

Chinese Products in Ivory Coast: A New Material Culture and New Figures of Success

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In this paper, we will focus on consumers of Chinese products, but also other key players in this revolution of Chinese products in Ivory Coast: Ivorian traders, paying particular attention to the micro-social consequences of the arrival of Chinese products on the daily lives of Ivorian people. To date, work on relations between China and Africa is still struggling to grasp the micro-social consequences of Sino-African trade in African economies. Most of this work perceives Sino-African trade in terms of threats or opportunities for the development of African economies. While attention is generally focused on Chinese imports from Africa, given their geostrategic value, we want to show, in the case of Ivory Coast, the profound transformations induced by imports of Chinese products into Ivorian society. Sino-Ivorian trade has grown rapidly in recent years. While in 2012, exports of Ivorian products by China were 55,515 billion francs CFA (Communauté financière d'Afrique); in 2016, they reached 42,383¹ billion francs CFA. On the other hand, imports from China increased by a whopping 364,103 billion francs CFA in 2012, reaching 885,699 billion francs CFA in 2016. This increase in imports of Chinese products by Ivory Coast corresponds to the arrival of a wide variety of manufactured products in the Ivorian market. For many Ivorians, the presence of these products on the Ivorian market is an expression of good Sino-Ivorian cooperation. In order to appreciate the various dimensions of Chinese products in Ivorian territory, our communication will be part of an interdisciplinary approach and will be based on empirical observations and interviews conducted in Ivory Coast during 2014-2016.

Keywords: China, Ivory Coast, new success figures, Chinese products

Chinese Products in Ivory Coast

Chinese presences in Ivory Coast are not limited to physical (men) and/or moral actors (companies and institutions). It is also visible by the “Made in China”. Thus, the Chinese presences on the territory are not only based on struggles for the control of the natural resources, nor obtaining big contracts. These also contain deep issues of the social transformations that take place in the everyday life of the population in a banal way and very often far from the centers of interest of cooperation between states.

The quantitative and dramatic increase in imports of Chinese products by Ivory Coast shows an equally radical evolution in the variety of imported consumer products as their place in the life of the Ivorian population. Trade between Ivory Coast and China makes technological innovations accessible which appears

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¹ Ivorian customs statistics.

for some people, the only alternative. Generally speaking, Sino-Ivorian exchanges “democratize” access to new ranges of goods, some of which were previously considered as luxury goods. For a better understanding, we have distinguished three types of Chinese products presented on the Ivorian market. First of all, the first group of products is the one we probably talked about the most, since it is taking part of a dynamic of competition with the “old” products of current consumption. Sometimes, derived from local industry or handicrafts, they were also often imported, especially in the West African very little industrialized countries. These are clothes, shoes, loincloths, kitchen utensils, etc.

Then, a second group of products is composed of “old” luxury products. Generally, products imported from Europe whose access was previously limited to a small elite. Here, we talk about vehicles, household appliances (washing machines, refrigerators, etc.), electrical equipment (air conditioning systems, fans, etc.), or electronics (TVs, DVD players, computers, hi-fi systems, and mobile phones). The arrival of these Chinese products largely democratized access to the consumption of these luxury goods markers of social success.

Finally, there are the “new” consumer products, often forgotten by the literature because of their uselessness apparent. These are plastic flowers, paintings, posters, toys, Christmas decorations, or other rather innocuous fashion accessories. These products were almost non-existent in Ivory Coast before being imported from China. They are gradually becoming standard consumer goods.

The presence of three types of products brings about as social consequences, the emergence of a new material culture.

Chinese Products in Ivory Coast: A New Material Culture

Every day, the district of Adjamé is in full effervescence. Customers flock to the stalls and the many commercial establishments lining the market. A Chinese shop, known for its large selection of shoes, jeans, and T-shirt, is always full. All are engaged in a buying frenzy often leading to the acquisition of pairs of new shoes and pants that they would never dream of having elsewhere. Not far away, a small salesman presents on a wooden board, Chinese mobile phones to customers, having already two laptops for the most part, all “Made in China”. These observations, which can be made in any commercial district of Abidjan, testify that the commoditization of the consumption of Chinese products is real.

