

THE CHINESE IN INFORMAL TRADE IN YAOUNDÉ-CAMEROON: ANALYSIS
OF THEIR SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION AND THEIR INTEGRATION
(1971-2018)

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Abstract

This work focuses on the informal trade of Chinese in Yaoundé. Based on oral sources, selective bibliography and on participative observations, this article shows that the presence of Chinese traders in Yaoundé has contributed to a large extent to the amelioration of the living conditions of the Cameroonian population. Even though, the installation of the Chinese has also led to the problem of social interactions. The Chinese are not easily integrating and inserting themselves into the host society, whereas their commercial activities are liable to put them in a « face-to-face » situation and relation of exchange with members of the same society.

Keywords: informal trade, Chinese, insertion, integration, Yaoundé.

LES CHINOIS DANS LE COMMERCE INFORMEL À YAOUNDÉ-CAMEROUN:
ANALYSE DE LEUR APPORT SOCIO-ECONOMIQUE ET DE LEUR INTÉGRATION
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Résumé

Cet article porte sur le commerce informel des Chinois à Yaoundé. En s'appuyant sur des sources orales, sur une bibliographie sélective et sur l'observation participative, l'article montre que le commerce informel des Chinois a impacté les conditions de vie et entraîné des changements positifs dans le quotidien des populations de Yaoundé. Cependant, leur installation pose le problème des interactions sociales ou des relations d'ouverture. Les commerçants Chinois tardent à se greffer dans la société d'installation, alors que

la pratique de leurs activités les mettent tous les jours dans un rapport de face à face, d'échanges avec les autochtones.

Mots clés : commerce informel, Chinois, insertion, intégration, Yaoundé.

Introduction

In 1971, Cameroon and China established diplomatic relations. These relations have led to fruitful cooperation in various fields, to a sound communication on national issues that has enabled the China-Cameroon relationship to progress. The mutual trust between the two countries fostered ties which led to the signing of several cooperation agreements that facilitated the arrival and establishment of more Chinese citizens in Cameroon (Souleymanou Amadou, 2009, p. 46). In order to diversify its partners and thus reduce the poverty rate of their people (Boullenois, 2020, p. 51), Chinese companies and their population began to shift towards the emerging Southern States. In 39 years, the current President of Cameroon has visited China five times, and Chinese leaders and business people have also visited Cameroon, thus consolidating and binding the relationship between the two countries. However, local people have welcomed and approved the installation and the presence of Chinese and their products since they have contributed to revamp the face of declining purchasing powers and incomes in Yaoundé. In fact, since the beginning of the 2000s, the Chinese are heavily investing in the informal economy and in large cities of Cameroon their presence is seen through the numerous Chinese shops that sell products coming straight from China at affordable prices.

The informal economy is the part of any economy that is neither taxed nor monitored by any form of government. Comprising activities that have market value and would add to tax revenue and GDP if they were recorded, informal economy is a globally widespread phenomenon (Deléchatand Medina, 2020, p. 54). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), about 2 billion workers, or 60 percent of the world's employed population ages 15 and older, spend at least part of their time in the informal sector. The informal economy is informal because formal arrangements, including laws and regulations, are not, or not sufficiently, applied, observed or applicable (ILO, 2015, p. 2). In fact, informal trade means the trading in goods and services in the informal sector by an informal trader in a public road or public place. In Yaoundé, as in other parts of Cameroon, the streets have become the preferred place for the distribution of Chinese products. The neighborhoods of Yaoundé, travel agencies, the passenger train operating between North and South have become popular areas for the flow of Chinese products. Due to the importance given to Cameroon by China, a study on the involvement of Chinese in the informal sector in Cameroon in general and in the town of Yaoundé in particular seems relevant to understand one aspect of China's power strategy in Africa. The main questions of our analysis are the following: how did the Chinese business people and traders deploy themselves in the informal sector in Yaoundé between the years 1971 and 2018?; what are the impacts of their activities on the socio-economic environment of the Cameroonian capital city?; what are the difficulties they face in the insertion and integration process in Yaoundé? This study is in the field of economic and social history which makes it possible to report on activities rarely considered as transnational of a part of the Chinese population in Cameroon and also to

highlight how the informal sector can also be linked to building transnational networks of Chinese living abroad. The analysis is based on the organization theory of Crozier and Friedberg. This theory is important to understand the workings and evolution of the organization of Chinese informal trade and the result of the strategic actions of the Chinese traders. Our target in this work is to show that in the early 1970s, the Chinese have contributed to densify the economy in Yaoundé through their investment in informal sector.

I. Literature review

Given the scarcity of documentation on the Chinese in Africa, the objectives of this study have been addressed in many other domains and approaches in social sciences like economics, geography and sociology.

