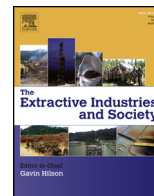




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Original article

The spatialisation of China's presence in Cameroon: The case of the mining sector

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ABSTRACT

The paper details the entry and the evolution of China in Cameroon from independence to the present day. It also outlines how the development of the mining sector has evolved. Using the spatial signature of China's economic interest, it appears that China started through the "peripheralisation" of its footprint (1971–1976) with subtle investments. China increased its presence in the capital city in a "centralisation" step thanks to diplomatic ties and symbolic investments (1977–1999). Its most recent phase (2000 to present) is characterized by the proliferation throughout the country. Similarly in the mining sector, Chinese actors started as peripheral players in Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM) in a first phase characterized by small numbers of non-professional investors originally involved in trade. They then spread rapidly throughout the eastern region, including some as yet unexplored localities, a process accelerated by the arrival of professional miners expelled from Ghana. Concurrently, the industrial mining sector gradually became an area of interest both for private firms and state-owned enterprises. However, while private investors are stepping back, governmental ventures are gaining projects. Overall, China's presence is expanding to all administrative regions and multiple economic sectors, including one of the most recent, the mining sector.

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1. Introduction

Asian–African relations is a subject that is gaining increasing scholarly attention. Contacts between Chinese and African people occurred even before the first expeditions from Europe: when Vasco da Gama arrived on the Mozambican coast in 1498, he found Chinese traders already there. The famous Chinese sailor, later admiral, Zheng He, whose voyages on board an impressive fleet would facilitate Sino–African trade, created a platform for the exchange of Chinese goods, namely gold, silver, silk, porcelain, rice and beans, for African products such as ivory, rhinoceros horn, and red sandalwood (Li, 2015). It has been reported that in 1418, the admiral brought back gifts from Somalia for the Chinese Emperor (Wekesa, 2013). Although mainly concentrated in Northern and Eastern Africa and Madagascar, Asia and Africa had indeed established ties long before contemporary developments.

The conventional wisdom about the interest of China in Africa – a view that is challenged by Bräutigam (2015) and Bräutigam and Zhang (2013) – implies that the former is essentially interested in natural resources. Its actions in Africa, therefore, are seen as steps towards accessing the continent's rich natural resource base. Some

cases (e.g. Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Sudan, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Malawi, Ghana, Ethiopia and Angola) have been well studied. In contrast, although French-speaking countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo have been examined in this context, little research has been carried out on others, most notably Cameroon (but see Bakia, 2014; Tehna et al., 2015; Weng et al., 2015).

Most studies on Chinese–African cooperation seem to focus on China's quest for natural resources without any reference to the history of their relations (Plate, 2008; Jansson, 2009; Wenzel, 2010). None of the above-mentioned studies capture the long history of China's presence in Africa. In the case of Cameroon, investigations of the first contacts between Mao Zedong and Félix Moumié before Cameroon's independence reveal that China provided a host of social investments (a dam, agriculture, numerous buildings). This took place before a shift in its interactions with Cameroon, which created new opportunities for Chinese mining investments. The aim of this paper is to build on these issues.

The paper analyses relations between China and Cameroon, focusing on the former's progressive spatialisation strategy in the latter. It then examines contemporary Sino–Cameroonian relations and the role mineral resource extraction has played within this relationship. The paper argues that China has tactically interacted

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with Cameroon in recent years in order to gradually move from a peripheral to a more central position, accomplished through intensification of diplomatic efforts and social investments.

In the context of economic and diplomatic ties, geological resources represent a small portion of China's presence in Cameroon at present. There have been noticeable Chinese investments in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in the country but at the time of writing, no Chinese mining company was operating on a large scale in Cameroon. China's interest and active involvement in Cameroon, however, seems likely to shift in future years, which could completely change dynamics in the mining sector.

2. Methodology

Mining is a very volatile sector in which mergers and acquisitions take place very often. Moreover, the targets of individual mining companies change regularly, in response to fluctuations in commodity prices and shifting investor interests.

In sub-Saharan Africa, local communities affected by large-scale mining typically engage in subsistence agriculture (manioc, maize, groundnuts, yam, cocoyam, vegetables, coffee, and cocoa) and livestock rearing (cattle, poultry, goat, sheep, and swine). Inhabitants also pursue secondary economic activities such as ASM, transport, subsistence trade, hunting, and fishing. In the case of Cameroon, artisanal and small-scale gold mining has become an important activity for riverine communities. The intensive capital orientation of new investors coupled with the progressive mechanisation of operations has discouraged many people from getting involved in mining. However, there are still a number of determined individuals who are committed to pursuing this activity; mostly women and youths, they are mainly engaged in pure artisanal mining, known as *Nguéré* in Cameroon's Eastern Region. Only a small number of adult men are involved, serving as middlemen between communities or as local administrators.

