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## Unequal Extractions

### Reconceptualizing the Chinese Miner in Ghana

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## **Extractions inégales : Reconceptualiser le mineur chinois au Ghana**

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### *Résumé*

*Au cours de la dernière décennie, la migration chinoise vers l'Afrique a rapidement augmenté au fil de l'engagement économique croissant de la Chine avec le continent. L'arrivée de nouvelles formes d'industrie chinoise, d'aide, de commerce et d'exploration des ressources a été transformatrice, provoquant des débats à savoir si la présence chinoise en Afrique serait mieux décrite comme néo-colonialiste ou comme une nouvelle forme de développement bénéfique. L'un des exemples les plus dramatiques de migration chinoise vers un pays africain (et de participation économique à ce pays) est la récente ruée vers l'or au Ghana. Commencée au milieu des années 2000 avec l'arrivée de dizaines de milliers de travailleurs miniers œuvrant dans l'extraction aurifère à petite échelle venus d'un seul comté pauvre et rural en Chine, elle se poursuit à ce jour mais les travailleurs sont moins nombreux. Cet article présente un examen critique de la façon dont les mineurs chinois ont été dépeints, dans les discours publics, médiatiques et académiques, comme un groupe homogène, qui bénéficie de l'extraction de l'or ghanéen et qui agit sur son environnement de manière généralement uniforme. Nous appuyant sur des recherches de terrain approfondies Ghana et en Chine, nous soutenons que cette représentation omet de souligner la diversité des expériences des mineurs et la segmentation qui existe au sein du groupe, composé aussi bien de gagnants que de perdants.*

# Unequal Extractions: Reconceptualizing the Chinese Miner in Ghana

Nicholas Loubere, Jixia Lu, Gordon Crawford, Gabriel Botchwey<sup>1</sup>

## *Abstract*

*Over the past decade, Chinese migration to Africa has increased rapidly alongside the expansion of Chinese economic engagement with the continent. The entrance of new forms of Chinese industry, aid, commerce and resource exploration has been transformative, prompting debates over whether China in Africa is better described as neo-colonialism or a new form of beneficial developmentalism. One of the most dramatic examples of Chinese migration to—and economic engagement with—an African country is the recent gold rush in Ghana, which started in the mid-2000s with the rapid influx of tens of thousands of Chinese small-scale gold miners from a single poor rural county in China, and continues to this day, albeit on a smaller scale. This paper presents a critical examination of how the Chinese miners have been depicted in public, media and academic discourses as a homogenous group, both benefiting from Ghanaian gold extraction and impacting their surroundings in generally uniform ways. Drawing on in-depth fieldwork in both Ghana and China, we argue that this portrayal neglects to highlight the differentiated experiences of the miners and the segmentation that exists within the miner group, which consists of both winners and losers.*

## **Introduction**

In recent years China's expanded economic engagement with Africa has provoked widespread debate over the nature of Chinese investment in, and migration to, the continent—with some depicting China as a new colonizer and others arguing that China represents a new beneficial developmental model (Mohan, 2008). The majority of research and public discourse has focused on China's top-down investment by the government and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in Africa, notably “infrastructure-for-resource loans” (Alden and Alves, 2015: 250), along with the labour migration of Chinese nationals associated with these projects. In these discussions China

is frequently depicted monolithically as a new colonial power exploiting African resources and feeding into corruption, much like Western countries and companies before it (Kolstad and Wiig, 2011; Michel, 2009; Hess and Aidoo, 2014). The Chinese government's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—aimed at creating trade and investment linkages across the globe—has increasingly provoked consternation in some quarters, with observers describing some projects as “debt trap diplomacy” (Kuo and Kommenda, 2018; Fernholz, 2018). There has been a particularly vigorous critique of China's role in the extractive industries, such as mining, with accusations that China is instigating a race to the bottom in labour standards (Dynamic, 2017).

Nevertheless, while the discourse of China in Africa is routinely framed in negative terms, there exist some counter narratives. Academic research in particular has sought to nuance and historicize claims of neo-colonialism, showing how depictions of Chinese engagement in Africa are racialized (Yan and Sautman, 2013; Sautman and Yan, 2016) and examining how Chinese capital operates in fundamentally different ways to that of Western governments and international corporations (Lee, 2017). Both the Chinese and African governments have also pushed back against the characterization of China in Africa as neo-colonial, framing the relationship as a win-win in the language of “south-south cooperation” (Lu, 2017; GhanaWeb, 2018; Alden and Large, 2011), and researchers have pointed to the ways in which Chinese engagement in Africa has, at times, promoted different forms of beneficial development (Brautigam, 2009; Monson, 2009).

While these debates paint a bifurcated picture of China's involvement in African countries, they also point to limitations in the dominant focus on top-down and coordinated action. In reality, Chinese engagement in Africa goes far beyond just government and SOE investments, with small uncoordinated projects and fragmented patterns of migration abounding, resulting in complicated and often contradictory manifestations of China in Africa (French, 2014). From petty entrepreneurs to farmers, from established migrant communities to new entrants, Chinese irregular migration to the continent is both increasing and increasingly complex—with migrants frequently having little or no connection to the Chinese state or even to each other (Xiao, 2015; Cook et al., 2016; Lam, 2015).

