Bourdieu’s symbolic power and postcolonial organization theory in local-expatriate relationships: An ethnographic study of a French multinational corporation in Singapore

Abstract
This empirical study seeks to illustrate the complementary interplay between Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power (field, habitus, cultural capital) and postcolonial organizational theory. Local and expatriate regional subsidiary managers of a French multinational corporation (MNC) hosted in Singapore share their divergent views on managerial assertiveness. Findings from ethnographic fieldwork point to the exercise of symbolic power and the differentiated responses to this imposition. The differentiated value of managerial assertiveness is found to be undergirded by not just power relationships within the organization, but also social inequalities, such as childhood socioeconomic background, within the broader social context of Singapore. Within this culturally diverse landscape, I examine the empirical representations of theoretical perspectives emergent from the imagined dialogues that the managers have with each other, through the researcher as the medium. Notions of how expatriate managers are assertive by disposition and local managers are, conversely, risk and uncertainty avoidant, are first presented as symbolic impositions of cultural hegemony, before presenting perspectives that concede (“conciliatory”) and reject (“retaliatory”) these notions from a postcolonial
vantage point. From the empirical findings, I explore how theoretical dialogues on symbolic power and postcolonial organizational theory may unfold within the context of highly globalized societies.

**Keywords**

Habitus, postcolonial organizational theory, symbolic power, childhood socioeconomic background, cultural capital, multinational corporation (MNC)

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**Introduction**

In highly globalized organizations, the field-of-play is modulated by cultural diversity. While organizational players attempt to gain a sense of control by drawing predictable representations, such as the divide between “locals” and “expatriates”, the manifestations of such divisions are much less clear-cut in reality. This is further complicated when highly globalized organizations are set within hyper-globalized landscapes.

The belief that an effective manager needs to demonstrate leadership ability by demonstrating traits of assertiveness has often been taken-for-granted as truism. Notions of good managerial leadership, in reality, are subject to reinterpretation
and resistance within Western multinational corporations, especially if its subsidiary is hosted within “multi-ethnic, pluri-cultural nation-states” (Mukherji, 2010: 1). I seek the further exploration of the matter from a case study, ECI (pseudonym), the Asia-Pacific subsidiary of a French MNC hosted in Singapore. Fieldwork at the ECI was conducted against the backdrop of changes in its organizational structure. In the past, in accordance to the old practices of MNCs, ECI relied exclusively upon expatriate managers dispatched from the corporate headquarters in France. As business interests expand, mounting pressures for managerial-level personnel opened the avenues for locals to be promoted into leadership positions. The belief that transnational corporations need to customize business interests to regional cultures further reinforced the imperative of having local Singaporean managers arbitrate business relationships with the customers of the region. This move expanded the career opportunities of local staff, but also highlighted the unequal power accorded to local and expatriate managers. The symbolic power relationships vested within cultural identities do not disappear with promotion into managerial positions, and the ECI provides one case of how ethnonational distinctions are made obvious due to the significant power asymmetry between local and expatriate managers.
My analytical approach employs several theoretical frameworks, as I am interested in presenting the fieldwork from multiple perspectives. Bourdieu's theoretical frameworks have been popular among scholarly analyses of social inequality. Similar explorations were also enacted, employing concepts such as social capital, social fields, and the habitus. For instance, the concept of social capital has been employed in the study of how faith-based organizations provided access to important social networks (Bunn and Wood, 2012), and how differentiated access to social capital shapes notions of vulnerability in gendered contexts (Siegmann and Thieme, 2010). Contestations between value regimes within the aesthetics field has informed on the power-play involved in the art procurement preferences of Belgian institutions (Gielen, 2005). Bourdieu's seminal works on the habitus find their permutations in the works on marginalized communities in the examination of the experience of informal care among Bangladeshi women in London (Nilufar and Jones, 2008), the responses of African American "exemplary elders" toward sexually transmitted infections (Lichtenstein, 2008), and a discussion on "working-class habitus" emergent within a postmodern context of job fragmentation (Lloyd, 2012). Closer to the site of this study, Hu highlights the example of how the state's successful efforts at engineering the
dominant cultural capital triggered the “accelerating shift to English monolingualism” of Singapore society (Hu, 2008: 207). In this study, I employ the concept of symbolic power (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1979) to examine how the notion of the essentiality of assertive managerial leadership is foisted upon, or assimilated and resisted by ECI managers. Symbolic power unfolds within the social field, which Bourdieu denotes as the site “within which agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take” (Bourdieu, 2005: 30). Within this structured social space, individuals are distributed into dominant-subjugate positions, thereby shaping the relationships between individuals as one identifies with the imperative of conserving or transforming how relationships are structured within a field (Bourdieu, 1985). At the ECI, symbolic power manifests along the lines of “locals” and “expatriates” because of the context within which the two groups were promoted into the management ranks. On the one hand, expatriates were deployed to regional subsidiaries as top managers. The legitimacy to lead is backed by their authoritative representation of the corporate headquarters. On the other hand, the locals started their careers as the rank-and-file. The legitimacy to lead is contingent upon their selection by expatriate managers. Relationships with expatriate managers, thus, tend to be characterized
by unequal power, even though they are equals in name. In the event of power struggles, ethnonationality becomes the symbolic expression of one’s position within ECI. The expatriates may seek to conserve the upper-hand by emphasizing their French identity, while the locals seek to transform old notions of managerial authority by highlighting their rootedness within the region. Thus, it is not uncommon to witness the groups breaking into chatter in different languages when conflicts arise during meetings. Expatriate managers would speak among themselves in French, while local managers would do the same in local lingua. The ground rule of English as the working language is ignored. Through language, the managers express “ways of speaking or the refusal of misalliances” (Bourdieu, 1985: 730). By speaking in French, the language of the dominant at the ECI, one seeks to exclude local managers on the basis of their lack of representation at the French corporate headquarters, and the other uses local lingua to highlight their knowledge of the region in comparison to the exogenous French.

