

## TRAVELING, TRANSLATION, TRANSFORMATION

On Social Responsibility and the Nordic Model in China

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Is it possible to identify a Nordic or Norwegian model of organization, work, and management when globalized Norwegian companies establish and run businesses abroad? The existing literature on the so-called “export” of the Nordic model asserts that the Nordic model is left behind at home (e.g., Løken, Falkenberg, and Kvinge 2008; Børve and Kvande 2018; Knudsen et al. 2020). The studies argue empirically that, when Norwegian companies internationalize, the Nordic model is not brought along in their new countries of operation, and they run their businesses as any global company or TNC. This is probably a fair assessment as far as it goes. This chapter problematizes this common understanding of a lack of “export” of the Nordic model, based on an understanding that cultural models are not “exported” and transferred like commodities but rather travel, are translated, transformed, and co-constructed anew in entangled cultural encounters.

The argument is based on extensive multisited ethnographic (partly collaborative) work during an eight-year period (2001–9) with the globalized aluminum corporation, Norsk Hydro, forming the basis of an ethnographic extended case study using Hydro as the ethnographic point of departure for a cultural critique of globalized capitalism (Røyrvik 2013a). The chapter investigates how core ideas and practices that can be associated with the Nordic model play out in their foreign operations in the authoritarian state of China, focusing on issues related to workplace democratic ideals and socially

responsible operations. The chapter highlights the translations and hybridity in the adoption and transformation of (aspects of) the Nordic model in China and suggests that several key notions, values, and principles attributed to the Nordic model indeed were enrolled and mobilized in Hydro's international ventures in China and, furthermore, were culturally translated and reassembled together with other internationally traveling concepts and trends as well as with local practices and knowledge traditions. The new local co-construction and reassemblage of aspects of the Norwegian model were enacted and materialized through cultural encounters in hybrid forms, and the chapter shows in particular how Hydro translated its Nordic model tradition of implicit CSR.

The chapter thematizes the Hydro model of state-corporation interaction and governance characteristic of state ownership in the Norwegian (Nordic) model. Hydro has 31,000 employees in 40 countries; as of 2021, the Norwegian state owned 34.26 percent of Hydro shares. Yet the prevailing logic of (partial) state ownership by the Norwegian state, developed arguably first in its relationship with Hydro and thus labeled "the Hydro model" (see chapter 4), is to refrain from direct intervention and active management of its shareholder position in a corporation. The logic is that the state cannot act as private owner (shareholder) because it is *not* a private owner (Lie 2005: 201). A strong confirmation of the Hydro model was established in the late 1980s (Lie 2005: 201), and this policy is followed to ensure financial markets and other stakeholders in the globalized market society of corporate independence from the state. To partially remedy the problem this model creates related to democratic control over (partially) state-owned companies, the Norwegian state rather governs and influences large corporations' international operations through signals and expectations of socially responsible behavior, communicated both publicly through, for example, actively promoting international CSR initiatives and more directly in frequent dialogue with top management.

Building on and contributing to theories of CSR and the Nordic model, the chapter argues that the existing literature on the international "export" of the Nordic model fails to take into account the dynamic social practices of travels and translations documented in the case, partly because the Nordic model is to some extent treated as a rationalized myth, reified as a static object/model, thus to some extent removed from the organizational realities and fields of practice, and partly because of the theoretical shortcomings in conceptualizing cultural "export" of phenomena such as the Nordic/Norwegian

model. In the ethnographic case, however, we find that core ideas, values, and practices of the Norwegian model—in particular, the Nordic tradition of implicit CSR—function dynamically as a hybrid, living reality co-constructed in translocal cultural encounters. In this way, the chapter also contributes to long-standing yet somewhat disparate theoretical traditions focusing on cultural travel and translation, such as the anthropology of globalization, cultural encounters, and translation (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1997; Larsen 2009), the anthropology of “traveling models” (Reyna 2007; Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg 2014), and actor-network-theory (ANT) of translation (e.g., Latour 1984; Callon 1984).

First, the chapter describes the discussions and struggles over the definition and role of corporations in society particularly in terms of social responsibilities. What follows is a section detailing the ethnographic context of Norsk Hydro, its highly significant role as an industrial locomotive in the developing Norwegian industrial society and economy, and, in particular, its key role in developing and promoting the Nordic model of work life and organization, as well as the place of CSR in this picture. Third, the chapter details the case of Hydro’s arguable “export” and translation of the Nordic model and social responsibility to their new venture in Xi’an, China.

## The Struggle over the Corporation

While the larger surge in the specific focus on the concept of corporate social responsibility emerged during the 1990s, the history of the concept is much longer, as is the practice of “implicit CSR” (see below and chapter 3). Not incidentally, we can at least trace the scholarly discourse back to management guru Peter Drucker’s book, *The Concept of the Corporation* (1993 [1946]). With the creation of limited liability joint stock companies and the rise of big business bureaucracies, the large corporations realized early that they had inherent reputation and legitimacy challenges. During the crises and depression of the 1930s, the critique against big business became overwhelming and instigated both new laws, regulations, and institutions as well as business-branding campaigns to posit business firms as socially responsible (Bakan 2004). It was also Drucker who popularized the term “management by objectives” in his 1954 *The Practice of Management* and thus galvanized the now dominant notion that the institution of management is first and foremost management by objectives.

Both management by objectives and CSR can today be considered part of the dominant corporate governance package associated with neoliberalism, where variants of American management (by objectives), including new public management (NPM), are its concrete, technical materialization. Critics have labeled CSR a neoliberal construct devised largely to allow corporations to dodge their inherent social and ethical commitments as important social actors and institutions while simultaneously posing as socially responsible actors. In this perspective, the CSR concept is similar to the well-known family of neoliberal constructs that perverts the original and everyday meaning of the terms it parasitizes (Lorenz 2012). Examples are notions such as quality control, transparency, and accountability—ideas that are hardly problematic in everyday usages of the terms. The neoliberal hijacking of the terms, however, transforms and often more or less flips their meanings.

