COMMUNICATION, CULTURAL, JOURNALISM AND MEDIA STUDIES

CHINA’S EXPANDING INFLUENCE IN AFRICA: PROJECTION, PERCEPTION AND PROSPECTS IN SOUTHERN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

China’s multi-faceted endeavour to expand its influence in Africa has attracted worldwide scholarly and media attention. This article examines the different moments of China’s soft power endeavour, from projection through its state media to representation and lived experiences in South Africa and Zimbabwe,
two African countries which receive a significant level of attention in China’s policymaking. Through interdisciplinary methodologies such as content analysis, online questionnaires and in-depth interviews conducted in China, South Africa and Zimbabwe, the authors found that China’s state-engineered soft power initiatives have resulted in partial success in the two countries. The conclusions indicate that China faces many challenges in fully accomplishing its intended goal. The findings provide new insight into China’s political impact in Africa within the context of Beijing’s growing influence on Africa’s political and economic future.

**Keywords:** foreign media; public diplomacy; reception; Sino-Africa relations; Sino-Zimbabwe culture; soft power; South African media

**INTRODUCTION**

China’s overwhelming engagement in Africa is not just economic. What has attracted scholarly and media attention worldwide is China’s great endeavour to gain influence in Africa, just as Xinhua Executive Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Zhou Qisheng, said: ‘We cannot just rely on economic power alone!’ (Shambaugh 2013, 230). In addition to such efforts as setting up Confucius institutes and providing cultural exchange programmes, China has greatly increased the momentum of establishing its media presence in Africa as an important instrument of soft power, causing some to believe that China has already displaced European, American and Japanese diplomatic and capitalistic soft power in many sub-Saharan African countries (Enuka 2010), and others to claim that ‘China aims to dominate the African media sector with the introduction of a radio broadcaster, news agency, TV station and newspaper to the African market’ (Schwarzbeck 2013).

Indeed, Xinhua News Agency, Central China Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI) and *China Daily* – the ‘Big Four’ official media outlets as China’s former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yang Jiechi, called them (Yang 2010) – have all increased their presence and expanded their reach as important instruments of soft power in Africa. Xinhua, the world’s largest news agency with 13 African bureaux in English, nine in French and two in Portuguese, has developed the most outlets of any Chinese or Western news agency on the continent. In 2006, its Africa Regional Bureau in Nairobi took over the production and distribution of French-language reports from the Paris Bureau. Two years later, Xinhua launched its China African News Service. CNC World, the English-language TV channel of Xinhua, reached cable television audiences in Africa in 2011 (Yu 2012). Its launch of mobile news in sub-Saharan Africa in April 2011 has enabled about 17 million Kenyan mobile subscribers to receive Xinhua’s latest news (Xinhuanet 2011). China has also stepped up its penetration of the African airwaves. On February 26, 2006, CRI launched its first overseas station with its FM channels in three East African
cities and its AM channel covering all of Kenya. China’s leading English-language state newspaper, *China Daily*, launched its Africa Weekly edition in late 2012. It is published in Nairobi and distributed on Kenya Airways flights and other venues. What York considers ‘the centerpiece of China’s media empire’ (York 2013), the new CCTV hub in Nairobi and its flagship show, *Africa Live*, were launched in January 2012. Every day CCTV Africa provides an hour-long programme for the global CCTV News. CCTV’s mobile TV application, *I Love Africa*, was also launched in January 2012.

To ensure readership and audience, these media organisations purchase space in African newspapers and increase the amount of news-sharing. Shinn and Eisenman (2012, 205) report that Xinhua has bought space in eight Zimbabwe state-controlled community newspapers which run international pages carrying Xinhua stories and pictures; it also publishes collaborative stories with South Africa’s official Bua News Agency. Likewise, CCTV enters local networks by exchanging news programmes with local media organisations. For instance, while CCTV is already available to many Zimbabweans who have free-to-air satellite receivers, in November 2011 China sealed a deal with the Ministry of Information for the state-run Zimbabwe Broadcasting Cooperation (ZBC) and CCTV to share news programming. *Africa Live* is also broadcast on prime-time slots in Kenyan stations. In 2010, Togolese authorities and CRI and CCTV officials agreed that Radio Lome and Togolese Television would broadcast China’s French-language reports, while receiving technical and material assistance for modernising their radio and TV stations (ibid, 210).

In addition to the expansion of the ‘Big Four’ media outlets, China also provides infrastructural and technical support to the media sector in Africa. According to Shinn and Eisenman, countries including the Comoro Islands, the DRC, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Togo, Zambia and Zimbabwe have all received radio equipment from China; the donation of computer systems to Zimbabwe’s state-run *Herald* newspaper is another case in point. Other technical support includes transmitters, towers, generators and antennae (Banda 2009, 52–53).

