



Gilded shadows: unveiling the role of Chinese trading posts and transnational networks in fueling illegal gold mining in French Guiana

Recherches & Documents

N°13/2023

Simon Menet

Research fellow, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique

Antoine Bondaz

Research fellow, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique

September 2023

www.frstrategie.org

FONDATION
pour la **RECHERCHE**
STRATÉGIQUE

Summary

Illicit gold mining in French Guiana is a pressing national concern, presenting the authorities and the population with a complex and multifaceted challenge. This illicit activity not only undermines sovereignty but also serves as a catalyst for various illicit trafficking networks, exacerbating insecurity and disproportionately impacting the people of Guiana. The ongoing fight against this challenge, notably through Operation Harpie since 2008, has already resulted in the deaths of French soldiers, including two in 2023. Furthermore, repression operations cost 70 million euros annually, while the plundering of Guyanese soil represents a major economic loss for the local economy and public finances, estimated at over 500 million euros per year.

Illegal gold mining goes with serious health and environmental consequences. Mercury contamination and soil pollution directly affect French Amerindian populations, especially pregnant women and their children. The degradation of watercourses and rampant deforestation, particularly within the Amazonian Park of French Guiana, harm a unique ecosystem – a source of biodiversity, and a carbon sink.

While these illicit activities in French Guiana are mainly carried out by illegal Brazilian gold miners, known as *garimpeiros*, they are made possible by Chinese actors, whose role is essential albeit indirect. The 120 Chinese shops established along the Surinamese bank of the Maroni River play a key role in the logistics of gold mining by supplying equipment and daily necessities to the work sites and facilitating their financing. The transnational networks that accompany them facilitate the concealment and laundering of nearly ten tons of illegally extracted gold each year and are involved in various aspects of environmental crime, including wildlife trafficking. Chinese shops and networks ultimately enable the resilience of illegal gold miners, which detrimentally affects the state's action and goes against French interests.

The rise of these Chinese shops benefits from a favorable regional environment marked by shortcomings in the Surinamese state and increasing Chinese influence, with close ties established with certain Surinamese political elites and a monopoly in the trade sector of communities integrated into the economic fabric for decades.

The Guyanese case is part of a global phenomenon of resource predation by Chinese actors. In Ghana, Mali, Colombia, and Suriname, Chinese nationals are directly involved in illegal gold exploitation, sometimes encouraged or even supported by Chinese authorities. Beyond economic opportunism, Beijing seeks to increase its gold reserves to bolster the stability of the yuan and reduce its dependence on the dollar amid growing tensions with Washington.

It is necessary to improve understanding of both this phenomenon and its local consequences, and to better identify the role of these Chinese actors in illegal gold mining in French Guiana. This study represents a first step in this direction. It is based on observations and interviews conducted with all players involved in the fight against illegal gold mining during a field

mission in French Guiana and Suriname in early 2023, as well as several months of research in open sources, including in the Chinese language.

The authors would like to thank all the actors of the state and civil society in French Guiana as well as the diplomatic post in Paramaribo. Their work is indispensable in combating the scourge of illegal gold mining on national territory.

Chinese trading posts along the Maroni and active gold mining sites

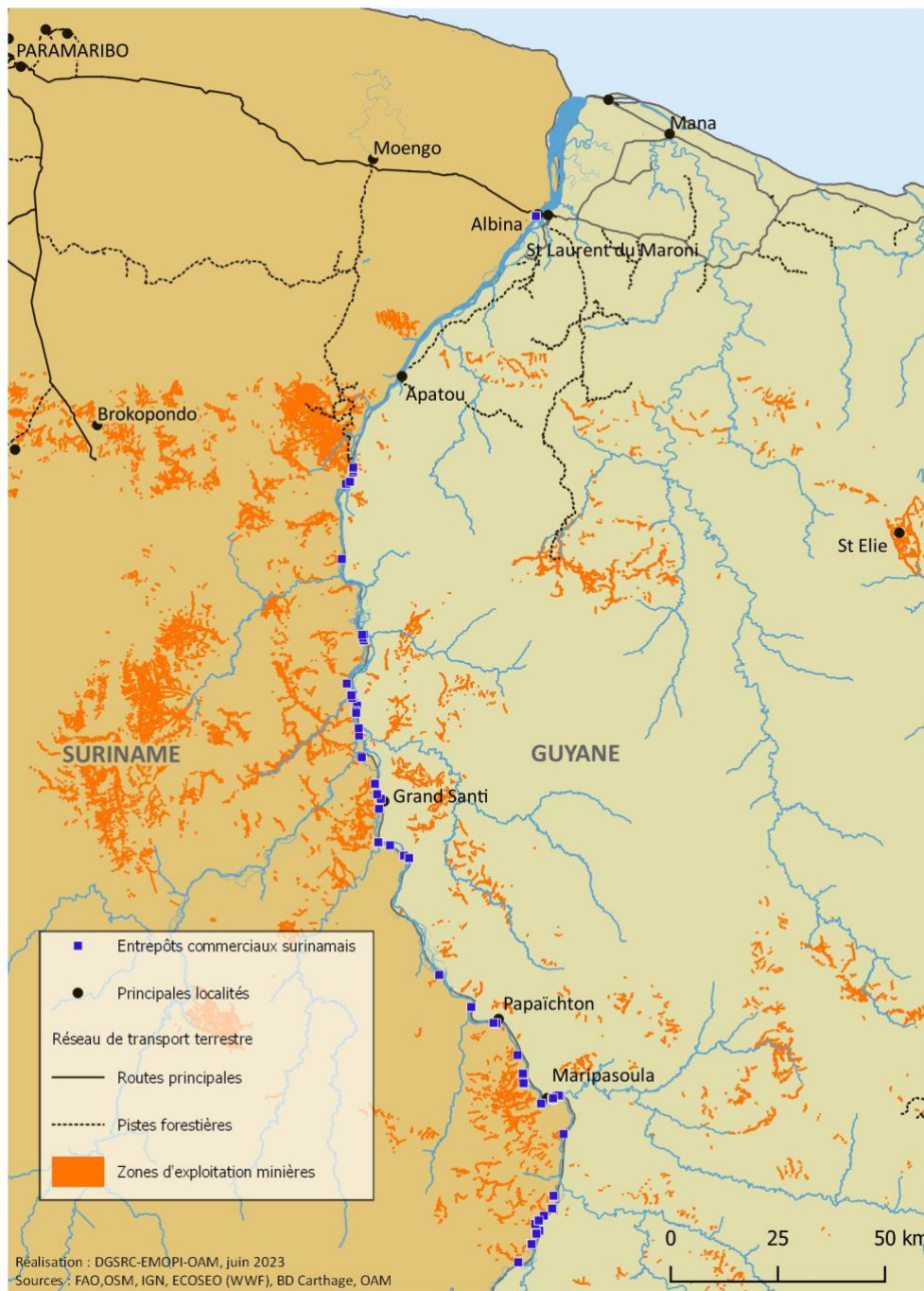


TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY 1

INTRODUCTION..... 4

1. THE PREDATION OF MINERAL RESOURCES BY CHINESE ACTORS: A GLOBAL PHENOMENON 5

1.1. The strategic importance of mineral resources for Beijing 5

1.2. The growing Chinese footprint in illegal gold mining worldwide 8

1.3. Chinese illegal gold mining activities and environmental crime convergence 10

2. CHINESE TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS AND INFLUENCE: A FAVORABLE REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT..... 13

2.1. Transnational linkages between Suriname and French Guiana 13

2.2. A tightening grip on key economic sectors 17

2.3. China’s diplomatic and political levers in Suriname 20

3. LOGISTICS AND GOLD FLOWS: A CRUCIAL CATALYST FOR ILLEGAL GOLD MINING IN FRENCH GUIANA 22

3.1. The vital role of Chinese trading posts along the Maroni 23

3.2. The robust supply chains behind French Guiana’s illegal gold mining 28

3.3. Outflows and modus operandi of gold laundering 31

CONCLUSION 35

Gilded shadows: unveiling the role of Chinese trading posts and transnational networks in fueling illegal gold mining in French Guiana

Introduction

Illegal gold mining in French Guiana is a matter of national interest. The fight against this scourge costs the state a minimum of 70 million euros each year, while the plundering of several tons of gold represents a loss of over 500 million euros for the local economy and public finances. Beyond the economic harm, which is all the more detrimental that the department already has one of the lowest standards of living in France, this is a significant infringement on French sovereignty and a major environmental and health challenge, especially for the Amerindian populations.

Within the Guyanese gold crescent, the “Western façade” encompasses the vast majority of illegal gold mining sites. Nearly 80 percent of alluvial operations are located there. Most of these activities take place just a few tens of kilometers from the Maroni River. Due to the high porosity along the border between the French department and Suriname, the river and its surroundings have become a crucial logistical artery.

This transformation of the illegal gold mining ecosystem coincides with the increasing involvement of Chinese actors in the region. Nearly 120 Chinese traders now provide illegal Brazilian gold miners, known as *garimpeiros*, with a continuous supply of mining equipment and everyday products. This ongoing support to the 300 illegal sites active in French Guiana sustains their resilience and hinders the action of security forces within the framework of the “Harpie” operation launched in 2008. Since these traders are paid in gold, they also participate, at least indirectly, in the financing of illegal gold mining, the laundering of gold extracted from the forest, and the predation of mineral resources in French Guiana and neighboring Suriname.

The presence of Chinese actors in illegal gold mining on the French territory is not an isolated phenomenon. There are numerous precedents in Latin America and Africa, with some cases involving direct participation of Chinese individuals in illegal gold extraction. The establishment of shops along the Maroni coincides with a favorable regional situation, marked by the presence of long-established and influential Chinese communities, both economically and politically, as well as a deteriorated economic and political environment on both sides of the river.

This study aims to better understand and assess the role of Chinese actors in illegal gold mining in French Guiana. To do so, it examines the global phenomenon of resource predation by Chinese actors, in which the Guianese case fits (1); it analyzes the drivers of Chinese influence in Suriname and Guiana (2); and it identifies the main logistical aspects, with the

central role of Chinese shops along the Maroni and transnational networks established around Suriname (3).

The information gathered in this report is based primarily on observations and interviews conducted with all stakeholders in the fight against illegal gold mining during a field mission in French Guiana and Suriname in January-February 2023, as well as several months of open source research in Chinese, including official websites, academic articles, media, and social networks.

