

# China's Institutionalised Cultural Presence in Africa

*Cultural Investments, Perceptions  
and Implications for China-Africa  
Cultural Relations*

**Avril Joffe**



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# Foreword

China is by now the largest trading partner for Africa. However, as the author states, China's interest in Africa goes beyond economic reasons, entailing interests in security and building soft power. It seems no surprise, that the number of African students in Chinese universities increased from less than 2,000 students in 2003 to over 81,500 students in 2018. Accordingly, China's increasing investment in the cultural infrastructure of African countries such as in theatre, museums, media and film industries, encompass more than mere "symbolic expression" of China's economic presence.

In her subtle analysis, the author describes the perception of various African stakeholders (such as ministry officials, arts and culture organisations, artists and civil society) towards these investments and points out the challenges around this partnership. As the author argues, these investments "should enhance the local cultural and creative sector through technical expertise and concessionary loans and grants, enhance rather than crowd out local cultural expressions, and provide cultural infrastructure that is appropriate to the local urban environment in each specific location".

I would like to thank the author, Avril Joffe, for breaking new ground with this study and outlining a path for further research and discussion in this matter. This study forms part of ifa's Research Programme "Culture and Foreign Policy", in which experts provide analysis on current developments relating to culture and foreign policy with the aim of involving academics, practitioners, policymakers and civil society. I would like to thank my ifa colleagues Sarah Widmaier and Ivana Putri for their work on the coordination and editing of this project.

Acknowledging the vast potential of culture for development, the author shows that careful analysis is needed in order to safeguard a common understanding of the 2005 Convention on Diversity of Cultural Expressions. It is important to understand the current dynamics of South-South cooperation in international cultural relations, among others through the perceptions of local stakeholders as well as implications for the local cultural scene, in order to be able to complement current and planned action of international cultural relations with African partners.

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# Abstract

This study looks at the effects of Chinese cultural diplomacy on the African continent. While for a long time China's investments in large infrastructure projects were viewed positively, Joffe now notes a growing awareness both in civil society and in government agencies of ambivalent consequences. Many African countries are now groaning under the burden of debt, and about two-thirds of new loans now come from China. This study provides insight into Chinese investments, particularly in the area of international cultural policy. The study's findings highlight the complexity of Chinese engagement in Africa and the various facets of its associated impacts. The author suggests that African actors should ensure that a more equitable engagement develops, where conditions are determined by local needs and culture, and more aggressively advocate for equality, needs, and respect for national sovereignty.

# Executive Summary

It is well known that China is active in Africa in terms of trade, infrastructure and other areas of economic cooperation; however, the fact that China is investing in culture on the African continent is less so. In this research, the author, supported by co-researchers, explores the various Chinese initiatives in Africa since the late 1950s, specifically those which demonstrate China's increasing investment in cultural infrastructure (theatres, libraries, museums), in media and film, and in Confucius Institutes. The research also explores how this institutionalised cultural presence in African countries is perceived by local actors and investigates some of the potential impacts of this rapidly increasing symbolic expression of China's growing presence on the continent.

The paper argues for a more refined and subtle view of Chinese investment in the African cultural and creative sector, as opposed to a binary view of China-Africa engagements. Ministers of culture, arts and culture organisations and civil society in Africa ought to remain alert to these investments, paying attention and taking care that they achieve their outcomes as supported by African stakeholders. In other words, African stakeholders should ensure that these investments enhance the local cultural and creative sector through technical expertise and concessionary loans and grants, rather than crowding out local cultural expressions, and provide cultural infrastructure that is appropriate to the local urban environment in each specific location.

This is an exploratory study which aims to consider China's historical and contemporary engagement on the continent in order to describe and understand some of the concerns, opinions and perceptions surrounding this engagement. The countries selected for this research include Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zambia. They represent different regions (East Africa, West Africa and Southern Africa), have received substantial investments from China, have had substantial media and formal coverage and were chosen given existing knowledge of these countries by the researchers.

Thirty-one interviews were conducted with artists and cultural professionals, academics, government officials and agencies, media houses and NGOs in these five countries, covering perceptions of investment in culture, cultural exchange programmes and the opportunities and challenges associated with the types of investment present in their respective countries.



## **Historical background**

The Asia-Africa Bandung Conference in 1955 marked a key moment for China-Africa relations. The then Chinese premier Zhou Enlai articulated the “Five Principles Governing the Development of Relations with Arab and African Countries”, in which support for Africa and the Arab peoples was outlined, and “Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries” as the basis for all future engagement. Since the late 1950s, the Chinese government has used culture and trade to enhance the image of China internationally and reduce its isolation (Liu 2008). At the same time, China adopted new economic policies and shifted its diplomacy efforts, which 70-plus years later has resulted in China being the largest trading partner for Africa (Mhaka/Jeke 2018). China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), now ten years old, is seen as highly significant to Africa’s development as it focuses on infrastructure development, unemployment reduction, improved trade and connectivity.

China is both a long-established diplomatic partner as well as a relatively new investor and major aid donor in Africa. China’s interest in Africa goes far beyond natural resources and export markets for trade—it also encompasses security and soft power. Soft power and the increasing scope and scale of interest shown in cultural relations, libraries, educational and cultural infrastructure, and media and film are the subjects of this report.

The China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC) was established between China and ‘friendly’ countries at a ministerial level and is viewed as a strong partnership. However, there is recognition in the African Union (AU) that “Africa needs to utilize the partnership to the fullest in terms of the potential of the available market and the business opportunities” (AU 2012). This will also entail aligning the partnership to the AU’s strategy.

Since the 1990s, there has been a noticeable increase in ‘culture building’ to enhance China’s image and anchor China’s ‘peaceful rise’ while building a bridge for business. Towards the end of the twentieth century, China’s economic interest in developing the cultural industries worldwide became evident, as has been shown by Justin O’Connor and Xin Gu in *Red Creative: Culture and Modernity in China*.

The accelerating levels of Chinese interest in Africa and of investments from Chinese businesses on the continent in the 2020s has been attested to by many scholars; however, there is seemingly little agreement as to the neutrality of China's presence in Africa or whether China-Africa relations should be viewed as a vibrant, two-way dynamic in which both sides adjust to the policy initiatives and popular perceptions emanating from the other. The ever-increasing presence of China in Africa is largely driven by China rather than African governments. These differing viewpoints are well illustrated by Ghana and Nigeria's bilateral relations.

### **Chinese cultural engagement in Africa**

China has a clear strategy for Africa and published an updated white paper on its African policy in 2006, entitled "China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals", which was adopted in November 2021. This "African Policy Paper" outlines China's principles and intentions towards African countries, which include sincerity, friendship and equality; mutual benefit, reciprocity and common prosperity; mutual support and close coordination; and learning from each other and seeking common development.

The 2021 policy commits to a stronger China-Africa community of shared future, China-Africa cooperation in the new era, strengthening mutual support and breaking new ground in China-Africa relations. The Chinese government has also committed itself to the AU's goals, as expressed in the AU's "Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want", the strategic framework for growth and sustainable development on the continent.

While the BRI supports Africa's sustainable development goals, covering economic and trade cooperation, resource development, industrialisation and infrastructure development, there is much less written about China's investments in cultural infrastructure or in media, film and education. This research shows that the extent of China's cultural engagement is widening in scope and growing in reach, with most Chinese cultural investments being embarked on in parallel with development projects.

### **Chinese investments in cultural infrastructure**

One of the first investments by China in cultural infrastructure on the African continent was the National Theatre in Accra, Ghana. Other cultural infrastructure built by the Chinese includes the Grand Theatre in Dakar, the Central African Cultural and Arts Centre in Kinshasa and the Museum of Black Civilisations in Dakar.

Much of Chinese engagement in the urban landscape of African capital cities extends far beyond the building of theatres, museums, libraries or institutes. The African urban development sphere, according to urban commentators, has been built by the Chinese. Through various financial arrangements and collaborations, Chinese construction companies have started large-scale urban development projects ranging from road networks and train systems to high-rise skyscrapers and residential complexes.

### **Chinese investment in media, film and music**

The Chinese government's investment in the media landscape is an important component of Chinese cultural sector investment in Africa. This investment covers media houses, channels, set-top boxes, content development, production, content distribution, infrastructure development and direct investment. Notable companies include StarTimes, China Africa, CCTV Africa, Huawei, ZTE and Sekunjalo, some of which have a growing interest in African creative content. Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa all provide substantial examples of such investment.

The film industries in Africa are currently receiving substantial investment interest from Chinese private companies. A range of diverse players have entered the industry, as seen in Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria. China supports a market-focused commercial approach to the African film and television industry, which is a different financing model to that currently in play, namely one largely based on funding and grants with no expectation of a return.

### **Confucius Institutes, libraries and educational exchange**

In addition to China's soft power influence through cultural exchanges, media and film, other instruments of soft power include educational exchanges, books and libraries, and the presence of cultural institutes. Scholarships and exchanges

help students enculturate into their host countries, build networks and appreciate cultural norms and values. Since the late 1940s, the US has offered scholarships to future leaders to do exactly this. It is not surprising that this has also become an important component of Chinese activity in African countries.

Confucius Institutes have been established on the continent since the 2000s as a key instrument of cultural diplomacy. Since the late 1950s, China has used language and trade to change perceptions of China and help remove its isolationist image. The focus on its ancient and imperial past rather than contemporary issues is a key element of China's image management (Bound et al. 2007: 58). Unlike other institutions of external cultural affairs such as the British Council, the Goethe-Institut or the French Institute, Confucius Institutes are a direct engagement by the state in foreign territories, with 61 Confucius Institutes now located in Africa.

Chinese investment in libraries takes three forms: the construction of libraries, the donation of books and other e-learning materials by Chinese multinational companies, and the donation of books and other materials by Chinese non-governmental organisations to local schools and communities. China's contribution to library support in Africa is extensive. These investments show that China is constantly seeking new ways to impact how African citizens, governments and the media respond to its increasing presence on the continent. Clearly, large numbers of books written in Chinese are in this case not as useful to the library landscape as infrastructure, the upgrading of technology and funds to either purchase books in the main lingua franca or to invest in the publishing of local books—measures that, according to the current evidence, are not yet being attempted.

The number of African students in Chinese universities increased from less than 2,000 students in 2003 to over 81,500 students in 2018. The Chinese government expects students to return home telling the China story well. China is attractive to African students for multiple reasons, for instance learning Chinese may assist with future jobs and African students can access multiple scholarships which cover tuition and teaching materials as well as living expenses. Furthermore, the role that China plays in investing in and developing infrastructure across Africa serves as an exemplar for African students—China

has worked hard to develop its soft power diplomacy in Africa as it cooperates economically and politically with the governments of different African countries.

### **Perceptions of China in Africa**

A number of artists on the continent use their art to express their perception of the role that China is playing in Africa. These include writers, painters, cartoonists, photographers, animators, comedians, curators and performing artists. These artists use their work to highlight tensions in the relationship between China and Africa or to provide social commentary on corruption, dictators, the debt burden, impacts on marginalised publics and the dangers of a new form of colonialism. A few artists in particular want to find space between binary positions to explore the complexities, nuance and subtleties in the relationship.

Civil society actors (journalists, artists and creatives, businesspeople) in Africa are alert to some of the challenges posed by Chinese engagement on the continent, while African governments are tentatively suggesting the importance of African identity, Pan-Africanism, African ownership and patronage of local products in response to the increasing Chinese encroachment. A key question is how to ensure that China-Africa relations maintain a vibrant, two-way and equitable dynamic in which both China and Africa constantly reflect on and adjust their policies to achieve this outcome. Although African governments have been overwhelmingly positive towards China's presence on the continent during the 2020s, during this time there has been an increase in criticism from civil society, that is, non-governmental bodies and individuals such as trade unions, media bodies, artists and journalists, focusing on good governance, accountability and transparency.

The Chinese government has shown a degree of sensitivity to the negative criticism from African governments, journalists and citizens and has adjusted some policies in response. There is an enhanced focus on sustainability in economic and trade relationships and, importantly for this study, there is also a complementary focus on soft power, cultural engagement and people-to-people exchange. The author suggests that the increased cultural interest and investment seems to be guided by a strategy of fostering broader public support

for China, which in turn facilitates continued Chinese investment in securing natural resources.

### **Conclusions**

There is no denying the significance of China's engagement on the African continent and the diversity of opinions as to whether China's role is a positive one for development or whether there are critical problem areas that have yet to be considered. The key question is whether there is any recognition of the 'danger' that local cultural content could be crowded out, especially when the appetite of African governments for financial resources is large, local funds for cultural expressions are in short supply and when sustainable systems for cultural governance are not in place (including when civil society participation is weak).

# 1. Introduction

That China is active in Africa in terms of trade, infrastructure and other areas of economic cooperation is well known; the fact that China is investing in culture on the African continent is less so. In this research, the author, supported by co-researchers, explores the various Chinese initiatives in Africa since the late 1950s, specifically those which demonstrate China's increasing investment in cultural infrastructure (theatres, libraries, museums), in media and film, and in Confucius Institutes. The research also explores how this institutionalised cultural presence in African countries is perceived by local actors and investigates some of the potential impacts of this rapidly increasing symbolic expression of China's growing presence on the continent.

There is much written about the relationship between Africa and China. Often the very titles of the papers/articles indicate an ambivalence about this relationship, as demonstrated by, for example: "How Genuine is China-Africa Cultural Cooperation?" (Batchelor 2017), "China in Africa: A Relationship in Transition" (Ajakaiye and Kaplinsky 2009), "China in Africa – A Mixed Blessing?" (Vines 2007), "China-Africa Relations: A Neo-Imperialism or a Neo-Colonialism? A Reflection" (Lumumba-Kasongo 2011) or "Negotiating China: Reinserting African Agency into China-Africa relations" (Mohan and Lampert 2012), among others. There is, however, much less written about the relationship between China and Africa from the perspective of cultural relations, including about cultural trade, cultural investment or how soft power is exercised or experienced.

The paper argues for a more refined and subtle view of Chinese investment in the African cultural and creative sector, as opposed to a binary view of China-Africa engagements, as much of the current discourse and existing research suggests (Chemingui/Bchir 2010; Wang 2010; Ado/Su 2016). Ministers of culture, arts and culture organisations and civil society in Africa ought to remain alert to these investments, paying attention and taking care that these investments achieve their outcomes as supported by African stakeholders. In other words, African stakeholders should ensure that these investments enhance the local cultural and creative sector through technical expertise and concessionary loans and grants, rather than crowding out local cultural expressions, and provide cultural infrastructure that is appropriate to the local urban environment in each specific location.

In light of African governments' overwhelming appetite for investments, concessionary loans and grants, and the fact that China remains a key resource partner for this, all stakeholders are required to adopt this more nuanced view to shift attention away from the purely negative consequences of these investments for the African economy and to assess and analyse each investment in terms of its contribution to the local cultural context. This will enable stakeholders to offer recommendations, suggest initiatives and enter into partnership agreements between China and Africa to ensure greater dynamism and equity in cultural engagements.

## **Methodological note**

This report will refer to Africa as a whole, with the important qualifier that a continent of 54 countries, five regions and more than 2,000 languages should not be generalised in this way. Nevertheless, Africa as a whole is referred to as the recipient of Chinese investment, with similar experiences emerging from multiple regions and countries. When China is referred to in this study, this refers to both the Chinese government (state-owned, state-funded, etc.) and Chinese companies owned and funded by private stakeholders. While there is much written about China-Africa trade and investment, there is little to no analysis of China's investment in cultural expressions, cultural infrastructure or cultural trade.

This is therefore an exploratory study which raises more questions than it answers; it aims to consider the historical and contemporary engagement of China on the continent in order to describe and understand some of the concerns, opinions and perceptions of this engagement. The countries selected for this research include Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zambia. They represent different regions (East Africa, West Africa and Southern Africa), have received substantial investments from China, have had substantial media and formal coverage (mostly grey literature) and were chosen given the existing knowledge of these countries by the researchers, who therefore had substantial existing networks of artists, government officials and NGO communities (Kenya, Ghana, Zambia) or had additional research capacity to support this study (Nigeria). Some sections have research findings from only one country or



from only a few countries, depending on the availability of data, responses from the interviews and academic literature or researcher capacity. These countries then act as a proxy for the overall arguments and analysis concerning China's cultural engagement on the continent. It is clear that further empirical study in each of these, as well as many other, specific countries (in each of the five African regions) will be necessary to be able to respond to some of the critical questions, of which this paper was only able to scratch the surface.

The information was compiled using documentary research including academic literature, grey literature, reports and artists' works. The review of academic literature was important for providing an evidence-based historical analysis, while the grey literature predominantly reflected opinion-making news media on the African continent and provided a lens into the perceptions of Africans on Chinese engagement in the cultural landscape. The works of artists from selected African countries provided a more intimate sense of the perceptions on the ground, as expressed by these works. Thirty-one interviews were conducted with artists and cultural professionals, academics, government officials and agencies, media houses and NGOs in these five countries, covering perceptions of investment in culture, cultural exchange programmes and the opportunities and challenges associated with the types of investment present in their respective countries. The interviewees are anonymously identified as A1 to A31, although to the extent possible the location and area of expertise of the interviewee is noted. In some countries (South Africa, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria), visits to libraries and Confucius Institutes enhanced the research.

## **2. The History of China in Africa: Through the Lens of Culture**

### **2.1 Asia-Africa Bandung Conference 1955**

The Asia-Africa Bandung Conference in 1955 marked a key moment for China-Africa relations. The conference was co-sponsored by five Asian countries, namely Burma, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, with participants from 24 nations from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The purpose of the conference was to consider peace, economic development, decolonisation and the role of the Third World in the Cold War.

The then Chinese premier Zhou Enlai articulated the “Five Principles Governing the Development of Relations with Arab and African Countries”, in which support for Africa and the Arab peoples was outlined, and “Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries” as the basis for all future engagement. Subsequent to the Asia-Africa Bandung Conference, Premier Zhou Enlai toured ten newly independent African countries between 1963 and 1964 (Mushoto 2021).

**Table 1. The Principles Governing Arab and African Countries and the Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Africa**

<p><b>The “Five Principles Governing the Development of Relations with Arab and African Countries” outlined by Premier Zhou:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- China supports the African and Arab peoples in their struggle to oppose imperialism and old and new colonialism and to win and safeguard national independence.</li> <li>- China supports the pursuance of a policy of peace, neutrality and non-alignment by the governments of the African and Arab countries.</li> <li>- China supports the desire of the African and Arab peoples to achieve unity and solidarity in the manner of their own choice.</li> <li>- China supports the African and Arab countries in their efforts to settle their disputes through peaceful consultations.</li> <li>- China holds that the sovereignty of the African and Arab countries should be respected by all other countries and that encroachment and interference from any quarter should be opposed.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The “Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries” which guide China’s engagement with Africa:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Chinese government always bases itself on the principle of equality and mutual benefit in providing aid to other countries. It never regards such aid as a unilateral aid but as a mutual event.</li> <li>- In providing aid to other countries, the Chinese government strictly respects the sovereignty of the recipient countries, never attaching any conditions nor expecting any privileges.</li> <li>- China provides economic aid in the form of interest-free or low-interest loans and extends the time limit for repayment, when necessary, to lighten the burden of the recipient countries as much as possible.</li> <li>- In providing aid to other countries, the purpose of the Chinese government is not to make the recipient countries dependent on China but to help them embark step by step on the road of self-reliance and independent economic development.</li> <li>- The Chinese government tries its best to help the recipient countries build projects which require less investment</li> </ul>

	<p>while yielding quicker results, so that the recipient government may increase its income and accumulate capital.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Chinese government provides the best quality equipment and material of its manufacture at international market prices. If the equipment and material provided by the Chinese government are not up to the agreed specifications and quality, the Chinese government undertakes to replace them.</li> <li>- In giving any technical assistance, the Chinese government will see to it that the personnel of the recipient country fully master such technique.</li> <li>- The experts dispatched by China to help in construction in the recipient countries will have the same standard of living as the experts of the recipient country. The Chinese experts are not allowed to make any special demands or enjoy any special amenities.</li> </ul>
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Source: Hanauer and Morris, 2013

## 2.2 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Since the late 1950s, the Chinese government has used culture and trade to enhance the image of China internationally and reduce its isolation (Liu 2008). At the same time, China adopted new economic policies and shifted its diplomacy efforts, which 70-plus years later has resulted in China being the largest trading partner for Africa (Mhaka/Jeke 2018).

