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Powers in Everyday Life:
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on Hedging Chinese and
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Negotiating External Powers in Everyday Life: Congolese Perspectives on Hedging Chinese and French Influences

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Abstract

Like many former African colonies, in Congo, the influence of the former colonizer is now challenged increasingly by the growing activities and presence of China. This phenomenon of how weaker states manage competing international influences has led to a valuable influx of literature on hedging, or how states are proactive and reactive in this changing landscape. Such interest has not yet paid sufficient attention to how hedging is not only a matter of international relations but also everyday practices. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and digital ethnography in 2021 and mid-2023, this paper attends to this shortfall, arguing that the Congolese population participates in hedging practices every day, as they build futures in which both Chinese and French influences are prominent. While the literature on aspiration and agency recognises the importance of pragmatism, it does not yet reflect that pragmatism and everyday hedging are essentially the same. The paper contends that both France and China are regarded as strong forces of change in Congo and that the Congolese population engage with both in ways that demonstrate varying degrees of cooperation, but also reservation at the same time.

Keywords

Congo, Brazzaville, China, France, Negotiation, Aspiration, Future

Introduction

In August 2023, a Congolese media outlet based in Brazzaville posted a story on Facebook about the ongoing French influence in Africa, something particularly topical given the recent coups in Niger and more recently, in Gabon. The story attracted many comments, with some taking a measured tone and expressing satisfaction at the continued connectivity between France and Congo (and elsewhere in Africa). Others were far more critical, with one comment (written in French) summing up the sentiments of many by saying: “We no longer want a country like France to participate in any development of our continent because they telling us that partnership for the emergence of Africa is a strategy to drain us of our wealth. Long live Africa, long live Pan-Africanism, and long live our continent without France!”

Congo is a country of just around six million people, with Brazzaville as its national capital and home to just under half of its population.¹ A former colony of France until 1960, Congo retained French as its sole official language after independence. Despite or arguably,

¹ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/brazzaville-population>

because of, periods of political upheaval and periods of civil war between 1993 and 1999, French influence in Congo has been an integral part of Congolese political and social life since independence.² Continuing French influence is also apparent in France's controversial role in the management of Congo's currency, the Central African Franc (CFA), which is pegged to the Euro.³ Congo is ranked by the UN as a low-middle income country largely because of its oil wealth⁴. The influence of France in political, economic and cultural spheres is also apparent in the Congolese imagination, demonstrated through the queues outside the French Embassy in the summer of 2023 spilling out into the road not least with large numbers of students undertaking higher education in France facilitated through schemes such as Campus France.⁵

If French influence seems strong, it is not unassailable. Around the same time as the Facebook post was published, an associate in Brazzaville commented to me that China is very present in Congo. He told me about Chinese influence in construction projects in Congo, most visible through the construction of Brazzaville's airport. He talked about how China features in the landscape of possible study destinations, given the rising number of scholarships to study in China for Congolese students. In his words, "China is very present here [in Congo]". Intrigued, I asked him what this meant for the presence of France. He told me that the French are in Congo too, even if not always so visibly or as something one can touch, as there are currently fewer white French people in Congo and the number of people who are visibly Chinese is rising. But he was adamant that France remains present given the colonial history and ongoing ties between the two countries, and that the arrival of China has not changed this, or in his opinion, at least not yet.

While China and Congo are by no means the only sources of influence in Congo, they are the most significant. This means that my interlocutor's comment about China not displacing the presence of France yet is worth exploring. At the end of 2020, the Congolese Prime Minister confirmed that Congo's debt to China stood at 98% of GDP and following negotiations, an agreement for debt restructuring was made.⁶ What exact form this restructuring has taken is not clear, but China investing heavily in infrastructure in the global south and causing a possible debt trap for recipient countries is hardly a new picture (Freyman 2021; Walsh 2022). But in Congo, this is not a simple story of China acting, or being perceived to act, as a neo-coloniser in the global South and local people victims of the consequences of expansionist ambitions. My interlocutor urged me to think carefully about how the newer influence of China intersects with the ongoing influence of France, how Congo balances the two and how local people understand this. He urged me to think of this in terms of how people act and what they do, rather than them as recipients of the consequences of changes happening around them. My intention in this paper is to do just that.

