

# The Image of Africa in China: The Emerging Role of Chinese Social Media

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**Abstract:** While the debate on Africa's image is sliding into two extremes in the Western world, either too desperate or too optimistic, China's narrative on this continent remains politically oriented and does not fit the fast growing economic and trade relationships between two sides. As the online social platform is gaining mass popularity in China, however, many new forms of information dissemination channels have been established focusing on various developments in Africa. The monopoly of information in the mainstream media represents new opportunities for the Chinese, especially those potential investors, to understand a more diversified Africa and a real China-African relationship, with the hope of avoiding investment failure and misbehavior. This paper first takes one of the traditional mainstream Chinese media as an example, to examine how limited it was when it comes to reports and news on contemporary Africa, giving a rather incomplete and sometimes misleading impression for Chinese migrants before their departure to Africa during the past few decades. It also analyses new social media in China and how it differs from traditional media in terms of ownership, usage, and impact. This paper finds that the new media is providing a change in the perception of Africa and the China-Africa relationship.

## Introduction

China and Africa are both developing at a fast pace and consolidating their relationship with each other, constituting another pole of the world, as described by the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during his visit to the African Union in May 2014. China is taking a more active lead in terms of this relationship. Its investments in African infrastructure, agriculture, manufacturing industry, mining, and trade have brought noteworthy positive impacts on the continent's social and economic development, but some of them have resulted in controversy and serious local debates due to the Chinese lack of knowledge regarding local customs, legal systems, and lifestyles. Thus how the Chinese perceive Africa and how they receive information about Africa has become a serious factor in this bilateral relationship's sustainable and mutually beneficial future.

The truth is that the vast majority of Chinese know little about Africa. A Chinese person may know Africa from his or her primary school textbook, especially the China-Africa friendship illustrated by the TAZARA railway and Ethiopia's patriotic defense that prevented foreigners from making it a colony. Even now when people are more interconnected by the

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v16/v16i3-4a10.pdf>

Internet and various means of modern transport, the impression and image of Africa among the Chinese to a large extent remains unchanged as the continent is too far away, and the connections between it and China are still weak. While the relationship between the two sides has made a positive switch from political-oriented to business-led, under a wave of industrial product transfers from China to overseas markets, the management of Africa-China relations has remained largely the province of the Chinese government. Understanding the real nature of Africa as well as acknowledging China's previous involvement in Africa has become an urgent and desperately needed requirement for potential Chinese investors who are interested in this continent.

Until recently, there was a de facto monopoly of Africa reporting in China in that the major information sources on Africa-related stories were in the hands of several giant state-owned news agencies and media organizations. These agencies and organizations have been developing their Africa coverage in a more comprehensive and well-rounded way, but many challenges remain. It is still difficult to obtain accurate descriptions of the African realities as these sometimes collide with the official stance on China-Africa relations, which is a red line for the media. With the revolutionary development of social media, however, many new information exchange platforms on mobile devices have been established in China and among the Chinese overseas, which provides a golden opportunity to break this monopoly and to offer China another picture of Africa and China-Africa relations. This paper first analyzes the causes of the formation of the de facto monopoly of Africa reporting in China. It then moves on to discuss how new media, especially the We Media platform, is changing and having an impact on the media industry landscape in China. Last, the paper provides statistics and a case study to show how public accounts on WeChat are providing subscribers with more background and real stories about Africa and the Chinese in Africa.

### **Formation of the de facto Monopoly of Reporting on Africa in China**

Reporting on Africa in China must be seen as a subject that is more related to China-Africa relations, rather than African stories only. This is not to suggest that the Chinese media does not report pure Africa stories, but rather that bilateral relationship stories are more influential and attractive to the domestic Chinese readership and audience as Africa is really far from China. In the initial stage of this bilateral relationship in the early 1950s, media coverage was more linked to historical decolonization and African independence struggles as well as to China's efforts to export and strengthen the socialist revolution on the continent. Mutual political support and trust was the spirit and backbone in this bilateral relationship. In later stages, however, especially after the 1980s and early 1990s, China's motivation behind its engagement with Africa was largely associated with the continent's natural resources. Consequently, it is now switching to the continent's unlocked market potential and industrialization opportunities.

