

CHINA IN AFRICA



Photographs by NOAH FOWLER For The Times

VILLAGERS BRING out two slot machines from a hut in Zamashegu, Ghana. Residents play obsessively, ignoring work or school, sometimes stopping only when the whole village runs out of change.

ONE-ARMED BANDITS ROB VILLAGES OF HOPE

In rural Ghana, slot machines brought by the Chinese spread a gambling epidemic among farmers and even children

By JONATHAN KAIMAN :: REPORTING FROM ZAMASHEGU, GHANA

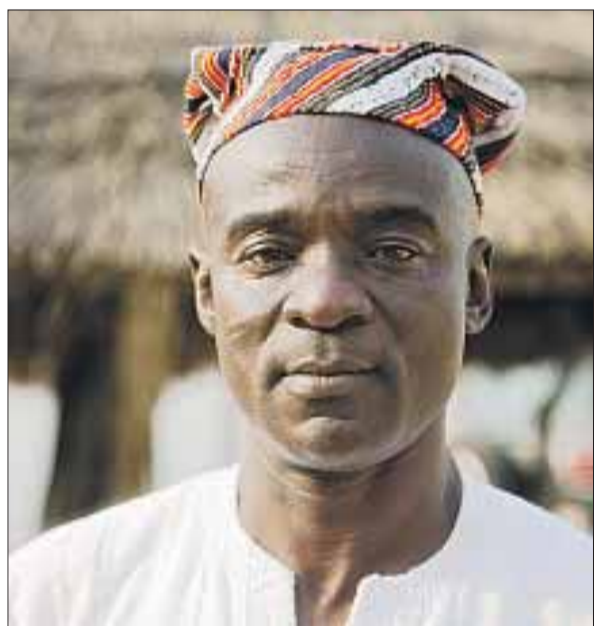
When the machines arrived last winter, the villagers were mesmerized.

In Zamashegu, a farming community of 1,000 people in northern Ghana, they may as well have come from outer space — four electric slot machines installed in two roadside shacks, chirping and clattering, bathing the packed-dirt walls in a pale, kaleidoscopic glow.

Their lure was magnetic. Soon, villagers stopped farming, leaving their yam and cassava fields fallow. Children stayed home from school. Instead, they'd queue up at the slots and play all day, until their pockets were empty or the village ran out of change altogether.

About twice a week, a Chinese man would arrive in a pickup truck. He would unlock the machines, hand some cash to the shacks' owners and drive off — carrying about \$100 in coins and, many villagers came to understand, their community's hope for the future.

China's influence across Africa has been deepening for decades — China surpassed the U.S. as the continent's biggest trading partner in 2009 — and Ghana, a



‘They’d play all day, hoping they would win. But you never could beat the machine.’

— UBOR DAWUNI WUMBE, chief of Bunbong village, on the slot machines' effect on residents

rapidly developing democracy of 26 million people on West Africa's Atlantic coast, has been one of the relationship's greatest beneficiaries.

Beijing has funded Ghanaian roads, dams, stadiums, hospitals and government buildings; it has flooded the country with inexpensive goods. Trade between the two nations hit \$6.6 billion in 2016, up from less than \$100 million in 2000. Ghanaian officials have welcomed the rise — in February, Finance Minister Kenneth Ofori-Atta called for an “enhanced relationship” with Beijing.

Yet Chinese entrepreneurs in Ghana are increasingly overstepping the once tightly prescribed limits of state control, and the widening presence of Chinese migrants selling cheap, low-quality goods at Ghanaian markets is undercutting — and infuriating — local sellers.

In 2013, the Ghanaian government arrested 168 Chinese nationals on suspicion of illegal gold mining, following reports of environmental devastation and social unrest.

Then came the gambling. Chinese slot machines [See Ghana, A4]

Detention center roiled by attempts at suicide

Immigrants describe desperate conditions at Adelanto facility, leading to multiple hunger strikes.

By PALOMA ESQUIVEL

ADELANTO, Calif. — Alexander Burgos Mejia was in his bunk at the Adelanto Detention Facility on a Tuesday evening in July when he heard a guard scream.

Walking into a common room, Burgos Mejia saw a man hanging from the second floor with a bedsheet around his neck, he recalled in an interview. A guard was trying to lift the man, and Burgos Mejia ran to help her before other officials arrived and cut the man down, he said.