In thinking through how people exercise pragmatism in what agency they have over their own lives, my interlocutor is talking about hedging. As a concept, hedging has been defined by Ciorciari and Haacke as a "strategy, undertaken by one state toward another, featuring a mix of cooperative and confrontational elements" (2019, 367). The concept is receiving increased attention in the age of global China and has been investigated in a variety of contexts, most commonly in terms of how smaller states manage the influence of super or major world powers (See amongst others: Cabestan 2016; Vu, Soong, and Nguyen 2020). This paper adds to the literature on hedging in four ways. First, by considering the influences of France and

² Dates for the periods of the Civil War in Congo vary as outbreaks of violence happened in stages.

³ These countries make up the Central African Economic and Monetary Fund: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fab-ric/backgrnd.htm> (accessed 13 August 2023).

⁴ <https://data.worldbank.org/country/XN>

⁵ Campus France facilitates the movement of students from the global South to higher education in France: <https://www.congobrazzaville.campusfrance.org>

⁶ <https://www.africanews.com/2021/06/22/china-to-restructure-congo-s-debt/>

China together, which to the best of my knowledge has not been done before and has never yet been addressed specifically concerning Congo. Second, it argues against thinking of external political influences in binary terms of balancing or bandwagoning (Roy 2005) and more in terms of what Vu et al term “hedging with resistance” (Vu, Soong, and Nguyen 2020). As I will argue here, my interlocutors in Congo show cooperation towards external influences, but also strongly held reservations. Third and most crucially, it considers how hedging works in an everyday context as people perceive the influences of France and China in their own lives, and how this informs everyday decision-making. This matters, because most literature on hedging focuses on the macro level of international relations, without sufficient reference to how this works in lived experience or how national discourse on foreign relations with all its contradictions, is mirrored in everyday life. Finally, this article suggests bringing together literature theorising everyday aspiration (see amongst others High 2014; Jackson 2011) with literature on hedging, arguing that if these two things are essentially the same, it is somewhat surprising that nobody thus far has connected the two.

I begin with an overview of French influence in Congo and then consider the newer (but not entirely new) history of China in the country. In the next section, I demonstrate how ordinary Congolese encounter these overlapping, and sometimes competing influences. In the third section, I demonstrate how they hedge these influences as they grapple with different versions of what the future of Congo might look like. Finally, I argue for the importance of thinking about hedging as everyday action, and away from its traditional domain of international relations.

This paper is based mainly on initial fieldwork in Congo in July-August 2023, during which time I lived in central Brazzaville. I conducted participant observation, mapping Chinese activities in and around the capital, and semi-structured interviews with around ten Congolese men and women, who mostly described themselves as natives of Brazzaville, under the age of 35 and working in businesses and/or establishing their own. Data was collected in a mixture of French and English and all translations from French are my own. The paper also includes around one month of digital ethnography comprising observation of how people talk about China in Congo on the social media pages of media and Chinese organisations, and interviews via instant message with around six people who commented on posts about China in Congo. This digital work was done largely during the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2021.

Congo, “France-Afrique” and increasing Chinese influence

Colonialisation and consolidating power

The contemporary Republic of Congo became a French protectorate in 1880, a regime that lasted until independence in 1960. The capital, Brazzaville, was named after explorer Pietro Paolo Savorgnan di Brazza, whose monument still stands in Brazzaville today.

Independent Congo adopted Marxism as a political ideology in the late 1960s, before dropping this several decades later (Clark 2002; 2008). President Denis Sassou-Nguesso who became president in 1979, and remains so today, signed an official pact of friendship with the Soviet Union while at the same time accepting – willingly or otherwise – high levels of the former colonizer’s influence, particularly in Congo’s growing oil industry. Clark (1997; 2002) points out that the relationship between Congo, its resources, and France is critical, as this has a lot to do with why France has been able to maintain such high levels of influence over so many decades since independence (see amongst others, Kohnert 2022; Sumata 2023).⁷ In the

⁷ France has a long history of cultivating relationships with leaders of its former African colonies. Kohnert (2022) notes that these *Messieurs Afrique* matter for understanding political dynamics in Francophone Africa in that these rulers are vital for furthering French agendas in Africa. In turn, they also produce a small number of

case of Congo's oil wealth, French oil company, ELF, and more recently, Total Oil, have enjoyed a close relationship with Sassou-Nguesso and his regime over many years, with a unique tower, the "Tour Elf" visible on the Brazzaville skyline.



