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China–Cameroon relations: Fortunes and limits of an old political complicity

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Since the 1990s, the Sino-Cameroonian relationship has grown rapidly. Today, China plays a key role in Cameroon's economic development, particularly in regards to infrastructure projects. However, in the last few years, Yaoundé's partnership with Beijing has encountered an increasing number of obstacles. Behind the warm pro-China rhetoric, the Cameroonian government has become more willing to rebalance their country's external relations, in favour of both its traditional partners and other emerging economies.

Keywords: Cameroon–China relations; Cameroon–China trade relations; Cameroon foreign policy; Paul Biya

Introduction

China has for a long time invested much political and financial capital in Cameroon. After the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1971, the relationship has been dominated by the completion by Beijing of a handful of symbolic but visible projects and the regular exchange of delegations. As with many Sino-African economic partnerships, the Sino-Cameroonian one took off in the late 1990s and in the early 2000s.¹ Today, China is one of Cameroon's key partners in both trade and development, and particularly, infrastructure projects.

Concomitant to China's growing presence in Cameroon has been decreasing engagement with this country among Yaoundé's traditional partners. The decreased engagement from France, particularly after Nicolas Sarkozy's election as president in 2007, and other Western nations, has created, in Cameroon as elsewhere in Africa, more room for China to step in.² Political stability and the longevity of President Paul Biya's rule as well as the support of large segments of the Cameroonian elite have also contributed to facilitating Beijing's growing involvement in Cameroon's development strategy and international positioning.

However, Cameroon's deepening relationship with China has not completely weakened the role played by traditional partners and, arguably, politically, economically and culturally, the influence of these partners has remained to a large extent dominant. Moreover, in the last few years, Yaoundé's partnership with Beijing has encountered an increasing number of obstacles. Behind the warm pro-China rhetoric, the Cameroonian government seems to have become more willing to rebalance its country's external relations

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in favour of its traditional partners, its neighbours (such as Nigeria, Gabon and Congo) and other emerging economies able to contribute to Cameroon's development. The West's lasting influence on the Cameroonian elite as well as Yaoundé's growing concerns about the 'side-effects' of cooperation with China may lie behind this willingness. As a result, although China is today a key diplomatic and economic partner of Cameroon, it is far from exerting a decisive role in this country's foreign policy or development strategy.

This article, based both on a fieldwork conducted in Cameroon in January 2014 and on a critical review of the existing literature and media reports on this country's relationship with China, will first present a background of China–Cameroon relations, followed by an analysis of this relationship with regard to investment and trade. Finally, the paper will describe the sources of tension between the two countries to show how, despite the increased influence of China in Cameroon, it still does not compare with the influence of Cameroon's traditional Western and regional partners.

Background of Sino-Cameroonian relations

From 1971 to 1997, Sino-Cameroonian relations were mainly driven by Beijing's willingness to increase the number of its diplomatic allies and showcase its solidarity with the 'third world' and, to a lesser extent, Yaoundé's non alignment policy and hopes to loosen France's dominating influence on Cameroon's economy and foreign affairs.³ As with many other African countries, Cameroon's relations with China were initially politically significant but economically marginal.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between Cameroon and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in March 1971 and the end of any official link between Yaoundé and Taipei were important for both sides. For President Ahidjo in Cameroon, this took place just after, with the help of the French military, he had completely beheaded the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), a Marxist opposition movement that was trying to topple his increasingly authoritarian rule by force. With the opening of diplomatic relations, Beijing promised to stop supporting the rebel UPC organisation⁴ in exchange for gaining another ally in its fight against Taiwan at a critical time; later in 1971 the PRC replaced the ROC (Republic of China or Taiwan) as the sole representative of China in the United Nations.

Taking advantage of the Sino-Western rapprochement, Ahidjo visited China and met Mao Zedong in 1973: he was the first African president to travel to this country after the most chaotic part of the Cultural Revolution.⁵ Four years later, he paid another visit to China and met Hua Guofeng, Mao's first successor. In the following years several visible and symbolic infrastructure projects were launched in Cameroon, including the construction of a new Presidential Palace (Unity Palace) and a National Congress Hall (Palais des Congrès) in Yaoundé (inaugurated in 1977 and 1985, respectively). Additionally, a large hydroelectric project, the Lagdo dam in the north of the country, was financed with a \$75 million Chinese loan (completed in 1982). In 1972, the first trade agreement was signed (followed by a second signed in 2002), and in 1984, a cultural cooperation accord was concluded. In the same period of time, Beijing launched a medical assistance programme, turning Cameroon into a window for the rest of the continent. As early as 1975, it started to send Chinese medical teams and it offered to build two hospitals equipped with Chinese doctors, one in Mbalmayo, south of Yaoundé (which opened in 1975), and the other one in Guider, in the Northern Region (1976). This led to a very close partnership in the fight against malaria that took off not long after (see below). This later development was for a long time the most specific feature of Sino-Cameroonian cooperation.

Despite these actions, for China, Cameroon was apparently not a priority. A limited number of Chinese high-level delegations went to the country in the first 25 years after normalisation, the first one led by Vice-Premier Ms Chen Muhua in 1978 and the second one by State Councillor Zhang Jingfu in 1986. It was only in 1993 that China's Foreign Minister, then Qian Qichen, also State Councillor, visited Cameroon, followed two years later by Vice-Premier Li Lanqing. The relationship started to gain significance after Premier Li Peng's visit in 1997 when a politically significant agreement for the reciprocal protection and promotion of investments was signed, highlighting Beijing's intention to do more in Cameroon, and in Africa.

The 2000 turning point: economic cooperation takes the lead

However, the turning point in the Sino-Cameroonian relations was the first Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held in Beijing in 2000. Since that summit, bilateral trade and economic cooperation projects have rapidly increased and China's presence in this country has substantially deepened and diversified. In the same year, a China Trade Promotion Centre was created in Douala and, in 2002, Premier Zhu Rongji visited Cameroon and signed an ambitious 'agreement for economic and commercial cooperation', a framework accord 'specifying Chinese willingness to offer grants and loans to Cameroon as well as giving orientations to boost commercial exchanges'.⁶ In 2006, Cameroon was granted Approved Destination Status for Chinese tourism and, a year later, Hu Jintao became the first Chinese president to visit this country. During this visit, eight agreements were signed worth \$129 million, increasing technical and economic cooperation and including the construction of a gynaecological, obstetric and paediatric hospital in Douala as well as two primary schools. In return, according to some sources, China was able to secure its participation in the Cameroonian oil sector.⁷ In 2010, China Political People's Consultative Conference Chairman Jia Qinglin led a parliamentary delegation that allowed the signature of an additional eight cooperation agreements, including a 3.2 billion CFA (\$6.4 million) grant and an interest-free loan of the same amount. The following year, two other Chinese vice-premiers visited Cameroon: Hui Liangyu, in charge of agriculture, and Liu Yandong, responsible for education.