The CSR trend from the 1990s might also fruitfully be perceived in this perspective. With the widespread fall of the perception of the corporation as a social actor with broad social responsibilities and the triumph, to a greater or lesser extent depending on national contexts, of a more myopic understanding of the corporation as a profit-maximizing vehicle where its only, or at least its primary, mission is the increase of shareholder value, we have simultaneously witnessed the creation and widespread rise of CSR as a cultural construct. The economist Milton Friedman is the emblematic voice of the tradition conceptualizing corporations as profit machines, denouncing, in a famous 1970 *New York Times* essay, social responsibility as socialism. The title of the piece says it all: “A Friedman Doctrine—the Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profit” (Friedman 1970). Later often referred to as “the Friedman doctrine,” it states that a company has no social responsibility to the public or society, only to its shareholders. He justifies this by arguing that shareholders are the owners of a company and that corporate executives are the employees of the owners of the business. He considers the corporate executive employees to be the agents of the owners with their only responsibility being toward the desires of the owners—which translates into maximizing profits—while playing by the rules of the game—which include laws, regulations, and ethics.

While Bower and Paine (2017) dissect the flaws in this argument related to the view of shareholders as the owners of the company (they are owners/holders of shares, not owners of the company) and managers as their agents, this doctrine nevertheless developed into both principal-agent theory and the surge of shareholder value that

during the last forty years of neoliberalization has become dominant and has transformed the purposes of business to a large extent in line with the Friedman doctrine (Ho 2009; Røyrvik 2013a; Bower and Paine 2017).

It is in this broader context that we must situate the revival and new emergence of CSR since the late 1990s with more nuanced perspectives on CSR and related concepts—such as corporate citizenship (Matten, Crane, and Chapple 2003), sustainability, and business ethics—and consider in particular the notion of CSR in the context of the Nordic model (e.g., Gjørberg 2010; Ihlen 2011; Knudsen et al. 2020). The revival of CSR is thus premised upon the preceding descent of the corporation as a societal institution. Broadly, we might divide the recent academic debate on CSR into three main perspectives (Marrewijk 2003): (1) the shareholder perspective associated with the Friedman doctrine; (2) the stakeholder perspective associated with Freeman (1984), arguing that the company has responsibility toward all parties affected by its operations; and (3) the societal perspective, arguing that the company operates legally and morally on the basis of a social contract and that they are an integral, constitutive part of society and thus responsible to all of society. I argue below that Hydro's approach to social responsibility in China, despite the company's massive turn to value for the shareholder from 1999, also illustrates perspectives two and three.

In the context of the Nordic model, the societal perspective on corporations has arguably had a comparatively stronger presence than in many other countries and regions of the world. This is one main reason why, while in many other countries CSR has been used by corporations to bypass the state, in the Nordic countries “the states have taken the lead role in promoting CSR and sustainability and expect Norwegian-based TNCs to act responsibly when ‘going global’” (Knudsen et al. 2020: 2). Official Norwegian CSR policies have mainly been devised in light of a perceived governance gap in the global economy and have especially targeted Norwegian-based business operations abroad (Carson and Nilsen 2021).

The case of Norsk Hydro, to which we now turn, exemplifies this particular Nordic approach to CSR. And as I have elaborated upon extensively elsewhere (Røyrvik 2013a), Hydro also exemplifies the major struggle, duality, and ambivalence between the two opposing conceptualizations of the corporation as an inherently societal actor versus the shareholder-value view. Norsk Hydro was created in 1905, the same year that Norway gained its independence, and has arguably been the most important locomotive in the develop-

ment of Norway as an industrial nation. While being a cornerstone in the Norwegian social democratic industrial state, from 1999 Hydro turned seriously toward a shareholder-value orientation (Lie 2005: 424–33) and transformed into what I describe (Røyrvik 2013a) as a hybrid organization, positioned ambivalently but with considerable balancing capacity, with one foot in each of the two opposing paradigms conceptualizing the corporation.

## **Hydro, the Nordic Model, and CSR**

As an industrial force in developing the modern Norwegian economy, state, and society, Hydro was significantly also a key actor in the development and institutionalization of the Nordic model in Norway both at the macro level of the tripartite collaborative arrangements and, not least, at the company level of collaborative and democratic arrangements between management on the one hand and workers and unions on the other.

Inspired by the human relations tradition and the early sociotechnical research on coal mining in Britain (Trist and Bamforth 1951), the so-called work-life collaboration trials were introduced in Norway in the 1960s by a joint British-Norwegian team headed by Einar Thorsrud (Thorsrud and Emery 1970; Emery and Thorsrud 1976). The major initiative from 1962 was labeled the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Program, because the ideology behind it was to enhance democracy at the workplace and in industry. Thorsrud was appalled by the alienation and meaninglessness experienced by workers in the Taylorist scientific management regime, treating people solely as manual labor and essentially machines. He wanted to turn Herbert Marcuse's (2002 [1964]) "one-dimensional man" on its head and employ the whole human at work (Sørhaug 1996). However, increased productivity for the companies was always central. To cajole the companies into participation, Thorsrud said he would "eat his hat" if productivity did not rise in tandem with democratizing work relations (Sørhaug 1996).

In collaboration between employer and employee unions as well as between management and workers/unions, a series of concrete trials of increased democratic organization at several industrial plants and companies were brought to life. Norsk Hydro was a key partner in these trials and has since identified with these trials and the resulting Norwegian model of democratic work-life relations. A national strategy for the humanization of work came out of these initiatives,

and the model has in successive stages been heavily institutionalized in both Norwegian state laws—such as the law of employee representation on organization boards and, not least, the unique law on working environment—and particularly in comprehensive agreements between the work-life partners.

