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Cross-border mergers and acquisitions in Shanghai: the everyday production of profits, states and cultures

Short abstract:

This text explores the practices of cross-border investment in Shanghai, based on interviews and participant observation with a Mergers and acquisitions consultancy firm. The paper shows that everyday practices of cross-border investment make sense through multiple but limited repertoires about profits, states and cultures. These repertoires are labile, and combined in fluid ways, that are often contradictory and fragmented. The meanings of business cannot be reduced to profit maximization, but also encompass the notions of entrepreneurship and the specific technicalities of each industry or sector of activity. The meanings of the state are multiple, corresponding to different institutions and the imaginaries about state sovereignty and macroeconomic policy that financial professionals encounter in their work. Finally, these professionals use the term "culture" to designate conflicts and misunderstandings as the product of a divide that would be both bridgeable (by themselves) and yet always redrawn. These are points of reference to which financial professionals come back to in order to make sense of their practice in particular situations. Thereby, these professionals contribute to legitimize the specific distribution of monetary resources that results from their activity, and the specific discourses of national sovereignty, cultural difference and profit making that go with them.

Long abstract:

This text explores the practices of cross-border investment in Shanghai, based on around 50 interviews with professionals and about 10 months of part-time participant observation in a company providing consultancy services in mergers and acquisitions between Europe and China. The paper analyzes the strategy of the company, its everyday operations and explores them by presenting the detailed evolution of a particular cross-border investment project, which concluded at the end of the observations. The paper shows that everyday practices of cross-border investment make sense through multiple but limited repertoires about profits, states and cultures. These repertoires are labile, and combined in fluid ways, that are often contradictory and fragmented.

The "cross-border" character of the company's activities is in great part defined by its relations to the states whose limits are crossed by the social relations implicated in the

investment projects. The company's members take up state regulations and macroeconomic policy as a given environment understood both as a series of constraints, but also as business opportunities, for instance by establishing contractual relations with municipalities in Europe and China is part of the strategy of expansion. Thereby, state sovereignty, the law, and macroeconomic policy are understood in the terms of professional everyday financial activity.

The company's existence, and the continuity of its members' income, depends on the capacity to create profits. This distribution of money within the company, in the form of salaries, bonuses and dividends, follows professional rules, that are articulated with the temporalities of the deals in mergers and acquisitions. The analysis of one deal, where a big Chinese company purchased a small European company in the sector of medical technologies, allows for seeing that profit maximization is not the only meaning of the activities. They are understood differently by the different participants, and include the distribution of information in the Shanghai stock market at a moment when Chinese state agencies were investing heavily to stop price falls, the notions of entrepreneurship and the specific technicalities of that sector of activity, for instance the composition of molecules and production facilities.

Finally, these professionals position themselves as operating in a divide between "China" and its other, often designated with the expressions "Europe", "Europe and the US", "the West" or "the rest of the world". Professionals present this divide as one between "cultures" or "mentalities", among others expressions, and often mobilize it to designate the causes of conflicts and misunderstandings in everyday work. Most often, professionals elaborate very little on the specific content of the entities that are thus created and separated, but point to particular professional situations that prove their existence. These situations are usually linked to everyday work operations in which the professionals positions themselves as those who can go through the divide itself, connecting its two sides. This bridging is presented as being in need of a constant repetition, as the divide remains, in a way that becomes constitutive of the professional and non professional identity of the people observed. Thereby, the meanings of these "cultural" are partly composed of financial terms and stakes.

The paper shows how these three repertoires combine in multiple and labile ways in everyday practice. These are points of reference to which financial professionals come back to in order to make sense of their practice in particular situations. As financial transactions are constituted through shifting relations of force, these repertoires are mobilized to articulate relations of competition, collaboration and hierarchy between employees and between companies. Using these meanings of profits, states and cultures to justify their own practices, these professionals contribute to legitimize the specific distribution of monetary resources that results from their activity. Thereby, they reproduce and transform the particular claims of legitimacy of the narratives according to which profits should lead the allocation of monetary resources, within specific notions of state sovereignty and identifications and separations in the name of culture.

Introduction

As he takes me on his Jaguar to the airport, Jack, partner of Merge Consulting, tells me that he has lived in the area since he was born, a wealthy region of Western Europe that concentrates global financial activities and high-end technology companies. He expands on the hopes he has about developing that part of the business of his company, which started only five years before. In his mid forties, having worked in the financial industry all his professional life, he explains that he accumulated enough wealth to collect some luxury cars, and that he spends most of his leisure time with his family enjoying the highly preserved natural environment that we cross at full speed on the highway. As he recalls with pride the time he served in the army, and the extreme sports that he developed a liking for when he was there, he explains that China is where he expects most of the activity of Merge Consulting to grow, especially now that Europe is experiencing a serious economic slowdown and that the Chinese government has launched the "outbound" investment wave, favoring the purchase of small and medium high-tech European companies by big Chinese state-owned companies.

In the US and Europe, in the last forty years, the financial industry, composed of banks, insurance companies, investment funds, brokerage houses and rating agencies has come to occupy a central role in financing the activities of companies and states. During the same period, "China" has moved from designating a land of poverty and global isolation to becoming the center of global industrial production and the second biggest "economy" in the world. As part of the juncture of these two processes, during the same period, over 1 trillion US dollars have entered the Mainland Chinese territory to purchase, establish or create companies (REF). In the last ten years, an increasing amount of money has crossed the same border in the other direction, so that today, "inbound" and "outbound" "foreign direct investment" reach equal annual amounts of around 200 billion USD (REF). This particular financial flow is part of a global hierarchical distribution of monetary resources, whereby certain social activities, certain regions, certain people, are more allowed to exist than others, with different rights and duties. This relation of forces around the access to money contributes to create a particular global political space. The present paper seeks to explore some of the ways in which this money is distributed, following the everyday practices of a small team of consultants in mergers and acquisitions (M&A) in Shanghai, through participant observation and interviews.[1]

Through the particular case of the practices of these professionals, this paper aims at contributing to the understanding of how is money distributed globally, i.e. what are the concrete everyday practices whereby financial professionals contribute to channel money to certain activities and not to others, participating in the global hierarchy of the distribution of monetary resources. This also implies paying attention to the multiple, labile and yet limited repertoires or meanings mobilized by these employees to make sense of their activities. The meanings that professionals give to their activities contribute to the legitimization of the particular social hierarchy that results from them. In their everyday practices, different institutions, such as financial and commercial stately regulatory bodies, companies, professional associations, are present in multiple ways. Cross-border transactions are explicitly established as a problematization of state borders, which they contribute to produce and transform. States, money, and the selves of those concerned with the financial flows are thus redefined in these transactions, that redraw the social worlds in which these entities make sense at all (Hart & Ortiz 2014). The analysis of the everyday practices of cross border financial transactions thus calls for thinking together power, money and the global. This paper will approach this issue through the lens of the practices of money.

