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***Problematizing the Concept of Chinese Soft Power<sup>1</sup>***

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**Abstract**

This paper consists of two main arguments: The first is conceptual and deals with a critique of the way the concept of ‘soft power’ has been extended beyond its original use by Joseph Nye in his book from 1997 *Bound to Lead*. Especially the paper questions the way the concept has been taken over by Chinese academics and policy makers. From critiquing the concept the paper proceeds to offer alternative ways of analysing the power that is related to advances within the area of communications, media, culture, based on theoretical input from Todd Hall, Steven Lukes, Michael Mann and Pierre Bourdieu.

The second argument of the paper is more concrete dealing with how examples of Chinese investments and initiatives may be understood not as part of a facile soft power strategy, but rather in a broader context of communication investments, media cooperation and cultural image building. The paper ends with a preliminary attempt to situate these elements within an alternative power analysis.

Key words: soft power, power analysis. Chinese involvement in Africa: communications. Media, culture.

**‘Soft Power’**

There are few, if any, concepts that have been used so often and in so many different contexts in international relations discussions in the past decades than “soft power”. There are many reasons for this. First of all it is a catchy phrase that has great rhetorical power by being an oxymoron, which is a figure of speech that juxtaposes seemingly contradictory elements. It is a rhetorical figure that has become very popular in political jargon, but it is also a favourite element in much

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<sup>1</sup> NB: This is an UNFINISHED DRAFT. Please do not quote without consulting me.

modern poetry. Anyway it is a term that fascinates also because one invariably is forced to ask what then is “hard power”? That the concept also utilises the binary opposition between hard and soft, does not make it less attractive. There are already many books and articles that have titles that include “soft power”.<sup>2</sup> And there is a French Internet journal that is called “Soft Power”.<sup>3</sup> It is by the way significant that in France they use the English term, not the French “puissance douce”. And in German “weiche Macht” does not have the same rhetorical implication as “soft power”, not to talk about Portuguese “poder soave”. Conferences are organised around it. The question that must be asked it obviously whether it really is useful as an analytical term for understanding international power relations and national political strategies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As is well known Joseph Nye first introduced the term in his 1990 book *Bound To Lead. The Changing Nature Of American Power*.<sup>4</sup> He has since discussed the concept further in the book that is titled after the concept in 2004 *Soft Power. The Means to Success in in World Politics*,<sup>5</sup> and latest in *The Future of Power* from 2011.<sup>6</sup> In the last book Nye also combines hard and soft power to what he identifies as “Smart power”.<sup>7</sup> The definitions Nye uses for the term vary a bit from context to context and from book to book, but in the latest book he defines it thus: “[...] soft power is the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes.”<sup>8</sup> And he expands a bit on this in an endnote:

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<sup>2</sup> A very superficial check on Amazon.uk revealed that by searching under the phrase “soft power” 32 different books with the phrase in its title turned up on the first seven pages that Amazon displayed. And the fancy and popular high class magazine *Monocle* publishes an annual soft power surveys of the countries of the world: <http://monocle.com/film/affairs/soft-power-survey-2013/> (last accessed March 3, 2014)

<sup>3</sup> “Soft Power” est le magazine global et bi-média des industries créatives et des médias de France Culture.” <http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-soft-power-12-13> (Last accessed Feb 19, 2014)

<sup>4</sup> Nye, Joseph (1990). *Bound to lead: The changing nature of American power*. New York (Basic Books)

<sup>5</sup> Nye, Joseph S. (2004) *Soft Power. The Means to Success in in World Politics*. New York. (Public Affairs)

<sup>6</sup> Nye, Joseph S. (2011) *The Future of Power*. New York. (Public Affairs)

<sup>7</sup> “Smart power is the combination of the hard power of coercion and payment with the soft power of persuasion and attraction.” Nye (2011) op. cit. p. xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

At various times, in trying to explain soft power, I have shortened my formulation to statements such as "Soft power is attractive power," "Soft power is the ability to shape or reshape preferences without resort to force or payment," and "soft power is the ability to get others to want what you want." These short forms are consistent with the longer more, formal definition of the concept.<sup>9</sup>

And elsewhere he writes that soft power

[...] is simply a form of power, one way of getting desired outcomes. Legitimacy is a power reality. Competitive struggles over legitimacy are part of enhancing or depriving actors of soft power [...]

Not just states are involved. Corporations, institutions, NGOs and transnational terrorist networks often have soft power of their own.

