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Sylvain Racaud

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

- 1 The saying “cheaper is expensive” is often heard in Cameroon as well as many other African countries about the junk coming from China. This aphorism means that buying a poor quality cheap item repeatedly because it doesn’t last, makes it more expensive in the end. It also suggests that the use of low quality items can have important costs, e.g. if a low-cost electric oven sets the house on fire. Within this context, inexpensive plastic sandals are nicknamed “*sans-confiance*” (unreliable) in Cameroon because there are no guarantees one can reach the destination wearing them. Nevertheless, despite their short-lived nature, these items have flooded African markets: plastic sandals, cheap jewellery, various fashion accessories, cheap clothing, etc. A wide range of imported items of low value can be found everywhere, from busy metropolitan commercial areas to small periodic markets in agricultural mountains.
- 2 New commercial hubs develop through overseas exchanges with, for example, the journey from Guangzhou or Yiwu (China) to Douala or Dar es Salaam. These metropolises are the most visible aspect of the trade routes. In such African places, the *global merchant streets* reconstruct urban landscapes and strengthen the commercial functions of these areas (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2009). But what about the *dark side of the road*, i.e. the destinations of the cheap things entering rural areas? Indeed, most of the studies show these transnational routes articulating Chinese trading posts with the African continent ending in urban areas (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007, 2009) or stopping on main arteries without following rural branches (Pliez 2009). The question of connecting the rural areas to these global trade routes is not well documented in Sub-Saharan Africa. But nevertheless, Chinese junk is omnipresent in the landscapes of rural markets, particularly in dynamic rural areas of the African mountainous countryside.

- 3 Agricultural trade networks and the flow of imported goods have connected rural areas with urban areas for decades (these ways of integration to the market are very heterogeneous). However, the development of the Chinese junk sector intensifies the relations between rural areas and urban areas and with recent transnational networks. Indeed, if finding imported goods in a rural market is not new, the flood of Chinese junk in the markets is recent; it dates back to the early 2000s. According to Cabestan (2005: 1), “The turning point in the Sino-Cameroonian relations was the first Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held in Beijing in 2000. Since that summit, bilateral trade and economic cooperation projects have rapidly increased”. Bilateral agreements, availability and cheap prices of the junk, socioeconomic deadlocks both in urban and rural areas (high unemployment, lack of agricultural horizon, etc.) are major drivers for the intensification of the Chinese junk trade. The specificity of the junk is that these items are very much available; they are cheap and are adapted to low income populations. The junk trade business is also easily affordable as the necessary starting capital can be very low. Moreover, the renewal of these poor quality items is high because the junk is mainly flimsy items that are highly fashion-prone. Therefore, the junk circulates a lot and its flows connect the centres and some *margins of the world*.
- 4 This paper deals with the trade route of Chinese junk in Cameroon, from Douala, the coastal metropolis, up to villages in Mont Bamboutos (West Cameroon). How does this imported junk manage to reach a mountainous village? Who are the actors involved in the exchanges of the Chinese junk? What commercial places contribute to the circulation of these items? The objective is to analyse geographical effects of the structuring of the trade route of Chinese junk, both in urban and rural areas. How does the development of the Chinese junk sector structure a trade road which contributes to specific territorial dynamics at two ends of the road, i.e. the national trading post and rural periodic markets? The trade route consists of the actors and the places linked by lasting relations with regards to commercial exchanges. Analysing the path of trade through its actors and its places highlights the junction between social networks and spatial networks (Belguidoum and Pliez 2012) and it enables a grasp of the sense of the place within the network.

## Methodology

- 5 This paper favours a comprehensive description of the circulation of Chinese junk, through the examination of commercial places and of traders (in their context), in order to show the space of the road and the territorial dynamics between the trading post and rural markets; in other words, the geographical forms of the road. This article proposes the following hypothesis: the structuring of the trade route for Chinese junk integrates town and countryside in a “merchant zone” (Grégoire 2002), a complementary space produced by commercial relations, appropriated by the traders, and characterised by recent booming trading places, recent urban-rural mobility and unprecedented connections to transnational networks. The space of the road is a “form of spatial continuity between urbanity and rurality” (Walther 2004: 319); it is a continuum of flexible combinations of urban and rural attributes. The landscapes of the commercial places, the circulations and the practices of the traders are the starting points for exploring a trade route and its more or less visible faces.

- 6 The empirical material stems from two periods of fieldwork (May 2014 and August 2015) in Douala and Mont Bamboutos. Douala, the coastal metropolis, is the Cameroonian gateway for the imported goods. Mont Bamboutos, at the end of the road, is relevant to the study of the structuring of new trade networks because this zone (as many African Mountains), has been integrated into old agricultural transnational networks for decades. However, because of the reshaping of the agricultural model, new commercial linkages have contributed to the new opening up of the mountain economy. With the flooding of Chinese junk several merchant networks coexist.
- 7 The approach is inspired by the multi-sited approach, particularly the *follow the people*, *follow the thing* and *follow the life* techniques (Marcus 1995). The data have been collected along the road and biographies have been carried out. Following the goods in commercial areas in town (from main street to inconspicuous interstices), following the rural hawkers from village to village, and using the same means of transport (on foot, moto-taxi, lorry, collective taxi) is a kind of *road research*: the movement is the vital lead for data collection along the road. It enables one to experience the road and some aspects of the daily life of the hawkers. 54 semi-structured interviews of vendors were used, one third in town with shop managers and shop employees, and two thirds in rural periodic markets with traders which follow the route of the periodic markets. Group discussions with rural hawkers were carried out in two rural markets. Observations and landscapes' analysis were used; the landscapes shaped by the commercial activities provide relevant information (Steck 2006). Interviews were carried out in the "working place" (except for the biographies, the latter having been carried out in bars). Conducting a survey in the streets, in shops or in markets, with more or less precarious actors, is difficult. There are blockage factors linked to the activity and to the place where data is collected such as the high precariousness of traders, limited availability, and fear of giving information to somebody who could work for the tax office.
- 8 To highlight specific territorial dynamics at two segments of the road, the article is organised in two parts. The first one is about the emergence of Chinatown in Douala and shows the shift of the commercial landscape and the emergence of the behind-the-scenes in trade. The second part emphasis is on *inconspicuous places* and *inconspicuous actors of the road* in the countryside, by showing the role of rural markets and of rural hawkers in the structuring of the trade route.

