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**Chinese Soft Power Diplomacy: A Case Study of China-Africa Relations**

**Sara Zafar1, Irfan Ahmed2**

1. M.Phil Scholar in Political Science, BZU, Multan. Email: sarazafaramir@gmail.com
2. M.Phil Scholar in Political Science, BZU, Multan. Email: irfaanullah112@gmail.com

**Abstract**

China is successfully increasing its influence throughout the globe through its soft power. Africa is also an important continent for China, as it possesses 30% of the world’s mineral reserves. China is using soft power and public diplomacy to establish its prominence in Africa. This study discusses how China is constructing and enhancing its soft power through cultural diplomacy in African countries. Furthermore, the research highlights that Chinese educational initiatives, such as scholarships and training programs, are being used as tools to build and strengthen China’s national interest perspective. The study also examines economic engagement, including trade, investments, aid, and infrastructure development, positioning African countries as supportive allies in the international community. Additionally, the article explains that the Chinese media presence on the African continent projects China’s soft image in the region and counters misinformation about China in Africa. Moreover, the study explores the challenges and limitations China faces in shaping soft power in the region.

**Introduction**

The relationship between China and Africa boasts a history that stretches back centuries, long before the formal diplomatic ties of the modern era. Medieval accounts highlight early interactions, such as the 14th-century journey of the renowned Moroccan scholar Ibn Battuta, who traversed parts of Africa and Asia, and the 14th-century visit of Somali scholar and explorer Sa'id of Mogadishu to China. The 15th century witnessed the grand Ming dynasty voyages of Chinese admiral Zheng He, whose fleet reached the eastern and southern coasts of Africa, showcasing Chinese strength and culture to the continent. These expeditions, authorized by the Yongle Emperor, are considered the first official contacts between the two regions, sowing the initial seeds for friendship through the exchange of gifts and the granting of titles to local rulers. Furthermore, evidence suggests even earlier connections, with trade relations, sometimes through intermediaries, dating as far back as the Roman era (202 BC - 220 AD), as noted by Ptolemy in Roman Egypt, who was aware of China via both the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean trade. A formal tribute mission from an unidentified East African kingdom arrived in China in 1071, during the Song Dynasty, further illustrating the historical interactions. The modern political and economic relationship between mainland China and the African continent commenced in the era of Mao Zedong, following the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese Civil War. This period was marked by China's support for various African liberation movements during the Cold War, aligning with its broader foreign policy of backing wars of national liberation and revolution as part of an international united front (Gin Ooi, 2004). In 1971, a significant moment of political solidarity occurred when 26 African nations played a crucial role in supporting the People's Republic of China to take over the seat from Taiwan in the United Nations. Mao Zedong himself expressed profound gratitude for this support, famously stating, "It is our African brothers who have carried us into the UN". This early political alignment laid the foundation for future cooperation. As China underwent domestic reforms and economic liberalization under Deng Xiaoping, the focus of its engagement with Africa saw a relative shift towards a more pragmatic approach, though political ties remained important. Relations intensified again under Jiang Zemin, partly influenced by the need for international political support following the Tiananmen Square events, setting the stage for a major expansion of the China-Africa relationship. The leadership of Hu Jintao witnessed a substantial increase in China's trade, aid, and investment in Africa, driven significantly by China's growing demand for African raw materials. This economic pivot marked a new phase in the relationship. Since Xi Jinping assumed leadership, the economic engagement initiated by Hu Jintao has continued, with an expansion of China's involvement in the security and political sectors, particularly through party-to-party cooperation. A landmark initiative of this era is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, featuring the ambitious goal of reinvigorating the ancient Silk Road trading routes, including those along the East African coast. This initiative has become a central framework for China's foreign direct investment in Africa, focusing on infrastructure development (Wang, 2024). The establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 stands as another critical milestone, institutionalizing the strategic relationship between China and African states and providing a platform for multilateral engagement every three years. FOCAC can be seen as a continuation of the spirit of the Bandung Conference held in Indonesia in 1955, emphasizing common prosperity, equality, and development for the developing world. Trade between China and Africa experienced a remarkable surge, increasing by 700% during the 1990s, and China has since become Africa's largest trading partner, with trade volumes reaching a record $282 billion in 2023. This deepening economic interdependence is marked by a significant increase in Chinese investments and infrastructural projects across the continent. China's "Going Out" strategy in 1999 played a crucial role in this economic expansion by encouraging Chinese companies to invest beyond national borders. While Chinese investment peaked around 2016, the overall economic engagement remains substantial. China often characterizes its financial support as mutually beneficial cooperation between developing countries, contrasting its approach with Western governments. More recent trends indicate an evolving dynamic, with China's private sector likely to take a leading role in future trade and investment in Africa, and new initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are expected to shape the economic relationship further. China has also become increasingly involved in Africa's efforts to control global clean energy supply chains, particularly in the mining sector. The relationship has progressed to a point where bilateral ties are being elevated to strategic levels, with a long-term vision of an "all-weather China-Africa community with a shared future". This vision includes a focus on personnel training, poverty reduction, employment, and promoting green development in Africa, alongside the provision of emergency food assistance and support for agricultural modernization. The trajectory of China-Africa relations reveals a pattern of increasing engagement driven by China's evolving strategic needs, from political solidarity to economic partnership and a growing interest in comprehensive influence. While African agency has played a role, particularly in the initial phases of seeking support against colonialism, China has largely initiated the significant shifts in the relationship's focus. The institutionalization of ties through FOCAC and the BRI underscores a sustained commitment to this partnership, aiming for mutual dependence and a shared future on the global stage (Taylor, 2010).

