

# Chinese goods reshape Africa<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In the context of rapid increases in Sino-African trade over the last fifteen years, this article examines the consequences of the proliferation of Chinese goods in the daily life of African societies and the rise of mass consumption on the continent. The impact of Chinese goods is frequently analyzed solely through the lens of their cheap prices, yet these products need to be further understood as contributing to the emergence of a new material culture. In this article, we focus on African consumers of “made in China”, as well as the key category of actors actively creating this new material culture – African traders themselves. Through an analysis of these traders of Chinese products, this article argues that their activities partially reconfigure local power relations surrounding access to extraversion – or ‘relations with the exterior on which those who dominate the society base their power’ (Bayart, 2000).

**Keywords:** China in Africa; Chinese goods in Africa; Material culture; African traders

## 1. Introduction

During the last fifteen years, trade has increased twenty-five fold between China and African countries, totalling US\$198.4 billion in 2012.<sup>2</sup> In 2009, China became the largest trading partner of the continent. To date, studies related to the

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2 Data from the Information Office of the State Council, ‘China-Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation’, Beijing, 2013, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/2013/9329142/329145/Document/1345037/1345037.htm>.

Chinese presence in Africa perceive Sino-African trade in terms of either macro-scale economic threats or opportunities for the development of the continent, and consequently many studies overlook the social and cultural transformations occurring on the ground.<sup>3</sup>

While academic and media attention generally focuses on the geopolitics of Chinese importation of raw materials from Africa, we want to emphasize here that Chinese exports into African societies have also spurred profound transformations. In fact, these exports have dramatically increased to a value of US\$85.3 billion in 2012.<sup>4</sup> On the ground, this increase of imports from China signifies the arrival of a wide variety of manufactured goods that enter into the daily lives of African populations, even in the smallest village markets. Furthermore, for many Africans, these products materially embody the Africa's new relationship with China and as such provide rich material for social analysis.

This article traces the reception of Chinese goods in African societies, using the approach of “follow[ing] the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories” (Appadurai, 1988, p. 77). We want thus to show that Chinese goods can not be reduced to “cheap substitutes for the real things” for African consumers, who would be taken prisoner by these goods because of their limited financial means. Instead, this article argues that the new accessibility offered by low prices of Chinese goods is currently ushering Africa into an era of mass consumption, which is, in itself, a revolution of sorts.

In our opinion, this point is generally underestimated by research on the arrival of Chinese goods in Africa, and even more so the significant implications of this statement in terms of transformation of consumption practices and logics. Indeed, since Chris Alden wrote in 2007 that “for ordinary Africans the most significant impact of Chinese economic involvement is low-cost consumer goods available to Africans as never before” (Alden, 2007, p. 58), little has been made to understand the reception of these goods in Africa except concerning their perception in terms of quality (see Park, 2013, pp. 139-140). Some researchers have identified new avenues for reflection, without however examining them in any detail, as Michal Lyons and Alison Brown, when they quoted

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3 In 2008, D. Large signalled the predominance of macro-scale literature on Sino-African relations. Since then, international relations approach is still dominating the field, as it has been identified by numerous researchers (Hirono and Suzuki, 2014 ; Monson and Rupp, 2013).

4 Data from the Information Office of the State Council, *op. cit.*

a second-hand clothes market trader of Lomé, who said : “Customers like the Chinese goods because of their cleanness and sharpness, but the problem is that Chinese goods, especially clothes, don’t last” (Lyons and Brown, 2010, p. 777). In fact, by (over-)focusing on the low-cost dimensions of Chinese goods and on the low quality issue, researchers have generally overshadowed the complexity at stake in their consumption. To schematize, it is agreed that the low prices of Chinese goods open new access to consumption for a wide new range of African consumers, but little is known about the patterns of consumption and the aspirations of modernity that these goods often embody; these are main concerns of our research. Furthermore, it is important to note that most of studies on Chinese goods has simply set the consumption issue aside, in favor of other goods-related topics.<sup>5</sup>

The ways in which African societies enter into mass consumption unveils a new material culture (Warnier, 1999), where purchases are no longer based on a lack of choices, but instead involve a complex interplay of logics of utility, distinction and pleasure (Langlois, 2002). The Chinese goods themselves are invested with various symbolic features and interpreted through local cultural registers, which can recall Jonathan Friedman’s work on prestige goods (1994). The social status of these objects (Appadurai, 1999; Kopitoff, 1999; Miller, 1987) is involved in a continual cultural process of domestication (Geschiere and Rowlands, 1996), “that allow to alter the commodity object to remove its taste of money, to impose to it a personal mark and to integrate it in the intimate space of their home” (Warnier, 1994, p. 21). These elements will be addressed in the second part of this article, after presenting a few elements related to Chinese goods and the history of their insertion in African markets.

Thirdly, we will focus on African importers of Chinese goods, who are the key actors in disseminating this new material culture throughout Africa. While academic attention has mostly focused on the presence of Chinese shops on the African continent, we emphasize that African importers and retailers play a central role in this circulation process.<sup>6</sup> While some of them travel directly to Hong

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<sup>5</sup> This can be notably seen in the Jing Jing Liu’s work on the Chinese goods and goods-mediated relationships between Ghanaian and Chinese traders in a Ghanaian marketplace, from which the author questions identity issues (2010). Another example is the work of Linn Axelsson on Chinese textiles in Ghana, which closely examines smuggling and counterfeit practices and the process by which “borders” are made to deal with this threat (2012). To the foregoing can also be added Nina Sylvanus’ work, which underlines the reconfiguration of economic elites in Togo after the arrival of Chinese goods, based on the case of Nana Benz (2013).