For this research, interviews were carried out with key actors involved in the country's mining sector. Three Chinese operators, along with two Cameroonian investors, were interviewed, along with local officials of CAPAM (*Cadre d'Appui et de Promotion de l'Artisanat Minier* – Support Framework for Small-Scale Mining), a project funded by the Government of Cameroon and launched in 2003, to promote and forge joint-venture agreements with Western and Asian companies for the benefit of ASM development in Cameroon (MINMIDT, 2011). In Bétaré-Oya and Colomine, in the Eastern Region, 37 workers from Chinese firms were interviewed. The data gathered from these interviews were reinforced with analysis of secondary sources, specifically newspaper articles and the scholarly literature.

3. Analysis of findings

The findings presented and discussed here were gathered over four separate visits to Eastern Cameroon, carried out between March 2013 and December 2015. The research was undertaken in the following mining areas: Colomine, Garoua Boulay, and Bétaré-Oya. From the capital, Yaoundé, the nearest mine sites (Bétaré-Oya and the surrounding area) are located approximately 800 km away.

3.1. China–Cameroon relations in context

Although often overlooked, there is a lengthy and rich history of African–Chinese relations, which can be traced back several centuries. The most frequently discussed early interactions are the seven sea voyages by the Chinese Admiral Zheng He who journeyed from Nanjing (China) to Mombasa (Africa) during the Ming Dynasty in the 15th century. The Horn of Africa was the main

area that he visited but he also sailed with his fleet to different coastal locations, including Madagascar and parts of Northern and Eastern Africa (Li, 2015). At that time, the main interest was trade. The fleet left Nanjing loaded with silk, ceramics, pottery, and copper coins and it returned with spices, fruits, and rare and exotic fauna, such as China's first giraffe, which was transported from Somalia.

Cameroon belongs to a more recent generation of African countries interacting with China. In comparison, Cameroon has much longer-standing contacts with Europe, dating back to the 15th century. In 1884, Germans annexed “Kamerun” and colonised it until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. At the Berlin Conference, the “winners” of WWI (France and Great Britain) took control of the country, dividing it into two parts, Cameroun and Cameroons, respectively. Each was administered separately by UN Trusteeship until French Cameroun gained independence on 1 January 1960 (UN, 1958). On 1 October 1961, after a referendum, British Cameroonians decided to unite with the Republic of Cameroon, leading to the establishment of the Federal Republic of Cameroon. China first established a presence in the country shortly before its independence.

3.2. Early chinese interactions

China's present-day relations with Cameroon date back to its early engagements with Cameroun's revolutionary party, the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC). An opposition party based in the coastal and western regions of French Cameroun, first contacts between the UPC and the PRC occurred on the eve of the country's independence in the midst of its immense struggle against the French trusteeship system. The purpose of this struggle was highlighted very clearly by the conciliatory UPC leader, Um Nyobè, at the time: to obtain the “fundamental freedoms [. . .] and the independence to which we must press forward [. . .]” (Mbembé, 1996, p.328). Champions of Cameroun's UPC nationalist movement attended the Afro–Asian People's Solidarity Conference in 1957 in the context of growing differences in the ideological interpretation of Marxism–Leninism by Communist China and Russia. The Chinese criticized Russia (USSR) for its lack of temerity in fighting the West, and even more for adopting the Western coexistence doctrine. Communist China started claiming leadership over the Communist world. Despite the Sino–Soviet rivalry at the time, both countries managed to broker an agreement on the war in Cameroon, backing UPC militants (Ogunsanwo, 1974).

The president of the UPC, the Marxist Félix Roland Moumié, travelled to China to participate in the 1958 Solidarity Conference. At this time, he was conversing with both the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC). Moumié received from Mao Zedong a copy of his work, *Problems of strategy in the guerrilla war against Japan*, in a bid to help him carve out a strategy in his own war for independence against French-dominated forces in Cameroon (Power et al., 2012). Some UPC militants who were trained in China (George, 2014) were already prepared to challenge the French colonial system, even when the fight took a violent turn in 1959 (Mbembé, 1996). The PRC supported the UPC's campaign, and offered official Chinese recognition immediately after independence. The links of the PRC to the UPC – which, in addition to China, was supported by other Marxist regimes in Africa – probably motivated the newly-declared government at independence to establish diplomatic relationships with Western-oriented Taipei/Taiwan (ROC) instead of communist Beijing (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012).

Before official ties, which began on 19 February 1960, a government delegation from Taipei attended the independence ceremony on 1 January 1960 in Yaoundé (Tseng, 2008). The ROC's cooperation with the newly-independent state of Cameroon was short-lived, however, lasting only until 1971. Over that period, four

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