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Geopolitics of China's Rising Media and Soft Power in Africa: Eating and Being Eaten

Winston Mano

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6958-3716>

University of Westminster, United Kingdom

manow@westminster.ac.uk

Abstract

China is part of a group of countries rapidly projecting their geopolitical power in an expanded engagement with Africa. The extent to which this is imperialism is debatable among Africans, with some arguing that China is actually Africa's best ally when it comes to trade and development. Using Zimbabwe as a case study of local responses to China's expansionist geopolitics, the article contributes to debates on international development based new forms of imperialism and dependency perpetrated by rising economic powers in the Global South. The article innovatively analyses China's rapidly rising media and soft power in Africa as evidence of a new scramble for the continent and South-South imperialism. This is done in terms of what the Cameroonian anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh regards as "eating and being eaten", a form of dog-eat-dog "cannibalism" at the heart of global capitalism that has been evident in past enslavement, extractive colonialism and in today's exploitative neoliberal economic arrangements. The findings from the current Zimbabwean study build on the author's previous research on the media coverage of China in Zimbabwe that showed how for smaller and less powerful states, when dealing with China, there are mixed and complex responses within the emerging Sino-African relations. Using research from 2011–2020, including interviews and findings from the media, the Sino-Zimbabwean relations illustrate acceptance, resistance and negotiation as pragmatic strategies, in an attempt to "eat" whilst trying not to be "eaten". The current study contributes to work on media and geopolitical relations from the theoretical lens of new imperialism and dependency.

Keywords: Sino-Zimbabwean relations; soft power; China-Zimbabwe media; African development, Zimbabwean politics



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Introduction

This article deals with China-Zimbabwe relations at a time when there are increased concerns about asymmetrical geopolitical power relations between China and Africa. Even though the new relationships are couched as win-win deals, there is growing concern among some Africans that China is colonising Africa. The narrative of China in Africa is characterised by both pessimistic and optimistic perspectives (Matingwina 2020). Beijing's increased foreign direct investment in African countries has raised concerns in the African media about high indebtedness and dependence amidst its rising media and soft power from Chinese-owned media which suggest otherwise (Zhang and Mwiinga 2019). In a world where people cannot eat, African countries desperate to develop or to "eat" are themselves vulnerable to "being eaten" within the emerging tentacles of neoliberal global extractive capitalism that still lack ethics and a moral order (Nyamnjoh 2018). In the deepening entanglement between China and Africa, there are growing concerns about a new form of dependency and imperialism which needs to be discussed in the context of shifting geopolitics associated with Africa's economic, media and cultural dependency on China. In this typology, China is part of a group of countries rapidly expanding their engagement with Africa, along with rivals Russia, Turkey, India, Brazil, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, amongst others. Given its huge population size, unique constraints from its geography and limited natural resources, industrialising Beijing's growing interests in Africa are in direct competition with those countries with historic geopolitical ties with Africa, including the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), France, Germany and the majority of those in the European Union (EU) – in most cases, due to advantages accruing from the colonial era. Geopolitical imperatives at the international level are especially driving growing economic needs. While presenting a wider context of geopolitics and dependency theory, the article specifically reports on an investigation of the impact of growing Sino-Zimbabwean relations, against the background of China's rising media and soft power (Zhang, Wasserman and Mano 2016).

Scholars have mainly analysed imperialism in terms of the colonial supremacy of Western powers, especially through the exploitation of developing countries by the powerful Global North. What is lacking is an account of how nations in the Global South are implicated in new exploitative relations towards each other in what, using Nyamnjoh (2018, 2), can be defined as capitalist "cannibalism in all its guises and disguises", which lacks "all-inclusive ethics and morality" based on an understanding of "incompleteness as the norm" that drives imperialist geopolitics. This requires debunking the notion that Africa is a "void" with nothing to offer the world. It requires recognition of Africa's rich resources and rich interconnections with the rest of the world and the attendant hierarchies within such global capitalist encounters. As noted by Nyamnjoh (2018, 40–41):

In the game of life characterised by unequal encounters between individuals and cultures [countries] compelled to share places and spaces like scorpions in a lidded basket, it would appear that the question is not so much whether cannibalism is possible but rather

who is eating whom, how and why, and the power relations that render such eating or being eaten visible and invisible in particular ways and contexts ...

The above observation could help redirect attention onto issues of media, power relations, ethics and geopolitics in the Global South. Using Nyamnjoh (2018), it can be argued that the recognition of such cannibalism can reveal open-ended composites behind rapacious capitalism, and unpack ways to deal with ethical and moral dilemmas involved in Sino-African relations. Recognising the “incompleteness” of China and African geographies can also help make us understand the nuances behind their increasing interaction. It can also lead to new analysis of claims of mutual benefit in China-Africa geopolitics.

There is a need to accept that the nations coming to Africa are “incomplete” and in need, hence the upscaling of their economic and political engagement in Africa: “Being and becoming as works in progress require borrowings and enhancements to render them beautiful and acceptable” (Nyamnjoh 2018, 257). The trade agreements, economic forums, media overtures, soft power and diplomatic initiatives are evidence of the incoming countries’ incompleteness, not because of absences but because of endless possibilities, including the possibility of expanding and “eating” others’ resources. A critical examination of neoliberal modernity entails that Western nations have all along projected “illusions of completeness” and branded Africa as an “incomplete” territory. This overlooks the point that nations are not composite given their blatant and constant “need of activation, potency and enhancement through relationships” with the so-called “incomplete others” (Nyamnjoh 2018, 258). Geopolitics needs to recognise the nuances arising from incomplete interrelationships between “nations”, with the power relations, ethics and a moral order that come with it.

Given the above, China and other countries are in Africa out of need and in a competitive order. Consider how in 2019, John Bolton, then US National Security Advisor, whose country also engages asymmetrically with Africa, rebuked China for using what he called

bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing’s wishes and demands ... Such predatory actions are sub-components of broader Chinese strategic initiatives, including “One Belt, One Road” – a plan to develop a series of trade routes leading to and from China with the ultimate goal of advancing Chinese global dominance. (Cited in Maru 2019)

The above Sino-phobic view from the US is at odds with pro-China official views, especially in Africa itself, not least based on a perceived ability of China to meet Africa’s economic needs. China is viewed as a driving force for Africa’s fast-growing economies (Shepard 2019). Much of the geopolitics has been examined in terms of dependency theories.

