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## China's rising Soft Power: the role of rhetoric in constructing China-Africa relations

*Ascensão da China no Soft Power: o papel da retórica na construção das relações China-África*

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### Introduction

This article distinguishes three separate lines of conversation comprising the discourse surrounding China-Africa relations, that from “the West,”<sup>1</sup> that from China and that from African actors. Drawing on more than 200 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with Chinese, Western and African respondents, several key narratives come to light. From Western sources two central themes emerge, the possibility of a “China threat” to the established order, in a political and economic sense and furthermore the challenges China poses for the “development” paradigm in a broad sense. Chinese concerns centre around the need to distinguish China from African countries’ other partners and the importance of strengthening “soft power” in the international community. Africa is seen as a testing ground for such diplomatic experiments. Chinese scholars posit an alternative vision for development stemming from China’s own experience that implicitly challenges established dogma. African rhetoric encourages China’s role, despite various challenges to the relationship, specifically in order to exploit the arising tensions between China and “the West.” In order to crystallize the meaning of such messages, I examine how Chinese and African use rhetoric in the context of their bilateral relations for both international and domestic audiences.

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1 While it is recognized that in many ways this term is as analytically poor as referring to “China” or “Africa,” it is a term consistently used by Chinese and African commentators alike and I will therefore retain its use. I take it to mean the “industrialized North” or countries composed predominantly of North America and Europe.

## Rising concerns: a Western perspective on China-Africa relations

Most Chinese sources remark upon a perceived bias in the way Western sources portray China's relations with African countries (Li, Anshan 2008, 6; Li Anshan 2009, 8; Li Geqin 2009, 42 10; Zhang 2010). These are generally characterised as a misguided concern that China is "locking out" European energy interests in Africa (Downs 2007, 43) or that China is exploiting African countries, the latter generally portrayed as passive victims in this exchange (Mawdsley 2008, 9).

In terms of China's global role in general, a broader debate exists as to whether China is a "status-quo" power, seeking to assimilate and promote the current architecture of international institutions, or a "revisionist" power, with intentions to disrupt and rebuild them (Mawdsley 2008, 7).

Elements within the United States foreign policy circles have long advocated the increased assimilation of China as an emergent power into the international order, in order to viably sustain the current global architecture (Kim 2004, 42). The European Union (EU) is increasingly recognising the inevitability of modifications to the international architecture (Geissmann 2006, 2). This has been made even more evident given the recent global financial crisis of 2008–2009. Calls have come from the EU for China to play a "full role... [in] creating an open, flexible and robust global economy" (Weir 2009).

Several sympathetic scholars have sought to show that China's re-engagement with the world is resulting in Chinese acculturation of internationally held practices and values. Carlson (2006, 217) recognises a shift in Chinese foreign policy, pointing to the influence of "norm diffusion" on the former's evolution. China's shifting foreign policy approach thus reflects the changing status of China as a global power. He suggests that a certain flexibility has crept into official rhetoric even as regarding such important concepts as sovereignty. This resonates with Kim (2006, 281) who points out that as China further integrates into the international system, so shall the rhetoric of China's political leaders conform to convention within the current international system. Within this debate, there is an implicit assumption that China's rapprochement with Western norms is an inevitable linear development as the country's stature increases. Thus the international community applauds any "...move meant to bring China into closer conformity with international (read, Western) legal norms." (Chin and Thakur 2010, 129).

Pearson (2006, 242) however, while agreeing that China is a "status quo" power, thus posing no threat to the current international political structure, contends that China will not compromise on such issues as "non-interference." Perhaps closer the mark, Chin & Thakur (2010, 120) posit that China will continue to internalise those global norms deemed advantageous "...alongside registering its desire and right to be at the table for rewriting some others." This is supported by Zhang and Luo (2008, 27) who suggest China could transform current norms from within international institutions. Indeed Economy (2010, 142) has gone as far as

to call China a “revolutionary power” in the context of its transformative power within international institutions. China is outwardly supportive of international norms and institutions, as the current global order has been very conducive to its growth thus far (He 2007, 10). Indeed, Ikenberry (2008) argues that China is conforming to international norms such as foreign assistance precisely because the existing structure has assisted and continues to aid its objectives. As this is in line with China’s national interests, it will seek to perpetuate, rather than transform, the status quo. In clear approval of such conformity, Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Small (2008) for instance claim that China is showing a “new maturity” in its dealings with pariah countries and dictatorial regimes.

Such an analysis of Chinese foreign policy reveals a Western-centric bias, in that China’s policies are seen as laudable given that they are conforming to a universalism of which Europe is the “author and the embodiment” (Ayers 2006, 156). This idea is developed by Inayatullah and Blaney (2004) as the “politics of difference.” They suggest that under current norms, equality among states is achieved through reaching a “level of sameness” with the West. Conversely, not to do so implies inferiority to Western practices. According to Inayatullah and Blaney (2004), “difference is expressed largely in one’s own terms; by appropriating the other within one’s own cultural categories, the values and visions of the other are thoroughly obscured.” The debates surrounding China’s foreign policy thus mirror the debate of China as an emerging power. However, failure to take into account the rhetoric of the Chinese government and thinkers will result in an overly Eurocentric and thus flawed argument.