China is even presented by François Lafargue as an African power (Lafargue, 2005). To achieve this position of power, it deploys several seduction strategies including the strategy of "soft power" (Nye, 2000) which led its leaders to favour their pragmatic influence and pertinence in the face of competition with other powers. The book written by Emmanuel Ma Mung (2000) is both a summary presentation of Chinese migration and a very current thinking on the process of its transformation by her diaspora. According to Emmanuel Ma Mung the Chinese Diaspora is built around an entrepreneurial center whose activities are "strongly connected" with the "economic organisation in which the identity dimension is predominant", therefore warranting its influence and success in African economies which are not well structured.

Recent studies of writers such as Harry Broadman (2006) analysed the flow of trade between these two sides indicating that African exports to Asia fell of recent making it the third largest trading partner of African countries (27%) after the EU (32%) and the US (29%).

The works of He and Shi (2010) forecast mainly on the implication of China in the development of Africans. He explains that "the positive impact of the presence of the Chinese in African's development would be limited in the long-run because of an enormous outbreak of economic and social conflicts between the Chinese and Africans". Other authors such as François Wassouni (2011) and Olivier Mbambia (2011) went into the depth of discussion on the relations between China and Francophone Africa. In their view, they have developed an influential link that bind the most edifying partners on cultural, diplomatic and economic sectors. Their work is a real study on the dynamics of recent relations between China and Francophone Africa and it is an approach from an African perspective on the reality of China's commitment and explains the role played by China in Africa.

Following the works of Ofofode (2008) and Tsafack (2014), since the year 2000s, commercial exchanges between China and Africa have experienced a sensitive increase. The Sino-African Commerce which was nearly negligible in the beginning of the 1980s has grown significantly due to the fact that Africa is a rich continent that has a variety of natural resources. This should however not be considered as the only reason for the presence of Chinese in the world's international commercial scene but also the price of the Chinese products which is comparatively lower than those of the Western partners.

In view of this literature made, we note that many works have addressed the question of the Chinese presence in Africa and Cameroon. These works analyze the real causes of Chinese migration and the economic activities that interest these Asians in Africa in general. However, none of these works addresses the Chinese informal trade. This justifies the choice of this subject.

2. Method

As part of this work, we will use two methods of scientific investigation. The first is to collect oral data in the field and the other will involve the consultation of written and published documents relating to Chinese immigration and the Cameroonian informal economic sector.

Oral sources occupy a very important place in African historiography. In this sense, interviews were conducted in the city of Yaoundé and the concerned were the Chinese, street vendors and other informal sector actors dealing with Chinese products. These Chinese vendors with other players in the informal sector and the categorization of the informal economies have facilitated data collection because with each informant consulted, we knew exactly where to conduct the interview. The interviews were mostly conducted with an interview guide and most of our interviews were recorded using a smart phone. For others, we only took notes because the informants refused the recording of interviews, especially hawkers and street vendors who always thought we were government officials sent to make an inquiry about them. Ten people were interviewed. The choice of these informants was made according to their socio-professional status, their nationality, their age and their residence.

Written data are divided into two groups namely primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of archival documents and secondary sources in turn are composed of books, Newspaper articles, Ph.D. thesis, "memoire de DEA" and Masters that are more or less closely related to the subject of study. These documents were consulted in University of Ngaoundere including the University central library. In the town of Ngaoundere, we consulted the works at the African knowledge Sharing Centre (AKSC) and the municipal library.

As part of this work, observations in Yaoundé markets enabled us to have an idea of the degree of investment of the Chinese in informal sector in Yaoundé and the socio-economic impacts of their activities in the milieu. We had to move while behaving as full customers and this enabled us to speculate on the prices of Chinese goods in our local market. Moreso, the participant observation has been of great importance to the realisation of this project because it permitted the establishment of a link between the sources and real facts.

After collecting the data (written and oral), it is left to compile and put them together to compare and analyse, whereby the essence of our present study lies. Due to the approach and method of study which is inscribed in the long term, it was necessary to adopt a method of mainly ageing analysis. It therefore enabled us to compute the data and information on time. We used the multidisciplinary approach with regard to this situation and it consisted in conducting our work while associating history with other social sciences. The use of sociology as a human science has allowed us to study the organisation of work and the level of integration of Chinese traders in Yaoundé. The economic sciences

have allowed us to analyse the behaviour of the Chinese, the deployment of their informal trade and measure the socio-economic implications of China's informal activities in Yaoundé's economy.

3. Findings and Discussions

3.1. The presence of Chinese with economic ambitions (1971-2018)

The first diplomatic relations between China and Cameroon were signed on the 26th of March 1972. The two official visits of president Ahidjo, respectively in 1973 and 1977, was an appraisal of the importance of these socio-economic ties that could bond the two nations. The China-Cameroon cooperation has considerably evolved of recent due to the presence multiple bilateral agreements. As outlined by Wassouni:

To understand the Chinese presence in Cameroon, it is important to look at the history of relations between China and this African country. The evolution of these relations can be analysed in three stages: the period of distance and suspicion (1960-1972), that of detente (1973-1982) and finally that of multidimensional exchanges" (1982 to present days) (Wassouni, 2010, p. 97).