On the Cameroonian side, 2000 is also perceived as a turning point. From the beginning, Yaoundé played a very active role in the FOCAC, using this forum as a platform for promoting Cameroon's role in Sino-African relations as well as a closer bilateral partnership with Beijing.⁸ Biya has been a frequent visitor to China, having travelled five times to this country since 1982 when he gained office, including on three occasions since 2000 (2003, 2006 and 2011). His state visit to Beijing in July 2011 underscored the importance that he has vested in this relationship, which Biya described as 'exemplary' and, as a result, 'a model for the rest of the continent'.⁹ Praising China's 'crucial support' for Cameroon's economic development, Biya indicated that 'Chinese projects have a direct impact on the improvement of the socioeconomic conditions of our population and are highly appreciated by a large majority of the Cameroonian people', adding that 'China is among the most steadfast and faithful partners of our country'.¹⁰

Although relations are presented as 'mainly economic', Biya's last state visit to China, organised on the eve of the October 2011 presidential election, had a strong domestic political dimension, in that it highlighted the key role that China had acquired in Cameroon's development strategy.

Today, Cameroon's relationship with China is presented in Yaoundé as 'strategic'.¹¹ Chinese companies are involved in 70% of Cameroon's official 'structuring projects',

which are the key development and particularly infrastructure projects launched since the end of the 2000s. Among them are the Memve'ele Dam in the South region, expected to be operational by June 2017; the Lom Pangar Dam north of Bertoua, due to be completed in 2016; the Mekin hydroelectric power plant, expected to be operational in 2016; Douala's two-phase water projects (2014); the construction of 1500 low-income houses in Yaoundé (2014); the Yaoundé–Douala Highway (2017); and the Kribi deep-water port (2014). In addition, 90% of the road construction or restoration projects have been won and carried out by Chinese companies.¹² As a result, China has become Cameroon's main external creditor, as discussed further below.

This close economic partnership could not have been possible if it had not been supported by a strong political will on the Cameroonian side. Of course, mutual economic needs and interests have been key drivers of this new privileged partnership. China needs Cameroon's natural resources and raw materials (oil, cotton, timber and iron) and the latter needs the former's rapidly built and easily financed infrastructure. Nevertheless, political convergence has also spurred the emergence of this 'strategic partnership'.¹³ President Biya had clearly taken over and amplified his predecessor's intention to diversify Cameroon's partnerships, particularly since the late 1990s. As elsewhere in Africa and other parts of the developing world, this has expanded the room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis traditional partners and creditors.¹⁴ However, in Cameroon's case, diplomatic and political convergences have been deeper. China's anti-Western rhetoric has matched well with Cameroon's 'neutrality' on or, more accurately, lack of engagement in many international issues, as well as the opposition parties' often anticolonialist, anti-imperialist discourse. As seen in the debates of both the United Nations and the African Union, these inclinations have resulted in the two nations sharing very similar positions on a large number of international issues, from opposition to the American war in Iraq, to neutrality in the Syrian crisis and careful support for French intervention in Mali and the Central African Republic. In other words, China's international posture has well matched Cameroon's rather low-key and insular diplomacy. Moreover, domestically, relations with China were warming at the same time that Biya was seeking to prolong his rule, in the face of criticism from the West (and Cameroon's opposition party) regarding his country's human rights situation. Both China and Cameroon, it is clear, value a policy of non-interference in domestic affairs in their partnership.¹⁵ This diplomatic balancing act is reflected in some of the key features of the Cameroon–China economic relationship, as well, particularly in the areas of trade and investments.

Sino-Cameroonian trade relations

Since the late 2000s, China has become one of Cameroon's top trade partners. In 2012, Sino-Cameroonian trade represented 12.3% of Cameroon's foreign trade, against 4% in 2005, elevating trade with China to about the same level as that with France and three times that with the US (3.8%), although China has remained behind the European Union (41.4%). When the EU is excluded, Beijing is identified in 2012 as Cameroon's top bilateral customer (15.3% of its exports), surpassing Portugal (11.8%), the Netherlands (11.3%, buying 70% of Cameroon's cocoa), Spain (11.2%) and France (8.6%).¹⁶ This is significant, as in 2012 China was only its third supplier with a 10.4% share, behind Nigeria at 17.8% (which does not include refined oil and consumer goods which are reportedly smuggled from this neighbour), and France (11.8%; see [Table 1](#)).

Owing to the weakness of Cameroon's customs and statistical instruments, one is often confronted with conflicting figures. If we use Chinese data, Sino-Cameroonian bilateral

Table 1. Cameroon's Merchandise Trade with US, EU and China, 2005–2012 (million \$)

Year	Total exports	Total imports	Balance	By destination/origin														
				European Union			China			US								
				Exports	Imports	Balance	Exports	Imports	Balance	Exports	Imports	Balance						
2005	2829	2885	−56	1870	66.1%	1070	37.1%	800	79	2.8%	150	5.2%	−71	130	4.6%	141	4.9%	−11
2006	3573	2990	583	2655	74.3%	1011	33.8%	1644	121	3.4%	188	6.3%	−67	229	6.4%	87	2.9%	142
2007	3604	3760	−156	2678	74.3%	1316	35.0%	1362	123	3.4%	237	6.3%	−114	231	6.4%	109	2.9%	122
2008	4350	4360	−10	3232	74.3%	1526	35.0%	1706	148	3.4%	275	6.3%	−127	278	6.4%	126	2.9%	152
2009	3000	4250	−1250	2229	74.3%	1488	35.0%	742	102	3.4%	268	6.3%	−166	192	6.4%	123	2.9%	69
2010	4000	4850	−850	2208	55.2%	1528	31.5%	680	340	8.5%	514	10.6%	−174	228	5.7%	160	3.3%	68
2011	4600	6500	−1900	2539	55.2%	2048	31.5%	492	391	8.5%	689	10.6%	−298	262	5.7%	215	3.3%	48
2012	4500	7300	−2800	2453	54.5%	2438	33.4%	14	689	15.3%	759	10.4%	−71	189	4.2%	256	3.5%	−67

Source: World Trade Organization, Trade Profiles, from 2006 to 2013.

Notes: figures are author's calculation based on the percentages provided by the WTO reports. 2005–2006 refer to the EU with 25 member states, instead of 27.

Table 2. Comparison of Cameroon's total trade volumes with China among different sources, 2003–2012 (million US40 Dollars)

Year	China Commerce Yearbook			WTO			UN Comtrade		
	Exports	Imports	Total	Exports	Imports	Total	Exports	Imports	Total
2003	115	65	180	—	—	—	99	87	186
2004	149	100	249	—	—	—	63	111	173
2005	67	130	197	79	150	229	68	143	212
2006	200	191	391	121	188	310	122	200	321
2007	160	297	457	123	237	359	96	308	405
2008	479	375	854	148	275	423	160	400	560
2009	398	416	814	102	268	370	136	442	578
2010	461	541	1002	340	514	854	330	543	873
2011	663	874	1537	391	689	1080	182	722	904
2012	890	1064	1955	689	759	1448	653	678	1331

Sources: *China Commerce Yearbook*. Beijing: China Commerce and Trade Press, 2004–2013. United Nations: UN Comtrade Database, 2013, <http://comtrade.un.org/data/> (accessed 5 April 2014). World Trade Organization, Trade Profiles, 2006–2013.

Note: figures are author's calculation based on the percentages provided by the World Trade Organization reports.

trade has been more robust (Table 2) and EU sources confirm this bigger share: according to these numbers, in 2012, China represented 18.9% of Cameroon's imports (\$1186 million) and 15.2% of its exports (\$819 million) or 17.2% of its trade, ahead of Nigeria (7.4%) and nearly half of the EU's exchanges (39.9%).¹⁷ In any event, Sino-Cameroonian trade has expanded ten-fold in a decade and should gradually catch up with the EU.

