

# Neo-Imperialism and the Chinese Diaspora in Ghana

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China's ongoing relationship with the African continent has typically been characterized as a double-edged sword. On one hand, lucrative socio-economic partnerships promise an African utopia of infrastructural development, economic self-sufficiency, and a vibrant Sino-African cultural exchange. On the other hand, though, China's approach to investment in Africa motivates worries about its facilitation of economic dependency.<sup>1</sup> Even more sinister is the prediction that under such a regime, some African countries may have to cede political and economic control to China to preserve the promise of a vibrant economy. These two future scenarios have been variously characterized by observers as paranoia associated with China's 'compassion capitalism' in Africa and genuine concern about 'what the catch is'. What remains clear, however, is that these ostensibly generous Chinese investments on the continent come with far-reaching implications.

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<sup>1</sup> Pdraig Carmody, "Dependence Not Debt-Trap Diplomacy," *Area Development and Policy* 5, no. 1 (January 2020): 28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2019.1702471>.

A significant facet of this link between China and Africa is migration – Chinese nationals have had to relocate to Africa to realize China’s dream in the region<sup>2</sup>. This has created compelling scenarios for the growing Chinese diaspora dispersed all over the African continent, and the central goal of this paper is to ascertain whether the presence and activities of this diaspora in Ghana constitutes a form of neo-imperialism.

This paper will examine societal patterns that are peculiar to shifts in hegemony and ask whether or not these shifts constitute a new, diaspora-led Chinese imperialism in Ghana. For this purpose, we will situate our conception of the term ‘diaspora’ to reflect Walker Connor’s definition: any group of individuals whose livelihoods depend on an existence outside the homeland<sup>3</sup>. Such a broad definition is helpful because, in the case of the Chinese diaspora, this definition acknowledges the diversity in the reasoning behind relocating to Africa. In the case of Ghana, the diverse range of Chinese migrants includes engineering professionals on one end of the spectrum and mining laborers on the other. A further merit of Connor’s definition is that it is adaptable to the potential change in the status of this Chinese diaspora within the structures of Ghanaian society if our neo-imperialism thesis is proven valid. This idea of a change in migrant status is inferred from Edward Said’s “Reflections on Exile” in which he asserts that “White [European] settlers in Africa may once have been exiles, but as pioneers and nation-builders, the label ‘exile’ dropped from them.”<sup>4</sup> Said’s claim is further confirmed by an argument advanced by some African scholars that these white settlers played an integral role in advancing the three phases of imperialism in Africa. The first phase of European expansion into Africa involved land and mineral resource exploitation starting in the nineteenth century. The second phase, which started in the twentieth century, complemented this material exploitation with ideological indoctrination with the purpose of maintaining neo-colonial ties. The third phase, which according to these scholars is ongoing, includes non-white settlers and involves a pursuit of free trade ideals by opening up Africa’s existing economies to global capitalism<sup>5</sup>. If we can demonstrate that the Chinese diaspora facilitates, or has facilitated, any of these three phases of imperialism in Ghana, we would be confirmed in our neo-imperialism thesis.

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<sup>2</sup> Xiaoyang Tang, “8 Geese Flying to Ghana? A Case Study of the Impact of Chinese Investments on Africa’s Manufacturing Sector,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 114 (November 2018): 925, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1488106>.

<sup>3</sup> Connor Walker, “The Impact of Homelands Upon Diasporas,” in *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, ed. Gabi Sheffer (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 181.

<sup>5</sup> Munoda Mararike, “The New Scramble for Africa: Re Colonising the Continent,” in *Zimbabwe Will Never Be a Colony Again!: Sanctions and Anti-Imperialist Struggles in Zimbabwe* (Mankon, Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG, 2019), 257-8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvmd84jt.14>.

Other than Said's formulation, Hannah Arendt's identification of imperialism as the first manifestation of capitalist political control gives salience to the possibility that if Chinese economic practices are making Ghana perpetually dependent on Chinese investments, the country could eventually exert political and cultural dominance on Ghana<sup>6</sup>. Arendt suggests that "Imperialism was born when the ruling class in capitalist production came up against national limitations to its economic expansion."<sup>7</sup> Arendt's theory allows us to infer that an economically disenfranchised Chinese population could be turned into international foot soldiers of Chinese expansion abroad. Whether the Chinese diaspora in Ghana fits this characterization is something this paper will have to establish, but Arendt's proposition at least presents the possibility for such an inquiry.