One of the most striking instances of such Chinese engagement in Africa has come in the form of the bottom-up Chinese migration to undertake artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), with the most dramatic example being the rush into Ghana's informal alluvial gold mining sector. Since the mid-2000s, tens of thousands of Chinese citizens from a single rural poverty-stricken county in the country's southern Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region have been migrating to Ghana in order to engage in ASM. The Chinese miners rented farmland in rural areas, often near rivers, and imported their own machinery and mining equipment, including for river dredging, which is illegal in Ghana. This allowed them to rapidly scale-up the extraction of alluvial gold (Loubere and Crawford, 2017). This mass migration event has created new forms of cooperation between Chinese miners and local Ghanaians, but has also resulted in substantial environmental degradation and some violent conflict. Moreover, foreign involvement in small-scale mining is formally illegal. In mid-2013 the Ghanaian government initiated a nation-wide crackdown on illegal mining activities, implemented by a military task force, deporting nearly 5,000 Chinese miners (Botchwey et al., 2019). This was followed in April 2017 by a complete moratorium on ASM in the country for locals and foreigners alike, which continued until the ban was lifted on 17 December 2018 (Nyavor, 2018). This was justified by the Ghanaian government mainly on environmental grounds, due to perceived degradation of land and water bodies by intensified ASM.

The Chinese presence in the Ghanaian ASM sector has been widely covered in the domestic and international media. There is also a small but growing body of academic literature examining this event and its outcomes. However, with some notable exceptions, the vast majority of the political, media and academic discourses surrounding the event have been framed in the same dichotomous terms as the wider China-in-Africa debate discussed above. The Chinese gold rush has been overwhelmingly depicted in a negative light, and the Chinese miners have been depicted as a homogenous and monolithic group having a uniform impact on the local society, economy and environment in Ghana (see Depiction of Chinese Miners below).

This paper questions the validity of this sweeping depiction of the gold rush event and the homogenization of the Chinese miners, including their motivations, experiences and impacts. Drawing on

in-depth fieldwork in mining sites in Ghana and Shanglin County in China, where the majority of miners are from and itself a gold mining area, this paper seeks to bring the voices of those involved in, and impacted by, Chinese involvement in ASM in Ghana to the fore. It is the first study to focus primarily on the narratives of the Chinese miners and their families in China, based on detailed fieldwork rather than secondary sources. Fieldwork was conducted in Shanglin County in 2017 and 2018, utilizing the Systematic and Reflexive Interviewing and Reporting (SRIR) Method, alongside more traditional participant observation and the collection of documentary data (Loubere, 2017). Fieldwork also took place in Ghana in mid-2014 in Dunkwa-on-Offin in the Central Region, a main location of Chinese involvement, with some follow-up research undertaken in mid-2018. Fieldwork in both places took an inherently grounded approach to data collection, allowing themes to emerge organically and adopting an open disposition permitting new information to guide the research direction (Chambers and Loubere, 2017). The information presented below draws on the data collected during this fieldwork. Specific interviews are cited only when direct quotations are used.

Rather than adopting a theoretical position or clearly defining a research question at the outset, we instead aimed to give voice to the miners and other local actors, allowing them to represent their own experiences in their own ways. This rich data set challenges the prevalent depiction of the homogenous miner. Instead, what emerges is a picture of the Chinese miners as being highly segmented. They have had diverse experiences and outcomes, but they have also impacted the people and places in Ghana in different ways. Our fieldwork nuances the oft-told story of the successful Chinese miner extracting wealth from Ghana to send back to China and instead paints a picture of a heavily textured and segmented labour landscape marked by instances of audacious wealth creation on the one hand, and widening inequalities and new forms of precarious existence on the other, alongside the ever-present spectre of environmental destruction.

### **Depictions of the Chinese Miners**

The ongoing Chinese gold rush in Ghana is a dramatic event characterized by the movement of large numbers of people and resources, as well as the transformation of physical, political

and economic landscapes. It is, therefore, no surprise that it has sparked heated discussions, both in Ghana and elsewhere. However, as we outline below, the public, media and academic discourses surrounding the event have been largely two-dimensional in their depiction of the miners, framing them as a monolithic group extracting resources at the expense of locals and having a uniformly negative impact on the country and people. This tends to mirror the binary framing of the wider debate over the implications of China's increased presence on the African continent, discussed above.

The homogenous framing of the Chinese miners can be clearly seen in media representations, which have consistently "othered" the miners, depicting them as a threatening uniform mass. Analyzing the discourse of 87 articles about the gold rush published on the news website Modern Ghana, Abid et al. found that the Chinese are depicted "as a critical menace that needs to be eradicated from Ghana... [and] that the Chinese miners are aggregated and presented as a horde rather than being individualised" (Abid, Manan and Amir, 2013: 46). These kinds of depictions have been present across the domestic media landscape. For instance, on 15 March 2013 the Graphic Online, one of the most widely read news websites in the country, published an editorial on illegal mining calling on the government to act: "The Daily Graphic calls on the government to deal decisively with lawless elements in the country, so that law-abiding citizens can operate in a peaceful environment." The editorial goes on to frame foreign miners, notably from China, as an invasion force of wealthy powerful people: "As in the retail trade, the foreigners have virtually taken over small-scale mining in the country. These groups of people come into businesses reserved for Ghanaians in full vim because of their economic power and in no time they take over the entire sector" (Frimpong, 2013).

