Soft Power and Chinese Internationalism in Africa

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Abstract

In international relations, the conduct of soft power by states is often tied to democratic states owing to the ideals of democracy being inclusive. As such, states of a totalitarian outlook are often considered as not having the necessary tools to advance their interests on the basis of soft power. However, the emergence of China as a burgeoning power on the international stage has never seen trends in the conduct of international affairs considering its stretch into exporting its ideals into the international system. The opportunity to use economic linkages with states in the international system, especially in Africa, is well presented in extant literature. However, the output of Chinese soft power (such as the existence of media partnerships, Confucius institutions, educational scholarships and humanitarian activities) has been captured not as an effective extension of Chinese relations with Africa. China has displayed the trappings of democracies all over the world by being accommodating to the changing ideals of international governance not just through the use of power but also adding soft power as a way of gaming subtle influence in the conduct of relations and internations. This paper discussed the use of soft power as an integral part of Chinese international outlook towards states particularly using Africa as a case study. Using Africa as a case study comes from the need of understanding China and its role in establishing Africa as a partner in development. Also, this paper looks into the recent People to People soft power strategy launched in January 2026 as an extension of the will of the Chinese State to use subtlety to gain influence in the comity of African states by tilting away from traditional State led trade and infrastructure projects towards direct cultural and social engagement with the public. Most importantly, this paper seeks to look into the intersection of soft power as a key display of advancement in a subtle manner through the activities of states deemed to be totalitarian in governance.

Keywords: *Soft Power, Chinese Soft Power, Africa, People to People, Infrastructure.*

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Introduction

When Joseph Nye first developed the concept of soft power in 1990, his writing implicitly referred to an assumption about the United States. He contended that "attraction as well as coercion [is power]" and the attractiveness of one nation's culture, policies, and values serves as an element of power (Nye, 1990). Implicit in this was that liberal democratic countries have the structure to build the attractiveness of culture, since its political culture is viewed as universally attractive, while authoritarians have a structural problem since you cannot export the freedoms you do not practice. China has spent 30 years testing this assumption, the case of its interactions in Africa is only a piece, but not the entirety, of the story and these efforts are not limited to trade and construction contracts. The Chinese are broadcasting Chinese state television in Swahili and French. They have the Confucius Institute operating across the African continent in places like Nairobi, Lagos, and Dakar and every year, thousands of Africans travel to China for university education, funded by scholarships by the state. These actions are intentional and they represent an attempt by the state to build a case for the legitimacy of soft power. Whether its political system is compatible with what the Western world considers prerequisite for genuine projection of its culture, and the attractiveness of its values remains to be seen. This paper examines China's soft power in Africa from the early 2000s to 2026, looking at the debate of whether authoritarians could exercise soft power, the architecture that China has built in the continent, and the latest people-to-people soft power strategy unveiled in January 2026 as a new dimension of the country's engagement in Africa. The paper claims that over the years China's soft power in Africa has evolved from displaying state sponsorship to developing a genuine

social and cultural relation with the Africans and whether it will generate enduring influence remains to be examined, yet the initiative itself cannot be ignored.

Theoretical Framework: Soft power beyond democracy

Throughout the debates in international relations about the usefulness of soft power, there has been the continuing question whether non-democracies can make full use of it. Nye's initial framing of soft power on values and political institutions clearly restricts it to countries that possess genuinely appealing and open political systems (Nye, 2004). Under such interpretation, China cannot create real soft power because its party system is a liability, not a resource of attraction.

A number of scholars disagree on this notion. Giulio Gallarotti (2011) suggests that soft power resources are not exclusive to liberal democracies. Development aid, cultural exchanges and multilateral engagement, he maintains, can generate attraction for any state regardless of their political system. Li Mingjiang (2008) goes further, arguing that China possesses a distinctively new form of soft power generated from the attraction of its development model and the narrative of solidarity towards the Global South. Unlike American public diplomacy, this new form is a different appeal, directed at different target audience, with a different origin story.