The sociology and anthropology of money have shown that far from being a factor of homogeneity, as imagined by authors like Simmel or Marx, money has multiple meanings and roles in everyday practices, that shape these practices as much as these practices shape money itself (Dodd 2014). Viviana Zelizer has shown that money is constitutive and constituted by kinship and intimacy in the US (1997, 2005), as much as by the relation to divinity and death

[1] I have conducted participant observation and interviews with stock brokers and fund managers in Paris and New York, between 2002 and 2004, and as finance teacher in business schools, in Paris and Shanghai, between 2008 and 2014. The fieldwork presented in this paper is composed of around 50 formal and informal interviews with financial professionals working in cross-border investment in Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong, between 2011 and the present, and part-time participant observation, for ten months in 2015 and 2016, in Merge Consulting, a team working in the intermediation and consultancy of business and mergers and acquisitions in Western Europe and in China. As agreed with the people I observed, all names have been changed.

(1979). Keith Hart has shown that the hierarchies in the distribution of money that are effected by monetary policy are central in the meaning of citizenship, both within state borders (1986) and on a global scale (Hart & Ortiz 2014, Hart 2015). The anthropology of finance has extended these findings, showing that financial methods of investment and valuation are part of theological traditions concerning the notion of infinity in probabilities (Maurer 2002), of philosophical traditions concerning the ontology of presence (Riles 2011), and carry positivist assumptions about the representative character of mathematical formulae mixed with liberal presuppositions about the importance of markets for social justice (De Goede 2005, MacKenzie 2006, Preda 2009, Muniesa 2007, 2014, Ortiz 2013, 2014a, 2014b). Ellen Hertz has shown that some of these imaginaries are crucial in the constitution of class and political identities for the legitimacy of stock markets (1998). These descriptions show that far from responding to a single logic, for instance that of "commodification" as a hallmark of "capitalism" and "financialization" (Van der Zwan 2014), the uses of money in the financial industry, and thereby the financial relations that constitute the global space of the relation of forces around the access to monetary resources, are multiple, sometimes fragmented, contradictory and labile. I will use this approach to explore three different but interrelated repertoires mobilized by financial professionals in the everyday practices of cross-border monetary transactions in Shanghai.

On the one hand, these practices are explicitly posited as crossing a border that is defined in multiple ways. A main component of the frontier that is avowedly trespassed is determined by regulations that are backed, enforced and plausibly legitimized by state entities (REF). The two sides of that which is crossed are thus made sense of both in their separation and their juncture (REF). Contrary to analyses that tend to view global finance and states as equally homogenous entities that either undermine or collaborate with each other[2], the study of the multiple meanings of financial transactions shows that borders are both transformed and produced by the way in which they are presupposed, claimed, and defined in everyday practices. Jane Guyer has shown that the juncture of different monetary institutions allows for creation through conflict and exclusion (2004). This is all the more so since the "state" referred to in these practices is itself multiple, compounding under one word, often loosely, regulations, companies, places, events and discourses (Abélès 2005 (1990)). Ellen Hertz has shown how the meaning of the Chinese state was transformed for people who bought and sold stocks in the Shanghai stock exchange in the early 1990s (1998). The analysis of cross-border transactions will thus first be attentive to the way in which these practices appropriate and transform the "states" whose borders they cross.

A second element that composes these practices, from an analytic point of view, is the fact that they are carried out as professional activities. The common educational background is central in these activities, and plays out in the way in which these people project themselves in professional careers (Godechot 2007, Ho 2009, Ortiz 2014a), within companies whose activities are explicitly standardized by state and professional regulations and codes of conduct. The shared understandings around particular procedures are carried out through relations of cooperation, competition and hierarchy (Abolafia 1996, Godechot 2007, Ortiz 2014a), which are often organized through oppositions between methodologies of valuation and investment and the orientation of the business of the company (Godechot 2001, 2016, Zaloom 2006, Ho 2009, Ouroussof 2010, Lépinay 2011, Ortiz 2014a, 2014b, 2015). This implies specific power relations between employees and companies, that are articulated and legitimized by professional and technical narratives, which often appeal to the moral and political repertoires of the intellectual history of the techniques themselves (De Goede 2005,

[2] A similar pattern can be found in analyses that study the encounter of a money considered as "Western" and thereby homogeneous and its "others", monies defined as multiple and resisting. Cf. for instance (Bloch & Parry 1989, Akin & Robbins 1999)

Preda 2009, Ortiz 2011, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). In the case of cross-border transactions, these power relations are also established by mobilizing the multiple repertoires of "states" and "borders" mentioned above.

Finally, professional practices make sense for financial professionals in relation to their non-professional life. Just like Viviana Zelizer showed that monetary practices are the occasions of the elaboration of moral and emotional boundaries and connections between different social interactions (2005), many authors have shown the complex relations between the professional and non-professional, often termed "personal" lives in finance (Zaloom 2006, Ho 2009, Ortiz 2014a), in particular as certain social identities play a strong role in both domains, notably age (Ortiz 2014a), social class (Godechot 2001), race (Ho 2009) and gender (Roth 2006, Ho 2009, Fisher 2012). In the context of cross-border investment, employees add to these identities ones relating to "cultures" and "nationality", developed in relation to the borders they are supposed to cross, with the money of their clients, but also with their own bodies and emotions (Ong 1999). The distribution of resources by M&A activities at Merge Consulting made sense, for its employees, also by elaborating a labile and often tense meaning about their own trajectory in a space the "global" character of which needed to be problematized.

The paper will follow these three analytically distinct repertoires with which employees made sense of their practices, showing their multiple connections and disconnections in everyday practice.

M&A through states

An important part of the activity of Merge Consulting was articulated around different forms of the "state", conceived as a site of regulations, business connections and macroeconomic policy. Like any other "state" the Chinese state is composed of multiple institutions, regulations, and imaginaries about sovereignty that cannot be bundled into a single analytic entity. In order to understand the meaning that employees like those of Merger Consulting gave to their practices of channeling money across state borders, here I will only present some of the main elements that they mobilized explicitly. The main presence of something like a "state" was elaborated when understanding the place of cross-border investment in the macroeconomic policy and planning supposedly orchestrated by a central government. According to the general narrative, proposed, among others, both by the People's Bank of China and by some of its critics (REF), foreign investment occupies a small portion of overall funding inside Mainland China's borders, where most bank loans are given by state-owned banks to state-owned companies, and smaller companies obtain credit through a myriad of credit relations, among which loans given by municipalities through special purpose vehicles, peer-to-peer electronic platforms and family loans, a multiplicity that is often obscured under the general term "shadow banking" (REF). In that sense, foreign investment is sometimes understood by those who carry it out as an "opportunity" for cash-deprived non-state-owned small and medium enterprises. This is all the more so that foreign investment in bonds and listed stocks is almost barred by regulation in the Mainland, besides some programs that determine the relatively small amounts invested, and the allowed origins and objects of investment.

