How ready is China for a China-style world order? China’s state media discourse under construction

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Abstract

What exactly is the China-style world order that Chinese officials and intellectual elites have recently been talking about, and how ready is China for it? An examination and analysis of discourses on ‘Africa Live’ on CCTV Africa, the first overseas news center of China Central Television (CCTV), yields some highly noticeable features and significant themes, confirming that although China has shifted from a low-profile approach to a more assertive one, in an attempt to change the global order, its verbal challenge and sometimes harsh criticism of the American-led international system is accompanied by an obvious absence of a clear vision of what the new world order should be like. This lack of a clear vision may be due to the fact that the Chinese discourse on world order is still a work in progress, constrained by internal practices, and Africa is its testing ground for the construction of a discourse that China envisions as an alternative.

Keywords: international community, new world order, Sino-African relations, soft power, state media discourse, testing ground

Research context, questions, theoretical frameworks and methods

Scholars and observers of China have noticed that with an increased sense of confidence, pride and ambition derived from its growing economic power, China is shifting away from the low-profile approach in its foreign policies (introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the early reform period) to become more assertive as its interests and capabilities grow (see Callahan 2012, 22; Zhang 2008). These researchers argue that China is no longer content with ‘playing the game created and defined by the world’s advanced industrial economies, most notably the United States’ (Steinfeld 2010), or to continue to work largely ‘within the existing international order and conciliated the big powers’ (Yan and Sautman 2012), but is keen to have a say in international affairs.

Accompanying the shift, discussions for a Chinese-style world order are also
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Emerging. Many Chinese public intellectuals have published books and articles describing China’s future as the world’s future. For instance, in *2030 China*, Hu Angang, one of China’s most influential public intellectuals, concludes that China will create a Sino-centric world order to establish the World of Great Harmony, which is not only ‘China’s dream’ but also the ‘world’s dream’ (Hu et al. 2012). China’s political leaders have also been presenting Chinese visions of a future world order. In September 2005, Hu Jintao introduced ‘a harmonious world’ as a new way of thinking about global politics from the podium of the United Nations General Assembly. This harmonious world, Hu explained, is different from the current Western-dominated world order, and to challenge this existing world order, China needs not only to increase its level of ‘dealing with the international situation and international affairs’, but also ‘to have more influential power in politics’ (Wang 2012).

Two things are certain: first, there is recognition and consensus in China that it should move from a low profile to a more confident and assertive approach in foreign policies. Second, harmony is the core value in China’s vision of the world. The question then is: What exactly does ‘harmony’ mean within a Chinese-style world order? The answer will help to clarify how China intends to reshape the contours of the international system; it will also cast light on whether China is ready for such a new world order.

This article draws on discourse analysis and semi-structured interviews. Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, 4) note that ‘in discourse analysis, theory and method are intertwined and researchers must accept the basic philosophical premises in order to use discourse analysis as their method of empirical study’. This is employed for an examination of the one-hour programme ‘Africa Live’, produced by Central China Television’s (CCTV) CCTV Africa in Nairobi (CCTV’s first overseas news center). Here, discourse analysis is used both as theory and as method. A critical analysis of media discourse, understood as an attempt to show systemic links between texts, discourse practices and sociocultural practices (Fairclough 1995, 16), allows the investigator to examine the intricate relations between media discourse and its political, social and economic contexts. It not only identifies and analyses the main themes of the programme, with a view to revealing what discourse or new concept of the world order China’s major state media want to project, but also what is missing from the concept, since ‘the analysis is extremely useful as it is “sensitive to absences as well as presences in texts”’ (1995, 58). The absence, if any, of values from the concept will help determine whether China is ready for the order it promotes. Extensive in-depth interviews with Chinese foreign and media policy makers and media practitioners (in 2011 and 2012) serve to not only contextualise the analysis, but also to ensure greater interpretive coherence.

There are three reasons for analysing the discourses on ‘Africa Live’, broadcast on the global English CCTV News (its website claims to have 80 million subscribers globally) and targeting an international media public (from interviews with the Director of CCTV Africa): first, state media play an important role in communicating a country’s efforts to bring about an understanding of the nation’s ideas, culture, national goals and current policies. In the case of China, state media for overseas audiences play an even more important role in conveying messages from the state, as the industry falls under the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party, although the domestic
media environment is increasingly diverse and far from monolithic since the industry underwent marketisation (for media system transformation see Lee 2000; Zhang 2011; Zhao 1998, 2008).

Second, the shift in China’s approach to foreign policies is reflected in its shift from wanting its voice to be heard (‘right to speak’) to ‘having the power of discourse’ (Zhao 2011) – a discourse that should differ from the West, yet dominate global discussions on norms and values (Zhao 2011). At the symposium on ‘Trends in African Development and Prospects of Sino-Africa Relationships’, in April 2011, Qu Xing, president of the China International Affairs Research Institute, called on Chinese academia to construct a non-Western discourse. As an official in Beijing reasoned during an interview on the power of discourse in 2011: ‘Human rights is a concept from the West. We will not win if we try to highlight this concept.’

More importantly, over the past decade, China’s presence in Africa has become more visible than that of other countries. It is one of the regions where China is increasingly active: today, China is Africa’s largest trading partner. Bilateral trade volumes surged from US$10 billion in 2000 to more than US$160 billion in 2011 (CCP website). Africa is also an important part of Hu’s harmonious world; in fact, he first mentioned the concept at the Asian–African summit meeting in Jakarta, in April 2005.

