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The Influence of China's Global Soft Power Strategy on Its Relations with African Nations

Li Wei



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 Li Wei
Tsinghua University

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to analyze the influence of China's global soft power strategy on its relations with African nations

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: China's soft power strategy in Africa, through Confucius Institutes, media outlets, scholarships, and cultural festivals, has enhanced its image as a development partner and fostered diplomatic ties. However, challenges include limited rural reach, perceived cultural dominance, and dependency concerns. Effective engagement requires inclusivity, transparency, and alignment with African cultural and developmental contexts.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Soft Power Theory, Dependency Theory and Constructivist Theory in International Relations maybe used to anchor future studies on the influence of China's global soft power strategy on its relations with African nations. Prioritize mutual respect, transparency, and local empowerment, ensuring that soft power tools are not perceived as mechanisms for cultural domination as well as adapting its Confucius Institutes and cultural programs to African contexts by integrating local cultural elements.

Keywords: *China's Global Soft Power; Strategy; African Nations*

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INTRODUCTION

China's global soft power strategy has emerged as a cornerstone of its foreign relations, particularly in Africa, where the country seeks to position itself as a leading partner in development and diplomacy. Soft power, defined as the ability to attract and influence others through cultural, educational, and ideological means, has become a vital complement to China's economic investments in Africa. Initiatives such as Confucius Institutes, state-sponsored media like CGTN Africa, scholarship programs, and cultural exchanges aim to foster mutual understanding and enhance China's image across the continent. These efforts are strategically aligned with broader economic objectives, including trade deals, infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative, and enhanced bilateral agreements with African nations.

The United States has strengthened economic relations with African nations through initiatives like the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and recent bilateral trade agreements. AGOA, renewed in 2018, facilitated exports worth over \$12 billion annually from Africa to the U.S., focusing on sectors such as textiles and manufacturing. In 2022, U.S.-Kenya strategic trade talks outlined frameworks for digital economy and agricultural exports, boosting bilateral trade volume to over \$1 billion (Pay & Gitonga-Mutethia, 2021). Similarly, Japan's Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) underscores its focus on infrastructure and human resource development, with over \$20 billion invested between 2018 and 2022. These efforts underscore the interplay of diplomacy and economic interests in fostering mutual growth between developed economies and Africa.

Developing economies like India and China have cultivated significant economic ties with African nations, underscored by initiatives targeting mutual growth and infrastructure development. China, under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has established itself as Africa's largest trading partner. Between 2018 and 2022, China's trade with Africa grew from \$185 billion to \$254 billion, with key investments in energy, transportation, and mining (Afesorgbor, 2018). Its funding of major infrastructure projects, such as Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam and Djibouti's Port Expansion, highlights its strategic focus.

India, Africa's third-largest trading partner, has reinforced its ties through the India-Africa Forum Summit and trade volumes reaching \$60 billion in 2022. This trade largely involves crude oil imports from Nigeria and Angola and exports of pharmaceuticals, vehicles, and machinery. Additionally, India's Line of Credit schemes have supported over \$12 billion worth of development projects in Africa, including agriculture, healthcare, and renewable energy (Cherono, 2022). Brazil, as part of South-South Cooperation, has focused on agricultural technology transfer, exemplified by its partnership with Mozambique for sugarcane and ethanol production. These examples reflect a developmental diplomacy model emphasizing mutual benefits, sustainability, and long-term partnership.

Turkey has emerged as a key partner for African nations. Through its "Opening to Africa Policy," Turkey increased its diplomatic presence from 12 embassies in 2002 to 44 in 2022, complementing a trade volume that surged from \$5 billion in 2008 to \$30 billion in 2022. Investments focus on construction, textiles, and manufacturing, with Turkish Airlines expanding connectivity across the continent (Okeke, Odigbo & Eze, 2021). Furthermore, Turkey's emphasis on soft diplomacy includes scholarship programs for African students and humanitarian assistance in conflict-affected regions like Somalia.

Indonesia has also strengthened ties with Africa, leveraging South-South Cooperation frameworks and focusing on trade, investment, and cultural exchange (Indonesia-Africa Forum Report, 2021). Trade between Indonesia and Africa reached \$13 billion in 2021, with an emphasis on palm oil, coal, and processed goods. Bilateral initiatives like the Indonesia-Africa Forum aim to create new opportunities for trade and investment, particularly in energy and infrastructure. Mexico, though less prominent, engages Africa through limited trade and technical cooperation programs, focusing on areas like renewable energy and agricultural development.