## Douala, a major African gateway

- 9 Douala is a port with important commercial and logistic functions. The national census of 2005 indicated that Douala had more than 1.9 million inhabitants (BUCREP 2010). For the period 1987-2005, its annual population growth rate was notable at 4.7 % and with the same rate Douala would have three million inhabitants in 2015.
- 10 As with other African countries, the bilateral trade between China and Cameroon is booming. Between 2000 and 2011, China-Africa exchanges have multiplied 12 times over as a consequence of the economic growth both in China and in Africa (Gabas and Chaponnière 2012). Cameroon has become a regular African trading partner with China since its first commercial bilateral agreement signed in 1972 and cooperation agreements followed one after another. The Cameroon's merchandise trade with China is booming: from 2005 to 2012, importations have increased by 406% and exportations have increased

by 772% (Cabestan 2015). Textiles and footwear are listed among the main imported goods from China and they enter Cameroon via Douala.

## A flood of Chinese goods

- 11 The imported goods from China brand a booming merchant area, located in the old town: a section of the President Ahidjo Boulevard to La Douche, in the Akwa area. Douala has two other major commercial places: the central market (*Marché central*) in New Bell area and Mboppi market in Deido. These two huge markets date from the early 1980s. They are the biggest commercial places of Douala and are highly congested areas whose delimitation is not clear. There is a commercial continuum from La Douche to the central market; the Congo market along the Congo Paraiso Street is the interface. Mboppi and the central market follow a linear trajectory: growth of the activities and spatial extension is problematic here, contrary to La Douche which is appropriately called Chinatown due to the development of the Chinese trade.
- 12 Indeed, the landscape is highly particularized by many Asian indicators: Chinese characters on shop signs, Asiatic sellers behind the counters, and the omnipresence of clothes, footwear and hand bags. Chinatown is the hotbed of Chinese commercial activities in Douala (Toug 2010) and would be the main supplier in Cameroon of imported shoes and clothes. Everybody agrees (at least the interviewed vendors both in Douala and in the West region) that, if someone wants to get supplies of clothes or footwear, Chinatown is the right place. Countless shops of various sizes and numerous warehouses run along the President Ahidjo Boulevard on both sides for about 500 m to La Douche. This area is the busiest shopping street from the origin of the town, adjoining the Congo market and central market. The shops used to be run by Indians, Greek, Lebanese, and Cameroonian particularly Bamileke. Recently, the Chinese are newcomers that have migrated to do business.
- 13 Although Chinese migration is limited compared to internal African migrations, the increase of Chinese migration is considerable and rises with the same rate of Sino-Africa exchanges, with probably an increase by twelve times from 2001 to 2011; there was about one million Chinese in Africa in 2011 (Gabas and Chaponnière 2012). In Cameroon, they would have been 1,000 to 3,000 in 2005 (Kernen and Vulliet 2008), and “from 20,000 to 200,000, a more realistic figure being 50,000” ten years later (Cabestan 2015: 17). If estimations vary, the number of Chinese migrants is rapidly increasing. “The majority of them live in Douala [...] new migrants have arrived and developed business in many areas, such as wholesale and retail trade” (Cabestan 2015: 17). The first Chinese implantation is a shopping centre that opened in 1999 in place of the closed Rex cinema. This was the beginning of a continuous movement that is still occurring. Indeed, shops have occupied the existing building and Chinese traders have taken up many edifices; among the most known, the Pmuc building, Saint-Juliette hotel and Étoile cinema. With significant capital they have outbid existing rent and as a consequence most of the initial occupants could not stay. According to traders, the rent has increased fourfold over recent years.
- 14 Chinese investors make agreements with local landlords, mainly Akwa dignitaries (the Akwa are Duala original occupants, they are descended from the King Akwa; the second Duala branch is descended from King Bell) and also with some first migrants native to the Bamileke land which bought lands in Akwa some decades ago. The Akwa are familiar and experienced with the letting in a context of high competition. If before the Bamileke were

the main traders interested in commercial space, as they took over from the European, the Greeks and the Lebanese some decades ago (Mainet 1981), the Chinese are the recent competitors looking for commercial space. Due to leaseholds of 15 to 30 years, Chinese tenants have been able to renovate and add floors therefore causing the landscape of this hotspot of trade to literally develop vertically. The *street grabbing* refers on the one hand to the setting up of multiple Chinese traders along the boulevard by “the sweat of Chinese capital” (economic, relational and informational capital) at the expense of the former traders, and on the other hand, to the flooding of the street with Chinese items sold by vendors who get their supply of junk from the nearby shops. *Street grabbing* creates a symbiotic commercial space within wholesalers mixed with street vendors. This complementary space, linking formal and informal business, is highly attractive.