However, Segal (1999, 16) suggests that China is careful to retain a rhetorical vagueness in order to be able to effect diplomatic a *volte face* if required. Furthermore, although increasingly aware of the opportunity cost of remaining an outsider in international institutions, Chinese policy-makers are seen as being reluctant to subscribe to a regime that they had no part in formulating (Stähle 2008, 145).

Symptomatic of these tensions is the fact that China’s foreign policy has increasingly come under fire from the international community particularly as regards relations with African countries. Propounded international norms and institutions are time and again placed at odds with China’s activities in Africa. Faced with mounting criticism, and the threat that Beijing’s international acceptance as a fully-fledged member of the international community will be withheld, Chinese policy-makers are increasingly faced with a dilemma when confronted with Western discourse challenging Chinese foreign policy actions.

Linked to the above debate is the discourse regarding the rise of China as a “threat” and possibilities for the country to be assimilated as a “responsible stakeholder”<sup>2</sup> in the global institutional architecture. Perhaps underlining China’s

2 The term was first used by the then US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick in the context of urging China to be a ‘responsible stake-holder’ work[ing] to protect and strengthen the international system as it is currently constituted; they do not merely derive benefits from it.’ (Blumenthal 2007, 1).

awareness of this uncertainty, Mierzejewski (2009), drawing on the debate surrounding Zheng Bijian's (2005) "Peaceful Rise" concept, pointed to a lack of consensus as to the image that China should outwardly project. The carefully cultivated concept of "peaceful rise" was used to counter the perception that China's rise was a "threat" to the global status quo. It was hoped it would address the tension emerging between China's support for the global status quo as a structure within which it can develop, and the challenge to the status quo that China's development brings (Kim 2004, 37). The controversy surrounding the theory eventually led to its withdrawal from official documents and China reverted to insisting on developing country status to assuage Western fears of Chinese ascendancy.

According to Leonard (2008) Chinese foreign policy hawks resent the fact that each time China displays any kind of assertiveness on the global arena, the US uses its "moral height" to resurrect the "China threat." Li Geqin (2008, 45) likens this to a kind of "containment" of China by the international community. A growing frustration at the sustained negative image of China in the West thus remains (Yong Deng 2006, 200). Indeed, Yong Deng (2006, 192) suggests that China's "threat image" is used by state actors to further their own agendas, rather than representing any genuine concerns. Luo (2007, 20) has gone as far as to suggest that Western countries deliberately seek to destroy China's reputation internationally for their own gain.

International aid agencies and donor organisations have joined their voices to Western governments expressing the concern that China is causing retrogression in the supposed gains in a good governance agenda African countries pursued through responsible aid policies. In rebuttal, one Chinese interview respondent questioned using the West as a kind of "principled example." As with many others (see for instance Shu 2008, 17; Gao 2009) he pointed out that China, unlike the West, has never used force, to take strategic possession of African countries. By implication it is hypocritical of former colonial powers to lecture China on best practices as regards Africa (He 2009a, 46). He argues that China's practices were far superior to those of the West, "Instead China is providing finance for constructing basic infrastructure like schools, housing, roads, hospitals. It is the kind of infrastructure that the people need the most."<sup>3</sup>

Brautigam (2009) emphasises that fact that China's development assistance policy was influenced by and strongly mirrors China's own domestic experience with Japan as a development partner several decades ago. A Chinese academic confirmed this:

I can give you some examples of China's early development. In the early 1980s, the Japanese government offered some aid for some infrastructure projects in China, in return for some favorable [sic] conditions for investment, trade

3 Interview, chief executive officer of a Chinese import-export company, Luanda, 10 August 2010.

and natural resources. China accepted that way, because there was no other way, and we needed money at that moment. We consider that as aid. What is more, it was a win-win situation. Later, all the foreign investment companies enjoyed more favorable [sic] conditions than their Chinese counterpart [sic]. Until quite recently, foreign companies had very much more favorable [sic] conditions (such as lower tax) than Chinese companies, that's why some Chinese companies asked for a "national treatment" since they received an unequal treatment from their own government. Why? Because China needed investment and the government wanted to create better conditions to attract foreign companies.<sup>4</sup>

Another Chinese scholar highlighted the importance of "no strings attached" assistance, again based on China's own development experience. She explained, "China's aid needs to be assessed on a country-by-country basis; China cannot adopt a multilateral model. China has never considered itself a "donor" in economic co-operation, so can never integrate into the multilateral framework. The bilateral nature of China's aid is an issue with the West because it is not transparent enough, but the bilateral model is the most effective in terms of rolling out projects."<sup>5</sup> While implicitly criticizing the "one-size-fits-all" structural adjustment policies employed by the international financial institutions in years gone by, she neatly provides a defence for China's reluctance to join organisations such as the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Stähle (2008) puts forward an argument for how China can be cajoled into "playing by the rules of the game" by raising the opportunity costs of China remaining outside the existing aid regime. Such commentary has not gone unnoticed. Fang (2009, 58) points out that China will increase its "soft power" by participating in more international organisations. Stähle however, as with most Western commentators, assumes the infallibility of the aid architecture and does not question whether China's implicit challenge merits a re-examination of the current system. Interestingly, some Chinese respondents suggested that in terms of aid, China was still learning and could learn a lot from the West in terms of standards and norms. Such suggestions have also emerged recently in Chinese scholarly literature (Zhou 2009; Zhang and Zhu 2009). Wang (2005; 2009) has made studies of the administrative procedures of Western countries' aid programmes. He was particularly interested in the reporting structure of the aid department vis-à-vis other ministries and the accountability mechanisms. It has unsurprisingly also been pointed out that the West can also learn from China in terms of the results achieved in such a short time<sup>6</sup> (He 2009a, 51).