In Ivory Coast as elsewhere in Africa, Chinese traders adapt themselves to the fashions and seasons of Ivorians. Also have a wide range of choices. Thanks to the knowledge of Chinese companies in copies, local or European products are copied and sold back at half price from those produced by European or local industry. Even if the quality is lower, the prices defy all competition and the consumers love it. Ivorian consumers are well aware of this quality/price ratio. Of course, a pair of pants bought at 1,000 FCFA (Franc de la Communauté financière d’Afrique) will last only a few months at most. However, the Chinese also offer high-end goods for wealthy populations and less sophisticated products for smaller grants. The strategy is to offer to every Ivorian a product “Made in China”.

For the surveyed consumers, the use of these products is perceived as an evidence because of their price. Up to 10 times less expensive, they arouse a certain attraction. Far from being fooled by Chinese products, Ivorian consumers make their choice on all products available on the market, adapting their consumption according to contexts and needs. Mr. Koffi Clément² lives in a village in Daloa, a city located at 450 km from

² Interview conducted on June 12, 2015 in Daloa.

the capital. Aged about 30, draws his income from the motor tricycle trade.

His activity consists of bringing food products out of plantations, whose tracks are hardly accessible to trucks. It is with enthusiasm that he easily remembers the exact day of his acquisition, six months earlier.

“Thanks to this bike tricycle my life has changed, said our passionate for Chinese products”. Koffi explains us: “Chinese three wheeled motorcycle help us to solve our displacement problems, In any case, you can do nothing in our countryside without these motorcycle-tricycles. Already to deal a business in another village you must be mobile. And it gives you money”. In addition, he lets us know that he consumes 100 percent Chinese, “from my laptop to my bike through my clothes, it is made in China”. To the question of duration of these Chinese products, the answer of our interlocutor is well-known to Africans: “We can not usually repair Chinese products when they fail”. The anecdote looks funny and leads to a well-honed chorus: “That’s how it’s done, but how are we going to manage with it? We have no choice!”³. In the capital as in the provinces, the ostentatious staging of Chinese products is our everyday life reality.

This profile shows that consumption of Chinese products exceeds too much the scope of financial captivity. The use made by Koffi of his Chinese three-wheeled motorcycle in specific contexts: works, visits to parents, solves a problem, and gives this property an eminently prestigious scope. The ostentatious staging of Chinese products, especially consumer goods, which is particularly visible among young Ivorians reveals the complexity of a consumption where a multitude of logics are entangled.

By visiting the homes of cities and countryside, we are struck by the disruption of consumption habits of Ivorians by Chinese products. For many Ivorians, the arrival of Chinese products has allowed access to consumer goods (motorcycles, computers, air conditioning units, mobile phones, etc) that they could never buy. The case of Chinese motorcycles (The DJAKATA) helps us understand how Chinese products have democratized the access of prestige products in Côte d’Ivoire. Before the arrival of Chinese motorcycles, the cheapest Japanese motorbikes were sold to a million Francs (1,000,000 FCFA) or 1500 €, today with about 300,000 FCFA, or 450 €; we buy this machine of Chinese manufacture. Before the arrival of the Chinese motorcycles, the access to the motorbike was reserved for a certain category of people; the motorbike was in fact a product of prestige. Since the arrival of the Chinese, to have a motorbike became a necessity for Ivorian consumer. Chinese motorcycles are one of the most visible signs of products “Made in China” in Ivory Coast.

These goods are often criticized for their negative impact on the process of industrialization of the African continent, or for their role in establishment of unfair competition between Chinese and African traders. As a result, work on the consequences of Sino-African trade often obscures the flexibility with which a majority of African businessmen integrate these goods into the daily management of their activities. The massive importation of cheap Chinese products into Côte d’Ivoire is bringing many opportunities for Ivorian entrepreneurs because they enter into the creation of new activities. Also, the growing presence of Chinese products gives new opportunities for many young Ivorians to enter the business. Without the mediation of these Ivorians, this new material culture would not have the same impact in Ivory Coast.

³ Interview conducted on October 10, 2015.

