Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

Topical Issue: The Chinese Presence in Africa: A Learning Process

Dittgen, Romain (2015)
Of Other Spaces? Hybrid Forms of Chinese Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa, in: *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 44, 1, 43–73.

URN: http://nbn-resolving.org/urn/resolver.pl?urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-8151

ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

Of Other Spaces? Hybrid Forms of Chinese Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract: Chinese economic activities in Africa have gained increased visibility in parallel to the recent acceleration of Sino-African relations. This paper, which is framed from a geographical perspective that is often absent or neglected in studies covering China–Africa, focuses on the spatial forms and dynamics. It depicts the way in which two contrasting Chinese economic entities – a state-owned company in Chad and privately owned commercial malls in Johannesburg, South Africa – engage with their respective host environments. While drawing on concepts of "liminality" as well as "heterotopias", I argue that the modalities of the Chinese footprint are characterised both by closure and interaction, creating a dynamic tension that produces its own set of unique practices. This ambivalence between enclave and active linkages with host societies is not only perceivable from a spatial point of view, but also emerges with regard to economic strategies. In the midst of a transitional period, along with a launching and a consolidating phase, the Chinese economic entities in both case studies show signs of change in terms of behaviour and territorial foothold.

■ Manuscript received 22 April 2013; accepted 29 May 2014

Keywords: Chad, South Africa, enclave, graft, resource space, hybridisation, oil, mall, Chinese actors

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Introduction

The image of Africa has been dominated recently by two conflicting views. On the one hand, Western media coverage has increasingly depicted the continent "as the next frontier for economic growth" (Polgreen 2012). This is not only imputable to apprehension about diminishing resources but also to an expanding offer of opportunities. On the other hand, doing business in Africa is still perceived as a risky endeavour. In effect, the continent has generally been characterised by a series of on-going lacks, failures, problems and crises (Ferguson 2006: 8). Most international stakeholders who are considering investing in this region usually discern between a "useful" and a "useless" Africa (Reno 1999: 35; Herbst 2000: 90). As a result, foreign involvement has remained predominantly selective – both geographically and economically – as well as concentrated in capital-intensive areas (Ferguson 2005: 379).

Since the turn of the century, the sudden rise of emerging powers and their growing involvement in Africa has introduced new possibilities. By investing large sums and taking an interest in a wide range of areas, the Chinese presence appears to have had the greatest impact and visibility. Even so, the twofold perception of the continent, split between opportunities and risks, raises similar questions about the conduct of Chinese actors in unfamiliar African contexts.

Adopting a geographical perspective, this paper[1] focuses specifically on the spatial forms and dynamics of Chinese economic ventures in sub-Saharan Africa. It explores two contrasting case studies that mirror the predominant features of the Chinese economic foothold in Africa; namely, extractive and commercial activities. One case

1 This article was written in preparation for my doctoral thesis and has benefitted greatly from various sources of funding that have enabled me to access essential data. Fieldwork in Chad was carried out within the framework of a collective research project financed by the French Development Agency, as well as with support from the South African Institute of International Affairs. In South Africa, research was conducted with financial assistance from the French Institute of South Africa, the UMR 8586 Prodig and the research project EsCA ("Chinese cultural spaces in Africa"). Particular thanks go to all the interviewees in Chad, China and South Africa for taking the time to respond to my questions and for helping me to enrich this research work, as well as to Yoon Jung Park, Thierry Sanjuan, Pál Nyíri, Geert van Vliet, Solange Guo Chatelard and three anonymous reviewers, for very useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

study is set in Chad and examines China National Petroleum Corporation's (CNPC) recent engagement in the Chadian oil sector. The other deals with the rapid and on-going expansion of Chinese wholesale and distribution centres in Johannesburg, South Africa. Based on these empirical examples, the paper depicts the way in which different Chinese entities (specifically, a state-owned oil company and privately owned malls) relate to their respective host environments. Despite evident contrasts in terms of motivations, configuration and available resources between these two economic structures, they both display similarities with regard to their process of settlement and spatial footprint. From the outside, Chinese activities on the continent are often portrayed as disconnected or "disembedded" (Giddens 1990), not only physically but also metaphorically, and seen as reproducing the same pattern of spatial engagement as other foreign investors. However, I argue that both of the selected case studies are simultaneously characterised by closure and interaction. This paper borrows from Foucault's concept of "heterotopias" (1984) and Anzaldúa's interpretation of "liminality" (1987, 2002) in order to grasp these hybrid spatial dynamics and to obtain a better understanding of how Chinese activities associate with their host economy.

Although the Chinese presence has gradually become a tangible part of the economic landscape in Africa, many questions regarding long-term developments remain open. The selected Chinese economic entities are currently in transition, set between a launching and a consolidating phase, and have consequently shown signs of change in terms of their behaviour. Therefore, settling in challenging African contexts raises questions about the level of resilience of Chinese actors and the degree of influence that the host environment holds over the organisation and the structuring of activities. In other words, it is interesting to see the extent to which both Chinese operations are "anchored [or embedded] in particular territories or places" (Hess 2004: 177).

The data for this study was collected during several field-research trips. In Chad, fieldwork took place during the construction phase (between June and September 2010) and shortly after the inauguration of the refinery in late June (in September 2011). Most of the information was gathered through interviews with government representatives (Chadian, Chinese and French), managers and engineers at CNPC and ExxonMobil, members of civil society and residents bordering the different production units. In Johannesburg, fieldwork took place at the end of 2009 and 2010, as well as (more briefly) in mid-2012 and 2013. Since each Chinese commercial centre is composed of different layers, it was necessary to talk to owners, promoters, shareholders, management boards, shopkeepers, employees and various customers. Most of the interviews were conducted in five selected structures: *China City*, *China Mart*, *China Mall*, *Dragon City* and *China Cash & Carry*, formerly known as *Afrifocus Centre*.

