

CHINA IN THE AFRICAN MEDIASCAPE

CHINESE ASSISTANCE TO AFRICAN MEDIA IS NOT NEW. WHAT IS DIFFERENT NOW IS THAT IT IS BEING ADMINISTERED IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA WITH A GREATER DEGREE OF OPENNESS, SAYS JACKSON BANDA

In 2006 China and 48 African countries drew up the Beijing Action Plan (2007-2009) under the Forum on China-Africa Co-operation (Focac). The plan outlines key milestones for China's intervention in the African mediascape. In the Focac framework, "news media" falls in the area of "social development". The framework lists five points of intervention, including an undertaking by China to "explore ways of conducting effective co-operation".

In August 2007, the Commonwealth Press Union (CPU)'s quarterly magazine had a cover story on China's penetration into the African mediascape. The story, "Enter the dragon: how the emergence of China is impacting on the Commonwealth", was a medley of opinion pieces by several Commonwealth media executives, including *The Post's* Fred M'Membe in Zambia, *The Monitor's* Angelo Izama in Uganda and *The Concord Times's* Ibrahim Seibure in Sierra Leone. It laid out a variety of key themes:

- "Welcome China but keep a wary eye"
- "Resentment of the Chinese echoes Amin years"
- "Murmurs of discontent but China a true friend" (CPQ 2007: 12-18).

Much research has concentrated upon aspects of Chinese foreign trade and aid policy (Davies, Edinger, Tay and Naidu 2008; Taylor 1998); the role and impact of Chinese economic operations in Africa (Keet 2008); China's influence in Africa and its implications for the West (Brookes and Shin 2006; Sachs 2007; Wild 2006); and Africans' perceptions of China in Africa (Alden 2006). Pehnelt's study (2007) views Chinese aid policy in terms of political and economic goals which include: gaining support in international organisations, establishing itself as a new super power and securing access to energy resources and commodities. Many analysts ask what China's real economic intentions in Africa are and how they differ from those of the imperialist West (Keet 2008: 78; Cheng 2007: 1).

Some scholarly work is emerging, albeit slowly and incoherently, to explain how media are caught up in China's insertion into Africa. For example, Alden (2006: 7) argues that there are three basic portrayals of China within Africa: China as development partner; as competitor; and as hegemon. As a development partner, Africans appreciate China's "no conditionality" policy, anti-colonial solidarity and model of economic development. As a competitor, China is seen as displacing local businesses with its mass-produced, cheap exports. As hegemon, China is seen as harbouring grand designs of an imperialist nature on the African continent.

But these studies beg the question about what the enduring,

cultural influence of China might be on African media institutions, on the practice of journalism, and on African journalists.

Chinese intervention in African media

Chinese assistance to African media is not new. What is different now is that it is being administered in the post-Cold War era with a greater degree of openness. But even before the Cold War China was involved in some level of media engagement in Africa. By early 1958 China had opened a New China News Agency office in Cairo (Ismael 1971: 507). Such ideological support was then extended to the liberation movements and support given to their radio stations. In 1967 Radio Peking was transmitting 21 hours weekly in English to East Africa, with transmissions occurring daily at prime local time – between six and nine o'clock in the evening (Yu 1968: 1023). Chinese publications – the *China Pictorial*, *Peking Review*, *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, Mao's selected works, Swahili translations of Chinese poems for children, etc – were readily available in East Africa (Yu 1968: 1024), demonstrating China's interest in countering the West's imperialist designs.

In the post-Cold War era, China made use of "Chinese nationalism", and not necessarily communism, to undergird the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) engagement with the rest of the world, including Africa. The launch in 2006 of the state-run China Radio International in Kenya can be seen in this light (Brookes and Shin 2006: 6). China's engagement with African media must thus be contextualised in terms of China's wider agenda for Africa. Gao Jinyuan, in his talk at a joint meeting of the Royal African Society and the Africa Centre on 7 September 1982, outlined what he saw as China's policy towards Africa:

- Support Africans in their struggle to win independence and safeguard their national sovereignty against colonialism, imperialism and hegemonism;
- Establish and enhance friendly relations on the basis of equality, mutual benefit and co-operation, providing material and technical assistance;
- Support African governments' pursuance of a policy of peace, neutrality and non-alignment;
- Advocate peaceful negotiations to solve disputes between African countries, the upholding of African solidarity, and opposition to aggression and interference by alien forces; and
- Support African countries in their efforts to develop national economies and seek a new economic world order (1983: 248).

