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## Low-cost Chinese Goods in Tanzania: The Rise of Transnational Trade Routes' Peripheral Branches

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This article illustrates how rural margins and urban-rural relations in southwest Tanzania join up with transnational trade routes for Chinese goods. It examines the trade in low-cost imported goods from China (plastic sandals, cheap jewellery, various fashion accessories, cheap clothing, etc.) that are widely spread in Tanzania up to peripheral countryside. Through the concept of trade route, it contributes to the literature on urban-rural relations in African studies and on “inconspicuous globalisation” by first proposing a reverse perspective, with rural areas viewed as consumption areas of imported products. It then rescales the globalisation analysis by putting urban-rural relations at the heart of local and global interconnections. The article demonstrates that geographically peripheral places and actors, have a real capacity to influence the direction of the global trade route as they combine complementarities between the urban-rural continuum and the topological continuity of networks from local to global. The global trade geography is profoundly influenced by what goes on in its inconspicuous tentacles in upcountry regions such as the Uporoto mountains, where the global trade route relies on the dynamism of local agriculture, the latter increasingly merged with other livelihoods. This is exemplified by the complementarities between trade and agriculture in terms of livelihood, circulation of capital, urban-rural mobility, and links with global scales, which highlight the de-agrarianisation process and the development of a mass consumption society.

Key words: trade route, Chinese goods, urban-rural links, rural markets, network, mobility, Tanzania

Low-cost Chinese goods<sup>1</sup> are widely spread across African markets: plastic sandals, various fashion accessories, low-cost clothes, etc. can be found everywhere, from busy metropolitan commercial centres to small, regularly held markets in agricultural uplands. The specific characteristic of these goods is that they are widely available; they are cheap and adapted to

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<sup>1</sup> The term "cheap/low-cost Chinese goods" refers to low quality, low value goods manufactured and imported from China. It is well acknowledged that the range of products manufactured in China also includes good quality and expensive products. However, the latter are not widely found in markets frequented by populations with low purchasing power.

low-income populations in both rural and urban areas. Moreover, there is a high renewal rate of these poor-quality items as they are generally flimsy and highly fashion prone. This means there is considerable deal of movement of such goods and their flow connects Chinese ports to urban and rural areas of Tanzania.

Tanzania has been a regular trade partner of China since the 1970s with a succession of cooperation agreements. Exchanges between China and Africa multiplied 12-fold between 2000 and 2011 as a consequence of the economic growth in both regions, and China has been Africa's main trading partner since 2009 (Gabas and Chaponnière 2012). According to the World Bank, between 2000 and 2018, GDP (current US\$) increased by 333% in Tanzania and by 1,023% in China. Chinese exports to Tanzania (million US\$) increased by 1,400% between 2005 and 2015, with a strong acceleration from 2009 (Cabestan and Chaponnière 2016). In 2019, China was Tanzania's biggest source of imports, accounting for 34% of the total<sup>2</sup>. These macroeconomic figures cannot mask a level of poverty that is still high. According to the World Bank, in 2016, one quarter of Tanzanians lived on less than \$1.90 per day. Urban and rural structural blockages persist, such as the lack of viable professional opportunities for an increasingly young population (Haji 2015). Resourcefulness remains the principal tool of a major part of the population who find entrepreneurial opportunities in the "informal sector", yet precarious sector. The informal economy accounts for 50 to 80% of GDP and as many as 90% of new jobs in Africa (Steel and Snodgrass 2008). Characterised by informality, petty trade in low-cost Chinese goods has low entry barriers. It presents an opportunity, especially for those who are out of reach of the sources of agricultural accumulation. In the rural areas of the Uporoto Mountains (South West of Tanzania), the lack of available land reduces the prospects of wealth accumulation via agriculture for a large proportion of young people (Mwamfupe 1998).

The Uporoto Mountains<sup>3</sup> are one of the main agricultural production areas that supply the national (and sub-regional for some crops) market. Rural densities are high, ranging from 150 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> to 400 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. Agriculture is essentially small-scale farming. Integration of this mountainous form of agriculture to the market maintains a rent-based economy; structurally, the market is based on low remuneration for producers (Racaud 2016). High population densities, land pressure, and widespread agriculture are major characteristics of this rural mountain territory, as are the links with the city, especially Mbeya, the regional capital, located in the foothills. Mbeya, Tanzania's fifth largest city, has about 500,000 inhabitants in 2020. Agriculture is a major economic driver and the city is an outlet for part of the local agriculture as well as a hub in extended trade networks (Racaud 2022). Located near the border with Zambia and Malawi, Mbeya is a busy commercial centre linked to Dar es Salaam and to Southern African countries by both the Tanzania-Zambia highway and the Tanzania-Zambia railway. The specific characteristics of low-cost Chinese goods, the macroeconomic environment, and urban and rural features are driving forces behind the increasing flow of Chinese goods in cities and in the countryside.

Given the general driving forces of the spread of Chinese goods in Tanzania on a global and local scale, I ask what links Tanzanian villages of the Uporoto Mountains to the transnational network of low-cost Chinese goods? More specifically, what are the actors and the territorial dynamics of these links in urban and rural areas? How are rural margins, cities and urban-rural relations integrated into transnational trade routes for Chinese goods? This article thus looks at

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<sup>2</sup> Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tza/> (retrieved May 26, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> "Uporoto Mountains" includes the Uporoto Range and Mount Rungwe.

the movement of low-cost Chinese goods between rural areas, once considered as being on the periphery of globalisation, and Mbeya. I scale the analysis to “spatial and social margins” (particularly rural areas) in order to examine the place and the role of these “inconspicuous spaces of globalisation” (Choplin and Pliez 2015) into transnational trade routes – the globalised economy. The main argument is that peripheral places and actors, take on an active role in the development of transnational trade routes by combining complementarities between the urban-rural continuum and the networks’ topological continuity from local to global. The objective is thus to shed light on the unprecedented integration of urban-rural relations into the globalised economy via the trade route for low-cost Chinese goods.