- 15 The new commercial buildings house the retail shops on the ground floor. The goods are stored on the first floor while members of the growing Chinese community live on the upper floor(s). The International Commercial Center (Figure 1), with its characteristic signs in Chinese and English, pictures of non-African characters, satellite dishes, and exposed emblematic goods, is very symbolic of the globalized attributes of this area. This movement produces a new urban landscape distinguished by the presence of China through its goods, its citizens and its signage.

Figure 1. Jin Mao International Commercial Center on the President Ahidjo Boulevard



**SOURCE: AUTHOR. THIS KIND OF BUILDING, WITH EMBLEMATIC ATTRIBUTES OF GLOBALIZATION, IS THE MODEL OF THE NEW BUILDINGS IN CHINATOWN, AKWA, DOUALA.**

- 16 This business street mainly performs wholesale functions by means of hundreds of shops. They have various dimensions but generally their sizes are about 15 to 25 m<sup>2</sup>. Each building hosts from a half-dozen to dozens of shops. The business activity visible from the road serves as a shop window for the entire edifice that hosts numerous establishments inside. The buildings are generally organised from a main central corridor. The interior



space is overrun by goods packed in cartons or piled up in their plastic wrappings. In such enclosed spaces the synthetic world spreads a strong smell of plastic and glue. Most of the businesses are run by Chinese especially in the new edifices. These traders employ one or several young Cameroonian employees with whom they communicate using a very basic “*Cameroonized French*”.

- 17 In old buildings some Cameroonians still run businesses (Figure 2). Traders sell bags of a hundred pairs of shoes, or at least several series of four, six, or 12 pairs. The buyers are traders from Douala, greater Cameroon, Chad, Gabon, and Central African Republic. This place is not only the “arrivals” area for the imported items, it is also the starting point for the whole region. If the logistic role is not new, the development of the Chinese junk sector has brought more buyers attracted by the high availability of the junk, their cheap prices and the easy willingness of Chinese traders to sell to anyone who pays. Small traders can get supplies of considerable quantities of items even with a low capital because the price per unit is low. The importance of Chinese imports impacts the regional mobility because it provides more opportunities for young African to start businesses (Marfaing 2015). The junk trade develops more connections between a more varied range of places and a newly diversified class of private actors.

**Figure 2. Specialized wholesale shop in an ancient building by the side of the President Ahidjo Boulevard**



**SOURCE: AUTHOR**

- 18 Since the 2000s, the area started to become saturated. More shopping centres opened, then shops and kiosks. Gradually shops took up the verandas of the existing buildings before traders seized the pavement. Obviously, there is a lack of space and competition for access to commercial space is stiff: any kind of space is a resource, even a piece of pavement. Although street vending is considered an informal activity, i.e. outside of state regulations, it is not unregulated (Lindell 2010), and informal rules exists. For example,



there are two main ways to get access to a piece of pavement: co-optation by a vendor and/or physical strength. In addition, such spaces are often appropriated by the owners of adjacent buildings; they rent out these spaces which are in reality a public space. Rent prices have increased to peak status; the monthly rent of a 12m<sup>2</sup> shop is 1,000 euros and reaches 2,300 euros for a 25m<sup>2</sup> shop like the one shown on Figure 2. This competition leads sellers to maximize available space, therefore the smallest urban interstices are occupied by commercial displays. The latter are basic, e.g. some kiosks in which the boards are removed during the day to display the goods (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Basic commercial displays in the interstices leading behind the scenes**



**SOURCE: AUTHOR**

- 19 The *street grabbing* by the Chinese and the transfer of Cameroonian traders behind-the-scenes is a new territorial differentiation, the latter resulting from the original configuration of territorial governance (Dorier-Apprill and Jaglin 2002). The *street grabbing* results in an inconspicuous effect: the high increase in the number of small shops behind the buildings located by the side of the boulevard. The small lanes in these commercial areas lead to behind-the-scenes (Figure 4). Indeed, behind the visible area of bustling trade activity running alongside the boulevard, the landscape is still particularized by old spontaneous houses and promiscuity. Nevertheless, the shops enter into this old housing area and they replace the houses, in the same premises. This penetration results in a multiplicity of countless shops run by Cameroonians who can't afford the rents along the boulevard. In places, some small buildings of one floor develop and replace the old houses. Some specialized areas, such as the area of the tennis shoes, the area of the women shoes, etc. develop in the old housing area. The housing function is decreasing in favour of the commercial functions, a symbol of the predominance of commercial logics.

Figure 4. Behind-the-scenes of Chinatown: small shops run by small traders



SOURCE: AUTHOR

- 20 The new landscapes are the visible results of the change in the production of space. This latter, is at the core of power relations (Lefebvre 1974) that are renewed because of the attractiveness of the commercial spaces and the increase in prices. The flooding of La Douche by Chinese imported goods and Chinese traders means that the landscape of actors has changed. The latter integrates local logics and global economic logics, “the governance regime [...] represents a complex interplay between local and extra-local forces” (Roshan Samara et al. 2013: 5). The local power arena is a combination of a loose conglomeration of many actors of several sectors (public/private, economic/politic, government/civil society, formal/informal) of which frontiers are permeable (Blundo 2002). For example, street hawking is forbidden in Cameroon and the *sauveteurs* (street hawkers) use bribery of municipal agents and/or policemen as a means to protect themselves from administrative and police exactions (Fodouop 1993).
- 21 The local chiefs have a role of mediation in case of conflicts, but they are appointed by the government, the chief of the quarter comes under the sub-prefect (Michelon 2007). Moreover, many politicians are also businessmen and some of them are also traditional chiefs. In Cameroon (and not only there), economic, politic and social elements form a whole, economic accumulation enables people to keep the power and the holding of power enables economic accumulation (Bayart 1993). The fall of the big businessman Yves-Michel Fotso, known for having created his fortune by the merging of the political and economic (Dougueli 2015), is an emblematic illustration of the hotchpotch of power in Cameroon.

