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Introduction

The voice of China in Africa: media, communication technologies and image-building

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In the last decade, much has been written about the new and rapidly evolving relationship between China and Africa. A great deal of the discourse has occurred in journalism, but contributions have also taken the form of academic books and articles. The relationship has also been the topic of numerous conferences – in the West, in China, and in Africa.

There are, of course, many reasons for interest in this issue. For one, there exists a fascination with the increasing economic and political importance of China in the global economy, in international politics, and in African affairs. China's rapid economic expansion in Africa, together with economic growth on the continent, has led to a new dynamism in Africa's relations with the outside world. This emergence is most clearly evident in the struggle for access to Africa's oil and other raw materials, but also in the strengthened political position and bargaining power of many African governments (and in the reduced influence of the West).¹

In December 2015, the fifth Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) took place in South Africa. It was also the second summit meeting, nine years following the first in 2006. There was an impressive presence of heads of state, including President Xi Jinping.² Following the first forum in Beijing in 2000, it has been a recurring event every third year, alternating between China and Africa. Each conference adopts a three-year action plan, putting forward a range of Chinese commitments to increasing trade volume, infrastructure development, scholarship provision, and more. The results of the 2015 meeting concentrate on four main areas: industrialization; security and military cooperation; environmental protection; media cooperation; and educational exchanges. The Forum is an event that highlights the different areas of joint Chinese and African interests, but it may also be interpreted as a symbol of China's importance for Africa.

Most of the focus on China and Africa has considered the economic aspects of the relationship and its implications for development in Africa. Less has been written on the political, cultural, ideological, and media aspects of this cooperation. In terms of politics, there have been some articles, books, and conferences focusing on public diplomacy in Africa, a phenomenon that often has been called “China's soft power initiatives”. The FOCAC Johannesburg action plan (2016–2018)³ is a good place to start when it comes to China's rationale for public diplomacy in Africa. The document contains one particularly relevant section related to cultural and media diplomacy in Africa. In chapter 5, the plan deals with “Cultural Cooperation and People-to-People Exchanges”, and subchapter 5.2,

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“Press and Media”, outlines general aspects of the cooperation in this area. In section 5.2.1, the document states that the implementation of the China–Africa Press Exchange Center Program will continue in order to facilitate training and exchange programs. It goes on to highlight China’s provision of training for 1000 African media practitioners per year. Many other aspects of this section imply a continuation of Beijing’s previous action plan from 2012.⁴ Here, the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) African headquarters in Nairobi was singled out with a special mention. As for cooperation in radio and television, both in 2012 and 2015, plans were outlined for regular exchange of films and TV programs. Of particular interest is the discussion of radio and TV digitalization, as well as training and technology support. This section underlines the central role of the Chinese company *StarTimes* in the migration from analogue to digital television in many African countries. Furthermore, the document mentions cooperation in film and TV production, both with regard to film festivals and other forms of exchange. Book publications are highlighted, particularly those related to specific development programs, such as health, agricultural technology, or culture and education. Finally, the action plan notes agreement that the Forum on China–Africa Media cooperation should be institutionalized as “an official sub-forum of FOCAC”.

From 2012 to 2015, China struggled to meet the program goals, but there is no doubt that much progress has been made in several areas. There has been extensive cooperation in the area of journalism exchange, and CCTV Africa is playing an increasingly important role in the African media landscape. As for the wide-ranging exchange programs for African and Chinese journalists, most visits seem to consist of African journalists going to China, rather than Chinese journalists visiting Africa. The majority of the African journalists have come from state broadcasters and government media. Nevertheless, reports indicate that the journalists come back with a far more positive image of China than they originally had. China has also announced major short-term training courses for Africans, as well as scholarships to study at Chinese universities and institutions of higher learning. In the 2013–2015 FOCAC action plan, China promised to bring 30,000 Africans to China for training (typically a two-week course) and to offer 18,000 scholarships for studies in China.⁵ There are a few scholarships in the media and communication sector, including some for media studies degrees.⁶ However, little is known about the impact of such capacity-building on individuals. Monetary and equipment donations have supplemented the scholarships for studies and training. A biased approach can be recognized even here, with most support being provided to state media.

