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Explaining the Persistence of Illegal Chinese Mining in Ghana: The Efficacious Role of Local Patrons

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Abstract.

The Ghana-China relationship has in recent years had severe tensions resulting from the practice of illegal gold mining by some Chinese citizens. Several solutions, including military raids on illegal Chinese miners, have still yielded no tangible result. What explains the persistence of illegal Chinese mining in Ghana? Drawing from extensive literature review and personal experiences of the author, this paper will essentially argue that the persistence of illegal Chinese mining is a result of a collaborative effort between some local patrons in Ghana and some Chinese. The persistence of illegal Chinese mining is also at the core, a partnership between ‘comrades in need’ (local patrons) and ‘comrades with power’ (illegal Chinese gold miners) to primarily satisfy economic motives. Additionally, the paper also builds on insights from a previous publication (Alden & Ocquaye, 2021) to argue that local patrons are key to the successful absorption of the Chinese into the political economy of illegal mining in Ghana.

Keywords

Chinese, Illegal, Local Patrons, Small-scale, Ghana.

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing and persistent menace of illegal Chinese mining in Ghana has become a topical research problem for many interested in China-Africa relations. Several publications have outlined the reasons, motivations, and complexities behind illegal Chinese mining in Ghana (e.g., Botchwey et al., 2019; Debrah & Asante, 2019; Boafo et al., 2019; Crawford & Botchwey, 2017; Aidoo, 2016; Crawford et al., 2015; Hilson et al., 2014); others have also investigated the menace and conducted interviews with illegal miners and locals within mining communities to make some sense of the situation and the way forward (e.g., Banchirigah, 2008; Andrews, 2015; Ofori & Ofori, 2018; Antwi-Boateng & Akudugu, 2021). Yet Illegal Chinese mining still persists in Ghana, inciting what some call the anti-Chinese sentiment (e.g., Aidoo, 2016; Debrah & Asante, 2019). Recently, two Chinese illegal miners were arrested as part of the Ghanaian government crackdown on illegal mining (Olander, 2021). What explains the persistence of illegal Chinese mining in Ghana? With the abundance of publications on the topic (e.g., Hilson et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2015; Aidoo, 2016; Botchwey et al., 2019; Boafo et al., 2019), what remains “missing” from the literature? Can the persistence of the practice of illegal Chinese mining be fully or accurately explained?

This paper will seek to provide an account that can help explain or at least give a framework within which we can grapple with/understand the persistence of illegal Chinese mining in Ghana. Drawing extensively from the existing literature on illegal Chinese mining and the authors’ own personal experiences (2020-2021) with the Chinese and local mining communities in the Western and Ashanti regions, this paper will offer a refreshing and interesting perspective on the persistence of illegal Chinese mining in Ghana. The paper will essentially argue that the persistence of illegal Chinese mining is a result of a collaborative effort between some local patrons in Ghana and some Chinese (who may either be miners themselves or providers of resources/technology for illegal mining). The persistence of illegal Chinese mining is also at the core a partnership between ‘comrades in need’ (local patrons) and ‘comrades with power’ (illegal Chinese gold miners) to primarily satisfy economic motives. Deporting the Chinese would have ended the menace of illegal Chinese mining, except for the unchangeable fact that there are some local patrons (comrades in need) who due to dire poverty assist the Chinese (comrades with power) in diverse ways to engage in illegal mining in order to earn some income for survival. Additionally, the paper also builds on insights from a previous publication (Alden & Ocquaye, 2021) to argue that local patrons are key to the successful absorption of the Chinese into the political economy of illegal mining in Ghana.

The structure of this paper is as follows: the first section provides an overview of small-scale mining, illegality, and Chinese involvement in the sector. The second section develops and theorizes local patrons as an effective way of explaining the persistence of illegal Chinese mining in Ghana. The third section examines the implications of illegal Chinese mining on the Ghanaian society. The final section offers a conclusion and some suggestions on the issue of illegal Chinese mining.