**Defining Soft Power in the Context of International Politics**

In the realm of international politics, "soft power" is defined as the ability of a nation to influence the behavior or thinking of other nations or actors through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercion or payment, which are characteristic of "hard power". “Smart” power comprises the astute synthesis and utilization of soft power and hard power characteristics. The efficacy of foreign policy needs a thoughtful and purposeful combination of all three forms of power.  The concept of soft power was initially suggested by Steven Lukes in his publication, Power: A Radical View, and by Jeffrey C. Isaac in his work, Beyond the Three Faces of Power: A Critique (Gideon Kimaiyo, 2023). These two scholars had formulated a novel type of power that, in contrast to traditional hard power, resided in a state's intangible assets. These intangible assets encompass culture, values, geography, cultural diversity, arts, political systems, science and technology, civil society, and policies. Likewise, Joseph Nye’s soft power involves shaping the preferences of others through appeal and attraction, utilizing a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies to achieve its goals. This approach contrasts sharply with hard power, which relies on military strength and economic sanctions to compel action. The essence of soft power lies in its convincing nature, fostering admiration and shared objectives that can cultivate long-term relationships and mutual benefits. Nations employ various mechanisms to cultivate soft power, including cultural diplomacy, which involves promoting a country's culture, arts, and values; public diplomacy, which aims to engage with foreign publics directly through communication and exchange; educational programs, offering opportunities for international students and scholars; and digital diplomacy, leveraging online platforms to connect with global audiences. Soft power has the potential to create a favorable environment for diplomatic relations by fostering mutual understanding, establishing networks of contacts, and gaining public support for diplomatic initiatives. While soft power is a potent tool, it is often more challenging to measure its impact compared to the tangible metrics of hard power. Its effectiveness is also highly dependent on the perceptions and values of the receiving audience, making it inherently contextual. It is important to note that soft power is not inherently benign and can be used for negative purposes; its effectiveness hinges on the credibility and attractiveness of a nation's resources. From a realist perspective, soft power can also be viewed as a strategic tool that provides advantages in international competition by shaping the motives, meanings, and rules that underlie actions. Key characteristics of soft power include its intangible nature, its reliance on attraction rather than coercion, and its potential for comprehensive and expansive influence. The mechanisms through which soft power operates are diverse, encompassing cultural exports, the promotion of political ideals, and the strategic use of foreign policies. The principles of soft power, emphasizing attraction and compelling, provide a crucial framework for understanding China's approach to its relations with Africa, particularly as it seeks to build influence without resorting to the overt coercion often associated with hard power. China's strategies in Africa often focus on projecting an image of a responsible and benevolent partner, leveraging its economic success and cultural heritage to foster goodwill and shape perceptions (Simić, 2024).

**Research Objectives:**

* To analyse the diverse soft power strategies that China employs in its interactions with African nations.
* To critically assess the effectiveness of Chinese strategies in shaping African perceptions.
* To identify the various challenges and limitations that China encounters in its pursuit of soft power diplomacy across the African continent.