The second, and by far the largest share, of Chinese resources to media and telecommunication have been channeled towards supporting Africa’s information infrastructure.⁷ 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. This influence also appears in efforts to play a role in the digital transition in broadcasting and in providing access to digital television through set top boxes. 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 (EXIM Bank) (providing guarantees and loans for the purchase of Chinese goods and services) and 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.

The final area where China has made inroads into the African media landscape is the expansion of its own media, including CCTV, China Radio International, Xinhua, and

China Daily.⁸ Through FOCAC, a range of interrelated, specific initiatives has been highlighted, including people-to-people exchanges and think-tank forums. Most important is the establishment of Confucius Institutes at universities throughout the continent. Initiatives like these can best be grouped under the rubric of “public diplomacy”. Within China, there is also much use of the term “soft power” to describe Chinese efforts to counter negative perceptions from the West.

In economic terms, Angola and South Africa are China’s most important partners. These two countries account for nearly half of the trade between China and Africa, and they receive the bulk of Chinese foreign direct investment to the continent. They are also home to a large proportion of Chinese people residing in Africa. Nonetheless, China media companies remain marginal players in both countries. In fact, South African investments in Chinese media are larger than the funds flowing into South African media from the Chinese. China is one of several actors (mainly through provision of equipment) in the development of infrastructure for telecommunications, but it is succeeding in expanding its market share as a supplier of mobile phones, tablets, and PCs. More importantly, the awareness of China in these two countries is, to an increasing extent, shaped by perceptions from below – by African experiences engaging with Chinese companies, workers, business people, and communities. Public sentiment and opinion, together with assertive advocacy, media, and civil society groups, make Chinese public diplomacy increasingly difficult in terms of high-level and formal engagements. Research on the coverage of China in African media tends to be quite varied. There have been positive reports about Chinese economic expansion, as well as a great deal of criticism regarding the attitude of Chinese entrepreneurs and workers in Africa. Issues include corruption and lack of transparency in contracting as well as environmental crime, such as poaching and illegal logging, among others.

Perhaps the most important element of the Chinese media presence in Africa is the establishment of CCTV’s African headquarters in Nairobi and its impressive coverage of African news and contemporary issues in daily broadcasts. While CCTV generally sticks to the role of being an instrument for state propaganda, its international arm, the CCTV NEWS (formally known as CCTV-9 or CCTV International), launched in 2000, defines itself as “China’s contribution to greater diversity and wider perspectives in the global information flow”.⁹ With a special focus on China, the channel also emphasizes events taking place in Asia, Africa, and all developing countries. Although CCTV Africa and CCTV America enjoy more editorial freedom than other CCTV international channels, the norm of conforming to the Party line might have stifled CCTV Africa’s capacity as a critical news medium, hence impinging upon its capacity as a tool for Chinese public diplomacy.¹⁰

China invests heavily in digital broadcasting in Africa. The Chinese company *StarTimes* has been offering digital television via set-top boxes and mobile television kits to clients in many African countries since 2008, when it opened its first subsidiary in Rwanda. The enterprise has since expanded greatly. It has been awarded contracts to migrate analogue to digital television in 12 countries, and it has served as an important provider of terrestrial digital broadcasting in other nations. According to its website, it is active in 23 African countries.¹¹ To a substantial degree, its ability to expand has been supported by favorable loans from the China Development Bank and the Chinese Export–Import Bank.

A central element in the discussion of China’s media and cultural relations with Africa has been implications for China’s power, both in Africa and around the world. Here again, “soft power” is an often-mentioned concept. Power in this context must be understood as combining ideological aspects with economic power: media and communication investments are very much about economic influence. This is clearly the case with the increasing strength of Chinese communication industries on the African continent. It is not just the

case for giants like Huawei and ZTE, but also for smaller mobile phone manufacturers like Techno and companies like *StarTimes* and others venturing into digital broadcasting. Telecommunications companies are the most significant success story of China's investments in the area of communications. Though important in Chinese image building, these success stories must be interpreted more as business accomplishments than public diplomacy achievements.