This trade is very much modelled on the North–South structure, as China buys raw materials and sells manufacturing and consumption products. Its imports (see Table 3) have been mainly driven by a rapid increase in oil purchases, especially since 2008 (62% of Chinese imports in 2012). Cameroon's oil exports increase caused a trade deficit for China in 2006 and 2008, but this has since been reversed. Chinese exports to Cameroon are mainly electrical appliance, textiles, footwear, vehicles such as motorbikes and tractors, mechanical and electrical products, and cement. There was also a period of rapid increase of imports of food products from China, but since 2003 Cameroonian purchases of Chinese grains have gone down while the share of manufactured goods and machineries has gone up. In other words, China has replaced Cameroon's traditional suppliers in these areas.¹⁸

Cameroonians complain about their widening trade deficit with China (\$174 million in 2012 according to Chinese sources) and about the fact that some Chinese imports, such as ceramics or shoes, compete with local products.¹⁹ The smuggling of fake drugs (pharmaceutical products) from China and India coming through Nigeria has also been mentioned as a growing concern.²⁰

Chinese investments in Cameroon

It should be noted that Cameroon as an investment environment, because of rampant corruption (ranked 144 in 2013 against 134 in 2011, according to Transparency International),²¹ is not considered very propitious, and is in any case less attractive than a number of other Africa economies like Ghana or Ivory Coast. Since the late 1990s, President Biya has tried to convince Chinese companies to invest more in his country, particularly in the oil and the manufacturing industries, but not with much success.²²

Table 3. Distribution of Cameroon's exports to selected partners, 2003 and 2012 (million US%)

	2003		2012	
<i>Cameroon's total exports</i>	2283	100%	4275	100%
To Spain	493	21.6%	480	11.2%
To Italy	303	13.3%	223	5.2%
To France	245	10.7%	370	8.7%
To US	170	7.4%	179	4.2%
To China	99	4.3%	653	15.3%
To others	973	42.6%	2370	55.4%
<i>Fuels</i>	1114	48.8%	2374	55.5%
To Spain	413	18.1%	427	10.0%
To Italy	159	7.0%	98	2.3%
To France	30	1.3%	176	4.1%
To US	132	5.8%	98	2.3%
To China	59	2.6%	407	9.5%
To others	321	14.1%	1168	27.3%
<i>Wood</i>	355	15.6%	452	10.6%
To Spain	67	2.9%	14	0.3%
To Italy	104	4.6%	60	1.4%
To France	32	1.4%	27	0.6%
To US	6	0.3%	16	0.4%
To China	19	0.8%	104	2.4%
To others	128	5.6%	232	5.4%
<i>Cocoa</i>	245	10.7%	491	11.5%
To Spain	6	0.3%	20	0.5%
To Italy	—	—	2	0.05%
To France	32	1.4%	53	1.2%
To US	23	1.0%	28	0.7%
To China	—	—	2	0.04%
To others	183	8.0%	386	9.0%
<i>Cotton</i>	108 ^a	4.7%	146	3.4%
To China	20	0.9%	130	3.0%
To Malaysia	4	0.2%	8	0.2%
To India	7	0.3%	2	0.1%
To others	62	2.7%	6	0.1%
<i>Other commodities</i>	460	20.2%	811	19.0%

Source: United Nations, UN Comtrade Database, 2013, <http://comtrade.un.org/data/> (accessed 5 April 2014).

^aData from Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2014, 'Export destinations of raw cotton from Cameroon (2012)', http://atlas.media.mit.edu/explore/tree_map/hs/export/cmr/show/5201/2003/

For example, China had a plan to assemble cars in Cameroon but abandoned it in 2013 because of repeated delays in reaching an agreement with the government.²³

While the Cameroon government does not have any official track record of country-based foreign direct investments (FDI), Chinese sources indicate a modest flow of FDI, with a slight increase in 2010 and 2012, estimating the total cumulated amount of Chinese FDI at \$80 million in 2012. There are some obvious discrepancies between the inflow and stock figures, suggesting that some of the Chinese FDI is registered with some delay by the Ministry of Commerce. According to the US Heritage Foundation, by mid-2014 Cameroon was Chinese FDI's tenth destination in Africa, with a total amount estimated at \$5.3 billion, mainly in the transportation (\$2.3 billion) and energy (\$1.5 billion) sectors.²⁴ Although indicative of a trend, this data includes infrastructure projects that are not FDI as such. In any case, China's official stock of FDI in Cameroon remains

Table 4. Distribution of Cameroon's foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows, 2003–2013 (million \$)

Year	Total FDI inflows	Partner country		
		France	US	China
2003	336	142	163	0.3
2004	86	60	-32	0.4
2005	244	11	36	0.2
2006	59	121	-11	0.7
2007	189	84	-52	2.1
2008	21	-66	2	1.7
2009	740	57	-50	0.8
2010	538	103	48	14.9
2011	652	-330	-4	1.9
2012	526	85	6	17.7
2013	572	—		

Sources: total FDI inflow: UNCTAD, 'World Investment Report 2013: Annex Tables', Annex Table 01 – FDI inflows, by region and economy, 1990–2012, 26 June 2013, <http://unctad.org/en/pages/DIAE/World%20Investment%20Report/Annex-Tables.asp> (accessed 20 March 2014). France and USA: OECD Statistics, 'FDI flows by partner country', http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=FDI_FLOW_PARTNER (accessed 20 March 2014). China: *China Commerce Yearbook*. Beijing: China Commerce and Trade Press, 2013, p. 231.

far smaller than that of France (\$1,546 million) or even the US (\$203 million; cf. Tables 4 and 5). The key sectors in which significant Chinese FDI have been made are oil, forestry and agriculture.

Oil and mining

Until recently, Cameroon has been a declining crude oil producer and exporter, with an output of 55,000 barrels per day (bpd) in 2013 (against a peak of 185,000 bpd in 1986),

Table 5. Distribution of Cameroon's FDI inward stock, 2003–2012 (million \$)

Year	Total FDI inward stock	Partner country		
		France	US	China
2003	2611	650	242	6
2004	2698	635	264	7
2005	2941	399	122	8
2006	3000	536	114	16
2007	3190	1078	73	19
2008	3210	967	68	20
2009	3951	1101	185	25
2010	4489	1160	194	60
2011	5141	1187	192	62
2012	5667	1546	203	80
2013	6239			

Sources: total FDI inward stock: UNCTAD, 'World Investment Report 2013', Annex Table 01 – FDI inflows, by region and economy, 1990–2012, 26 June 2013, <http://unctad.org/en/pages/DIAE/World%20Investment%20Report/Annex-Tables.asp> (accessed March 20, 2014); France and USA: OECD Statistics, FDI Flows by Partner Country, 2013, http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=FDI_FLOW_PARTNER (accessed 20 March 2014). China: *China Commerce Yearbook*. Beijing: China Commerce and Trade Press, 2013, p. 236.

but it wants to re-energise this sector. In 2014, it hoped to nearly double its production to 82,000 bpd.²⁵ Although China started to buy a significant amount of Cameroonian oil in the mid-2000s, it only became a major actor in the oil industry in 2011, with two large Chinese investments being made in this sector.