However, far from all major Norwegian business enterprises took part in the trials; on the contrary, major industrial and financial actors in the Norwegian system were formed in a much stronger sense (than in, for example, Norsk Hydro) by the American management tradition. This tradition was represented, in particular, by the management consultant George Kenning and what became the Kenning school in Norwegian business life, a more authoritarian ideology, top-down organization, which advocated the principles of “loyalty” and “following orders” (Sørhaug 1996). Thus, the contemporary Norwegian model in actual practice contains a continuing struggle over the main and opposing representations of what constitutes a company, its internal relations, and its role in society.

Norsk Hydro was a pioneer in the Norwegian industrial democracy program (Mumford 1997: 310), which contained a series of main principles and events: the first was creating improved representative systems of joint consultation, involving the establishment of “worker managers.” Furthermore, the program focused on workplace democracy, with employees importantly gaining both the resources and the power to be able to change their own work organization when and where they judged it was necessary and appropriate (Mumford 2006).

Some of the results from the program became law and formal agreements, for example, giving workers the right to demand jobs conforming to certain sociotechnical and psychological principles and requirements, such as variety of work, personal decision-making power, learning opportunities and organizational support, a desirable future, and social recognition. Subsequently, a program initiated by Kristen Nygaard, the inventor of object-oriented software programming, emerged for increasing trade union competence in information technology and thereby, implicitly, trade union power (Mumford 1997). Important concepts that emerged out of the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Program were, for example, the ideas of sharing of responsibilities, worker participation and codetermination, autonomous work groups, or semiautonomous work groups, forerunners of concepts such as self-managing and self-directed work teams. Importantly, the core idea and value of the program, and arguably of the Nordic/Norwegian model, is democratization.

It was General Director (CEO) Johan B. Holte who took the initiative to involve Hydro in the industrial democracy program. Together with shop steward Tor Halvorsen, chairman of the labor union at Hydro's facilities at Herøya, Norway, Hydro put all its weight into the program (Lie 2005: 302–15). Holte said, for example, as Hydro communicates on their website:

The most important is not the immediate increase in productivity and economic advantages, but that the human being and human values are put center stage ... It is a democratization of the work situation through a higher level of knowledge and through improved collaborative relationships. (My translation)<sup>1</sup>

We see again that humanization and democratization at work go hand in hand with productivity and economic gain. Hydro has thus maintained a long tradition of social responsibility, and their strong focus on HSE (health, safety, and environment) emerged in tandem with their commitment to the Norwegian model (Lie 2005); furthermore, this focus is an integral part of their own culture-building efforts and communicated purpose (“a more viable society”) and values, summed up in their comprehensive company platform, the Hydro Way (Røyrvik 2013b).<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on the distinction between *explicit* and *implicit* forms and traditions of CSR (Matten and Moon 2008)—that is, explicitly codified and formulated corporate CSR policies versus CSR as implicitly assumed institutional frameworks in the companies—writers on CSR in the Nordic context highlight how the Nordic welfare regime and the Nordic model of tripartite agreements, partnerships, and social democratic political culture have also formed a Nordic tradition of implicit CSR and an implicit culture of CSR in Norwegian companies (e.g., Gjørberg 2010; Carson and Nilsen 2021). In this tradition, a consensus emerged that explicit CSR is redundant in the domestic context while increasingly necessary in international operations due to the perceived governance gap abroad.

Hydro was also, however, an early Norwegian industrial actor in formally adopting CSR as corporate policy, as evidenced by the 1996 employment of anthropologist Rolf Lunheim as a director to investigate the social and cultural implications of Hydro's controversial bauxite project in Utkal, India, where the local indigenous people engaged in civil disobedience to stop the project.<sup>3</sup> Hydro eventually pulled out of the project. Hydro's commitment to CSR was not least signaled by appointing an executive vice president of corporate social responsibility in 1999. CSR has since been a continuous area of responsibility for



one of the executive vice presidents and part of the corporate management group. According to a 2002 article in the popular Norwegian engineering magazine *Teknisk Ukeblad*: “Hydro is one out of few Norwegian corporations actively working with CSR.” The magazine interviews director Lunheim, who states: “Industry is a social matter where society and company have reciprocal economic interests that transcend cultural and religious differences. Hydro has since [its inception, with] its establishment at Rjukan [in Norway in 1905,] been in close contact with the local community and handled the challenges that emerge between industry and society” (my translation).<sup>4</sup>

In 2015, the title of one of the executive vice president positions was “CSR and General Counsel,”<sup>5</sup> which was changed in 2019 to “Legal, CSR, and Compliance.”<sup>6</sup> In December 2019, a major reorganization created a new executive vice president position for “Corporate Development,” in which one big area of responsibility is that of “Sustainability” (organized in “Group Sustainability”), which now incorporates social responsibility, the environment, a climate office, and extrafinancial reporting. According to Hydro, they perceive many advantages to gathering these areas of responsibility in one group, for example, to further develop their systems and routines for managing risk in their supply chain related to sustainability and human rights.<sup>7</sup> The reorganization may have been instigated by the severe environmental and social responsibility problems and critique of Hydro’s operations at the Alunorte facility in Brazil (see chapter 4).<sup>8</sup> It would be safe to assume that CSR, like HSE, is now being considered an integral part of the way Hydro conducts its operations everywhere, and furthermore, that CSR is, in line with the broader trend, increasingly being subsumed under the heading “Sustainability” and formalized as explicit CSR policies, as for example in the Hydro Way corporate value-based management and identity platform.