<sup>6</sup> In that, we are referring, throughout the paper, on a now quite substantial literature on Chinese in Africa and African in China. See notably on Chinese in Africa, Karsten Giese, 2013 ; Antoine Kernén, 2010 ; Yoon Jung Park, 2010 ; Françoise Bourdarias, 2009 ; Gregor Dobler, 2009 ; and on

Kong, Guangzhou, and Yiwu to procure goods, they are much more likely to go to the ports of Ghana, Togo, Benin, Senegal or even to Chinese shops in African metropolises. These traders of Chinese products participate, through containers, bags or backpacks, in the process of “globalization from below” of Africa (Tarius, 2002; Portes, 1999).

The emergence of a new material culture is not without consequences on the existing power structures. In the last section, we will focus on the impact of the proliferation of these Chinese goods’ traders and argue that, despite popular belief, the competition between Chinese and African traders in certain import sectors is not so naturally won by the former. Moreover, it appears that competition is rarely articulated or structured in ethnic terms in countries where our research took place. Instead, the differences in financial resources between traders of Chinese goods are often more significant than the ethnicity of the trader. Furthermore, the proliferation of African transnational traders reconfigures various sectors some of which were formerly considered to be positions for the economic and political elite to accumulate wealth. This new material culture raises questions about an eventual transformation of the management of the rent extraction related to extraversion that is constitutive of the political economy of many African states (Bayart, 2000).<sup>7</sup>

This article is based on a large corpus of semi-structured interviews and observations made in West Africa (Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mali, Cameroon, Ghana, Togo, Benin), as well as in other parts of the continent (South Africa, Cape Verde) within the framework of two projects funded by the Swiss National Fund for Scientific Research. The main interest is focused on West African

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African in China : Laurence Marfaing and Alena Thiel, 2014 ; Heidi Ostbo Haugen, 2012 ; Gordon Matthews and Yang Yang, 2012 ; Olivier Pliez, 2010 ; H el ene Le Bail, 2009. The focus of our paper is however innovative, by concentrating its interest on African importers and resellers of Chinese goods in Africa. This focus allows us to build a reflection on the central role of the African traders in the diffusion of these goods throughout Africa, and of the new material culture related to their consumption. Such a central role is related not only to their trading activities, but also to their status of new figures of success.

7 According to J-F Bayart : “ the leading actors in sub-Saharan societies have tended to compensate for their difficulties in the autonomization of their power and in intensifying the exploitation of their dependants by deliberate recourse to the strategies of extraversion, mobilizing resources derived from their (possibly unequal) relationship with the external environment’ . The external environment thus turned into ‘a major resource in the process of political centralization and economic accumulation’, and also in the conduct of the social struggles of subaltern actors from the moment that they attempted to take control, even in symbolic ways, of the ‘relations with the exterior on which those who dominate the society base their power’” (Bayart, 2000). Thus, at the heart of what J.-F. Bayart calls the paradigm of the strategy of extraversion, “is the creation and the capture of a rent generated by dependency and which functions as a historical matrix of inequality, political centralization and social struggle” (Bayart, 2000).

societies due to the desire to go beyond the currently paradigmatic discourse on deindustrialization. The impact of Chinese imports, that we have been able to observe in very few industrialized West African countries, is not the same as in South Africa, Tunisia or Morocco. Without wanting to over-generalize, however, it appears that the transformations identified here in terms of consumption practices, commercial networks or power structures mark an observable trend throughout the entire continent. Nevertheless, it remains clear that we cannot do without a systematic contextualization of these results, given the magnitude of regional and national differences across Africa.

## **2. The Chinese goods revolution**

The novelty of Chinese goods in Africa is differentiated by country, because in countries that maintained diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, their presence sometimes goes back to independence. In addition to the medical teams and certain agricultural and industrial projects, Chinese cooperation sometimes included the donation of manufactured goods that could be sold locally to finance development projects. This was notably the case in Burkina Faso, where Chinese goods were marketed in the mid-1980s in the "Faso markets" (Faso Yaar), which were state-structured importation and trading programs. Françoise Bourdarias made the same observation in Mali, stressing that "Chinese goods arrived very early in the Malian market in the wake of economic missions accompanying technic expertise activities" (Bourdarias, 2011). Therefore, "Made in China" bicycles, pots and hardware did not simply appear in African markets solely on the initiative of African or Chinese transnational traders.

The post-reform rise of China's light industry, however, marks a turning point. By the late 1980s, Africans studying in China were often also running small businesses in their country of origin to compensate for the inadequacy of their scholarships, particularly during inflation. Gradually, this trade grew and became more professional as demonstrated through Nina Sylvanus' work on the initiatives of Togolese traders who went to China to procure textiles (Sylvanus, 2009). Françoise Bourdarias makes the same observation about Mali: "the distribution of Chinese products, and for the most part the importation, have long been done by Malian commercial networks, whose activities extend into many countries in West and Central Africa" (Bourdarias, 2011).

In particular, trade between China and the African CFA franc zone was further strengthened as a result of the devaluation of January 1994. With the increasing price of European imports, the currency devaluation increased the competitiveness of Chinese products. For many Chinese traders interviewed in different countries in West Africa, the late 1990s was the Golden Age of the small-scale Sino-African trade, with many testimonies citing the significant profit margins and the speed of commodity turnover. Wu Jinhai, a trader in Douala since 1994 and a founding member of the Association of Chinese traders in Cameroon, remembers the early years when profit margins were around 60%, adding: “Today the margins have changed in the field of footwear and clothing, and do not exceed 20%. They are even lower for other products” (Zhouxi, 2008). A Chinese director in Ghana similarly stated:

“In 1994, when I started the import of fishing nets, we had 100% margins, sometimes even 300%. Then others came and margins declined. Today, we are only 10% of profits. The fishing net is no longer interesting. We will soon abandon them, but it allowed us to accumulate the capital needed to get into other sectors”.<sup>8</sup>

This ephemeral golden age is now gone for Chinese traders as well as for their African counterparts (Kernen, 2010).

