

Chinese in the forest:

An Oral History of Soubré Hydroelectricity Project, Côte d'Ivoire

In memory of Professor Harvey Frommer. Without him, I would have never turned my life to this oral history.

As a student of the French language, out of curiosity, and the prospect of adventure, I chose to work in former French colony countries in Africa upon completing my undergraduate degree in 2013. I spent five years working as the public relations coordinator for a Chinese engineering company, Sinohydro, in West Africa. These five years are very important in my life. However, I couldn't reflect on this experience properly, until I met Professor Harvey Frommer, under whose guidance I began to study Oral History, which is not only a means of recording the past, but also a way of resolving it.

Introduction

This oral history is based on interviews I conducted with four employees of Sinohydro, a Chinese state-owned company. I interviewed a secretary, a driver, a designer, and an interpreter who all worked on the construction site of Soubré Hydroelectricity Project. Soubré is a small village in Côte d'Ivoire,¹ 190 miles away from the country's biggest city, Abidjan. In 2011, the Ivorian government decided to build a hydroelectricity plant at Soubré. The Chinese government financed the project, and Sinohydro undertook the construction. The project started in 2013 and ended in 2018. During these five years, around 200 Chinese and 500 Ivorians worked and lived on the construction site. Isolated in a forest near Soubré, they became a small community. Through this oral history, I want to share the real experiences and emotions of Chinese people in Côte d'Ivoire.

The Secretary

Y, born in 1986, worked at Soubré from 2013 to 2016

I am an orphan. My husband worked in Africa, so I followed him. My father and my mother passed away when I was only two years old. My uncles and aunts raised me.

¹Though we often use "Ivory Coast" in English, the official English name is Côte d'Ivoire, the same as its French name.

They treated me very well. However, they couldn't replace my parents, and they had their own children. I felt like a guest.

I lived in Shuangliu, a town near Chengdu, the headquarters of Bureau 5.² People in Shuangliu couldn't avoid Bureau 5. They ate in the restaurants run by Bureau 5. They went to the hospital of Bureau 5 when they felt ill. They sent their children to the primary school of Bureau 5. And finally, most of us worked in Bureau 5. I was not an exception. When I graduated from the university, I started working in a market run by Bureau 5.

My only hobby was playing online games on the internet. When I lived in my uncle's house, the online game was my real home. I met my husband in an online game.

Falling into a romantic relationship in an online game is ridiculous to most Chinese, including my uncles and aunts. They couldn't believe that I never met my boyfriend in person.

My husband is from Gansu, a poor province in China. He worked for a local engineering company. We talked a lot in the game. We talked about marriage. When he knew that I was an orphan, he decided to leave Gansu and live with me in Sichuan. He said if he asked me to live with him in Gansu, my uncles and aunts would refuse that plan, so he came to Sichuan to live with me, to show his sincerity.

I didn't tell him that I didn't care about the thoughts of my uncles and aunts. That sounded a little cruel. If he asked me, I would have gone to Gansu immediately. But I would like to see his sincerity, too. I responded: "Okay, come to me." The next month, he quit his job and arrived at Shuangliu.

I cried of joy.

With experience engineering, he quickly found a job in Bureau 5. We married. I must say, I love my uncles and aunts. Without them, I couldn't live. However, I want my own home, my own family.

In 2012, the company sent my husband to Morocco. Bureau 5 had a highway project there. My husband worked there for one year. I missed him very much. When he came back to China, I told him that I would like to go to Africa with him. Morocco is a good place. My husband agreed and talked with his director. Several days later,

²Bureau 5 is a branch company of Sinohydro.

his director gave a response. Because the project in Morocco was near the end and they didn't need many workers, the company decided to send us to Côte d'Ivoire. Bureau 5 had a new project there.

I knew that Bureau 5 planned to send experienced workers to Côte d'Ivoire, especially those who worked in Morocco. But those experienced workers didn't want to work in Côte d'Ivoire. Morocco was considered much better than the Côte d'Ivoire. Who would want to move from a better place to a worse place? It was an exchange: "You want to work with your wife? Okay, you go to Côte d'Ivoire."