For the purposes of this paper, neo-imperialism constitutes a scenario where the dominant hegemonic discourses in Ghana have been replaced by Chinese socio-cultural, political, and economic ideals. A reliable way to gauge the existence of this scenario would be to review the economic and labor relations, educational curriculum, and political ideologies that shape the relationship between Ghana and China.

In terms of economic and labor relations between the two countries, China had invested a total of \$11.5 billion into the Ghanaian economy by the end of 2019. A majority of its investments have been in the energy, transport, real estate, and metal industries. Other than these, China has also made significant investments in agriculture, chemicals, utilities, and logistics. Jointly considered, these industries represent the backbone of the Ghanaian economy<sup>8</sup>.

Starting in 2005, phases of Chinese investment came to be accompanied by waves of migration into Ghana. The first wave mostly comprised technocrats working on various developmental projects<sup>9</sup>. As of 2018, there were 3,082 Chinese workers in Ghana, up from 1,591 in 2009; these numbers mostly represented technocrats from the Guangdong region of China<sup>10</sup>. As soon as these technocrats settled in Ghana, they were joined by their family members. Increasingly, these technocrats started to function as chaperones for Chinese

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<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 138.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt, 126.

<sup>8</sup> "Chinese Investments and Contracts in Ghana (2005-2019)," China Global Investment Tracker, *American Enterprise Institute*, accessed April 6, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>.

<sup>9</sup> Antoine Kernén and Katy N. Lam, "Workforce Localization Among Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in Ghana," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 90 (November 2014): 1059, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2014.898894>.

<sup>10</sup> "Data: Chinese Workers in Africa," *China Africa Research Initiative*, accessed April 6, 2021, <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-chinese-workers-in-africa>.

businesses seeking to invest in Ghana, and their liaison led to waves of Chinese laborers relocating to Ghana<sup>11</sup>.

It is estimated that there are no less than 6,000 Chinese nationals living in Ghana today<sup>12</sup>. Post-2018, the migrants tended to be family members of technocrats already settled in Ghana or laborers in the construction and mining industries. For this latter group of migrant laborers, the economic prospects back in China looked grim, and the move to Ghana was motivated by a desire for a fresh start and a shot at the wealth being generated in Ghana's gold mines and infrastructure projects<sup>13</sup>. On the surface, such aspirations seem harmless and even laudable. But a closer look at the interactions between Chinese workers and their Ghanaian counterparts raises concerns about the resurgence of social mechanisms that European settlers employed to subjugate Ghanaians in the colonial era.

Christine Choy's 2016 documentary *Reorienting Africa: The Chinese in Ghana* explores the workplace dynamic between Chinese and Ghanaian construction workers and provides insights into the potential power differential between them. In one of the more memorable scenes from the documentary, a lead Ghanaian engineer expresses worry about the fact that a Chinese construction company that employed sixty Ghanaian workers and forty Chinese workers had failed to hire a skilled interpreter to help facilitate effective communication between the two groups of employees<sup>14</sup>. The engineer's remarks suggested that the Chinese workers were more interested in maintaining a separation between themselves and their Ghanaian counterparts. The persistence of this separation seemed to foster a power dynamic between the Chinese and Ghanaian workers. In this power dynamic, the language barrier emerged as a reason for the Chinese workers to answer strictly to, and work directly with, their Chinese chain of command rather than collaborate with the Ghanaian lead engineer or other Ghanaian workers. Moreover, a closer look at the language with which the Chinese workers addressed their Ghanaian counterparts reveals a lot of pejorative gesturing and imperative phrasing. Why this is the case is finally reflected in the lead Ghanaian engineer's comments that, since the Chinese have the know-how and the money and it is Ghana that needs these resources to support its growth, the subjugation of Ghanaian workers in the

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<sup>11</sup> Seth Cook, Jixia Lu, Henry Tugendhat, and Dawit Alemu, "Chinese Migrants in Africa: Facts and Fictions from the Agri-Food Sector in Ethiopia and Ghana," *World Development* 81, (May 2016): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.11.011>.

