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China in Africa: Are Beijing's Confucius centers a boon or bane for Cameroon youth?

By Mbom Sixtus

APRIL 17, 2016 IN

Even as China increases its footprint in Cameroon through its language institutes and companies, locals are divided on how these facilities are impacting their lives. While youth welcome them as cultural bridges and windows of opportunity for jobs, critics feel they will only serve China's own interests in the long run. What is most worrying is a growing feeling that these language schools may make local youth lose their moorings, confidence, belief and identity

YAOUNDE (Cameroon)—Learning Chinese language and culture has become a passion among Cameroon's youth. Most of them admire Chinese people for their hard work and adherence to traditions and values.



The Chinese Confucius Institute in Cameroon has drawn about 10,000 learners so far

The will to win and excel like them is drawing thousands to the Chinese Confucius Institute set up in this West African country in 2007.

The institute has drawn over 10,000 learners so far, the highest number in the continent, according to Yu Guoyang, director of the institute.

It is part of the University of Yaounde II's International Relations Institute of Cameroon and is co-chaired by the varsity's rector and the rector of China's Zhejiang Normal University.

Yu says many of the students come to the institute for the pleasure of learning something new and also to get jobs in companies set up by China in Cameroon and elsewhere.

According to Professor Ibrahima Adamou, rector of the University of Yaounde II, China is making great strides in the field of research.

“Currently, it has the highest number of certified inventors. If we have to be like Chinese, we need to learn their language which is a catalyst to their scientific and technological riches,” he said.

Asia Times met some of the students to seek their views.

“I admire China. The Chinese were once oppressed by foreigners but they held on to their ancestral beliefs and culture and today they are the world's giant in many aspects. They are hardworking and I believe we can be like them,” said Lauric Temfack, (Lau Liké in Chinese), a level three student.

He thinks that financially, China is helping Cameroon more than the US.

“You can see it in projects executed in Cameroon – for instance, the \$60 billion financial aid Beijing pledged during the recent China Africa Summit,” he said.



Cameroon location in Africa

Asked why Chinese construction firms are still employing their own workers, he said: “True, Chinese construction companies do not use local labor but their men can work for 16 hours a day – which we cannot – and deliver on time.”

Temfack is hoping to get scholarships for studies in China and work for Chinese companies in Cameroon.

Vincent Janvier, a Public Law student at the University of Yaounde II, loves martial arts and wants to master Kung-fu.

“I will practice law or choose combat sport as a profession. I only want to learn the basic words in Chinese used in Kung-fu,”

Janvier said.

Mastering Chinese language will be another feather in his cap for Andre Luke Kombou who is proficient in English, French, German and Spanish.

“When I am through, I can decide to go back to school and study computer sciences, maybe in China” he said.

Curiosity alone led Alex Yadou, a fine arts student, to the institute.

“China is an economic giant. I am learning their language because I might need it in future. I can even learn their arts,” Yadou said.

Schools: Vehicles for global dominance?

While many students sing praise, critics say China’s language program, like those run by some western countries, is a weapon for cultural domination through soft power.

The pan African magazine, *New African*, says Confucius institutes are “nothing but China’s vehicles for global dominance, effected in the cultural sphere through the promotion of the Chinese language, tastes, education, architecture, music, food, movies, beliefs, banks, dressing, art, history and lifestyle, to be continued until such a time that these would have supplanted

existing cultural precepts and raised local agents who would become the defenders of the new imposed order themselves.”

Professor Oumarou Bouba, former Rector of the University of Yaounde II, does not find any fault in the analysis.

“If I am to make an analysis on this, I would say it is but normal for a newly-emerging and fast-growing superpower like China to develop such a so-called “soft-power” institution in order to match its political and economic influence at global level,” he told *Asia Times*.

New African warns how this soft power could alienate and weaken youth of the continent.

“Education, acquired through scholarships to China and through Confucius schools, captures the promising youth of Africa, implicates them in Chinese philosophies, material and ideological exchanges, and creates a moral indebtedness that is difficult to totally unpick. One possible outcome of this scenario is the production of a national leadership with a sense of alienation from its own settings and which may increasingly look East, seeking to imitate the master.”