The language-play between local and expatriate managers indicate that individual distinction is represented by economic capital (i.e. the wages earned), and, symbolically, by social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Expatriate managers are distinguished by their remuneration to stand on the higher ground. In
addition to the higher basic wage (based on the European salary guide), they are also lavished with generous annual leaves double to that of the local managers. Housing and car allowances distinguish the living standards of the two managerial cohorts. Moreover, this practice of wage discrimination among MNCs appears not just limited to the ECI (Frenkel, 2008: 934). In terms of social capital, or the vested influence due to one’s network associations, the French language delineates not just the personal friendships formed among expatriate managers, but also connections with corporate headquarters compatriots. Cultural capital, or the tacit knowledge on what is deemed propitious (Bourdieu, 1977a: 1; Bourdieu, 1980: 230; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 99; Bourdieu, 1991: 14), binds those sharing the same language with the “intimacy and fellow-feeling, congeniality… (providing for) a social cohesion and continuity which would be lacking in elites united solely by links of professional interest”. (Bourdieu, 1971: 171). For instance, if one deems it propitious to adopt an assertive, spontaneous and flexible approach to leadership, one would be drawn to managers sharing the same disposition, and conversely be disappointed by managers possessing opposite traits. One of the most discussed forms of cultural capital is the habitus, or the embodiment of one’s social position in enduring dispositional characteristics. (Bourdieu, 1977a: 658; Bourdieu, 1977b: 86;
Bourdieu, 1991: 37) Individual mannerism, knowledge and taste are disposed by deeply entrenched “bodily tensions” (Bourdieu, 2000: 117), triggered by repertoires that one has been deeply ingrained with through recurring childhood experiences. An understanding of the function of the habitus illuminates the prospects of transcending the local-expatriate divide, and hence the limited potential of integrating local elements into the ECI’s managerial field of power. Local managers cannot win the approbation of the French expatriates by sheer mimicry of managerial assertiveness, as dispositions are shaped by the relationships within the organization, and one’s habitus, which is the outcome of capital accumulation since childhood (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 130). Lacking in symbolic authority, “such an utterance is no more than words; it reduces itself to futile clamor, childishness, or lunacy” (Bourdieu, 1991: 74).

Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power possesses explanatory rigor, but the lens employed skew towards the dominant vantage point. Postcolonial theories relevant to ECI data analysis provide the alternative angle. The subaltern lens adopted by Frenkel (2008; 2003), Nandy (1983), and Prasad (2003) casts views on symbolic power from the perspective of the subordinated. In addition, I seek to further reiterate the continued importance of considering the structural factors that
shape variable responses to symbolic power (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 102).

In this examination of the interplay of different theoretical angles, I seek a holistic theoretical account that can better explain hyper-globalized empirical realities.

The objective of this paper is twofold. Firstly, I seek to offer an empirical analysis of symbolic power through the examination of divergent notions over the essentiality of managerial assertiveness at the ECI. In this, I seek to explore how dominance is enforced, accommodated and resisted. Secondly, I seek to examine the interplay of the theoretical assumptions of Bourdieu’s theories with that of postcolonial theorists.

Methodology

As trust and rapport are essential for gathering in-depth insights (Gold, 2005), I commenced ethnographic fieldwork as a full-time employee for 1.5 years. Observations are undertaken with a Vygotskyan lens, where everyday events at the ECI (“ongoing action”) are observed and recorded alongside how they are understood by the participants (“mediated action”). (Daniels et al., 2007: 51-59) That is, analytical insights are obtained via the meanings that participants infuse to events, as informed by the positions they occupy within the organizational
hierarchy. In order to elicit participant interpretations of the events that occur in their work environment, unstructured interviews accompanied this phase. Critical incidents (both positive and negative) that surfaced during the observations were raised for discussion in the interviews. The participants’ subjective takes, as informed by the "histories from the social positions" they occupy, serve to highlight “underlying structural contradictions” of these critical incidents (Daniels et al., 2007: 51). Questions posed to the respondents in these unstructured interviews were kept exploratory.

Observations from the unstructured chats form the basis for developing the focus of the semi-structured interviews. The full engagement of working as a colleague with ECI participants gave me a context-rich exposure that facilitated the framing of in-depth interview questions in contexts that respondents are able to relate to. Three rounds of interviews, each spanning 1-6 hours, were conducted on 30 Chinese Singaporean managers, and the French expatriate Vice-President of ECI. In-depth and exploratory interviews characterized the initial rounds and the final round was structured and condensed.
**Demographical Data**

In order to provide a nuanced account of the dispositional variations of the local managers, a range of demographical data was collected and compared with group identifications expressed during interviews to explore for possible patterns between predispositions and demographical characteristics. From this, childhood socioeconomic background stands out. The effects of socioeconomic statuses (SES) on life-chances are evident (Kaplan et al., 2001; Mello, 2009). Childhood socioeconomic background is much less explored in comparison. However, as childhood experiences are crucial in shaping enduring dispositions, and past circumstances may differ significantly from present socioeconomic status, its effects may override current status achievements. In this, I take the position that it is not just economic resources afforded by one’s socioeconomic status that shape individuals, but more importantly, the dispositions that are consequential from the life-chances afforded by childhood socioeconomic circumstances.

Childhood socioeconomic background is defined as the financial situation of an individual in his/her childhood (in this case, up to the age of 12). Given that the local managers currently enjoy affluent socioeconomic circumstances due to the positions they hold within the ECI, or have held in the industry, it is more
meaningful to study variations in childhood socioeconomic circumstances than current ones. Household income earned by one’s parents during the respondent’s childhood is the most objective indicator of childhood socioeconomic background. However, pragmatic challenges are against the collection of this data, being that the respondents were born between the years of 1960-1979. As decades have passed since the time the respondents were in their childhood, these figures are difficult to recall in retrospect. Housing type offered a good alternative. In Singapore, housing type is found to be a vital indicator of class (Mak, 1993: 319-322). Works on housing types and class associations from 1960s to 1980s (Chen, 1973: Table 1-26; Chiew and Ko, 1991: Table 5.4; Mak, 1993: 319-322) provided gauges for the comparison of socioeconomic backgrounds between respondents. Based on the data collected on housing types, respondents were organized into “most affluent”, “reasonably affluent” and “least affluent” childhood socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Findings**