In September 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as “the project of the century ... a road for peace, prosperity, opening-up, and innovation, connecting different civilizations ... [to] build a broad community of shared interests” (Xi quoted in Lema 2023). China’s BRI, now ten years old, is seen as highly significant to Africa’s development as it focuses on infrastructure development, unemployment reduction, improved trade and connectivity, in which

*relevant countries [...] work together to discuss project investment, build infrastructure, and share the benefits of cooperation. They should promote as their five major goals policy coordination, facility connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. (Wang 2018: 64)*

Many African experts agree, such as Ugandan independent researcher Frederick Golooba Mutebi, who commented at the online Belt and Road Initiative forum that “China is not here to exploit Africa as the Western world perceives, because looking at the African infrastructure development side, the BRI is helping Africa to transform itself. China comes with the help Africans need”.<sup>1</sup>

Wang describes the Belt and Road Initiative as one that “helps build a harmonious world with lasting peace, universal security and common prosperity” and is aimed at “bridging the gap in public goods’ demand and delivery” (2018: 65) while Shambaugh (2013) points to the dilemma faced by China that the BRI, as global public goods, “may be perceived by others as private goods to enhance China’s geostrategic national interests even at the expense of others’ interest”.

South African commentators such as Cobus van Staden from the China Global South Project and the South Africa Institute of International Affairs suggest, however, that the tenth anniversary of the BRI programme might be more like a “funeral procession” than a birthday celebration since BRI investments in sub-Saharan Africa have fallen from US\$16.5 billion in 2021 by 55% to US\$7.5 billion in 2023 (quoted in Lema 2023).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> SCIO China. (2022) ‘Belt and Road initiative transforming Africa’s development landscape: experts’, The State Council Information Office (SCIO), the People’s Republic of China. Available at: [http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/beltandroad/2022-08/25/content\\_78388818.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/beltandroad/2022-08/25/content_78388818.htm) (Accessed: 4 September 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Lema, A. R. (2021) ‘From a “project of the century” to “small is beautiful”: The changing face for the BRI in Africa’, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. Available at: <https://munkschool.utoronto.ca/belt-road/research/project-century-small-beautiful-changing-face-bri-africa#:~:text=That%20global%20trend%20is%20also,2021%20in%20sub%2DSaharan%20Africa.>

## 2.3 The AU and the China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC)

China is both a long-established diplomatic partner as well as a relatively new investor and major aid donor in Africa. China's interest in Africa goes far beyond natural resources and export markets for trade—it also encompasses security and soft power. Soft power and the increasing scope and scale of interest shown in cultural relations, libraries, educational and cultural infrastructure, and media and film are the subjects of this report.

China established a Permanent Mission to the African Union in 2015 and built the AU headquarters in 2012, signalling its support and facilitation of African integration. At that point, bilateral trade between China and the continent was over US\$120 billion in 2011 (from less than US\$20 billion a decade earlier in 2001) (News24 2012).<sup>3</sup> The China-funded AU office in Beijing opened a representational office in September 2018, just before the FOCAC forum.

The China-Africa Cooperation Forum was established between China and 'friendly' African countries at a ministerial level to seek "mutual reinforcement and cooperation" through the strengthening of consultation and expansion of cooperation, as well as the promotion of political dialogue and economic cooperation. Two sessions have been held in China (Beijing, October 2000 and November 2006) and three sessions in Africa (Addis Ababa, December 2003; Sharm El Sheikh, November 2009 and Johannesburg, December 2015).

While FOCAC is viewed as a strong partnership, there is recognition in the AU that "Africa needs to utilize the partnership to the fullest in terms of the potential of the available market and the business opportunities" (AU 2012). This will also entail aligning the partnership to the AU's strategy.

As China-Africa cooperation has expanded and deepened, a number of sub-forums have been established within FOCAC. They include the China-Africa

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<sup>3</sup> News24. (2012) 'New AU HQ marks strong China-Africa ties', News24 online news. Available at: <https://www.news24.com/News24/New-AU-HQ-marks-strong-China-Africa-ties-20120127> (Accessed: 15 September 2023).

People's Forum, the China-Africa Young Leaders Forum, the Ministerial Forum on China-Africa Health Cooperation, the Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation, the China-Africa Poverty Reduction and Development Conference, the FOCAC-Legal Forum, the Forum on China-Africa Local Government Cooperation and the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.4 Bilateral approaches

During the 1970s, the Chinese government appeared to make Chinese diaspora communities a focus in order to “attract overseas Chinese with the same language and culture roots, and to thereby build a platform for investment and business” (Liu 2008: 17). This period of external cultural relations is marked by the rediscovery of traditional culture and values alongside a decrease of emphasis on political ideology. At the same time, economic development connected to the “four modernisations” policy remained a priority and interest in Western, mainly European, ideas and exchanges on science, technology and business management increased. At the same time, there is evidence of an increase in touring exhibitions and international cultural exchanges, including of ancient artworks and traditional music performances. Often these were leveraged as trade and investment opportunities (Liu 2008: 17).

From this period, and more so since the 1990s, there has been a noticeable increase in ‘culture building’ to enhance the image of China and also solidify China’s ‘peaceful rise’ while building a bridge for business. Liu explores how the Chinese government’s official discourse begins to incorporate the term ‘cultural China’ and, quoting Jiang (1997), its aim of “setting up a strongly supportive international public opinion matching with China’s prestige and position” (quoted in Liu 2008: 17). Towards the end of the twentieth century, China’s economic interest in developing the cultural industries worldwide became evident, as has been shown by Justin O’Connor and Xin Gu in *Red Creative: Culture and Modernity in China*.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.focac.org/eng/ltjj\\_3/ltjz/](http://www.focac.org/eng/ltjj_3/ltjz/).

The ever-increasing presence of China in Africa is largely driven by China rather than African governments. Ogunsanwo affirms this: “On the whole Chinese policy in Africa has resulted from the diplomatic initiative of the People’s Republic of China, rather than of the African States themselves” (1974: 5).

In the contemporary era, the accelerating levels of Chinese interest in Africa and of investments from Chinese businesses on the continent in the 2020s has been attested to by many scholars; however, there is seemingly little agreement. On the one hand, some, such as Ado and Su (2016), question the explicitly neutral views of China’s presence in Africa and reposition some of the existing controversies through a detailed content analysis of existing peer-reviewed articles. On the other hand, scholars such as Hanauer and Morris (2014) highlight China-Africa relations as a vibrant, two-way dynamic in which both sides adjust to policy initiatives and popular perceptions emanating from the other. These differing viewpoints are well illustrated by Ghana and Nigeria’s bilateral relations.

In the 1950s and 1960s, China established various bilateral trading relationships, including with Nigeria, and supported the national liberation movements of numerous African nations as part of its foreign policy of seeking new allies in developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Odeh 2014). By 2021, China had formal diplomatic ties with 53 African countries (the sole exception is Eswatini).

### **Ghana**

While Chinese diplomatic relations are now extensive in sub-Saharan Africa, the longest existing diplomatic relations appear to be with Ghana, having been established on 5 July 1960 (Amoah 2010: 6). According to Amoah, the Kufuor era (2001–2009) “ushered in a golden age of Ghana-China relations, marked in particular by massive infrastructural projects supported by China, of which the flagship example is the Bui Dam Project” (2016: 242). Ghana and China continue to have a close political and economic relationship with Ghana’s then president, Nana Akufo-Addo, who visited China in 2018 and concluded a number of bilateral deals. China is Ghana’s largest trading partner, and Ghana has joined both the BRI and the Beijing-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The vice premier of China, Sun Chunlan, visited Ghana in 2019. Ghana



is also a member of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), while Beijing's strategic fund, the China-Africa Development Fund, has an office in Accra. A 2018 agreement between the two countries for financing infrastructure projects (roads, railways and bridges) in exchange for 5% of Ghana's bauxite reserves (to supply China's aluminium industry) saw the first tranche of funding released in 2019. The agreement has not been received without criticism, especially in relation to its environmental impact.

The controversial 'galamsey'<sup>5</sup> has been a key point of contention since the early 2000s and was a key focus of bilateral relations in 2017, when the Ghanaian government launched a five-year strategy to end illegal mining. Even though Beijing officially opposes the involvement of Chinese nationals in illegal mining, many Chinese miners from Shanglin County in the Guangxi region were among those arrested during the ensuing crackdown.

Lloyd Adu Amoah suggests that China is targeting two different publics: the first, the government and people of Ghana with messages of fraternity, benevolence and influence; with the second being China's geostrategic political and economic competitors, with messages that underscore that China "has become a force to reckon with" (Amoah 2010: 3).

## **Nigeria**

Towards the end of the Cold War and during the post-Cold War period, in light of China's growing economic influence, there was a renewed emphasis on economic ties, trade and investment. The Chinese government started investing in Nigeria's transport systems around this time, with formal diplomatic ties established on 10 February 1971.

China-Nigeria ties substantially improved in the 2000s, mainly due to China's interest in Nigeria's oil reserves. China also made significant investments in Nigeria's infrastructure and telecom industries around this time.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Galamsey' is a Ghanaian term drawn from the phrase "gather them and sell" and is used in reference to illegal small-scale gold mining in Ghana.

China and Nigeria strengthened their economic and political ties under the leadership of President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007), who oversaw the 2006 FOCAC.

The 2010s saw a major increase in trade between the two nations. China made considerable investments in infrastructure and economic projects in Nigeria, particularly in telecommunications, ports and railways. Meanwhile, China became a significant market for Nigeria's oil exports in this period. However, throughout this time, there were growing concerns about the sustainability of debt levels, employment practices and the trade imbalance favouring China.

Nigeria clearly demonstrates the scale and scope of Chinese interest in Africa. According to the website of the People's Republic of China's embassy in Nigeria,<sup>6</sup> China-Nigeria relations comprise three main areas: i) China-Nigeria events; ii) economic cooperation and iii) cultural exchanges. The scope of China-Nigeria events covers a range of areas, including diplomacy, space exploration, health, culture and policy discussions.

The cultural exchange between China and Nigeria has historically been unbalanced. Nigerians have watched Chinese films and eaten Chinese cuisine since the 1970s and 1980s, but the reciprocal interest is much more recent and has only really emerged in the last decade and a half.

The embassy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was established in Beijing in 1972 to enhance bilateral relations between Nigeria and China. The relationship between the two continents' representative giants has grown steadily in terms of trade and mutual economic development. The Nigerian embassy in China also has a Nigerian Cultural Centre in Beijing, founded in 2012 as a division of the Nigerian embassy in Beijing's Information and Culture section. The first-ever Nigerian Cultural Centre in Asia, run by the embassy's culture attaché, has the dual duties of acting as a small museum and organising cultural exchange activities between China and Nigeria (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Nigeria, n.d.).

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<sup>6</sup> Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Nigeria. (2023b) China-Nigeria Relations. Available at: <http://ng.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zngx/> (Accessed: 3 August 2023).

China's economic cooperation takes place across a range of sectors, as follows:

- **Infrastructure:** Infrastructure is arguably the sector with the highest level of Chinese engagement and investment. Chinese companies, notably China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) and China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC), are deeply involved in several significant construction projects in Nigeria, including road, rail and airport construction. With China's assistance, the Abuja-Kaduna rail line was constructed between February 2011 and December 2014. In July 2016, Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari inaugurated the line for commercial services. The project was undertaken by CCECC.<sup>7</sup> Another example is the Mambilla Hydropower project, a 3,050 MW hydropower plant which will launch in 2030 and is being undertaken by China Gezhouba Group Corporation and Sinohydro.<sup>8</sup> Both projects are funded with Chinese investment.
- **Oil and gas:** China is also a big player in Nigeria's oil and gas industry. Along with long-term oil supply deals with the Nigerian government, Chinese companies have recently made high-profile acquisitions of oil properties. Nigeria's oil sector has seen significant involvement from China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC).<sup>9</sup> China's Sinoma International Engineering has provided construction services and equipment to the multi-billion-dollar Dangote refinery project.<sup>10</sup>
- **Manufacturing:** China also participates in Nigeria's industrial sector through activities in steel, cement and the manufacturing of different consumer items at varying scales.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.railway-technology.com/projects/abuja-kaduna-rail-line/> (Accessed: 3 August 2023).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nsenenergybusiness.com/projects/mambilla-hydropower-project-nigeria/> (Accessed: 3 August 2023).

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.voanews.com/a/africa\\_china-invests-16-billion-nigerias-oil-sector/6174771.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_china-invests-16-billion-nigerias-oil-sector/6174771.html) (Accessed: 3 August 2023).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.marketscreener.com/quote/stock/SINOMA-INTERNATIONAL-ENGI-6497827/news/Sinoma-International-Engineering-Dangote-Refinery-Constructed-by-32105549/>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/china/49814032.pdf> (Accessed: 3 August 2023).

- **Agriculture:** China's involvement in Nigeria's agricultural industry includes cooperation, services and trade designed to increase agricultural productivity and efficiency through sharing information and transferring technology, for example, by assisting with irrigation projects and supplying agricultural equipment.<sup>12</sup>
- **ICT:** Chinese businesses have made large investments in Nigeria's ICT industry, with Huawei playing a significant role, including developing telecommunications infrastructure, offering reasonably priced digital goods and educating local ICT specialists. Huawei has actively contributed to the development of Nigeria's digital economy through initiatives like the Abuja Smart City project.<sup>13</sup>
- **Mining:** Chinese businesses have demonstrated a growing interest in Nigeria's solid mineral industry, particularly in the mining of gold, iron ore, coal and other natural resources. Several Chinese businesses have obtained mining licences, and there have also been allegations of illicit mining operations in several Nigerian regions.
- **Finance:** Numerous infrastructure projects have been supported by loans from China's Exim Bank, including developing new terminals at Abuja's Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport and the Lagos Murtala Muhammad Airport. Chinese banks have a sizeable presence in Nigeria, including the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and the Export-Import Bank of China, which are lending money for numerous projects and industries.

In 2021, China exported goods worth US\$21.9 billion to Nigeria, with the main items being non-knit women's suits (US\$769 million), telephones (US\$729 million) and rubber footwear (US\$541 million). This trade has witnessed a significant growth over the past 26 years, increasing at an annualised rate of 21.1% from US\$151 million in 1995. Conversely, Nigeria exported goods valued at US\$3.05 billion to China in 2021, dominated by petroleum gas (US\$1.42 billion), crude oil (US\$1.02 billion) and lead ore (US\$73 million), showing an annualised growth rate of 17% since 1995.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <https://independent.ng/agriculture-china-hands-over-n2-8bn-project-to-nigeria/> (Accessed: 3 August 2023).

<sup>13</sup> <https://techcabal.com/2017/08/16/fg-partners-huawei-to-create-smart-cities-in-nigeria/>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/nga> (Accessed: 3 August 2023).

# 3. Cultural Engagement in Africa

## 3.1 China's strategy for Africa

China has a clear strategy for Africa and published a white paper on its African policy in 2006. This “African Policy Paper” outlines China’s principles and intentions towards African countries, which are as follows:

- *“Sincerity, friendship, and equality.”* China adheres to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, respects African countries’ independent choice of the road of development and supports African countries’ efforts to grow stronger through unity;
- *Mutual benefit, reciprocity, and common prosperity.* China supports African countries’ endeavours for economic development and nation-building, carries out cooperation in various forms in the economic and social development, and promotes common prosperity of China and Africa;
- *Mutual support and close coordination.* China will strengthen cooperation with Africa in the United Nations and other multilateral systems by supporting each other’s just demand and reasonable propositions and continue to appeal to the international community to give more attention to questions concerning peace and development in Africa;
- *Learning from each other and seeking common development.* China and Africa will learn from and draw upon each other’s experience in governance and development, strengthen exchanges and cooperation in education, science, culture, and health. Supporting African countries’ efforts to enhance capacity building, China will work together with Africa in the exploration of the road of sustainable development”<sup>15</sup>.

A more updated policy entitled “China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals” and adopted in November 2021 (Xinhua 2021b) is a commitment to building “an even stronger China-Africa community of shared future; All Round China-Africa cooperation in the new era; Strengthening mutual support; and, Breaking new ground in China-Africa relations”.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [http://gh.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/200601/t20060114\\_6137256.htm](http://gh.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/200601/t20060114_6137256.htm) (Accessed:3 August 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Xinhua. (2021b) Full Text: China and Africa in the New Era: A partnership of Equals. White Paper. Available at: [http://www.news.cn/english/2021-11/26/c\\_1310333813.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/2021-11/26/c_1310333813.htm) (Accessed: 3 September 2023).

The Chinese government has also committed itself to the African Union (AU)'s goals, as expressed in the AU's "Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want",<sup>17</sup> the strategic framework for growth and sustainable development on the continent. The agenda was adopted by the AU in 2015 as an agreement for the continent and outlines political and socioeconomic aspirations. Goals include a higher standard of living for citizens, access to education, the promotion of health and wellness, transformed economies, increased productivity and production in agriculture, environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient economies and communities, the stabilisation of Africa in terms of peace and security, full gender equality and the promotion of a united Africa. To ensure that the Agenda 2063 delivers transformation and tangible results for all African countries, activities which prioritise sustainable development, governance, respect for human rights, justice and law, and peace and security have been planned to take place as part of a 10-year implementation plan over the next 50 years.<sup>18</sup>

China sees its Belt and Road Initiative—with its emphasis on infrastructure investment—as a means to commit to the AU and Agenda 2063. A significant number of African countries have signed memoranda of understanding with China on the BRI—46 of the 140 countries and 31 international organisations (Fu and Eguegu 2021: 3). China and the AU signed a cooperation plan to promote the BRI and the AU Agenda 2063 in December 2020.<sup>19</sup> The BRI, a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure investment platform, is seen as supporting Africa's sustainable development goals as it covers economic and trade cooperation, resource development, industrialisation and infrastructure development.<sup>20</sup> China has built more than 6,000 kilometres of railways and

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<sup>17</sup> African Union Commission. (2021). Available at:

<https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/agenda2063.pdf> (Accessed: 30 April 2021).

<sup>18</sup> AU Agenda 2063. (n.d.) Available at: <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/goals>.

<sup>19</sup> Government of the People's Republic of China. 'The Chinese government and the African Union sign a cooperation plan to build the "Belt and Road"' [16 December 2020]. Available at: [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-12/16/content\\_5569870.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-12/16/content_5569870.htm).

<sup>20</sup> Head of Mission of the People's Republic of China to the African Union. 'China-Africa Joint Contribution of the BRI Is on the Momentum' [15 January 2021]. Available at: [https://au.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/sghd\\_1/t1846707.htm](https://au.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/sghd_1/t1846707.htm).

highways, 20 trade ports and more than 80 power facilities in Africa (Ojeme 2021).<sup>21</sup>

Having said that, there is much less written about China's investments in cultural infrastructure or in media, film and education. However, as the author and co-researchers in this study found, there is no doubt that the extent of China's cultural engagement is widening in scope and growing in reach. For the purposes of this report, much of the evidence was sourced from grey literature and fieldwork in the five countries with artists, cultural activists, organisations and government officials working in cultural departments or ministries.

