



005/2024

Occasional Paper

**China's soft power
strategy in Africa: the
case of Zimbabwe**

SEPTEMBER 2024



PPRIZ
Policy Observatory

005/2024

Occasional Paper

China's soft power strategy in Africa: the case of Zimbabwe



PPRIZ
Policy Observatory

Acknowledgements

This occasional paper was published by the Public Policy and Research Institute of Zimbabwe (PPRIZ) Policy Observatory.

We extend our sincere gratitude to Dr. Ronald Chipaike, a Research Fellow at PPRIZ under the China in Africa Programme, for his dedicated research and contributions to this policy brief. Special thanks also goes to the reviewers and editors, Dr Gordon Moyo & Dr Wayne Malinga whose valuable input helped shape and refine the content of this research paper.



Contents

1. Abstract	5
2. Introduction	5
3. The Concept of Soft Power	6
4. Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics	7
5. Confucius Institutes	8
6. Grants, interest free loans and debt forgiveness	8
7. Medical Assistance during Covid pandemic	9
8. China's soft power in Zimbabwe	9
9. Confucius Institute at the University of Zimbabwe	9
10. Grants	10
11. Conclusion	12
12. Reference	13

Abstract

China's soft power projection in Africa ensures cordial relations with African leaders. Using a mixture of cultural diplomacy and aid giving, Beijing has managed to cultivate positive perceptions in African leaders' mindsets. Using the case of study of Zimbabwe, this study adopts a qualitative narrative approach using mainly documentary sources of evidence to highlight the nature and impacts of soft power. The data analysed and reviewed reflects that China's soft power initiatives China have consciously or unconsciously cultivated the perception in African leaders' minds that an alternative route to development exists, even without adopting democracy. This has negative implications for civil and political rights in Africa and is leading to democratic regression and the entrenchment of authoritarianism. Such a scenario requires African people and their leaders to be able to learn from China what is beneficial to their interests without sacrificing the space for civil and political rights.

Key Words: Africa, China, Democracy, Soft Power, Zimbabwe

Introduction

China's relationship with Zimbabwe is steeped in the history of the cold war and Zimbabwe's quest for political independence from British colonial rule. Robert Mugabe, the then leader of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) in the 1970s initially sought soviet support for his Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army in order to prosecute the liberation war but he was not successful. At this juncture, the Soviet Union was already supporting another liberation movement in the country, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU)'s military wing called the Zimbabwe African People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA). This was in the context of the Sino-Soviet split which was an ideological conflict between China and the Soviet Union in terms of how global socialism was to be achieved. Mugabe turned to China and from the late 1970s ZANLA benefitted from Chinese donations of military equipment and personnel training, this became a critical factor in nurturing future ties in post- independence Zimbabwe. After a negotiated settlement at Lancaster House in England in 1979, Zimbabwe was granted independence on the 18th of April in 1980.

ZANU Patriotic Front (PF) won the election, with Robert Mugabe becoming the first black Prime Minister of the country. As a result, China became one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with independent Zimbabwe (Chun, 2014). Pursuant to this, Mugabe sent Simon Muzenda the same year to thank China for the role it played in Zimbabwe's liberation war. Mugabe himself travelled to Beijing for state visits in 1980, 1981, 1985, 1987 and 1993 before the first Chinese head of state visit to Zimbabwe in 1996. In 1985, Zimbabwe received its first loan of around \$85 million from China (Chun, 2014). Zimbabwe also received assistance for the construction of the National Sports Stadium in Harare and Chinhoyi Hospital through an interest free loan from the Chinese during the same period (AFRODAD, 2008).

When the Chinese government brutally crushed pro-democracy protests in what is commonly known as the Tiananmen Square crackdown that occurred in 1989, Mugabe was at the forefront rallying African leaders and those from other developing countries to support Beijing on the premise that China had the right to deal with its domestic affairs in a manner it deemed appropriate (Chun 2014), a position which agreed with China's so called non-interference policy. This was a push back against Western criticisms of not only the crackdown but of the undemocratic governance model in China. Paradoxically, Mugabe took this stance in spite of his ongoing honeymoon with the West in that epoch in history. This was because of his initial renunciation of a radical path as had been feared would happen at the country's independence by the West. In return, Zimbabwe got loans from the United States of America (USA), the World Bank and other lenders to aid in post war reconstruction (Sachikonye, 2008).