We thought what mattered was that we were together. We set off to Côte d'Ivoire in April 2013. We were the first workers of Bureau 5 in Soubré. I knew nothing about engineering. The general director found it difficult to give me a proper position. Then he called me to his office: "You work as the secretary."

"Whose secretary?" I asked.

"The secretary of the project." The general director sighed.

The secretary of the project. This title was big. I worked in the office of administration and handled everything, except engineering. We had a blackboard outside the office of administration. Every day, I wrote down the announcements on it. I was good at calligraphy. When I worked in the market, I was also in charge of writing announcements.

Other important work of mine included managing the storage. We had two storage units on the construction site. One was full of food, managed by the kitchen. The other was full of daily necessities, like pens, notebooks, soaps, shampoos, towels, etc. This storage was managed by the office of administration, or me. Côte d'Ivoire has nothing. Every single daily necessity is imported from France. They are very expensive, and only the rich Ivoirians buy them. If we bought the daily necessities in the local market, the budget of the project, certainly, would boom. We imported our daily necessities from China, by containers. When these daily necessities arrived at Soubré, we put them in storage and distributed them to our workers periodically. I noted everything about the distribution. I thought the director of the project was very clever. He let a woman manage the storage. You know, most workers were male. If a man managed the storage and someone couldn't get what he wanted, they would probably quarrel and fight. However, when I said something, they would listen.

Laughs.

Work was easy. Life was difficult. When I arrived, we didn't have a stable water supply on the construction site. I could only take a shower every three or four days. My male colleagues, including my husband, bathed in Sassandra River.³ I couldn't do that! I couldn't sleep without shower either! I was the only female then, and others thought they should take care of me. They reduced their use of water, to offer me enough water to bathe every night. I was moved. I owed them.

After two months, the condition of the construction site improved. We could live there relatively normally. We had daily necessities distributed by the company, but those things only met the minimum requirements. I carried many cosmetics from China to Côte d'Ivoire. And, many, you know, necessary things.

DL: What?

Pads. I had two big suitcases, and one was filled with pads which I could use for two years. That was a wise decision. Some girls, our interpreters, arrived after me. They didn't carry any pads. They were naïve. They thought that they could buy them in the local market. Well, in the supermarket in Abidjan, you could buy expensive French-made pads. In Soubré, nothing. Local women had their own way to deal with their periods. I shared my pads with the girls. I saved their lives! In 2015, there were 13 females on the construction site. I wrote a report to the general director and suggested that the company import pads from China to Soubré by container. They agreed. We didn't have to carry two suitcases anymore.

Entertainment was another issue. I liked playing online games, but there was no internet for personal use on the construction site. When the number of females got large, the director of the project decided to use a minibus to take female workers to Abidjan once every month. To do what? To shop!

The journey to Abidjan was usually on Saturday. We got up early in the morning, and we arrived at Abidjan at 11 am. We had lunch and went shopping until 2 pm. Then we came back home. There was a Carrefour in Abidjan.⁴ In China, Carrefour is nothing special. But in Abidjan, Carrefour is paradise! We also had some male

³Sassandra River is the river near Soubré. Soubré Hydroelectricity Project uses its water to generate electricity.

⁴A French supermarket

escorts. It was dangerous to have a dozen Chinese females alone on the bus. The escorts were appointed by turn. Some might give their position to others: “Hey, here is a chance to approach the girl you like, and I’ll take your chocolate biscuits in return.” *Laughs.*

Because of my position, I barely communicated with the locals. It felt like working in China sometimes. In 2016, I went back to China with my husband. We saved much money in the bank during these four years. We bought a small apartment and a car. I believe that my life, our life, has started. My husband’s boss says that there will be a new project in Israel in 2019 and that we can work together if we like. Well, my dream is opening a restaurant with my husband, and we don’t have enough money yet. Maybe next year you will receive my postcard from Israel! *Laughs.*

The Driver

Z, born in 1984, worked at Soubré from 2013 to 2016

I was an athlete before. Shot put. I haven’t touched a shot for. . . 5 years. I wasn’t an excellent athlete. You haven’t heard my name before, have you? (I smiled and shook my head.) Neither had my wife. *Laughs.*

I chose to retire in 2008 when I was 24 years old. I knew I didn’t have enough talent.