4 Chinese academic, personal correspondence, 11 June 2009.

5 He Wenping, IWAAS, presentation, 'China's Aid to Africa, Developing Features and Challenges Ahead' at 'Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects', Beijing, 13 October 2009.

6 Interview, reporter, *People's Daily*, Beijing, 3 December 2009.

Chinese researchers cite both Angola and Sudan as examples of China's successful development co-operation with African countries<sup>7</sup> (He 2009a, 46, 51). Given the notoriety among the international community of China's involvement in these states as a "rogue donor" (Naím 2007), it is clear that rhetorically at least, Chinese commentators see their country's involvement in a very different light. Western narrative on both countries generally focuses on the authoritarian and corrupt nature of the African regimes and China's apparent disregard for human rights violations in dealing with the incumbent governments (Kleine-Ahlbrandt & Small 2008). Chinese interview respondents however, have repeatedly emphasised that through economic co-operation with China, Sudan has become an oil exporting country, and Angola has received the means to begin post-war reconstruction. This is bound up by a concept of governance that facilitates development borne of China's national experience. As one commentator opined, "Stability is the most important thing for a country—without stability there is no basis for development. Africa needs strong leaders like Bashir and dos Santos."<sup>8</sup> Stability as a prerequisite for economic growth is thus the key to the Chinese approach to development both domestically and abroad.

The criticism of Western aid practices is clear. As a representative from China Exim Bank put it, "Africa is a huge continent with lots of people needing development and basic services such as clean water and electricity. They do not need charity or lectures. Most of the money from the international financial institutions was used for a few contracts with international consultants recycling the money back to their own countries. There was never any real benefit. Angola needed help. They needed access to finance and investment, despite their oil wealth."<sup>9</sup>

One Chinese interview respondent's rebuttal to the Western fixation with democracy and human rights was that it is "not really about these things," suggesting that it was rather a stick to beat China with as regards its engagement in African countries. This resonates with many respondents who talked about "international social justice" as being paramount, i.e. democracy between states, rather than the state of democracy in a country internally. Li Anshan (2008, 11) suggests that this concept of equality challenges the current international order; hence Western countries' resistance to it. President of China Exim Bank, Li Ruogu has commented in a public lecture:

...a truer way is giving society their basic needs; this is much more powerful than democratic rights. In terms of democracies, all countries are different... you must meet the needs of the people. In terms of human rights; the developed countries have an internal contradiction. Their standard of living uses so many

7 Interview, reporter, *People's Daily*, Beijing, 3 December 2009, various presentations at Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects' organized by IWAAS, Beijing, 13 October 2009.

8 Interview, Chinese reporter, *People's Daily*, Beijing, 3 December 2009

9 Interview, China Exim Bank official, Beijing, 13 October 2009

resources of the world, that we would need so many resources if the whole world had the kind of standard of living that these developed countries enjoy. If all countries used resources equally, the developed countries' standard of living would go down, as the world does not have enough resources. This is a fake democracy. When you are talking about democracy, equality and human rights in China, the US still consumes most of the products that are being produced in China under the conditions that they purport to criticize. Is this the Western implementation of equality? When Western countries talk about democracy, equality and human rights, it is generally according to their own internal situation, but it does not reflect in their behaviour as states in the international context. They try to control others. They try to be the representatives.<sup>10</sup>

As another Chinese interview respondent commented along similar lines,

The Western perspective is often put forward, but all countries have different development levels. The method of managing a country is not the same if the level of development is different. To talk about democracy is not wrong, but this is for advanced countries; it is not appropriate for less advanced countries. ... If you just give them the vote, but not a better life, will this change anything? On the contrary, other people cannot follow what you want them to do. The biggest problem is that you need education, food and shelter. This is more important before other considerations.

This implies that raising a population's material standard of living should be prioritised over civic liberties. In fact, "human rights" are conceptualised in material terms. There is also the presumption that the kind of projects endorsed by Chinese institutions will in fact lead to these material gains for the masses. This was reinforced again by President of China Exim Bank, Li Ruogu's comments regarding Africans,

Western countries talk about human rights and freedom every day, but if the people there can't even watch television or listen to radio, how can they enjoy human rights and freedom? (Reuters 2007b).

This again reflects China's internal narrative, or a ruling party whose current generation is the first to have their political legitimacy hinging solely on economic performance and public service (Lam 2006, 32).

To return to Li Ruogu, his attitude regarding China's role in Africa, while interesting in its outspokenness, is not surprising, given the increasingly active profile the state-owned China Exim Bank has in Africa, specifically to fund tangible, material public goods. Li Ruogu (2009) in a strongly worded academic essay points

10 Interview, chief executive officer of a Chinese import-export company, Luanda, 10 August 2010



to the hypocrisy inherent in Western criticism of China's role in Africa. In contrast to earlier criticisms from predominantly European media of Chinese exploitation of African natural resources, Li advocates for African countries to harness their resources to kick-start development<sup>11</sup>, implying that Chinese involvement is facilitating this process. Formerly deputy governor of China's Central Bank and having worked at the IMF and Asian Development Bank, Li is well-known for his outspoken opinions regarding the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWI). That they are often printed in official Chinese media sources implies state approval (Brautigam 2009, 112).