Created in a thorough organizational brand process aided by the New York-based consultancy Siegal+Gale, which conducted interviews and surveys throughout the organization in 2003, the resulting comprehensive report was the foundation upon which the Hydro Way was launched in 2004 (Røyrvik 2013b). It highlighted Hydro’s “mission, talents, and core values.” Interestingly, in the Siegal+Gale report, three underlying external forces are highlighted as drivers of the need for Hydro to reorient and rebrand itself: a “more demanding shareholder,” the “trend to internationalize,” and a “growing sustainability imperative” (Røyrvik 2013b). A few quotes from the report illustrate how employees and managers highlight the continuing tradition of social responsibility in Hydro:

“Working at Hydro, you have an understanding that what you are doing is important. It makes a difference, every day, in the lives of millions of people.”  
—*Agri Employee*

“We see the world through one lens where there is no distinction between business performance and social contribution. They are mutually supportive.” —*Corporate Employee*

“I don’t think we have the capacity to isolate business needs from social needs—not without a lot of trial and some pain.” —*Aluminum Executive*

“For better, for worse, we’ve used profit in ways that let us contribute more over time—not just to customers and shareholders, but to people generally.”  
—*O&E Employee*

“We helped build a country not just a company. It is in our blood to see the world of business through the lens of society.” —*Corporate Executive*

“The very premise of our existence was to help found a nation, not just make money.” —*O&E Employee*

(Røyrvik 2013b: 20–23)

The Hydro Way and Hydro’s increasing commitment to explicit forms of CSR illustrate the rise of organizational signification, expressiveness, and the rising importance of branding and image building (Røyrvik 2013b; Røvik 2007). In its new China ventures, Hydro very actively used the Hydro Way material, which was well received by local managers and employees there, while in Norway the material was often considered superfluous and of little relevance (Røyrvik 2013b). A quote from Hydro’s facilitator of the Hydro Way process illustrates some of these issues (Røyrvik 2013b: 21).

Of course, introducing the Hydro Way in such a culture as ours, it was unfamiliar for many. For most of our staff what Hydro is doing is self-evidently important and beneficial to society. It does not need any form of “profiling” or “branding.” You know what we say, that Hydro has “a very high level of its low profile.” This is because what we do permeates society fundamentally.

The Chinese employees I talked with often praised the Hydro Way material, typically highlighting how they liked both the way the company emphasized respect for people and the environment and, not least, the mission of a more viable society.

Even though there have been several ups and downs in the Hydro management’s commitment to the Norwegian model’s ideals of democratization and humanization, there is no doubt that there have been very close relationships and tight collaboration between

management and workers/unions in Hydro since Holte became CEO in 1967. After a relatively slow period, the collaborative arrangements were revitalized, beginning in 1986, and Hydro's relationship with the main labor union, LO, and with the Norwegian national Labor Party has consistently been close and on good terms. For example, Halvorsen moved on to become head of LO, and the chairman of LO (Tor Aspengren) was, for several years, a member of the Hydro board of directors (Lie 2005). In sum, Hydro is an exemplary company in the sense of both co-constituting and instantiating the Nordic/Norwegian model, which at the macro level has been described as "democratic capitalism" (Sejersted 1993), where democracy is considered to be the overarching system value of capitalism, and the core question is how the economic domain can contribute to enabling democratic participation and societal development (Slagstad 2001). Though it has come under increasing pressure during the last decades (e.g., Byrkjeflot et al. 2001)—not least due to the neoliberal transformations of society, including, as I argue elsewhere, the strong shareholder turn in Hydro (Røyrvik 2013a)—to varying degrees, Hydro continues to strive to bring aspects and elements of this tradition when establishing ventures abroad. As Knudsen summarizes (see chapter 4), Hydro has widely been considered a model in terms of state ownership and with respect to social responsibility related to community, unions, and sustainability, as well as for a particular model of capital's embeddedness in society "exemplified especially by the alignment of 'corporate values' with 'Norwegian values'" (p. 117). Knudsen argues that it has increasingly become CSR and "Norwegian values" rather than Nordic model institutional arrangements that are pronounced in Hydro's self-presentation.

Focusing on the Norwegian model of democracy at work and its embedded tradition of implicit social responsibility in the community, as we shall see, these cultural practices and views traveled and translated in interesting ways in China.

### **Traveling with the Nordic Model and CSR to China**

In 2002, Hydro opened their first wholly owned industrial plant in China, a magnesium alloy facility, in the ancient city of Xi'an. The ethnographic story of the plant is described in detail elsewhere (Røyrvik 2013a); here I want to scrutinize the case in light of the arguable "export" of the Nordic model to Xi'an and of the related notion of social responsibility. The Nordic model "on the move" can be con-

sidered a “traveling model” (Reyna 2007; Behrends et al. 2014)—that is, cultural intentions and plans to move some human practices and cultural views from somewhere and implement them elsewhere. As exemplified by the Nordic model, not all models emerge from the United States (Peck and Theodore 2015); Reyna (2007) highlights that not all traveling models travel equally well and distinguishes between high- and low-fidelity models. Setting up a McDonald’s franchise in Norway can be considered a high-fidelity operation because of the relatively few contradictions encountered and the relative ease in standardizing and “copying” such operations. “Exporting” Western democracy to the Middle East or “implementing” development programs in Africa are low-fidelity cases because they involve much more socially complex, contested, and abstract ideas, institutions, and practices and are more difficult to standardize while simultaneously necessitating higher levels of multilateral relations and interaction. The fidelity of a model, in Reyna’s words, is to some extent due to “the intensity of contradiction between different structural actors within fields of power ...” (Reyna 2007: 79), and low fidelity is the case when the efforts to implement a traveling model are in greater contradiction with the interests and operations of the other actors in the field where the model is arriving. As shown in the research referred to in the beginning of the chapter, which documents that the Nordic model is not “exported,” it clearly does not travel well and can be considered low fidelity.