Figure 1: The Elf Tower or "Tour Elf" in downtown Brazzaville
Photo by author – July 2023

Congo fell into several periods of civil war in the 1990s, in reality, the only time when the current regime was in any realistic danger and during which Sassou-Nguesso fell from power, then assumed the presidency again at the end of the conflict in 1999. These periods of civil war led large numbers of Congolese to flee the country, many of whom migrated to France, where many remain. Several outbreaks of violence have occurred since in a challenge to the ongoing ruler and consolidation of power and resources unequally, most recently in 2016, which have been brutally crushed. Sassou-Nguesso won parliamentary elections in mid-2022, and his control of power in Congo as well as what is keeping it in place shows little sign of changing anytime soon.⁸ The power of France behind political power in Congo is apparent in the labelling of Brazzaville's streets. Boulevard Denis Sassou-Nguesso runs through the downtown area and passes the Presidential Palace before intersecting with Avenue du General De Gaulle, which passes the parliament building.

In 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a so-called "new deal" for Africa which would (amongst other points) provide investment in Africa, improve education

African elites who have access to the top echelons of French political power. As I argue in this paper, this leads to the everyday sentiment that politics in countries such as Congo largely does not serve the interests of its population.

⁸ The parliamentary elections consolidated an already strong grip on power. In presidential elections in 2021, Sassou-Nguesso finished with nearly 90% of the vote. The candidate in second place achieved under 8%/
<https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210323-congo-brazzaville-s-sassou-nguesso-re-elected-with-more-than-88-of-vote-early-results-show>

and increase opportunities (Kohnert 2022). France is currently Congo's largest foreign direct investor, especially around natural resources. Congo is also a major importer of French products, as well as a recipient of development aid from France, especially around capacity building and reforming the health and education systems.⁹ Yet, the feeling of exasperation at ongoing and often unwanted French influence with few tangible benefits to the Congolese population is summed up well in the words of one person commenting on ongoing French influence elsewhere in Francophone Africa. Noting rising levels of Chinese influence offering an alternative vision of future building to that of France, the writer states: "*I will wave the Chinese flag because [of] the majority of achievements... what did France build?*"

China in Congo

China in Congo is not an entirely new phenomenon, and stretches back to the Mao era in China and attempts by Chinese leaders to spread their political agendas in Africa (Ismael 1971; Lovell 2019). Lovell (2019) notes how Africa and colonial oppression in Africa formed part of the messaging in China in the 1960s as to why communism worldwide was necessary, and an alternative route to development than that offered by former colonisers based in the global North. In Congo, such sentiment about displacing the long-standing influence of France landed on particularly fertile ground given the country adopted Marxism briefly as a political ideology.¹⁰

Even if China in Africa is not entirely new, the speed at which China has become present and visible to much of the population in Congo is a development that has come at a rapid pace in both breadth and depth (Alden, 2005; Brautigam, 2011). This has been pronounced since China embarked on the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, which has led to an outward expression of Chinese power and an agenda of re-ordering the world along Chinese lines. In sum, the Chinese authorities have now cast China as an alternative model of development to more established examples offered by countries in the global North, for example, France. The renewed arrival of China and Chinese agendas in countries such as Congo means that for the first time, China is outwardly doing and encouraging particular forms of development in the global south over and above other forms of development activity encouraged by donors elsewhere (see amongst others, Freymann 2021). This is development packaged as being about developing economic activities in countries such as Congo, without any political demands associated with aid and investment from donors through the global North (Brautigam 2011a; 2011b; Freymann 2021). This form of development aid is particularly visible around infrastructure projects (see amongst others Freymann 2021; Walsh 2022). Such activities make for a much closer conflation between people of Chinese heritage in Congo and the contemporary state of the People's Republic of China, a point my interlocutors were quick to articulate.