- 22 Chinatown is a combination of visible commercial places and inconspicuous commercial areas. This whole is connected to transnational and regional networks and is a major place on the trade route and a major resource for the actors involved in Chinatown.

### **Chinatown, a mix of businessmen, employees and “smart cookies”**

- 23 The range of traders is broad as Chinatown mixes shopping centres and their rich businessmen with a plethora of vendors and countless street peddlers. In Cameroon, “most of these Chinese originate from Fujian and Zhejiang” (Cabestan 2015: 18), and they have a diversified profile. This busy commercial area attracts rich Chinese investors able to independently import containers of goods, but it has also attracted many small traders who came from China to try their luck in Douala. For a certain number of them, life is hard and becomes harder as the competition increases. Their life revolves around their shop and the neighbouring room or flat they share with their fellows. Some, both men and women, leave their families in China for years. Capital accumulation is far from systematic and some complain that the business has become too difficult, e.g. the length of time to sell a container has become three times longer than previously. This is very problematic especially for items that become out of date very quickly like clothes and shoes. Old-fashioned items are very difficult to sell, even below cost.
- 24 Cameroonian importers are busy businessmen not easily reachable so information has been collected from vendors. Their common practice is to be unobtrusive, in order to not attract attention and notably that of tax officers. They travel to overseas places like Dubai, Turkey, Bangkok or China. In 2013, “the Chinese Embassy issued 4,500 visas to Cameroonians, mostly business people going to Yiwu or Canton trade centres” (Cabestan 2015: 18). The number of Africans travelling to China is increasing, from 238,000 in 2005 to 463,600 in 2010 (Gabas and Chaponnière 2012). It is an acknowledged fact that the Bamileke play a leading role in the economic domain. The Bamileke have, conjointly to the colonization of the grassfields in the West, massively migrated to towns notably because of the inheritance system, the promotion of social success, and the strength of their customary associations (Champaud 1983). This group comprises dozens of sub-groups and despite the similarity and the proximity, there are rivalries and conflicts between some chieftainships (Mouiche 2013).
- 25 Douala is a centre of a spontaneous Bamileke migration area (Barbier 1976). In the early 1980s, they would have been 40% of the Douala population (Champaud 1981) and more than 70% in the 2000s (Onana 2005). Despite ethnic data not being available and although Onana probably overestimates the proportion of Bamileke in the Cameroonian economic capital, Douala is certainly the largest urban Bamileke stronghold. The linkages between the town (Douala) and the Bamileke villages are a real geographical fact (Mainet 1988). It can be grasped as an urban-rural continuum, a space of complementarity notably organised by commercial exchanges. Moreover, associations based in town are also a driver for the rural modernisation through infrastructure and production investments (Fodouop 2003, Kuete 2013). The Bamileke space also has a political basement because Douala, nicknamed the *rebellious city* and the West region, are strongholds of the opposition to the Rassemblement du Peuple Camerounais (RDPC).
- 26 The numerous business employees receive low wages, from the sales assistant to the shop manager, although the second is better paid than the first. An employee is typically paid about 80 euros per month. Traders generally have a very flexible business path. For

instance, in 2014 Mr E is the manager of a shop. Originating from the West region, he arrived in Douala in 2002 with a capital of 20 euros and started selling bras as a street peddler. His business career has been very hectic, meeting with ups and (serious) downs, he was compelled to flee Douala for Yaoundé. As an ambulant trader, he sold umbrellas, buckets, plastic sandals, flasks, glasses, fruits, etc. following market opportunities and according to available capital. He has been employed in several places, fired, and returned to street business: “I sold every kind of things! Everything I see, I sell, tangerines, glasses, everything!” (Interviewee 1, Douala, May, 16, 2014, our translation). In 2007, he returned to Douala and has been employed as a sales assistant, then a factotum before being granted shop manager. This position, according to him, only enables him to pay the household bills and he must run a parallel business (from the one where he is working), which is the case for many sales assistants.