Most Chinese cultural investments are embarked on in parallel with development projects. In Ghana, for instance, the construction of the National Theatre was not a stand-alone investment. Chinese funds supported the construction of the Kumasi Youth Centre, a sports complex in Cape Coast, several rural schools and funds were also contributed to the University of Health and Allied Sciences in Ho (Prio Policy Brief 2022: 2).<sup>22</sup>

A few Chinese cultural exchange programmes are implemented in multiple countries, for example the China-Africa Cultural Cooperation and Exchange Month organised by the Bureau of International Exchange and Cooperation, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, the Zhejiang Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism and the Jinhua Municipal People's Government.

The promotion activities known as "Golden Rainbow Shining Brilliantly" were held in Johannesburg, South Africa, most recently in September 2023. Numerous productions and exhibitions of music, opera, dance and performance were held, including robust debate on Chinese Wujia opera and African dance,

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<sup>21</sup> Ojeme, V. (2020) 'China constructs 6,000km railroads, 20 ports, 80 power plants in Africa', Vanguard. Available at: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/11/china-constructs-6000km-railroads-20-ports-80-power-plants-in-africa/amp/> (Accessed: 5 December 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Chinese Embassy in Ghana. (n.d.) Introduction of China-Ghana relations. Available at: [gh.chinaembassy.org/eng/zjgx/zzwl/t177920.htm](http://gh.chinaembassy.org/eng/zjgx/zzwl/t177920.htm);

Chinese Embassy in Ghana. (2021) Inaugurating a new journey for China-Ghana relations. [13 March]. Available at: [www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbw\\_665378/t1860715.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbw_665378/t1860715.shtml).

and visits were undertaken to key tourism sites such as Lesedi Cultural Village (IOL 2023).

The Chinese Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC) Literary and Art Research Institute is another multi-country initiative including ten English-speaking African countries, namely Sierra Leone, Zambia, Ghana, Mozambique, Tanzania, Malawi, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda and Egypt. The programme includes research and training on literary and art organisation management and administration at the Nanjing University of the Arts. The leader of this training project and Vice President of CFLAC, Fu Yixuan, explained that:

*Passion for promoting our Chinese values abroad is far from enough to conduct foreign exchange and aid. We need to find what they are really interested in. Currently, they are demanding to know more about this largest developing country with an extreme acceleration as well as the mysterious and colourful Oriental culture [sic]. We take this point in our training plan so as to meet their demand and enable them to understand a true and open China. (Fu, quoted in He 2013)*

This was the first international training project by CFLAC, a new Chinese endeavour for international aid sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, undertaken by the Research Institute of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television and implemented by the Literary and Art Research Institute of CFLAC.<sup>23</sup> The aim of the training project was to enhance mutual understanding between China and Africa and promote bilateral exchange and friendship.

The 17 cultural officials and artists who travelled to Beijing, Nanjing, Gaochun and Suzhou received training and heard from experts about the actual conditions in China—be it in metropolises, in an ancient city that housed the capital of six dynasties or in other smaller cities, ancient towns and villages. They learned about Chinese cultural policies as well as the management, preservation and heritage of Chinese folklore. The cultural activities that were showcased

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<sup>23</sup> [http://www.cflac.org.cn/ArtExchange/201302/English/201403/t20140326\\_249708.htm](http://www.cflac.org.cn/ArtExchange/201302/English/201403/t20140326_249708.htm).



included calligraphy, seal cutting, paper cutting, Kunqu opera and Tai Chi boxing. Participants visited museums, art colleges and academies, art ensembles and cultural companies. Many Chinese artists were volunteers on the CFLAC programme, which prompted questions from the African participants about how they were identified, remunerated and mobilised. As one of the interview respondents (A1) stated, “it is hardly possible for so many African artists to do such a similar thing”.

CFLAC highlighted that this project was an attempt to strengthen cultural cooperation between China and Africa. While a number of cultural cooperation agreements have been signed by African countries, the process has been hamstrung by linguistic barriers. CFLAC recognised that it was not sufficient to establish agencies such as Confucius Institutes and art centres—it is important that both Chinese and African people know about each other’s history and culture.<sup>24</sup>

### **South Africa**

In the case of South Africa, diplomatic relations with China were established in 1998 when South Africa cut ties with Taiwan. The two countries have close ties both politically and commercially. Since 2010, South Africa and China form part of the strategically important BRICS trading bloc, along with Brazil, Russia and India. There are presently no formal trade agreements between the BRICS countries, resulting in no preferential tariffs similar to those signed under South Africa’s trade agreements with the South African Customs Union (SACU), the EU-SA trade agreements or with MERCOSUR. While “most cultural product categories are fully liberalised (i.e. no customs duty is charged), more sensitive product categories<sup>25</sup> continue to attract tariffs on a Most Favoured Nation (MFN) basis” (Cattaneo & Snowball 2019: 583).

On joining the BRI in 2015, China (President Xi Jinping) and South Africa (former president Jacob Zuma) signed 25 business agreements worth US\$16.5 billion at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Johannesburg

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<sup>24</sup> [http://www.cflac.org.cn/ArtExchange/201302/English/201403/t20140326\\_249708.htm](http://www.cflac.org.cn/ArtExchange/201302/English/201403/t20140326_249708.htm).

<sup>25</sup> The term ‘sensitive’ or ‘special product’ category exists in many bilateral trade agreements (e.g. the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) between the EU and ACP). These products are excluded from the liberalisation process.

(Freedom House 2022: 7). Since its inception, both sides believe the BRI remains a “mutually beneficial platform for international cooperation”, pledging to work cooperatively in the focus areas of “infrastructure and logistics, trade and investment, manufacturing, agro-processing, energy and resources, the financial sector, the digital economy, science and technology, and green development” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023). In the joint statement issued on 23 August 2023 in Cape Town by President Ramaphosa and President Xi, a commitment to cultural exchange and mutual learning was made and value placed on high-level people-to-people exchange mechanisms. In particular, mention was made of culture, women, education, the media and tourism “to consolidate the social foundation of the bilateral relationship” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2023).

South Africa and China have both ratified the important UNESCO Convention (2005) on The Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which provides both obligations and opportunities to ensure preferential agreement, ensure a balanced flow of cultural trade and international cultural cooperation and to strengthen domestic cultural and creative industries. However, given the distance and often inadequate cooperation between departments of arts and culture and those of trade and industry, as Cattaneo & Snowball observed, “tensions may arise between the liberalisation provisions of trade agreements and the need to protect cultural expressions in a developing country like South Africa” (2019: 583).

The trade of cultural and creative industry (CCI) goods between South Africa and China amounts to a significant percentage of China’s world trade. According to UNCTAD, the creative goods exported from China to South Africa accounted for 19.06% of China’s world exports in 2002, while this grew to a staggering 55.77% in 2015. Fashion and design account for a significant portion of this growth, but art, crafts, performing arts and visual arts goods all contributed substantially to this increase. According to Cattaneo and Snowball, “cultural goods imports show greater downward sensitivity in bad times, while cultural goods exports appear to have been more resilient during the downturns” (2019: 591). Interestingly, the 2008 global economic depression seems to have had little impact on cultural trade between South Africa and China, in fact the data shows unaffected, consistent growth across all areas (Cattaneo & Snowball 2019: 585).

South Africa's total export of CCI goods rose globally from US\$325 million in 2002 to US\$501 million in 2015, while imports from all global trade partners rose significantly from US\$467 million in 2002 to US\$1.48 billion in 2015. This sharp rise in imports to South Africa is largely influenced by a rise in imports from China, which is predominantly attributed to the fashion, design and textiles industry. According to the South African Government's Masterplan for CCIs, "on the import side, BRICS (largely due to China and, to a lesser extent, India) was the most important source of cultural goods imports for South Africa in 2019 with a share of 39.7% (US\$156.62 million), much the same as in 2018" (SAGov 2022: 19).

There are already substantial cultural engagements between the two countries, although these remain largely undocumented or appear in grey literature rather than in peer-reviewed journals. Apart from general cultural exchanges such as the South African Department of Arts and Culture and China Seasons, the Chinese Cultural Exhibition (linked to the Chinese New Year by the Chinese embassy in South Africa), China's Qinghai province exhibition in Jan 2020 and the 2015 Zhejiang Cultural Festival in Kirstenbosch, there are also cultural domain-specific events. These include in film (China Africa International Film Festival, BRICS Film Festival in Durban), fashion (2018 China Home Life Expo in Johannesburg), dance (Cape Town International Dance Festival/iKapa, tour of Jin Xing Dance Theatre in Shanghai, in 2015), theatre (Artscape being the first African arts centre to be inducted into the Silk Road International League of Theatres in 2018), heritage (South Africa Heritage Day celebrations at Beijing Horticultural Expo in September 2019 organised by the South African embassy in China), language (17 September as South African-Chinese Language Day), books and literature (University of Johannesburg China Book Exhibition) and television (DISCOP Africa-TV industry marketplace/expo for China across the continent).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> DISCOP is the business-to-business (B2B) market for film, television, digital content distribution and co-production business.

## Kenya

A Kenyan government respondent, A2, explained the cultural exchange relationship between the Kenyan government and the Chinese government as fraught with complexity. The example offered was the case of an arts exhibition held in China. He recalled 70 selected artworks and two Kenyan artists who travelled to China, received a high level of publicity and whose exhibitions were well attended. As part of this exchange, 24 Chinese artists came to Kenya for a week and participated in an exhibition in Mombasa with national parks and in a one-day exhibition at the Department of Design, University of Nairobi.

Despite the high level of publicity received by the aforementioned events, the event led to some tensions when the Chinese professor did not return all the artworks as per the agreement and instead retained them for a national exhibition in China. The Kenyan government demanded the return of these works, but the Chinese government contacted the artists directly, promising that the works would be purchased and funds transferred after the exhibition.

Criticism of African governments' subservience to China is evident in the decisions taken in 2013 and 2015 on the choice of artists to represent Kenya at the Kenyan Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Kenyan artist respondent A3 recalled that in 2013, two out of twelve artists representing the country in the Kenyan Pavilion were Kenyan born; the rest were Chinese. Despite the fact that the 2015 Biennale celebrated its first African director, Okwui Enwezor from Nigeria, with over 21 African artists showing in the main exhibit, the poor decision-making by the Kenyan and Chinese governments was repeated. In 2015, only one out of seven artists was Kenyan, with the other six being Chinese.<sup>27</sup> Kenyan artists were angry and frustrated at the presence of Chinese artists in the Kenyan Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, according to A3, and consequently delivered a petition addressed to the Kenyan Ministry of Sport, Arts and Culture, entitled "Renounce Kenya's fraudulent representation at 56 Venice Biennial 2015 & commit to support the realisation of a national pavilion in 2017". The petition read as follows:

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.okayafrica.com/venice-biennale-2015-kenyan-art-pavilion-michael-soi/>.

*A group of well-connected persons, who lack neither the intellectual nor creative capacity to represent Kenya's contemporary art to the international arena, are posturing to the world as the Kenyan Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennial in Italy [...] This petition therefore, is another urge to amalgamate the resonance of Kenya's contemporary voices and consolidate the outrage that our supporters both locally and internationally feel. It is to seek the comradeship of those who are witness to both the vibrancy and frustration of Kenya's contemporary artists, and those who bear them support.<sup>28</sup>*

## **Nigeria**

In the case of Nigeria, recent developments—specifically during the last decade and a half—point to a broader strategy, with China expressing a growing interest in the Nigerian media, culture and educational sectors. Insights from cultural professionals and academics interviewed for this study highlight an increased scale of activity across these areas. This diversification suggests a more comprehensive engagement strategy.

A prominent Nigerian theatre maker based in Lagos, Nigeria, who was interviewed for the study (A4), remarked that “until a few years ago, China had little influence over our culture, especially our filmmaking. However, we grew up watching Chinese films, studying their costumes, music, food and more. Over the years, Nigeria’s relationship with China has predominantly been about receiving rather than giving.” A4 further underscored the significance of China’s impact on Nigeria, stating,

*From an infrastructural perspective, China has profoundly impacted Nigerian healthcare, transportation, investment and foreign aid. Their contributions span from healthcare initiatives, railway projects, constructions to trade and investment endeavours.*

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/government-of-kenya-ministry-of-sports-culture-and-the-arts-kenya-renounce-kenya-s-fraudulent-representation-at-56-venice-biennial-2015-commit-to-support-the-realisation-of-a-national-pavilion-in-2017>.

This perception is corroborated by cultural exchange being one of the three areas of priority listed officially as part of China-Nigeria relations.

The Cultural Exchange section of the China in Nigeria website includes two elements: Chinese Culture and Nigeria. The Chinese Culture section highlights various Chinese cultural topics, including information about Chinese festivals, notable architecture in China and various Chinese art institutions such as museums. The Nigerian culture section highlights China's constant and strategic engagement in Nigeria, utilising a mix of high-level diplomatic interaction, educational exchange and cultural diplomacy to increase its influence and relations. The listed events show a dynamic interchange of cultures between China and Nigeria over many years, highlighting China's persistent efforts to influence and forge close cultural connections with Nigeria.

The website contains a range of media around culture, arts and education-focused initiatives, including the following:

- A press release announcing an event entitled “China Holds Tourism Week, Pledges More Cultural Exchange with Nigeria” outlines how China is dedicated to enhancing cultural understanding and exchange between the two countries.
- A report of a meeting between Chinese ambassador Zhou Pingjian and Emir of Kano Muhammadu Sanusi II on 25 February 2017 highlighting China's diplomatic engagements at various levels, including with both traditional authorities and the federal government, underscoring China's comprehensive approach to its diplomatic relationships.<sup>29</sup>
- China's interest in Nigeria's educational system, demonstrated by several actions such as the provision of supplies to a model elementary school and interactions with many Nigerian ministries, including the Ministry of Youth and Sports Development and the Ministry of Education.
- The “China-Nigeria Ceramics Art and Culture Exhibition” and the “Shandong Martial Art Troupe” performance demonstrate the utilisation of art and culture to bridge the two societies. This promotes appreciation of Chinese culture in Nigeria and highlights China's rich cultural history.

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<sup>29</sup> [http://ng.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zngx/whjl/201702/t20170227\\_7775572.htm](http://ng.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zngx/whjl/201702/t20170227_7775572.htm) (Accessed: 3 August 2023).

Respondents (A4–A9) concluded that overall, while China’s initiatives in cultural exchange are evident and well-intentioned, their impact on the Nigerian cultural scene appears to be mixed. They suggest that the relationship seems tilted towards promoting Chinese culture in Nigeria, with less emphasis on reciprocal exchange. There is a clear call for more structure, sustainability and genuine reciprocity in these programmes from the consultees.

Bilateral relations between Nigeria and China have significantly increased in the economic, political and cultural arenas, with China becoming a major trading partner and an important investor in industries such as manufacturing, telecommunications, oil and gas and infrastructure, as outlined above. Through frequent high-level exchanges, participation in international forums and agreements on topics like security and public health, both countries have worked to strengthen their political connections. Cultural interactions have increased as a result of mutual travel and educational programmes such as those of the Confucius Institute in Nigeria. These complex exchanges have continued to shape the dynamic China-Nigeria relationship, despite some difficulties such as trade imbalances and worries over debt sustainability.

At the International Arts and Crafts (INAC) Expo’s inauguration, held in Abuja in September 2023, Otunba Olusegun Runsewe, the director general of the National Council for Arts and Culture, introduced the Investment Forum on the theme of “Culture, Economic Development and National Security” on the event’s second day. He described this forum as the intellectual aspect of the INAC Expo. The sixteenth edition of the Expo aims to showcase Nigeria’s arts and crafts globally. Additionally, as part of an empowerment initiative, Runsewe revealed that the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) has plans to send over 3,000 young Nigerians to China for skill acquisition training, with each state contributing 100 participants.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/09/16/promoting-nigerias-rich-culture-at-arts-expo> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

## 3.2 China-Africa cultural seasons

‘Cultural seasons’ are bilateral agreements between states to showcase one another’s arts and cultural expressions on stages in their respective countries, host masterclasses and facilitate cultural exchanges with the long-term aim of strengthening bilateral cultural relations and bilateral trade.

### South Africa

In 2015, South Africa hosted a cultural season with China which, according to the chief director of international relations in the Department of Arts and Culture, aimed to “raise the profile of China in South Africa and vice versa; create a fertile ground for cultural and public diplomacy in order to strengthen bilateral relations; and promote multi-sectoral cooperation” (Wu 2015: 2). The South African-Chinese cultural season was preceded by formal bilateral relations in 1998, which indicated a deepening of business and diplomatic relations and acknowledged the need to increase people-to-people exchanges to build trust and better understand each other’s values and culture. The season coincided with the AU Summit and Sixth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, providing China with the opportunity to extend its reach beyond South African audiences into the region. Wu suggests that the critical task was to “include participation in the relationship beyond policy circles to include cross generation communication, engaging sceptics of the relationship and clearing the air on possible points of disagreement between both sides” (2015: 3).

In general, seasons raise the question of equity in resources and financial commitments (for instance between South Africa and European countries like France and the UK)—the one with China being no different. This is partly due to the lack of a formal cultural diplomacy policy to guide South Africa’s foreign relations and ensure targeted resource mobilisation but is also in part due to the vast resources China is able to mobilise. As Wu stated, “China has the capacity to run broader more ambitious initiatives than the Europeans, such as setting up Confucius Institutes and media agencies abroad, as well as establishing public diplomacy divisions in their foreign embassies” (2015).



## Zambia

In Zambia, the year 2019 was declared the Zambia-China Year, which aimed to “enhance the visibility of Zambia in China and promote Zambia as a preferred tourist and investment destination for the Chinese”<sup>31</sup> (Xinhua 2019). The National Arts Council’s vice chairperson, Agness Nyendwa, welcomed the initiative for its effort to increase tourism and enhance Zambian arts. She stated:

*A great opportunity has been presented to persons and entities in the business of arts and theatre to market and sell their products and services outside Zambia. This is an opportunity that ought to be fully utilized. (Nyendwa quoted in Xinhua 2019)*

The Zambian Arts Council’s support for the Zambia-China Year began with a ‘Road Show’ in 2016 and the Zambia Week in Sichuan Province in 2017 and ended with two closing events: the “Meet China - Digital Media Art Exhibition” and “China Beyond Your Imagination - China Tourism Promotion” in November 2019. At the closing event, which hosted more than 250 dignitaries, Li Qun, vice minister of culture and tourism of China, said:

*the Chinese side wishes to further strengthen cultural exchanges and mutual learning with Zambia and other African countries through the cultural year, jointly promote the development of cultural undertakings of China and Zambia and contribute to the building of a China-Africa Community with a shared future that enjoys cultural prosperity. Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China would like to continue to deepen tourism cooperation with the Zambian side and make important contributions to the development of bilateral relations. (China Embassy in Zambia 2019)*

While Zambia expressed its willingness to continue to hold similar events with China, the Chinese government committed to further people-to-people exchanges in culture, art, education, sports and other fields, as well as making active efforts to grow bilateral tourism.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/31/c\\_137790043.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/31/c_137790043.htm)

<sup>32</sup> [http://zm.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dshdyjh/202210/t20221008\\_10778550.htm](http://zm.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dshdyjh/202210/t20221008_10778550.htm).