The paper first focuses on theoretical debates about urban-rural relations and inconspicuous globalisation. The next section deals with the method adopted. It then examines access to trade routes and livelihoods to show the complementarities between agriculture and trade. The following section deals with the traders’ mobility and mercantile links. It explains how the daily movement of small traders and mercantile links have built inconspicuous branches of transnational trade routes and new socioeconomic horizons. The article concludes by noting that the geography of global trade routes is profoundly influenced by what goes on in their inconspicuous tentacles in upcountry regions such as the Uporoto mountains, where the global trade route relies on the dynamism of local agriculture which is more and more integrated to other livelihoods.

### **Theoretical approach: a geography of the peripheral branches of transnational trade routes**

In this section, I set out the concept of the trade route of low-cost Chinese goods in scientific topics of urban-rural relations in African studies and of “inconspicuous globalisation” (Choplin and Pliez 2015; Pliez 2007), two topics that are rarely combined in the literature. Urban-rural relationships in Africa have mainly been examined through the lens of the link between agriculture and urbanisation (Tacoli 1998, Pélissier 2000). This approach has been used in studies on urban food supply for many decades. Based on a territorial approach, Vennetier (1972) considers cities as consumption areas and focuses on the organisation of urban supply, especially its logistical aspects. Guyer (1987) emphasises the political and institutional dimension, particularly the state’s role in urban supply issues. Urban food supply is related to the question of urban food security which is mainly considered from a socio-technical point of view, in particular the concept of value chains, while overlooking issues dealing with food governance (Janin 2019). Countryside areas that are best connected to the city find an outlet for agricultural goods in urban markets, based on a national or regional market logic; urbanisation thus appears to be an opportunity for the rural economy (Chaléard and Dubresson 1999). As rural economies open up, links are observed between agricultural dynamism, income diversification, and urbanisation. Studies of extractive economies, industry and crafts take globalisation into account in respect of urban-rural relations (Agergaard, Fold and Gough 2009), but the links between globalisation and petty trade, although attractive to many low-capital populations, remain on the scientific periphery. Moreover, such approaches tend to examine issues dealing with goods that move from the countryside to the cities or for export. The focus on low-cost Chinese products reverses this perspective, since I examine the links between imported goods that move from cities up to the countryside.

Adopting a geography of relationships, Chaléard and Dubresson (1999) suggested avoiding compartmentalised approaches towards “urban” and “rural” scientific objects by analysing what unites and separates cities and the countryside. According to this approach, the relational

aspects of urban-rural relations can be viewed through a continuum. The urban-rural continuum is a spatial form organised by a series of gradients of urban-ness and of integration into the city. However, the urban-rural relationship is subject to global processes that affect its various elements. It is characterised by “the development of mobilities and of forms of hybridisation, whereby the territory as a continuous and delimited space is, on the one hand, articulated with other spatial structures (e.g., networks) and, on the other hand, is part of a logic that operates from local to global” (Charlery de la Masselière 2020, 11). The local section of transnational networks of Chinese goods articulates “urban” and “rural” as well as their relations with other scales, informing the nature of urban-rural relations and their links with global processes. Local dynamics find meaning as part of a larger whole, and geographical forms of routes for goods in rural Tanzania should be understood in view of their relationship with other scales. Massey (1991) proposed the expression “a global sense of place” to describe the interweaving between the global and the local, which is essential to our understanding of a place.

The recent massive spread of Chinese products is helping to usher Africa into an era of mass consumption (Kernen and Khan Mohammad 2014). Most of the studies dealing with the spread of Chinese goods in Africa focus on their most visible aspects such as international migration/mobility, international commercial hubs in Asia, the main entry points into Africa (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2007; Belguidoum and Pliez 2015, Bouhali 2020) or sub-regional exchanges (Choplin and Lombard 2014; Marfaing 2015), but rural areas, especially remote ones, are under investigated. They are not on the map of economic globalisation, except for mining or agricultural exports. For these two types of commodities, rural areas are production spaces whose commercial processes lead to dispossession, exclusion, social differentiation, and deeper inequality (Charlery de la Masselière 2014; Hall, Scoones and Tsikata 2017). In other words, they are dominated spaces. My intention, on the other hand, is to place peripheral spaces and actors – peripheral branches of transnational trade routes– on the map of transnational networks, specifically that of low-cost Chinese goods. This approach encompasses inconspicuous globalisation – *mondialisation discrète* – (Pliez 2007), i.e., the “global shadow archipelago constructed through invisible transnational connections”, characterised in particular by routes, secondary cities, and marketplaces (Choplin and Pliez 2015, 2) in order to highlight inconspicuous connections to globalisation and their links with urban-rural relations via the trade route concept. The paper contributes to the debate on the changing geography of global trade. Recent studies have shown that the Global South is growing as a final market and the directions of global trade flows are changing (Horner and Nadvi 2017). South–South trade is rising as part of a pattern of increasingly polycentric trade. This suggests that paying attention to how the growth of southern actors and southern end markets might alter the geography of global trade (Horner and Nadvi 2017). Considering geographical peripheries as actors in global processes is part of this movement.