**Methodology:**

The research employs a case study methodology, focusing on the multifaceted relationship between China and Africa. This approach is particularly suitable for examining complex, real-world phenomena within their specific contexts, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the intricacies of China's soft power diplomacy in Africa. The research primarily utilizes qualitative data analysis, drawing upon a wide range of sources, including academic literature, government and non-government documents, coupled with media reports. Where relevant, the report employs process tracing to delineate the causal pathways through which China's soft power initiatives are intended to influence African actors and outcomes. Furthermore, a comparative lens is applied where appropriate, considering the diverse responses and experiences of different African nations to China's soft power strategies. While acknowledging the inherent limitations of a case study, such as the potential for selection bias and the challenges of generalizing findings to all contexts, this methodology will allow for a rich and detailed examination of the specific dynamics at play in China-Africa relations. The research is grounded within the theoretical frameworks of Joseph Nye's soft power theory, dependency theory, and constructivism to provide a robust analytical foundation for understanding the complexities of power, influence, and international relations in this context.

**Joseph Nye’s Soft Power Theory: An Analytical Lens**

Joseph Nye's soft power theory posits that a nation's ability to influence others can stem not only from its military or economic might (hard power) but also from its cultural attractiveness, political ideals, and foreign policies. These three pillars culture, political values, and foreign policy form the core of a nation's soft power resources. Culture, in this context, encompasses the appealing aspects of a society, such as its arts, literature, music, and popular culture, which can generate admiration and a desire for emulation. Political values, when genuinely upheld both domestically and internationally, can also be a source of attraction, particularly if they resonate with universal ideals like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Finally, foreign policies that are perceived as legitimate and having moral authority in the eyes of others can enhance a nation's soft power. The application of this framework to China-Africa relations requires a nuanced understanding of how China utilizes these pillars. China actively promotes its rich cultural heritage through initiatives like Confucius Institutes, cultural exchange programs, and media exports, aiming to enhance its attractiveness in Africa. In terms of political values, China often emphasizes principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual benefit in its foreign policy towards Africa, which resonates with many African nations seeking to avoid external intervention. China's foreign policy, particularly its economic engagement through aid, investment, and infrastructure development under the BRI, also serves as a significant tool of its soft power, projecting an image of a reliable partner for development. The concept of "attraction" is central to Nye's theory, and in the China-Africa context, this attraction might be fostered through a combination of cultural appeal, shared historical experiences of anti-colonialism, and the tangible benefits of economic partnership.

Nye’s theory includes the concept of "smart power," recognizing that an effective foreign policy often requires a strategic blend of both hard and soft power resources. Nye identifies three components of soft power: an attractive culture, coherent political ideologies, and a nation's trust and ethical weight in world affairs. Nye defines soft power as a delicate strategy designed to engage and influence the target mass (Nye, 1990). China's approach in Africa seems to reflect this, as its significant economic power underpins many of its cultural and diplomatic initiatives. However, Nye's theory, rooted in the context of a liberal democratic system, faces critiques regarding its direct applicability to non-democratic regimes like China and in situations of asymmetrical power relations, such as those between China and some African nations. Therefore, while Nye's framework provides a valuable analytical lens, it is essential to consider its limitations and potential biases when examining China's soft power in Africa.

**Dependency Theory and its Relevance to Understanding Power Dynamics**

Dependency theory offers a critical perspective on global economic relations, arguing that the economic conditions of developing countries are shaped by their dependence on more developed nations, leading to a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment. Key tenets of this theory include the idea of core and periphery nations, where the core (developed countries) benefits at the expense of the periphery (developing countries), resulting in unequal exchange and structural dependency. This perspective emphasizes how historical processes, such as colonialism, have created and perpetuated these unequal power dynamics, with peripheral countries often relying on the export of raw materials and the import of finished goods from core countries. Dependency theory can be relevant in understanding the power dynamics between China and Africa, particularly concerning the economic aspects of their relationship. As China has become a major economic power and Africa's largest trading partner, questions arise about whether this relationship exhibits characteristics of dependency. Some scholars argue that Africa's reliance on China for investment and infrastructure, coupled with its export of raw materials, could create new forms of dependency, mirroring historical patterns of exploitation. Concerns have been raised about potential debt traps and the long-term implications of China's economic engagement for African sovereignty and development. However, the applicability of traditional dependency theory to the China-Africa context is debated. Some argue that the relationship represents a distinct form of South-South engagement, characterized by mutual benefit and a shared history of underdevelopment. Others point to the agency of African nations in shaping their interactions with China, suggesting a move towards greater interdependency rather than simple dependence. It is also important to acknowledge criticisms of dependency theory, which include its potential oversimplification of complex global relationships and its neglect of internal factors within developing countries (Amtenbrink, 2024).