These different waves of Chinese goods arriving in Africa are obviously a continuation of a longer history of African markets whose relationship with world economy is marked by “extraversion” (Carneiro, 2008), or significant outward orientation. The reorientation of supply chains to China marks a transformation that resembles earlier shifts, from the arrival of products from Japan, to Thailand and other Southeast Asiatic countries (Marchal, 2007). China became the largest import source for many African countries from the early 2000s. This “Chinese moment” of African economies’ extraversion marks a profound historical break due to the sheer scale of their impact on the consumption practices and import volumes. Attracted by business opportunities, Chinese goods importers have rapidly increased in number, resulting in increased competition and pressure on prices. Far beyond being a mere fad, Chinese goods have become significantly more and more accessible to African consumers.

The claim that some Chinese products have helped offset the rise in import prices from Europe, however, must be more nuanced. First, the increasing accessibility varies across sectors and countries. Then, this claim is only applicable

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8 Interview, Accra, Ghana, 26 October 2010

to newly manufactured products. Before the arrival of Chinese goods, African consumers could already count on a thriving second-hand market of clothing, electronics or vehicles. Known in francophone West Africa as “France au re-voir,” these second-hand products are generally in the same price range of new Chinese products and are often considered by our interlocutors to be of higher quality. Far from disappearing (Bredeloup and Lombard, 2008), second-hand clothes, for example, have been experiencing a return in popularity. Therefore, the transformations of the African consumer market can not be understood as cheap Chinese goods simply replacing expensive European goods. Instead, the presence of both new Chinese and second-hand European goods that sometimes occupy the same price range widens the spectrum of qualitative assessment on which African customers evaluate purchases and decide to consume. In sum, in Africa, Chinese goods have only modified accessibility to “first-hand” products.

However, this change is important: access to a wide range of new products makes African consumption patterns more complex, by increasing the need to take into consideration novelty, distinction, exclusivity, and the high rate of turnover.<sup>9</sup> The arrival of Chinese goods represents a real breakthrough, in that it contributes to the massification, diversification and the acceleration of consumption in Africa. Through Chinese products, these societies enter into mass consumption, marking the emergence of a new material culture.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. A new material culture of success**

Every morning in Ouagadougou, the Central Market area is buzzing with customers who flock to the numerous market stalls and bordering commercial establishments. In particular, one Chinese shop, renowned for its large selection of shoes, is always full. Everyone is involved in a buying frenzy that often leads to the acquisition of two or three pairs of shoes by each customer. At a street corner, a small ambulant salesman presents sunglasses and Chinese mobile phones

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9 In that, the influence of new Chinese goods are not comparable with second-hand goods, whose supply, in terms of both quantity and nature, is subject to their availability by their previous owner. On this issue see notably Nicolas Besnier, 2004.

10 Of course, this entry into mass consumption varies across sectors and countries. In Burkina Faso, certain specific goods are particularly representative of this dynamic. The arrival of Chinese mobile phones, for example, has coincided with a dramatical decreasing in prices (from 150'000 FCFA to 20'000 FCFA), which has largely contributed to their mass consumption. Nowadays, mobile phones can be found, even in the most remote villages (Hahn and Kibora, 2008), where most people have one, often offered by a relative to even the poorest villagers. Another example is motorcycle sector, where the arrival of Chinese motorcycles has accompanied an increase in the total number of imported bikes in Burkina Faso of 5800%.

on a wooden board to a sharply-dressed client in a tie who is casually negotiating for yet another phone to add to the three already prominently displayed on his belt. In the evening, youth groups go to the *maquis* – bars with music – of the capital on their Chinese motorcycles. Dressed in jeans and new shirts, they go from bars to clubs to do “le show” to the tunes of Ivoirian *coupé-décalé* music.

These observations, made in any African capital, testify to the extensive presence of Chinese goods. For consumers surveyed, it is obvious that their prices, as much as ten times cheaper, have led to their popular appeal and mass adoption. Yet the symbolic appropriation of these products that gives them an eminently cultural character must be taken into consideration (Miller, 1995), where increasing importance is placed on not simply having, but having the latest fashions.<sup>11</sup> Thus the entry of Africa into a mass consumption era coincides with the emergence of a new “material culture of success” (Rowlands, 1996, 1994), which is closely related to the appropriation of the extraversion resources (Bayart, 2000).

Far from being tricked by the shiny appearance of Chinese goods, African consumers make their choice based on all of the products available on the market, adapting their use to different contexts and needs. The act of purchasing, as with anything, involves many interrelated logics. In this section, we will present a few consumer profiles. Rather than attempting to draw an exhaustive typology of all consumers of Chinese products, our goal is to emphasize the tangled set of different logics in daily practices of consumption. These profiles show the link “between material culture and its relationship to the ‘conduites motrices’ – that is people’s largely unconscious use of objects - on the one hand, and the representations of other part” (Warnier, 1999, p. 28).