In April 2009, Yan Chang, a Shaanxi provincial company, signed a \$62 million production-sharing agreement with Société Nationale des Hydrocarbures (SNH, National Hydrocarbons Corporation) and started to explore oil onshore in two blocks that it had acquired for \$18 million, Yan Chang controlling 75% and SNH 25% of the shares of Yang Chang Logone Development Holding, the joint venture created by the companies. In 2011, it successfully drilled an oil well in the Zina–Makary block in the Logone Birni basin of the extreme north region of Cameroon, close to Chad.²⁶ However, in July 2014, the expanding insurgency of Boko Haram across the Nigerian border forced this company to suspend its activities and to recall its workers from the area.²⁷

The other investment is much more important. In November 2011, Addax Petroleum, a Swiss company, was acquired by SINOPEC in 2009. It then bought Royal Dutch Shell's 80% stake of Pecten Cameroon Corporation for \$538 million, consolidating its position as Cameroon's second largest oil producer, behind Perenco, an Anglo-French company. SNC holds the remaining 20% share. The acquired company was renamed Addax Petroleum Cameroon Company. Obviously not included in the Cameroonian statistics, this investment has given China access to 11 blocks with 32 producing fields (12,000 bpd in 2011).²⁸

In the mining industry, the only noticeable investment has been made by Sinosteelcam, a subsidiary of Sinosteel, for exploring iron in the Lobe concession, close to Kribi in the South region.²⁹ A few private Chinese companies, some which arrived in 2013 after having been expelled from Ghana, have been operating in iron and gold mining concessions, particularly in the South region. China is seen as a potential shareholder of the Mbalam–Nabela iron ore project, located across the border with the Republic of Congo.³⁰ Located 510 km from the sea, this mine will not be operational before a railway and a mining terminal in Kribi are built, work that was contracted in 2010 to Australia's Sundance Resources and will not be completed before 2017. In June 2011 Chinese company Hanlong was interested in taking over Sundance for \$1.4 billion but negotiations came to an unsuccessful end in 2013, partly because the Chinese government did not think that Hanlong was able to complete the project.³¹ In June 2014, it was decided that a Portuguese construction company, Mota–Engil, would build the railway.³²

Forestry-timber

In the timber industry, the only important Chinese investment goes back to 1997 when Vicwood, a Chinese group headquartered in Hong Kong, acquired the French group Thanry, becoming the largest timber company in Cameroon, controlling 10–12% of the total area of concession (570,000 ha), which is ahead of the next biggest company, from France (555,000 ha). There are only nine timber companies in the country, exploiting 23 logging concessions.³³

Agriculture

In the agricultural sector, the first Chinese investment announced was the establishment in 2006 of a Sino-Cameroonian joint venture, called Sino Cam Iko, that would exploit

10,000 ha of land leased for 99 years from the Cameroon government. The plans were to cultivate rice, cassava, maize and other farming products on three different sites: 2000 ha in Nanga-Eboko (in the Centre region's Haute-Sanaga department, 170 km from Yaoundé); 4000 ha in Ndjoré (in the same area, 100 km from Yaoundé); and another 4000 ha in Santchou (in the West region). Then estimated at \$62 million, the project was to be financed by FOAC funds via the Exim Bank.³⁴ However, there has been some uncertainty about the amount of the realised investment since, to date, only an agricultural demonstration centre and a pilot project using 2000 ha for cultivating fruits, vegetables and various varieties of rice have been built. On this site, a preliminary 120 ha has been used to test various varieties of rice. Sixty Chinese and 100 locals work there and part of the labour is allocated for the construction of an agricultural school; because of local opposition and compensation problems, the rest of the concession has not yet been granted to Sino Cam Iko.³⁵

A less controversial but much larger investment was Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) Sinochem's purchase in 2008 of 51% of a Singapore Rubber company, GMG Global, which had long-term leases on rubber plantations in Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire. Its largest concession includes 41,000 ha in Cameroon, of which less than half is under cultivation. In 2011, it established another company to develop a 45,000 ha concession for rubber. GMG International Cameroon owns most of the shares of two subsidiaries Hevecam S.A. (90%) and Sud Cameroun Hévéa S.A. (80%).³⁶ However, again, these investments do not appear in local statistics.

All together, the Chinese government has approved only eight rather limited investments in the Cameroon agricultural sector, including three farming, three cash crop and two livestock companies.³⁷ Consequently, most Chinese FDI in Cameroon is in small-scale private ventures, such as restaurants, shops and small farms.

Infrastructure projects

This is clearly the area where Chinese companies have been most successful and competitive in Cameroon, as they have in the rest of Africa. Their spectacular capacity to bid for and win large contracts aimed at completing structural projects has been well reported. In addition to the projects financed by the Exim Bank without tender (in Cameroon as elsewhere), Chinese infrastructure companies, both public and private, have been able to get funding from the African Development Bank and the World Bank, especially for road projects.³⁸

It is impossible to present all the infrastructure projects which Chinese companies have been engaged in, but [Table 6](#) includes all the major ones. As indicated above, Chinese companies have won the lion's share of infrastructure projects because, as elsewhere in Africa and the developing world, they propose a low price (which is seen by their competitors as a dumping strategy) and they are able to complete the project at great speed. Further, the Chinese are able to help fund the projects. However, as the number of projects funded by China increases, so does Cameroon's external debt, significantly increasing its burden in the mid-term future.

Hard to compete with the Chinese companies

In fieldwork in Cameroon, the author was given access to the tender results of some of the infrastructure projects. This was the case for the Yaoundé–Nsimalen highway project

Table 6. Conditions of major Chinese loans to Cameroon (2007–2013)

Project's name	Loan amount (\$ million)	Signature date	Maturity (in months)	Interest rate (%)	Grace period	Grant element (%)
CDMA (Code Division Multiple Access) Project (10 year): mobile network project jointly developed by Huawei and CAMTEL	55.5	31/01/2007	21	2	5	36.85
Enhancement of water supply in Douala (phase 1)	27.1	13/11/2007	24	2	7.5	36.85
Construction of the CTPhone, the national fiber optic backbone, by Huawei for CAMTEL	52	08/07/2009	32	1	11.5	37.67
Enhancement of water supply in Douala (Phase 2)	97.1	05/11/2009	21	2	5	29.13
Stadium constructions in Bafoussam and Limbé	44.2	05/11/2009	20	2	5.5	27.15
Construction of an hydroelectric power plant in Mekin	53.4	07/01/2010	19.5	2	4	25.36
Construction of 1500 low-income housing units in Youandé	75	12/01/2011	19.5	2	7	23.7
Kribi deep-water seaport	423	12/01/2011	20.5	2	7	30.41
Memve'ele dam and hydroelectric station	541.6	03/05/2011	16	Euribor 6 months + 310 bps	6	2.43
Cameroon e-post project	68.6	21/07/2011	34	2	8	26.36
Yaoundé-Douala highway (phase 1)	482.8	08/03/2012	21	2	7	28.36
National broadband network project	168.3	19/07/2012	21	2	5.5	31.57
Military equipment supply to the Defense Ministry	330	24/05/2012	11	Euribor 6 months + 300 bps	2	18.88
Water supply projects in Bafoussam, Bamede, Kribi and Sangmélima	173.6	14/11/2013	20.5	2	5	30.06
Construction of an national telecommunication emergency network	155	14/11/2013	21	2	5	30.06
Purchase of two airplanes type MA60	71	14/11/2013	21	2	5	30.06
Total	2818.2					23.22

Source: Cameroon Finance Ministry, via diplomatic channels.