China accords great importance to strategies aimed at gaining influence in Africa, which makes certain observers believe that China has already displaced European, American and Japanese diplomatic and capitalistic soft power in many sub-Saharan African countries, ‘winning influence in countries where western governments were conspicuous by their absence’ (Rotberg 2008). In addition to setting up 29 Confucius Institutes and classrooms in 22 African countries (Hu 2012), China’s initiatives in Africa include infrastructural and technical support to the media sector, and a greatly increased media presence, as ‘China recognised the international media as an important outlet for managing and communicating a non-threatening, responsible and peaceful image’ (Sheng 2008).

The Chinese media’s engagement with Africa greatly increased after 2000, thanks to the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Major changes came in 2006, when Xinhua strategically moved its regional editorial office from Paris to Nairobi, a central hub in Africa, for China’s ‘going abroad’ media project. The launch of the state-run China Radio International (CRI) in Kenya in the same year can also be seen in this light. In 2008, Xinhua launched its China African News Service. With over 20 bureaus in Africa, the Chinese state news agency has become a primary source of information (Wu 2012, 17). Its newly developed English-language television channel, CNC World, reached cable audiences in Africa from 1 January 2011, following an agreement between CNC and the South Africa-based MIH Group. Xinhua’s launch of mobile news in sub-Saharan Africa in April 2011 enables about 17 million Kenyan subscribers to receive Xinhua’s latest news. China Daily launched its Africa edition, the first English-language newspaper published in Africa by a Chinese media enterprise, on 14 December 2012. The speed and scale of the expansion of the Chinese media are especially noticeable at a time when many Western media houses are cutting back on their overseas operational budgets.
Hillary Clinton, then US Secretary of State, recognising that the new battlefront is the progressively ‘crowded field of state-financed satellite television news’, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2012, citing the emergence of international broadcasters Aljazeera, Russia Today and CCTV News, that the US is ‘engaged in an information war’, adding: ‘We are losing that war’ (Massey). Whether Clinton is right or is exaggerating the picture, the launch of CCTV Africa is a vital step in China’s outreach campaign designed to raise awareness of its language, culture, values and diplomacy around the world in general, and in Africa in particular. It is also an important effort in challenging the long-standing Western monopoly by creating its own news providers to tell China’s story on global affairs (especially African), and to win the hearts and minds of everyday people who have traditionally learned about the country through global political news circles (Wu 2012, 5).

The scale and visibility of China’s intervention in Africa have attracted much media and scholarly attention. Critics have also begun to examine China’s use of soft power, offering insights into the way soft power is playing an increasingly important role in China’s foreign relations (Brautigam 2009). A small but growing number of scholars are also starting to explain how the media are caught up in China’s incursion into Africa, and the implications for the global mediascape (see Alden 2006; Banda 2009). Recent conferences organised by Oxford University China Africa Network (2012) constitute such an endeavour, bringing together academic experts and practitioners to examine and discuss the issue.

Despite the widespread attention, however, there is one under-acknowledged yet vital point: while reversing established global perceptions of China is a priority, state media are using Africa as a testing ground for constructing an alternative discourse to that of the West. That discourse is not only to showcase its soft power, but also to challenge the existing world order. This understanding is not only grounded in the context of the pragmatic nature of China’s foreign policy and its learning-by-doing approach to development at home and abroad, but is also inspired by those who convincingly argue that China is using Africa as a stepping stone for global expansion. The Economist (2011) considers that China views Africa, where ‘they can learn the ropes in a region where competition is weak’ as a stepping stone to a greater global commercial presence. The well-known Chinese scholar, He Wenping (2007), notes that Africa is perhaps the most important testing ground for promoting Chinese soft power, but offers no reason for this. Stephen Ellis (2012), in another context, believes China and Africa’s development is the testing ground of a world power. Interviews with officials and media professionals reveal that Africa is an important frontier, where China will test and cultivate its new identity as a rising power along with its newly-found soft power, by constructing a discourse on the developing world with great political-economic diversity. Some media professionals are more confident about promoting a positive image and spreading China’s influence in Africa, as an interviewee from Xinhua News Agency noted in 2011: ‘The level of expertise and technology are lower there’, while ‘in the West it is harder for China to compete’. These media professionals believe what they need is a platform to practise and build up the power of discourse, before moving into more challenging territories. The examination of discourses from
‘Africa Live’ will thus reveal what alternative norms and policies Chinese state media are promoting to the outside world. The answer to the question will clarify whether China is ready for a new order.

Data analysed and interviewees

‘Africa Live’ is broadcast daily, in English. It consists of ‘African News’, with a weekly series of 30-minute documentary programmes, ‘Faces of Africa’ on Monday, and half an hour on ‘Talk Africa’ on Saturday, featuring interviews on current affairs in Africa. The examined programmes span the period from January (when it was launched) to the end of April 2012. Programmes from the archives on the CCTV website were downloaded and transcribed. For ‘African News’ items (N = 283) every fifth day from 24.01.2012 to 30.04.2012 was transcribed and examined, so that the data from 21 days would cover each day of the week, for three weeks. The data were then checked sentence by sentence, summarised and categorised into negative, positive or neutral reports, following the key words of each item in their context (e.g., ‘war’, ‘blood’, ‘death’ as negative; ‘celebration’, ‘boost’, ‘stable’ as positive; ‘sports’, ‘football’ as neutral). ‘Talk Africa’ was similarly transcribed from 15.01.2012 to 29.04.2012, summarised and examined for main themes. During the same period ‘Faces of Africa’ was transcribed and examined for outstanding features.