And he goes on to state that soft power relates to "culture", "political values", "policies".<sup>10</sup> Or for that matter of fact the three resources of international power – military, economic and intangible. These are rather broad categories that imply many aspects and elements, and it points in the direction of the vagueness that term has been criticised for having.

The term has been widely discussed and also criticised. An important objection to the term has been that it apparently is being used differently in disparate contexts. Thus policy makers often refer to it as a practical term for political action and strategy. Thus it is being employed in order to promote the standing of countries in the world, often as a kind of tool for the bringing about understanding at top-level between political elites. This is something that Nye himself refers to in the latest book where he points out that at high level meetings there is a form soft power being exercised when a nation mobilises resources through their government elites and this creates attraction for the nation that employs its resources and influences the elites of other nations to a degree that fulfils the interests of the first nation, or both. An example this form of elite soft power can be illustrated by what goes on at the annual January meetings of The World Economic Forum in Davos. But in our context here the most important

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 243.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 81 ff.

example would be the so-called FOCAC meetings<sup>11</sup> between Chinese and African political leaders. There is no doubt that these meetings may be characterised as a central element of Chinese soft power policies towards Africa.

It is also clear that Nye coined the concept within the context of a special political event – the first Gulf War. Nye himself has emphasised this and pointed out that the concept is a particular form of power related to military power, economic power and power over opinion. It was intended as a critique of the way that the Bush administration solely related on military hard power in its foreign policies, to what Nye saw as a detriment to US broad foreign policy interests. Thus soft power is a concept that has a clear policy element also when Nye uses it in his analyses. And thus it has also caught on by many policy makers and by those who provide them with their tools of the trade.

However, and this has been pointed out by among others Todd Hall,<sup>12</sup> does this turn soft power into a useful analytical category? Hall argues that even if a term is widely used within practical politics it is not necessarily a suitable analytical term, as it tends to lack a proper conceptual framework. This often becomes clear when one tries to relate the concept to the public diplomacy strategies and practical political initiatives that are brandished as building on soft power. Because it is not evident how this is related to a broader vision of what are the real power elements in this initiatives. Thus soft power has come to imply everything from tours of athletes from one country to another to foreign aid and emergency assistance. The very fluffiness of the practical use of the term undermines its analytical value.

However others who have analysed the term have come to other conclusions. One of those who have analysed the concept most thoroughly in order to find the answer to whether the concept can aid our understanding of power as such and whether it can be a useful analytical tool for political scientists is a young

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<sup>11</sup> Five "Forum of China-Africa Cooperation" meetings have so far been held every three years between 2000 and 2012. Three in Beijing, two in Africa – Ethiopia and Egypt. The next will be in South Africa.

<sup>12</sup> Hall, Todd (2010) "An Unclear Attraction: A Critical Examination of Soft Power as an Analytical Category." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, 2010. 189 – 211. <http://cjjp.oxfordjournals.org/content/3/2/189.full.pdf> (last accessed Jan 24, 2014)

Norwegian political scientist Sigrid Sandve Eggereide.<sup>13</sup> Her conclusion is that soft power refers to an element of power that cannot otherwise be explained nor be reduced only to side effects of hard power, or economic power. It contributes to the understanding of a full spectrum of power, and may be characterised as the “third element of power”. Maybe it is here that the implications of the wide use of the term in relation to an analytical examination should start.

### **The Idea of Attraction**

One of the objections that Hall has to soft power as an analytical term linked to Nye’s theory is his “[...] idea of attraction as the primary mechanism behind the effects he attributes to soft power.”<sup>14</sup> Halls complaints are in many ways related to that it is difficult to associate this with the question of how Nye’s three main categories of soft power – ‘culture, political ideas and policies’ with necessity can produce an attraction that will help a country in the pursuit of its foreign policy. This again has to do with the vague implications of culture, and whether political ideas are bound to be attractive to those they are supposed to influence, and policies is an equally amorphous term as culture. Hall puts his critique in the form of two questions with three answers:

First, does the behaviour that actors exhibit towards designated soft power resources signify attraction? Second, if attraction does exist, does it actually produce favourable policy outcomes for states that enjoy its benefits? The preliminary answers appear mixed at best. First, whether or not it is the cultural elements of high and low culture goods or exchanges that make them attractive is not apparent. Even if they are understood as generating an attraction, there is still no clear link between this and support for a particular state’s foreign policy. Second, as it pertains to political values, soft power as an analytic category is in itself highly problematic, given the fact it is interwoven with discursive struggles over political identity. What is more, the desire to emulate another state’s perceived ‘political values’ does not necessarily signify wholehearted backing of its foreign policy. There is an important distinction between actors that ‘want what you want’ and that ‘want what you want them to want’. Finally, on the question of attraction and