## 4. Chinese Investments in African Cultural Infrastructure

### 4.1 Investments in cultural spaces

One of the first investments by China in cultural infrastructure on the African continent was the National Theatre in Accra, Ghana. This was the product of a technical cooperation agreement signed in Beijing in September 1985 between the governments of the Republic of Ghana and the People's Republic of China. This fully financed theatre was considered a gift to Ghana for its support after the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 (Amoah 2016: 245). The distinctive architecture of the National Theatre is considered one of the most impressive buildings in downtown Accra and was offered by the Chinese to “propel this [Ghanaian] culture into the next highest level ... [as] the arts have been the way of life and part of the everyday activities of Ghanaians”.<sup>33</sup> Since its opening, the National Theatre regularly receives visits and performances from foreign performers, including Chinese performers. In 2014, the then acting executive director, Amy Appiah Frimpong, said in an interview with Xinhua, “Our mission is linked to our mandate which is to preserve and promote the performing arts through live stage and televised performances, projecting the national identity and an African personality.”<sup>34</sup>

A Ghanaian cultural expert (A10) confirmed that there had in fact been cultural agreements between Ghana and China since the 1960s and that the Chinese were then engaged in many large infrastructure projects. For A10, there was no controversy about the National Theatre as it worked very well. In China, theatres are very different to those on the African continent, and Amarteifio acknowledged that the architecture may not have been ideal with its “surfeit of black and white tiles reflecting yin and yang symbolism” (Amoah 2016: 245). The Chinese architect, Cheng Taining, lists the National Theatre as one of his major international projects and himself argues against the influence of foreign architects in Chinese cities, saying that “buildings should speak Mandarin and be designed according to the tenets of Chinese culture” (Yu 2011).

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<sup>33</sup> [http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2014-10/10/content\\_33720826.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2014-10/10/content_33720826.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Xinhua. (2023) ‘Interview: Chinese-aided national theatre enlivens performing arts in Ghana’, Editor: huaxia [3 April 2023]. Available at: <https://english.news.cn/africa/20230403/e2b9f4ea5cfa4bb5b1b2c7ab70967370/c.html>.



The National Theatre in Accra, Ghana. Photo: Avril Joffe

This Chinese ‘gift’<sup>35</sup> to Ghanaians houses three resident companies: the National Dance Company, the National Symphony Orchestra and the National Theatre Players, who go by the name of ‘Abibigroma’. However, the gift was also seen by the Chinese as an opportunity to host Chinese productions in the National Theatre, such as the “Wulin Hanyun” tour, which was hosted by the Confucius Institute Headquarters/Hanban and the Chinese embassy in Ghana, and co-hosted by the Ghanaian Education Department, Henan Province, China and the Confucius Institute at the University of Ghana. During this tour, kung fu was performed alongside traditional Chinese dance and folk music at the National Theatre, Accra.<sup>36</sup>

Respondent A10 added that the theatre built in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, was a huge improvement on the National Theatre. It works with the environment as

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<sup>35</sup> In 2007, it was reported that China wrote off the costs of constructing the National Theatre in Accra (see [https://www.myjoyonline.com/china-writes-off-cost-of-national-theatre/\\_](https://www.myjoyonline.com/china-writes-off-cost-of-national-theatre/_)).

<sup>36</sup> Ntim, A. (2020) The National Theatre: the Artistic Chinese gift to Ghanaians [20 September 2020] Available at: <https://myghanadaily.com/the-national-theatre-the-artistic-chinese-gift-to-ghanaians/> (Accessed: 14 December 2022).

it has few walls for improved airflow, faces the river so the audience can face both the stage and the river, and blends into the landscape of Abidjan.

Many Chinese productions are housed at the National Theatre in Accra, such as the above-mentioned “Wulin Hanyun” tour. These productions see dignitaries from both China and Ghana in attendance, for example the Chinese ambassador to Ghana H.E. Sun Baohong, representatives of the Ministry for Tourism, Culture and Creative Arts (MOTCCA) and Joel Sonne, the chief director of MOTCCA. Presidents of the Ghana Association of Chinese Companies as well as headteachers and students from the numerous Confucius Institute teaching sites were among the more than 1,500 attendees.

Since the construction of the National Theatre, Chinese infrastructural investments in Ghana have increased significantly, resulting in large numbers of Chinese people (businesspeople, workers) now making Ghana their home (especially in Kumasi). Ghanaians are not unanimous in their opinion of the benefits of these investments. Ghanaian respondents (A10–A15) questioned the ‘ulterior motive’ of Chinese businesses and government, the lack of concern for displaced fishermen in the Jamestown developments, the creation of a ghetto in that historic neighbourhood, as well as how ‘galamsey’ is polluting the sea and destroying the environment.

Other cultural infrastructure built by the Chinese includes the Grand Theatre in Dakar, which was built between 2008 and 2011 by China National Complete Plant Import Export Corporation, also labelled as a gift. However, China did not fund the entire construction of this six-storey, 1,800-seat theatre. Senegal contributed CFA 2 billion and China paid the remaining CFA 14 billion.<sup>37</sup>

A new Chinese-financed Central African Cultural and Arts Centre is under construction in the DR Congo capital, Kinshasa, and is a 36,000-square-metre development (Olander 2023). At the groundbreaking ceremony in 2019, the acting charge d’affaires of China’s embassy in the DRC, Tu Wentao, explained that this major China-Africa cooperation project was initially suggested at the

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<sup>37</sup> Major aid projects built by China in Africa. [Updated 1 December 2015]. Available at: [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/XiattendsParisclimateconference/2015-12/01/content\\_22525849\\_6.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/XiattendsParisclimateconference/2015-12/01/content_22525849_6.htm).

2015 Johannesburg Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC):

*Once completed, it will play an important role in advancing the cultural and artistic undertakings of DRC and the whole of Africa, thus becoming a new milestone of the cooperation between China and the DRC. China attaches great importance to the friendship between the two countries, supports the DRC in achieving economic prosperity, and is willing to further strengthen intergovernmental cooperation between the two countries.<sup>38</sup>*

In 2018, the President of Senegal, Macky Sall, inaugurated the Museum of Black Civilisations in Dakar. The construction took seven years, with an investment of US\$34 million from China, who also provided the architects for the museum. The Chinese state-owned Beijing Institute of Architectural Design created the circular design, which was apparently inspired by the forms of traditional houses in southern Dakar (Sutton 2018). The building is four storeys high, with the capacity to house 18,000 artefacts, and exhibits the works of artists from Burkina Faso, Mali, Haiti and Cuba (Sutton 2018).



Photo: Yarri Kamara

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<sup>38</sup> 'Groundbreaking ceremony of China-aided Central African cultural center held in Kinshsa (sic) in China', International Development Cooperation Agency. Available at: [http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2019-12/09/c\\_430855.htm](http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2019-12/09/c_430855.htm).

China also built the Grand Theatre in Dakar, which is seen as “one of the most beautiful architectural achievements on the continent”.<sup>39</sup> As the largest theatre in West Africa, it can accommodate approximately 1,800 patrons.

Nigeria did not follow China’s cultural infrastructure development trajectory, which in other West African nations like Ghana began with building a National Theatre. This may be because, as A4 mentioned, Nigeria has had a National Theatre since 1977, which was opened to host the Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos that same year.

## 4.2 Urbanisation in Africa: built by the Chinese

Much of China’s engagement in the urban landscape of African capital cities extends far beyond the building of theatres, museums, libraries or institutes. The African urban development sphere, according to urban commentators, has been built by the Chinese. As Daan Roggeveen, founder of MORE architecture and the author of works on urbanisation in China and Africa,<sup>40</sup> has said:

*Right now you could say that any big project in African cities that is higher than three floors or roads that are longer than three kilometres are most likely being built and engineered by the Chinese. It is ubiquitous.*<sup>41</sup>

Railways, hospitals, universities and stadiums have been built by the Chinese throughout the continent, even before the formal announcement of the BRI in 2013. Shepard (2019) suggests that China was well aware of the power vacuum after independence and the ‘stockpile’ of natural resources and “wasted no time

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.au-senegal.com/le-grand-theatre-national-une-des-7-merveilles-du-senegal,3120.html?lang=fr>.

<sup>40</sup> Roggeveen, D. (ed.) (2017) ‘Progress & Prosperity – The Chinese City as a Global Urban Model’, NAI booksellers. Available at: <https://more-architecture.com/publications/> (Accessed: 26 January 2023).

<sup>41</sup> Daan Roggeveen quoted in Wade Shepard, contributor to Forbes on ‘What China is really up to in Africa’. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2019/10/03/what-china-is-really-up-to-in-africa/?sh=66aa3eb15930> (Accessed: 3 February 2023).

stepping into the power vacuum, laying the political and economic inroads that have given Beijing the advanced position it has there today”.

## **Ghana**

Ghanaian architect Lloyd G. Adu Amoah (2014) has written that architecture and urban space in Africa, and specifically the Accra cityscape, are perhaps “concrete signs of a soft Chinese imperium?” He comments that the “very visible and undisguised presence of China’s architectural signature in Accra represents in style and concrete a contemporary fortress-like expression of China’s attempt at constructing a soft imperium in Africa” (2014: 238-239).

However, Amoah encourages a sophisticated and nuanced view of China-Africa engagements, demonstrating what each has to gain or lose. For Africa, he suggests the gains include the pecuniary and physical terms of Chinese representation, as well as investments in the financial, telecommunications, infrastructure and manufacturing sectors. On the other hand, for China, he suggests it is Africa’s extractive sectors, particularly oil, that are of interest. He adds that African countries are materially and financially resource hungry and require aid (both technical expertise and concessionary loans and grants) (2010: 5). This view led Ogunsanwo to suggest, as far back as the 1970s, that the policies and terms of engagement are mostly determined by China rather than African countries themselves (1974: 1). There is little evidence to suggest that this has since changed.

A respondent (A11) who had lived in China for many years commented on the way Kumasi, a town in Ghana, had changed over the years, with Chinese hotels, shops, restaurants and other commercial activities changing the urban landscape. He confirmed that Ghana has one of the oldest and largest Chinese communities in all of Africa. Some had arrived more than ten years ago as interpreters for Chinese companies and to help industry leaders communicate with locals and representatives of the government. This gave rise to new commercial and hospitality infrastructures.<sup>42</sup> This anecdotal account is confirmed by doctoral researcher Jinpu Wang, who writes:

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<sup>42</sup> See also YouTube blogger post ‘You Won’t Believe What China Is Doing In Ghana!’. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BITGL5gZ3Ek>.

*China's drastic political and economic changes in recent decades, coupled with its changing positioning in the global economy, have created a distinct social infrastructure for emigration. I found that opportunities for social mobility, rather than simply economic incentives, generated emigration flows to countries like Ghana. (2022)*

The anecdotal account is also underscored by authors Cobbinah et al. (2020), who state that the landscape of the city of Kumasi is continuously changing due to rapid population growth:

*[...] the uncontrolled in-migration of individuals seeking improved lifestyle opportunities. From a situation in 1950 in which the total population of the city was no more than 100,000, the figure had by 2010 jumped to well over 2 million, representing a sharply increasing proportion of the city's population.*

## **Nigeria**

Urbanisation in Nigeria has grown from 45.25% in 2012 to 53.52% in 2022.<sup>43</sup> Alongside other international and local players, China's engagement has played a key role in addressing the demand for major infrastructure development expenditures brought on by the swift urbanisation of cities like Lagos and Abuja.

Through various financial arrangements and collaborations, Chinese construction companies have started large-scale urban development projects ranging from road networks and train systems to high-rise skyscrapers and residential complexes.<sup>44</sup> While these collaborations support urbanisation and modernisation in Nigerian cities, there are also issues such as the possibility of economic dependence, labour disputes and concerns about the sustainability and quality of some of the projects. For example, despite the commissioning of the Chinese-constructed terminal at the Murtala airport in 2022 by President

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/455904/urbanization-in-nigeria/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.thecable.ng/in-detail-the-11-projects-funded-by-chinas-3-1bn-loan-to-nigeria> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).



Muhammadu Buhari, most airlines are choosing to use the more dated Terminal 1 over the new terminal. According to various reports, this is because Terminal 2's apron is too narrow to fit some wide-body aircrafts, including the Boeing 787 Dreamliner, 777, 747 and Airbus A380.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> <https://simpleflying.com/lagos-new-terminal-largely-unused/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

# 5. Chinese Investment in Media, Film and Music

## 5.1 Media

The Chinese government's investment in the media landscape is an important component of Chinese cultural sector investment in Africa. This investment covers media houses, channels, set-top boxes, content development, production, content distribution, infrastructure development and direct investment. Notable companies include StarTimes, China Africa, ZTE and Sekunjalo. There is a growing and solid Chinese interest in African creative content, as can be seen by other major investments by StarTimes (local pay television channels), CCTV Africa (Nairobi-based media hub) and Huawei (optical cables and 5G technology).<sup>46</sup>

### Ghana

StarTimes in Ghana—a member of the StarTimes Group, a Chinese multinational media company headquartered in Beijing—was founded in 1988 and has more channels and content than GOtv.<sup>47</sup> In fact, confirms a Kenyan respondent (A12), many of the channels and much of the content available on GOtv are also present (and cheaper) on StarTimes. StarTimes Ghana claim to be “a leading digital TV operator with a vision to enable every Ghanaian family to afford and enjoy digital TV”.

China's influence on Ghanaian media has increased in recent years, in part as a response to negative coverage over illegal mining, after which the Chinese embassy started a WhatsApp coordination group with local journalists and partnered with privately owned outlets (Datt and Ayisi 2022). However, this has not reduced the negative public opinion of China, as Ghanaians remain critical of their own government, which is seen as exercising “poor judgment regarding investments that have come at a high cost to the country” (Datt and Ayisi 2022).

The Chinese official news agency, Xinhua, has partnerships with diverse Ghanaian media outlets and has content-sharing agreements with three

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<sup>46</sup> <https://www.howwemadeitinafrica.com/seven-chinese-companies-made-africa/59407/>.

<sup>47</sup> GOtv Kenya is a minor service operating in more than nine countries. It is part of the South Africa company MultiChoice, which also operates DStv, a satellite television service in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as Showmax.

influential state-run outlets (Ghana News Agency, Ghanaian Times and Daily Graphic) and with other private media outlets (the *Finder* newspaper and *Business & Financial Times*). In turn, other smaller local outlets reproduce the content of the aforementioned state outlets, which tend to be supportive of China.

In 2017, the Chinese embassy “warned that local media coverage threatened bilateral relations and demanded that the Ghanaian government ‘guide’ local media” (Datt and Ayisi 2022). In order to influence journalists to offer more positive coverage, in 2019 the Chinese government sponsored travel and training programmes in China for Ghanaian journalists. The result was ambiguous, with some journalists developing a more positive attitude towards China while others remained critical (Datt and Ayisi 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to such trips.

Chinese companies increasingly own or are involved in parts of Ghana’s content-distribution infrastructure, for example digital and satellite television services (provided by *StarTimes*), the construction and maintenance of telecommunication infrastructure (Huawei), social media applications (TikTok, owned by Chinese company ByteDance) and mobile phones (Tecno).

In Ghana, freedom of the press is constitutionally guaranteed and respected, reports a Ghanaian artist (A13). In addition, Ghana’s civil society is characteristically independent and includes watchdog journalism, which counters disinformation and promotes fact-checking and media literacy. However, media regulatory enforcement is weak, resulting in media freedom being under pressure. The Ghana National Media Policy guides the media sector, but commentators report that “its provisions are not upheld by statutory requirements, and enforcement of rules on foreign and cross-ownership is weak” (Datt and Ayisi 2022). Ghanaian respondents (A10–16) report that, since 2018, there have been reports of harassment and arrests of journalists, particularly of journalists covering politically sensitive issues.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> United States Department of State. (2022) Ghana: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022. Available at: [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/415610\\_GHANA-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/415610_GHANA-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf) (Accessed: 29 September 2023).

## **Kenya**

Kenya is the media hub for China in East Africa and the rest of the continent. Kenya plays host to the African headquarters of Xinhua, China Radio International, China Daily and China Global Television Network. Each of these outlets have both local and Chinese staff. The choice of Kenya as host to these headquarters is due to a mix of factors including Kenya's investments in ICT infrastructure and its relatively advanced internet and telecommunications network, as well as the growth of the Kenyan media and entertainment industry. Perhaps more importantly, Kenya is a strategic choice, often referred to as 'Silicon Savannah' because of its many international organisations, including UN agencies, and is also a political choice as it has good diplomatic relations with China (Onyango 2022; Rosenberg/Brent 2020).

A Kenyan journalist respondent (A17) suggested that journalists working for Chinese media houses in Kenya are obliged to follow the political priorities of the Chinese government. He mentioned that when journalists file articles that are critical of African governments, the instruction will most often be to not run the story for fear of antagonising 'China's friends' on the continent. Stories on subjects such as 'state capture' in South Africa, political dictators, corruption and unfair elections were, for example, off limits. The journalist reported that, after this happened more than once, he left the agency to work elsewhere.

In response to the delays in the roll out of digital television in Kenya, which required set-top boxes to allow users to switch from analogue to digital, StarTimes Kenya offered a very affordable StarTimes Full Kit (KSh 2,999) that came with a free one-month super bouquet subscription (renewable at KSh 1,599). A combo decoder, satellite dish and coaxial cable are included in the StarTimes satellite kit (Ezekiel 2023). A Kenyan film producer (A18) noted that the Chinese brought in digital boxes costing KSh 2,000 less, which "flooded the market".

## South Africa

In South Africa, Chinese media influence<sup>49</sup> has been declining since prior to 2019, despite the launch of new social media accounts such as the South African Facebook accounts of China Radio International (CRI), People's Daily and the 'Xinjiang Journal' launched by CRI-hired South African journalist Zanele Buthelezi (Han and van Wyk 2022: 12–13).

Public opinion tends to be sceptical of China's influence and ways of working with journalists and critical of Chinese state narratives. Nevertheless, there are strong ties between Chinese state media and the ruling party, the African National Congress. One of South Africa's largest media conglomerates, Independent Media,<sup>50</sup> has two Chinese state-owned companies as shareholders. In 2013, a Chinese consortium acquired a 20% stake in Independent Media; the consortium includes state media company China International Television Corporation and the state policy bank China Africa Development Fund, while in 2015 Independent Media's syndication service Africa News Agency (ANA) entered into a content-sharing agreement with Chinese state news agency Xinhua (ANA 2015).<sup>51</sup> Iqbal Survé, executive director at Independent Media, made numerous trips to China, organised dialogues for African journalists with China's State Council Information Office and was honoured with an appointment to the Council of the Belt and Road News Network chaired by People's Daily.<sup>52</sup>

There has been an increase in pro-Beijing coverage of China as well as increased content from Xinhua news agency through Independent Media's syndication service. This results from the above-mentioned content-sharing agreement signed in 2015 between Independent Media's news syndication service ANA

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<sup>49</sup> This section acknowledges Freedom House's report by B. C. Han and Barry van Wyk, 'Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022', on South Africa. Available at: [https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-africa/beijings-global-media-influence/2022#footnote2\\_skzjpl](https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-africa/beijings-global-media-influence/2022#footnote2_skzjpl).

<sup>50</sup> Independent Media publishes more than 20 papers in South Africa, including the English-language The Star, Cape Times and Pretoria News, and the isiZulu outlets Isolezwe and Ilanga. The digital version is the second most-read news site in South Africa.

<sup>51</sup> ANA. (2015) 'Sekunjalo Wins Sapa Assets', Independent Online [13 March 2015]. Available at: <https://www.iol.co.za/business-report/companies/sekunjalo-wins-sapa-assets-1831609>.

<sup>52</sup> African News Agency. (2019) 'Top Honour for Survé in China', Independent Online [24 April 2019]. Available at: <https://www.iol.co.za/mercury/business/top-honour-for-surve-in-china-21837574>.

and Xinhua, the Chinese state news agency. Chinese state media speak of a “profound, win-win friendship” between China and South Africa, with references to *ubuntu* (an African worldview that celebrates mutuality, knowledge of self via the other and cooperation despite difference), which is perceived as compatible with China’s vision of building a shared future for mankind.

Media analysts believe Chinese state media targets elites, with content published in English and Chinese only. People’s Daily regularly runs paid features in the print and online editions of Business Day, promoting bilateral economic relations. Chinese state media is also available in print newspapers and on cable television such as MultiChoice, where China Global Television Network (CGTN) produces news videos and documentaries on South Africa. China Daily and ChinAfrica Magazine have a circulation of less than 30,000, while China Daily has a smaller circulation. This compares well with the top four South African daily newspapers in 2022: the Daily Sun (32,661), Isolezwe (30,197), The Star (27,945) and Die Burger (27,757).<sup>53</sup> As the reach of Chinese media expands, both CRI and People’s Daily have Facebook accounts specifically targeting the South African audience, with more than 775,000 followers (as of December 2021).