2. SMALL-SCALE MINING IN GHANA: BRIEF HISTORY & CHINESE INVOLVEMENT

Mining on a small scale has been in existence in Ghana and many other countries for centuries. As Banchirigah (2008, p.29) rightly observed, mining ‘operators have deep ancestral ties to mining lands’ and were involved in small-scale mining long before the arrival of Europeans or large mining companies. Thus, before there was any law or regulations to govern small-scale mining, the natives of different mining communities engaged in mining with improvised/indigenous tools like the pickaxe, shovel, and head pans (Hilson, 2002; Ofori-Mensah, 2017; Owusu-Nimo et al., 2018;). The process of small-scale mining, as described by

Ofori-Mensah (2017, p.72), was ‘extremely simple’ though characterised by traditional ingenuity, and equally had little negative impacts on the environment.

Throughout the post-colonial decades, several laws and regulations were enacted to control the mining sector in Ghana, but the main focus was on large scale mining (Hilson et al., 2014). After Ghana gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1957, most mining companies were nationalised and operated by the state. This was done, for instance, through the Minerals Act (Act 123) of 1962 which effectively made all minerals the property of the state (Hilson, 2002). However, due to this rigid state monopolisation of gold mining, the sector fell into a series of crisis and low productivity until about 1986 when the Minerals and Mining Law (PNDCL 153) was ‘implemented to reverse declines in mineral production’ (Hilson, 2002, p.24). The facilitatory and conducive conditions of the Minerals and Mining Law ever since increased foreign investment and subsequently production levels in Ghana’s gold sector, particularly for large-scale mining. However, the quest to increase/attract foreign investment in large-scale gold mining equally led to the marginalisation of small-scale mining in Ghana’s gold sector (Hilson et al., 2014).

Formal state recognition of small-scale mining in Ghana’s gold production began in 1989 (Hilson, 2001; Crawford et al., 2015; Hilson et al., 2014; Ofori-Mensah, 2017). Precisely, three laws (1. Small-scale Gold Mining Law – PNDCL 218; 2. The Mercury Law – PNDCL 217; 3. The Precious Minerals Marketing Corporation Law – PNDCL 219) were passed to help regulate, legalise, and institutionalise small-scale mining of gold (see Hilson, 2001 for a detailed discussion on the formalisation of small-scale mining in Ghana). The changing nature of the mining sector led to an updated and amended version of laws embodied in the Minerals and Mining Act 2006 (Act 703). Section 83a of the Minerals and Mining Act 2006 established small-scale mining as an exclusive occupation for only Ghanaian citizens (Crawford et al., 2015). It specifically states that ‘A licence for small-scale mining operation shall not be granted to a person unless that person is a citizen of Ghana’ (Crawford et al., 2015, p.11, emphasis added). Herein lies the issue of illegality, especially the involvement of foreign nationals – of whom the Chinese are the ‘largest concentration’ (Crawford et al., 2015, p.12).

The case of illegal Chinese mining arises as a breach of the stipulations of the Minerals and Mining Act 2006 which clearly reserves small-scale mining to only Ghanaians. Although several accounts explain the persistence of illegal mining (also called *galamsey*) on the part of Ghanaians (e.g., Banchirigah, 2008; Andrews, 2015; Ofori & Ofori, 2018; Antwi-Boateng & Akudugu, 2021), this paper examines illegality that arises from Chinese (foreign nationals) participation in the small-scale gold mining sector. This is because Chinese involvement in the sector is not only against the laws of Ghana but has led to extreme negative effects on the landscape, health, and safety of local mining communities (Crawford et al., 2015; Crawford & Botchwey, 2017; Botchwey, 2019; Antwi-Boateng & Akudugu, 2021). Hitherto, the small-scale mining sector in Ghana, though debatable, did not pose any significant threat to the society and state. The only cause for the recent fierce tensions between mining communities, the society, the state and the media is the involvement of some Chinese in small-scale mining, which has produced catastrophic consequences for the environment and society (Hilson, 2002; Hilson et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2015; Obeng et al., 2019). For example, the introduction of heavy machinery like excavators, *changfa* (crushing machines), and toxic chemicals like cyanide have severely contaminated several of Ghana’s water bodies (e.g., Pra River, Offin, and Ankobra), which are critical sources of drinking water for most communities (Armah et al., 2013; Debrah & Asante, 2019).