1. The predation of mineral resources by Chinese actors: a global phenomenon

The involvement of Chinese players in illegal gold mining in French Guiana is not unprecedented and is part of a global context of resource capture and predation, encouraged or facilitated by the Chinese government. These activities encompass not only gold but also bau-xite, iron ore, and certain critical metals extracted outside of China.

While the majority of these efforts are legal and mostly driven by market logic, a significant proportion of them rely on illegal practices. In Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, cases of Chinese actors directly or indirectly involved in illegal gold mining are on the rise.

The expansion of resource predation activities benefits from both an ambiguous stance by Chinese authorities and organized transnational criminal networks that engage in a wide spectrum of environmental crimes, including illegal gold mining, wildlife trafficking, illegal logging, and more.

1.1. The strategic importance of mineral resources for Beijing

The People's Republic of China (PRC) plays a central role in the global mining industry and markets. Between 2005 and 2010, it accounted for 80 percent of the world's increase in demand for metals.¹ It is, for example, the largest importer of bauxite and iron ore, essential to meet the country's substantial needs for infrastructure, industry, and defense.²

The gold sector holds particular strategic importance for the Chinese regime. China has been the world's largest gold producer since 2007, representing approximately 10 percent of global production in 2022. It has also been the world's largest gold consumer since 2013, surpassing India, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In 2022, 27 percent of the global demand for gold jewelry came from China. As for gold bars and coins, demand has skyrocke-

¹ "Going global: Chinese natural resource policies and their impacts on Latin America", *OFSE Briefing Paper*, 2019.

² Simon Menet, "Terrain minier. Une expansion à risque des intérêts chinois en Guinée", *Recherches & Documents*, FRS, July 2022.

ted, rising from 12 tons in 2004 to 218 in 2022.³ According to some estimates, the PRC may have acquired up to 10 percent of the world's gold stock.⁴

Apart from cultural traditions, such as Lunar New Year gifts, and the needs of the Chinese industry for electronic component production, these figures can be explained by the growing appetite of the People's Bank of China (PBOC), which seeks to diversify its foreign exchange reserves by reducing its reliance on the US dollar and to strengthen the stability of the yuan. By the end of February 2023, the Central bank's gold reserves had risen to 2,000 tons, according to Chinese authorities.⁵ However, several analysts believe that these official figures fall short of the actual holdings. Some estimate that by the end of 2022, the PBOC held a gold stock of 4,309 tons, which would make China the world's second-largest national gold reserve.⁶ When adding private gold holdings, encouraged by Beijing and estimated at 24,000 tons, there could be over 28,000 tons of gold in China.⁷

The gradual capture of gold by the PRC is made possible by a high-level strategy to acquire mineral resources. For Beijing, these resources are not merely economic assets; they are fundamental to national security. Specifically, resource security stands as one of the key pillars in Xi Jinping's "comprehensive national security concept" (总体国家安全).⁸ The Chinese leader reaffirmed this emphasis in his speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party (CPC) in October 2022, where he called for "*firmly guaranteeing the security of state power, institutional security, and ideological security, strengthening the development of security capabilities in key areas, and ensuring the food and energy resources security and important industrial supply chains.*"⁹

Before that, Xi Jinping had already emphasized, in an important letter addressed to geologists from a brigade in the Shandong province, who were responsible for the discovery of a geological reserve of 2,000 tons of gold, that "*mineral resources constitute an important material foundation for economic and social development, and the exploration and exploitation of mineral resources are matters of national planning and security.*"¹⁰

In practice, this prioritization of resource security has translated into increased attention to prospecting, exploration, and mining site development, increased investments, and strategic adjustments to the industrial structure domestically. Beijing has notably encouraged Chinese companies to invest abroad through political support or incentives, within the framework of

³ "Gold demand bounces back to shine bright again", [China Daily](#), February 2, 2023.

⁴ Figures quoted in the non-public report by Antoine Dutta Gupta, "La présence chinoise au Suriname : le rôle déterminant des commerces du Maroni dans l'approvisionnement des orpailleurs illégaux et la captation de l'or extrait", EMOPI, August 2022.

⁵ "Gold optimizes reserves portfolio", [China.org.cn](#), March 14, 2023.

⁶ Jan Nieuwenhuijs, "China's Central Bank Likely Owns 4,309 Tons Of Gold, More Than Double What Is Officially Disclosed", [nxtmine](#), February 27, 2023.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Katja Drinhausen, Helena Legarda, "Comprehensive National Security Unleashed: How Xi's approach shapes China's policies at home and abroad", [Merics](#), September 15, 2022.

⁹ "Summary of my country's gold industry's efforts to ensure the safety of gold resources in 2022" (2022 年我国黄金行业全力保障黄金资源安全综述), [China Gold Association](#), January 30, 2023.

¹⁰ "General Secretary Xi Jinping's important reply letter to all geologists in the Sixth Geological Brigade of Shandong Provincial Bureau of Geology and Mineral Resources has aroused enthusiastic response in the gold industry" (习近平总书记给山东省地矿局第六地质大队全体地质工作者重要回信在黄金行业引发热烈反响), [China Gold Net](#), October 11, 2022.

the “going out” policy initiated in the early 2000s,¹¹ and later through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by Xi Jinping in 2013 and implemented since 2015.¹²

One of the emblematic cases is Zijin Mining (紫金矿业), the largest gold producer and one of the 3 largest copper producers in China. Established in 1993, the mining group is listed on the Hong Kong financial market and partly owned by Chinese and Emirati capital.¹³ It is led by Chen Jinghe (陈景河), who is also the vice-president of the China Gold Association (中国黄金协会), the president of the China Mining Federation (中国矿业联合会), and a former representative of Fujian Province in the National People’s Congress – the Chinese parliament – from 2003 to 2018.

Logo of Zijin Mining Subsidiary in Suriname



In recent years, Zijin has invested in mining projects in twelve countries along the BRI, including several copper mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a copper and gold mine in Serbia, and gold mines in Tajikistan. Additionally, in February 2023, Zijin acquired a world-class gold mine in production in Suriname for \$401 million. This significant operation includes the purchase of IAMGOLD’s 95 percent stake in Rosebel Gold Mines N.V., which owns the Rosebel gold mine, and a 70 percent stake in the Saramacca mine.¹⁴

While these investments reflect Zijin’s ambition to become a “world-class mining company”, they also align with the Chinese regime’s desire to secure its supply of mineral resources. Chen Jinghe thus affirmed that *“the overseas development of the company must not only pay attention to the resource endowment effect but also to the strategic orientation of the government and consciously combine the development of the company with national strategy.”*¹⁵ However, these links between Beijing’s resource capture strategy and foreign mining investments are problematic, especially when they, in some cases, include illicit behavior.

It increasingly appears that Chinese nationals are directly involved in illegal gold mining activities in several African or South American countries, blurring the boundary between resource

¹¹ “Lei Yalin: Current Situation and Countermeasures of my Country’s Mineral Resources Security” (雷涯邻: 我国矿产资源安全现状与对策), [Sina Finance](#), August 2, 2006.

¹² “Comprehensively Improve the Supply Guarantee Ability of my country’s Primary Products” (全面提高我国初级产品供给保障能力), [National Development and Reform Commission](#), March 7, 2023. Also see: Yu Hongyuan, “Mineral Security and Resource Strategy in the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’” (矿产资源安全与“一带一路”矿产资源风险应对), [Pacific Journal](#), 2018.

¹³ Sovereign wealth fund Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) acquired a 0.62 percent minority stake in Zijin Mining at the end of 2022, making it one of the ten largest shareholders.

¹⁴ Shi Yimin, Luo Guoping, Han Wei, “Zijin Completes \$360 Million Suriname Gold Mine Purchase”, [Caixin](#), February 3, 2023 ; “Zijin Mining to acquire world-class producing gold mine in Suriname”, [Zijin Mining](#), October 20, 2022.

¹⁵ “Zijin Mining: Demonstrating the responsibility of Fujian enterprises in the joint construction of the ‘Belt and Road’” (紫金矿业: 在共建“一带一路”中彰显闽企担当), [Fujian Network](#), June 25, 2021.

capture and predation, between state-sponsored strategic investment and economic opportunism by individuals or criminal groups.

1.2. The growing Chinese footprint in illegal gold mining worldwide

Rather than a purely local problem, illegal gold mining in French Guiana is part of a global pattern of predation on gold resources, notably by Chinese nationals. Alongside the increasing investments of Chinese mining companies abroad, other illicit or informal channels have developed on several continents.

Research shows a multiplication of cases of illegal gold mining directly or indirectly involving Chinese actors in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Myanmar), in Latin America (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Suriname), as well as in at least 14 African countries.¹⁶

In Mali, for instance, Chinese gold miners are very active on primary and alluvial sites that keep growing. The country reportedly has over a million artisanal miners, spread across about 350 gold sites that produce ten to fifteen tons of gold a year.¹⁷ While it is difficult to estimate their number, frequent arrests of Chinese workers by Malian authorities suggest a significant presence.¹⁸ Several pieces of equipment (excavators, motor pumps, generators, etc.) have been seized, showing a semi-industrial and mechanized gold mining method contrary to local practices. Operations by Malian security forces initiated in 2021 reportedly dismantled several dozen sites and arrested more than a hundred illegal gold miners, mostly of Chinese origin. At the same time, they have led to a growth of the Chinese presence in neighboring countries like Senegal and Guinea, where borders are very porous.¹⁹ In November 2022, the Guinean government tried to curb the rising illegal gold mining in the southeast of the country by closing several sites.²⁰ According to local media, Chinese nationals were illegally mining gold there with nearly 250 machines, with the help of the local population.²¹

From these three cases, it appears that Chinese actors in the area mainly operate according to a gold basin logic that disregards borders. This transnational operation is facilitated by a context of degraded state governance and control and well-established Chinese networks. Investigations on Chinese social networks show that most of the Chinese gold miners in the area come from Shanglin County (上林县), in the Guangxi autonomous province.

This region of southeastern China is known for its long gold mining tradition. A Chinese saying goes, *“Where there are restaurants, there are Chinese; and where there is gold, there are*

¹⁶ The countries concerned include: Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

¹⁷ “Mali : des orpailleurs chinois accusés d’avoir exploité illégalement et pollué le fleuve Falémé”, [France 24](#), March 26, 2021.

¹⁸ Nearly 50 Chinese miners were arrested by the Malian authorities in February and December 2022, as well as in March 2023.

