



## City profile

## Djibouti: From a colonial fabrication to the deviation of the “Shekou model”

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## ABSTRACT

Djibouti is a postcolonial African city that embraced neoliberal ideology after the country's independence, and yet still lags behind in the world's economy. With the fragmentation of both its society and space, the city has continued to be a playground for global powers, because of its strategic location for trade and global security. In the global era, Djibouti's aspirations for development have encountered China's “Belt and Road Initiative”. Through a series of recent investments, China Merchant Group, a Chinese state-owned enterprise, has attempted to redeploy the successful model in Shenzhen in the horn of Africa. This study first delineates the history of Djibouti from the colonial to independence periods, and then examines how China's experience is being applied in African lands. The study is significant in revealing the processes and problems of global investment and planning in the developing countries.

## 1. Introduction

Djibouti city is the eponymous capital of the Republic of Djibouti, a small nation bordered by Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Located in the coastal region of Tadjourah, it sits at the crossroads of the Red Sea, Africa, and the Arab world (Fig. 1). Equipped with the most modern port in east Africa, Djibouti serves as a regional hub for the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. For example, Ethiopia, the second most populous country in Africa, with 109 million people,<sup>1</sup> handles more than 85 % of its import and export through Djibouti,<sup>2</sup> whose port connects east Africa with the global economy.

Due to its strategic location at the junction of the African Horn, Djibouti was a battlefield during the colonial period and continues to be so within the global economy. A city of 26 sq.km., which has few natural resources, has attracted eight countries to set up military bases, as this is the most important port of East Africa. In recent years, however, Djibouti's embrace of neoliberal capitalism has shifted to meet and marry with China's “Belt and Road Initiative”. After donating many government and public buildings since the early 1980s, China established a navy supply base in Djibouti in 2017. Moreover, China Merchant Group (CMG), a Chinese state-owned enterprise registered in Hong Kong, has been involved in developing all ports of Djibouti-city, and has helped to create an ambitious urban planning to apply its

highly successful “Shekou model” to Djibouti.

Most urban studies are still based on theories that use US or European cities as universal models or measure cities in non-Western settings by the models and metrics of the West (Myers, 2011). After World War II, the United States replaced the dichotomy of “colonized/colonizer” societies with an “underdeveloped/developed” dichotomy. This interpretation of the world suggested that an acceleration of economic growth was the only logical way of bridging the developmental gap, and that countries which accepted the designation of “underdeveloped states” needed to accept the aid and guidance of Western powers. In this process, however, the “underdeveloped nations” sought to gain self-determination by giving up their right to self-definition (Gilbert, 2002:79).

Over the past 40 years, China has become the second largest economic entity, and it has done so with the public ownership playing a leading role in its basic economic system. Recently China has sought to extend its globalization by sending state-owned companies, which has contributed to the rapid domestic urbanization, to work with other nations. This initiative is audacious, in that it involves exporting a “model” for development across national boundaries to lands where the technical fixes, laws, and urban policies are different or even absent. Hence, the large amount of investment from China carries with it the risk of mismatching political strategy and the logic of trade.

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<sup>1</sup> See World Bank data at <https://data.worldbank.org/country/ethiopia>.

<sup>2</sup> The data were derived from a private commercial 2019 report of CMG.



Fig. 1. The location of Djibouti-country and Djibouti-city.

How could such a small city/country with few natural resource survive in a global economy? What have colonial and post-colonial processes brought to Djibouti-city? Does foreign-aid help Djibouti-city? Can China's experience, which involves non-Western practices with its socialist ideology, be directly transplanted to Djibouti-city? The recorded history of Djibouti has been fragmentary and mostly written in French, and to date no serious publication has addressed the above-mentioned questions. As essential elements of contemporary capitalism, the major infrastructures of ports, railways, and trade zones attract the attention of economic planners, as these facilities can not only stimulate the economy, but they can also constitute the shape of international political geography. However, the traditional political conceptions of state and territoriality fail to capture newly emerging political topographies, and they are not efficacious for understanding the process of economic growth as trade follows economic principles. Instead, we should observe the particular sites associated with specific problems and stakeholders.

The authors of this study have investigated the particular situation of Djibouti, and they hope to fill the research gap by considering China and Djibouti, in both their national and international contexts. This study first examines how the space of Djibouti city has been formed by the logic of colonialism, and with techniques for the social and spatial segregation of its populations. The following parts of the study explain the subsequent urban fragmentation and social inequality of the city's development. Next, the study explores how China's efforts to work with Djibouti have faced difficulties in building and maintaining joint ventures with Djibouti's state-owned company, as these efforts involve the risks of developing trade in the absence of production facilities and urban administrative regulations. This study meticulously analyzes the definitions and conditions of the "Shekou model," and shows why it is not presently working in Djibouti, partly due to monopolistic practices and political uncertainty in relation to Ethiopia. The significance of this study lies in the way it reveals the essential colonial logic of Djibouti's space design, the problems that Western-based ideology have posed to indigenous development after independence, and the challenges of global investment and planning with Chinese experience. The study thus offers a unique supplement to existing scholarship on the development of African and Chinese cities.

## 2. Colonial impact on space and demographics

Most land in the nation of Djibouti is barren desert. Djibouti City has an area of 26 sq km and an intermittent stream, but the region lacks a supply of fresh water. The underground water has been overexploited, and the urban water supply suffers from saltwater intrusion due to the shallowness of the water table (Bisaillon & Mohammed, 2005). In addition, Djibouti is one of the world's hottest cities. During the intense summer, the temperature often exceeds 40 °C, and most of the average rainfall (> 20 in. [~50 cm]) falls within a short time, causing floods in the city region (Thompson & Adloff, 1975).

Even though Djibouti City has scarce resources in terms of water, vegetation, and arable land, it is home to around three quarters of the country's population of 1.02 million (CGOIC, 2018). Considering the scarcity of resources, what factors contributed to the city's formation?

Djibouti, as French Somaliland and later the French Territory of the Afars and the Issas, was France's last African colony (Cher, 2017). Before the colonial period, the territory was occupied by the Afar and Issa, who led nomadic lives without a permanent settlement, and a trade network in salt, coffee, wax, leather, spices, and slaves spanned from Arabia to the isolated depths of Ethiopia and Sudan (Thompson & Adloff, 1975). During the 1840s, European powers were not yet active in the Horn of Africa (Thompson & Adloff, 1975), but after the Suez Canal opened in 1869, the Red Sea became the gateway to the Mediterranean, and the political space was changed (Cher, 2017). The European colonizers entered a new era of expansion in the Red Sea, India, and the Far East. Great Britain and Italy claimed territory in Somali and Eritrea. In the 1880s, French colonizers wished to move their trade line in East Africa southward because of the competition on the boundaries between Ethiopia and the surrounding colonizers, Great Britain and Italy. Djibouti became their best option because of its natural port and its potential to connect to the Ethiopian highlands and was colonized by the French in 1888 (Imbert-Vier, 2008). In addition, the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik wished to see a railway connect his country to the port at Djibouti (Bayeh & Atinafu, 2015), the major marine outfall, and he thus authorized French construction (Thompson & Adloff, 1975). The railway project from Djibouti to Dire Dawa (Ethiopia) and port construction were implemented simultaneously in 1897 (Thompson & Adloff, 1975), and the rail connection between

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