- 27 This path, characterised by mobility and flexibility, is emblematic of the life of the majority of people in the trade. It illustrates the notion of *informality*, i.e., taking a common-sense notion, it refers to “economic activities that lie beyond or circumvent state regulation” (Lindell 2010: 5). Lindell (2010: 5) indicates that “the notion of ‘informality’ does not necessary involve a dualistic view of the economy as having two separate sectors [...] the boundary between the formal and the informal economy is blurred”. Mr E.’s example sheds light on these assertions. He has no working contract, no social security, he is working in a shop that is registered and of which the owner pays taxes (maybe not completely...) and he is running a parallel business, from this shop. These selling places, and certainly the majority of the shops, straddle the boundary between formal and informal, “the two interconnect in varying degrees and multiple ways and often contain elements of each other” (Lindell 2010: 5). The many youngsters who transport the goods from storage to the shop, from the shop to a lorry, etc. with no contract or daily payment, and the street peddlers and traders who get in supply at Mr E. shops, are *off the map* of the State regulation. Moreover, the majority of the employees intend to run their own business; meanwhile they use their position to accumulate information and experience and to do business behind the boss’s back.
- 28 Chinatown is a specific vibrant formal/informal interface with Chinese attributes. Informal activity is about 75% of Douala employment (Talagrand et al. 2013), while its development is the result of the Structural Adjustment Plan of 1987 (Foudouop 1993). Street hawking is an emblematic activity evoking informality and it is generally the first stage in business activities as it does not require a lot of capital. But nevertheless, street hawking has been legalized in Cameroon by the decree of November 15, 1991. This legal recognition, following the *Journées Villes Mortes* movement – a social mobilization in opposition of the ruling power through several general strikes and riots – indicates that informal activities are not systematically prohibited, they are situated in specific context (Lindell 2010). Informal vendors are accused of unfair competition. But, those who are the most virulent against the street peddlers are often those who supply them! The world of the Chinese junk in Douala is characterised by local arrangements for which the official interests appear contradictory, e.g. between a custom officer and an importer. But, hidden from view, the conspicuous contradictions can converge in a commercial world within which everybody, despite the difference of power, tries to serve their own interests. “The everyday praxis of informal markets takes shape within an interplay of available resources and social alliances specific to time and place” (Mörtenböck and Mooshammer 2015: 14). These embedded dynamics and actors, transgressing the



boundaries such as formal/informal, are local expressions of an inconspicuous globalization.

- 29 All in all, the panel of business relations is broad: clientele relations, friendship networks coming from clientele relations (including social assistance), familial networks (based on familial relations and related to trade purposes), tribal networks (close to familial networks but extending to a sub-Bamileke group) and secret society (e.g. Moukouagne for the Bamileke group). An association, a tontine, i.e. a group of members who pay a contribution, who know and trust each other, and who assist each other, is an important means of organisation. One person is generally a member of several associations, this one in town, this one for business, this one for social purpose, this one in the village, etc. This multiple membership enables a person to use their specific positions for their specific interests (business, social prestige). The most successful traders are those who can achieve a high level of internal and external ties (Walther 2015: 15).
- 30 The condition of multiple memberships is to be able to pay several contributions, and this is not always possible for the small traders. The latter often hesitate to enter an association because they fear to fail to honour their commitments, i.e. to pay the contribution. The level of interrelations is proportional to the level of the business. The association of wholesalers shopping in Dubai is very well linked to the Central government and to the RDPC, an importer must have personal relations with a customs officer (Interviewee 53, trader, August, 19, 2015, Douala). Some businessmen open the capital of their business to politician of the central government to make sure that they have a high level of protection. A “friendship relation” with a police superintendent or a prefect ensures that controls on the quality of the Chinese junk are very limited (Interviewee 53, trader, August, 19, 2015, Douala). Relations with Douala authorities can also provide information about the forced evacuation (Yemmafouo 2014). The foundations of the trade route of Chinese junk are also the collusion between political, administrative and security authorities and the traders.
- 31 In the gateway to Cameroon, the territorial dynamics resulting from the development of the Chinese junk sector leads to new urban commercial landscapes and new spatial differentiation. The varied actors appropriate this main hub of the junk’s route, using the permeability of boundaries, such the one of the so called formal/informal categories. The next part focuses on the territorial dynamics at the “rural end” of the trade route, in villages of Mont Bamboutos.

## Reshaping of the space-time in rural areas

- 32 Approximately 300 km from Douala, the Mont Bamboutos region is a dynamic agricultural region. The urban hierarchy in the region consists of Bafoussam, Dschang and Mbouda. Bafoussam, capital of the West Region, had 240,000 inhabitants in 2005. The fourth largest town of Cameroon is growing quickly with an annual population growth rate of 4.1% for the period 2005-2010 (BUCREP 2010). With the same annual rate, the population would be 357,000 inhabitants in 2015. Located in a food basket, Bafoussam plays a major role in two trade routes. Bafoussam is a logistic and commercial hub for the foodstuffs and for Chinese junk while Dschang and Mbouda (120,000 inhabitants each in 2005, BUCREP 2010) have a secondary role, undertaking retails functions. The study looks at rural markets to point out the contrast and the complementarity of two ends of the Chinese junk’s road.

## Rural markets as gateway for Chinese junk

- 33 Rural markets serve as major interfaces between rural areas, and more or less distant areas, and are hotspots for exchange, both economic and social. The periodic markets are the meeting places where people exchange more than goods; news is exchanged and friendships are forged and dissolved. Periodic markets are great moments of rural life (Chaléard 1996). In agricultural economies, the vitality of rural markets rests on the dynamism of the surrounding agriculture. They perform the function of the collection of foodstuffs from their hinterland as well as retail trade as they offer a venue where peasants can sell their foodstuffs and also buy other goods. The link between agriculture and the business in a rural market is fundamental as almost all the customers are peasants. In the Mont Bamboutos region, agriculture supplies food for the local population and also meets the urban demand of Cameroon and some countries of Central Africa. Therefore, this rural area is well connected to the towns through agricultural trade routes. On the other hand, these dynamic periodic markets are attractive for traders of imported junk who can meet the local demand for such global goods as plastic shoes or clothes made in China. Figure 5 illustrates the collection, in a rural market (Batcham) of “traditional” trade (agriculture, second-hand clothes) and of recent trade (Chinese junk).