The significance of the African case here is obvious. African states already possessed memories of colonial pillaging, adjustment conditionality and lecturing with aid. Chinese aid and investment entered in Africa devoid of such legacy: they did not demand political reform; nor demanded market reforms; and certainly, no sermons of rule of law and democracy were prescribed. Political non-conditionality on aid was indeed an element of attraction even if not

labeled as such (Rotberg, 2008). It is not about African governments wanting to copy China's autocratic system; it is about whether Chinese aid came free from politics, at least from the type of politics which was an element of liability of Western countries for African states and governments.

The idea of representational force by Mattern (2005), where states use communicative and cultural power to shape the perceptions other countries and agents have of themselves and their interests, is a concept that can be particularly useful in discussing the expansion of Chinese media to Africa. China Radio International (CRI), CGTN Africa and the China Daily Africa edition do not function just as information providers, they constitute efforts to shape the information environment for African states and populations so they can better understand the world and its problems. The literature is far from concluding if it falls into the definition of soft power or information control but it must be discussed when talking about Chinese soft power in Africa. The definition adopted for soft power in this paper is: a state's capacity to achieve its foreign policy aims through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Such a definition has the flexibility to allow for non-democratic states to produce soft power and at the same time remain grounded in the core logic of power operating through preferences, not force. It does not imply that Chinese soft power works well in Africa nor that African people are passive recipients. Rather it assumes that the countries and individuals in Africa have agency in interpreting Chinese intentions and offerings.

The Structure of Chinese Soft Power in Africa

China's apparatus of soft power in Africa was built over the course of two decades and, as of now, functions across at least five channels: Confucius Institutes and educational programmes, state media,

medical and humanitarian aid, cultural exchange activities, and more recently, digital and social media activity. Each of these channels operates differently, reaches a distinct set of target audiences and has generated varied scholarly attention. But before looking into the individual channels, it is instructive to contextualise the set of tools that China has brought to bear on its African soft power and internationalist project. They come in a variety of formats and are aimed at a range of audiences: Confucius institutes, to attract educated urbanites and the budding professional classes, through language and culture; aid and medical programmes, to reach rural and periurban populations with little or no prior engagement with China; People-to-People programmes, to engage future political, civil society and media elites; information via state media channels that exerts influence over the general environment in which the rest of this work takes place; and physical infrastructure, which in isolation is of course no soft power tool at all, but provides the material terms through which Chinese culture and education programmes are understood. Each works at a different pace and brings Chinese investment to different facets of African life. And all work together as part of a layered strategy of engagement, even if these parts of the layer are not always implemented in tandem.

Confucius Institutes and education engagement

Operated jointly by Hanban (China International Chinese Language Council) and their partner universities, Confucius Institutes in 2024 numbered over 60 across Africa, located mainly in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zimbabwe (Hanban, 2024). Confucius Institutes teach Mandarin and offer programmes related to Chinese culture and opportunities to study in China, through scholarship provision. The spread of Mandarin teaching at African universities is

one of the more concrete outcomes of Chinese engagement in the field of education and the political dimensions of this process continue to be debated.

The scholarship provision part of Chinese educational engagement is significant. The provision of Chinese government scholarships to African students rose from nearly 2,000 in 2006 to over 12,000 annually by 2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). The FOCAC, the overarching forum on China-Africa cooperation, has more than doubled scholarship provision during each of its summit's, committing to 50,000 scholarships between 2022 and 2024 alone. Chinese scholarships for African students foster Chinese language skills, establish professional networks, and engender familiarity with Chinese institutions and practices that can last for decades. The long term impact of Chinese scholarship investment on Africa's educated class, and ultimately on the relationship between the African states and China, has yet to be properly analysed, but the scale of the program should not be understated.

Accusations have been leveled at the Confucius Institutes for functioning more like institutions for the purposes of censorship and monitoring than for authentic academic exchange, with concrete evidence from certain cases revealing Hanban ordering its institutes to refrain from discussing such issues as Tibet, Taiwan and the Tiananmen Square Massacre (Sahlins, 2015). These criticisms have led to a number of Chinese institutes in Western universities being closed. However there have been relatively few closures in Africa due to African universities being much less exposed to the political pressures that frame the debate on academic freedom in the West; indeed many African universities benefit from the financial support provided by Chinese state institutions.

