THE ROLE OF CULTURE AND EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA–CHINA RELATIONS

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To build a beautiful image of our country, we should display the Chinese civilization of a long history and unity of diversified ethnic groups with varying cultures; an Oriental power with honest and capable political administrations, developed economy, thriving culture, stable society, unified people and splendid landscape; a responsible great power that is committed to peaceful development, common growth, international fairness and justice, and contributions to mankind; and a socialist power opening its doors wider to the outside world, full of hope, vigour and vitality. (Xi Jinping 2014)

INTRODUCTION

South Africa and China diplomatically interact with each other at a much wider scope than most countries in the international relations. These interactions range from a comprehensive and strategic one at bilateral level which flourished significantly since 1998 (when South Africa switched
from officially recognising Taiwan to mainland China) to multi-pronged engagement within multilateral fora. South Africa and China constantly interact with each as members of the Forum on China-Africa Coop-
eration (FOCAC), the Group of Twenty (G20), Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), United Nations (UN), and many other critical institutions of global governance. Scholars focus on assessing South Africa–China relations tend to be more biased towards traditional trade and security matters at the expense of the emerging cultural and educational diplomacy. This chapter therefore aims to carry out a clear assessment of South Africa’s relationship with China from the perspective of Confucius Institutes (CIs). Having switched recognition from Taipei to mainland China what benefits has South Africa obtained from its partnership with China? How have CIs fared in deepening Sino-South African relations and what are the perceptions and implications of CIs on these relations? By taking this route, the chapter will focus on the cultural aspects of Sino-South African relations. It will draw on some information from the University of Johannesburg Confucius Institute (UJCI) (where the author is a director).

**Historical Background**

Expanding trade and cultural relations between South Africa and China is for some an opportunity for South Africa to achieve its strategic development goals and in the case of China, South Africa as a fast paced developing market forms part of its growing interest in Africa for resources, resource markets and diplomatic support. Wasserman contends that South Africa is regarded by Beijing, as “the continent’s mineralog-
cal treasure house’, the world’s largest producer of gold and big reserves of industrially important metals and minerals” (Wasserman 2016). South African leading firms such as SAB Miller, NASPERS and Investec have also effectively entered the China markets as well as that of other Asian countries. The relationship between South Africa and China mainly rests on overt but also concealed vested interests. South Africa remains China’s biggest partner not only in terms of trade but also in respect to cultural exchanges. China remains South Africa’s top exporter and importer from the time it usurped the United States in 2015 (Mhaka and Leward 2018).

In terms of diplomatic relations, the active relationship between South Africa and China as emerging powers within the changing geopolitical and geo-economic order was re-established when South Africa joined
the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) group of emerging countries in December 2010 with the support of China (Andreasson 2011). South Africa’s entry into this association not only underscores its role as a leading economy on the African continent, but also reaffirms its growing partnership with the BRICS member countries and most importantly with China.

In addition to the shared interests of reforming the global governance architecture, more precisely “democratizing” the Bretton Woods institutions, South Africa and China have both played key roles in promoting South-South solidarity and cooperation (Matshanda 2010). This follows the spirit of the Bandung Conference of 1955, when 29 Asian and African countries came together in Bandung in Indonesia to build solidarity among the newly independent countries as well as built upon the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence namely: “Political self-determination, mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, and equality of all states” (Dieleman et al. 2010). The conference focused on “promoting Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation and to oppose colonialism and neo-colonialism” (Acharya 2016).

Amid optimism about South Africa–China relations, several scholars, the media and even the general African citizenry have lamented the current and future implications of China’s growing engagement in South Africa and on the African continent at large. At the centre of this suspicion and ambiguity is China’s record of human rights abuses, which some fear might dent South Africa’s human rights image, especially considering the significant efforts made by South Africa’s former heads of state Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki in shaping a well-meaning democracy that champions the respect for human rights.

**Confucius Institutes in Africa**

As part of its cultural exportation drive, China has opened 54 Confucius Institutes and 27 Confucius classes in 54 African countries (Textor, September 23, 2019). Globally, between November 2004 and August 2011, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) established 530 Confucius Institutes (CI) and 473 related Confucian classrooms in more than 104 countries and regions, Confucius Institutes, as tools to promote linguistic and cultural exchanges between China and the world at large, hold an important place in Beijing’s foreign policy. This chapter will situate the
CI projects as part of China’s soft power projection (Chinese Language Council International 2011).