**Constructivism:**

**Exploring the Role of Ideas, Identities, and Norms**

Constructivism, as a major theory in international relations, emphasizes the role of ideas, identities, and social interactions in shaping the international system. Unlike materialist theories that focus on power and economic interests, constructivism highlights the socially constructed nature of reality in international politics, arguing that norms, values, and shared understandings among actors play a crucial role in shaping state behavior and international outcomes. Key concepts in constructivism include the idea that identities and interests are not fixed but are shaped by social interactions and the prevailing norms within the international community. Applying constructivism to China-Africa relations can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of their engagement. The shared historical narrative of anti-colonialism and South-South solidarity has played a significant role in constructing a sense of affinity and mutual support between China and many African nations. China has actively sought to construct its identity as a responsible developing country and a reliable partner for Africa's development, emphasizing principles of non-interference and mutual benefit. This constructed identity influences how African nations perceive China and shapes the norms of their interactions. Furthermore, constructivism highlights the role of discourse and narratives in shaping international relations. China's strategic communication efforts, including its media engagement in Africa, aim to promote positive narratives about its involvement and foster a soft image. By focusing on shared identities and common interests, China attempts to build a strong foundation of soft power based on mutual understanding and cooperation (Bimantara, 2023).

**Chinese Soft Power Strategies in Africa: An In-Depth Analysis**

**Cultural Diplomacy:**

Promoting Language, Arts, and Values China's cultural diplomacy in Africa is a multifaceted strategy aimed at fostering goodwill, enhancing mutual understanding, and projecting a positive image of the nation. A key instrument in this endeavor is the proliferation of Confucius Institutes across the African continent. These institutes, established in partnership with local universities, serve as centers for teaching the Chinese language and promoting Chinese culture through various activities such as calligraphy classes, traditional music and dance performances, and cultural workshops. By offering accessible avenues for Africans to learn Mandarin and engage with Chinese culture, China aims to build bridges of understanding and create a more favorable perception of the country among the populace. Beyond language and cultural centers, China actively engages in cultural exchange programs, sending artistic troupes and performers to Africa and hosting African artists in China. These exchanges provide opportunities for direct interaction and appreciation of each other's cultural expressions, fostering a sense of connection and shared humanity. China also seeks to promote traditional Chinese values, such as harmony, respect for elders, and community, which it often highlights as being in alignment with certain African values. The establishment of Chinese cultural centers in various African countries further supports these efforts by providing dedicated spaces for cultural activities and exchanges. The increasing popularity of Chinese television dramas and films in Africa also contributes to the dissemination of Chinese culture and lifestyles, offering a glimpse into contemporary Chinese society. Recognizing the importance of linguistic exchange, Chinese universities have begun offering majors in African languages, while African countries are increasingly promoting the teaching of Mandarin in their own educational systems, signifying a growing mutual interest in linguistic and cultural understanding. China has also partnered with UNESCO in initiatives aimed at preserving African World Heritage sites, demonstrating a commitment to the continent's cultural heritage. The construction of cultural infrastructure, such as the Central African Cultural and Arts Center in Kinshasa, stands as a tangible symbol of China's investment in cultural relations with Africa. Through these diverse cultural initiatives, China endeavors to create a positive and engaging image, fostering a deeper appreciation for its culture and values among the African people (NGUYEN, 2024).

**Educational Initiatives:**

**Scholarships, Exchanges, and Training Programs**

China's emergence as a donor in education and its soft power in Africa get significant attention. The Chinese scholarships, along with training quotas for Africa, as pledged in the FOCAC, have escalated from 6,000 and 10,000 from 2004 to 2006 to 50,000 each during 2019–2021 (Ye, 2022). This trend is fueled by the generous scholarships and financial support offered by the Chinese government, making China an increasingly attractive destination for African students seeking higher education. These scholarships cover a wide range of academic disciplines, attracting students from across the African continent to experience Chinese academic life and culture firsthand. In addition to long-term academic programs, China also offers various short-term training programs tailored for African professionals and government officials. These programs aim to enhance skills and knowledge in areas relevant to Africa's development, fostering stronger ties between Chinese and African institutions and individuals. Partnerships between Chinese and African universities have also been established and strengthened, exemplified by initiatives like the 20+20 Cooperation Plan, which promotes collaboration between higher education institutions from both regions. Furthermore, China has supported the establishment of "Mandarin plus vocational skills" education centers in Africa, aligning language learning with practical skills development. Recognizing the importance of teacher capacity building, China has also been actively involved in providing training programs for African educators in fields such as STEM education, digital education, and vocational training. The ambitious China-Africa Universities 100 Cooperation Plan further underscores China's commitment to deepening partnerships in higher education. China's support extends to Pan African University (PAU), with a commitment to establish a PAU Institute of Engineering, demonstrating a focus on advancing technological education in Africa. Moreover, China provides specialized training programs for African politicians at leadership academies, such as the one established in Tanzania, aiming to cultivate relationships with future leaders. Many of these educational initiatives also incorporate mentorship programs in Chinese institutions, providing African participants with firsthand exposure to Chinese practices and governance. Through these comprehensive educational programs, China seeks to build long-term relationships, foster a positive perception among future African leaders and professionals, and contribute to the continent's human capital development (Zreik, 2024). The inaugural Confucius Institute in Ethiopia was founded at the Federal TEVT Institute in 2009, in response to the Ethiopian government's desire to address the need for Chinese language education, spurred by bilateral commercial relations. In 2013, the CI was established at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at AAU. Since that time, the Chinese language has become the most sought-after program in this department (Ye, 2022). The Chinese language has become a significant part of African education system, which indicates the success of Chinese soft power in Africa.