After the subprime crisis in the US and Europe, three changes in China were considered central for Merge Consulting's members. One was the massive bank loan expansion in China, officially directed by the central government in order to prevent a decrease in GDP growth due to lower foreign trade; another was the official claim that the economy needed to change from being oriented to industrial exports to being based on internal consumption; and the third one was the policy pushing Chinese companies to invest abroad (REF). Licenses for "outbound" investment were made more accessible, and funds were increasingly channeled to sectors like education, health and tourism (REF). The members of Merge Consulting followed the kind of narrative found in global financial media, according to which these changes contributed to the growing consumption trend of an aging middle class, something often read as part of a political agreement whereby the Communist Party remains in power thanks to a middle class that is content with higher standards of living (REF). Finally, these policies combined the previous narratives of nation building, socialism and economic development, with the narrative of environmental protection, for which increasing funds are also being channeled[3].

For the employees and partners of Merge Consulting, these elements were combined in the development of the company's activities with narratives about the European environment in which the company first developed, in the late 2000s. The two main partners, in their mid-forties, had both trained in business and finance in Europe and the US, before starting a career in major European banks. After working in asset management and M&A in these institutions, they established Merge Consulting as an independent company. According to John, one of the founding partners, the majority of their clients were referred to them by their contacts in the banks where they had worked before. These clients were mainly small and medium enterprises that were "too small" for the banks, where M&A departments were oriented towards bigger operations. These small and medium enterprises were usually looking for a bigger company to purchase them, or to bring funding through a joint venture. Merge Consulting had first grown by intermediating between these SMEs and bigger companies in Western Europe.

The partners explained that, since the subprime crisis, their strategy had to take into account that in Western Europe, GDP growth had been almost nil since the subprime crisis and the tensions around the payment of sovereign Greek debt. Population ageing and demographic stagnation also meant that the prospects for companies to grow in Western Europe were mainly based on increased competition and cutting costs. On the contrary, China's "economic growth" and the orientation towards services and environmental protection, meant that European companies could provide technology to big Chinese companies, not in order to benefit from low production costs oriented towards global exports, but in order to benefit from growing consumption within the Mainland Chinese territory. This happened at a moment where the official crackdown on corruption launched by central government meant that this consumption did not benefit, as it had done in the past, the luxury sector (REF).

In 2012, John and Jack brought Peter into the company as a partner. Two years earlier, in his late thirties, Peter had moved to Shanghai, after a international career in media, in order to "change" his "life" and "explore the business world". He was meant to look for Chinese companies that could potentially buy or invest in the European SMEs that Merge Consulting worked with and help with Merge Consulting's development in China in general. By the time I did my observations, three years later, Merge Consulting was intermediating several M&A projects at different levels of completion, where Chinese companies were potentially going to purchase or invest in European SMEs. As the partners explained, these investment projects fitted exactly in the macroeconomic and political orientation of the Chinese central government. They were projects where major Chinese companies, some state-owned or with state-backed investment, were purchasing small producers of high technology in the sectors of health and environmental protection. The three partners of Merge Consulting felt they were thus positioned in the right place to follow and profit from this political

[3] See for instance the resolution after the third Plenum of the CCP, where all these narratives are combined in contradictory ways.

orientation of investment, something that the growth of the consultancy firm seemed to confirm. In Europe, Merge Consulting attracted a fourth partner to the company in 2014, and hired new financial analysts, as the company grew from five to ten members. In Shanghai, Peter hired an assistant. Asking to be called by her "English name" of "Vicky", she was thirty years old, and did not have any formal training in finance.

This was not the sole engagement with "state" power in the channeling of money between China and Europe. The partners of Merge Consulting had close connections with the municipality of Villagiund, the mid-size city where the company was based. These connections were developed to turn the firm into the official representative of the city in China. This was supposed to be strategic for the economy of Villagiund, and hence for the political career of the party in power, as China was seen both as a potentially major site of expansion for companies established in Villagiund, especially those in the sector of high technologies, and as a potential source of investment in the region of which Villagiund was the administrative center. Since 2012, one of Peter's activities had been to contact municipalities in China that had developed industrial parks that could be interested in creating common agreements with the municipality of Villagiund. This had led to the signature of an agreement during the time of my observations, where the mayor of the mid-size Chinese city of Zhongzhen had travelled to Villagiund, and held a day-long series of ceremonies at the city hall, with the presence of the Chinese ambassador, followed by signatures of several agreements between companies based in the two countries. Two of these agreements concerned companies that were Merge Consulting's clients, and implied the prospect that they would be purchased by companies based in the industrial park present in the jurisdiction of the Zhongzhen municipality.

Merge Consulting's partners in Europe, as well as Peter and Vicky, were all unanimous in highlighting that the comparatively small size of Villagiund, less than 500,000 inhabitants, but its high GDP, meant that they could target cities that did not belong to the "first and second tiers", but only to smaller ones, which had nevertheless sometimes several million inhabitants, or which were districts within bigger cities. This hierarchy of population volumes, GDP and administrative levels was understood as the limited space of opportunities for the consultancy firm. These Chinese municipalities, according to all Merge Consulting employees, had very little or no experience in cross-border investment. They needed to be "educated", but were also eager to participate in the "outbound" orientation indicated by the central government. The signature of agreements like those between Zhongzhen and Villagiund would foster the career of the Chinese mayor and the bureaucrats in charge of the project, who could show it as the proof of their capacity to implement central government policy in terms of internationalization, environmental protection and GDP growth.

John, one of two founding partners of Merge Consulting, combined European nationalism with and admiration for Chinese governmental policies. In our first meeting, he expanded on how much Europe was suffering from the influx of immigrants. Conveying an avowedly conservative political view, he considered that the continent needed to start closing its borders in order to retain its social stability. He remarked that terrorist attacks were due to this European "openness", and that China could provide an alternative perspective, in particular with the way in which it dealt with what John considered the Islamic terrorists there, echoing the official discourse of the Chinese central government about the bloody attacks attributed to Uighur separatism. Considering that China needed European technology, he said that Europe could learn from China. In his visit to Shanghai, remarking that all bags were screened in the access to subways, he said "maybe Europe could learn from China, after the terrorist attacks, and stop refraining from taking some measures in the name of the respect of individual liberties".