All of the above reflect China's own insecurities in a unipolar world, where the United States is the singular super power.

Contemporary Chinese assistance to African media

The Focac action plan lists five points of intervention:

1. Increased contact between news media and encouraging journalists to play a role in enhancing mutual understanding and friendship;
2. Multi-level exchanges and co-operation, visits between media groups;
3. Reporting and coverage by their news media of the other side, facilitating news agencies in sending resident and non-resident correspondents to report;
4. Workshops for African correspondents in China;

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5. Expanding co-operation in radio and television broadcasting (Focac 2006a: 12-13).

Within this framework, it is possible to pinpoint three key areas of Chinese intervention in African media: infrastructural alignment; ideological expurgation; and cultural reproduction. The relationship between these three factors can be set out as follows: while *infrastructural alignment* represents the “hardware” of Chinese penetration into African media, *ideological expurgation* and *cultural reproduction* refer to the “software” of China’s interventions.

Infrastructural alignment

Technical assistance to media has consisted of media and communications infrastructure. Media support has been mainly towards state-owned broadcasting houses, such as the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC), the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings (ZBH) and the National Radio of Equatorial Guinea. Such technical support has included:

- Transmitters, towers, generators and antennae (Journalism.co.za 2007).
- Nigeria’s purchase of Chinese satellite technology, which included a Chinese training package and a ground station to be built in the Nigerian capital Abuja.
- In Malawi, a fibre-optic communication project to the tune of US\$22.94 million.
- In 2002, Zambia received FM transmitters for seven provinces. In 2006, it received more transmitters for further extension of radio services (Davies, Edinger, Tay and Naidu 2008: 49-55).

Such an infrastructural realignment – presumably *away from* Western technology and expertise – is likely to make African countries become more dependent on China than the West and such technological dependence is almost always linked to other forms of dependencies – economic, social, educational, etc.

In some instances infrastructural support has been implicitly linked to political ends. For example, the provision of FM transmitters to the State-owned media in Zambia has almost always occurred in an election year, timed to support the pro-Beijing ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) in its electoral campaign effort, especially in rural Zambia.

This can be viewed as China’s first step in a process designed to integrate Chinese state capital into the economies of African countries. In almost all cases where China has supplied technology, it has been accompanied by Chinese training packages.

Ideological expurgation

A careful analysis of Chinese involvement in African media demonstrates that China is actively engaged in expurgating or expunging those Euro-American views of it which it considers inimical to its foreign policy in Africa. The context of such Chinese ideological commitment in Africa is both its anti-colonial or anti-imperial history in Africa and its continued rejection of the equally ideological commitment of Western countries in Africa. For example, China is opposed to linking aid to the kinds of liberal-democratic values that Western nations and multilateral financial institutions insist upon: free markets; human rights; good governance; environmental protection; etc.

As an attempt at asserting its nationalism and internationalism, China is involved in an international campaign to de-legitimise Taiwan’s and Tibet’s separatist ambitions (Meidan 2006: 73, 90; Wild 2006). When Beijing launched Focac in October 2000, the first summit was astutely held from 9-11 October to coincide with Taiwan’s national day held on 10 October. A related aspect is its ideological justification of what it sees as its democratic reforms in Tibet. For example, Malawi’s *Daily Times* newspaper ran a 12-page supplement on 6 April 2009 entitled “50 years of democratic reform in Tibet”.