Mahdi K. lives in a village in northern Burkina Faso and is around 40 years old. He works as a farm laborer and sometimes sells mobile phone recharge cards, while also relying on money sent home by one of his sons who recently went to look for gold. This morning he rode ten kilometers by bicycle to go to the fields. Throughout the discussion that arose, he shows us on his Chinese phone a picture of his motorcycle, a Chinese counterfeit Yamaha. “Look how beautiful she is! It’s not like the P50 there!”<sup>12</sup> He speaks with enthusiasm and easily remembers the exact date of its acquisition, a year earlier. However, he

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<sup>11</sup> Chinese products allow West Africans to be fashionable, even without means. In the secondary cities of Mali, Chinese products offer the only access to an «urban way of life» for rural migrants (Chapatte, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> The P50 is a model of Peugeot moped; a used P50 costs the same as a new Chinese motorcycle. Many of the older Peugeot models have been in circulation for more than twenty years.

brings it out of his yard only on rare occasions, as petrol is expensive. In contrast to his neighbors' big motorcycles, his is an urban model that is less suitable for bush tracks, so he uses it mainly to go to town or celebrations in the neighboring villages. In order to participate in the celebrations, he does not wear the second-hand European clothes that he usually wears while working in the fields; instead he sports a new shirt that is the same color as the motorcycle.

Back in the village, Mahdi K. charges his mobile phone at Aziz's charging hub, dubbed "4500 Volts," that runs a generator and provides charging GSM for 100 CFA francs. At night, Mahdi lights a Chinese iodine lamp in front of his house and makes tea while remarking "We can not repair them when they break down, but they are far less dangerous than the old oil lamps." Soon, a group forms around the halo of his lamp and begins to chatter and relax together. Over the noise of a television nearby, Mahdi explains how his neighbor, a rancher, uses battery packs to power a TV and DVD player. Mahdi stresses the importance of investment, "and this is the second solar panel he buys. The first was Chinese and had melted in the sun ...". The anecdote makes them laugh and leads to a well-rehearsed chorus: "that's how the *chinoiserie*<sup>13</sup> are but how are we going to do? We have no choice!"<sup>14</sup>

Laurence O. is a young woman from a Christian middle class family in Ouagadougou. Long-term unemployed, she has recently developed a small business selling Chinese clothes she buys in Togo. She has a child with Omar C., her partner, who is Muslim, although they are not married and do not live together. On the last day of Ramadan, Omar comes to take her to celebrate a family event. He dressed for the occasion a traditional Bazin,<sup>15</sup> sewn by a tailor from the city center. Laurence and her child are wearing outfits cut from Chinese textiles by local artisans. Although he came on a motorcycle, they leave with Laurence's motorcycle. Omar gave it to her the previous Christmas, and her Chinese motorcycle is much more in style than Omar's old Yamaha that cost three times more.

After fulfilling their family obligations, the young couple moves to the *maquis*; but first they go back home to change clothes. "We don't go out to

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<sup>13</sup> Chinese products are often referred to as «chinoiserie» – literally, Chinese-made things. However, this term implies overall the «poor quality» of the good. In that, it is interesting to note a certain continuity of popular speech. In the early years of their arrival in Burkina Faso, Japanese products were stigmatized as «that's Zampou!», implying also «poor quality». In Southern Africa, the term «fong kong» is used in a similar way as «chinoiserie». For more information about perceptions of Chinese goods in Southern Africa (See Park, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Interview, Bougré, Burkina Faso, 28 October 2010.

<sup>15</sup> The Bazin is a kind of textile, which is produced in Germany and the Netherlands. It is worn in many West African countries, such as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

*maquis* dressed in Bazin!” So, dressed in a miniskirt, a sequined T-shirt, high heels, earrings, bracelets and hair clips of assorted colours, Laurence finally appears, saying with a laugh: “I am in a way the model for my shop.” They speed off into the night, this time on both bikes so they can convince a friend to come out with them and pick the “best chicken in town” or bar-hop. Omar explains: “In Ouaga you can do nothing without motorcycle. Already, to do business you have to be mobile. In addition, without a motorcycle you are not respected. It’s like with girls, if you do not have a motorcycle, you do not have a girlfriend.” They arrive at home as the sun rises. Laurence changes again, this time into secondhand clothes that she bought two days earlier, before settling with Omar on the couch to watch TV. Above their heads stands a poster of Jesus and an old Chinese clock that stopped over a month ago.<sup>16</sup>

Christian T. is one of the many entrepreneurs for whom the acquisition of a Chinese motorcycle enabled the establishment of a small business. While working as a courier for a delivery company to pay for his university education, Christian T. realized how large companies such as DHL experienced significant difficulty in locating many small to medium enterprises in the streets of Ouagadougou. Christian T. therefore quit his job and rode around Ouagadougou with his motorcycle to learn to identify various small to medium enterprises. His delivery company now has four bikes after two years of excellent customer relations with individuals and offices. For 500 CFA francs per letter, he can sometimes deliver up to two hundred a day. He hopes to expand his team in the coming years. Meanwhile, he treated himself to an original Yamaha because “now that I’m boss, I don’t ride *chinoiseries* anymore”<sup>17</sup>.

These profiles show that the consumption of Chinese goods is more than an issue of financial capacity or limitation. K. Mahdi’s use of his Chinese motorcycle in specific contexts of social valuation - village festivals and visiting relatives— imbues these goods with prestige and social value. The conspicuous display of these products, particularly visible in the case of Laurence O. and Omar C., reveals the complexity of consumption, where a multitude of logics are intertwined.<sup>18</sup> This reminds us that “value is never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgment made about them by subjects” (Simmel, 1987, p.). Without being totally detached from the prestige dimension of such goods,

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16 Interviews, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 10 September 2010.

17 Interview, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 20 January 2011.

18 In particular, it shows us that the use of Chinese goods is negotiated according to the context. Their value is therefore changing : the Omar’s use of his Chinese motorcycles instead of a more expensive Japanese one is an example of context in which it is more important to have new and fashionable goods.

the last example points out, more pragmatically, the still little-studied potential use of Chinese products in the development of small entrepreneurial activities (Khan, 2006).

