

Harmonious racism



International observers evaluate the expanding Chinese presence in Africa according to their own countries' involvement in Africa in the past, as observed by a Chinese analyst who contends that "The charge of neocolonialism is in large part the West's anxiety over China's rising presence and influence in Africa rather than just a humanitarian concern."¹ Thus, China is being criticized for practicing a new form of colonialism,² presumably to replace the old European colonialism.

Chih-Yu Shih

THE CHARGE OF NEW COLONIALISM has two aspects, which are not completely compatible with each other. Hilary Clinton articulates one of them best when she criticizes that the Chinese invest in the African elite, which undermines good governance in Africa. In comparison, she alleges that the US invests in the people of Africa, which is for the long run. Yet, a second view of new colonialism actually suspects that there is a long-term planning behind China's Africa Policy.³ Colonialism in the past systematically exploited Africa; this fact has given rise to the convenient analysis that China is exploiting Africa in a similar, well-planned manner.

The notion of new colonialism implies, likely correctly, that the new colonialism mimics the old one.⁴ Hence, the so-called new colonialism is a sort of Anglicization of Chinese foreign policy. Grounded on the Anglicization angle, new Chinese colonialism should aim at China's economic gain (i.e., capitalism) and political influence, as well as strategic security (i.e., realism). Even critical reflections are Anglicized.⁵ Few, however, have detected the irony that the spirit of colonialism may have been lost in the mimicry. What critics of China fail to address are views and values arising out of a non-Christian historical trajectory. If China's new colonialism, so to speak, is the result of the Anglicization of China's Africa policy, another Sinicization aspect is worth exploring. One promising scholar specifically opines that Anglicization is an intrinsic component of Sinicization.⁶ If Anglicization is about making the world suitable for Anglo-Saxon capitalism and realism, and vice versa, Sinicization is the process that makes the world suitable for Chinese, through mutual learning and adaptation. Civilizational politics thus leads to recombination of cultural norm, practical preference, and institutional arrangement on all sides. Accordingly, there cannot be any easy assessment on expansion of China's presence in Africa, which is neither unilateral, nor teleological.

In this spirit, I argue in the present work that China's African policy is one of "harmonious racism." Officially, the call for peaceful co-existence of different political systems symbolizes China's normative foreign policy and constitutes China's soft power in the developing world in general, and in Africa in particular. Socially as well as culturally, however, the Chinese display a racist attitude toward the darker-skinned Africans,⁷ despite the fact that racism leads neither to policy discrimination practically, nor does racism constrain China from treating African nations as ideological, strategic, and global governance allies. On the one hand, China's African policy is characterized by classic realism, in that China does what most other major powers do in Africa. They seek economic opportunities in terms of resources, market, and labor.⁸ On the other hand,

Above:
Newly arrived
engineers from
China serving
with the United
Nations-African
Union Mission in
Darfur (UNAMID)
stand to attention
after arriving in
Nyala, South Darfur.
Courtesy of UN
Photo on Flickr.

China manifests a contrast in its pursuit of a harmonious world with due respect to cultural differences. As a result of China's preoccupation with harmony and aid, its concessions to African nations are made at the state level, even if racism influences practices from time to time at the individual and corporate levels. The rise of China as an advocate of harmony has caught the world's attention. Meanwhile, with the seeming Sinicization in Africa, the question on the kind of soft power needed by China to achieve its goal, without causing anxiety among its watchers, remains. The concern is more pronounced especially in the case of realists who do not believe a word about harmony.

