

How China seduces Africa

During the last decade, China has managed to considerably establish its influence in the world, including in Africa. Some analysts have focused on economic imperatives, particularly in the energy sector, to identify what conditions have facilitated this achievement.¹ Others have pointed to the absence of conditionality (democracy, human rights, good governance, etc.) in the Chinese approach towards Africa.² Finally, another group of authors claim that by increasing its presence in Africa, China has been trying to promote a 'Beijing consensus' (in opposition to the Washington consensus), relying on "the example of their own model, the strength of their economic position and their rigid defence of the Westphalian system of national sovereignty".³

Mamoudou Gazibo and Olivier Mbabia

Co-opt rather than coerce

In this paper we attempt to understand the reasons why China has become so influential in Africa in the past fifteen years. Our analysis is inspired by the paradigm of "soft power". Soft power refers to when a country tries to obtain desired outcomes in world politics indirectly, "because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it." It is a form of power that is based on the capacity to influence the international agenda in a way that shapes others' preferences (agenda-setting) and that co-opts others rather than coerces them.⁴

However, we need to adapt this concept to the context of Sino-African relations. Initially, J. Nye used the concept of soft power in opposition to the idea that the influence of the United States is declining.⁵ According to Nye, America was "bound to lead" because of the attractiveness of its culture, its political system and other economic and institutional comparative advantages. Although the paradigm of soft power was not conceptualized with reference to China, it is nonetheless helpful in understanding the Chinese approach towards Africa. China is attractive to Africa for different reasons: its powerful economic rise driven by non-western recipes, its insistence on development, its non-interference policies, and its smart and respectful way of interacting with African officials. China's attractiveness is also explained by the peculiarities of the African context, mainly the fact that many African regimes are, at best, pseudo-democratic and that after decades of western-oriented policies and pressure, Africans are desperately searching for new models of development.

In 2006, the Chinese leadership launched a new Africa policy with the publication of the *White Book*. According to this text, "China seeks to establish and to develop a new type of strategic partnership with Africa, characterised by equality and mutual confidence in political affairs; mutually beneficial cooperation in the economic realm; and the strengthening of exchanges in cultural affairs".⁶

Certainly, China's influence in Africa dates back far earlier; The People's Republic of China was involved in liberation wars in Africa and cooperation projects with Africa throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This involvement, however, did not always lead to success because of East-West rivalries and China-Soviet Union competition, which imposed many constraints for China on the African continent.⁷

What is different with China's influence in Africa today is its unprecedented scope. It is now felt either politically or economically in all 54 African countries including those (Burkina Faso, Gambia, Swaziland and Sao Tomé and Príncipe) that do not have diplomatic relations with Beijing. Naturally, this presence also creates problems.⁸ In several countries, anti-China demonstrations have been held, particularly in Zambia where anti-Chinese rhetoric was key to the victory of former opposition leader Michael Sata in the 2011 Presidential elections.⁹ Nonetheless, the attractiveness of the Chinese development model, or at least a general receptivity towards China, is undeniable in Africa. Its most important sign is the institutionalization of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). But in recent years, Africa has shown its interest in China in several ways: the passing of the Olympic flame in a festive atmosphere in Africa; donations offered by Africans to the disaster stricken regions of Wenchuan; and the inflexible

adherence to the "One China Principle", which refers to the recognition of Taiwan as a Chinese province. In this paper, we analyze three crucial elements that explain why African countries have responded to the Chinese call: culture, history and diplomacy.

The cultural factor

China's strategy with regards to culture is linked to public diplomacy, which is understood as "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies".¹⁰ Information, education and culture are all privileged in the Chinese strategy. Four out of the eight steps announced at the FOCAC conference in November 2009 in Egypt are directly linked to the education and the training of African professionals by the Chinese government. China plans to implement 100 joint scientific research pilot projects and accommodate 100 post-doctoral fellows in China; build 50 schools; train 1500 school headmasters and teachers and increase the number of Chinese stipends to 5500; send out 50 agrarian technical missions and train 2000 African agrarian technicians; and train 3000 nurses and doctors for Africa. The training of African elites in Chinese universities is even more important. In 2006, 3737 African students were accepted into Chinese universities; this constitutes a 40 percent increase from 2005.¹¹ Whereas the main factor for this change is the ongoing development of Sino-African relations, there are several other reasons that have influenced African students' interest in China, including a recognized improvement of the training received in China; the possibility of obtaining study stipends; the low cost of education and life in China; and finally, the ever-increasing international standing of the PRC.