Mugabe's stance against Western criticisms of China in 1989 paved the way for more cooperation with China. As a result, In 1993, Mugabe travelled to China and a Joint Economic Commission was soon established (Hodzi, Hartwell and de Jager, 2012). This increased the levels of trade and other economic contacts between the two countries. However, the turn of the century brought even strengthened relations as Zimbabwe became

isolated by its erstwhile partners in the West as a result human rights violations, electoral malpractices by ZANU PF as well as a chaotic Land Reform Programme implemented from 2000. These infractions attracted sanctions that amplified the poverty of a country already suffering from astronomical levels of inflation owing to the crush of the Zimbabwe Dollar around 1997.

Owing to these challenges, Mugabe proclaimed a Look East Policy in 2003 that shifted the country's foreign and economic policy focus to eastern countries. However, the chief target was China. China itself responded by increasing trade and investment with Zimbabwe in addition to declaring the country a safe tourism destination. China was also one of the few countries to endorse Zimbabwe's Operation Murambatsvina which resulted in the demolition of 'illegal' urban structures and displaced around 700 000 people (Thompson, 2012). In 2008, China together with Russia vetoed a United Nations Security Council Resolution to place Zimbabwe under general sanctions for the government supported electoral violence against opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) supporters and leaders.

China's relationship with Zimbabwe has thus grown in leaps and bounds from 2000 and with the launching of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) during the same period the relationship could only grow further. The 'all weather friendship' mantra that characterizes discourses between the two partners is an indication of the strength of this partnership which is further fostered by their common belief in authoritarianism as well as non-interference in each other's affairs. Consequently, the China-Zimbabwe relationship was upgraded to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership level in 2017.

As a top global economy, China's increasing need for raw materials to power its industrialization drive as well as markets for its products has become clearer and more apparent. The country has become more aware of Africa as both a source and a market. Thus, a number of deliberate foreign policy initiatives are now being implemented to cement the country's relationship with Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. One such foreign policy instrument is the use of soft power strategies. The purpose of this paper is thus to review the nature and impact of selected soft power activities related to China in Zimbabwe.

The Concept of Soft Power

Nations are used to hard power or coercive tactics to achieve their national interests. This has historically been a settled fact since the emergence of the Westphalian state system. However, a niche for what is called soft power has also historically existed, only that it had not been given enough theoretical and analytical attention. In the 1990s, the concept of soft power was first popularized by Joseph Nye indicating the potential of using non-compulsive and non-violent strategies of statecraft in international politics. Since then, the concept of soft power has been articulated and applied by a number of other scholars (Melissen, 2005, Galarotti, 2011).

Joseph Nye highlights that "soft power (is) the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2008: 94). It is the ability of a state to entice or co-opt other states to do its bidding under no compulsion or coercion. It is about appealing to "hearts" and "minds," not "twisting arms" (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2021). According to Nye (2004) Soft power draws upon three key resources: cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policy. China has strategically harnessed these elements in its pursuit of cultivating soft power and normative influence, thereby bolstering its political identity, and molding global perceptions of itself. Nye (2012) argues that the cultivation of soft power emerged as a strategy for China, allowing it to adopt the identity of a global responsible stakeholder without heavy reliance on coercive or hard power tactics.

According to Caruso (2020) in other words, it is a critical tool for managing international relations without resorting to coercive measures. Soft power rather uses intangible tools such as ideology, culture and institutions; it is, in short, the power that is obtained through cultural attractiveness and ideological fascination and the possibilities; it offers to pilot relations between states through inculturation attempts capable of affecting the socio-political systems of other countries (Li Lin & Leng Hongtao, 2017). The objective of soft power is

hence to ensure that the targeted audience develops positive attitudes and perspectives towards the policies of the particular country in question. Soft power does not only have the ability to persuade and guide, but it also has the effect of cultural fascination and attraction becoming an indispensable component for the affirmation of a country in the period of globalization (Caruso 2020). The soft power policies are mainly based on three resources: culture, political values and the content of foreign policies as well. Culture, as a superstructure, plays an important role in the contact countries (Nye, 2005)

Indeed, China has used a mixture of soft power instruments in its engagement with African countries. What follows is a brief discussion of some of these instruments and initiatives.

Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics

China has historically had some sort of soft power engagement with Africa. In the 1960s, China extended an interest free loan amounting to \$500 million to Zambia and Tanzania for the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway Line from Kapiri Mboshi in Zambia to Dar-es-salaam in Tanzania (Chipaike and Matarutse, 2018). The loan would be repaid over 30 years. This was to find an alternative route for transporting Zambian copper to the sea ports since Southern Rhodesia and South Africa were under racist and apartheid regimes respectively during that time. This loan was given in spite of the economic challenges that China was still facing at that time in history. The Chinese also funded or supported a number of liberation movements in Africa from the 1950s until the 1970s including Zimbabwe's ZANU, Algeria's National Liberation Front (FNL) and South Africa's Pan African Congress among others. From the 1950s, China has also been sending Chinese Medical Teams (CMTs) to different African countries to assist in medical emergencies as well as to capacitate African medical personnel (Kobierecka, 2022). Agricultural instructors have also been dispatched to assist different African countries to come up with productive crop varieties and impart skills to African farmers. These soft power initiatives created an image of China as Africa's 'true friend and brother' willing to assist even in the face of own challenges at home.

These historical soft power initiatives greatly assisted China in influencing African leaders to vote overwhelmingly in its favour in the UN General Assembly in 1971. This allowed mainland China to assume its place in the UN Security Council as the legitimate representative of Chinese people (Chipaike, Nunoo and Chingono, 2023). This also prompted the African support of China when Beijing violently repressed the student protests in Tiananmen square in 1989 (Chipaike and Matarutse, 2018).

However, China's soft power as a subject of scholarly discussion did not get into the limelight until the mid 2000s after the FOCAC was launched to provide a framework in which Africa-China relations could be discussed. According to Caruso (2020:3)

It was also during the same time that during his keynote speech at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. President Hu Jintao for the first time stressed the need to enhance Chinese culture as the country's "soft power" to keep its unity: We must enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests». He also has proposed some highlights in order to affirm Chinese culture as an unfailing driving force for the nation and, among these ... to vigorously develop the cultural industry, launch major projects to lead the industry as a whole, speed up the development of cultural industry bases and clusters of cultural industries with regional features, nurture key enterprises and strategic investors, create a thriving cultural market and enhance the industry's international competitiveness and to step up the development.

Caruso (2020) believes that the soft power theory seems to resonate with some traditional Chinese concepts; for a number of Chinese scholars that first translated and discussed Nye's theory the main concept that power flowed from the perceived success of institutions shaped by virtues, fits well with the Confucian ideal of leadership by moral virtues. Hence, the soft power theory aided Chinese intellectuals who were trying to grasp what China could do to increase its cultural attractiveness. First of all, the idea of soft power can arguably be

traced back to Mencius, who said that right causes gain support, while wrong causes do not. Then, Chinese strategists, Daoist thought and Confucian thinkers all recognize that power can be derived through benevolence righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trust. These are the five Confucian principles of good governance such as a right society. So, Chinese scholars remark that soft power ideas are deeply embedded in Chinese theory and praxis and the notion of realizing goals through attraction can be traced thousands of years back in Chinese philosophy (Chou, 2014; Huang & Ding, 2006; Ding, 2008).

Confucius Institutes

Important to note is the fact that at the core Chinese soft power in Africa is the deployment of culture through a variety of strategies. Chief among these is the establishment of Confucius Institutes in a number of African countries. The first one was introduced at the University of Nairobi in Kenya in 2005 and that number has grown to a total of 61 in the African continent. South Africa has the largest number of these Institutes (8 in total) for a single country in the continent. As a form of cultural diplomacy, these institutes are centers for teaching Chinese language and culture to Africans. By way of definition, Confucius Institutes are state-sponsored organizations which constitute an educational “collaboration with foreign universities and educational institutions in order to promote understanding of the Chinese language and culture” (Ren Zhe 2012:14).