Interviewees included three officials from the media industry and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; nine media professionals from CCTV, Xinhua News Agency, China Daily and Global Times; four media academics from Tsinghua University, China’s University of Communications and Renmin University in Beijing (2011, 2012); and four local and two Chinese employees of CCTV Africa in Nairobi (2012). Note that the author did not examine the validity of what was reported in the CCTV coverage, but focused on state media discourse for the values and norms it was trying to project.

Findings and analysis

An examination of the programmes on ‘Africa Live’ revealed highly noticeable features and significant recurring themes.

‘African News’, the balance between positive and negative reporting

‘African News’ differs from the current affairs programme ‘Talk Africa’ in that it presents the news of the day without much in-depth analysis. There are eight to 17 items a day, with the majority Africa-related. Nevertheless, five highly noticeable features could be identified: first, contrary to the findings from China Daily and Xinhuanet (Zhang 2013), namely that there are overwhelmingly positive reports on Africa, no such trend is clearly discernable in ‘African News’. In fact, as Figure 1 shows, on many days negative reporting outweighed positive reporting on Africa.
Second, in the 21 days under scrutiny China appeared ten times, with the majority of programmes being about China providing aid to various African countries, in the form of medical help, investment or cultural exchanges. Three of the China-related items were non-Africa related, but all painted a positive picture of China.

In contrast, however, a number of the items included negative reports on the US. For instance, one non-Africa-related item dealt with American airlines shedding jobs, and one was critical of US sanctions which forced an Angolan state oil company to pull out of a US$7.5 billion natural gas project in Iran. One item dealt with the conflict between Egypt and the US over a travel ban on foreign NGO employees in Egypt, two dealt with US soldiers killing Afghan citizens, with one relating this to Obama’s visit.

The fourth obvious theme running through the news items was China’s critical view on the European Union (EU) and certain established international practices: four items focused on the EU’s high carbon tax, and two challenged the World Bank for automatically giving the presidency to an American, thus raising questions about the merit and transparency of the selection process. One negative report was on European unemployment (the highest in 14 years), while one piece of sports news was critical of the divide between East Africa and Europe.

Finally, throughout the programme, solidarity and camaraderie were demonstrated by items dealing with collaboration with Africa on the international stage, such as the item on Indian airlines, the Chinese, and African aviation authorities being united in opposing the carbon scheme, and the one on Russia and China blocking a UN move to force President Assad in Syria to step down. This is obviously a footnote to Hu Jintao’s remarks in his report to the 18th Party Congress: ‘China opposes any foreign attempt to subvert the legitimate government of any other countries.’
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**Themes in ‘Talk Africa’**

This 30-minute Saturday current affairs programme ‘discusses the pertinent issues affecting the African continent’. High-level officials, including Kenya’s Vice President Kalonzo Musyoka (2008–2013), Malawi’s president, the Ethiopian prime minister, as well as scholars from around the world have been guests on the show. In fact, the first guest on the programme was Kenya’s then vice president, who showed his support for the launch of CCTV Africa.

| Dates       | Titles                                                                 |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 15.01.2012  | How Africa can reposition herself in int’l affairs                     |
| 22.01.2012  | Egypt in transition                                                    |
| 29.01.2012  | The changing face of Africa                                            |
| 05.02.2012  | Africa’s food security                                                  |
| 12.02.2012  | AU elections charter                                                   |
| 19.02.2012  | Libya in reconstruction                                                |
| 20.02.2012  | New hope for Somalia                                                   |
| 04.03.2012  | Senegal’s election                                                     |
| 11.03.2012  | Rwanda’s phenomenal rise from the ashes                                |
| 18.03.2012  | Lord’s Resistance Army                                                 |
| 25.03.2012  | New Milestone in Sudan talks                                           |
| 01.04.2012  | Charting a new economic path                                           |
| 08.04.2012  | Africa’s oil wealth                                                    |
| 15.04.2012  | Somalia post TFG                                                       |
| 22.04.2012  | Mali in transition                                                     |
| 29.04.2012  | The Taylor verdict: what it means for Africa                           |

Six recurring themes emerged from the programmes, with many reinforcing China’s stand, as demonstrated in ‘African News’. The list below ranks frequency of occurrence, with No.1 being the highest frequency:

1. Condemnation of Western intervention in African affairs
2. Democracy, revolution, elections, crisis and stability
3. Reforming international systems
4. Chinese support without conditions and China’s role in Africa
5. China’s construction of the African image
6. Questioning the US’s behaviour in Africa.
In addition to these clear themes there is another highly noticeable feature – the challenge facing the presenter of the programme, who frequently encounters liberal-minded discussants.

1. Condemnation of Western intervention in African affairs

In contrast to the West’s preoccupation with ‘political conditionalities’ and calls for ‘good governance’, China has stood by the principle of non-interference and non-intervention in its foreign and Africa policies, and remained highly critical of foreign intervention in Africa’s affairs (although see, e.g., Large 2008). It strongly supports the African Union (AU) in exercising its power over African affairs. In the following programme, for instance, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies are challenged for ignoring the stand of the AU in dialogue over events in Libya:

(1) How Africa can reposition herself in int’l affairs (15.01.2012)

Presenter (P): When we look back at what happened in Libya the AU had a stand for dialogue. NATO Allies had a different stand. In the end it was foreign intervention. So what is Africa’s position in an issue like the DRC and where does that leave Africa’s voice when it comes to dealing with one of its own?

Solidarity between China and Africa (Kenya) is demonstrated when Kenya’s vice president at the time, Kalonzo Musyoka (KM), concurs: ‘Let us take hold of our own destiny as a continent.’ The same is true of the following:

P: You talk about a system in place, is that a domestic system, an African-led system, an African Union system?