Chinese media try to foster particular perceptions about the country through highly sophisticated journalistic initiatives on CCTV's African services, the African edition of *China Daily*, and Radio China International. These initiatives must be understood as attempts to strengthen China's political and military power as a rival to other international players. In this context, it is significant to note that the Johannesburg FOCAC meeting emphasized "security cooperation" in chapter 6 of the action plan.

This issue of the *Chinese Journal of Communication (CJC)* is part of an attempt to provide preliminary answers to the many questions regarding China's "public diplomacy" or "soft power" initiatives. The answers are partly an outcome of the research project entitled, "The Voice of China in Africa" (<http://www.cmi.no/research/project/?1686=voice-of-china>), which is based at the Christian Michelsen Institute (CMI) in Bergen, Norway. The project involves researchers from China, Mozambique, Norway, and Uganda. The Norwegian Research Council funds the project, with additional support from Norwegian embassies for workshops in Kampala and Beijing. The aims of the project are as follows: to contextualize China's public diplomacy and soft power strategy in Africa; to investigate how Chinese telecommunication companies shape Africa's future in telecommunications, digital broadcasting, Internet provision, and mobile Internet markets; to analyze the role of cultural and journalistic promoters; and to assess China's nation branding project in Africa. This branding can take the form of public diplomacy, political value-sharing programs, and economic aid. In this context, it may help to establish how Chinese media perceive the engagement in Africa. Yet another goal involves evaluating how African societies perceive China's presence on the continent, as reflected in their media.

Through research articles and commentary in this special issue, we seek to provide answers to the following questions: What impact does Chinese media expansion have on Africa? How is China perceived in African media? How are African issues reported in Chinese media? What role does CCTV play?

In his article, "China's Soft Power and its Influence on Editorial Agendas in South Africa", Herman Wasserman takes his point of departure in South Africa's flux of private media investment both in and by China. This phenomenon is linked to the "comprehensive strategic partnership" established by the two countries in August 2010.¹² The study sheds light on the diversity of attitudes towards China among South African journalists. Herman Wasserman's interviews and content analysis verifies the presumption that China receives substantial coverage in South African media. More importantly, journalists hold a "cautiously optimistic" attitude towards China. Convinced by the bright prospect of economic benefits, journalists are concerned with how the relationship with China may play out in South African policy-making, as China's influence over South Africa's foreign policy has already become apparent. Wasserman observes that there is a recurrent theme of explicit criticism and rejection of the Chinese media model; however, this model is not yet seen as a threat. In his study, individuals display confidence in the capacity of South African media to resist external pressures, and they note that there might be positive outcomes resulting from increased exposure to Chinese media.

Another article dealing with the situation in South Africa is Yu-Shan Wu's commentary on "China's Media and Public Diplomacy Approach in Africa: Illustrations from South

Africa". Wu uses South Africa as a case to demonstrate the limits and potentials of China's public diplomacy engagement. She finds that China's media presence in South Africa appears to serve multiple purposes, ranging from serving as public diplomacy instruments to acting as a service to Chinese companies seeking investments. She also indicates that the manner in which China's media seek to influence target audiences is a haphazard process determined by a range of engagements.

Goretti Nassanga's and Sabiti Makara's article elaborates on Wasserman's study using Uganda as a case in point. The authors show that the attitude of Ugandan journalists and media is generally neutral or even in favor of China. After searching through 916 articles containing the term "China" or "Chinese" from two major newspapers, they distinguish between local sources/journalists and foreign sources/news agencies. They conclude that local sources perceive the China-Uganda relationship as beneficial for Uganda, while foreign sources portray it as beneficial for China. The findings highlight a concentration of negative image generation in relation to issues, such as the transparency of Chinese companies, especially in labor relations. Supplementing the content analysis with key informant interviews, Nassanga and Makara are able to identify the contribution of China's public diplomacy initiative. The initiative partly consists of inviting African journalists and information officials to China for seminars and tours. Those who have been invited on such trips developed a positive impression of China, especially about the country's progressive attitudes and fast-growing economy, bearing little resemblance to what is portrayed in the Western press. However, the authors also acknowledge the restrictions on foreign journalists who seek to conduct interviews in China.

