

Soft Power and the Role of Media

A Case Study of PKU African Tele-Info (Draft)

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It is interesting that BBC, TV5 of France, and CNN have existed for a long time in Africa, usually occupying prime-time slots. Then the convenient newspaper stands spread in almost all African cities with French and English newspapers, magazines and journals such as *Guardian*, *Financial Time*, *Jeune Afrique*, etc., transported from European metropolitan countries or the United States. Moreover, there are African newspapers which copy news or opinions about China from European counterparts, either for the shortage of money, or channels or sources of news. This is a natural phenomenon with the historical heritage of colonial linkage, as well as in the period of globalisation.

As for China, it is another story. There has been a great criticism from the West that China only emphasised summit diplomacy, or governmental contact, while neglecting contact in other fields and especially the exchange with African local people. Yet when China just started to set up its stand in Africa, began to express itself in its own way, there is again criticism. It is right that with more and more economic cooperation, exchange of other fields gets more and more frequent. Now there is an African Students Association in Peking University, and an African diaspora in Guangzhou, and African journalists in Beijing and Shanghai, and African artists in China television. Cultural exchange is getting more frequent, as accompanied by rapid development of cooperation between China and Africa.

In a recent article in *The African Executive*, it is stated “China has recently announced that it will provide Africa with loans of a staggering \$1 trillion for infrastructure and development over the next twelve years. In contrast, last year, the World Bank’s spending on Africa was just \$5.6 billion. Africa is China’s success

story: whereas, the Americans bring drones and economic destabilisation to Africa, the Chinese bring roads, bridges and dams.”¹ Does this statement indicate a comparison of soft power between the United States and China? The answer is definitely yes if we use what is described in *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States*, a CSIS report in 2009.

This article is divided into three parts, an analysis of the rationale and critique of the concept of “soft power”, an exploration of advantages and disadvantages of China in Africa, and a case study of PKU African Tele-Info, followed by a conclusion which argues that the role of media is neither devil nor angel.

Soft Power: Rationale and Critique

“Soft power” was a concept came out of a criticism of Paul Kennedy’s *Rise and Decline of the Great Powers* published in 1988. In his book, Paul Kennedy claimed that although the United States had most advanced science and technology, unmatched military power and biggest capital and markets, yet it was challenged by new rivals with larger savings, more engineers and big ambitions. As a result, the world would be replaced by a multi-polar one in which the U.S. was first among equals but not necessarily supreme.

In order to counter Paul Kennedy’s “America’s declining” argument, which indicates the United States’ position in the world is weakening, and persuade nearly half of Americans who believed that America was in decline, Joseph Nye used a new expression of “soft power” to describe what the United States was unique. It is emphasized that the United States also has its soft power of ideological and institutional resources to preserve its lead in the world, besides the traditional hard power resources.² This debate between historian Paul Kennedy and political scientist Joseph Nye is by no means new. It has started since 1945 when the United States’ power was at its peak and is still going on till today. But the expression of “soft

¹ Garikai Chengu, “African’s New Struggle against Financial Imperialism”, *The African Executive*, 15-22 January, 2014

² 1990. Article and work, Bound to;

power” began to prevail all over the world.³ Therefore, “Soft power” is an expression related to international relations and only meaningful in international politics.

In a CSIS report entitled *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States*, the author listed various aspects of China’s soft power in Africa, while the recommendation for the American government is triple. The first is to encourage the United States should have more economic engagement and infrastructure in Africa as China and other countries do. The second is that the American government should ratchet down its rhetoric on democracy promotion and to strengthen governance and civil society in Africa. The third is to do more to engage collaborative efforts with China and other parties as well in Africa.⁴ All these policy recommendations already indicate that China’s presence in Africa, including its thinking and practice, had a great impact on American strategy regarding Africa. In other term, the so-called “China’s soft power” has had some impact not only in Africa, but also on thinking and policy-making in the United States.⁵ Yet, with its conventional perspective and hegemonic tendency, the United States continues its policy which resulted in various negative feedbacks.⁶

The Chinese government first adopted this expression in 2007 in the political report of the 17th National Congress of Chinese Communist Party by adding “cultural” before it, thus “文化软实力”(cultural soft power), to indicate the influence of culture, implying a kind of promotion in public diplomacy which has become an important tool in the creation of a positive image of China abroad.⁷ Later, it is introduced into various government documents and many articles are published on the issue. Although the “cultural soft power” or “soft power” has become very popular in China, yet I am opposed to the usage of the expression by the Chinese government. First, the word 'power' itself used in the context of international relations has

³ Reappraisal

⁴ Jennifer Cooke, “China’s Soft Power”, in Carola McGiffert, *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States*, 2009, CSIS, pp.27-44.