¹⁹ In Senegal, three Chinese individuals linked to the Taiji Investment Group were sentenced to prison terms in March 2022. In the same month, Senegalese gendarmes dismantled a website operated by Chinese nationals based in Mali.

²⁰ “Guinée : fermeture de plusieurs exploitations artisanales d’or dans le sud-est”, [China Internet Information Center](#), November 30, 2022.

²¹ Youssouf Keita, “Siguiri : les sites d’exploitation minière sont envahis par les Chinois, plus de 250 machines dans les brousses (direction préfectorale des Mines)”, [Média Guinée](#), November 5, 2022.

people from Shanglin” (有餐馆的地方就有中国人, 有金子的地方就有上林人).²² Historically, gold miners from Shanglin had migrated *en masse* to the Heilongjiang province in northeast China. Due to some restrictions, they later turned to Ghana, emigrating in several waves in the 1990s-2000s. Between 2005 and 2013, over 50,000 Chinese miners reportedly arrived in the country, most from Shanglin. It is estimated that the actual share of production from small-scale mines controlled by Shanglin nationals could reach 40 percent in 2011, given that this type of gold mining represented 30 percent of Ghana’s national gold production at that time.²³

The rise of the “Shanglin gang” (上林帮) in Ghana can be attributed to several factors:

- **A mutual interest alliance between local landowners and Shanglin miners**, on which they rely to obtain mining licenses in exchange for interests (about 10-12 percent of the mine’s capital). Several studies highlight the key role of Ghanaian elites or businessmen in the successful establishment of Chinese miners,²⁴ as confirmed indirectly by the Chinese ambassador to Ghana in an interview in 2019: “*Why don’t the Chinese practice illegal mining in South Africa, where there’s also a lot of gold? It’s not possible because the local people don’t support us. In Ghana, however, some locals help the few Chinese who practice illegal mining.*”²⁵
- **Support from local Chinese authorities.** A 2013 New York Times investigation revealed that Shanglin authorities encouraged the county’s historically poor population’s gold rush to Ghana by facilitating equipment shipping and obtaining passports.²⁶ They also dispatched a delegation when the crackdown on illegal Chinese miners began in Ghana, alongside diplomatic efforts from the central government in Beijing. In June 2013, China deployed an interministerial task force (foreign affairs, trade, and public security) in Ghana to manage the return of Chinese citizens suspected of illegal gold mining.²⁷ Indicating a somewhat ambiguous stance of the Chinese authorities on this matter, the rhetoric of the Chinese officials in the delegation was centered on protecting the rights and interests of their nationals and the role of Ghanaians in illegal gold mining.
- **A highly organized human, logistical, and financial network.** “*Almost every household in Shanglin is involved in gold mining in Ghana*”, says a Chinese journalist, suggesting that locals bring over their relatives, attracted by the lure of profit.²⁸ The settling in

²² “Guangxi Shanglin Gang’ Ghana Gold Rush Story: Holding Gold in Hands and Embracing Black Wife” (广西上林帮“加纳淘金记: 手捧黄金 怀抱黑妻), Guangming, May 15, 2013.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Nathaniel Ocuaye, “Explaining the Persistence of Illegal Chinese Mining in Ghana: The Efficacious Role of Local Patrons”, *LSE-GSU Working Paper*, 2023.

²⁵ “Don’t blame Chinese for galamsey, blame Ghanaians – Ambassador”, *Starrfm*, 2019.

²⁶ Dan Levin, “Ghana’s Crackdown on Chinese Gold Miners Hits One Rural Area Hard”, *New York Times*, June 29, 2013.

²⁷ “Chinese Working Group Arrives in Ghana to Handle Matters Related to Persons Suspected of Illegal Gold Mining” (中国工作组抵加纳处理涉嫌非法采金人员相关事宜), *Xinhua*, June 12, 2013.

²⁸ According to a Chinese source, the arrival of Shanglin’s gold miners in Ghana worked in cycles. For example, eight miners would come to work on a site. After about three months’ work, they would become site bosses, and when they returned to Shanglin, each would recruit eight more. And so on. For more details, see “The Ghana Gold Rush Story: Riches and Deaths on the ‘Gold Coast’” (加纳淘金故事: “黄金海岸”上的暴富和死亡), Jizhou Gongzuo Shi (WeChat), April 22, 2020.

Ghana is then facilitated by businessmen from Shanglin, well connected to local authorities.²⁹ The hometowns of Shanglin gold miners have become hubs for gold mining equipment (excavator, water cannons, etc.), which are gathered there before being shipped to Shenzhen and then dispatched to Ghana. Some equipment even comes from Guangxi, like excavators from the industry giant, LiuGong Group (柳工集团). In addition to this key logistical role, Shanglin serves as a financial platform for gold miners. According to a source within the Guangxi branch of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) cited by the Guangming Daily, the county saw more than one billion in foreign deposits flow into its financial system between May and June 2011, alarming the central authorities.

Despite several years of operations by Ghanaian law enforcement, Chinese illegal gold mining not only persisted but also spread to other African countries. There are now traces of the Shanglin gang in Ivory Coast, DRC, or Central African Republic, where nine Chinese miners were killed in March 2023. Xi Jinping personally condemned the killing and called on Central African authorities to “*severely punish the murderers.*”³⁰

In Zimbabwe, Chinese nationals have become influential players in the gold sector, aided by partnerships with the country’s political and military elites. According to a source cited by the NGO Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), “*the Chinese have the audacity to tell compliance officials that they are ‘small boys’*”.³¹ Like in Ghana, Chinese nationals are involved in gold mining and equipment supply. Their stores sell everything needed for small-scale artisanal gold mining, including mercury believed to come from China. They also own the gold processing facilities, further consolidating their dominant position.

Beyond their geographical, political, or socio-economic specifics, these different cases show large-scale predation on gold resources by Chinese nationals – whether supported by the Chinese state or not – which cannot be disentangled from the specific situation in French Guiana. This global logic is even more critical for the fight against illegal gold mining on French territory as it combines with a web of illicit activities, especially in environmental crime, within which many Chinese criminal networks thrive.

1.3. Chinese illegal gold mining activities and environmental crime convergence

The issue of illegal gold mining cannot be viewed in isolation from other criminal activities. Often, the actors involved, including those of Chinese origin, belong to organized criminal networks and engage in other illicit activities: money laundering, arms trafficking, timber trafficking, wildlife trafficking, etc. This accumulation of criminal activities is particularly

²⁹ “The real experience of the first generation of Ghanaian gold rushers in Africa: At the peak of gold mining, money flows like water” (第一代非洲加纳淘金上林人的真实经历：黄金开采高峰，钱就像水一样流动), Shanglin Network (WeChat), July 23, 2016.

³⁰ “Xi Condemns Killings in African Nation Where Russian and Chinese Interests Compete”, [New York Times](#), March 20, 2023.

³¹ Marcena Hunter *et al.*, “Illicit Gold Markets in East and Southern Africa”, [GI-TOC](#), May 2021.

Mr. Chen showing off jaguar fangs on his social media account (source: Douyin)



PROFILE 2: Mr. Wei is also a Chinese national engaged in gold mining activities in Suriname. He works alongside local employees at primary and alluvial sites, where other Chinese are present. The harvested gold appears to be resold to businesses owned by individuals of Chinese origin, such as Goldsky NV or Century Mining NV (see section 3.3.).

Like Chen, Mr. Wei’s Douyin profile shows that he partakes in a range of illicit activities. He owns firearms, including large caliber weapons. He even uses them during shooting sessions in the wild. He keeps monkeys in captivity and hunts wild animals such as monkeys and jaguars. He also seems to be connected to the illicit extraction of wood in Suriname.

These various cases fit into the context of a proven Chinese criminal presence in Suriname, particularly in the field of environmental crime. A 2022 study by the Los Angeles-based NGO Earth League International (ELI) revealed the existence of two powerful Chinese wild species trafficking networks in the country:³³

- The first – known as SA1 – is a multi-goods criminal network made up of Chinese individuals operating from several Latin American countries. It is involved in illegal gold mining, wildlife and timber trafficking, money laundering, and human trafficking. It is believed to have links with Chinese, Venezuelan, Colombian, and Brazilian mafia groups, as well as major Surinamese timber, gold, and stone companies.
- The second criminal network – known as SA18 – is based in Suriname. It is connected to the “Putian gang” (莆田帮), the South American branch of a mafia from the Fujian province, which is based in Bolivia and Argentina, where it manages casinos among other types of businesses. It participates in wildlife trafficking and money laundering.

³³ Andrea Crosta *et al.*, “The Criminal Networks Behind Jaguar Trafficking: Research Crime Convergence to Better Understand and Combat Jaguar Trafficking”, [Earth League International](#), 2022.

According to ELI, all its members have U.S. visas and frequently travel to and from the United States – like Mr. Chen (see above). The network can launder half a million dollars a day.

Supermarkets, jewelry stores, and other shops run by Chinese retailers may serve as fronts for these traffics, while social networks – like Facebook or WeChat – are used to advertise the products. Trafficking between Suriname and China is typically done by air through the Netherlands and, more rarely, through the United States.³⁴ However, with increased police checks at Suriname’s airports in recent years,³⁵ other routes are now used. Banned jaguar products are transported by bus and sometimes by logging trucks, where they are hidden in trunks. They can also be smuggled on large container ships managed by Chinese shipping companies. Traffickers also use smaller boats, uncontrolled waterways to discreetly transport jaguar products to Guyana or French Guiana. These transit routes are established thanks to the close relationships that criminal networks maintain with Surinamese police and customs.

Given the interconnectedness of these environmental crimes, studying the *modus operandi* of these groups provides valuable information about potential flows of illegally extracted gold (see section 3.3.). It also reveals a transnational and organized system that directly affects French Guiana and overlaps with Chinese networks on both sides of the Maroni River.

2. Chinese transnational networks and influence: a favorable regional environment

The increasing involvement of Chinese actors in the illegal gold mining ecosystem in French Guiana has been facilitated by a favorable regional context that goes beyond the scope of organized crime alone. The Chinese shops established on the Surinamese bank of the Maroni, which enable illegal gold mining on French territory, take advantage of the long-standing local foothold of Chinese communities. These communities have developed in Suriname and French Guiana over generations and now hold a near-monopoly in certain key economic sectors. The shops also benefit from Chinese economic and political influence in the region, especially the close ties between Surinamese and Chinese political elites.