In March 26, 1973, President Ahmadou Ahidjo trampled Chinese soil for the first time where he said in response to Zou Enlai, the then Chinese Premier of China, that:

We are pleased to tread, for the first time, the soil of this country of civilization. For thousands of years, this great country that is not only great because of its geographic and human dimensions or weight in increasing legitimacy in the international society but also because of the outstanding contribution of the qualities of its valiant people, enabled her to bring a heritage of world civilization (Ahmadou Ahidjo, 1975, p. 1380).

Thus, President Ahmadou Ahidjo, through this visit, laid a solid foundation that he judged very helpful on the mutual interest in signing a trade and economic cooperation agreement between the two nations (Ahmadou Ahidjo, 1964: 131). When President Paul Biya came to the highest office on the 6 November 1982, relations between China and Cameroon seemed to be one of those major priorities. This is noticeable during his multiple visits to China: 1987, 1993, 2003, 2003, 2006 and 2011 (Souleymanou Amadou, 2009, p. 94). These are the last three visits of the Head of State that will accelerate the China-Cameroon cooperation. Cameroon, which had established her first cooperation relations with China in 1971, now stands as a true dynamic field of observation of China in the African context. In 2004, some major Cameroonian newspapers alarmists outlined a stigmatising tone on the installation of Chinese traders in Derb Omar a quarter in Casablanca Morocco shopping district (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2009, p. 13.). Then the following year, Mauritanian and the Cameroonian daily newspapers went digging the same trench by using abusive metaphors for the invasion of Chinese citizens in our local economic tissue.

Everywhere in Africa, in central districts or close to city centers, the Chinese national initiatives like bazaars actually emerge, offering a wide range of cheap products made in China. According to the first Counselor of the Chinese Embassy in Yaoundé quoted in the daily *Mutations* of 27 March 2013: out of the vast majority of Chinese residents in Cameroon, about 4,000 of them undergo commercial activities for a living. The activities of these merchants of the Middle Kingdom have significantly contributed to increasing trade between China and Cameroon to bring the 1.8 billion dollars (about 800 billion F.CFA) in

2012, against 170 million (about 85 billion FCFA) only in 2000¹. Despite their small numbers, the Chinese have acquired a very high profile in the city of Yaoundé on their commercial activities. Chinese traders are more visible than their Lebanese counterparts, melted long ago in the African landscape. In Cameroon, the Chinese informal trade is concentrated in the big Cities like Yaoundé and Douala, where they supply local traders who re-sell these products in other parts of the capital, other parts of the country and sometimes within countries in the sub-region.

3.2. Commercial informal sectors invested by Chinese business people and traders in Yaoundé

The deployment of these Chinese business people and traders in the informal economic sector in Yaoundé enables the perception of diverse and multiple commercial activities exercised by the Chinese on one side, and on the other side, a rich wide range and brand of varied commercialised Chinese commodities in the arteries of the town of Yaoundé by Cameroonian traders and business people.

In Yaoundé, as in other Cameroonian metropolies, the Chinese impose their products to the point where certain Cameroonians have finished by adopting the term « *chinois* », to design a shoe or any other article coming from China. In Yaoundé, Chinese stalls, stores, shops and even warehouses are almost everywhere. In Yaoundé, the Chinese shops are almost everywhere along the main markets and even in the streets. Chinese shops in Yaoundé are located in places like Ekounou, Mokolo, Etoa-Meki, Mvog-Betsi, Mvog Ada, Biyemassi Acaccia, “*Rond point Express*”, Nkoldongo, “*Marché Central*” etc. The number of individual Chinese here in Yaoundé is really overwhelming today and their numbers far exceeds the number of business outlets owned and managed by them. While in some shops there is only one Chinese manager assisted by his brother and thereafter there is one or two Cameroonians employed in there. However, in other large shops, the Chinese are in number two or three. They work in family in their various shops, waiting to find an available commercial space to expand the family business to make more turnovers. Every Chinese businessman imports goods from China himself or through a partner who, according to certain intermediaries, is a member of their family installed in their country.

In these shops, products like electronics (music systems, TV sets), gas plates are spread over various departments. A little to the back of the store other products such as flowers, shoes for men and women and children, decorative objects, tables, children toys etc. are found. At the exterior, some white chairs commonly used in bars are exposed, small tables; suit-cases travel bags, basins for newborn babies. In short, it is almost a whole market that is concentrated there and on each commodity selling prices are listed to easy transactions. At the area called “*descente Tsinga-Elobi*”, a Chinese shop is well situated there and it displays its superb allure along the roadside. Undoubtedly, the artificial flowers exposed to the outside of this shop are very attractive and we can also see products in large numbers inside the bazaar. It is a vast shop which is not only specialised in selling flowers as one might think from afar in the outset (Fankam, 2004, p. 22.).