State media and the information environment

China's presence on African airwaves dramatically increased after 2012. Its state-sponsored broadcaster CGTN Africa, located in Nairobi, broadcasts into the continent through English and French language television feeds, and has made distribution agreements with a number of African broadcasters. The China Daily Africa Weekly is available both online and in print, and a Chinese pay-television broadcaster, Star Times, is a service provided by over 30 African countries and estimates 10 million subscribers (Wasserman, 2020). In sum these services together make China the single biggest provider of media services on the African continent, outperforming British, French and American state broadcasters by a wide margin.

News output on Chinese state media channels tends to focus on South-South cooperation, Chinese development success and African economic advancement, and glosses over the issues of government mismanagement, conflict and negative reporting on Chinese corporate behaviour in Africa. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales' study found CGTN Africa to be more reliant on official governmental perspectives when covering political news on the continent compared to Al Jazeera and BBC Africa (2019) due to an editorial philosophy based on an emphasis on stability and development over competitive political discourse.

These information interventions are strengthened by partnerships with African media companies; Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Zimbabwe are all examples of African countries with which China has signed information sharing agreements or entered into partnerships providing for the transfer of technology and training. This approach allows Chinese content to reach new audiences without them actively seeking out China's own media sources. The implications for the long term independence of the African press, though still the subject of

serious debate, have remained somewhat under-analysed (Gagliardone, 2016).

Medical and humanitarian aid

Chinese medical diplomacy in Africa dates back to the 1960s, when medical teams were dispatched to Algeria in 1963. Today, they are present in over 40 African countries and hospitals have been built or furnished by the Chinese in countries as diverse as Ethiopia, Cameroon and the DRC, for example (Alden, 2007). In the COVID-19 pandemic China donated vaccines, PPE and other necessary medical equipment to numerous African countries, at a time when supply chains from Western nations were constrained due to high domestic demand. The publicity garnered for such initiatives in national media across Africa was immense, with China's embassies and missions across Africa actively highlighting vaccine deliveries in a bid to receive positive media attention.

Medical diplomacy has proved to be one of the most effective vehicles of soft power diplomacy to Africa, as the aspect of human-to-human interaction is a crucial component of public engagement. A doctor working in an Ethiopian village clinic is very different from a Chinese constructed motorway or stadium in that the former offers a very personal point of connection between the Chinese state and its citizens and has the capacity to generate genuine goodwill, while the latter can only serve a limited number of purpose. The major weakness of medical diplomacy is scale; African states are huge and Chinese doctor deployments, whilst appearing to numerous, are relatively small relative to need and dispersed across over 40 countries.

Could infrastructure be a form of soft power? Limitations to the Chinese approach.

The central imagery of Chinese operations in Africa in the West and within the sphere of policy making is of loans for infrastructure: a railway, a port, a special economic zone, a dam. It is a true depiction. China has financed and constructed major infrastructure throughout the continent through policy banks, such as China Eximbank and the China Development Bank. The Standard Gauge railway connecting Mombasa to Nairobi, the railway to Djibouti, the Chinese-built expressways in Nigeria and Ghana and the port expansions throughout the continent are some of the often-cited projects. The total sum of Chinese infrastructure contracts throughout Africa between 2005 and 2022 exceeded $150 billion, according to statistics from the China Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University (Brautigam & Gallagher, 2023).

Infrastructure investment will invariably win approval from the recipient countries, however the relation between the two is not always a clear one. African citizens are content with the tangible output, however they have strong criticisms concerning the conditional nature of the contracts for such development. China's loan agreements throughout Africa have provoked significant debate during the last decade. Issues surrounding debt sustainability for Zambia, renegotiation of port lease terms in Kenya, the proportion of locals employed in Chinese construction projects and similar criticisms have been evidence against the argument that this is a generous partnership among Southern countries (Brautigam, 2011). Afrobarometer polls from 2016 and 2019 demonstrate that, although Africans maintain favorable opinions regarding China's economic role in the continent, this positive outlook is conditional upon concerns for the quality of Chinese products, for employment opportunities locally, and for the ethics of Chinese business dealings (Sanny & Eberhard-Ruiz, 2019).