By multiplying the opportunities, whether they are related to logics of entrepreneurship and/or distinction, the low prices of Chinese products have participated in transformation of the consumer practices in Africa. This entry into mass consumption through “Made in China” mass production, however individualistic it may seem, is embedded in socially situated practices. Olivier Gosselain (et al.) analyzes the arrival and use of Chinese cookware in Niger to show how these assets have become indispensable for certain matrimonial rites (Gosselain et al., 2009). In Zanzibar, Elisabeth Hsu emphasizes the ritualized adoption, in Ramadan meals, of Chinese noodles produced locally by some members of the first wave of Chinese migration on the island (Hsu, 2007). Thus the appropriation of Chinese products is intimately involved with new forms of ritualization in social processes across the continent.

In Burkina Faso, the Chinese motorcycle is particularly prominent in the ritualisation of consumption, where many urban parents give one to their children to mark their passage into adulthood. This ingrained practice now leads some, like this young man of Ouahigouya, to declare: “I prefer to walk, even if I have a bicycle. At my age, you must have a motorcycle!” Furthermore, the purchase of a motorcycle is often accompanied by a small ceremony where the customer calls his family for a drink to “sprinkle” the new purchase. Finally, it is common that the use of a new motorcycle is “collectivized”, even beyond the family group, during the first weeks. Despite the sometimes visible reluctance of the new owners to share it, they can not easily escape these redistribution rituals, which, according to some of our urban interlocutors, aim less at stemming the jealousy of the neighborhood than to prevent “a malicious act of witchcraft”.

#### **4. New figures of success: Chinese goods traders**

This new material culture is closely linked to the emergence of a new generation of transnational traders. Contrary to popular belief, Chinese entrepreneurs do not have the monopoly of Chinese goods trade. During the past decade, many African entrepreneurs have successfully invested in these trading networks and actively participate in the dissemination of Chinese products. While their activities have contributed to integrate the continent, from below, to globalization processes, their successes have also inspired the myriad of small-scale resellers

who, even in the most remote areas of the continent, distribute these products, and participate in the imagination of a Chinese *Eldorado*. Without the mediation of these African traders, this new material culture would not have had the same impact in Africa, where these new figures of success are simultaneously consumers who show off these products in their daily lives (Banégas and Warnier, 2001).

#### *4.1. Those who go to China...*

Early research on Chinese goods traders was focused on Chinese migrants in Africa, taking cue from the coupled increases of both Chinese products and the visible presence of Chinese traders in major African cities. These studies have enabled a better understanding of migration patterns and sociological profiles of Chinese business communities in various countries of Africa (Kernen, 2007). It nonetheless remains true that in focusing solely on the Chinese traders, this literature has neglected others whose activities are no less central in the spread of Chinese products.<sup>19</sup>

Even today, only a few studies are interested in business networks between China and Africa, because the majority of researchers dealing with the African side of Chinese goods trade have oriented their fieldwork towards African traders who are settled in the cities of Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Yiwu. These studies underline the ability of the African traders to take advantage of opportunities offered by the economic emergence of China (Marfaing and Thiel, 2014; Mathews and Yang, 2012 ; Bertoncetto et al., 2009).

The professional career of Boubacar O. is quite representative of these new African entrepreneurs who go back and forth between Africa and China<sup>20</sup>. As the son of a merchant in the central market of Ouagadougou, Boubacar O. was initiated at a very young age into a commercial environment. In 2000, his father gave him a stock of clothes to develop his own business. In 2003, the fire of the “Grand Marché” of Ouagadougou destroyed most of his stock. He took this opportunity to reorient his activities and went that year to Dubai to procure Chinese mobile phones. In 2005, he traveled to China, where he discovered

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<sup>19</sup> In respect of the now substantial literature on Chinese traders in Africa, we have decided here to focus on the African side of Chinese goods trade. It is however evident that Chinese traders also play a role in the commerce of these goods in the countries (this role is already presented by works notably cited in footnote 6). In Burkina Faso, from which the following vignettes are extracted, the role of African traders is more visible, in part due to the fact that the absence of diplomatic relationship between China and Burkina Faso has contributed to limit the Chinese presence in the country (Khan, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> This new generation of African traders follow an older one (Grégoire and Labazé, 1993; Meillassoux, 1971).

mobile phones that can hold two SIM cards. He saw the commercial potential of such a product in Burkina Faso, where many consumers juggle between multiple telecom operators. He ran his first order of one hundred phones with a profit margin of 400%. Quickly imitated by others, he diversified his activities into different sectors (laundry, computer, audiovisual equipment) and his supply sources (China, Dubai, United States). As the head of a successful business, he is pleased: “Today, I have gone beyond my father’s success”. His social status is not only made evident by a Chinese motorcycle, but also with a splendid second-hand car from Europe. He explains with a laugh, “I use my car to visit my clients; it’s not like those officials who just drive their Mercedes sparingly”.<sup>21</sup>

Mahdi B. is also a mobile phones trader in Ouagadougou. The much smaller size of his business highlights the economic diversity of these transnational traders. Mahdi B. goes every two to three months to China to supply his small shop with mobile phones and USB devices. He discreetly brings them in two backpacks, thus avoiding customs fees. His repeated travels grant him a certain social status; he considers it necessary to display his success through conspicuous consumption. He has now become accustomed to coming to work with a tie and also bought a new motorcycle, justifying the investment by stating the importance of good presentation: “I could not keep my old motorcycle. When customers see that I have a *rainbow* (term used for Chinese motorcycles), they say “he grew up”, (and) it gives them confidence to come and do business with me”.<sup>22</sup>

#### *4.2. Small retailers of Chinese goods*

While African traders traveling in China are becoming more numerous, the dissemination of Chinese products and its material culture on the continent is largely based, in turn, on small retailers, who do not have the resources to undertake such transnational travels. Studies on these small retailers of Chinese products remain rare, although, some scholars have been interested in the places that make this “new geography of international trade” (Debie and al., 2003), such as Roland Marchal’s work on Nairobi’s current role as a new international trade hub, largely driven by the success of the direct plane line connecting the city to Hong Kong (Marchal, 2007). Similarly, we note that the port of Cotonou in Benin plays a major role in the supply of Chinese products in the West African region. Furthermore, numerous West African coastal states, such as Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Togo, have also prioritized importation and freight forwarding in their international trade policy. As such, the increase in imports from

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21 Interviews, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 30 November 2010.