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<sup>13</sup> Eggereide, Sigrid Sandve (2012) *Facing the Intangible, Unobservable and Immeasurable: A Conceptual Analysis of Joseph Nye’s Soft Power*. Master Thesis in Political Science. NTNU. (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) Trondheim. <http://ntnu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:561318/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (last accessed Jan 24. 2014)

<sup>14</sup> Hall op.cit. p. 190

how it relates to support for another state's foreign policy, it is difficult to disentangle evidence of attraction from its claimed outcome, which could easily have other causes.<sup>15</sup>

Now Hall does not claim that it is unimportant to try to come up with alternatives to hard power. His problem is that just to posit a dichotomy such as soft power instead of clarifying the issues obscures what is at stake in relation to international power strategies. Thus Hall proposes that instead of talking of soft power, one should rather think of power strategies within different arenas. He discusses this in relation to institutional power, reputational power, and representational power. He specifies this through some definitions:

1. "[...] institutional power as the options available to state actors according to their membership and relative position within specific international organizations which enable those states to exercise influence within them."<sup>16</sup>
2. Reputational power may be exemplified by: "A reputation for being economically successful, for instance, might give a state more of a say in the creation of development models. Being known as a neutral broker could qualify a state to intercede as arbitrator in a conflict."<sup>17</sup>
3. "[...] representational power is defined in a more limited and concrete fashion as the ability of states to frame issues, advance their own interpretations, and consciously seek to shape the beliefs of others. Sources and tools of representational power include public diplomacy, propaganda and information control."<sup>18</sup>

### **Other Concepts of Power**

This implies that the utilisation of "soft power" as a concept in such a broad manner and in so many different contexts lump many different policies, strategies, phenomena in areas ranging from government policies, over business investments to cultural undertakings. Rather than clarifying strategies that governments and

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p. 207

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p. 208

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p. 209

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p. 210

non-governmental actors use in order to gain influence, this mystifies, because the focus on power disappears. This again points in the direction of relating the role power plays in a relationship between intended and non-intended consequences. And this again must be seen in the light of how Steven Lukes<sup>19</sup> launched the idea of the three dimensions of power – decisions, non-decisions, and ideology.

Lukes' first dimension of power concentrates on what kind of behaviour is involved in the making of decisions on issues where there is a conflict of interests that expresses policy preferences. The second dimension deals with how it is possible to influence decisions by shaping the agenda and that this can take place also through more subtle means than overt decisions in relation to policy preferences. The ideological dimension deals with that people sometimes acts without being coerced in ways that appear contrary to their most basic interests. Thus the powerful through an omnipresent ideology transform the powerless so they behave according to the interests of the powerful. This again is linked to the issue of how to create hegemony. Here Lukes is influenced by Antonio Gramsci's way of perceiving hegemony as something linked to cultural contradictions and concepts and shaped and maintained by groups, institutions and organisations. In relation to the role of media and cultural policies and programmes what is of particular importance is the power to shape perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way as to ensure the acceptance of a certain roles in an existing order or social process. This of course is essential for the analysis of how the attempt to create hegemonic media power is at play in international relations.

Rather than sticking to soft power as a concept in our analysis of the Chinese presence in Africa in communications, media, culture, and the image of China in Africa, and Africa in China, we will take our point of departure in Hall's three forms of power, Lukes' power dimensions combined with how Michael Mann in his "IEMP model" has identified as the different types of power.

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<sup>19</sup> Lukes, Steven (1974 originally, here 2005) *Power: A Radical View*, Basingstoke (Palgrave Macmillan).

*Ideological Power* implies the human need to find ultimate meaning in life, to share norms and values, and to participate in aesthetic and ritual practices with others.

*Economic Power* deals with economic relations, which are powerful because they combine the intensive mobilisation of labour with very extensive circuits of capital, trade, and production chains, providing a combination of intensive and extensive power and normally also of authoritative and diffused power.

*Military Power* might be defined as the social organisation of concentrated and lethal violence.

*Political Power* is the centralised and territorial regulation of social life. The basic function of government is the provision of order over this realm.<sup>20</sup>

Finally I will throw in yet another way of looking at power in relation to our research by referring to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. It seems to me that his concept of ‘cultural capital’ might be useful in an analysis of China’s relationship to Africa in the area of communications, media and culture. In Bourdieu’s at time cryptic definition cultural capital exists in three forms. The first is what is called the ‘embodied state’, which briefly may be described as cultivation of culture so that it becomes part of a person, or a class, or social group. The second property is what Bourdieu calls the objectified state, which may be said to consist of cultural objects (art etc.) and media. The third property is the institutionalised state, which consist of cultural institutions such as academies, universities, publishing houses, museums, and art and music arenas.<sup>21</sup> The question one might ask is of course how much cultural capital does China really possess outside its own borders?