Training sessions and workshops for African journalists and editors under the framework of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) are another source of attention in Sino-Africa relations. Between 2004 and 2011, China held eight training workshops for African media, sponsoring training for about 300 African media officials from 48 African countries in China (Shinn and Eisenman 2012, 209). According to Zimbabwe’s *Herald*, in 2011 alone, 400 Zimbabwean government officers attended seminars in China and 30 journalists went to China for training (*Herald Reporter* 2011).

China’s recent direct investment in South African media is considered a new phase in the expansion of the former’s media across Africa. In August 2013, StarTimes, the fastest-growing and most influential digital TV operator in the region (with registered branches in 23 countries and operations in 12 countries) purchased
a 20 per cent stake in South African satellite television provider TopTV (renamed StarSat). StarTimes is granted the status of ‘Key Cultural Export Enterprise’ and the only certified private enterprise in China to contract foreign projects in the radio and TV industry. Inspections by high-level party officials of StarTimes subsidiaries in Africa, including Li Changchun, Liu Yunshan and Li Yuanchao, underscore the importance the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) accords the company. CCTV, backed by the China-Africa Development Fund, is believed to be behind the Chinese consortium that provided 20 per cent of the financing for the Sekunjalo Group, with links to the ruling African National Congress, to purchase Independent News and Media (Harber 2013). The Independent Group, one of the most powerful media groups in the country, owns daily newspapers in all of the major cities.

However, just as controversial as China’s increasing economic engagement with Africa has been (Ampiah and Sanusha 2008; Brautigam 2009; French 2014; Shinn and Eisenman 2012), concerns over China’s media development abound. Reporters without Borders, for instance, contends that China’s involvement in Africa is ‘toxic for democracy’ (BBC News 2008). Critical questions are being asked about what Chinese investment in media may mean for editorial independence and democratic media culture in South Africa. For example, Anton Harber (2013) from the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, asks: ‘Is this just investment, or is it colonialism with Chinese characteristics? How will their media investments serve their interests and will this affect our media culture?’

A small but growing number of scholars are starting to examine the impact of China’s increased involvement in Africa as it pertains to the media (Banda 2009; Gagliardone 2013; Li and Rønning 2013; Shinn and Eisenman 2012; Xin 2009; Zhang 2013). Few studies have, however, looked at the entire process of soft power involving not only China’s projection, but also the reception in Africa. First, due to difficulties around interviewing Chinese officials, there is a lack of empirical data on China’s official justifications for its engagement in Africa. Second, as Max (2011) has rightly observed, ‘the media plays a big part in influencing Africa’s perception of China’, thus examinations of African media representations of China can shed light on how the African media public view China. Such examinations are, however, only now starting to emerge, and insight into African editors’ and journalists’ views on China’s influence is missing. Although recent opinion polls by Pew Research Centre (2014) and the BBC World Service tell us that China is receiving mostly positive views in Africa, their coverage of African countries is limited and does not describe the broader socio-political, economic and cultural context.

**THEORY AND METHODOLOGIES**

This article draws on public diplomacy grounded in the notion of Joseph Nye’s soft power (Powers and Gilboa 2007) or, in Melissen’s (2005, 4) words, one of soft
power’s key instruments. This analytical lens allows the authors to examine the different moments of soft power – projection, representation and lived experiences.

Two interrelated investigations are conducted in answering the following questions, thereby contributing to the construction of theoretical frameworks in understanding Chinese influence in Africa and offering insights into the effectiveness of China’s assertion in two southern African countries:

- How does China wish to guide international views of Sino-Africa relations?
- What are the perspectives of Chinese officials, media professionals and academics on Sino-Africa relations in general and media relations in particular?
- How is China reported on by major media outlets in South Africa and Zimbabwe?
- What are the editors’ and journalists’ views on China’s influence?

First, an analysis was conducted of the languages and images projected by China Daily, Xinhuanet and CCTV Africa, three major official outlets for the promotion of China’s influence, followed by extensive interviews with Chinese officials, media professionals and academics in Beijing and Nairobi. The examination and analysis of China Daily were conducted of the first ten pages that came up when using the search word ‘Africa’. A similar analysis was conducted of the online news service of Xinhua News Agency, Xinhuanet.

All respondents and interviewees were granted confidentiality following the ethics regulations of the authors’ institutions, so as to protect interviewees when divulging potentially sensitive viewpoints. These interviews serve not only as important foundations in assessing how China – through its discursive official media outlets – wishes to guide international views of Sino-Africa relations, but also give voice to the perspectives of Chinese officials, media professionals and academics on these relations.

