

China's Soft Power Strategies in Africa: Challenges and Obstacles

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Abstract:

The African continent represents an essential part of the Chinese foreign policy, in consideration of its significant economic and strategic opportunities. China's approach to soft power is rooted in long-standing friendships and partnerships with African nations which extend back to the period prior to the opening-up policy. China aims to position itself as a reliable partner in Africa, one that respects the region's cultural diversity and offers an alternative to Western models of development and partnership. The Chinese government developed a clear strategy to strengthen its relations with African countries as well as counter the negative perceptions propagated by some Western media, often framed under the concept of "the Chinese threat". This strategy primarily emphasizes cultural and public diplomacy, economic cooperation, and assisting African nations in their development efforts.

This study aims to shed light on China's soft power instruments and their role in achieving China's foreign policy objectives, in addition to assessing the effectiveness and criticism of its soft power strategies.

Keywords: soft power; China; Africa; FOCAC; culture.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Globalization has created an interconnected world that is more open to trade, capital flow, and cultural exchange. It is evident that globalization has a profound impact on international relations. For instance, it led to the spread of standards, values, and cultures beyond borders. This brings us to the concept of soft power which stands on three key pillars “culture, political values and foreign policies”. In other terms, soft power is about getting what you want through attraction and persuasion, contrarily to hard power which relies on coercive means to achieve one's aims.

Since the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party has been active in Africa, by supplying material and technical aid to anti-colonial movements. In the aftermath of the economic openness policy, China focused its attention on the continent in order to create a stable environment to meet its growing energy needs, sustain economic development and hinder the influence of other global powers in the region, especially since Africa became a major market for Chinese products.

Today, Africa is a major destination for Chinese investments, by hosting several projects under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Statistics, issued by the World Economic Forum in June 2024, indicate that China is Africa's largest bilateral trade partner. Nonetheless, the importance of Africa to Beijing transcends the relation of trade. For China, Africa is a central piece of a grand strategy aimed to expand its influence and reshape the international system. China leverages its relations with African nations to mobilize support for its stances and initiatives at the level of international organizations, primarily because Africa is the largest single bloc of votes in the United Nations General Assembly, comprising 54 member states.

Mobilizing and educating the Chinese about the strategic importance of Africa has become a governmental priority. In that respect, China has been intensifying soft power initiatives in Africa, which act as an efficient instrument to project a positive image about the country to the world, counter foreign misrepresentations, and maintain the current regime.

Beijing's soft power is derived from the following sources: china's developmental model, the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, diplomatic engagement, win-win economic principle, affordable products, as well as “cultural exports”, promoted by the Confucius institutes, which constitute a key vehicle to promote the Chinese culture and language across the African continent.

Since the founding of the Forum on the China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, Beijing emerged as a key player in human resources cooperation with Africa. By taking the existing Sino-African education and training programs to a new level, many African students benefited from Chinese scholarships and short-term training programs. Chinese leaders believe that culture, values, and people-to-people relations are more relevant in international relations and should be prioritized to support foreign policy objectives.

The prominent presence of China in Africa, paired with its aims of establishing a multipolar system and a parallel economy in Africa, which operates independently of Western influence, raises concerns amongst traditional powers in the region, particularly Western countries, which witnessed a setback in their economic leverage and political influence in Africa.

The Chinese approach to soft power is founded on a long history of friendship with African nations; China's south-south policy is unique and worthy of closer study. Beijing is working relentlessly to present itself as a reliable non-interventionist partner that only aims to rise peacefully while offering an alternative to the Western model of development and partnership.

Research question:

China uses various soft power instruments to achieve and expand its interests globally, however, the concept of soft power itself remains complex and challenging to Define, study, or even measure in terms of effectiveness. In light of the above, this article seeks to explore these ambiguities by answering the following research question: What challenges does China face in implementing its soft power strategy in Africa?

Hypothesis:

China faces significant economic, cultural and socio-political challenges in implementing its soft power strategy in Africa.

Structure of the Study:

This article is organized as follows:

In the first part, we will discuss the concept of soft power, with a focus on the differences between China's approach to soft power and the Western approach. We will also explore the Chinese elite's perception of soft power and China's intents of this commitment.

In the second part, we will examine China's soft power strategies in Africa, by detailing how China built its influence in the continent and how it employs its power.

In the third part, we will assess the effectiveness of Chinese soft power strategies and the challenges encountered in the African continent.