The trade route encompasses spatial and social networks, combining the spatial dimensions of movement with aspects of relationships between actors. The spatial conception of the road reflects a set of places that are continuously or discontinuously connected. In the latter case, the image of the road is a metaphor (Pliez 2007). However, it is also a transport infrastructure, a physical road, and a logistical device. More discreetly, the road reaches the confines of peripheral mountains, where it often takes the form of a muddy or stony track, depending on the season. The trade route is also the set of actors linked together through commerce. The concept informs the articulation between social and spatial networks, i.e., individual or collective paths and links between marketplaces (Belguidoum and Pliez 2015). It is partly inspired by elements of the Global Value Chain (Gereffi, Humphrey and Sturgeon, 2005), but this economic approach requires a methodological rigour that is difficult to apply to highly flexible objects such as petty trade, characterised by a combination of “formal” and “informal”

factors. In addition, if a main objective of the GVC analysis is to illustrate how firms create and differentially capture value at each distinct point of transaction along the chain, my aim is to analyse how margins are integrated into globalisation through actors and places. Consequently, my approach is not market-oriented, but focuses on territorial dynamics. Choplin and Pliez (2015) argue that the concept of "road" is more flexible and better reflects the reticular dimension of trade. It allows us to study dynamics that are not very visible or are relatively marginal to States, with discrete scale interconnection processes "to understand the ways in which networks of people trace out paths which, by creating new destinations, by the emergence of forms of organisation based on trust and reputation, and by establishing unexpected regulations combining public and private action, strengthen the links between the places involved and locate these places within global trade routes" (Choplin and Pliez 2015, 6) such as the peripheral branches of transnational trade routes located in southwestern Tanzania.

### **Putting Uporoto Mountains on the commercial networks map**

In Tanzania, urbanisation<sup>4</sup> is a driver for commercial food crops. Dar es Salaam is a major market and the city's food supply relies on dynamic channels at national level. Demand for food in the city has created a growing market for farmers and makes a substantial contribution to rural development (Wegerif 2017). Crop-specific value chain dynamics in Tanzania are a considerable driver for the demographic growth of local village centres (Lazaro et al. 2019). The agricultural perspective shows that urban and rural economies are intimately linked. Emerging urban centres in rural areas provide new and growing livelihood opportunities (Lazaro et al. 2019) such as trade. Tanzanian urbanisation is shaped by a chain of connections in which rural and urban livelihoods interact, and small towns play an active role (Steel et al. 2019).

Dotted with villages and intermediate urban centres, the Uporoto mountains are integrated into the city, both materially, since Mbeya, the regional metropolis, is located in the foothills at 1700m, and because the mountain agriculture is incorporated into the national and sub-regional food supply networks. In the 1960s, the Mbeya region was important in supplying rice, and to a lesser extent maize, to Dar es Salaam. The region benefited from investments in transport infrastructure such as the Tanzam highway, which, together with the railway in the 1970s, contributed significantly to the economic development of Mbeya and its hinterland (Bryceson 1993). This corridor, followed by considerable investments in roads in southern Tanzania in the 1990s, was key to Mbeya's blossoming in the 1990s. It enabled Mbeya to strengthen its regional trade function in the non-agricultural goods market and to prosper through long-distance agricultural surplus trade. Agriculture is still the backbone of the rural economy and a major driver of the urban economy. Agriculture is part of Mbeya and the city is part of agriculture (Racaud 2022). However, fertility, one of the main comparative advantages of agriculture, is being challenged by the commodification of the means of production for supplying cities (Sokoni 2008). Moreover, in the last ten years, the development of avocados for European markets has led to a twofold trend, with the inclusion of small-scale local farmers into an unprecedented global market, and the movement of foreign capital towards the mountains (Racaud 2022).

Tanzanian urban-rural relations became more complex after the liberalisation of agriculture and the diversification of the rural economy – de-agrarianisation which is a long-term process of

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<sup>4</sup> According to the World Bank, the urban population's annual growth rate over the last 20 years has been high at slightly above 5% a year. The urban population accounted for 36% of the total population in 2021.

occupational adjustment, income-earning reorientation, social identification, and spatial relocation of rural dwellers away from strictly peasant-like modes of livelihood (Bryceson 1996). Mwamfupe (1998) observed that agriculture is no longer a binding force for households in southwestern Tanzania due to the decline in agricultural activities as the main source of cash income, the increasing scarcity of land, and a deterioration in soil fertility. This observation was made at the end of the 1990s, a period of agricultural crisis marked by the disorganisation of cash crop sectors (particularly pyrethrum and coffee) and the fall in prices. To compensate, producers switched to fast-growing, intensive crops to generate rapid income (Ponte 1998), as shown by the development of commercial food crops at the expense of former export crops. The tonnage and cultivated area of the main commercial food crops (maize, banana, potato, bean) increased over the period 2002-2010 (Racaud 2022). However, pressure on land and fertility risks have increased since the 1990s. Growth in non-farm activities is both an alternative means of survival and a strategy that people have developed to take advantage of the cash flow generated through agriculture and remittances (Mwamfupe 1998). Trade in imported goods illustrates the growth of the cash economy, the economy's liberalisation, and the strengths and weaknesses of agriculture connected to urban markets. Market integration based on agriculture goes hand in hand with the diversification of rural incomes.

While the development of trade in imported goods has grown sharply since the 2000s, Chinese goods were already available in much smaller volumes in rural Tanzania in the 1990s, e.g., in the Mbeya region (Bryceson 1999). Indian shopkeepers, mostly established in the numerous up-country towns (often with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants), have contributed to the circulation of cash in rural Tanzania since the colonial period. They purchased diverse cash crops from farmers and, in return, sold incentive and basic needs goods in villages (Bryceson 1993). However, their numbers were limited and the barriers to entry into this market were high for African traders. As a result, this trade did not absorb large numbers of people, unlike the trade in Chinese products in recent decades. Indeed, trade in Chinese products is characterised by low barriers to market entry; they are cheap and thus extremely attractive, especially for those with little capital.