Recent news has indicated that the Ghana Water Company Limited (GWCL) is facing severe challenges in extracting water for processing and nationwide distribution due to illegal mining (GNA, 2022). Rivers have been widened beyond crossing or diverted for mining activities, vast farmlands with cocoa has also been destroyed and reduced agricultural production in mining communities (Botchwey et al., 2019). Indeed, a personal visit to the Western region of Ghana in 2020 (Tarkwa to be precise) revealed the extent and severity of illegal mining: the Pra River was so brown as mud and the physical appearance of the lands in the community was indicative of severe pollution resulting from the use of hazardous chemicals (Author's personal experience, 2020). Crawford et al., (2015, p.40) similarly observe that 'the river Offin was described by a local journalist as "now looking like coffee with milk", and that is an apt description'. The severe pollution of Ghana's rivers due to illegal mining can be chiefly attributed to the Chinese, who introduced 'direct mining within rivers' to process riverbed sand for alluvial gold (Crawford et al., 2015, p.40; see also Owusu-Nimo et al., 2018 for a detailed discussion on types illegal mining in Ghana).

Moreover, Chinese participation in the small-scale mining of gold is a clear breach of the laws of Ghana and the resulting tensions in the Ghanaian state has made the case of illegal Chinese mining a very divisive and disturbing topic across the country. For example, it is 'against the law to mine within 100 metres of a riverbank, far less in the river' (Crawford et al., 2015, p.40). Yet, mining on Pra River has continued for many years and the river is currently completely polluted. Indeed, a video documentary by Caleb Kudah of Citifm (2021) shows the extent of the pollution of the Pra River (Kudah, 2021). In addition, there have been several tensions amongst Ghanaians over the state's 'soft' reaction towards illegal Chinese mining. For instance, the recent decision to deport En Huang (aka Aisha), a female Chinese mastermind in illegal mining has led to several divisive views and comments from the Ghanaian society, most of whom had expected that this Chinese woman be put in jail or given some form of punishment that will be severe enough to discourage other Chinese nationals from venturing into illegal mining in Ghana (Aziba, 2019). As a video on Graphic Online (2019) shows, most Ghanaians were not happy with the comments passed by the Senior Minister, Yaw Osafo-Mafo, who argued that 'jailing...Aisha was not...going to solve Ghana's economic problems'.

This decision to deport En Huang was quite disappointing to many Ghanaians as she had not only breached sections of the Minerals and Mining Act (2006), but was also involved in several human right violations, including shooting people dead as she wished...which was revealed by one of her Ghanaian associates (MyjoyOnline, 2019). This and many other issues with illegal Chinese mining has created tensions and anger in the Ghanaian society as is exemplified by clashes between local communities and illegal Chinese miners (Starrfm, 2017) as well as criticisms of the Ghanaian government for failure to give a severe blow to illegal Chinese miners.

The key question on illegal Chinese mining in Ghana is: how did it start? From whence did the Chinese come and why has this illegal act persisted to the point of societal division? To the point where Ghana's waterbodies have been severely polluted beyond repair and threatening the supply of clean water to Ghanaians. The answer to these questions, this paper argues, lies in the agency, power, and efficacy of local patrons to facilitate the absorption of Chinese into illegal gold mining in Ghana. The next section presents this argument on local patrons.