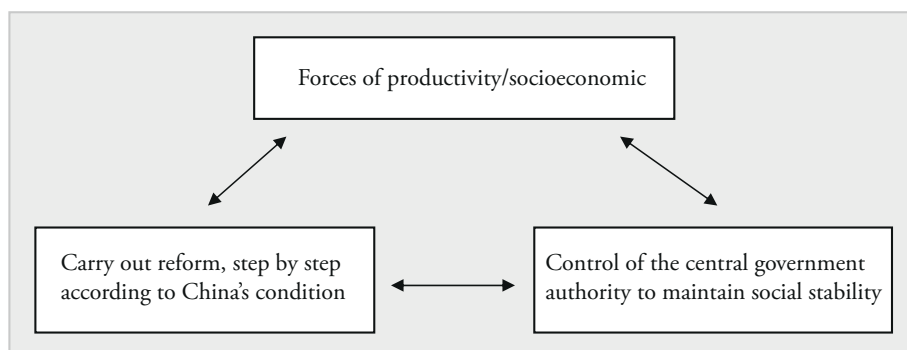
Li dismisses concerns about African countries' debt sustainability as an excuse used to influence and control their debt, "For instance, China has US\$ 2 trillion in reserves and US\$ 600 billion in debt—this is operating at full capacity."<sup>12</sup> This is echoed by Ministry of Commerce official Zhong Manying who in response to concerns that China's increased lending to Africa would deepen debt issues said, "What is the most important thing for Africa? Survival and development" (Zhong and Yao 2010). Li Ruogu continues this theme:

Human rights, development, debt—these all sound so beautiful and reasonable, but they cover the main purpose to restrain developing countries. They are all the results of development, not the pre-conditions for development. There is Western criticism, but development is the primary task of developing countries and sometimes there must be sacrifices to achieve this. In terms of human rights and democracy, you must take into consideration the stage of the country's development. You cannot look solely to external assistance to develop. You need to "give full play" to competitive advantages and integrate it into the international division of labour. The costs of development should not be used as an excuse to hold back development. The sacrifices for development will be well paid back. Western occupation of developing countries is the cost of history but Western exhortations for human rights and democracy "so-called" in Africa is putting the incidental before the fundamental. These are the outcomes, not the preconditions of development. We cannot talk of human rights and democracy irresponsibly. The real purpose of these Western criticisms is to restrict Africa's growth from playing a dominant role.<sup>13</sup>

11 Press interview with Li Ruogu at World Economic Forum (2007), available at <<http://www.weforum.org/en/events/WorldEconomicForumonAfrica2007/IssuesinDepth/LiRuogu/index.htm>>.

12 Li Ruogu, Chairman and President of China Exim Bank, Presentation at the Tsinghua University School of Public Policy and Management Lecture Series, 11 January 2010.

13 Li Ruogu, Chairman and President of China Exim Bank, Presentation at the Tsinghua University School of Public Policy and Management Lecture Series, 11 January 2010.



**Figure 1.** Li Ruogu's conceptualization of a sustainable development path.

Source: Li Ruogu, Chairman and President of China Exim Bank, Presentation at the Tsinghua University School of Public Policy and Management Lecture Series, 11 January 2010.

Li advocates, "...proper balance between stability (the precondition) and reform (the driving force), in order to develop (goal/ objective)..."<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, this almost exactly echoes the former Angolan Central Bank Governor Aguiñaldo Jaime on the same topic, "If you say to a country, 'We'll reward you when things are perfectly O.K.,' the country will say, 'When things are perfectly O.K., we won't need you anymore'" (Traub 2006). This illustrates the similarity of approach to development between China and many developing countries.

Sautman and Yan (2010) argue that despite China's portrayal through international media, the Asian country's role in Africa is on balance, positive. Indeed, Chinese respondents have repeatedly stated that critics should "come and see themselves what is happening"<sup>15</sup> and that "the proof of the pudding is in the eating,"<sup>16</sup> showing a clear confidence in the effect of Chinese engagement in Africa.

Chief among these propounded benefits is the fact that cheaper (relative to European) Chinese imports afford most African consumers more disposable income and buying power (He 2009a, 49). A second bone of contention is the perspective on trade in natural resources. One former Chinese official dismissed this stating, "Chinese don't rob and will never rob from Africa." Lots of Western countries (and China) import oil; it is not exploitation; it is trade!<sup>17</sup> Indeed, several academics, both Chinese and Western have pointed out in studies that China imports a good deal less oil from Africa than either Europe or the US<sup>18</sup> (Luo 2009, 33).

<sup>14</sup> Li Ruogu, Chairman and President of China Exim Bank, Presentation at the Tsinghua University School of Public Policy and Management Lecture Series, 11 January 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Chinese official, Luanda, 10 May 2010

<sup>16</sup> Interview, former senior management of Chinese state-owned company, Beijing, 11 December 2009

<sup>17</sup> Interview, former official, Chinese Ministry of Commerce, Beijing, 8 December 2009

<sup>18</sup> It must be noted however, that while the absolute volume is less, China is more reliant on African oil imports as a percentage of total foreign energy imports.