The sports committee of Sichuan found a job being a P.E. teacher for me.⁵ We athletes live in an isolated world. We know nothing but training. If the committee didn’t help me, I would be starved to death the next day after retirement. I became a teacher at the technical secondary school of Bureau 5. I married. I had a boy. I lived a normal life.

In 2013, Bureau 5 would like to pick up some teachers in the technical secondary school to work in Côte d’Ivoire. Côte d’Ivoire? All I knew was that it’s a foreign country. My dream was to play for my country in a foreign country. That dream was dead, but working in a foreign country, somehow, could be a placebo. I went directly to the office of the principal, telling him I would like to work in Côte d’Ivoire.

“I will tell the general director of Bureau 5, but, don’t count on it.”

⁵Every province in China has a sports committee that takes care of athletes after they retire. They often force state-owned companies to hire retired athletes.

Why did Bureau 5 want teachers? Because some of their best technicians and mechanics were teachers at the school. They wanted the best workers to complete the Soubré project. Me? I was just a burden.

Several days later, the principal called me. To my surprise, I became one member of the first team in Soubré. Then I realized: no one wanted to work at Soubré. Bureau 5 couldn't find enough workers so anyone who would like to go could go. I felt like my dream had come true. My wife couldn't understand why I was so happy. She was not that happy. She had to look after our boy alone. He was three years old. I told her I could buy the best European products for our boy. Our neighbor, who worked in Morocco, did so for his child.

"It is Morocco," my wife said.

"They are all in Africa. I believe they are the same."

I was half right, half wrong. I could buy the best European products in Abidjan. Amazing. However, most of the time I worked and lived in the forest in Soubré. I hardly had chances to shop in Abidjan. And again, I became a burden. The director of the project couldn't understand why the headquarters sent a P.E. teacher to help him. At last, he asked me, "Can you drive?"

Driving might be the only thing I learned during my athlete life outside of shot put. I must thank the sports committee. They organized several training courses for driving, cooking, and something like that, so we would be able to live after retirement. I have a Class-A driving license, which means I can drive any vehicle, from heavy truck to motorcycle.

I became the leader of the driver team. I was the only Chinese person on the team. According to the local laws and our contract of the construction, only Ivorians could drive, unless a Chinese driver got permission from the Foreign Affair Ministry. The Ivorian government hoped that we could recruit as many locals as possible to help solve the problem of unemployment. Bureau 5 thought they should have at least one Chinese driver in case of emergency. I became that Chinese driver. For three years, I drove every single vehicle on the construction site: the SUV for the director of the project and important guests, the pickup to carry materials from San-Pédro, the minibus to transport our colleagues between Soubré and Abidjan, and even an ambulance!

One day, the owner said that we should buy an ambulance.⁶ If someone on the construction site was heavily injured, we could send him to the big hospital in San-Pédro by ambulance as soon as possible. They gave us a permit to own one ambulance. We imported a brand-new ambulance from China. I went to Abidjan and drove it back to Soubré. The owner told me I could use the warning light so other vehicles would let me pass quickly. It only took me 4 hours to drive from Abidjan to Soubré. That was the only time we used that ambulance. Fortunately, no one was injured enough to use the ambulance in the next years. They gave the ambulance to a local hospital after the completion of the Soubré project. Free, no charge. And it was still brand-new.

Our driver team, well, there were only three drivers. Besides me, two Ivorians. One was Jean, a Christian; the other was Bamba, a Muslim. Me, I was the freethinker. Jean didn't work on Sunday, and Bamba didn't work on Friday. I worked every day. They were good drivers. Jean used to drive for a French company and Bamba for the president. They were all born in Soubré. When they heard that a Chinese company sought for local drivers in Soubré, they quit their job in Abidjan and came back to Soubré immediately.

I didn't know French. I should have learned. Every time I wanted to give them orders, I used a lot of body language, like dancing, a little funny. They could understand me every time. Bamba tried to teach me some French words. Aller, venir, manger, dormir.⁷ I like them.