Second, an analysis was undertaken of major media reports on China in South Africa and Zimbabwe, contextualised by an online questionnaire for journalists and editors in South Africa and in-depth interviews with journalists, officials from journalists’ unions, and politicians in Zimbabwe. The authors are fully aware that the media in Africa are far from homogenous entities. Therefore, instead of identifying a consistent response to China’s presence in Africa, the authors follow Yun Sun (2014, 20), who identifies two types of African countries which receive a higher level of attention in China’s policymaking: South Africa, a regional political and economic leader, and Zimbabwe, which belongs to the category of ‘problematic countries’ not only because China has large vested economic interests in the natural resources, but also because its volatile internal politics often raise international concerns and spark criticism that China is ‘propping up’ the authoritarian regime through economic deals and international political support. The questionnaire and interviews served to establish editors and journalists’ views on China, which are very likely to play out in their practice.
FINDINGS

China’s story

The work on China’s perspective covers the period from 2011, when the project started, to May 2014. The examination and analysis of *China Daily* and the online news service of Xinhua News Agency, Xinhuanet, were first conducted in March and April 2011 respectively.

As expected, in addition to framing and legitimising China’s involvement with Africa, African countries received more positive coverage on the websites of *China Daily* and Xinhua.

![Figure 1: Tone of reports on Africa by Xinhuanet.com, 2011](image1)

![Figure 2: Tone of reports on Africa by *China Daily* website, 2011](image2)
Examinations of the two official websites revealed that negative issues tended to be reported positively. When talking about its involvement in Africa, China used a mixture of defensive and offensive rhetoric. In response to skepticism about China’s presence in Africa, China employed a number of tactics to shift its image from the ‘uncertain other’ to the ‘friendly other’. The relationship between China and Africa was overwhelmingly portrayed as a mutually beneficial one, and based on principles of equal partnership rather than a neocolonialist attitude. Also in line with expectations, the reports tended to feature no in-depth analysis.

Most noticeable from the examination was an emerging discourse from China calling on Africa to change the established world order, which was argued to have been established without the participation of emerging economies. This was especially evident on Xinhuanet, which focused on consensus, common standing and the mutual prosperity of China and Africa. This discourse highlighted the newer, emerging rhetoric of global partnership based on equality. These two websites continued to identify China as a developing country, aligning with African countries to challenge the Western-dominated global order. In 2012, data were collected from 1) the 15 weeks of the weekly current affairs programme, *Talk Africa* (on CCTV Africa), from its first programme on January 24, 2012, to April 30, 2012, and 2) *African News*, on every fifth day during the same period, so that the data finally covered three days respectively. The examination revealed seven significant recurring themes which were similar to the findings from *China Daily* and Xinhuanet in 2011, but with one highly noticeable difference, namely the absence of a clear tendency to report positive news on Africa. The main themes were:

1. Condemnation of Western intervention in African affairs;
2. Democracy, revolution, elections, crisis linked with instability;
3. Reforming international systems;
4. Chinese unconditional support and China’s role in Africa;
5. China’s positive construction of the African image;
6. Questioning America’s behaviour in Africa;
7. Solidarity and camaraderie with Africa on the international stage.

As Figure 3 shows, on many days negative reporting outweighed positive reporting. This practice indicates the efforts of Chinese media in general, but CCTV in particular, to make programming more attractive to both African and international audiences.
In Beijing and Nairobi in 2011, 2012 and 2014, interviews were conducted with six officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Council Information Office and the media industry (CRI, CCTV News, CCTV Africa, Global Times), 18 media workers from CCTV News (including four local and two Chinese employees of CCTV Africa, Xinhua News Agency, China Daily and Global Times), and six media academics from Tsinghua University, China University of Communications and Renmin University in Beijing.

The interviews provided a rare glimpse into some Chinese officials’ mindsets on Sino-Africa relations. For instance, while he agreed that China needs resources from Africa, one high-level official argued: ‘China is not a threat to the West as it recovers petroleum in the least hospitable area.’ Besides, he added, it was a mutually beneficial exchange. The interviews also revealed that China was keen to construct a discourse that differed from that of the West. One official from the State Council Information Office reasoned that for a developing country such as China, it was more important to feed everybody than to work on human rights: ‘People of different income levels cannot share the same discourse.’ He argued that China’s discourse of a harmonious world was consistent with Unesco’s convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions, meaning that different discourses should coexist. An interview with an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also showed that China was more confident with the government-to-government approach, not because it was unaware of the need to reach out to non-government sectors, but because it did not have the experience of doing so at home. On criticism
around China’s support for African governments which suppress media freedom, the CRI official argued:

Running a country is like running a household. The father may be very authoritarian. However, if the son has not succeeded in overthrowing the father that means the condition is not ready yet, whether we do business with the father or not.