International reporting has also tended to reproduce discourses that homogenize the Chinese miners and their impacts on local areas and people. Frequently, miners are depicted as uniformly becoming enriched through (illicitly) extracting wealth from Ghana. International news stories on the gold rush invariably have a passage about the tremendous wealth of the miners. For instance, in the South China Morning Post it was reported that: "Villagers in Shanglin love to repeat tales of the fortunes made in Ghana: one miner returned home with a gold bar as a gift for a relative; another ordered a Ferrari over the phone from Hong Kong airport while transferring

to a flight home” (He, 2013); while the International Business Times wrote: “In 2005, there was talk of a man from Shanglin who took five million yuan (\$813,535) to Ghana and turned it into 100 million yuan (\$16.27 million) in three years. As the story spread, hordes of people rushed to Ghana” (Song, 2013). In these reports the miners become rushing hordes. They represent a “mass exodus” that is streaming into Ghana uncontrollably (Quartey, 2013). The frequently used moniker of the “Shanglin Gang” also serves to paper over the individuality and autonomy of the miners, implicitly framing them as agentless foot soldiers in a criminal conspiracy. This ties into other common representations of the miners as a corrupting influence:

*Chinese miners have also been accused of worsening corruption, with several high-profile cases of police and immigration officials being involved in extortion and bribe-taking linked to illegal Chinese mining having been exposed recently (He, 2013);*

and a national security threat:

*In West Africa, security threats have linkages: illegal mining can lead to arms trafficking and other kinds of trafficking (drugs, fake medicine, etc.). Not acting on illegal mining... could undermine the entire country's security (Kane, 2013).*

All in all, media coverage domestically and internationally has reflected and reinforced the homogenizing government discourse, depicting the Chinese miners

*as an out-group or “the other”, perpetuating stereotypes of invaders, offenders, and perpetrators... Such broad-sweeping stereotyping seemed to pursue one overarching goal—the devaluation of foreign miners that infringed on local livelihoods and resources, justifying the actions of an authoritative government under pressure (Tschakert, 2016: 125).*

This reflects the wider popular trope, prevalent in

reporting on China in Africa, of “a monolithic Chinese dragon in an unvariegated African bush stripped of historical and political content” (Large, 2008: 46).

While more nuanced and less explicit in its characterizations, the small but growing body of academic literature also tends to implicitly frame the miners and their impacts as relatively uniform. This is primarily because the existing research mainly focuses on the gold rush from the Ghanaian perspective. This work has provided valuable insights into the motivations and perspectives of Ghanaian actors (Botchwey and Crawford, 2018; Hausermann and Ferring, 2018; Luning and Pijpers, 2018); the varied impacts that the event has had on different segments of Ghanaian society, politics and economy (Crawford and Botchwey, 2018; Aryee, 2015; Crawford et al., 2015; Crawford and Botchwey, 2016); technological transformation and implications for the natural environment (Rodríguez and Oevelen, 2018; CSIR - Water Research Institute, 2013); and the inherent informality of the Ghanaian ASM sector that has enabled Chinese involvement (Hilson, Hilson and Adu-Darko, 2014). Nevertheless, as the primary focus of these studies is not the Chinese miners themselves, they necessarily fail to fully represent the diversity within the miner group. The only study that focuses explicitly on the Chinese actors relies entirely on secondary sources in English—an approach that has obvious limitations (Hess and Aidoo, 2016). Additionally, there are also examples of academic literature that explicitly feeds into the demonization of the Chinese miners, calling them “foreign invaders” and attempting to identify gaps in policies aimed at keeping foreigners out of the ASM sector (Armah et al., 2013). In contrast, an article in the Ghana Mining Journal notes: “There is enormous bad press about the migrant miners, thus, objective literature about their impact on the host nation is limited and insufficient” (Agyei, 2016: 21).

The above analysis does not mean to suggest that the examples of negative public, media and academic discourses are entirely incorrect, or that the Chinese miners are victims of a concerted conspiracy to defame them. The problems that have been identified with the gold rush, particularly with regard to violence, environmental degradation and political corruption are undoubtedly real, as we have ourselves written elsewhere (Botchwey et al., 2019; Crawford and Botchwey, 2016). Moreover, there have been notable exceptions to the homogenizing depictions of the Chinese miners in

the academic literature—for instance, the media discourse analysis of Abid et al. and their conclusion that the miners are vilified (Abid, Manan, and Amir, 2013), and Petra Tschakert’s findings that the miners have been “rendered both invisible and wholly othered... [and] produced as less-than-human mining subjects” (Tschakert, 2016: 123). And some recent studies have called for more research analyzing the patterns of segmentation that characterize the miners in order to better understand them as a complex set of differentiated actors (see, for example, Botchwey et al., 2019; Loubere and Crawford, 2017).