## **Methodology**

The empirical material comes from a post-doctoral study on low-cost Chinese products trade routes in Tanzania and Cameroon (2014) and research included in a broader study about informal vending in Tanzania and Kenya (2015-2016)<sup>5</sup>. The fieldwork was conducted in Tanzania in September 2014, November 2015, and November 2016. The data were collected by following the route taken by Chinese goods from the rural confines of the Uporoto Mountains to the gateway in Dar es Salaam. The surveys were conducted in six regularly held rural markets (Ibililo, Igoma, Ikuti, Kiwira, Santilya, and Tandare) and Mbeya in 2014, and in Mbeya and Dar es Salaam in 2015 and 2016. The material is based on 45 semi-directive interviews with sedentary or itinerant traders, half in towns and half in the countryside. Four biographies, a focus group interview with young traders, and observations and analysis of the commercial landscape enriched the method. In addition, I conducted two additional interviews by phone with traders from Mbeya in April 2020.

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<sup>5</sup> The 2014 research was financed by the University of Toulouse 2, LABEX SMS, reference ANR-11-LABX-0066. The 2015 and 2016 fieldwork were financed by the French Institute for Research in Africa - IFRA-Nairobi. At the time the study was conducted, there were no ethical approval requirements for this type of research at the University of Toulouse 2 and IFRA-Nairobi.

Interviews were conducted in the streets, in shops or in markets (except for the biographies, the latter being carried out in bars). Conducting a survey in the “workplace” is difficult, especially with more or less precarious actors, and also because my presence interfered with business. Apart from two interviews with local government officials, I focused on traders because I was mostly interested in discussing with “ordinary actors”, those who contribute locally to the circulation of low-cost Chinese products through their daily activities. In town, small traders are generally present in their shops, while larger traders are less likely to be found in shops, which are generally run by one or more employees. In rural areas, I decided to follow the itinerant traders from market to market, allowing me to meet the same traders in several markets as well as other traders. However, it was not possible to join them on their urban shopping trips as their time is limited during these purchases. This method enabled me to momentarily “experience” the road and some aspects of traders’ daily life, making it a kind of “road research”, the movement is the vital lead for data collection along the road. The method is inspired by the multi-sited approach (Marcus 1995) which involves following objects and people in space and to a lesser extent in time (e.g., biographies). The researcher is directly involved in the movement, which is the driving force behind the approach. The movement is then apprehended in various rural or urban situations. Nevertheless, the multiplication of survey locations makes it difficult to carry out in-depth ethnological surveys of a place. This methodology contributed to the development of a picture of peripheral branches of transnational trade routes in southwestern Tanzania as reflected in the present paper.

### **Rural markets: peripheral spaces at the crossroads of several trade routes**

There are 26 registered regular rural markets spread throughout the Uporoto Mountains (Figure 1). They are located on networks that consist mainly of dirt roads. These markets differ in size (traded volumes, number of people ranging from hundreds to thousands), degree of specialisation, and degree of integration in local, regional, national, and international agricultural markets (Racaud 2022). Observations (2014) from the Ibililo, Igoma, Ikuti, Kiwira, Santilya, and Tandare markets show that the proportion of different kinds of imported goods is relatively homogenous between the markets. Second-hand clothes and shoes are the most common items, followed by plastic sandals and shoes, clothes, and then fashion accessories.





Figure 1. Registered regular markets in the Uporoto Mountains in 2014 (author and Alfaut 2022)

Rural markets in the Uporoto Mountains perform the function of collecting foodstuffs from their hinterland as well as retail trade, since they offer a venue where small-scale farmers can sell their foodstuffs and buy other goods. The link between agriculture and business in these rural markets is crucial, since almost all the customers are small-scale farmers. In the Uporoto economy, the vitality of rural markets depends on the dynamism of the surrounding agriculture. Agricultural seasonality has a direct impact on the market for Chinese products since the periods when sales are most important correspond to harvest times.

Rural markets act as centres for several trade routes. They attract flows of agricultural production from the hinterland and flows of itinerant traders in Chinese goods. The spatial network of Chinese goods partly overlaps with the trade routes for agricultural products. Indeed, major rural agricultural collection centres such as Kivira and Ibililo are the most attractive for itinerant traders of Chinese goods. The new trade route for Chinese goods thus follows the old agricultural roads, complementing both the dynamism of shared places and their hinterland. Figure 2 illustrates the intersection of two trade routes in Ibililo. The market is connected to the

trade route for bananas, which reaches as far as Dar es Salaam or Gaborone. The market is also connected to the trade route for Chinese goods, acting as a local hub in a rural branch of a transnational network. Rural markets mirror both their hinterland and the contextualised globalisation.



Figure 2. Ibililo market: the crossroads of old and more recent trade routes (Author 2014)

The dual integration via agricultural trade routes and that of Chinese goods contributes to the development of rural markets. For instance, the recent development of commercial banana farming and the even more recent expansion of cultivation of improved varieties of avocado led to a saturation of the original marketplace in Ibililo. The market was moved to the outskirts of the village in 2012 to accommodate both the trucks collecting agricultural commodities and the vendors selling Chinese goods. The Ibililo and Uporoto mountains illustrate the fact that the rural areas best connected to the city are the most dynamic. The integration of rural areas into urban agricultural markets is a driving factor behind their integration into the trade route for Chinese products.