Interviews with academics showed that there was a close link between officials, academics and media professionals. This was also demonstrated by the frequent joint workshops hosted by media organisations, government officials and academic institutions. Although interviewed scholars were critical of government’s way of doing things in Africa, they did not question what was done and were sometimes even defensive. On training journalists from Africa, one academic argued: ‘When African journalists come to China, they are here only for about two weeks, unlike the US who trains them with a full package.’ The training held at the Communication University of China, according to one academic, introduced not only Chinese-style journalism, but also Western theories. He added that African journalists only constituted a portion of the students from developing countries: ‘Why single them out?’ Academics did, however, believe that Chinese media had a lot to improve on before they could really exert an influence in Africa. One complained that officials did not understand the differences between domestic and international audiences, let alone differences among international audiences: ‘Leaders think that outside China there is only one other country.’

Interviews with media professionals also yielded insights into the world in which they worked. They were highly aware of criticism from the West and were thus very defensive. For instance, on the issue of overwhelmingly positive reporting on Africa, one media researcher from Xinhua argued that ‘reporting on the negative side is not doing Africa any favours, as very few would then want to invest in the continent’. A female Xinhua journalist, just back from four years’ duty in Africa, cherished fond memories of the continent, remembering the people as friendly and helpful: ‘African people are proud people. They are keen not to see their country always reported negatively.’ The interviewed journalists believed that China was providing the world with a different perspective on Africa, while ‘there are already enough reports in the world on the negative side’. On not providing in-depth reports, another media official from CCTV Africa argued that ‘this practice is in line with China’s principle of non-interference’. On the credibility of state media, a media official responded thus: ‘Whoever reports does not matter. What matters is that what has been reported is true.’

CCTV Africa has actively sourced local and international personnel. Interviews with local employees of CCTV Africa in Nairobi showed that the majority, who had previously worked in private media companies, brought with them diverse
experiences to their new jobs. This ensured the expression of more subtle views on Africa and Africa-related international issues.

Balanced news reports in South Africa

China’s reporting across Africa has a mixed character. Zeleza (2008, 174) sums up the various positive and negative portrayals of China in African media as fitting into one of three frames: imperialism, globalisation and solidarity. There was reason to suspect that reporting in the South African media might follow much the same pattern. Building on De Beer and Schreiner’s 2009 study, which pointed to the fact that news events pertaining to this relationship were likely to receive coverage, a content analysis was conducted of data for the period 2010–2012, generated by the research company Media Tenor, of all mainstream ‘traditional’ platforms (excluding the web).³

![Figure 4: Tone of South African media reports on China, 2010](image-url)
Figure 4 shows that the coverage of China in those outlets with the highest volume of reports was fairly balanced in 2010, with an almost equal balance in positive and negative statements on SABC 3 News, and a majority of neutral statements in *Business Day*. In 2011, even after the announcement of South Africa’s accession to the BRIC group (Brazil, Russia, India, China), both the top outlets had a majority of neutral statements. A clear dip is, however, noticeable towards mid-2010, when reporting overall became quite negative before picking up again towards the end of 2010. An examination of the articles shows that this drop in positive reporting – the only time during the two years under comparison here, when reporting was consistently negative – was due to reporting on several natural disasters in China: the Yushu earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter Scale that struck in Qinghai, killing at least 2,000 and injuring more than 10,000; rainstorms in Southern China that left at least 115 dead in May; and flooding in June that killed at least 88 people and forced 750,000 to evacuate their homes.

As Figure 5 shows, coverage from 2011 to 2012 continued to be dominated by ‘neutral’ reports. This could be the result of the nature of broadcast news bulletins being more general and superficial in their approach, highlighting news events and developments which may come across as more positive in tone, rather than the more in-depth and critical analyses offered by the business media, which would weigh up different positions and therefore be coded as neutral. The business media are also likely to report more positively on stories focusing on China’s economic investment in Africa, with less focus on the political and/or ideological implications.
A comparison with De Beer and Schreiner’s 2009 study reveals the continuation of a balanced picture on China. This contradicts assumptions in the literature about China being portrayed either in highly positive terms as a saviour or close partner for African states, or in highly negative terms as an exploitative, neocolonial predator.