It is important to disentangle the miners and present their own experiences and perspectives, especially as the Ghanaian gold rush is, in many ways, emblematic of much Chinese engagement with Africa. As mentioned in the introduction, recent research on Chinese migration to Africa has noted that, far from being a primarily top-down and coordinated affair, the Chinese presence in the continent is increasingly characterized by bottom-up entrepreneurial activity with little or no connection to the Chinese government (Kuang, 2008; Park, 2009; Cardenal and Araujo, 2014; French, 2014; Cook et al., 2016; Gu, 2011; Mung, 2008; Hess and Aidoo, 2014). Studies have also shown that, despite their depiction as a monolithic mass, entrepreneurial Chinese migrants are rarely unified. Instead, migrants frequently create groups that compete with each other and form relationships with local actors. In this sense, Chinese migrants become integrated into the social, economic and political fabric of their destinations (Lam, 2015). For this reason, the popular and media discourse of demonization does not actually indicate the existence of a homogenous anti-Chinese sentiment, as local perspectives of the Chinese in Africa are varied, complex and highly dependent on the types of interactions and relationships formed in different contexts (Haugen and Carling, 2005; Sautman and Yan, 2009; Wang and Elliot, 2014).

Our fieldwork in both Ghana and China reinforces the findings in this emerging literature pointing to the complex and fragmented nature of irregular Chinese migration to Africa. We found that the Chinese miners are far from a homogenous group, despite the fact that the vast majority of them originated from just three neighbouring townships in a single county. In the following sections we will outline the differentiated receptions and perceptions of the miners, the ways in which they have been socioeconomically

segmented and the varied impacts that they have had on the localities and people that they have engaged with.

### **Divergent Reception and Perceptions**

While popular media and academic discourses tend to depict the Ghanaian reception to the Chinese miners in broadly negative terms, in reality the miners have been perceived in very different ways by local groups and individuals. Mirroring findings in other African countries (Esteban, 2010), our research found that elites and others able to capitalize on the migrants have more accommodating views, whereas those local people entering into direct competition with—or negatively impacted by—the miners tend to hold more negative views.

Those Ghanaians who have benefited from the presence of the Chinese miners fall into two distinct categories, with very different motivations, attitudes and social positions. The first comprises Ghanaian small-scale miners and local traders whose livelihoods have benefited from the Chinese presence. The second group are those Ghanaian officials in gatekeeper roles who have been able to engage in rent-seeking behaviour. We look at the responses of these two groups in turn.

Many Ghanaian artisanal miners—both registered and unregistered—collaborated closely with groups of Chinese miners, benefiting from the capital, equipment and know-how of the Shanglin miners. In particular the miners from Shanglin introduced specialist equipment from China—trommels (wash plants), crushing machines (known as *changfa*) and water platforms for river dredging—as well heavy machinery (excavators and bulldozers), enabling an intensification of production. According to our interviews, a common practice by licensed Ghanaian miners was to form a partnership with Chinese miners, to whom they (unlawfully) sub-let their concessions, taking between 10 and 15 per cent of the value of the gold produced, while the Chinese who financed and undertook the mining activities took 85–90 per cent. Due to mechanized production, this relatively small percentage often amounted to much higher incomes than ever imaginable before—we were told that a 15 per cent stake amounted to an income of 15,000 to 25,000 Ghanaian cedis per week (approximately USD 6,000 to USD 10,000 per week in 2013). The gold rush associated with the incoming Chinese miners also led to a boom in local trade, with soaring demand for fuel, food

items and rental accommodation. Business was commonly described as “booming” in Dunkwa. Indeed, our research revealed that local traders had been upset when the government’s task force chased away the Chinese miners, with the consequent decline in sales. This confirmed the study by Liu (2013), who undertook interviews in Dunkwa at the time of the task force operations in June 2013. Local respondents reported loss of employment, for instance as cooks or laundry women at mining sites, while local market women stated that “we want them [the Chinese miners] to come back” (Liu, 2013: 14).

The second group of beneficiaries comprise both traditional authorities and state officials. A range of respondents noted that local chiefs sold land to the incoming miners (often dispossessing marginal local farmers) for large sums, despite not having the right to sell customary land. At times this practice has caused intra-community strife, with community members accusing chiefs of taking money from the Chinese miners, thus allowing their farms to be destroyed in illegal mining operations, but not sharing any of the money with community members as compensation. There is also evidence from our interviews with both Ghanaian and Chinese respondents that the Chinese miners have had the covert and illicit support of people throughout the government bureaucracy for purposes of private gain, effectively enabling and protecting the Chinese miners, despite the fact that their involvement in small-scale mining is illegal. It is reported that this extended from immigration officials providing visas and bogus work permits for a fee, all the way to the highest levels of government, including state-level ministers and members of parliament, with the latter requiring funds for their election campaigns. While such extortion and corruption is obviously difficult to verify, some Ghanaian respondents noted that the Chinese miners were above the law due to high-level connections. One Ghanaian small-scale miner in Upper Denkyira East Municipality said: “People here in Dunkwa can never arrest Chinese people as they have top guys supporting them; they just need to make a phone call.” This view was corroborated by the personal experience of one municipal administration official that the Chinese miners had connections with “big shots in government”, stating that he had personally been foiled in attempts to formally register Chinese businesses related to mining for local taxation purposes, being threatened by people at higher levels of government to “lay off the Chinese”.

