The Dragon Shapes Its Image: A Study of Chinese Media Influence Strategies in Africa

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Abstract: As China continues its human, cultural and commercial expansion into Africa it has a clear strategic interest in managing its image on the continent. The leadership in both its government and private sectors know China must find ways to counteract negative reports that accuse China and some African leaders and their regimes of being complicit in China’s accelerating exploitation of African labor and resources, undermining and weakening regulatory controls, and illegal profiteering in their countries. In addition, there are continuing attempts by Western media to portray China as the new colonizer in Africa, creating a perception that China is the new bully on the block, and positioning it as a country that should be watched and monitored with suspicion regarding its Africa intentions. It would appear that the continued expansion of Chinese trade and investment in Africa will depend on China’s success in developing and deploying a vigorous “soft” and “smart power” strategy that counters such allegations and media representations. This paper examines the extant research on Chinese government media-related strategies in Africa, suggesting directions future research on this topic might take.

Introduction

According to Joseph Nye, governments exercise various forms of power. The most common are hard power, soft power, and smart power. Nye defines hard power as the use of economic, political and military resources to coercively achieve one’s objectives. He defines soft power as the use of language, culture, social policies, and media to achieve one’s objectives in a non-coercive way. Smart power, on the other hand, is described by Nye as an intelligent combination of hard and soft power. In media studies, seminal thinkers Kenneth Boulding and Walter Lipmann both argued persuasively that mass media, exercising soft power, play a key role in constructing national images and advancing foreign policy objectives. This paper reviews and discusses the scholarly literature that has explored China’s use of a combination of soft power initiatives in its attempts create and sustain a positive image of itself in the African press and African public opinion as it expands its economic presentation into the African continent.

Discussions on China’s growing presence in Africa sometimes ignore the fact that trade with Africa plays a significant role in fueling China’s economic growth, because it supports the growth of China’s manufacturing industries. China’s economic growth—on average

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approximately 9 percent annually for the last three decades—has been fueled to a great extent by export growth averaging 17 percent per annum. Natural resources from Africa provide the raw materials for Chinese industries. Clearly, China’s rapidly developing economy is intricately connected to the expansion of Sino-African trade.

While the motives behind Chinese foreign direct investment in Africa can be seen as predominantly resource seeking, the facts point to a more nuanced reality: the increased economic exchanges between China and African nations can be attributed to the market potential that Africa offers for China’s industries. Africa is also experiencing rapid development, with the onset of peace and stability in many African nations after periods of wars of various sorts. The Chinese likely see this period of relative calm to be the perfect opportunity to invest in Africa, when African governments are focusing on developing infrastructure for their countries’ future.

As these investment and trade initiatives grow, however, some resistance and criticism have emerged from some quarters of the press, which accuse China of neocolonialism, racism and exploitation in Africa. And, as China’s economic footprint has expanded, it has also been accompanied by some misfortunes that have prompted negative coverage in the African media and western press. For example, the shootings of Zambian miners in the Chambeshi mines, frequent mining accidents, and criticism of Chinese-Zambian labor relations by Human Rights Watch and others, have framed China’s relations with Zambia in a negative light, resulting in headlines such as “China needs to respect Zambian laws,” “Chinese traders allege unfair competitive practices by Chinese companies,” and “Zambian workers exposed to harsh conditions of employment in Chinese-run mines.” The same type of headlines have also appeared frequently in the western press and focused international attention on Chinese economic and military activities and their consequences throughout the continent. Headlines such as “Chinese neocolonialism in Africa,” “China exploits African workers,” and “China supports anti-democratic regimes,” have become normative as Western perceptions of China as a threat to Western interests in Africa proliferate.

In responding to these negative portrayals of its relationship with Africa, China had generally felt it was best to “wait for time to explain everything.” The underlying idea was that, if its actions were good, they would prove themselves and the need to respond to negative criticisms would simply vanish. Nonetheless, with ongoing and mounting threats to its image in the world press and in the Africa media, China has devised a multifaceted strategy to influence African public opinion and the African media.