¹ Quoted from “Mutation” newspaper, 13th of March 2013.

<https://www.investiraucameroun.com/index.php/commerce/2703-4068-les-4000-chinois-installes-au-cameroun-font-du-commerce-selon-l-ambassade-chinoise-a-Yaounde/amp>, consulted on the 5th of May 2019.

The positive influence (lower cost of living) of products made in China is felt strongly here, with a question concerning "women's shoes", however. These shoes have hit the market in Yaoundé. The lists of goods from the countries of South-East Asia present in Cameroonian markets are long and constantly changing. These items are offered for sale in a hierarchical and descending order. Chinese importers channel these products to Cameroon through the transport process of containerisation. On arrival, the classical economic Channel of distribution is well respected as the wholesalers sell the products in wholesale and semi-wholesale to retailers who sell it to the final consumers. The Chinese business peoples themselves and the traders exchange with the "*sauveteurs*" who walk on the various streets and markets of Yaoundé to sell in a clandestine manner.

Moreover, the majority of Chinese traders have to invest their own capital to the housing rents and the store rents. After which a minimum fund would be required for the import of goods to start their various businesses in their host countries. Some of them originally had that capital, but still yet others had to obtain credits, aid and even grants from friends and family members to achieve a reasonable social capital for the business. Their common goal is to have the material and financial resources to launch their trade. Others have brought both personal funds and borrowed funds. When borrowing is from the family and friends the pressure is lower on these business people; but when it has been borrowed from a bank, there is an obligation of results so they are more severe and determined in their actions to repay on short term notice to strive for real financial independence. But however most of the money borrowed for trade in foreign countries by these business people is taken from the People's Bank of China.

Regarding the choice of articles, it should be noted that they choose themselves, according to the local market, customs and traditions. Three Chinese who requested anonymity said they do not choose their own products. Examples of responses are: "according to the local market", "cheap prices", "according to the taste and fashion of the customers", and even through "observing".

As for the price of Chinese goods that seem to defy all competition from both European and local producers, this may be related to foreign exchange. It is true that China has more than any state currency (its reserves are estimated at 1200 billion) but more than half of these huge amounts of reserves comes from the United States largely. While some traders sell at a loss, it is for the sake of selling its stocks than anything. A trader sells a lot and cheap but it is the quantity that counts, like a supermarket chain. If Chinese traders claim to have received support from their government, it is more out of concern for its citizens and to find markets for products made in China unsalable on the domestic market to generate foreign exchange, easier to get to the other side of the Atlantic and Western Europe. Traders send spare parts of machinery, some which are assembled on site, in the villas and housing. But the part which is destined for sales in Yaoundé is usually very small.

3.3. The socio-economic contribution of the Chinese informal commercial activities in Yaoundé

Contrary to what many opinions think, the Chinese presence in Yaoundé was to improve the living conditions of the population and lead to other positive changes in their daily lives. This long-standing work of China has led many observers to judge this work to compare it with that of the former colonizers.

3.3.I. The reduction of unemployment rate of youths in Yaoundé

The Chinese presence in Yaoundé through their economic dynamism has enabled the opening shops, display centers, warehouses, health centers just to name a few, which have greatly contributed to reduce the high unemployment rate of young people in the city as it has offered opportunities both directly and indirectly. Although characterised to have harmful effects on the economy, these informal activities of the Chinese has however enabled the presence of many Cameroonians in their shops, thus alleviating poverty and improving considerably in the living standards of the local population. Chinese traders who increasingly move into the city of Yaoundé are also very much compelled to recruit local Cameroonian labour to solve the problems of communication and understanding with their customers in their various businesses. So, when you go to the Chinese Embassy in Yaoundé, we also find Cameroonian employees who perform various tasks in their offices there. The Cameroonian authorities, signed all the necessary cooperation agreements with China in view to increasing to increase economic possibilities and also to increase rate in hiring local people (high demand for local labour), in the actions of the Chinese business people in the Cameroonian informal economic sector which is a real alternative for employment today.

These employees have a separate status and benefit from consideration from their Chinese boss. In many shops, they took the place of an assistant and quite naturally ran the store, when the boss is away. In most cases, they seemed to form a relatively cohesive team. Chinese shops usually employ one or two others involved in the sale and handling of the business. Inside the shops, there are often two or three Chinese: the boss, his wife and another person usually presented as a young cousin. The Chinese staff does not occupy the center stage in the stalls of Yaoundé. Their withdrawal is concerning the place of negotiation mainly due to their inability to communicate with their customers as with employees. They are limited to approving the price that the employee will deliver slowly in French. Far from ideal, this system promotes misunderstandings and conflicts between retailers and employees, Cameroonian and Chinese wholesalers.