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<sup>20</sup> See: Hall, John A. & Ralph Schroeder (eds.) (2005) *An Anatomy of Power. The Social Theory of Michael Mann*. Cambridge (CUP).

See also: <http://understandingsociety.blogspot.no/2013/03/michael-mann-on-power.html> (last accessed Jan.25. 2014) for a brief definition of the elements in the IEMP model.

<sup>21</sup> See: Bourdieu, Pierre (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge (Polity Press) and Bourdieu, Pierre (1986) ”The Forms of Capital” In Richardson, J.G. (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York, Greenwood), p. 241-258.



### **Chinese ‘Soft Power’**

Power is a product of interest and control. Thus it might be more useful to analyse for instance the many Chinese enterprises in Africa not as expressions of power as such, but rather as ways of exercising interest in different areas and to achieve some sort of control which again may lead to a situation of power. In order to provide a different perspective it may be fruitful to have a look at what Michael Mann in his “IEMP model” has identified as the different types of power, and then to relate this to that they all relate to the recent Chinese advances in Africa (as well as the role of colonial powers earlier), and that except for crude military power, they all have aspects that may be characterised as ‘soft’ as well as ‘hard’. It should, however, be borne in mind that in China’s steadily closer political relations with African states, there is also the Chinese hope that this will result in support for China’s military interests in for instance in the East and South China Seas. In our research on “The Voice of China in Africa”<sup>22</sup> we deal with ideological, economic and political power, and we do so through an institutional, reputational and representational prism.

Chinese politicians and thinkers use the concept of soft power to communicate the Chinese “Going out Strategy”, and to allocate resources on creating a favourable propensity for China in the international arena. The soft power discussion in China dates back to the democratisation setbacks in China in 1989. China strained to break away from international alienation after the Tiananmen Square crackdown. The concept of soft power was alluring to Chinese political ears. The terminology presented liberal political values not as a moral imperative but as pragmatic advantages for a state. Chinese political intellectuals needed a road to reconcile the “particularism” or “socialism with Chinese characteristics” insisted on by the Chinese Communist Party champions with the “universalistic value” held by the mainstream international society. Wang Hu-Ning, one of the major brainpowers of President Jiang Ze-Min, analysed the transition of power and the propensity of international soft power in the article

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.cmi.no/research/project/?1686=voice-of-china>

“Culture as a form of national power: Soft Power”.<sup>23</sup> China’s quest was to regain a beneficial status in its interstate relations. To do so, China first needed to align itself to international perceptions of valid soft power. Wang distinguished between four elements of soft power: 'Industrialism', 'scientificism', 'democraticism', and 'nationalism'. Wang called for a strategic planning of the country’s soft power that could respond to international trends and thoughts.

Chinese academia began an intellectual quest to distinguish American soft power from Chinese soft power. American soft power was hegemonic assimilation and cultural imperialism. Chinese soft power was generically reflexive and benign, compatible with the Chinese interpretation of Marxist socialist theories providing a theoretical formality for China’s peaceful rise, which eventually were used to contend the ‘China Threat Theory’. Many Chinese writings point out that the Chinese soft power is related to traditional Chinese cultural values found in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, involving winning respect through virtues, benevolent governance, peace and harmony with suppressing differences. This is being combined with the principles of Chinese foreign policy – multilateralism, economic diplomacy, non-interventionism.<sup>24</sup>

A quote from the then Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, at the third Annual Meeting of the New Champions of the World Economic Forum (WEF) 10 September 2009 includes references to China’s role in Africa and the implications of soft power:

Many people don't know that China's relations with Africa did not start just from yesterday. We started providing aid to Africa shortly after the People's Republic was founded. China and Africa share similar historical experiences, and we respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of African countries. Even in our most difficult days, we continued to help African countries build railways and send medical teams to Africa. The assistance has been mutual. African countries support China as brothers, and it is on the shoulders of our African brothers that China was carried into the United Nations. As an old Chinese saying goes, "Forget the favor you did others, but remember always the favor others did you". In my view, China's soft power lies in its respect for all countries, particularly developing

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<sup>23</sup> Wang Hu-Ning (1993) ”Zuowei guojia shili de wenhua: Ruan quanli” (Culture as national power: Soft power), *Journal of Fudan University* 3.