It is thus apparent that infrastructure investment alone can create presence and awareness in Africa and that it demonstrates China's interest in investing in countries where other countries are either afraid or unwilling to do so. This alone however is not enough for China to have attraction for Africa as suggested by Nye. People living close to the Chinese infrastructure constructed will not instantly share Chinese foreign policy interests as a direct result of quick construction or impressive architecture. Soft power involves something else: the conviction that the relationship between the two sides is equal, and that each has something worthwhile to offer aside from capital investment and contracts.

The People-to-People Strategy of 2026 is what aims at resolving this deficit. This transition away from state-level investment and trade towards building cultural, educational and social ties, highlights the acknowledgement of the fact that infrastructure alone does not achieve the comprehensive form of influence China hopes to achieve.

The People-to-People Strategy of 2026

In January 2026, a new strategy entitled the People-to-People Soft Power Strategy for Africa was announced jointly by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the China-Africa Cooperation Office. The launch ceremony was held in Beijing at a forum, with an official document being sent out to Chinese embassies on the continent. This represented not just a codification of the China-Africa partnership model and the new practices established, but also incorporated a distinct element lacking in previous phases of China-Africa cooperation.

The People-to-People strategy argues that the success and durability of China's influence on the African continent are reliant not only on state-to-state partnerships but primarily on the engagement

with African citizens at all levels of society: in the field of culture, arts, journalism and even within the framework of local government. This is a shift because till the launch of the new strategy, almost all engagements between China and Africa were state-controlled. Loans, infrastructure contracts, aid programs and diplomatic discussions were conducted on an inter-governmental level and civil society actors in Africa, local governments and free media in Africa were outside the range of China-Africa relations.

Some of the new aspects of the People-to-People strategy include expansion programs of youth exchange programs between African youth leaders and their Chinese counterparts; the organization of media training for African journalists in Chinese institutions; establishing a residency program for African artists in China; strengthening partnerships with African content producers to create Chinese content on platforms like YouTube and Tik Tok, along with financial assistance for events and festivals which celebrate African culture in China; and the increasing importance of Mandarin education throughout the continent with the establishment of Mandarin learning centers at the high school level as well as the increase in the number of Confucius Institutes.

Particular mention needs to be made about the digital nature of this strategy; previous Chinese cultural activities concentrated more on tangible and state-controlled institutions and media outlets, while the new strategy also targets social media audiences through cooperation with African content producers, instead of providing content for a passive African market, as a recognition of the fact that African audiences are more active and influence in the internet age depends on genuine exchange of ideas instead of monologue. The strategy does not however reflect any concerns about the potential undermining of African autonomy through this process.

Arguably, the most politically sensitive aspect of this strategy is the youth exchange element. The newly devised scheme will provide opportunities for select African youth leaders to spend from three months up to a year of their lives in China to engage in studies and professional internships, with appointments to both state-owned corporations and governmental offices. The choice of young African leaders is to be undertaken jointly by the respective Chinese embassy and host countries; this is where the political nature of the strategy comes in, and critics fear this may result in the creation of more state-dominated relationships, as opposed to those centered around the citizens themselves (Moyo, 2017).

Assessing the impact of Chinese soft power in Africa: Methodological and empirical insights

There are inherent methodological challenges associated with Measuring soft power impact. For example, attraction is inherently difficult to measure, the causal mechanisms between a governments' cultural initiatives and public opinion abroad involves many intervening variables and as such, can rarely be attributed with a high level of certainty. As such, evidence for the impact of Chinese soft power in Africa remains mixed. Evidence for Chinese soft power impact at the government and diplomatic level is relatively consistent; governments of African nations have generally resisted calls to publicly denounce China. When resolutions condemning Chinas's human rights record in its Western region of Xinjiang at the United Nations Human Rights council came to the vote in 2019 and 2020 African states have consistently voted with the government and its allies, or abstained. Similarly African countries have shown remarkable solidarity with China's position in the WTO and at the UN