2: The Chinese Perception of Soft Power

Nye (1990) believes that culture and values are becoming more relevant in international relations and should be taken into consideration by nations. The concept of soft power, by definition, is vague but powerful. Originally, it was interpreted as the use of attraction and persuasion instruments to disseminate culture, values, language, and other soft power elements. The concept of soft power was coined by the end of the Cold War, which witnessed the emergence of the United States as a supreme power. In that context, the United States implemented soft power tools in parallel with military and economic means to gain international legitimacy as the leader of the international system.

According to Joseph Nye, a state's soft power rests on three key sources: political values, culture, and foreign policy. Political values such as democracy, human rights, equality and justice are fundamental and represent the core ideals of a nation. Culture acts as a supportive component, which significantly influences the nation's identity and perception, whereas Foreign policy functions as the instrument through which a country promotes its ideals and implements concrete measures. These three sources are interlinked, each playing a vital role in shaping a nation's soft power.¹

2.1 Culture:

The concept of soft power is deeply rooted in the Chinese culture, in reflection of its rich cultural heritage including Confucianism, Taoism, Art and literature. According to Confucianism, a successful ruler wins the hearts and minds of the people through the values of love and virtue rather than force. Moreover, the principles of Taoism and Buddhism emphasize values such as honesty, faithfulness, tolerance and cooperation.

The Chinese leaders employ the concept of “cultural soft power” instead of soft power to emphasize the cultural dimensions of china's soft power strategies. For instance, China promotes its culture by implementing policies that emphasize: non-interference, fairness, and morality. As a result, China is viewed as an attractive partner by countries that feel marginalized by external powers².

2.2 Political Values:

China's political values are closely linked to its cultural principles. The country stresses that its diplomatic relations are founded on equality, mutual gain, non-interference, and respect for sovereignty. In contrast to Western policies, according to which power refers to the ability of one actor to influence the attitude

and behavior of another actor. China aims to increase the degree of acceptance of its soft power influence and improve the perception of its values by other nations and cultures. In this respect, Confucius maintains: “Do not impose upon others what you do not desire yourself.” For instance, through the Belt and Road Initiative, China insists on respect of local customs and governance models and avoids imposing its values universally. Additionally, China has shown an ability to adjust its soft power initiatives when met with resistance³.

The Chinese understanding of soft power is closely linked to equality and morality, particularly the notion of “moral leadership”, according to which leaders are expected to govern ethically rather than coercively.

2.3 Foreign Policy: China’s foreign policy is a vital component of its soft power strategy. It aims to project a favorable image worldwide and establish international partnerships by emphasizing cooperation, mutual benefit, and peaceful development. By deepening people-to-people relations, China seeks to create positive attitudes to repel the “China’s threat theory”, build political trust, support its foreign policy objectives, and strengthen its global influence⁴. The Chinese leaders believe that Soft power is an important indicator of a state’s international status and influence and a tool for maintaining advantageous positions in international competition, which is a fundamental aspect of China’s peaceful rise theory.

The concept of soft power is broad, allowing for considerable political interpretation and maneuvering. Contrarily to the concept of soft power that is advanced by Joseph Nye, which focuses on external interactions, both Chinese leaders and thinkers advance that the Chinese soft power serves domestic and international purposes alike. This dual approach is believed to add legitimacy to the government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) domestically and internationally, especially since the latter does not rely on elections to gain public support.

According to the Chinese perception of soft power, domestic and international spheres are closely intertwined. For instance, The Chinese elite view that the recognition of their culture by other countries can boost the confidence of the Chinese people in their culture and build trust in their governments.

However, when China promotes nationalist policies to defend its interests and criticize Western countries via social media platforms like Twitter, it targets local audiences rather than international ones⁵.

While the western perception of soft power is built on attraction and persuasion, Chinese leaders favor respect and appreciation. Although, this does not

necessarily entail that countries should follow or emulate China, which is vastly appreciated by developing countries. China's stance on soft power is more defensive, unlike Joseph Nye's version which urges the United States to adopt more proactive policies. Chinese soft power does not advocate for interference in the internal affairs of other countries or violation of their sovereignty, instead, it promotes respect for independence and territorial integrity and advocates for peaceful resolutions to settle disputes and respect of the rules of international law and the principles of the United Nations. It also calls for strengthening economic partnerships and mutually working to establish the rules of a multipolar international system.