When Chinese Presences Create New Figure of Success

Young unemployed Ivorians benefit from the opportunities offered by the settlement of Chinese in the country. Face to unemployment, Ivorians and other Africans have been engaged on a process of adaptation⁴ (Marfaing Laurence, 2015); that is constantly changing according to the new variables they perceive. Here, these variables are both the Chinese presence as well as that of products from China. Because conditions of access to Chinese products for those who want to be resellers are less constrained than those from Europe. Moreover, in all the markets of the Abidjan capital and the cities of the interior, products “Made in China” are ubiquitous, from clothing to shoes through consumer goods. At the point where the traders who still import from Europe believe that they will not be able to hold very long. As Kakou Eugene⁵ puts it so well: “A few years back, imports of construction materials, tiles, sanitary plumbing and furniture came from European countries. But since 2007, everything comes from China”. Listening to “Made in Europe” traders, the arrival of Chinese products has some consequences on Europeans imports. While these traders are shouting at unfair competition, a good part of the youth benefits from the Chinese presence in the fact that they are in direct contact with both the Chinese small traders and the Chinese products.

In Adjamé, one of the commercial districts of Abidjan, when the Chinese began renting stores to turn them into shops in the 2000 years, young Ivorians looking for jobs or having lost their jobs because of the crisis enjoy the opportunity to become street sellers. Others have chosen to install tables in front of Chinese shops to take advantage of the influx of customers attracted by particularly cheap products. Apart from active full-time resellers, there are seasonal or occasional vendors depending on the festivities or events. Thus, the opening of these Chinese businesses has allowed Ivorians to find a job. Other young people were very ingenious in developing a new form of commerce that could be called “trade on the ground”. In the working-class neighborhoods of Abidjan, “trade on the land” has rapidly developed as an activity in its own right, thanks to the arrival of Chinese products. Struggling the road with motorists and pedestrians, this activity is dependent on the economic crisis and the socio-economic situation. Not having the means to pay a rent for their activity, young people illegally exercise on public roads.

The paradox of this illegal activity is that it allows up to thousands of people to live. The testimony of Fatou Diallo, a young lady practicing the business by “land” is expressive:

I exercise this activity, because I have no choice, I lost my father and my mother, I manage in the small businesses and I have three brothers to school, for lack of a store that I can not pay elsewhere, I am obliged to use the street to sell.⁶

Many Ivorians trade by “land” because they generally have no alternative; because despite the evictions they suffer from the administrative authorities, this trade continues to flourish in all cities of the country, Ivory Coast. Some of them became real traders, street vendors, and shop owners.

We met Koné Moussa⁷, a reseller of Chinese products in his shop in Treichville. His testimony illustrates the social impact of Chinese products on people’s lives. He began as a street vendor of Chinese products, unemployed, he was trying to make a living. He started this business with a capital of 10,000 Francs CFA

⁴ On the process of adaptation of local populations to the opportunities offered by the Chinese presence, we can read with interest the work of Laurence (2015); Alessandro Triulz (Eds.), *Long journeys: Lives and voices of African migrants on the road*, Leiden, Brill Aegis African Studies: 135-163.

⁵ Interview conducted in Abidjan February 16th, 2015.

⁶ Interview conducted in Abidjan June 2015.

⁷ Interview conducted in Abidjan October 2016.

(about 15 €) by buying some products to the Chinese he resold in the Abidjan streets. The shirt bought 1,000 Francs CFA is sold at 1,500 Francs CFA and the shoe purchased 1,000 Francs CFA is sold at 2,000 Francs CFA. As the holiday season approached, he would spend several times a day at the same supplier or at another supplier. Thanks to this rotation, Koné quickly opened a shop. His immediate project is to go sourcing in China to increase his turnover. Like Koné, several Ivorians have seized a business opportunity induced by the presence of Chinese or Chinese products. Moreover, it is thanks to these resellers that Chinese products have become more accessible to the population. In villages, such as remote towns which are poorly served by infrastructure and commerce, they have become indispensable for bringing not only products intended to meet everyday consumption needs, but also to circulate “fashion” cheaply (shoes, clothes, accessories, and cosmetics), thereby influencing the consumption habits of poor local people who, like the middle classes, can also buy new loincloths, new shoes for ceremonies or parties, or simply dress their children for the fall season classes.

These young Ivorian businessmen, excluded from the Ivorian economic system, have become the new figures of success. This reconfiguration relates to the emergence of new entrepreneurs. They are found in both import and resale, as wholesalers or retailers. Some of them pursued dazzling accumulation trajectories, upsetting the existing marketing hierarchies. However, these new entrepreneurs, figures of success “Made in China” seem to have largely participated in injecting into Ivorian society new habits, making ostentatious staging of their wealth consumption practices.

