South Africa and China's Tariff Exemption: An Assessment Based on 2024

This working paper assesses, on the basis of 2024 Comtrade data and Chinese customs tariffs, what China's tariff exemption would actually have meant for South Africa had it been in force that year. It shows that 92.5% of South African exports to China already benefited from the zero most-favoured-nation rate, so that the average customs duty rate collected was only 0.49%. Only a handful of products (diamonds, macadamia nuts and pecan nuts) could genuinely have benefited from the measure. Generally speaking, phytosanitary protocols, far more than customs duties, are the main obstacle to South African agricultural exports to China.

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Since 1 May 2026, all African countries – whether or not classified among the least developed countries (LDCs) – have benefited from a tariff exemption on all the products they export to China, provided they recognise Peking rather than Taipei. This exemption, announced by Xi Jinping on 14 February 2026 from Addis Ababa, where the 39th summit of the African Union was being held, is valid for two years and will require a renewal if it is to remain in effect over the long term.

We had previously examined the question in general terms, before looking at the impact of this measure on various products, such as sesame, coffee, cocoa, copper and cherries. It was the case of cherries that led us to look at the situation of South Africa, a country not classified among the LDCs. Its cherry exports to China are negligible, and high customs tariff was not preventing their export. The question then became: "What about other products?"

The UN Harmonised System, as adopted by China, comprises 8,972 import tariff lines, broken down as follows (see table 1) :

Table 1– Tariff lines and tariff rate

Number of lines	Type of tariff
7,484	MFN rate > 0%
1,454	MFN rate = 0%
34	Specific duty not expressed as a percentage
8,972	

MFN rate: most-favoured-nation rate

Meeting this challenge was no easy task, given the limits (ten tariff lines per extraction) imposed on free users of the Comtrade online database. We therefore proceeded in stages. First, we identified the most important two-digit tariff lines. Then, within these, we repeated the operation for four-digit lines and, where necessary, for six-digit lines. This process allowed us to isolate the 115 main tariff lines, accounting for 95.3% of Chinese imports from South Africa in 2024 (see table 2).

Table 2– The 115 tariff lines selected

HS Code	Category description	Chinese imports US$ million	% of total Chinese imports	Number of 4- or 6-digit tariff lines selected
71	Natural pearls, precious stones, precious metals…	13,453.31	43.97	22
26	Ores, slag and ash	12,267.23	40.09	12
72	Iron and steel	1,901.01	6.21	22
74	Copper and articles thereof	1,035.92	3.39	12
08	Edible fruit; peel of citrus fruit or melons	493.89	1.61	11
Total		29,151.36	95.27	79

Once this selection had been made, the customs duty applicable to these products upon entry into China could be calculated. In 2024, South Africa's exports to China totalled US$30.599 billion. The 115 selected tariff lines accounted for US$29.151 billion, representing 95.27% of the total. The payable amount would have come to around US$143 million, equating to an average rate of 0.49% (see Appendix). The situation varies considerably from product to product, but from a trade perspective, 92.5% of the products listed in these 79 tariff lines benefit from a zero most-favoured-nation (MFN) tariff rate. The remainder mainly consists of diamonds (5.1%), taxed at 4%,

macadamia nuts[1] (0.8%), taxed at 12%, and pecan nuts[2] (0.5%), taxed at 24% (see table 3). This finding allows several clear conclusions to be drawn. Had the tariff exemption applied in 2024:

Table 3– Distribution by tariff rate

Category	Amount exported	
	US$ million	share
MFN rate = 0%	26,963.93	92.5%
MFN rate > 0%	2,187.43	7.5%
• *1%*	*55.57*	*0.2%*
• *1.5%*	*25.11*	*0.1%*
• *2%*	*0.05*	*0.0%*
• *3%*	*72.74*	*0.2%*
• *3.5%*	*36.64*	*0.1%*
• *4%*	*1,483.36*	*5.1%*
• *4.5%*	*0.25*	*0.0%*
• *5%*	*0.95*	*0.0%*
• *5.5%*	*1.81*	*0.0%*
• *6%*	*0.28*	*0.0%*
• *8%*	*0.04*	*0.0%*
• *9%*	*16.20*	*0.1%*
• *10%*	*20.46*	*0.1%*
• *10.5%*	*0.56*	*0.0%*
• *11%*	*75.56*	*0.3%*
• *12%*	*226.75*	*0.8%*
• *13%*	*13.98*	*0.0%*
• *24%*	*157.13*	*0.5%*

- By value, 92.5% of products would not have been affected by the relief promised by this measure.
- Even if a small number of products had been subject to tax – or even heavy taxation – this measure would have had a very limited impact, given how small the amounts imported by China are.
- The products that might potentially have been affected in 2024 are agricultural products in HS category 08. In this respect, this measure is consistent with the statement that Peking wishes to encourage imports of African agricultural products.