<sup>12</sup> Seth Cook, Jixia Lu, Henry Tugendhat, and Dawit Alemu, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Sophie Song, "A Modern Day Gold Rush - How People Of One County In China Are Making Millions In Ghana," *International Business Times*, May 15, 2013, <https://www.ibtimes.com/modern-day-gold-rush-how-people-one-county-china-are-making-millions-ghana-1260801>.

<sup>14</sup> "Engineer Mohammed Ibn Ahmed explains workplace dynamic and language", *Reorienting Africa: The Chinese in Ghana*, directed by Christine Choy (2016; New York: Film News Now Foundation, 2016), <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/reorienting-africa-the-chinese-in-ghana>.

workplace through this kind of denigrating and ineffective communication emerges as a justifiable sacrifice<sup>15</sup>. In commenting on this situation, New York University professor and filmmaker Manthia Diawara remarks that the use of language in this setting seemingly reflects the existence of a dominance hierarchy. Diawara argues that countries that harbor a superiority complex do not learn the languages of the people they interact with, and the Chinese were certainly complicit in that regard. Conversely, the Ghanaian workers' willingness to learn the Chinese language confirms Diawara's proposition that this superiority complex requires members of the subordinate group to learn the language of the superior group<sup>16</sup>.

In the educational realm, an interesting development has been the establishment of a Confucius Institute on the University of Ghana's main campus. Similar to the Alliance Française, Goethe Institute, and British Council models of the French, German and British cultural missions, China employs this institution to teach Elementary Chinese, Business Chinese, Chinese Martial Arts, and Chinese Chopsticks and Tea Culture<sup>17</sup>. Reports suggest that the Confucius Institute also offers private Mandarin lessons all over Ghana's coastal and central regions, particularly in areas where Chinese developmental projects are located like the coastal town of Tema that houses a number of energy infrastructure projects<sup>18</sup>. This, I submit, represents the most official form of Chinese cultural influence. The offerings of the institute may seem like nurturing of a tolerant and congenial relationship between Ghana and China, but a closer look at the curricula reveals a more serious motivation. Both Elementary and Business Chinese curricula emphasize that conversations between the Chinese and the Ghanaians need to be along strictly economic and work-related lines, and are thus likely to feature the kind of imperative and potentially denigrating language used by the Chinese workers on the construction site discussed earlier. This point about strictly economic and functional relationships between the Chinese and the Ghanaians can be further clarified by a look at Ghana's gig economy.

The gig economy in Ghana, particularly around domestic help and security, has been a great revenue source for Ghanaians looking to supplement their incomes. There is a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Confucius Institute Courses at University of Ghana", *University of Ghana*, accessed April 6, 2021, <https://www.ug.edu.gh/announcements/confucius-institute-courses-university-ghana>.

<sup>18</sup> "Ghanaian college adopts Chinese language as credit course," *Xinhuanet.com*, accessed April 6, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/03/c\\_138193507.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/03/c_138193507.htm).

widespread assumption in this industry that Chinese employers tend to pay higher wages<sup>19</sup>. For the affluent Chinese technocrats, a Ghanaian cleaner or security guard fluent in Mandarin is a great asset. What is problematic, however, is the fact that the fluency of these employees is often limited to understanding the imperative commands of the employer. As a consequence, even the simple act of serving tea, which the Confucius Institute teaches, insinuates a dominance hierarchy between the server and served. As Li Xiousong notes in an essay on Chinese Tea Culture, “[in the] ancient times, tea-tasting was among the things that distinguished men of refinement from men of poor taste. One who was not good at tasting tea was usually despised<sup>20</sup>.” Moreover, Xiousong notes, these ‘men of poor taste’ tended to be the ones serving tea to their masters.<sup>21</sup> This aspect of Confucius Institute’s literacy curriculum that emphasizes communication along strictly economic lines, particularly in Ghana’s domestic help economy, raises concerns about an ulterior motive that seeks to re-socialize a class of Ghanaians into subordinate roles relative to their Chinese counterparts.