2.1. Transnational linkages between Suriname and French Guiana

Suriname boasts some of the largest Chinese diasporas in the Caribbean. During president Bouterse’s second term, between 2015 and 2020, they reportedly reached nearly 60,000 people, accounting for about 10 percent of the country’s population. These numbers have significantly decreased since, largely due to the deterioration of the country’s economic situation in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Estimates from the Chinese Embassy in Suriname suggest a current Chinese-origin population of around 20,000 people.

³⁴ “Stroperij En Illegale Handel In Bolivia En Suriname Vormen Serieuze Bedreiging Voor Soorten”, [One World](#), January 25, 2019.

³⁵ “Jaguar-tanden bij vertrekkende reizigers aangetroffen”, [Star Nieuws](#), February 13, 2018.

Despite this decline, the Chinese diasporas in Suriname are old and well-established. The first Chinese migrants arrived in the country in the mid-19th century to work on Surinamese plantations before settling down by establishing initial trades. They are mainly of Hakka origin and come from the southern regions of China. After a certain slowdown, Suriname experienced a new wave of migrants in the 1990s. During this period, nearly 40,000 Chinese nationals, some of them arriving illegally, settled in the country. They mainly come from the cities of Wenzhou and Qingtian in the Zhejiang province, and from Fujian and Guangdong. They are involved both in the formal economy, through neighborhood stores and supermarkets, or as goldsmiths, and in the informal economy, where they act as middlemen and creditors, for example.³⁶

While most of them are engaged in trade-related activities, a number of Chinese – mainly from the provinces of Fujian and Guangdong – work in the gold extraction sector. This presence is made even easier by the reliance on interpersonal and geographical ties and common practices within Chinese communities such as the “tontine” (和会), *i.e.*, an informal loan between the beneficiary and their entourage, with or without interest.

The Chinese community organizations based in Suriname also play a key role. Open source data indicates that at least 26 organizations operate within the country. Most are founded based on the origin of Chinese migrants and their specific sectors, with trade being the predominant sector represented. The oldest and most significant among them are Kong Ngie Tong Sang (广义堂) and Chung Fa Foei Kon (中华会馆), established respectively in 1880 and 1928.

Headquarters of Chinese community associations Chung Fa Foei Kon and Ngie Tong Sang in Paramaribo, Suriname (source: FRS)



³⁶ “China and Suriname: The virtuous circle of China’s two globalizations”, in Theodor Tudoroiu, *China’s Globalization from Below Chinese Entrepreneurial Migrants and the Belt and Road Initiative*, Routledge, 2021.

More recent organizations include the Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce (浙江商会), the Dongguan Association (东莞同乡会), and the Suriname Chinese United Association (苏里南华侨华人社团联合总会, SCUA). The latter was established in 2010 under the initiative of Yuan Nansheng (袁南生), then Chinese Ambassador to Suriname, to unify the Chinese diasporas. Touted as the “light of the Chinese community” (华社之光), it brings together 14 Chinese associations and chambers of commerce.³⁷ Some of these organizations even have their Mandarin media, such as the *Xunnan Daily* (海南日报) and the *Chung Fa Daily* (苏里南中华日报).

The role of these community organizations is crucial in the growth of the Chinese presence in Suriname. They promote Chinese economic interests in the country and help protect their citizens by liaising with Surinamese authorities. Simultaneously, they are essential conduits for Chinese authorities, for coordination or control. Known activities of Kong Ngie Tong Sang include regular meetings with Chinese diplomats in Suriname, public stances that follow the Party’s line,³⁸ and interactions with officials linked to the United Front Department (统战部) of the CCP, a key organ responsible for controlling and influencing Chinese nationals outside the Party, both within and outside of China. In August 2019, for example, a delegation from the United Front Department of Longgang district, Shenzhen city, visited the Kong Ngie Tong Sang headquarters.³⁹ Indicative of Beijing’s influence over the various leaders of the Chinese communities, leaders from Kong Ngie Tong Sang, SCUA, and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Suriname (华侨商会) participated in the “7th Global Conference of Overseas Chinese Associations” in 2014, an event organized by the United Front Department.⁴⁰ In 2015, the president of Chung Fa Foei Kun, Li Xuexiong (李学雄), was invited by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council to attend the military parade commemorating the “70th Anniversary of the victory of the Chinese people’s anti-Japanese war and the global anti-fascist war” in Beijing.⁴¹

The development of Chinese communities in French Guiana mirrors that of Suriname, showcasing similar migration trends and a comparable ecosystem. With a history of emigration dating back to 1898, the Chinese diasporas have solidified their presence in French Guiana over generations. Throughout the 20th century, migrants from Longgang, Bao’an, Dongguan, and Huizhou in the Guangdong province, Cantonese and Hakkas from Hong Kong – mainly restaurant owners – and traders from Qingtian and Jinhua, in Zhejiang province, migrated there.⁴² The population of Chinese origin now counts about 8,000 people, most of

³⁷ “Liu Quan, the Chinese ambassador to Suriname, went to Suriname Overseas Chinese Federation for investigation and investigation” (驻苏里南大使刘全赴苏里南华侨华人联合总会调研考察), [PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), November 23, 2018.

³⁸ In August 2022, the association was among the signatories of a press release condemning Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan.

³⁹ “A Delegation from the United Front Work Department of Longgang District, Shenzhen, visited Suriname” (深圳市龙岗区统战部代表团到访苏里南), [Chungfa Daily](#), August 28, 2019.

⁴⁰ “Ambassador Yang Zigang Meets with Representatives of the Overseas Chinese Community in Suriname Attending the ‘Seventh World Conference of Overseas Chinese Associations’” (杨子刚大使会见出席“第七届世界华侨华人社团联谊大会”的苏里南侨界代表), [PRC Embassy in Suriname](#), July 1, 2014.

⁴¹ “Introduction to Suriname Chinese United Association” (苏里南中华会馆简介), Chung Fa Foei Kon, December 7, 2017.

⁴² Isabelle Dubost, “Chinois de Guyane et de Martinique : des mobilités sans cesse retravaillées”, *Recherches Haïtiano-Antillaises*, 2019; “Overseas Chinese business in French Guiana is booming” (法属圭亚那华人华侨生意兴隆), [Duoxian News](#), April 18, 2013.

them French nationals.⁴³ Approximately 800-900 people are settled in Saint-Laurent du Maroni, according to official figures.

While Chinese settlement was certainly fueled by the arrival of relatives to work in the businesses and family reunification, it was also driven by economic opportunism, facilitated by a well-documented mutual assistance system and networks. Anthropologist Isabelle Dubost's research, supported by Chinese sources, highlights the key role of one of the first migrants from Zhejiang, Guo Shenghua (郭胜华), in creating an immigration stream in French Guiana. Since his arrival in Cayenne in 1976, the businessman from Qingtian is believed to have been responsible for the arrival of no fewer than 300 people in the department. He invited "schoolmates" from his hometown to join him and facilitated their settlement through a tacit contract, similar to the "tontine" system: their journey is paid for, but in return, they must work for several years in his merchandise import business; if they want to start their business, Guo Shenghua grants them a loan in exchange for exclusive supply from him. Although his businesses are still active in Guiana, including his company SARL Amitiés Groupe, Guo returned to China a few years ago, where he maintains significant influence. Described as "a non-governmental ambassador of China" by Chinese media, he is a member of the Zhejiang Provincial Committee within the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) – an institution affiliated with the United Front system – and executive vice-president of the Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce.⁴⁴

Beyond these interpersonal links, the Chinese communities in French Guiana have developed thanks to a robust transnational network with Suriname. Chinese diasporas on both sides of the Maroni River generally belong to similar geographic basins (Longgang, Dongguan, Qingtian, etc.). Some Chinese nationals arrived in French territory directly from Suriname, including to escape the country during the civil war from 1986 to 1992. Chinese community organizations in Guiana were also established with support from those based in Suriname.

This is particularly the case for the Fa Kiao Kon So (华侨公所) association, founded in 1957 with the help of the Kong Ngie Tong Sang association. It is one of the oldest and most important Chinese associations in French Guiana, with nearly 350 regular members who pay dues. According to Chinese sources, it may have over 4,500 members. Long chaired by Joseph Ho Cho Shu (何祖树) – a businessman from the Henggang district (Shenzhen) –, the association is now chaired by his son, André Ho. It is a living place for members of the Chinese communities, where they can learn Chinese, engage in sports activities, and handle administrative procedures. Like in Suriname, it is also a go-between for the Guianese authorities and a preferred contact for Chinese authorities. This is evident, for example, in its partnership with the Shenzhen municipal government⁴⁵ and the visits of successive Chinese ambassadors stationed in Suriname and France in 2009, 2011, and 2018.

⁴³ Estimates made by the Chinese communities.

⁴⁴ "Guo Shenghua" (郭胜华), Zhejiang Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, July 9, 2009.

⁴⁵ "Overseas Chinese Leaders from French Guiana Visited Shenzhen and Appointed as Advisory Director of the Maritime Trade Fair" (法属圭亚那侨领访问深圳 受聘市海交会顾问理事), Shenzhen Overseas Chinese Press, November 9, 2007.

Fa Kiao Kon So association building in Cayenne (source: WeChat)



Other leading community organizations include the Jiang Zhe Hu Association (法属圭亚那江浙沪联合会), founded in 1993 under the initiative of Guo Shenghua, and the Saint Fa Foei Kon (or Sing Fa Kon So) Association. The latter unites the Chinese from Saint-Laurent du Maroni and Mana and maintains ties with the Chung Fa Foei Kon Association, based in Suriname. In 2009, the Chinese Dongguan Association in French Guiana (东莞同乡会) was inaugurated in Cayenne in the presence of the Chinese Ambassador to Suriname, Yuan Nansheng.⁴⁶

Behind this transnational operation – a recurrent process in the migration of Chinese diasporas –, a significant economic influence has been built. In both French Guiana and Suriname, Chinese actors have strengthened their grip on entire sectors of the economy, managing to achieve a monopoly in the trade sector.

2.2. A tightening grip on key economic sectors

The Chinese communities have a disproportionate economic weight in French Guiana. While they account for less than 3 percent of the Guyanese population, they contribute to 25 percent of the total tax revenue of the department.⁴⁷

In Cayenne, most of the businesses located at street intersections are owned by members of the Chinese communities.⁴⁸ They own the majority of the groceries and bazaars in the territory, like the “Fa Fa Fa Cayenne” or “Orient Shopping” stores, located in the heart of Cayenne and owned by people from Zhejiang province. They also own many import-export

⁴⁶ “Yuan Nansheng, Ambassador to Suriname, Attends the Establishment Ceremony of the Dongguan Association of France and Guiana” (驻苏里南大使袁南生出席法圭东莞同乡会成立仪式), PRC Embassy in Suriname, December 9, 2009.