African students in China now represent such a significant number that it is hard to miss them on the main Chinese campuses. African students who go to Beijing attend Chinese institutions, such as the *Beijing Language and Cultural University* (BLCU), the *Beijing Foreign Studies University* (BFSU) or even *Tsinghua*. These students overwhelmingly opt for scientific and technical programs. Shanghai hosts students registered in *Fudan University*, in *Shanghai International Studies University* (SISU) or in *Tongji University*. Other campuses also receive numerous Africans: Guangzhou, Chongqing, Wuhan, and Nankin. For most universities, however, proficiency in Mandarin is mandatory, as the Chinese know that a country's political and cultural influence is also transmitted through language.¹²

In addition to students, there is also the temporary presence of African professionals who come to China in the context of internships, or technical or military training. Groups of young African diplomats are selected every year to spend one month in China, during which time they are intensely immersed and exposed to the Chinese development model. There are also a number of African military personnel who follow training sessions and internships in telecommunications at the military bases of Xi'an and Nankin. Aviation officers returning to Africa from Xi'an confirm that China is now the country that offers the greatest number of stipends for African countries in certain domains.¹³ This increase in human and cultural interactions has led Chinese authorities to promote the presence of Confucius Institutes in Africa, the first of which was opened in 2005 in Nairobi, Kenya. These institutes are instruments through which Chinese authorities seek to officially promote cultural interactions between Chinese and Africans.

At the beginning of 2010, there were twenty-one Confucius Institutes and four Confucius Chinese classes throughout Africa. The institutes are located in South Africa, Benin, Botswana, Cameroun, Egypt, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe.¹⁴ With the universities of the African cities in which they are established, and in partnership with Chinese universities, these institutes promote Chinese language and culture and contribute to the PRC's cultural influence and its seductive power in Africa.

Convinced of the positive impact that cultural exchanges with Africa can have, China has encouraged more tourist and artistic encounters with Africa, such as the African Ballet in Beijing, martial arts demonstrations in Africa, and the commemoration of the Chinese New Year in the Confucius Institutes in Africa.

The increased presence of Africans in China has influenced the media sector as well. For instance, in September 2007, the *China Central Television* (CCTV) launched a French language channel targeted at francophone viewers. Before that, on 26 February 2006, *China Radio International* (CRI), based in Beijing, launched a station with a frequency in Nairobi, Kenya. This CRI radio station is the first to be operated in a foreign country and it broadcasts nineteen hours a day in English, Chinese and Swahili, thus spreading Chinese culture into Africa.

In the same vein, the increased presence of African nationals and the rise in official delegation visits represent a great opportunity for the Chinese to practice their hospitality. This non-material element is of capital importance in African culture.¹⁵ This hospitality is seen in *The Analects of Confucius*: "It is a pleasure to receive friends from far away places." However, the presence of Africans in China is not always unproblematic: several cases of racism against African have been noticed (see Shih's and Callahan's contributions in this volume).

Appealing to history to legitimize current relations

Chinese discourse unanimously situates the origins of the countries' contacts with Africa in a distant past. In fact, China can claim a long history of contacts with the African continent.¹⁶ Modern China has a series of sources, preserved by the different dynasties, that allow curious minds to retrace the links that China has forged with foreign peoples throughout history. In the eyes of Chinese leaders these historic texts justify maintaining such links today. For this reason, whenever Chinese talk about their relations with Africa, they always refer to the historical context, as this reinforces its present relationship.

Beijing claims that it wants to promote an "African memory", but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a "common past" (e.g., colonialism and racism) and "common values" (e.g., third-worldism and anti-hegemony). In his speech at the opening ceremony of the FOCAC Fourth Ministerial Conference at Sharm el-Sheikh in 2009, Chinese Premier Minister, Wen Jiabao, declared: "I would like to point out here that neither the Chinese presence in Africa, nor the support of the African countries to China are recent phenomena. Already in the 50s and 60s of the past century China and Africa have fought side by side in the battle against imperialism, colonialism and hegemony, and have advanced hand in hand on the rocky path of economic recovery."

Soft power refers to when a country tries to obtain desired outcomes in world politics indirectly, "because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it."