**Figure 5. Rural markets are a collection of several trade routes**



**SOURCE: AUTHOR**

- 34 The dynamic agricultural background is a condition of the development of the trade route of Chinese junk in rural areas. In other words, rural markets express commercial complementarities of the merchant territory and they denote that contemporary globalization leans on local contexts.



- 35 The density of the pattern of the markets globally follows that of the population and is thus important. The population density is high, ranging from 200 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> to 800 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> (Yemmafouo 2013) and there are about thirty periodic markets in Mont Bamboutos area (including a larger part of the Yémba land) between Dschang, Mbouda and Bafoussam. They are located on the dirt road networks. The Yémba country, a small cultural region of the Bamileke group, has a week consisting of eight days. Most of the rural markets are weekly and thus take place once each eight days following a rotating calendar. The dense territorial organisation of the rural markets network provides opportunities for the structuring of a trade route.
- 36 The markets are divided into different sections specializing in particular products. There is a food section and a goods section, both with their sub-sections. There are as many spatial layouts as there are markets. Some markets take place in an open space while others are embedded in the village premises. The types of displays correspond to the types of goods, e.g. the second-hand clothes are generally laid on canvas covers set on the floor while the brand new clothes are arranged on vertical displays (Figure 6). On the whole, the commercial displays are basic, consisting of bamboo tables from less than one square meter to six square meters that may or may not be covered.

**Figure 6. Plastic sandals' section in Baleveng market**



**SOURCE: AUTHOR**

- 37 The proportion of different kinds of imported goods is quite homogenous between the markets. The Chinese junk is in competition with second hand clothes and have rock-bottom prices “the Chinese products changes the poverty, there is no more poverty, those who were dirt are no more dirt, it helps us a lot” (Interviewee 31, trader, May, 26, 2014, Bangang, our translation). This housewife selling clothes has a very positive opinion about the Chinese items because they are affordable. At least she is able to buy more

clothes for her children than before the flooding of rural markets by Chinese goods. According to her, wearing a new brand clothes means to come out of poverty. The cheap Chinese items' business development provides local population new opportunities for livelihood, maybe accumulation and improved access to consumer goods (Lyons et al. 2013). The issue of quality of the Chinese goods is of secondary importance. Everybody agrees that the Chinese shoes, clothes, jewels, phones, etc. don't last long, but they are available and affordable, both for consumers and traders.

- 38 The development of Chinese junk depends on a local context which is characterised by low incomes and young population. For example, plastic and synthetic fashion accessories, poor quality cosmetics, etc. are cheap and affordable by the youth as shown in Figure 7. The customers are young women and the one dressed in black rivals urban women in term of fashion. She has an urban style and she wears the latest fashion: short dress, "doll shoes", fashion belt bag, fashion hair dress and jewellery, etc. In periodic markets, the majority of the customers are female and the market-places attract a horde of young people wearing Sunday best clothes. The issue of attractiveness is a global concern in the markets.

**Figure 7. Fashion accessories displays in Batcham market**



**SOURCE: AUTHOR**

### A road rooted in the rural with cheap access ways

- 39 The majority of Chinese junk hawkers are men and some specialisations are almost exclusively reserved for male traders, like fashion accessories and cosmetics. Half of the hawkers live in town, mainly Dschang, and most originate from a surrounding village. Despite Chinese junk having flooded the Cameroonian market since 2007-2008, half of the hawkers have been traders for more than ten years. There are thus legitimate careers

made by merchants, and the trade of Chinese junk can be a durable source of income. For a young person, starting a business with new items means earning a fast income, a lot of travel, meeting new friends in several places, being on top of new fashions, and knowing the trends. It also means being far from a homeland perceived as boring with nothing to do other than farming, often as a labourer, with little chance of obtaining or inheriting sufficient land of their own.

- 40 More than two thirds of the hawkers interviewed in rural markets (comprising those who live in town) have access to agricultural incomes, i.e. the household does farming. Usually, it is small scale farming for commercial food crops and subsistence crops where the acreage under cultivation is generally about one hectare. Less often, the hawker himself does the farming one or two days per week and thus integrates agricultural activities into his schedule. This is more typical for commercial agriculture. Traders without land are mainly young traders, who have not accumulated enough capital to buy land, not to mention that in a context of land scarcity a future dependant on agriculture appears uncertain. The finiteness of the land forms a basis of rural deadlocks and is one of the drivers of the development of the Chinese junk business.
- 41 In addition, the link between agriculture and the growth of Chinese junk trade translates into the complementarity of these two sources of income. Indeed, both activities support each other as the income from one side can benefit the other. There isn't a side that prevails over the other one "both sides are equivalent" (Interviewee 14, May, 23, 2014, Baleveng, our translation) even for those who have an average acreage (1 ha) and sell more than four days per week. "If you do only the trade, you can't manage it" (Interviewee 25, May, 25, 2014, Fongo-Tongo, our translation), said this hawker who sells four days weekly, farms two days per week, and rests on Sunday.
- 42 On the other hand, agriculture (including agricultural employment) among construction employment, sales of products from gathering and hunting, various crafts, etc. is an important means to establishing a starting capital. The starting capital is frequently supplemented with a cash donation, a donation in kind from the family, and/or with cash from the tontine. However, some traders started with no capital and begin as sales assistants, often of a relative. In the Bamileke society, the trade industry has an enhanced standing and it is common that during the school holidays young people become hawkers. Some shopkeepers give items on credit to the young based on an agreement that they return a certain amount of money. In a three month period, the most gifted hawkers are able to accumulate almost 100,000 CFA Francs (about 150 euros). However, the majority of the hawkers interviewed in rural markets started with a capital ranging from 10,000 to 50,000 CFA Francs (15 to 75 euros) and some with only five euros. Most of the hawkers follow the itinerary of the rural markets to guide them in their first steps into the business. There is a social obligation to assist the newcomers building their future. Social solidarity is a factor contributing to the structuring of the trade route.