South Korea has intensified its diplomatic and economic ties with Africa, focusing on technology, energy, and human capital development. The Korea-Africa Economic Cooperation (KOAFEC) initiative has facilitated over \$10 billion in development projects between 2018 and 2023. South Korea's investments prioritize renewable energy and smart agriculture, with flagship projects like solar energy plants in Rwanda and healthcare technology partnerships in Ethiopia. Trade volumes reached \$25 billion in 2022, reflecting steady growth in electronics, machinery, and medical exports to African markets (Afesorgbor, 2018).

Saudi Arabia, leveraging its Vision 2030 framework, has increased economic cooperation with Africa, particularly in the energy and agricultural sectors. The Saudi Fund for Development has disbursed over \$5 billion in grants and loans to finance projects in water, education, and health across Sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, Saudi Aramco has expanded its oil and gas partnerships, ensuring energy security for itself while supporting African economies. The Arab-Africa Economic Forum underscores this strategy, fostering partnerships that advance infrastructure and trade connectivity (Arab-Africa Economic Forum (2022).)

United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as a key player, establishing itself as a trade hub for African goods and services. UAE-Africa trade reached \$50 billion in 2022, with Dubai serving as a gateway for African products into global markets. Investments in logistics infrastructure, such as ports in Djibouti and Senegal, have enhanced Africa's integration into global supply chains. The UAE's partnerships also extend to renewable energy, exemplified by the construction of solar power facilities in West Africa, aiming to alleviate energy deficits while promoting sustainability (UAE Ministry of Economy, 2022).

South Africa has become a focal point for economic partnerships with developed and developing economies. Under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), South Africa exported goods worth \$2.3 billion to the United States in 2021, including automotive and agricultural products (Cook, 2020). South Africa's bilateral agreements with China have fostered investments in energy and mining, exemplified by the \$2.5 billion loan for Eskom, the state energy company. Trade with India has also flourished, with imports of pharmaceuticals and technology supporting local healthcare and industrial growth.

Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, has cultivated strong ties with India and China. Bilateral trade between Nigeria and India reached \$13 billion in 2022, driven by crude oil exports and technology imports (Cherono, 2022). China's engagement includes over \$10 billion in infrastructure projects, such as railways and telecommunications. The Dangote Refinery, funded partly by foreign partnerships, illustrates Nigeria's focus on self-sufficiency while leveraging international expertise.

Ethiopia has been a key beneficiary of China's Belt and Road Initiative, with investments exceeding \$4 billion in railway infrastructure like the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway. Ethiopia

has also secured favorable terms under Turkey's investment strategies, receiving support for industrial parks that bolster textile exports. The UAE's funding of renewable energy projects, including a \$100 million solar power initiative, highlights a shift toward sustainable development (Afesorgbor, 2018).

Kenya has emerged as a strategic partner in East Africa, particularly through its trade relationships with the U.S. and China. U.S.-Kenya trade reached \$1 billion in 2022, with a focus on digital and agricultural sectors (Pay & Gitonga-Mutethia, 2021). China's investments in Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway and the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport (LAPSSET) corridor emphasize its role in connecting East Africa to global markets.

The impact of regional integration versus bilateral diplomacy on bilateral trade. Research Handbook on Economic Diplomacy. Retrieved from Elgar Online Within Sub-Saharan Africa, bilateral agreements reflect efforts to integrate into global trade systems while addressing local challenges. The U.S. and South Africa, under AGOA, facilitated a \$2.3 billion trade in 2021, focusing on automotive and agro-processing industries (Cook, 2020). Meanwhile, China's focus on energy infrastructure, including the \$4 billion Mombasa-Nairobi railway, highlights transformative projects in the region. Nigeria's partnerships with India resulted in the \$13 billion trade in crude oil and technology in 2022. The UK's post-Brexit trade strategies have also targeted Sub-Saharan markets, emphasizing sustainable investments. Such partnerships underscore the blend of diplomacy and economic interests within these strategic engagements.

China's global soft power strategy is characterized by cultural diplomacy, media influence, educational programs, and cultural exchange initiatives. Its Confucius Institutes, operational in over 50 African countries, promote Chinese language and culture, strengthening diplomatic ties through education. Media influence is evident through outlets like CGTN Africa, which seeks to portray China's role positively in Africa and counter Western narratives (Iftikhar & Hanif, 2023). Cultural exchanges, such as the China-Africa Cultural Cooperation Forum, foster people-to-people connections and enhance China's image. These initiatives link directly to economic relations, as fostering goodwill and understanding aids in the seamless execution of trade deals and infrastructure projects funded by Chinese entities (Li & Rønning, 2018).