The growth of CIs generated heated discussions and debates regarding their purpose. The question asking whether Confucius Institutes represented the rise of in pessimists went as far as labelling CIs Trojan horses in Beijing’s spying toolkit. The broader Chinese foreign policy initiatives in Africa targeted at increasing people-to-people diplomacy. CIs as the leading initiative will be discussed in detail in an effort to illustrate Chinese efforts to increase people-to-people diplomacy through promotion of its culture and education.

Much of the focus on the role and contribution of CIs in Africa centres around the African public universities. In addition, arguments against the functioning of CI’s and subsequent allegations against the institution were mainly emanating from the rising diplomatic tensions between China and the United States. Due to strong diplomatic ties with China, Africa has avoided entangling itself in China–US rivalries with regard to the rising CIs suspicions in the western world, particularly in the United States and Australia. Although the African continent have fewer CIs than the United States and most western countries, it still welcomes and promotes cultural and educational strong relations with China.

**Soft Power**

Soft power since its inception into academic space through the work of Harvard professor Joseph Nye has transformed how social scientists debate and discuss non-cohesive means of persuasion in the international relations arena. According Nye, who coined the term, “soft power,” refers primarily to ways in which a nation’s cultural resources constitute a form of power that enhances, or even substitutes for military and economic strength (Nye 1990). The term was not totally new to academia; scholars argue that it is an extension of Carr’s (1954), idea “power over opinion” and Lukes’ (1974), “third dimension of power.” Central to the latter is the thesis that holds that nation’s culture, ideals, policies, education and diplomacy influences other states to comply with its objectives. Nye explained the essence of soft power by noting “when one country gets other countries to want what it wants-might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants” (Nye 2004). A state’s economic power, language,
media and education and societal values are examples of what has been previously used to build up soft power.

In 2014, President Xi Jinping declared, “We should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s messages to the world” (Shambaugh 2015). Nye recognised the Chinese growing soft power by pointing to the success of Beijing’s Summer Olympics and popularity of Chinese literature, particularly in the United States. The possibilities of Chinese soft power are endless on the African continent. African people are getting used to Chinese products like Huawei mobile phones, clothing, and house appliances, which are sold at relatively affordable prices. African people are increasingly opting for Chinese products against the backdrop of being consumers of traditional stakeholders on the African continent like Japanese, European and American products. Because of Chinese close relations and increased activities on the continent, there has been high suspicion causing massive anti-Chinese rhetoric. One can argue that Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilisation” captures in ideological terms is what is behind the rise of anti-Africa-Sino pessimists.

According to Pun, the CI project can be seen as a form of cultural diplomacy that is state-sponsored and university-piloted, based on the project’s overall rationale, its close ties to the state, diplomatic concerns over the name given the institutes, the use of CIs to showcase the PRC’s diplomacy and foreign policy and the use of Chinese universities to link the CI network around the world (Pan 2013). It is widely acknowledged that the Chinese rise in the global economy has resulted in Mandarin becoming an emerging language in Africa. The language is therefore a mechanism that Africans are using in order to participate in the global economy. Confucius Institutes are part and parcel of many African universities however they are funded by the Chinese government with the aim of promoting Chinese language and culture.

In the quest to strengthen the already thriving Sino-Africa relations, both Chinese and African governments are actively supporting cultural exchanges and people-to-people diplomacy. According to Cummings, “cultural diplomacy” is the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding (Cummings 2003). Public diplomacy on the other hand is however a bit different in that it is aligned to a state’s foreign policy in order to attain approval of certain policies.
Soft power is a useful tool of analysis in understanding CI’s role on the African continent. Chinese soft power cannot be limited to CI’s as this will be undermining other successful people-to-people initiatives that have been shared between African and Chinese people.

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama published the essay, “End of History?” In this essay, Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy will engulf all other forms of political systems. The collapse of the Soviet Union largely due to the triumph of the US’s capitalism over Soviet Union’s communism might have blinded Fukuyama’s analysis. China today is flourishing with a socialist republic run by the Chinese Communist Party of China (CCP). There is no liberal democracy in China as Fukuyama had predicted but rather a one party state system. China today is great power which economic and military power to be reckoned with. It is important to understand that after China took an isolationist strategy thereby minimally contributing to global affairs, however with its rise and importance in the international area, Beijing has been on the forefront of reclaiming its space in the global arena. China’s foreign policy has subsequently taken the strategy of interpreting its own narrative.