Most of these Confucius Institutes are offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Chinese in collaboration with their host African Universities. The increasing Chinese business activities in the continent as well as the increasing numbers of African students going to China for their studies has heightened the importance of the institutes in the continent. According to Saini and Zhou (2023:2) ‘in cooperation with China, Chinese has been introduced into the national curriculum of 16 African nations, and 61 Confucius Institutes and 48 Confucius Classrooms have been established in Africa. Since 2004, a total of 5,500 Chinese language volunteers and teachers have been dispatched from China to 48 African countries’. At the same moment however, there is an upsurge in the closure of these same institutes in Europe and America resulting from China’s mistreatment of the Muslim Uighur population, its support of autocratic regimes, general human rights violations as well as fundamental differences in global economic and security management issues with the West.

It must also be highlighted that institutes of this nature are not entirely a new phenomenon in Africa since a number of Western countries also have them. The British Council, Alliance Francaise and the German Foreign Cultural and Educational Policy (AKBP) among others exemplify this fact. This means language and culture has long been an instrument of furthering states’ foreign policy goals globally.

Since the launch of the FOCAC, China has also provided scholarship opportunities for African students over the years. According to Kigotho (2020) between 2016 and 2020, China accounted for more than 40 per cent of scholarships awarded to Sub Saharan African students. Additional to these undergraduate and postgraduate scholarships, short term scholarships are also provided for African government employees as well as ruling party officials for exchange visits in China. This has strengthened Chinese soft power in Africa.

Grants, interest free loans and debt forgiveness

China has been very generous and benevolent in its dealings with African countries especially when it comes to putting up symbolic infrastructure. This is against a background of Chinese provision of mainly concessional funding from the Export and Import Bank (EXIM Bank) for the construction of hydroelectric projects, thermal power units, roads and other critical infrastructure in Africa. While concessional funding is repaid at low interest rates, grants are gifts. These grants have been used for the construction of Parliament Houses, Presidential Palaces as well as government buildings. A significant number of African countries have received such grants over the years including Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia, Congo-Brazaville and Zimbabwe among others. The African Union Headquarters in Addis Ababa Ethiopia was also built by a Chinese grant of around \$200 million. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Headquarters is also being constructed through a Chinese grant. Further, a number of African countries have received interest-free loans. These are

loans which do not attract interest and are normally the ones that are included in debt forgiveness programmes by China. China has forgiven debts to a number of African countries especially the Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

Medical Assistance during Covid pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic that affected the whole world beginning end of 2019 also presented China with an opportunity to project its soft power in Africa. While Western countries embarked on what has been termed vaccine nationalism-hoarding of vaccines more than is necessary, China gifted African countries in particular and developing regions in general with batches of their Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines to manage the pandemic. Although not entirely altruistic, this gesture was a masterstroke in China's public diplomacy and soft power especially in Africa where the capacity to produce the vaccines was not existent. In addition, the Chinese entered into an agreement with a number of African countries that would be capacitated to produce the vaccines in partnership with China. Concerns were however rife that the efficacy levels of Chinese vaccines were low compared to Western produced vaccines.

Besides vaccines, China also availed to different African countries Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), a gesture which was appreciated by a number of African leaders. Although some of the Chinese vaccines were actually bought by African countries, the fact that China donated some of these vaccines is something that African leaders are quick to highlight indicating the strength of China's soft power. However, it is debatable whether Chinese soft power has the same kind of effect on ordinary African people as it does on the leaders. What follows is a detailed study of the impact of China's soft power in Zimbabwe.

China's soft power in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, China's soft power has been projected largely through cultural initiatives as the Confucius Institute, scholarships, musical and commemorative events such as the Lunar new year celebrations and Jacaranda festival. China has also given the Zimbabwean government a number of donations and grants as well as interest-free loans to put up various types of infrastructure and deal with emergencies. Zimbabwe was one of the major beneficiaries of Chinese covid 19 vaccines and also received donations to assist victims of Cyclone Idai. Chinese companies in Zimbabwe have also made various donations, contributed to scholarships and constantly organize career fairs to advertise positions that Zimbabwean graduates can apply for.