Chinese attempts to influence media content in Africa and about China’s relationship with Africa are not new. Even before the Cold War, China was involved in some level of media engagement in Africa and by early 1958 China had opened a New China News Agency office in Cairo. Chinese ideological support was given to liberation movements on Chinese radio stations broadcasting to Africa. By 1967, Radio Peking was transmitting twenty-one hours weekly in English to East Africa, with transmissions occurring daily at local prime time – between six and nine o’clock in the evening. Chinese publications such as the Mao’s selected works, Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung, Swahili translations of Chinese poems for children, China Pictorial, Peking Review, etc., were readily available in East Africa, as part of China’s effort to counter Western imperialist designs.
What is new is the intentionality with which China is attempting to influence African media in the context of the post-Cold war geopolitical environment. In 2006, China and forty-eight African countries announced the Beijing Action Plan (2006-2009) under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). While the plan outlined a comprehensive action plan for cooperation between the two parties, it also specified key milestones for China’s intervention in the African media-scape, focusing on three aspects of the Africa media: African media institutions, the practice of journalism, and African journalists.

The 2006 FOCAC action plan listed five points of intervention. First, increased contact between news media, encouraging journalists to play a role in enhancing mutual understanding and friendship. Second, it called for multi-level exchanges and co-operation, with international visits and exchanges between media groups. Third, the plan focused on reporting and coverage by both sides’ news media, sending resident and non-resident correspondents to file news reports. Fourth, there would be workshops for African correspondents in China, and expanded co-operation in radio and television broadcasting. Finally, China committed itself to the improvement of telecommunication infrastructure in African countries. Significantly, China also appealed for a more sovereign African continent in its final declaration at the Beijing FOCAC 2006 summit: “We call on the international community to encourage and support Africa’s efforts to pursue peace and development. In particular, we urge developed countries to increase official development assistance and honor their commitment to opening markets and debt relief to enhance Africa’s capacity in poverty and disaster reduction and prevention and control of desertification, and help Africa realize the UN Millennium Development Goals.”

Prior to the 2006 FOCAC summit, there was an active media campaign to showcase Africa’s beauty and importance. Giant photographs of Africa’s scenery, people and wildlife were put on billboards. The Chinese news channels were primarily focused on the high-level interviews and information about countries in Africa. The massive media campaign and advertisement that China engaged in was meant to show the importance of Africa, with photos and banners, and media talking about “Amazing Africa.” The summit was given center-stage in the Chinese media, and the citizens were also actively involved, with approximately one million citizens volunteering to help and provide security. The summit focused on the theme of “Friendship, Peace, Development and Cooperation.” Since then and in successive meetings of FOCAC, China has actively courted African countries and passed along its message of the importance of China to Africa and vice-versa. In addition, China has restructured its foreign policies to focus on the discourse of common economic benefit, universal political exchange, and regular cultural cooperation.

The language of co-operation in all areas was repeated in every tri-annual FOCAC summit, with a focus on trade and investments. The dominant discourse was about cooperation across the political and social spectra, always anchored in the benefits that will accrue to both parties in the economic sector. The phrase “win-win” was used to signify the benefits of stronger China-Africa relations and for portraying the possible economic benefits from the interactions. Good governance on the African continent, it was said, would ensure the protection of foreign investment in the private sector. Before the commencement of each summit, there was always an increased intensity of bilateral talks between the Chinese premier and African leaders and numerous bi-lateral deals were signed and reported in the press.
According to Banda, there were also significant investments in media and communications infrastructure, including loans and grants directed towards state-owned broadcasting houses such as the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC), the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings (ZBH), and the National Radio of Equatorial Guinea. Nigeria purchased Chinese satellite technology, which included a Chinese training package and a ground station to be built in the Nigerian capital Abuja. In Malawi, a fiber-optic communication project to the tune of US $22.94 million was commissioned. In 2002, Zambia received FM transmitters for seven provinces. In 2006, it received more transmitters for further extension of radio services. In some instances, infrastructural support was implicitly linked to political ends. For example, the provision of FM transmitters to the state-owned media in Zambia almost always occurred in election years, timed to support the then pro-Beijing ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) in its electoral campaign effort, especially in rural Zambia. As China supplied information technology, Chinese media training was coupled with those information technology transfers.

Some scholars have skillfully noted that media training is not value-neutral; it also carries with it the cultural and political values associated with the acquisition of those skills. African journalists invited to China were exposed to the internal operations of Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), and the Beijing Organizing Committee for Olympic Games. This introduction to China’s view of journalism and journalistic practice allowed African journalists and scholars to compare it objectively to the dominant models of Western journalistic and communications practice, perhaps developing a more balanced understanding and appreciation of the pros and cons of each.

The Chinese embassies in Africa arranged visits for leading reporters from Africa’s large newspapers to visit Chinese enterprises that were engaged in cooperative projects, increasing their knowledge of the challenges inherent in south to south cooperation. China invited delegations of African reporters to visit China and participate in short-term training on news exchanges. These exchanges focused on sharing China’s development experience—particularly in areas of poverty reduction and development of manufacturing industries—while discussing alternative models of governance and reform.