⁵ Two dada, Ibid; Yan Hairong and Barry Sautman, field report on the issue??.

⁶ Harvard’s professor’s criticism; Kenya’s condemn few days ago, etc.

definitely an implication of militancy, dominance, threat, pressure, coerce, violence, control, etc. This does not quite fit China's traditional philosophy of peace under the heaven, modern principle of peaceful co-existence and contemporary search for "peaceful rise". Even the word "rise" so alarmed the Chinese leaders after the reaction from the West which exaggerated the "China's threat" by quoting the "rise" in the expression of "peaceful rise" that they decided to stop the use of the term and chose the concept of "peaceful development". Secondly, Joseph Nye developed this concept at a time when there is a doubt or even belief that the U.S. military power, that is the hard power, is comparatively declining. It is an imperative for the U.S., a superpower, to find another kind of power to exert its influence, thus to define and develop the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, using force or money as a means of persuasion. It is natural for this hegemonic power which is used to dominating the world with force to justify its continuous control of the world by other means. Yet China is pursuing a policy of peaceful rise and calls for the building of a harmonious world. To use the concept of 'soft power' would be contradictory to its principle. What is more, to encourage or seek 'soft power' may scare away the old friends of developing countries, especially those small and weak nations.

China in Africa: Advantage and Disadvantage

In terms of China in Africa, there are advantages and disadvantages. China has benefited from several factors in its relations with Africa, compared with other countries. The first is a long history of contact. China-Africa relations have a long history.⁸ As early as (Sun and Leyden's article) the Han Dynasty (202B.C.-220A.D.), there was business contact between the two. Later, Zhen He's fleet also visited African continent during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), much earlier than the Europeans.⁹ Secondly, there is a similar experience of exploitation by the West. China can understand what Africa feels about colonialism because both suffered humiliation from the European powers in modern times. Thirdly, China can provide its

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experiences in development field since it has progressed recently from the similar position as Africa, and Africa appreciates China's lessons in development, thus comes out a longing for "looking East" in African continent.¹⁰ Fourthly, Africa and China support each other in various world issues in terms of changing the current international system and fight for a just and fair international order, since China and Africa hold a similar position in contemporary world system dominated by the West. Fifthly, China and Africa both respect each other and enjoy a relationship of equality, and both have benefited from the current political and economic cooperation. (Martyn Davies, etc).¹¹

At the same time, China is in a disadvantageous position in its relations with Africa, compared with other powers, mostly in natural aspects. The first is the demographical factor. For the U.S., about 12 % of its population is of African origin. For Great Britain and France, people of African origin are of 6 or 5 percentage of its population. Even Brazil occupies a much better position than China in this aspect. The second is language. Owing to the colonial heritage, African countries' official languages are mostly of their metropolitans', such as English (22), French (21), Portuguese (5), etc. As members of BRICS, both India and Brazil enjoy this advantage. Chinese language becomes an obstacle in the deals with Africans.

The third is the distance. Looking at the world map, you will find the distance is very long between China and African continent, which becomes another negative factor. However, there is a Chinese saying "A bosom friend afar brings a distant land near". The fourth factor is the lack of mutual knowledge and understanding of culture between China and Africa. During the modern times, there was no opportunity for contact between China and Africa, yet this is the most active time for the European powers in their expansion in Africa. As a result, there is very little knowledge of Africa in China, either for the scholars or for the ordinary people.¹²

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¹² For the study of Africa in China, see LI Anshan, "",

The fifth is something also relevant to the present topic, imagined picture, twisted fact or even sinister rumor about China by the West media and the most vicious is rumor. Here is a vivid example. In 2008, during the question-and-answer of my public speech in Nairobi, somebody raised the question, 'Are all the Chinese labourers in Kenya prison laborers?' I was quite surprised. My answer was of course definitely no, since it is almost unthinkable for the Chinese government or companies to use prison labor outside the country. Yet there were news reports about this fabrication. After the study of the pattern of the Chinese labor in African countries, I realised the reason of the misunderstanding of the local African people. The first reason is their appearance. Chinese labourers are mostly peasants who go abroad the first time to make money. They are dressed in their working clothes, and their expressions are usually less figurative. The second concerns segregation. The peasants know very little about the country where they are working, care less about the surroundings, and show no interest in the outside world. What is more, few of them know the local language. Therefore, they have neither the will nor the interest to communicate with the local people. To add to this, the factory is usually in a compound surrounded by fences or other obstacles and the workers seldom go out. The third concerns the workload. Usually the contracted Chinese company works to a very tight schedule since the contract takes much longer time to issue than expected, and the time period for work is not enough. [3] Therefore, the Chinese labourers have to work by three shifts, e.g. every shift works eight hours a day. Yet outside the worksite, the local people only hear the machines running and see the Chinese labourers working. This increases their speculation: those Chinese really are not the same as the other whites, and their look and behaviour are quite unique judging from the standard of the whites they have met. Who are they? They work hard, are dressed in shabby way and are locked in a compound; they must be prisoners. That is the local people's speculation and misunderstanding, and it is natural and understandable.