**Economic Engagement:**

**Aid, Investment, and Infrastructure Development as Soft Power Tools**

 China's economic engagement with Africa has become a cornerstone of its soft power diplomacy, establishing it as a dominant player in the continent's development landscape. China wields considerable economic influence as China is Africa's leading trading partner. Approximately 25% of the continent's exports, primarily consisting of minerals, fuels, and metals, are sent to China, while over 16% of imports originate from China. Moreover, China projects that its yearly trade volume may attain $300 billion by 2035.  China is the largest creditor on the continent. From 2006 to 2021, it pledged to invest $191 billion in African nations (Lawal, 2024). This influence is further amplified through the provision of substantial concessional loans, financial aid, and grants to African countries, often with fewer conditions compared to Western donors. China has also become a major source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa, channeling significant capital into crucial sectors such as infrastructure, mining, and energy. Recently, China has announced its willingness to eliminate the tariffs imposed on imports from all 53 African nations with which it maintains diplomatic ties. China has maintained its status as Africa's largest trading partner for the past 15 years, with the value of goods exported from Africa to the Asian nation reaching approximately $170 billion in 2023 (Zane, 2025). The most visible manifestation of China's economic soft power is the extensive infrastructure development it has financed and constructed across Africa, including railways, ports, roads, and power plants. These projects address critical infrastructure deficits in many African nations, contributing to economic growth and improved connectivity. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as the overarching framework for much of China's FDI in Africa, aiming to enhance connectivity and facilitate trade flows between the two regions. Additionally, China has established Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in various African countries to promote industrialization and attract further investment. China's willingness to invest in sectors and regions often deemed too risky by Western investors has positioned it as a key partner for many African nations seeking development. In line with its commitment to sustainable development, China has also expressed a focus on supporting "green growth engines" and assisting Africa in its transition to a green and low-carbon economy. Furthermore, China has actively worked to improve infrastructure connectivity across Africa to facilitate trade and economic integration within the framework of the BRI and FOCAC. While there has been a recent shift towards trade credit for regional exports and the promotion of private investments, China's overall economic commitment to Africa remains substantial. China has also demonstrated its soft power through debt relief efforts for African countries, further solidifying its image as a supportive partner. Through these multifaceted economic engagements, China projects an image of a reliable and committed partner in Africa's development, fostering goodwill and potentially influencing policy decisions in its favor (Carrai, 2025). A 2020 analysis by the Heritage Foundation, a think group based in Washington, DC, indicates that a minimum of 186 government buildings throughout Africa have been partially sponsored and constructed by China. The number has increased significantly over the past two decades as China's economy has strengthened, prompting Beijing to exercise its available soft power (Falk, 2022).