Such evidence indicates how the (illicit) Chinese mining operations were facilitated and indeed protected by both traditional and state authorities. However, there were also pockets of officialdom, for instance the above-mentioned municipal administration official, that were unhappy with the situation and saw the Chinese miners as feeding into, and exacerbating, political corruption in the country. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has also been critical of this state of affairs and its adverse consequences, with a senior official speaking of the “culture of impunity” that has led to environmental destruction, and another noting that it was necessary to “make the law bite”. This echoes statements made by Charles Wereko, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources, in 2013: “Illegal mining in Ghana has assumed alarming proportions and has got to the point where it is threatening the survival of our water bodies” (Kaiman and Hirsch, 2013). Additionally, local people—particularly local miners, farmers and more marginalized groups—often hold negative views of the influx of Chinese miners. For instance, one local gold trader was quoted in the media saying that the mining “doesn’t help us at all... Now our drinking water is all polluted, the farms [are] all gone and we haven’t had any benefit from that” (Hirsch, 2013).

At the same time, the Chinese miners themselves have divergent views on how they have been received in Ghana and their positions within the Ghanaian socioeconomic landscape. In general, the returned Chinese miners we interviewed in Shanglin County spoke about “local people” (i.e., most Ghanaians they interacted with at the mining sites) in positive—albeit racialized—terms. Locals were described as “overall good”, but also “simple, underdeveloped and not as hard-working as the Chinese”. Some miners also reported good relationships with the locals they employed, saying things like: “Regular local people welcome us miners from Shanglin because we employ them and they have a chance to earn a salary. This salary is much higher than they would earn otherwise.”

However, other returned miners described continuous conflict with local people, necessitating the purchase of guns and the constant paying out of bribes to different groups to avoid being violently robbed. Particularly those Shanglin miners who owned machinery—and were thus the investors rather than labourers—complained about being targeted by corrupt police and officials, and needing to keep a certain amount of cash on hand to quickly pay

bribes when confronted. This confirms the picture of extortion by corrupt Ghanaian officials noted above.

The miners also brought an internalized marginal identity with them from Shanglin to Ghana. In China, the Shanglin miners are marginalized both due to their ruralness (and being from a poor part of the country) and because of their ethnicity—the miners are Zhuang (rather than the majority Han), a minority group mainly found in the south and southwest provinces. As such, in the popular imagination the Shanglin miners represent a “backward” existence compared to those living in the cosmopolitan urban centres, such as Shanghai and Beijing. Frequently the miners in Shanglin have internalized such perceptions, with returned miners referring to themselves as “low quality” (*suzhi di*). Indeed, one miner said that problems encountered by the Shanglin miners in Ghana were due to their “uncivilized” behaviour and “not knowing how to behave, since they had no training on how to act and did not care about their behaviour or reputation”. In this way, the miners at times reproduced imagined socioeconomic hierarchies, attributing their tribulations in Ghana to their own “underdeveloped” nature.

### **Success and Failure**

As discussed above, in popular discourse the Chinese miners have been depicted as uniformly striking it rich—extracting Ghanaian resources and returning to Shanglin with unimaginable wealth. However, our research has found that the Chinese miners experience a wide range of outcomes, with some becoming extremely wealthy, while others did not do well. In this way, the Chinese gold rush in Ghana follows established boom/bust, feast/famine patterns common to gold rushes historically. At the same time, the depiction of the Chinese miners as an organized, homogenous group benefiting uniformly at the expense of local populations is one that parallels historical depictions of Chinese miners in gold rushes from the United States to Australia and New Zealand—where the Chinese were “objects of Euro-American racism and xenophobia”, ultimately resulting in policies excluding Chinese citizens from these countries (Ngai, 2015: 1083).

The Chinese miners are also frequently depicted in the media as successful, jubilant and even carefree. They are returning home with great wealth, smuggling gold bars in their luggage or ordering expensive cars from the airport (He, 2013). This obscures

the fact that the search for gold is a stressful and dangerous activity. Returned miners we interviewed spoke of the hardships and risks involved in mining. Going to Ghana necessitates long (often unpredictably so) periods away from home and family, and large expenses to pay for travel and equipment (often on credit). This results in substantial pressure for many miners, both personally and economically. Indeed, we spoke with the family of a miner who had been in hiding in Ghana since one of the crackdowns, and he had never even met his nearly two-year-old daughter. However, many miners had little choice but to leave Shanglin to earn a livelihood. Most households in the county have very small plots of farmland, making it impossible to survive by agricultural activity alone. There is some seasonal wage labour available on large-scale farms paying approximately RMB 70 (USD 10.50) per day, but this is also not enough to support a family. As such, households that do not have at least one member migrating out to earn money are extremely poor. While some Shanglin residents opt to do less risky migrant work in factories domestically, mining for gold has the potential to be much more lucrative and is the established mode of “going out” for young men. Mining is where both the expertise and connections are, making this type of migration the norm, and following established patterns of labour migration in contemporary China, where localities tend to specialize in a specific type of labour.