### **Urban-rural complementarities at the core of trader career paths and livelihoods**

#### ***Traders' career paths***

A wide range of people: men, women, married and unmarried, young people, retired civil servants, etc., engage in the trade in Chinese goods. There is no general profile as the actors are highly flexible and can switch from one category to another overnight. For example, some street vendors located in town also sell two or three times a week in regular rural markets; thus, they can be viewed as street traders or itinerant traders depending on which day it is (Interviews September 2014). There is also seasonal flexibility in trading activity. December and the start

of the new school year are high seasons, as are harvest periods. Of the 23 itinerant traders interviewed, the majority of traders began less than ten years ago, but the oldest have been trading for over ten years. The oldest have thus made legitimate careers as merchants, and trade in Chinese goods is a durable source of income. This is the case for instance for Mama Lukia who has been selling clothes in periodic markets since the 2000s, or Henry who sold second-hand clothes, hardware, and then clothes in rural areas for 15 years (interviews 9 September 2014).

The interviews (2014-2015) with traders show that their career paths vary widely, with several ways of establishing seed capital. Many of them were employed, mostly in agriculture as day labourers or in trade as sale assistants. Some invested capital earned from agriculture, either from rented or inherited land. Others were woodcutters, brick-makers, construction labourers, repairmen of various items, hunters, etc. The starting capital was mainly built up individually. The majority of traders I met in rural markets started with capital ranging from €20 to €100, with an overall average of €80 (Tsh200,000). It is very common to start by trading second-hand clothes, either as an itinerant trader in rural areas or as a street trader in town. The length of each stage in an individual's career depends on the extent of their commercial success. Baba Jacob's career history is typical. In his early thirties, he began selling fashion ballet pumps in a small shop in Mwanjelwa, the main commercial area of Mbeya, in 2012. Before that, he sold used clothes for seven years in rural markets (interview 4 November 2015). John's trajectory demonstrates the high degree of flexibility of traders' careers. He inherited half an acre of land in the Uporoto mountains when he was sixteen, but decided to move to Moshi in northern Tanzania where he was a hawker for six months. The experience was unsuccessful, but instead of going back to the rural area of Santilya, he settled in Mbeya, hosted by a friend from his home village. He worked as a hawker for one year, then followed the rural markets circuit for three years before moving to Mansa in Zambia, where he was a hawker for three years. This professional experience enabled him to accumulate enough capital to rent a shop in Mwanjelwa where he sells imported women's clothes (interview 5 November 2015), thereby achieving the goal of most of the rural and urban petty traders interviewed: to get a shop in town.

Social solidarity comes into play in the initiation of trade. For example, Colman, in his twenties, started out as his sister's assistant selling dried fish. She then gave him capital of Tsh300,000 which he used to start his own fish business before he switched to selling Chinese products. This was made possible by help from friends from his home village who were traders themselves and showed him the tricks of the Chinese goods trade. Social assistance is thus an empowerment factor for young people. Since then, he has founded a family, bought an acre of land, and now also helps other youngsters (interview 10 September 2014). Support is therefore also based on obligation or on "class solidarity". It is very common to share information about commodities, prices, and sales outlets, and to escort youngsters to the supply areas to introduce them to suppliers. Initial supplies usually come from the regional commercial hub: Mwanjelwa. As most of the traders are from rural areas, they are unfamiliar with the town, its sales outlets, its customs, etc. A similar process is observed for the first supplies obtained in Dar es Salaam. Traders from Mbeya are guided by friends for their first experience in Kariakoo (interviews November 2015). Traders continue to remember this first experience, even several years later. It is almost a rite of passage, involving as it does a change of status in society, from a dependant to a self-sufficient person. Social solidarity is thus a contributory factor to structuring the commercial route. It has both a vertical mode (i.e., family, older people, and those who have succeeded in town are duty bound to assist younger people) and a horizontal mode (i.e., solidarity between friends and classmates).

### ***Livelihoods based on urban-rural complementarities***

Most older traders have access to significant amounts of land, like Rose and Dismas, traders in their fifties who have 3 acres in Mwakaleli (interview 6 November 2015). This is not always the case for younger people since their parents' land may be too small to be subdivided into several plots. Land purchase can be an alternative to the deadlock caused by the inheritance system. About two thirds of the traders interviewed in rural markets (including those living in towns) have access to agricultural income from inherited smallholdings or purchased or rented land, usually supporting small-scale farming for cash food and subsistence crops. The area under cultivation generally averages around two to three acres. Less frequently, rural traders themselves farm once or twice a week, thus integrating agricultural activities into their schedule. Julius, for instance, farms on Monday and Saturday, trades on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, and goes to church on Sunday (interview 12 September 2014). Most of the traders in Mwanjelwa, especially the older ones like Rose and Dismas, originate from the region, and are engaged in shop business and agriculture. For specific agricultural tasks such as planting, weeding, and harvesting, they stay in the village and leave a relative in Mwanjelwa in charge of the shop (interview 6 November 2015). Rural traders engaged in farming on their own land or on rented land, also undertake these periodic agricultural tasks (Focus group interview in Igoma, 7 September 2014). There is complementarity in terms of schedule, as well as social responsibilities in the village. Indeed, parents and relatives remain in the villages while someone who lives in town has social responsibilities and must commit to religious or other kinds of associations. For example, Joseph, one of the first traders to settle in the Mwanjelwa market, travels to his village, Mwakaleli, twice a month for social reasons (interview 25 November 2016). This means that the symbolic, social, and financial urban capital accumulated from trade remains attached to the village. Despite differences in generation and location (rural or urban), the livelihoods of many urban traders and rural traders combine both commerce and agriculture. This involves livelihood complementarities and a degree of flexibility in organising activities according to the season and to the schedule of regular markets.