Sinicization and realism

Foreign and Chinese observers regard 2006 as the benchmark of China's return to Africa, as China dubbed 2006 as the "Year of Africa."⁹ The fast-growing Chinese investment, trade, immigration, and aid witnessed in Africa testify to the expansion of Chinese influence in the continent. At the same time, African presence in China is continuously increasing for various purposes. By and large, the Chinese believe that China and Africa are in a win-win economic situation. In addition, China gains significant new sources of energy supply, for example, but continues to provide aid to needy African nations. Their positions in multilateral organizations are usually mutually attuned. Their distance from each other rules out territorial disputes that still poison contemporary international relations in Asia.¹⁰

Chinese enthusiasm with their opportunities in Africa is met with suspicion, if not antagonism, in some parts of the world.¹¹ The debate over the nature of the seeming Sinicization of Africa centers on the concerns over the China threat. In the United States, the critics conceive the threat both in terms of substitution for American supremacy and impediment to the spread of liberal democracy in Africa. For local African writers, the threat is perceived in the alleged exploitative consequences of Chinese investment environmentally, as well as economically. That said, governments of African nations predominantly perceive China in a positive light, despite localized incidents, which sometimes generate a negative attitude among Africans. China supports and enjoys the support of African nations on most global governance issues. Accordingly, the multiple and varied results of Sinicization disallow any easy assessment. Hence, there is the call for sophisticated analyses.¹²

Sinicization is, in part, Anglicization to the extent that the institution setting the growing Chinese presence in Africa represents and embraces market capitalism, which reproduces globalization and the liberalistic values undergirding it. The China threat, felt due to China's growing influence in Africa,

reinforces rather than undermines certain American values and, therefore, rests upon China's assimilation of globalization through its own manner of Anglicization, namely, marketization and privatization. Chinese corporations in Africa are driven by profitability, which parallels mercantilism in 19th century Europe and blinds them from any socialist spirit of sharing gains squarely with local labor. The environmental consequences of Chinese ventures similarly follow the practices of their Western predecessors, despite consistent reminders by the Chinese authorities to behave otherwise. Most noteworthy to Western observers is China's quest for energy. They believe that energy security concerns explain China's acquiescence on the suppression of human rights in Africa's failing states. In response to the accusation that China supports African dictators for the sake of acquiring energy, the Chinese official rebuttal points to Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, who in fact used to be "staunch allies of the West" and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, who was never China's ally but "a guest of many Western leaders."¹³ In any case, Sinicization in Africa insinuates China's Anglicized national interests, except that it is China, instead of the United States, that appears ready to take the lead in the coming decades.

Harmony

Another side of Sinicization that justifies the charge of a China threat to a certain degree is China's consistent rejection of global intervention on human rights violations. However, China's insistence on the principle of sovereign autonomy, which questions the legitimacy of intervention, has a much deeper cultural root than the critics are willing to take note.¹⁴ Long-held cultural values in China, embedded in Confucianism, Taoism, and even modern Maoism, share the wisdom of ruling by modeling, which is about preaching and learning. Intervention would be a sign of moral decay of the intervening party as it would signal the loss of its civilizational attraction. Much stronger early Chinese dynasties did not value intervention of any sort, either. Therefore, China's relative power weakness in recent decades cannot fully explain China's restraint for intervention.

Nonetheless, China intervenes in a peculiar way. Specifically, it intervenes privately through persuasion, instead of punitive sanctions. Thus, Chinese intervention is heavily subject to the personal faculty of its diplomats. Chinese diplomats mediate behind the scene for resolutions acceptable to both the global intervening forces and the local government. The purpose is by no means global governance. It is about avoiding choosing sides, hence harmony.¹⁵ Harmonious intervention ensures that the local government understands its own precarious situation under both external and internal pressures. Harmonious

China's civilizational soft power in Africa

intervention reassures African nations of China's continued support to the former's autonomy, and prepares a platform that could meet the requests made by global forces, at least half-way. In this manner, the local government could give in without giving recognition to the norms proclaimed by the global forces, and in the process reduce their legitimacy to execute intervention. China has painstakingly applied harmonious intervention in North Korea, Myanmar, and former Sudan.¹⁶ In former Sudan, for example, by stressing the increasing possibility of external intervention, Beijing could press Darfur to accept a relatively neutral alternative. After all, friendly China would be part of the peacekeeping to ensure its fair operation. Harsh provisions in the UN authorization on its Sudan mission were accordingly tabled at China's insistence.