Chinese diplomatic and trade missions are on the rise in Africa

Yu disagrees. He sees it from an exchange perspective — a cross-cultural assimilation process. He says that last year, 35 Cameroonians received scholarships to study in Chinese universities.

“I had a meeting with 60 Cameroonian students in China last December and encouraged them to spread Cameroonian culture,” he said, adding that tens of Chinese teachers travel to Cameroon and return with knowledge of local culture.

Professor Li Anshan of the School of International studies in Peking University in China points to similarities between Chinese and African cultures. Both have a history of colonization and long struggle for liberation, independence as well as development. Hence, there is blossoming cooperation between them, he says.

Dr. Willibroad Dze-Ngwa, current president of Africa for Research in Comparative Education, views Confucius schools as a strategy by China to broaden its supremacy in the international arena.

“It is all about interests. Both the teachers and learners of Chinese language and culture are looking for benefits. China has a great economy and Cameroonians and other Africans want to tap from it. Other countries are also struggling to promote their language and culture worldwide. By the way, learning every additional language is a plus to the learner,” said Dr. Dze Ngwa.

Emmanuel Tatah Mentan, a Cameroonian political economist, likens Sino-African relations to “a wedding with uncertain prospects.”

Fondo Sikod, Professor of Economics at University of Yaoundé II, feels China’s push in Cameroon and Africa is fuelled “by a desperate need to find oil and raw material to fuel its fast-growing industry”.

According to him, Chinese companies in Africa are strangling domestic industries.

‘Chinese firms don’t follow norms’

Local companies and citizens complain that Chinese firms do not respect the terms of agreement and human rights after a contract is awarded.



China has become a leading export market for Cameroonian logs.

Hamadou Abba, managing director of Ste An’andal Sarl construction, says Chinese companies prefer to work solo in violation of a government rule which requires foreign firms to sub-contract at least 30% of work awarded in Cameroon.

Earlier this month, residents and local miners of East region clashed with small-scale Chinese gold miners who began setting up camp there six years ago. They complain that Chinese, who arrived at the mining site in Betare Oya, began extracting gold after three years and are now taking away their livelihood.

Reports say about 300 Chinese miners are working in the area against 100 authorized by the Cameroon government. They are said to be using equipment to clean stones and sift soil facilitating easier detection of minerals.

Adamou Assamou, the traditional ruler of the locality, says locals have not seen any sign of the development they were promised.

Irate locals vandalized the equipment and beat up some Chinese miners. Many shifted to neighboring towns as gold mining left behind polluted holes and destroyed vegetation and animal habitat.

Chris Ho, a Chinese gold miner, denies this. He says his company, which is operating with a temporary authorization, has provided roads, generators and safe drinking water to the locality.

Earlier this month, the East regional office of Cameroon's National Social Insurance Fund (NSIF) indicted China International Water and Electric Corporation for non-payment of social insurance covers for its employees working on the Lom Pangar HEP dam.

According to a NSIF official, the Chinese usually conceal the statutes of Chinese employees.

"They present employees from China as visitors and we only fish them out after investigations. They have employed over 3,000 people since they started work in 2012," he said.

The Chinese company was forced to pay for local employee's social security in November 2014 after laborers decided to down tools for ten days.

Some Cameroonians, however, praise Chinese companies for contracts executed in Cameroon, such as the construction of a giant Multipurpose Sports Complex in Yaounde and the Yaounde Conference Center which, since its completion in 1982, is still maintained by the construction company.

But critics say it only indicates there is no transfer of technological know-how by the Chinese.

About 4,000 Chinese have been living in Cameroon. A majority of them are involved in medium- and small- scale businesses. Some are involved in petty trades like roasting corn, fish, and plantains on the sidewalks of streets in big cities.

At least 40% of Cameroonians live below the poverty line, which is an apparent reason for growing acceptability of Chinese goods by citizens who, however, describe them as substandard.