Apart from breaking news generated from international agencies or China's Xinhua News Agency, African news in the Chinese media correlates with China's engagement and exchanges with Africa at various levels. Thus Africa's image in Chinese eyes is often intertwined with and reflected by its relationship with China in the present day. Also, the channel for learning about Africa was quite unified, and there was a de facto monopoly on reporting about Africa in China, which was more likely to create a singular understanding of Africa in China.

In Li and Ronning's analysis of Chinese news about Africa, 168 Africa-related stories published on various Chinese media platforms between 1 January 2002 and 30 December 2011 were selected and classified into seven categories. These were bonding with Africa, success and opportunity in Africa, development opportunities for Africa, international criticism, strategic analysis, disclosure, and debate. Their analysis showed a correlation with official Chinese engagements on the continent.

The Chinese media system is now experiencing an oscillation between the state and the market, but it is still state-owned and is part of the government. While some of the areas in this field, such content production and advertising, are now open to private capital, the media is both a "pre-eminently political propaganda machine" and a "competitor in the media marketplace" which provides "a public service," and it is also a mouthpiece of the government. Even with the commercialization of the Chinese media market, media are still under the control of the government. Their coverage on the Sino-African relationship is thus focused on "disseminating China's official policy of soft power, propagating cooperation and mutual development between China and African nations."

A new Chinese network, CCTV Africa, has tried to deliver a fuller African story to an international audience, different from the orthodox Anglo-American perspective. Since its production team is mainly composed of Africans, its content is designed to have less of a focus on Chinese subject matters and Chinese interests. This is because many Africans have been "utterly and justifiably fed up with the agenda of death, disease and destruction that we have been offering them for ages." Gagliardone describes this new approach as positive reporting. It places more attention on "collective achievements while overlooking divisive issues...[but] this principle has often resulted in an institutional and uncritical style which marginalizes alternative narratives." However, it does tap into the "rising Africa" narrative. Although CCTV Africa, by mobilizing vast resources and providing a non-traditional perspective, has won a certain percentage of the audience in Africa, this channel is in English and its target outlet is more the international audience than the domestic Chinese one. Thus its content can hardly be received on other Chinese speaking CCTV channels, and even its "Africa perspective" and "African stories" will require time to evaluate its authenticity and viability.

While orchestration with national policy is a hindrance to the Chinese mainstream media's reporting on Africa, lack of knowledge of Africa by Chinese correspondents is another. Many young Chinese journalists were sent to Africa at a career transition stage. The vast majority of them went to Africa without a solid understanding or knowledge of the continent and with a hope of being transferred to some more advanced world region afterwards. For example, one of the Chinese agencies has a classification of its overseas offices by which developed countries like the US and UK are ranked as A category and most African countries are ranked as C. If you want to be assigned to A category countries, one has to take a rotation to a C category country first. This lack of real interest in reporting about C countries severely hinders correspondents' learning curve on Africa and constrains their in-depth reporting on many issues.

In addition, while African studies in China is a booming well-established subject, which is supposed to take responsibility for providing decision makers, and the media and business community with solid knowledge on Africa, it faces some limitations. Learning about Africa has a long history in China but its major development was closely associated with China's

engagement with Africa in the past two decades. Thus this subject area in China is trying to find its own paradigm. There is a greater demand to know more about Africa, and this demand will stimulate African studies in China. But at this stage it still needs more “effort, hard work and collaboration.”