Notes: This table includes only those projects financed by China involving a loan above \$20 million. Euribor: Euro Interbank Offered Rate; bps, basis point. A basis point, in the financial industry is one-hundredth of a percentage point. Thus, an increase of 190 basis points equals an increase of 0.19%.

tender, for which results were issued on 9 October 2013.³⁹ Ten applications had been withdrawn, and the following five were returned:

- China Communication and Construction Company (CCCC) – 36.7 billion CFA;
- Groupement ESER/ ESER Contracting (Turkey) – 56 billion CFA;
- Groupement BUNS/CHAABANE (Cameroon/Tunisia) – 61.5 billion CFA;
- ARAB Contractors Cameroon Ltd (Egypt) – 66.6 billion CFA;
- Groupement RAZEL BEC/DTP Terrassements (France) – 67.6 billion CFA.

The gap between the Chinese and the second cheaper bidder, from Turkey, is impressive, feeding speculation of dumping practices. A foreign competitor indicated that Chinese companies are ready to lose money on such projects because they can win back their money in other projects signed without any tender. In this particular case, it is worth noting that two other Chinese companies (China First Highway Engineering and Sinohydro) had proposed an application but had not submitted it, increasing speculation that CCCC had coordinated their submission with the help of the Chinese embassy to avoid double Chinese bids,⁴⁰ although the majority of the time Chinese companies still compete for tenders, as shown below.

A recurrent side effect of Chinese companies' cheap offers has been that, to save money, the winning companies impose on their subcontractors, usually private Chinese small and medium-size enterprises, low prices that consequently lead the latter to deliver bad-quality services.⁴¹

In order to win tenders, developed countries' companies tend to specialise in complex projects or suggest to the Cameroonian authorities more constraining social and environmental norms that tend to dissuade Chinese companies (at least some of them) from bidding. This has been the case for the second bridge project on the Wouri River in Douala that was won in early 2013 by a French consortium led by Sogea Atom (a Vinci subsidiary) and mainly financed by the Agence Française de Développement for a price that was privately considered by some Chinese officials as far too high. However, part of the work has been subcontracted to Chinese engineers.⁴²

Introducing more stringent labour regulations and compulsory company-based working agreements (*conventions collectives*) has also been perceived as a method to impose a more even playing field. This has been the case for the building industry (Syndicat du Bâtiment or SEBAT), which imposed new working agreements for the whole sector in January 2014. However, some Chinese companies, such as CCCC, have deliberately decided to play a leading role in the introduction and implementation of these new rules and other big Chinese companies have started to follow this path.⁴³

Another more indirect means used by the Cameroonian government itself has been to ask (by tender) a well-known company to control Chinese infrastructure projects. This has been the case for the Yaoundé–Nsimalen Highway, in which construction is being supervised by STUDI/CENOR/ECTA BTP, a Tunisian–Portuguese–French consortium.⁴⁴

While still dominating the bids, Chinese companies can also sometimes compete with each other. This was the case of the tender for the first part of the Kumba–Mamfé road project (southwest region, 150 km), the results of which were published at the end of 2013: seven Chinese companies had made the seven cheapest offers, from 46.6 billion CFA (China Gezhouba) to 59.4 billion CFA (CGC). The next cheapest offer was made by Iran's Kaysun (64.1 billion CFA), close to that of France's SOGEA SATOM (65.4 billion CFA) but much less expensive than the Arab contractors' bid (84 billion CFA). Eventually, after Gezhouba's disqualification, CCCC and Jiangsu Provincial

Transportation Engineering Group shared the bid (54.6 billion CFA or 32.6 billion CFA and 22 billion CFA, respectively).⁴⁵

As elsewhere in the developing world, one of the key strengths of Chinese infrastructure companies is generally their ability to secure financing and the apparently more generous funding conditions that they offer. In Cameroon, most Chinese infrastructure projects are funded by the Exim Bank. The interest rate proposed is usually around 2%; the grace period can vary but on average is five years long and, although not always disclosed, the grant element varies between 25 and 35%, usually slightly lower than the OECD's Development Assistance Committee norms and practice (average is 23% against 30%; Table 6).

These advantageous conditions have sometimes convinced the Cameroonian government to attribute infrastructure projects not by tender but by mutual agreements. This was the case of the first phase of the Douala–Yaoundé highway project. The EU had financed this project's feasibility study and proposed to fund its construction, but in 2011, after he visited China, President Biya decided to give the project to China without tender.⁴⁶

In any event, China will probably continue to dominate the infrastructure and construction sectors in Cameroon, feeding its external debt to a level that may become problematic in the mid-term future. However, since 2012 the Cameroonian authorities have demonstrated a willingness to rebalance their infrastructure projects in favour of both their traditional partners and other emerging economies, such as Turkey or Tunisia, which have become more aggressive bidders in this area.

A growing debt

In late 2013, seven years after having benefited from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative, Cameroon's external debt was sustainable at around 18% of its GDP. China also cancelled part of Cameroon's bilateral debt on several occasions, particularly in 2001 after the 2000 FOCAC (\$34 million), in 2007 after Hu Jintao's visit to this country (\$32 million) and again in 2010 (\$30 million). However, these debt reliefs were much smaller than the relief offered by Western bilateral donors such as the Paris Club (\$1200 million) or other multilateral institutions (\$1306 million).⁴⁷ Today, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that Cameroon's debt should increase to 34% of the GDP in 2018, owing to new loans accepted by Yaoundé, half of them coming from China.⁴⁸

Chinese loans to Cameroon started to increase dramatically in 2009 (2009, \$193 million; 2010, \$53 million; 2011, \$1.1 billion; 2012, \$981 million; 2013, \$390 million). Most of them have been made in yuan, less often in US dollars. They are non-concessional loans, since the grant element was lower than 35%, a ratio that would have made them 'concessional'. Funded by the Eximbank, they usually cover 85% of the cost of the project, the Cameroonian government financing the remaining 15%. If we include earlier financial commitments, at the end of 2013, these loans were above \$2.9 billion, representing more than five times the current debt vis-à-vis China at the end of 2012 (\$560 million; Table 6).

Consequently, Cameroon's debt service is due to increase from \$185 million in 2013 to \$209 million in 2014 and \$290 million in 2022, the highest projection point, based on the engagements approved before the end of 2013. This debt is seen as sustainable because many of the projects financed by China will increase development and improve tax revenue (such as the two hydroelectric dams, the Yaoundé–Douala highway, the various telecom projects and the Kribi deep-water port). Nevertheless, another 11 Chinese projects had been planned for 2014, including nine amounting to \$2.36 billion, according

to the IMF.⁴⁹ It is true that, in late August 2014, only two additional Chinese loans had been approved, perhaps indicating a growing caution on the Cameroonian side: the first one, signed in April, was to build the Kribi–Lolabé highway (38.5 km), which is the access road to the newly completed Kribi deep-water port (193 billion CFA or \$386); the second one, signed in May, will bring drinking water from the Sanaga River to Yaoundé (339 billion CFA or \$678 million). However, several other Chinese projects are already in the pipeline, including the second phase of the Yaoundé–Douala highway, the cost of which is not yet known but should not be lower than the first one.

The Cameroonian government and elites, including the ones sympathetic towards China, are aware of the risks attached to getting back into heavy debt.⁵⁰ It remains to be seen whether President Biya, who approves every loan, will be able to reach the right balance between his country's urgent infrastructure needs and the financial burden it can accept. In any event, Cameroon's growing debt vis-à-vis China will be watched very carefully not only by the IMF and other international agencies but also by other African countries, particularly the ones facing a similar burden.