The paper begins by outlining the theoretical foreground for understanding hybrid forms of Chinese engagement in sub-Saharan Africa. The remaining sections illustrate these dynamics through the analysis of two empirical case studies. First, I detail the setting-up of both selected Chinese activities as well as their spatial configuration, characterised by visible enclave features. The next section, which is centred on the role and economic impact of these selected Chinese activities, reveals the existence of strong linkages with the host economy. Finally, the last sub-section adopts a more prospective approach and analyses the extent to which the conduct of Chinese activities in their receiving environment is influenced by evolving economic realities.

Dialogues across Space

This paper deals with Chinese "spatiality" in two complex African contexts.

Among other meanings, this notion alludes to the "spatial dimension of (inter)action by agents within a given society", making it possible to "think about spatiality as a way through which people relate to the world" (Lévy and Lussault 2003: 867). Only a few researchers have specifically examined this aspect of the Chinese presence in Africa. If, in Western media as well as in scholarly work, Chinese activities are often depicted as being disconnected or maintaining very limited links with the host environment, this subject has only rarely been theorised. Some scholars have used the image of "enclaves" or "enclosure" to describe the form of settlement or the lack of interactions between Chinese and African actors, but it has mostly been done from a sociological or economic perspective (e.g., Lee 2009; Park 2010a; Dittgen and Large 2012; Mohan 2013), without necessarily grappling directly with the spatial dimension.

Given the variety of meanings surrounding the term "enclave", a definition seems necessary. In this paper, the term refers to the "isolation of one space in relation to others" (Lévy and Lussault 2003: 309), "displaying distinctive economic, social and cultural attributes from its surroundings" (Gregory et al. 2010: 191). It also "contains the idea of a key and of closure" (Brunet, Ferras, and Hervé 1992), aiming to "maintain a protective envelope" and to "regulate the contact with the outside in the form of a communication channel" (Donner 2011: 8–9). Similar to Mohan's (2013) recent paper, I do "not dispute the existence of Chinese enclaves" on the African continent and corroborate his assessment on "avoiding static readings of space" (Mohan 2013: 1268). However, while his paper deals mostly with various forms of capital and labour relations, the present study focuses on the unfolding of Chinese businesses on the ground. As developed hereinafter, I argue that the selected Chinese activities are closely related to their respective domestic economy to which they are linked by flows of various kinds. In other words, they oscillate between an isolated enclave and a connected economic "graft". The latter notion was first employed in botany, describing a process during which plant material from two different plants fuses. In medicine, the term refers to any tissue or organ for implantation or transplantation. By analogy, the term has been used widely, namely in political sciences, as a tool to question the mechanisms of State creation and formation in Africa and in Asia (e.g., Bayart 1996; Badie 2000), as well as in geography to analyse the ties between a "grafted body" (most commonly with regard to extractive activities) and the "receiving tissue"; that is, the host economy (Magrin and van Vliet 2005; Magrin 2011).

The resulting dynamic tension between enclave and active linkages of Chinese activities with host societies translates into a state of hybridity and in-betweenness. It raises questions about the nature of Chinese endeavours and their spatial dynamics, both in real and metaphorical terms. In this regard, Foucault's (1984) concept of "heterotopias", which he defined as "places […] outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location" (Foucault 1984: 4), is helpful for interrogating and characterizing the forms of Chinese spatial engagement in various African contexts. Among other principles,

> heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. […] To get in, one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures (Foucault 1984: 7).

Furthermore, they are seen as having "a function in relation to all the space that remains" (Foucault 1984: 8). To some extent, these principles are also applicable to Chinese activities in both case studies. Additionally, Gloria Anzaldúa's interpretation of "liminality" (or, as she put it, "tierra entre medio"), offers a useful lens through which to understand "the transformations [which] occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries" (Anzaldúa 2002: 1). In reference to the South African context, scholars have previously highlighted the "in-betweenness and [the] struggle with notions of belonging" (Park 2010b: 472, 2012) of Chinese migrants, "inhabiting a liminal space between acceptance and rejection" (Accone and Harris 2008: 203). However, in comparison to the predominantly sociological approach of these studies, liminality in this paper is grasped from both a spatial and an economic angle. Accordingly, the notion of hybrid spatiality is used to highlight the ambivalence between the protective envelope and the taking root of both case studies in their respective host environments.

As both Chinese activities are far from static, change is inevitable, which makes it essential to adopt a long-term approach. According to Harvey (2006), "it is impossible to disentangle space from time" and "[one needs] to focus on the relationality of space-time rather than of space in isolation" (Harvey 2006: 123). While it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw any lasting conclusions due to the recent strengthening of Chinese economic foothold in Africa, it is possible to witness on-going processes as they unfold. This is particularly interesting during the early stages where difficulties seem to be more salient and require swift responses. Consequently, analysing the launching phase has been insightful for understanding how attitudes of various Chinese actors evolve over time.

One of the main features shaping current Chinese economic presence in Africa is imputable to its relatively late development compared to other foreign economic actors. While the influx of foreign capital has remained limited and largely concentrated in spatially segregated extractive enclaves, there is a common Western perception that the “useful bits” have – for the most part – already been seized (Ferguson 2006: 38–40). Following this view, Chinese economic agents have been compelled to find – or, rather, to negotiate – a place among a competitive collection of other foreign players. While trying to grasp missed opportunities on the continent (as well as create new ones), Chinese operators, both public and private, are (mostly) entering unknown host environments that are often perceived as risky.

Venturing into Unfamiliar Territory

Regardless of the status of economic operators, three main motivations for investing abroad are to seek resources, foreign markets or efficiency (Dunning and Lundan 2008). The Chinese “turn” to Africa is mainly fuelled by the first two of these motivations. While CNPC’s objective in Chad is to secure continuous access to oil, the shopping malls in Johannesburg aim to maximise their accessibility and visibility in order to reach a large customer base. At the same time, Chinese economic operators must take into account the geographical and political realities of their host environments, which makes it crucial to acknowledge and understand the spatial configuration.