3. LOCAL PATRONS: POWERFUL AGENTS IN STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS

The literature on African agency in the China-Africa relationship usually situates agency at the state and elite level of analysis (Corkin, 2013; Phillips, 2019; Soule-Kohndou, 2020). ‘African actors are treated as passive and lacking agency’ in the China-Africa relationship and the emphasis on state elites is often exaggerated and tends to overlook other actors with agency (Mohan & Lampert, 2012, p.92; Staden, Alden, & Wu, 2018). Moreover, few have tried to examine the agency at the micro-local level of African societies (Mohan & Lampert, 2013; Lampert & Mohan, 2014, 2015; Alden & Ocquaye, 2021). As I argued with Professor Chris Alden in a recent paper, the agency role played by African citizens is actually the key determinant of the success of Chinese private enterprises and individuals operating in Africa (Alden & Ocquaye, 2021). We attempted to explain the role of local Africans who we described as ‘local patrons’ as being the most powerful agents in the absorption of Chinese private enterprises into the political economy of African countries (Alden & Ocquaye, 2021). Drawing from Alden and Ocquaye (2021), this paper develops a theoretical argument on local patrons as the key driving force behind the persistence of illegal Chinese mining.

3.1 Who are local patrons?

Local patrons ‘may be people akin to the elites, or ordinary people who rally during elections for the elites or they may be close to the traditional leadership (chiefs, for example) or just the indigenes in the community’ (Alden & Ocquaye, 2021, p.5). Essentially, local patrons can constitute all persons/citizens besides the political elites in an African state. Moreover, there are classes and different functions (Ofori & Ofori, 2018), as we shall later see, amongst local patrons in the small-scale mining sector.

3.2 What role do local patrons play?

Local patrons have the ability to shape the trajectory of anything from national policy to institutions to foreign policy. Their power is so efficacious that it is often felt and has shaped discussions even at the international level. Staden, Alden and Wu (2018) have shown that in AU-China relations, concerns from the grassroots of individual African states have often shaped the agenda at big events like the FOCAC. Local patrons can through their actions alter national policies and determine the fate of the political elites in the next election. Again, local patrons, if well engaged with, can determine the success of the operations of both domestic and foreign businesses (Alden & Ocquaye, 2021). Indeed, Mohan and Lampert (2013) have demonstrated through their research the efficacy and power of local patrons in aiding Chinese enterprises thrive in Ghana and Nigeria.

Throughout the literature on illegal Chinese mining in Ghana, several scholars directly and/or indirectly indicate that local patrons are a cause of illegal Chinese mining, though none have sought to theorize/conceptualize local patrons. For example, ‘local people’ (Botchwey et al., 2019, p.311); ‘local actors’ (Boafo, Paalo, & Dotsey, 2019, p.2); ‘willing compradors’ (Antwi-Boateng & Akudugu, 2020, p.149); ‘local Ghanaian front men’ (Crawford et al., 2015, p.65) are terms that these scholars have tried to use as explanatory factors for illegal Chinese mining in Ghana. Richard Aidoo also magnifies the power and agency of local patrons when he made the following observation:

Most research and reports on Chinese involvement in the galamsey crisis in Ghana vaguely bifurcate the blame on both Ghanaian political actors and Chinese diplomats and nationals. Nevertheless, the nuance overlooked by these reports and studies is the preponderant role played by the local and traditional political forces and actors such as the constitutionally non-partisan local chiefs, district assembly members, and community leaders that serve as conduits between the “corridors of power” and local people (Aidoo, 2016, p.60, emphasis added)

In addition, even though some authors see and argue that the Chinese are the most powerful actors in their joint partnership with some Ghanaians in illegal mining, the evidence indicates that illegal Chinese miners and even the Chinese embassy in Ghana acknowledge that it is rather local patrons in Ghana who are the most powerful agents in illegal Chinese mining. For instance, the Chinese ambassador to Ghana told journalists the following:

“How can we be able to do galamsey in your country...it is because of your own people...why are Chinese not doing illegal mining in South Africa where there is also a lot of gold...it is not possible...because the local people don't support us but in Ghana some locals help the small number of Chinese people doing galamsey” (Starrfm, 2019, emphasis added).