**Media and Communication Strategies:**

**Shaping Narratives and Perceptions**

China has significantly amplified its media and communication strategies in Africa as a crucial component of its soft power diplomacy, aiming to shape narratives and influence perceptions of its role on the continent. Chinese state media outlets, such as Xinhua News Agency and China Global Television Network (CGTN), have expanded their presence across Africa, establishing numerous bureaus and increasing their output in local languages. These media organizations actively engage in content sharing agreements and partnerships with African media outlets, providing news, features, and documentaries that often highlight positive aspects of China-Africa relations and China's contributions to African development. Furthermore, the state-owned Chinese media entities functioning in Africa are CRI, China Daily Africa Weekly, CGTN, Xinhua News Agency, and Beijing Review. The preeminent private media company in China, StarTimes, is interlinked with the government of China (Gideon Kimaiyo, 2023). These Chinese state-backed media serve as conduits for the dissemination of China's soft power and the development of a media narrative in Africa that is increasingly centered around Sino-centric perspectives. A key element of China's media strategy involves offering training programs and exchange visits for African journalists to China. These initiatives provide African journalists with opportunities to gain firsthand experience of China and to develop relationships with Chinese media professionals, potentially influencing their reporting on China-related issues. China also utilizes digital platforms and social media to disseminate its narratives and engage with African audiences online. A primary objective of China's media and communication efforts is to counter what it perceives as negative or biased portrayals of its involvement in Africa by Western media outlets. By presenting its own perspective and emphasizing the mutual benefits of the relationship, China seeks to shape a more favorable image among African publics. The Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation serves as a platform for fostering dialogue and collaboration between Chinese and African media professionals. China also actively promotes its own history and cultural perspectives through its media engagements, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the nation beyond its economic prowess. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Journalists Network further connect African journalists with their counterparts in China and other developing countries, fostering a shared narrative. To enhance its media reach, China often provides free content and equipment to African media houses, strengthening its presence in the African media landscape. Through these concerted media and communication strategies, China seeks to cultivate a positive image, promote its policies, and ultimately enhance its soft power influence across the African continent (Lu, 2025). Chinese soft power has grown inevitably through the media, as the “China Daily Africa Weekly” and broadcasts from China Radio International in Nairobi exemplify the notable influence of Chinese media within the African continent (Papachristou, 2021).

**Challenges to China’s Soft Power Diplomacy in Africa**

**Western Perspectives and Criticisms:**

Debt-Trap Diplomacy and Neo-colonialism Concerns China's growing influence in Africa has been met with considerable scrutiny and criticism from Western governments and media, and critics accuse Beijing of tempting African governments into large loan deals that they are unable to repay, allowing Beijing to grab profitable assets - an approach known as "debt diplomacy". Some countries, like Zambia, have defaulted on loans. Zambia had more than $18 billion in external debt by the end of 2022, with China, the country's largest bilateral creditor, owing at least 12% of that total (Lawal, 2024). John McCauley, associate professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland, asserts that one should not underestimate the potential of China's investment-driven diplomacy in Africa to transform relationships. Additionally noted that there have been changes in the stances of African nations toward issues such as Taiwan and the South China Sea dispute. Research reveals that this type of influence is zero-sum: as China's influence increases, the impact of the United States diminishes (Falk, 2022). Western powers often voice fears that China's intentions in Africa are predatory, aimed at creating a network of African states obligated to service their debts by offering China access to resources, trade opportunities, and locations for military bases. Allegations of neo-colonialism also frequently surface, with critics arguing that China's focus on extracting raw materials and its trade practices perpetuate an unequal economic relationship reminiscent of historical colonial exploitation. Concerns have also been raised about the quality and long-term sustainability of some Chinese-funded infrastructure projects, as well as the lack of transparency surrounding investment deals and loan agreements. Furthermore, China's practice of supporting authoritarian regimes in resource-rich countries has drawn criticism for potentially undermining democratic gains and human rights on the continent. The "China threat" narrative, prominent in some Western media outlets, further contributes to a perception of China's growing influence as a challenge to the existing international order. These Western perspectives and criticisms pose a significant challenge to China's soft power efforts in Africa by shaping international discourse and potentially influencing African public opinion, creating suspicion and wariness towards China's growing presence (Mendes, 2025).

**African Agency and Diverse Responses to Chinese Influence**

While China's soft power initiatives have been met with varying degrees of acceptance across Africa, it is crucial to recognize that African nations are not merely passive recipients of Chinese influence but active agents with their own motivations and responses. Many African nations view China as a willing partner in development, appreciating its infrastructure investments and its approach of non-interference in their internal affairs, which contrasts with the perceived conditionality of Western aid. There is a desire among some African leaders to learn from China's rapid industrialization and economic development model. Afrobarometer surveys have indicated generally positive views of China's economic and political influence in many African countries, suggesting that China's soft power strategies are resonating with a significant portion of the population. However, this reception is far from uniform. Growing awareness among African civil society and governments regarding the potential for debt burdens and the ambivalent consequences of Chinese investments indicates a more nuanced and cautious approach in some quarters. Instances of resentment towards the Chinese diaspora in Africa, sometimes fueled by cultural misunderstandings or local economic impacts, also present a challenge to China's soft power. Furthermore, African media professionals, while engaging with Chinese media through training and partnerships, sometimes push back on perceived attempts to influence their reporting, highlighting a desire to maintain journalistic independence. The level of agency demonstrated by African media organizations in response to Chinese media engagement varies depending on factors such as commercial capacity and the degree of press freedom in their respective countries. This diversity of responses underscores the complexity of China's soft power influence in Africa, where African nations actively navigate their relationships with China based on their own interests and perceptions (Mendes, 2025).