Other facets of Sino-Cameroonian cooperation

Health

Presented in 2008 by the then Chinese ambassador Huang Changqing as 'one of the most fruitful areas of cooperation between China and Cameroon',⁵¹ the health sector has remained a key area of Beijing's development assistance in Cameroon. To be sure, China has developed medical cooperation with not fewer than 47 African countries, and has set up 27 antimalaria centres on the continent.⁵²

This area has been very successful in Cameroon, attracting much interest in the local society. Another one has been traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Simultaneously, China's participation in hospital construction and modernisation has continued.

In Cameroon, China has put on the market an antimalarial medicine which is a combination of injection (Artesunate) and tablet (Arsumoon), derivatives of DihydroArtemisinin. Manufactured by Guilin Southern Pharmaceuticals, a laboratory based in the Chinese city of Guilin (Guangxi), this medicine and this combination have been recommended by the World Health Organization since 2004. Efficient and cheap, this treatment has been welcomed by the Cameroonian public.⁵³ In addition, at FOCAC 2006, China decided to donate to Cameroon a malaria research centre (at a cost of \$0.4 million) housed by Yaoundé's Hospital of Gynaecology, Obstetrics and Paediatrics, which was also built by China for 5 billion CFA or \$10 million. This centre was inaugurated in 2009.⁵⁴

Since the 1970s, China has also trained Cameroonian doctors in TCM, as they have in Mali and Tanzania. The lack of infrastructure and doctors (the ratio has actually deteriorated to 1/15,000 inhabitants in 2009) has enhanced the popularity of TCM. Like in China, TCM is practised in public hospitals side by side with Western medicine and in private clinics. Cooperation with some specific Chinese provinces, such as Shanxi, has also developed. With the agreement of the Ministry of Public Health, Chinese companies, such as Chinese Pharmaceutical Cameroon Company, have penetrated the Cameroonian public health sector, selling antimalarial drugs and TCM.

Considered by some as an efficient feature of China's soft power, TCM and Chinese doctors are also in effect 'agents of a "discrete" form of globalization (based on survival strategies)'.⁵⁵ Also practised by Chinese migrants, TCM has had the side effect of feeding

migrations to Cameroon, a problem that will be discussed below, and increased numbers of unreliable Chinese healers.

Since the early 2000s, China has increased its assistance to the construction of hospitals. Apart from the already mentioned construction of hospitals in Yaoundé and Douala, Beijing also restored and modernised the Buéa hospital in the English-speaking southwest region (3 billion CFA or \$6 million).

For a long time, Chinese doctors have been attached to hospitals built by China. The numbers vary depending on the source but are probably between 10 and 30 per hospital.⁵⁶ As an indication of their real number, it was reported in 2006 that 44 new Chinese doctors had arrived to take over from the team that had been there for 2 years.⁵⁷

Education, culture and language

Since the 1970s, China has been symbolically active in Cameroon's education and culture, offering every year a handful of scholarships, sending dancers and acrobats, or building on occasion a few primary schools.

However, since the late 1990s and even more the mid-2000s, China has become much more active on these fronts, especially as an education donor. One of its most visible achievements has been the opening of Cameroon's Confucius Institute (CI) in 2007, 2 years after the inauguration of the first CI on the African continent in Nairobi. Housed by the Cameroon Institute of international Relations (Institut des Relations Internationales du Cameroun, IRIC), Cameroon's CI is part of the University of Yaoundé II.⁵⁸ In 2009, it also created a branch in Douala that organises languages classes in local schools and another one in Marua's Ecole normale supérieure (Normal University) that trained 10 new Chinese language teachers in 2012–2013.⁵⁹

Proposing language training to students (75%), civil servants (20%) and business people (5%), the Yaoundé CI is based on a cooperation initiated in 1996 between the IRIC and Zhejiang Normal University, located in Jinhua, and hosting today China's largest Institute of African Studies. Run by a Cameroonian administrative coordinator, Etienne Songa, and a Chinese director, Ms Jiang Yulan, the CI teaches Chinese with the help of one local teacher, Pauline Zang Atangana, the first Cameroonian to have been specially trained in China with the support of a scholarship in 1998, and 25 Chinese volunteers hired and dispatched by Hanban, the Chinese Ministry of Education's National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language.⁶⁰

The creation of the Yaoundé CI has stimulated Cameroonians' interest in the Chinese language. As a result, in 2013, 6500 Cameroonians were learning Chinese as against 2500 just 2 years earlier. The following year, Chinese started to be an optional subject in the *Brevet*, the middle school public final exam. However, this new trend should not be exaggerated, as learning Chinese is still perceived by most Cameroonians as unusual, if not strange. In 2009, only 17 Cameroonian students had completed the Chinese language test (equivalent of the Test of English as a Foreign Language, TOEFL).⁶¹

Similarly, China is sometimes presented as the most important donor for scholarships, but data is conflicting and in any event figures remain modest. It is safe to indicate that since 1973 the Chinese government has offered on average 10 scholarships every year to Cameroonian students and that their number has increased since the early 2000s, up to 40 according to some sources.⁶² In 2010, the Chinese ambassador announced that a quota of 100 scholarships per year would be provided to Cameroon,⁶³ but it seems that his goal has not yet been reached. In early 2014, the Chinese embassy indicated that 25 Cameroonian students go to China every year, 10 with a scholarship and 15 self-financed.⁶⁴

While it is recognised by everyone that the number of applicants keeps increasing (in the past there were too few applicants), the total number of Cameroonian students studying in China has remained small and not much higher than the group of Chinese students studying in Cameroon, of which there were 50 in 2010.⁶⁵ Cameroonians generally go to China to study medicine, agronomy, electrical engineering, telecommunications or computer science.

In addition, as in other developing countries, China provides Cameroon technical training for a much shorter period of time (2–3 weeks), with a programme specially designed for civil servants and politicians who travel around China free of charge: this scheme is clearly part of China's active soft power diplomacy.

To put things into perspective, in 2013 there were 6000 Cameroonian students studying both in France and in Germany and 1500 in the US (the numerous bi-nationals, particularly in France, excluded), against at most 100 in China, in spite of a more flexible visa policy. Although it offers scholarships only to graduate students, the French government continues to provide strong support to tertiary education in Cameroon, sending many teachers and schoolbooks. Finally, while China has become more active in this area since the late 2000s, Japan still remains the biggest builder of schools in Cameroon.⁶⁶

Military cooperation

There was not much military cooperation between China and Cameroon before 2000. To be more specific, after its start in 1975, this cooperation was restricted to training a small number of Cameroonian officers in China, exchanging from time to time visits of military delegations at a rather low level and selling military equipment with interest-free credit. Between 1995 and 2004, China sold to this country an unknown amount of small arms and light weapons.

It was only in 2001 that the first high-level People's Liberation Army (PLA) delegation, headed by deputy Chief of Staff Wu Quanxu, visited Cameroon. Since then, the exchange of visits has intensified and weapons sales have increased. For example, in 2011, Cameroon Defence Minister Edgar Alain Mebe Ngo'o met with PLA top chief general Guo Boxiong in Beijing, triggering a much closer cooperation between the two countries, particularly in terms of military equipment supply.