22 Interview, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 22 November 2010.

China participate in the creation of additional economic opportunities for these interface areas at the ports.

Even after crossing oceans and entering the continent through the ports, however, the commodities still have a long way to go before reaching their African consumers. Bio Goura Soulé notes in this regard the major upheavals of trade at African borders that occurred under pressure of the emergence of a new generation of small traders of Chinese goods (Soulé, 2009). Strategies and practices of those small or large traders, however, remain largely forgotten. In our case, we were struck by their diversity, which we try to present here in some profiles.

Catherine K. is a 28 year old woman from Ouagadougou. While she used to depend on financial support from her family, she gradually succeeded in saving enough capital from occasionally selling clothes imported from a neighboring country. Her first trip to Ghana was at the invitation of one of her more experienced friends, who is familiar with Ghana. They took an overnight bus and arrived in the Ghanaian capital the next morning. During the first day, they roamed the markets in search of bargains. The next day, Catherine used intermediaries whom she had met the previous day to translate English for her. By evening, her purchases were securely attached to the roof of the bus headed back to Ouagadougou. The border crossing was nothing but a formality, with her humble load escaping the vigilance of customs officers. In less than a month, she managed to sell all her stock, aided by the Christmas shopping season and her low prices. Three such trips brought profits of almost 100,000 CFA francs each. Today, she plans to open a small shop in front of her family's home. "We're lucky to live in front of a high school. Students will come to buy a lot at a shop located here", she says.<sup>23</sup>

It is sometimes not even necessary for Chinese product retailers to go to the main entry ports to make a profit from routing these goods. Border towns are all starting points, potential sources of higher or lower profits, depending on the import methods. For example, the city of Cinkassé, on the border between Togo and Burkina Faso, plays an important role in trade between the two countries. Many smuggling networks weave themselves into the sidelines of legal activities, notably in the motorcycle sector. Every night, hundreds of motorcycles, cloaked under tarpaulins to prevent them from gathering dust, start their travel to Ouagadougou. Their drivers, hired by shops, take many risks in driving by night on bush roads with their lights off to avoid customs controls. Ultimately, this motorcycle supply line allows some shops in the city to provide all of their

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23 Interview, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 8 September 2010.

shops' motorcycles at prices that are 25 to 40% lower than their competitors. After earning 25,000 CFA francs per motorcycle, the drivers take one of the many buses providing a direct link between Ouagadougou and the border to start a new cycle of importation.<sup>24</sup>

Souleymane O. is one of the many retailers disseminating Chinese products from major urban centers. He sells medicines and beauty products, purchased from a Chinese trader in the capital, on the bus line that connects Ouagadougou to Bobo-Dioulasso. Souleymane employs a well-oiled marketing strategy that he has developed with the complicity of the bus drivers. After the bus leaves the outskirts of the city, the usually loud music is muted, leaving the seller the opportunity to praise the merits of his products. As a true showman, he manages to entertain his audience from the monotony of travel and involves some passengers who go along with his game good-naturedly. His sales pitch uses shared social registers to contextualize these objects through amusing anecdotes.<sup>25</sup>

Mohammed S. is one of the countless traders who contributes to the infiltration of Chinese products well beyond the major interurban roads, providing access to consumption even in the most remote villages. For almost two years, he has traveled on his motorcycle loaded with goods every three days to the village of Ziga in the northern region of Burkina Faso, where he offers T-shirts bearing the image of Barack Obama, Bob Marley, or local stars. In the remaining two days, he does the same in other villages in the region. This son of merchants chose to escape the competition of the city, although according to him, village customers are nevertheless demanding: "If it is not good like this, the villagers, they do not buy anyway". He therefore seeks to renew his stocks regularly, following the trends in vogue in the capital.<sup>26</sup>

Internationalisation is a common goal for almost all of these traders of Chinese goods. For those who have never traveled there, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Yiwu are perceived to be places where everything becomes possible. Back home, the obvious economic success of many importers continues to perpetuate stories of windfall profits. While some itineraries of accumulation are truly rags-to-riches stories, the reality is sometimes much more cruel. This straight path to success outlined in the dreams of small-scale retailers is certainly not the norm.

Like the failures of some Chinese who try to make a fortune in Africa, seek-

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24 Interviews, Cinkassé, Burkina Faso and Togo, 20 au 26 November 2011.

25 Interviews, Ouagadougou –and Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, 7 December 2011.

26 Interviews, Ziga, Burkina Faso, 28 October 2010.

ing fortunes in China is not without risks for African traders. Those who have gone there talk about the difficulties of finding the right supplier or fighting their way through multiple intermediaries. Today, however, with the increased competition, the slightest misstep can be fatal. One Cameroonian official's son, with no prior experience, tried his luck in China. After one positive experience, his following two trips ended in failure. One time, he discovered that the goods in his container were of lesser quality than he had ordered; the second time, delivery took place much later than expected, so that all of his goods were out of fashion by the time they arrived and did not sell well. Today, he has joined many traders who have gradually withdrawn from importing themselves in order to refocus their activities on the retail. However, dreams are tenacious, and China still represents, at present, this new *Eldorado* around which success fantasies are crystallized in the imaginations of a whole new generation of small retailers.