The Chinese oil company in the Chad case study has had to deal with the challenge of operating in a land-locked state. The production zone is situated in an enclosed area with very little pre-existent transport connection to other parts of the country. To allow the kick-off of the project, known as Rônier, the Chinese investors needed to carry out a number of preliminary works. This multi-faceted investment is structured around a 311-kilometre pipeline connecting the oilfields, situated in the Bongor Basin in Eastern-central Chad, to a refinery in Djarmaya, some 40 kilometres north of the capital, N’Djamena (Magrin and Maoundonodji 2012: 125). The cost of the entire project was set at one billion USD, half of which was allocated for developing the oilfields and linked transport infrastructure, and the other half for building the refinery. Construction works of the oil field surface facilities and the pipeline, launched in 2007, were completed in just four years and the valves were opened in March 2011, followed in late June of that year by the inauguration of the connected refinery. The Chinese project represents the third phase of Chad’s oil history, following an episode of failed attempts (from 1973 to 2000) and the carrying out of the Doba project since 2000, located in the Southern part and operated by a consortium led by the major US ExxonMobil (Magrin and Maoundonodji 2012: 121). In comparison to the latter – which had a daily production of about 122,500 barrels in 2010 (Esso 2011: 1) – the scope of the Rônier project remains limited, with 20,000 barrels per day during the first phase and a possible increase to 60,000 barrels during a second phase. As a result, the project has attracted little interest among Western contenders.

Onshore oil investments in Africa tend to be avoided, as they are commonly assimilated with high risk-taking. Most oil companies favour offshore operations, due to the relatively low probability that their activities will be affected by political instability in the host country. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, Chad accommodates two onshore projects, the first of which has been part of a specific setting. The Doba project benefited from substantial support from the World Bank and was predicted to help alleviate poverty and provide social services. Its implementation required a major investment, including a 1,070-kilometre Chad–Cameroon pipeline (Doba-Kribi) to an offshore terminal in the Gulf of Guinea (Magrin and van Vliet 2005). ExxonMobil, a global conglomerate with huge amounts of liquid capital at its disposal, would have been readily able to provide the necessary funds. According to the general manager of Exxon-Chad, it was the initial financial involvement and guarantees provided by the bank that finally convinced the company to take the risk of investing in Chad (Miller 2010). However, following a dispute with the Chadian government over the use of oil revenues, the World Bank withdrew from the project in 2008. Compared to the strategies of a Western multinational, CNPC is usually portrayed as less profit-orientated and less sensitive towards the political evolutions of the host society. As a state-owned enterprise, the company's actions are not only warranted but also partly shaped by the Chinese government. Therefore, CNPC's establishment in Chad is mostly conditioned by two factors: the urgency of getting access to natural resources, and the lack of international experience within a context of late arrival. Since most of the more accessible offshore sites are already occupied and also due to insufficient technical skills in the field of deep-water operations, China's first oil company must include the land sites (even the small-scaled ones) in order to multiply its options for oil investment in Africa.

As for the Johannesburg case, the diversity of the Chinese presence, manifested by several waves of migration (Huynh, Park, and Chen 2010) and sectors of activity, can also be observed via its spatial footprint. Among other components, the agglomeration encloses two Chinatowns, a few neighbourhoods with a noticeable proportion of Chinese residents, firms of variable sizes, as well as numerous distribution centres (Harrison, Moyo, and Yang 2012). The location of the latter is determined, to a certain extent, by the configuration of the post-apartheid city. Johannesburg is often compared to Los Angeles because the two cities have a similar urban sprawl and a dense network of highways and roads. These characteristics, combined with the significant expansion of the city, have increased the use of motorised travel. Furthermore, with rapidly increasing crime rates in the city centre during the mid-1990s, vital businesses fled the downtown CBD, and with it went capital. The majority of these financial and commercial activities have swiftly moved towards the city's northern suburbs, amplifying the already deeply enrooted urban fragmentation and pattern of a highly decentralised city (Guillaume 2001: 300–301). These factors have also played an essential role in the emplacement of most of the Chinese commercial centres, which are largely assimilated with cheap products.

The first one of these malls, *China City*, was opened in 1995 and located close to downtown. A Chinese businessman from Hong Kong purchased an existing building as well as a nearby office tower across from Ellis Park for a low price, converted them into shopping facilities and started renting out retail space to Chinese merchants. After slow beginnings, the site experienced a gradual increase in both customers and profits, persuading the Chinese owner to build an extension in 2004 (Anonymous 1 2010). The success of this first development led to other initiatives at the turn of the century. The lack of available locations and, primarily the negative image of the inner city, persuaded potential developers to move elsewhere. Consequently, most of the more recent and dynamic Chinese wholesale and distribution centres – such as *China Mart*, *China Mall* and *Dragon City* – are located either in Fordsburg (west of downtown) or on the southern outskirts of the city centre in Crown Mines (Dittgen 2011: 9; Harrison, Moyo, and Yang 2012: 919). Today, this vast area, which was once a mining dump, is predominantly dedicated to wholesale trading and well serviced by the road and highway network. Located between two low-income consumer basins (the city centre and the South-Western part of town), this area offers the type of accessibility and visibility that Chinese economic operators have been looking for. Prior to the development of such commercial entities, Chinese merchants were mostly scattered all over town. With hundreds of shops collected together inside one shopping mall, and thanks to links to nearby warehouses, they benefit from economies of scale and can organise themselves more effectively.

With regard to economic and development indicators, Chad and South Africa show very distinctive features. While the former remains at the very bottom of the usual indices of "human development", the latter, portrayed as Africa's powerhouse, is much more attractive, business-wise. Nonetheless, despite distinct development trajectories, both countries are often considered – although in different ways – to be risky investment destinations. On one hand, Chad has experienced recurring phases of civil unrest and political instability (Magrin 2008; Debos 2011). On the other hand, crime (either perceived or real) has led to Johannesburg being commonly considered a dangerous place to work and live (Guillaume 2004). As a result, Chinese activities in both case studies tend to adopt an enclave approach. Overall, this form of engagement aims to simplify their insertion, create favourable conditions on site and regulate their activities' contact with the host environment.