African states’ ties with China were strengthened during the Cold War mainly through the solidarity stance Beijing took during the liberation struggle. China and Africa have a shared history of conquest and imperialism. Post-colonial African states have kept close ties with Beijing and return China has substantially assisted Africa with foreign aid and solidarity on multilateral platforms. The Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) framework established in 2000 has been the vehicle which China and Africa drive their relations. Since the formation of FOCAC, the relationship between China and Africa has significantly improved. Scholars have been preoccupied with analysing the economic boom that has come as a result of the organised FOCAC framework. Cultural and People-to-People exchanges have been strengthened with the increased trade and contact between Chinese and African people.

China has signed inter-governmental cultural cooperation with more than 48 African countries.

African countries like Mauritius, Benin, Nigeria and Egypt and Tanzania have established Chinese cultural centres.

After taking a long isolationist position, China’s economic development that uprooted millions out of poverty, together with the “Go Out” policies of the 1990s, Chinese culture and business started to spread again in the global affairs. The movement of Chinese people as well as business
has directly influenced the demand of the Chinese language and culture around the world. Recently, China’s One Belt One Belt Initiative has brought additional attention on Confucius Institutes. At the heart of this initiative lies language.

**CONFUCIANISM AND RELEVANCE TO CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY**

China’s Confucius Institutes around the globe that teach China’s language and culture are an example of soft power. Understanding why China has resorted to using Confucianism as part of its foreign policy reveals its national moral thinking. The “Chinese Dream” narrative is embedded in China’s “Two Centenary Goals” aimed at building a prosperous society by 2049, simultaneously with the 100th anniversary of the CCP. Domestic endeavours of most countries are reflected by their foreign policy and China is no different. China’s 5000-year-old civilisation is a history that holds an important place in China’s history. Not only Chinese people but also the rest of East Asia also take Confucianism seriously. Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew is an example of an Asian prominent influential leader who lived according to the Confucius ideology.

Confucius Institutes around the world take their name after the famous Chinese ancient philosopher and educator Confucius. This an obvious move to signal to the world that China wants to incorporate its ancient values into today’s globalised world. In July 2006 Hanban organised its first ever International Confucius Institute which was hosted in Beijing with the aim to standardise CIs globally. Despite the growth of CIs worldwide, majority of them, remain underdeveloped due to limitation of funds and staff. Since the first CI establishment in 2004, the institutes have shown signs of growth and increased relevance, bringing them on par with long established French Alliance Francaise or British Councils. It is however important to note that within the shortest period of their existence, CIs have contributed a lot of academics spaces in most African countries.

Confucianism has been embedded in Chinese people’s daily life for more than 2000 years. Today the philosophy shapes the social, ethical and political foundations of Chinese cultures. According to Confucius, there are four social strata based on occupation: scholars (Shi), farmers (nong), workers (gong) and businesspersons (Park and Chesla 2007).
Some political thinkers like Joseph Levenson have argued that Confucianism is irrelevant to contemporary Sino politics (Levenson 1969). Widespread support for Confucianism has been evident in academia with most scholars supporting the philosophy as a potential remedy to deficiencies and excesses in Western culture and politics.

Shaohua Hu notes that Chinese scholars recognise that Confucianism and the modern West belief systems place a different emphasis on communitarian values and individual autonomy, respectively, but found Confucianism nonetheless compatible with individual human rights and peaceful existence (Hu 2007). Peaceful existence and harmony in the international system have been Beijing’s stance ever since it re-emerged in the global arena. That goes to say that the Confucius philosophy, which is uniquely Chinese, has an important place in Beijing’s ideological agenda. The way the Chinese government is spreading Confucian ideology through establishment of Confucius Institutes abroad is a clear signal to the external world that it takes the philosophy seriously and demands to be understood in that context.

**CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES**

In 2004, the first Confucius Institute was established and countless other Chinese language learning institutes have been opened throughout the world. As of 2015, there are 465 institutes in 123 countries, with 97 institutes in the United States, more than 95 in Asia, 149 in Europe and 38 in Africa (Hanban 2016). Confucius Institutes were created as a mechanism to spread Chinese language, values and culture to the world. In China, the institution is known as Hanban; it is run by the Office of Chinese Language Council International and in addition works closely with the Chinese Ministry of Education. The institutes collaborate up with local universities and a Chinese university thereby making them part of high education in the countries they are situated in. Unlike other foreign powers institutes that act independently like the British Council or Alliance Française, CI’s do not stand alone. They are supported by a local university as well as heavy funding from the Chinese government. The funds are used to set up resources needed for their function. It is important to note that the CIs are not required to make profit. Students registering pay a very minimum registration fee and in most cases study free of charge.
According to the official Confucius Institute website, the institute seeks to address the demands of foreign Chinese learners around the world and contribute to the development of multiculturalism and the development of a “harmonious world” (Hanban 2016). The function of CIs is clearly explained on its official websites as:

To make policies and development plans for promoting Chinese language internationally; to support Chinese language programs at educational institutions of various types and levels in other countries; to draft international Chinese teaching standards and develop and promote Chinese language teaching materials. (Hanban 2016)

The following are some of the activities offered by CIs, (i) Basic, Intermediate, Advance and Business Mandarin Chinese, (ii) Chinese History, (iii) Chinese Painting, (iv) Chinese Calligraphy, (v) Taijiquan, and (vi) Shaolin Kungfu and other Chinese related cultural activities. In addition, CIs offer the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) examinations which are standardised Mandarin examinations for non-native speakers. HSK is important for students who wish to further their studies in China since most institutions require a certain level of proficiency before getting space. The institutes have been hosting book launches, cultural days, exhibitions (film, book and art) to attract the university populous and communities around them to the Chinese cultural learning institution. CIs have been on the forefront of debates about China and their respective countries and regions. Topics on Chinese aid, business investments, South–South solidarity and One Belt One Road are often conducted with academics and expect from prestigious institutions at home and China taking part.

Janina Tan argues that, “the Confucius Institutes have become a way for China to show the world who the Chinese people are, their values, characteristics and even nuances” (Tan 2016). This is important in Africa where Chinese presence has been misunderstood for long. Chinese President Xi Jinping echoed the same sentiments when he stated that CIs are “a symbol of China’s unremitting efforts for world peace and international relations [that] links the Chinese people and people of other countries.” and that they have an “important role... in enhancing understanding and friendship between Chinese people and people of other countries” (Wang 2014).

Confucius Institutes have been credited with bringing the spotlight on Chinese universities. Collaborative research and forums have been
conducted between Confucius Institute hosting university and Chinese partner universities. CIs have a history of offering programmes and scholarships to its students in order for them to advance their Chinese language proficiency. The CI’s website openly admits that it offers doctoral level degree scholarships in China in an effort to attract foreign students into the country. Students who study in China get exposed to the Chinese daily living conditions and cultures which they can export back to their respective countries. Exchanges done through the CI’s are instrumental in achieving some of the goals the African states have with China as set in the FOCAC agendas.

DEBATES AROUND CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES OPERATING ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

The Ministry of Education of China estimates that there will be interactions with as many as 100 million people in a total of 1000 overseas CIs by 2020. A significant number of the latter will obviously be on the African continent given the increase in business and diplomatic relations between African governments and China. The first CI in Africa was established in Nairobi, Kenya in 2005. Currently on the African continent, South Africa is home to the largest number of Confucius Institutes and Chinese language learners (The People’s Republic of China Embassy in South Africa, 2016).

In African states, a lot of critics point to Chinese cultural invasion and the investment in Chinese language against the backdrop of poorly developed African languages as a chief reason why CIs should not be expanded. Critics have argued that CI’s are language institutes with an aim of spreading Chinese propaganda.

It is not a secret that China does not establish diplomatic relations with countries that do not recognise the “One China Policy,” countries such as Eswatini that still recognise Taiwan. CIs do not engage controversial topics like the banned practice of Falun Gong, the role of the Dalai Lama and the Tiananmen Square protests. The lack of academic freedom and allegations of political influence are issues that critics have raised against CIs.