<sup>24</sup> See: Mingjiang Li (ed) (2009) *Soft Power. China’s Emerging Strategy in International Politics*. Lanham. (Lexington Books)

countries and the least developed countries. It means that we should do what we can to help others while pursuing our own development. I hope that developed countries, when coping with the financial crisis, will not forget these poorest countries, and the World Economic Forum will one day be known for its reputation of being not just a club of the rich, but also one for the poor, and that it not only takes interest in the growth of developed countries and the Fortune 500, but also works for attaining the Millennium Development Goals and meeting the global challenges of hunger, poverty and major diseases.<sup>25</sup>

Wen's statement make implicit references to the five dimensions that are detectable in the Chinese policy initiatives and pronouncements of interest. These are also are found in more elaborate academic texts and policy documents. First there is a dimension of good will. Chinese soft power implies no threat. It is a civilised intentional force. It is meant to be an emblem of Chinese generosity and unselfishness. It intends to increase the chance of world peace instead of aggravating conflicts and poverty. Secondly 'so-called Chinese soft power' is area-specific. The less developed countries, those in Africa and Asia, are the prioritised targets of China's good-will intentions. There is a special territorial focus as regards Chinese 'soft power' concerns. Thirdly there is an ideological identity. Premier Wen's pronouncement refers to a pan-development identity, including ideological emphasis on south-south cooperation and an anti-hegemonic narrative. These may sound like a cliché but those narratives are very real to the Chinese government. They are important sources of rhetoric and ideology in both domestic and international settings. The fourth and the most forceful dimension, is that of economic power. Financial engagements in Africa come both through the form of aid and the form of market entrance. China, with its surging economic capacity and international influence, will move in to fill the vacuum left by the traditional actors in Africa affected by the global financial crisis. It is interesting to note that Wen's statement seen in the light of the wider discussions of what Chinese soft power policies imply touch upon three of Mann's IEMP power elements: Ideology, Economy, and Politics. It may also be interpreted in the perspective of Hall's three sources of influence. The Premier makes reference to the UN, and China's and

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<sup>25</sup> <http://np.china-embassy.org/eng/zgwj/t583794.htm> (last accessed Jan. 25, 2014)

Africa's institutional roles there. He plays on reputational values in referring to the building of railways and providing medical aid to Africa. And finally he refers to public diplomacy through meetings such as at the World Economic Forum, and by referring to the Millennium goals and thus the representational role.

There is no doubt that the concept of 'Soft power' has become a hot topic in Chinese practical policy debate as well as academic analyses. This has a manifold background linked to among others China's increasing strength economically its rising influence in international relations, and the growing interest in the Chinese development model. There is a clear perception in China that the country must present an image to the world that is related to more than economic power and increasing political and military ambitions.

It seems as if that there are two dominant Chinese ways of analysing the role of 'soft power' in Chinese politics. One, which is centred on culture in a wide sense of the word, as the most important element in soft power initiatives – this of course leads to another quite odd concept, namely 'cultural soft power', which of course is a pleonasm. This has resulted in increased state funding for a diverse range of cultural initiatives – such as large-scale events such as the 2008 Olympics, exhibitions; Confucius institutes; cultural exchange programmes; support for Chinese film export. Related to this is the expansion in Chinese international media initiatives through CCTV, Radio China International, Xinhua, *China Daily*, journalist exchange programmes.

The other school of thought seems to emphasise a wider perspective encompassing more clearly political elements that among others include a promotion of the Chinese model of development as well as Chinese participation in multilateral diplomacy, overseas aid programmes, involvement in peace-keeping and conflict solution. The debate, however, apparently focuses on how 'soft power' initiatives are linked to state policies. It does not take much into account what private organisations and enterprises contribute to a wider agenda in this area – telecommunication companies, the film and entertainment industry. This is a kind of paradox that while internationally big cultural stars such as artists and authors are seen as important elements of a country's image building, China seems to have

a ambivalent attitude to this. A case in point is China's arguably most famous contemporary visual artist Ai Weiwei, who is more or less a persona non grata to official China.

