

# Winning hearts and minds: Chinese Soft Power Foreign Policy in Africa



In President Xi Jinping's first public speech on African soil after taking office in Tanzania 25 March 2013, his reference to a popular Chinese soap opera drew large applause and laughter: "The foundation and lifeline of China-Africa relations lie with the people." His reference instantly evoked mutual understanding and affinity. His reference was not coincidental. The strengthened cultural and emotional ties between China and Africa in recent years are the result of Chinese soft power. This brief outlines the carefully crafted Chinese soft power foreign policy implemented to win the hearts and minds of Africans.

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#### THE BIRTH OF CHINESE SOFT POWER

The soft power discussions in China date back to the democratisation setbacks in China in 1989. China struggled 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 as pragmatic advantages for a state rather than moral imperatives. Soft power made it possible for Chinese political intellectuals to

reconcile "particularism" or "socialism with Chinese characteristics" insisted on by the Chinese Communist Party champions and the "universalistic value" held by the mainstream international society. Wang Hu-Ning, one of President Jiang Ze-Min's major brainpowerers, outlined a transition to international soft power in his seminal 1993 article "Soft Power: Culture as a form of national power". China's quest should be to regain a beneficial status in its interstate relations, and to

### “Soft Power”

‘Soft Power’ was the catchy phrase Joseph Nye introduced in his 1990 book *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power*. Instead of the inducements and threats of hard power, soft power applies softening mechanisms like attraction and seduction to keep undesired trends at bay. Strategic goals are reached through creation of preferences rather than coercion. Nye identified three primary yet non-exclusive sources of soft power: culture, political values and foreign policy, and proceeded to proclaim that information and institutions would be essential in the 21st century. Yet, only the United States had the sufficient ability according to Nye, to combine hard and soft power resources.

do so China first needed to align itself with international perceptions of valid soft power. Wang distinguished between four soft power components: industry, Science, democracy, and nation. Wang called for a strategic planning of the country’s soft power responding to international trends and propensities.

#### CONSTRUCTING CHINESE SOFT POWER: GAINING THE MORAL HIGH GROUND

The mid-1990s saw an important evolution in China’s foreign policy. China began to adapt a more sophisticated, confident and less confrontational approach towards regional and global affairs. The term soft power shifted meaning from “opening up” to “going out”.

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 should be reflexive and benign. To contend the ‘China Threat Theory’, Chinese soft power should be compatible with Chinese interpretations of Marxist socialist theories and China’s peaceful rise.

The China Threat concept in China-Africa relations included fears of and criticism against “Chinese neo-colonialism”, but in 2008, the benign soft power rhetoric started to gain momentum. China needed to mitigate the frictions between Chinese corporations and African societies to save its national image from being tarred. Prominent scholars proposed that China construct a moral high ground, which would be of utmost strategic value for the promotion of soft power in Africa. In addition to the long-term continuity underpinning China-Africa relations, China also defined itself as a developing country, thus distancing itself from Western countries politically and ideologically (Wang, 2009). China needed a clear break from its earlier alignment with the international order. China started to promote its own standards, to defend itself against external criticism and to actively promote Chinese culture.

#### INFLUENCE THROUGH CULTURAL AND TECHNOLOGIES

By 2005, Beijing had implemented *cultural diplomacy* as a strategic soft power foreign policy roadmap applying cultural expressions to serve national interests, (Hu, 2009). The FOCAC (Forum on China Africa Cooperation) Beijing action plan (2013-2015) outlined China’s cultural diplomacy in Africa. It positioned China and its commitment to Africa in a People-to-People Exchange and Cooperation framework with six areas of cooperation: Culture; education; press, publishing, media; and People-to-People exchange programmes in academia and think tanks, , among young people, women and athletes.

#### Culture

During the first FOCAC meeting in Beijing, in 2012, the Cultural Ministers’ Forum was accompanied by a high profile, multifaceted programme called the “2012 Africa Focus” which was launched in nine Chinese cities. The programme included art and photo exhibitions, performances by African ensembles, press interviews with African diplomats and cultural celebrities, as well as an array of seminars, book releases and public talks held in universities and research institutions. There are plans to raise the profile of the “Cultures in Focus” events in the China-Africa cultural exchanges even further. “African Culture in Focus” events will be hosted in China every even-numbered year. “Chinese Culture in Focus” events will be hosted in Africa every odd-numbered year. More regular state visits and cultural visits are also planned. Chinese cultural centres are built in Africa. African cultural centres are built in China. These centres stage regular culture-exchange activities. There are currently long-term plans for a “China-Africa Cultural Cooperation Partnership Programme” which lists cooperation between 100 Chinese cultural institutions and 100 African cultural institutions, and a “China-Africa Cultural Heritage Preservation Roundtable” which will promote cooperation between the cultural industries in China and Africa.

