



Nathaniel Ocquaye

October 29th, 2025

Ghana and China Have a Shared Responsibility for the Illegal Mining (Galamsey) Crisis in Ghana.

- Chinese migrants in Ghana have undertaken a varied portfolio of business ventures, the most illicit and destructive being *illegal mining in Ghana*, locally known as *galamsey*. *Galamsey* has devastated major river bodies and forest reserves in Ghana driven by Chinese technology and sustained by a long-term Chinese presence as service providers—often supported by local elites and patrons.
- The period from 2008 to 2025 highlights the enduring legacy of Chinese miners' involvement in *galamsey* and the related transformations that reveal an exploitative agenda among some private Chinese migrants. Encouraged by China's early-2000s 'Go Out' policy, these migrants established themselves as wealthy entrepreneurs through unorthodox and exploitative practices in Ghana.
- The government of Ghana must strictly regulate and monitor Chinese migrants, businesses, and entrepreneurs operating across the country. Ghana should also collaborate with China —drawing on resources and technical expertise—to revive its dead rivers, a direct result of Chinese miners' illegal involvement in the small-scale mining sector.

When Ghana **deported thousands of Chinese miners** in 2013, I assumed that the Chinese miners' participation in *galamsey* had ended. However, this assumption proved false. The crisis of illegal gold mining—together with the ongoing involvement of Chinese migrants and their technology—has become a persistent feature of Ghana's political landscape, appearing regularly among top priorities in campaign pledges. Several explanations and policy interventions have been proposed to explain and mitigate the *galamsey* crisis in Ghana, yet to no avail. Revisiting the Chinese gold rush in Ghana (2008 onwards), I argue that the cyclical nature of *galamsey* in Ghana is largely a result of Ghanaian collusion and **Chinese migration and involvement in the illegal mining business**.

Is China responsible for the illegal mining crisis in Ghana?

The literature on Chinese migration to Ghana clearly shows that **thousands of Chinese miners migrated to Ghana** from 2008 onwards, following a surge in global gold prices. Tales of quick wealth from Chinese migrants in Ghana spread like wildfire in China and many wanting to escape poverty and expensive cities in China ganged up and headed for the West African country. Aided by **corrupt elites and greedy local patrons**, the Chinese miners introduced new technology, including the *changfa*, excavators, bulldozers, and financial largesse into artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in Ghana. **ASM is strictly reserved for Ghanaian citizens** and has historically involved indigenous methods and simple tools like the pickaxe, shovel, and head pans. The arrival of the Chinese miners irreversibly transformed ASM into a mechanised, industrial-scale activity. Bulldozers and excavators levelled up forests within a few days – an impossible feat for locals using hand tools. Cocoa farms vanished like mist wherever the Chinese miners arrived. Most devastatingly, **the *changfa* machine**, used in mining alluvial gold from riverbeds, turned Ghana's once-pristine rivers into a rich **coffee and milk** colour. Aquatic life died almost instantly with the washing of mercury and cyanide waste into the rivers. Partnering with local Ghanaian ASM licensed miners and riding on **the 2006 foreign service provision policy** of the Ghanaian government, many Chinese miners became rich overnight and have since maintained, arguably, a more diplomatic and **indirect presence in the illegal gold mining business**.

The Metamorphosis of Chinese Miners in Ghana: from illegal to legal business entrepreneurs.

Despite successive government crackdowns, *galamsey* persists in Ghana. If illegal Chinese miners were deported, why do we still see their technology, money, and services at work? The answer lies in the adaptive strategies of Chinese migrants and the networks that continue to sustain their interests.

Firstly, while thousands of illegal Chinese miners were deported, their technology was left behind into the hands of some Ghanaian local miners in the mining communities. These local patrons have appropriated the Chinese technology to their profit by re-purposing them and manufacturing parts locally. For example, on a visit to *Magazine*, a local market in Kumasi, I noticed that ***changfa* parts** were manufactured and sold to local miners. Again, the *changfa* machine, which is used for river mining (dredging) is still in use by several local miners on Ghana's rivers who have improved on the usability of the machine.