Nevertheless, while there was a nearly uniform pattern of young men from Shanglin going out to mine for gold, the outcomes for the miners themselves were far from uniform. Instead, outcomes were influenced by a number of factors, frequently reflecting local hierarchies and inequalities in Shanglin. The most obvious predictor of success was related to ownership of the means of production. The first movers in the wave of mining migration to Ghana—from 2006 to 2008—were richer Shanglin households who were able to mobilize larger sums of capital to invest in mining machinery and pay for travel/expenses. Excavators are a major investment—costing around RMB 1,000,000 (USD 150,000) and RMB 20,000 (USD 3,000) for shipping. Initially, only members of the local elite class were able to gather the necessary resources and take the substantial financial risk necessary to engage in mining. These investors would then hire wage labourers, both from Shanglin and local Ghanaians. In these early years, Chinese miners were paid RMB 6,000 (USD 880) per month and 2 per cent of the earnings

(substantially more than factory work in China). Local Ghanaian labourers were only paid RMB 600 (USD 88) per month, or one-tenth the amount of their Chinese counterparts. As reported by more than one interviewee, the owner of a machine, on the other hand, could earn as much as RMB 3,000,000 (USD 450,000) *per day* on a good site. Such levels of income are quite extraordinary and almost impossible to comprehend, although it is not clear how common this was, nor for how long these levels of extraction were maintained.

In more recent years, many of those who initially went to Ghana as labourers have been able to save their wages, organize into small cooperative groups of six to ten people, borrow additional funds and purchase machines themselves. This has meant that more Shanglin miners had the chance to gain wealth through mining, but also that a larger segment of the population was exposed to financial risk. At the same time, when these former labourers were finally able to take the means of production into their own hands—usually in the early 2010s—with the purchase of a machine, the environmental and political landscapes had changed. After years of intensive mining, much of the gold had already been extracted from the more obvious sites, making the search more difficult. Moreover, the miners were facing increasing animosity from the media, who repeatedly framed the Chinese miners in negative terms from late 2012 onwards. They were also targeted by some high-level politicians— notably the Minister for Land and Natural Resources, the Hon. Inusah Fuseini—which ultimately resulted in the first crackdown and mass deportations in mid-2013.

By the time of the 2013 crackdown, many early movers had been in Ghana for years and had already amassed substantial wealth, much of which had been safely reinvested in China. They had also diversified their operations and started mining in other nearby countries, such as Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Some cooperative groups who were able to invest relatively early—i.e., 2010 or 2011—were also able to weather the crackdowns, frequently by finding a place to hide out with machinery until the military task force left the areas where they were operating. One miner told us how he and some family members invested in an excavator in 2010 but then got caught up in the crackdown and their machine was destroyed. They lost money, but had already saved enough to reinvest in two new machines, one in Ghana and one in Cameroon, after the situation calmed down.

Others, however, were ruined by the crackdown. One miner we spoke to had just managed to invest in a machine with partners a few months before the crackdown began, at which point they lost their entire investment and found themselves in debt. He was also traumatized by the ordeal, as he was involved in gun violence and was arrested and detained in a small room with 40 people filled with mosquitos for days before being deported. He has since returned to Shanglin and tried to start a pig feed business to pay off his debts, as he no longer wants to mine for gold. His partners tried their luck in Guyana, but were unsuccessful in finding gold there, so they now must return to wage labour or find some other ways to pay off their debts. During fieldwork, we heard numerous stories about Shanglin miners who had not been able to strike it rich in Ghana and/or suffered losses during the crackdowns, but who had remained in Ghana in a precarious situation with little or no means of securing a livelihood, let alone becoming wealthy.

Our interviews with returned miners and their families in Shanglin uncovered how local social stratification had been reinforced and intensified through the Ghanaian mining experience. A general estimate made by the miners themselves was that “30 per cent get richer, 40 per cent are just OK, and 30 per cent lose”. The winners, mainly the local elite, have often become extremely rich and can invest in expensive urban properties, purchase luxury cars and send their children to good schools so they can find good jobs in China rather than engaging in future migration to dangerous mining environments like their parents. Those that lose are generally already the poorer households in Shanglin with little room for error. After encountering failure in Ghana, their attempts to improve their livelihoods through migration are in ruins, and instead they are faced with overwhelming debt.

### **Differentiated Impact**

As the above indicates, rather than being a uniform phenomenon, Chinese mining in Ghana has actually had varied impacts—transforming the socioeconomic contexts in both Ghana and Shanglin in a variety of ways. While the miners have had a number of easily observable impacts on Ghanaian politics (e.g., feeding into corruption) and the physical environment (e.g., destruction of waterways and farmland), they have also entered into local communities and transformed the socioeconomic dynamics in

more indirect and less easily observable ways. At the same time, the mass exodus of young men from Shanglin to far away Ghana, and the resources that have been acquired through this migration, has resulted in major shifts in their home county. As such, assessing the role of the Chinese miners in Ghana and China requires us to step back and view the situation through a broad holistic lens.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Chinese miners themselves generally perceived their own impact on Ghanaian people, society and the environment in positive ways. Frequently, the miners saw their impact in economic terms. One group of returned miners in Shanglin said that they were playing an important role in developing Ghana and providing employment. They told us that each mining project employs 20 to 40 local people who earn RMB 50 (USD 7) per day, which is generally higher than they could earn elsewhere. The miners also saw themselves as contributing to local economies in other ways. For instance, we were told that successful miners and other Chinese businesspeople had invested in businesses in the mining areas—restaurants, supermarkets, trading companies and even agricultural production. However, it was admitted that most of the profits earned from the mining were not re-invested in Ghana-based, non-mining businesses, but rather sent to China or used to expand mining activities.