KM: Well they actually, basically we must build capacity for African countries themselves.

The presenter again refers to NATO interference as follows:

(2) Libya in reconstruction (19.02.2012)

P: At the recent AU Summit, African leaders were quite upset about the AU Mediation team and their role when they got sidelined by NATO-led military intervention.

Although political leaders such as Rwanda’s President, Paul Kagame, are reported to hold different views (Rwanda’s phenomenal rise from the ashes, 11.03.2012), the presenter voices her suspicions of such international efforts, as demonstrated below, by challenging the American non-profit Invisible Children for raising awareness of the activities of the Lord’s Resistance Army and the use of child soldiers a) at the wrong time, and b) on the role African countries and individuals should play, rather than calling for foreign assistance in this matter:

(4) Lord’s Resistance Army (18.03.2012)
P: What African countries or African individuals should do, in the case of the advocacy or the campaign by the Invisible Children? One of the criticisms has been that it makes Africa unable to solve its own problems, and Africans are waiting for issues to be imposed on them by foreign countries. What should African countries do? What should African individuals do?

Since the discussants do not really answer the question as to what African countries and individuals should do about African affairs, the presenter pushes them for an answer:

(5)

A) P: Thierry, are African countries doing enough?
B) P: Fred, is the region doing enough?

The presenter raises similar questions about the role of the AU when it comes to African affairs, and highlights the failure of foreign intervention in other programmes:

(6) New milestone in Sudan talks (25.03.2012)
P: What impact has the influence of external parties outside of the AU had on the negotiations on the two countries?

(7) New hope for Somalia (20.02.2012)
P: Foreign interventions, diplomatic interventions, peace initiatives have failed to bring stability to Somalia. Why is that?

The examples show an obvious effort on the part of the presenter to drive home the point to the participants, and hence the audience, that Africa will deal with its own issues rather than allowing any external interference.

2. Democracy, revolution, elections, crisis and stability

Just as frequent as the themes treated above, are discussions on democracy, revolution and elections – taboo topics in China’s domestic media. In fact, the topic of democracy came up in the first programme:

(8) How Africa can reposition herself in int’l affairs (15.01.2012)
P: What is influencing these changes? Is it a result of the changing power dynamics in the rest of the world or are Africa’s democracies maturing?

In his report to the 18th National Party Congress in 2012, Hu Jintao made it clear that China ‘will never copy a Western political system’ (Hu 2012). China supports other developing countries in establishing a political system that suits local conditions. In this sense, CCTV’s ‘Talk Africa’ provides a platform for the former vice president of Kenya, who is keen on an African-style democracy:

(9) How Africa can reposition herself in int’l affairs (15.01.2012)
KM: Africans have to make democracy responsive to Africa.

Bingu wa Mutharika (BWM), former (controversial) president of Malawi, believes African democracy to be superior to that of the West:

(10) Africa’s food security (05.02.2012)

P: How is Africa going to change the image of political and social instability? How do you rate Africa’s democratisation?

BWM: So we begin from there, and come out with our own system of African democracy, much more superior to Western democracy.

From the first programme, political stability is highlighted as crucial to economic development and investment:

(11) How Africa can reposition herself in int’l affairs (15.01.2012)

P: The issue of stabilising the region. What are some of the initiatives that Africa’s leaderships are pursuing to ensure that there is stability in the region and to ensure that there is stability that can be conducive for economic development and investment?

The presenter frequently solicits views from the participants on democracy in Africa and the link between election and stability:

(12) The changing face of Africa (29.01.2012)

A) P: Africa had an economic success last year, but it was quite mixed on the political front. For instance, there were some disputed elections in the Ivory Coast, in DRC and a lot of attention throughout the year was focused on North Africa.

B) P: What was the AU’s view though in relation to Libya and Egypt and Tunisia given that the AU Charter and the AU Democracy and Elections charter stipulates that it will not accept unconstitutional changes of government?

(13) The AU Elections Charter (12.02.2012):

A) P: The African Union now wants to entrench a culture of change on the continent based on the holding of regular, free, fair, and transparent elections, through the Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. … Now through the charter the AU is pushing member states to commit themselves to establishing independent bodies for the management of elections. However, only 15 of the 54 member states have so far ratified this charter. This is quite worrying…..

The question is repeated in the same programme:

B) P: The AU says it wants to revolutionise democracy in Africa. In 15 days the charter comes into force, however, only 15 of Africa’s 54 states have ratified that charter, why that lack-lustre response?
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When the presenter does not receive the expected answer, she makes a third attempt:

C) P: Isn’t there the thought though that when there is an election in Africa, there is hardly ever any good news. Africa as an investment location during election years, is that still a crisis?

The same link between stability and election is made in the following programmes:

(14) Senegal’s election (04.03.2012)

A) P: David, elections and stability ... What would it take to end that cycle of violence during Africa’s elections?
B) P: There are going to be several parliamentary and presidential elections coming up in 2012 across the continent. What’s the likelihood of another Senegal?
C) P: Ok, David, briefly your final comments. There are going to be elections across Africa this year, about 15 of them. Your view on the lessons learned from the Senegalese experience, and what’s expected out of Africa’s elections this year?

This is different from Lee’s (2010) observation that ‘the Chinese elite and authorities have been for the most part interested only in economic globalization: cultivating foreign capital, markets, and technology. They are determined to keep such “bourgeois thought” as democracy and human rights out of China’s media.’ So the question is: Why so much discussion on taboo topics in ‘Talk Africa’? A close examination reveals that the presenter actively brings up the topic of democracy for the following reasons:

1. Providing a platform for Africans to talk about their ‘own style of democracy’ rather than copying a Western political system;
2. Establishing a link between elections, revolution and instability;
3. Advocating that stability is important for investment and economic development;
4. Democratising or reforming the international system, the rules of which were created and defined by the world’s advanced industrial economies, most notably the US.