To understand and contextualise the findings from the content analysis, a purposive sample of editors and senior journalists was selected based on two criteria: 1) their employment at one of the major media outlets analysed in the content analyses, and 2) their seniority in the organisation, which was likely to amplify their influence over media content. After initial contact had been established via email or telephone, an online questionnaire was administered to the respondents in 2014. The 20 responses cast much light on South African media professionals’ perceptions of Sino-Africa relations, as well as China’s influence on their work. It also offered insights into how their perceptions translated into their daily work.

Responses to Question 1 on Sino-Africa relations yielded no congruent perceptions. Those who showed pessimism believed that the relationship was not equal, with China dictating the terms. The majority were not so sure, despite admitting to being ‘fascinated’ by what was happening. Question 2, whether the close cooperation between the two countries would lead to good economic development in South Africa, elicited not only varied answers, but also revealed a great deal of concern. Apart from the five very confident ‘yes’ and ‘definitely’ answers, and a couple of negative views on the relationship, the majority of responses were uncertain, characterised by ‘yes, however …’, ‘yes, but …’ and ‘yes and no’. One big worry was that such relations might harm South Africa’s relationship with the West.

Question 3 was designed to understand the respondents’ views on the political implications of the relationship, and once again the answers were mixed. Perceived benefits included ‘moving away from the West’ and ‘potentially [forming] a counterweight against US/Europe in some political matters’. However, the concerns far outnumbered the positive responses. Some respondents were concerned that closer political ties would ‘impact on South Africa’s own internal politics or our government’s democratic principles’. Strong terms such as ‘scary’, ‘recolonisation of Africa’ and ‘fear’ were used, because of ‘China’s draconian laws and lack of sympathy for opposing views’ and ‘more state intervention’ which led respondents to feel that they ‘would rather we kept our distance’. Some negative feelings derived from China not being transparent, ‘so we never quite know who we are dealing with’ and ‘one has the fear of possible corruption’. However, one respondent warned that ‘we cannot pre-judge China’s actions until we see what is on the table’.

The questions interrogating respondents on their consumption of Chinese media, and their views on China’s increased engagement in the African cultural and media sphere, received many negative responses. That Chinese media are controlled and censored was one of the main reasons leading them to conclude that so far they ‘have little impact’; ‘I can’t see the African public consuming Chinese media’. Optimists,
however, saw a different picture, because it will ‘help Africans to better understand the lives of the Chinese and vice versa’. One also welcomed it, as ‘a diversity of views is a positive development – why always just get the view from the West?’

On China’s investment in South Africa’s media sector, apart from four clearly negative attitudes, the majority were uncertain, typically starting the answer with ‘Yes, if’, ‘yes, as long as’, ‘positive if’ and ‘positive development, but ….’ This shows again that many see it as a positive development, but they would like control to remain in South African hands, and want media freedoms to be safely guarded. One response summarises all the rest: ‘A strange mix of positive and negative censorship and control is always a worrying spectre, but new voices lend diversity to the landscape.’

When asked if closer contact with China and Chinese media will change the way they view their role, despite differences (some were very confident it would not happen, others were more certain) there is a shared hope that ‘South African media won’t change its role to adjust to China’ as the Chinese media are ‘hardly a model you would want to emulate’.

Answers were predominantly negative as to whether the South African media provided a fair representation of China, and whether they had a role to play in creating a better understanding of China. One reason given was that few journalists have been to China and that most sources are from international media organisations. Some simply questioned where the resources would come from: ‘Unrealistic to expect South African media to cover China. Who will pay for it?’; ‘It is not the South African media’s responsibility to create a better understanding of any specific country’; ‘We’ve got far more important work to do than making China look better or presenting a better picture of it – like telling our own stories better.’

The last question aimed to find out whether respondents thought the Chinese media had been successful in creating a better image. With two exceptions, the majority give a negative answer. Few consumed Chinese media, which they considered to be inaccessible, unattractive/difficult to understand, and not relevant: ‘And what does a Chinese TV channel and news agency mean to the man in a shack in (the Cape Town township of) Gugulethu? Probably not much.’ Some preferred to believe that China has ‘been successful in bringing African news to China, more so than creating a better image of China’. For one respondent, ‘Chinese soft power is much more influential in the gadgets it produces than in its news’.

**China’s partial success in Zimbabwe’s media sphere**

China’s involvement in Zimbabwe has been long and historic, given how it supported the anticolonial Chimurenga struggles of the 1970s. Today, high-level visits and aid continue under the current coalition government. President Xi Jingpin’s 2015 two-day state visit to Zimbabwe (December, 1–2) confirmed Harare’s growing special relationship with Beijing. However, in contrast to democratic South Africa,
Zimbabwe falls into the category of ‘problematic countries’. Widespread concerns have been noted on growing official media relations between the two counties – a fact which has not only been hotly debated by Zimbabwean news media (especially social media), but also presented, defined or framed in ways meant to influence public opinion about China in Zimbabwe.