Crucially, Chinese foreign policy insists repeatedly its actions are done without any interference with the political affairs of any other state (Alden 2005; Brautigam 2011a; 2011b).¹¹ In official rhetoric, development is a purely economic activity and one in which countries in the global South can develop their economies as a way to raise living standards and eradicate poverty. Taylor (2007) notes how official; Chinese policy insists that Chinese activities in Africa have nothing to do with resource extraction, but that such activities often appear concentrated in places known to have high levels of natural resources (Meierding 2011; Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010). One could well argue that Congo is therefore particularly attractive to Chinese interests given its natural resources, and an authoritarian political system.

⁹ <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/congo/france-and-congo-65123/>

¹⁰ Lovell (2019) notes rightly that for all the talk of freeing Africa from imperialism, there was also a notion of history repeating itself in Chinese official rhetoric from the 1950s also referring to Africa as something ready for taking by China.

¹¹ It is questionable just how far apart politics and economics are, yet this distinction is maintained strongly in China's foreign policy alongside the principle of "non-interference" in the political affairs of other states.

The visible profile of China in Congo has come firmly into view. Niambi (2018) provides an overview of these, noting that Chinese infrastructure projects in Congo include the renovation of the country's principal airport, the redevelopment of the corniche in Brazzaville and the upgrading the road between Brazzaville to Pointe Noire cutting journey times from several days to around twelve hours. Most prominently, Congo's parliament building was renovated with funding from China. Such projects led to the common conflation between Chinese-backed construction in Congo and rising levels of debt. As Samba-Zitou (2017) points out, Chinese economic fortunes have very real effects on Congo, and a decline in trade with China had negative consequences for Congo. As noted at the outset, debt levels are higher than ever, and a more pressing concern at the time of writing this paper with concerns over an economic slowdown in China.¹² Overall, scholars concur that as Chinese activities at a macro level in Congo increase, Congo's and China's economic fortunes are intertwined with Congo's debt to China increasing (Bokilo 2012; Niambi 2018; Samba Zitou 2017), and, as we will see below, the population worries about the implications of debt to China.

France, China, and Congolese futures

In July 2023, a media outlet based in Brazzaville published a post on Facebook criticizing the scoring of the most recent round of school baccalaureate exams. The post criticized one candidate for scoring too highly when the candidate's level of proficiency in French was reported to be poor. The post stated that an intelligent person in Congo must have good proficiency in French. While a small number of commenters – who all commented in French – noted that as the candidate passed, the situation could not be so bad, the majority agreed with the position that to be educated in Congo is to speak good French and vice versa, and that Congolese in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo across the river in Kinshasa often speak French of inferior quality. In the very clear opinion of one: “French is the foundation”.

Many Congolese aspire to study in France, have family there, or are connected to someone who does. Many of my associates in Brazzaville received visitors from France during the period of my fieldwork in the summer of 2023 and planned future visits to or longer periods in France. As one of my interlocutors put it: “People here want to go to France. They have family or work or lives there”. When people talked of imported food products, they often referred to those imported from France. Many Congolese with the necessary financial capital, talked about going to “the supermarket” meaning the Geant Casino supermarket in the city centre, which is a branch of the French supermarket chain of the same name.¹³ Other supermarkets now exist, although nobody seemed to have any interest in trying them out when Casino fulfilled their requirements already, and could park easily outside it. Casino sells many products imported directly from France, and even when selling local products such as pre-packaged cassava, sells these in a medium that replicates supermarkets in France itself.

Ironically, it was in this very supermarket that I first really encountered Chinese people in Congo doing what everyone else was doing, waiting for fresh pizza and availing themselves of the ease of buying groceries at fixed prices and products unavailable in local markets.¹⁴ We began to recognise each other as people so obviously foreign in Brazzaville and offered greetings and brief small talk in a mix of French and English when we encountered each other. Later, I would also meet them strolling along the waterfront in the early evenings, which is a popular spot for many different people to take a walk, and at the Chinese restaurants in the city, which are mostly managed by Chinese with local waiting staff and are frequented by Chinese and

¹² See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/21/china-cuts-interest-rate-economy-central-bank-rate>

¹³ <https://www.geantcasino.fr>

¹⁴ Anecdotaly, I am aware of a larger community of Chinese in Pointe Noire, and I witnessed large numbers of Chinese passengers on flights to and from there but have no other first-hand data on this.

local customers. Most of my interlocutors had eaten in one of them at least once and knew others who went often.