Hydro corporate management in Oslo deliberated for many years before deciding on establishing their first wholly owned production plant in China, what eventually became the Xi’an plant. Hydro had been criticized for not showing social responsibility when, in 2001, management decided to close the magnesium alloy plant at Herøya, Norway.<sup>9</sup> The main reason for establishing the plant in Xi’an was to serve the automotive market in Japan and the car makers that had established manufacturing plants in China. Hydro’s main concern about entering China was related to the perception of cultural differences and the popular belief in the international business community that, because of those differences, foreign companies had substantial difficulties succeeding in China. Thus, Hydro finally opted for a management and organization model in the Xi’an venture that, to a considerable extent, ran counter to commitments to the Nordic model. Based on knowledge gained during management’s participation in cultural training courses, Hydro decided on a quite radical adaptive localization strategy. Based on popular notions of Chinese culture as a Confucian, top-down, hierarchical, and loyalty-based system,

Hydro determined that they had to abandon the ideals of the Nordic model and needed to establish and run what they perceived to be a “Chinese company,” with only Chinese managers and employees. This did not go well in the first years. The plant performed poorly on all indicators, from productivity to quality of metal to HSE. Marketwise, Japanese customers did not want the products from Xi’an. Hydro tried in successive moves to remedy the situation, first by substituting the first general manager (CEO) with a Chinese professional trained in the American management tradition, who introduced detailed management systems at the plant, and, not least, later, by moving a Hydro-internal Western general manager to the plant to try to secure, more or less at all costs, that the plant complied with HSE standards.

In Røyrvik (2013a), I disclose one of the main premises of the failure of the plant in the early years. It turned out that the Chinese managers and employees who were hired by Hydro in Xi’an had extensive knowledge beforehand about Hydro and the Nordic model. Partly because foreign companies are established in dedicated industrial zones and there is considerable exchange of knowledge and personnel between companies from different countries, the Chinese workforce in these zones is highly knowledgeable about the diverse models of management, organization, and culture that the various international companies represent.<sup>10</sup> The managers and employees at Hydro’s Xi’an plant were thus seriously surprised and disappointed when it turned out that the plant was run the way it was, and there was a high turnover at the plant. As one local manager noted: “I wanted to work for a Norwegian company, but it was not as I thought it would be.” However, I call this cultural encounter between Hydro and the local context and workforce in Xi’an during the first years a “reverse culture crash” (Røyrvik 2013a). It was a spectacular failure of cultural translation, where Hydro’s local organization had been constructed based on notions of what the Norwegian-dominated international project team believed constituted a Chinese company, while the local workforce (the entire workforce was local) expected and anticipated working for an exemplary Nordic model company. The employees responded, in the way industrial sociology and anthropology have extensively documented, by sabotaging through silent protest, slow and sloppy work, and generally low motivation and lack of compliance with corporate policies. But as I will show below, much more productive encounters and translations eventually emerged. This initial failure of cultural translation illustrates how translation processes are people- and context-dependent, fragile,

and, not least, susceptible to failure if reciprocal relationships, especially in terms of cultural knowledge in this case, are lacking. The case illustrates how culture is on the move, largely constituted in a postcolonial world in motion (Clifford 1997), as both “transnational and translational” (Bhabha 1992: 438).

The Xi’an facility was on Hydro’s list of underperforming plants that corporate management contemplated closing down when a general manager very dedicated to the Nordic/Norwegian model was hired as a final effort to try to salvage the plant. This last GM was a technical expert with management experience from Hydro’s Herøya industrial complex, arguably the most important site in Hydro’s participation in the industrial democracy collaboration trials and in their co-development of the Nordic/Norwegian model. He had a strong commitment to the Norwegian model and conceived of Hydro as standing firmly in this tradition. He had also participated in establishing the plant in Xi’an; during that process, he had developed a keen interest in and knowledge of contemporary, local Chinese cultural notions and practices. He turned out to be quite a para-ethnographer, and I’ve related elsewhere (Røyrvik 2013a) how he was responsible, together with his local team, for turning the plant around completely. From being an underperforming plant, the Xi’an facility, in just over a year, became best in class, producing the highest quality magnesium alloys in the Hydro system (and arguably in the world), with high productivity and recognition as the best plant on HSE in the Hydro system. The skeptical Japanese customers now *only* wanted products from the Xi’an plant. The plant expanded production by 50 percent by installing a new production line and simultaneously expanding the site facility. This expansion was solely designed and managed by local plant managers, employees, and the GM, who also hired contractors and other essential personnel, and did not involve the Hydro-wide professional project organization as is normal procedure in projects of this scale and scope. Similarly, the plant became highly innovative, for example, by developing production technology that other Hydro plants also came to want and that the main R&D center at Herøya became involved with. Furthermore, the plant was offered prestigious R&D projects for high-end customers. With these developments, the plant had arguably reached a new and hybrid form of “democratic innovation management” that Hernes (2007) labels the Nordic model’s ideal relationship between an involvement-oriented management and union-organized employees that is constituted through broad participation and codetermination.