The July 11 incident was the fifth report of an attempted suicide at the immigration detention center since December, according to San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department 911 call logs obtained by The Times through a public records request.

The incident unnerved Burgos Mejia, 28, who came to the U.S. this year from Honduras, fleeing gangs and seeking asylum, and has been detained since.

“I think doing something like that is something that has crossed the mind of all of us who are locked up here,” he said.

As soon as he arrived at Adelanto, Burgos Mejia said, he felt like he was treated like a criminal, not a refugee.

“It's the most horrible” feeling, he said. “From the moment that they chain you up from your feet and hands.”

Government officials say the Adelanto Detention Facility is subject to “rigorous operating requirements” and is tightly monitored to ensure those standards are met. When problems are identified, they are promptly addressed, officials say.

But complaints about the facility have grown particularly loud this year following the suicide attempts and three deaths since March, with multiple hunger strikes by detainees. [See Adelanto, A10]

Sexist memo a new blemish on diversity in tech

Male Google worker's rant shows it will take more than workshops to shift the culture.

By TRACEY LIEN AND DAVID PIERSON

When Google realized in 2013 it had a diversity problem, it followed the corporate playbook by introducing workshops to train employees about hidden biases.

But four years later — and after sending three-quarters of its 70,000 employees through sensitivity training — the Mountain View, Calif., tech giant is now reeling after a male employee circulated a memo arguing women are biologically

incapable of doing a man's job in Silicon Valley.

The 3,000-word post — which contended, among other things, that men fundamentally have a higher drive for status than women — has triggered another crisis for a tech industry scrambling to find a credible solution to its underrepresentation of minorities and women. And it comes at a time when high-profile start-ups such as Uber and venture firms such as Binary Capital have come under fire for sexual harassment scandals.

The memo also puts Google's push to promote diversity in the spotlight, raising questions about its efficacy. How could a company whose purported raison d'être is “do no evil” harbor an employee bold enough to deride empathy as irrational, equate more women in the workforce as “social engineering” and claim females are too agreeable to effectively lead?

“If this engineer said he didn't believe in the company's product philosophy, and he was going to work against the product internally, there's no way that person would keep their [See Google, A7]

N. Korea says U.S. isn't safe

By JONATHAN KAIMAN

BEIJING — North Korean state media said Monday that the United States will “pay dearly” for a round of strict sanctions approved by the United Nations over the weekend, suggesting that Pyongyang remains committed to its nuclear ambitions and willing to bear the economic costs.

“There is no bigger mistake than the United States believing that its land is safe across the ocean,” the isolated country's state-run Korean Central News Agency said in a statement.

The United Nations Security Council on Saturday voted on a new round of sanctions targeting North Korea's primary exports, including iron, coal and seafood — together worth [See North Korea, A5]

A prediction predicament

Furor at UC Irvine underscores guesswork in student enrollment



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

A STUDENT visits the admissions office at UC Irvine, which drew outrage last month when it rescinded nearly 500 admission offers.

By TERESA WATANABE AND ROSANNA XIA

A flood of students unexpectedly accepted admission offers. A UC campus was caught off guard. Administrators scoured the files of the admitted and took a hard line on those who had failed to meet paperwork deadlines. They withdrew more than 500 offers, causing a furor.

The year was 2015, the campus Santa Cruz.

The storm that UC Irvine recently unleashed when it took a similar approach to overenrollment was unusual but hardly unheard of on the nation's college campuses. Experts say the two UC cases and others like them at Temple University in Philadelphia and St. Mary's College of Maryland underscore the vagaries of enrollment prediction — a discipline that aims to meld the science of data analysis with the guesswork of anticipating teenage whims. Cal Poly San [See Irvine, A7]

Man gets a stay from deportation

Father became a cause celebre when he was arrested after dropping off his daughter at an L.A. school. CALIFORNIA, B1

Angel standout Don Baylor dies

He was the American League MVP in 1979, and went on to become manager of the year with the Rockies. CALIFORNIA, B5

Weather: Clearing. L.A. Basin: 87/66. B6





Photographs by NOAH FOWLER For The Times

VILLAGERS GAMBLE in Zamashegu. Half of the population in Ghana's Northern Region lives below the poverty line, yet the slot machines are almost everywhere.