Again, other researchers have noted the frequency with which the phrase ‘the Chinese were led by (some) Ghanaians’ occurred during their field trips (Crawford et al., 2015, p.14). This gives credence to the argument that local patrons have a powerful agency role, upon which the success of illegal Chinese miners is hinged.

As mentioned earlier in section 3.1, there are also classes/hierarchies amongst local patrons. In the case of illegal Chinese mining, some local patrons are essentially the masterminds who team up with other rich and powerful Chinese men/women to engage in illegal mining. These top ‘business class’ then finance and mostly bring in Chinese immigrants/mining equipment to work on the mining site (Ofori & Ofori, 2018, p.363). Then there is the ‘management class’ who literally may have ownership of the land but are distinguished from the ‘business class’ by their lack of financial and/or logistical autonomy (Ofori & Ofori, 2018, p.363). Finally, there is the ‘poverty driven’ class who are the masses that work on the mining sites (Ofori & Ofori, 2018, p.363). Ofori and Ofori (2018) offer a detailed explanation of the hierarchy that exist within the illegal mining sector; others also identify the gender dynamics that prevail (Hausermann et al., 2020), however, that is not the focus of this paper. In addition, it is worth mentioning that the classes that may exist within the sector are not mutually exclusive: a member from below (management class) may link two masterminds (business class) – one from Ghana and the other from China, for example.

Finally, it is important to note that the above explanation is not to deny the fact that there are other factors that can explain illegal Chinese mining in Ghana, rather the paper situates local patrons as the primary causal factor of the persistence of illegal Chinese mining. For instance, it does not deny that some political elites and public officials are connivant to the menace of illegal Chinese mining. Indeed, several authors have indicated that there was evidence from their research that some politicians and public officials were/are involved in illegal Chinese mining, through for instance, protecting and assisting Chinese migrants get false immigration documents (Crawford & Botchwey, 2017; Antwi-Boateng & Akudugu, 2020, 2021).

4. ‘COMRADES IN NEED’ & ‘COMRADES WITH POWER’

This section traces how local patrons have facilitated the successful absorption of illegal Chinese miners into the political economy of small-scale mining in Ghana.

Firstly, the most perplexing issue in illegal Chinese mining is: how did the Chinese come to be involved in small-scale gold mining? Where did they come from and who brought/initiated them into the business of illegal mining? Botchwey et al., (2019) note that the illegal Chinese gold miners in Ghana hailed from the Shanglin County in the Guangxi province of China. They argue that the tales of treasure hunters in Ghana during the 2000s spread to Shanglin and resulted in an ‘exodus of Shanglin miners’ to Ghana (Botchwey et al., 2019, p. 314). Other scholars concur to this narrative surrounding the sudden surge of illegal Chinese gold miners

in Ghana (e.g., Antwi-Boateng & Akudugu, 2021). Antwi-Boateng and Akudugu (2020) go a step further to classify the coming of the illegal Chinese miners into two waves: (wave 1) those who hailed from Shanglin and (wave 2) those who exploited the legal provision that foreigners could provide services to miners. Though this narrative of treasure hunters' tales is quite credible, there remains another narrative that is much stronger and lends agency to the role played by local patrons. This explanation is provided by Hilson et al., (2014, p.16) who indicate that 'in 2008,...several licensed operators were sent by the Minerals Commission to China 'to train' and 'to learn''. These licensed operators then 'used the visit to identify potential (Chinese) investors' (Hilson et al., 2014, p.16). The resulting companies that were established, like Hansol Mining, have been involved in bringing in thousands of illegal Chinese gold miners (Hilson et al., 2014).