Moreover, in Ivory Coast there, there is a close relationship between the new figures of success and Chinese products. The affirmation of the social status of the individuals passes by an ostentatious object for which these products are frequently used on the one hand and on the other hand in return, the prestige related to these individuals reflects on these Chinese products, thus participating to increase their symbolic value.

By focusing on Chinese products in Ivory Coast, it is possible to identify a number of economic, social, and political processes that reflect the importance of their impact on Ivorian society. The arrival of “Made in China” in Ivory Coast, however, does not mark a revolution in consumption patterns and the emergence of a new material culture. At the economic and political level, Chinese products have sometimes shaken the system that existed until now. Through the Chinese presences, it seems to take place certain transformations of the logic of predation of the resources of the extraversion towards more indirect forms. In many respects, Chinese products are thus at the heart of a subtle struggle between “elites and non-elites”, both for the definition of the cultural codes of modernity (Antoine & Khan, 2014).

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Appendix

Table 1

Ivory Coast Imports From China

	Ivory coast imports from China (value, weight)									
	2012		2013		2014		2015		2016	
Value in millions FCFA	Value	Weight	Value	Weight	Value	Weight	Value	Weight	Value	Weight
Weight in tons										
Foodstuffs	30,326	40,846	35,031	46,636	33,703	47,442	36,257	55,960	46,593	99,760
Dairy products	3	5	47	6	2	1	24	44	5	8
Fresh fruits and vegetables	852	1,682	1,342	2,759	1,185	2,753	1,426	2,573	2,138	2,827
Canned meat	46	49	77	77	58	101	5	1	23	13
Canned fish	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Crabs and shrimps	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fishes	14,669	19,352	17,101	22,332	20,551	26,058	25,411	34,443	30,624	47,850
Semi-milled rice	0	0	3	1	1	1	0	0	6,157	30,240
Soft wheat	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other cereals	16	4	4	2	8	26	169	17	0	0
Sugar	542	1,284	864	2,259	589	1,655	853	3,273	1,153	4,231
Drinks	40	63	0	0	94	193	174	381	10	50
Tobacco	5,835	526	6,722	621	3,614	355	0	0	0	0
Other food products	8,323	17,881	8,872	18,578	7,600	16,302	8,194	15,228	6,482	14,541
Other consumer goods	106,860	78,546	106,932	89,573	141,856	122,162	170,283	153,844	177,225	166,063
Clothing	3,589	2,031	2,882	1,889	3,642	2,482	5,078	4,146	5,205	4,166
Pharmaceutical products	5,065	931	4,797	515	6,545	1,196	6,437	1,146	8,188	1,138
Bookstore	540	294	1,146	357	434	411	822	337	674	355
Plastics	10,455	8,180	12,091	11,859	13,854	17,052	23,599	26,57	19,078	26,073
Rubber	13,601	7,950	12,340	7,770	12,900	9,727	13,180	10,368	12,373	11,622
Cars	2,177	497	1,933	515	2,162	395	1,845	413	2,080	404
Personal effects	190	81	38	36	35	55	0	0	0	0
Other consumer goods	71,243	58,583	71,706	66,631	102,284	90,844	119,322	111,077	129,628	122,304
Intermediate goods	86,642	200,511	123,719	543,204	134,532	454,347	203,950	459,348	210,632	657,432
Crude oil	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oil products	222	309	360	466	354	449	724	315	640	686
Chemical products	20,355	35,095	20,463	36,719	22,718	52,203	21,651	43,085	25,995	52,207
Cotton	9,881	8,747	11,372	7,338	8,108	2,980	8,539	3,300	8,411	3,056
Other textile fibers	8,129	7,751	8,483	8,481	9,037	9,865	10,129	10,566	10,433	11,852
Iron, cast iron, steel and articles	25,248	40,782	46,735	102,551	55,714	135,835	115,103	233,704	122,198	335,493
Metal products	4,002	3,495	5,622	4,165	5,281	4,438	17,878	8,304	12,195	6,536
Ceram. Glass and stone	10,272	89,771	11,902	95,474	13,062	108,236	13,692	112,446	14,610	143,480
Fertilizer	777	3,700	3,697	21,439	6,499	33,988	7,118	33,314	4,189	19,285
Clinker	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	1,777	68,483
Other building materials	516	2,981	8,475	258,181	5,039	94,965	620	4,207	964	5,176
Paper and cardboard	5,361	6,802	4,851	7,331	6,660	9,882	5,705	7,785	5,698	7,646
Other internal goods.	1,879	1,078	1,758	1,055	2,059	1,505	2,792	2,322	3,522	3,533
Capital goods	140,275	177,767	447,415	163,032	175,084	66,593	306,882	91,887	451,249	100,840
Machinery	39,633	16,298	58,845	24,044	62,724	24,158	85,262	29,603	100,308	33,626
Electrical equipment	72,041	16,634	72,372	16,007	70,720	19,597	80,318	22,852	159,702	23,958