#### Education

China is investing in Africa’s professional education programmes though agencies promoting Chinese initiatives and advocacy to African NGOs and think tanks. Since 2000, China has emerged as a major player in human resource cooperation with Africa. In 2006, China increased the number of scholarships to African students who wanted to study in China from 2000 per year to 4000 per year in 2009, and 5500 by 2012. Since 2001, China has arranged PR seminars and workshops celebrating China’s achievements and sharing their experiences for African media houses and media regulation departments. According to the 2012 Beijing Action Plan, cooperation is built at the institutional level. Twenty Chinese universities cooperate with twenty African universities establish China research centres at the universities. China also helps African countries with infrastructure and the actual construction of educational and training facilities.

Currently there are more than 30 Confucius Institutes (CI) in African universities, and the number is growing. In May 2013, a CI opened in Namibia, and in June the same year, another CI opened in Eritrea. The curriculum goes beyond language and grammar. Students celebrate traditional Chinese festivals, curate exhibitions, and take hobby courses. There are also frequent public lectures.

#### Press, Publishing and Media

The 2012 Beijing Action Plan set concrete objectives for the coordination of media in China and Africa on China-Africa issues:

- ensure that the press organisations provide fair coverage of each other and intensify the communication of information on China-Africa relations and China-Africa cooperation.

- establish a China-Africa Press Exchange Centre and facilitate visits between Chinese and African journalists and press professionals and support exchange of correspondents.

- inaugurate a “China-Africa Radio and Television Cooperation Forum” and strengthen collective dialogue and friendly cooperation in this field.

- share with African countries and the AUC its achievements and good practices in the digitalisation of radio and TV and support personnel training and the application of technology.

- strengthen cooperation in film and TV production. China will actively participate in the film and TV festivals and exhibitions held in African countries, and hold Chinese film and TV festivals in Africa. China welcomes and supports African countries that promote their films in China.

- facilitate publications cooperation , through China-Africa translation cooperatives, printing and publication programmes, and engage in publication cooperation in fields like medical care, health, agricultural technology, culture and education. China will take an active part in international book fairs in Africa and welcomes the participation of African countries at the Beijing International Book Fair.

An immediate implementation followed the official multi-lateral announcement. In August 2012, the first *Sino-African Media Forum on cooperation* hosted by China’s State Radio, Film, and Television Administration (SARFT), accommodated more than 200 participants from the upper echelons of the African media world: government ministers, chief executives from broadcasters and NGOs, and media professors from 42 African states. The forum discussed policy-making in broadcasting, China-Africa cooperation in broadcasting and digitalisation of broadcasting. Ten agreements to show were signed Chinese movies and TV channels in South Africa, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Mauritius were signed. In return, China will help these countries in the digitalisation of their broadcasting.

China’s culture diplomacy is a supplemental tool in the China-Africa relations, and has not superseded China’s economic and political diplomacy. Yet, the media business deals have had a substantial impact on China-Africa relations. These deals form another domain of power beyond Nye’s framework of soft power. Fitting with the conceptualisation of the Chinese soft power, they exert influence through a combination of export of technology, economic cooperation, development aid, and knowledge dissemination.

#### A NEW DIMENSION: CHINESE TELECOM VENDORS & MEDIA OUTLETS IN AFRICA

Telecommunication has become a new arena in the strengthened ties between China and Africa. Africa has become the world’s second largest mobile telecommunication market in terms of subscribers. In December 2012, Africa had more than 650 million mobile subscribers outnumbering the United States and the European Union (World Bank, 2013). Chinese vendors take the lead in the gold rush in Africa. Huawei has the lion’s share of the telecoms equipment market in Central, East and North Africa, surpassing Ericsson and Siemens. In South Africa it has the second place. Huawei and ZTE (Zhong Xing Telecommunication Equipment Company Limited) nearly monopolise the Nigerian market with a 90% market share. The success of Chinese telecoms can be contributed to their low-priced products, unparalleled responsive service, but most of all the immense low-interest loans offered by Chinese credit and financial packages.