Dependency theory is concerned with resource extraction from poor countries to rich (core) countries in the global capitalist systems as the major cause of underdevelopment in developing (periphery) countries. Dependency also describes unequal international relationship between two sets of countries or regions (Ghosh 2001). For Fuchs (2010), the hallmark of new imperialism is the formation of international capitalist monopolies which share the world among themselves and territorial division of the whole world among the greatest capitalist powers. In a critical sense one needs to question the extent to which the China-Africa relations are forms of dependency and new imperialism marked by continuous primitive accumulation based on colonising spaces to resolve economic crises, in this case Beijing's quest for raw materials in support of its rapid industrialisation. China is among Global South players expanding media, cultural and economic relations with less developed countries such as Zimbabwe (Zhang, Wasserman and Mano 2016). The increasing engagement with China has resulted in asymmetrical relations of dominance of China across economic, political, media and cultural relations, renewing dependence on external power. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and as the world's second largest economy, China wields immense economic and political power.

With an economy set to be the biggest on earth in a few years, the world's largest population, an expanding global presence, modernizing military and an assertively nationalistic one-party regime, China may well seem bound to dominate the present century. (Fenby 2017, 1)

However, power between states in the current global order is often perceived as a system of total domination, with one country projecting power and achieving complete control over another. To an extent this is true but the article also argues that unlike hard power, soft power is relational and communicative to the extent that any influence depends on reciprocal recognition by other political actors and realisation that they possess counter power that they may deployed in return. It considers the ways in which power works uni-directionally and at multi-levels, a relational power in geopolitics from various sites of production, including within civil society, government and media narratives.

The article provides an alternative narrative on the impact of one of the key BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – illustrating how the impact of China's increased role is negotiated by smaller countries in the Global South. There is admiration for and emulation of the Chinese model, with Covid-19 and the global financial crisis, it can be argued, increasing the attractiveness of China's development brand in the developing countries while weakening the attractiveness of the West. The expanded geopolitical role of China is, however, under scrutiny, including by the media in the "West". Consider how on 17 November 2017, UK and other media in the West alleged that China had orchestrated a coup to end the 37-year rule of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe (Tinsdal 2017). This was a controversial claim given how China had backed Mugabe's anti-colonial struggle since the 1970s. It was strongly refuted by China which argued that the particular military exchange between the two countries was normal and

that it did not interfere in other countries' internal politics. For Beijing, the accusation that they had a hand in dethroning Mugabe was an "evil" plot designed to sully its reputation and derail China-Africa relations" (Phillips 2017). As discussed below, when Zimbabwean political leaders fall ill, they are currently increasingly seeking treatment in China. The close relationships are given wide coverage in the media and described as significant shifts in the global geopolitical contest as it generates local and international media frames that favour China's role in Africa. The question is not only what China is doing in Africa but more importantly how Africans have negotiated its growing hard and soft power within their specific geographies.

China's Soft Power in Africa

China's soft power or public diplomacy is multi-sided but has been more evident in areas such as health, culture, Confucius Institutes, environment, interparty communication, mass media, tourism and youth development. In this regard, Li et al (2012, 25) note that China has enhanced its "media influence in Africa to challenge false international media reports about China-Africa cooperation, and issue news reports reflecting China's perspectives". China's main news agencies have upped their role and African media personnel have been visiting China to attend training programmes. Meanwhile, China's role in Africa continues to be debated among scholars (Gagliardone, Stremlau and Nkrumah 2012; Li and Ronning 2014; Wasserman 2013; Zhang 2013). Kupe (2013, 146), for instance, argues that:

The African media is yet to grapple in any coherent way with this changing global scenario, given their traditional dependence on "western media" for foreign news and global affairs and lack of knowledge of Chinese or Chinese society.

Further, Kupe (2013, 146) observes that African media and African public spheres have so far followed frameworks that are largely based on

media systems in North America and Europe and not the media systems of the rest of the world. They have yet to produce a coherent theoretical response to the emergence of China and its media systems.

As China's geopolitical imperatives in Africa multiply so are complexities of the African responses to them.

Why Zimbabwe?

Zimbabwe was chosen for the study because of its strategic importance to China. Also Zimbabwe's "Look East Policy" under the long rule of Mugabe (1980–2017) is a major factor in Sino-African relations. After taking over as president from Mugabe in December 2017, Emmerson Mnangagwa prioritised China in his government's foreign relations. In 2019, when one of Zimbabwe's vice presidents was unwell, Beijing was

chosen as the location for their medical treatment. China is regularly debated in the local media with highly divided public views being voiced about its role and actual intentions in Zimbabwe. Local opposition politicians also attack the inability of Zimbabwe's ruling party to learn the positive economic lessons from China (Cross (2013). The overall tone of debate on China in Zimbabwe focuses on the pros and cons of China's continued and increased presence in Zimbabwe (Mano 2016). Zimbabweans, including those I interviewed in new research on the topic in 2021, are most passionate about the topic. This is why it is imperative and important to investigate the range of opinions among different groups.

Growing China-Africa Relations

Literature is also emerging to explain how the media is implicated in China's growing involvement on the African continent (Abegunrin and Manyeruke 2020; Alden 2007; Brautigam 2011; Gagliardone 2019; Umejei 2020). For instance, Alden (2007, 7) examines African media representations of China and concludes that there are three portrayals of China for Africa: as a development partner, as a competitor, and as a hegemonic power. Others, such as Abegunrin and Manyeruke (2020) analyse the dynamics of the escalating Chinese investments in African economies and the political implications of the growing Chinese presence in Africa. Xin's (2009) study of Xinhua News's intervention in Southern Africa sheds some light on the question of whether the Party-state has an influence ideologically on local politics. More recent studies include Umejei's (2020) research on the experience of African journalists working for the Chinese state-controlled media organisations. Others, such as Banda (2009), have long proposed investigating the ideological dimensions of Sino-African relations. However, the ideological influence of the Chinese political system on any system is not immediately observable, as observed by Kynge (2007, 186):

The main problem with China's political system is that it does not permit the checks and balances necessary to supervise and regulate a capitalist economy in an efficient manner ... a Communist political system is engineered to venerate and sustain a single source of authority.