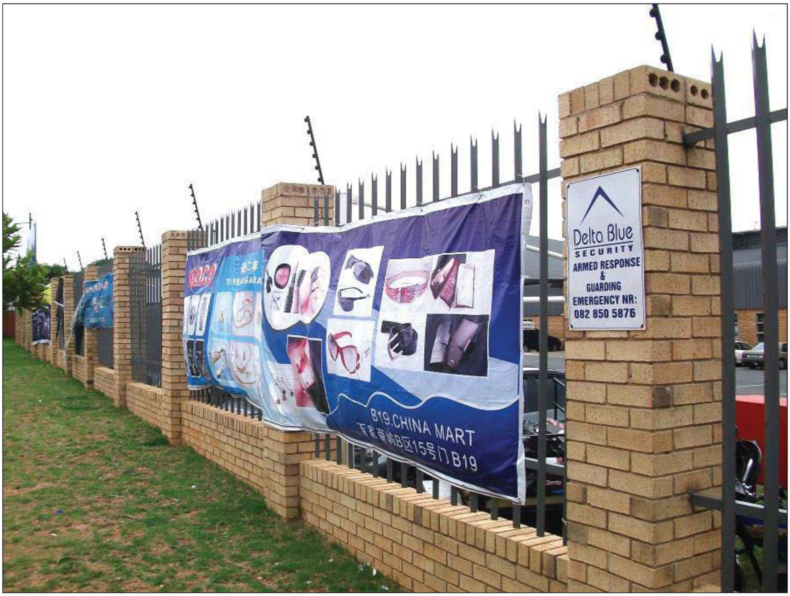
The prevailing combination between oil and secured enclaves in Africa results from the highly strategic nature of this business. For onshore sites, such as in Chad, where it is not possible to entirely isolate operations from the host territory, oil companies aim to "make onshore production as 'offshore-like' as possible" (Ferguson 2006: 203). While extractive companies are "walled [and fenced] off" (Ferguson 2006: 203) from their immediate surroundings, both literally and figuratively (Donner 2011), these companies benefit from a global network and are fully connected with their headquarters, other multinationals, subcontractors, as well as the country's ruling class. If both oil investments in Chad follow a similar pattern, the Chinese project distinguishes itself in certain ways. Compared to the fully private investment of Doba, Rônier includes the Chadian state as a directly involved stakeholder. Although the Chinese have advanced the entire amount, China Exim Bank has granted a loan to the Chadian side to allow and promote its participation in this venture. Via its national oil company Société des hydrocarbures du Tchad (SHT), N'Djamena became a 40 per cent shareholder of the Société de Raffinage de N'Djamena (SRN) (with the remaining 60 per cent going to CNPC), which was created specifically to manage the refinery (Magrin and Maoundonodji 2012: 123). Another difference between the two oil projects stems from the political context. While the launch of the Doba project occurred during an agitated period and was set in what was at the time a sensitive region, the Rônier oil fields are located in a sparsely populated region and have not yet been confronted with issues of local conflict and instability. Nonetheless, due to the domestic-production component, the refinery, which is located near the capital, stands out as a highly strategic infrastructure and could easily be targeted in the case of a conflict.

Figure 1: Entrance Gate of *China Mart*

Source: Romain Dittgen, Johannesburg, November 2010.

In addition to purely business-orientated reasons, the clustering of Chinese merchants inside distribution centres in Johannesburg is also related to security matters. The recent development of Chinese wholesale activities in and around town has undergone several phases. Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, the first wholesalers – from mainland China – operated directly from warehouses situated in industrial zones in Isando, Kempton Park (near the International airport) or Selby (Southern outskirts of town), and were also spread out in the city centre (downtown CBD, Hillbrow). Although lucrative, this individual organisation involved some important risks due to the deterioration of security during the mid-1990s. Frequent armed robberies and high crime rates have gradually driven Chinese merchants to operate from within secured and supervised premises (see Figure 2). Today, most of these malls employ private security firms, are equipped with CCTV cameras, and some of the newer constructions even offer on-site accommodation (Dittgen 2011: 9).

Figure 2: A Chinese Mall Surrounded by Walls and Electrified Fences



Source: Romain Dittgen, Johannesburg, November 2010.

In both case studies, the objective is to make the profitability/risk ratio bearable by using various safety precautions. The establishment of a physical barrier is the most visible part of this desire for separation, and is materialised through the erection of fences, walls and barbed wire, "designed as filters" (Magrin 2011: 231). Furthermore, these various sites are protected by mobile and fixed personnel: mainly military forces in Chad (at least for the refinery) and private security companies in Johannesburg (see Figure 3). Depending on the nature of the activity, objectives diverge and result in different degrees of closure. The "immunization" (Donner 2011) of oil sites aims to protect the site against potential dangers from the "outside", with access being restricted to authorised personnel. The paved road that leads to the refinery in Djarmaya is monitored by the Chadian military, which is positioned in a fixed tent behind the workers (see Figure 4) and controls access to the site. In Johannesburg, the majority of distribution centres are surrounded by walls and fences (often electrified) (see Figure 2). In addition, some of the developments resort to more or less rigorous checks of the passing customers at the entrance/boom gate (see Figure 1). While access control usually comes down to a furtive glance, guards do sometimes check the content of the bags of non-motorised customers. These security measures are not only intended to reassure the Chinese shopkeepers, but also the customer-base of these commercial structures. However, as Goss argued, the perception and image of security are often more important than their actual content (Goss 1993: 27).