Though complex in nature, the sudden influx of illegal Chinese gold miners into Ghana's small-scale mining sector can largely be attributed to the facilitatory role played by local patrons. These local patrons assist the Chinese in diverse ways, including linking them to some corrupt public officials to obtain false immigration documents and also bringing them before traditional heads (like some chiefs) to access lands for mining. Indeed, in research carried out by the International Growth Centre (IGC), Crawford et al., (2015, p.14) observed that there was high repetition of the saying that 'the Chinese were led by (some) Ghanaians'. This essentially means that besides all the factors that one could point out as causing illegal Chinese mining, the role of local patrons in Ghana remains the key factor as 'no one can enter somebody's house to do something without the owner's permission' (Ofori-Mensah, 2017, p.83). It also suggest that the 'business class' (Ofori & Ofori, 2018) in illegal Chinese mining, if eradicated/or arrested, could eventually collapse the enterprise. This is because, most illegal Chinese miners could not have come to Ghana by themselves as they are mostly uneducated and lack the knowledge to get as far as to Ghana to engage in illegal mining (Crawford et al., 2015). Thus, there must be some very rich and influential local patrons who have teamed up with equally powerful Chinese nationals to establish the enterprise. This might also explain why the illegal Chinese miners keep coming back: if deported, those rich/powerful Chinese masterminds together with some Ghanaian local patrons will arrange for a fresh set of Chinese miners to come into the country, indicating a collaborative effort between some Chinese and some Ghanaians.

Secondly, another important aspect of the role local patrons play is their ability to determine the success of illegal Chinese miners. Local patrons, it must be particularly noted, are arguably the key determinants of the operations of any foreign enterprise in Ghana (Alden & Ocquaye, 2021; see Luning & Pijpers, 2017 for an illustration of the role played by local patrons in mining communities). This is because no matter how much some of the elites may assist illegal Chinese miners to get false documents and get their equipment cleared from the ports, the success of operations hinges on the local patrons, particularly those in the management and poverty-driven classes. These local patrons are the ones who actually know the terrain of the mining site and can lead foreigners to places 'undiscovered' and unknown to any military force that might be sent to halt mining operations in the area. The 'ins and outs', the dos and don'ts, the escape routes, the safe routes for transporting mined gold, the times to mine and not to mine, and all the bits and pieces of information surrounding a successful mining operation are in the 'heads' of local patrons. If one makes good connections with them, they can offer all the 'protection and provision' needed for successful operation of illegal mining. On the other hand, disrespect or maltreatment of these local patrons can actually lead to huge losses and failure of the business: the illegal Chinese miners may not know the 'secret' escape routes in case of military raids or may take the 'wrong' routes to transferring gold and subsequently be attacked by robbers, for example. Indeed, some military men bear witness to some of these points, for instance, that the mining sites

have so many pits that only the locals involved can safely run across those sites, outsiders may fall in the pits and drown. Again, this is not surprising, local patrons played similarly important roles even in the pre-colonial days: they knew the safe paths amidst the many mining pits and could lead foreigners safely over to the right place to find gold (Ofosu-Mensah, 2017).

5. ILLEGAL CHINESE MINING: IMPLICATIONS ON THE GHANAIAN SOCIETY

There are several implications of illegal Chinese mining on the Ghanaian society. The paper will examine some of the environmental, economic, political, and societal implications.