At the time, critics accused China of providing despotic African regimes with the media communication infrastructure to perpetuate their hold on political power because it protected Chinese interests in their countries. For example, Brookes and Shin claimed that “China provided a military-strength radio jamming device, which the Harare government used to block broadcasts of anti-government reports from independent media outlets during the 2005 parliamentary election campaign.” It would appear that the Chinese leadership was prescient in its decision to develop a media and development strategies that would work to counteract such claims.

**Campaign to Expand Soft Power**

The Chinese government continued to make major investments in the African media. In 2012, former President Hu Jintao wrote in a party journal: “Hostile international powers are strengthening their efforts to Westernize and divide us. We must be aware of the seriousness and complexity of the struggles and take powerful measures to prevent and deal with them.”
His statement preceded a seven billion dollar campaign, part of a Chinese Communist Party bid to expand the China’s soft power in Africa, based in part on the notion that biased Western news media had painted a distorted portrait of China.

According to Jacobs, Chinese state media investors began expanding their footprint across Africa in 2006.29 A Chinese company, StarTimes, purchased a controlling stake in South African satellite television provider Top TV, adding to its presence in thirteen other African countries and the state-run radio broadcaster, China Radio International, had FM stations in three East African cities, while its AM channel covered all of Kenya. Jacobs says that by 2006, the state-run China Radio International (CRI) had begun broadcasting from Nairobi, Kenya, while Xinhua, the official press agency of the People’s Republic of China had over twenty bureaus across the African continent. By the start of 2011, Xinhua’s television station, CNC World, had begun broadcasting to African satellite and cable viewers and that same year, partnered with a Kenyan mobile operator to provide news feeds for mobile phones.

In January 2012, the state-run Chinese Central Television (CCTV), established CCTV Africa, choosing Nairobi to be its first ever broadcast hub outside its own headquarters in Beijing, its flagship show, Africa Live. With its staff of about one hundred people (forty of whom were Chinese), and correspondents in fourteen bureaus, the show intended to compete with the BBC and CNN. Meanwhile, China’s state news agency, Xinhua, had nearly thirty bureaus in Africa, along with its own television channel, providing news bulletins for seventeen million Kenyan cellphones, while CCTV provided a mobile TV service called “I Love Africa.”

Kenya’s most popular English-language newspapers featured articles by the Chinese state news agency, Xinhua, and television viewers could get their international news from either CCTV or CNC World, Xinhua’s English-language start-up. As Jacobs notes, on the radio, just a few notches over from Voice of America and the BBC, China Radio International featured Mandarin instruction along with positive accounts of Chinese-African cooperation.30

By the end of 2012, China’s leading English-language state newspaper, China Daily, had created an Africa edition, published in Nairobi and distributed on Kenya Airways flights. China also launched ChinAfrica, a monthly magazine, based in Johannesburg. And in South Africa, Chinese investors partnered with allies of the ruling African National Congress to purchase Independent News and Media, one of the most powerful media groups in the country, with daily newspapers in all of the major cities South African cities.31 Jacobs’ description of these multiyear, multi-pronged and multi-level Chinese media initiatives leaves little doubt about China’s intention to exert a long-term and wide influence on the African media.

Communication University of China

The Communication University of China (CUC) has trained or educated more than one hundred journalists or government officials from Africa through its Radio and Television News gathering and Editing for African Countries Program. One of CUC’s most illustrious graduates is Bob Wakesa (cited elsewhere in this article), at the time of writing a fellow at the University of Witwatersrand. Through its Master’s Degree Program in International Communication for Developing Countries and other short term training programs, CUC is creating a new generation of young African media professionals with a sophisticated understanding and appreciation of China.
An Africa Communication Research Center has been established in Beijing, the goal of which is to raise China’s ability to disseminate information in Africa, increase the potency of China’s soft power and contribute to China’s efforts to create a positive image of itself. According to Jiang et al. the Center hopes to promote mutual understanding and friendly cooperation between China and African media through providing Chinese and African media organizations and firms with communication strategy advice and personnel training. African journalists and press officers are often invited on all-expenses-paid training sessions in Beijing as part of Chinese aid programs that give short-term training to 30,000 Africans and full university scholarships to another 18,000.