The number of Cameroonian employees, traders and security officers assisting the Chinese in their business seem on the whole satisfied with their working conditions, in comparison with what they have experienced with Cameroon bosses. They point to the fact that they are properly and regularly paid and respected by their employers. Their monthly salary is between 40 and 50,000 CFA francs. They ensure both the sale of products and monitor the store and act as interpreters. It is also noteworthy that the massive presence of Chinese products in the Yaoundé markets gives small traders and retailers employment that help them to provide for their families as highlighted by Bernard Onambele, a young merchant Yaoundé-Mokolo market, who says that "*we live in trade of these Chinese products because they are cheaper and attract the poor who do not have a big purchasing power*" (Bernard Onambele, reported by Souleymnou Amadou, 2009, p. 133).

In almost all quarters, in railway transport stations even inside the moving train agencies of public transportations buses in Yaoundé, there are also many Cameroonians those sale agents and sell products of traditional medicine and modern Chinese to customers travelling through these agencies. Among those who benefit from China's informal economy in Yaoundé, include small street vendors who serve as intermediaries between Chinese merchants and Chinese store owners that have two or three employees who also serve as interpreters.

The hawkers (“*sauveteurs*”) who engage themselves in the exercise of commercial activities in the arteries of the town of Yaoundé are in large majority the youths and most of them are not professionals in the activity. They have no reliable training or education in the profession of commerce and trade. Most of them have another main activity or another training that does not provide them a lot revenue to enable them have better living conditions, feed and cater for their family and ultimately to enable them progress significantly in the activity which they were destined to exercise professionally (Baron, 2012). This type of traders has simply deduced methods to seize the opportunity and induce in trade through the presence of the Chinese or/and Chinese goods imported by Cameroonian-based business people.

This given constellation has permitted the resurgence and emergence of a new economic business environment which has been seized by the youths and can be clearly witnessed through their manner of quickly adapting to new market trends. They resell Chinese merchandise by searching what would interest the customers in a given place and time period (Baron, 2012). Their habit and behaviour is very innovative in terms of the business strategy applied in selling their products, spaces covered and the creation of needs or the satisfaction of their customer’s needs.

They develop selling strategies while valorising the quality of the goods in order to demarcate themselves from other sellers in a very competitive business environment wherein they circulate and exercise their commercial activities. Most of them are from Yaoundé, they profit, contrary to the Chinese, from the warmth confidence that their customers have in them in the market.

They have thus become indispensable in supplying not only products that are destined to meet the needs of current consumption (plates, electronic appliances, electric (material, furniture etc.), but also to enable the circulation of fashionable products like shoes, clothes, cosmetic products and accessories) at very moderate and affordable prices. Through their activities, they influence the consumption habits of the local poor population and most of the times they succeed in distorting consumer’s sovereignty. Though dwindling in the business, these products presented permits the poorer social classes and households with the middle class citizens, to buy new loins, new shoes for ceremonies or feasts or simply to dress their children for school resumptions.

3.3.2. The presence of a variety of a wide range and variety of products on the markets in Yaoundé.

The novelty of Chinese products in Africa is relative, since sometimes countries that maintained diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China, dating back before independence and their presence of those wide ranges of products is massive. In addition to the medical teams and certain agricultural and industrial projects, Chinese cooperation then included the gift of manufactured goods that could be sold locally to finance development projects (Kernen and Guive, 2014, p. 114).

This was the case in Cameroon where Chinese products have been marketed in the mid-1980s in the markets of major cities, state import and marketing structures. Trade between China and Africa will be further strengthened in the countries of the CFA franc zone at least, as a result of the devaluation of January 1994. By increasing the price of European imports, devaluation increases the competitiveness of Chinese products. The late 1990s corresponds to the Golden Age of China-Africa trade. China becomes major import source for most of the African countries in general and Cameroon in particular from the

early 2000s. "China's moment" (Kernen and Guive Mohammad Khan, 2014, p. 114) of the extraversion of African economies, has however, marked a profound break because of the extent of the upheavals occasioned on how to consume and on import volumes. Attracted by business opportunities, Chinese products importers saw their numbers increase rapidly, resulting in increased competition and pressure on prices. Therefore, beyond the mere fabric, Chinese products are gradually becoming more accessible to consumers in Cameroon (Kernen and Guive Mohammad Khan, 2014, p. 114).

According Kernen and Guive Mohammad Khan (2014: 114), for about fifteen years, there has been a significant increase in trade between China and African countries. Sino-African trade amounts in 2012 to 198.4 billion US dollars¹. In 2009, China became the largest trading partner on the African continent. To date, work on the presence of China in Africa, has led to perceptions that Sino-African trade could be analysed in terms of threats and opportunities for the development of the continent and researchers are still struggling to understand the micro-social consequences of their presence and their trading. If the focus is generally on Chinese imports from Africa, we want to point the profound transformations brought here this time by the availability of a wide range of Chinese products in the markets in Yaoundé. These products made in China are readily available even on peripheral markets of Yaoundé (remote districts and surrounding areas of the city capital), these products now fall into the daily life of a significant part of the Cameroonian population.