5.1 Implications of Illegal Chinese mining on the Ghanaian society

Firstly, the environmental damages caused by illegal Chinese miners is extremely heart-breaking. Landscape, waterbodies and vegetation is completely destroyed beyond reclamation most of the time. Essentially, the ecosystem and biodiversity of the mining site is destroyed beyond repair. According to a cocoa farmer in the southern part of Ghana, the existing 99 water bodies in his township has been destroyed through illegal Chinese mining (BBC, 2021). River mining has also caused the destruction of Ghana's water bodies and caused diverse illnesses to local inhabitants who often use the water (Crawford et al. 2015). Moreover, the use of heavy machinery, explosives and toxic chemicals by illegal Chinese miners to increase productivity has led to severe damages of building structures in various mining communities (Antwi-Boateng & Akudugu, 2020). Another sad aspect of the negative impacts of illegal Chinese mining is that mining pits are left uncovered, fill up with water, and innocent children playing around or even walking to farms often fall and drown in these pits (Crawford et al., 2015). These water-filled pits also breed mosquitoes that spread malaria to locals within the community (see Rozo, 2020 for a detailed discussion of the link between illegal gold mining and malaria). In spite of these negative consequences on the environment, most affected locals in the mining communities continue to work with the illegal Chinese miners, why is this so? The answer can perhaps be summed as follows: the lands (including farms) are destroyed, the water is destroyed, and the previous source of income is destroyed. The only thing left is to hop on the Chinese train of illegal mining and earn an income to buy food and sachet water in many cases. Indeed, Burrows and Bird (2017) note that 'mining often occurs in cocoa farming regions and can lead to the seizure of land and environmental destruction. Both of these outcomes further erode the viability of agriculture, leading to the local population's deepening dependence on illegal mining for income' (emphasis added).

Secondly, there is a wide range of economic benefits from illegal Chinese mining, though not evenly distributed. Mostly, the first economic advantage often goes to the inhabitants of the mining communities: there could be wide ranging transformations of the community. Sometimes, subsidiary firms and grocery shops may spring up due to demand for certain goods and services from the illegal Chinese miners. Thus, local patrons may stand to benefit, especially those who have ownership of the lands or shares in the joint enterprise with the Chinese. This is not to say that the local patrons who do not have land ownership may gain nothing, they also benefit through employment on the mining sites which sometimes gives them higher incomes compared to farming. On the ground in mining communities, one of the booming businesses is usually vendors of airtime. These and other vendors make significant profits from Chinese insatiable demand for airtime to call family and friends back home in China. Crawford et al., (2015) also offer detailed accounts of the varying economic impacts of illegal Chinese mining on communities. It is however worth mentioning that the economic impacts may be negative for those who cannot join the illegal Chinese miners in their enterprise (Crawford et al., 2015).

The paper refrains from commenting on contribution to gold production in Ghana as it is well known that the illegal Chinese miners find ways to smuggle the gold out of Ghana (Crawford et al., 2015, p.60; Crawford & Botchwey, 2017; Bofo et al., 2019). Thus, though small-scale mining in general contributes to gold production in Ghana (Muthuri et al., 2021; Ofori & Ofori, 2018), the case of illegal Chinese gold production is quite questionable, as these miners are more likely to smuggle the gold they produce out of the country.

Thirdly, illegal Chinese mining has a significant effect on Ghanaian politics. It is often the case that concerned citizens will look at the manifestoes of presidential candidates to examine their policy towards the issue of illegal mining. Interestingly, both the NPP and NDC have criticised each other of their actions and inactions towards illegal mining (Ayelazuno & Mawuko-yevugah, 2021, p.16). It is important to note that mishandling the issue of illegal mining in general can lead to severe electoral losses. Indeed, records show that the current President of Ghana, Nana Akuffo-Addo, was well aware he could lose the elections in 2020, saying that ‘I understand the galamseyers say if I want to go by the dictates of the law, they will vote against me and my party the NPP at the next elections’ (Takyi-Boadu, 2017 in Ntewusu, 2018, p.865).

Unsurprisingly, the voters from communities affected by the crackdown on illegal mining did as they always do: the NPP lost a significant number of seats in the recent parliamentary elections in 2020 (Ayelazuno & Mawuko-yevugah, 2021, p.18). Yet, the suggestion here is that the government ought to eliminate the aspect of small-scale mining that has to do with illegal Chinese miners and find a way of stabilising and properly institutionalizing the small-scale mining sector so that it completely becomes exclusive to only Ghanaians just as the mining laws stipulate.