The Chinese perspective on Western concerns for African countries vis-à-vis their engagement with China is highly cynical. Most believe it is rhetorical warfare “aimed at squeezing China out of Africa.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, charges of neo-colonialism are deemed to be Western jealousy of Chinese diplomatic and economic success in Africa (He 2007, 29). A Chinese diplomatic based in Luanda suggested that the negativity of Western countries towards China’s role in Africa was due to ignorance,

They feel that some of their influence is being taken away, so they are smarting a bit. Angola is however an independent country and has the right to deal with whomever they like, according to their own thoughts.<sup>20</sup>

This view is shared by many African observers. As one Angolan civil society representative put it,

The World Bank, the IMF are “losing” to the Chinese. It is all business, all business. The approach is a question of competition. China is a threat, but for whom? Africans or Western business? Chinese goods are in US and Europe; you see “made in China” products everywhere. All the Western companies have migrated to China to take advantage of the cheap Chinese labour. The discourse of academics and businessmen is not about “protecting in Africans.” They are threatened and worried about Western business interests, not “Africa’s destiny.”<sup>21</sup>

## China’s Soft Power diplomacy in Africa

Although China’s relations with Africa are a small percentage of China’s global economic engagement overall, a disproportionate amount of high-level diplomacy has been showered upon the continent in order to promote “win-win” co-operation.<sup>22</sup> One Chinese policy-maker declared, “Africa has rising international status and is the cornerstone of China’s policies.”<sup>23</sup> Chinese political rhetoric vis-à-vis African relations is significant for two reasons. Firstly it is an important tool that Beijing has used in order to distinguish itself from Western practices in Africa and the developing world. Secondly, it is a manifestation of China’s increasing interest in using “soft power”<sup>24</sup> to cultivate “great power” status.

19 Liu Hongwu, President of the African Studies Institute, Zhejiang Normal University, presentation “Some Research Questions on Sino-African Co-operation in the New Era” Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects’, Beijing, 13 October 2009.

20 Interview, Chinese official, Luanda, 14 July 2010.

21 Interview, NGO, Luanda, 18 August 2010.

22 Interview, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, 6 January 2010.

23 Li Chengren, President of the Chinese Society of Asian and African Studies, Deputy President of the Chinese Association for International Understanding and Former Vice Minister of the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPC, Speech at the Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects’, Beijing, 13 October 2009. See also (Luo 2009, 26).

24 First coined by Joseph Nye (1990).

There is a strong discourse among Chinese scholars on the importance of China developing “great power status” (Jiang 2007; Wang and Wang 2008; Zheng 2008). A published discussion between Chinese scholars on whether China has indeed achieved “great power” status in a prominent foreign policy journal (see Shen 2007) indicates not only the spectrum of opinions on the subject, but the Chinese government’s implicit desire to explore this debate.

However, this is a controversial issue. Chin (2010) comments that Chinese diplomats are at pains to reign in “excessive public exuberance” regarding China’s place in the world.

Ye Hailin (quoted in *People’s Daily* 2010a) urges Chinese people to be humble, as narcissism detracts from China’s international image. Furthermore, Qiu Shaofang, Chinese Ambassador to Sierra Leone wrote in an open letter in one of the African country’s newspapers that China was most definitely still a developing country, despite its status as the second largest economy (Qiu 2010). There is thus a growing tension between the idea that “China is just regaining its long lost right to have its say in world affairs” (Liu Xiaoying quoted in *China Daily* 2010) and Deng Xiaoping’s notion of “hiding brightness and nourishing obscurity”<sup>25</sup> which has been a foreign policy guiding principle for decades.

Nye and Wang (2009, 18) define soft power as “the ability to shape the preferences of others.” Importantly, it relies on the powers of attraction, rather than coercion. In 2007, Hu Jintao drew attention to the importance of soft power, calling it “a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength” (quoted in Lawrence 2009).

At a conference on China-Africa relations, one academic suggested that the “big powers” want to influence Africa and are increasing their political clout through economic co-operation frameworks.<sup>26</sup> This is precisely what China is doing through the Forum on China-Africa Co-operation (FOCAC). Indeed, one Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs official talked about the increased influence of China and that FOCAC is becoming more important and is now a “brand” or a banner in China-Africa relations.<sup>27</sup>

China feels the need to counterbalance the impression that “the big powers want to force Africa to accept their world view; they want to improve their international image, they want to expel China from Africa, and they want to consolidate their influence in co-operative areas.”<sup>28</sup> Fang (2009, 58) points out

25 韬光养晦 taoguang yanghui.

26 Zhang Yongpeng, IWAAS, presentation, ‘The International Factors in China-Africa Relations’ Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects’, Beijing, 13 October 2009.

27 Sun Baohong, Counselor, Department of African Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, presentation at Institute for West Asian and African Studies (IWAAS) ‘Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects’, Beijing, 13 October 2009.

28 Zhang Yongpeng, IWAAS, presentation, ‘The International Factors in China-Africa Relations’ Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects’, Beijing, 13 October 2009.

that it is the strength of Western soft power that allows them to attack China's image and that China's own soft power needs to be further developed in order to counter this, particularly the evocation of the "China threat." One Chinese academic suggested that China should select some African NGOs to support, in order to promote Chinese "soft power."<sup>29</sup> Tellingly, this shows not only that China is drawing lessons from Western countries in terms of promoting a sphere of influence, it betrays the fact that many Chinese commentators see NGOs as a vehicle for the promotion of foreign influence in a country's domestic context.