## **5. Rents and power structures**

While the arrival of Chinese goods shows the contours of a new material culture, power relations that traverse certain sectors affected by these imports are modified and transform the rules of competition. Contrary to popular belief, however, this competition is not automatically built along ethnic lines. The categories "Chinese" and "Africans" blur too easily the tensions within these categories as well as the collaborations established between them. Furthermore, the proliferation of Chinese and African transnational traders raises questions about the capacity of political elites to control the rents of extraversion, or all the resources that can be captured by the dependency of an economy vis-à-vis the exterior. Such rents of extraversion include both formal extraction from commercial activity such as taxes or tariffs, but also informal channels such as corruption and clientelism. In some sectors, where management was previously considered as important rent-extracting opportunity, the management of extraversion has become more indirect and diffused.

### *5.1. Rethinking the competition between Africa's Chinese goods traders*

By showing how many African entrepreneurs have seized upon these new business opportunities, ethnic or national labels to categorize these entrepreneurs appear ineffective. This perception remains, however, very present in certain popular discourses that readily portray "Africa" as the victim of unscrupulous Chinese traders. It can be found in some national newspapers, such as *le Messager* in Cameroon or *le Potentiel* in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is

also a discourse that some local traders' organizations such as UNACOIS in Senegal frequently echo. In the face of the "Chinese" threat, these organizations also temporarily erase the division between "African" and "Lebanese" and set themselves up as the guarantors of legal and legitimate businesses, in contrast to the practices of the Chinese, which are presented as unfair (Kernen, 2010).

Obviously, this dichotomy obscures the complexity of the hierarchies that crisscross the trade of Chinese products in Africa. In general, many Africans are smaller retailers, while many Chinese are wholesalers. However, to stop at this observation is much too simplistic. In Kinshasa, some young Chinese supply their shops in suburban areas by going to downtown Chinese shops<sup>27</sup>. In many African countries, numerous Chinese migrants choose to work for others in hope of eventually opening their own business. Moreover, according to the stories told by Chinese in Africa, success is difficult to achieve in the face of the 'African' competition and the corruption of administrations.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, in certain countries, some large African importers (including those of Lebanese and Syrian origin) seem to dominate whole sectors of imports and resale, like the Lebanese in the Dakar appliance market or the Burkinabe in the Ouagadougou motorcycles sector. Less visible and therefore more difficult to identify, they nevertheless form a large part of the 'African' role in the importation process from China.

Some business networks bring together people based on shared origins. However, upon closer analysis, we see that these are, in most cases, family networks. Thus, the "Chinese" networks of some Chinese small shops operating in Africa can be better understood as transnational family connections rather than broad ethnic networks. While many of these Chinese trader networks existed prior to their migration (including those with familial ties), some new networks are also developing on the ground in Africa. This type of situation can be found in Ouagadougou, where traders from the city of Fuzhou of Fujian province meet every Friday night at a restaurant downtown. While some of them knew each other even before coming to settle in Africa, this is certainly not the case for everyone. They have other common characteristics: they tend to be young and single, they enjoy their drinking and cardplaying, and they are all starting up small businesses in Africa. In one case, regular Friday evening meetings/gatherings turned into a credit rotating group, and today many of the members are financially involved in the activities of the others (Lam, 2015). The participation in such a network, however, is not always enough to diffuse the rivalries and competition (Laribee,

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27 Interview, Kinshasa, 28 August 2009.

28 Interview, Ouagadougou, 24 February 2010.

2008). Chinese shops in Dakar or Yaounde are involved, according to the traders interviewed, in fierce competition, all trying to sell similar products. For those who still doubt the competition between Chinese businesses, one small sign hung at the entrance of a Chinese shop in Accra is more explicit: “The compatriots working in the same business sector are requested not to enter” (Kernen and Lam, 2014).

Beyond the ubiquitous competition between Chinese products resellers, traders formed alliances that transcend ethnic considerations. The dynamics of competition, complementarity, and cooperation between Africans and Chinese are intertwined (Haugen, 2011). It must be noted, however, that this collaboration is sometimes difficult to identify. It is sometimes revealed during conversations with interlocutors, who are often reluctant to shed light on the composition of their networks. For example, on the occasion of special popular events, such as Women’s Day or the elections, some traders used to order customized fabrics from the local textile industry. Yet after local demand exceeded the capacity of the local textile factory, a powerful Burkinabe entrepreneur, who was a major player in this market, diversified his supply sources through a partnership with a Chinese factory, made possible by earlier connections between certain African traders and their Chinese counterparts (Khan, 2014).

We also observed in Burkina Faso how a big Chinese importer of motorcycles, after importing his goods on the mainland from the port of Lomé, sold half of them to buyers in Ouagadougou and the other half to African shops settled at the border. These border shops were ultimately selling these motorcycles in Ouagadougou as well, following the smuggling networks we presented above. The demand of these traders involved in cross-border trade is so important that it is unthinkable for this Chinese importer not to participate, even if the profits of such extra-legal activities eventually compete with the goods he delivers himself to the capital.

### *5.2. Trajectories of accumulation and management of extraversion*

The emergence of a new generation of entrepreneurs and transnational traders of various origins is not without consequence for the political economy of several West African countries. Indeed, the growth of importation and retail activities opens up competition in sectors that were previously controlled by political elites or the President’s entourage. Historically, the textile sector was first to transform significantly, with the loss of influence of the old sector importers and sometimes the bankruptcy of national industries (Toulabor, 2012;

Sylvanus, 2009). The proliferation of traders of Chinese goods is thus sometimes accompanied by the disappearance of formerly very lucrative positions of accumulation. Is it, however, a real revolution or an evolution which does not fundamentally call into question the functioning of African economies largely characterized by the capture of rents related to extraversion?