As the managerial ranks of the MNC become increasingly accessible to diverse ethnonationalities, the pressure mounts for the accommodation of divergent views
to management. However, the dissemination of management philosophies is often unidirectional, where “local” managers are expected to imbibe the “head-quarter’s identity and value system”, and a “failure” to do so is often attributed to the “cultural and institutional inability to cope with the advanced technique” (Frenkel, 2008: 929-930). An examination of the continued prevalence of corporate headquarters management philosophies is examined with the contingent application of the Bourdieuan and postcolonial lenses. The “dialogues” between local managers and the French expatriate Vice-President of the ECI form the echoes of the two theoretical schools. The “dialogues” had taken place with the physical absence of the other party. That is, the researcher is used as a medium for expressing sentiments otherwise deemed inappropriate for articulation. Neither of the parties had heard of the others’ responses for the in-depth interviews, but they appear to be able to anticipate what the other party has to say, and seemingly craft their statements according to these anticipated responses.

In the first set of findings, I examine the grounds for conserving the ethnonational composition of the ECI top management. I then proceed to present the sentiments of local managers who appear conciliatory toward the conservation
of this status quo, followed by those fighting for the transformation of current ECI practices. The profiles of the two groups will be outlined in the respective sections.

“Lee Kuan Yew will be here to take care of them”

As the person helming the Asia-Pacific business, the Vice-President expresses his regret in failing to equalize the relationship between local and expatriate managers at the ECI. While French managers take to leadership like “fish in water” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127), the locals disappointed him with their lack of assertiveness. He refers to this shortfall as “the Complex”:

“They are not risk-takers by nature, and the flip-side is that they don’t like uncertainty, and like to remain in the comfort zone. They like to remain here in this island where they are well-protected and organized, where Lee Kuan Yew (Singapore’s distinguished prime minister, 1959-1990) will be here to take care of them… In school, it’s really learning by heart how to do it; very little of self-discovery… They will not find their own way, but will wait for you to instruct them how to do it… The most obvious to me is that there is some kind of a complex amongst Singaporean managers. It’s not very nice, but I have very few managers who believe they compare equally to Westerners.
They seem to believe that at the end of the day, the Americans and the French know best. This is precisely what I don’t want. When the Western directors use this complex to push their position, the Singaporean director backs off and will view that the Westerners have the right to do so... They need to be able to deal with the Western arrogance of not knowing how to respect others.”

The Vice-President attributes “the Complex” to a habitus-like trigger of submission, due to an innate lack of confidence and hence the desire for predictability. Comparisons between ECI French and Singaporean managers are further extended to managers in France as a general cohort:

“In France, when you have a problem that you don’t know how to solve, you will know that step-by-step, you will discover eventually how to solve it. Here, people will not move until they have clearly identified how to solve it.”

As top management positions are no longer the reserve of the French across all subsidiaries, the Vice-President provided a global perspective of similar leadership gaps by extending ethnonational comparisons to other regional subsidiaries (without elicitation):
“Germans, I would say, are close to Singapore. They formulate a plan, and once the plan is done, they then move. This is the same problem that we have with the Germans when we work together.”

The Vice-President further shares his insights on the unequal relationships in the managerial hierarchy as the outcome of dispositional confidence that is symbolically differentiated by cultural capital:

“With the Chinese (Mainland), we tend to work the same way... culture, which is quite strong there, makes the difference. With Singapore, culture does not exist because of the history, and because society is very Westernized... The problem is comparing a country that is young – only forty years old (Singapore) – with countries that has thrived for eons... Just like America, where they have very little roots because their history is poor.”