Another barrier for information flow between the two sides is a lack of funding to establish bureaus in Africa for the more diversified Chinese media organizations, especially the commercialized ones. Setting up an overseas office or bureaus in Africa is extremely costly given the high living and operation costs for expatriates in Africa. To further consolidate its international propaganda strategy, the Chinese government granted a large amount of money in 2009 to support several state-owned media organizations’ overseas operation and expansion. Apart from the yearly grant, only those with a strong funding support from the government are capable of running an African operation.

The national news agency Xinhua established its first Africa office in Egypt in 1956 and relocated its Africa regional headquarters from Paris to Nairobi in 2006 to further integrate African reports and gain influence in the continent. Some of their offices were even established earlier than the Chinese embassy in some countries. The People’s Daily, the Chinese Communist Party’s propaganda mouthpiece, was also one of the earliest to distribute in Africa. In recent years, other major government-owned media have also made their maiden visit to Africa with CCTV setting up its first overseas station in Nairobi in 2011 and China Daily opening its first Africa bureau in Nairobi in 2012, and circulating its newspaper in Africa in the same year. Others including Chinese News Service, Economic Daily, and Science and Technology Daily have also opened offices in various African cities. These government-owned media largely rely on government funding to sustain their daily operations as the Chinese government has been increasing investment in these organizations with a hope to shape its overseas image and have a say in the international media sphere.

For other media platforms in China, especially those commercialized and market-driven ones that have a freer space to exercise criticism, Africa is not attractive enough to make the huge investment necessary for establishing a permanent office. Only in recent years, did one of the leading commercial stations, Phoenix TV, send its first correspondent to Nairobi and open its Africa office. Under such circumstances, the Chinese audience and readership has had narrow information channels through which to know Africa, as state-owned media normally conform to the Chinese government’s official views regarding Africa.

### **A Changing Face for Africa in the Chinese Mind?**

As previously mentioned, many Chinese have little interest in understanding Africa or knowing it in a more comprehensive and in-depth way as this continent is not directly related to their daily life. Also the main information channels for them to know Africa are highly orchestrated under the de facto monopoly of major state-owned media. Thus their knowledge on Africa is anecdotal and shallow.

In 2006, 5,119 respondents took part in a survey organized by China Youth’s Daily, the official organ of the Communist Youth League, and the biggest Chinese Internet news portal Sina.com, to see “how much do you know about Africa.” The result turned out that the majority of respondents (71.7 percent) knew very little about Africa and 10 percent of them knew

nothing at all. For the information channel through which they knew Africa, 21.3 percent said they learned about Africa through the print media and the Internet, and 21.2 percent attributed their knowledge to film and TV. The largest portion of interviewees (15.9 percent) saw Africa as impoverished and underdeveloped, and 14.5 percent linked Africa with AIDS. The following impressions of Africa were ranked in order of salience: wildlife (14.2 percent), Africans being gifted in sports (13.8 percent), people's talents in music and dance (10.6 percent), the origin of humankind (8.9 percent), rich resources (7.7 percent), passionate people (7.6 percent), tourist resort (6.7 percent), and other (0.2 percent).

The survey was done around the 2006 FOCAC conference, which saw the burgeoning boom of China-Africa exchanges. Three years later in 2009, another similar survey was launched on the website of the Global Times, a tabloid affiliated to the People's Daily, with a total of 5,745 participants. This survey revealed a striking change in the media through which Chinese people get to know about Africa, compared to the 2006 survey. "70 percent of respondents acquired knowledge about Africa through news reports (three times more than in 2006), suggesting a greater density of media coverage of Africa from 2006 to 2009, which contributed to the public's improved knowledge of the continent." But when it comes to the first impression of Africa, despite more dense news coverage, more than half of the respondents (53 percent) still saw Africa as having a "laggard economy, skinny, starving children," while "lions, zebras and exotic primitive landscape" ranked second (19 percent), and "frequent warfare and Somali pirates" third (12 percent) in salience.

