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## **Sino-Africa relations through the lenses of Western, African and Chinese media**

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In the modern era, the mass media represents one of the most important factors shaping foreign policy. It plays a central and active role in providing justification for policy positions, and is often the lens by which current events are viewed and given weight by the public and by policymakers alike. An important way that the media performs this role is by its use of 'framing.' A useful definition of the term 'framing' in this context is when certain aspects of perceived reality are chosen and assembled into narratives which emphasizes facts or events, deemphasizes others, and links them in a manner which promotes a particular interpretation, assessment, or resolution. By the use of framing, the media influences how its consumers understand a particular topic.<sup>1</sup>

It may be argued that media from around the world typically reflects local perspectives about the political, cultural, and economic environments in which they operate. For example, Western media is considered to reflect more liberal values, born out of a freer and more open environment, while Chinese media is considered to reflect a more centralized and restricted model. The purpose of this article is to compare and contrast how Africa, Africans, and Sino-Africa relations are viewed through Western, African, and Chinese media, to identify the differences, and to help explain the reasons for such differences.

## **The Western media's critical view of Sino-Africa relations**

Western media outlets tend to frame Sino-Africa relations as harmful to Africa. They frequently allude to a Chinese 'takeover' of the continent, and essentially accuse the Chinese of neo-colonialism. On the main, the Western media primarily spotlights the negative aspects of China's entry into the continent at the expense of the positive, and for the most part tends to ignore African interests in their relations with China.

A good example of this phenomenon may be found in the media coverage of Hillary Clinton's 2011 formal visit to Zambia, Tanzania, and Ethiopia while serving as Secretary of State in President Obama's first administration. While there, she warned that "Africa must beware of 'new colonialism' as China expands ties there and focus instead on partners able to help build productive capacity on the continent."<sup>2</sup> Clinton's usage of the term "new colonialism" was likely meant to convey a sense that China is moving to subjugate the African continent by economic means, plundering its natural resources in exchange for building its infrastructure in a practice known as 'infrastructure for commodities.'

Some more recent articles highlight how Chinese infrastructure projects, such as new rail networks, are having transformative effects on local economies and are powering the expansion of Chinese influence in the region, but often with deleterious consequences for impoverished locals.<sup>3</sup> One article in particular accuses the Chinese of engaging in corrupt practices, such as bribing local officials.<sup>4</sup>

## **The African media on the relationship with China**

In contrast to the above, African media outlets present a more complex picture of the relationship between African countries and China. It is important to note that there is significant variation between one country to the next, with various degrees of freedom. Yet, as Teke Ngomba has noted, there are common features across the media in Africa which facilitate broad generalizations. For example, on the whole African media systems are not fully open and free from government influence, and not infrequently take sides in inter-ethnic disputes at the expense of adhering to journalistic ethics.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to China-Africa relations, two opposing trends in the African media can be discerned. On the one hand, the African media encourages and supports the relationship which helps Africa to develop its infrastructure and presents China as the "constructor of Africa." In this regard, China is also willing to be active in regions that the West is not, such as Angola and Zimbabwe. One example of such positive coverage was published on GhanaWeb in October 2018. The article emphasized the position of Ghana's President Akufo-Addo that Chinese assistance in Ghana is not aid, but rather loans that "will be channeled to projects aligned to the Chinese government's Belt and Road initiative".<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the African media presents a less pleasant picture when it tells about the failure to provide work for locals, highlighting the Chinese policy of importing their own labor force and spreading unsubstantiated rumors that such laborers included prisoners. Other reports exhibit racism or at the very least anger towards the Chinese, and there have even been reports of violence and even murder against them.<sup>7</sup>

Other articles, such as one written by Fredrick Golooba-Mutebi from Uganda, are able to provide us with the more complex picture. Golooba-Mutebi presents the commonly held opinion that China is interested in exploiting Africa's natural resources, but refutes claims that little to no locals are employed by Chinese firms. On the contrary, he emphasizes that the number of locals employed by Chinese businesses is far greater than the number of foreign workers, and concludes by arguing that while "some Chinese investors do some harm [...] much of today's anti-China rhetoric is built on recycled myths."<sup>8</sup>

### **The Portrayal of Africa and Africans in the Chinese media**

Over the last thirty years, China has become one of the world's leading powers, and the breadth and depth of its involvement in Africa has increased tremendously. Beyond direct economic benefit, China sees Africa as a way to leverage political and diplomatic support. Through local development, and the building of strong alliances with African countries, it hopes to challenge Western domination on the geopolitical level.<sup>9</sup>