Figure 3: A Security Guard at China Discount Shopping Centre

Source: Romain Dittgen, Johannesburg, November 2013.

Figure 4: Workers Leaving the Refinery in Djarmaya

Source: Romain Dittgen, Djarmaya, September 2011.

Nevertheless, the concentration within protected structures is far from being a Chinese singularity. In effect, the spatial configuration of the Rônier project in Chad refers to a standard procedure in the oil industry and the structure of the Chinese malls reflects a frequent setting for doing business in Johannesburg. If there is a novelty, it stems from the function and role of these activities. In effect, despite leaving the impression of a disconnected or "other" space, both case studies are closely related to the domestic economy to which they are linked by multiple flows.

Towards New Spaces of Interaction

In Chad and in Johannesburg, the selected Chinese activities were able to establish themselves in market niches and have, in their own ways, created new economic possibilities in their respective host environments. By expanding the supply of oil in Chad and commercial goods in South Africa, they have turned into central places of interest for various local players and stakeholders.

Despite having produced oil since 2003, the lack of a national processing unit has kept Chad entirely dependent on imports of refined products. The energy burden has played a very important part in limiting the country's development. Due to its land-locked position, inconsistent supply from Nigeria, and management problems in the energy sector, electricity prices in Chad are among the highest in the world. Additionally, beyond N'Djamena, only a handful of cities have regular access to electricity (Magrin and Maoundonodji 2012: 138).

Given this difficult context, China's interest in Chad's oil has been considered as a boon. Because Chinese public extractive projects in Africa tend to be structured as "package deals", Chadian authorities appealed to CNPC's willingness to adopt a more inclusive approach and include the refinery. The centrepiece of the Chinese investment has a maximum production capacity of 40,000 barrels a day, although it has only been processing half this amount (or even less) during the first phase of the project (Moctar 2011; Boukar 2011). The crude supplies a central power plant that produces 40 megawatts (MW). The refinery uses half the amount of the energy to function; the other half goes to Chad's national electricity company. President Idriss Déby publicly forecast Chad's – or at least N'Djamena's – energy independence, but the 20 MW that this power plant provides is far from sufficient to address the country's energy shortage; the capital alone already consumes 100 MW (Magrin 2011: 389). Even so, this investment will help alleviate a saturated network, at least until longer-term solutions are found.

Between the resumption of diplomatic ties in 2006 (from August 1997 to August 2006, N'Djamena officially recognised Taibei) and the beginning of oil production in 2011, China's role in Chad has evolved rapidly. The initial turn to China arose from a short-term tactical imperative in the context of several interlocking conflicts in the greater Chad–Darfur region, including a proxy war between Chad and Sudan (Behrends 2008: 41). Gradually, however, Chinese projects have become more important and central in Déby's political and economic agenda, and are even incorporated in the longer-term politics of his regime. During the presidential campaign leading up to elections in April 2011, Déby portrayed himself as Chad's social architect-in-chief and promised to deliver a range of development projects in order to enhance the legitimacy of his rule (Dittgen and Large 2012: 8). From a Chadian viewpoint, one of the main challenges is to mitigate the negative impacts of being a land-locked (and marginalised) country. In this regard, Chinese investments, above all the Rônier project, are believed to play an important part.

As a neuralgic centre, the refinery in Djarmaya constitutes the bedrock for further activities, suggesting that the oil sector can form the foundation for an expansive, more diverse Chinese business presence. Following CNPC's oil engagement, Chad and China have agreed to develop an industrial park. The project, implemented by a

Chinese company (Soluxe International), will cover an area of 25 square kilometres close to the refinery. This future industrial complex will not only be in charge of transforming several by-products from the refinery (including various plastic goods, polypropylene fibre and natural gas bottling factories), but will also host companies providing a wide range of activities such as solar energy, drinking water and electric bicycles. Although applications to launch activities within the park are not restricted, as of 2011 only Chinese companies had committed to developing operations (Wei 2011).

Additional initiatives can also be seen in the area of transport infrastructure. Having access to cheaper fuel (thanks to the refinery), the Chadian government signed an agreement in April 2011 worth 919 million USD with China CAMC Engineering Co. Ltd (a subsidiary of China National Machinery Industry Corporation) to build a new international airport in Djarmaya. This site, which is expected to accommodate approximately one million passengers a year and will be connected to N'Djamena by highway, was also included in the project. For the Chadian authorities, the objective is to turn N'Djamena into a regional transit hub, similar to those in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and Douala (Cameroon). Simultaneously, another transport project aims to link Cameroon, Chad and Sudan via an extensive rail network. In March 2011, the Chadian minister of transport signed a contract worth 7.5 billion USD with China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) for the construction of a 1344-kilometre-long railway (*Reuters* 2011).

Compared to other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the commercial offer in South Africa – primarily in Johannesburg – is rich and diverse. Nonetheless, South Africa ranks among the most unequal countries, with a wide gap between its first and second economies (Devey, Skinner, and Imraan 2006: 112–113). This dualistic reality is also reflected in the commercial offer, which favoured the setting up of Chinese malls within a neglected gap. With more than half of the country's population living below the poverty line, most commercialised products are still out of reach. Consequently, the opening and gradual development of Chinese malls in the economic capital has helped expand not only the offer but also the accessibility to affordable goods, mostly in clothing and daily consumer products. If the Chinese distribution centres are not the only ethnic-based shopping malls in Johannesburg, the specificity of the Chinese versions comes from the scope of the phenomenon, translating into a rapidly increasing number of centres in recent years and large-scale marketing. Several Chinese shopkeepers have stated that the market demand in South Africa during the mid-1990s was significant, allowing them to trade products at very competitive prices (Anonymous 2 2010). Most of the stores sell clothing, but the range of goods has gradually widened and now includes items such as electronic equipment and furniture. As to the Chinese merchants who are operating inside these commercial establishments, the lion's share of their turnover comes from wholesale. Nonetheless, they often combine bulk and retail sale.