**Internal Challenges and Limitations of China’s Soft Power Approach**

Despite its significant investments and efforts, China's soft power diplomacy in Africa faces several internal challenges and limitations. One key challenge lies in the potential disconnect between state-led soft power initiatives and genuine people-to-people interactions. While grand cultural festivals and high-level exchanges are organized, fostering deep and authentic connections between ordinary Chinese and African citizens can be more elusive. The nature of China's political system, which is totalitarian and centrally orchestrated, can also hinder its ability to project a truly "lovable and respectable" image, as genuine soft power often thrives on the free flow of information and diverse voices. Suspicion surrounding Confucius Institutes as potential platforms for propaganda and censorship, while not as prevalent in Africa as in some other parts of the world, still exists and can limit their effectiveness in promoting genuine cultural exchange. Linguistic and cultural differences between Chinese and many African populations can also pose a barrier to deeper understanding and connection. The heavy hand of state control over media in China can undermine the credibility of its media outreach efforts in Africa, where audiences may perceive the information as biased or lacking in objectivity. In some African countries, particularly those with strong historical ties to the West, China faces an "intellectual disadvantage" as many elites are Western-educated and may identify more closely with Western culture and values. Furthermore, Chinese policymakers sometimes equate culture with soft power, potentially overlooking other crucial dimensions such as political ideals and foreign policy legitimacy in the eyes of African populations. These internal challenges and limitations suggest that while China has made strides in its soft power projection in Africa, there are still significant hurdles to overcome in achieving deep and lasting influence based on attraction and persuasion (Rapanyane, 2020).

**The Role of Competing Global Powers**

China's growing soft power influence in Africa operates within a dynamic landscape where other global powers, particularly the United States and the European Union, are also actively engaged. The United States and other Western powers view China's increasing presence and influence in Africa with considerable concern, perceiving it as a challenge to their strategic interests and the existing international order. In response, the US has sought to counter China's influence through its soft power campaigns, focusing on promoting democratic values, investing in development initiatives, and engaging in strategic partnerships with African nations. Africa has increasingly become a site of geopolitical competition, with major global powers vying for influence through various means, including economic, political, and cultural engagement. Notably, recent trends suggest a shifting balance in soft power influence, with some polls indicating that China's approval ratings in Africa have edged ahead of those of the United States, highlighting a potential decline in the US's soft power edge on the continent. The European Union is also seeking to strengthen its engagement with Africa, emphasizing a partnership based on equal footing and mutual interests. Additionally, other Asian nations, such as Japan, also engage in soft power diplomacy in Africa, contributing to a multipolar landscape of influence. This context of competing global powers underscores the challenges and complexities of China's soft power efforts in Africa, as its initiatives are constantly being compared and contrasted with those of other influential actors on the continent (El Baz, 2024).

**Findings:**

**Assessing the Impact and Effectiveness of China’s Soft Power in Africa**

China's soft power diplomacy in Africa has yielded mixed results, demonstrating successes in certain areas while facing limitations in others. China has effectively leveraged its economic engagement, particularly infrastructure development and investment, to project an image of a reliable partner in Africa's progress, which has been positively received by many African governments and populations. The shared historical narrative of South-South cooperation and anti-colonial solidarity has also fostered a sense of affinity between China and many African nations, contributing to a generally favourable view of China's role on the continent. Cultural exchange programs and educational initiatives, such as Confucius Institutes and scholarships, have increased understanding and people-to-people connections to some extent. However, China's soft power has also encountered resistance and limitations. Concerns about debt sustainability, the potential for neo-colonial exploitation, and the quality of some infrastructure projects have raised skepticism among certain segments of African society and within the international community. Cultural and linguistic barriers, as well as the top-down, state-driven nature of some initiatives, can also limit the depth of China's soft power influence. Moreover, African public perceptions of China are significantly influenced by local media narratives, indicating that China's direct media efforts are mediated through domestic interpretations. Notably, China's soft power appears to resonate more strongly in developing nations, like those in Africa, compared to the developed world, possibly due to shared developmental experiences and a different set of priorities. It is also important to distinguish between the generally positive views often held by African elites and the more nuanced and sometimes critical perspectives found among the broader public. Assessing the overall effectiveness of China's soft power in Africa is an evolving and complex endeavour, influenced by a multitude of factors and subject to ongoing shifts in the geopolitical landscape.