In China, there is a focus on exchanging views and ideas, promoting knowledge of other cultures and bridging gaps between communities. Unlike the West, China does not seek cultural hegemony; learning the Chinese language should be pursued with the purpose of improving business and economic relationships, rather than enculturation. China is only interested in promoting a positive vision of cultural diversity, which creates an environment of peace, dialogue and innovation. In the same vein, Beijing consistently emphasizes on "equality" and "win-win" outcomes, contrarily to the Western approach, which is often based on inequality, "charity" and "conditional aid"⁶.

To conclude, China only seeks to be recognized and understood as a major global power; it does not strive for cultural hegemony through the use of soft power. It prioritizes showcasing the country's contributions to global development in order to position itself as a respected and reliable member of the international community without necessarily altering global values and norms.

3. China's Soft Power Strategies in Africa

Chinese foreign policy makers and government officials stress on changing the perceptions of African nations on China. The latter has devoted significant financial resources and employed various soft power tools, including the promotion of the Chinese culture, language, media, aid, trade, investments, and health diplomacy. These efforts aim to enhance China's influence in Africa and undermine the influence of other powers.

3.1 Sino-African Economic Cooperation:

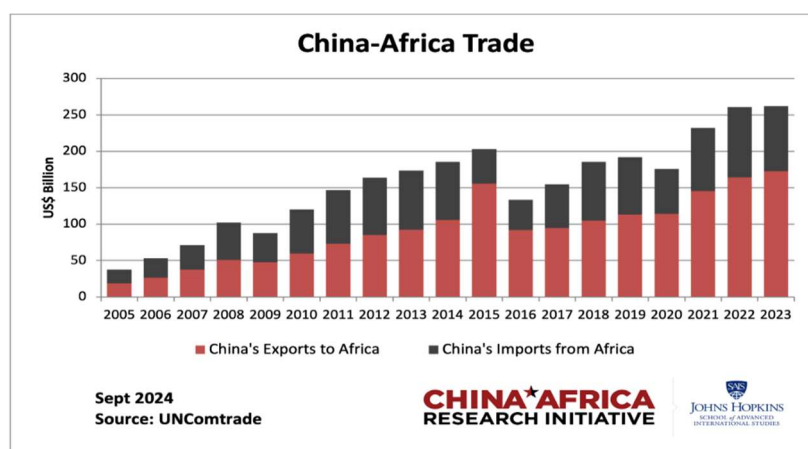
China's growing presence in Africa reflects its economic priorities, which indicate the importance of the African continent in the agenda of Chinese decision-makers. Africa is considered a promising market, in addition to being a major source of various raw materials.

The Chinese strategy emphasizes on building trust through economic cooperation and respect of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. In a response to that, China has become a preferred partner for certain African nations. This approach gained prominence in 1999 when China launched its ‘Go Global policy’, aimed at encouraging Chinese enterprises to invest overseas, improve their competitiveness, secure an international business presence as well as enhance China’s public image globally⁷.

To promote economic interdependence, China opened a branch of the Bank of China in Johannesburg in 2000, which now supports business operations in many African countries. Additionally, China established the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 as a framework for collective dialogue with African countries based on equality and mutual benefit.

The distinguishing trait of this forum is consistency, which has been proven to foster trust and reliability. In that respect, China held the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) 9 times; the last one was held in Beijing on September 4-6, 2024. These summits, along with ministerial conferences, led to significant economic and diplomatic advancements in Sino-Africa relations. Since 2009, China has been Africa’s largest trading partner, with a bilateral trade of 262 billion U.S. dollars in 2023, and over 3,500 companies settled across the continent. Private companies have eventually become an investment powerhouse, creating millions of local jobs.

Figure 1: Bilateral trade between China and Africa from 2005 to 2023



Source: China Africa Research Initiative, September 2024

As demonstrated in figure 1, bilateral Sino-African trade has increased significantly over the past two decades to reach 262 billion U.S. dollars in 2023, driven by China's growing demand for energy resources and Africa's need for infrastructure development.

The success of the Chinese model in Africa is a manifestation of the South-South cooperation. Initiatives like the Belt and Road contribute to the improvement of infrastructure across the continent by creating new trade routes both on land and at sea, which facilitates trade connectivity⁸. At the latest FOCAC Summit in 2024, China offered zero-tariff treatment for a 100 percent of taxable items from 33 least-developed African countries to enhance trade and support their economic growth. This initiative aims to reduce the trade imbalance and decrease Africa's reliance on raw materials exports. In addition, China provided technical assistance and training on export requirements. Nonetheless, China's significant economic presence in Africa is perceived as a threat to Western interests which once dominated Africa, but are now being replaced by Chinese multinational corporations.