The Chinese distribution centres in Johannesburg are places of intense flows of people and merchandise. The customer base is very diverse, made up not only of end-consumers, but also, and primarily, by different types of economic operators. For most distribution centres, hawkers, brokers, retailers and intermediate wholesalers, aiming to stock up, form the majority of shoppers on weekdays, whereas "leisure shopping" prevails on weekends. Given the lack of sufficient means (or desire) to go directly to China, or in the absence of local contacts, Chinese malls in Johannesburg have become major "resource spaces" (Pliez 2007: 12) for various economic operators. Because these commercial establishments offer a wide range of products at affordable prices, sold in varying quantities, they are at the interface of production units in China and the South African market. At the same time, they foster, albeit indirectly, different dynamics of resale, involving a growing number of secondary actors who operate in different sites and at various scales.

The catalytic effects of the Chinese malls first materialise at the local level. There is a high concentration of commercial activity in the eastern part of the city centre; several sections of streets display more or less permanent stalls selling clothes that are "Made in China". Many of these African micro-retailers (both local and from other countries) have limited means, but have been able to start their small business by directly sourcing from Chinese distribution centres. In parallel, a large number of Ethiopian entrepreneurs have opened shops around Jeppe Street in an area referred to as the "Ethiopian Quarter". Often combining the functions of retailer and wholesaler (similar to the Chinese, but on a smaller scale), these Ethiopians are closely connected with the Chinese distribution centres in terms of supply of their goods (Zack 2014). Other related local dynamics are more dispersed. Throughout Johannesburg, street hawkers tend to sell different objects – ranging from phone chargers and bags, to jewellery, clothes or other small accessories – to drivers who stop at red lights or are stuck in traffic jams along the city's major roads. In addition, a number of shop-owners – South African, African, Chinese and other immigrant groups – purchase their stock from the Chinese malls. They target customers with limited purchasing power and their shops are often scattered in lower or lower-middle income neighbourhoods.

Simultaneously, the customer catchment area of the Chinese distribution centres far exceeds the local scale. Many buyers who shop inside these malls come from other provinces, notably the North West, Limpopo, the Free State and Mpumalanga, as can be seen through the registration plates of the vehicles parked outside. This regional clientele is mainly made up of South African, other African, and Chinese shopkeepers. Two studies, one by Laribee in a small town in the Western Cape and one by Park and Chen in 14 small towns in the Free State, have shown that many Chinese shopkeepers regularly drive up to Johannesburg to get their supplies at these malls (Laribee 2008: 362; Park and Chen 2009: 35). As the main commercial outlet of affordable goods in Southern Africa, the attraction stretches even beyond the national borders. Within the sample of surveyed Chinese merchants, many indicated that a portion (sometimes significant) of their customer base comes from neighbouring countries (Anonymous 2 2010), including Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi (among the most cited), Zambia, Swaziland and Lesotho, as well as (less commonly) the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Seychelles. The commercial hub function of these malls on an international scale also stems from Johannesburg's advantageous geographical position, benefiting from a good road connection with the other countries in the region.

In both case studies, the strong domestic component characterizing the studied activities has introduced a new set of possibilities for additional activities. Nevertheless, it remains extremely difficult to assess their impact and determine whether these Chinese economic "grafts" are sufficiently embedded to function as "turning points" (Abbott 2001: 240–260), enabling structural changes in the host economies. In Johannesburg, the Chinese malls not only provide an indirect access to the Chinese market, but have also generated or at least enhanced cash flow as well as work opportunities for secondary economic operators in a context of limited purchasing power and massive underemployment. Nevertheless, because the malls are (mostly) confined to importing goods from China, they have not yet initiated any fundamental transformations. In Chad, the potential for change seems higher. By pursuing the integration of the Chadian upstream and downstream oil industry, CNPC's engagement has added a completely new dimension. If the Rônier project has given rise to connected investments, past experiences call for caution, as some of the planned – often ambitious – initiatives have never gone beyond the state of announcement. Therefore, much depends on the political context and how the Chadian central authorities, as a stakeholder, will manage the Chinese oil project.

At the same time, the host environment is not a passive recipient. As stated by Giese, "increasing integration within the world system can never be regarded as a one-way street and involves impacting and being impacted simultaneously" (Giese 2013: 3). Consequently, whether in the case of CNPC in Chad or the commercial malls in Johannesburg, the foothold and viability of activities seem to be largely conditioned by their ability to quickly react (and adapt) to challenges within their respective host environments. If the launch of both Chinese ventures has been facilitated by a niche approach, the continuity of operations is far from being guaranteed. The final section will therefore consider the spatial-temporal context and analyse the evolutions of the selected Chinese activities.

Definitely, Maybe

Any economic activity involves a certain degree of risk-taking, which is calculated and included within an overall strategy (Bost 2003: 199). Entering a third country and engaging in a certain sector of activity requires an assessment of the pros and cons, a decision that varies depending on the level of acceptability of the interested parties. To Western players, Africa has for a long time been considered a risky investment destination; however, Chinese economic agents have mostly seen the continent as a market with lower entry barriers. Initially, these Chinese agents thought that either maintaining good links with the host government (for large companies) or fading into the woodwork (for small-scale entrepreneurs) would be sufficient to avert or at least minimise most of the financial and operational risks.

In practice, Chinese actors in Africa have not always grasped the magnitude of challenges that accompany the unfolding of their activities. During a first phase, risk assessment was merely seen as a formality rather than a prerequisite serving as an investment arbitration (*Africa-Asia Confidential* 2013: 1–3). This situation has gradually changed as Chinese actors have become increasingly aware of the need to incorporate this aspect into their management practices to ensure the sustainability of their activities. In effect, the frequent recourse to intermediate and somehow less strategically salient undertakings has also resulted in greater sensitivity in terms of profitability. While the functioning of both of the selected Chinese activities is simultaneously affected by operational, physical and reputational risks, the following focuses only on the operational risks, in order to highlight a gradual shift in priorities or behaviour.