Secondly, some Chinese entrepreneurs back in China keep **exporting the *changfa* machine** to their local Ghanaian partners in business. This is evidenced in the continuous and **recent call** of the Ghana National Association of Small-Scale Miners (GNASSM) on the Ghanaian government to ban/restrict the import of *changfa* machines. The *changfa* machine is of particular concern as it mainly dredges riverbeds for alluvial gold, deposits mercury-contaminated water back into the river and thus the primary reason for **Ghana's dead river** bodies.

Thirdly, I argue that the nefarious social mobility of Chinese migrants and their undercover businesses have sustained *galamsey* in Ghana. Largely unexplored in the extant literature on

Chinese migration is the nefarious aspect of Chinese migrants' social mobility. During my time as a Mandarin translator in Kumasi and Tarkwa, I was informed by reliable sources of how some illegal Chinese miners used the proceeds from their gold exploits to establish legal businesses in Ghana. These businesses, most of which evade their taxes and treat workers badly, are legally recognised enterprises in Ghana specializing in the production of everyday goods, groceries/supermarkets, and construction materials/equipment. However, behind the scenes, they maintain their business interest in *galamsey* either as **joint owners with Ghanaians, funders, or service providers**. For example, some Chinese workers are still seen on illegal mining sites servicing the excavators/bulldozers while others run companies that hire these earth-moving machines to illegal miners. A **similar trend** has also been revealed in French Guiana where Chinese shops and networks supply equipment and finance to illegal Brazilian gold miners.

Moreover, due to China's large infrastructure portfolio in Ghana and across Africa, several private Chinese entrepreneurs have set up legally recognised construction companies with the purpose of selling construction materials and equipment to constructors. However, alongside this legally recognised venture, they also hire out the excavators to illegal miners either as partners or simply for business. Thus, some construction businesses have become complicit in *galamsey* and helped maintain a steady influx of excavators (and Chinese workers) into Ghana, supposedly for legal purposes in the construction sector. This is evidenced by the recent surge in Ghana's import of excavators, with the country emerging as the **highest importer of excavators in West Africa**.

Elite Collusion and Local Patrons

Who is responsible for the *galamsey* crisis in Ghana? Is it mainly Chinese migrants or Ghanaian citizens? I argue that it is neither the Chinese nor the Ghanaian but rather a **powerful syndicate network** comprising some Chinese migrants, some Ghanaian government officials, and **local patrons in Ghana**. As someone who studied Chinese language and culture both at the University of Ghana and Zhejiang University of Technology – China, I believe it is **unfair** to say that all Chinese migrants are to blame for the *galamsey* crisis in Ghana. There are a decent number of Chinese migrants working lawfully in Ghana. However, the notorious reputation of some Chinese migrants like **Aisha Huang** has caused many within and without Ghana to associate the crisis of *galamsey* with the Chinese.

Nonetheless, it is important to establish the facts in order to provide an objective analysis of the *galamsey* crisis. First, **thousands of Chinese migrants** moved to Ghana in search of gold and a better life. *Galamsey* is largely associated with the Chinese because Chinese miners introduced unorthodox methods that literally industrialised artisanal and small-scale mining in Ghana. Moreover, some Chinese entrepreneurs continue to import thousands of *changfa* machines to sell to local miners in Ghana. The Chinese miners' thirst for gold also meant no respect to Ghana's laws as they mined for alluvial gold directly on river bodies, a strictly prohibited act. Embedding themselves into Ghana's political economy, some of the illegal Chinese miners have now

transformed themselves into legal business owners of supermarkets, construction companies, **casinos** etc, creating a network of undercover businesses involved in **smuggling gold** and bringing in new miners from China. These nefarious Chinese networks are difficult to notice but I argue that they do exist owing to my field experience working with Chinese companies and visiting mining towns in Ghana. (You can read **a detailed investigative report** of how Chinese shops and networks 'enable the resilience of illegal gold miners' in French Guiana, thereby making the state's efforts to curb illegal mining futile).