Every year, a larger number of Cameroon officers (around 40 today against 5–10 ten years ago) are sent to China for training: they usually spend 6 months to 1 year at the National Defence University in Beijing, but their stay can also last several years. As of 2007, 228 Cameroonian military officers had undertaken studies in China.⁶⁷ It appears that the Chinese government is willing to invite a growing number of Cameroonian officers as part of its military diplomacy and also to stimulate arms export. For that purpose, contrary to other countries (such as France, Britain or the US), China does not carefully select the candidates nor try to adapt the proposed training to the career needs of the selected officers. Consequently, training received in China is not perceived by Cameroonian militaries as very useful apart from the financial benefits attached to it.⁶⁸

While Cameroon weaponry is mainly bought from the US, France or Spain, China has been able to sell more military equipment, particularly since 2000. Chinese PLA technicians have also helped maintain vehicles and other equipment at Douala Naval Base.⁶⁹ Moreover, in the last few years, Cameroon has acquired from China some infantry fighting vehicles and tank destroyers.⁷⁰ One of the three MA60s acquired from China was integrated in the Cameroonian Air Force as a transport airplane.⁷¹

More importantly, in October 2013, China and Cameroon signed a contract for the supply of two navy patrol vessels (P108 and P109). Built by Poly Technology in Qingdao and financed with a loan from the Exim Bank, these ships will help Cameroon enhance the security of its territorial waters in the area of the Gulf of Guinea.⁷²

In 2013, a defence attaché, Yang Xu, a senior colonel (equivalent of brigadier) from the army and a deputy, Captain Du Qiao, were appointed for the first time to the Chinese embassy in Yaoundé. Their role is to support military equipment exports to Cameroon, enhance the security of Chinese nationals in this country and be ready to face potential regional or domestic political crises, particularly in view of President Biya's uncertain succession.

In May 2014, the 16th Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce made its first visit to Cameroon. It also conducted for the first time a joint antipiracy and maritime drill with the Cameroonian Navy, suggesting Beijing's intention to be more active in the security of the Gulf of Guinea (although it still refuses to cooperate with Western military vessels).

In 2011, the Cameroonian military attaché in Beijing since 2005, Navy Captain Jean-Pierre Nsola, was suddenly called back to Yaoundé and forced to retire shortly after having been promoted rear admiral.⁷³ However, for obscure reasons, he managed to stay at the Cameroonian Embassy in China until September 2013. The origin of this decision was a corruption scandal that, according to some media, also implicated the Defence Minister Mebe Ngo'o.⁷⁴ Other sources have mentioned Nsola's criticism of his ministry's priority for military training in China.⁷⁵ In any event, increasing military supply from China has spurred temptations and competition among Cameroonians trying to control the receiving end.

The Chinese community in Cameroon

The Chinese community in Cameroon is hard to evaluate but has been growing rapidly in the last decade. Estimations go from 20,000 to 200,000, a more realistic figure being 50,000.⁷⁶ It has become active in many sectors of the economy, including where it is perceived as unfairly competing with locals who already have financial difficulties. Chinese migration to Cameroon started in the late 1980s but until the 2000s was very limited and concentrated in restaurants, traditional Chinese medicine and retail shops (around 1000).

In the last 10 years, new migrants have arrived and developed business in many areas, such as wholesale and retail trade, transportation, farming and fishing. The appearance in the late 2000s of Chinese doughnut or popcorn sellers on Yaoundé's street corners and of Chinese prostitutes, who are accused of charging much cheaper rates, in Douala has been reported in the Cameroonian media, causing increasing resentment in the local population.⁷⁷ The development of Chinese farms has also been the source of tension with the neighbouring peasants, sometimes mobilised by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) opposed to land being leased to foreigners or to the rapid encroachment of agribusiness on traditional farming. Chinese fishermen have also been accused on occasion of fishing without permit or of using improper fishing nets.⁷⁸

Today, the Chinese embassy estimates the number of its nationals in Cameroon at around 10,000 including 2000 contractual workers hired by Chinese SOEs. Most of these Chinese originate from Fujian and Zhejiang. The majority of them live in Douala and, to a lesser extent, in Yaoundé. There is a Chinese chamber of commerce and industry in Douala (Chambre d'Industrie et du Commerce des Chinois d'Outre-Mer au Cameroun) with a branch in Yaoundé. There are also expatriate organisations for different Chinese provinces.⁷⁹

The Cameroonian society has developed ambivalent feelings towards the Chinese. On the positive side, Chinese stick to their clichéd image of being hard-working and quickly completing many badly needed infrastructure projects, in other words contributing actively to the country's development. On the negative side, there has been a growing impression of a Chinese invasion, in sectors usually protected from foreign competition.

As a result, the number of anti-Chinese demonstrations or attacks has been on the increase, particularly in 2010–2012. Since then, some limits have been imposed on the number of visas issued and stricter regulations have been introduced for Chinese visitors applying for longer stays or migration. However, border controls, as elsewhere in Africa, are lax and residency is rather easy to buy.

In 2013, the Cameroon embassy in China granted 5000–6000 visas, suggesting that the flow of migrants has not decreased.⁸⁰ Conversely, in the same year, the Chinese Embassy issued 4500 visas to Cameroonians, mostly business people going to Yiwu or Canton trade centres.

Cooperation among Chinese and Cameroonian traders has contributed to weaken the role played by Lebanese and other older foreign communities. The Akwa district in Douala where the Amicale Chine–Cameroun (Zhong Ke youhao lou) and many Chinese businesses are located illustrates this growing role and integration.

In the last few years, more rich Chinese have settled down in Cameroon. For instance, between 2012 and 2013, membership increased from 180 to 250 at the Mont Fébé Golf Club in Yaoundé, mainly due to new Chinese members.⁸¹ However, security problems in the extreme north of the country have forced the Chinese working there to move out. According to the Chinese embassy, only 60 of them remained in this region at the beginning of 2014.

In any event, although very diverse, the Chinese community in Cameroon has today become an active and visible part of the economy, obviously larger than the French community (there were 6300 registered French nationals in 2014).

The limits of Sino-Cameroonian partnership

Although at an official level, Sino-Cameroonian partnership is presented by both sides as highly positive and dynamic, several problems have contributed to complicating cooperation, particularly on the Cameroonian side. However, beyond these rather usual and expected sources of tension, President Biya and his government have decided in the last couple of years to limit and perhaps even reduce China's economic presence by giving priority, when possible, to other partners.

Sources of tension

On the Chinese side, the main sources of frustration can be found in most African countries: lengthy negotiations, delay in the implementation of agreements, slowness of customs, which take up to 6 months to clear imports, and difficulties in finding a well-trained and productive workforce. Safety issues have also become more of a concern in Cameroon, particularly in the northern region, forcing some projects to be put on hold. This was the case for road repair work conducted by Sinohydro in Waza close to the Nigerian border after 10 Chinese employees were kidnapped by Boko Haram in May 2014 (they were released in October 2014). Two months later, oil exploration by the Yan Chang Logone Development Holding Company was also suspended.⁸²

On the Cameroonian side, one needs to draw a distinction between the government and the civil society. As far as the authorities are concerned, they are publicly very satisfied with the cooperation with China. The only reservation comes from the perceived lack of technology transfer. Although some companies such as Huawei have trained many local technicians, these cases have remained exceptional and, even in the government, there are some growing concerns about China's presence and intentions in Cameroon.⁸³