China also recognizes that its image suffers, as highlighted in the preceding sections of this article. To cope with this fact, China has begun to build its cultural influence and

'soft power' in the form of increased journalistic writing about Africa and the Chinese relationship with the continent. To this end, Chinese English-language media, clearly made for foreign consumption, portrays the African continent as a land of unlimited opportunities, "the new El Dorado."<sup>10</sup> Chinese articles argue that Chinese firms create, not take jobs, and 'feel-good' stories are often published, such as that of the 55 Kenyans who won a trip to China.<sup>11</sup> China portrays itself as the savior of the continent, at least on an economic level, in direct opposition to the Western and African framing. For example, in an article titled "China's bonds with Africa give hope for a prosperous future", it was written that, "The billions of dollars in deals signed during President Xi Jinping's trip to Africa promoted an agenda of development, particularly with projects involving the 'Belt and Road Initiative.' Africa's sights for its future are firmly turned on China rather than the West."<sup>12</sup>

### **Conclusions**

While the Western media mostly focuses on the negative aspects regarding Sino-African relations, the African media presents a more complex framing of Chinese involvement in Africa, depicting both the good and the bad. The Chinese media, or at least the English-language outlets, presents the more positive aspects of Africa in general and the essentially positive aspects of Chinese involvement in the continent. It can be assumed that the Western media echoes the positions held by Western governments, who disapprove of Chinese entry into Africa, not least because they fear for the preservation of their own economic interests on the continent. In contrast, the African media provides a balanced approach, sometimes echoing the viewpoints of the African regimes who benefit from Chinese support and on other occasions echoing the viewpoint of the local populations who oppose such support. Finally, the Chinese media, which represents the English-language mouthpiece of the regime, encourages Chinese entry to Africa, as a direct reflection of the geopolitical interests of the Chinese leadership.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm", *Journal of communication*, Vol.43, No. 4, 1993, pp. 51-58.

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<sup>2</sup> "Clinton warns against "new colonialism" in Africa", *Reuters*, June 11, 2011. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-clinton-africa/clinton-warns-against-new-colonialism-in-africa-idUSTRE75AORI20110611>

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Kaiman, "China says it built a railway in Africa out of altruism, but it's more strategic than that," *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 2017. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-china-africa-ethiopia-20170804-htlmstory.html>;

<sup>4</sup> "Chinese Investments in Africa Go off the Rails", *Financial Times*, December 5, 2018. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/82e77d8a-e716-11e8-8a85-04b8afea6ea3>

<sup>5</sup>Teke Ngomba, "Differing paradigms of media systems development in contemporary Africa: Does the 'Chinese Model' have a place?", *Journal of Asian and African studies*, Vol 47, No. 1, 2011, pp. 54-55.

<sup>6</sup> "Even the U.S. borrows; \$60bn China support 'not aid' - Akufo-Addo", *GhanaWeb*, October 26, 2018. Available at: <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/business/Even-the-U-S-borrows-60bn-China-support-not-aid-Akufo-Addo-695713>

<sup>7</sup> "Zambia: Three Chinese Murdered in Kitwe", *Zambianeye*, 27 October, 2018. Available at: <https://zambianeye.com/three-chinese-gruesomely-murdered-in-kitwe/>

<sup>8</sup>Fredrick Golooba-Mutebi, "Critics of China in Africa are recycling Yellow-Peril myths", *The East African*, August 17, 2018. Available at: <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/oped/comment/Critics-of-China-in-Africa-are-recycling-Yellow-Peril-myths/434750-4717056-105a076/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> Xinhua, "China, Angola eye enhanced military exchanges", *China Daily*, July 21, 2010. Available at: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-07/21/content\\_11032849.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-07/21/content_11032849.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Lucie Morangi, "Chinese, Kenyan entrepreneurs ramp up investment opportunities", *China Daily Africa*, 5 December, 2018. Available at: <http://africa.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201812/05/WS5c06b46ba310eff30328f0d7.html>

<sup>11</sup> Edith Mutethya, "55 Kenyans named outstanding employees win a trip to China", *China Daily Africa*, 5 December, 2018. Available at: <http://africa.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201812/05/WS5c06b595a310eff30328f0de.html>

<sup>12</sup> "China's bonds with Africa give hope for a prosperous future", *South China Morning Post*, August 3, 2018. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2158214/chinas-bonds-africa-give-hope-prosperous-future>