The partners and employees of Merge Consulting were thus explicitly positioned within the multiple narratives of state power between China and Europe. They attempted to intermediate between different discourses about economic expansion linked to technology, national growth and environmental protection, by attending to the multiple rationales of the political careers of the people in charge of the jurisdictions where the company operated. Thereby, Merge Consulting actively contributed to the production and transformation of these processes. Merge Consulting's activities, among those of other such companies, were a site of encounter between the careers of mayors and municipal teams elected in multiple-party elections in Villagiund and advancing through the multiple criteria of achievement, discipline and proactive creativity within the CCP in Zhongzhen. The company also contributed to bringing together, in fragmentary and often slightly veiled contradictory ways, the discourses of national expansion in Europe and China, as well as the search for common grounds in the name of economic development, environmental protection and the fight against corruption. Yet, the employees and partners of Merge Consulting produced and mediated these practices of state power in relation to the concrete deals, and profits, that could be made through them.

Business, profits and deals across the border

The activities of Merge Consulting's partners and employees were oriented at multiple forms of creating profit for the company, with different forms of remuneration, in particular dividends, salaries and bonuses, within the prospect of a career. The companies that met through Merge Consulting had officially different aims, which gave different meanings to the operations, albeit articulated around the official common aim of reaching an agreement that was supposed to be justified in terms of the profits the deal would bring for all the participants. These multiple meanings were organized through relations of cooperation, competition and hierarchy between employees in Merge Consulting and between the companies that were coming together, all these participants vying for profits that would be shared differently according to shifting relations of power. The cross-border character of the transaction was a crucial component of these meanings, which were mobilized to justify the specific channeling of money that each deal led to.

Merge Consulting developed several activities. M&A were the main activity in terms of strategy and revenues. This implied working for a client who wanted either to buy another company, to be bought by one or to find a partner, for instance, in order to establish a joint venture. But the consultants also carried out other activities. In China, in particular, they provided the service of "business development" consultancy, oriented at contributing to the development of a European company's activities in China, for instance by finding clients or distributors for its products, by advising on where to establish a local branch, or how to devise a strategy of business expansion. Finally, as we saw with the case of the municipalities of Villagiund and Zhongzhen, the company also operated as representative of institutions for their international dealings. This was not restricted to municipalities, since, at the time of my observations, Merge Consulting was also exploring brokering agreements between engineering schools close to Villagiund and in China.

These activities were remunerated in different forms. Representation of institutions was usually paid with a fixed annual fee, under a contract that established general aims, such as organizing events or finding a certain number of partners. Business development activities could be paid in multiple manners. They could be composed of a fixed fee for a single consultancy leading to a particular aim, for instance establishing a representative office of the client in China. Or they could be paid as a percentage of the sales generated by the business that was developed, for instance if a distributor in China was found for a European client, leading to a payment that was variable over several years, and needed a particular form of monitoring. M&A transactions, like in most of the financial industry, were paid as a mixed set of fees, with fixed installments paid at the beginning of the operation, and after reaching a series of standardized steps, marked each by the signature of an intermediate contract between the client company and the potential purchaser or target. Each of these steps could be of several tens of thousands of dollars, depending on the overall theoretical price of the company bought. Finally, in case the deal was "closed", a bigger "success fee" was paid, usually calculated as between 3% and 5% of the total price of transaction. For a small company, valued at 10 million USD, this would mean a fee of between 300,000 and 500,000 USD. These multiple fees composed the total sales of the company, that were between 1 and 2 million USD at the time of my observations, most of which came from the deals carried in Europe between European companies.

The relation between Merge Consulting and its clients could become tense, in particular when the latter would start considering that the consultants were charging fees for intermediate contracts that did not lead to a final sale. At the same time, some of the deals were concluded several months after the clients had paid the final installment of operating fees. This meant that Merge Consulting would not be receiving any fees for the hours of work provided to complete the transaction, except if the deal was indeed closed. In this case, the consultants could start to put pressure on their clients for them to accept conditions set by the counterpart, in order to secure a payment of success fees. These tensions were sometimes open, sometimes implied, but potentially always present.

The returns obtained by Merge Consulting were distributed in multiple ways among partners and employees. Partners and employees all had fixed salaries, which were around 100,000 USD for the partners, and around 40,000 to 60,000 USD for the analysts in Europe and for Vicky. These salaries were complemented by varying dividends for the partners, and by bonuses that were distributed among partners and employees depending in particular on the success fees linked to M&A activities. The official justification for this distribution of money in the company was that partners were the primary source of business, since they found the clients. The office in Shanghai was thus pushed to find potential clients for the company, i.e. companies willing to pay fees for Merge Consulting to find either a target company to purchase or a company willing to buy the China-based client. According to Peter and Vicky, as well as all the other professionals interviewed during fieldwork, this was an almost impossible target, since the working norm in the Mainland was that the client would not sign a contract and would not pay any fees before the transaction was itself concluded. This meant that the office in Shanghai could not find clients, because the organization of the company was such that it paid its salaries partly based on the intermediate fees that it received. The partners in Europe refused to look for target European companies unless the Chinese client was already paying operating fees. This clearly reduced the potential for Peter, the partner based in Shanghai, to have higher bonuses and dividend distribution, creating a constant tension with the partners based in Europe, who brought all the clients, composed of European companies that accepted to pay operating fees.

These tensions were exacerbated by the fact that all partners knew that anyone could leave the company at any moment, potentially taking his or her contacts away, and reducing the business of the company. This happened during my observations, when Peter left the company to work for a Chinese conglomerate, as an external consultant based in Europe. According to him, this allowed him to "go back" to Europe, where he wanted to live, and to exploit his experience with Chinese companies in order to contribute to their expansion in Europe through acquisitions and business development. His departure erased some of the connections established by Merge Consulting, for instance with managers who could give advise on the viability of a project in their sector of activity. When he left, Vicky took charge of the office in Shanghai, with 50% increase in salary, but without the status of partner. Having worked as an assistant for three years, she was considered by the partners based in Europe as fully capable of dealing with the office, but not trustworthy enough to bring new clients. My role was to work as an external consultant who would be available for situations when Vicky would not have enough knowledge in finance or in dealing with European clients for the operations based in China. She explained to me that she could get a much higher salary in a Chinese company, given her experience with European companies, but that she preferred staying at Merge Consulting, because the small size of the company meant she had more freedom to act and better perspectives of increasing her income and responsibilities, if the business grew. At the same time, she explained, working for Merge Consulting helped her expand her network of contacts among Chinese companies interested in investing in Europe, i.e. companies that could potentially become her next employer.