In Chad, one of the main challenges for CNPC has been evolving around a price dispute with the Chadian state. Despite the high expectations placed on the Rônier project, there have been tensions ever since the refinery was inaugurated. Chinese and Chadian protagonists, embodied by the CNPC on one side and Chad's Ministry of Oil and Energy on the other, disagreed about the way this project should be managed and operated. The main impediment came from the difficulty of finding a compromise between a market price, allowing the CNPC to pay off its investment, and a "social" price enabling the Chadian government to carry out its objectives (Dittgen and Large 2012: 16). The latter derives from President Déby's desire to accomplish a set of social promises, one of which consists of providing more affordable petroleum prices. At the opening ceremony, and apparently without any prior consultation (Moctar 2011; Wei 2011), the Chadian president announced a transitional price of refined products for a period of three months. Initially, the Chinese oil company decided to keep a low profile regarding Déby's ostentatious statement of holding one of the cheapest petrol prices in the region. Nonetheless, this temporary price was considered unreasonable, as the refinery had already undergone heavy losses and could not continue to operate normally. Having advanced the entire amount of required funds as a loan, mostly via the China Exim Bank, CNPC obviously aims to recover its investment through the sale of petroleum products. As the deadline approached without any significant progress regarding the establishment of a new price, the Chinese company decided to take action and put the refining process on hold. By the end of September 2011, both sides claimed that negotiations to resolve the dispute were progressing; however, difficulties continued amidst mutual recrimination. Following the pressure caused by this temporary shutdown, new rates were finally introduced in October 2011.

Far from being resolved, this first conflicting episode was followed by further obstacles. The negotiation eventually led to a substantial price increase of petroleum products; for some it almost doubled, much to the surprise of the Chadian population. Local NGOs expressed their regret that CNPC intended to obtain an immediate return on its investment and rapidly maximise its profits, on the grounds that Chad remained a politically unstable country and that recovering funds could be a difficult task. According to civil society, the Chadian government had turned its back on its pledge to provide an affordable source of energy. As one of the few international partners willing to invest extensively in Chad, the risk of falling out with China over a simple price disagreement seemed too great. Consequently, it is even more surprising that Idriss Déby revealed yet another downwards revision of rates in November 2011. This change of mind can be directly related to prior reactions by the Chadian civil society (Cefod 2011). These on-going price debates led to a second shut down of the Djarmaya refinery in January 2012. In the process, Déby fired the ministers in charge of planning and of oil, expelled the Chinese plant's director and announced the reopening of the site for the following month (*Africa-Asia Confidential* 2012: 6).

Apart from highlighting continuous uncertainty regarding the nature of oil management, this extended period of bargaining in Chad has also revealed a less visible side of CNPC. To date, the state-owned company has mostly been seen, understood and portrayed as a direct extension of the Chinese state. As a flagship of the Chinese economy, CNPC enjoys considerable support from the central authorities. This translates into easy access to abundant sources of financing at affordable costs and incentives to finance long-term engagements, which are often unprofitable in the short run (Soares de Oliveira 2008: 98). From the outside, therefore, the latter are often perceived as not attaching the same degree of importance to immediate returns as private OECD firms. Nonetheless, this perspective of public investments, where the quest for immediate economic gains is presented as negligible, can be misleading because it suggests that Chinese firms have limited manoeuvrability, leverage and bargaining power vis-à-vis Beijing. The above-mentioned tariff dispute between the Chadian government and CNPC hints at a gradual change of CNPC's motivations and behavioural practices, torn between the directives of the Chinese government and the objectives of a multinational firm. China's first oil company does not only resolve (or, at least, does not anymore) in terms of securing long-term investments, seen as a strategy for market penetration, but is more and more concerned with economic viability (Moreira 2013). In Chad, this dimension will probably even amplify given the projected evolution of the project. If the Chinese production is initially ascribed to local consumption, oil will ultimately also be exported due to the gradual increase of the number of wells and the limited processing capacity of the refinery. Consequently, the easiest solution to export the surplus of unrefined oil is via the Chad–Cameroon pipeline, which is only used at half its potential capacity of 225,000 barrels per day. An agreement regarding this matter was concluded between Exxon and CNPC, as well with the government of Cameroon in early 2012 (Magrin and van Vliet 2012).

As for Johannesburg, the Chinese malls must adapt to a quickly evolving market in South Africa. If economic challenges are first felt by shopkeepers, operating autonomously and harboured within these different malls, they also have a direct effect on the wider business outlook of each commercial structure. In other words, failure or success has some kind of reciprocal influence. Most of the surveyed Chinese merchants claimed that their profit margins and economic opportunities have been declining in recent years. Since the turn of the century, competition has been increasing through the emergence and densification of different types of trading structures. The market gap, which initially favoured the setting-up of Chinese malls, is shrinking and the commercial offer of affordable goods has gradually diversified over the years. In parallel, customers in South Africa have become more credit-worthy, and consequently also more selective. A Chinese shopkeeper at *China Mart* recalled that, during the early 1990s, his clientele was primarily concerned with acquiring the cheapest products available. He started off selling various types of jeans, ranging from good quality to second choice. Although the price difference between the two was only minimal, customers almost exclusively picked the cheaper ones, which persuaded him to market "reject jeans" for a while (Anonymous 3 2010). This changed quickly, as potential customers have increasingly started looking for branded goods and quality.