Some Africans seem to be interested in "eating" economic gains without adopting Beijing's centralized political system as it is contrary to the existing legacy of competitive liberal democracy in many African countries. The attractiveness of the Chinese brand in Africa has amongst other things been attributed to its provision of "unconditional aid, low-interest loans and technical cooperation agreements to cement bilateral deals over oil supply, engineering contracts and trade agreements" (Power, Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2012, 221). Added to this how China pursues its own interests while respecting other state's sovereignty and not interfering in their internal affairs. In return China expects other countries to respect its own geopolitical imperatives of including the "One-China Policy" (Power, Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2012, 221). For some critics, the overall geopolitics of China-Africa relations is based on the view that "China will resort to any means to extract all available oil and gas resources, thereby

destabilizing the regional and even global order” (Power, Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2012, 221). This article investigates the responses to China’s increasing geopolitical imperatives in Zimbabwe.

Methodology

The article is based on fieldwork and content analysis of news stories on Sino-African issues in Zimbabwe from 2011–2020 which resulted in a longitudinal view. It mainly relied on purposive semi-structured interviews which crucially ensure “that the areas you think are important are covered, but you also provide the interviewees with opportunities to bring up their own ideas and thoughts” (Willis 2006, 145). A combination of context analysis, semi-structured face-to-face interviews and news content analysis produced nuanced perspectives relevant to illustrating how China’s power is projected and negotiated by Zimbabweans from various backgrounds. The findings were analysed and structured in terms of how China is viewed, not just in the media, but through the lens of Zimbabweans from varied backgrounds. As noted by Tuchman (1978, 1), perceptions of reality can depend “upon where one stands, far or near” and general positioning and this influence interpretation, moral evaluation, treatment or recommendations. This was applicable to how Zimbabwean respondents (journalists, civil society, politicians and audiences) perceived China’s involvement. The responses were analysed according to their implications in the geopolitical relationship in terms of positive, negative and negotiated/pragmatic perspectives. To put the discussion into context, I briefly review surveys of Africans’ perceptions of China which covered the period 2011–2020, at a time of mounting political and economic challenges in Zimbabwe.

China in Africa: The African View

China’s geopolitical interests in Africa are led by its strategic interests. Of significance is how Africans have perceived Beijing’s increased role in their continent. Responses from Africans are mostly favourable, with shifting and mixed perceptions within individual African countries. China’s image in Africa is largely positive but notably varied among different countries (Pew Research Center 2014). African countries vary widely in their admiration for various development models, but the findings from the Afrobarometer (2016, 2) survey showed that on average across 36 African countries the US was the most popular model for national development (cited by 30% of respondents), closely followed by China (24%). The report also showed that Africans viewed former colonial powers as wielding the greatest external influence in their countries (28%), followed by China (23%), and the US (22%). Given Mugabe’s “Look East Policy”, in 2016 China’s influence in Africa was perceived to be highest in Zimbabwe (55%), followed by Mozambique (52%), Sudan (47%), Zambia (47%), South Africa (40%), and Tanzania (40%) (Afrobarometer 2016, 2). The Afrobarometer (2020) survey analysed emerging perspectives in the wake of China’s pledge of \$60 billion in financial support to the 2018 China-Africa Cooperation Forum. This pledge

has brought intense scrutiny and debate on China's intentions in Africa. In the Afrobarometer (2020) survey of 18 countries, in terms of the best development model, China's average ranking (23%) was second highest after the US's (32%), with approval of the Chinese model highest in Burkina Faso (39%). In terms of funding, an average of 58% of Africans surveyed felt that their governments had over borrowed from China, with 87% of Kenyans surveyed worried about the financial debt. An average of 77% of Africans surveyed were aware that the loans from China increased the national debts which had to be repaid (Afrobarometer 2020).

Findings

The findings from the current Zimbabwean case study echoed other studies, including complaints about the behaviour of Chinese traders and inferior Chinese products. It is needless to point out that most African states want to emulate the rapid economic progress of China, which is set to overtake the US as the world's leading economy even though the background circumstances are dissimilar. Apart from a resource driven diplomacy, politically a range of important geopolitical imperatives are behind China's current engagement with Africa, with countries that recognise the "One-China Policy" being rewarded by Beijing (Power, Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2012). For example, Senegal, Chad and Malawi's diplomatic relations were enhanced when they switched to recognising the People's Republic of China (PRC) government. Crucially,

the link connecting all Chinese foreign policy over the past 50 years is a desire to diminish and contain the influence of hegemonic powers and also to carve out a rightful place for China in the world, born from a sense that China has been "muscle out" of international relations. (Power, Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2012, 224–225)

I will now review the study findings given China's increasing involvement in the country, with high-level visits in both directions. As will be shown, the findings demonstrated a pro-China, anti-China and more negotiated stance, balancing eating and being eaten.

Mixed Responses to China's Involvement in Zimbabwe

The Pro-China Perspective: The "Upstairs" View

One of the main findings of the current study was the emergence of a pro-China view in Zimbabwe, largely expressed by officials linked to Sino-Zimbabwean businesses and the Zimbabwean government. Within this perspective is a solid appreciation of political and economic advantages of dealing with China. Alden and Park (2013) distinguish between what they refer to as an "upstairs" (world of political elites) and a "downstairs" (world of ordinary people) dimension of Chinese relations in South Africa. This framework is also applicable in evaluating how respondents saw the role of China differently. For example, the Zimbabwean government officials highly valued help Zimbabwe got from China to prevent political destabilisation by the "West". The pro-

China perspective in Harare was a result of high-level political links between China and Zimbabwe. It was opposite to the discordant “downstairs” dimension, as will be discussed here, whereby there was friction between ordinary Zimbabweans and the Chinese.