An analysis, conducted on a range of media from 2009 to 2012, showed that coverage of China has been increasing year on year. Based on the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe in The Herald databases, Table 1 points to the number of stories in which China was covered in different Zimbabwean media outlets during the period under discussion.

Table 1: Number of stories on China, 2009–2012

| Medium                                      | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|---------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television 1 (ZBCTV) | 16   | 62   | 80   | 132  |
| The Herald                                  | 52   | 74   | 100  | 102  |
| Sunday Mail                                 | 7    | 16   | 4    | 15   |
| NewsDay                                     | 0    | 4    | 10   | 2    |
| Standard                                    | 3    | 8    | 7    | 11   |
| The Daily News                              | 0    | 0    | 4    | 6    |
| Radio Zimbabwe                              | 33   | 68   | 78   | 18   |
| Spot FM                                     | 18   | 25   | 26   | 4    |
| Zimbabwe Independent                        | 5    | 11   | 3    | 19   |

As Figure 6 shows, government-controlled media – ZBC TV, The Herald, The Sunday Mail, Radio Zimbabwe and Spot FM – allocated more space and time to coverage of China. Privately controlled media, namely Newsday, The Daily News, The Standard and the Zimbabwe Independent, did not commit much space and time to covering China.

Figure 6: Space and time covering China, 2009–2012
The analysis also focused on the language used in describing China in both public and private media. State-controlled media generally adopted a ‘development journalism’ style of reporting; most of the stories were therefore positive, appreciating the Chinese as partners in development. China was described as ‘Zimbabwe’s all-weather friend’ in some stories and the ‘Asian economic giant’ in others. A closer look at discourses in the stories pointed to an attempt to show that Beijing respected Zimbabwe’s sovereignty and worked in the best interests of the country’s development, supporting initiatives such as the land reform programme, which Western countries describe as counter-productive. Where the West spoke of targeted measures against Zimbabwe’s political elites, China was presented as referring to these as sanctions – this resonates with the government’s official position. China was also shown to fully support and recognise Zimbabwe’s liberation war politics, as opposed to some Western countries such as Britain and America which appear to want to do away with the liberation war movement. China was also portrayed as anti-imperialist, and the Look East policy as an alternative to Western-sponsored development initiatives. Stories focused on cultural cooperation through, for instance, the introduction of Chinese language in schools. This counters the discourses of a neocolonial modernity promoted by the West.

In sharp contrast, however, private media were critical of the relationship, describing China as ‘exploitative’ and long on trade but short on investment. Others described China as ‘a dominant force in the resource rush’, or as slave drivers and cruel employers who demand excessive work from workforces, without bothering to improve their working conditions and remuneration.

Overall, the state-controlled media showed unbridled enthusiasm for continued friendly relations with China, while the private media, with their more liberal discourses, called for an open, unrestrained free-market system. While China was acknowledged as a fast-growing economy, its model was depicted as having a missing link in terms of promoting civil liberties. The findings showed that most stories in the private media took their slant from Western news agencies such as Reuters, Associated Press, AFP and others which purvey liberal discourses. The Chinese model of business was portrayed as feudalistic and exploitative, which is in sync with comments made by social media users (who are unfortunately not the focus of the current article).

In-depth interviews carried out in 2013 and 2014 yielded original insights into the varying extent of China’s influence on different media sectors. For instance, the Union of Journalists has had a close relationship with China since 2000. It frequently sent journalists to China on an official exchange programme. However, an interview with the Information Officer of the union in Harare (April 11, 2013) showed that while he was very positive about certain aspects he was equally critical of others: ‘There are pros and cons of China coming to Zimbabwe.’ To be specific, he thought highly of the employment opportunities China brought to the country, yet he was
very uncomfortable with China’s ‘government-to-government approach’, because China ‘does not deal with civil society and therefore uses our relationship with media employers’. He was also critical of what he called ‘cheque-book diplomacy’, and wary of the dependency syndrome that he believed China was promoting. In addition, in his view ‘China promotes a culture of consensus, centralisation and “a one-party model”, while helping the Zimbabwe government jam “dissident radio stations”’. Paid trips to China, in his view, were self-serving because ‘they are a way of whipping Zimbabwean journalists into line’ and as a result ‘ideology is present in media content, even in cooking programmes on television. The trips are resulting in partisan coverage.’ He added:

Friendly journalists are handed trips easily and all journalists are carefully vetted … You cannot propose a journalist who is too critical of the Chinese. Some names are turned down. With the Herald they wish they can take the entire team.