Confucius Institute at the University of Zimbabwe

A potent instrument in China's soft power projection in Zimbabwe is the use of cultural diplomacy In this connection, a Chinese Confucius Institute was established at the University of Zimbabwe in 2006 with the assistance of Renmin University. Speaking at the founding of the Institute in 2006, the then ambassador of China to Zimbabwe Zhang Xianyi said the Institute would serve as a platform for Zimbabweans to learn the Chinese language and Chinese culture. On the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the Confucius Institute at the University of Zimbabwe in March 2023, a memorandum of understanding was signed to teach the Chinese language in high schools across Zimbabwe. Saini and Zhou (2023:3) aver that 'as an important platform for local Chinese language teaching and cultural exchanges between China and Zimbabwe, the Confucius Institute at Zimbabwe University has become one of the largest and most powerful Chinese teaching institutions with the largest number of students'. By 2019, the Institute had 3000 graduates, 50 of whom had Masters Degrees and 3 had doctorates. In 2015, the Institute launched the first ever Shona-Chinese dictionary at the University of Zimbabwe. The Confucius Institute in Zimbabwe also works to verify the credentials of Chinese teachers, guides Chinese language and culture, and implements exchange programs for Chinese language and culture (Saini and Zhou 2023).

This is an important step in view of the increasing investments by the Chinese in Zimbabwe which entails the need for locals to know the Chinese language to enhance communication, negotiation and bargaining.

However, if locals are the only ones mainly taking the courses, it means the language is potentially being used as a tool for domination just as the former colonialists did with English, French and Portuguese. The Confucius Institute must also exist to teach Chinese investors Shona, Ndebele and other indigenous languages to enhance effective communication. The Chinese should be able to speak local languages for them to be able to understand the cultural milieu of Zimbabwean communities in which they do business. This will also go a long way in breaking the language and cultural barriers that have been confirmed as impediments to effective communication in everyday encounters between Zimbabweans and Chinese citizens residing in the country. Indeed, most of the labour related conflicts at Chinese run workplaces have largely been blamed on the language barrier (Chipaike and Marufu, 2020).

Closely tied to the Confucius Institute at the University of Zimbabwe (CIUZ) is the awarding of scholarship under the China-Zimbabwe Friendship Scholarship Programme to help students at the Institute and in other programmes to cover their tuition costs. The initial ceremony of this project was launched at the University of Zimbabwe by the China Africa Economic and Cultural Research Centre (CAECERC) with the support of the Chinese Embassy in Harare (Saini and Zhou, 2023). According to the director of the CIUZ, ‘the China-Zimbabwe Friendship Scholarship was launched early last year and is aimed at students from state universities majoring in engineering and technology, health sciences, agriculture, natural sciences and other fields. Each of the scholarship recipients receives a cash award’ (Saini and Zhou, 2023:3).

Zimbabwe-China cultural engagements have also seen a number of Chinese festivals being conducted and commemorated in the Southern African country. For instance, the Chinese Lunar New Year is celebrated by Zimbabweans and Chinese residents in Zimbabwe on the 20th of January each year. This has become an annual event organised by the Chinese embassy and the Chinese community in Zimbabwe attracting participation from Chinese and local artists under the banner of the Jacaranda Media and Culture Corporation (JMCC). Also, at the epicenter of Zimbabwe-China cultural engagements is an organisation called the China-Africa Economic and Cultural Research Centre (CAECERC) whose mission is to bridge the cultural gap between Zimbabwe and China in order to stimulate economic development in the Southern African country. In pursuit of its objectives, the CAECERC has introduced scholarships for primary school, high school and university students studying in local educational institutions, organised culture events and tours as well as workshops. This organisation and the Jacaranda Media and Cultural Corporation are the brain child of Zivanai Steven Zhao, a Chinese expatriate who, with the support of the Zimbabwe Arts Council (ZAC) established the Dream star, a Chinese sponsored talent show. The Dream star has been running annually since 2014, and is regarded as the flagship of Zimbabwe-China cultural corporation.

The foregoing discussion reflects the important place held by cultural diplomacy in China’s projection of soft power in Zimbabwe. What is worrying however is that Zimbabwe does not have a similar initiative to engage China through ‘selling’ her own culture sustainably other than the piecemeal exchanges that take place. This imbalance may result in cultural imperialism or rather the use of culture as a weapon of domination. This is how Western colonialism managed to sweep through the African continent. This is something not only Zimbabwean leaders should reflect on, but African leaders in general as well.