In reality, the new accessibility offered by the low prices of Chinese products helps to bring Africans into a mass consumption era, which is in itself a real revolution (Kernen and Guive Mohammad Khan, 2014, p. 112.). Limited to Chinese shops already fairly investigated, importers and African retailers play a central role in this setting of circulation of products within international boundaries. If some go and buy directly in Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Yiwu, they are much more likely to head for the port of Douala or even from Chinese shops. These Cameroonian traders of Chinese goods involved with blows of containers, bags or of backpacks, illustrates that the dissemination of Chinese products in the markets of Yaoundé and its environs are very much guaranteed.

Every day the "Mokolo" and "Mvog Mbi" markets are booming. Customers flock to the stalls and in the many commercial establishments bordering the market. Thus, the Chinese shops, known for its large selection of shoes, are never empty. All are engaged in a buying often leading to the acquisition of two or three pairs of shoes since the prices are readily affordable.

If the commercial system set up by the Chinese take the appearances of ethnic business where all the actors belong to the same community and monopoly elapsing Asian products, is a reality, the situation is more complex. Cameroonians are likely increasingly selling goods from China and those who, at first, were employed by the Chinese set up their own business, benefiting from the expertise and networks of their former employer. At a street corner, a small street vendor has inscribed on a wooden board, sunglasses and Chinese mobile phones to customers. In the evening, groups of young "*sauveteurs* and *apacheurs*" head to the "bars" of the capital to sell their products to sitting customers because bars in Yaoundé and environs

¹Data from the information office of the state council, "China–Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation", Beijing.

are real areas of agglomeration as they are always full all the time. They spend most of their time parading in bars to offer these Chinese products to customers.

These observations demonstrate the extension of products made in China in the Capital City of Yaoundé. The use of these products is viewed by many Cameroonians as evidence because of their attractive prices. Sometimes the prices are usually ten times cheaper than the European alternatives; they thus arouse a certain appeal from marginal and potential consumers and customers. Yet, the symbolic appropriation of these products gives them an eminently cultural character (Miller 1995, p. 141-161). In many cases, it is not the question to have or not to have, but rather to have what is considered to be in actual page (Kernen and Guive Mohammad Khan, 2014, p. 117).

3.4. The difficulties related to the integration of Chinese traders

The Chinese presence raises a lot of pre-occupations that makes new questions to arise. What type and kind of relationships do the Chinese establish with the local population in Yaoundé? This relationship, is it only economical or commercial? These relationships, didn't they go beyond the commercial framework to evolve socially and turning on the machine of social integration? The perspective of two groups with different cultural traits, poses very often, a form of adversarial relationships, a type of friendly relations with a lot of ambiguity

3.4.1. Timid relations between the Chinese and the local Yaoundé population

The Chinese are functioning in the logic of a "*Gemeinschaft*" ("community") social gathering of Tonnies (1997), which is German social relationship logic based on direct relationships and emotional characteristics of family groups, villages or communities. The "Community gathering logic borrows certain important aspects from the "*Gesellschaft*" ("society") social gathering that categorises social relationships with elements such as rationality and the manner of organisation. However, the Chinese residents in Yaoundé are in a certain "face-to-face" contact with the host society which expresses the full characteristics of a "*Gesellschaft*" society dominated by individualism, a society of people trading in goods. According to the British economist Adam Smith cited by Townies (1977) the social relationship between the two societies is one wherein where everyone is a trader. Every group in the society or the community is in search of gain and power. This is what explains the low intensity of social relations between them and the host population. In the game of trade, interactions are not really fluid on both sides. However, some interactions are noted though very timid and limit itself to trade. There is no visible or perceived relationship between the two societies that show that these ties may go above common business relationship. As such, they are tied in various forms with their country of origin than to the countries of migration and moreover, economic information is more strengthened with other poles of their diaspora.

This necessarily leads to changes in the societies where they are installed. This is how the Chinese remain folded on themselves, as they function in isolation in order to allow the construction of an essential community connection for the sustainability and the perenisation of the group's identity with practices based on ethnicity, lineage or geographical dialects. This explains the behaviour of the Chinese established in Cameroon, which is understood as a preservation reflex that involves maintaining their lifestyles in a

host society to enable its installation to seem as if they are in their original environment, manifested in neighbourhood relationships by constituting a circle of close friends, coming into contact with well identified members who kept in inside their group.