⁴⁷ “Overseas Chinese business in French Guiana is booming” (法属圭亚那华人华侨生意兴隆), [Duoxian News](#), April 18, 2013.

⁴⁸ Interview conducted by the authors with local officials in Cayenne, French Guiana.

companies, warehouses, and major brands, including those of the French retail group, Groupe U.

In Suriname, the trade sector has also been gradually taken over by Chinese communities. It is estimated that in Suriname nine out of ten businesses are run by Chinese actors.⁴⁹ Products are typically imported from China and then resold on the local market with significant markups. According to UN Comtrade data, Surinamese imports from China – estimated at \$276 million in 2021 – primarily consist of machinery (crushers, refrigerators, pumps, vehicles, etc.), products made of metals, plastics and rubber, and textiles. Not all imports are registered though, as some of the trade flow is informal or illicit.

While Chinese businesses represent a large part of the Chinese economic presence in the country, they do not constitute the entirety of Chinese investments in the country. According to figures from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, complemented by data available from open sources, there are about thirty companies active in key sectors of the Surinamese market.

In terms of infrastructure, the China Dalian International Group (中国大连国际经济技术合作集团, CDIG), or Dalian Corporation (大连公司), has been present in Suriname since 1999. It has constructed over 1,300 km of roads, including the one connecting Paramaribo to the airport, and nearly 650 residences.⁵⁰ In 2018, the company began phase IV of its “Suriname National Infrastructure” project, which involves constructing or renovating roads and residential areas for a total of \$235 million.⁵¹ Phase V was announced at the end of 2020,⁵² but information indicates that the company’s activities have slowed, or even stopped, in the last two years, awaiting a resolution on debt issues, partly related to CDIG’s projects.⁵³

China is Suriname’s third largest creditor, holding \$480 million of the country’s external public debt according to recent estimates.⁵⁴ Even though a debt restructuring program, led by the Paris Club with China’s involvement, was launched in June 2022, the country faces a very concerning total debt level — \$3.383 billion at the end of 2021 —, further exacerbated by the deteriorating economic situation (significant devaluation of the Surinamese dollar, soaring inflation, etc.). Such a sharp increase of Suriname’s public debt provides Beijing with significant negotiation levers.

Chinese companies are very active in two strategic sectors: logging and mining. Forest resources are not only a significant driver of Suriname’s economy, but also its primary export

⁴⁹ Interview conducted by the authors with local politicians in Paramaribo, Suriname.

⁵⁰ “The Reception for the 45th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between China and Suriname Held in Beijing” (中国与苏里南建交 45 周年招待会在北京举行), [CDIG](#), July 6, 2021.

⁵¹ “Vice Chairman Wang Xinmin and his party went to Suriname to carry out business activities” (王新民副董事长一行赴苏里南开展商务活动), [CDIG](#), December 23, 2016.

⁵² “The new General Manager of Dalian Branch visited the Minister of Public Works” (新任大连公司总经理访问公共工程部长), [Chungfa Daily](#), December 7, 2020.

⁵³ “Public Works Department reports update on megaprojects” (公共工程部报告大型项目的最新情况), [KNTS Dagblad](#), March 13, 2023.

⁵⁴ Interview conducted by the authors with diplomats in Paramaribo, Suriname.

to China. Encouraged by local authorities,⁵⁵ several Chinese companies have invested in the country: China Zhong Heng Tai Investment (中国中恒泰投资), CIMC Group Suriname Tegoba Forestry Company (中集集团苏里南特高霸林业公司), Suriname Donghui Wood Investment (苏里南东辉木业投资), Suriname Gisen Wood Industry (苏里南吉森木业), etc. In particular, the Surinamese government allocated about 51,000 ha of tropical forest to Zhong Heng Tai Investment, with 40,000 dedicated to creating an oil palm plantation and the subsequent transformation of palm fruits into crude palm oil. However, in 2022, political figures called to revoke the license, granted in 2005, to the Chinese company,⁵⁶ which, in reality, has only been cutting trees and exporting the logs.

In the gold mining sector, the Chinese presence has long been relatively discreet. According to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, one of the few Chinese mining companies in Suriname in the early 2010s is China Mingjin Group (中国明金集团), or China Mega.⁵⁷ The company reportedly signed an agreement with Suriname National Mining Development in 2016,⁵⁸ and acquired the Sara Creek mine, with a concession of 225 km².

Gold mine operated by China Mingjin Group in Suriname (source: China Mingjin Group)



However, no information about this contract or China Mingjin's operations in Suriname is publicly available. The company's structure is also unknown, except for the suspicious creation of two subsidiaries in the British Virgin Islands related to its activities in Suriname.

This opacity has not prevented the leader of China Mingjin from interacting with local authorities and integrating into Chinese business networks. He notably met with the Surinamese Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Public Works, and the director of the

⁵⁵ In 2007, the Suriname Minister of Natural Resources led a delegation to Shenzhen to introduce the country's forest resources and development plans to domestic companies and called for increased cooperation in that sector.

⁵⁶ "Government Considering Revocation Of China Zhong Heng Tai Permit", United News, May 15, 2022.

⁵⁷ "List and contact information of Chinese-funded enterprises in Suriname" (驻苏里南中资企业名单及联系方式), [PRC Ministry of Commerce](#), 2013.

⁵⁸ "China Mingjin Tiansheng signed an agreement with Suriname National Mining Development Co., Ltd." (中国明金天盛与苏里南国家矿业发展有限公司签订协议), [Mingjin Group](#), December 2, 2016.

Suriname National Gold Council. He also spoke with the Chinese Ambassador to Suriname⁵⁹ and participated in several events organized by the embassy or Chinese organizations (for example, a reception on the occasion of the “63rd anniversary of the PRC” in 2012 and an official dinner with President Bouterse during his visit to China in 2013).⁶⁰

The head of China Minjin Group and Suriname president Bouterse in Beijing in June 2013 (source: China Mingjin Group)



While it is challenging to precisely measure the involvement of Chinese companies in the Surinamese mining landscape, the recent acquisition of the Rosebel and Saramacca mines by Zijin Mining has definitely changed the balance of power significantly. This investment has further consolidated China’s grip on vast sectors of the country’s economy and increased its influence, which is based in part on close ties with Surinamese authorities.

2.3. China’s diplomatic and political levers in Suriname

Beyond the commercial and economic activities of the Chinese communities established in French Guiana and Suriname, one of the determining factors of the Chinese presence in gold mining – legal or tolerated on the Surinamese side and illegal on the Guyanese side – is the proximity between Chinese actors (whether state-related or not) and the Surinamese authorities.

Over generations, Chinese migrants have integrated into the Surinamese society and political landscape. From 1980 to 1982, a president of Chinese origin, Henk Chin A Sen, governed the country. Several deputies of Chinese origin have sat or still sit in the National Assembly, such as Wang Chuanrui (王传瑞) and Stephen Tsang (曾锦荣), who was also the Minister of Trade, Industry, and Tourism from 2018 to 2020. The new Surinamese ambassador to China, Chong Pick Fung, is also of Chinese origin, as is the wife of former president Desi Bouterse, Ingrid

⁵⁹ “Chairman Ming Jin Tiansheng Met with Chinese Ambassador and Counselor to Suriname” (明金天盛董事长会见中国驻苏里南大使及参赞), [Mingjin Group](#) (undated).

⁶⁰ “Chairman Mingjin Tiansheng was invited to attend the ‘Suriname President’s Visit to China Dinner’” (明金天盛董事长应邀出席“苏里南总统访华晚宴”), [Mingjin Group](#) (undated).

Figueira. The latter even served as a consultant to the Federation of Chinese Women of Suriname (苏里南华人妇女联合会).

In addition to these key positions, there are very frequent interactions between members of the Chinese communities and Surinamese political leaders. The current president, Santokhi, like his predecessor Bouterse, regularly participates in activities of Chinese associations, such as the commemorative event for the 169th anniversary of the arrival of the first Chinese in Suriname organized by the SCUA in October 2022 or the Lunar New Year festival in January 2023. Several prominent members of the Chinese diasporas were also honored by Bouterse himself during a medal award ceremony in 2016. This includes senior executives from Dalian International, Chung Fa Foei Kon, the SCUA, and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.⁶¹ Through these informal networks, Chinese non-governmental and business organizations exert significant influence in political circles.

Since Santokhi came to power in 2020, Suriname has shown a desire to get closer to the United States. According to an American diplomat, the bilateral relationship with the current U.S. administration is very good politically.⁶² The Surinamese president wishes to attract more American companies, as evidenced by the project for a new deep-water port and an economic zone involving Siemens and the Texan company Phoenix Development. The two countries have also strengthened their cooperation in law enforcement through the recent launch of a \$300,000 program financed by Washington.⁶³

However, this effort to diversify diplomatic relations should not hide the close ties that remain between the Chinese and Surinamese governments. Under president Bouterse, bilateral cooperation strengthened, with an increase in high-level visits, including a 2018 visit by Wang Yi (王毅), then State Affairs Advisor and Foreign Minister, and several trips by president Bouterse to China. In 2013, Xi Jinping hosted him even though he was under an international arrest warrant issued by the Netherlands for his involvement in international cocaine trafficking. Suriname also joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019, while China increased its funding, becoming one of the main donors to the country, ahead of the Netherlands.

This financial support has included strategic Surinamese infrastructures. China renovated *pro bono* the headquarters of the Surinamese Foreign Ministry. The expansion and modernization of the Paramaribo airport were managed by the state-owned China Harbor Engineering Corporation (中国港湾, CHEC), with a loan of \$205 million from the China Exim Bank granted to the Surinamese government. In addition, Huawei Technologies (华为技术) has established itself in telecom infrastructures, be it 5G in downtown Paramaribo or submarine cables. This penetration of Chinese technologies is expected to continue to grow under the Santokhi administration. In early 2023, Suriname strengthened its security cooperation with Beijing as part of the launch of the third phase of the Safe City project. After two camera installation programs in Paramaribo initiated in 2017, this new agreement concluded in January 2023

⁶¹ "The President awarded medals to 163 people who have contributed to society" (总统向 163 位对社会有贡献的人士颁发勋章), *Chung Fa Daily*, November 24, 2016.