M&A were thus the most profitable activity for Merge Consulting, and its members explained unanimously that the other activities were carried out "opportunistically", to generate additional sources of revenue, and to expand the network of contacts that would allow to find new clients and to understand better the environment in which M&A operations would be carried out. In a description that was almost identical to the one that other interviewees gave me, Merge Consulting members remarked that for each deal that came to conclusion, several tens of deals were explored, and around ten projects could be officially started without reaching completion. An M&A deal followed a series of standardized steps. In the case of a European SME looking for a buyer in China, the first step consisted in a free assessment by Merge Consulting on the plausibility of the deal. Vicky would look for at least three companies that could be potential buyers, to show the seller that it was worth entering a contract with Merge Consulting. While companies in the health and environmental technologies would often move on to the next step, this was not always the case. For instance, during my observations, Merge Consulting refused providing a service to a financial company that was looking to set foot in the mutual fund industry in China through a joint venture. The potential client was too small a company and those deals were only possible between big banks and investment funds, that would not work through small consultancies such as Merge Consulting. Other projects, for instance in the luxury sector, were also sometimes be refused. In this case, the reason given by Vicky's contacts in China, was the decline of the sector after the official campaign against corruption among state officials.

Once the initial viability of the project was assessed positively, the client would sign an exclusive contract with Merge Consulting, whereby the consultancy committed to find a purchaser and work with the client until the completion of the purchase. Merge Consulting analysts in Europe would then write a "teaser", consisting of a one page presentation of the main activities of the company and its growth potential. This document would not mention the name of the company, and was circulated freely among Merge Consulting contacts. Vicky and Peter would use the network they had already established, but also look online for information in the sector of activity of the client, and contact as many companies as they thought could be interested in the deal. The second step of the operation, occurred when Vicky and Peter would find a Chinese company officially interested in knowing more about the client. This led to the signature of a "Non Disclosure Agreement" ("NDA"), whereby the potential buyer had access to more information, that was supposed to remain confidential and not be shown to third parties. This information included the name of the seller, and a few pages of financial and operational information: what kinds of products or services it produced, the annual sales and profit, particular information about its shareholder structure, for instance whether the company was a subsidiary of a bigger company, or an independent company owned by one person or several people, for instance a family.

These first steps could take between a few weeks and several months. If the potential purchaser was still interested after accessing the initial information, a third step would consist in the signature of a "Memorandum of Understanding" ("MOU"), where the seller and the buyer would agree to share all necessary information to explore whether the deal was doable. This document could already include a tentative price for the operation, and it often opened the way for some employees of the purchasing company to go to Europe to see the facilities of the seller and meet with its top management. If these exchanges were considered positive by both sides, the following step would consist in the signature of a "Letter of Intent" ("LOI"). This contract establishes a price and important rights and duties for each side for the transaction, which are all dependent on the completion of "due diligence" procedures. These involve officially a full disclosure of all available information of each of the companies. The purchaser company would hire consultants that would go through the documents presented in a "data room", accessible for a few days. If all the documents corresponded to what the seller had disclosed, and there were no hidden liabilities, technical problems in the facilities, or any other issue that could be a deal breaker according to the LOI, the two parties should reach the final step, i.e. the signature of a contract of purchase at the agreed price. This could be a total or a partial purchase, sometimes including the establishment of a new company, or of a series of companies in different jurisdictions, notably in Mainland China, the European country where the seller was based, and Hong Kong.

The signature of the contracts at each step, NDA, MOU and LOI, implied a payment by the client to Merge Consulting, of a fixed fee established in the initial contract with the consultancy. Merge Consulting members were thus supposed to have their interests "aligned" with those of their client. Yet, there was also a constant suspicion from the clients that the consultants may find partners that were willing to sign the intermediate steps without ever really wanting to reach a final agreement. This was particularly so in the first step of the NDA. For these reason, the fees paid by clients increased with each step. The temporality of these payments was extremely variable. Although the contracts signed in each of the intermediate steps usually included a deadline for the signature of the next step, in practice these deadlines were often renegotiated, and each step may be the last one, without ever reaching the sale. The intermediate contracts did not bind the parties to reach the final agreement. At the LOI level, penalties could be established if one of the parties broke the process for reasons not contemplated in the contract, but it may be hard to impose their payment, in particular due to the fact that, before the signature of the deal, it was likely that neither of the companies had any legal presence in the jurisdiction where the other one was based.

During the ten months of participation observation I did, two operations reached completion. They were the first ones to reach that level in the more than three years that Merge Consulting had been operating in China. When I arrived to the company, in the spring of 2015, they were both at the level of the MOU, which it had taken more than a year to reach, and it was almost another year before the deal was "closed". In the meantime, around five potential clients had to be dismissed due to the unviability of the projects, and only one NDA was signed.

In order to understand how these meanings are mobilized in the distribution of money in everyday practice, I will present one of the deals that reached completion during my observation, the purchase of Bolbus, a company producing medical devices, by Alpha, a big chemical company listed in a Chinese stock exchange, and whose major shareholder was an Asian investment fund. Bolbus was a subsidiary of a mid-size European company, Calcus. M&A transactions conducted through the activities of Merge Consulting's members implied a particular distribution of monetary resources. In the case of Bolbus, about 15 million USD were transferred from Alpha to Calcus. Merge Consulting obtained several hundred thousands

USD in fees, that were distributed among its partners and employees, according to the specific rules determining salaries, bonuses and dividend. The meanings of this distribution of monetary resources were multiple, but within a limited repertoire combining industrial and chemical concerns, managerial horizons, a fight around prices, and state politics.

Calcus had belonged for many decades to the same family, and was not listed in any exchange. Bolbus was directed by Mr. Hecks, who had worked in China for several decades. He also owned Zador, a small company based in China, which produced part of the components that Bolbus purchased to carry out its operations. Mr. Hecks had a long relation with the owners of Calcus, and according to the management of the latter, there was a common agreement that Bolbus needed to be sold because it did not belong to the main orientation of its mother company. Mr. Hecks, carried out the deal as director of Bolbus, and proposed to stay in that position after the sale, and eventually also sell to the new purchaser Zador, his own company, which provided Bolbus. In his late fifties, he was interested in remaining in activity for a few years, before retiring after the sale of his small company, for a few million USD. The purchasing company, Alpha, produced chemicals similar to those produced by Bolbus, but, according to their presentation, of a lesser quality, which meant that the purchase of Bolbus allowed them to widen the spectrum of their product offer. As a listed company, they also aimed at showing the purchase of European technology as part of the strategy of expansion, hopefully to boost the price of its stocks, in line with the reporting needs of the investment fund that was its biggest shareholder. The last phases of the deal were being negotiated during the collapse of prices in Chinese stock exchanges, in the summer of 2015. Alpha, like many listed companies, was part of the targets of a purchase of stocks by state-owned companies, oriented at reducing the price falls. These companies, dubbed the "national team", ended owning 6% of the Shanghai Stock exchange at the end of this operation. This cash did not benefit Alpha directly, since it concerned stock owned by other investing companies, but it did help its main shareholder to show lower losses at the end of the year.