Chinese diplomatic representatives in South Africa are active commentators in the media, using op-ed pages to highlight the strong China-South Africa relationship. Other commentators include Lin Songtian (Chinese ambassador to South Africa from 2017–2020), who was active on the Chinese embassy Twitter account, and Chen Xiadong (Chinese ambassador to South Africa since September 2020), who is less active. In 2017, the executive director of Independent Media, Izbal Survé, organised the “China-Africa Media Dialogue” with China’s State Council Information Office and in 2019 was appointed to the First Council for the Belt and Road News Network, an association based in Beijing and chaired by People’s Daily.

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<sup>53</sup> Manson, H. (2022) ‘CircData Q2 2022: SA’s most popular print mags & newspapers’, Marklives.com. Available at: <https://www.marklives.com/article/42101-circdata-q2-2022-sas-most-popular-print-mags-papers> (Accessed: 8 September 2023).

The StarTimes Group has made investments in satellite provider StarSat through On Digital Media. StarSat competes directly with South African Naspers's MultiChoice<sup>54</sup> and has a subscriber base of 1.3 million across Africa. Its subscriber base is likely to be competitive with MultiChoice in the rest of Africa by 2025.

Since the appointment in 2021 of a local Chinese-South African businesswoman<sup>55</sup> to parliament on an ANC ticket, there has been a more visible and, say Han and van Wyk in the Freedom Report, a potentially vulnerable profile for the approximately 300,000 Chinese people living in South Africa. The MP's appointment "coincided with xenophobic media reports about her" (2022: 4). The local Chinese community are also served by Chinese-language media dominated by pro-Beijing content.

The diverse South African media landscape is robust and resilient. When combined with a critical and independent academia,<sup>56</sup> the media provides varied and critical coverage supplemented by foreign news channels. This landscape is characterised by a well-defined legal infrastructure on press freedom as well as limits on foreign- (no more than 20%) and cross-ownership. Institutions that support the legal frameworks include the Press Council,<sup>57</sup> which, together with the statutory Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa, discourages allowing "commercial, political, personal or other non-professional considerations to influence reporting" and promotes the labelling of "opinions"

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<sup>54</sup> MultiChoice operates DSTv, a major satellite television service in sub-Saharan Africa, and GOtv, a minor service operating in over nine countries of this area, as well as the Showmax service. The pay-TV company was formed out of the subscriber management branch of the M-Net terrestrial pay television company and broadcasts the full range of M-Net channels on the DSTv service. The subscriber base of MultiChoice is made up of more than 20 million viewers throughout Africa (see: <https://www.multichoice.com/>).

<sup>55</sup> Xiaomei Havard is also co-president of South Africa-China Famous Female Business Council and the president of the Africa Federation of Chinese Women in Commerce & Industry (see: <https://www.pa.org.za/person/xiaomei-havard/> (Accessed: 5 September 2023)).

<sup>56</sup> University of the Witwatersrand's SAILA publishes the China-Africa Toolkit, which covers China-Africa relations, and the Africa-China Reporting Project supports journalists working on China-Africa. Academics such as Herman Wasserman, Cobus van Staden and Philani Mthembu provide media commentary.

<sup>57</sup> The Press Council guides ethical practices and offers complaint mechanisms for media consumers and journalists.

and “sponsors of content”.<sup>58</sup> South Africa also has an active civil society which includes freedom of expression advocacy organisations and watchdogs, e.g. the Campaign for Free Expression, Freedom of Expression Institute South Africa, Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), Africa Check (which focuses on fighting disinformation), the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) and the Institute for Advanced Journalism.

A strong independent media played an important role during the dark days of apartheid in South Africa, when state control over media platforms was widespread. The lack of criticism by most African governments pertaining to the influence of Chinese state media is therefore not well regarded by South Africans, for whom a healthy scepticism of government, an abundance of critical civil society voices and direct testimony is critical. Not surprisingly, in South Africa the response to *Business Day*'s twelve-page supplement celebrating Mao Zedong's revolution was to view it as misleading.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, a 2020 survey revealed the distrust that South Africans had of CGTN compared to other broadcasters (with the BBC ranked first).<sup>60</sup>

## **Nigeria**

China's involvement in Nigerian media has seen significant growth in the last 15 to 20 years. StarTimes entered the Nigerian market in 2007/2008 as a joint venture with the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). Since then, it has expanded rapidly, offering both satellite and terrestrial TV services. In addition

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<sup>58</sup> Press Council of South Africa. (2020) Press Code of Ethics and Conduct for South African Print and Online Media [1 January 2020]. Available at: <https://presscouncil.org.za/ContentPage?code=PRESSCODE/>; Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa, 'BCCSA Free-to-Air Code of Conduct for Broadcasting Service Licensees 2009'. Available at: [https://bccsa.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/BCCSA\\_Broadcasting\\_Code\\_NEW.pdf](https://bccsa.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/BCCSA_Broadcasting_Code_NEW.pdf) (Accessed: 18 September 2023).

<sup>59</sup> "To describe this propaganda as 'advertorial' is to mislead your readers. 'Advertorial' implies editorial input; while extolling a product or service it offers a certain amount of objectivity too. By no stretch of the imagination do these Chinese efforts to expand the reach and influence of China in vulnerable parts of the world such as Africa meet these standards". See 'China Ads Wrongly Tagged', *Business Day* [5 November 2019].

<sup>60</sup> Dani Madrid-Morales et al. (2021) 'How China, Turkey and Russia Influence the Media in Africa', Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Available at: <https://www.kas.de/documents/285576/0/How+China%2C+Turkey+and+Russia+influence+media+in+Africa.pdf/6594fc3e-f240-6aea-342d-92c8f90dbf43>.



to providing a broad mix of channels, StarTimes also invested in translating and dubbing popular Chinese films and TV shows into local Nigerian languages to cater to the diverse linguistic communities in the country. As of 2020, StarTimes reportedly had approximately 10 to 11 million subscribers in Nigeria.<sup>61</sup>

Another prominent Chinese media company in Nigeria is Transsion. Transsion Holdings was established in Shenzhen, China, in 2006. The business was focused mainly on producing mobile phones and other telecommunications equipment for emerging African markets. Transsion launched its mobile phone brand, Tecno Mobile, in the Nigerian market in 2008. Due to its inexpensive mobile phones that catered to the Nigerian market's sensitivity to price, Tecno Mobile immediately became well known and a dominant market player. Transsion has succeeded in securing a strong position in the Nigerian mobile phone market through Tecno Mobile and other brands such as Infinix and itel. Its success is largely attributable to its emphasis on offering smartphones with features catering to regional needs and preferences.

One of the major elements that contributed to Transsion's success in Nigeria, suggested one Nigerian media expert (A19), was its localisation strategy, which created features targeted at the Nigeria market alongside marketing strategies that positioned the company as a Nigerian brand to such an extent that not many people know that Transsion and its online music distribution platform Boomplay are not Nigerian companies.

## 5.2 Film and music industries

The film industries in Africa are currently receiving substantial investment interest from both US and Chinese private companies. From the US, Netflix and Disney+ have partnered with African filmmakers on numerous projects. From China, a range of diverse players such as Huahua Media have entered the industry. Huahua Media signed a deal in 2019 with Nigerian studio FilmOne Entertainment to coproduce the first China-Nigeria film, while also investing in

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<sup>61</sup> <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/01/startimes-others-tipped-to-boost-africas-digital-tv-penetration/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

Nigeria's first million-dollar film fund, run by FilmOne Entertainment. According to commentators like Benard Ayieko, Africa's film industry has "the unrealized potential to enter a golden age" (Ayeiko 2022).

China supports a market-focused commercial approach to the African film and television industry, which is a different financing model to that currently in play, namely one largely based on funding and grants with no expectation of a return. In terms of revenue, China has recently become the largest box office market globally, according to Statista (2023):

*In 2021, China reported the highest box office revenue worldwide, at approximately 7.3 billion U.S. dollars. This is more than the revenues of the United States, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom combined. France ranked fourth alongside the UK, each grossing around 800 million dollars at the box offices.<sup>62</sup>*

## **Kenya**

A financial expert in the cultural and creative industries (A19) stated that the Chinese are making films (long features and commercials) in Kenya for their own market. He spoke of commercials made for the railway locomotives brought in from China that were in Chinese with English subtitles.

This interest in the Kenyan film industry has now resulted in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to "boost film investment in both countries" (Geisinger 2023). The Kenyan cabinet secretary for youth affairs, sports and the arts, Ababu Namwamba, hoped that the MOU would facilitate co-production agreements and that this would "create better understanding between Kenya and China" (quoted in Geisinger 2023). The Kenyan Ministry of Information, Communications and the Digital Economy (ICT), through the Kenya Film Commission (KFC) and Kenya Film School, are also keen to access the Chinese film market and have launched a screenplay/scriptwriting competition to facilitate this. The cabinet secretary of the Ministry of ICT,

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<sup>62</sup> Statista. (2023) Leading box office markets worldwide 2021, by revenue. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/243180/leading-box-office-markets-workdwide-by-revenue/> (Accessed: 25 September 2023).

Joe Mucheru, stated that the Kenyan scripts would be co-produced by Chinese production houses for both the Chinese and African markets.<sup>63</sup> This was part of a larger suite of measures to support the Kenyan film industry, including the establishment of a film and media city with state-of-the-art facilities and equipment. The CEO of the Kenyan Film Commission, Timothy Owase, mentioned that they were already in talks with Chinese counterparts on location, funding and crew for the production of three of the scripts. Owase confirmed that the films would all be in English, Kiswahili and Chinese in order to reach a wide audience. The co-production with China was expected to improve the quality of locally produced films.<sup>64</sup>

Another respondent, A20, a Kenyan filmmaker whose work includes films, reality shows, TV programmes, commercials and providing location and crew from Cape Town to Cairo, mentioned that people like him have already been making commercials for Chinese corporations for a couple of years. A20 spoke positively about Chinese support for TV series such as *Hunting*, a popular crime series about gang members escaping their own countries and coming to Kenya.

A20 reported how professional the Chinese were in their dealings with his company and how different the financial arrangements were to those entered into with European co-producers. At first, the contract was set to provide 40% of the budget up front, with 40% disbursed later and the rest (10%) at the end. However, in agreement with K2, the Chinese funders paid 90% of the budget up front, which was important for ensuring that all the development and production work could be paid for immediately. Secondly, A20 argued that the Chinese producers made the Kenyan police look good in the series, as in the storyline it was the Kenyan police that caught the gangsters. Thirdly, a part of the episode was shot in the Chinese embassy (with all the permissions organised by the Chinese), and the whole crew was then invited to Chinese Day Celebrations in 2020.

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<sup>63</sup> <https://kenyafilmcommission.go.ke/news/kenya-looks-at-tapping-into-chinese-film-market-with-launch-of-a-screenplay-competition/> and <https://newsaf.cgtn.com/news/2020-11-12/Kenya-to-co-produce-films-with-China-to-boost-creative-sector-VI7MOpZ7WM/index.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Africans on China. (2020) Africa Partners with China to Co-produce Films. Available at: <https://africansonchina.com/kenya-partners-with-china-to-co-produce-films/> (Accessed: 15 September 2023).

In discussing what this newfound interest on the part of the Chinese in the African filmmaking industry may mean, many interview respondents in Kenya spoke about the infrastructural needs of their country and how the “West has screwed up Africa—giving development aid but not building necessary infrastructure” (A17–A22). The Chinese government (albeit often through private stakeholders) is now seen as an actor which provides Africa with what it needs in terms of development. As A22 said, “The development aid from the West was for good governance, elections, etc.—but not the things that helped us materially develop as a country”. China is now providing what African stakeholders perceive as “needs” such as public transport, housing, roads and railways, and heavy industry. In discussing Kenyan sentiment on China’s presence, A20 said it was very negative, in fact “all my friends are anti-Chinese”. He argued that much will need to be done for China to gain the trust of African citizens.

In 2022, the Kenya Cultural Centre, the Chinese embassy in Kenya and the Chinese Confucius Institute jointly hosted a Chinese Film Festival, not only to boost cooperation and cultural exchange but also to provide a platform for filmmakers from both countries to discuss how the viewership of Chinese films could be enhanced in Kenya. Ababu Namwamba, cabinet secretary in the Ministry of Youth Affairs, Sports and Arts, said that the festival “is also a concrete action to actively implement the cultural and people-to-people exchange programme under the nine plans of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) that was held in 2021” (Xinhua 2022).<sup>65</sup> Twelve of the 14 Chinese films shown in the festival had been translated into Kiswahili.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Xinhua. (2022) ‘Chinese film festival opened in Kenya with 14 films waiting to meet local audience’, ChinaDaily.com.cn. Available at:  
<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202210/28/WS635b7ab3a310fd2b29e7f195.html>;  
<https://www.africanleadershipmagazine.co.uk/kenya-hosts-the-opening-ceremony-of-the-chinese-film-festival-2022/> and  
<https://english.news.cn/africa/20221209/63607a8f36074e6b9e48bb8ce054a774/c.html>.

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202210/28/WS635b7ab3a310fd2b29e7f195.html>;  
<https://www.africanleadershipmagazine.co.uk/kenya-hosts-the-opening-ceremony-of-the-chinese-film-festival-2022/> and  
<https://english.news.cn/africa/20221209/63607a8f36074e6b9e48bb8ce054a774/c.html>.

During the same year, StarTimes Kenya announced the launch of the Swahili drama series KIU. Leading Kenyan actors feature in the series, which discusses themes of intimacy, betrayal, lust and vengeance. A StarTimes affiliate, the Rembo Television channel, premiered the series. Wang Qianxu, CEO of StarTimes Kenya, said that the results of their audience research showed that the series would run with over 100 episodes. Tang Jianjun of the Chinese embassy in Kenya commented that “KIU’s launching is a great success of the two countries’ cultural exchanges, and it does give us the confidence to continue to strengthen our cooperation in the future”.<sup>67</sup>

CEO of the Kenya Film Commission Timothy Owase acknowledged that “there has been a progressive growth of the Kenyan film industry and we welcome support from StarTimes to develop a vibrant film industry,” and added that the launch of the drama series marked a significant milestone in the growth of the local creative industry.<sup>68</sup>

## **Ghana**

The Ghanaian filmmaking industry in Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti region and second largest city in Ghana, has shown huge potential, and in 2020 plans were announced to establish a Kumasi International Theatre/Conference Centre to grow heritage tourism and the film industry. A private Chinese company, China Bengbu International Technical and Economic Cooperation (CBITEC) Limited, has developed the conceptual design for the eco-friendly facility, accommodating large conferences and cinema, exhibitions, drama, music performance and modern dance. The land was provided by the local municipality, the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly. The Ghanaian Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture signed a memorandum of understanding with CBITEC.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Xinhua. (2022) China's StarTimes launches local drama series in Kenya. Available at:

<https://english.news.cn/africa/20221209/63607a8f36074e6b9e48bb8ce054a774/c.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Xinhua. (2022) China's StarTimes launches local drama series in Kenya. Available at: <http://english.news.cn/20221209/1c32b1a6f7bc41f59c37bb46fc05b31a/c.html> (Accessed: 5 February 2023).

<sup>69</sup> <https://africa.sis.gov.eg/english/africa-today/african-news/ghana-signs-agreement-to-construct-an-international-theatre-conference-centre/>.

The vernacular Kumasi film industry, known as ‘Kumawood’, fuses Ghanaian culture with digital technologies, and its growth has drawn attention from other film industries in the region. It is distinct from other filmmaking projects in Ghana in that it is focused on direct-to-video distribution, with rare instances of theatrical release, and uses the vernacular languages such as the Twi dialect instead of the language of the so-called ‘glamour actors’ (English), who have often accused Kumawood of promoting “sub-standard production”.<sup>70</sup> The so-called ‘Ghallywood’ industry faces fierce competition from English-speaking imports from Hollywood and Nollywood, both in cinemas and from piracy on direct-to-video markets. Prior to the interest shown by Chinese investors, the Kumawood film industry had faced huge challenges, despite producing up to twelve films a week with budgets between US\$7,300 and US\$12,200 per film.<sup>71</sup>

The Chinese interest in developing the film industry value chain<sup>72</sup> to better capture the growth of the Kumasi film industry also extends to production investment, through what are known as ‘Ghana Chinese’ films. These are adapted Chinese films that will be (re-)made by Ghanaians in Kumasi.<sup>73</sup> Visual artist A13 commented that these films recast an earlier Chinese narrative of martial arts with a Ghanaian twist and wondered who was paying for these and who the audience of these films would be. He added that this was not happening in Accra, only in Kumasi.

## **Nigeria**

In Nigeria, there are different partnerships, for example the Beijing TV Dramas and Films Broadcasting Season, which aim to promote artistic and literary exchange and deepen cooperation between China and Nigeria’s film industries. The partnership of Ayo Makun (also known by his stage name AY), a Nigerian

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<sup>70</sup> <https://www.businessghana.com/site/news/entertainment/141529/Give-English-actors-chance-in-Kumawood>.

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.africanews.com/2017/06/08/kumawood-the-triving-film-industry-in-ghana>.

<sup>72</sup> The film industry production chain includes creation (commissioning editors, film financing, scriptwriters, producers), production (studios, shooting, location, crew, equipment), distribution (distributors, broadcasters) exhibition (cinemas, platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV, YouTube and alternative screening venues and festivals) and consumption or audience reception (film critics, film awards).

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.adomonline.com/when-stephen-amoah-enacted-kung-fu-moves-while-announcing-introduction-of-ghana-chinese-in-kumawood-films/>.

actor and comedian, with Hua Hua Media, a Chinese production firm, is one such endeavour aiming close the gap between the Nigerian and Chinese film industries, notwithstanding the rarity of such collaborations. The partnership will produce “30 Days in China”, the first film jointly produced by the two nations.

Transsnet Music Limited, a joint venture between the Chinese internet technology giant NetEase and the Chinese mobile phone maker Transsion Holdings, launched Boomplay in 2015. Boomplay came pre-installed on all Transsion phones sold in Nigeria (Tecno, Infinix and itel), giving the music streaming service a significant user base right from the start. Boomplay also concentrated on offering an extensive selection of African and Nigerian music, including local artists and genres, which connected well with the Nigerian public and helped the platform forge a significant position in the Nigerian music industry. Internet access and data consumption remain problematic in many places in Nigeria. Boomplay responded to this by allowing users to download music for offline listening, which was appealing to users in places with poor connectivity.

Boomplay provided free and premium subscription options, allowing customers to choose how much they wanted to spend and how many features they wanted to access. Boomplay pays the musicians based on the revenue received from these subscriptions, using a sharing formula that considers the number of streams per song. Boomplay has progressively increased the number of users and services it offers in Nigeria and other African countries over time and is reported to be the most popular music streaming service in Africa (Quartz 2022).<sup>74</sup>

The above-mentioned Boomplay music streaming service has become one of the largest music platforms on the continent. It has more than 75 million users and has recently moved into video production through its “investment in Afrobeats: the Backstory, a nine-episode documentary series about the origins of the popular Nigerian music genre” (UNESCO 2021).

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<sup>74</sup> <https://qz.com/africa/2121253/chinas-boomplay-is-dominating-africas-music-streaming-market> (Accessed: 23 September 2023).

## 6. Confucius Institutes, Libraries and Educational Exchange

In addition to China's soft power influence through cultural exchanges, media and film, other instruments of soft power include educational exchanges, books and libraries, and the presence of cultural institutes. Scholarships and exchanges help students enculturate into their host countries, build networks and appreciate cultural norms and values. Since the late 1940s, the US has offered scholarships to future leaders to do exactly this. It is not surprising that this has also become an important component of Chinese activities in African countries.