However, it is far from clear that it is the level of customs duty that *in fine* most hinders the import of these products. Recent Sino-South African agricultural relations have been marked by a succession of phytosanitary protocols aimed at organising Chinese imports, including citrus fruits (2004), apples (2015), lemons (2021), pears (2022), avocados (2023), stone fruits (2025) and cherries (2026). The latest agreement is presented as the implementation of the China–South Africa Economic Partnership Framework Agreement which was signed in 2026. An article in *Agri News* published on 17 February 2026 under the title Why the "Phytosanitary Protocol" is the Real Key to China's 0% Tariff sums up the situation very explicitly:

> *Without this ["Health Passport"], your fruit or food isn't just expensive – it's illegal.*
>
> ***The hard truth**: China does not lower its health standards just because it lowered its taxes. If a specific crop does not have a signed Phytosanitary Protocol, it is prohibited from entry – even if the tariff is 0%.*

[1] To be precise, nuts account for 71.5%; the remaining 28.5% consists of citrus fruit (mandarins, clementines, pomelos and grapefruit).

[2] See the note to the table in the Appendix.

Appendix– Total duties payable on entry of 95.3% of South African goods entering China in 2024

HS Code	Category description	Chinese imports US$ million	% of total Chinese imports	MFN rate (%)	Duties US$ million
26	**Ores, slag and ash**	**12,267.23**	**40.090**	**0.00**	**0.039**
2610	Chrome ore	4,724.63	15.440	0.00	0.000
2601	Iron ore	4,353.42	14.227	0.00	0.000
2602	Manganese ore	2,294.34	7.498	0.00	0.000
2615	Niobium, tantalum, vanadium or zirconium ore	407.08	1.330	0.00	0.000
2608	Zinc ore	265.67	0.868	0.00	0.000
2603	Copper ore	184.89	0.604	0.00	0.000
2614	Titanium ore	13.29	0.043	0.00	0.000
2616	Precious-metal ore	10.88	0.036	0.00	0.000
2607	Lead ore	10.38	0.034	0.00	0.000
2617	Other ores and concentrates (n.e.s.)	2.60	0.008	1.50	0.039
2604	Nickel ore	0.04	0.000	0.00	0.000
2605	Cobalt ore	0.00	0.000	0.00	0.000
71	**Natural pearls, precious stones, precious metals and articles thereof**	**13,453.31**	**43.966**	**0.48**	**64.312**
7108	Gold, unwrought or semi-manufactured	9,030.21	29.511	0.00	0.000
711011	Platinum, unwrought or in powder form	2,106.51	6.884	0.00	0.000
710239	Non-industrial diamonds, cut or otherwise worked	1,450.72	4.741	4.00	58.029
711031	Rhodium, unwrought or in powder form	237.44	0.776	0.00	0.000
711021	Palladium, unwrought or in powder form	228.74	0.748	0.00	0.000
711041	Iridium, osmium and ruthenium, unwrought or in powder form	224.56	0.734	0.00	0.000
711019	Platinum, other forms (semi-manufactured)	41.21	0.135	3.00	1.236
7103	Precious/semi-precious stones (other than diamonds)	36.64	0.120	3.50	1.282
710491	Synthetic stones, worked (including sapphire)	32.49	0.106	4.00	1.300
710231	Non-industrial diamonds, unworked	31.36	0.102	3.00	0.941
7113	Jewellery of precious metal	16.20	0.053	9.00	1.458
7106	Silver, unwrought or semi-manufactured	14.89	0.049	0.00	0.000
710221	Industrial diamonds, unworked	1.37	0.004	0.00	0.000
7101	Natural or cultured pearls	0.56	0.002	10.50	0.059
7105	Powder of precious or semi-precious stones	0.17	0.001	0.00	0.000
711029	Palladium, other forms (semi-manufactured)	0.16	0.001	3.00	0.005
710499	Other synthetic stones, worked	0.04	0.000	4.00	0.002
7115	Other articles of precious metal	0.02	0.000	5.00	0.001
7117	Imitation jewellery	0.00	0.000	13.00	0.000
7116	Articles of pearls or precious stones	0.00	0.000	10.00	0.000
7114	Goldsmiths' or silversmiths' articles of precious metal	0.00	0.000	10.00	0.000
7118	Coin	0.00	0.000	0.00	0.000
72	**Iron and steel**	**1,901.01**	**6.213**	**0.00**	**0.083**
720241	Ferro-chromium (>4% carbon)	1,896.36	6.197	0.00	0.000
7207	Semi-finished products of iron or non-alloy steel	2.58	0.008	0.00	0.000
7219	Flat-rolled products of stainless steel, ≥600mm	0.74	0.002	5.00	0.037
7204	Waste and scrap of cast iron, iron or steel	0.30	0.001	1.00	0.003
7211	Flat-rolled products, <600mm, not clad	0.24	0.001	6.00	0.014
7216	Angles, shapes and sections of iron or non-alloy steel	0.22	0.001	4.50	0.010
720292	Ferro-vanadium	0.16	0.001	5.00	0.008
7224	Alloy steel, in ingots or other primary forms	0.15	0.000	0.00	0.000
7213	Wire rod, in coils	0.11	0.000	4.00	0.004
7205	Granules and powders of pig iron, iron or steel	0.05	0.000	2.00	0.001
7212	Flat-rolled products, <600mm, clad/plated/coated	0.03	0.000	6.00	0.002
7209	Flat-rolled products, cold-rolled, ≥600mm	0.03	0.000	4.50	0.001
7220	Flat-rolled products of stainless steel, <600mm	0.01	0.000	6.00	0.001
7228	Bars and sections of other alloy steel	0.01	0.000	5.00	0.000
7226	Flat-rolled products of other alloy steel, <600mm	0.01	0.000	5.00	0.000
7225	Flat-rolled products of other alloy steel, ≥600mm	0.01	0.000	5.00	0.000
7208	Flat-rolled products, hot-rolled, ≥600mm	0.01	0.000	4.50	0.000
7214	Bars of iron/non-alloy steel	0.00	0.000	5.00	0.000
7210	Flat-rolled products, clad/plated/coated, ≥600mm	0.00	0.000	6.50	0.000
720229	Ferro-silicon	0.00	0.000	2.00	0.000
7217	Wire of iron or non-alloy steel	0.00	0.000	8.00	0.000
720249	Ferro-chromium (≤4% carbon)	0.00	0.000	0.00	0.000
74	**Copper and articles thereof**	**1,035.92**	**3.385**	**0.10**	**0.993**
7402	Unrefined copper; copper anodes	576.02	1.882	0.00	0.000
740311	Refined copper cathodes	200.19	0.654	0.00	0.000
740319	Refined copper, other forms	179.85	0.588	0.00	0.000
740321	Brass (copper-zinc alloy)	54.62	0.178	1.00	0.546
7404	Copper waste and scrap	22.51	0.074	1.50	0.338
7407	Copper bars and sections	1.77	0.006	5.50	0.098
740329	Other copper alloys	0.65	0.002	1.00	0.006
740313	Refined copper billets	0.24	0.001	0.00	0.000
7412	Copper tube or pipe fittings	0.04	0.000	5.50	0.002
7419	Other articles of copper	0.02	0.000	8.00	0.002