## Hawkers build commercial roads

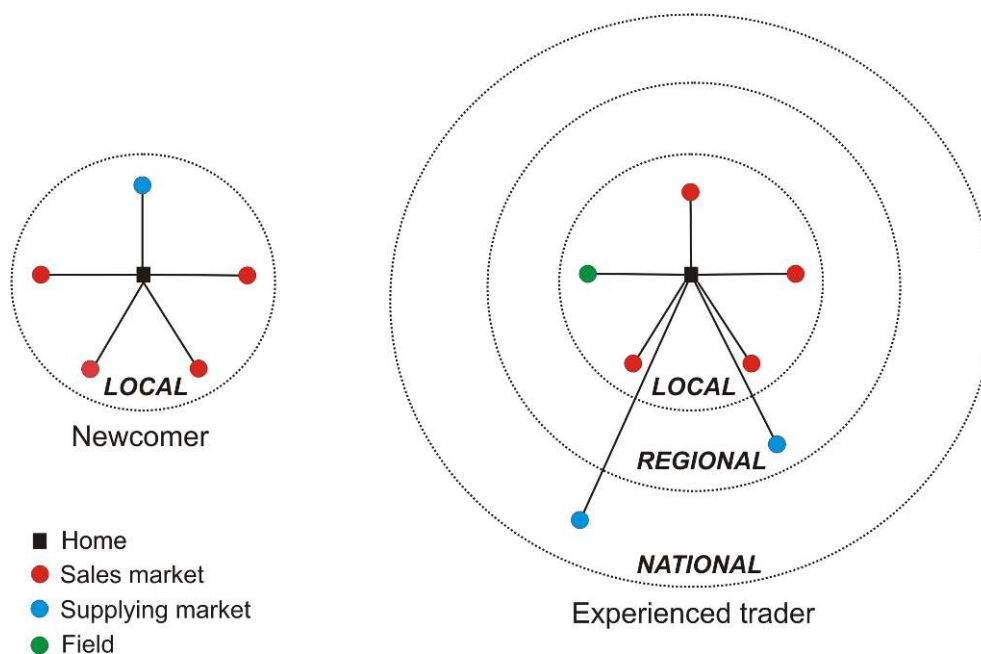
- 43 The structuring of the junk road results in the development of mobility within rural areas and between rural and urban areas. Indeed, on one hand there are hawkers living in town and following the itineraries of the rural markets, and on the other hand, the rural hawkers who shop regularly in town. The supplying usually takes place in Bafoussam and in Douala. However, a few hawkers shop in Dschang or Mbouda that are directly supplied



by a few importers from Bafoussam during the market day. Half of the hawkers stock up in Douala, among them about half go once or twice a week, and the other half once or twice a month. A very few go less than once per month. This means that the connections between rural areas and the international trading post are frequent and the multiple commuters structure linkages between the villages and the metropolis. The mobility to Bafoussam occurs more often as most of the travel happens once or twice a week. It is common for traders to get supplies in Douala about once per month and Bafoussam once per week. On the whole, traders travel to Douala for larger purchases whereas the shopping in Bafoussam concerns smaller amounts.

- 44 Traders circulate using collective transports, mainly buses of 30 seats (in theory). Small amounts (less than three bags) can be transported by bus, otherwise larger amounts are transported by trucks. Therefore, the transport sector also benefits from the development of the trade route. Transporters take advantage of the complementarity between Mont Bamboutos and Douala. Indeed, the trucks carry foodstuffs from the West to Douala and they transport goods from Douala to the West.
- 45 The ambulant traders circulate a lot within and between the rural areas and the towns. Without exhausting the complexity of the trajectories, some representative patterns develop and reveal some types of merchant territorialities. The sketches presented on Figure 8 shows the space of merchant activities of a newcomer and the one of an experienced trader, both selling fashion accessories. Both are representative of commercial circulations at two stages of a merchant career.

**Figure 8. Spaces of activities of two traders**



**SOURCE: AUTHOR**

- 46 The merchant territory of the experienced trader is not only larger than the one of the newcomer, it also integrates both the regional metropolis and the international trading post, as well as the rural areas. Furthermore, there isn't a single road connecting the villages with the port but there are some bypasses from the villages to the port. Some hawkers manage to shop frequently in Douala, and more traders are commuting from the

village to different towns, meeting new people and being closer to urbanity. The structuring of the Chinese junk road contributes to extending the circulation area of the vendors. Their mobility connects different places into a system built on urban-rural complementarities, and on several scales from local to regional, and national. This mobility relies on transport systems. Hawkers move almost daily and their mobility increases the connections between different places. They have a new, more mobile way of life.

- 47 Hawkers have little capital so they have to shop constantly (Figure 9). The periodicity of their purchases varies according to the season. The start of the new school year and Christmas season are the busiest periods and circulations can easily double. Furthermore, when a tontine falls, this is the occasion to travel to Douala. Generally the hawker goes to regular suppliers in order to obtain goods on credit. The latter is proportional to the total amount, and repayable the following week, e.g. 50,000 CFA Francs on credit on a total of 150,000 CFA Francs. However, as it is commonly said by the traders, “the goods lead the purchases”.