In 2015, we had twenty Ivorians in the team. They worked very well. I didn't need to drive myself. It was boring to stay in the office, so I went to the kitchen. I wanted to learn cooking. When we organized the banquet at the camp, I acted as the assistant of our chefs. The director of the project said to me: "Should I pay you a double salary?" I apologized. *Laughs.*

In 2016, the situation dramatically changed. All the projects in Morocco were finished. The Soubré project became Bureau 5's only overseas project. Everyone wanted to work at Soubré because the experience of working abroad could guarantee promotion. Well, it is true. The year when they came back most of them were

⁶"Owner" means the owner of the plant, namely the Ivorian government.

⁷Go, come, eat, sleep

promoted.

Some applied for the position; some tried to use [connections]. . . the cousin of the director, the niece of the manager. They all came. Finally, another Chinese driver came to my office. The Ivorian drivers were enough. Why did we need another Chinese driver? I knew it was time to leave.

I talked with the director of the project. He readily accepted my resignation. One week later, the new Chinese driver drove the minibus to carry our female colleagues and me to Abidjan. Others would come back to Soubré, but me, I would go back to China. That was the second time that I was a passenger; the first time was when I arrived in Abidjan three years ago. When I stayed in the office of Bureau 5 in Abidjan, I received a phone call. It was our interpreter. She wished me a happy voyage, then told me that Bamba had something to say.

“Zaijian! Zaijian!” His Chinese was as poor as my French.

He didn't know, in Chinese, “Zaijian” means “See you again.” But I can't see him anymore.

I miss Bamba and Jean sometimes.

The Designer

H, born in 1985, worked at Soubré from 2014 to 2018

I got my Ph.D. degree from Sichuan University in 2013, then began working at a design institute for the Sinohydro Group. That institute is also in Chengdu, near the Bureau 5 headquarters. We have many co-op projects. Our institute designed the Soubré project.

One day in 2014, at the meeting, our director said, “Who would like to work in Côte d'Ivoire with Bureau 5?” No one responded.

There is a chasm between designer and worker in the Sinohydro Group. Our institute is on the side of the designer. Bureau 5 is on the side of the worker. It is true that we usually work together, but in fact, we look down on each other. We consider the worker rude and uneducated. They think we only know the theories, and that the practice they mastered is the most important during construction.

The director talked with every designer, and the others refused him for the same reasons: they had a wife, they had children, they had a family. I was the only single

man in the institute. I wanted to refuse the director for the reason that I needed to take care of my parents. Well, my parents were very healthy. When I started working, they seemed to have lost weight off their shoulders. They began traveling all over China. I didn't want to lie. I accepted the director's offer. That night, when I got back home, I called my mother. They were in Shandong, a province of China.

"I will take a business trip to Côte d'Ivoire, for a long time. Maybe one year."

"Côte d'Ivoire? What's that?"

"It's an African country."

"Ah! Is it dangerous there?"

I told her it was safe. We had a very big camp in the forest. We had a Chinese kitchen. There was an Ivorian army protecting us. Africans were kind to Chinese people. The bulk of my work would be staying in the office to make and edit the drawings.

"Sounds good. You are a man. You shouldn't stay in Sichuan all your life. Looking at the world outside is good. Remember to call me every day."

I arrived at Soubré in June 2014. The workers on the construction site called me "Doctor," "Professor," and "Xiucai."⁸ One day, a mechanic ran into my office. "Can I help you?" I asked. He stared at me and said, "I have a question about the drawing. But first, I would like to observe a doctor. I didn't even attend high school. How did you become a doctor? That's amazing."

I didn't know how to respond. Well, the chasm, I believe, resulted from ignorance. Worker and designer, we work together, but we don't know each other at all. I read more books than them. However, I ate the same meal, slept in the same house, and we smoked the same cigarettes. It is funny that I made my first friends on the construction site because I smoked. We had a small smoking room at the corner of the camp. The first time I met some workers in the smoking room, they were very surprised. "Unbelievable! A doctor smokes!" That was the time when they realized that we were all the same, human.

In 2016, we were going to install generators under the dam. I was not an expert about the generator, and the installation of the generators is the most important part of the construction. The institute sent an expert to Soubré. You left Soubré in 2015, but I

⁸A scholar who wants to serve the emperor

believe you heard of this. . . tragedy.

DL: Yes.