Baidu.com is now the largest Internet search engine in China as Google.com is blocked, and it also claims to be the biggest Chinese language search engine worldwide. Based on keywords and search clicks, Baidu offers a statistical service to provide detailed information on a designated key word, including the number of searches and topic salience within a certain period of time. After entering the search term "Africa" and choosing the period of the last four years, this researcher found the average number of weekly searches on Africa increased from less than 1,200 in 2011 to around 2,000 in early 2015, with a high point of 3,200 reached in 2013. Thus, the average demand for Africa information among Baidu users increased by 167 percent during the period. But when it comes to the salience of the search topic, the most searched topics related to Africa were Africa maps, followed by African girl's circumcision, African rose wood, Chinese in Africa, African tribes, teaching in Africa, and the state of African states.

With the rapid change of China-Africa relations, however, the diplomatic and government-driven bilateral relationship has switched to being business and commercial driven. In this major transition, private companies are playing an increasingly significant role. Information and knowledge from and on Africa thus requires more professionalism, depth, and correlation with the ground reality, which cannot be satisfied by traditional media channels. Reality on the ground and real time information on African markets have become major concerns for Chinese investors at home. While the Chinese government is calling for a more rapid industry transfer from China to Africa, suspicions are in the air as little reliable information is available for decision-making.

### **Analysis of the We Media**

The popularity of social media has proved to be a key element in China's social and political transformation in recent years. Information dissemination has found a new way to influence targeted people. During the last seven years, the number of Chinese netizens has increased from 253 million to 649 million, of which 86 percent are via mobile access. This has led to a new route of information flow, defined by Bowman and Willis as We Media. "Armed with easy-to-use Web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information." BBS, blogs, Micro-blog, and many other immediate information transition platforms all could be regarded as We Media. Among all these developments in China, Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, and WeChat, a similar application to WhatsApp, have gained the most popularity and have had a significant social impact.

WeChat was launched in January 2011. Its core service is message transmission surrounded by many affiliated services including social life sharing, public account subscription, real life applications, and games. The number of users has exceeded 468 million. Official account is a service created by WeChat in June 2012, which is to deliver information and various media content on a large scale to subscribers, while interacting with them by automatic reply or in person by the message creators. Individuals anywhere in the world can be establish an account, and the current main users are companies, media, public organizations, celebrities, and individuals.

WeChat is a stickier and a more private information exchange platform compared to microblogs. Since information is distributed only once in any 24-hour period, only those posters with rich, practical, attractive, and interesting content will win followers and survive. Consequently, for the founder of the official account and the owner of the media platform, their passion for WeChat is from heart. On this platform, they can break the constraints of traditional media and enjoy a freer space for personal perspectives and content selection. It is a way that transcends the media bureaucracy and creates a free and direct information flow among people. Besides, this form of communication stimulates subscribers to be part of the story generation process as recipients are encouraged to be the creators and transmitters of information on this platform. This kind of communication and exchange between creators and subscribers is more likely to stimulate the desire for expression among subscribers, which will help them establish their "existence" with others who share the same interests with them. Eventually by analyzing the detailed statistics provided by WeChat analytics, official account creators will sift and identify the most desired information and stories by its number of views and reposts. Thus, they can maximize the impact of the news between each news cycle.

### **Reporting Africa in China's Social Media**

When it comes to Africa-related information flows, there are clear signs that the information monopoly is being broken with the advent of social media. With increasingly more immigrants from China to Africa, various online social platforms are available for them to tell their stories of living in Africa. Thus naturally they can offer more perspectives and stories on Africa and

China-Africa relations apart from the official messages. For those who have been living in Africa and those who want to learn about real life experience in Africa, WeChat official accounts created by various sources give them a revolutionary channel to learn about Africa.

The significance of this service has been spotted by both traditional and new media organizations, and even governmental organizations have joined to make an impact on this platform. When the search keyword "Africa" was entered on the official account official website by this researcher, 357 accounts could be found with a classification of six categories, including business and life information, logistics, academics, official media and governmental organizations, as well as African drum lessons and African products information. Individuals, media groups, and government missions such as the Chinese embassies in Egypt and Ethiopia created these accounts.