Grants

It is also important to note that Zimbabwe has also received a number of grants from China over the years. Perhaps the best-known project to have been funded by a Chinese grant today is the Zimbabwean parliament. Built by the Shanghai Construction Group as a ‘donation’ from China at a cost of \$200 million, the new parliament building was officially handed over to the Zimbabwean government on 26 October 2023. The new parliament complex is situated in Mt Hampden about 20 km west of Harare and is lauded as a sign of the enduring ‘all weather’ ties between Zimbabwe and China. Among other benefits, the Chinese funded structure is said to have alleviated space challenges that plugged the colonial era structure that had been used as a legislative chamber for nearly a century. Another project funded by a Chinese grant is the \$30 million Agriculture Technology Demonstration Centre (ATDC) established in 2012 at Gwebi Agricultural College about 30 km west of Harare. The main purpose of the ATDC was to experiment on a number of seed varieties of different

plants in conjunction with local seed suppliers to enhance crop productivity in the country. The project was run for three years by the Chinese government and has since been handed over to the Zimbabwean government as one of its centers of agricultural excellence. Other small grants have come through China Aid-the Chinese government's official Humanitarian wing. These have been used to build schools, drill boreholes and establish health related infrastructure such as the pharmaceutical Warehouse in Harare.

Zimbabwe also received donations of COVID 19 vaccines from China as well Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at the peak of the pandemic. In May 2020, a team of Chinese medical experts specializing in infectious and respiratory diseases visited three provinces in Zimbabwe and a number of government hospitals. These experts also brought with them a consignment of ventilators, nucleic acid testing kits, masks and bio-security suits. In September 2020, a 10 member Chinese medical team visited the country to assist Zimbabwean doctors in fighting the corona virus. These donations played an important role in the management of the disease in the country. Most noteworthy however is the donation by China of 400 000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines in March 2021. These Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines were then used by the government of Zimbabwe to launch its national vaccination campaign. The Vice President Constantino Chiwenga was the first government official to receive the Sinopharm vaccine jab publicly at Wilkins Hospital in Harare. The President Emmerson Mnangagwa also got his first jab of the Sinovac vaccine in Victoria Falls together with some opposition party officials. This was an effort to allay fears by the Zimbabwean public that Chinese vaccines were not safe.

Besides the specific assistance given towards managing the COVID 19 pandemic, China has also contributed humanitarian assistance in Zimbabwe. For instance, in the aftermath of cyclone Idai, China contributed \$1.2 million to deal with women health among those affected. Also to note is the fact that during the cholera crisis in 2008, China also donated \$500 000 to deal with the infectious disease that claimed a significant number of lives in the Southern African country.

In April 2024, it was reported that Zimbabwe benefitted from Chinese cancellation of some of the interest free loans that it owes to China. The amount was not disclosed owing to the opacity and secrecy that surround some of the Zimbabwe-China engagements. But the agreement is believed to have been reached in October 2023 when the Minister of Finance Prof Mthuli Ncube visited Beijing to discuss debt restructuring issues. Zimbabwe owes external creditors around \$17.5 billion, with just above \$2 billion believed to be owed to China. Although the gesture to cancel some interest-free loans may be seen as insignificant in the sense that interest-free loans are relatively small amounts compared to concessional and commercial loans, it nevertheless adds weight to China's solidarity with Zimbabwe. It is another way of strengthening the projection of their soft power in the Southern African country. In international politics, it is these little gestures that sometimes have the power of changing attitudes and maintaining already existing ties. This is how soft power works!

Lastly, Chinese companies operating in Zimbabwe have also been playing a role that can be seen as minor but nevertheless very significant in China's soft power arsenal through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities. This is because ordinary citizens do not see the difference between Chinese state actors and private citizens or businesses. All are conflated as representing the interests of the Chinese state. Chinese companies have been instrumental in supporting Zimbabwe's education through infrastructural development and giving opportunities to young people. In Lupane, Matabeleland North Province, there was the construction of the Lupane China-Africa Friendship Primary School by a Chinese mining and construction company known as the Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Group at of \$1,7 million (The Standard, 2016). In Bindura, Mashonaland Central Province, China Aid built and furnished a new school (Chiwaridzo Primary) which was handed over to the government of Zimbabwe in 2011. In the same vein, a subsidiary of Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt, Prospect Lithium Zimbabwe, built teachers' residences, two classroom blocks and school furniture as part of its corporate social responsibility initiatives to improve local education at Vhuta Primary School in Goromonzi district. It also extended the gesture by donating textbooks to other surrounding schools (Xinhua 2022).