China's soft power complements its economic diplomacy by cultivating trust and cultural alignment, which is vital for long-term partnerships. For instance, scholarships for African students under China-Africa Cooperation enhance human resource development while creating future trade and diplomatic allies. Similarly, media narratives emphasizing shared development goals align with China's infrastructure investments like the Belt and Road Initiative. These strategies reinforce China's positioning as a partner of choice in Africa, ensuring acceptance of its economic footprint while promoting mutual growth (Wasserman & Mano, 2016). By intertwining cultural, educational, and media outreach with economic goals, China consolidates its influence in Africa.

Problem Statement

The rise of China's global soft power strategy has significantly influenced its relations with African nations, yet this phenomenon raises critical questions about its long-term impact on Africa's sovereignty, development priorities, and socio-cultural identity. While initiatives such as Confucius Institutes, cultural exchanges, and state-owned media like CGTN Africa aim to project a positive image of China, they have also sparked debates about their role in shaping African perceptions and narratives (Iftikhar & Hanif, 2023). Critics argue that these initiatives

may promote dependency on China's economic model, potentially undermining local cultural and institutional frameworks (Li & Rønning, 2018). Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence on whether China's soft power fosters genuine mutual benefits or primarily serves its geopolitical and economic interests (Wasserman & Mano, 2016). Addressing these concerns is critical for understanding how China's soft power strategies align with its broader diplomatic and economic objectives in Africa.

Theoretical Review

Soft Power Theory

Originated by Joseph Nye, the soft power theory emphasizes the ability of a country to shape preferences and influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. This theory highlights the role of culture, political values, and foreign policies in building influence (Nye, 2004). It is directly relevant to China's strategy of using Confucius Institutes, media like CGTN Africa, and cultural exchanges to create a favorable image and align African nations with its interests. The theory provides a framework for analyzing whether these soft power tools foster genuine partnerships or primarily serve China's geopolitical ambitions (Iftikhar & Hanif, 2023).

Dependency Theory

Developed by scholars like Raúl Prebisch, dependency theory suggests that relationships between developed and developing nations often lead to dependency, where the former dominate the latter economically and politically. In the context of China-Africa relations, this theory can explore whether China's soft power initiatives, tied to economic investments, promote dependency that may undermine Africa's sovereignty and self-reliance. It is particularly relevant for assessing the long-term implications of China's media influence and cultural diplomacy on Africa's socio-political development (Li & Rønning, 2018).

Constructivist Theory in International Relations

Constructivism, advocated by Alexander Wendt, emphasizes the role of ideas, beliefs, and identities in shaping international relations. This theory is suitable for analyzing how China's cultural and educational diplomacy impacts African perceptions of identity and partnership with China. By shaping narratives and fostering shared values through media and cultural exchanges, China constructs a favorable image that influences its diplomatic and economic relations with African nations (Wasserman & Mano, 2016).

Empirical Review

Iftikhar and Hanif (2023) explored China's cultural diplomacy in Africa, particularly through Confucius Institutes, which promote Chinese language and cultural programs. Using surveys and interviews with African students and educators, the study highlighted the institutes' role in fostering mutual understanding and enhancing China's image. However, the study revealed concerns over marginalizing local cultures and presenting a one-sided narrative that favored Chinese values. Respondents from rural areas noted the absence of such initiatives, limiting accessibility and inclusivity. The authors argued that China's soft power strategy could be more effective by integrating African cultural contexts and values into its programming. They recommended expanding Confucius Institutes into rural areas and leveraging digital tools to improve outreach. Furthermore, partnerships with local cultural organizations were proposed to enhance credibility and sustainability. The study emphasized that cultural diplomacy must

be reciprocal, respecting local traditions while fostering global exchange. Overall, it concluded that while China's soft power efforts were impactful, a more inclusive approach was essential for long-term success.

Li and Rønning (2018) examined the influence of Chinese state-run media, such as CGTN Africa, in shaping perceptions of China in Africa. Using content analysis, the study revealed that Chinese media strategically portrays China's investments in Africa as mutually beneficial, with a focus on development and partnership. Interviews with African journalists highlighted mixed opinions, with some appreciating the alternative narrative to Western media while others criticized the lack of critical coverage. The authors found that CGTN's focus on economic partnerships, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, often overshadowed local concerns and perspectives. They recommended fostering greater inclusivity by featuring African voices and stories alongside China's achievements. Training programs for African journalists within Chinese media outlets were proposed to enhance professionalism and collaboration. Additionally, the study emphasized the need for transparent reporting to counteract skepticism about media biases. The findings suggest that while Chinese media effectively enhances China's soft power, addressing credibility and transparency issues would ensure sustainable influence.