More than one hundred accounts were related to African drumming lessons, as this is a popular art among young college students across major cities in China. The second largest category, which takes about fifty accounts, is tourism information, and the third is African business and life information, with an approximate number of forty-five. Tourism is the most direct and vivid way to understand and know Africa; however, this is so far limited to a small number of Chinese who are financially privileged or professional tourists. Information on African business and life is the category that may play a bigger role as China continues to expand its commercial interests in Africa.

Among all these public accounts, HSHAFRICA ("Buy For and From Africa") is gaining popularity among subscribers. It was established in June 2014 by Shi Yingying, a former employee of the Xinhua news agency in Nairobi. The account can be found by searching HSHAFRICA on the WeChat official accounts page, and it now delivers four to eight articles with pictures or videos to its subscribers daily. It was initially built up to circulate Kenyan news related to the Chinese community such as currency exchanges, Kenyan business policies, local development strategies, and even information about second-hand goods. But with more subscribers and volunteers participating in her project, this account has become a pan-African information and news channel for readers and other WeChat users.

Shi said people in China do not know Africa well due to underdeveloped and old information exchange patterns, so she created the account to transmit Africa's daily news, cultural issues, economy, tourism, agriculture, investment opportunities, life experiences, local services and also Africa security reminders. The account is also aimed at building up an information platform for Africans who want to understand Chinese culture, business, and other related information in a non-official way. Apart from the services and information it provides, Shi said based on the account's information and news sources across the continent, it also plans to provide some industry statistics to research institutes and think tanks, becoming a real first-hand reference. The account largely relies on local newspapers, media, or personal writing, and has a team composed of many volunteers living in different African countries, or who used to live in Africa. There are even local Africans now joining her project. She did not disclose the number of subscribers to the account as she is seeking partnerships with other investors to strengthen the account. According to the open statistics under each of the stories they publish on the account, the most-read article exceeded 69,000 viewings. Shi said that the average daily visits to all articles of this account amount to between 15,000 and 30,000.

Reader-friendly and convenient is an advantage of information circulation on WeChat, but the content is the vital tool to attract and retain readers. Thus HSHAFRICA's strategy is to offer vivid, lively, and real business and life stories and pictures to its subscribers in a readable non-news style. This approach differentiates it from stories generated by the serious and politically-oriented government-owned news organizations based in Africa. So far, the most read article is "Ten Things You Won't Know Until You Come to Africa" with more than 64,340 viewings, in which some Chinese in Africa assert that some matters need attention in Africa. Such content can rarely be found in traditional media. This includes tips such as one should be careful about corruption or even robbery from the police.

An article titled "Why Africans Hate Chinese" was published by HSHAFRICA in December 2014, a story reposted from another private owned social media account called World Old News Daily. The story tells how many Chinese in Africa were treated in a rough in some of the African countries and hated by local people due to their misbehavior and dishonorable businesses, which is different from the rhetoric of friendship created by the official media. The article received more than 17,000 views on WeChat. One of the subscribers based in Nigeria, Xue Xiaoming, who has been living and doing business in the country for more than eighteen years, said it is a reality and Chinese people should know it is actually not easy to live in certain parts of Africa. This is something that will never appear in the official Chinese media. Xue said a platform like this dares to voice some ugly truths and tough pictures of Chinese engagement in Africa, which is a good thing as it shows the positive and the negative side of China-Africa relations to those who want to come and invest in Africa, leaving the decision to them, rather than providing good stories only.

Diversification and enrichment of communication channels and content are regarded as the most valued effects in terms of this public account reporting of Africa, according to Zhang Yanqiu, director of the African Communication Research Center at the Communication University of China. She says on this platform, an account creator can communicate and exchange ideas with subscribers, which is a two-way communication process that traditional media cannot manage.