Other significant players in Chinese CSR activities in Zimbabwe include Tian Ze tobacco company, AfroChina as well as Sino-Zimbabwe Cement Company who have upgraded roads, built schools, trained farmers and built and equipped health centers in their areas of operations. Notably, such companies are under the Chamber

of Chinese Enterprises in Zimbabwe, one of the few umbrella bodies that coordinate and represent the interests of major Chinese companies in Zimbabwe.

It is thus important to note that China's soft power in Zimbabwe is a combination of Chinese state and private sector programmes, for instance, the Confucius Institute at the University of Zimbabwe, various grants and donations towards medical emergencies and establishment of needed infrastructure are all state driven programmes. However, community development initiatives and donations made by private or State-Owned Enterprises may not be directed from the state but still serve the same purpose of projecting China's soft power. The major worry regarding Chinese soft power is that although China does not specifically lecture African or Zimbabwean leaders to adopt its authoritarian governance style, psychologically these leaders are apt to follow and take that route. This is because Chinese soft power appeals more to African leaders because of the nature of interaction between the two sides. Although recently China is making attempts to influence African public perceptions through African based Chinese media platforms and correspondence, such initiatives are still in their nascent and infant stages to have a significant effect. China is known for stifling human rights, especially civil and political rights, is a one-party state and prioritises unity over diversity and development over democracy. Whenever it is used, soft power's main objective is to change the negative perceptions of foreign audiences towards that state and its policies. This appears to have worked effectively with African leaders judging by the number of countries who have cut ties with Taiwan (Eswatini is the only one left with diplomatic ties with Taiwan) as well as the level of democratic regression in the continent. Chinese soft power appeals to most African leaders because they realise that Western democracy is not the only way of managing politics and development; authoritarianism/autocracy is also able to provide the framework for providing development. This has entrenched authoritarian regimes such as those in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Uganda and Zimbabwe to mention just a few.

Lastly, Chinese soft power appears to be used to mask the problems that have been brought by Chinese investors in Zimbabwe in particular and in Africa in general. Chinese companies stand accused of environmental degradation and pollution, violations of labour rights as well as desecration of important shrines in different communities. The only way to provide a different narrative is through this soft power crusade that paints Chinese actions as altruistic and benevolent. However, ordinary Africa citizens who are daily impacted by the negative effects of Chinese investments maybe difficult to convince otherwise. A survey done by William Hatungimana and Haruka Nagao revealed that only around 37 percent of Zimbabweans had positive perceptions about the China-Zimbabwe relationship A 2016 survey conducted in Harare by Mano showed that 98 per cent of respondents did not believe that China-Zimbabwe relationship was mutually beneficial. Most of them indicated that China was exploiting Zimbabwe's mineral wealth without a positive return (Mano, 2016) To counter these negative perceptions, China is making use of local media correspondents of News channels such as CGTN and Xinhua but the narrative is difficult to change since exposure to these Chinese news channels is still at a nascent stage.

Conclusion

A global power without a soft power strategy may not achieve its Foreign Policy objectives effectively. As one of the global powers, China has projected its soft power in Africa through cultural diplomacy, grants and assistance in medical and humanitarian emergencies. In Zimbabwe, Chinese soft power is seen through the establishment of the Confucius Institute, provision of scholarships for Zimbabwean students studying at local and Chinese universities, grants and Corporate Social Responsibility Activities among other initiatives. While these initiatives are noble, their impact on democracy is worrying because they provide incentives for the ruling party to entrench its authoritarian rule. Such a soft power strategy also seems to nurture in general African leaders' mindsets towards a future where development can be achieved without democracy, something which would suit China well as a global power. It is hence important for African people to read between the lines so that they reap benefits from their engagements with China without sacrificing the space for civil and political rights.