The pro-China view in the study was especially articulated by Supa Mandiwanzira, the then Deputy Minister of Information in Zimbabwe, when he recounted the immense political support Zimbabwe had received from China over the years. He told of how China (and the Russians), for example, blocked a “very poorly crafted agenda at the UN Security Council that was going to lead to an invasion of Zimbabwe”.¹ Contrary to media reports, he was certain that China helped to preserve Zimbabwe’s sovereignty unlike what had happened in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, after violent Western interventions.² The Chinese, according to the official view, were not intervening without benefit for themselves, but rather totally understood and benefited from Zimbabwe’s influence on the pan-African front: “They engage Zimbabwe on that so that we can also influence on their behalf”.³ Zimbabwe supported the “One-China Policy” and China valued that. This was a reciprocal circulation of power that was normally absent from the discussion about China in Africa.

The pro-China perspective also praised the emerging media and cultural relations between the two countries. With limited resources, the journalists who visited China were given good exposure of the country. Contrary to what critics of the programme said, journalists on exchange programmes were reportedly not given huge sums of money: “That’s propaganda, there is nothing lucrative about the Chinese trip.”⁴ More interesting, Mandiwanzira intimated that there was no linkage between increased coverage of China in Zimbabwean media and the increasing number of journalism trips and incentives from China:

It is very mischievous to suggest that there is more reportage because they are getting incentives. It is a view planted by those with an agenda to perpetuate Western narratives about China and link with the country with corruption.⁵

As will be seen below, my interviews with the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ) indicated that increased coverage of China in the Zimbabwean media arose from competition among journalists fighting over limited places to go to China within the bilateral exchanges. China achieved competitive advantage from the media and cultural exchange programmes.

1 Supa Mandiwanzira, then Deputy Minister of Information in Zimbabwe. Telephone interview by author. July 25, 2014.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

After all, China media and cultural exchange programmes in Zimbabwe were established to support China's economic activities. As argued by Mandiwanzira, the Chinese instituted cultural exchange programmes in Zimbabwe as a way to quash hostility towards them in existing media and also as a result of learning from what Western countries did. Mandiwanzira further argued that the UK has institutions that have done exactly the same – they have used their power to control and influence opinions in Zimbabwe and yet there has been no debate about it. The training provided by the Commonwealth and other UK-linked media institutions, such as the Thomson Foundation, was cited as an example of the way the UK maintained its ideological influence in Zimbabwe. The competition was healthy for Zimbabwe:

I think a lot of the media and Zimbabwe people have been believing Western narratives about China, that they are here to loot resources and that their country is not a democracy, it's Third World and still developing. *When journalists go to China they come back with a totally different perspective about China.* They can see what the Chinese are doing or have done and they start to appreciate that in terms of development. This engagement from a media and cultural point of view does not change perceptions overnight. It is a process and they are beginning to do it (Author's emphasis).⁶

The Zimbabwe government obviously perceived the cultural exchange programmes as successful. Journalists who had been to China described the trip as an "eye-opener".⁷ One journalist received US\$100 from the Chinese hosts after all their expenses were covered. The trips were seen as a good opportunity to ask questions directly to relevant Chinese officials. Mandiwanzira was, however, concerned that the media exchanges with China were starting to be asymmetrical:

I think what is important is that some of us do not allow a cultural overload or an invasion and that we work on cultural exchange. If we watch CCTV here then they should also watch ZBC in China.⁸

This comment showed that there was an acute awareness of China's dominance and immense potential power over Zimbabwe media.

The pro-China perspective was based on what were considered real benefits that in turn empowered the recipients. A General Manager at the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), the national public service broadcaster, argued that Zimbabwe was already benefiting from the Sino-Zimbabwean media exchanges:

From a technically [sic] point of view China can provide what the West provides. They have been very clear because they have also learnt from BBC, DW and other West

6 Ibid.

7 *The Chronicle* journalist. Interview by author. Bulawayo, June 20, 2014.

8 Supa Mandiwanzira, then Deputy Minister of Information in Zimbabwe. Telephone interview by author. July 25, 2014.

broadcasters. We do not miss the training from the West. We still get it. We have an agreement with Xinhua. We share news and equipment. We share resources. In terms of presentation style we have not shared much. Their journalists now have an uplink and they can broadcast from here ... The OB van we got is said to be a first for this country, for Southern Africa if not for Africa. It helps us broadcast anything from anywhere to anywhere in the world. In terms what it is equipped with, you will not find that anywhere else. It gives very good quality.⁹

The Chinese were portrayed as shrewd business people who offer loans to broadcasters and charge interest. It was up to the broadcast managers in Africa to take the main decisions. Others saw these investments as a waste of tax payers' money.

The pro-China perspective recognised that Beijing's governance system was different from Western models and yet more beneficial to Zimbabwe. Mandiwanzira was clear about how Chinese democracy should be expected to be different:

If we are to follow the [West's] understandings word for word then democracy in Saudi Arabia and the UK are very different. You can't expect same kinds of democracy ... The Chinese have modelled their democracies in their own way.¹⁰

The Sino-Zimbabwe Company is a Gweru-based manufacturer of high quality cement. The officials described relations between China and Zimbabwe as cordial and mutually beneficial to the country.

Mandiwanzira was unapologetic in his praise of the Chinese state-led approach:

The Chinese generally like to deal with the government. They like to engage with the media through the government given the sensitivities with the media. They know the consequences and you have seen them particularly here in Zimbabwe where funding has been channelled through the media by NGOs linked to CIA, M15 institutions or foreign government institutions. That leaves a sour taste for the Zimbabwean government. The Chinese want to involve everyone in the media.¹¹

The Chinese initiatives were preferred because they were inclusive of all mainstream media beyond ownership aspects, as long as they "stick to the principles of professional journalism". It is debatable what this meant, but probably explained why a Harare-based journalist working for China Central Television (CCTV) – the Chinese state-controlled broadcaster – confirmed that it was far easier for them than for local Zimbabwean journalists to hold interviews with Zimbabwean politicians: "The moment you say you are from CCTV doors will open."¹² They were granted interviews because they did not