In domestic political conversations in Ghana, it is highlighted that Ghana possesses extensive natural resources which the country intends to exploit to facilitate its local development. In these conversations, China features as an enabler whose role is limited to providing technical expertise and machinery<sup>22</sup>. But in reality, China’s status as a manufacturing giant means it needs a steady supply of raw materials, and it is this incentive to gain access to raw materials that drives Chinese investments in its relationship with Ghana. Current export data suggests that Ghana supplies cocoa, precious metals (gold and manganese), and timber to China<sup>23</sup>. This in itself is not an exploitative relationship. But it happens to be the case that whenever Ghana does not submit to Chinese needs, the Chinese government resorts to punitive economic measures and forces Ghana to do its bidding. These punitive measures typically benefit the Chinese diaspora and are emblematic of the skewed nature of the political relationship between the two countries.

The Chinese government’s power to force the Ghanaian government to bend its rules and favor the Chinese diaspora is apparent in Ghana’s small-scale mining sector. Legalized

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<sup>19</sup> Karsten Giese, and Thiel Alena, “The Vulnerable Other - Distorted Equity in Chinese-Ghanaian Employment Relations.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 6 (May 2012): 1110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2012.681676>.

<sup>20</sup> Li Xiousong, “Chinese Tea Culture,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 2 (September 1993): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1993.00075.x>.

<sup>21</sup> Xiousong, “Chinese Tea Culture,” 79.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Aidoo, “The Political Economy of Galamsey and Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Ghana,” *African Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 3/4 (December 2016): 56, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1863559417/>.

<sup>23</sup> “Ghana Exports to China,” *Trading Economics*, assessed April 6, 2021, <https://tradingeconomics.com/ghana/exports/china>; “Ghana Import from China,” *Trading Economics*, assessed April 6, 2021; <https://tradingeconomics.com/ghana/imports/china>.

by the Ghanaian government in 1989, small-scale mining was meant to be a source of income for Ghana's rural population. The Minerals and Mining Act of 2006 further protected this privilege by preventing foreigners from purchasing mining land smaller than twenty-five acres<sup>24</sup>. This legislation ensured that access to small-scale mining was limited to local populations. However, in 2013, it came to national attention that Chinese miners, some of them illegal, had successfully acquired swaths of mining land and started mining operations in prohibited areas. It also emerged that the chemicals used in these mining operations had ended up polluting many of the water bodies in that area. When Ghanaian officials reported the incident to the Chinese embassy, the embassy was quick to censure them because their actions were seen as a threat to the political relationship between China and Ghana. Responding to the outrage, the Ghanaian government deported 713 of these illegal miners. The Chinese government retaliated by imposing visa restrictions on Ghanaian citizens<sup>25</sup>. The China Development Bank went one step further and stalled its disbursement of a \$3 billion infrastructure loan to Ghana<sup>26</sup>. Of course the Chinese government in this case was responding to its economic interests and looking after its citizens in Ghana. But does this need for the Chinese government to cater to its diaspora necessarily entail punishing Ghana even when members of this diaspora are involved in illegal activities?

A stronger explanation of the Chinese government's punitive actions against Ghana to protect its diaspora could emerge from an understanding of the implications of China's economic evolution. As confirmed by Wilson Wu, a Chinese engineer who relocated to Africa to start a business, the climate on the African continent is "like the China of [the seventies and nineties] when you could open a business and maybe earn a fortune...those kinds of fortunes are not possible in China today<sup>27</sup>." Economic exiles such as Wu are symptomatic of a phenomenon that unfolded in China as it became an economic superpower: China's economic growth denied large swathes of its population a chance to join the middle class, and forced many of these disenfranchised people to go into economic self-exile and take refuge in places like Ghana<sup>28</sup>. Could it be that by taking punitive actions against Ghana, the Chinese government is guaranteeing the incorporation of these exiled and disenfranchised

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<sup>24</sup> Aidoo, "The Political Economy of Galamsey and Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Ghana," 60.