In some cases, we are witnessing the gradual abandonment of these old – and weakened – rentier positions in favor of repositioning in new – and more so lucrative – sectors. Indeed, this is notably the path followed by a Burkinabe entrepreneur reputed to be close to powerful higher ups, who occupied a central position in the sale of motorcycles assembled on site in Burkina. Following a drop in profits due to the increasing number of both legal and illegal import lines, he repositioned himself in the recently liberalized phone industry, leaving his motorcycle resale business to gradually decline. This example suggests how already powerful elites are able to adapt to increased competition in certain sectors through the dynamic and scalable management of resources of extraversion.

It must however be noted that there are not so many examples like the former one. Bankruptcies and repositioning should not obscure the coexistence of supply chains; the rent captured from Chinese products does not necessarily sweep away old suppliers, but instead currently fills the market with even more actors and potential sites of rent extraction. Furthermore, while the importance of some business in the hands of elites may appear to be reduced by the arrival of Chinese products, it would be too quick to say that such adjustments necessarily mean an abandonment of rent-seeking logics. The proliferation of transnational entrepreneurs in historically monopolistic sectors does not imply the absence of a financial extraction of these flows of goods by elites, nor does the smaller scale of these enterprises suggest that their impact is similarly negligible. These “suitcase traders” or small smuggling networks, grease the wheels of the customs administration to ensure the durability of their businesses as well as a source of income for the state (Axelsson, 2012). Traders of Chinese goods, whether settled in shops or as street vendors, deal with various levels of officials from the neighborhood police to the tax authorities. This logic appears in Burkina Faso in the expression, “If you want to eat, you have to let others eat too!” This explains why, to avoid heavy extortions, traders multiply their camouflage strategies or even forego developing their business substantially. In other words, it appears that the importation of Chinese products is not free of diverse “taxes” or extortions at many levels and that these import activities still generate revenues for the “State”.

At this stage of our research, we are however unable to say whether the money collected on Chinese goods trade is only used to make a living for the lower level administrative bureaucrats or if it is a more systematic source of State revenue. Today, it is much more difficult to know how resources related to the trade of imported products are allocated compared to when a few entrepreneurs shared a monopoly. In many ways, Chinese products do not enable Africa to get out of this rentier logic, but their arrival contributes to significantly complicating its management across various countries and sectors, and increases the number of players in the game.

Clearly, the management of the rent extracted from the importation of Chinese goods seems to be ruled by more indirect capture modalities (Hibou, 1998), not dissimilar to the work of Emmanuel Grégoire and Pascal Labazée in 1993, which announced the advent of a “new articulation between State and merchants”:

*“The powers are forced to tolerate parallel exchanges and give up a significant part of their authority over the distribution of rentier spaces, because trade networks today supply the domestic market at lower costs, provide significant additional income to members of administrations, thus contributing to the reproduction of social alliances that government revenues can no longer finance”* (Grégoire and Labazé, 1993, p.14).

This new articulation between the State and merchants has direct political implications, since access to mass consumption for most of the population materializes long-delayed development promises. For example, consumer-voters can see access to new material culture as evidence of an “emerging Burkina” referring to the campaign slogan of Blaise Compaoré in 2010. Even more than the polls, the lower prices of imported products can then be conceptualized as buying political stability.

## **6. Conclusion**

By focusing on Chinese products in Africa, it is possible to identify a plurality of economic, social and political process, which shed light on the importance of their impact on societies nonetheless long structured by extraversion. The arrival of these cheaper products leads us first to envisage the entry of African societies into an era of mass consumption. It is important to note, however, that these new consumption patterns are entangled with different sets of logics that can not be

reduced to their low price. In many ways, the arrival of Chinese products reveals the emergence of a new material culture. Due to the wide distribution of these goods, invention of modernity become thereby more complex. In this process, the central role of young transnational traders or resellers must be emphasized. These new figures of success, by their conspicuous consumption, stage Chinese products while spreading new codes of distinction throughout Africa. This massification of consumption, however, does not illustrate the emergence of a new Chinese register of modernity. The idea of a coherent Chinese model, supported by some who argue of the existence of a Chinese “Soft Power” project in Africa (Cooke, 2009), hardly seems relevant in the case of the Chinese goods. Even if some African dreams about China can be materialized by their consumption of Chinese goods, such patterns are still largely shaped by a mass consumption model, which, beyond the mechanisms of local appropriation, refers to a concept of modernity that is not wholly Chinese.

The arrival of Chinese goods in Africa, however, does not only mark a revolution in terms of consumption patterns and the emergence of a new material culture. At an economic and political level, the proliferation of Chinese goods has occasionally shaken up previously existing systems. Through the process of “globalization from below” of African economies, there is a certain transformation of historic relationships between political elites and economic control of commercial revenue. In many ways, Chinese goods are thus at the heart of a subtle struggle between “elites and non-elites”, both for the definition of the cultural codes of modernity and for the potential rentier gains from these new configurations of extraversion.

### **Biographical notes**

**Antoine Kernen** is a Senior Lecturer and Researcher, Department of Social and Political Sciences, at the University of Lausanne. One of the earliest scholars working on Chinese flows – of migrants and goods – to Africa, he has focused his research on Chinese traders in West Africa, including Mali, Senegal, and Ghana. He has authored and co-authored numerous papers, including “Small and Medium-sized Chinese Businesses in Mali and Senegal” in *African and Asian Studies* and “Workforce Localization among Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in Ghana” (with Katy Lam) in the *Journal of Contemporary China* and is a leading senior scholar in the field.

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