### 6.1 Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes have been established on the continent since the 2000s as a key instrument of cultural diplomacy. Since the late 1950s, China has used language and trade to change perceptions of China and help remove its isolationist image. The focus on its ancient and imperial past rather than contemporary issues is a key element of China's image management (Bound et al. 2007: 58). Unlike other institutions of external cultural affairs such as the British Council, the Goethe-Institut or the French Institute, Confucius Institutes are a direct engagement by the state in foreign territories. Typically, Confucius Institutes and Confucius classrooms are established by the Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) on university campuses. Apart from promoting Chinese culture and language, their role is "to do business and open markets or provide an effective mechanism for the scientific contribution to economic globalisation" (Hartig 2012 in Neuwirth 2019: 640).

As of February 2021, of the 541 Confucius Institutes in 164 countries, 61 were located in Africa (Olayoku 2022). Olayoku reports that the expansion of Confucius Institutes has been met with accusations that they are China's attempt at cultural imperialism. In Western countries such as the US and the UK, Confucius Institutes are closing—in contrast, in Africa the number of these institutes is increasing, and none have been closed so far.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/as-west-shuts-china-confucius-institutes-more-open-in-africa/6837437.html>.



## **South Africa**

South Africa now has six Confucius Institutes—the highest number in any one African country, with the newest being located at the University of the Western Cape. While universities such as the Universities of Cape Town, Rhodes, Johannesburg and Stellenbosch, as well as the Durban University of Technology, have established Confucius Institutes, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) chose not to, arguing that it was compromising to the university, which values freedom of expression.

Bell, a co-researcher, suggests that rather than Confucius Institutes arising out of a Chinese university expressing interest in establishing relationships with a foreign counterpart, they are sometimes the result of direct requests from Chinese embassies, as was the case at Wits University (2023: 23). The decision of Wits University was partly recommended by the head of Wits Strategic Partnership Office, Mahomed Moolla, who “referenced a suspicion of the ulterior motives of the Chinese diplomats as well as a Wits policy to refuse government money for the establishment of research institutes” (Bell 2023). Wits University remains deeply aware of the importance of considering the influence of China in Africa and is, according to Bell, “in the process of establishing its own Africa Centre for Global China Studies” (2023: 25). In a statement to Bell, Moolla emphasised that the centre will be privately funded and will not be tied to any government funding in order to preserve the integrity of the Centre’s academic output.

In 2015 in South Africa, the Department of Basic Education approved the inclusion of the Mandarin language in the school curriculum for grades 4–12 as a “non-official language”. Back then, Minister Angie Motshekga argued that this would “help South African children compete in a shifting global economy” (Chutel 2019). Chutel (2019) observed the reaction from the public to be deeply critical, with the public questioning “why African languages were not similarly prioritised to build domestic capacity first”, and making accusations of neocolonialism, adding that this was “clearly also a diplomatic move to please South Africa’s largest trading partner”.

South Africa’s Department of Basic Education and China’s Ministry of Education signed an implementation plan to strengthen educational ties at an

institutional and policy level. The agreement, implemented from January 2016, includes cultural exchange and adding Mandarin to the school curriculum.<sup>76</sup> This agreement is not unique as South Africa puts particular focus on agreements on infrastructure and improving mathematics and science with countries such as Japan, Korea, Cuba, Belgium, the US and others (Chutel 2019). Olayoku (2022) suggests that China is a century behind Britain and France in expanding its cultural influence in Africa. In South Africa, English—as the British colonial language—remains the dominant language in its education programme.

### **Ghana**

The Confucius Institute at the University of Ghana, co-hosted by the University of Ghana and Zhejiang University of Technology in China, was established in May 2013 and commenced its operations in April 2014. Currently the Institute is offering Chinese language proficiency and Chinese cultural courses at eight teaching sites, with an enrolment of more than 3,000 Ghanaian students. Besides language teaching, the Institute has held HSK examinations (Chinese language proficiency tests), Chinese language proficiency competitions and cultural activities to help Ghanaians attain the Confucius Institute Scholarship or other forms of Chinese government-funded scholarships to study in China. More than 120 Ghanaian students obtained scholarships to study for their PhD, MA or for one year or half a year in China between 2013 and 2017 (Confucius Institute Ghana 2017).

The Institute has also organised for more than 50 people, including students, to visit China. Colbran reports in *Global Student Living* (2022) that there is a general increase in tertiary student mobility in Ghana (although not as large as in Nigeria), with the most popular destination being China. The number of Ghanaian students studying in China far exceeds the 18,214 outbound students tracked by UNESCO in 2020, following those in the US (22.2%), the UK (12.47%), Germany (7.6%) and Canada (7.6%). UNESCO had not tracked students to China. As Colbran notes:

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<sup>76</sup> <https://www.caglobalint.com/post/mandarin-official-second-language-for-south-africa-s-curriculum-1/#:~:text=The%20Department%20of%20Basic%20Education,it%20as%20a%20second%20language.>

*The number of Ghanaian students studying in China is reported to be in the region of 6,500 – the result of strong economic ties between China and Ghana and a scholarship programme offered by the Chinese government for students from Ghana. (Colbran 2022)*

In addition to language and cultural activities, the Institute held the 2017 Campus Recruitment for Ghanaian Students and Chinese Enterprises in March of the same year, which was the first of its kind in Ghana. The campus recruitment fair helped Ghanaian students find jobs and set up a bridge between Ghanaian students and Chinese enterprises in Ghana. With its achievements and the number of enrolled students exceeding 2,000, the Institute has been given the status of a Global Model Confucius Institute.<sup>77</sup> According to the vice chancellor of the University of Ghana, Ebenezer Oduro-Owusu, there is a lot of interest in Chinese language and culture in Ghana:

*The completion of the Model Confucius Institute here on campus through the joint efforts of the Confucius Institute Headquarters Hanban and the University of Ghana is timely, because the state-of-the-art administrative building with facility will serve as a hub for the teaching and learning of not only the Chinese language and culture, but also of Chinese traditional medicine and Chinese Martial Arts.<sup>78</sup>*

## **Nigeria**

There are two Confucius Institutes in Nigeria, and they are central to Chinese language teaching in Nigeria. The University of Lagos (in the south-west of the country) and Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU) in Anambra (in the south-east) serve as the host institutions for the institutes.

The Confucius Institute at NAU was established pursuant to an agreement reached in March 2008 by Hanban and NAU and opened in February 2009. NAU and Xiamen University together make up its boards of directors. The institute employs 14 people, eight of whom are lecturers sent by Hanban and

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<sup>77</sup> <https://myghanadaily.com/the-national-theatre-the-artistic-chinese-gift-to-ghanaians/> and [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-12/01/content\\_35156556.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-12/01/content_35156556.htm).

<sup>78</sup> [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-12/01/content\\_35156556.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-12/01/content_35156556.htm).

Xiamen University and six of whom are local lecturers. Since the institute was founded, approximately 2,500 students have received training there. In its years of operation, the institute has had significant success. In order to meet the rising public demand for the institute's services, the Confucius Institute has so far constructed three Confucius Institute classrooms: at Federal Polytechnic Oko, where 350 registered students were enrolled; in twelve teaching classes at Enugu State College of Education Technical, and at Unizik High School, both of which had 130 registered pupils and eleven teaching courses.

The establishment of the full-time Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Chinese Language with effect from the 2013–2014 academic session was approved by the National Universities Commission (NUC) in 2013.

The Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos (CI UNILAG) was established through an agreement signed by the Beijing Institute of Technology and the University of Lagos on 9 October 2008, with the approval and guidance of Hanban. On 20 May 2009, CI UNILAG began its first Chinese class at UNILAG, and on 16 October 2009 it was formally inaugurated with a status similar to that of the university faculties. Six offices, a reading room with over 25,000 books, a multimedia classroom, a linguistics lab and a Chinese culture experience centre are all present thanks to the cooperative efforts of both higher education institutions.

In addition to language teaching, the Confucius Institutes administer various educational and cultural exchange programmes. The Confucius Institute in Lagos, for example, strongly focuses on the Yoruba culture, philosophy and Ifá ideology,<sup>79</sup> as well as promoting exchanges in this area with academics from China. The institute also runs various scholarship programmes that support students to go and study in China. Additionally, the institute supports the activities of various culture-focused departments in the university.

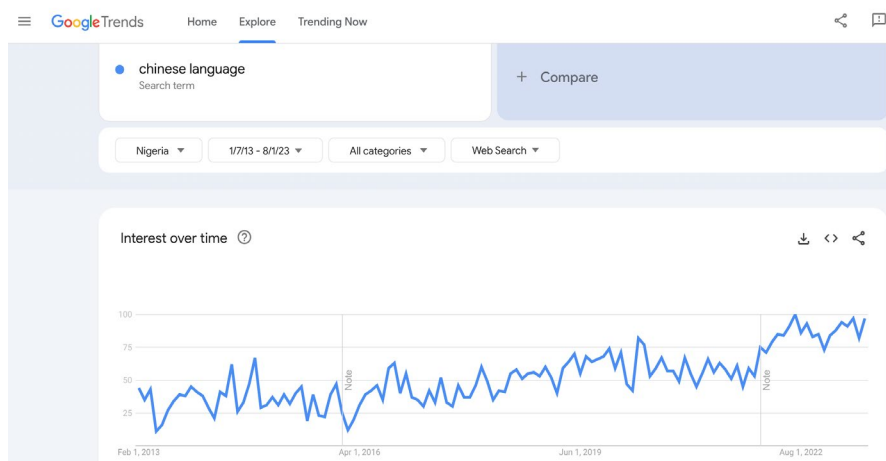
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<sup>79</sup> Ifá ideology, often simply referred to as Ifá, is a traditional African spiritual and religious system practiced primarily by the Yoruba people of Nigeria and Benin, as well as among the Yoruba diaspora in other parts of the world, particularly in the Americas. Ifá is a complex and holistic belief system that encompasses a wide range of religious, philosophical and cultural elements.

The centres primarily provide Mandarin language instruction, offer teacher training, administer the HSK examination, test proficiency in Chinese and sponsor cultural and artistic events. The director of the Confucius Institute in Lagos estimated that around 14,000 people learnt Mandarin at the institute between 2015 and 2018. Currently, the Confucius Institute trains as many as 500 students per session at Level 1, with fewer students progressing to the higher levels of the nine-step HSK certification programme, according to respondent A23, a tutor at the Confucius Institute in Lagos.

Beyond the structured language programmes offered by institutions like the Confucius Institute, there is a growing market of private tutors in Nigeria who offer both online and offline Chinese language training tailored to different groups of learners. These tutors, said A23, cater to various students, from executives and businesspeople who need to learn Chinese for their professional engagements to adults and intermediate-level learners seeking to expand their linguistic skills or cultural understanding. They also provide services to schools looking to include Chinese language classes in their curriculum, in light of the increasing importance of Mandarin in schools. Learning platforms range from face-to-face lessons to digital sessions that allow flexibility for busy professionals.

More generally, since 2013, Google searches for the term ‘Chinese language’ have increased in Nigeria.



Taken from Google Trends on 3 August 2023

According to respondent A24, an alumni of a Chinese university who received a scholarship, both provincial scholarships and university-specific scholarships are available to Nigerian citizens and residents.

With the help of the Chinese Consulate-General in Lagos, the Confucius Institute Alumni Association of Nigeria was established in 2023, marking a significant development in strengthening ties among Nigerian alumni of Chinese universities. The association aims to be a forum for intellectual and cultural exchange. It also aims to develop understanding of and respect for the Chinese language and culture among its members and, eventually, the larger Nigerian community. Further, it is anticipated that the association will help its members network professionally as they seek various career opportunities following their educational experiences in China. In addition, it establishes a framework for Nigerian graduates of Chinese universities to keep in touch with China and contribute to Nigeria's engagement with China on a range of issues.<sup>80</sup>

## 6.2 Libraries and books

Chinese investment in libraries takes three forms: first, the Chinese government is directly involved in the construction of libraries; second, Chinese multinational firms donate books and other e-learning materials to schools and libraries; and third, Chinese non-governmental organisations donate books and other materials to local schools and communities (Patra 2023).

Africa's largest university library at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, costing an estimated US\$40 million, was built by the Chinese government. Harvergal (2016) reports that, despite concerns about growing Chinese investment in Africa, the academics interviewed by Times Higher Education in 2016 argued that Chinese investment "helped improve African teaching premises and research facilities".

A Chinese private company, Tencent Holdings Ltd, funded an open digital library for indigenous games in Kenya in a joint project with UNESCO and the

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<sup>80</sup> <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/07/chinese-consulate-general-supports-associations-inauguration-to-foster-bond-between-chinese-nigerians/> (Accessed: 3 August 2023).

National Museums of Kenya. The Tencent-funded open digital library has previously been implemented in Brazil, Bangladesh, Greece and Mongolia, but Kenya is the first country on the African continent to launch such a library.<sup>81</sup> The project uses modern technologies to preserve and showcase indigenous games.

In Zambia, the Chinese government donated 200 books to Lusaka City Council (LCC) in 2015 to help restock and update its libraries. This is part of a commitment made by the Chinese ambassador to Zambia, Yang Youming, pertaining to cooperation in the fields of finance, trade, education and culture (Mumba 2015).

Libraries in Nigeria, particularly those affiliated with universities or the Confucius Institutes, often house a significant number of books about China. These books cover a broad spectrum of topics including language and literature, culture and history, politics, economics and China-Nigeria relations, among others. For example, the University of Lagos Confucius Institute has a well-stocked library filled with books about China. The library includes resources for learning Mandarin and on Chinese culture, as well as academic texts about China's history, politics and economy. However, during a visit by co-researchers to the National Library in Abuja and the African University of Science and Technology (AUST) library in July 2023, they found that these libraries have a restricted selection of Chinese literature. The National Library did have Chinese literature, the majority of which was translated into English, whereas the AUST library had neither Chinese literature nor books concerning China.

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<sup>81</sup> China Daily reports on the projects in East Africa and notes the digitalisation of indigenous games and the digitisation of information and visual images of sports (see: [http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2017-11/23/content\\_41933307.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2017-11/23/content_41933307.htm)). The China-Lusophone Brief reports on the release of "MOBA, Honour of Kings" in Brazil. The game is a competitor to League of Legends (see: <https://www.clbrief.com/tencent-markets-new-game-in-brazil-for-first-time-outside-china/>). The official website for MOBA is <https://www.ea.com/games/library/moba>. UNESCO reports on the Tencent Interactive Entertainment Art Summit in Beijing, where the safeguarding of traditional games as living heritage was discussed (see: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/innovative-ways-preserve-and-share-knowledge-about-traditional-games-explored-beijing>).

According to another respondent (A25), a librarian, the most-read Chinese book in the National Library was *Zhuan Falun: the complete teachings of Falun Gong* by Li Hongzhi, although they were not able to comment on the reason. The book considers the human experience and the meaning of life by drawing on an ancient, secret oral tradition. The core concepts of Falun Gong are truthfulness, compassion and forbearance. It includes teaching the Qigong method of healing. It was the best-selling book in China before it was banned. A25 highlighted that, because the government gave all of the books to the National Library, the book choices were not based on reader interest. A25 also highlighted that it was not possible to say if the choices of readers were based on their own interests or if they were limited by the selection of books available.

A25 reported that it was difficult to try to build their collection of Chinese books due to the language barrier and challenges in choosing titles to acquire. Despite a slight increase in demand for Chinese books or books about China in recent years (mostly from university students looking to study abroad in China), there were no books or literature on programmes promoting Chinese literature and culture, and no digital resources or e-books related to China in these libraries. The general public and students could access the existing Chinese resources with relative ease, giving a rating of 9/10 for accessibility according to the librarians. In terms of the type of books about China most commonly found, these included recipe books, translated Chinese classics, biographies and socioeconomic texts. The co-researchers found that there are several books and studies about the China-Nigeria relationship by Chinese authors, Nigerian authors and authors from other countries, for example:

- *The History of Chinese Presence in Nigeria (1950s–2010s): Factories, Commodities, and Entrepreneurs* by Shaonan Liu. Published by Taylor & Francis (2022)—this book explores how Chinese migrants and the Nigerian state, labourers, traders and consumers interacted with and impacted one another from the middle of the twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. It claims to be the first book-length work on the history of the Chinese presence in Nigeria.
- *Nigeria China Economic Relations* by Olatunde Samson Sanusi. Published by Lambert Academic Publishing (2012)—the economic and developmental relations between Nigeria and China are the subject of this book, particularly



the tactics used by the two nations. It emphasises how the two-state relationship has been impacted by globalisation.

- *A Tale of Two Superpowers: Nigeria and China Relations* by Faouziatou Aboudou Kabassi. Published by Lambert Academic Publishing (2012)—this book discusses China’s approach and position in the emerging West African nations. Although China’s relationship with West Africa is presented as a ‘win-win’ cooperation, Nigeria’s ambitions to develop its economy and become an African powerhouse may be hindered if the country does not find ways to curtail its reliance on China for its development.

There have been exchange programmes through which African librarians were supported to travel to China on learning exchange visits, as elaborated in the table below.

**Table 2. China’s contribution to African libraries**

<b>Country &amp; China’s Contribution in the Respective Country</b>	<b>Library Support</b>
Djibouti  <i>Addis-Ababa-Djibouti Railway: the first electric railway in Africa</i>	Aid to National Library and Archives of Djibouti for reconstruction and development
Egypt	China Cultural Centre in Cairo donated books and audio-visual materials to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a library and cultural centre in Alexandria
Kenya  <i>Transportation, in particular the Nairobi-Mombasa Standard Gauge Railway</i>	National Museums of Kenya in partnership with UNESCO launched an open digital library for indigenous games funded by Tencent Holdings Ltd. Chinese government proposal to build a China-themed library at the University of Nairobi (which already has a Confucius Institute)
Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Namibia, Zambia and Ethiopia	Project Hope for Africa, an initiative of the China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF) in Tanzania, since 2011, to support government initiatives to provide reading materials, textbooks and educational equipment to schools

	across Africa, which has now built 18,335 'Hope Primary Schools' and 20,604 small libraries in rural areas. Supplemented by Chinese entrepreneurial support (19 entrepreneurs) who donated US\$ 1,570 to 23 school libraries
Burundi	In 2010, the Chinese Business Association, the CYDF and the Tianjiu Happiness Holding Group initiated Project Hope in Africa and jointly launched "China-Africa Project Hope"
Lesotho  <i>Established a free-trade zone, radio, television and other broadcasting facilities</i>	Lesotho's National Conference Centre, Paramount Hall and the National Library were built by China
Madagascar  <i>Partnership with China since 1972 includes health, education, culture, sport, etc.</i>	National Library of Madagascar received a donation of Chinese books
Nigeria  <i>China upgraded undersea cable to Europe</i>	Huawei Technologies deployed e-libraries, e-classes and smart campus networks for the National Information and Communication Technology Infrastructure
Republic of the Congo	The Chinese government funded and constructed the Ngouabi University library
Rwanda	The Chinese community started a library to promote learning and academic and cultural exchange between the Chinese and Rwandan peoples
South Africa	Huawei Technologies helped build an e-libraries programme as part of its corporate social responsibility programme to boost literacy in South Africa
Tanzania	China helped Tanzania build a university library for the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania

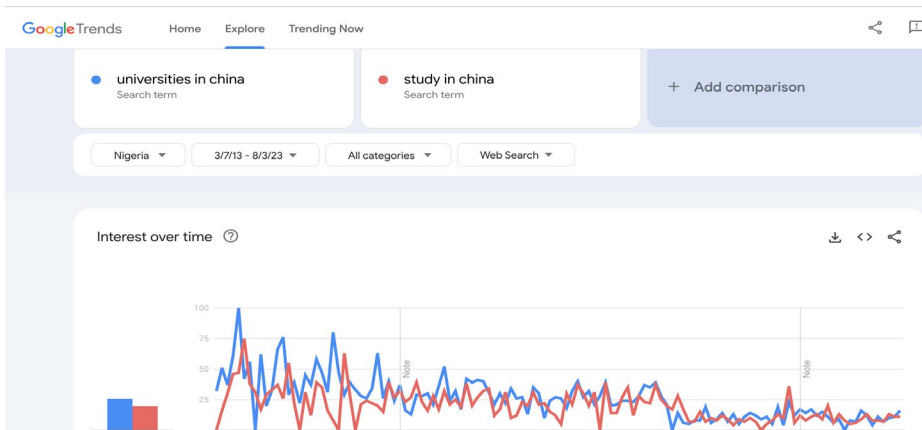
Source: Patra 2023

These investments show that China is constantly seeking new ways to impact how African citizens, governments and the media respond to its increasing presence on the continent. Clearly, large numbers of books written in Chinese are in this case not as useful to the library landscape as infrastructure, the upgrading of technology and funds to purchase either books in the main lingua franca or to invest in the publishing of local books—measures that, according to the current evidence, are not yet being attempted. Impacting the reading culture of African countries is crucial, particularly focusing on local languages and the enhancement of reading habits. In addition, each African country’s library system needs to be sufficiently robust to absorb the educational or technological support they receive.