Wasserman and Mano (2016) investigated how China-Africa media partnerships influence perceptions of China among African audiences. Through interviews and focus groups with African journalists and media professionals, the study revealed that China's developmental narratives appealed to many but raised concerns about editorial independence. Chinese media emphasized infrastructure projects and economic growth while minimizing critical views. Respondents highlighted the need for more balanced reporting to build trust and credibility. Wasserman and Mano suggested that Chinese media invest in joint ventures with African news organizations to include diverse perspectives. Expanding training programs for African journalists in China was recommended to improve skill-sharing and mutual understanding. The study also noted the limited reach of Chinese media in rural African areas and suggested a more decentralized approach to programming. Ultimately, the authors argued that enhancing inclusivity and transparency would strengthen China's media-based soft power strategies.

Odoom and Owusu-Akyeaw (2020) analyzed the effectiveness of Confucius Institutes in Ghana as tools for cultural diplomacy. Their mixed-methods study included interviews with students, educators, and policymakers. Findings indicated that Confucius Institutes played a significant role in promoting Chinese language and culture, particularly in urban centers. However, the study found limited engagement with rural areas, which reduced the overall impact of the initiatives. Respondents noted that the programs often emphasized Chinese values without adequately addressing Ghanaian cultural contexts. The authors recommended integrating African cultural elements into the curriculum to foster mutual respect and understanding. Expanding digital learning platforms was also proposed to improve access for underserved communities. Additionally, partnerships with local universities were highlighted as a way to legitimize the initiatives. The study concluded that while Confucius Institutes strengthened China-Ghana relations, a more inclusive and context-sensitive approach would enhance their effectiveness.

Yoon and Kwak (2019) examined China's scholarship programs for African students as a soft power tool to strengthen diplomatic relations. Using a survey-based methodology, the study analyzed the experiences of African students who received scholarships to study in China.

Findings revealed that these programs enhanced educational opportunities and fostered goodwill toward China. However, some participants expressed concerns about cultural adjustment and dependency on Chinese institutions. The authors recommended diversifying scholarship fields and offering joint programs with African universities to reduce dependency. Additionally, they proposed enhancing mentorship programs to support students in adapting to Chinese cultural and academic environments. The study emphasized that while scholarships are a valuable soft power strategy, addressing structural and cultural challenges is crucial for maximizing their impact.

Zhao and Cheng (2021) explored the role of cultural festivals in promoting China's soft power in Africa. Using ethnographic research and participant observation, the study found that festivals, such as Chinese New Year celebrations, effectively strengthened interpersonal relationships and cultural appreciation. However, these events were often limited to urban centers, reducing their reach to rural populations. Respondents noted that the festivals highlighted Chinese traditions without adequately incorporating African cultural elements. The authors recommended adopting a more inclusive approach by featuring African-Chinese cultural collaborations. Expanding these events to rural areas and less-connected regions was also proposed. The study concluded that while festivals were successful in enhancing China's image, a more geographically inclusive strategy would ensure broader engagement.

Song and Wang (2022) conducted a case study on China's infrastructure diplomacy in Kenya, focusing on the Standard Gauge Railway project. The study used interviews with policymakers, community leaders, and local residents to assess the railway's impact. Findings showed that the project improved public opinion of China by demonstrating its commitment to African development. However, respondents noted a lack of community engagement during the project's planning and implementation phases. The authors recommended involving local stakeholders in decision-making processes to enhance transparency and trust. They also suggested that China adopt more community-driven approaches in its infrastructure projects to maximize social benefits. The study highlighted the dual role of infrastructure as an economic initiative and a soft power tool for strengthening diplomatic ties.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Gaps: The studies collectively highlight China's success in promoting its soft power through cultural diplomacy, media, scholarships, and infrastructure. However, gaps exist in addressing the reciprocal dynamics of cultural exchange. For instance, Iftikhar and Hanif (2023) and Odoom and Owusu-Akyeaw (2020) emphasize the need for integrating African cultural elements into Chinese programs to foster mutual respect. Yet, little attention is given to how these exchanges influence China's domestic perceptions of Africa or shape bilateral relations beyond cultural promotion. Similarly, Yoon and Kwak (2019) point out dependency

issues in scholarship programs but do not explore how these dependencies affect long-term diplomatic strategies. There is also limited exploration of the interplay between China's soft power tools, such as media and infrastructure diplomacy, as highlighted by Song and Wang (2022). Understanding these interdependencies could provide a holistic perspective on the coherence of China's soft power strategy.