9 Tazzen Mandizvidza, then ZBC General Manager. Telephone interview by author. April 17, 2014.

10 Supa Mandiwanzira, then Deputy Minister of Information in Zimbabwe. Telephone interview by author. July 25, 2014.

11 Ibid.

12 CCTV reporter. Interview by author. Harare, August 14, 2014.

cross the line. They were expected to avoid stories about China-induced problems in Zimbabwe, such as reports on poverty or on the plight of workers. They also did not include stories about “China bailing-out Zimbabwe” as these could anger domestic audiences in China. Preference was for stories about arts, tourism, travel expos, health, culture and environment. There was a lot of focus on the Confucius Institute in Harare, “It’s a success story and it’s always covered by Chinese journalists when they come to the country.”¹³ News decisions were controlled from the main CCTV office in Kenya. Stories were used on CCTV Africa Channel 409 on DSTV – a Sub-Saharan African direct broadcast satellite service – and also on CCTV’s YouTube channel where viewers could leave comments.¹⁴ One of the main principles in reporting, according to the respondent, was recognising that Zimbabwe supported the “One-China policy” and cherished its long-term relationship with China, since the days of the struggle for independence.

The pro-China perspective was also premised on China’s perceived contribution to development of Zimbabwe. In Bulawayo, the second largest city, people were grateful to China: “Thanks to the Chinese, the water supply situation in Bulawayo has slightly improved.”¹⁵ The Mtshabezi water project and the Gwai-Shangani pipeline water projects were helping to ease the city’s perennial water shortages.

The Sino-Zimbabwe officials were in no doubt about China’s positive contribution to the cement, agriculture, mining and hospitality sectors in Zimbabwe that the company had a role in. At the time of the interviews in June 2014, Sino-Zimbabwe had 1 050 workers and had contracted at least 15 000 smallholder communal cotton farmers, with a capacity to reach 300 000. Mandiwanzira argued that “generally the Chinese give without discrimination.”¹⁶ Sino-Zimbabwe operated in six of the nine ecological zones in Zimbabwe and officials from the company revealed that on the cotton side, they had regional managers, area managers and field managers. In addition, they had about 390 staff at their ginneries, factory and hotels. “We have about 33 Chinese people and 5 on the other side.”¹⁷ Another senior official at Sino-Zimbabwe offered what he considered a professional view which “could be biased” since he was representing his paymasters:

The Look East Policy has brought about much needed employment and foreign direct investment. Unfortunately, you can’t have your cake and eat it all. They come with conditions. At large, the economy has been looking East. Traditional investment from our banks has been low. This is on the table. It’s there for you but it comes at a cost.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Family Group. Interview by author. Bulawayo, June 20, 2014.

16 Supa Mandiwanzira, then Deputy Minister of Information in Zimbabwe. Telephone interview by author. July 25, 2014.

17 Sino-Zimbabwe Official B. Interview by author. Harare, June 24, 2014.

Unfortunately, when the investment comes it takes long for locals to start seeing the benefit.¹⁸

The Sino-Zimbabwe officials also argued that food security in Zimbabwe was strengthened rather than threatened by their commodity farming because the communal farmers they dealt with also grew groundnuts, peanuts, maize and other food crops. They were offered fertilisers and seeds. The model provided inputs worth a hectare and demanded the equivalent to what it gave. The scheme supported the Zimbabwean government's efforts in agriculture, especially after the land reform exercise:

I'm pro-Chinese investments because it is supporting our agriculture. Imagine US\$70-100 per bale? Small scale farmers can take home US\$200 but to survive to the next season is sometimes tough. We currently have 15,000 farmers ... When it comes to the Chinese I can't speak bad [sic] about them because there is no other option.¹⁹

The above views were backed by Mandiwanzira who saw China as a huge market for Zimbabwean commodities, especially cotton and tobacco. "Zimbabwean farmers were shut out of markets because of land reforms. The Chinese have come in with the much-needed finance ... The Chinese have reduced the risk for the Zimbabwean farmer."²⁰ Clearly the pro-China perspective valued the big opportunities offered by the Chinese market.

The mining sector was also seen, by respondents who were pro-China, as a sector in which Beijing had made significant investments. Zimbabwe had benefitted immensely from Chinese investment in mining. Chinese-owned or supported mines such as Rio Tinto and ZIMASCO were huge players in the gold and chrome industry respectively. The criticism of China by the Zimbabwean labour body was, therefore, political:

They just want to pick on the Chinese. It is the same issues you see with the investment of China in other areas. These guys are sponsored, look at the way they get their monies the ZCTU. Most of their sponsors are Western. The issues they raise are also there among Western companies but they do not see them. The problems cut across entire industries.²¹

Mandiwanzira also justified the practice of bringing labour from China because Chinese labour regulation has made their system more productive and efficient. He observed:

The Chinese work like slaves because they would like to deliver projects on time or well ahead of time. They like to work with workforce that already understands that you work

18 Sino-Zimbabwe Official A. Interview by author. Harare, June 24, 2014.

19 Ibid.

20 Supa Mandiwanzira, then Deputy Minister of Information in Zimbabwe. Telephone interview by author. July 25, 2014.

21 Ibid.

to deliver and you don't work at leisure. Part of the problem is that we have allowed our labour laws to deny us productivity. The Chinese are more productive because they do not have stringent labour laws. This is why the Chinese have attracted UK, US, and EU investments back home because their labour laws are not restrictive.²²

According to Mandiwanzira, the labour movement in Zimbabwe was lacking exposure. To appreciate that “most high end ... Gucci, iPhone and all” are made in China which is seen as a major handicap. Apart from a narrow perspective based on lack of knowledge, local labour was also accused of holding prejudices against China.

The pro-China view was especially prevalent among officials and managers from the Zimbabwean government and parastatals that had close dealings with China. It was an “upstairs view” that was aware of China's transformative power in Zimbabwe and other contexts. It was a sympathetic reading of China's role that did not quite engage with the workers' concern, as will be discussed below. In the Zimbabwe context the interviews with officials close to China offered an upstairs view which was very pro-China. The media usually concentrated on the “upstairs” view covering political and economic ties, but it was the “downstairs” relations that carried the experience and views of ordinary Africans. The following is a “downstairs” view which is more critical of China's role in Zimbabwe.