Within hyper-globalized organizational fields, the expression of symbolic power, of who possesses the cultural capital against the have-nots, is delineated by nationalities. The capacity to “work the same way” is contingent upon the predisposition to manifest the ways of the dominant-elect. “second-lieutenants” manifest their “true positions” with their habitus in spite of promotions into top management positions.
Within the organizational field where the Vice-President occupies the position of dominance, he embodies the dominant habitus of the establishment (Bourdieu, 1977a; Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu, 2005). In the expression of the desire to groom local managers, he relates to them, perhaps unconsciously, as “irrational children in need of supervision and guidance by a rational manager” (Frenkel and Shenhav, 2003: 7). Furthermore, the desire for local manager assertiveness is coupled with the worry of cultural dilution (i.e. a local manager that is “westernized” loses his regional advantage), resonating of Prasad’s observation of the continued desire of today’s organizations to preserve the Other’s cultural purity (2003).

“Honestly, for Asians, we always regard Westerners as more superior.”

Where the symbolic embodiment of the managerial norm is in the demonstration of assertiveness, local managers may find this dispositional demand counterintuitive. In “the Complex”, the Vice-President referred to how his local managers “believe that at the end of the day, the Americans and the French know best”. Upon further investigation, I found possible echoes of this belief among a section of the local managers (9 of 30 respondents). Yet, rather than conceding that “Westerners know
best”, they appear to sound the reality that they are operating within an unleveled playing field even in the region that they supposedly are locals to.

“The culture is such that they (Asians) look up to the Westerners as the ‘greater being’… It’s very hard for them to imagine a Western multinational corporation with a big boss that is Asian.” -Leon-

“All Asian people (Asians) prefer the Westerners rather than the locals or Asians.” -Norman-

“Honestly, for Asians, we always regard Westerners as superior.”

-Shane-

The Vice-President’s description of local managers lacking in confidence appears re-enacted. Yet, they seem to take it upon themselves to ensure the delivery of promises to the clientele, not just sales figures:

“I don’t sell things that I am not sure of, I don’t go with programs that I am not sure of, I don’t do things that I am not sure of. I want to check, double-check and make sure. Unlike some of the other people (French managers) who think, ‘Just sell; never mind (the rest)’. At the back-end, can the
structure support? Can the people deliver? Most importantly, can we meet the margins? Do we have profit to secure? If you lose money, who is going to be responsible? Maybe because of that, I am being penalized because they (French managers) feel I am not very creative. I am more careful because I tend to look at the overall profitability at the same time. I am not a creative salesperson. I have to make sure that we can deliver and not just sell." -Leon-

“As Asians, we learn by heart (and) study by heart (of) what is taught in school (i.e. rote learning).” -Norman-

This group concurs with the Vice-President’s belief that Singaporeans over-rely on “the higher authorities” for decision-making responsibilities, but perhaps also expresses the constraints upon them to follow rules that are externally imposed:

“Like I said, locals don’t have the guts to speak up and voice out… So they end up becoming ‘yes men’ than to go against those people (French managers).” -Norman-
“I tend to follow more of the corporate guidelines rather than my personal beliefs.” – Shane-

Based on the yardsticks of the Vice-President, the “conciliatory” responses of these local managers fall short of his expectations of good leadership. However, assertiveness is not prioritized by this group of managers as they hold different yardsticks to good leadership. The respect for ethical business and top management decisions are deemed more strategic to organizational effectiveness.