References

- AFRODAD (2008). Mapping Chinese Development Assistance in Africa: An Analysis of the Experiences of Angola, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Harare: AFRODAD
- Ameyaw-Brobby, T (2021). A Critical Juncture? COVID-19 and the Fate of the U.S.–China Struggle for Supremacy. *World Affairs*, 184(3), 260–293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00438200211024622>
- Caruso, D (2020). China soft power and cultural diplomacy. The educational engagement in Africa, *Rivistasulle trasformazioni socialism* Vol. 10, n. 19: 47-58. doi: 10.13128/cambio-8510
- Chipaike, R and Matarutse, K (2018). South-South Cooperation and Africa’s economic development: the case of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, pp: 822-833
- Chipaike, R and Marufu, E (2020). Chinese Construction Companies and the Question of Labour Rights in Zimbabwe, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 1-13, DOI: 10.1177/0021909620912777journals.sagepub.com/home/jas
- Chipaike, R, Nunoo, I & Chingono, N (2023). Chinese covid diplomacy in Africa: Interrogating Zimbabwe’s experience, *Cogent Social Sciences*, 9:2,2275442, DOI: 10.1080/23311886.2023.2275442
- Chou, M (2014). Projections of China’s normative soft power, *Australian Journal of International affairs*, 69(1), pg 104-114.
- Chun, Z (2014). China-Zimbabwe Relations: A model for China-Africa Relations? South African Institute of International Affairs Occasional Paper 205, Global Powers and Africa Programme. Accessed November 9, 2023 at <https://saiaa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Occasional-Paper-205.pdf>
- Ding, S. & Huang Y (2006). Dragons underbelly: an analysis of China’s soft Power, *East Asia*, 23(4), pg 22-44.
- Ding, S (2008). *The dragon’s hidden wings: How China rises with Its Soft Power*, NY: Lexington
- Galarotti, G. M (2011) Soft power: what it is, why it’s important, and the conditions for its effective use, *Journal of Political Power*, 4(1), pp 25-47. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/2158379X.2011.557886>
- Hodzi O, Hartwell L and de Jager N (2012) ‘Unconditional aid’: Assessing the impact of China’s development assistance to Zimbabwe. *South African Journal of International Affairs* 19(1): 87.
- Kigotho, W (2020), China increases scholarships to students from Sub-Saharan Africa, World University News-Africa Edition, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2020112410303875>
- Kobierecka, A. (2022). Post-covid China: ‘vaccine diplomacy’ and the new developments of Chinese foreign policy. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 19(3), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-022-00266-2>
- Li Lin & Leng Hongtao (2017). Joseph Nye’s Soft Power Theory and Its Revelation Towards Ideological and Political Education, *Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(2): 69-74.
- Mano, W (2016). “Engaging with China’s Soft Power in Zimbabwe: Harare Citizens’ Perceptions of China-Zimbabwe Relations”, in: Zhang, X., Wasserman, H. and Mano, W. (eds.) *China’s Media and Soft Power in Africa*, pp. 163-180, Palgrave Macmillan. Reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.
- Melissen, J (2005). *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nye, J.S (2004). *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs
- Nye, J. S (2005). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York: Paperback
- Nye, J. S (2008). Public diplomacy and soft power. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 94–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699>
- Ren, Z (2012) “The Confucius institutes and China’s soft power,” IDE Discussion Papers 330, Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO).
- Sachikonye L (2008). ‘Crouching tiger, hidden agenda? Zimbabwe–China relations’, in Naidu S & A Kweku (eds), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon? Africa and China*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, pp. 124–135.
- Saini T. K, Zhou C. S (2024). A Study on Talent Training at Confucius Institute in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Science, Technology and Society*, 12(1), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijsts.20241201.11>
- Thompson R (2012). Assessing the Chinese influence in Ghana, Angola and Zimbabwe: The impact of Politics, Partners and Petro. Honours Thesis, Stanford University, CA, USA.
- The Standard (2016). China builds school for Lupane. Retrieved 15 June 2023 at <https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2016/05/29/china-builds-school-lupane>
- Xinhua (2022). Chinese-invested firm donates classroom blocks to Zimbabwean school. Retrieved 18 July 2023 at <https://english.news.cn/africa/20221208/2d26cbf32d0549128d9883e4fe7e1648/c.html>

About PPRIZ

The Public Policy and Research Institute of Zimbabwe (PPRIZ) is an autonomous public policy and research institute established in the year 2013 by a Deed of Trust. PPRIZ is a non-profit making organisation based in Zimbabwe. PPRIZ endeavours to influence civic and public discourses in Zimbabwe on public policy driven by timely empirical research. PPRIZ will provide an open discussion platform for both aspiring and established Zimbabwean Scholars and Academics to research and engage with social, economic and political issues impacting the country.



Interested in working with us?

info@ppriz.africa



<https://ppriz.africa>