She arrived in June. Her mission was to help us install the first generator in four weeks. The director wanted to welcome her, but she refused because she would like to start working as soon as possible. Then she rushed into my office. I even remember the first sentence she said to me: “H, can I borrow your cell phone?”

She told me that her daughter had a parent-teacher conference at school that day. Though her husband attended, she wanted to call the teacher herself to learn about her daughter. After ten minutes, she began working. I knew she had flown for nearly 18 hours. She didn’t rest at all.

She was very kind. There were many technical difficulties during the installation, and the workers couldn’t understand everything in the drawings. She always guided the workers on site with lots of patience. Everyone liked her. With her help, we succeeded in installing the first generator in three weeks. At the very end, we finished the project three months before the deadline, and the owner gave the company a reward of ten million dollars. So, this one week she saved, equaled eight hundred thousand dollars. She was great.

That night, when we celebrated the success of the installation, she told the director she wanted to go back to China. I said, “Why not stay for one more week. Your mission is complete, so you can relax for one week. You haven’t been to San-Pédro.”

She smiled. “I have much work to do in China, and I miss my daughter.”

The next day she left. We began the installation of the second generator, and I continued communicating with her for technical support. One week later, she didn’t appear online. Her colleague told me that she was in the hospital. I didn’t know why, but I was a little worried at that time. One more week, she was still absent. Another week passed, and I heard nothing from her.

Then the institute called my local number. That was unusual. Normally, they just sent me emails. They told me that she died.

I looked at my cell phone, the same cell phone I lent her when we met. I didn’t cry. I stood up and lit one cigarette. I never smoked in the office before, but I couldn’t help it.

I was the only one in Soubré's design office. I worked alone. Then she arrived. We worked together for three weeks, then she left. She left forever. I worked alone in the office again. Maybe she became a ghost. She was kind, so she would become a kind ghost. Sometimes I felt I was being accompanied by her ghost in the office.

The institute told me the cause of death. When she got home, she had a fever. She went to the hospital but the doctors there couldn't find a reason. It was malaria. Malaria disappeared in China a long time ago, so the doctors didn't diagnose it at first. When they realized what the cause was, it was too late. The parasites traveled to her brain. No one could save her.

I regretted it very much. If I could have persuaded her to stay one more week. You know, malaria is very common in Côte d'Ivoire. If you got malaria, the local doctor, no, even our clinic would cure you immediately. If she had stayed, she wouldn't have died. I hated myself. I was useless. I knew it was not my fault, but except blaming myself, I couldn't do anything.

I informed the director of the project. He didn't cry either. He asked me if I had a cigarette. I gave him one. It was his order to build the smoking room at the camp and forbid smoking in the office because his wife didn't like the smell of cigarettes. Now he smoked in the office.

My business trip to Soubré ended in 2018. I was promoted when I came back to China. I have my own office now, and I lead a team. The future seems good. But she can't see her future. I didn't change my cell phone for two years. Perhaps it's time to buy a new one after telling you this story? What have I learned from her death? Is life fragile? Do I need to appreciate everything around me? It is like a fishbone in my throat, making me uncomfortable. However, I won't let the doctor take it out of my throat. If the pain disappears, she, or the memory of her, will disappear too.

The "Ivorian"

F, born in 1988, worked at Soubré from 2011

My French is bad. Last month I attended a meeting in France. I made a speech in French. One Frenchman asked me, "What's your accent? It's bizarre."

I said, "The Ivorian accent. Isn't it exotic?"

He laughed and told me he had been in Abidjan once. We talked a lot about Côte

d'Ivoire. At last, he said, "You are not Chinese. You lie. You must be Ivorian."

Both of us laughed.

I graduated from a university of foreign languages in 2011. My major was French. I found a job in Bureau 5. In 2011, Bureau 5 recruited six French interpreters. The office in Morocco sent an email to the general director. They only had five open positions for the interpreters. Bureau 5 organized a French exam for those six new interpreters. I ranked 6th. The others went to Morocco. I stayed in Chengdu. I was very depressed. I began studying French again, much harder than in university.

Bureau 5 wanted to find work for me. I did nothing, and they paid me. At this point, I was happy. *Laughs*. Then, the Sinohydro group sent a message to every Bureau: they were going to sign a contract for the construction of a hydroelectricity plant with the Ivorian government. Sinohydro wanted to know which bureau could work in the Côte d'Ivoire.