For older traders, agriculture provided the means to accumulate capital in order to start trading. On the contrary, trading in Chinese goods provided younger people with the means to acquire land. Commerce in these goods gave them an opportunity to break the socioeconomic deadlock in both urban and rural areas (high unemployment, lack of agricultural prospects, etc.). For example, in Uporoto, Juma's parents had too little land to be able to give him any. In 2008, Juma started trading in plastic sandals in regular markets, and in 2010, he bought his own plot where his wife grows cash food crops (mainly bananas and beans). He gets more income as a market trader but says that both activities are important (interview 10 September 2014). Most of the traders involved in farming say that trading is obligatory as agriculture does not provide enough income. Agriculture is seasonal and the shop provides an activity for older people in Mwanjelwa during the agricultural "off-season" and is "a place to save money, not to produce money" (interview 6 November 2015). Agriculture and trade in Chinese goods are thus complementary since the capital circulates between the two activities. These flexible livelihoods based on income from rural and urban areas demonstrate livelihood diversification and de-sagrarianisation, while the boundary between urban and rural for households engaged in both agriculture and trade in imported items is becoming increasingly porous. In Mbeya, nearly 40% of the city's inhabitants derive most of their income from agriculture (URT, 2010). The rural and (albeit to a lesser extent) urban economies depend on agriculture since a fair proportion of consumers' income is based directly or indirectly on agriculture.

### **Trader mobility and mercantile links outside the urban-rural continuum**

### *Mobility: from villages to other countries*

Interviews with traders encountered in the rural markets reveal that most of them sell six days a week in regular markets, and some follow the regular market circuit up to seven days a week, like Evelyne who I met in Kiwira, or Festo who I met in Santilya (interviews 9 and 13 September 2014). Hence rural trading is a genuine full-time activity facilitated by the territorial organisation of the rural market network which provides opportunities to develop a commercial route. Rural traders living in the same area share fairly similar routes. For instance, a common route from Monday to Saturday in the Rungwe district for traders from the Kiwira area is Lugombo, Kiwira, Ikuti, Igembe, Kiwira and Kyimo (interviews with traders in Kiwira market, 9 September 2014). Sunday is generally devoted to attending church and there are no major markets in the area on that day. Some traders, such as George or Henry who have more capital, follow a more regional route, heading to the busy markets of Rungwe (Kiwira) or some surroundings districts (Kyela, Chunya), and as far as Sumbawanga (230 km from Mbeya) where monthly cattle markets are held (interviews 13 and 9 September 2014). Traders choose market locations according to their accessibility, evaluated in terms of distance and time, transport cost, and the size of the market. The routes are also adapted to the agricultural calendar, since some markets are more interesting during the local harvest period. Since rural traders do not have much capital, they have to buy supplies continually, making rural-urban mobility frequent. They generally obtain supplies weekly, with average amounts ranging from €25 to €120. The journeys to obtain supplies are unprecedented as most of the rural traders say that it was exceptional for them to travel to the regional commercial hub before they started their business.

Interviews with traders from Mwanjelwa, the ward executive officer, and a trade representative from Mbeya City, reveal that most of Mwanjelwa's traders obtain supplies from Kariakoo in Dar es Salaam. Traders indicate that they generally travel between once a fortnight (e.g., Mama Colin, interview 11 November 2014) and once every six weeks (e.g., Rose, interview 6 November 2015). There is complementarity in the transport flows on the Tanzania-Zambia highway. Trucks take crops from Uporoto to Dar es Salaam and bring imported items back to Mbeya (interview with a transport middleman in Mbeya, 22 November 2016). In addition, some importers travel to China, Bangkok or Dubai. The head of the trade department in Mbeya city estimates the number of importers in Mbeya at around fifty (interview 10 November 2015). Mama Anne, who knows about ten importers, is one of them. She has been selling clothes, layettes, baby toys, suits, etc. since 2007, and she travels overseas every two or three months. She shops in China and Dubai, depending on the goods she is looking for (interview 14 September 2014). Bi Maua is even more experienced as she started shopping overseas in 2003. She first went to Bangkok, then switched to Guangzhou in 2004, before turnover fell due to a conflict with her sister who was her business partner. According to Bi Maua, the minimum capital needed to obtain supplies from overseas is €4,000. In 2008, she got a bank loan of about €2,000 euros and got her supplies from Dar es Salaam. She used to travel to Kariakoo three times a month. In 2011, she started to get supplies from Kampala, 1,500 km away. Kampala is interesting because the exchange rate is better, taxes are low, and administrative processes are easier. She travelled there five times before she had an accident and consequently lost her capital (interview 9 November 2015). Looking for opportunities, she built fragile connections between Kampala and Mbeya, the inconspicuous trade route is sometimes precarious. The urban traders' clientele consists of local consumers, urban and rural retailers, as well as traders from Malawi and Zambia. These examples show different scales and pace of mobility: urban traders travel further than rural traders who are more mobile in a locally situated area. They also show that a town in remote southwestern Tanzania is directly integrated into transnational trade routes. Mbeya organises some branches of the route over a wider hinterland, the latter

being sub-regional. These market links illustrate the reticular aspects of the trade route on a sub-regional scale, and a capitalist integration based on commercial networks.