This is interesting in that the international debate on soft power, and indeed Joseph Nye himself emphasises the importance of culture and communication products being elements in a comprehensive soft power strategy. Thus it seems that in spite of the great interest in developing a soft power strategy for China, the elements of such a policy still are rather disparate. This may have to do that Chinese analysts increasingly find that concept itself limiting.<sup>26</sup> Incidentally on New Years Day 2014 the first Chinese non-profit organisation dedicated to the promotion of soft-power initiatives – China Public Diplomacy Association (CPDA) was set up. It is to mobilise and coordinate “social resources and civilian efforts” to contributing to “promoting China’s soft power”.<sup>27</sup>

### **African Engagements**

In the introductory essay to his book *The Morality of China in Africa* Professor Stephen Chan of School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London wrote among others:

There are two common assumptions in extant literature on China and Africa. The first is that Africa is of critical and primary importance to China and its drive to grow and industrialize. The second is that China is unrestrained in its largesse to Africa, is at ease with this largesse, and sees no risks in it. Both assumptions are false.<sup>28</sup>

Looking at the Chinese so-called ‘soft-power’ engagements in Africa there are certain characteristics that stand out, and which are in line with the over-all soft power engagements of China in general. First of all it is often difficult to distinguish between which elements in the Chinese presence that may be

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<sup>26</sup> See: Glaser, Bonnie S. & Melissa E. Murphy (2009) “Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics. The Ongoing Debate.” Chapter 2 from McGiffert, Carola (ed) (2009) *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States*. A Report from the CSIS Smart Power Initiative. Washington (CSIS)

[http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/090310\\_chinesesoftware\\_chap2.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/090310_chinesesoftware_chap2.pdf) (Last accessed Jan 26, 2014)

<sup>27</sup> <http://thediplomat.com/2013/01/destined-to-fail-chinas-soft-power-offensive/> (Last accessed Jan. 26, 2014)

<sup>28</sup> Chan, Stephen (ed) (2013) *The Morality of China in Africa*. London. Zed Books. p. 36.

characterised as an expression of what type of power – ideological, economic, military, political.

It is important to look at China's development assistance to Africa, which takes many forms – loans and direct economic support, health, agriculture, education, training, academic, infrastructure construction, culture, and media. Some of these projects are linked to economic investments; others have the form of direct assistance. Aid is growing but the Chinese development assistance to Africa is still much below what traditional donors provide. And it will remain so in the foreseeable future. However, it should be mentioned that it is not easy to acquire reliable statistics of the aid provided by China, because aid figures remain a state secret and only a minimum of information is provided. However, it should be borne in mind that Chinese assistance at times is more grass-root oriented than other donors' assistance. But it is also more directly aimed at government, and it does not involve NGOs. It is also clear that aid is a tool of China's foreign policy, but this is also the case for other donor countries.<sup>29</sup> Thus development assistance is an essential element of the Chinese soft engagement in Africa. It is politics, but it is also ideology. In the perspective of a combination between political, ideological and military power it should be mentioned that Chinese troops as of June 2013 take part in the peacekeeping mission in Mali.

The principal source of China's increasingly positive image in Africa is linked to economic engagements of many kinds – not only mega-projects and investments in extractive industries, construction, infrastructure, and finance. But also small and medium scale Chinese economic presence in trade, agriculture contribute to the image of a partner who sees Africa as a continent of the future, and did so also at the time when the image in the West of Africa was “The Hopeless Continent” as was the infamous cover story of an issue of *The Economist* in 2000.<sup>30</sup> The radical rise in trade between China and Africa is obviously an economic power element, but it also contributes to strengthening the ideological

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<sup>29</sup> See Brautigam, Deborah (2009) *The Dragon's Gift. The Real Story of China in Africa*. Oxford (OUP) for a comprehensive discussion of the issue of Chinese aid to Africa.

<sup>30</sup> *The Economist*, May 13th, 2000. Incidentally 5 months before the first FOCAC meeting in Beijing.

and political power of China. China's trade with and investments in Africa are growing, and in the process of overtaking EU and US. In 2013 the trade was standing at over US \$170 billion.<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note that it is not only China that serves as new player in this configuration and compete with China as regards a positive image. In 23 March 2103 *The Economist* reported:

African elites see China as their biggest partner among emerging countries, but by no means the only one. Brazil, Russia and India (also in the BRICS club), as well as Turkey, South Korea and several others are following China's path. Indian companies rack up deals worth about a third of Sino-African trade, and some estimates see that proportion rising to 50%.<sup>32</sup>

And in the same article is was also reported that a growing number Africans thought that the Chinese created jobs, transferred skills and spent money in local economies. And a BBC poll<sup>33</sup> on attitudes towards countries found that China in general was viewed positively in Africa – Senegal (73% positive), Nigeria (68%), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (59%), Kenya (59%), Tanzania (53%), Ghana (46 %), Zimbabwe (34 %), and South Africa (34 %). The results for the Zimbabwe and South Africa are interesting because in Zimbabwe China is seen as a strong supporter of President Mugabe, and he is a very divisive figure in the country, in addition there have been conflicts between Zimbabwean workers and Chinese businesses. In South Africa civil society ad the press are strong and there has been criticism of Chinese businesses from among others the strong trade unions. Chinese products have been regarded as undermining South African industry e.g. textile.