For another recent example, honoring its non-intervention stance, China was the last to recognize the change in Libyan regime, despite the high cost of its slow response. Beijing refrained from voting on UN air strikes on Gaddafi's troops because, according to an official source, the wording of the resolution indicating the possibility of abuse did not warrant China's support, but the Arabic League's wish for UN intervention had China's respect.¹⁷ China's non-intervention philosophy carried it to the point of yielding the rights to exploiting Libyan oil to France, the concerns for which are suspected by critics to dominate China's African policy.

In effect, Sinicization that brings enhanced relationships between China and African nations, in particular, demonstrates a style of realism unheard of in Western international relations textbook.¹⁸ China is ready to pay for the preservation of autonomy of an African nation plagued by whatever institutional failure. In the case of pre-divided Sudan in 2008, for example, China adamantly opposed the proposed unilateral intervention without the prior consent of the local authorities.¹⁹ China did the opposition at the risk of provoking an anti-Beijing Olympic campaign that labeled the Olympics "the genocide games."²⁰ Furthermore, China has characteristically financed large projects in Africa that were not aimed at profitability since the 1960s. The most noteworthy of which was probably rails in Tanzania in the past, and more recently, the Conference Center for the African Union in Addis Ababa.

Cajoling harmony comprises a conventional wisdom in China's African policy long before the critics' suspicion that contemporary China's calculated interest in Africa favors dictators for the sake of convenience. In fact, Chinese Foreign Ministers tour Africa every year as no other counterparts outside the African continent have ever done. The Chinese style of realism carries the belief that outsiders cannot solve domestic conflicts, not to mention trying to solve the conflicts abiding by a pretentious universal standard of human rights. As long as a legal government is installed in the country, the Chinese principle of harmony is to cope with it within the scope of China's capacity. To do even slightly otherwise, the Chinese government relies heavily on the regional organizations to take the lead. Involvement of regional organizations was apparent in the case of Myanmar and the Association for Southeast Asian Nations, in the case of former Sudan and the African Union, and in the case of Libya and the Arab League.

Soft Power

The Chinese have their particular style of realism, making the Chinese approach to soft power dramatically incompatible with the American viewpoint. American realism draws others to voluntarily practice American values and adapt to American institutions regardless of their apparent indifference to the American government. Ironically, Chinese analysts largely abide by this discourse of soft power, though. As regards to Africa, the American definition of soft power is echoed by Chinese writers.²¹ In practice, nevertheless, Chinese soft power contrarily lies in the intellectual capacity to appreciate diversity in harmony. This concept has earned the appreciation of the late Lucien Pye, who noted Chinese tolerance for cognitive dissonance, as well as the mystery of Chinese civilizations pretending to be nation states.²² In other words, whereas the American version of soft power compels even its rivals to practice American values, the aim of Chinese soft power is to make its rivals believe that China does not contest any value, hence the rival never sees China as an adversary. If China's advocacy for non-intervention fails on any of the numerous global governance issues, developing countries all over the world could anticipate unrestrained application of liberalistic universalism coming their way shortly. As a result, the support for Chinese positions resonates accordingly with the quest for the national autonomy of most developing nations.

The rise of China attests to its peculiar style of harmonious diplomacy whenever China detects a hint of confrontation. Harmonious diplomacy emerges at times in the style of ambiguous disciplining such as small neighbor policy. Occasionally, smaller developing countries in the Asian region challenge China. In response, China resorts to an ambiguous disciplining action of hit-and-run that shows China's resolute strength but,

with concession in the immediate aftermath, does not appear to be happening. The South China Sea is where China practices indefinite and yet harmonious disciplining. Similarly, harmonious diplomacy may lead to a style of ambiguous balancing as regards global power policy. When global power appears to circulate in China, China raises a set of core national interests to sacrifice them in the short run in order to indicate its readiness to compromise. US arms sales to Taiwan is such a quintessential issue whereby China's opposition has been on and off. The purpose of ambiguous balancing is opposite to that of harmonious disciplining, namely, to compromise without the semblance of compromising. Both are in line with the aforementioned style of harmonious intervention whereby China intervenes on behalf of the global forces for the sake of restraining them from really intervening; China does this by persuading the target nation into symbolic compromise in the immediate run.²³