3.2 Chinese Economic Aid Diplomacy in Africa:

To achieve its economic objectives in Africa, China has attracted several African countries in need of assistance, particularly those that were unable to obtain loans from the International Monetary Fund. The economic aid diplomacy has strengthened relations between China and African countries. For instance, Beijing funded the construction of several social infrastructure and logistics projects, such as the African Union Conference Center, the Lusaka General Hospital in Zambia, the soccer stadium in Mali, the Senegal National Grand Theater, the Ethiopia-Djibouti railway, and the Mombasa Nairobi railway in Kenya. Between 2000 and 2020, China helped construct over 13,000 kilometers of roads and railways, nearly 100 ports, and more than 80 power facilities in Africa. Additionally, it provided assistance in the construction of more than 130 medical facilities, 45 sports venues, and 170 schools in Africa⁹.

During the Beijing summit of the FOCAC in 2018, China exempted certain African countries from their outstanding debts, particularly the least developed and heavily indebted countries. Moreover, During the COVID-19 pandemic, China canceled the outstanding debts for 15 African countries¹⁰.

3.3 Consolidating Cultural Relations:

Aware of the importance of language in enhancing cultural attractiveness, China developed a strategic plan to disseminate the Chinese language and culture, particularly through the establishment of the Confucius Institutes in Africa (over 60 institutes), through which China seeks to foster cultural understanding between

African and Chinese peoples, increase academic exchange and build a positive image of China.

There has been a steady increase in the number of Confucius institutes within African universities. These institutes offer more than just language learning; they celebrate traditional Chinese festivals and organize job fairs where students can network with local Chinese companies. They receive funding from the Chinese Ministry of Education to promote the Chinese language and culture as well as support academic and cultural exchange since the year 2000. Many African students benefit from Chinese scholarships and short-term training programs. Most importantly, China exclusively targets scholarships for higher education training program.

In the same vein, China increased the number of annual scholarships awarded to African government leaders. These leadership training programs now include participants from parliaments, local governments, politically neutral groups, and even opposition parties, which indicate China's intent to spread its culture into the minds of future African leaders.

These various cooperation programs appear to be an indicator of a determination to make the Sino-African relationship transcend purely commercial interests. On the other hand, Chinese learning programs enable students to discover China as both a destination and a potential employer¹¹.

3.4 Media as a Chinese Soft Power Tool in Africa:

The presence of Chinese media in Africa has its roots in the pre-Cold War era. In 1958, China began its media engagement in Africa by opening the New China News Agency in Cairo. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the influence of Chinese media in Africa increased and evolved. The formal engagement of the Chinese media in the continent began in 2000 with the establishment of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The latter stressed the development of media infrastructure.

However, a landmark development for Chinese media engagement in Africa took place at the Beijing action plan meeting in 2018, under FOCAC, which institutionalized communication and cooperation between Chinese and African media through the establishment of the China–Africa Press Exchange Center. The aim of this center was to enable African journalists based in China to observe and report on China. The action plan also provided for the establishment of the China–Africa Radio and Television Cooperation Forum.

China has strengthened collaboration in media by creating audio-visual content, news coverage, training media professionals, and advancing media

technologies. Chinese media actors adopt a strategy aligned with Chinese diplomacy, which counters Western criticism by promoting a positive image of China and Africa globally. For instance, Xinhua covers many African news stories which other media networks ignore, such as positive investment opportunities in Africa, tourism, and local leadership stories.

The analysis of the presence of Chinese media in the African media landscape shows that it is the direct result of the Chinese policy of going global. The media coverage is carried out through both state-run media such as Xinhua News, CCTV, CRI, and China Daily Africa as well as private media companies such as Star Times. The aim of these initiatives is to project China's soft image, counter the anti-Chinese narrative propagated by Western media in Africa and offset the China threat theory.

Through its media business, China shapes the minds of Africans by countering negative perceptions and framing Sino-African relations as a win-win partnership, which serves the Chinese business model.

In an effort to improve its image, China hosted thousands of African journalists for capacity-building training and workshops. Furthermore, China invested in media infrastructure across the continent, providing digital broadcasting technology and satellite TV to 10,000 rural African villages. This proves that China's assistance to media development in Africa is a part of the Chinese strategy of soft power.

Some studies ¹² point out that Chinese media channels are more popular in Africa than Western media, mainly sponsored by the USA. However, since these studies are limited to a few cases, their findings cannot be generalized. Regardless, China offers an alternative to Western media in Africa.