This particular restaurant stands not very far from the Brazzaville waterfront. The Brazzaville corniche, a popular spot for an evening stroll, affords everyone a good place for a view over the river to Kinshasa. The corniche was redeveloped with financial assistance from China which, as far as I could see, is not noted anywhere publicly. One does not need to walk far to be encountered by a stunning bridge, which notes the date of Congo's independence from France prominently. This is an important symbol of Congo, and the date of independence is a reminder of the country being divorced from its colonial heritage and its trajectory of being an independent nation. A sign at one end of the bridge marking the occasion of its opening does not refer to any external assistance in the redevelopment of the area. In other words, one can encounter both France and China here with their influences carved into the Congolese landscape, with the date of independence from France visible for all to see, but any outward acknowledgement of Chinese capital for this structure hidden from view.

Where China is visible in Congo, my interlocutors were quick to make a connection between people of Chinese heritage, the Mandarin language, and the contemporary state of China. The Chinese Embassy, situated in downtime Brazzaville and just around the corner from one of the campuses of Congo's only public university, maintains a busy calendar of social and cultural activities and makes strenuous attempts to publicise these. Opportunities to learn Mandarin are increasing. The university hosts a Confucius Institute on its campus, and the number of students offered scholarships to study in China is increasing. In mid-2023, I noted a new International Chinese School in the capital, which offers tuition to all age groups. Located not far from the Congolese parliament, which was also renovated with financial assistance from China, the school displays photos prominently of its activities outside, including its opening as a joint project between Congo and China, Congolese children performing Chinese dances, and perhaps most telling of all, the photo at figure 2 of Congolese children holding up signs with Chinese characters spelling out the words "China: Congo friendship".¹⁵



Figure 2:
Students learning Mandarin in Brazzaville hold up signs spelling out “China: Congo friendship” Photo by author – August 2023

¹⁵ I am grateful to Dr. Jingyu Mao for her translation assistance.

Everyday hedging of China and (new) visions of modernity

Interlocutors in Brazzaville were clear with me that Chinese influence in Congo is visible but also controversial. When I asked about what China is doing in Congo, what my associates had seen of China here, and how they understood this, all agreed on one point, China in Congo is synonymous with levels of debt from Congo to China. This is mirrored by some of the sentiments expressed online in respect of social media posts about China. Commenting on the growing associations between Chinese-financed infrastructure in Congo and Chinese influence, one commenter notes: “The new settlers are here....This is probably another form of colonization”. Another dismissed China in Congo and criticised the Congolese political establishment for the state of rising China in Congo by stating: “What did Sassou give China in return?”

China is imagined as a neo-coloniser in such a statement, with Chinese workers the agents of that colonisation and therefore, something to be rejected. Anti-China sentiment was also something to be spoken about openly, either by writing comments online that are critical of China in Congo or in everyday gossip, such as dismissing China-made products as being of largely poor quality. Hearing that I was interested in China in Congo, an interlocutor in her early thirties who works in business in Brazzaville asked me if I knew that most Chinese labourers on construction projects in Congo are from what she termed bad social backgrounds in China. Unable to comment on the veracity of that statement, I asked her how she knew this information and she told me confidently that this is common knowledge, and everyone knows it, even if they have never spoken to a Chinese worker first-hand. All knew of Chinese in Congo and encountered them while out and about in the city but few had ever had a long conversation with one, and none of my acquaintances talked of having Chinese friends.