Road transport equipment	24,506	142,867	30,989	82,340	36,132	20,528	54,925	24,449	45,258	19,411
Other Transport Equipment	8	9	280,912	38,105	175	75	78,941	12,879	128,999	21,217
Precision instrument	3,858	1,756	3,871	2 041	4,533	1,675	6,694	1,747	16,503	2,086
Other equipments.	228	203	426	496	801	560	742	358	479	541
Total importation	364,103	497,670	713,097	842,445	485,174	690,543	717,371	761,039	885,699	1,024,096

Source: Ministry of Commerce of Craft and SME (Small and medium-sized enterprise) Promotion and Customs Statistics of Côte d'Ivoire.

Table 2

Ivory Coast exports to China

Ivory Coast exports to China (in value, weight)										
	2012		2013		2014		2015		2016	
Value in millions FCFA	Value	Weight	Value	Weight	Value	Weight	Value	Weight	Value	Weight
Weight in tons										
Agriculture, breeding, fishing	53	46	14	25	2	2	2,585	1,902	4,426	4,595
Cereals	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
starchy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Breeding and hunting	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Peach	53	46	14	25	2	2	2,585	1,902	4,426	4,595
Other fruits	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Industrial and export agriculture	48,600	44,319	47,635	49,661	40,773	43,653	44,229	55,549	29,487	35,297
Green coffee	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cocoa beans	5,410	4,805	6,883	6,052	12,106	9,136	4,470	2,903	8,610	5,036
Cola	0	0	1	18	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cashew nut	635	1,561	295	796	538	1,258	374	692	227	310
Fresh pineapple	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Banana	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mass cotton	33,367	32,267	33,601	36,876	13,627	15,011	12,652	16,464	1,980	2,394
Oleaginous	3	29	7	31	60	175	29	98	41	137
Oilseed seeds	0	0	3	63	130	432	158	310	8	25
Rubber	9,184	5,657	6,844	5,825	14,312	17,640	26,547	35,082	18,622	27,395
Sugar	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tobacco	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wood	5,110	51,969	11,452	150,005	13,926	81,399	995	6,089	638	3,372
Log wood	3,829	45,212	10,181	143,477	130	1,519	0	0	1	16
Transformed wood	1,280	6,757	1,271	6,528	13,795	79,881	995	6,089	637	3,356
Preserves and food preparation	616	413	423	1,054	742	1,396	1,301	574	1,811	836
Processed cocoa	616	413	309	187	725	520	1,300	574	1,811	836
Processed coffee	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Canned tuna	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Canned pineapple	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pineapple juice	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Smoked fish	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
sweet things	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Palm oil	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Palm kernel oil	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other preserves and preparations	0	0	113	867	17	876	0	0	0	0

Others products	1,137	10,424	15,792	193,405	15,393	281,127	7,135	145,073	6,022	298,033
Whose :										
Fertilizer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Essential oils	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Chemical Miscellaneous	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Plastics	25	247	14	138	30	321	6	142	3	149
Oil products	0	0	81	209	14	26	0	0	0	0
Cement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Paper and cardboard	0	0	0	0	16	85	0	0	0	0
Various	1,112	10,177	15,697	193,058	15,334	280,695	7,129	144,931	6,019	297,884
Total export	55,515	107,170	75,316	394,151	70,836	407,577	56,245	209,187	42,383	342,133

Source: Ministry of Commerce of Craft and SME Promotion and Customs Statistics of Côte d'Ivoire.