Additionally, most miners did not see a problem with their use of local land and tended to minimize the degree of environmental degradation. We were told by returned miners that large sums—as much as USD 100,000 for 50 acres—were paid to rent unproductive farmland and that this provided local people with far more money than they could have earned otherwise. This was framed as a benefit to the economies and people where mining was taking place, and the local people involved were described by the miners as being “happy to rent out the land” and also “happy to receive a good regular salary”. The miners told us that it is the Ghanaian government that is worried about environmental destruction, not the local people, and that the concerns about environmental destruction are exaggerated. One returned miner told us that the Shanglin miners are just small-scale and do not use heavy metals like large mining companies. In his words, they are “just digging in the mud”.

However, despite the Chinese miners’ assertion that their activities only caused minor and temporary environmental degradation, there is mounting evidence that the rapid expansion

of mechanized informal mining has produced serious and hard-to-remedy ecological problems (Armah et al., 2013; CSIR - Water Research Institute, 2013). In terms of land, it is probably a misrepresentation to say that the Chinese miners “rent” the land from locals, as the mining itself often renders the land unusable for future agricultural purposes. One Ghanaian informant stated how local farmers, including his father, sold their cocoa farms to Chinese miners for between 20,000 to 50,000 Ghana cedi (approximately USD 3,700 to USD 10,000) from 2009 onwards. They were attracted by the instant money, but the land was destroyed through “the soil being turned upside down” by excavators and no longer usable for farming. Regarding water supply, a recent study of 12 communities in mining areas in the Western and Central regions revealed that over 20 water bodies (rivers and streams) had been heavily polluted and were no longer suitable for domestic or agricultural purposes, while 25 no longer exist or only mud remains (Botchwey, 2018). In addition, a four-fold increase in chemicals was required at water treatment plants in order to make the water suitable for human consumption, and there was a 50 per cent loss of water available for treatment over just ten years, from 2008 to 2018. Botchwey’s (2018) study also found that the degree of pollution in many rivers means that fish no longer survive or are inedible.

Such evidence all indicates that the consequences of mechanized small-scale mining—initially due to Chinese involvement—on the ecology have been severe, leaving the state to remedy the damage at a significant cost. However, it has to be noted that the Chinese mostly worked together with local miners to undertake the mining activities that have resulted in such consequences. As such, framing this as solely a Chinese phenomenon is a mischaracterization.

The returned miners also characterized the impact in Shanglin in positive economic terms. For instance, the son of one of the early and most successful miners showed us his family’s Gold Mining Theme Park (*taojin leyuan*)—a large area of land that has been contracted from local farmers in order to build an homage to the gold mining legacy of Shanglin, including buildings in a pseudo African style. The Park also serves a dual use as a fruit tree plantation. The miner’s son told us that the Park promotes economic development and has created 30 jobs in the township where it is located, including seasonal labourers on the plantation, who can earn

RMB 70 (USD 10) per day. In our interviews, the production of the dredging machines was also identified by local people as a source of economic development. The Shanglin miners have developed their own dredging technology and produce the machines in two workshops located in the county. The machines are then sold both to local miners—who ship them around the world—and, increasingly, to international customers who have encountered the technology through interactions with the Chinese miners. However, the evidence of the ecological damage from river dredging in Ghana is incontrovertible (CSIR - Water Research Institute, 2013; Botchwey, 2018).

It is also undeniable that the gold rush has resulted in large sums of money flowing into Shanglin County—with estimates being as high as RMB 10 billion (USD 1.5 billion) in the boom years (Botchwey et al., 2019). On the ground, this translated into tangible improvements for some, while also increasing inequality. In the villages and townships where the miners are originally from, money from the gold rush was being used to build new housing and buy expensive cars. One of the townships had even been given the moniker “small Hong Kong” (*xiao xianggang*) because property and living expenses had increased—a form of rural gentrification. Additionally, some of the returned miners have invested in scaled-up agriculture by renting land from others—particularly for the cultivation of orange groves.

Nevertheless, the money invested in the rural areas has been limited, as even large houses are not expensive to build (approximately RMB 500,000 or USD 72,500) and agriculture also does not represent a large expense in comparison with the amounts earned. There is also evidence from our interviews that the Ghanaian gold rush has had an economic impact on the wider county itself, with miners telling us that they invested in county businesses and properties. This was confirmed in an interview with an employee of a county real estate company, who said that miners were purchasing apartments in the county at a price of approximately RMB 3,000 (USD 440) per square metre. However, most of the money earned by the miners has been invested in Chinese cities, particularly Nanchang (the provincial capital and located a few hours from Shanglin by car), Guangzhou and Shanghai. This is unsurprising, as urban real estate is the most lucrative—and widely seen as the most secure—form of investment in contemporary China. As such, the media stories

of dramatic and obvious wealth accumulation in Shanglin County presented in Section 1 are exaggerated—the county, townships and villages are not distinguishable from other similar areas that receive flows of remittances from residents engaging in migrant work in China’s urban areas.