But if China is a byword for, at least mostly, bad news in the form of debt, dependency, and a loss of sovereignty, all of which many are quick to complain about, I was curious to find out who is studying Chinese and answering the calls I saw on noticeboards and online to apply for scholarships to study in China. Walking past the new Chinese school during its summer break, the gatehouse staff were friendly, offering me a leaflet with extensive detail as to the levels of study offered, and how to register. One young person shared with me that she is learning basic Chinese there because “Why not? Maybe it could be useful”. This is not unusual. Asking around associates at a university in Brazzaville, I was told that people want to learn Chinese because the chance is there, and opportunities are not always plentiful in Congo. I asked how far this changes the study trajectory of many wishing to go to France and was told that that remains the preferred destination of most Congolese. To them, China is far away, and anxieties about racism towards black people in China are expressed frequently, especially as many had never had a real conversation with anyone Chinese in Brazzaville. Maybe they too believed the rumours about Chinese construction workers being somehow threatening or dangerous. But at the same time as being anxious about or outright critical of China, notions of future employment in Congo are attractive to many, even if they involve China. One interlocutor explained to me that while Congolese graduates from Chinese universities are still rare, it is quite straightforward for them to find employment with Chinese companies upon returning to Congo, which also means a good salary.

When I shared with some new friends in Brazzaville, all young professionals working in offices and businesses throughout the city, why I was there and what I was interested in, one took a very sharp intake of breath and told me that this is a very controversial subject in view of the political implications of the China-Congo relationship. In contrast to the negative rumours about construction workers, many were quick to point out that the Chinese are good at business, and those not working directly as labourers in construction sites have reputations as good entrepreneurs. This also matters because in a nation with such high unemployment, having one's own business is attractive. Upon hearing that I am interested in China and have been there, one interlocutor asked if I had any Chinese contacts in Brazzaville with whom she could

discuss importing products from China to Congo, a strategy that several others in the same group remarked on favourably as a potentially lucrative source of income. I was struck by just how open this interlocutor seemed in her aspiration to cooperate with Chinese businesses and her pursuit of Chinese business partners. Unfortunately, I could not help with this request but promised to let her know if I heard of anyone potentially useful.¹⁶

At the same time, many Congolese expressed frustrations at the speed of what they saw as encroachment by the Chinese in Congo and an abject lack of action on the part of their national authorities to mitigate against it. They are unconvinced by the notion that China does not meddle in the political affairs of other countries, or even if it did not mean to, what they see around them will change rapidly because of Chinese activities. Taking a measured view, one associate wrote to me: “China is a technology leader and has the means of constructing infrastructures. Unfortunately, in my opinion, our government is naïve because the Chinese profit from the contracts, steal our primary resources, and exploit workers”. But even if that is the case, it does not follow that all mention of China and Chinese activities in Congo are to be rejected and shunned. It is perfectly possible to be hopeful, and pragmatic, yet also worried at the same time. I suggest that pragmatism towards China and Chinese actors in Congo may explain why Congo has not yet seen the same level of anti-China sentiment seen elsewhere, most clearly demonstrated by rioting against Chinese and Chinese businesses in Kinshasa in 2015.¹⁷ When I asked whether my Congolese friends would use new transport infrastructures even with the knowledge that they contribute to high levels of the national debt, they laughed and said, of course, they would, and had I not yet travelled along many of the decaying roads? Driving with those same interlocutors who had told me at length about the bad social background of many Chinese workers and some others along a highway just outside Brazzaville, we had to pause repeatedly because of road works, or to drive around potholes in the road. In an apt demonstration of a contradictory attitude towards China that I outlined above, at one point one expressed frustration at the state of the road, slamming a hand on the steering wheel and exclaiming that had the road been built by the Chinese, it would be a lot better.

Hedging: cooperation and criticism, with pragmatism

What then, does China really mean and represent to many Congolese? I was told by numerous Congolese that to understand that China in Congo holds some allure and positivity for Congolese, especially younger Congolese, I needed to think about what they identified as modernity and take this seriously. When I asked what modernity means in this context, I was told that China in Congo largely represents a sort of fast-track development that is visible to everyone. One associate, a middle-aged Congolese man, told me that China is attractive precisely because it is understood to be modern, a place where people have material possessions, and it has infrastructure that works effectively, a contrast to much of what is present in Congo and was often left behind by the French on independence. This is a point made also to me by a taxi driver while bemoaning the state of infrastructure around Brazzaville and how, decades after independence, many people remain poor. One could add that to be modern is to also have opportunities to study and for new forms of employment or economic opportunities.¹⁸

But, as I asked frequently, if China is understood, at least in some regards, to be modern, is France somehow not modern? In response, I was told repeatedly that this is complicated and multi-layered. Of course, French influence across Congo remains strong, not least in the way

¹⁶ Ning (2023) relates something similar, especially as he was visibly Chinese in Brazzaville. I find the connection between China and entrepreneurialism a striking one, and while I was surprised initially by this enquiry, it is less surprising in hindsight.