Ghana loses in gambling epidemic

[Ghana, from A1] began appearing throughout rural Ghana early last year. And though the scope of the phenomenon remains unclear, interviews with dozens of villagers and officials in the country's Northern Region — an area about the size of West Virginia, home to 2.5 million people — suggested that the machines have proliferated widely and precipitated an epidemic of gambling addiction that the government has been unable, or unwilling, to quell.

"For me what China is doing here is economic colonialism," said Esther Armah, a prominent radio host and lecturer at Webster University in Accra. "Part of Ghana's challenge is creating an economy that serves Ghanaians first and foremost. We don't have that. We have an economy that first and foremost serves foreigners."

Alexander Afenyo-Markin, a member of parliament for the Efutu Municipal District near Accra, about 300 miles south of the Northern Region, said local authorities have been lax on enforcement — and national officials, bound by Ghanaian law, are sometimes powerless to help.

"Most of these gambling centers have been opened without any authorization," he said, adding that he knows of 15 in Efutu alone, run by several Chinese com-

panies. "Now this has a lot of kids out of school, and it is also encouraging stealing and robbery."

He has urged Efutu's Municipal Assembly to muster a task force and crack down. "As a member of parliament I don't have that capacity," he said. "I can only do advocacy."

The Northern Region is particularly vulnerable. About half its population lives below the poverty line. Many villages have no access to clean water. Child malnutrition is rampant. Yet the machines are everywhere, though mostly hidden from view: in a pharmacy; in an electronics store; tucked away in a dusty lot, flanked by small children.

At first, Ubor Dawuni Wumbe didn't even notice the machines.

Wumbe, the chief of Bunbong, a village of 2,500 people at the heart of the region, lives and governs — overseeing village projects, settling villagers' disputes — in a brilliant white hut complex, insulated from the chaos of village life. But one day, "I noticed there was always a car that was parked here," he said, gesturing to a dusty patch just outside the complex. Its driver was Ghanaian; its passenger looked Chinese.

In mid-2016, the Ghanaian government completed a major highway through the Northern Region, cutting



THOUGH POPULAR throughout the Northern Region, the slot machines are mostly hidden from view, inside stores, cafes, pharmacies and homes.

About this series

This is the last in a series of reports on a massive program of Chinese investment that is reshaping Africa. Times staff writer Jonathan Kaiman and visual journalist Noah Fowler traveled to Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya and Ghana with support from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. More online, including 360-degree videos, at latimes.com/chinainafrika

travel time from Bunbong to Yendi District — a commercial center about 18 miles away — from several hours to about 30 minutes. "I think all of a sudden, [the Chinese] realized there was access," Wumbe said. "That this was virgin territory, where they could ply on ignorance, or human emotion, to get rich quick."

Soon he began seeing slot machines across the village; he counted 30, spread across 15 convenience stores, cafes and homes. They were strikingly crude: plywood boxes, each about the size of a mini refrigerator, sealed with a rusty padlock and outfitted with a coin slot, a metal tray and a flimsy plastic facade. They were emblazoned with famous figures — Super Mario, soccer player Lionel Messi — the faces sunbleached and streaked with dirt. Minimum bets were 5 to 10 cents.

They were wildly popular. "You'd go there and it was packed," he said. "People weren't going to their farms anymore. People began to think that this was a way of earning income. They'd play all day, hoping they would win. But you never could beat the machine."

Wumbe confronted the

Chinese agents — by this point, he said, there were several — and demanded they remove the machines. The agents complied. Later, they returned offering a bribe of six soccer balls, imploring him to change his judgment. Wumbe refused. "We knew there were going to be a lot of problems in the near future," he said. "You know it's going to bring drugs, prostitution, robbery."

But most villages seemed to be doing nothing. Across the region, the one-armed bandits were winning.

"I think there are a lot of people who feel the same way as I feel," Wumbe said. "It's just that nobody acts. We all just sit and talk about it. But nobody acts."

Gambling in Ghana is legal and highly regulated; casinos line the streets in Accra, and online gambling, sports betting and lotteries are popular farther afield. Yet the primitive slot machines, and their link to underage gambling, have proved politically contentious.

In January 2016, officials in the Bolgatanga Municipal District, a two-hour drive from Bunbong, granted a Chinese company permits to distribute slot machines

in local villages. Almost immediately, they were flooded with complaints: Children were skipping school to play, stealing from their parents. In June, they revoked the company's permits, but the problem persisted. In September, they assembled a police-military task force and conducted a series of raids, confiscating 38 machines in total.