3.5 Health Diplomacy:

China views health diplomacy as an integral part of its soft power strategy in Africa. This approach involves strengthening the relationship between Chinese and African doctors and fostering ongoing cooperation through regular exchange of medical teams and training for African medical professionals as well as provision of free medical equipment and financial support to certain African countries.

In the same vein, China funded and built several hospitals and clinics in Africa, such as the China-Uganda Friendship Hospital in Naguru and the China-Guinea Friendship Hospital. China also transfers advanced medical technologies and sends medical teams to various regions in Africa. These teams offer free medical care, public health education, and establish many joint programs to combat diseases like malaria. The medical teams also support awareness campaigns in

Africa aimed at educating communities about malaria prevention and control. In result of these contributions, malaria cases and deaths have decreased in several African countries, leading the WHO to acknowledge China's role in supporting global malaria eradication efforts.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a clear illustration of China's health diplomacy. During the crisis, the Chinese government effectively provided assistance in various forms, including medical supplies and equipment, it also deployed medical experts to several African countries to help manage the health crisis. "Xi Jinping", the President of China met with at least 40 African leaders during the FOCAC summit in 2021, where he emphasized on providing support during the pandemic and highlighted China's sharing of scientific and technological achievements.

Throughout the pandemic, China distributed vaccines in several African countries. This vaccine diplomacy strengthened China's partnerships and influenced public opinion in host nations. Following this approach, China aims to rebuild its international image following the outbreak of the pandemic amid allegations regarding the virus origins¹³.

4: Challenges and Criticism to the Implementation of China's soft power in Africa:

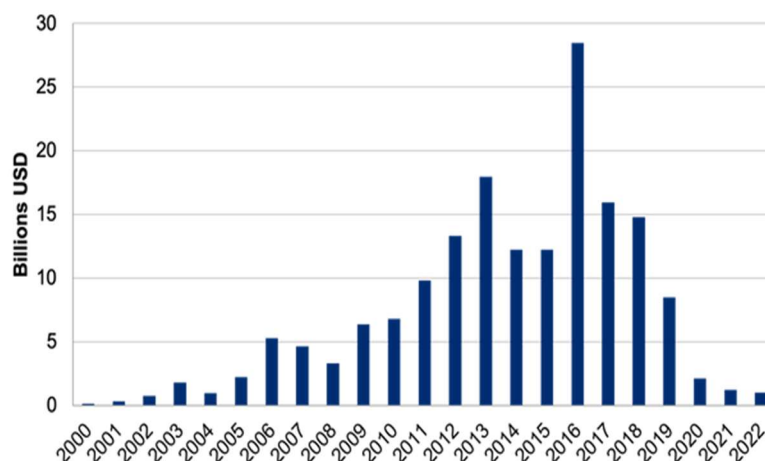
Understanding the implementation of the Chinese soft power is, to this date, challenging. Assessing and measuring its effectiveness can also be difficult due to the multiplicity of influencing factors and the intangibility of soft power characteristics. Additionally, soft power efforts must be consistent as they may only bring results over the long term. In the following, we present some of the challenges of the implementation of China's soft power strategies in Africa.

4.1 Debt Trap Policy:

China faces criticism for what is referred to as the "debt trap policy". Allegedly, this policy burdens African countries with debt, resulting from Chinese loans without achieving the expected economic benefits. As a consequence, the indebted countries often lose control over vital infrastructure. The Chinese debt trap policy has raised concerns about economic overdependence.

Under this policy, China approves large-scale loans to partner countries that cannot repay them. When the recipient country cannot repay the loan in time, China demands economic or political privileges, such as ownership of key assets including ports and railways, or tax concessions for Chinese companies operating in those countries. These strategies are employed in different parts of the world to increase China's power and economic influence, which may lead, in certain cases, to dependency.

Figure 2: Chinese loans to Africa , 2000_2022



source: Boston university global development Policy Center, September 2023

Figure 2 shows that between 2000 and 2022 China lent an estimated 170.08 billion U.S.Dollars to African countries; these loans were mostly granted through the Export-Import Bank of China (CHEXIM) and the China Development Bank (CDB). The Chinese loans granted to African nations have raised concerns about economic overdependence and sovereignty.

China reached the Horn of Africa through the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative. Since the Government of Djibouti could not repay the loans received from China for infrastructure development, the former was practically forced to lease part of its coastal territory to China under a very favorable condition to China. This arrangement enabled Beijing to set up its first overseas military base near Bab Al Mandab strait, which raised concerns about sovereignty and economic dependence.