### **Discussion: Reconceptualizing the Chinese Miner**

The exploration of the Chinese miners’ lived realities presented above complicates the dominant homogenizing narrative prevalent in media, academic and public discourses, which depict the miners as experiencing the gold rush and impacting on local areas in uniform ways. Instead, it becomes clear that the Chinese miners themselves are highly differentiated in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds; are perceived in different ways by different local populations; are heavily segmented in terms of how they benefit (or not) from the gold rush; and have a range of impacts on local populations, economies and landscapes. As such, it is necessary to identify different theoretical tools to help us better understand the Chinese gold rush in Ghana.

A useful place to turn—and as yet under-utilized in the discussion on the Shanglin miners—is the rich body of literature on Chinese labour migration domestically since the initiation of market reforms in the late 1970s. Over the past four decades China’s rural areas—including counties, townships and villages—have been fundamentally reshaped by the largest mass migration in human history. At the end of the 2000s it was estimated that 230 million rural people were engaging in migrant work in Chinese cities, constituting a massive floating population (Ye et al., 2013). This migration has followed patterns similar to the Shanglin miners, with communities specializing in specific occupations and utilizing local kin and friendship networks to forge migration pathways from one place to another. For instance, people from one township in Jiangxi province may travel to work in specific textile factories in urban areas of Zhejiang province (Loubere, 2019). As such, migration is not random but structured around traditions and trajectories, which ultimately become local identities. The Shanglin miners fit this mould—they migrate for a specific purpose to specific places and have taken on a migration identity that has come to shape aspirations and even define the people of the county more broadly in popular discourse.

China's domestic migration shares other useful points of comparison with the Ghanaian gold rush. For one, as in Shanglin, China's mass migration has produced new forms of rural wealth and played a key role in China's poverty reduction "miracle", with hundreds of millions of rural people escaping from absolute poverty in the decades since the market reforms were initiated (Yao, 2000). However, the imperative to migrate to earn a livelihood and support family in the countryside has had myriad other impacts on rural society and the lives of those involved. As in Shanglin, across China left-behind populations of elderly and children now inhabit "hollow" villages surviving on remittances from family members. This has fundamentally restructured rural society, having negative outcomes for children and the elderly and straining family relations, even as material wellbeing has improved for many (Driessen, 2018; Jacka, 2018; Lin, Yin and Loubere, 2014). Additionally, as with the remittances from the miners, China's broader domestic migration has resulted in remittances that have been invested—in limited ways—in rural areas, but mainly used for consumption (De Brauw and Rozelle, 2008). This has fuelled inequality within rural areas, and points to the fact made clear by the Shanglin miners' choice to invest primarily in urban real estate rather than the countryside—the nexus of China's current political economy of development resides in the city rather than the village, meaning that capital will necessarily accumulate in the urban centres, regardless of where it is acquired (Peng and Swider, 2017; Loubere, 2018).

Finally, much like the Shanglin miners, Chinese migrant workers have been systematically marginalized in a number of ways. They have been institutionally marginalized through the country's "household registration system" (*hukou*), which restricts their rights in urban areas, designating them as semi- or non-citizens existing in a legal grey zone. They have also been marginalized in the popular imagination and shunned from urban society. Depicted as being low class and not having good "human quality" (*suzhi*), migrants are often framed as a scourge rather than acknowledged for their contributions to urban development (Zavoretti, 2017). As such, rural-urban migrants have been constructed as a subaltern population, with the policy and popular discourse lumping all migrants together into a homogenous group and defining them by what they lack, rather than engaging with them on their own terms or examining the class relations that produce these subordinate subjects in the first

place (Sun, 2014). This mirrors the socio-political construction of the Shanglin miners in media, academic and popular discourses, and the rich body of academic literature elaborating on the social lives, representations and experiences of China's domestic migrants presents a potentially illuminating avenue of inquiry to disentangle and better understand the Chinese gold rush in Ghana.

## **Conclusion**

Future research on the Shanglin miners needs to draw inspiration from the detailed investigations that have been done into the workings of China's mass domestic migration. This will allow for the creation of conceptual frameworks that are suitable for analyzing the experiences, identities and outcomes of the miners. More broadly, starting from the processes underpinning domestic migration and extrapolating outwards will provide new insights into the complex formations that emerge from an increasingly global China.

In particular, domestic Chinese migration provides an indispensable lens for viewing: 1) China's rise and presence in the global south; 2) new patterns of migration, entrepreneurship and resource extraction under globalized capitalism; and 3) the associated new forms of exploitation, subjugation and environmental destruction. Identifying and developing nuanced and holistic understandings of these phenomena is exceedingly important as we aim to honestly and completely depict the complex forms of interaction that are occurring around the world without falling into tired xenophobic tropes and inadvertent "othering". This is of particular relevance in the present context with Chinese migration increasing alongside global south-south migration. We would also do well to look to the past, to other eras when Chinese gold miners fanned out across the globe, and the resultant raft of anti-immigration policies that shaped racial segregation and inequality over the past nearly two centuries (Ngai, 2015). The story of Chinese miners during gold rushes is a story of a particular type of actor operating in a particular type of extractive capitalist context, but it has resonances and parallels with many of the processes that define our current moment, allowing us to more clearly see potential futures.

## Endnote

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