The new GM said he used management and organization principles from Herøya and the Norwegian model to unleash the energy, motivation, creativity, and diligence of the plant employees with the eagerness of his all-Chinese workforce to learn, develop, and progress. He said that “in several ways it is more fulfilling to work as GM in a Norwegian-model type-of-way here at the Xi’an plant than in Norway, because of the vitality and responsiveness I experience from the employees.” Manager and employee involvement surged under his leadership. He got his managers to believe in and apply many of the values and principles of the Nordic model, not least through his example of leadership through dialogue, constant involvement, and delegating power, responsibility, resources, and autonomy. Importantly, he consciously adopted an explicit stance and demeanor toward exemplifying high tolerance and acceptance of failure. “You have to show them in practice, in the way you react, that it is ok to do something wrong. And you must show it again and again.” He had learned that what he called “the Maoist culture of chopping off people’s heads for doing wrong” was the major obstacle toward enabling a culture of learning and taking responsibility and initiative. Thus, he used every opportunity to signal and exemplify that it is perfectly normal to be mistaken and to make bad judgments, but he insisted upon reflecting over each episode in a respectful and trusting atmosphere. “Failure and mistakes are opportunities for learning rather than punishment,” was one of his credos, and “when the employees came to trust that this was actually the reality,” he said, “their engines for learning and individual progress turned to full throttle.”

Furthermore, working together with the HSE and HR (human resource) managers, the management team made the production workers become much more involved and active in a Nordic model way of working. For example, the classic suggestion box on the shop floor had been empty for a long time, but now a steady flow of suggestions came in from the operators and shop-floor stewards. The HSE manager was responsible for facilitating this change. She said: “Earlier maybe the employees didn’t think there was any point in putting suggestions in the box, but now they really have started to believe that their inputs are valued and taken seriously.”

The GM was held in very high esteem among the employees and managers, and his gentle style of management was frequently noted; for example, the quality control manager stated that “his management style is very soft, but he always gets us to do our best.” Like-

wise, his genuine interest in his employees and in understanding the Chinese ways of thinking were often noted by the Chinese employees. His technical expertise was also an important source of his status and authority among the staff. He knew magnesium production through and through, and his implementation of Nordic model principles was mostly done by way of practical processes related to production. The GM was, however, careful to point out that he never simply copied a Herøya-type Norwegian model and tried to implement it “as is” in Xi’an. “I use values, ideas, and principles of management and organization from the Norwegian model and adapt them to the situation, people, and culture here,” he said.

### **Hybrid Collaboration and the Traveling Cafeteria**

One example of this form of adaption is that the systematic collaboration between management and unions in the Nordic model, both directly and indirectly through employee representation, had necessarily to take another shape in the Chinese context—especially the formal, representative collaboration. Only one union is allowed, the Chinese Communist Party’s All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). As in all foreign companies, the Xi’an plant had employed one representative from the union; interestingly, the union representative was the HSE manager at the plant. This role appropriation would, in a Nordic context as well as in many other countries, be considered a complete undermining of the labor union. However, in the eyes of both the GM and employees, the union representative did much to further collaboration and employee involvement and to foster good working conditions at the plant. In addition, the union representative (HSE manager) and the HR manager arranged to help employees outside of the plant, for example with housing. This is in keeping with part of the mandate of the labor union in China. However, this type of social welfare is also quite dependent on the discretion of the employer and the work of the union representatives. At Hydro Xi’an, according to the GM as well as the HSE and HR managers, they wanted workers to influence their own situation both at and outside of work. This approach to translation illustrates one of the main dictums of translation in ANT, that instead of “transmission” it is a process of “continuous transformation” (Latour 1984: 268) that leads to a chain of context-dependent translations. In the context of formal organizations and institutions, this might be translated, as it were, to Czarniawska and Sevón’s claim that “to set something in a



new place is to construct it anew" (2005: 8). In ANT, "translation is the mechanism by which the social and the natural worlds progressively take form" (Callon 1984: 224), and it was indeed the construction of a new form of hybrid "Nordic-Xi'an model" at play.

Hydro had, like most international companies, also employed several so-called migrant workers, often considered unskilled, moving in from other Chinese provinces to work. In China, these workers have, in general, few social rights and are frequently exploited by employers, but at Hydro they were relatively well paid (three times more than they could expect, according to the GM), and the HSE and HR managers put in a lot of effort to help the workers in terms of what the workers themselves wanted. The workers were very satisfied with and expressed excitement about the kinds of support and training they received and the opportunities that were afforded. As one production worker emphasized: "I learn many new things and improve my skills." The managers also went out into the local community and supported workers outside of the plant by, for example, helping them enroll in courses to enhance professional skills and to learn English as well as with other socioeconomic and psychosocial issues. The HR manager emphasized this strongly and said: "We help many workers with their economic affairs so that they, for example, are able to acquire their own housing." According to managers and employees, this social responsibility helped improve both motivation and productivity at the plant, and the plant produced much more and of better quality than expected by anyone in the Hydro system. This extended, networked way of translating the Nordic model, both within the corporation and in the local community, and in collaboration between management and the Chinese "union," illustrates how cultural translation is not a unilateral sender-receiver type of communication or transfer logistics but rather, as Bachmann-Medick (2006) maintains, a dynamic process of transformation that takes shape in reciprocal forms of cultural encounters characterized by negotiation of cultural difference.

Some other important examples illustrate Hydro's approach to the Nordic model and social responsibility in their China venture. One early discussion on CSR in China was whether Hydro should acquire and own the Chinese supply companies providing the raw magnesium needed for the alloy plant. These suppliers had severe challenges in terms of HSE and issues of social responsibility. Should Hydro acquire some suppliers to secure stable and high-quality supplies of raw magnesium and simultaneously take responsibility to lift and develop these suppliers to Hydro standards? Hydro finally

concluded that they could not take on such a total supply chain responsibility: it was too risky, and too much investment would be required. They opted for the route of trying to affect the suppliers in what they saw as a positive way by being a demanding customer that required certain standards of HSE in order to purchase from the suppliers. They established a group of suppliers that they worked in close collaboration with, both to improve quality of the metal and standards of HSE. The example highlights some of the ethical dilemmas of corporate social responsibility.