Another illustration of this strategy takes place in Kenya which is facing an overtake of its port in Mombasa by Chinese companies because it cannot pay the loan taken out build its railway. Similarly, Angola is repaying Chinese loans with oil exports while Chinese companies secure contracts for infrastructure projects that are funded by these loans¹⁴.

4.2 Local Tensions:

Despite its contributions to infrastructure and economic development, the presence of Chinese companies led to popular protests due to the employment of a large number of Chinese workers instead of local workers. Chinese companies have been accused of bringing in workers from China instead of training and hiring local

workers, which would allow for the transfer of skills and knowledge. Chinese entrepreneurs based in Africa also create unfair competition that local businesses are unable to keep up with. On the other hand, public opinion in Africa is rather mixed regarding China's economic activities. While some have a positive perception on Sino-African interactions, Many view them as threats to local entrepreneurs and job seekers, especially since they are carried out in poor working conditions¹⁵.

4.3 Doubts about China's Intentions:

Despite China's efforts to improve its image, many believe that its policies in Africa may be motivated by political and strategic goals aimed at controlling natural resources and securing markets for Chinese exports. There is growing concern that these actions are intended to increase China's influence at the level of international institutions.

Several Chinese engagements in Africa have been criticized for encouraging corruption, weakening accountability, and supporting authoritarian leaders¹⁶.

4.4 Difficulty of the Chinese Language and Cultural penetration in the African continent:

In terms of its cultural exports to Africa, China has not been as successful as the United States. Many Africans have limited knowledge about China's history, traditions, culture and language. African communities have longstanding ties with Western education systems, media, and cultural products making it difficult for China to compete effectively. Therefore, it is essential for China's soft power strategy in Africa to be consistent, long term oriented and adapted to the sociocultural contexts of the African countries.

4.5 The Emphasis on Government-to-Government Interaction:

The United States focuses on minimizing "government-to-government" interaction and often opts for non-governmental organizations, particularly those in alliance with U.S. national interests and foreign policy goals, to achieve its objectives in a more flexible and informal manner.

This approach reduces political resistance and avoids sensitivities about external interference and pressure. It also leads to a more direct influence on individuals and civil society, which is the aim of soft power, that is centred on people to people connections. Such connections allow for deeper penetration into local communities and direct influence without provoking significant political sensitivities.

Most importantly, a fundamental misconception about China is that the government is the main source of soft power. In fact, soft power emerges from

individuals, civil society and the private sector. Therefore, the absence of Chinese NGOs at the level of the international stage is considered as a significant weakness in China's soft power strategy. Meanwhile, the Chinese political system mandates that all NGOs operate under the supervision of the communist party of China (CPC), in alliance with party objectives and face strict monitoring. This restriction deprives the political system of an important soft power tool and limits the country's ability to win hearts and minds globally¹⁷. According to Joseph Nye's theory on soft power, active civil society participation is crucial for building and strengthening soft power.

5. CONCLUSION:

China has been investing in soft power globally, since the early stages of its opening up policy. These efforts are aimed at shifting the world's attention to the "peaceful rise of China", by leveraging its vast cultural resources in an attempt to counter the anti-Chinese narrative, propagated by Western media in Africa and to offset the "China threat theory".

However, it is important to note that China's support for Africa has a long history that cannot be reduced to narrow concepts of cultural diplomacy and soft power. China is engaged in a special South-South cooperation and these cultural programs indicate a determination to elevate the relationship between China and Africa beyond the purely commercial nature.

China's engagement in Africa generated two opposing reactions. On the one hand, some people value the benefits drawn from the relationship with China, particularly in terms of trade, investment, an alternative development model, educational programs, and training. On the other hand, others view China as an imperialist power seeking to exploit the resources of the region and maintain an imbalanced economic relationship that is largely in favor of China. However, the intangible nature of soft power makes it challenging to measure its effectiveness, particularly since soft power outcomes can only be measured over the long term.

In addition, some scholars suggest that China's soft power does not create a positive impression among African civil societies. They argue that it mainly benefits government officials (elites) rather than the general public. Another significant criticism of China's soft power strategy in Africa is that non-state diplomacy, particularly through NGOs has not received enough attention. Active civil society participation can be crucial in building and strengthening soft power,

but China has primarily focused on government-to-government and business-to-business interactions. The absence of Chinese NGOs at the level of the international stage is a significant weakness in China's soft power strategy in Africa.

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