on numerous occasions regarding technology governance etc. This consensus however, might be due to coercion, economic dependency, and genuine preference: a combination of all three; with the proportion attributable to soft power alone, extremely hard to isolate (Dreher et al. 2022). Public opinion offers a more complex picture; data from Afrobarometer, for example shows that in surveys carried out in 34 African countries between 2019 and 2021, the majority surveyed (59%) rated Chinese influence in their country as somewhat positive or very positive. However, it also showed a marked difference between various regions, social class and country, with highly educated, urban, working individuals more sceptical about China's role than less educated rural dwellers (Sanny and Eberhard-Ruiz, 2019). This is consistent with a theory of direct interaction; it implies that those people in close proximity with China in a practical sense (urban businesses and workers) are less accepting of Chinese influence, than the image of China projected at official, high-level diplomatic meetings and through the mass media. Evidence from African students in China offers further insights; in a study of 1,200 African graduates of Chinese universities by Peking University, the majority had overwhelmingly positive experiences of living in China, and a significant number maintain business contacts with people from China. Significantly, however, there were racial elements in the experience, a minority were subjected to racism in China, and a positive image of China corresponded directly with fewer experiences of racism (Bodomo 2021). This problem persists throughout Chinese public-facing diplomacy; the dissonance between the projected, positive image of China as an African partner, and the reality of the everyday experiences reported by Africans in China including housing discrimination, lack of medical care access and day-to-day interactions seems unresolvable. Mass media diffusion has been somewhat more

successful, at least in providing greater awareness of Chinese content. Wasserman (2020) highlights that CGTN Africa is very visible in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa; however these audiences perceive this content very differently from their home media and from western media. While a brand may become known, this does not always translate into confidence and an acceptance of the messages transmitted. Chinese state media in Africa may be more visible, but still struggle for credible authority.

The Role of Chinese Internationalism and Soft Power Diplomacy in Africa, Africans and African Culture

The impact of Chinese soft power and internationalist China in Africa goes beyond the voting booth and policy elites. They extend into the core of African societies, economies and daily life in ways that warrant immediate study. In particular, three issues matter: the influence of Chinese aid in managing who governs and what gets developed, the political new order of Africa's external partnerships, and the cultural front of tightening China-Africa relations.

On aid and geopolitics, the impact of Chinese aid has been to shift the balance of power in the relationship between African governments and external actors more generally. The provision of Chinese assistance without regard to political conditionalities in practice undercuts the comparative weight of Western donors and multilateral financial institutions in forcing governance reform in Africa. Governments that in previous years might have been left with little choice but to accept conditionalities attached to IMF programmes or governance conditionalities offered by the World Bank now have an alternative Chinese offer on different terms and with different expectations. Impacts of this change have been hotly debated. Some

advocates of the Chinese model see this as a positive development, with nonconditionality respecting African agency in setting its developmental agenda. Others see the removal of accountability mechanisms as giving governments a freer hand to dodge necessary fiscal adjustments and governance reforms, with long-term costs for African citizens (Brautigam, 2011). There is no one-size-fits-all explanation here, but the one thing that is clear is that it has widened the strategic and policy space available to African governments and, on the whole, different external actors have had at least a presence.

At the level of the international order, China's presence has translated into a slow pluralisation of African international alignments. Formerly "deeply Westernised" African countries have built up an extensive Chinese network of diplomatic and institutional relations in trade, investment, security training, and multilateral cooperation. This is not an extreme scenario of "Western loss and Chinese gain": it is a structural change in how African states relate to external powers. Countries are more equipped for external balancing, they are less likely to submit to pressures from any given side, and they are more cognizant of the new strategic opportunities that the Sino-American rivalry provides to smaller countries. The AU's foray into Chinese financing of its administration building in Addis Ababa, completed in 2012, was an early and tangible sign of this: the later presence of surveillance equipment in its computer systems, revealed in 2018, demonstrated the ambiguities that come with it (Tilouine & Kadiri, 2018).