The Anti-China Perspective: A View from “Downstairs”

Contrary to the warm relationship between the Zimbabwean government and Chinese elites, responses from “downstairs” held more critical views on the deepening China-Zimbabwe relationship. This downstairs view had three key elements: (1) criticism of China's undemocratic media culture and its one-sided cultural exchange programmes; (2) criticism of China's negative role in Zimbabwean political processes; and (3) criticism of China's asymmetrical economic practices. The views came from a cross-section of respondents, especially journalists, workers, students, politicians and civil society groups. The ZUJ officials satirically found it odd that when the Chinese Premier Xi Jinping visited Africa in 2018 he did not bother to go to Zimbabwe, given the frequent media reports of a so-called “special friendship”. Some workers, students and journalists saw China's role in Zimbabwe as self-serving, selective and detrimental to Zimbabwean democracy. They disliked the way the relationship was about China and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) party rather than Zimbabwe.

The anti-China perspective criticised the media and cultural exchanges programme between Zimbabwe and Beijing because it was undemocratic and biased towards public media. A media advocacy official, Nhlanhla Ngwenya from the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), saw China as having no lessons for Zimbabwe because of its

22 Ibid.

lack of respect for “freedom of expression and of the media” in line with constitutional democracies”.²³ Bloggers and online platforms in China were described as unfree:

Their (China) media equipment is not durable because we have experiences with goods from the East that do not last after spending so much money” on purchasing them. He added that part of the problem was that China “does not attach democratic conditions to its aid ... we are likely to have democratic recession whereby it does not matter as long their economic interest is taken care of.”²⁴

Representatives of the ZUJ were concerned about the lack of direct access to access to China in their on an annual basis, especially after 2000. The procedure involves ZUJ selecting and recommending to the Ministry of Information in Zimbabwe, a group of journalists that go to China as part of a cultural exchange programme run by the Embassy of China. ZUJ officials stated that on the face of it there is obviously nothing wrong with journalists learning about China. However, “the problem is China does not deal with civil society” and there was no mechanism for direct communication with ZUJ and other civil society groups. The ZUJ also believed that China’s work in the media is questionable given how it “has helped the Zimbabwe government jam ‘dissident radio stations’”.²⁵ It was alleged that China provided equipment to jam the short-wave signals of SW Radio and other “clandestine stations” broadcasting into Zimbabwe. The other problem was that the exchange trips it offered were mainly for “friendly journalists” after careful vetting.²⁶ In Bulawayo, a journalist felt that they were not fully consulted about the criteria or recruitment process.²⁷

You cannot propose a journalist who is too critical of the Chinese. Some names are automatically turned down [by the Zimbabwe government and the Chinese Embassy]. With *The Herald* they wish they can take the entire team.²⁸

The exchange trips were seen as biased and self-serving for China:

China’s contribution is a bit insignificant ... and yet in terms of pay back they get positive coverage of China in the media. ZBC is now increasingly broadcasting boring Chinese programmes. CCTV has a slot on ZBC. In our news sources, China is becoming more and more visible ... Ideology is present in media content, even in cooking programmes on television. The recipes have become Chinese. The trips are resulting in more partisan coverage. The trips are a way of whipping Zimbabwean journalists into line.²⁹

23 Nhlanhla Ngwenya, Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA). Interview by author. Harare, June 19, 2014.

24 Ibid.

25 ZUJ official. Interview with author. Harare, April 11, 2013.

26 Ibid.

27 ZBC official at Montrose Studios. Interview by author. Bulawayo, June 20, 2014.

28 ZUJ official. Interview by author. Harare, April 11, 2013.

29 Ibid.

The journalists noted that the increase of positive stories about China was at the expense of news about problems in the country. China tended to support public media that are already friendly to them” while displaying poor capacity and a lack willingness to deal with non-state media.

Responses from the Zimbabwe Workers Union were sharply critical of the increased role of China in Zimbabwe’s economy. Ordinary citizens in Bulawayo held mixed views about China as they also resented Zimbabwe’s growing dependency on China on the back of collapsing Zimbabwean industries: “In Bulawayo, industry has all but collapsed. There is no more industry to talk about. People have begun to witness Chinese industrial practices and have started talking about them.”³⁰ Another comment was: “If the Chinese come and restart industrialisation and we see smoke coming out we will be happy. At the moment it’s not much happening.”³¹ While respondents acknowledged the huge economic investments and growing presence of China in the various industries in Zimbabwe as beneficial, especially in the short term, this was also seen as undesirable because it has created a “dependency syndrome”. Zimbabwe, for the ordinary Zimbabweans, over relies on China for everything. The journalists argued that it was beyond dispute that China was behind the new shopping malls, road construction and many other economic activities in Zimbabwe. China has also offered grants, aid, loans and subsidies, all of which are important for employment creation. However, China’s overall relationship with Zimbabwe was asymmetrical. According to the ZUJ representative, the problem was also that China’s policy was undermining Zimbabwe’s efforts at indigenisation and attempts at economic emancipation. The ZUJ official observed that

you will not succeed in austerity and indigenisation, when 80 per cent of your investments as a country are controlled by China ... In Zimbabwe this is becoming a major economic crisis. Even in terms of what they [Chinese] remunerate, it is very low ... If you look at it closely, there are more disadvantages or negatives for us depending on China. What China is promoting in Zimbabwe is ideological per se. The moment they influence the economy they will be influencing politics as well.³²

Those who are against increased Chinese power in Zimbabwe were critical of the adoption of a centralised Beijing-type statist model in local politics and economics. It was argued that “big brother” China was bringing into Zimbabwe centralised policies that kill competitive politics and business. Chinese support was aimed at the ruling party and was reliant on undue controls of state media:

They have nationalism, centralisation and are led by centrist ideologies. In Zimbabwe the Chinese are encouraging a culture of consensus, centralisation and “a one party

30 Family Group. Interview by author. Bulawayo, June 20, 2014.

31 ZBC official at Montrose Studios. Interview by author. Bulawayo, June 20, 2014.

32 ZUJ official. Interview by author. Harare, April 11, 2013.

model ... Pretty much we are taking the Chinese model. China is a willing supporter to ZANU-PF".³³

In China, the powerful government monopolises the media and propagates the same ideology to Zimbabwe. "It is encouraging consensus, centralization and a one-party model."³⁴ The media in Zimbabwe is a de facto monopoly and the influence could be coming from Beijing.³⁵ China was seen as providing jamming equipment to narrow the democratic space in Zimbabwe.³⁶ This perceived control was seen to be undermining the practices and procedures of competitive democracy.