In the trade field, the Chinese retain their organisation in relation to the host society's autonomy, which allows them to pursue their economic reproduction through economic activities and not through other activities that may make them lose their identity. It seems as if it is this form of organisation which participates in the structuring of the Chinese population living in Yaoundé. So, they do not need to have strong links with the Cameroonian population, since Chinese enterprises retain all their internal autonomy as they sell and distribute only their products (products made in China). This form of autonomy therefore participates in the economic reproduction of their different social groups in activities and to their identical construction, which helps to persevere their social and economic wellbeing. This economic interdependence between the different communities and their societal way of organising themselves does not favour the growth of social cohesion which is utmost needed in the society wherein there are host. This manner of functioning opens doors for dishonesty and discomfort that arises between the Chinese themselves who function in distinct ethnic groups and same villages and also with the Cameroonian population.

3.4.2. Communication and sociability problems

In 2013, out of the over 3500 estimated Chinese, 2,500 reside in Douala and 1500 in Yaoundé¹, China's population is increasingly growing in Cameroon. This growth leads to an obligation of a massive co-existence between Cameroonians and the Chinese. In addition, communication between Chinese living in Yaoundé and Cameroonian customers is not always easy. The results of the survey conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation reported that 56% of Chinese respondents believe that communication with the Cameroonians is not easy. 90% of these Chinese immigrants are trying to understand the French language and 10% the English language (Reinhold Plate, 2005, p. 4).

However, their level of knowledge of the language is low and causes communication difficulties raised by 56% of the respondents. This difficulty in communication has often led to an allusive or suggestive fight related to the art or practice of public speeches between small Cameroon retailers (actors and operators of the informal economic sector) and their Chinese suppliers. Beya Zephirin, referring to the communication aspect between the Chinese themselves and the Cameroonian inhabitants in Yaoundé claimed that:

Nothing is known of them and it is difficult to communicate with the Chinese. The problem is already the language barrier because language is the vehicle of civilization when you don't not know the language it will be difficult to know the culture; it's been years that I live with them I never started a discussion with the Chinese. It even happens that the Chinese will move without greeting, they are there without being organised, when they close the shop they make a tunnel and they stay in them. Chinese must do communicational efforts (Interview with Beya Zephirin, July 3, 2019).

¹<https://www.investiraucameroun.com/commerce/2703-4068-les-4000-chinois-installes-au-cameroun-font-du-commerce-selon-l-ambassade-chinoise-a-Yaoundé> Accessed on August 24, 2019

More to that, Kombo Albert claimed in his point of view stating that:

The Chinese only see the money. If you bring money with you as soon as they see you, they are ready to talk with you; if this is not the case even if you talk to them they would be eager to reply. I see no effort on their part to speak French, they just take the words that are interesting to them; when they mingle with people it is often with young Cameroonian girls with whom they get acquainted to have talks every time and this with the sole aim to fill their knowledge of the language and if not so they take the services of an intermediary acting an interpreter (Interview with Kombo Albert, Yaoundé, June 15, 2019.).

To overcome this problem, the Chinese traders that settled in this city generally recruit young Cameroonians who help and assist in facilitating transactions and the various bargaining with both retail merchants with customers who are having the most difficulties to exchange and to be understood in the persistent bargaining over the cost products. One of these young workers of a Chinese shop says: *"Certainly, it was not easy to start to understand what they wanted or what they said, but staying around them all day have permitted us to rub shoulders with them and today we finally understand what they want"* (Interview with Defo Augustine, directed and conducted by Souleymanou Amdou, July 9, 2009.).

In terms of sociability, the Chinese living with people of different orders and race, reported from resident surveys of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation that 65.5% has a superficial friendship with Cameroonians. For some, they are exclusively based on professional relations while for others they are essentially linked to business relationships (Reinhold Plate, 2005, p. 9).

Furthermore, only 52% of those who responded to the question on their willingness to improve their relations with Cameroon, and results from the surveys that 48% (Reinhold, 2005, p. 9) of the Chinese from their past experiences in their country about Cameroonian citizens have no interest in attaching themselves or really collaborating with the Cameroonians because they claim the Cameroonians are very dishonest and describe them as very cunning. For others, language difficulties are a major handicap to consolidate a friendly relation with Cameroonians.

Regarding the possibility of a conjugal relationship between Chinese living in these localities and Cameroonians in Yaoundé, 81% of Chinese respondents are married to their Chinese counterparts. For 9% unmarried, the possibility of a conjugal relationship with Cameroon or Cameroonian is zero. Respondents to justify this situation, evoke the following reasons: cultural differences, and poverty level of Cameroonians. Despite the marital incompatibility, the question that could depict is how are those Chinese living in Cameroon? How do they adapt to the Cameroonian social context with all these differences? To these interrogations, Bei Yin Max, owner of the Chinese store based in Yaoundé in "Marché central" since 2005, replied: *"It is very difficult for us to adapt to the Cameroonian culture and fashion, but we are making efforts to do so."* (Interview with Bei Yin Max, Yaoundé, June 20, 2019).