### *Mercantile links and mass consumption horizons*

Mercantile relations between traders contribute to the development of the Chinese goods trade route. Generally speaking, experienced rural traders go to regular suppliers in order to obtain goods, paying cash for between  $\frac{2}{3}$  and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the supplies. The remainder are bought on credit, to be repaid the following week (e.g., Evelyne or Juma, interview 9 and 10 September 2014). The weakest, often less experienced rural traders fear credit because they are not sure they will be able to pay it back (e.g., Helena or Colman, interview 12 and 10 September 2014). For wholesalers, the advance on goods enables them to capture clients. Mama Anne calls her regular customers to advertise new items and maintain a social relationship (interview 14 September 2014). Nisha, a rural trader, gets regular calls from some Mbeya suppliers (interview 10 September 2014). These links help to keep the exchanges fluid. Maintaining durable relations enables traders to develop loyalty. In addition, the spread of smartphones equipped with the WhatsApp application and mobile banking facilitates intangible connections (interview with Mama Anne 14 September 2014, Baba Jacob 4 November 2015). Such material and immaterial commercial links inform professional networks between rural traders and urban traders. These networks are characterised, on the one hand, by the opportunism of the petty traders in search of the best deals and, on the other hand, by the techniques implemented by suppliers to build customer loyalty. These networks of market actors involve more or less durable and flexible exchanges, they integrate relations characterised by solidarity, trust, and asymmetry of power and capital.

Actors engaged in the Chinese goods trade are connected to a wider range of places, resulting in new familiarities. Rural traders are more familiar with the “window of globalisation” – the trading centres. Accustomed to the town, rural traders and Mwanjelwa traders are vectors of new horizons and of the fashion trends that the young traders wear themselves. This relationship with new horizons is combined with the fact that agriculture is often negatively perceived, especially by young people. There are several reasons for this, including the impossibility to inherit large plots, the risk associated with agriculture as it depends on the climate, and incomes that depend on the harvest (quantity, period). Daily income from trading, although modest, is attractive, unlike the seasonal income from farming. In the city, daily income is adapted to daily expenses, such as the fresh food needed for the daily family meal. Moreover, young people believe that small-scale farmers have no negotiating power over prices, convinced that the trade in Chinese goods gives them far more room for manoeuvre. Women traders and young traders feel that they have acquired independence. In addition, young traders consider that they have acquired social status as they are able to start a family and acquire land thanks to the income from trade. They use itinerant trading – local spatial mobility – to foster social mobility.

Furthermore, rural traders say that trading in Chinese goods enables them to change their consumption patterns for imported items. The spread of Chinese goods contributes to a relationship with “elsewhere” which shapes demand for globalised items, symbolic of the mass consumption society. Because they are cheap, Chinese goods are popular, despite a widely shared belief about the lower quality of the goods: “Sometimes these products, they cause lot of problems in houses, many houses have this fire. Why this fire? Because of Chinese switch” (interview with Sekela, Mbeya trader, 8 November 2015). The choice of these products is constrained by a weakness in purchasing power and by the range of goods available. The latter correspond to economies where most incomes are very low. Consumers have an ambivalent

perception of low-cost Chinese goods. They know the quality is poor, but at least the products are financially accessible and widely available: “We buy them, it’s not from the heart, it’s because of the [economic] conditions” (interview with Sekela, Mbeya trader, 8 November 2015). Low-cost Chinese goods meet the new standards of consumers with limited purchasing power. This is in line with what Kaplinsky and Farooki (2011) observe about southern markets: standard requirements, and hence entry barriers, are lower in southern end markets as there is less consumer pressure.

Previously, consumers preferred to buy long-lasting products; buying a pair of shoes was a matter of investment. But with the massive arrival of Chinese goods, the relationship with goods has changed. For clothing, the issue of long life is less important since fashions change rapidly as new styles come onto the market at a rapid pace: “Shoes from Italy is Tsh120,000, shoes from China is Tsh25,000. I know, I’ll buy another one [ ]. Chinese, after two, three months, it will come a new design” (interview with Isaac, Mbeya trader, 23 April 2020). Julius, an importer in Dar es Salaam, also points to the ephemeral aspect of fashion and the strong competition to get the latest items: “You need to be creative [ ] people need new things, you don’t sell old fashion, even if you cut the price” (interview 29 November 2016). Chinese goods change as they adapt to fashion, and thus the relationship with the object changes as time “speeds up”, both in urban and rural areas. Figure 2 shows a young trader wearing an American-style cap and his display of “Rasta-style” belts, charms, etc. epitomises the spread of globalised fashion. Easier access to short-lifetime goods, the immediacy of income from this trade, and new mobilities drive intermediate identities on the urban-rural continuum connected to a wider network logic.

### **Conclusion: discontinuous territories of the Chinese goods trade route**

In this paper, I illustrate how rural margins and urban-rural relations in southwestern Tanzania are incorporated into transnational trade routes for Chinese goods. The concept of the trade route, with its relationships between actors and places, sheds light on the inconspicuous territorial dynamics of transnational route ramifications. Links between traders in the rural marketplaces, in Mwanjelwa (Mbeya) and in Kariakoo (Dar es Salaam) are strengthened. These traders and places are active parts of a global trade route, although some are less visible, like the rural margins. The geography of global trade routes is profoundly influenced by what goes on in its “inconspicuous” tentacles in upcountry regions such as the Uporoto mountains. In Tanzania, as in most African countries where most of the population is rural and where agriculture remains a major source of income, the geography of the global trade route relies on the dynamism of local agriculture which has increasingly merged with other livelihoods. This is exemplified by the complementarities between trade and agriculture in terms of livelihood, circulation of capital, urban-rural mobility, and links to global scales. The complementarities adopted by the actors are at the heart of what the paper demonstrates: geographically peripheral places and actors, have a real capacity to influence the direction of the global trade route because they combine complementarities between the urban-rural continuum and the topological continuity of networks from local to global. Complementarities are internal to the household, e.g., agricultural and trade activities are combined, and capital circulates between agricultural production and trade in Chinese items. The trade route involves interlaced social and spatial networks organised by rural traders and urban traders. Some traders meet certain formal sector standards, while a greater number of others remain largely outside the scope of State regulations. Thus, the trade route integrates “formal” and “informal” aspects. In this sense, it illustrates Roitman's view (1990) that the formal and the informal form a system. The very