3. Calling for the reform of international systems

‘African News’ provides a platform for African countries to show that they are keen to have a sense of ownership of the international system. In the programmes, the Western conception of ‘democracy’ is taken up by China in arguing for an equal say for both China and Africa in the international system.

An examination of the programmes shows that for the presenters as well as the interviewees and discussants, ‘the international community’ is almost synonymous with ‘the West’ (the US and Europe), and, by extension, ‘international systems’ refers to those set up by the West. China is now a member of the UN, the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Health Organisation. All these institutions have rules and norms on global engagement, which China, as a member, is expected to abide by. However, these rules were made without
China’s participation. Some observers believe that in recent years China, in the face of an apparently faltering Western democratic capitalist model and with the confidence provided by continued high growth rates and massive foreign exchange reserves, is changing its low-profile image to reflect a more confident, assertive (some say arrogant), anti-status quo power that is pushing back against the West, promoting its own alternative norms and policies in many areas, and generally seeking to challenge the US-led global system.

This move is clearly reflected in the programmes examined here, where much discussion centers on the need to reform global governance. In the following programme, the International Criminal Justice system is accused of targeting Africa:

(15) The Taylor verdict: what it means for Africa (29.04.2012)

A) P: The landmark verdict on Charles Taylor comes at a time when the International Criminal Justice system is under attack for allegedly targeting Africa.
B) P: There are those who say that the verdict had more political connotations than in justice.
C) P: The court has had a biased approach, the ICC specifically?
D) P: If you look at the case selection, the majority are in African countries ...
E) P: So why do you think that there is this focus on Africa, Professor?

A similar case is made about the International Criminal Tribunal (ICT) transferring one of its cases to Rwanda:

(16) Rwanda’s phenomenal rise from the ashes (11.03.2012)

A) P: The ICT has recently transferred one of its cases to Rwanda. How significant is that for Rwanda’s justice system?
B) P: Do you think it is selective justice?

In the following programme, the presenter questions the number of AU forces the UN Security Council has voted to send to Somalia:

(17) New hope for Somalia (20.02.2012)

P: The UN Security Council has voted there to increase the number of AU forces in Somalia to just under 18 000. Is that enough?

The interview with the South African High Commissioner, Ncumiso Ntsinga (NN), shows the common desire on the part of China and South Africa to change the West-led world order, in which developing nations do not believe they have a voice:

(18) Charting a new economic path (01.04.2012)

A) P: Your Excellency ,… Why is South Africa in BRICS?
NN: We’ve always strongly believed in solidarity amongst the countries of the south, in democratising the international system. The South itself needs to be organised and be able to organise the international system. I think that you would agree with me that a unipolar system does not work for anybody.
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B) P: South Africa’s government has indicated that it will be seeking a reform of global governance institutions, what are the concerns with regard to this and what does SA expect to achieve through this?

NN: … there’s something wrong with the system. That the system has not been democratised, that we need to democratise the system so that we also feel a sense of belonging and feel that it is our system, it does not belong to somebody else. You look at the continental issues, for instance the issue of Libya, and the AU was almost ignored. When the AU said let’s find a political solution, it was ignored, the bombings happened. Would you call that a fair international system? I do not think so.

C) P: Do you feel that Africa still does not have a voice on the global scene?

NN: Well, I would argue that all of these are indicators of where we are, of how undemocratic the global system is.

One can conclude from the above two themes that when democracy is applied at a domestic level, China believes it, along with African countries, should consider local conditions and develop something that is different from, or ‘superior’ to, ‘Western democracy’. When it comes to reforming the international system, the Western concept of democracy is used to further the developing world’s (including China’s) interests.

4. Chinese support without conditions and China’s role in Africa

China’s support for Africa is notable for its ‘no-strings-attached’ approach. In the programmes, in addition to framing and legitimising its involvement with Africa, the topic of China as Africa’s biggest trade partner and unconditional supporter of African countries, comes up frequently. The presenter often pushes discussants for their views on China’s unique no-strings-attached approach:

(19) Africa’s food security (05.02.2012)

A) P: One of China’s top political advisors addressed the AU Summit and he talked about any assistance coming from China to Africa without any strings attached. How are African countries reading this?

BWM: … it’s a new thing that we very much welcome … They are true friends of Africa.

In the same programme, Britain is held up as an example for withholding aid, in contrast to China’s unconditional support of Africa:

B) P: The UK is one of Malawi’s biggest donors and about a year ago they withheld about $500 million in aid. What is your view on foreign aid?

In the programme below, Africans are reminded of the differences between aid providers:

(20) Libya in reconstruction (19.02.2012)
A) P: Where will Libya be seeking aid from?
... The cash to resuscitate the fledgling economy will not be hard to come by, but there will be many strings attached.

In the same programme, China’s role in Africa is discussed:

C) P: When you look though the West had a lot of input in ousting Gaddafi, what is the likely role that China will play in Libya today?

A scholar from Beijing summarises the aid China can offer:

Firstly, the overhaul of the infrastructure across the nation is the area where China has the specialty, has the managing capacity, the capital, and the technological knowhow. Secondly China has been strong in the areas of project engineering. And China has the experience of running and building up the small and medium-sized enterprises which are badly needed in Libya to provide more jobs for the people. And fourthly, China as a friend of Libya can help Libya to regain access to the international community.