China’s ideological influence is in fact a double-edged

sword. On a negative note, China equips despotic African regimes with media-communication infrastructure to perpetuate their hold on political power. Brookes and Shin (2006: 4) say: “China provided a military-strength radio jamming device, which the Harare government used to block broadcasts of anti-government reports from independent media outlets during the 2005 parliamentary election campaign.” And Reporters without Borders contends that China’s involvement in Africa is “toxic for democracy”.

Cultural reproduction

China sees its anti-colonialist and pro-liberation movement history as a point of cultural harmony between Chinese and African peoples, providing a historically-grounded framework for carrying out China’s contemporary Africa policy on a more “complex” and “higher plane” (Gill, Huang and Morrison 2007: 5).

Cultural experiences are often mediated through education. King (2006: 8) notes of student exchanges between Africa and China that “students are not just seen as a one-

way act of generosity by China, since, according to the China Scholarship Council, Africans bring to China ‘their unique experiences and colourful cultures’”. Through such cultural exchanges, China reproduces itself in Africa, complete with ‘China towns’ beginning to emerge across sub-Saharan Africa. Wenping (2007: 28) says: “Africa is perhaps the most important testing ground for the promotion of Chinese soft power.”

These cultural exchanges have included African journalists and other media workers, mostly those in the employ of state-owned media, although there is

evidence of editors from privately-owned media participating (according to the Chinese Embassy in South Africa). As Cheng Min, Johannesburg bureau chief for Xinhua, informed Journalism.co.za: “We invite journalists from African countries to China and train them on journalism, news gathering and writing.”

“Training” is not value-neutral; it also carries with it the cultural and political values associated with those skills. This is deducible from the content of the Third Workshop for African Journalists held under the auspices of Focac in 2006 which was attended by 42 journalists from 23 English-speaking African countries and included discussions on such topics as:

- China-Africa relations and China’s Africa Policy;
- China’s experience and achievements on economic reform and national development;
- The Taiwan Question; and
- China’s journalistic view and the operation of the Chinese press.

In addition, the journalists visited Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI) and the Beijing Organising Committee for Olympic Games. A particularly telling aspect of the workshop was an introduction to China’s view of journalism and journalistic practice.

Another important arena of China’s influence is the setting up in African countries of the so-called Confucius Institutes. These are patterned after the British Council and other similar institutes. The setting up of such centres has significant implications: it provides opportunities for a possible paradigm shift from the “West to the East” in interrogating the relationship between mass media and society. At the very least, it signals the possibility of a more pluralistic media education, incorporating not only Occidental theo-

ries and practices of journalism but also Chinese and Africa philosophies and practices.

A critical cultural analysis

While a political-economic approach to understanding the role of China in African media is necessary, it needs to be complemented with a *critical* culturalist perspective. Analysing China in Africa requires a perspective which understands both China and Africa as *agents*, actively engaged in constructing a new cultural milieu. In other words, the question should not be only about what the so-called Chinese dragon is doing to Africa, but what China and Africa are doing together.

Firstly, it would be useful to understand how Chinese perspectives of journalism are being taken up in African media institutions. How are the workshops for African journalists enabling African journalists to negotiate their often Western-oriented understandings and practices of journalism? And, with the establishment of Confucius Institutes in several African countries is there a possibility, for example, of Chinese philosophical thought becoming enmeshed with African political thought? As Kezar (2004: 120) observes, Confucianism offers an alternative language and philosophical system to that offered by Platonic/Aristotelean, Western thought. Given the conjoined histories of Sino-African anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, it is likely that Chinese and African media scholars will begin to examine the philosophical principles common to Confucianism and Ubuntuism and how these could inform media production.

Secondly, will Chinese infrastructural and technical support become a new impetus for state control of media in Africa? Given the fact that many of the state broadcasters in Africa are not accountable to the public this renders the support less than transparent and accountable.

Thirdly, any analysis would have to untangle how Chinese media support to Africa promotes certain kinds of positive representations of China in Africa and the implications for the identity politics of Africans. It is clear that, given the Western modes of media education into which most of Africa is socialised, Chinese support for African media might engender new ways of imagining what modernity and progress mean.

Finally, how do African audiences receive and interpret African media’s representations of China?

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