Contextual Gaps

The studies predominantly focus on urban-centric programs, with limited engagement in rural contexts. For example, Zhao and Cheng (2021) and Odoom and Owusu-Akyeaw (2020) identify significant rural-urban disparities in access to cultural festivals and Confucius Institutes, respectively. This highlights a lack of inclusivity in China's soft power initiatives. Wasserman and Mano (2016) similarly identify a limited rural reach of Chinese media. These gaps indicate a need for broader contextual adaptability in soft power strategies, particularly in targeting underrepresented rural communities. Additionally, concerns about the unilateral narratives promoted by Chinese media and cultural initiatives (Li & Rønning, 2018; Wasserman & Mano, 2016) suggest that more context-sensitive and locally driven approaches are needed to balance influence and respect for local identities.

Geographical Gaps

The research heavily concentrates on specific African countries such as Ghana, Kenya, and a few other urban centers, leaving large parts of the continent unexplored. For instance, Song and Wang (2022) focus on Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, providing valuable insights into infrastructure diplomacy but overlooking similar projects in other regions. Similarly, Yoon and Kwak (2019) highlight scholarship recipients from a limited sample of African nations, missing broader geographic representation. This geographical skew suggests a need for studies that encompass diverse African nations, including less prominent partners in China's soft power outreach. Expanding research into regions like Francophone Africa or rural populations could provide a more comprehensive understanding of China's influence across the continent.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

China's global soft power strategy has become a pivotal element of its relations with African nations, blending cultural diplomacy, media influence, educational exchanges, and infrastructure initiatives to foster mutual engagement. These efforts have strengthened China's image as a development partner while creating pathways for deeper economic and diplomatic ties. However, the strategy is not without challenges, including criticisms of cultural dominance, limited inclusivity in rural areas, and dependency concerns arising from scholarship programs and infrastructure projects. While tools like Confucius Institutes, media outlets such as CGTN Africa, and cultural festivals have enhanced China's appeal, gaps remain in addressing local African identities, promoting balanced narratives, and ensuring broader geographic outreach.

To achieve sustainable and equitable relations, China's soft power efforts must evolve to prioritize inclusivity, transparency, and reciprocity. Integrating African cultural elements into initiatives, engaging rural and underrepresented populations, and fostering mutual learning can strengthen the foundations of these partnerships. As Africa continues to play a strategic role in global geopolitics, China's ability to align its soft power objectives with the diverse needs and

aspirations of its African counterparts will determine the long-term success of these relations. Ultimately, refining these strategies will not only enhance China's influence but also contribute to more balanced and mutually beneficial engagements between China and African nations

Recommendations

Theory

Existing theories on soft power, such as Nye's framework, focus on unilateral influence. There is a need to expand these theories to emphasize reciprocity, where cultural diplomacy becomes a two-way process. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between Chinese and African cultural exchanges, allowing scholars to explore the mutual influence of soft power strategies. Theoretical models should consider how soft power tools may foster dependencies while simultaneously shaping shared identities. Incorporating insights from dependency theory and constructivism can offer nuanced analyses of how educational exchanges, media, and cultural diplomacy shape long-term relationships.

Practice

China should prioritize adapting its Confucius Institutes and cultural programs to African contexts by integrating local cultural elements. For example, co-developing curricula with African educators and featuring African-Chinese cultural collaborations in festivals would enhance inclusivity and respect for local traditions. Many soft power initiatives remain urban-centric, limiting their impact. Expanding programs to rural areas using digital platforms and partnerships with local organizations can ensure broader access. This would foster goodwill among underrepresented populations and enhance the credibility of China's efforts. In projects like Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, China should involve local stakeholders during planning and implementation stages. This would address criticisms of exclusivity and ensure that the projects align with local needs, strengthening community trust and the overall impact of soft power efforts.

Policy

China and African nations should co-develop policy frameworks that govern cultural diplomacy. These policies should prioritize mutual respect, transparency, and local empowerment, ensuring that soft power tools are not perceived as mechanisms for cultural domination. Policies should encourage partnerships between Chinese and African media outlets to produce content that reflects diverse perspectives. Training programs for African journalists within Chinese media organizations can foster professionalism and balanced reporting, addressing criticisms of bias. Policies should promote scholarships that address diverse academic fields, including areas relevant to African development priorities. Collaborating with African universities to offer joint degrees or exchange programs would reduce dependency and ensure that educational initiatives benefit both partners.

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