Various other forms of support from China come up in the programmes:

(21) Africa’s oil wealth (08.04.2012)

P: In terms of the oil find and the infrastructure that will be required to support the oil discovery in Kenya, where does the government hope to raise its funds?
KM: ..., we are looking at the private sector. We have been able to do a lot with the Chinese support, because of the China Exim Bank and the China Development Bank. We are right now trying to find the oil pipeline from Sudan. And we are looking at big multinational companies which can bring not only the expertise and construction, but which can also mobilise financial resources.

Letting Africans voice their opinions on the programmes, makes it more convincing to combat or counteract concerns over China’s intentions and strategic aims in Africa.

5. China’s construction of the African image

One of the goals of ‘Africa Live’ is to present an image of Africa that differs from what is projected by the West. Discussions on the changing image of Africa occur in different programmes, with the West being branded as the ‘other’ for harming Africa’s image:

(22) The changing face of Africa (29.01.2012)

P: Africa is still burdened by the questions of political and social unrest or instability. How must this change if Africa is to become an investment area?

(23) Charting a new economic path (01.04.2012)

P: The changing face of economies, like we call them now in Uganda, Nigeria, the growths of countries like Rwanda are actually perceptions of the changing image
of Africa. How is this changing the perception of the international community or the international community’s current engagement with Africa?

(24) Africa’s food security (05.02.2012)

P: How is Africa going to change the image of political and social instability?

The excerpt below raises questions about the issue of advocacy, which ‘Africa Live’ believes will reinforce the negative image of Africa:

(25) Lord’s Resistance Army (18.03.2012)

P: Do you believe any meaningful change will come out of the advocacy, or is it just stereotyping Africa, that kind of prejudice has been put on the continent for a long time?

6. Questioning the US’s behaviour in Africa

It is a widely held perception that China is in Africa for its rich natural resources. With its own platform in Nairobi, China is not only able to deflect Western criticism, but also to challenge the US’s intentions in Africa as a form of pushback. Similar to ‘African News’, two programmes in ‘Talk Africa’ – one on Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, and the other on Africa’s oil wealth – question the coincidence of raising awareness of the LRA and the use of child soldiers when this is no longer a threat, yet nonetheless sending 100 American soldiers to the region:

(26) Lord’s Resistance Army (18.03.2012)

P: If the LRA is no longer a threat to Uganda or to the Ugandan government, what are the 100 soldiers from the USA doing there?

As the participants use different terms to denote the American forces, the presenter tries to remind them that the troops are soldiers. For instance, the discussion between the presenter and Fred Opolot (FO), spokesperson of the government of the Republic of Uganda, illustrates that the latter sees the presence of the US forces as great support in the fight against Kony, while the presenter voices the strong possibility of a hidden agenda behind the soldiers’ presence in Uganda:

FO: … with the US support as far as logistics and intelligence is concerned, Kony’s days are numbered.

P: Your view on the recent raising of awareness on the issues and on the arrival of the soldiers from the US, those that are asking why this is happening when there’s a bit of speculation about oil in that part of Uganda.

The same is true for the following excerpt:

(27) Africa’s oil wealth (08.04.2012)
A) P: Africa is slowly becoming a theatre for fierce rivalries between multinational corporations and by extension their countries of origin. But is the fight to claim African oil laying bare the geostrategic and political interests of the world’s biggest energy consumers, and do Africa’s massive oil revenues really trickle down to the citizenry?

As the discussant veers off topic without saying why American soldiers are in Uganda after the country announced that it may have found oil, the presenter demands an answer:

B) P: I just want to revisit the question of strategic interests of the world’s energy consumers, and recently the international community became proactive again in Somalia at the time Somalia was announcing that it may have found oil. America has also sent about 100 troops to Northern Uganda at a time that Uganda announced it may have found oil.

Scholars such as Carlson (2004), Rozman (2004), Friedberg (2005) and Johnston (2003) note that China can be seen to have been socialised into accepting the dominant norms of international behaviour in the US-led post-Cold War international system. This implies that the relationship between the US and China should continue to improve, with their identities and values gradually converging. Lee (2010, 264) argues that since 2002, China has decided not to contest the US’s global supremacy, but an examination of the programmes scrutinised here, shows this is no longer the case: China seems more willing now to challenge the US and its allies in areas of disagreement within the international arena, than at any time since it introduced reform and opening-up policies more than three decades ago. It can be predicted that as China continues to assert its presence in international affairs and attains greater power and capabilities, it will increasingly come into direct contact with the US across a whole host of spheres.

When the presenter encounters liberal-minded participants
Throughout the programme there is one noticeable feature: unlike talk shows at home, where discussants are supposed to voice different perspectives, very often it is the presenter and the discussants who disagree on almost every issue on ‘Talk Africa’. For instance, while the presenter repeatedly tries to establish a link between elections and political instability hampering economic development, the answers of many liberal-minded participants are always that revolution is a good thing. Some attribute instability not to the elections but to an abuse of the electoral system. Hence, many discussions (by participants) centre around setting up credible institutions and systems, rather than on leaders, legitimacy, civil society, credible operations of power within the nation, setting up infrastructure for elections and improving governance – all of which are taboo topics in China’s domestic media.

Examples of discussants disagreeing with the presenter emerged in the programme on elections in Senegal, when David Zounmenou (DZ), head of the African Conflict Prevention and Risk Analysis Program of the Institute of Strategic Studies in South...
Africa, criticises the political manipulation of electoral processes, rather than confirming the link between elections and instability.