An added postcolonial reading provides an alternative view of local managers beyond the lens of them as “passive victims” of political struggles (Prasad, 2003: 18). By choosing a non-confrontational approach, this group of local managers seeks best practices from their own stock of cultural beliefs, hybridized with a selective appreciation of Western best practices. As Frenkel points out, the tendency to essentialize the actions of people of “exotic” cultures (i.e. Non-European) tend to white-wash the variety of global exposures possessed by local managers (2008: 933). “Conciliatory” local managers may lack the requisite capital to engage in the field where the ruling elite define the rules of engagement. However, the silence may indicate a refusal to engage in fruitless struggles within a field where profiteering takes precedence over delivery, more so than defeatist
apathy. Although given the appearance of “conciliatoriness”, these managers are motivated by a different field of priorities (e.g. living up to their promises to clients). “Conciliatory” managers hence appear “silent” where the Vice-President is seeking answers (e.g. assertiveness in tough negotiations). Shane, a respondent from the “conciliatory” group, analogizes the prioritization of a different field (guided by ethics, not pure profiteering) to “having a good sleep at night (sic.)”. By not responding to the wager by the Vice-President to “Go do it and it and fight the French and Americans! (sic.)”, “conciliatory” respondents work to neither abide by nor resist against the field where profiteering mandates aggression and subjugation. (Prasad, 2003: 17-18) The “conciliatory” approach resonates with Nandy’s “moral and cultural superiority of the oppressed” (Nandy, 1983: 49), who engage the field in their own terms. In other words, they refuse the prescribed roles of “servile imitators and admirers”, or “counter-players performing their last gladiator-like acts of courage in front of appreciative Caesars” (Nandy, 1983: 14), but seek instead to relate to “the ‘West’s other self’ (Nandy, 1983: xiii), which represents many of the precious cultural values and priorities that have been marginalized and rejected by the colonizing West’s dominant self.” (Prasad, 2003: 19). This approach, however, appeals to the goodwill of the dominant to
accommodate alternative voices (Nandy, 1983), which may not be perceived as forthcoming by other local managers. At the ECI, another group took to a diametrically opposite approach to voicing the same opinions.

“This is my home base.”

While Nandy shows high regard for conciliation, his view of retaliation is reflected in the servile terms that he employs toward confrontational moves (e.g. “gladiator-like”). The dispositions of local managers to be outlined in this section, therefore, runs against the position propounded by Nandy. Yet, the preference for engagement also departs from that which characterizes Bourdieu’s denotation of the dominant habitus. Rather, this group of local managers (5 of 30 respondents) re-enact Bhabha’s position that new sites of power may emerge with the “strategic reversal of the process of domination” (1994: 112).

As with “conciliatory” local managers, this group prioritizes the commitment to deliver, over the delivery of creative sales pitches, albeit in strongly worded ways: “This is my home base. The reason behind this integrity is because I know I am here to stay… I have built the relationship and trust. Test this: ask the other respondents if the customers believe in the (expatriate)
management? … customers come and tell you, ‘I like you and I trust you, but I don’t know if your top guy is thinking straight or not because 2 years later, he’s gone.’ Who are they going to count on? YOU.” —Joseph-

I will proceed to delineate the source of the rift between the Vice-President and the two groups of local managers.

The Vice-President assessed his local managers as lacking in assertiveness due to their risk-fearing ways. Correspondingly, the self-perception that one lacks assertiveness was voiced by the “conciliatory” group, without the agreement that risk-taking is necessarily a good business practice. It was a respondent from the “retaliatory” group who verbalizes the common sentiment of the two groups that risk-taking is not always good commercial practice. To Alvin, the permission for flagrant risk-taking is limited to the hegemonic:

“Things (bribery in China) are still being done through the middlemen, but things are evolving from the simple wine and cigarettes to golf trips, fishing trips and Grand Prix tickets. So are you saying they are now conforming to ethics? Yes, in the American way of conforming to ethics.”

Even though expressed in different ways, both “conciliatory” and “retaliatory” groups appear to disagree with the Vice-President’s business wisdoms more than
they fear risk-taking. They would rather take the risk and incur the Vice-President's displeasure for the alternative business wisdoms that they are committed to.

The desire for instruction from leaders was perceived by the Vice-President to plague local managers. Consistent with previous postures, “conciliatory” respondents concurred that Asians only move when instructed. Their belief that Asians “learn by heart, study by heart (i.e. rote learning)” echoed the Vice-President’s statement that “In school, it’s really learning by heart how to do it (for Singaporeans).” “Retaliatory” respondents took a contrary stand and express overt disagreement:

“You only need one visionary and ten people to follow.” –Alvin-

From this view, assertiveness is situational: one ought to display assertiveness only when in the position to do so. Assertiveness is an accompaniment of authority, rather than a stable personality trait. Moreover, critical issues cannot be resolved if every rank-and-file disputes the way forward. “Conciliatory” and “retaliatory” respondents disagree with the Vice-President that they could act without instruction, although on different grounds. “Conciliatory” respondents believe it is “their lot” to ensure critical issues are solved by cooperating with the leader. “Retaliatory”
respondents want to take the lead, but feel their hands are tied if not given real authority.