Left: Li Changchun, a member of the Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China Central Committee's Political Bureau dances with students from Nairobi University, in Nairobi, Kenya, April 20, 2011. (Photo: Xinhua/ Zhao Yingquan)

Right: Wang Gengnian, director-general of China Radio International (CRI) at the launching ceremony of CRI's first overseas FM radio station in Nairobi, Kenya, Feb. 27, 2006. [Xinhua Photo]



China's political elites are accustomed to emphasizing the historical foundations of the links with Africa and refer to themselves as members of the Third World community; China is "the biggest developing country in the world and very attached to peace and to development, [and] is pursuing a foreign policy of independence and peace." Similarly Africa is "the continent regrouping the greatest number of developing countries, [and] constitutes a weighty force in the realisation of peace and development throughout the world".¹⁷

However, China's self-identification as a Third World country is motivated by the pursuit of national interests. It has contributed to the accomplishment of fundamental national objectives that have remained the same over the different leadership periods: preserving security and national unity; and promoting China's place and role in the world.¹⁸

Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, China has often used its relationships with the Third World, particularly Africa, to better its own position vis-à-vis the United States or the Soviet Union.¹⁹ For example, Mao's theory of the Three Worlds and his opposition to American hegemony after the Cold War was aimed at creating coalitions that would be capable of limiting the superpower's influence. This approach has become even clearer since the 1990s. Scholars thus point out that the Chinese promotion of history is significant. History is being instrumentalized to resolve a foreign policy dilemma that is generally encountered by emerging powers.²⁰ In effect, far more than being a simple description of the historical foundations of the past, the use of history also serves to convince African leaders that despite China's emergence to the ranks of a world power, its commitment to the interests of developing countries will remain unwavering. This is unclear, however, as the history of great power politics shows us.

Diplomacy as a rallying ground

Yet another element of China's influence in Africa is seen in the implementation of a kind of diplomacy that African countries, generally marginalized in the international arena, are very sensitive towards. China promises to contribute to the promotion of South-South cooperation with a view to improving the position of developing countries on the international political and economic chessboard. Both partners also fight for the democratization of international relations and equity in the international order through the reform of international economic and political decision-making bodies (e.g., the WTO and the UN). China is an attentive observer of the institutional mechanisms of the UN and seems inclined to push for an institutional reform of the organization that will favour the entry of certain African countries. All African countries have rallied around a proposal, supported by Beijing, that asks for two permanent seats with veto rights and two additional non-permanent seats for Africa. It is possible that China has the intention of soliciting the support of her African allies in order to permanently prevent the entry of its Japanese rival into the Security Council; such an entry would diminish China's regional predominance in Asia.

Moreover, Chinese diplomacy in Africa forms but a part of a general strategy, which features multipolarity and non-interference as key principles. In fact, in the face of an uncontested American hegemony that could have slowed down China's emergence, Chinese leadership has been promoting the idea of a multipolar world in which all principal powers are balanced and cooperate with each other.²¹ In that spirit, Wenping He highlighted that in

its quest for great power status in the international system, China will need "Africa's political and moral support".²² Thus, the Chinese leadership is looking for durable alliances and intensified South-South cooperation as it wishes to secure support within international organizations, such as the High Commission of Human Rights in Geneva or the World Trade Organization. This explains the importance of African countries that have many times prevented the passing of sanctions against China for its human rights records. Africa is thus a "power" that China must keep seducing in order to preserve Chinese interests in these institutions.

In addition to the diplomatic symbolism of choosing Africa as the destination for their official foreign visits at the beginning of each year, Beijing also seems to try to position itself as a moral defender of the African people. In general, Africans are very receptive to Chinese policies, which are aimed at building a strategic partnership that is based on equality and mutual benefits. However, excessive optimism must be treated with caution. It is important to take into account all of the interests pursued by China. Overall, though, China's aims to build a sincere friendship, ensure mutual advantages on an equal footing, cooperate in solidarity and work towards a shared development,²³ look very attractive to African countries, long trapped in a subservient relationship with the Western powers.

Conclusion

After the Sino-African summit in Beijing in November 2006, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, declared that "China is a source of inspiration for all of us". Like other African leaders, he is satisfied with the promises made by the Chinese leadership. China can indeed pride itself on a number of economic, political and diplomatic successes in Africa; successes, which seem to be a result of the Chinese initiatives that were intended to charm and seduce Africa.

The attractiveness of China surpasses material considerations, such as aid and financial support, and forms part of Chinese 'soft power' in Africa. Africans identify more readily with China, which is seen as a benevolent mentor. This is partly due to its nature as a developing country. It is also because China has not put into practice the neoliberal recipes of the international financial institutions. In addition, it does not impose conditions on African states and it seems more willing than other overseas actors to contribute to the industrialization of Africa.

It is not our aim to judge the effectiveness of this 'Chinese Model', although through China's actions, we have seen a relative increase in the political, cultural and economic status of the African continent. Indeed, the Chinese presence in Africa is real and it plays a role in the way in which African countries now evaluate their relations with their other partners.²⁴ China is clearing a path for other countries that are trying to find their own avenues and means for development and trying to position themselves on the international stage while maintaining their independence and protecting their way of life and their political choices in a world dominated by the West.²⁵

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