CCTV in Africa: A Special Focus

According to Szcudlik-Tatar, the decision to establish CCTV Africa was formalized during the 2006 FOCAC, a meeting that was an integral part of China’s public diplomacy strategy. In the context of Africa, this involved disseminating a positive narrative on China’s increasing activity on the African continent. This also included the promotion of Chinese culture and values, disseminated in a way intended to appeal to an African audience. According to York, CCTV News, which claims two hundred million viewers outside China, is available in six languages; one of its latest ventures is an Arabic news channel. To increase their reach — and compete with Western news organizations — both CCTV and Xinhua often give away dispatches programming to financially struggling news media outlets in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia.

The CCTV Africa site reveals a robust and wide range of activities, designed not only to inform the world about Africa, but to extend China’s ability to stay abreast of events in Africa through its network of Africa correspondents and Africa bureaus. As a recent review of CCTV’s activities in Africa by Jiang et al. notes, CCTV’s African headquarters in Nairobi provides impressive coverage of African news and contemporary issues in daily broadcasts and its international arm, and CCTV NEWS sees itself as China’s contribution to greater diversity and wider perspectives in the global information flow. With a special focus on China, the channel also emphasizes events taking place in Asia, Africa, and all developing countries.

China’s Current Media Strategy

China continues to be committed to its established media strategy there. The 2015 Fifth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which took place in Johannesburg, South Africa, produced a three-year (2016-2018) action plan with a sub-section of the plan devoted to “Press and Media.” This sub-section, implies a continuation of Beijing’s previous action plan from 2012, including notably: implementation of the previously proposed China-Africa Press Exchange Center in order to facilitate media training and exchange programs, including provision for training for one thousand African media practitioners per year; regular exchange of films and TV programs; training and technical support by the Chinese company StarTimes for migration from analog to digital television in many African countries; cooperation in film and television production; publication of books related to health, agriculture, culture, and education; and further expansion of the CCTV initiative in Nairobi, Kenya. While Jiang et al. point out that China has struggled to meet those goals, they concede that it has made significant
progress in meeting its goals, including extensive cooperation in the areas of journalism exchange, with CCTV playing an increasingly important role in the African mediascape.40

Although the 2013-2015 FOCAC Action Plan established a wide-range of exchange programs for both African and Chinese journalists, these exchanges have favored African journalists visiting China rather than Chinese journalists visiting Africa, and the majority of the African journalists work either for African state broadcasters or other government media. Predictably, these journalists have come back with a far more positive image of China than they originally had.

By far, the largest share of Chinese resources to media and telecommunication have been channeled towards supporting Africa’s information infrastructure. Similar to its role with roads and railways in many African countries, China has emerged as one of the most important actors in developing terrestrial and mobile information infrastructure, including efforts to play a significant role in Africa’s digital transition from analogue broadcasting to digital television through set top boxes. Importantly, Jiang et al. point out that China is also succeeding in expanding its market share in Africa as a supplier of mobile devices, including phones, tablets and PCs, another demonstration of the importance of African markets for the continued growth of the Chinese export economy.

Chinese state-owned and private companies have participated in project financing, with significant assistance provided by China’s chief financial instruments for its Africa expansion – the Export–Import Bank, providing guarantees and loans for the purchase of Chinese goods and services; and the China Development Bank, through which the China Africa Development Fund and other instruments seek to stimulate Chinese investment. Some of these loans receive concessional terms with subsidies through the Chinese development aid budget.41

Is China’s Media Strategy for Africa working?

One of the most ambitious projects to track Chinese influence on the African media is the China Africa Reporting Project at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. According to the project website, the Wits China-Africa Reporting Project aims to improve the quality of reporting around China-Africa issues:

Despite the expanding links between the two regions media reporting has often been inadequate or polarized, either portraying China as an exploiting predator or a benign development partner. The project aims to encourage balanced and considered reporting as the topic of China-Africa relations is further entrenched in the editorial narrative of both regions.42

The project offers reporting grants to African and Chinese journalists and encourages collaborations to investigate the complex dynamics and uncover untold stories and enables research for journalism students looking at media responses to China’s engagement with Africa. Funded by the Open Societies Foundation, the program aims to increase the amount of quality reporting and information about what China is doing in Africa and how Africans are responding to the expanding Chinese presence, while training a new generation of reporters for
South Africa and beyond. Notably, the project also monitors the coverage of Africa in the Chinese media. The media monitoring activities associated with this program will generate more empirical knowledge about the impact of China’s engagement with the media in Africa, both on Africa and on China.