¹⁷ <https://www.news24.com/news24/chinese-become-targets-in-drc-anti-govt-riots-20150125>

¹⁸ Modernity here, is articulated as something people strive for, individually and collectively. There is a crossover here with modernity as a personal project, as explored by Newell (2012)

politics is done and maintained. Many Congolese have family in France, have been there or wished to do so. This would explain why during my fieldwork, I witnessed large numbers of Congolese visa applicants outside the French consulate every morning. I never actually met a Congolese who had been in China while in Brazzaville in 2023, but everyone I met had seemingly either been to France or knew someone who had. Coming from a university, many young people explained to me their plans for future study and dreams to move abroad for further education usually in France, and asked how the university system works where I am from. They were also quick to ask me about how Campus France works and how their applications could be expedited or strengthened, a point on which I had nothing meaningful to advise. But even if, as my interlocutor mentioned in the introduction of this paper pointed out, “France is present in Congo”, decades of “development” activities led by France have not raised living standards for many Congolese and have instead entrenched a political system that many Congolese consider does not act in the interests of the population. In the opening of this paper, we see sentiments that call for a future without France, but also for the prominence of France in the Congolese imagination in ways that are not entirely negative and may also be desirable. In other sentiments expressed above, we see China imagined as a neo-coloniser, but also a bringer of a form of modernity to Congo, elements of which many Congolese identify as being attractive in their promises of quick development of the country’s transport infrastructure.

In his work on thinking through what it means to be modern, Ferguson (2006) rightly points out the importance of taking local voices seriously. Modernity, as articulated by my interlocutors is conceived largely – but not exclusively – around infrastructure, amenities, and material goods. As Ferguson points out, while nobody has a monopoly on the term modernity, if interlocutors in Africa talk of modernity in terms of social status or economic situation, then we should listen carefully to what they are telling us. I would add that we should also take seriously what they tell us in terms of how they see Congo changing along the lines of these foreign influences and more importantly, what they do in their own lives accordingly. To do so means thinking through what they do in this shifting landscape, but also how they perceive their options, what is attractive, and what is not. For my interlocutors wondering what France built in Congo that was meaningful during the colonial period and what France is doing now that has any meaningful impact on them, China represents some of the trappings of what it is to be a modern person, even while they criticise Chinese influence in Congo at the same time. The same can and does apply to France.

In holding these seemingly contradictory viewpoints or facing both towards and away from France and China at the same time, my interlocutors are participating in the day-to-day practice of hedging. Their criticisms of China in Congo are far-reaching, as we see in the stereotypes of how Chinese labourers are portrayed as having bad social backgrounds and how these rumours are shared. But we also see the notion of “learning Chinese, why not?” at the same time. This is an example of the resistance to foreign influences that Ciorciari and Haacke (2019) argue for. But those same scholars also argue for resistance as only one part of hedging, with the other as cooperation. At the level of international relations, states may well be friendly and receptive, but also cautious to foreign influences. Moreover, as scholars of hedging as an international relations strategy also note, hedging as a strategy is often not done in any sort of uniform way (Kuik 2016) and can be contradictory (Strating 2020).

Moving away from its traditional domain as a topic of interest in international relations or political science, I argue that any consideration of hedging needs to include an active role for the individual as well as the collective, the local as well as the national and international. Such a consideration must also take into account how neither France nor China is a monolithic force in Congo, much as the Congolese population are not homogeneous. What I am arguing for here is an apt example of what De Boeck and Balojji (2016) refer to as suturing different worlds together, or of how people build futures amidst contradictory statements and often empty promises from different outsiders who, of course, have their own agendas. We see in the words above

that many Congolese resent what they regard as interference by both French and Chinese actors. But we also see, if not optimism, then at least pragmatism, as part of aspiration, in their everyday sentiments. Pragmatism and hedging in these daily actions are then the same thing.