Tokunbo Ojo provides a wider perspective on the coverage of China in Africa in his article, "Framing of Sino-Africa relationship in Diasporic/Pan-African News Magazines". His analysis is a study of the frames used by the two international African news magazines – *African Business* and *New African* – in their coverage of Sino-African relationships. First of all, he shows that these two magazines, published by the same company, have quite different approaches to portraying Chinese and African relations. The business journal is multifaceted and comprehensive in its coverage and sees the relationship from a more analytical perspective. By comparison, the *New African* is more ideological in its Africanist and South-South approach. The two magazines thus illustrate frames that are often found in the coverage of China in African news media, either critical but interested, or ideologically positive. The two magazines are international, with a wide circulation, both on the African continent and elsewhere. Hence, this article is of particular importance as it speaks to an audience that is exposed to international media.

Shi Anbing, a media professor from Tsinghua University, has coined the phrase "charm defensive"¹³ to describe Chinese media engagements in Africa that intend to offset the negative stereotyping about China generated by Western media. Whether the aim is to strengthen China's position or to ameliorate criticism, this strategy reflects the idea that public perception of Chinese media outlets in Africa is at the heart of evaluating the effectiveness of the media's "going out strategy". In their perception study, Zhang Yanqiu and Jane Muthoni Mwangi provide commentary on the public's perception of China's media engagement in Africa, taking Kenya as an example. The study is timely because there is little audience research in African media studies, and studies are scarce regarding how African audiences relate to Chinese media in Africa. Their study concludes that CCTV Africa and *China Daily's Africa Weekly* do contribute to a better understanding of China among Kenyans, notwithstanding the limited awareness of those media outlets among local people. Zhang and Mwangi corroborate the arguments of other authors in the special issue

that Chinese media have yet to address many challenges in adapting to the unique African media market.

One of the major aims of Chinese media expansion in general, and in Africa in particular, has been to establish an alternative to the “Western” news agenda in coverage of the African continent. In her article, “Mixed Messages, Partial Pictures? Discourses under Construction in CCTV’s *Africa Live*, Compared with the BBC”, Vivien Marsh examines 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. Marsh’s analysis reveals substantial differences in terms of geographical spread of news, topic coverage, sources, and correspondent deployments and roles. In comparison with earlier studies of CCTV Africa, Marsh finds fewer negative portrayals of the West and a reduced aversion to cultural or offbeat stories. The data indicate a content strategy designed to prioritize the Chinese agenda in Africa, rather than to promote an “Africa rising” narrative. It remains questionable whether CCTV’s Africa coverage rivals that of the BBC in terms of breadth of portrayal and visual vividness.

The analyses in the articles of this special issue question whether Chinese media initiatives in Africa contribute to China’s soft power. This question is particularly important, as the concept of soft power increasingly has come under criticism for being too facile a way of characterizing the many facets of China’s media, communication, and investment in Africa. Rather than positing China’s attempts at building its public image in Africa as an attempt to advance its “soft” instead of “hard” power, it might be useful to look at the many Chinese media and communication advances as part of a gamut of power strategies through which China is trying to match its economic strength with its potential cultural capital.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. For a general background, see Freeman (2015). See especially the chapter by Garth le Pere (2015).
2. For an analysis of the FOCAC process and history, see Taylor (2012).
3. http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/2015/focac_action_plan2016_2018.pdf (accessed 16 December 2015).
4. <http://www.focac.org/eng/zxxx/t954620.htm> (accessed 16 December 2015).
5. See Yuan (2015).
6. See also King (2013).
7. See also Gagliardone (2014).
8. See more on this issue in Wu (2012).
9. <http://english.cntv.cn/20100426/104481.shtml> (accessed 16 December 2015).
10. See Zhu (2012).
11. <http://en.startimes.com.cn/companyprofile/index.htm> (accessed 16 December 2015).
12. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China (2014).
13. See Shi (2015).

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