The cultural aspect of China's ties to Africa is perhaps the most difficult to interpret and least developed. As a result of the growth in the spread of the Chinese language through Confucius Institutes and secondary school learning centres, Africa is poised to have a cohort of China-capable young people who may offer tangible benefit for

Chinese business interests in Africa, but also who provide cultural ballast. The language used to frame any social or political issues, and the networks into which one is enrolled, are experienced through the prism of one's native or acquired language. An increasing number of African professionals experiencing China's political, cultural and social norms through their skills in Mandarin, as opposed to Western languages and norms, will not merely be observing the norms they encounter, but likely also ascribe to them some different professional orientation and international outlook (Bodomo, 2021). If there is a way on how to position cultural flows in the face of potential cultural imbalance?, one could look towards an Africa cultural presence in China, through the establishment of culture and artist residencies, digital content partnerships and cultural festivals in Africa, may help achieve this goal. If it can be achieved at a comparable scale.

Authoritarianism and soft power limitations

The initial question posed was whether or not authoritarians could legitimately be perceived as possessors of soft power; there is no easy answer to this. China's role in Africa shows that not only is there a more complex relationship between internal political structures and soft power capabilities than Nye proposed in his initial formulation, there is also a cost. China has certainly managed to foster genuine attraction on a number of levels. Its success story, told as a narrative about the emergence of a nation from poverty into middle-income status within one generation without following prescriptions of Western models, has proved compelling to a continent that is dissatisfied with the inconsistent outcomes of the Western development model. China's medical diplomacy has engendered direct human connections, while scholarship schemes have engendered a generation of African experts conversant in Mandarin and possessing

Chinese professional networks. These are certainly not trivial soft power gains. At the same time, China's political system creates obvious disadvantages for its soft power. The lack of transparency of Chinese decision making, which makes it difficult for African partners to understand Chinese actions and to cope with abrupt shifts in Chinese policy, is a source of apprehension. The restriction of the flow of independent information within China limits the information available to African students and researchers living in China. The suppression of minority rights, both of Tibetans and Uyghurs within China itself, casts doubt on the reliability of China's credentials as a protector of developing world interests in international organizations; African states may have remained silent about these issues from a diplomatic perspective but silence doesn't constitute consent. Nye himself later returned to the idea of whether authoritarian states can foster attraction, suggesting in an article in 2013 that they can achieve a certain level of attraction through the cultural and economic spheres, but their authoritarian political systems have limitations in terms of credibility (Nye, 2013). The case of China in Africa would seem to confirm this conclusion, where the gains in terms of soft power at the level of elites and institutions are real, with considerable branding and generalized good perceptions by the African public, but depth is shallower than breadth. This is partly based on the limitations in African public awareness of Chinese society's inconsistencies, rather than the public being knowledgeable about China as it really is.

Africa as a Testing Ground for Chinese Internationalism

All of the 54 African states have a vote in the UN General Assembly and at the Security Council, and among the entire range of multilateral institutions that organize the world: WHO, WTO, IMF, International

Atomic Energy Agency, Human Rights Council, treaty bodies etc. For any power wanting to change the rules of the game, or at least make sure that they cannot be used against them, Africa cannot be a side show, but the center stage of things. And China's involvement in Africa, soft power included cannot be considered in a vacuum of this structural reality. Beijing cannot afford to be a minor player in Africa. The logic of multilateral governance requires that.

This has implications because the rule-based international order created in 1945 was not created with Africa and has been managed largely without African leadership. China and Africa have, to different degrees, both been "latecomers" in a world order whose foundational norms they did not write. China has clearly indicated its willingness to revise it. And Beijing's stance on issues ranging from sovereignty to technology governance, the reform of international institutions to the internet, all contest the liberal internationalist consensus of the US and its allies. Gathering the support of African states for China's positions in the multilateral system isn't just about votes, it is about convincing others that China's conception of the global order resonates among states around the world, far beyond its neighborhood.

For twenty years now, China's policy makers have pursued this systematically, and African states have provided consistent support for Beijing's policies in a multitude of multilateral questions ranging from UN human rights resolutions, to debates over internet governance at the International Telecommunication Union. To explain this pattern, care must be taken. There are two reasons: economic interdependence: countries heavily reliant on Chinese money/goods/investment are less likely to challenge Beijing in international institutions; and second, shared interests: Many governments in Africa genuinely sympathize with China's insistence on national sovereignty and respect for internal affairs, because those principles can shield them from criticism

concerning their own internal governance systems. China's long term investment in culture and soft power (scholarships, Confucius Institutes, media outreach, cultural exchange programs) has undoubtedly helped to create an environment where China's message is better received among African elites than it otherwise would have been. All these factors make an analytic disentanglement difficult, yet politically necessary, for the sustainability of Africa's vote for China's policy agenda ultimately depends on the dominant driver among these three.