Yet there is another way of explanation - vicious rumour and groundless accusation as early as 1991, spread through American media by a former American

official. A letter to the Editor of the New York Times appeared on May 11, 1991, which started the rumor. "The Chinese not only export goods made by prison labor, but they export prison workers too. While living in West Africa a few years ago, I learned of the case of a Chinese construction company building a road in Benin using prison labour. 70 to 75 percent of the construction workers were known to be prisoners. They were laboring on the Dassa-Parakou road in central Benin under a broiling sun and exposed to malaria and other tropical diseases. The company was the Jiangsu Construction Company, which also built a sports stadium in Cotonou, Benin's capital, and won a \$3.5 million contract to build a hospital and mosque in Porto Novo. The company was able to underbid all its competitors by a wide margin because its labor costs were so cheap."¹³ Who is the author? The author was the former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights in the Carter Administration. Where did she get the information? Does she have any evidence? If yes, she would definitely indicate as usually required. If not, is this a rumor with vicious intention? I don't want to continue since it is obvious, maybe another footnote of American "soft power".

Owing to the lack of knowledge between China and Africa, especially among the ordinary people, there is a need to improve mutual understanding of basic facts, culture and values, etc. between the both sides. This is one important aspect. With its rapid economic development and problematic image around the world, the Chinese government is eager to balance the international media coverage of Chinese image and this approach is becoming more and more urgent for Beijing's strategy of engagement in Africa. This is another aspect. Thus followed by the increasing efforts to strengthen its cultural presence in Africa, such as the establishment of CCTV branch in Kenya, followed by Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily and China International Radio, etc.

¹³ Roberta Cohen, "China Has Used Prison Labor in Africa", New York Times, May 11,1991. For a more detailed criticism, see Yan Hairong and Barry Sautman. China Quarterly.

PKU-African Tele-Info: Principle and Function

In order to meet the social need and transmit objectively the information about Africa, to demonstrate the independent stand of the intellectuals and to provide advice to policy making, the Center for African Studies at Peking University decided to launch PKU-African Tele-Info on July 20, 2010. As an electronically transmitted weekly, PKU-African Tele-Info has continuously published weekly, with this readership increasing more and more. Usually issued freely on Tuesday, it has now published 174 issues altogether. It is composed of three parts, Letter to readers (in Chinese), Activities of Center for African Studies at Peking University (in Chinese), and African News. Although African news is always quoted from international media in English (occasionally French), yet it also included some reports in Chinese at first period. In addition, there are occasional reports of important activities in African Studies in China, also in Chinese.

Readers As a free distributed electronic news bulletin, it is clear that from the very beginning the purpose of PKU African Tele-Info is to serve the Chinese readers. Yet more and more overseas readers have joined the reader-team, and now there are about 6000 readers in five continents. PKU African Tele-Info is also distributed through different channels, such as IPRCC network in China, CA/AC google email group, etc. The readers are composed of various groups, such as scholars and students who are involved in African studies, government officials who are concerned about what is happening in Africa, businessmen or immigrants who are engaged in African business, or NGO and ordinary people who are interested in African issues, etc. Although most of them of Chinese or those who can read Chinese, yet there are others who are watching what is happening in China-Africa relations or African continent.

Principle The principle of PKU African Tele-Info is threefold. First, the bulletin is indented to introduce objectively African situation in general or activities in particular countries, in order to provide some knowledge of Africa and to give an

objective picture of Africa to both Chinese and other people interested in Africa. There are still some biased views regarding Africa, as well as China-Africa relations, and mutual understanding is very important for both sides. Secondly, to promote African studies in China. Center for African Studies at Peking University takes as its task to improve African studies, thus the bulletin recommends research news, reports, articles or readings about African scholars in Africa, China and the world in order to provide a timely introduction to African studies around the world. Although a lot of things remain to be done, yet it has started to drive to that direction. The third is to contribute ideas and suggestions. The bulletin offers its views on how to look at African situation or Africa's position in world politics by introducing African perspective, and also makes suggestions to the making of China's Africa policies or opinions about understanding of China-Africa relations.