China was criticised for undermining local Zimbabwean industries and for its poor labour practices. Zimbabwe's largest labour union, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), raised many concerns arising from the increased role of China in Zimbabwe. The ZCTU official argued that China mainly comes to Africa "to satisfy its need for resources" and that "it has cut deals that have destroyed our industries".³⁷ Similarly, in Bulawayo, ordinary citizens had ambivalent perspectives on China as they took issue with the quality of the country's products: "We see the Chinese through their products ... Chinese products are of a poor quality and are not durable."³⁸ The anti-China perspective also arose from the view that prevailing Sino-Zimbabwean relations were asymmetrical and that China was far too protected by the Zimbabwean government. The stance was political as it also described China's assistance as being directed at one political group in power that periodically benefited from funding without any conditionalities. In arguments similar to those raised by the ZUJ, the ZCTU perceived China as having taken over all sectors of the Zimbabwean economy. They disliked the fact that the Chinese approach was of most benefit to a few individuals in the Zimbabwean government. Other concerns related to how Chinese companies struck deals with the Zimbabwe government that allowed them to bring their own labour and even "wheel barrows and bricks". The Sino-Zimbabwe officials acknowledged human resource-related problems but were positive that most of them have since been resolved:

All in all, the Chinese are learning to adjust to our way of life, to our laws ... When these guys started they used to hire and fire at will. Since 2009 it is now better after we established departments like mine [human resources section]. So, I think in terms of past friction, the understanding is now there.³⁹

The Sino-Zimbabwe official stated that the situation had improved and the problem was that journalists did not want to represent accurately what was going on. Other points

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Nhlanhla Ngwenya, MISA. Interview by author. Harare, June 19, 2014.

36 Ibid.

37 ZCTU official. Interview by author. Harare, July 25, 2014.

38 Family Group. Interview by author. Bulawayo, June 20, 2014.

39 Sino-Zimbabwe Official A. Interview by author. Harare, June 24, 2014.

from the ZCTU official included complaints about the low quality Chinese hotels built for their benefit and the following points:

Zimbabwean rural farmers are growing cotton under contract and the problem was that the money offered was not enough and that such cash crops undermine food production.

China is happy with the status quo because it protects and guarantees its interests.

In my view, the Chinese lack respect for black Zimbabwean managers. The problem is that they think they know everything and that local managers know nothing.

When they first arrive from China they come with a condescending attitude and want to even whip workers into production.⁴⁰

In Harare, a 28-year-old car salesman was also against China because of the way China had “emptied Zimbabwe of its diamonds”, without bringing in any investment to the country. He strongly disliked the manner in which China “bribed” local politicians in order to “cheat” Zimbabwe of its resources:

So they are just here for the quick buck. It’s a quick buck thing! ... It’s like a redo of European colonisation ... the Chinese are taking advantage of the selfish individuals in influential positions ... we give you \$2million for awarding us this contract. He then thinks about his pocket. He gets \$2million and the whole nation suffers. Few guys simply get the bucks.⁴¹

The ZCTU official further argued that Chinese malpractices in business have promoted corruption in the country and that this effectively amounts to “re-colonisation of Zimbabwe” because China has taken full advantage of the “lack of accountability” in Zimbabwe.⁴² There was need to put a stop to the problems by charging the corrupt locals who sell the country’s resources to China for cheap.

Altogether the anti-China perspective was based on perceptions of the asymmetrical power between the two countries. Big Brother China was perceived to be wielding immense political and economic power that was distorting the market and politics in Zimbabwe. It was not a win-win relationship. Civil society groups were especially disempowered and disadvantaged by the growing Sino-Zimbabwean relationship and the country’s democracy perceivably threatened by the Beijing model.

40 ZCTU official. Interview by author. Harare, July 25, 2014.

41 Car salesman. Interview by author. Harare, June 17, 2014.

42 ZCTU official. Interview by author. Harare, July 25, 2014.

The Critical Realist Geopolitical Perspective: Towards Mutually Beneficial Sino-Zimbabwean Relations

What I regard as a critical realist perspective saw China's intentions as genuine and wanted to draw lessons learnt from dealing with the Chinese. The respondents sought to redefine relations and find ways of maximising benefits for Zimbabwe. As part of this, the ZCTU officials wanted Zimbabwean leaders to learn important lessons from China about political and economic renewal. The Chinese renew their leadership every seven years and the process involves "actually electing new faces", whereas Zimbabwe had not emulated this element. Zimbabwean leadership was seen as too "rigid" and for years there had not been any significant change of leaders. China was lauded for its pragmatic decision that opened up its economy to the world. Zimbabwe leaders needed to learn the right things from China. As the agents of change, Zimbabwean executives needed to do more to extract better concessions from China. The critical realist perspective was especially expressed by strategic-minded Zimbabweans and it had three main facets: (1) realignment of national priorities; (2) smart negotiation; and (3) building a regional response.

The critical realist perspective perceived China's intentions as genuine but also wanted Zimbabweans to develop a better understanding of the "Chinese model". According to this perspective, so far the problem has not been so much with the Chinese model, but rather with the Zimbabwean government's attitudes and policy that have failed to grasp the China-end:

The Chinese work with priorities. They will not question your priorities ... they are not going to do your socio-economic analysis. Their strategic interest is to appear more respectful of your priorities ... If you say you want to kill your mother and you say please give me the coffin, they will provide you with the coffin and they won't charge you ... You cannot be bashing the Chinese and then come to the Chinese for help.⁴³

The main point here is that Zimbabwe had to revisit its priorities so that it could benefit fully from dealing with China. Zimbabwe needed to ask for the appropriate help and support from China, whose core value is "no interference". It was up to Zimbabwe to set its priorities in development. It was recognised that the criticism levelled at China was an invitation to start adding value to commodities before they were shipped out of Zimbabwe. China could support more industrialisation in Zimbabwe with the correct national policy framework.