Dependency on Hanban for financial funding is a problem that most analysts bring to the table. The argument is that if the government of China through Hanban suddenly withdraws its funding or reduces it, the institutions face possibilities of closing down. Other than CIs there are no substitute institutions on the African continent where Africans can go and learn the Chinese language and culture.
South Africa plays a central role in Chinese plans in Africa since the country remains its biggest trading partner. Other than South African membership in the BRICS alliance, the country has consistently been engaged by China because it is the largest economy in Africa and remains a critical player in African economics and leadership. The country hosts the largest number of CI’s on the continent (there are 6 as of 2019). This alone speaks volumes to the intentions of China. South Africa as the gateway to the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) is an important place to strengthen Sino-Africa people-to-people diplomacy.

The UJCI was established in July 2014 as a joint venture between the University of Johannesburg (UJ), Nanjing Tech University NTU), and the Confucius Institute Headquarters or Haban, with the aim of facilitating language training, cultural exchanges and public diplomacy that deepen Sino-South African relations. This institute is the youngest in South Africa and is situated in Johannesburg. However, UJCI has grown exponentially. In 2019 it enrolled 3300 students compared to 2018’s 1300 students. This marks a 253.8% growth rate from the 2018 academic year, with new classrooms established in Malvern High School, teaching at St. John’s and UJM continued (UJCI and CACS 2019).

The launching of the UJCI is particularly important because Johannesburg holds a special place in Sino-Africa history. Chinese migrants mostly arrived in Johannesburg during the gold rush and are credited in building up cosmopolitan Johannesburg, as it is known today. With its rich commercial possibilities, Johannesburg has, over the years, provided a particularly rich and diverse hub of Chinese commercial activities, captured in the phenomenon of South Africa’s “China Malls” such as Dragon City, China Mall, China Mart and China City—make up the majority of the market (Dittgen 2014). The demand for Chinese culture and language in the city can be understood in the broader context of centrality of South Africa and Africa, as well as Johannesburg commercial hub in both South Africa and Africa. One of the most unique aspects about the UJCI is that since November 2018 it has been joined by the Centre for Africa-China Studies (CACS), a purely academic and African initiative that does not form part of the Chinese government’s initiatives. Through impartial and objective scholarship, CACS offers the UJCI the academic rigour that other CIs do not enjoy.
THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN CI’S AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Confucius Institute could possibly be some of the biggest vehicles of China’s soft power in Africa, considering the importance that universities as places of learning. It is indeed in universities that knowledge is most developed. Thus, by penetrating the university space, CIs could actually influence the African narrative of how China is perceived. Confucius Institutes could conceivably play a major role in shaping the next generation’s attitudes towards China. The effort China has been putting in creating better relationships with Africa has been bearing fruit. According to a 2013 survey by the Pew Research Centre, out of six African countries surveyed (Uganda, Kenya, Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria and South Africa), a majority of respondents in five had a positive view of China (in South Africa, 48 per cent had a favourable view of China). As explained earlier, CI’s are not the only mode that China extends her people-to-people diplomacy. There are countless other initiatives such as Cultural Centres, music festivals, exchanges between think tanks and media exchanges.

For CIs to enjoy credible acceptance in Africa, they have to demonstrate their willingness to also promote African languages and culture. Acceptance by African institutions could be important because in the event that China is unable to continue funding the institutes, an accepting African host, aware of the value of CIs could be more willing to fund the institutes. UJCI has done well in promoting both Chinese and local culture. Most of the events hosted usually have a blend of both Chinese and African cultural aspects.

CONCLUSION

South Africa occupies a special place within China’s Africa Policy and global strategy. It comes as no surprise therefore that the flourishing diplomatic relations goes beyond the traditional spheres of foreign policy such as trade and security. Cultural and educational interactions between these states in recent years has taken an upward trend. The cultural and educational exchanges underpinned within FOCAC appearing tangibly trickling down to bilateral relations between South Africa and China. One of the major vehicles to drive this approach is none other than the six CIs established in South Africa. The outbreak of Coronavirus in Wuhan City in Hubei Province in China and subsequent spread across the globe will in short and medium term have a huge impact of South Africa and China
cultural and educational exchanges. However, this will not disrupt cultural and educational activities between the two nations. What will more likely be going to happen will be digitisation of these programme within the ambit of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

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