**Recommendations:**

**Towards a More Sustainable and Mutually Beneficial Relationship**

To enhance its soft power diplomacy in Africa and foster a more sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship, China should consider the following recommendations: increase transparency in its economic engagements, particularly regarding loans and investment projects, to alleviate concerns about debt sustainability and potential exploitation. Promote more genuine cultural exchange initiatives that encourage deeper people-to-people interactions and go beyond state-led programs, fostering a better understanding of diverse African cultures. Be more sensitive to local contexts, values, and concerns in the design and implementation of its soft power programs, tailoring initiatives to specific African needs and preferences. Support media independence in Africa and foster a more open information environment, which could enhance the credibility of its own media outreach efforts. Invest in long-term initiatives aimed at building stronger linguistic and cultural understanding between Chinese and African populations at the grassroots level. Engage more proactively with African civil society organizations and demonstrate a greater commitment to addressing concerns related to human rights and governance. For African nations, strategically engaging with China to maximize benefits involves developing clear and unified strategies at national and regional levels to articulate their interests and priorities in their dealings with China. Enhance financial transparency and accountability in all agreements and transactions with China, particularly in the extractive industries, to ensure equitable outcomes. Promote economic diversification to reduce over-reliance on Chinese investment and trade, fostering greater resilience and autonomy. Strengthen domestic institutions and governance frameworks to ensure that partnerships with China are mutually beneficial and align with national development goals. Foster an independent and vibrant media landscape, as well as an engaged civil society, to ensure diverse perspectives on the China-Africa relationship and promote accountability. Invest in education and skills development to enhance the capacity of African professionals and workers to effectively engage with Chinese partners and leverage technology transfer opportunities.

**Conclusion**

Chinese soft power diplomacy in Africa has emerged as a pivotal aspect of China's foreign policy, fostering strong diplomatic ties and economic cooperation through a multifaceted approach that encompasses economic, cultural, and political dimensions. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been instrumental in promoting infrastructure development, trade, and investment in Africa, while China's cultural diplomacy efforts, including educational exchanges, cultural festivals, and Confucius Institutes, have promoted mutual understanding and people-to-people ties between China and Africa. Despite concerns about debt sustainability, environmental impact, and labor practices, China's soft power diplomacy has been successful in achieving its objectives in Africa, contributing to Africa's economic growth and development, and fostering a sense of mutual understanding and cooperation. As the global landscape continues to evolve, China's soft power diplomacy in Africa will likely remain an important aspect of its international relations, offering valuable lessons for other countries seeking to enhance their diplomatic influence. To further enhance its soft power diplomacy, China should prioritize sustainability, debt sustainability, and cultural exchange, while respecting African agency and sovereignty. By adopting a more equitable and sustainable approach, China can promote a more mutually beneficial partnership with Africa, contributing to global peace, stability, and prosperity. Ultimately, China's soft power diplomacy in Africa serves as a model for effective international cooperation, highlighting the importance of mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation in achieving foreign policy objectives. As China continues to play a more prominent role in global affairs, its soft power diplomacy in Africa will be crucial in shaping its reputation as a responsible and benevolent global power. By leveraging its soft power diplomacy, China can promote a more positive and constructive image of itself, while contributing to the development and prosperity of Africa and the world at large. China's engagement with Africa demonstrates the potential for soft power diplomacy to drive economic growth, promote cultural understanding, and foster global cooperation, providing a valuable framework for other nations to follow in their own international relations endeavours. Through its soft power diplomacy, China can build lasting relationships with African nations, grounded in mutual respect, trust, and benefit, ultimately contributing to a more harmonious and prosperous world.

So, China's soft power diplomacy in Africa represents a complex and evolving phenomenon, deeply intertwined with the historical, economic, and political dynamics of the relationship. While China has achieved notable successes in projecting a positive image and building influence through its multifaceted soft power strategies, it also faces significant challenges arising from Western criticisms, diverse African responses, and its own internal limitations. The effectiveness of China's approach is contingent upon its ability to adapt to local contexts, address concerns about its economic practices, and foster genuine people-to-people connections. For African nations, strategically engaging with China while safeguarding their own interests will be crucial for ensuring a mutually beneficial and sustainable partnership in the years to come.

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