Another early and important event related to CSR ensued when Hydro, in the preparations of the construction site, was met with demonstrations by local farmers. Hydro had an agreement with the Xi'an municipality for use of the land for the plant and, before hiring a subcontractor to prepare the construction site, had been assured that everything was formally in order. The local farmers, however, occupied the site and managed to physically shut down the work. Hydro, at first, left the problem to be solved by the municipality, because formally the issue of the land was a question between the municipality and the farmers. But Hydro soon left this formalistic path and chose, with the indispensable aid of their own local Chinese consultants, to negotiate directly with the farmers. It turned out that the farmers felt they had not been compensated adequately for the land by the municipality. Hydro and the farmers came to an agreement by giving the farmers access to paid work in the preparation of the site; the local farmers, with shovels, crowbars, levers, and small machines, worked side by side with big bulldozers from the subcontractor. Some people from the local farming community were also later hired as production workers at the plant. In the aftermath of the resolved conflict, which had delayed the completion of the plant considerably, as one of Hydro's project managers explained: "We enjoyed an excellent relationship with the local farmers," who, in large numbers and in ceremonial costumes, ritually inaugurated the plant site. This exemplifies a practical kind of social responsibility Hydro undertook in the Xi'an project.

An important example related to the "traveling Nordic model" and linked with CSR was found in the discussions and negotiations related to the design of the infrastructure plant, especially as concerned the plant's cafeteria. In the planning and project phase, some of the important local Chinese advisors and consultants, either working for Hydro or hired on contractual basis by Hydro, wanted two separate cafeterias at the plant. The plant was designed by the

project group, mostly Norwegian engineers, according to more or less standard Hydro principles and values, where an important symbolic idiom is *one* joint cafeteria for all staff, operators, office workers, and managers alike. This design instigated discussions in the project phase in China, where local representatives thought this would be alien in the Chinese context and argued for two cafeterias, one for production workers and one for managers and office staff. This would more appropriately reflect local cultural notions of authority and power chains, as well as each group's place in the organizational structure and hierarchy, they argued. The Norwegian-based project team refused and ultimately won the discussion, arguing that a joint cafeteria is part of the way Hydro works and would facilitate better collaboration, involvement, and relations at the plant. The project team had to negotiate this issue also because the chosen strategy was first to create a "Chinese company," but as this specific case shows, from the inception there were negotiations between the perceived need for radical local adaptation against Hydro and the Nordic model principles. The joint cafeteria was explicitly referred to by Hydro managers as reflecting the Norwegian model of close collaboration between management and production, and further it was to be a signal of equality, low hierarchies, and a short distance to power. It might be perceived as a concrete, *material metaphor*, instantiated in the plant design and building structure, of some of the ideals, values, and principles of the Norwegian model. Here we see that infrastructure design is an integral part of the traveling Nordic/Norwegian model as it was negotiated and translated in the local Chinese context.

Importantly, in ANT, translation is enacted through processes of *inscription*, "the result of translating one's interest into material form" (Callon 1991: 143). Referring to Reyna's (2007) distinction between high- and low-fidelity traveling models and the conceptual pair of inscription and translation in ANT, I suggest that in this case the infrastructure design was inscribed with aspects of the Nordic model in a way that helped a low-fidelity model travel. This inscription in plant design and its material infrastructure functioned as a material metaphor contributing to a partially successful translation of a low-fidelity model in China—a translation that came on most strongly, as we have seen, several years after the opening of the plant. The cafeteria case might furthermore be interpreted as Hydro taking on social responsibility of furthering democratic workplace ideals through their international operation, which is significant in the Chinese context.

## From Export to Travel and Translation

If we summarize key characteristics of the Norwegian model and how it traveled and was translated at the Xi'an plant, an interesting picture emerges. Of formal representative roles and functions of the Norwegian model, only the safety representative was directly implemented, while neither employee representation on the board nor collective wage negotiations were adopted. Both of these deficits relate to the constraints placed on independent labor unions in the Chinese institutional context. The company had, however, a huge *collective* bonus system based on productivity, which (only) partly ameliorated the problem of the lack of collective wage negotiations. On the other hand, the main principles of organizational design (work roles, hierarchy, responsibility, plant infrastructure such as the cafeteria, etc.) were adopted. Fully developed autonomous work groups were not established, according to the GM, but there was continuous development in this direction.

In terms of the psychological job demands, so central in the Norwegian industrial democracy project and materialized in the Norwegian law on working environment, these demands were in practice translated in the local context. Meaningful work and a variety of tasks; having one's own decision-making power, learning opportunities, and organizational support; and social recognition for independent efforts as well as linking work with a desirable future were all issues that were part of the relationships and codetermination at the plant. According to the Xi'an GM and former Herøya technical expert and manager, the collaborative relationships between management and the union were in fact better in Xi'an than at Herøya—the cradle of the Hydro Norwegian model. In Xi'an, the GM maintained, both managers and employees were (more) genuinely concerned about improving the plant and making money and that the employees should have a good life both at work and outside of work.

Communication and collaboration between management and the union (and workers) was, as described above, very different in formal organization than in the Norwegian context, but at the same time, on a very high level in terms of participation and codetermination. The collaborative relationship, although labor was organized completely differently with the HSE manager as both union and communist party representative at the plant, involved everything from production and productivity, professional training and development, to R&D, innovation, and, not least, socioeconomic and psychosocial

issues both inside and outside of the plant. At the most basic level, it is evident that Hydro eventually, after the failed attempt of establishing a so-called Chinese company in Xi'an, was to a large extent able to translate values and principles of democracy at work so vital in the constitution of the ideal (and idealized) Norwegian model of work, organization, and management.