### **6.3 Studying in China**

The number of African students in Chinese universities increased from less than 2,000 students in 2003 to over 81,500 students in 2018. The Chinese government is clear on their reasons for this support of African students, as on returning home they would “tell China’s story well and spread China’s voice” (Xi Jinping quoted in Robinson 2022: 3). China is attractive to African students for multiple reasons; learning Chinese may assist with future jobs and African students can access multiple scholarships which cover tuition, teaching materials and living expenses. Furthermore, the role that China plays in investing in and developing infrastructure across Africa serves as an exemplar for African students—China has worked hard to develop its soft power diplomacy in Africa as it cooperates economically and politically with the governments of different African countries. In addition, the China Africa Institute held forums in 2021 on being an international student in China entitled “We, the Inheritors of African-China Friendship”, which has encouraged more African students to pursue higher education in China.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of a decline in interest from African students generally; for example, in Nigeria a decreasing number of people are searching for “universities in China” and “study in China” on Google, as shown in the Google Trends analysis below.<sup>82</sup>

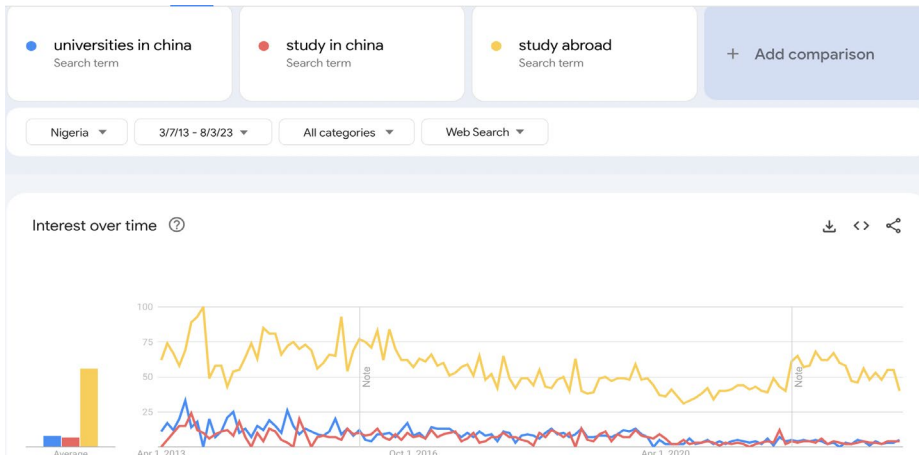


Taken from Google Trends on 3 August 2023

In comparison with the broader search term “study abroad”, which has seen some decline over the same period, the decline for the search terms specifically related to China has been somewhat sharper.

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<sup>82</sup> The Borgen Project. Available at: <https://borgenproject.org/african-students-in-chinese-universities/#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20African%20students,from%20this%20study%20experience%20overseas.>



Taken from Google Trends on 3 August 2023

This could mean that universities in China are much more proactive in student recruitment and thus there is less need for more generic search terms, but the author of this study and co-researchers could find no evidence to support this. Importantly, African students report experiences of racism and discrimination when studying in China, so that, as Robinson (2022) suggests, the ‘story’ they tell is “not necessarily the one Xi had in mind”.

*But a picture emerged of discrimination, interpersonal hostility, and widespread racism [...] most the students here are just saying, ‘I have to graduate and go back home, I can’t ever come back to China [...] China is for the Chinese’. (2022: 5-6)*

It is also important to note that the global COVID-19 pandemic may have substantially affected student movement patterns and levels of interest in studying abroad.

These theories would need to be confirmed by further research in order to gain a more thorough knowledge of the variables affecting Nigerian students’ decisions on studying in China.

Notwithstanding the above, students studying in China study a range of courses, including engineering, medicine, economics, business and computer science.

There are also partial and full scholarships for studies in the arts and humanities, so some students and academics also go to study in these areas. In addition to the arts, China also provides scholarships and exchanges in other disciplines, such as media, academia and filmmaking. Through these programmes, academics and media professionals from Nigeria had the opportunity to study in China. According to ChinaAdmissions.com (an investor-backed online platform for international students to apply to Chinese universities, founded in 2015 and based in Beijing), 6,845 Nigerian students were studying in China as of 2019, with 512 of them receiving Chinese government scholarships.<sup>83</sup>

Through a scholarship programme, the China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC) sponsors undergraduate and graduate students specialising in subjects such as civil engineering, transportation engineering and ridge road and river-crossing engineering. The programme, which is run in conjunction with the Nigerian government and two Chinese universities, Central South University and Chang'an University, has so far sponsored 197 Nigerian students.<sup>84</sup> Zambia currently has more than 3,500 students studying in a variety of degree programmes in China as Beijing grants approximately 800 scholarships to Zambians each year. Freelance journalist Derrick Silimina suggests that “China [is] the favorite destination for Zambian students wishing to study abroad” (2022). Silimina reports that a music degree recipient, Moffat Chifita, commented: “I am now living my dream after studying in China [...] This experience will definitely shape my music career” (quoted in Silimina 2022).

The author and co-researchers suggest that some reasons for the decline in student numbers may include the following:

- The (perceived) language barrier: Although many programmes are available in English, the notion of language as a major barrier may discourage students. Additionally, even though studying Chinese is viable and frequently encouraged, initial apprehensions may put off potential students.

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<sup>83</sup> <https://www.china-admissions.com/nigerian-students-in-china/#:~:text=As%20of%202019%2C%20there%20are,at%20various%20universities%20in%20China>.

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/608485-company-receives-nigerian-students-sponsored-to-study-in-china.html> (Accessed: 3 August 2023).

- Work restrictions: The ability to work part time while studying is often a crucial factor for international students, as it is an opportunity for acquiring professional experience while helping to defray living and tuition expenses. However, part-time employment is often not permitted under Chinese student visas (with a few limited exceptions for internships). This lack of employment opportunities may render China less desirable as a place to study.
- Cultural disparities: Cultural differences could also be a factor. While some students could find this appealing because they want to experience an entirely different culture, others might be put off by it.
- Comparative attractiveness of other locations: The drop in interest in studying in China may also be a result of the relative allure of other well-known locations with a solid track record of accepting international students, such as the US, Canada, the UK and Australia, where language and cultural difference are not as big a deterrent.

# 7. Perceptions of China in Africa

## 7.1 Artists' perceptions

A number of artists on the African continent use their art to express their perception of the role that China plays in Africa.

Zimbabwean writer Tendai Huchu's *The Sale* (2013) and South Africa science fiction writer Abigail Godsell's work *Taal* (2009) both offer commentary on China's economic power in Africa and the use of technology to invade and control Africa under the guise of African development. South African writer Mandisi Nkomo's *Heresy* (2013), in which South Africa is caught in a rivalry with China, discusses China's rise as a global leader. The narrative establishes the dichotomy of enemy and friend to highlight the tensions in this relationship and options for the future of this political friendship. As Moonsamy suggests,

*Yet, while these narratives express neo-colonial fears that a 'new scramble for Africa' seems imminent, they also provide a speculative arena in which to interrogate how we ultimately perceive the value, use and future of Sino-African political friendship. (2019: 544)*

This includes Michael Soi from Kenya, whose "China Loves Africa" collection depicts Africans as sex workers pleasuring their Chinese overlords and depicts the Chinese as gift bringers who are simultaneously sucking all the natural resources out of Africa.<sup>85</sup>

Michael Soi developed this collection of more than 100 pieces in which he "examines the symbiotic and often corrupt relationship between Beijing and African elites" (Dahir 2020). In conversation with Abdi Latif Dahir, Soi expressed his views on China's investments in Kenya:

*No one is philanthropic for no apparent reason. All this generosity is suspect, [...] The bad leadership that exists in Africa is something they knew they could come and capitalize on [...] But let's not forget, African leaders invited China. These corrupt politicians who are*

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<sup>85</sup> Some of Michael Soi's work can be seen at [artsy.net/artist/Michael-soi](https://artsy.net/artist/Michael-soi).



*interested in massive acquisitions are the ones who brought them here. (Dahir 2020)*

In one of Soi's paintings, he depicts China's President Xi Jinping, larger than life with a briefcase overflowing with money, while African leaders hold out their hands begging for some of it. In his collection "China Loves Africa", Michael Soi's social commentary exposes three key areas of China's presence: i) the principles underpinning the engagement in Africa; ii) the role and actions of leaders in Africa and China and iii) the implications for Africans in all countries.

Michael Soi has done his own research on the subject while also following local and international TV programmes and reading other sources, as well as speaking to engineers who worked with Chinese firms in Kenya. His aim has been to document what Kenyans experience, not to discuss the experience. With China being Africa's largest trading partner and the largest player in the infrastructure boom on the continent, Soi believes the relationship is one-sided and "amounted to a new form of colonialism" (Dahir 2020). In Kenya, questions are being raised about the commercial viability of big projects such as the multi-billion-dollar railways in both Kenya and Ethiopia (Chen 2019).

Despite claims by China that the relationship is one built on "political equity" and "win-win economic cooperation", through his collection Soi expressed that this view should be questioned. He does not view China's presence in Africa any differently to that of Western countries. In fact, he sees it, says Dahir, "as the latest in a long line of outside powers intent on plundering Africa's natural resources" (Dahir 2020). Some of the themes explored in this collection include the following:

- Africa as a woman being courted by China while Western countries (all depicted as men) watch.
- African leaders asleep while China becomes chairman (sic) of the African Union by 2030.
- A bedridden Chinese man being treated by a Black male doctor with an IV treatment of gold, oil, copper and titanium, all of which are hooked up to a Black woman.

- A Chinese man dressed up as Father Christmas and armed with lollipops, with African leaders seemingly playing with the pompom on his hat. The words “now China rewards Kenya with billions” is written on this work.
- A Chinese man pouring coffee into cups labelled Kenya, Ghana, Zambia, South Africa, Rwanda, Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo, helped by different African men.

China takes note of these social commentaries and at times attempts to halt them. Michael Soi reported that, in 2014, he was visited by six Chinese officials at his studio at the GoDown Arts Centre in Nairobi. They accused him of being “ungrateful” for all that China was doing for Kenya, all the while mishandling his stacks of artwork and his paint cans (Dahir 2018). Soi explained that as a father he is concerned that his daughter “will be paying for the debts we are incurring from China now. The presence and impact of China will be here with us for a long time” (as said to Dahir 2020). In an interview, Soi says that this is not only about Kenya but “it’s basically African leaders mortgaging Africa to the Chinese” (as said to Dahir 2018).

Cartoonist and satirist artist Bright Tetteh Ackwerh from Ghana uses social commentary to raise awareness of debt, corruption and extraction by China. He suggests that China’s involvement has allowed new forms of corruption and bribery not seen before in his country. He bemoans the impact this has on Ghana’s good record of governance on the continent and speaks of the corrupting influence that money has, with no accountability for government officials or government systems. Bright Tetteh Ackwerh has been lauded in some media outlets as the “lone Ghanaian cartoonist who stood up to China” (Asiedu 2017). For example, his Facebook post, titled “We Dey Beg” or “We are Begging” in support of a campaign against illegal gold mining and the pollution of local rivers, expressed his views on Chinese investments in his country. The cartoon, shown below, shows China’s president Xi Jinping pouring dirty water from a Ming dynasty vase into bowls held by Ghana’s president and the minister of natural resources, both kneeling in a begging manner. Beside the Chinese president is the delighted Chinese ambassador to Ghana, holding a gold bar victoriously in the air.



"We Dey Beg" | ©Bright Ackwerh

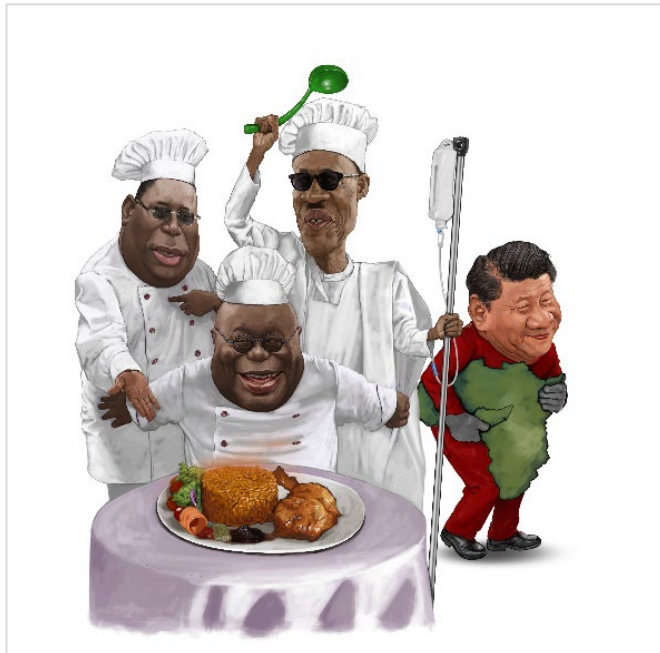
The Chinese embassy was dismayed by the cartoon and "issued a complaint to the Ghanaian government on media coverage of the arrests of several Chinese miners involved in illegal mining", an activity known locally as 'galamsey' (Asiedu 2017). Bright Tetteh Ackwerh was quick to reply with a cartoon, namely "Them Threaten", depicting Ghanaian president Nana Akufo-Addo hiding a poster behind his back which read "Stop Galamsey Now".



"Dem Threaten" | ©Bright Ackwerh

However, the harsh words from the Chinese embassy and the corresponding cartoons were seemingly forgotten when the Chinese ambassador Sun Baohong attended Ackwerh's exhibition in Accra and posed in front of his cartoon (Asiedu 2017).

None of this has put a halt to the creativity and political outrage of Ackwerh, who then published a cartoon, "Occupation", in which he targeted the presidents of Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal, depicted as arguing over a plate of jollof rice (a staple of the region) while the Chinese president Xi Jinping is seen "sneaking away with the continent of Africa" (Asiedu 2017). As Ackwerh explains to Asiedu (2017) of the jollof 'wars': "It was embarrassingly becoming a distraction at a time when Africa was being taken over by China. The ingredients used for making jollof such as the rice are imported, mostly from China".



"Occupation" | ©Bright Ackwerh

Cameroonian theatrical self-portraiture artist Samuel Fosso dresses up as Mao Zedong in his photography series entitled “The Emperor of Africa” (2013). He uses theatrical self-portraiture as a commentary on the politics of the day. In *Aperture*, Olu Oguibe (2016) explains the purpose of this work:

*Fosso channels a different spirit by restaging iconic images of Chinese leader Chairman Mao not only as a liberator who, like the subjects of Fosso's African Spirits series, is highly admired in Africa, but also as the founder and symbol of a modern imperial behemoth that is currently engaged in an expansive long march across Africa. Though China's growing economic and cultural presence is eagerly embraced by many African leaders, it has raised concerns, especially among the continent's intellectuals. [...] Fosso's Mao is both ancestral figure and absent dictator.*

Fosso has developed a unique set of contributions to highlight his views on China's engagement in Africa.

Animator and cartoonist Godfrey Mwampembwa (known as Gado) from Tanzania uses witty cartoons to hold politicians accountable and reflect on topics ranging from corruption, revolutions, climate change, dictators and democrats to China's deepening role in Africa, while Zimbabwean artist Moffat Takadiwa turns discarded Chinese-made plastic goods into brightly-coloured wall sculptures. He pays street children in Harare to collect these for him. His artwork “Vendors Teeth Tight” is moulded from plastic computer keys and bottle caps into a traditional pattern. His work echoes his views on China: “China is offering a raw deal. They are taking Africa's natural resources and in return are flooding the continent with cheap plastic items that are replacing traditional African cultural items” (Twigg 2016).

In Namibia, the cartoonist Dudly has depicted China as being unwelcoming to artists, with an African young man standing on a stylised map of China with a sign “Africans not welcome”. The top of the cartoon reads: “Stop the abuse of

Africans in China”.<sup>86</sup> Another, created for Africa Day on 5 June 2015, shows a Chinese man with a Chinese flagpole pointing into a map of Africa which reads “Or as we like to call it, Chinese Colonialism Day”.

Comedy shows are another creative outlet for artists to express their views and opinions. They are “an acute barometer of social contexts as they are embedded in power relations and often constructed as a space of resistance” (Yuan and Shen 2022: 157). Popular Kenyan stand-up comedy show “The Churchill Comedy Show” has had China as a recurring theme. Notable themes, such as Kenya’s increasing debt burden, are used to open up discussion and critically reflect on how debt impacts China-Kenya relations. Comedy is used to express resistance and a moral critique of the increasing presence of China in Kenya, as well as of how this is impacting marginalised publics. As authors Yuan and Shen assert, it is not the case that China-Kenya relations are either all bad or all good, but rather that comedy helps to uncover both the intimacy in Chinese engagement in Kenya as well as the nuance in that relationship:

*The Skit analysed here acknowledges the increasing intimacy between Kenya and China and sharply catches the ambiguous and nuanced dynamics within their interactions, while it also exhibits the contextual situatedness of humour that is culturally specific, linguistically located and historically bounded. (2022: 168)*

South African academic and exhibition curator Ruth Simbao is more tempered in her discussions about China in Africa and appeals for a more nuanced conversation away from strict binaries of good and evil. Simbao’s essay in the “Making Way” exhibition catalogue<sup>87</sup> appeals for a more human-centred narrative to strike a balance between the binaries:

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<sup>86</sup> The Namibian, Archives: Dudley Cartoons (see: <https://www.namibian.com.na/category/opinion/cartoons/>).

<sup>87</sup> Simbao, R. (2012) Making Way (ukuvul’indlela) Catalogue: Contemporary Art from South Africa & China, Published by ViPAA (Visual and Performing Arts of Africa). Available at: [https://www.ru.ac.za/media/rhodesuniversity/content/ruthsimbao/documents/exhibitionsbookletsandcatalogues/MAKING\\_WAY\\_exhibition\\_catalogue\\_2012.pdf](https://www.ru.ac.za/media/rhodesuniversity/content/ruthsimbao/documents/exhibitionsbookletsandcatalogues/MAKING_WAY_exhibition_catalogue_2012.pdf).

*We need, urgently, to move beyond the stale canards and thoughtless generalisations about China in Africa and about Africa and China. Too often the relationship is presented as a binary of good and evil. Between those poles, however, are numerous gradations, and it is in endeavours such as Making Way that the complexities and subtleties of the China-Africa relationship are pondered. Behind the grand geopolitical game of resources for infrastructure lie countless human stories, fears, hopes, frustrations and aspirations. And it is in these, rather than in jaundiced and simplistic media reporting and analysis or in bandwagoning academic rushes to judgment, that a balance will be struck. (quoted in Accone 2013)*

The “Making Way” exhibition, held at the National Arts Festival in Makhanda (South Africa) in 2012 explored migration and the ‘diaspora’—although there is no equivalent of this concept in modern Chinese. She reverts to the concept of “bei jing li xiang”—being forced to leave one’s home.