The large-scale use of Chinese workforce on Chinese projects in a country where unemployment and underemployment are very high is not understood. The 60% local workforce quota is rarely respected by Chinese companies. Additionally, criticism focuses on the way Chinese projects are managed, construction sites often becoming 'areas of extraterritoriality' in the eyes of many Cameroonians, including the authorities, which have difficulties accessing them.⁸⁴ Chinese project contracts as well as instructions to use the delivered projects are too often in Chinese or only partially translated. Work quality is uneven and some roads or bridges have rapidly deteriorated. When local workers are hired, working conditions and salaries are often lower than in other companies, and contracts are frequently non-existent, particularly for subcontractors (*tacherons*), who are generally paid much less than the Chinese workers (\$63 against \$183 per month in 2011). Some cases of racism and physical violence on Chinese working sites have also been reported.⁸⁵ Illegal fishing activities have created tensions with the local authorities and fishermen. While Chinese and Cameroonian companies rarely compete, cheap imports from China have been accused of killing local small businesses, especially clothing and footwear. Several Chinese companies, particularly in the oil and timber industries, have been singled out for the damage they cause to the environment. Although not only Chinese but also other Asians and some Africans are implicated, illegal logging, animal poaching and ivory smuggling are the most common issues raised both by Cameroon officials, discreetly, and NGOs and social activists, more vocally.⁸⁶

When problems occur, the Chinese embassy intervenes to impose *omerta* (silence) and settle disputes behind closed door, feeding a sense of opaqueness in the relationship with China and Chinese companies.⁸⁷ While language is an obstacle to communication, problems more often stem from a difference of mind-set and attitude towards work and authority.

More importantly, while fully aware of their country's blatant infrastructure needs, Cameroonian elites have become more critical of the type of 'tied' and not so generous development aid provided by China. Some go as far as thinking that China is trying to take Africa hostage.⁸⁸ However, a larger group is concerned about two risks: on the one hand, the terms of trade with China tend to lock Cameroon in the primary sector; on the other hand, new debt has been built up in Cameroon owing to the rapid increase in loans from China; 'if Cameroon starts borrowing again, then some Western countries might view the debt relief to Cameroon as indirectly subsidizing new Chinese lending'.⁸⁹

To put it differently, China is not as disinterested as it claims, which the current political scandal around the purchase of two M60s from China in 2011 illustrates. Beijing initially appeared as very generous: it sold these two planes to Camair-Co, the national carrier, for 34.4 billion CFA (\$69 million) with the help of a Chinese loan and added a third one as a gift, later delivered to the Air Force (see above). The problem is that the local media rapidly noticed that the price of one unit in China was only 5.6 billion CFA and the neighbouring Republic of Congo paid 7 billion CFA for the same plane (\$14 million); in other words, Yaoundé had been overcharged. In July 2014, President Biya ordered an inquiry,⁹⁰ although very little is likely to be resolved, as this scandal most likely involves corruption at the highest levels.

This brings us to the criticisms made by China's foreign competitors in Cameroon, particularly Western governments and companies. Their interest is obviously to propagate, and possibly exaggerate, Chinese's misbehaviours, adding many criticisms to the list made above. One particular and recurrent assumption among Western donors is that China's growing presence in Cameroon is feeding corruption and bad governance, for instance in the timber industry.⁹¹ Examples are many, confirming the export of practices that are common at home: for instance, some Chinese companies have been accused of buying Cameroonian media, distributing 'red envelopes' (brown envelopes or 'gombo' as they are known in Cameroon) to editors in order to convince them to write articles critical of their competitors. Unfortunately, corruption of journalists in Cameroon has remained widespread.⁹² Even though there has been media liberalisation and growing pluralism since the 1990s, there is still an inclination for exaggerations and hyperbolic reports, including on matters related to the Chinese presence in Cameroon. Consequently, local reports must be taken with a grain of salt and always double checked.

The limits of the Chinese connection

Few would disagree in Cameroon that China has become a crucial partner. Nonetheless, there are still only a few elite in Cameroon who promote this country as a model for economic development. Actually, China's swift mutation from extreme communism to harsh state capitalism, its continued social inequalities, dramatic environmental degradation and widespread corruption, are all well-known realities that have convinced many Cameroonians that China is precisely not the example to follow. Moreover, no one in Cameroon, not even its pro-China elite, who openly admire Beijing's repressive methods, is ready to imitate its one-party political system and authoritarian rule.⁹³

Cameroonian elites are divided along familiar lines, as some are more liberal while others are inclined to embrace social-democracy, with both sides concentrating their discussions on the proper role of the state in the economy and the best methods to get rid of corruption. However, many are wary of China's growing presence, and opposition politicians, for instance Alain Fogu  (from the Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Cameroun), are prone to remind their compatriots that the Chinese are no 'philanthropists'.⁹⁴ Moreover, Cameroonians' strong resentment against their colonial past and masters has fed rather than diverted their criticism of China. Seen as a powerful country and a developed economy, China is put by most Cameroonians in the same basket as other wealthy partners or 'imperialists'. This is particularly the case for people close to Mongo Beti, a now deceased well-known writer and opponent of President Biya, as well as his widow, Odile Tobner, chairwoman of 'Association Survie', who accuses China of being just another 'predator'.⁹⁵ In other words, while a minority of local activists praise China, Cameroon's still dominant post-colonial discourse has on the whole contributed to keeping some distance between the two countries.

A few personalities would like to see Cameroon and China move closer to each other, in order to 'put an end to the "carnage" that Cameroon has been victim of' (*sic*) and invite the latter to open military bases in Africa to balance and diminish Western influence there. They also see cooperation with China as a factor conducive to reducing the pressure of the IMF and World Bank on Cameroon.⁹⁶

However, except perhaps the last point, these are minority views. Most Cameroonian politicians, civil society representatives and NGOs share the idea that their country should defend its national interests and put more limits and conditions on its partnership with China for the simple reason that it 'is not better than Western partners'.⁹⁷

In circles closer to the government and Paul Biya himself, there is a growing awareness that Cameroon should diversify its partnership and better balance China's growing presence, both in keeping strong cooperation links with its traditional partners and in attracting more emerging economies. There is also a growing awareness that Cameroon's security environment is becoming more unstable and that it is not China, but France, the US, Britain and key neighbours such as Nigeria which may help keep the country stable and focused on its economic development.

In other words since its last visit to China in 2011, there has been a strong impression in Yaoundé that President Biya is willing to distance himself from Beijing. The recent developments presented in this article are evidence of this new trend.

Conclusion

China is today one of Cameroon's key economic and political partners. This will not change in the future. Yaoundé will officially continue entertaining close and friendly relations with the world's second largest economy. The recent changes that this paper has tried to highlight are limited and should be put back into context. Cameroon will continue to rely on China for what it does best: its infrastructure projects. It will also keep the door open to Chinese companies willing to invest more in the energy sector, the manufacturing industry or even in agriculture, a sector that needs to enhance its productivity to reduce Cameroon's grain imports and eventually help it reach self-sufficiency. At the same time, like a growing number of its African neighbours, Cameroon will probably be more cautious and will refrain from putting all of its eggs in the same basket, and cultivate as many partnerships as possible. Politically, Yaoundé is likely to remain a reliable partner for Beijing, active in the FOCAC and demonstrating South–South solidarity and a convergence of views, particularly around the principles of non-interference and neutrality. Yet can both capitals go further? Cameroon will probably continue to stand closer to the West than China, because of its past, its culture, but also its multiple economic and human links in that part of the world. As Cameroon's Prime Minister Philemon Yang told EU High Commissioner for Trade Karel de Gucht when he visited Yaoundé in November 2013: 'China does not have the weight that some people believe in Cameroon'.⁹⁸

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