An important element of the Chinese economic role and also image building strategy towards African countries is concessional loans for major and conspicuous construction projects. One example is the loan provided to Angola in 2004 and 2007 by China's Exim Bank for reconstruction of infrastructure – roads and railways. Once the loan had been negotiated and approved Chinese companies

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<sup>31</sup> Ernst & Young's attractiveness survey. **Africa 2013**. Getting down to business. P. 3.

<sup>32</sup> "More than Minerals" *The Economist* 23. March. 2013. <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21574012-chinese-trade-africa-keeps-growing-fears-neocolonialism-are-overdone-more> (Last accessed Jan 26, 2014)

<sup>33</sup> [http://www.globescan.com/news\\_archives/bbc06-3/](http://www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbc06-3/) (Last accessed Jan 26, 2014)

started undertaking the work, bringing its own materials, equipment and workers.<sup>34</sup> There are many by infra-structure projects of the same kind all over the continent. A more recent and less spectacular example is the construction of the new presidential offices in Maputo. They were inaugurated on 24 January 2014. The report in the very government supportive newspaper *Domingo* the following Sunday is revealing. The headline says that the new building will contribute to the self-esteem of Mozambicans. In the report it is written that the building is the fruit of the co-operation between China and Mozambique, but not that it was financed through a loan. And the article mentions that 5000 Chinese and Mozambican workers were involved in the construction.<sup>35</sup>

China's economic engagements are related to diplomatic initiatives aimed at cultivating African support for China's foreign policies. In this the principle of non-interference is emphasised. This is often regarded as a sign of mutual respect, even if it may also lead to an international and also often domestic perception of China being soft on dictators, as has been the case in Sudan and Zimbabwe. China has also been consistent with this attitude in that it has supported the African criticism of the International Criminal Court in relation to the cases against President Uhuru Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto of Kenya.

Finally, China emphasizes the win-win aspect of its engagement in Africa. This approach finds support in Africa for a number of reasons. First, there is appreciation for China's pragmatism and the idea that it comes to Africa as a business partner, not to proselytize or offer charity. Second, the perception is that economic self-interest is more likely to ensure sustained engagement than will humanitarian impulse or intermittent crisis diplomacy. Finally, the win-win notion implies that Africans are free to negotiate the terms of the arrangements, and that China will be responsive to African demands.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Campos, Indira & Alex Vines (2007) "ANGOLA AND CHINA. A Pragmatic Partnership". Working Paper Presented at a CSIS Conference, "Prospects for Improving U.S.-China-Africa Cooperation," December 5, 2007 [http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/080306\\_angolachina.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/080306_angolachina.pdf) (Last accessed Jan. 26, 2014)

<sup>35</sup> *Domingo* 26 de Janeiro de 2014. p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Cooke, Jenifer C. (2009) "China's Soft Power In Africa". Chapter 3 in McGiffert (2009) op.cit. Some of the arguments here leans on this article.



## Challenges

There is no doubt that China is up against formidable challenges when it comes to confronting the hegemony left by the colonial powers in Africa. This emphasises the importance of viewing power in a relational perspective. There is no doubt that the previous colonial powers and the US have an influence in Africa through language dominance, inherited institutional frameworks – political, educational, artistic, popular culture – that far surpasses any form of cultural and media power strategies that China can launch. But China is also faced with competition from other ‘new’ powers in Africa that in this context have great advantages – India, through its diaspora and long presence on the continent, and Brazil through language and cultural links to Lusophone Africa. In such a relational perspective China’s power strategies may be up against internal contradictions when it comes to harmonising the attempts to wield economic, political and ideological power at the same time.