This testimony reflects the difficulty, reluctance, distrust observed by the Chinese to open to Cameroonian culture. 94% (Reinhold Plate, 2005: 9) of these Chinese who live in Cameroon in general and in Yaoundé in particular consume mainly Chinese food which they cook themselves or they order it from local Chinese restaurants around the arteries of Yaoundé. In terms of dress, 95% of the Chinese wear

only clothes made in China, purchased for from China and others on the spot in Cameroon from Chinese shops (Reinhold Plate, 2005, p. 9).

From the above, one can conclude that this kind of attitude is likely to create social distance with the local population. It is in this sense that Guy Mbangué in his experience with the Chinese living and trading in Yaoundé stated that: “We have very little contact with them, we are forbidden to converse with their wives, for fear of retaliation by them, life is not easy. They live and sleep eight to ten in numbers in a small two or three-room apartment, and often sleep two or three on a small mattress on a place”(Interview with Guy Mbangué, conducted and directed by Souleymanou Amadou, July 12, 2009).

These words of Guy Mbangué, a trader of Cameroonian nationality selling mattresses in Mokolo market in Yaoundé, suggest that the living conditions of the Chinese people in Cameroon are sometimes very deplorable. According to reports from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation, 84% of Chinese occupy multiple housing where rent is paid from the contributions of each of the persons accommodated. The rest of the rent is paid either by the employer, then the Chinese government that sends them to Cameroon (Reinhold, 2005: 9).

4. Recommendations

To optimise business and the informal economy in China, it should be conducted at two levels: at Cameroon's informal sector and the level of Chinese traders. At the informal sector, it is important to reinvigorate this economic sector by financially supporting the players and framing it legally and politically. This is however a panacea in the fight against unemployment, boost Cameroon's economy and face unfair competition from Chinese traders.

With regard to Chinese traders in Yaoundé who are a closed community on itself, it is important to facilitate the integration of each socio-cultural group in line with the objective to accelerate the process of integration of Chinese traders in Yaoundé. It is also very important that the State of Cameroon who is based on the republican model of tolerance should instead try to develop the ideal type of republican integration based on the principles of separation of the public sphere and the private sphere and the primacy of individual rights over collective rights. Cultural differences are respected and are both practiced and manifested in privacy. This is through the famous principle of “secularism” that privileges no religion in the public space to ensure freedom of worship in the private areas. The republican model of integration ignores ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it was a question, in this work, to study the investment of Chinese migrants in the informal economy in Yaoundé. The migration of Chinese into the African continent is always described by many people as an “invasion” or an “incursion”. The excessive use of these terms favours an exaggerated perception of the Chinese presence in Africa which is very much characterised by a high level of mobility both geographically and occupationally. The immigration of Chinese into Africa has its roots from the Chinese international policy during the rule of Emperor Mao Zedong at the end of the 50s. During this period, the Communist ideology of Mao derived the Chinese towards Africa mainly for political reasons. The main leitmotiv of these movements was to forge a better solidarity with new independent African

countries, which in most cases were officially recognised officially as Sovereign states by the People's Republic of China.

From 1971, we have gradually witnessed the normalisation of the China-Cameroon relations through the exchange of diplomatic documents and the creation of an embassy. However, the strengthening of Cameroon's economic cooperation with China greatly influenced the course of these traders (Chinese and Cameroonian informal traders and business men). The Chinese first came accompanied with the installation of companies and Chinese workers on Cameroonian soil. This phenomenon gradually caused the arrival of Chinese traders in Yaoundé. Labour migration framed by Chinese enterprises and commercial migration created a particular favourable context for the development of the second. Most of the times, it can happen that at the end of any building contracts or infrastructural project in Yaoundé, Chinese engineers and workers usually obtain the right to remain in the territory and afterwards, they open shops in the perspectives of a professional socio-economic re-conversion.

In addition, many other sectors, dominated by Chinese products remain in the hands of local merchants. Chinese traders in Yaoundé occupy places of choices in all economic sectors of the capital and their integration however still remains silent. The importance of Chinese importations equally has an influence on the economy reason, because it offers new possibilities and opportunities to a good number of Cameroonian youths of working age group to enter into commercial activities. The presence of these Chinese business people and their imports, show the capacity of the Cameroonian youths to develop new trading habits in the context of an adverse political and economic environment in the economies today. It has also prompted the youths to capture the opportunities initiated by the installation of new economic operators and actors in the social and economic commercial scene. On the other side, the installation of a foreign community brings about the problematic of social interactions, relations of opening and integration. Much is awaited from these immigrants on their will to improve on their social relationships with the host societies. Moreover, the Chinese immigrants are still backing on teaching to the host society though the prevailing situations puts them into a "face-to-face" commercial and trading situation with the members of this same host societies.

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