(28) Senegal’s election (04.03.2012)

A) P: David, elections and stability ... What would it take to end that cycle of violence during Africa’s elections?

DZ: Look electoral violence has become the threat to political stability and economic prosperity. If we look at Africa we see two major trends developing. One is the promise of economic prosperity, the other one is a kind of political stagnation that has emanated from political manipulation of electoral processes. And we agreed on three basic things that need to be done.

General Sameh Saif Al-Yazal (SSA), Director of the Egyptian Institute of Strategic Studies, also believes a better Senegal deserves a better leader by voting out Wade:

B) P: There are going to be several parliamentary and presidential elections coming up in 2012 across the continent. What’s the likelihood of another Senegal?

SSA: Well I think Senegal deserves a new better life. Wade is 85 years old. If he ran for the new period of seven years he would finish his period at 92 years, I don’t think he’ll have enough concentration to run the country, I believe he’s going to be too old for that, I don’t think his people will accept it, they deserve a better leadership I think.

On foreign intervention in Africa examples abound, with discussants disagreeing with the presenter. For instance, Mr Wetangula (MW), Kenya’s Foreign Minister at the time, in New hope for Somalia, calls for greater international attention to Somalia; Awad Ashareh (AA), a member of parliament for Somalia, welcomes the re-engagement of the international community; Wafula Wamunyinyi (WW), Deputy Chief of the Mission of the African Union Force in Somalia (AMISON) and representative of the chairperson of the AU Commission, expresses gratitude to the UN Security Council for increasing the number of AU forces in Somalia, while James Gondy (JG), Head of the Kenya Office International Centre for the Transitional Justice, disagrees with the presenter that the ICC has a biased approach; Tharcisse Karagamara (TK), Rwandan Justice Minister, is reluctant to join the presenter in accusing the ICC of practising selective justice:

(29) New hope for Somalia (20.02.2012)

A) P: Mr Wetangula, welcome to the programme. Foreign interventions, diplomatic interventions, peace initiatives have failed to bring stability to Somalia. Why is that?

MW: … despite the efforts of the AU, I think the international community has not paid sufficient attention to Somalia.
B) P: David Cameron has described Somalia as ‘the world’s most failed state’. After 20 years of isolation the international community is now re-engaging again in Somalia. Is this a good thing?

AA: Yes, we welcome this.

C) P: The UN Security Council has voted there to increase the number of AU forces in Somalia to just under 18 000. Is that enough?

WW: Yes. We’re really grateful for the decision. To us in AMISOM it is a vote of confidence.

(30) The Taylor verdict: what it means for Africa (29.04.2012)

P: The court has had a biased approach, the ICC specifically?

JG: I wouldn’t say that, I would say the ICC is an institution that is growing. That is not by design, it’s rather by default. The court could be more sensitive towards geopolitics. That notwithstanding, we must as Africans appreciate, when mechanisms are created to seek justice for victims. The ICC also operates on the principle of complementarity, which means the local jurisdictions and the countries have the primary responsibility to seek justice for victims.

(31) Rwanda’s phenomenal rise from the ashes (11.032012)

P: Do you think it is selective justice?

TK: I don’t want to make any blanket accusations …

On the intentions and interests of world oil consumers, Muhammed Ihseen (MI), a leading consultant in the oil and gas industry, disagrees with the presenter:

(32) Africa’s oil wealth (08.04.2012)

P: I just want to revisit the question of strategic interests of the world’s energy consumers, and recently the international community became proactive again in Somalia at the time Somalia was announcing that it may have found oil. America has also sent about 100 troops to Northern Uganda at a time that Uganda announced it may have found oil.

MI: Let’s be clear, the problem we have is with a person, not with the country. I don’t think we can blame third countries, we need to blame ourselves.

Although China wants to see the AU having greater impact in dealing with African affairs, participants do not always agree. For instance, Dr Joshua Kivuva (DK), from the University of Nairobi, and Erastus Mwencha (EM), Deputy Chairperson of the AU Commission, counter the presenter:

(33) The AU Elections Charter (12.02.2012)

P: The AU says it wants to revolutionise democracy in Africa. In 15 days the charter comes into force, however, only 15 of Africa’s 54 states have ratified that charter, why that lack-lustre response?
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JK: I think we should correct the impression that this charter is the one that is going to change the state of democracy in Africa. In fact, the charter is a product of the changes that are taking place, because if you look at the generation that was born with words like democracy, this is the generation that is bringing this change, and is demanding that things change to reflect their needs.

(34) The changing face of Africa (29.01.2012)

P: What was the AU’s view though in relation to Libya and Egypt and Tunisia given that the AU Charter and the AU Democracy and Elections Charter stipulates that it will not accept unconstitutional changes of government?

EM: That provision never foresaw a situation where you will have a popular uprising. … And if there is a popular uprising from the people to change the government that cannot be unconstitutional because the constitution is vested in the people, it is the people who embrace it. …

On the issue of the US sending troops to Uganda, the discussant has different views too, and these are reflected in the choice of words for the same group of people (underlined):

(35) Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA, 18.03.2012)

P: If the LRA is no longer a threat, what are the 100 soldiers from the USA doing there?

FO: With the US support … Kony’s days are numbered.

On the role of a British firm in the discovery of oil in Kenya and its future, obviously the presenter expects something different from KM’s answer.

(36) Africa’s oil wealth (08.04.2012)

P: A British firm discovered oil in Kenya, at a time when Kenya has declared that its future probably lies in the East, what is the significance of this?

KM: … in the energy sector, we have an open door policy.

