organizational subunits on the other. The expatriates posted in China, therefore, are indeed boundary spanners in a spatial sense. They steer knowledge flows and coordinate processes between several different locations of their MNCs. But they rather have to deal with the difficulties of communicating and working across time zones than across cultural boundaries. They do act as boundary spanners in translocal but mostly ethnically homogeneous workscapes, but the work of translating in culturally and ethnically diverse workscapes is delegated to others, e.g. bi-lingual secretaries.

Excluding local employees from knowledge flows: Strong personal networks with other expatriates of the same national background at the local company level lead to a desynchronization of formal and informal hierarchies and knowledge flows. For middle and lower rank expatriate managers this is the case especially with other higher ranking expatriates of the same national background. The case of Mr. Schwarz showed clearly, how he used his networks to influence the German CEO and thus sidelined higher ranking local American and other non-German expatriate managers. This led to serious tensions in the local subsidiary and is expected to decrease the boundary spanning capacity of the expatriate managers at the local subsidiary. The case of the top manager Mr. Meier instead showed how knowledge flows between expatriate top management and lower ranking local employees were restrained by language and culture based expatriate networks. This led to an exclusion of local employees from knowledge and hence to self-produced knowledge gaps on the one hand and to missing knowledge on the side of the expatriate himself about local conditions on the other.

5.3 Cosmopolitan dispositions?

Having discussed the everyday practices and lifestyles of the expatriates in our sample on their stints, and the networks they maintain, we will now discuss their

dispositions towards local colleagues and subordinates, and the local population in general, i.e. patterns of othering. Hence, we are asking in how far the expatriates develop cosmopolitan dispositions in the sense of the literature on global elites, if at all.

In both host countries, China and the US, global mobility policies position German managers in a way that an immersion into the host countries' culture is hindered. The dispositions of the expatriate managers towards the 'others' do not stay untouched by this distance to the local context. From our empirical material we could identify different modi of dealing with distance and proximity in the work context. For China, we could identify a "King Kong"- habitus, based on the emphasis of distance and control over the local co-workers and even a tendency of disappearing inhibitions and increasing brutalization in interactions with locals. This concept borrows from a very catchy expression of one of our research participants in China who used the King Kong metaphor for describing an expatriate attitude of overestimation of their own capabilities paired with a neo-colonial disrespect towards local Chinese especially of those expatriate managers who had stayed longer time in China and got used to their powerful position in the local context and the related privileges. The case presented here in this paper also reveals some traits of this King Kong habitus. The strong social segregation between expatriates and local workforce could be observed, for example, when Mr. Meier walked through the floors of the office building, not greeting any Chinese employer that he met on his way. This distance was also experienced by our Chinese research team member, who was completely ignored by Mr. Meier.

Notwithstanding this strong distinction oriented habitus that the expatriates in China generally displayed, they still develop a certain kind of cosmopolitan outlook, which on the one hand can be said as resembling Kanter's "global mindsets" in the sense that they have a much clearer sense now of the importance and the peculiarities of the Chinese market than they had before their stints, and, therefore, for the necessity to deal with the problems of cultural difference properly. The strategies, however, that they develop to deal with these problems are built upon keeping the local 'others' at an arms-length distance: Instead of acting as boundary spanners themselves, they need others as boundary spanners: bi-lingual and Western experienced Chinese, for example.

For the expatriates assigned to the US, we could not witness a habitus similarly orientated towards neo-colonial distinction from the locals. Here we could observe a very casual communication style with local co-workers and an instrumental use of national networks. To the contrary: the middle managers in our

sample showed the pretentious habitus that up to Bourdieu is characterized by the ambivalence of orientating towards the management style and lifestyle of the upper classes and at the same time feeling inferior and not belonging to the elite. Mr. Schwarz and his family from the beginning did not even try to engage with the local society. They were framing their stint as a long-term vacation, thus making clear to themselves and others that their upgraded lifestyle is a transitory state. However, during the stint, they are practicing leisure activities and traveling the continent as if they were belonging to the upper classes.

At work, too, the expatriates assigned to the US display a distant stance towards their US colleagues, even though it is not the same distinction orientated habitus that their counterparts in China showed. Instead they show a strong attachment to the group of German expatriates on site. Notwithstanding the closer and more direct cooperation between German expatriates and their US colleagues compared with the situation in China—facilitated by the good command of English that the expatriates have—the two groups are clearly segregated, a fact that is witnessed by Mr. Schwarz' playing off his good informal relationship with the German CEO against his US line manager.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to contribute to a better understanding of *boundary spanning* work of expatriate managers, by showing how 1) global mobility policies of MNCs shape the social positioning of expatriate managers in different host countries and 2) how in turn the management performance of expatriate managers depends on this institutionally shaped, transitory elite position. Based on ethnographic case studies of German expatriate managers in China and the US, connecting organizational and everyday life ethnography, we could demonstrate that global mobility policies encroach deeply into the personal everyday life arrangements of expatriate managers by distancing and disembedding them from local host country communities. For German managers in China this typically led to a "living-outside-China", for German managers in the US to a "lost-in-luxury" lifestyle. Both locally disembedded positions threaten their capability to successfully act as *boundary spanners*.

Regarding the consequences for the social positioning of the expatriate managers the home country approach is to be seen very critically. First, it is clear that it is definitely not the home country lifestyle that is reproduced by the so-called home country approach, but a lifestyle that reshapes the managers' social position during the assignment in a significant way. Second, in China, the idea of reproducing the home country lifestyle in the host country without taking into

account the local conditions, distances the expatriate manager economically, socially and spatially from the local population in such a way, that the everyday intercultural experience with local Chinese is basically non-existent.

Our research indicates that the image of expatriate managers as intercultural boundary spanners needs to be reconsidered. They are not automatically engaged in daily intercultural interactions with local staff. Depending on their management level, they possess powerful resources to shape their immediate working context and do so by filling key positions with either other expatriates of the same nationality or locals with an educational trajectory in the company's home country. This however means that they no longer act as cultural boundary spanners themselves, but that they delegate this function to others.

The notion of structured and structuring agency allowed us to elaborate on the reciprocity of organizational settings and expatriate life worlds. Thus, the paper opened up new vistas, methodologically and theoretically, for the debate on elite formation in MNCs and international management research.

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