To create a more balanced and rational news environment in China, these private media platforms should be embraced to complement the official messages. But their effects are yet to be evaluated. Also as an official account involves tailored information, it gives an excellent opportunity for marketing. So some of the accounts are also making efforts to make their accounts alluring to consultancy services in Africa despite the fact that the majority of Chinese companies did not have this kind of consumption habit. Zhang predicts that the market orientation of the public accounts will not change their appeal to subscribers and that their ability to balance news content among various news sources, including official ones and other private ones should not be underestimated.

## Conclusion

Chinese state-owned media in Africa usually present an official tone in terms of Africa's domestic situation and China's engagement in Africa. This has led to a de facto distortion of Africa reporting in China due to a lack of funding and interest by other private commercial media, the lack of professional knowledge of most correspondents in Africa, as well as

underdeveloped Africa studies in Chinese academia. So, the Chinese people's impression and perception of Africa during the past ten years remains at an anecdotal level. With the rapid change from diplomacy to business, however, there is a growing demand for accurate information for Chinese who want to know and invest in Africa, especially under a possible unprecedented industry transfer from China to Africa in the near future. Thus the emergence of new information exchange platforms on mobile devices comes at the perfect time to fill the gap. WeChat public accounts are regarded as the most popular option. HSHAFRICA's experience with circulating more comprehensive news and an all-round perspective to subscribers, including those who now reside in Africa or who want to come to Africa, has proved that this new way of transmitting news is attractive, convenient and popular, and it is gradually breaking the monopoly of Africa reporting in China. This will give a fuller picture of Africa and China's engagement among the Chinese.

Yet, concerns also exist for this newly established platform. Privacy is an advantage but also a constraint of the public accounts as it is still quite difficult to identify, reach and convince the right subscribers, especially in the relatively small Africa-interest community. Also, the information security of subscribers poses a challenge to the platform and its future operation. How the public accounts operational team will be organized to maintain such accounts and make them sustainable and active long-term is not yet clear.

It is challenging so far to provide media content analysis data to support the finding of the de facto monopoly of Africa report in China. Also it is still too early to collect solid data to evaluate the impact of official accounts on social recognition on Africa in China. Time and more data collection are needed to dig into this topic.

## Notes

- 1 See [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-05/06/c\\_1110547295.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-05/06/c_1110547295.htm) (accessed on March 7, 2015).
- 2 Zhang and Yang 2014.
- 3 Li and Ronning 2013b, p. 43.
- 4 Chau 2007, p. 141
- 5 Gagliardone 2013, p. 25.
- 6 Li and Ronning 2013a. p. 102.
- 7 Ngomba 2011, p. 52.
- 8 Zhengrong 2007, p. 335.
- 9 Mork 2012, p. 48.
- 10 Marsh 2014.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Gagliardone 2013, p. 25.
- 13 Marsh 2014.
- 14 Li 2005, p. 59.
- 15 Gagliardone 2013, p. 25.
- 16 See <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/10-25/3414071.shtml> (accessed on March 8, 2015).
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.

- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Li and Ronning 2013b, p. 43.
- 22 See [http://news.xinhuanet.com/info/2015-01/23/c\\_133940681.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/info/2015-01/23/c_133940681.htm). (accessed on March 8, 2015).
- 23 Bowman and Willis 2003.
- 24 Ibid., p. 7.
- 25 Wen 2013, p. 55.
- 26 See <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0fd1abc2-a610-11e4-abe9-00144feab7de.html?siteedition=intl#axzz3WnibbO9C>. (accessed on March 9, 2015).
- 27 Zhao and Li 2013, p. 8.
- 28 Li 2014, p. 57.
- 29 Wen 2013, p. 55.
- 30 Chen 2015, p. 79.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Shi 2015.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Xue 2015.
- 36 Zhang 2015.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Chen 2015, p. 79.
- 39 Zhang 2015.
- 40 Zhao and Li 2013, p. 8.

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