Western scholars have been concerned as to the rise of China's soft power in Africa. Kurlantzick (2007b) for instance claims that Beijing is using its diplomacy to limit US influence. However, this is felt to be exaggerated by many Chinese scholars. He (2009b, 11) suggests that Africa is the only place that China's soft power has "vitality," pointing out that the "China threat" concept has not caught on as readily here. Lu (2009) contends that China's lack of understanding of a foreign audience has limited the impact of soft power and cultural diplomacy.

A Japanese diplomat suggested bluntly that China's practice is to "[...] 'buy friends'; no-one can follow them, Japan cannot copy them... They have a large population and they need much energy [sic]; to develop they need oil. This is their basic policy. They are investing a lot of money into oil-rich countries, and a lot of money in African countries."<sup>30</sup> This reference to dollar diplomacy is relevant, as it was recognised to be Taiwan's strategy for maintaining diplomatic allies for decades (Taylor 2002). Taiwan announced in 2009 that it would discontinue such a strategy, an implicit admission that it could no longer outspend the PRC (Brautigam 2009, 125). From the above comment, it appears, China is willing to outspend other countries to develop "soft power." As one observer from the IMF commented, "from China's perspective, involvement in Africa has huge payoffs relative to the cost. Chinese reserves are huge in comparison to what Africa needs."<sup>31</sup>

There are also political implications for China exercising soft power. He (2007, 28) tellingly says that "Africa is perhaps the most important testing ground for China's soft power" and Luo (2007, 18; 2009, 26) discusses this in great detail.

## China: the alternative donor

China has been at pains to distinguish itself from Africa's Western partnerships by carefully constructing a message devoid of the donor-recipient motif and emphasising the mutually beneficial relationship between developing countries (King 2006, 2; Zhang and Luo 2008, 26). The roots of this discourse

29 Zhang Yongpeng, IWAAS, presentation, 'The International Factors in China-Africa Relations' Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects', Beijing, 13 October 2009.

30 Interview, Asian Embassy in Angola, Luanda, 7 July 2010

31 Interview, IMF, Beijing, 1 September 2009

are found in the Five Principles for Peaceful Co-existence, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. Of relevance here is the way that these concepts are used to craft a diplomatic framework that has been well-received by African governments.

He (2009b, 7) places emphasis on the advantage that China has over the West given the former's approach to "no-strings attached aid" and mutual respect and equality as guiding principles. Luo (2007, 22) points out that China, in contrast to the West, has kept its promises on aid deliverance and is not hypocritical. As one researcher commented, "The Chinese principle is not to impose what you do not want for yourself."<sup>32</sup>

Fundamental amongst China's rhetorical tools, is the concept of "win-win," indicative of mutual benefit to both China and her African partners, intended to contrast sharply with their narrative of African countries' experience with the West. Alden and Large (2011) examine in some detail China's attempts to distinguish itself from other donors, noting the increasing challenges China faces to do so. This was admitted by one Chinese academic who voiced the concern that "there are high demands on China now and China has to work very hard to fulfil them."<sup>33</sup> This was echoed by a Chinese foreign ministry official who suggested that should China not be able to fulfil the higher expectations of African countries, this will be used as ammunition by "anti-China forces."<sup>34</sup> Another scholar suggested hopefully that African countries should rely on its own efforts and the help of the West, implying that she could not rely on China alone for assistance.<sup>35</sup>

## Chinese model, Beijing Consensus

Chinese officials have noted various African countries' eagerness to learn from the Chinese experience of development.<sup>36</sup> Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, well-known for his "Look East" policy, was quoted as saying, "China has been able to develop its economy without plundering other countries, and the Chinese economic miracle is indeed a source of pride and inspiration," (Bezlova 2009). Indeed, some have even suggested that China is exporting a political

32 He Wenping, IWAAS, presentation, China's Aid to Africa, Developing Features and Challenges Ahead' at 'Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects', Beijing, 13 October 2009.

33 Zhang Yongpeng, IWAAS, presentation, 'The International Factors in China-Africa Relations' Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects', Beijing, 13 October 2009.

34 Sun Baohong, Counselor, Department of African Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, presentation at Institute for West Asian and African Studies (IWAAS) 'Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects', Beijing, 13 October 2009.

35 Interview, Chinese Academy for International Trade and Co-operation (CAITEC), Beijing, 5 December 2009.

36 Sun Baohong, Counselor, Department of African Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, presentation at Institute for West Asian and African Studies (IWAAS) 'Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects', Beijing, 13 October 2009.

model of authoritarianism (Kleine-Ahlbrandt & Small 2008). Suzuki (2009, 780) questions this interpretation, arguing that this betrays a tendency to: “look for enemies” at the expense of empirical accuracy, pointing out that rather than Beijing propagating a model of development to follow, it is other countries that have chosen to use China as an example. Chinese officials are cautious as to the applicability of Chinese development experiences to the African context,

China’s own experience and character may not apply to everyone, but it may benefit to a certain extent. Developing countries are interested in China’s development concept and experience. Asia in general and China in particular can give some lessons.<sup>37</sup>

There is however some doubt as to what exactly this “Chinese model” of development entails. Zhang (2006) tentatively characterises it as “gradual reform,” “constant experimentation,” and “selective cultural borrowing.” However, the lack of a perceived coherent policy outlook, particularly towards the developing world, has caused Western policy-makers to impose their own models. The phrase “The Beijing Consensus” was coined by Ramo (2004) to describe what he perceived as a new form of power politics emanating from Beijing that sought to challenge US hegemony implicit in the Washington Consensus,

China is marking a path for other nations around the world who are trying to figure out not simply how to develop their countries, but also how to fit into the international order in a way that allows them to be truly independent, to protect their way of life and political choices in a world with a single massively powerful centre of gravity. I call this new physics of power and development the Beijing Consensus. (Ramo 2004, 2–3).