The general director of Bureau 5 was hesitating. He decided to dispatch a team to investigate the Côte d'Ivoire. Of course, the investigation team needed an interpreter.

Before departure, the director told me: "This is the first time you work abroad. Don't be too nervous. W, [the leader of the team] he knows some French. He could help you." I was very discouraged. I studied French for four years! I needed help from an amateur?! But I couldn't say anything. I had ranked 6th on the exam.

The investigation was not easy. Few Chinese people lived or worked in the Côte d'Ivoire. We could only get some information from the Embassy, but their information was not detailed enough. We had to do a survey by ourselves. From the price of potatoes to the regular route in San-Pedro, we investigated every single detail. When we finished our investigation, the Ambassador invited us to dinner, and he asked whether he could "borrow" our information.

We "gave" him the information. *Laughs*.

The investigation lasted two months; then we received the order from China: Sinohydro group had appointed Bureau 5 to do the Soubré project. Our mission was canceled. The team joined the office of the Soubré project, and I became the director of the office of interpretation. Was this a joke? Three months ago, I was an interpreter with the worst score, and nobody wanted me. Now I became a director?

I worked in Abidjan for two years. It was difficult to deal with Ivorians. They

were very proud. They thought they were different from other Africans in the former French colonies. Moreover, they didn't know China much. In their opinion, China was still a very poor country. One day I negotiated with a minister in Abidjan. He pointed the highway outside the window, and asked me, "Is there any highway in China?" I didn't know how to respond. Every day, I taught Ivorians a lot of things about China. Soon, they all knew me. Once, another minister asked me: "F, we all call you F. Do you have a French name?"

"No." I shook my head, "F, my Chinese name. I like it. You should like it too." He laughed. Abidjan was not a big city. After that day, no one asked me about my name again.

I became famous. I was even more famous than the Ambassador. He had a five-year term. I didn't have that. The Ambassador changes, but F stays forever.

I began to speak like an Ivorian. I didn't expect that. Every French learner wants to speak like a man living in Paris. When I realized I had an Ivorian accent, I couldn't change it anymore.

The construction in Soubré started in 2013. We built a very big base there. I wanted to move to Soubré, to live in a Chinese community. The director of the project didn't agree. He said no one was more familiar with Abidjan and the Ivorian government than me. I should continue working in Abidjan.

My colleagues, they all thought that I was a lucky guy. F could live in a city! Well, I preferred to live with the Chinese in the forest. The accountant, he was the only one left in Abidjan. He accompanied me for one year. In 2014, he told me: "F, I must go back to China. Three years, my fiancée demanded me to go back to China every month. If I don't go back this month, she will leave me." He didn't come back to Côte d'Ivoire again.

In 2016, I was promoted. I was in charge of marketing in West Africa. With this position, I can work in China, but I didn't go back.

DL: Why?

Imagine: When I got up in the morning, I ate toast and drank milk. Then, I ran around in the nearby quarters. The peddlers greeted me. That beggar, he sat there since 2011. He smiled and said: "Cent francs, cent francs."⁹ I usually gave him cent

⁹One hundred CFA francs equals nearly 15 cents.

francs, except when I was not in a good mood, but he always smiled at me.

The policeman was the second policeman after I arrived. Every day, he asked, “F, have you talked with the General? When is my promotion?” Well, I talked about him once with the General, but I was pretty sure that the General forgot his name immediately. The policeman knew that the promotion was impossible, too. That was our unique greeting. Some kids surrounded me: “F, do you want me to wash your car? It’s free! Just give us the Chinese candies!” The French candies were very expensive in Abidjan. Every time I came back from China, I brought back many Chinese candies. I gave them to the kids, even though they didn’t wash my car.

Yes, I had my career here, and I *lived* here. When my daughters grew up, I planned to move my family to Abidjan. I had enough money to buy a villa. I like the Côte d’Ivoire.

In 2018, the Soubré project was finished, and I signed another contract for the construction of a hydroelectricity plant with the Ivorian government. At least I can work for five more years in Côte d’Ivoire. Ivorian accent is charming, would you agree?