Yet, the Chinese would not have thrived in illegal mining if they had not been aided by **corrupt Ghanaian elites and local patrons**. Some Ghanaian government officials provide false immigration documents for a fee; some local chiefs sell farmlands to Chinese miners with financial largesse; and some local small-scale miners procure mining licence on behalf of Chinese miners. This elite and local support depicts a negative agency role by some Ghanaians in the China-Ghana relationship. The frequent **presidential trips** to China to increase business relations between Chinese and Ghanaian entrepreneurs in manufacturing, agriculture and construction also fosters the right environment for Chinese businesses to import and supply equipment that ends up on the illegal mining sites. Perhaps, an emphasis on collaboration to engage in sustainable small-scale mining considering the damage Chinese technology has caused Ghana's rivers and forest reserves might be a great topic for the agenda of such presidential trips to China.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while some Chinese migrants have sought to legally expand their businesses across Africa, majority of those who landed in Ghana have become rich through illegal mining, at the expense of Ghana's minerals, rivers, and forest reserves. These Chinese migrants, in partnership with local patrons, have intelligently embedded themselves into Ghana's political economy and are partly responsible for the illegal mining crisis in Ghana, making the work of successive governments futile in the long run.

If Ghana is to recover its dead rivers, depleted cocoa farms, and forest reserves, there is the need to thoroughly examine and strictly regulate every Chinese business operating in the country. Many Chinese businesses in Ghana perpetuate *galamsey* by providing equipment, finance, and labour. If these Chinese businesses and the powerful syndicates are stopped, then local miners will lack the necessary resources to continue illegal mining with the unorthodox methods prohibited under small-scale mining laws. Halting these activities would also give the government a chance to reclaim and restore the dead river bodies, depleted forests and cocoa farms.

Moreover, the Ghanaian government must also resist from framing the *galamsey* crisis as a "war", as the livelihoods of many local residents in the mining communities depend on ASM. A constructive, research-based approach—possibly involving collaboration with the Chinese government—may be the best way to manage the *galamsey* crisis. Given that the *galamsey* crisis stems from Ghanaian–Chinese collaboration, it is reasonable for both countries to share

responsibility for resolving it. China can provide Ghana the much-needed financial resources and technical expertise as a sign of goodwill in its bilateral relations with the latter. Ghana should also incorporate civic education and training on good mining practices into the local governance of mining communities in order to foster good citizenship and compliance with mining laws.

Finally, government officials and public figures who own small-scale-mining sites should set an example by employing sustainable technology and trained miners, rather than delegating operations to Chinese or local miners likely to use unorthodox methods.

This post gives the views of the authors, and not the position of China Foresight, LSE IDEAS, nor The London School of Economics and Political Science.

Image: Large-scale and artisanal gold mines in the Central Region of Ghana (2020) by Lauren Dauphin, NASA Earth Observatory, using Landsat data from the U.S. Geological Survey, is in the public domain via NASA Earth Observatory.

About the author



Nathaniel Ocquaye

Mr. Nathaniel Ocquaye is an independent researcher working on China-Africa relations and China's quest for global dominance. His research examines the micro-level analysis of Chinese interaction with African countries, including issues of agency and social mobility in the construction and illegal mining sectors. He holds an MSc in International Relations (LSE), and a BA in Political Science and Chinese (University of Ghana and Zhejiang University of Technology). He previously worked as a Mandarin Translator with Chinese construction companies in Accra-Ghana and held a teaching assistantship at both the Political Science and Chinese departments at the University of Ghana.

Posted In: Technology



© LSE 2025