The other form of harmonious diplomacy is harmonious racism, which is relevant in Africa. For the Chinese, learning from the Chinese institution, practicing Chinese medicine, and receiving Chinese investment pose no pressure on Africa's extant value system or lifestyle. Note the statement that "We just tell them the good practices that we believe. Whether they will adopt them or not and how will they adopt them, it's up to them to decide. We have never asked African countries to follow China's model."²⁴ There is no such transformation of values to think about in an encounter with Western capitalism. However, the lack of motivation to move from civilizational learning to cultural assimilation sometimes hinders social mingling and reproduces racism in daily life. Liking China and disliking the Chinese way of life together could strangely compose a style of soft power that contrasts a different combination of liking the American way of life but disliking the United States. If China cares more about its public image in the global arena than making the world right, preaching specific civilizational devices without any cultural transformational implication should be the favored style.

Racism

Lofty policy concessions and aid, as well as normative support for autonomy, are not sufficient to soothe the Chinese racism toward Black people. In fact, almost 70% of respondents rank Africans lowest in social status in a survey.²⁵ One major impression among African students in China is racism. Not surprisingly, the increasing number of African workers in Canton leads to complaints by local residents, driven by racism.²⁶ In another occasion, one Chinese immigrant to Africa is quoted as saying that the reason she came to Africa is that in Europe, Yellow and Black people are equally low.²⁷ Larger corporations send only less competitive personnel to African posts as the more competitive ones avoid African assignments.²⁸

However, racism of this sort never translates to the public policy arena.²⁹ Chinese racism toward the Africans is a classic case of "old-fashioned racism", from the foreign policy point of view. In its old-fashioned sense, racism is an atavistic attitude functioning only to sustain the pretentiously higher self-image, presumably of a previous privileged class or group, but has no behavioral implication in daily interaction. To that extent, Chinese high officials have little difficulty in liking, befriending, or cooperating with their African counterparts. At a lower level, however, diplomats dispatched to Africa do not enjoy their social contacts as much. Going lower into the hierarchy, managers of Chinese national corporations in Africa may run their workplace with fear. In an extreme case in Zambia, two Chinese personnel took a shot at an approaching group of protesting workers and wounded 12 victims. Zambia's then opposition party ran an anti-China campaign and, after coming to power, detained the responsible managers.³⁰

Civilizational soft power

Racism is politically incorrect anywhere in the world, but in China's Africa policy, it ironically generates a lofty self-conception for the Chinese leaders to feel like a benefactor, who presumably cares and respects African cultures, as opposed to North American and Western European leaders who promote liberalization. Whereas China's fast growing investment in Africa carries the same realist logic of national interests as it does elsewhere in the world, the conscious provision of aid and privileges to African states likely characterizes China's African policy into a much longer and steady future. On account of the distance between China and Africa, China has no immediate stake in Africa. Such absence of immediate stake is the reason why Africa used to be China's moral theater of anti-imperialism, anti-hegemonism, Three Worlds Theory, and so on. For almost half a century, Africa has been fueling China's foreign policy morale in coping with the West in general, and the United States in particular.³¹ In the age of global governance where universal values and multi-culturalism compete, the Chinese civilization that treasures variety and modeling can generate new possibilities in Africa. Both harmony and racism are external to the realist logic of national interest,

but effective in combination with the calculated national interest. How these ways of thinking combine/recombine, impede, or bypass each other will have to be the choice of actual people at all levels.

Chih-yu Shih teaches cultural studies and political psychology at National Taiwan University, and is also a student of civilizational politics in East Asia and intellectual politics pertaining especially to Chinese studies. He is Editor-in-chief of Asian Ethnicity (cyshih@ntu.edu.tw).

Notes

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