Scholars are rightly taking more notice of aspiration, considering how it is formed, and its limits (see amongst others, High 2014; Jackson 2011; Miyazaki 2006). As High (2014) puts it, people wanting, or desiring stuff (both tangible and intangible) is a universal phenomenon and the driving force of economies and economic change. In thinking through aspirations, and what drives aspirations, it is vital to consider questions of agency, where the limits of agency are and how these limits are contested. In other words, there is a vital role here for thinking through pragmatism, which I regard as a synonym for everyday hedging. While pragmatism does feature in some of the literature on aspiration (High 2014; Jackson 2011; James 2014), seemingly nobody talks explicitly about hedging or sees everyday hedging and pragmatism as, essentially, the same. Yet being pragmatic on an everyday level mirrors the practices done at an international level by one state towards another. Thinking about aspiration and hedging together is fruitful because as we have seen, what people aspire to is informed by external landscapes, geo-politics etc and how people negotiate these different drivers of change. These everyday practices illustrate the visions and contradictions of those who dream of African futures without the shadows of past colonialism, or neo-colonialism.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that China's rising prominence in Congo is a major driver of change, and the question of how far this will intersect with or displace the historically strong influence of France is an emergent one. As we have seen, states may opt for a strategy of hedging external forces and their influences, but as I have argued here, this notion of hedging can also be deployed to understand how people act in sometimes contradictory ways. My interlocutors align fully neither with China nor France, but with elements of both and acknowledge that neither is entirely positive nor negative.

I have demonstrated here that Congo is an illuminating case study because the influence of France remains particularly prevalent. For that reason, Congo is a particularly interesting place to consider the agency of the local population in negotiating external influences. I have argued strongly here for thinking of hedging as something one does, rather than something done to an individual or a group. In seeing how hedging works on an everyday level in Congo, we see Congolese people networking with the Chinese, learning Mandarin, but also planning futures involving France and ongoing French influence in Congo. This paper adds to the literature on hedging and aspiration by making an explicit connection between these two concepts, recognising that everyday hedging and pragmatism are essentially the same. I have argued here that the hallmarks of hedging – cooperation with resistance, or even confrontation, are all visible in Congolese daily life and how this drives aspirations and future building. These everyday actions mirror what happens on the macro level of international relations. Future research could consider explicitly how these everyday sentiments also inform the hedging process at a policy level.

The question of ongoing French and other foreign influences, their displacements and contestations, and what this drives in terms of everyday actions could hardly be more topical. At the time of my fieldwork in Congo, Niger's first democratically elected president had been displaced in a military coup, events covered widely in the Congolese and international press. Niger's coup-leading generals railed against poor management under the democratically elected administration and citizens took to the streets to denounce the ongoing presence of France in Niger, holding signs praising Putin's regime in Russia. Somewhat ironically, as in Congo, all criticism of France is conducted mostly in French. While the Niger situation remains as of yet unresolved, what is clear is that French claims to a long history in Africa are not immortal or a

guarantee of future influence there. The Niger situation shows too that China is not the only external influence besides France that it is worth watching closely. There is a sense that displacing one influence seems to lead to another, who may be more or less welcome than the last. While I do not claim any specific expertise on the situation in Niger, the parallels are stark. This is not only the case in Niger. On 30th August 2023, following disputed elections, military personnel seized control in Gabon, arresting the sitting President and announcing the dissolution of all Gabonese official institutions. This situation is somewhat different to Niger in that the coup has followed an election, and the arrested Gabonese President does not have the democratic credentials held by the Nigerien President that the global North have shouted about so loudly in condemning the coup in Niger. However, the justification given for the coup in Gabon of saving the population from an illegitimate and incompetent government backed by France is the same as in Niger.¹⁹ One could argue that neither the Nigerien nor the Gabonese government was successful in hedging French influence sufficiently, and nor were the population convinced of this strategy at a personal, or everyday, level, or in their actions. Much as we see in Congo, what people aspire to really matters, and has far-reaching consequences for what the future will look like in their own countries and beyond.

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¹⁹ The coups in Gabon and Niger follow similar events in recent years in Central African Republic, Burkina Faso and Mali.

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