**Figure 9. Young hawker at the beginning of its career**



**SOURCE: AUTHOR**

- 48 Indeed, the Chinese junk sector is characterised by a high level of renewal of items. Goods become old-fashioned very quickly. This means that the connections must be constant, traders have to keep in touch with what is going on in town, and even more what's up in the big town, Douala. They must move constantly “it's the century of speed, if you don't do like this, you go back to the village” (Interviewee 20, May, 24, 2014, Bafoussam, our translation), said a trader comparing the pace of business to that of the agricultural based village which is perceived to be much slower. But as the village becomes more and more connected to the urban entity, its pace is also changing. While areas of mobility are

expanding, the rural pace speeds up. Indeed, the development of the junk's road produces daily income that is different from the agricultural time when money came often after the harvest. In the trade business, despite low values, incomes are earned quickly and contribute to the fluidity of economic exchanges. With the development of mobile phones and motorcycles, the flow of junk contributes to a new way of life based on circulation and immediacy.

- 49 The structuring of the trade route therefore results in new merchant territorialities integrating the rural and the urban in a space of complementarity, both for mobile traders living in town and the hawkers living in a village. These complementarities rest on commercial functions that strengthen the linkages between rural and urban areas through the circulation of people and goods. The mobile actors built the route which stretches out on a space of circulation within which there is more than people and goods moving. Ideas are also circulating through new familiarities in new places. Thus, new identities, tinged with traditional solidarities and business mechanism, develop in a space of movements between the villages and the towns.

## Conclusion

- 50 By focusing on two ends of the commercial space – Douala-Chinatown and the rural markets of Mont Bamboutos –, this article demonstrated territorial dynamics resulting from the structuration of the Chinese junk trade routes. Because a multitude of vendors carry out the circulation of the goods, because the junk is available and cheap, they meet the needs of the low income urban and rural population. Douala, the gateway of the Chinese goods, has experienced socio-spatial reorganization. Indeed, Chinatown develops and Chinese goods brand singular commercial centrality. Chinese traders are recent arrivals and the competition is stiff. They managed to replace the former traders, who are compelled to shift to the small lanes behind the Ahidjo Boulevard. The *street grabbing* by Chinese traders and goods contributes to new spatial differentiation and results from a combination of local and extra-local forces.
- 51 The local power arena emphasizes the complexity of local arrangements, each actor, according to his position, tries to secure their activities, playing with the permeability of the boundaries between formal and informal activities. The complex clientele relations, the more or less fairly disreputable linkages, are local expressions of an inconspicuous globalization. The trade route is an “*espace ressource*” (Pliez 2007), i.e. a space providing economic opportunities and appropriated by the medley of traders and a maze of actors holding some politic and administrative power for facilitating or complicating the connections. For these people this road is a resource; they are the winners and losers within such economy (Meagher and Lindel 2013). Both in Douala and in rural areas, hordes of vendors and transporters try to make a profit, as well as administrative officers and authorities, denoting the local inconspicuous interrelations between actors resulting in the development of transnational networks. In rural areas, the dynamic agricultural background is decisive for the structuring of the junk's road. In households engaged in agriculture and trade of junk, the capital circulates and both activities support each other. Periodic markets are a collection of traditional trade and of unprecedented trade, they denote that contemporary globalization leans on local contexts.



- 52 Despite the frivolous aspect of the junk sector, selling junk is a long-term source of income for rural households, maybe a condition, among other activities, of sustainability of peasantry with regards to rural deadlocks. The Bamileke continuum used to rest on flows of foodstuff, immigration to Douala and attachment and commitment to the village. It is recently renewed by the intensification of the commercial mobility between the Cameroonian economic capital and the food basket. The circulation is intensified because the renewal of these items is high, the junk is short lasting items and the demand is high. These intense circulations connect the urban centres and *margins of the world*. Rural areas, although often *off the map*, are connected to transnational networks. The insertion of rural markets and of vendors to the junk's road points out some inconspicuous insertion to a global network. Mobility of rural hawkers is complementary with transnational circulation as they are part of the same trade route. Locally, the connection to global networks results in new territoriality based on the movement in a merchant complementary space integrating town and countryside. Circulation and fluidity seems to be some solutions to the development failure (Lombard and Ninot 2010) but looking at the foundation of the junk's road one can feel doubtful. The junk is a cheap component of globalization, a globalization for the poor? Is it a real alternative to poverty or a mirage of development?
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## NOTES

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## ABSTRACTS

What are the connections between a village in Cameroon and the transnational network of Chinese junk? From interviews with vendors of Chinese junk and observations of commercial areas, this paper shows territorial dynamics at two ends of the trade route in Cameroon: Douala and the periodic markets in Mont Bamboutos (West). This paper argues that the structuring of the Chinese junk trade route integrates town and countryside in a complementary space produced by commercial relations, appropriated by the traders, and characterised by recent booming trading places, recent urban-rural mobility and unprecedented connections to

transnational networks. The development of the Chinese junk sector structures a trade route characterised by local combinations of visible faces and inconspicuous connections and sides. The first part of the paper emphasizes the development of Chinatown in Douala through the change of the commercial equipment's landscape and the change of the actor landscape. The second part deals with the role of the rural markets and of the rural hawkers' mobility in the structuring of the trade route and of new territorialities based on urban-rural mobility.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** commercial areas, markets, urban-rural linkages, mobility, Chinese junk, street grabbing, Cameroon

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