As shown, the more practical and institutional materialization of the values and principles were, by both personal experience and preference (e.g., the Herøya GM) and necessity (e.g., Chinese constraints and different mandate of the "labor union"), as well as the complex transnational relationships mobilized, manifested in hybrid forms and emerged in dynamic cultural encounters that co-constructed cultural practices and models anew. In conclusion, we might appreciate that acts of social responsibility in Hydro's translations in the Xi'an venture eventually could be interpreted as a new hybrid international-localized version of the Nordic/Norwegian model so formative of the Hydro company. In line with Bachmann-Medick's (2006) claim, the case highlights how (cultural) translation has become a concept of generative relationships and movement, and transformation, or what Clifford (1997) theorized as "travel and translation." This translational conceptualization of culture transcends the "them-us" frame of classification in conventional ethnography (Marcus 1995) and the colonial imaginary. Rather, it establishes cultural relations and models as associations (Latour 1984, 1987) formed in multilateral encounters of negotiation and mobilization, including conflict, empathy, and power, over cultural differences and possibilities.

Hydro, in its Xi'an investment, chose at first an unusually strict strategy of an adaptive, decentralized, and domestic orientation (trying to become what they believed to be a completely "Chinese company"). This failed both in terms of productivity, quality measures, market situation and HSE, work environment, and motivation. It was an interesting failure of translation, in which Hydro constructed Chinese culture in a reified and static way, whereas local Chinese employees expected to work for a Nordic model company. After some trial and error to save a disastrous situation, Hydro eventually moved toward a much more explicit orientation focusing on adapting a Nordic/Norwegian-like model in Xi'an. The process became in reality a transnational and translational orientation where several practices of organization, management, and diverse cultural practices and traditions were translated and integrated in hybrid and "glocalized" (Robertson 1995) transformations. This included local

practices and vernaculars as well as practices and systems from the American management tradition, but in the emerging new assemblage some of the core values, principles, and aspects of the Nordic/Norwegian model were highly present and visible. As we saw, for example, the Nordic and Hydro model tradition of responsibility in the community (see also chapter 4) met in new ways local Chinese notions and practices of communal responsibilities through the particular type of Chinese “union” ACFTU.

Interestingly, the Nordic tradition of implicit CSR was a notable part of the *project* of establishing the plant in Xi’an from day one. This has probably much to do with the fact that the nonlocal project team members were mostly experienced project managers and experts with long careers in Hydro Norway. The consequences of the decision to run an “all-Chinese” plant surfaced mostly when the project phase terminated and the plant went into the phase of daily operations. After almost being closed and with the subsequent turnaround, aspects of the Nordic model and its implicit CSR component surfaced again and were realized to a large extent at the plant in operation. Furthermore, we see that, when the Hydro Way material was launched, it was thoroughly introduced and well received at Hydro’s Chinese plants; this success can be taken to exemplify and support the literature emphasizing the broad emergence of explicit CSR in Norwegian-based companies’ international operations.

The chapter argues, in some opposition to the extant literature, that the Hydro case in Xi’an shows that some of the core aspects and practices of the Nordic model successfully traveled and translated to an authoritarian regime and that corporate social responsibility in this case can be read into the way the core values and principles of this model—democratization and humanization and all that these entail—are enacted at the workplace and beyond. In the translations demonstrated in the present case, we can also perceive of a particular case in Hydro’s international engagements and approach to CSR as part of Hydro’s tight history and relationship to the Norwegian state and its self-image as a “humanitarian superpower”—an active promoter and “exporter” of moral values of good, be it through peace building, humanitarian work, or, as in this case, democratization and broader social responsibilities of Norwegian-based TNCs. Reified, formulaic, and static ideas about the Nordic model, as well as theoretical concepts steeped in unilateral sender-receiver notions of “export” and “transfer,” might stand in the way of discovering similar kinds of travels and translations in other cases and contexts.

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## Notes

1. "Det viktigste er ikke den øyeblikkelige økning av produktiviteten og økonomiske fordeler, men at mennesket og de menneskelige verdier blir satt i sentrum ... Det er en demokratisering av arbeidssituasjonen gjennom et høyere kunnskapsnivå og gjennom forbedrede samarbeidsforhold." See <https://www.hydro.com/no-NO/om-hydro/var-historie/1946-1977/1966-de-fant-tonen-og-formet-en-foregangsbedrift/> (retrieved 15 December 2020).
2. See 'the Hydro Way' material here: [https://www.hydro.com/globalassets/08-about-hydro/the-hydro-way/hydro\\_brochures\\_a4\\_en.pdf](https://www.hydro.com/globalassets/08-about-hydro/the-hydro-way/hydro_brochures_a4_en.pdf) (retrieved 20 January 2021).
3. See <https://www.framtiden.no/199602014843/aktuelt/bedrifters-samfunnsansvar/sivilulydighet-mot-hydros-bauxitt-prosjekt.html> (retrieved 20 January 2021).
4. Dordi Digre, "Mer etikk i bagasjen" [More ethics onboard], *Teknisk Ukeblad*, 10 January 2002, retrieved 20 January 2021 from <https://www.tu.no/artikler/mer-etikk-i-bagasjen/219547>.
5. See <https://www.hydro.com/no-NO/media/news/2014/Endringer-i-Hydros-konsern-ledelse/> (retrieved 23 January 2021).
6. See <https://www.hydro.com/en-NO/media/news/2019/changes-in-hydros-corporate-management-board/> (retrieved 23 January 2021).
7. Source: Hydro Group Sustainability (personal communication).
8. See, for example, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-norsk-hydro-brazil-idUSKCN1SR2IK> (retrieved 15 January 2021).
9. See, for example, <https://www.nrk.no/okonomi/nedleggelse-pa-heroya-1.545103> (retrieved 8 April 2021).

10. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), the Communist Party labor union, with its 130–280 million members, is also an important factor in terms of knowledge exchange among managers and employees. All foreign companies have a representative from the ACFTU on their staff, and information about the various foreign companies and their respective traditions travels through this network (more on the role of this type of labor union below).

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