Particularly as China itself did not conform to recommendations implicit in the Washington Consensus, China has prematurely been touted as a new development model for Africa. Although the Chinese government has not accepted the term “Beijing Consensus,” it set off vigorous debate in policy circles (He 2009b, 8; Zhao 2010; Huang 2011, 4). Western scholars are divided on this. While some acknowledge the difficulties of applying China’s developmental model to other parts of the world (Lagerkvist 2009, 119; Kennedy 2010), many other are hopeful. This is misleading however as the “Beijing Consensus” is a Western term imposed upon China’s development circumstances<sup>38</sup>, which do not follow a coherent model (Ni 2010). Leaders since Deng Xiaoping have been at pains to emphasise that China’s growth path should not be imported wholesale in order to

37 Li Ruogu, Chairman and President of China Exim Bank, Presentation at the Tsinghua University School of Public Policy and Management Lecture Series, 11 January 2010.

38 According to Tao (2009b, 56) Chinese scholars prefer the term ‘Chinese Model of Development’ to Beijing Consensus



attempt to mimic China's trajectory (Tao 2009b, 41; Luo 2007, 23). Zhang (2006), among many other Chinese scholars<sup>39</sup> and policy-makers, is hesitant to promote the applicability of any "Chinese Model." The most important contribution of the "China Model" to the development debate is that it provides a conceptual alternative to the Washington Consensus, proving that a country can successfully pursue an endogenous development plan tailored to its own context and achieve results, rather having to accept Western doctrine (Tao 2009b, 56). He (2009b, 10) and (Luo 2007, 23) take this argument further, arguing that China's development has proved that Western values are not universal, and are not necessarily valid for all countries. Tao (2009a, 37) suggests that in the context of Africa, China can be used as a reference point, so that Africa can learn from China's experience, but stops short of advocating blind copying of any development practices.

### The most equal among equals

As noted above, several Chinese respondents pointed out that while Western countries harp on about internal democracy of countries, they pay scant attention to issue of global justice and democracy within the context of the global system.<sup>40</sup> He (2007, 31) points out that this is also to the detriment of "weak and small countries in Africa" while at the same time arguing that China's policies in Africa are "largely in line with those of the international community, not in opposition to them" (He 2007, 32), apparently to once again assuage fears of a "China threat." A tension however emerges, in that China appeals to developing countries on the basis of a history of colonization and its own developmental challenges, whereas it strives to achieve recognition from more powerful nations as a "responsible power." It is this attempt by China to be "all things to all nations" (Kim 2004, 46) that leads to the inherent contradictions of Chinese foreign policy, even as effort is made to ensure the continuity of its policy standpoints.

Luo (2007, 19) points out that China is careful to use phrases such as "common prosperity" suggesting that China and Africa need each other to develop, thus avoiding the idea of China as a donor nation, helping an impoverished continent. This not only reinforces the "win-win rhetoric," but allows China to identify itself as a developing, rather than a developed, country when it is in China's interests to do so. Furthermore, a *People's Daily* (2010b) editorial firmly defended China's status as a developing country, suspecting Western countries "lavishing praise" on China to be a ruse to "declare that China is no longer a developing country" resulting in the loss of concessions that this implies. Despite a yearning for China to be able to take its place among the "great powers," China

39 See for instance, Tao (2009a); Tao (2009b), Zhang Jun (2010).

40 Interview, China Exim Bank, Beijing, 15 January 2010; interview, chief executive officer of a Chinese import-export company, Luanda, 10 August 2010.



emphasises the developing country nature of the national economy, with many commentators emphasising that Shanghai is not representative of the country's level of development as a whole.<sup>41</sup>

There is thus also a tension that has been identified between China's political overtures to Africa as a partner, rather than a donor, and China's aspirations to be the leader of the developing world (Asche and Schüller 2008, 14; Taylor 2006, 4). The tendency to act as a "first among equals" again brings to the fore China's composite identity of having characteristics of both a developed and a developing country and the tendency to vacillate between the two as circumstances and perceived interests dictate. The lack of certainty in China's foreign policy approach to Africa is thus indicative of a much broader domestic debate concerning the theoretical underpinnings of China's foreign policy.<sup>42</sup> Carlson (2002, 229) points to theoretical changes in foreign policy thinking that are not yet reflected in active policies.

A Ministry of Foreign Affairs official also mentioned the Tazara Railway built in the 1970s<sup>43</sup> in this context; pointing out that despite China's poverty and difficulties at the time, this substantial aid project was undertaken. Although enacted in the context of an aggressive anti-imperialist foreign policy under Mao, this project has come to symbolise in the current discourse that "poor helps poor." China as the largest developing country is thus seen to show solidarity with Africa as the largest continent of developing countries<sup>44</sup>; as China's international obligation<sup>45</sup>.