Nowadays, various local franchises tend to supplant Chinese distribution centres and the trade share of the latter seems to be decreasing. Direct competition does not necessarily come from big shopping centres, located in the wealthy northern parts of Johannesburg, such as Sandton, Rosebank or Hyde Park. Products marketed in these malls are predominantly directed at the high end of the middle as well as the upper class, and require a certain purchasing power. The Chinese commercial structures are rather challenged by the growing numbers of local retail and wholesale establishments which are mostly targeting a clientele with smaller purses or wallets. In the field of clothing, Chinese traders are rivalled by franchises such as *Edgars* or *Ackermans*, while others, such as *Mr Price*, *Makro* or *Africa Cash & Carry*, compete with the Chinese on a wide range of products. According to various Chinese wholesalers, chain stores can rely on important financial capacities, have several outlets as well as a large commercial platform, and benefit from various forms of expertise (marketing, bookkeeping, fashion designers, etc.).

> They [the Chinese], on the other hand, need to do everything by themselves, without necessarily being an expert in these fields, making it more and more difficult to compete with large franchises (Anonymous 2 2010).

With more or less similar prices between these direct rivals, some end-consumers tend to move away from Chinese shops, often being associated with the informal sector and the bottom end of the market. The reactions of the various groups of economic operators relying on the Chinese malls are mixed and depend on the type of clientele they themselves are targeting. Overall, this has spurred newer developments to become more modern and diversified. They seek to provide a customer-friendly environment by seeking to offer a "complete shopping experience" with a wider range of products and shops, food courts and sometimes even sporting infrastructure (for hire), almost akin to the concept of a South African shopping mall.

In spite of that, the biggest source of competition for the Chinese has originated from within their own group. Following the success of the first Chinese malls and the substantial turnovers made by their tenants, more and more Chinese people have come to Johannesburg to try running, renting or buying a shop. This has prompted the rapid development of additional commercial structures. By the end of 2013, there were 23 Chinese developments across Johannesburg, half of which had opened within the preceding three years. To some extent, the Chinese malls seem to have become a victim of their own success. As commercialised product lines are often similar, some of the surveyed operators expressed their concern about declining profit margins and the risk of possible market saturation (Anonymous 2 2010). This apparent paradox can be explained by two diverging views. On one hand, Johannesburg continues to be seen as a major hub for commercial activities, enabling them to succeed in business and also keeping the demand for additional retail space high. On the other hand, is it also possible that the construction of some of the newer Chinese distribution centres has been done without sufficiently taking into account the realities of the local market. The second scenario would illustrate a growing gap between the interests of promoters, trying to rent out as much retail space as possible, and those of shopkeepers, mainly concerned about making profits through sales.

If challenges loom large in both case studies, the reactions put forth by the Chinese activities suggest a longer-term engagement. What remains uncertain is whether these behavioural changes have directly been caused or have merely been accelerated by risk. As for CNPC, the growing importance devoted to profit is not only related to the Chadian context, but reflects shifting priorities of a large multinational, aiming to establish itself on the global market. In Johannesburg, the modernisation and gradual inclusion of end-consumers in the market strategy of Chinese malls appears to be a direct result of changing market realities in the host economy.

Conclusion

Along with the recent acceleration of Sino-African trade exchanges and political ties, Chinese economic presence in Africa has gained increasing visibility. This expanding foothold not only mirrors the growing internationalisation of the Chinese economy, but also reflects the gradual "reinsertion" of the African continent within transnational dynamics of globalisation. By opting for a geographical lens, which is often neglected or even absent in the field of research about "China–Africa", this paper has specifically focused on the analysis of Chinese spatiality in sub-Saharan Africa. In other words, it has focused on the way in which two contrasting activities – a state-owned oil company in Chad and privately-owned commercial malls in Johannesburg – engage with their respective host environments.

Both case studies are part of a broader landscape of a recent revival of foreign investments in Africa. The title of this paper, "Of Other Spaces?", is borrowed from a paper by Foucault (1984) and suggests that one of the underlying questions is whether this unfolding of Chinese activities is unique and diverges from that of the more "traditional" foreign economic agents. The main argument, outlined throughout this paper, shows that the Chinese spatial foothold is characterised by an ambivalent and hybrid configuration. While there is a tendency towards enclaved investments, similar to other foreign economic agents on the continent, both of the case studies also interact closely with their host environments and have developed into "resource spaces". In comparison to Western engagement, Chinese activities – as seen in both examples – are more directly targeting the domestic market in the receiving economy.

Given their dissimilar product offerings (energy in Chad and retail goods in South Africa), both Chinese undertakings have brought about new possibilities. CNPC is pursuing the upstream and downstream integration of the domestic petroleum industry, adding a completely new dimension to the Chadian economy and providing the possibility for additional (more or less related) investments. On the other hand, the presence of Chinese malls in Johannesburg has generated an increase in business activities and cash flow, attracting secondary economic operators in retail and wholesale at different scales (from local to international). In a different cultural area, Nyíri (2012) has studied the impact of Chinese investments in special economic zones in the China–Lao borderlands and characterised them as "enclaves of improvement". This description also resonates with the functioning of both case studies in Chad and in South Africa, although the spill-over effects in both cases are an unintended consequence of their activities. However, this article is less concerned with connected development opportunities than with the influence of the host environment on the conduct of Chinese activities.

If the combination of a niche approach and a strong domestic component explains most of the initial success, the implementation of these activities has not been without challenges. This is even more valid due to the lower strategic relevance of these projects. Consequently, the circumstances and procedures that have facilitated the Chinese arrival are not necessarily those that guarantee the continuation of operations. In the face of several operational risks – reflected on one side by a price dispute in Chad and on the other by rising levels of competition as well as fears about market saturation in Johannesburg – both Chinese activities have shown signs of gradual changes in behaviour and an ability to adapt and adjust. Altogether, "hybridisation" and "in-betweeness", both from a spatial and economic point of view, seem to be attributes that help increase the viability of both Chinese activities in their respective host environments. Nonetheless, whereas the transformations of the shopping malls in Johannesburg seem to be directly related to the South African context, in the case of CNPC in Chad the operational risks have mainly highlighted an internal shift of the company's priorities. Despite the disparity in motives, the findings reveal that both activities are responsive to evolving realities and continuously renegotiate their position in their respective host economies.

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