ZBC is increasingly broadcasting boring Chinese programmes. CCTV has a slot on ZBC. In our news sources China is becoming more and more visible.

Mr. X, a trade journalist at the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) since 1996, was very open in his criticism of the relationship, stating that China came to Africa ‘to satisfy its need for resources’. He believed the relationship to be asymmetrical, with China literary ‘taking over all sectors’ and ‘cutting deals that have destroyed our industries’, arguing that China ‘supports public media already friendly to them’.

In sharp contrast, a deputy minister Supa Mandiwanzira (interview, July 25, 2014) spoke highly of the journalism exchange programmes:

When journalists go to China they come back with a totally different perspective about China. They can see what the Chinese are doing or have done and they start to appreciate that in terms of development … There is nothing lucrative about the Chinese trip. It is very mischievous to suggest that there is more reportage because they are getting incentives.

The anti-China view, in his opinion, was a sponsored position driven by Western interests:

I think a lot of the media and Zimbabwe people have been believing Western narratives about China that they are here to loot the resources and their country is not a democracy; its Third World and still developing. … It is a view planted by those with an agenda to perpetuate western narratives about China and link the country with corruption. (ibid.)

What is important for the minister is that ‘we work on cultural exchanges. If we watch CCTV then they should also watch ZBC in China’. In this regard, China has been purchasing equipment annually for state broadcaster/state publications, and was greatly involved in setting up Star FM. The interview with the General Manager of ZBC, Tazzen Mandizvidza (April 17, 2013) only confirmed the good relationship
it has with China: ‘Broadly speaking we have seen benefits for Zimbabwe … ZBC is a good example.’ In addition to receiving buses from China, for use by civil servants, the ZBC regularly sends technicians for training in China.

We acquired an Outside Broadcasting van from China, a first for this country, for Southern Africa if not for Africa. It helps us broadcast anything from anywhere to anywhere in the world. We have an agreement with Xinhua. We share news and equipment. We share resources. We now have an up link and they can broadcast from here. (ibid.)

Another benefit derived from close cooperation with China, is that ‘China has helped put pressure on the West so that they can reengage. It has helped because now the West says let’s sit down and talk.’ However, although ‘technically China can provide what the West provides,’ he admits that ‘in terms of content we have not done well. Obviously their businesses need to be qualitatively good.’ On China’s influence he argues that ‘ZBC has been able to criticize China when necessary …. We are good friends but we have been able to say our friends are not doing well.’ Yet he agrees:

I think it has this psychological impact on you, sometimes it’s difficult … We hear stories of problems with labour but such stories have not come out because the media think these people are helping us. (ibid.)

Finally, a group interview was conducted in Harare on April 16, 2013, with eight university students. While their views on China’s presence in Zimbabwe were mixed, they were well aware of the differences, in coverage of China, between state and independent media. The interviewees were critical of government media for being too supportive. They also thought Chinese programmes on ZTV ‘boring’ and therefore did not watch them.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

This article has examined different moments in China’s soft power efforts in Africa – projection, representations and reception – to arrive at an understanding of how successful China is in spreading its influence in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Our study has demonstrated that China’s state-led soft power initiatives on this continent have achieved some desired results. Its advantages in terms of the easy deployment of resources are obvious – the official ‘Big Four’ have all greatly increased their presence in Africa, which led former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to suggest at a Congressional Committee Hearing in 2011 that if there is indeed an ‘information war’ between China and the United States on an African battleground, it appears that China is beginning to win the war (York 2013).

An analysis of China’s major official media discourses and interviews with Chinese officials showed that China wants its engagement in Africa to be seen as
mutually beneficial, rather than asymmetric. It wants to increase its influence and build a positive image for itself in Africa, as much as in other parts of the world. It has aligned with African countries not only for economic reasons, but also to gain Africa’s support for its domestic and foreign agendas. China has constructed a discourse that not only poses an alternative to that of the West, but poses a challenge to the existing US-led world order. Interviews with state officials showed that China does not intend to become a rival for resources in Africa. The academics and media professionals interviewed for this study were supportive of China’s growing influence in Africa. They also endorsed the practice of China providing a different perspective on Africa, so that rather than contributing to the stereotyping of African countries as poverty-stricken and war-torn, China offers more positive reporting on this continent.