⁶² Interview conducted by the authors with diplomats in Paramaribo, Suriname.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

provides for a donation of \$15 million for camera installations throughout Suriname, except for the Sipaliwini district.⁶⁴

Lastly, the change of government in 2020 did not prevent China from maintaining close ties with influential figures within the Santokhi administration. Several sources in Paramaribo have highlighted the closeness between the Chinese authorities, particularly the Chinese Ambassador to Suriname, Han Jing (韩镜), and Vice President Ronnie Brunswick. Beyond their apparent complicity during recent events,⁶⁵ the two men interact regularly. For instance, in September 2021, Han Jing visited Brunswick and presented him with 300,000 yuan (approximately 40,000 euros), officially to support flood relief efforts.⁶⁶ Brunswick also seems to be a favored point of entry for the Chinese diaspora within the government. In October 2020, representatives from the SCUA association met with the vice president, discussing, among other things, the robbery of a Chinese gold store in Paramaribo. They also donated 5,000 masks as part of the anti-Covid effort.⁶⁷ More recently, Brunswick made donations for the organization of the Lunar New Year in Paramaribo in 2023. He also met with leaders from Chinese community organizations and visited the Suriname Times Mall (苏里南时代广场), one of the businesses targeted in lootings in early February 2023 in the capital.

Directly or indirectly, these ties with the Surinamese government contribute to protecting, or even isolating, Chinese actors from certain political, legal, or economic constraints. They can even facilitate illicit behaviors, especially considering Suriname's status as a narco-state, which inherently blurs the lines between legal and illegal activities.

3. Logistics and gold flows: a crucial catalyst for illegal gold mining in French Guiana

French Guiana is home to about 6,500 *garimpeiros*,⁶⁸ who illegally extract gold from around 300 alluvial and primary sites scattered throughout the territory, mainly in the western gold crescent. These Brazilian nationals use artisanal and semi-mechanized methods and set up camps in the forest, where an entire informal and illicit economy is organized, which also includes prostitution and various traffics.

This ecosystem could not exist without the crucial logistical chain in which many Chinese actors play a key role. This chain, in fact, supplies daily materials and products to the *garimpeiros* present on the Guianese sites, thus contributing to their resilience against the pressure exerted by the French security forces. While it is hard to gauge its scale, it appears to rely mainly on the large number of Chinese trading posts set up along the Surinamese coast

⁶⁴ "Safe City 3: China schenkt 15 miljoen USD voor installatie camera's in bijna heel Suriname", [Waterkant](#), January 19, 2023.

⁶⁵ Interview conducted by the authors with diplomats in Paramaribo, Suriname.

⁶⁶ "Ambassador Han Jing paid a courtesy call on Suriname's Vice President Brunswick and provided aid to Suriname for the flood" (韩镜大使到任拜会苏里南副总统布里斯韦克并向苏水灾提供援助), *Chungfa Daily*, September 10, 2021.

⁶⁷ "Representatives of Suhua Association paid a visit to Brunswick" (苏华总会代表拜会副总统布里斯韦克), *Chungfa Daily*, 2020.

⁶⁸ Figures based on a demographic study conducted by the Gendarmerie in 2022.

of the Maroni River and the development of a sophisticated supply chain from China to Maripasoula in French Guiana.

3.1. The vital role of Chinese trading posts along the Maroni

Unlike in Ghana, Mali, or Bolivia,⁶⁹ French Guiana faces an indirect Chinese presence in illegal gold mining, as the *garimpeiros* are not Chinese nationals. Chinese actors do, however, gravitate around the illegal gold extraction activities, which are 95 percent conducted by the *garimpeiros* and benefit largely from them without participating directly. Although indirect, the role of these Chinese actors is nonetheless essential as it enables illegal gold mining in French territory by providing crucial logistical support to the *garimpeiros* and by contributing to the financing of their operations.

Chinese trading post established on the Surinamese bank of the Maroni River (source: OAM EMOPI 2022)



According to the latest official figures, this Chinese involvement mainly focuses around 120 trading posts. These structures are located all along the Maroni River, from Antecum Pata, with a concentration opposite the river mouths and near the gold mining areas. While stores had once been established in French Guiana, they have all been dismantled as part of the Harpie operation. Now, only those situated along the Surinamese banks persist. In particular, two logistical hubs, Albina and Albina 2, have developed opposite the French towns of Saint-Laurent du Maroni and Maripasoula.

⁶⁹ On the involvement of Chinese players in illegal gold panning in Bolivia, see Sergio Mendoza Reyes, “The plunder of Bolivian gold: Chinese companies are hiding behind mining cooperatives”, [Todos Nube](#), January 9, 2023.

Albina 2: a major logistics hub for illegal gold mining in French Guiana

Established in the early 2000s, Albina 2 is organized around 24 trading posts spread across two informal villages: Antonio do Brinco and Ronaldo. This area is not registered by the Surinamese state, whose institutional presence is limited to five officers from the Surinamese police – the Korps Politie Suriname (KPS) – stationed in the first village. This presence is largely symbolic, given their lack of resources compared to the extent of illicit trafficking.

Antonio do Brinco, named after the *garimpeiro* who built the first building, is located opposite the Maripasoula gendarmerie post. While this location has not hindered its growth, the village has gradually shifted towards selling gold mining equipment and everyday products, transforming into a living space with restaurants, hotels, and bars.

Ronaldo, on the other hand, developed opposite the mouth of the Inini River, at a location chosen specifically to avoid facing the military base of Maripasoula. It has now become a major hub for illegal gold mining. Goods there are already packaged and ready for transit, having been paid for in gold. It is also one of the main hubs for all types of trafficking in the area: alcohol, narcotics, prostitution, etc. Devoid of any police presence, Ronaldo regularly witnesses violent confrontations and score-settlings.

Multiple sources suggest that the Chinese traders currently in Ronaldo were initially located in Benzdorp before relocating due to the depletion of gold resources in that area.

Aerial view of Ronaldo (source: OAM EMOPI, 2019)



The Chinese trading posts have built their dominance through a flexible operation, deeply rooted within the local informal economy. The *garimpeiros* can pay for equipment in any currency, including gold. While the reference prices of products and the majority of transactions are in euros, a portion of these transactions are made in gold nuggets, which are purified and weighed at the trading posts using specialized tools (scales, crucibles, blowtorches, etc.).

blowtorches, etc.). These payment methods combine with a debt system backed by Chinese traders. Indeed, the supply of equipment (fuel, mercury, water pumps, quads, etc.) relies on pre-financing in exchange for exclusive sales. In this case, the gold miners are obliged to sell their gold at prices not necessarily tied to market rates.⁷⁰

Gold panning equipment on sale at Chinese trading posts along the Maroni River (source: EMOPI / French Guiana Gendarmerie)



The strength of the Chinese trading posts also rests on a hierarchical organization that can be schematically divided into three levels:

- Local employees hired on the spot and located at the bottom of the ladder. Since 2019, this includes guards recruited from the Surinamese armed forces who secure the stores with their issued weapons.
- Chinese employees and managers who work and manage the stores daily.
- Chinese leaders who oversee the stores and logistical networks from Paramaribo, including through middlemen. They interface with the Surinamese authorities in the event of incidents, such as the fire that occurred in 2019 at Albina 2, resulting in the death of two people and the destruction of five stores.

This pyramidal organization closely aligns with the architecture of the Chinese networks established in Suriname. Our research suggests that Chinese traders move – or at least interact with each other – between Paramaribo and the various trading posts established along the Maroni, especially those located in Albina (see the box below).

⁷⁰ The price of gold is generally around 5% lower than the world price.

Journey of a Chinese merchant from China to Apatou

Digital investigations conducted by FRS have helped to reconstruct the journey of a Chinese individual, Mr. Wang,⁷¹ involved in the trading posts along the Maroni, thus offering a glimpse into the functioning of the logistical flows and Chinese networks that fuel illegal gold mining.

Originally from the city of Fuqing (福清) in Fujian province, Mr. Wang reportedly arrived in Suriname in November 2019. Less than two weeks after his arrival, he went to Albina for an estimated period of about ten days. Twice he crossed the river by canoe to Saint-Laurent du Maroni *via* an embarkation point at the “Transamerica” store. He also attended, or even participated in, artisanal gold refining activities in the company of another Chinese individual.

Between April 2020 and April 2021, Mr. Wang shared several videos while he was at a counter located in Pamaka weko weko (Apatou area).

This counter, known as “Grace Supermarket”, has several large diesel tanks, supplied by truck. During this period, several videos show him in Maripasoula, including on a pirogue in front of the Ronaldo stores. He is believed to have flown there *via* the Benzdorp landing strip. He also appears to travel by land on 4x4 tracks around Maripasoula.

In July 2021, Mr. Wang returned to China for a period of one month during which he quarantined in Shanghai. He then returned to Suriname *via* Schiphol airport (Netherlands).

After his return, he opened his own Chinese restaurant (好味一厨) in Paramaribo, while apparently continuing his activities related to illegal gold mining. Evidence of this includes the acquisition of a transport vehicle used to deliver fuel to sites.

Aerial view of “Grace Supermarket”, Apatou area (source: FAG, 2021)



⁷¹ Mr. Wang is a pseudonym.

These interconnections are all the more significant since those in charge of the Chinese trading posts seem to come primarily from the same geographical basin. A 2012 investigation revealed that all Chinese nationals settled in Benzdorp – and now in Ronaldo – are from Fujian province.⁷² Interviews conducted by the authors at Albina 2 specifically suggest that Chinese merchants come from the Putian region (Fujian), where one of the Chinese criminal networks based in Suriname operates (see section 1.3).

This information, which suggests a major role of Putian in the commercial ecosystem along the Maroni, is further corroborated by media coverage. In 2017 for instance, a resident originally from the village of Qiaoguang (桥光村) and located in Xianyou county (仙游县) in Putian, and his son were shot by robbers, who subsequently set their counter on fire. It was located in Santi Kondre, in the Gakaba region of Suriname, downstream from Grand-Santi.⁷³ The attack caused considerable consternation among Chinese communities, who raised funds amounting to 700,000 yuan (about 91,000 euros) from Suriname and Putian. The municipal authorities of Putian and the county donated 10,000 yuan, while the then Surinamese Minister of Justice and Police, Eugene Van der San, was present at a tribute ceremony in Paramaribo, chaired by a member of the SCUA executive board.⁷⁴ According to the Chinese press, the merchant in question had been the secretary of the Qiaoguang village before coming to Suriname.⁷⁵ When he arrived in the country, he borrowed a lot of money to open a chicken farm before taking over a relative's counter, due to insufficient income.