Source The main function of PKU African Tele-Info is to provide some information about Africa. How to choose the news becomes a key issue for us. It is understood that the most of the information channels are controlled by several biggest news agencies in the West. Therefore, the bulletin seldom uses reports of big news agencies such as BBC, Reuters and *Financial Times*. Even Xinhua News Agency is not in the list of source. Why? First, these big companies have their own agenda and African news is reported for their own purpose, not Africans' purpose. Secondly, biased reports are inevitable. Just take the reports on the land reform in Zimbabwe for example. Thirdly, people are easy to get access to those big news agencies. Therefore, the source of PKU African Tele-Info is more or less concentrated on African channels, Among 1500 pieces of news, most of them are from African source, such as *Allafrica* (480), *PAMBAZUKA* (35), etc. Intellectual publications are also taken from African think tanks such as *African Executive* (12) by Inter Region Economic Network located in Kenya. There are also news from African local newspapers or net news such as *Daily Nation*, *The East African*, *New Zimbabwe*, *Zimbabwe Star*, *Ghanaweb*, *It New Africa*, *The Star*, etc. We also quote some news from international organizations such as United Nations, regional organizations such as African Union, or African

governments. In addition, some information is from Africa related media, such as *How we made it in Africa*, established by Maritz Group in April 2010, *The Africa Daily*, an electronic news media, etc. Among about 1500 pieces of news, most of them are taken from foreign media, with a focus on African media.

Contributions It is not proper for the editor of the bulletin to make an objective judgment of its contribution. To run the risk of self-promotion, I only want to mention few points. As a weekly news bulletin, the most important contribution of PKU African Tele-Info is to introduce African idea and culture, Africa's views on international politics and its development. African initiative has got momentum in recent years, which is reported in two aspects, the African perspective on development and economic boom in the continent. James Shikwati, the director of Inter Region Economic Network, illustrated his view that China, still a developing country, can offer something for Africa to learn from, "China's economy no valued at \$ 1.33 trillion has surpassed Japan's \$1.28 trillion as the second largest economy in the world after the United States of America. Of interest to Africa is the fact that China, still a largely a developing country, is already a major power in global politics." Africa should take the opportunity to cooperation with China, yet take good care of its own interests.¹⁴ The bulletin also tries to introduce to Chinese academia African studies in other countries, such as research reports, centers, networks and different channels. In order to promote international cooperation between China and foreign academia, the bulletin also provides information about foreign research institutions and Chinese academic activities.

PKU African Tele-Info tries to offer different opinions regarding African affairs or China-Africa relations and suggestion of China's African policy. For example, the Center for African Studies was the first to condemn the bombing of Libya by the NATO and the voice was expressed in the bulletin.¹⁵ The bulletin also raised the issue of supporting African countries' entry into UN Security Council, and offered the

¹⁴ PKU AFRICAN TELE-INFO, August 31, 2010.

¹⁵ March 20, March 29.

suggestion that China should either hand in a proposal itself to support African countries to be a permanent member of UN Security Council or support African countries to raise a proposal for the issue.¹⁶ PKU African Tele-Info also points out in editorial that

Conclusion: Role of Media-Neither Devil nor Angel

The conventional idea about media holds that it can play a key role in the carry-out of state policies at home and abroad. It can beatify or destroy a state image at will. ¹⁷In other words, the role of media becomes so important that it can turn out to be either devil or angel.

There is no doubt that the Chinese government is eager to balance the international media in the coverage of Chinese image. Yet is the issue that important? In an early article, I once pointed out that the most important is to do the right thing. If you are doing the right thing and take responsible action, you do not have to worry about what others talk about you.¹⁸ This is what Dante said long time ago. Therefore, the conclusion is that the role of the media is neither devil nor angel. Although we cannot neglect its role, we should not care too much for its coverage. If we do things according to our own determination without too much caring for what others say, we can achieve our goal. As an Arabic proverb goes, “Dogs are barking, yet the camels are heading forward”.

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¹⁷ The extreme case is what Nazi propaganda minister Paul Joseph Goebbels proposed, “A lie is repeated one thousand times becomes the truth”.

¹⁸Li Anshan, "In Defense of China: China's African Strategy and State Image", *World Economy and Politics*, No.4, 2008, pp.6-15.