nature of the trade route is characterised by interdependent “informal” and “formal” aspects. For instance, rural traders need urban suppliers to obtain the goods to sell, while the urban supplier needs the rural traders to sell their goods. These interdependencies do not diminish the nature of the power relations, but contribute to building the trade route, i.e., links between actors and places. There are also complementarities between local and global scales since the mobility of rural traders is complementary to transnational movements: they are part of the same commercial route. Trade in Chinese products shows that actors appropriate low-cost opportunities and take advantage of transport infrastructures. There is complementarity between bottom-up and top-down dynamics, between the logic of the urban-rural continuum and the networks linking several scales. The *discontinuous territories of the Chinese goods trade route* reflect the idea that the current transformations of urban-rural relations within globalisation integrate a territorial logic – spatial continuity, continuum – and the topological continuity of the network. The trade route contributes to blurring the boundaries between urban and rural, and between formal and informal, but its development also relies on the complementarities between each of these elements, making the global route a paradoxical object. In this active periphery of globalisation, the geography of global trade firstly informs urban-rural linkages and secondly the inconspicuous spaces of globalisation.

The analysis goes beyond the dominant perspective of relations between the city and the countryside, in other words, that of food supply and agricultural issues. Indeed, the article addresses the issue of urban-rural relations by proposing a reversal of the usual perspective: rural areas are not simply areas of agricultural production that supply the city, but are also areas of consumption of imported products. The geography of relations between urban and rural areas (Chaléard and Dubresson 1999) is complemented in this article by a rescaling, that of urban-rural connections with globalisation. This rescaling goes beyond the urban-rural dialectic approach, which is insufficient to understand the complexity of urban-rural interrelations and transformations, their unprecedented linkages with other scales, and the strong interweaving of agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods. The livelihoods show that trade in Chinese goods provides a long-term source of income for rural households and, among other activities, may even be a condition for the sustainability of small-scale farming. Mobility between the rural home area and urban centres, over short, medium, or long distances, is often the only way to survive or to start modestly accumulating social and financial capital. Rural actors join the trade route of Chinese goods in a form of decompartmentalization, combining the attributes of urbanity (diversity, urban values) and rurality (the agrarian dimension). Mobility related to trade in Chinese products widens the space of access to resources. Actors on the Uporoto mountains trade route illustrate that rural societies are characterised by multiple activities in different places which increasingly exploit the complementarity between town and country or the diversity of places on several scales (Charlery de la Masselière 2013). The development of trade in Chinese imported goods is part of these combinatorial activities and reflects the unprecedented interconnections found in rural worlds at other geographical scales. With improvements in transport systems and means of telecommunication, mobility is part of a system of acceleration of flows and exchanges on other national or even international scales.

Secondly, the article analyses the emergence of specific forms of globalisation in some areas once considered as peripheral, but which have now become a full part of globalisation, in other words, the “inconspicuous spaces of globalisation” (Choplin and Pliez 2015). In Tanzania, the spatial network of Chinese goods partially overlaps with the old agricultural product trade routes, thereby complementing the dynamism of shared places and their hinterland. Rural marketplaces have become crossroads for several trade routes, playing a significant role in connecting different scales and markets. The trade route relies on established market and transport infrastructures. The Tazara railway and the TanZam highway are major



communication routes for the capitalist configuration of trade patterns in southwestern Tanzania, complemented by branches that connect villages. This network provides material support for the deployment of capitalist globalisation in the countryside. Production and trade are “irrigated” by infrastructure and immaterial networks, reflecting the fundamental link between market development and the conquest of material and immaterial spaces. Increased circulation of Chinese goods creates new relationships with space and time, and new lifestyles based on flexibility and immediacy. Such income immediacy and being in touch with fashion trends are at odds with popular representations of the villages, frequently perceived as a world of social constraints, boring, and with no promise of a prosperous future. In parallel, consumers have an ambivalent perception of Chinese goods, but because the latter are cheap, they are highly attractive for both consumers and traders. The dynamics analysed in Uporoto are in line with Kernen’s assessment of West Africa: “Chinese products, ‘modern’ or ‘fashionable’, materialize a dream of development and access to a consumerist modernity. Their symbolic power is therefore very strong” (Kernen 2014, 17). This view concerns the cities as well as the dynamic countryside, particularly for young people exposed to globalised products via the multiplication of material (markets) and immaterial (internet) interfaces. Young people embody mobility, opening up a consumer society where identities are now constructed via multiple experiences and products distributed by the market. Peripheral areas such as Uporoto are consumption areas, on the map of globalisation, illustrating the emergence of more polycentric trade that is now substantially reshaping economic globalisation (Horner and Nadvi 2015). These peripheries legitimate a geography of trade which takes into account the visible economic flows and the interwoven, but less visible, social and spatial networks.

The opening up of rural areas and the integration of the urban-rural continuum into transnational network logics through traders’ livelihoods illustrates the de-agrarianisation process, helping to account for “the fragmentation of spatial practices that seek to associate the resources and means of the city with those of rural areas, to associate the attributes of urban-ness with those of rurality” (Charlery de la Masselière 2014, 136). The actors at the bottom of the social scale shape territorialities that combine the complementarities of the urban-rural continuum and the topological continuity of networks between local and global systems. Mobility and places make it possible to identify the coherence between flows and places, i.e., the territories of Chinese trade. “Territory” and “network” form a system that is a product of the superimposition of these different spatial orders and that locate assimilates rural margins within global trade.

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