Chinese trading post burnt down in 2017 in the Surinamese village of Santi Kondre (source: FamilieNieuws)



Beyond its specific features, this case highlights the close ties between Chinese trading posts along the Maroni and the local authorities of Putian. This recalls the relationship between the

⁷² James Whitlow Delano, "Suriname: Chinese Migrants Cash In on Gold Rush", [Pulitzer Center](#), August 9, 2012.

⁷³ "Un commerçant chinois et son fils tués par balle", *France Guyane*, April 5, 2017.

⁷⁴ "Justice Minister Suriname wants to allow store owners to shoot criminals down", [Dutch Caribbean Legal Portal](#), April 24, 2017.

⁷⁵ "A father and son in Xianyou were robbed and killed in Suriname" (仙游一对父子在苏里南遭劫遇难), *Haidu News*, April 13, 2017.

authorities of Shanglin and illegal gold miners in Ghana (see section 1.2.). It also exemplifies the closeness between the Chinese trading posts and Surinamese authorities. The latter have legalized the trading posts established on their territories. Some even have a French SIRET number. Several officers from the KPS are stationed at Albina 2, where they are reportedly fed for free by the community. Before they settled there, the mayor of the Surinamese municipality on which Albina 2 was built would travel to the shops, even though this informal village has no institutional presence and is not connected to the country's electrical or drinking water networks. There is also a customary chief at Albina 2, appointed under the Bouterse administration, who meets individually with the Chinese merchants. He has even been invited by the Chinese ambassador to Suriname in the past, suggesting that Chinese authorities are at least aware of the involvement of Chinese nationals in activities related to illegal gold mining, or even tacitly support them.

Backed by these networks and ties with the Surinamese authorities, the Chinese trading posts rely on a substantial logistical organization. This allows an almost uninterrupted supply to the gold mining sites of western French Guiana, despite the repeated operations of French security forces.

3.2. The robust supply chains behind French Guiana's illegal gold mining

In 2022, the fight against illegal gold mining in French Guiana reported record seizures for the year: 1,585 water pumps, 603 pump bodies, 100 crushers, 132 outboard motors, and 187 quads. The seized equipment is overwhelmingly of Chinese origin, such as "Filong" mopeds, "Changchai" or "Sifang" engines, "Shengda" pipes, and more.

Zhejiang Sifang engines seized in the forest of French Guiana in June 2022 and January 2023 (source: French Guiana Gendarmerie / FRS)



These substantial volumes of equipment result from the establishment of actual logistical chains from China to French Guiana, notably passing through Suriname. While precisely mapping these flows can be challenging, various elements offer some insights into the logistics system. By examining information provided on the seized equipment, it is possible to identify the origin of certain parts. For instance, many engines are produced by a state-owned

company, Zhejiang Sifang Group (浙江四方集团), founded in 1961 in the city of Yongkang (永康), located in the Zhejiang province. They can then be exported through Zhejiang Sifang Import-Export, China's largest agricultural machinery exporter. As of April 2023 data, this Sifang Group subsidiary trades with 70 countries, including Suriname.

Once in Suriname, these equipment pieces transit through Paramaribo, serving as a logistical hub for Chinese trading posts established along the Maroni River. Along the commercial artery of Tourtonnelaan, numerous Chinese stores sell equipment subsequently used on illegal gold mining sites in French Guiana: engines, pump bodies, quads, hoses, etc. Examples include Zheng Xing NV (振兴机电公司) and Yifeng Trading Company Co. Ltd. (亿腾贸易公司). Indicative of their integration within the local Chinese ecosystem, these two stores are among the donors for campaigns led by Chinese community organizations based in Paramaribo. One such campaign aimed to send anti-Covid supplies to China in July 2020.⁷⁶

Chinese shops selling gold panning equipment on Tourtonnelaan Road, Paramaribo (source: FRS)



The large number of stores in Paramaribo, their size and the range of products they offer suggest major logistical flows, one of the main points of entry into Suriname being Nieuwe Haven, the country's leading port. This port, controlled by Vice President Brunswick's brother and the Emirati company DP World, is notably characterized by the lack of customs checks on unloaded containers. Some goods also appear to be tax-exempt. This lack of transparency is especially concerning given that 90 percent of Suriname's imports and exports are believed to transit through there, including from the Yiwu port (义乌) in Zhejiang,⁷⁷ known as the

⁷⁶ "The name of the fourth batch of donors who supported the government's fight against the epidemic for the second time" (第二次支持政府抗疫第4批捐赠者芳名), *Chungqia Daily*, July 14, 2020.

⁷⁷ Li Yuan, "Suriname: Lots of business opportunities" (苏里南: 商业机会多多), *Cooperative Economy & Science*, 2003.

“world’s supermarket”. Besides Chinese ports, sources suggest that products sold in Chinese trading posts on the Maroni also partly come from neighboring countries such as Brazil, Guyana, or Venezuela, where the fuels used by the *garimpeiros* may have originated.

From Paramaribo, imported equipment is transported by truck to Chinese trading posts or branches based in Albina. Strategically located opposite Saint-Laurent, this border town is the hub for supplying illegal gold mining equipment for the Maroni. All products sold at Albina 2 come from Chinese trading posts and warehouses in Albina, with the most iconic being “Transamerica”. Managed by Chinese nationals based in Paramaribo, this gold mining supermarket forms a massive complex consisting of a warehouse, gold purchase trading posts, supermarkets, and hotels-restaurants. Mining supplies are packaged there, ready for transit. They are then transported by pirogue in a journey of about thirteen hours. Pirogues can carry up to 15 tons of cargo, although the standard is closer to 5-7 tons. Delivery costs are estimated at about 800 EUR for 9-10 tons, compared to about 2.5 EUR/kg of airfreight.⁷⁸

From Paramaribo or Albina, supplying Chinese trading posts along the Maroni benefits from a favorable local environment. Governance in Suriname is plagued by notorious practices of corruption and patronage.⁷⁹ Surinamese security forces are severely under-resourced, and they exercise only marginal control over areas bordering French Guiana. These shortcomings are compounded by vast forest covers and porous borders, which are conducive to various traffics, as well as significant capacity constraints within the French security apparatus. The border police only control a fraction of Guiana’s territory, the size of Austria.⁸⁰ Customs have no presence on the Maroni beyond Saint-Laurent, and the state lacks any radar in the area, which would increase visibility over aircraft entering or exiting the territory.⁸¹ The local lifestyle, characterized by over a thousand pirogue rotations daily between Albina and Saint-Laurent and a growing dependence of populations along the Maroni on Chinese trading posts that now supply most of their basic necessities, further exacerbates the situation.

The Chinese logistical chain along the Maroni relies heavily on local expertise in pirogue handling, transporting 95 percent of products sold in the trading posts. The rest – perishable goods or gold mining equipment requiring rapid transport – is transported by plane. Suriname has a dense network of landing strips, largely due to its pivotal role in cocaine trafficking to Europe. According to French newspaper *Le Monde*, there are 43 legal, often remote, airstrips and at least 28 illegal ones.⁸² Among them, nine airstrips, including two illegal, are within 2 km of the Maroni. This includes the Lawa Tabiki strip, situated on an island opposite Benzdorp and used by Chinese merchants in Maripasoula. *Garimpeiros* also use air transport, as revealed by the December 2020 crash of a Blue Wing Airlines Cessna 208B Supervan 900 at the end of the Anapaiké runway, south of Maripasoula. The plane carried goods and five Brazilians.

⁷⁸ Interview conducted by the authors with local businessmen in Maripasoula, French Guiana.

⁷⁹ Douglas Farah, Kathryn Babineau, “Suriname : the New Paradigm of a Criminalized State”, Center for a Secure Free Society, March 2017.

⁸⁰ Interviews conducted by the authors with border police in Saint-Laurent du Maroni, French Guiana.

⁸¹ Interviews conducted by the authors with military officers in Cayenne, French Guiana.

⁸² “Trafic de cocaïne : enquête sur la nouvelle filière française de Guyane”, *Le Monde*, April 16, 2023.

While facilitating the essential supply for illegal gold mining in French Guiana, these logistical flows seem to coincide with those ensuring the conveyance and integration into the legal gold market of illicitly extracted gold. This complex process appears to rely significantly on the Chinese trading posts along the Maroni, which not only fuel the activities of the *garimpeiros* but also capture most of the ten tons of gold illicitly taken from France.

3.3. Outflows and modus operandi of gold laundering

Despite the resources deployed to fight illegal gold mining, tracing illegally produced gold in French Guiana remains a real challenge. Gold is a malleable and highly ductile metal, which can be easily melted or alloyed with other metals. Moreover, it loses any distinctive sign after each melting, making it difficult to implement control and transparency measures similar to the “Kimberley Process” set up in 2003 for diamonds.

Previous studies have sought to identify the flows of gold illegally extracted on French territory. In 2009, a WWF report highlighted the high permeability of the legal channels of production, transformation, and distribution of gold, which facilitates the absorption of illegal gold in Suriname and Brazil.⁸³ At that time, the gold collected by the *garimpeiros* in the forest was laundered through traders located on the Franco-Brazilian border in the town of Oiapoque. Part of it was also integrated into the legal circuit in French Guiana, with the department exporting far more gold than it officially produced or imported.

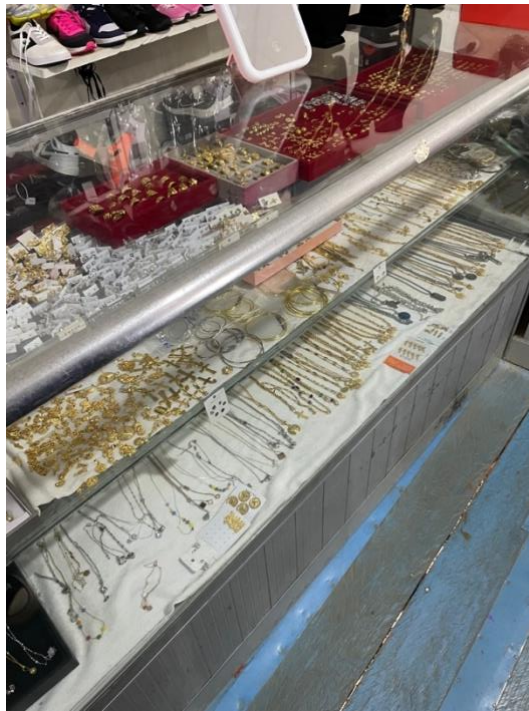
Today, a significant portion of the gold produced illegally in French Guiana is absorbed in Suriname. Some estimates suggest that over ten tons of gold extracted illegally in Guiana are sent every year to the former Dutch colony.⁸⁴ Although significant, these flows seem to rely on an opaque process that could be likened to an ant system, with a large number of individuals transporting small quantities of gold: *garimpeiros*, site owners, or “bankers,” *i.e.*, intermediaries who buy gold from miners in western Guiana and resell it in Chinese trading posts.