In essence, it is important to strike out the illegal Chinese miners but not the ordinary Ghanaian miners, to whom mining on a small-scale within the confines of the laws should be both justified and made conducive. This is because, most Ghanaians who do small-scale mining usually live in very poor economic and social circumstances. Therefore, these masses should be given enough support from the state so as not to make partnering with illegal Chinese miners an option. Self-sufficiency (financially and logistically) for the Ghanaian masses in mining communities is key to eliminating illegal Chinese miners.

Fourthly, there are several societal implications of illegal Chinese mining in Ghana. Within the mining communities, there may often be increase in truancy and dropouts from schools due to the enticing prospects of gaining significant income from mining with the Chinese (Crawford et al., 2015). Again, there is often an increase in social vices like crime, armed robbery, and sadly teenage pregnancy in such mining communities (Crawford et al., 2015). Finally, the issue of illegal Chinese mining has often created societal tensions and divisions over how the media reports the case, the government’s response, and perceptions about issues of illegality, about which some think should apply to foreigners and not Ghanaians. There have often been clashes between local residents and illegal miners, often resulting in damages, injury, and sometimes death. Moreover, the government’s strikes on illegal miners (through the military) often divides society into different groups that have very sharp perspectives on the military approach, which sometimes results in the death of innocent citizens.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has essentially argued that the perplexing continuity of illegal Chinese mining in Ghana can be primarily understood by examining the efficacious role of local patrons. The paper attempted to offer a theoretical conceptualisation of the term ‘local patrons’ and suggested that the ordinary Ghanaian citizen in the mining community has enough knowledge on gold mining to become an effective partner with an economically powerful Chinese miner seeking gold in the country. Moreover, coupled with local patrons are some rich/powerful elites in both Ghana and China who help perpetuate illegal Chinese mining. Notably, this paper also made significant consideration about the economic hardships of both Ghanaian and Chinese citizens that may drive both parties to engage in illegal mining, and it is on this consideration that the following suggestions will be made.

First, there is the need to strengthen the state institutional mechanisms in Ghana and also in China. In Ghana, there has to be an awareness and demand for legal mining documentation before local patrons assist the Chinese to engage in small-scale mining. No legal documents from the Chinese, no partnership and or assistance from Ghanaians. This will help create a strong sense of citizenship and sense of national pride in Ghana. Equally, the Chinese state ought to check the credibility of Chinese citizens going overseas to conduct business to help reduce the anti-Chinese sentiment that has been created in many African states due to illegal activities by some Chinese nationals.

Secondly, in view of the disastrous effects of illegal Chinese mining especially on Ghana’s water bodies, the state elites, politicians, bureaucrats and immigration officers ought to strengthen the control mechanisms in checking the credibility of immigration and operation documents by incoming Chinese nationals. I mention elites and politicians because if these are not in agreement or oppose strong checks from immigration officers due to their personal interests, then there will be no success at all in curbing the menace of illegal Chinese mining in Ghana. Thus, everyone has a role to play, from the highest to the lowest office in the land.

Similarly, the military/security forces in the country must strive to independently do their job with integrity and no fear of any force from within or without. Evidence of military men taking bribes from illegal Chinese miners and even guarding their mining compounds does not help to build trust in the Ghanaian security forces. A little bit of independence and national pride to save the country from illegal miners (and any other acts against Ghana’s laws) should be imbibed into the Ghanaian military service.

Finally, the Minerals Commission should also endeavour to be on top of the issue of illegal Chinese mining by paying regular visits to mining sites and interrogating and prosecuting all those found in breach of its laws. In sum, stronger oversight and regulatory works could help to bring down or at least reduce to the barest minimum the menace of illegal Chinese mining.

Statehood and statesmanship is no easy task to build and work out. There are many hindrances that Ghanaian statesmen, civil servants, chiefs, and citizens face in endeavouring to build a strong state. Nevertheless, a little persistence and commitment to the rules of the game can help make illegal Chinese mining an issue of the past.

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