Several of the 2016 articles published in the Chinese Journal of Communication present a mixed assessment of the impact of the various Chinese media strategies in Africa. For example, Herman Wasserman claims because of the Chinese efforts, journalists in South Africa now hold a “cautiously optimistic” attitude towards China, but are still concerned about China’s potential influence on South African policy making.43 An empirical study of the output of Ugandan journalists demonstrated that their published articles contained mostly neutral to favorable attitudes towards China, although there was a concentration of negative images in relation to the opaqueness of Chinese companies regarding labor relations. Ugandan journalists who had travelled to China on Chinese government sponsored visits were more likely to demonstrate favorable attitudes towards China.44 Tokunbo Ojo observed that South African Africa media attitudes towards China are largely dependent on the ideological orientation of the publication, with business magazines like African Business more likely to display more balanced coverage than an Africanist journal like the New African.45 Using Kenya as their laboratory, Zhang Yanqiu and Jane Muthoni Mwangi examined public perceptions of China’s media engagement in Africa, concluding that CCTV Africa and China Daily’s Africa Weekly “contribute to a better understanding of China among Kenyans.”46 Finally, Vivian Marsh examined agenda-setting and program-framing in CCTV Africa’s television journalism to find out whether CCTV Africa offers an alternative to Western news agendas and practices. According to Jiang et al:

In comparison with earlier studies of CCTV Africa, Marsh found fewer negative portrayals of the West and a reduced aversion to cultural or offbeat stories. [However] the data indicate a content strategy designed to prioritize the Chinese agenda in Africa, rather than to promote an “Africa rising” narrative....47

A survey conducted by the PEW Research Center, on Global Attitudes and Trends in 2015 in Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria showed that the majority of opinions about China were positive (70 percent, 80 percent, and 70 percent respectively).48 Similarly, an African public opinion poll of thirteen thousand people across the continent by Afrobarometer also confirmed that, with the exception of human rights and political system, the perception of China in Africa is largely positive.49 Perhaps China’s media strategy is working.

Discussion

This paper has taken a political-economic approach to understanding China’s engagement with the African media, discussing various methods by which China is deploying a “soft power” approach to influencing the construction of public opinion in African media institutions. Clearly the considerable increase in China’s overall direct investments in Africa will continue to elicit concern on the part of ordinary African citizens and African elites. Some will fear that the continuing expansion of Chinese exports to Africa will contribute to a rise in African unemployment.50 Others will fear that the imbalance in trade between Africa and might result in further devaluation of African currencies, making it impossible for African governments to repay their debts.51 Additionally, the promises of high-quality employment opportunities
coming to Africa with Chinese investments may never materialize since Chinese firms bring their workers with them to Africa.\textsuperscript{52} Finally, some will fear that Chinese commercial engagement with Africans states with weak governance structures will slow political reforms in those countries.\textsuperscript{53} These fears about the overall impact of both Chinese investment and the growing Chinese presence in Africa will continue to find their place in media discourse about China-Africa relations, alongside more positive and optimistic perspectives. These contradictory views will continue to be a source of ambivalence in African attitudes towards the Chinese, and given this contested terrain, there will continue to be an ample need for China to vigorously pursue its media initiatives and other soft diplomacy strategies as it expands in Africa.

Accurate evaluation of the valence of China’s influence in Africa, however, requires a long term perspective that understands both the Chinese and Africans as agents, actively involved in molding a new media environment that also acknowledges the positive aspects of China’s Africa engagement, including China’s role in building up African infrastructure (roads, airports, and seaports) as well as its direct aid contributions to African education and health care.\textsuperscript{54}

While China’s attempts to influence the African media are part of its soft power approach to creating a favorable public opinion environment for attaining its foreign policy objectives in Africa, the expanding scope of China’s activities on the African continent are increasingly becoming an inextricable part of development processes on the African continent. This reflects the significant change in the involvement of China with the world in general. China has short term, medium and long-term objectives in its involvement with other nations, and this is coming at a time of growing awareness of the interdependence of nations and unbridled competition for Africa’s material resources and burgeoning market. The direct connection between China’s growing strategic investment in Africa and its calculated strategy to position itself as a strong ally of Africa, in both African and world public is inescapable. This survey concludes that an ongoing empirical program of public opinion research is probably the best way to ascertain the effectiveness of China’s soft power media diplomacy in impacting the African media, shaping both public discourse and the practice of journalism and communications in Africa. Now may be the time to shift our media research agenda away from what China is doing in the African media, and focus instead on the new media scape that the Africans and the Chinese together are now creating. The South African Media and the New Geopolitics of Communication Research Project funded by the South Africa National Research Foundation represents an important step in that direction.\textsuperscript{55}

Notes

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