The Vice-President disagrees with the practice of acting on issues only when the team comes to consensus on a viable game plan. “Conciliatory” respondents conceded with their need to agree, citing the stereotype of the Chinese “yes-man”. “Retaliatory” respondents note with sarcasm that a team that works “spontaneously” without a game plan may end up running in circles:

“The leader shouts ‘CHARGE!’ and they run in all directions. After that, what happens? Then, someone questions, ‘Where are we?’ We fall into the limbo of ‘ask here 5 minutes, run there 5 minutes’ – PANIC TIME! This is spontaneity for you.” -George-

While “conciliatory” respondents blame themselves for wanting to be too sure and too agreeable, “retaliatory” respondents argue against engagement for engagement’s sake. Both groups, however, stood by their convictions, which is the source of frustration for the Vice-President.

Moving beyond explanations of dispositions as innate, immutable and inevitable cultural products, past and present circumstances create the cumulative histories, expressed in the different responses toward symbolic power.
Consecrated by the authority of the corporate headquarters, the Vice-President holds the symbolic power within the ECI. As the embodiment of the dominant economic, cultural and social capital, a predisposition of conservatism shapes his view of managerial assertiveness as a standard that effective managers should possess. Variations from the norm are hence perceived as negations of the standard. Local managers are faced with the expectation to possess an assertive managerial style, which may or may not be their preferred approach.

A postcolonial reading enhances the analysis by providing an alternative take towards the “lack of” managerial assertiveness from a different vantage point. Rather than a shortfall in standards, these groups of ECI local managers were applying a different set of managerial standards. There remains, however, another set of empirical findings that remains unaccounted for with the postcolonial lends. Here, I return to a Bourdieuan account of how structure ultimately creates discrepancies in upbringing, which consequently shape different responses-of-choice to symbolic power. Although the two groups of local managers may possess comparable current financial standing, their dispositions differ and appear to cluster according to childhood socioeconomic backgrounds. The “conciliatory” group is identifiable as local managers coming almost entirely from “least affluent”
childhood socioeconomic circumstances. With the perception of frequent misalignment with the dominant, the preferred approach will be to persuade with conciliation. In contrast, none of the “retaliatory” respondents came from the “least affluent” group, and are predominantly of “most affluent” backgrounds. With the view that engagement is a better option for getting things moving, the approach characterizes attempts to “surpass and defeat the West at its own game” (Prasad, 2003: 17).

Discussion

Statements on local-expatriate relationships at the ECI converge into imagined dialogues, as if each statement is a crafted response to another’s view over the differentiated assumptions on the need for managerial assertiveness. The interplay of views voiced from the dominant establishment, the “conciliatory” and “retaliatory” subordinate classes, re-enacts the underpinning theoretical assumptions on social inequality from the works of international scholars.

The ECI represents a microcosm of global power dynamics where the symbolic power of the corporate headquarters is expressed through the namesakes of “expatriates” and “locals”. As dispositions and relationships at work
are entrenched within the histories of colonialism and socioeconomic inequality, local-expatriate relationships within this Western multinational corporation is priced according to one’s access to the dominant symbolic capital. That is, those in possession of the dominant cultural capital (of ECI) gets to express cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 2001), or one’s capacity to traverse the global economic landscape as the representation of the international perspective. As expatriate managers, one is consecrated by this capacity to transcend cultural boundaries, reach out to similarly hegemonic partners (e.g. Mainland Chinese), and form alliances that “local managers” appear otherwise incapacitated to enact (e.g. Americans, German, Singaporean managers of the respective ECI regional subsidiaries). Conversely, cultural purity is deemed essential to local managers (e.g. Chinese Singaporean managers should not be “Westernized”). The monikers, “local” and “expatriate” managers, encapsulate the multinational corporation from this elitist point-of-view. Although symbolic power unfolds at ECI, its source is historically entrenched within the belief that the “ethnicization of occupational categories” (field of symbolic power) is an outcome of “‘voluntary’ group behavior” (habitus), where “the set of rules into which parents belonging to a social group are pressurized to socialize their children” (cultural capital) (Wallerstein, 1991: 83-84).
The Vice-President’s view converges with Bourdieu’s in the assertion that individual competence is assigned according to one’s access to cultural capital. As cultural capital is accumulated since childhood, individuals do not merely develop dispositions based on where they stand within the organizational hierarchy. The habitus reproduces past experiences with the dominant cultural capital, honing responses to present inequalities at work.