During the ten months of negotiation that I could observe, the meanings and terms of the transaction changed several times for each of the parties. Part of the deal was framed by the participants as an industrial match. The owners of Calcus insisted that Bolbus was a very good company, with very high technological qualities, but that they were disposing of it because the mother company was not oriented to developing its activities, and because the expansion within Chinese territory needed the distribution capabilities of a local actor. Merge Consulting members accompanied Mr Hecks to visit the facilities of Alpha, in order to exchange with its engineers and discuss their own technical capabilities. In subsequent visits, according to Mr Hecks, he discovered that Alpha's technology was much lower than that of Bolbus, i.e. that the purchaser was more in need of the target company than it initially claimed.

These debates, which involved the treatment of molecules and production machinery, within the horizon of their commercialization in China, were mixed with narratives about company leadership and career prospects. Mr Hecks explained that he still wanted to develop his own company, Zador, in order to sell it a higher price in the future. In "return" for this, he was willing to work for Alpha, the purchaser, as general manager of Bolbus after the sale. This implied that Mr Hecks would manage to retain his current power in both companies and capitalize on the money brought by Alpha, but that he was expected to follow the orders of the new mother company. In a meeting with Mr Hecks, the members of Merge Consulting, the management of Alpha and representatives of the investment fund that was the latter's main shareholder, the representatives of the owners of Calcus explained at length that theirs was a family-owned company, and that they were extremely concerned about the continuity of the company's operations in Europe, which would secure the jobs of the engineers that they had hired long ago, and who had helped the company to grow.

The narratives about management and molecules, in turn, were also combined with discussions about price. The insistence of Mr Hecks on the low technical capabilities of Alpha had several aims. He claimed that the representatives of the investment fund, who did not have a technical expertise in the chemicals produced by Alpha, were conned by the latter's management into believing that it had higher capabilities than it really did. This was supposed to increase the "added value" of the purchase of Bolbus, and strengthen Calcus' negotiating power. Calcus' management insistence on the fact that the sale was due to pure industrial reasons, i.e., a mismatch between Bolbus and the mother company's commercial orientation, worked in the same direction, i.e. reaffirming the technological quality of the company. This was double edged for the purchasers, represented by the investment fund. They explicitly needed a boost in the share price of the company, at a moment when there was a dramatic collapse in share prices in the stock exchange. The discourse of Bolbus high technological quality played into the use of information to increase share price. But the purchaser was also interested in paying the lowest price possible in the transaction.

The valuation of Bolbus was made according to the multiple standardized methods of valuation used in the profession. As many other interviewees had explained to me, in Europe the method that carries most legitimacy in the valuation of these small companies is based on the calculation of future returns, discounted at a discount rate that is supposed to reflect funding costs and "risk". This method is used as a common frame of negotiation, where the purchaser and the seller discuss about future returns and the translation of their unfathomable character into a numerical expression, as a discount rate that would reflect "risk". Yet, in China, Merge Consulting partners and other interviewees explained, this method was usually rejected as a basis of negotiation by Chinese professionals, who preferred instead to use "comparable" ratios, i.e. ratios that compare the purchased company to similar listed companies, relating the price of the company to its sales, earnings and other such accounting data supposed to reflect the company's capacity to generate profit for the owners. The collapse of share prices in the stock exchange meant that the price of comparable companies was increasingly lower. Merge Consulting were happy to remark that they had negotiated the price of the transaction before the summer of 2015, i.e. when stock prices were much higher. The collapse in share prices put pressure on Alpha's shareholder, to conclude the transaction before prices would be much lower, and the comparable price would be considered too high by higher levels of management in the investment fund and by financial analysts reporting on the transaction. The operation was concluded, at the initial price, but at the end of the year, once the "national team" had purchased 200 billion USD of stocks listed in the markets for tens of companies, among which Alpha's. The stabilization of prices meant that, from the point of view of a relative valuation, the deal could be publicized as a fairly valued acquisition of top level European technology, something Alpha's financial department readily did, sending standardized information to numerous financial journals and brokers.

Finally, these narratives made sense also in relation to the different forms in which stately institutions were present in the transaction. Mr Hecks told the members of Merge Consulting that he was happy that the investment fund acting as main shareholder for Alpha was not owned by the Chinese state. He said that if it was a Chinese state-owned fund, and it was really interested in the technology of Zador, they would send engineers to look into the factory, which was based in China, eventually offer a better salary to the engineers there, and thereby copy the company without having to pay for it. According to him, even if work contracts with these employees would have clear clauses stating that they were not allowed to work for a competitor immediately after leaving the company, the fact that their new employer would be state-owned meant that Mr Hecks would have no possibility to make the contract enforceable in front of a judge. It was for that reason, he explained to us, that in the negotiations, he disclosed the fact that part of Bolbus technology came from his own company, based in China, only after a few hours into the conversation, once he felt there was no "danger" of losing it all by clarifying the situation.

The Chinese central government's purchase of listed stocks was perceived, in the international financial press, as an intervention that countered basic principles of "free markets" economics, and thus contrary to the "reforms needed" by the Chinese economy in its path towards growth (REF). While the partners of Merge Consulting expressed politically conservative views about Europe, in particular in relation to the Greek sovereign debt crisis, the actions to stem stock prices fall were clearly, for the reasons exposed above, good news for them. This action helped completing the sale of Bolbus at a price that had been negotiated previously. The partners talked about this support as a positive thing, all the while expressing serious concern about the legal system in China, in particular when it came to framing the contract for the purchase of Bolbus. This led to a lengthy negotiation about the jurisdictions involved.

The management of Alpha, Bolbus, Calcus and Merge Consulting, all agreed from the start that all the parties would be better protected if the contract recognized as primary law that of the European country where Bolbus was based. Yet, a conflict took shape when it came to determining how the deal would be paid. The pledge to pay, inscribed in the contract, would need to be honored through bank guarantees certifying that the money was indeed available. Alpha's management initially claimed that they could only get a bank guarantee from a bank based within Mainland Chinese jurisdiction. This meant that if the payment was not made, Calcus could only attack them within the frame of Chinese law, something its management refused to accept. This was all the more so than, according to Merge Consulting partners advising Calcus, now that the Chinese state was a shareholder of Calcus, through the investments of the "national team", a small foreign company did not stand a chance to win a litigation against them in front of a Chinese judge. An intermediate position was found by placing the money in Hong Kong, in a bank legally established in Europe. Hong Kong, as part of Chinese territory, but with a legal system avowedly trusted by most foreign companies operating in China, provided the site for an agreement.