<sup>25</sup> Afua Hirsch, "Ghana Deports Thousands In Crackdown On Illegal Chinese Gold Miners," *The Guardian*, July 15, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/15/ghana-deports-chinese-goldminers#:~:text=Thousands%20of%20Chinese%20nationals%20have,of%20swoops%20on%20illegal%20goldmines.&text=We%20did%E2%80%99t%20think%20China,take%20it%20to%20this%20extent.%22>.

<sup>26</sup> Aidoo, "The Political Economy of Galamsey and Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Ghana," 61- 63.

<sup>27</sup> Emily Feng, and David Pilling, "The Other Side of Chinese Investment In Africa," *Financial Times*, March 26 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/9f5736d8-14e1-11e9-a581-4ff78404524e>.

<sup>28</sup> Cheng Li, *China's Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 291.

nationals into its globalizing economy through a sort of proxy-state arrangement? It should be noted that China's status as a global economic power grants it the possibility of aligning itself with such an economic agenda. Moreover, China possesses the capability to obscure this evidently exploitative agenda by alluding to its shared past with Ghana as a developing nation. Imperialism has taken more obvious forms in the past, from British naval conquests to slavery, but imperialism reincarnated in the Chinese form could constitute a more sinister and clandestine form of domination<sup>29</sup>.

Another story from *Reorienting Africa* confirms the plausibility of the above logic. Shu Jingping migrated to Ghana in the 1990s with the hope of selling mobile phones and making a better life for herself as her economic prospects in China looked grim. After moving to Ghana, Jingping sensed an opportunity in another industry: on learning that all the paint used in Chinese developmental projects in Ghana is imported from China, she decided to enter the paint business. The business turned out to be a success; Jingping became wealthy and employed two Ghanaian girls. When Jinping was asked about her experiences in Ghana, she confirmed the widely believed stereotype that blacks [Ghanaians] were viewed as unintelligent and lazy by their Chinese counterparts. One can observe through this commentary the kind of shift that Edward Said identified in the case of the early white settlers in Africa: these white migrants gained positions of power, lost the label of 'exile', and acquired the ability to exert prejudices upon their new subordinates. When the interviewer asked Jingping why she had so many dogs in her house, she remarked that it was because she lived in a black neighborhood, implying that they are meant for protection and confirming the hint of criminality associated with black people<sup>30</sup>. Jingping's story is emblematic of the experiences of the Chinese diaspora in Ghana which includes not just professionals and their family members but miners and construction workers as well. These migrants came to Ghana in search of better economic prospects and contributed to the Ghanaian economy by building restaurants, hospitals, and supermarkets<sup>31</sup>. However, in many cases, they also become conduits for China to tighten its political, economic, and cultural grip on Ghana, warranting concerns about a diaspora-led Chinese imperialism.

An evaluation of labor relations between Ghanaian workers and their Chinese counterparts in the construction, mining, education, and gig economy sectors suggests

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<sup>29</sup> Daniel Spence, *Colonial Naval Culture and British Imperialism, 1922–67* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2015), 79.

<sup>30</sup> "Shu Jingping explains life in Ghana," *Reorienting Africa: The Chinese in Ghana*, directed by Christine Choy (2016; New York: Film News Now Foundation, 2016), <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/reorienting-africa-the-chinese-in-ghana>.

<sup>31</sup> Song, "Modern Day Gold Rush."

undertones of discrimination and a desire to subjugate and exploit rather than cooperate with the Ghanaians. The role of language as a tool for exerting superiority is revealed in the interactions between the Chinese and the Ghanaians both in the workplace and in the domestic sphere. On top of this, the Ghanaian government remains beholden to Chinese economic interests that are fostered by the Chinese diaspora. The Chinese government has certainly made it clear that its interests are economic. However, without the support of the Chinese diaspora in Ghana, the Chinese efforts in the country, and in the continent at large, are unlikely to succeed. It is this crucial role of the diaspora in advancing Chinese interests that supports our assertion that the Chinese diaspora in Ghana constitutes a burgeoning form of neo-imperialism.

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