The same applies to the UK’s withdrawal of aid from Malawi, when BWM gave a very diplomatic answer rather than condemning the UK:

(37) Africa’s food security (05.02.2012)

P: The UK is one of Malawi’s biggest donors and about a year ago they withheld about $500 million in aid. What is your view on foreign aid?

BWM: … these things can be sorted out.

There are many more examples where the discussants provide contrary answers. One wonders whether these kinds of discussions have unintended consequences for domestic audiences. After all, although CCTV News targets an international audience, research shows that the English programme, ‘CCTV News’, is watched by many Chinese learners of English. However, this merits further research and falls outside the remit of this article.
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‘Faces of Africa’

An examination was also conducted on the 15 half-hour archived weekly documentaries aired on Mondays from 23 January to 30 April 2012. The documentaries are about African people’s lives, dreams, customs and culture, education, music, sports, fashion, and inspiring stories of people who found success through hard work despite hardship. They are stories of support, sharing and love.

This programme not only effectively balances out the unusually negative reports on Africa in the news programme ‘African News’, but also gives a social and cultural perspective to the African narrative.

Discussions and conclusion

China’s presence in Africa dwarfs that of many other powers (Shambaugh 2011, 22). Although it has developed at a slower pace in comparison to other sectors, China’s state media have recently made great inroads into Africa. The media are making notable efforts to increase China’s influence in Africa and in the world, as an instrument of China’s grand soft power engagement.

Although China increasingly seeks to project the image of a great power which is capable of assuming responsibility, China’s rapid rise means it has to deal with a whole new set of questions and external demands. What CCTV Africa is doing is a reflection of what is happening within China – the country is learning by doing. It is clear that ‘Africa Live’ is a platform for China to prepare itself for its new international status. To that end, ‘African News’ does not follow the usual practice of prioritising positive reporting in its news programmes, so that these are more attractive to an international audience. For the same reason, topics of discussion (i.e., elections and democracy) that do not make their way onto domestic talk shows, consistently appear in the programmes. To ensure that more subtle views are expressed on African and Africa-related international issues, CCTV Africa actively sourced local and international personnel. Currently it has over 70 local employees and over 40 from China. Interviews with both local and Chinese employees showed that local employees – the majority of whom worked for private media companies – bring vast experience to their new jobs. Local employees are helping CCTV Africa to report with greater sensitivity on African polity and culture. It has also changed its conventional way of spreading crude propaganda, by granting African participants the platform of ‘Africa Live’ to tell their stories. Local participants on the programme are given the chance to state that the democracy practised in their own countries is far superior to that of the West.

Harmony, the core value that China is trying to promote, is understood to be the peaceful co-existence of different cultures, values and systems. That is to say, the main goal of a harmonious world, as advocated by Hu Jintao, is not to share culture or values globally, but to allow different systems to co-exist peacefully. This holds great attraction for ‘those distant developing countries in Africa and Latin America, especially those alienated by the American policies or marginalized by the existing international system’ (Sheng 2008, 210). In promoting the co-existence of different systems, CCTV lashes out at the strings-attached approach followed by the West in Africa.
The examination of ‘Africa Live’ showed that Chinese official media not only aim to guide global views of contemporary Sino-Africa relations, but also to create a discourse on international affairs, as an alternative to a ‘Western’ discourse. It shows a China that no longer chooses to work with the current world order, which it believes is biased in favour of the West (Chan 2008). It wants fundamental change in the global order. Thus, China has aligned itself with African countries by expressing camaraderie with ‘the victimised’. In addition, it is promoting a positive image of China by highlighting Western intervention and interference in African affairs, condemning the international system (e.g., the ICC) for targeting and harming the image of Africa, leading to disinvestment in Africa; accusing the international system (e.g., the NATO allies) of not respecting the AU in dealing with African affairs; challenging the World Bank for automatically awarding the presidency to an American rather than an African, thus raising questions of merit and transparency in the selection process; questioning US intentions in sending troops to a relatively stable Uganda where oil has been found. The programmes thus also have the goal of ‘educating’ the African public that the West is to blame for many of Africa’s failures.

Challenges in discourse by China’s state media, of international systems and the US, indicate that a more assertive China is emerging. However, state media discourse contains only condemnation of the West and the West-led international system. What is obviously absent is the alternative discourse China can offer to the world, apart from an international system that allows the co-existence of different systems. In other words, China is trying to build up its challenging power, but no substantial content is to be found in state media discourse which offers an alternative to the West. China is aware of its lack of experience as a global power, and of its lack of discourse that is strong enough to counter the hegemony of a US-led Western discourse. Among other goals, ‘Africa Live’ therefore also serves as a platform to experiment with and strengthen China’s ‘power of discourse’. However, this lack does indicate that although China may be verbally assertive and occasionally harsh in its condemnation and criticism of the West and the US, it is little more than a ‘push-back’. Its response should also be read in the context of internal economic and social limitations. Although Chinese state media which target international audiences show less constraint, their discourse on a new world order is a work in progress that reflects internal practices such as the paramount importance attached to stability, and anything that affects stability – whether revolution or election – is considered undesirable. As a number of topics discussed in the programme are taboo in China’s domestic media, many professionals do not have the expertise to handle these subjects, as is demonstrated in ‘Talk Africa’, when discussants disagree strongly with the presenter. It means that although domestically, at present, there seems to be agreement on China’s more confident role, and even if ‘the new leadership is well prepared to deal with the international system and its institutions’ (Shen 2012), China, a global power and a developing country at the same time, is still trying to find its way as a great power within an international system which is, itself, changing rapidly.
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