This conflict was followed by another one, due to the fact that, in order to transfer the money, Alpha needed an explicit permit issued by the Ministry of Commerce. This took several weeks, during which Merge Consulting regularly contacted Alpha's management, and the investment fund that was its main shareholder, to put pressure to hasten the process. The purchasing parties replied systematically that it was not in their hands to do so, and that all everyone could do was wait and hope that there would be no adverse decision by the ministry. During a conference call with the Shanghai team of the consultancy Jack, one of Merge Consulting's partners, commented that he did not believe it, since now that they were "state-owned", "they belong(ed) to the system" and should therefore be able to use their "connections". Vicky replied that the state's investment in Alpha was indirect and recent, and that this was Alpha's first deal outside of the country, so that they did not know anyone in the ministry. She told me, after the call, how much this comment was an evidence of the fact that Merge Consulting's European members did not "understand China".

The transaction had multiple meanings about how to calculate a price, what were the industrial and management concerns, and how the state played into the possibility for each of the participants to increase and secure an income. The different companies could be in conflict, as could the employees within and between the companies. The industrial, financial and legal aspects of the purchase were fluidly combined not only to make sense of the different elements composing the industrial integration of one company's activities with another, but also in order to negotiate the price, speed up the conclusion and payment of the deal, or attempt at minimizing future conflicts and liabilities with people, organizations and legal systems that were, for one party or the other, little known, and marked by different forms of suspicion. Like for Merge Consulting's overall strategy, the different narratives about state power combined in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways. As we will see in the next section, this multiple but limited meanings of the everyday practice of M&A were in turn made sense of within the personal trajectories of the employees, who included them in discourses about cultural and national identity, about the global character of financial transactions, and about financial and legal technical elements that were also emotional, moral and political.

The cultures of M&A

Many of the tensions around prices, jurisdictions and the roles of states in the transaction were made sense of by the people conducting the transactions in terms of a difference between "China" and "Europe". These entities were understood as part of a broader global space where financial flows and professional standards were supposed to circulate. Thereby, the everyday financial practices acquired meanings relating to the emotional, moral and political narratives of "culture", "nation", and the "global", while these entities in turn came to be defined partly in financial terms. The M&A activities of people like the members of Merge Consulting can thus be understood as sites where national and cultural borders, partly defined by the rhetoric of nation states, were appropriated, reproduced and transformed, providing for specific ways to legitimize the particular distribution of money that was the result of these activities.

The distribution of tasks and professional identities within Merge Consulting were explicitly defined in terms of a distinction between Europe and China. Not only did the company have two offices, one on each side of the border, but the employees themselves were categorized in those terms. Thus, Vicky, was "Chinese", which meant not only that Chinese was her mother tongue, and that she could exchange with Chinese counterparties who often did not speak English, but she also understood the "culture", the "mentality" and the "way to do things" in China. These vague designations became specified in particular moments of the conversations and the transactions, often in labile and shifting ways. My participation in Merge Consulting was itself partly narrated in these culturalist terms.

Peter arrived to China in his late thirties and spent most of the first year in Shanghai studying Chinese Mandarin. He was hired by Merge Consulting as someone who had good "personal relations" capabilities, due to his previous work in media, and who could communicate with Chinese company managers in Chinese. He hired Vicky remarking that she was much better than him to establish contacts with these managers, due to the language and the "common culture" they shared. Yet, he remarked, since she was a young woman, there were moments where she would be bullied by these often male managers who were older than her. He participated in many meetings in order to create a stronger presence for Merge Consulting, due to his slightly older age, his gender, and because "they want to see a Westener" to feel that indeed they are dealing with a company that will open business in Europe for them. His relation with Vicky was often tense, as I could observe it in many meetings, with recurrent misunderstandings where she would claim not to understand an order he gave her. After these tense moments, he would often talk to me about the misunderstanding as a difference between "us" and "them": "Sometimes it is really surprising that they really don't understand the most simple things. Vicky is very smart, but sometimes she just does not get it. I hade many times the same problems with counterparts here. You send them the draft of the contract, it is crystal clear, and yet the ask you the most stupidest question about how to interpret it". He would then give examples of deadlines that would not be understood to be strict, or guarantee clauses that would be doubted and needed explanation or rewriting. After five years in China, Peter told me that he was tired of being an expatriate, that he could barely connect with "other expats", who were too focused on "business alone", and that he felt "totally shut off" from becoming friends with Chinese people, due to language barriers but, more importantly, to "cultural differences". His new job as a consultant for a big Chinese company, was part of a longer term project, in which he wanted to develop a consultancy about "inter-cultural relations in business", connecting Europe and China, based on the experience he would have accumulated, during the five years he lived in Shanghai and after that.

I was hired as an external consultant to assist Vicky, who became head of the Shanghai office after Peter's departure. She initially claimed that she did not need my help, in what was more or less clearly an attempt to assert her expertise and deflect the threat that I, or someone else with better background in finance than her, would take a more senior position in the office. The fact that my presence was not aimed at displacing her was officially asserted in a conference call in the presence of both of us and the partners in Europe. After this, we collaborated fluidly, but not before she sent a long e-mail to all of us, where she explained that she was absolutely necessary for the office due to matters of "cultural communication", as she could translate for European clients things that "only a Chinese could understand", such as the political system, and that she could explain to Chinese partners the "way Europeans do business". In this understanding, she would personally be the connection between the parties coming together in a merger. This was further exemplified by the way in which she used her Chinese name with Chinese counterparts, and her English name with non-Chinese ones, following a practice that was widespread in the profession and elsewhere where Chinese nationals worked with foreign companies, and just like many of the employees of the Chinese companies that were potential partners.

For both Peter and Vicky, the production of "European" and "Chinese" identities worked to give meaning to particular tensions, misunderstandings or difficulties relating to everyday technical practices, such as establishing contacts with potential partners or negotiating contractual clauses. They both claimed that "cultural differences" were fundamental in the conduct of the operations, showing as a proof of their existence particular moments that were eventually solved. The "solving" of the issues was thus presented as a bridging of "cultural differences" that were nevertheless bound to show up again in the near future, and would need more bridging. Thereby, the employees both termed the "cultures" in financial and commercial terms, and reproduced them by asserting both their inevitable recurrence, while they presented themselves as the people who bridge them. This became part of their professional identity, but also of the way in which they made sense of their personal trajectory, as members of Merge Consulting and potentially as employees or independent consultants in other companies in the future. The transactions were thereby also given the meaning of the encounter between different cultures. Peter's project to work as inter-cultural relations consultant was oriented at framing the deals in cultural terms. So was Vicky's insistence that only through her personal cultural bridging were the deals possible.