This view from Zimbabweans argued that China's powerful and transformative role in Zimbabwe ought to be premised on a more conducive investment environment. Indeed, Zimbabwe needed to weed out corruption:

43 Reneth Mano, Agricultural economist. Interview by author. Harare, August 17, 2014.

There has to be this thing called accountability which is missing ... Politicians are not willing to stop the corruption because they are implicated in the scandals. They are benefitting. My opinion is that all these people should be changed.⁴⁴

The Chinese were seen to be better because their system is “action oriented” when it comes to tackling problems:

I think there was a time when there was a bit of tension regarding Chinese business. The Chinese government acted very quickly to distance themselves from rogue characters who were tarnishing their country ... “We will take them to China for you and they will rot in jail. This is not the China we are ...” The naivety of our African leaders is to think that China will look after African interests!⁴⁵

It is clear from the above that China was perceived to have important lessons for Zimbabwe when it came to dealing with corruption and transforming the economy. The critical realist perspective wished that to happen in Zimbabwe as well.

The critical reassessment also emphasised the need for Zimbabwe to be smarter when negotiating with China. For instance, a University of Zimbabwe lecturer emphasised that so far the deals between China and Zimbabwe have been guided by the “spirit of liberation” and had a “win-win” element. However, he added that even though the deals were against vestiges of capitalist interests, “China is not a charity”.⁴⁶ Zimbabweans ought to avoid negotiating in ways that are detrimental to national interests:

If you (negotiate) agree on a win lose strategy where they sign, they will milk you. They are not here to help you become better at doing what you are doing. They are here for deals and in the process of doing deals because they have signed they will not question the legitimacy or lack of. There is not much pro-Zimbabwe analysis ... if they give you so many millions and they say we need so much in return, tobacco, minerals and you sign at overpriced rates and you do not see it as bad, they will take you for a ride.⁴⁷

In agricultural economist Reneth Mano’s view, China had a right to look after their interests. The problem was with the attitude of the Zimbabwe government who assumed that the Chinese would be different from British or colonial powers:

They were a bit naïve but now they found that the Chinese can also take you for a ride. The Chinese are not unlike any other investor. A section of the [Zimbabwe] government and the media is now waking up to that. I am not sure there is political stamina on our part. If they say “no” we can’t do this, we have nowhere else to go!⁴⁸

44 Car salesman. Interview by author. Harare, June 17, 2014.

45 Reneth Mano, Agricultural economist. Interview by author. Harare, August 17, 2014.

46 University of Zimbabwe lecturer. Interview by author. Harare, June 17, 2014.

47 Reneth Mano, Agricultural economist. Interview by author. Harare, August 17, 2014.

48 Ibid.

The above perspective seemed to be validated by the Zimbabwe government when it reportedly started reviewing and condemning some of the earlier mining deals signed with China as “bad deals” that never benefited the country. The Zimbabwean government was now setting up a consolidated mining company, because:

Chinese companies have not remitted, we know from their records that they exported a lot, so where is the money? The Chinese are smart. They were taking some of the money. Giving it to ZANU-PF to do the campaigning and all that. The government was literary afraid to go after them. Robert Mugabe’s party was the most clothed, with beautiful regalia, there was no shortage of regalia.⁴⁹

Mano also derided Zimbabwean contractors for failing to uphold the targets set by the Chinese. The readjustment also needed to come from local workers: “In Mozambique, the Chinese had to provide everything. You could see them pushing wheelbarrows.”⁵⁰

According to one student in the focus group interview held at the University of Zimbabwe:

Jobs have been lost ... we cannot blame the Chinese. We should blame the West who put sanctions on the country. The white British owners closed the businesses and it has nothing to do with the Chinese.⁵¹

Another student in the focus group observed how “China is using Zimbabwe in its fight with the US and other Western countries”.⁵² In this regard, the university students stated that Zimbabwe needed to study China’s motives so that the country could benefit more from the emerging partnership.

The critical realist perspective also supported regionalism to neutralise the power of China. The respondents wanted China to deal with Zimbabwe and other African countries, while Mandiwanzira commented that Zimbabwe could join other African countries to jointly negotiate big deals such as for platinum or chrome:

We have 90 per cent of this resource in the world. We must use the power of the resource that we have. We cannot talk to whoever also has the resource and negotiate as a block or group of producers for our oil, tobacco and cotton. If we see the price going down we can reduce production. We can follow the example of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).⁵³

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 University of Zimbabwe Focus Group. Interview by author. Harare, April 16, 2014.

52 Ibid.

53 Supa Mandiwanzira, then Deputy Minister of Information in Zimbabwe. Telephone interview by author. July 25, 2014.

Thus, the strategic perspective was more advanced than the downstairs and upstairs view as it made Zimbabwe eat without being eaten. It sought to uphold national interests and develop a guide for a win-win relationship with China. However, its success or lack thereof was dependent on a new ethics and moral order from Zimbabwe's leaders towards China.

China's rising media and soft power, combined with its broader geopolitical drive, is generating considerable power and concerns in Zimbabwe. However, the responses from Zimbabweans show that this power is not a magical wand as they perceive it differently, with some challenging and resisting it. The narrative of colonisation is there, as noted by the students at the University of Zimbabwe who expressed worries about the future of the country under the Chinese: "The British came through Christianity and the Chinese are coming through economics. If they are unrestricted, they will end up taking over."⁵⁴ However, this perspective is dependent on Chinese strategy and the effectiveness of bolstering the state and ruling party power. In spite of China's immense geopolitical power in Africa, the power on display in Zimbabwe is multi-directional, with counter power against China on the rise. Ultimately, China is influencing geopolitical shifts on media and development in African countries, such as Zimbabwe, but it is not shaping them as much as it wishes because of multiple emerging challenges. China's ability to develop a new ethics and moral order based on fair play could improve its engagement with Zimbabwe and other African countries. A balanced moral and ethical order will shape how Beijing's power will be appreciated in the Global South.

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