There are some aspects of soft-power policies that China seems to have problems with and it concerns the relationship to civil society organisations and the independent media. China focuses on dealing with governments and related institutions first, and then businesses, but to a little or no degree with actors in civil society. In African countries political space is expanding, hence the role of China is being increasingly debated and Chinese presence and engagement challenged. Civil-society groups have stood up against Chinese businesses and interests and pressured their governments to intervene in particular aspects of Chinese engagements.<sup>37</sup> One case is a strike against the Chinese company (China Road and Bridge Corporation) building the ring road around Maputo and the bridge between Maputo and Katembe, because the company had flouted regulations concerning work contracts. The workers got support from The Ministry of Labour, and the company was ordered to issue proper work contracts.<sup>38</sup> Another more amusing story is the report that was brought by Xinhua on the march to honour President Guebuza on his 71<sup>st</sup> Birthday January 18 2014. The news agency wrote: "around

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<sup>37</sup> See Cooke op.cit.

<sup>38</sup> Domingo 19 de Janeiro, 2014. p. 19.

250,000 people, including members and sympathizers of Frelimo are participating in the march, which kicked off from the Eduardo Mondlane Statue to the Independence square in the capital city of Maputo." The truth is that even the Mozambican government media did not report that there were more than 3000 people present.

There is more to the Chinese African engagement in media, communication and culture than creating a form of 'soft power' as opposed to 'hard power' or 'economic power'. It must be seen as part and parcel of China's steadily increasing interests in the continent in areas such extractive industries, construction, agriculture, finance, and increased aid. It involves Chinese government agencies as well as private companies and cultural organisations. People can get confused when studying China's involvement in Africa, because it is so multifaceted and fragmented. Nevertheless much of it is underpinned by conspicuous and consistent state support, and thus it also part of a wider power strategy as outlined above. Applying Steven Lukes' categories, it involves clear *decisions* that must be seen as part and parcel of the Chinese multi-layered strategy in relation to building political influence and support for its foreign policy strategies; acquiring raw materials and building a strong economic presence in Africa – soft loans; large-scale construction projects in the form of infrastructure – roads and railways, and prestige buildings – national stadia, parliaments, presidential offices; aid initiatives – health programmes; cultural and educational policies – Confucius institutes.

It also involves the dimension of 'non-decision' and shaping of agendas in that the so-called Beijing consensus and the Chinese model of development with a liberal market economy, state interventions, and an authoritarian political system leading to very high economic growth holds is an important agenda setter for political and development strategy debates. And finally as regards the ideological dimension international Chinese media have expanded greatly in the past decade – not only in Africa – but also to a very great degree on this continent – CCTV; China Radio International; Xinhua with offices in virtually all countries; *China Today*. Linked to this there have been established exchange programmes for African journalists. Chinese popular TV programmes have been broadcast with

success in African countries. And as a kind of straddling between economic and ideological engagements are the considerable investments that have taken place in communications industries – Huawei; StarTimes. Now these ventures are in no way comparable to the ideological hegemony wielded by Western media in Africa, they are, however, indications of that the struggle over ideological interpretations is heating up.

When we come to Mann's IEMP model the issue is also a bit fuzzy. Ideologically China has had some influence through its development model and as a provider of aid. But when it comes to knowledge of Chinese ways of life and culture the influence is minimal. This has partly to do with the language issue, but also that popular culture from the US, the former colonial powers, Brazil and India have much more influence than Chinese attempts to enter this arena. As a curious apropos on January 28, 2014, BBC reported that there was a state sponsored initiative to promote China's cultural "soft power" through pop music by heavy sponsoring of the singer Ruhan Jia and trying to turn her into a world star.<sup>39</sup> As regards economic power there is no doubt about Chinese importance in Africa as well as the rest of the world. When it comes to military power in Africa the China's presence is neglectable, though the presence in the international peace keeping forces in Mali as well as Chinese anti-pirate operations outside Somalia may indicate a change. China has important political power in Africa through its close relationships to African governments and as result of its economic influence, but it is up against problems when it comes to the relationship to the politics of civil society.

And finally does China possess cultural capital in Africa. Here the question arises whether its economic capital, which is the driving force, has been translated into symbolic power and cultural capital. In Bourdieu's terms there has been little embodiment of Chinese culture in Africa compared to for instance that way particularly Black American styles in culture have been adopted all over the continent. As regards what Bourdieu the objectified state of cultural capital that is in artistic products of all kinds, China also lags behind. Except for practical goods

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25910722> (Last accessed Feb. 19, 2014)

in the area of technological gadgets etc., which definitely are of importance of media for communication, but not as content, China does not figure prominently. And finally except for the Confucius institutes, and some exchange programmes in the area of journalism and research cooperation, China does not have a strong institutional presence when it comes to cultural capital.

There is still a long way to go before China wields the “soft power” so many Chinese politicians and academics foresee, and maybe this has to with the lack of analytical strength the concept has and the fluffy way it has been employed in Chinese debate and policy pronouncements.