These production of cultural differences, both as inevitable and constantly bridgeable, connected with the longer term horizon of the life trajectories of the employees, within a broader global space, where they situated the financial flows they were effecting. A common view held by Merge Consulting's partners in Europe, Peter and Vicky, was that the future of global finance was bound to find shared norms that resulted from a coming together between "China" and the "West". This narrative was presented as a justification for the existence of Merge Consulting's operations in China. Vicky remarked that, since she did not have formal training in finance, she wanted to learn more about it, in order to advance in her career. What she meant by “finance” were the methods of valuation and investment that were used by the financial analysts of Merge Consulting, which followed the standardized norms that I had to teach, for instance, when I was doing fieldwork as a finance lecturer in business schools. The adoption of these methods by Chinese companies in negotiation was, as I remarked above, conflictive, but according to Vicky, these companies would eventually integrate them in their operations, while they would retain many of the things that were made the “Chinese way”, and which justified her importance in the company. The idea that the future was composed of a coming together of two cultural units was also purported by Peter. After ranting against the misunderstandings of the day with counterparts and with Vicky, Peter would try to put this in a global historical perspective, by saying: “we are living a historical moment, China is just opening to the world, it will take a generation or even more for us to really understand each other”. His professional project was meant to contribute to the creation of this new global norm.

In interviews with professionals dealing with cross-border investment in Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong, the idea of a new “hybrid”, as one interviewee put it, was one among three main narratives that were recurrent, about a divide between “China” and its other, that was loosely defined as the “West”, “Europe and the US” or “the rest of the world”. One of these narratives, close to the kind of discourse that could be find in official documents produced by the institutions like the International Monetary Fund, claimed that “China” was on its way to adopting “global” financial standards, through a series of “necessary reforms” that would make it look closer to an idealized version of the US or Europe (REF). Thus, a top manager of one of the four global consultancy firms, of Chinese nationality and holding the US-based Chartered Financial Analyst certification, told me that although in China some people do things “the local way”, eventually they would change, just like it had already happened with companies that had become “internationalized”, stressing that the methods followed by her company were “universally applied”. This tension between a norm presumed to be universal, but which was nevertheless avowedly rejected by at least “some” actors in “China”, inscribed financial transactions in a teleology of global finance, of which the four major consultancies were supposed to be the spearhead.

This view found a certain opposite in the narrative that purported that it was “China” that was eventually going to be the global norm. Mr Martin, a former CFO of a the China-based subsidiary of a company based in Europe, had overseen the creation of a joint venture between his employer and a state-owned Chinese company. He was extremely negative about the experience, explaining that the valuation had been made according to standards that would not be acceptable in Europe, and that he had difficulties to translate them into a narrative that would be accepted by the financial analysts that would look into the deal, since his employing company was listed in a European stock exchange. Besides, he explained that the joint venture was mainly controlled by the Communist Party, whose members would hold separate meetings, without the European part of the management, where decisions would be taken that could not be negotiated. Expressing openly his political conservatism, he considered that “China” was not willing to negotiate terms with Europe, at a moment when the latter, with which he identified as “home”, was losing power around the world.

These last two positions did not correspond to the meaning that Merge Consulting’s members gave to the existence of their company and to their everyday operations. But the idea of a “hybrid” did not mean a radical transformation of the lives of all the members. Thus, while Peter had attempted to embody the bridge between the two entities that he understood to be separate “cultures”, by moving from Europe to China and attempting to learn the Chinese language, Vicky, Jack and John did not intend to leave the places where they lived. According to John, “if I were younger, I would probably come to Shanghai for a few years, but I have a family now, and Shanghai is not a place to bring up children”. He cited the "pollution" and the "quality of education" as main reasons. Vicky expressed her desire to go to Europe for holidays and her desire to purchase European and US luxury items. But she planned to stay in Shanghai, where she was hoping to start a family with her Chinese boyfriend. John and Jack expressed their admiration for the pace of "Chinese economic growth", of which they wanted to be part, and from which they expected to profit. They planned their activities in China to by multiplied by two in 2016, for which they wanted to hire a young analyst, who would be "Chinese" and would have studied a masters in finance in the US or Europe. But they did not plan to move from Europe either, where they had their families and where they had lived all their lives. The global norms to which all these professionals claimed to be contributing to where thus embodied in their everyday practices. They bridged and reproduced cultural and national borders, most of the time without moving physically. Within this global horizon of national and cultural borders, financial methodologies and the participation in "Chinese economic growth" framed the meaning of the personal engagement with the transactions for each of the participants, and thereby the emotional justification for desiring the specific monetary distribution resulting from deals that were concluded.

For employees and partners of Merge Consulting, like Peter and Vicky, conducting M&A transactions made partly sense as the separation and bridging of cultural entities, "China" and the "West". These practices had an emotional component, linking the everyday professional activity to family and friendship, but also to discourses about national and cultural identity. At the same time, these financial transactions became part of what defined these different "cultures", and their possible relations. That which was separated but which could be bridged was indeed, among other things, determined in terms of methods of financial valuation and investment. The conflicts, hybrids or assimilations between these entities themselves were partly understood, by the members of Merge Consulting as well as by other interviewees, as a matter of global rules for financial transactions. Thus, the production of "culture", as an entity that was supposed to give meaning to everyday practice, was partly determined by professional financial rules, and provided, in turn, some of the repertoires to make sense of conflicts and transformations concerning the latter.

Conclusion

For these employees, the meaning of the distribution of resources in the transaction, and the meaning of their remuneration as a small fraction of it, was composed of multiple and shifting repertoires. These comprised the personal trajectories in the professional world of M&A, the several meanings of business and profits of the client and the purchaser, the multiple discourses about national borders, rule of law and orientation of resources to activities such as health and environmental protection, and the meanings of bridging, separating, and thereby producing and transforming cultural borders within a global space in the making. Thus, the legitimizations of the particular hierarchy in the access to money effected in the transaction, which saw Calcus sellers of Bolbus benefiting from the support of the Chinese government and of the Asian investment fund for Alpha's expansion, had, for the members of Merge Consulting, technical, emotional, moral and political meanings, that reproduced and transformed the multiple but limited repertoires of cross-border M&A.

It is worth noting that these repertoires do not imply the demise or dissolution of nationalist and culturalist identifications, but, on the contrary, contribute to their reproduction and transformation. The horizon of nation states, and the official aim of profit making, as the main repertoires with which employees make sense of these financial transactions, are the locus of the limited transformations of power relations through cross-border financial transactions. Other imaginaries of monetary distribution are thus precluded.

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