According to Bolgatanga's municipal records, the machines belonged to a company called Pusheng Game Ghana Ltd., registered to a post office box in Accra. Yet officials in Bolgatanga could give no further details about Pusheng. The company has no website or public telephone number; its management could not be reached for comment.

"The headquarters is in Accra," said Ayimbila Abubakar Ateer, Bolgatanga's convener for justice and security. "If it's in Accra, they are operating countrywide."

In January, officials in Kyebi — a town in Ghana's Eastern Region, about 430 miles from Bolgatanga — confiscated 40 Chinese-run slot machines, also because of underage gambling, local media reported.

In April, a Chinese slot machine owner "unleashed thugs" on a bar owner in Awutu Breku — a small town in Ghana's Central Region — after accusing him of pocketing the machine's take, according to the popular Ghanaian news website Adom Online. The bar owner, Isaac Akufu, reportedly landed in the hospital with knife wounds.

Yet not all local governments have reacted to the machines with ire. Yakubu Abubakari, presiding member of the Mion Municipal District assembly, also in the Northern Region, said he was wary about the machines' social impact, but approved of their existence.

The machines' Chinese owners saw him as a threat at first, Abubakari said, but warmed to him once they realized that he'd let them operate. He said one Chinese businessman, after a meeting with the assembly, handed him an envelope containing 150 Ghanaian cedis (about \$30). He accepted the money.

The machines are "a form of business in the community," he said. "So the person who is gambling with the machine [does so] at his discretion.

"Some win, and some lose, and that's the game."

On a Saturday morning in Zamashegu, about a dozen villagers gathered around Azindo Nchegiri's roadside shack — and his two Chinese slot machines — to share their grievances. The air was thick with dust and the sun blazed overhead, driving even the goats and chickens into the shade.

Nchegiri, a farmer, said he's hosted the machines for about a year. Every three days, a Chinese man takes the earnings and gives him a cut — and every time, he loses it back to the machines. In total, he said, he has lost about \$115, a hefty sum in the village. "I like playing," he said. "But the money goes. That is painful."

Wumbi Abubakar, 13, said the first time he saw the machines, about a year ago, he didn't even know where to put the coins. An agent taught him how to play, and soon he was addicted.

"I was very happy then. I put in the money and won, and the sound that came out of the machine was very interesting," he said. "I won 150 cedis [about 34 cents], then I played again and won 5. Then I continued until I went home with empty hands. That night I wasn't happy."

The other villagers saw no way to get rid of the machines; unlike in Bunbong, their chief has not lodged a protest. Villagers play obsessively, praying for a stroke of luck, and local hosts are disinclined to surrender a source of easy income.

"One time I told the [Chinese] man to take the machines and go, because I didn't win," said villager Jijiri Nchegiri, Azindo's brother. "But he didn't do anything."

Suddenly, a child ran up to the crowd and shouted that "the Chinese" had arrived. The villagers hustled to the highway, where a white pickup truck sat idle. Its driver, a Ghanaian man, paced on the road, talking on a cellphone.

Moments later, a Chinese man emerged from a nearby shack. He was tall and pale, wearing a beige T-shirt and black baseball cap. He gave only his surname, Zhang. He said he'd been working as a cook in Hohhot, the capital of northern China's Inner Mongolia region, when a Chinese agent approached him with an opportunity overseas. He had now been in Ghana about a month and planned to stay a year.

"I'm really just here as a worker," he said. "Because local people didn't know how to do this business, my boss brought me over." As the crowd pressed in, he fell silent; his eyes darted uncomfortably. He said he was busy. He and the driver hopped into the truck and sped off down the road.

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FOR THE RECORD

Fresno State lecturer: In the Aug. 6 California section, an article about a history lecturer at Cal State Fresno who was suspended from teaching in the fall after tweeting President Trump "must hang" reported that his contract expires in December. Lars Maischak's contractual assignment ends in December; his three-year contract runs through May 2018.

Randy Newman: In the Aug. 6 Arts & Books section, an article about Randy Newman and his new album, "Dark Matter," said Newman has released new studio albums at a rate of about one every four years. The pace is

one almost every five years for the 11 albums he has released since 1968. It also referred to the 40 years that had elapsed since that release. It is nearly 50 years.

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