Lisa Essers, director of South Africa’s Goodman Gallery, agreed that Africans need to “start trying to understand China and Chinese culture” (Twigg 2016).

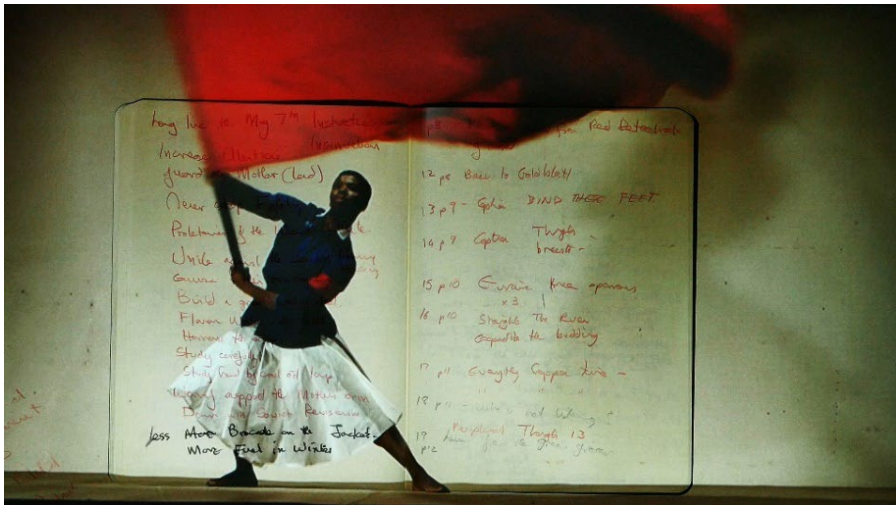
*Under apartheid, for example, people of Chinese descent were classified as black while people of Japanese descent were made honorary whites. Why? And when you look at the role China is currently playing on our continent, it can make you uncomfortable. Which is why we in Africa have a duty to educate ourselves on Chinese culture. Ignorance is not bliss. (In conversation with Twigg 2018)*

Renowned South African artist William Kentridge is interested in understanding Chinese culture while offering social commentary on China in Africa today. Kentridge has also created an exhibition, “Notes Towards a Model Opera”, consisting of a series of drawings and installations exploring the parallels between the Cultural Revolution and apartheid in South Africa. It was exhibited at Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing in 2015. This is partly reflective of an increased interest by Chinese collectors in African contemporary

art, as well as increased interest in Chinese culture by Africans as the connection between China and Africa grows in complexity.

William Kentridge explains the relevance of the model operas:

*The model operas were theatre pieces exemplary in revolutionary content, the form of the Peking operas re-worked with revolutionary stories: through passionate song, speech or dance, a peasant, a young soldier, a young communist, roused their fellows to fight the Kuomintang or the Japanese. There is singing, ballet or martial arts with its precise percussion. Many red flags are waved, the enemy is defeated, and then there is a singing of the Internationale. Seeing these films of the opera started the project.<sup>88</sup>*



A still from William Kentridge's video installation "Notes Towards a Model Opera" ©William Kentridge

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.kentridge.studio/projects/notes-towards-a-model-opera/> [2015].





Portraits from William Kentridge's "Notes Towards a Model Opera" exhibition ©William Kentridge

In the editorial notes to the exhibition programme, Kentridge observed the following:

*China certainly hovers over us like a huge zeppelin. The scale of it, the scale of its hunger for resources, the scale of everything. China in Africa today creates a sense of a series of questions rather than any answers. Are we here the tethered goat waiting for the tiger? Easy pickings? (Goodman Gallery 2016)*

Wubuntu is an initiative of a number of Chinese residents in South Africa, the University of Cape Town, the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups and the Education University of Hong Kong to drive

*Africa-Asia intercultural empowerment with the African concept of 'ubuntu', which means 'unity in diversity' [...] [It] consolidates global resources in Africa and Asia to promote intercultural awareness, close the cultural gap between the two continents, and its youth development impacts will lead it to significant economic impacts.<sup>89</sup>*

Wubuntu recently called for African art galleries<sup>90</sup> to collaborate in an intercultural art campaign, "New Colours of Africa", which aims to connect African artists and galleries with the Chinese art market and Chinese audiences. According to respondents A26 and A27, the key sponsor of the programme is the China Construction Development Bank in South Africa, which is using its

<sup>89</sup> Wubuntu website. Available at: <https://www.wubuntuafrica.com/> (Accessed: 27 September 2023).

<sup>90</sup> 'Bring "New Colours of Africa" to China: Call for African Art Gallery Collaboration'. Available at: <https://www.wubuntuafrica.com/newcoloursofafrica/> [2023].

corporate social responsibility arm to support the initiative, including providing space on its website for a webinar, artists' work and gallery information.

The project included a public education webinar introducing the African art market to the Chinese audience, a ten-session matching and trading platform connecting African galleries and artists with the Chinese market and buyers (including translation support services, information on trends and tastes in the different markets and on how to present work to different audiences) and a third area aiming to facilitate the purchase of African artworks from artists and galleries for the “New Colours of Africa” exhibition in selected Chinese cities.

A26 and A27 emphasise that they were keen to launch a ‘bottom up’ cultural exchange programme between China and South Africa (which both have now made their home) and facilitate access to Chinese markets for African artists and galleries and to African markets for Chinese artists and galleries. They have found partners for the project (such as galleries in Beijing and Cape Town) and networked with artists and other galleries at key fairs such as the Investec Cape Town Art Fair, as well as visiting many artist studios to assess interest. Through an online exhibition of more than 20 art galleries and several artists, they found the interest from African artists in this initiative to be “exciting”, if “overwhelming”.

## **7.2 Civil society perceptions**

Civil society actors (journalists, artists and creatives, businesspeople) in Africa are alert to some of the challenges posed by Chinese engagement on the continent, while African governments are tentatively suggesting the importance of African identity, Pan-Africanism, African ownership and the patronage of local products in response to the increasing Chinese encroachment.

A key question is how to ensure that China-Africa relations maintain a vibrant, two-way and equitable dynamic in which both China and Africa constantly reflect on and adjust policies to achieve this outcome. Hanauer and Morris (2014) examined the reactions of African governments and citizens to Chinese presence, investments and engagement and noted the policy adjustments made

by the Chinese government to accommodate these often-hostile responses. Their report acknowledges the competition between the United States and China and noted the key outcomes China is aiming for: first, access to natural resources such as oil and gas; second, Chinese investments in Africa facilitating China's restructuring of its labour-intensive economy;<sup>91</sup> third, Africa's support for Beijing's "One China" policy (which is a requirement for receiving aid and investment) providing political legitimacy for China and, finally, taking on the role of securing stability in the region, which in turn could mitigate security-related threats to China.

African countries require aid, investment, infrastructure development and trade to secure "political recognition and legitimacy" as these will contribute to development and thus contribute to sustainable livelihoods for Africans and engender greater trust in government by citizens. Hanauer and Morris suggest that:

*African governments believe that unlike the United States or other Western governments who impose what are viewed as condescending conditions to their aid (such as good governance), China will engage directly on the financial needs of the project and, in addition will invest in high-risk projects or in remote regions that many Western governments or companies would not. Some Africans aspire to replicate China's rapid economic development and believe that their nations can benefit from China's recent experience in lifting itself out of poverty. (2014: 30)*

African governments have been overwhelmingly positive towards China's presence on the continent during the 2020s; this was based on the view that

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<sup>91</sup> China produces the largest share of the world's labour-intensive exports, despite the higher standards of living experienced during China's economic development in the two decades of the 2000s. In fact, during this time, China's share of labour-intensive goods grew from 13.9% in 2000 to 26.9% in 2018 (Wolf 2020). China wants to increase its share of high-tech and high-value goods production and of research-intensive goods. Analyst Michael Wolf argues that economic (higher wages) and non-economic forces (interest in high-value production) will push labour-intensive production outside of China, which will benefit other countries (see: <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/insights/economy/asia-pacific/china-supply-chain.html#:~:text=China's%20labor%2Dintensive%20goods%20exports,of%20China's%20labor%2Dintensive%20production>).

China itself was a developing country with ‘noble intentions’ to support African development. Newspaper articles<sup>92</sup> abound with messages of praise from African leaders highlighting the benefits to African citizens of expanded economic activity, employment creation and improvements to critical infrastructure. Commentators report that “‘Satisfied’ and ‘inspired’” are key ways African leaders assessed their alliance with China at a FOCAC forum in Beijing in 2016, where approximately 50 African presidents and heads of government took to the podium “to define and defend China’s growing relationship with Africa” (Dahir 2018).<sup>93</sup>

However, since 2020, there has also been an increase in criticism from civil society (respondents A28–A31), that is, non-governmental bodies such as trade unions, media bodies and journalists who focus particularly on “poor labour conditions, unsustainable environmental practices, and job displacement”, with some of these claims resulting in protests targeting Chinese businesspeople and migrants (Hanauer and Morris 2014: 15). Watchdog organisations warn of how Chinese contracts “foster corruption and wasteful decision making” and that African governments are typically at an unfair disadvantage (Hanauer and Morris 2014: 5).

Despite the overwhelmingly positive government responses, there has over the years been visible if rare government criticism, such as that which came from the Zambian minister of trade and industry Dipak Patel in 2007. He noted that the government was mistaken in ignoring growing resentment building up in Zambia.

*‘We have a lot of Chinese traders selling in the market and displacing local people and causing a lot of friction,’ he said. ‘You have Chinese labourers here moving wheelbarrows. That’s not the kind of investment we need. I understand they have 1.2 billion people but they don’t have to send them to Africa. This needs to be dealt with*

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<sup>92</sup> “South Africa praises China’s efforts in development and world peace”; “Big Leap in China-Africa Ties”; Ethiopian president: “China is an inspiration for all of us. What China shows to Africa is that it is indeed possible to turn the corner on economic development” (Bangura 2007).

<sup>93</sup> Dahir, A. L. (2018) “‘Satisfied’ and ‘inspired’: All the ways African leaders praised their alliance with China”, Quartz. Available at: <https://qz.com/africa/1379457/china-africa-summit-african-leaders-praise-relations-with-beijing>.

*because you'll end up with a situation with what happened in Uganda with the Indians'. (quoted in McGreal 2007)*

He added that it was the responsibility of the government to set the terms of engagement and proceed with these favourably.

*The government needs to be very clear about what kind of investment it wants. If it's just shipping out resources and shipping in cheap goods and people that's not to our benefit. We in Zambia need to be very careful of this new scramble for Africa. What's happening is that the Chinese are very aggressive. They have a strategic plan. (quoted in McGreal 2007)*

African citizens have noted the role of citizens and journalists in asking questions and holding the government accountable. For example, Zambians, such as social activist Lukuku, deplore the fact that Chinese projects have contributed to the high level of corruption in Zambia. Laura Miti, head of the non-governmental organisation Alliance for Community Action in Zambia, believes that there is little transparency in Chinese loans, resulting in many Zambians being sceptical about which funds land in the pockets of their leaders. As Miti stated:

*We don't know what the conditions are. It's 'no questions asked' debt. If much of it goes to building mansions, nobody cares. In the West, even if the government wants to hide something, there is still the civil society to ask questions. In China, this information is nowhere to be found. (Jalloh/Wang 2019)*

The Chinese government has shown a degree of sensitivity to the negative criticisms from African governments, journalists and citizens and has adjusted some policies to accommodate these. There is an enhanced focus on sustainability in economic and trade relationships and, importantly for this study, there is also a complementary focus on soft power, cultural engagements and people-to-people exchange. The author suggests that the increased cultural interest and investment seem to be guided by a strategy of fostering broader public support for China, which in turn facilitates continued Chinese investment in securing natural resources.

Specific concerns from civil society bodies and individuals interviewed for this research include the following:

- The erosion of local cultures and traditions as Chinese influence spreads, which could potentially result in less local cultural content being produced and consumed.
- Dependence on Chinese education and Chinese media as Chinese ownership and control of media expands, combined with the spread of Confucius Institutes and classrooms and opportunities for scholarships to China. Questions are being asked about African knowledge, values and where young Africans will learn about their culture, language and beliefs when there is a lack of media diversity or when local education spending is not sufficient to counter a Chinese perspective.
- The lack of sustainability and follow-up regarding exchange programmes (e.g. in the form of assistance, mentoring or evaluation of impact) for participating African artists and cultural professionals when they return from China.
- China's cultural projects do not necessarily have a unified framework or policy to have a long-lasting influence. Without such long-term strategies, some programmes lack direction and continuity.

## 8. Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no denying the significance of China's engagement on the African continent and the diversity of opinions (as to whether China's role is a positive one for development or whether there are critical problem areas) that have yet to be considered. These potential problem areas are numerous and relate to perceptions of Chinese colonialism and, on the economic side, the possibility of a debt trap for African governments<sup>94</sup> due to the numerous loans taken for infrastructural development. On the cultural side, there are potential issues with the investment in storytelling (film, music), the dominance of Chinese-influenced media platforms, the number of African students studying in China and the number of people immersing themselves in Chinese culture and language.

The respondents interviewed in this study did not contest that there are opportunities for knowledge sharing, intercultural understanding and language acquisition between China and Africa through programmes like the Confucius Institute, or that there is an economic benefit to Chinese investment on the African continent. The key question is whether there is any recognition of the 'danger' that local cultural content could be crowded out, especially when the appetite of African governments for financial resources is large, local funds for cultural expressions are in short supply and when sustainable systems for cultural governance are not in place (including when civil society participation is weak).

What needs to be in place to ensure a more equitable set of engagements between China and Africa in the field of cultural investment? Clearly there is a need for a strong civil society to demand transparency from governments,<sup>95</sup> to push for the development of more equitable engagements in which terms are determined by local needs and local culture, and to be more aggressive in promoting an equal footing, local needs and respect for national sovereignty.

There are already warning signs on all these fronts. The examples of infrastructure-induced debt are numerous—this includes the fact that a quarter

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<sup>94</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2019/10/03/what-china-is-really-up-to-in-africa/?sh=66aa3eb15930>.

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.africanews.com/2018/10/08/the-chinese-influence-in-zambia-this-is-culture/>.

of Ethiopia's total 2016 budget was used to fund the US\$4.5 billion Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway; the four-fold increase in the budget of the Chinese-financed railway from Mombasa to Nairobi, costing Kenya more than 6% of its GDP; renegotiations required with Chinese contractors when African governments are unable to pay, as was the case with Nigeria (Shepard 2019); the fact that China owned 15% of Africa's external debt in 2012, with the following years seeing more than two-thirds of all new loans originating from China;<sup>96</sup> and cancellation of contracts because of perceptions of shoddy work, bribery and exploitative tendencies on the part of Chinese companies in Congo, Ghana and Kenya, among others.<sup>97</sup> When it comes to loans and infrastructure financing, there seems to be an awareness among African leaders of China's predatory style of loan diplomacy (Evan 2023).

Based on this research, various potentially positive consequences related to China's growing cultural influence in Africa have been identified. However, to mitigate the potentially negative impacts, more targeted recommendations are needed. These include the following:

- **Achieving African agency through unified policy:** There is a clear role for the AU and other regional economic bodies to play in terms of reinserting African agency through a unified policy that is intended to guide how African countries collectively interact with China. China's BRI is not country-specific as its overall international development plan views Africa as a whole rather than focusing on the individual countries. A unified policy would allow each African country to strengthen their overall bargaining power and enhance the positive effects of Chinese investment.

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<sup>96</sup> Shepard, W. (2019) 'What China is really up to in Africa', Forbes. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2019/10/03/what-china-is-really-up-to-in-africa/?sh=66aa3eb15930> (Accessed: 15 December 2022); Hsiang, E. (2023) 'Chinese Investment in Africa: A Re-examination of the Zambian Debt Crisis', Harvard International Review. Available at: <https://hir.harvard.edu/chinese-investment-in-africa-a-reexamination-of-the-zambian-debt-crisis/> (Accessed: 23 February 2023).

<sup>97</sup> CRUX editor Ashish Kumar with Anvita Bansal (see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NksNkg3wdts>).



- **Identifying the needs of artists and cultural professionals and establishing criteria:** Identify the needs of cultural professionals so that Chinese investment is more useful and better perceived.
- **Increasing national funding for cultural expressions:** Setting aside funds for cultural expressions in general and provide matching grants for artists and creatives who receive Chinese financial support for their cultural expressions (films, music, art exhibitions, design, etc.) in order to reduce potential funding monopolies (by China) to these artists and thus reduce the potential for undue influence.
- **Investing in the arts, culture and creative industries:** African governments should deliberately adopt systems and policies that support and promote regional creative endeavours, promoting domestic consumption and the export of locally produced goods. By so doing, these sectors, not having to rely on international funding (such as from China), can stay true to their national agendas rather than responding to funding priorities from foreign countries.
- **Implementing the 2005 UNESCO Convention:** National ministries/departments of culture need to establish conditions for all foreign direct investments (FDI) into the arts and cultural sector, as per the 2005 UNESCO Convention. This will ensure that all financial support for African arts and cultural activities, expressions or products is in accordance with nationally agreed criteria. This will allow local artists and creatives to have a basis for negotiation and mediation on the terms of the engagement.
- **Investing in education and empowerment:** African governments should prioritise investing in the education and empowerment of their own citizens to retain talent and foster local growth and development.
- **Focusing on mutual benefit:** African institutions and individuals should strive for balanced relationships with China and other nations, ensuring that the consumers, makers and contributors who take part in

cultural exchanges retain their intellectual property rights (such as copyright) as far as possible.

- **Adopting regulatory action:** The establishment of national agencies in charge of supervising and regulating exchange programmes for culture (or including this in the responsibilities of existing agencies) should be considered. This can ensure that programmes are long-lasting and give participants opportunities to advance their careers and creative abilities, not only in China-Africa exchange but for all international cultural exchange.
- **Implementing continuous engagement and follow-up:** Set up systems for ongoing communication and follow-up with exchange programme participants, perhaps by existing agencies, as suggested above. This would entail keeping track of the effects on artists' development, providing mentorship and awarding funding to support upcoming initiatives.
- **Applying long-term planning and strategy:** Put in place long-term planning and strategies to increase the effectiveness of cultural projects. A precise structure can direct programme implementation and guarantee its sustainability.
- **Adopting a long-term national perspective:** African governments should prioritise their long-term and short-term interests, safeguarding their cultural identity and economic benefits while engaging with China as well as with other countries.

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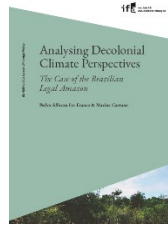
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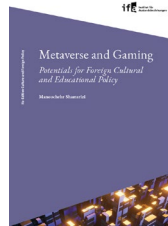
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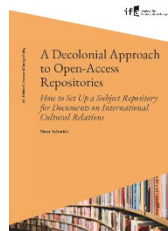
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# China's Institutionalised Cultural Presence in Africa

## *Cultural investments, perceptions and implications for China-Africa cultural relations*

This study looks at the effects of Chinese cultural diplomacy on the African continent. While for a long time China's investments in large infrastructure projects were viewed positively, Joffe now notes a growing awareness both in civil society and in government agencies of ambivalent consequences. Many African countries are now groaning under the burden of debt, and about two-thirds of new loans now come from China. This study provides insight into Chinese investments, particularly in the area of international cultural policy. The study's findings highlight the complexity of Chinese engagement in Africa and the various facets of its associated impacts. The author suggests that African actors should ensure that a more equitable engagement develops, where conditions are determined by local needs and culture, and more aggressively advocate for equality, needs, and respect for national sovereignty.