HS Code	Category description	Chinese imports US$ million	% of total Chinese imports	MFN rate (%)	Duties US$ million
7418	Household articles of copper	0.01	0.000	8.00	0.001
7415	Nails, screws and bolts of copper	0.01	0.000	8.00	0.001
08	**Edible fruit; peel of citrus fruit or melons**	**493.89**	**1.614**	**15.61**	**77.097**
080299*	Other nuts, n.e.s. (98.7% being pecan nuts)	157.13	0.514	24.00	37.712
080261	Macadamia nuts, in shell	140.30	0.458	12.00	16.836
080510	Oranges	67.77	0.221	11.00	7.454
080521	Mandarins, clementines	39.15	0.128	12.00	4.699
080540	Pomelos and grapefruit	25.50	0.083	12.00	3.060
080262	Macadamia nuts, shelled	21.80	0.071	12.00	2.616
080810	Apples	19.89	0.065	10.00	1.989
080610	Fresh grapes	13.98	0.046	13.00	1.818
080830	Pears	5.46	0.018	11.00	0.600
080550	Lemons and limes	2.33	0.008	11.00	0.256
080620	Raisins	0.57	0.002	10.00	0.057
TOTAL (5 chapters)		**29,151.36**	**95.270**	**0.49**	**142.525**

*: Code 0802299 is subdivided by the Chinese system into two sub-codes: 08029910 (ginkgo nuts) and 08029990 (other nuts not elsewhere classified). It is therefore under this latter sub-category that imports of pecan nuts are recorded, along with cashew nuts, Brazil nuts and other nuts. Statistics from the online database of the [Chinese] Ministry of Commerce show that the volume of this sub-category is 32,746 tonnes. At the same time, we know, according to data from the South African Pecan Nut Producers' Association (SAPPA), South Africa exported 32,620 tonnes of pecan nuts (98.4% of its output) to China in 2024. In other words, pecan nuts account for 98.7% by value of line 080299.

1) n.e.s.: not elsewhere specified.

2) Some Chinese import figures are shown as a value equal to "0.00"; this does not mean that these imports are nil, but that their amount is below US$10,000.