The China Great Wall Industry Corporation has been contracted by the Nigerian government to build the NigCOMSat1 communications satellite. In Uganda, Rwanda and Kenya, Chinese telecoms have also won important contracts. Where China has supplied technology, it has also provided training packages.

The digitalisation of TV and radio is a field that epitomises the influence of IT technology on everyday life. StarTimes, a Beijing-based “Cultural Exports Key Enterprise” accredited by the Chinese Ministry of Culture, has won digital broadcasting and mobile multimedia licences in 19 African countries and launched digital broadcasting services in nine of them. It claimed to have more than 1.2 million subscribers in Africa. Meanwhile, StarTimes’ construction and operation of digital broadcasting systems in eight African countries, along with other media content exporting programmes to Africa, is listed in China’s Catalogue of the Prioritised projects for National Cultural Export.

Another new aspect of the China-Africa phenomenon is the intensified Chinese media presence in Africa. In 2011, Xinhua News Agency added five new branches to its previous



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The focus of the 3-year research project on **The Voice of China in Africa** (financed by the Norwegian Research Council) is to analyse the interaction between China and Africa in areas such as communication industries, media, and culture, by:

Contextualising China's soft power strategy in Africa;  
Investigating how Chinese telecommunication companies shape Africa's future in communication: digital broadcasting, Internet provision and mobile Internet markets;  
Analysing the role of cultural and journalistic promoters;  
Evaluating how African societies perceive the manifestations of China's presence on the continent as reflected in African media, and how Chinese media perceive the engagement in Africa.

The main part of the research will concentrate on the situation in Uganda, Mozambique and Angola.

18 African Headquarters and branches. Manpowered by 60 journalists and 400 local staff, Xinhua's Nairobi headquarter dispatches 1800 pieces of news in English, 2000 in French, 2200 pictures and 150 pieces of video clips per month, surpassing its counterparts in Associated Press, Reuters and Agence France-Presse in terms of quantity of news releases. Xinhua has also tapped into new media platforms so as to boost local sales of news contents. It has launched a mobile newspaper in Kenya, SMS services in DR Congo, outdoor screens in Harare and Johannesburg. It also ran photojournalism workshops and environmental campaigns in Kenya, Mali, Zimbabwe and Congo. By giving media exposure to African leaders and ministers, Xinhua cultivates contacts in African governments and NGOs, which helps the sales of their content to local media, but this also confirms their status back home as the most credible agency on African news in China.

In December 2012, the biggest Chinese newspaper in English, *China Daily*, launched a weekly African edition in Johannesburg and Nairobi, both in paper and digital formats. In its mission statement CCTV Africa aims to "[...] provide a platform for its Chinese audience to better understand Africa and promote the China-Africa friendship so that the real China can be introduced to Africa, and the real Africa can be presented to the world."

Radio has been an indispensable means of transmitting soft power, especially on a continent where half of the countries have over 30% illiteracy rate. In February 2006, China Radio International (CRI) launched its first overseas FM radio station in Nairobi with a schedule 19 hours programmes

daily in English, Kiswahili and Chinese. The programmes primarily cover China's economic, social and cultural development. The Nairobi studio recently also started broadcasting live programmes in Lagos and Harare.

Chinese film and television constitute another cultural influx to Africa. Following the first Chinese soap opera translated into Kiswahili by CRI and launched by Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation (TBC) in November 2011, more officially selected contents of Chinese popular culture are about to flow into Africa, as heralded by the Beijing Action Plan (2013-2015) and coordinated by the Chinese and African state media organizations.

The translation and dubbing of the soap opera, "Golden days of a daughter-in-law" into Kiswahili was handpicked and shortlisted for export in 2011. The perceived strengthening of emotional ties between China and Africa begs the question: What is the nature and implication of this process? Is the 'ChinaAfrica' Dream an expression of 'Soft Power'?

#### CONCLUSION

The Chinese African engagement in media, communication and culture moves beyond the carefully crafted soft power. It must be seen as part and parcel of China's steadily rising interests in the continent in areas such as extractive industries, construction, agriculture, finance, and increased aid. It involves Chinese government agencies as well as private companies and cultural organisations. The many features in the manifold and growing relations between these two economic and political actors show the broad commitment the Chinese have to Africa.

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