A content analysis of major Zimbabwean media clearly demonstrated that China’s state-centred model and ‘government-to-government’ approach have achieved impressive results in Zimbabwe, as demonstrated by the positive public media coverage of Sino-Zimbabwe relations, as well as pro-China interviews with government officials and public media organisations. By following various approaches, China is not only enjoying a more significant presence in the Zimbabwe public media, but also a much more favourable image. The emerging overall balanced view, within three consecutive years in respect of South African media reports, appeared to confirm that the media have an influence on public opinion. This corresponds with the Pew Research Centre’s (2014) findings that South Africans are ‘closely divided (45% favorable, 40% unfavorable)’. It also suggests that journalists and editors understand that China’s role in South Africa is a complex one that cannot be pigeonholed as either a ‘bad’ or ‘good’ news story.

Analyses of private media in Zimbabwe and interviews conducted in China, South Africa and Zimbabwe revealed that Chinese public diplomacy has so far achieved partial success, especially where pro-state media are concerned. It is not surprising that the public, under the influence of international and domestic media (both public and private) are divided in their views about China. Online responses clearly indicate that China is far from able to assuage independent-minded editors and journalists in South Africa. It is predictable, given the responses of media professionals in South Africa, that resistance will be strong if there is pressure from Chinese investors to try and shape the media sphere. Our study therefore points to the challenges China faces in fully convincing African publics that its engagement is positive. The study also reminds us that African media are far from homogenous, and that the location of different media within different sets of political and economic power relations has to be taken into account when assessing the influence of Chinese soft power on African media.

Joseph Nye (2006) rightly stated: ‘[W]ether power resources produce a favorable outcome depends upon the context.’ China’s non-democratic political system is the
main cause of suspicion (and even fear) among South African editors and journalists, as well as the Zimbabwean private sector. Most South African respondents therefore, despite believing in the economic benefits of welcoming China as an alternative to the West, advocate caution in dealing with China. One South African respondent explained that ‘it may not be good for South Africa’s image to be seen as having too strong ties with the Communist Party of China (CPC)’.

Related to the above is the issue of credibility as regards Chinese official media working within the one-party political system. On the one hand they need to determine how to reconcile their role as loyal CPC mouthpieces with that of trusted news source(s). On the other hand, the absence of alternative and independent media inside China makes it impossible for Chinese policymakers to draw on the expertise of those kinds of media that attract the attention of international audiences. The lack of officials’ understanding of the different contexts within which soft power works, explains (to some extent) why state-controlled media do not appeal to most African publics.

In addition, China’s ‘government-to-government’ approach has proven to have largely failed to win media professionals’ hearts in a democratic South Africa, and even in private media organisations in Zimbabwe. Since the Cold War, public diplomacy has unfolded in an international environment which can no longer be described as exclusively state-centered. This new diplomacy extends beyond government operations to include the activities of the private sector and wider society. Interviews with Chinese officials have shown an increasing understanding of the need to reach out to civil society. However, doing so means China will have to operate outside its comfort zone, because of a lack of experience at home.

Finally, Chinese state media organisations continue to face difficulties in competing with international media organisations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) or Central News Network (CNN) in Africa. The interviews indicated that Western media’s influence on the media public and on media organisations is still strong. While this is partly due to historical reasons, the ‘quality’ of Chinese media is not up to the standard of other international media organisations.

Further research needs to be done into whether it is only wishful thinking on the part of the interviewed Zimbabwean deputy minister who argued for mutually beneficial ‘cultural exchange’, whereby ‘[i]f we watch CCTV here then they should also watch ZBC in China’. But the message is clear: the relationship should be reciprocal if it is to be sustainable. What deserves further attention is the fact that while China is keen to align with African countries in challenging the Western-dominated global order, both responses in Zimbabwe show that African countries are using China’s attention to get the West to reengage with the continent.

China will be taking on a larger role in Africa, as Xi told African leaders (Economic Times 2013) and reiterated at the 2015 FOCAC meeting in Johannesburg. Wenping He (2012) of the Think Tank on Africa from the Chinese Academy of
Social Science notes that China has thus far lacked the means to tell its story, hence she advocates ‘more soft power in Africa’. China therefore needs to undertake a more profound reconsideration of its overall strategic engagement with Africa, in order to resolve the aforementioned problem of further expanding its influence in Africa. However, given the difficulties of changing the nature of the media under the current political system, these issues will most likely remain unchanged in the near future. Looking ahead, the social media space could make or break China’s soft power ambitions on this continent.

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NOTES

1. For soft power, see Joseph Nye (2004, 2006 and 2001); http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2006/02/22/think_again_soft_power. For China’s embrace of soft power, see Hongying Wang and Yeh-Chung Lu (2008). For China’s international communications as instruments of soft power see Xiaoling Zhang (2010).
2. For a fuller discussion on the themes, see Zhang (2013).
3. See Herman Wasserman (2012, 2015a and b) for a more detailed discussion of these data.

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