Given their pivotal role in logistics, Chinese traders now appear to be the main transit points for gold mined illegally in French Guiana to Suriname. They are the ones acquiring gold from mining site managers coming to purchase equipment and supplies for their operations. They also buy gold from intermediaries or secondary line workers (prostitutes, logisticians, etc.). The precise amount collected is unknown, but some indicators, such as the regular attacks and violent burglaries against Chinese trading posts (see section 3.1.), suggest that they gather a significant quantity of gold (see section 3.1.).

⁸³ “De la mine à la vitrine : état des lieux et perspectives de la traçabilité de l’or guyanais”, WWF, October 2009.

⁸⁴ Interview conducted by the authors with local officials in Cayenne, French Guiana.

Jewelry for sale in a Chinese trading post in Albina 2 (source: FRS, January 2023)



Once gold is accumulated by the Chinese trading posts, it is then transported by pirogue or plane to Albina 2, Albina, and Paramaribo to be laundered and exported. The gold is moved in small quantities and concealed within merchandise to avoid drawing attention from security forces or armed gangs. However, few details are available on the conditions of transport and the exact steps involved for exporting the gold. This opacity is due in part to Suriname's lax regulations. For instance, local authorities have a laissez-faire attitude towards the use of mercury by gold miners to amalgamate gold, even though Suriname signed and ratified the Minamata Convention in 2018 that prohibits its use. Regarding gold purchases, the existing rules don't require seller identification and promote clientelist practices in granting export licenses.

In this context, a vast ecosystem of actors based in Suriname enables the insertion of illegal Guianese gold into the international market. Similar to the logistical chain, this involves several gold purchase shops in Paramaribo run by individuals of Chinese origin, including:

- **Century Mining N.V.:** This counter is one of the main companies in the sector. It was co-founded by two figures from the Chinese diaspora: Kenneth Chau Yuen Cheung and Henry Zse Ping Cheung.⁸⁵ Kenneth Cheung led the Chung Fa Foei Kon association and the SCUA, of which he was the first president, appointed by the then Chinese ambassador. He also appears to be the founder of the private security company Mozart Security Service N.V.,⁸⁶ which provides security for several casinos (Princess,

⁸⁵ Despite their identical names, the two men are not related.

⁸⁶ R. Evan Ellis, "Suriname and the Chinese: Timber, Migration, and Less-Told Stories of Globalization", *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 2012.

Golden Truly & Tulip) and for IAMGold. As for Henry Cheung, who died in 2011,⁸⁷ he was a major financial supporter of former president Bouterse's party, the Nationale Democratische Partij (NDP). His daughter, Noreen Cheung, sat in the Surinamese Parliament from 2010 to 2015 within the majority (NDP), while his son, Frank Cheung, now heads Century Mining. The counter has gold purchase and export licenses. According to 2012 estimates, it buys – together with Suriname Natural Stone N.V. – a third of the small-scale extracted gold in Suriname.⁸⁸ The purchased gold is then exported to Dubai.

- **Suriname Natural Stone N.V.:** This gold purchase and export counter was co-founded by Frank Cheung and John Fok Foe Chee. The latter is the son of Yuk Kee Chee, who presided over the community association Kong Ngie Tong Sang for fifteen years and was a supporter of the NPD. Chee Senior founded the jewelry and trading company Chee's Trading N.V., one of the only Surinamese companies with a refining permit. This allows him to export raw gold for refining and turn it into gold jewelry.⁸⁹ Several leads suggest one of the destinations of the collected gold is the United Arab Emirates, where John Chee is now believed to live.⁹⁰
- **Cactus N.V.:** This gold purchase counter is co-directed by Guno Chin-A-Sen and Chen Jinhua, the former president of SCUA and executive vice-president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Suriname. An influential Sino-Surinamese entrepreneur, Chin holds executive positions in the mining company C-Mining and Brokopondo Watra Wood International. Chin-A-Sen's father had opened a jewelry shop in Albina in the 1900s.⁹¹
- **Dennis Lee Jewellery:** Based in Paramaribo, this gold purchase counter and jewelry store was founded by Dennis Lee. Lee is the brother-in-law of Thomas Cheung – a prominent member of the Chinese community who died in 2019 – and a former executive of Kong Ngie Tong Sang.

While it is difficult to precisely measure the volumes passing through these Chinese trading posts, it is evident that they play a pivotal role in purchasing and exporting gold in Suriname, bolstered by an extensive network. Chinese managers maintain close ties with Chinese community organizations and authorities in Suriname, while also having political connections within Surinamese elites, where practices of nepotism and cronyism are common.⁹²

⁸⁷ Indicative of Henry Cheung's influence among Surinamese elites, several MPs and ministers, as well as the Surinamese vice-president and the head of the Central Bank of Suriname, were present at his funeral.

⁸⁸ "Chinees-Surinaams goudkartel betaalt nauwelijks belasting", [Parbode](#), February 1, 2012.

⁸⁹ Marieke Heemskerk, "The Gold Marketing Chain in Suriname", WWF Guianas, September 2010.

⁹⁰ Interview conducted by the authors with local businessmen in Cayenne, French Guiana, and Paramaribo, Suriname.

⁹¹ Marieke Heemskerk, *op. cit.*

⁹² For example, in 2020, Vice-President Brunswick appointed two of his children to the posts of District Commissioner of south-west Paramaribo and head of the state-owned National Transport Company (NVB) respectively.

Century Mining N.V. store in Paramaribo and its gold certificates provided to a Chinese gold digger working in Suriname (source: Century Mining Facebook Page / Douyin)



Alongside these Chinese channels for capturing gold, other players have gradually emerged in the sector. One of the most significant is the Kaloti Suriname Mint House (KSMH), a joint venture established in 2015 between the Emirati company Kaloti Precious Metals and the Bouterse government.⁹³ 80 percent of Suriname’s artisanal and small-scale mining production is allegedly recovered by KSMH, which now holds the Central Bank’s right to certify gold exports. According to its director, Ryan Tjon, between fifteen and twenty tons of gold – whose origins are unspecified – transited through the institution in 2019, with a portion heading to Kaloti’s refining plants abroad.⁹⁴

Kaloti’s activities are, however, subject to many suspicions. According to expert Douglas Farah, the Emirati company’s investment in Suriname is quite surprising given the country’s isolation and its limited ties with the United States.⁹⁵ In addition, the contract between the Surinamese government and Kaloti has significant reporting flaws, allowing transactions in foreign currencies and transfers of money anywhere without requiring justification. Coupled with this is the apparent lack of gold melting within KSMH, suggesting potential money laundering operations using “phantom gold” to justify significant illicit fund transfers abroad.

This hypothesis is especially plausible given Kaloti’s tarnished reputation from several incidents, including the manipulation of an OECD audit a few years ago.⁹⁶ It also coincides with an environment conducive to money laundering activities, with the involvement of Surinamese elites in various traffics and a disproportionate number of casinos. While Paramaribo only has 250,000 residents and few tourists, it reportedly has as many as 31 casinos, most of which are owned by Turkish and Chinese entities. These include, for instance, the Princess International Casino & Hotel Group, owned by Sudi Özkan, a Turkish casino magnate with ties to organized crime.⁹⁷ Players can use gold to buy chips in these casinos,

⁹³ According to some sources, former chairman Boutersé holds a 30% stake.

⁹⁴ Antoine Dutta Gupta, *op. cit.*

⁹⁵ “Fout Goud - Surinaamse politici in verlegenheid door documentaire”, [afromagazine](https://afromagazine.com) (non daté).

⁹⁶ Interview conducted by the authors with officials in Paris, France.

⁹⁷ “Gold Flows from Venezuela: Supporting due diligence on the production and trade of gold in Venezuela”, OCDE, 2021.

which can then be cashed out. Hence, casinos act as genuine gold laundries, allowing miners to bypass regulatory processes.⁹⁸

Conclusion

Although indirect, the role of Chinese trading posts is essential, as they enable and facilitate illegal gold mining on French territory. The 120 trading posts set up along the Maroni, and the accompanying transnational networks, continuously supply the *garimpeiros* with daily goods and equipment, finance their activities, and enduringly hinder the action of the French security forces. This control entails major risks for France's interests:

- The involvement of Chinese actors in the gold mining ecosystem in the Maroni basin constitutes a major factor contributing to the prevailing insecurity. The growth of trading posts has spurred the emergence of illegal activities such as prostitution and drug trafficking, while intensifying security risks related to criminal gangs and Brazilian factions operating in the Amazon region. Ties between the stores and Chinese criminal networks present in the area, like the "Putian gang", might fuel other aspects of environmental crime, such as jaguar trafficking and illegal logging.
- By fueling the plundering of gold resources and facilitating the concealment and laundering of nearly ten tons of gold annually, Chinese trading posts damage France's economic security. The impact is particularly severe, as it coincides with the rapid growth of the underground economy and the weakening of the local economic fabric.
- Illegal gold mining is responsible for the deforestation of nearly 500 hectares of forest each year, damaging Guiana's waterways and causing a net loss of biodiversity. Given the lack of governance and the opacity under which these trading posts operate, their activities lead to additional pollution and public health issues: illegal dumping, failure to comply with food conservation standards, illicit mercury sales leading to mercury contamination of Amerindian populations and increasing the risk of emerging infectious malaria hotspots and other zoonotic diseases.
- The situation of illegal gold mining in French Guiana is inseparable from the predation of mineral resources by Chinese actors in other Latin American or African countries, tacitly facilitated or supported by Chinese authorities. This is a sovereignty issue requiring a suitable response.

This study is an initial step in understanding the involvement of Chinese actors in illegal gold mining in French Guiana. It is merely a partial and exploratory work, complementing concrete measures and an evolution of the system fighting this menace. It is not intended to accuse the entire Chinese communities in French Guiana and Suriname, nor to question the significant work done by all state and civil society actors in French Guiana.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*