The People-to-People initiative, announced in Jan 2026 aims to boost the importance of this third factor. The premise underlying this policy initiative is that human ties are more resilient than loan agreements and construction contracts. Infrastructure can engender resentment, loan terms can be renegotiated, but an entire generation of African leaders educated in China and conversant in Chinese language and culture is another story entirely. Their professional and intellectual horizons will have been colored by the time they spent in China, and their personal relationships with their Chinese counterparts will endure in ways that loan repayment schedule cannot match. This initiative seeks to lay a social foundation under the economic one, so that the Sino-African relationship doesn't fall apart once the money issues are contentious.

The benefits of this strategy won't accrue for at least a decade, setting it apart from typical Chinese policy initiatives, where desired outcomes are expected within five-year planning cycles. In retrospect, the long-term benefits derived from the US investment in cultural and educational diplomacy in post-war Western Europe and Japan through Fulbright scholarships, the support for American cultural centers, media outreach, and a deliberate project to instill American institutional and academic models in Europe is in the same category.

These investments yielded multi-generational returns and outlived most of the specific bilateral agreements associated with them. The analogy however, is not without limits. American cultural diplomacy post-1945 took place under the protective canopy of American security guarantees, military occupation, and Marshall Plan funding for rebuilding war-torn economies. China has none of those structural assets in Africa. It offers no security umbrellas and, while influential, its developmental model is not unchallenged; there are documented incidents of racism against African students and laborers in China that no scholarships can overcome. But China does have financial capacity, diplomatic patience, and decades of sustained presence on the ground. The key question then becomes: are those factors enough to engender the same kind of deep social affinity necessary for sustained influence in Africa, that post-war American assistance generated in Europe and Japan? The People-to-People program is Beijing's most concerted effort to date to find out.

Conclusion

China's soft power in Africa is real, yet imperfect, and it is on the increase. It's real because China has developed the institutions, human and informational networks which mold the view African elites and general public have of China and China's engagement in international affairs. It's imperfect because China's inability to address the racial discrimination it faces Africans in China, the contradictions in the Chinese political system, and the lack of transparency within the Chinese corporate world in Africa limit the potential depth of its goodwill toward African people. It's growing because China's People-to-People strategy for 2026 indicates a willingness to extend its commitment beyond interstate diplomacy and physical infrastructure

development and move into people-to-people relations targeting African youth, civil society, and media.

The theoretical debate which the paper opened with on whether authoritarian countries can exercise soft power gains partial resolution from the experience in China. The case of China suggests that non-democratic countries can generate appeal by creating a compelling discourse on economic development, health diplomacy, educational exchanges, and strategic investment in media. At the same time it reveals that such appeal is fragile and relatively shallow and susceptible to crises caused by African perceptions stemming from their direct encounter with the Chinese people.

Future research must assess the application of China's People-to-People strategy for 2026 in different African settings and their impact. Beijing may have conceived the strategy and its delivery mechanisms through its embassies; however the success of the strategy is sure to vary between the 54 African countries depending on country-specific circumstances and internal political dynamics. Studies at community and state level are required to move beyond broad surveys in order to analyze how Chinese soft power projects were received in diverse African contexts. An examination of the perspectives of African youth on study exchanges in China, African journalists who have received training in China and African students attending Chinese universities, will offer a more insightful perspective than any diplomatic communiqué or speech.

For the overall international relations theory, the study also challenges the long-held view about the connection between regime type and a country's ability to command soft power. The fact that China can generate influence in Africa does not depend on the existence of democratic governance in the country. Rather, the secret lies in a disciplined long-term approach to diplomacy and investment

combined with a willingness to conform to local needs and norms even if such preferences deviate from Chinese ones. Whether this ultimately serves African interests or not is a separate question that Africans themselves are increasingly empowered to respond to.

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