China's scholars and policy-makers, despite distinguishing China from other Western "great powers," do believe that China will one day rightfully take its place among the "great powers" of the world (Leonard 2008; Dong 2009). As such, should China's role in Africa prove successful, or at least more successful than that of the continent's former colonial rulers; not only will China have by the current norms become a "great power" by developing an international sphere of influence, but it will have achieved one-upmanship over the West, having succeeded in developing Africa where the West had failed.

There is a contradiction here as whereas China's aid policies are often described as "selfless" (He 2009b, 8), the rhetorical emphasis on "win-win" means rather that "Chinese companies must make money but also help people."<sup>46</sup>

41 Alden and Large (2011) argue that this position is increasingly untenable.

42 See for instance Mierzejewski (2009)

43 At the time the largest aid project China had ever embarked upon, the Tazara Railway linked land-locked Lusaka to the port city of Dar-es-Salaam, providing Zambia with port access without reliance on white-dominated South Africa. It was built between 1970 and 1975, completed 2 years ahead of schedule and has come to be seen as an almost mythological symbol of China's assistance to Africa (Brautigam 2009, 40). For a more in-depth account see Monson (2009).

44 This set phrase is often used in political rhetoric and academic articles, presumably to reinforce South-South solidarity between China and African countries.

45 Interview, former official, Chinese Ministry of Commerce, Beijing, 8 December 2009.

46 Interview, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, 6 January 2010.

This implies a long-term and holistic view as China wants to help African countries develop so that they can be developed into markets. This idea was developed further towards the end of 2009, when it was debated in some policymaking circles that China should launch a kind of “African Marshall Plan”<sup>47</sup>. Superficially, this holds several similarities with US efforts to assist Europe destroyed after the Second World War. China would also be assisting a group of countries, many of them war-ravaged in rebuilding their economies, with the hope of creating powerful future political allies and markets for Chinese goods. Perhaps as a result of Beijing’s initial enthusiasm, several figures claimed authorship of the idea. Gu Wei (2009) reports that former Deputy Director of State Administration of Taxation Xu Shanda<sup>48</sup> proposed the notion. The idea was also mentioned as having been an inspiration of China Exim Bank President Li Ruogu.<sup>49</sup> A China-based consultant<sup>50</sup> remarked on having attended an entire conference dedicated to the topic. However, after debate the only representative still in favour of the idea was from the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), as he viewed it as a policy to generate export markets.

As pointed out by Brautigam (2009, 164) the Marshall Plan was predominantly in the form of grant aid. Furthermore, it focussed on institution-building.<sup>51</sup> Total disbursements were 2.5% of Europe’s collective GDP and lasted only a few years. This is in comparison to official development assistance (ODI) to Africa from OECD countries from 1992–1993 totalling 12% of Africa’s collective GDP, with few results (Van de Walle 2006, 206).

## Conclusions

It is clear that China’s political rhetoric directed toward Africa is a function of the country’s process of internationalisation and consequent domestic debates concerning China’s rise in the international community. Furthermore, China’s rhetorical position regarding development assistance is informed by lessons learned from the country’s own developmental experience. Many aspects of this are appealing to African elites. China advocates “gradualism,” rather than “shock therapy” administered by the West (Zhang and Luo 2008, 25).

47 Interestingly, this is not the first time a foreign power has proposed such a plan for Africa, the most recent being former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s own concept of a ‘Marshall Plan for Africa’ (see Blitz, 2004). Van de Walle (2001, 7) comments wryly that developing a ‘Marshall Plan for Africa’ was once very much *en vogue* in development policy circles.

48 On 6 January 2010, Xu Shanda also delivered a lecture to Tsinghua University’s School of Public Management students entitled ‘中国的“马歇尔计划”’ [China’s Marshall Plan].

49 Lei Xiancheng, Vice President, China Exim Bank, presentation at Institute for West Asian and African Studies (IWAAS) ‘Symposium on Sino-African Relations, Reflections and Prospects’, Beijing, 13 October 2009.

50 Interview, Consultant, Beijing, 6 January 2010.

51 Interview, Consultant, Beijing, 6 January 2010.

However, as noted above, the audience of China's public diplomacy is not restricted to Africans, be they elites or the masses, but it also intended for the international community at large, in order to project a positive image more broadly (Cull 2009). Indeed, as has been seen, Africa is actually viewed as a test case scenario where Chinese diplomats can perfect the art of soft power, increasingly recognised as being important to cultivate the kind of stature China wishes to attain on the global stage.

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## Abstract

As China turns increasingly to the cultivation of soft power in the course of developing its foreign policy, the use of political rhetoric and its explicit and implicit audiences become more and more important, both on a bilateral level and within the international arena at large. Using the case of China's relations with African countries, this article examines key themes within China's diplomatic narrative regarding its role on the African continent and contrasts with Western and African responses.

**Keywords:** China-Africa; rhetoric; Soft Power.

## Resumo

À proporção que a China se transforma cada vez mais para o cultivo do soft power no curso de desenvolvimento de sua política externa, o uso da retórica política e seus públicos explícitos e implícitos se tornou cada vez mais importante, tanto a nível bilateral quanto no âmbito internacional em geral. Usando o caso das relações da China com os países africanos, este artigo examina temas-chave dentro da narrativa diplomática da China em relação ao seu papel no continente Africano e contrasta com as respostas ocidentais e africanas.

**Palavras-chave:** China-África; retórica; Soft Power.