Bourdieu believes that highly reflexive professionals acquire not just the “tools of the trade” (inclusive of cultural capital), but also the possession of a critical mind that constantly questions the utility of these tools (1992: 249). While I concur with the importance of recognizing the reality of how symbolic power is enacted, I would like to propose a more holistic view of empirical (and theoretical) reality that extends beyond the victor’s vantage point. Faced with the imposition of dominant notions of efficacious managerial leadership (symbolic power), given the differential access to economic (childhood socioeconomic background and present remuneration), social (colleagues that converge based on organic “fellow-feeling”, not contrived collegiality) and cultural capital (worldviews on propitious responses to events), one may still end up with the same responses (“conciliatory” and “retaliatory” habitus) even with the exercise of reflexivity. A postcolonial perspective
provides the alternative take towards a multifocal view of symbolic power. For the case of ECI local managers, the respondents are knowledgeable about the utility of the “tools of the trade” (assertiveness, etc.), but have made the judgment call to not utilize these tools. Through the analysis of ECI data from the postcolonial vantage point, I seek not an account of how alternative views from the subordinate group are superior to those of the hegemonic. Rather, I hope to illustrate how differentiated accounts take shape from the exercise of professional reflexivity, and how this exercise has led to the use of alternative sets of tools (e.g. prioritization of virtue over competency). The managerial habitus of the local managers are far from manifestations of the uncritical “autodidact” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 130), doggedly attempting to replicate the dominant tastes, preferences and dispositions (but failing to do so) (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 130; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 248). From this view at the bottom, some had taken to establishing their own moral order of managerial efficacy, while others had taken to reversing the dominant reality as an act of resistance. (Prasad, 2003; Bhabha, 1994; Nandy, 1983) The first awaits the day when the dominant will come to recognize the utility of alternative approaches, while the second hopes to win approbation by demonstrating assertiveness in their own terms.
Most importantly, the postcolonial vantage point clarifies how the “conciliatory” and “retaliatory” respondents made it to the management ranks, despite the dearth of the requisite cultural capital among this group of managers. The “conciliatory” approach works effectively at appealing to “the other West” (Nandy, 1983: 48), which had perhaps won the Vice-President approbation without his conscious recognition during times of frustration. At times when ethnonational differences do not appear as salient, “retaliatory” managers had probably won his approbation, with the “fellow-feeling” of manifesting the gumption of standing up against confrontations, like an assertive manager should. That being said, structure does drive behavior. Childhood socioeconomic background, for instance, does shape enduring dispositions that manifests one’s possession of a “working class habitus”, or that of the “dominant-elect”. However, when enduring dispositions shaped by childhood socioeconomic backgrounds cease to be seen as manifestations value-laden by assessments of superiority and inferiority, the potential of good managerial leadership(s) crafted by an multiple sets of realities is made probable.
Conclusion

Within hyper-globalized realities, theoretical boundaries increasingly require dynamic extensions and reinterpretations to address an increasingly complex, fragmented, and challenging empirical landscape. Multiple approaches have emerged with regard to the treatment of divergent views. Some had taken to the view of dissident voices as potential threats to the dominant establishment, to be drowned out with its own noise if not granted the suitable platform to rise from the peripheries. Others approach the rising expressions of dissent as the emergence of a landscape where differences are increasingly embracing towards not just the unheard, dispossessed and marginalized, but also the patronized, restrained, and mediocratized. The international standard, it is hoped, will no longer be about the possession of one voice, with the capacity to coerce, but a multifocal one with the capacity for granting representation (not tokenism) to the underrepresented.

References


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