Co-opt rather than coerce

In this paper, we attempt to understand the reasons why China has become so influential in Africa in the past fifteen years. Our analysis is inspired by the paradigm of “soft power.” Soft power refers to when a country tries to obtain desired outcomes in world politics indirectly, “because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it.”4 It is based on the capacity to influence the international agenda in a way that shapes others’ preferences (agenda-setting) and that co-opts rather than coerces them.4

However, we need to adapt this concept to the context of Sino-African relations. Today, a new Chinese rhetoric has taken over, mainly because of the Chinese economic rise driven by non-western values, its unprecedented scope. It is now felt either politically or economically in all 54 African countries including those that have never been under Chinese influence. During the last decade, China has managed to considerably establish its influence in the world, including in Africa. How China seduces Africa

The cultural factor

China’s strategy with regards to culture is linked to public diplomacy, which is understood as “a government’s process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation’s ideas, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies.”11 Information, education and culture are all privileged in the Chinese strategy. Four out of the eight steps announced at the FOCAC conference in November 2009 in Egypt are directly linked to the education and the training of African professionals by the Chinese government. China plans to implement 100 joint scientific research projects and attract 100 post-doctoral fellows in China; build 50 schools; train 1500 school headmasters and teachers and increase the number of Chinese stipends to 5500; send out 50 agrarian technical missions and train 2000 African agrarian technicians; and train 3000 nurses and doctors for Africa. The training of African elites in Chinese universities is even more important. In 2006, 3737 African students were sent to China, and 2219 entered Chinese universities; this constitutes a 40 percent increase from 2005.12 Whereas the main factor for this change is the ongoing development of Sino-African relations, there are several other reasons that have influenced African students’ interest in China, including a recognized improvement of the training received in China; the possibility of obtaining study stipends; the low cost of education and life in China; and finally, the ever-increasing international standing of the PRC.

African students in China now represent such a significant number that it is hard to miss them on the main Chinese campuses: African students who go to Beijing attend Chinese institutions, such as the Beijing Language and Cultural University (BLCU), the Beijing Foreign Studies University (BSFU) or even Tsinghua. These students overwhelmingly opt for scientific and technical programs. Shanghai hosts students registered in Fudan University, in Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) or in Tongji University. Other campuses also receive numerous Africans: Guangzhou, Chongqing, Wuhan, and Nankin. For most universities, however, proficiency in Mandarin is mandatory, as the Chinese know that a country’s political and cultural influence is also transmitted through language.13

In addition to students, there is also the temporary presence of African professionals who come to China in the context of internships, or technical or military training. Groups of young African diplomats are selected every year to spend one month in China, during which time they are intensely immersed and exposed to the Chinese development model. There are also a number of African military personnel who follow training sessions and internships in telecommunications at the military bases of Xi’an and Nankin. Aviation officers returning to Africa from Xi’an confirm that China is now the country that offers the greatest number of stipends for African countries in certain domains.12 This increase in human and cultural inter-actions has led Chinese authorities to promote the presence of Confucius Institutes in Africa, already established in 2005 in Nairobi, Kenya. These institutes are instruments through which Chinese authorities seek to officially promote cultural interactions between Chinese and African students.5

Soft power refers to when a country tries to obtain desired outcomes in world politics indirectly, “because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it.”4

At the beginning of 2010, there were twenty-one Confucius Institutes that China has fostered with certain countries throughout Africa. The institutes are located in South Africa, Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Egypt, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Morocco, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe.10 With the universities of the African cities in which they are established, and in partnership with Chinese universities, these institutes promote Chinese language and culture and contribute to the PRC’s cultural influence and its seductive power in Africa.

Convinced of the positive impact that cultural exchanges with Africa can have, China has encouraged more tourist and artistic encounters with Africa, such as the African Ballet in Beijing, marital arts demonstrations in Africa, and the commemoration of the Chinese New Year in the Confucius Institutes in Africa.

The increased presence of Africans in China has influenced the media sector as well. For instance, in September 2007, the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) launched a French language channel targeted at francophone viewers. Before that, on 26 February 2006, China Radio International (CRI), based in Beijing, launched a station with a frequency in Nairobi, Kenya. This CRI radio station is the first to be operated in a foreign country and it broadcasts nineteen hours a day in English, Chinese and Swahili, thus spreading Chinese culture into Africa.

In the same vein, the increased presence of African nations and the rise in official delegation visits represent a great opportunity for the Chinese to practice their hospitality. This non-material element is of capital importance in African culture.14 This hospitality is seen in The Analects of Confucius: “It is a pleasure to receive friends from far away places.” However, the presence of Africans in China is not always unproblematic: several cases of racism against African students have been noticed (see Shi’s and Calabria’s contributions in this volume).

Appealing to history to legitimize current relations

Chinese discourse unanimously situates the origins of the countries’ contacts with Africa in a distant past. In fact, China can claim a long history of contacts with the African continent. Modern China has a series of sources, preserved by the different dynasties, that allow curious minds to retrace the footsteps of ancient Chinese missions in search of the origins of the empire and the rise in official delegation visits represent a great opportunity for the Chinese to practice their hospitality. This non-material element is of capital importance in African culture. This non-material element is of capital importance in African culture. This non-material element is of capital importance in African culture.

Beijing claims that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a Beijing’s claim that it wants to promote an “African memory”, but clearly uses history as a rallying tool by insisting on a
China's political elites are accustomed to emphasizing the already established links between Africa and China to refer to themselves as members of the Third World community, China is “the biggest developing country in the world and very attached to peace and to development, (and) is pursuing a foreign policy of independence and peace.” Similarly Africa is “the continent regrouping the greatest number of developing countries, [and] constitutes a weighty force in the realisation of peace and development throughout the world.”

However, China's self-identification as a Third World country is motivated by the pursuit of national interests. It has contributed to the accomplishment of fundamental national objectives that have remained the same over the different leadership periods: preserving security and national unity; and promoting China’s place and role in the world.

Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, China has often used its relationships with the Third World, particularly Africa, to better its own position vis-à-vis the United States or the Soviet Union. For example, Mao's theory of the Three Worlds and his opposition to American hegemony after the Cold War was aimed at creating coalitions that would be capable of limiting the superpower's influence. This approach has become even clearer since the 1990s. Scholars thus point out that the Chinese promotion of history is significant. History is being instrumentalized to resolve a foreign policy dilemma that is generally encountered by emerging powers. It effect, far more than being a simple description of the historical foundations of the past, the use of history also serves to convince African leaders that despite China's emergence, the ranks of a world power, its commitment to the interests of developing countries will remain unwavering. This is unclear, however, as the history of great power politics shows us.

Diplomacy as a rallying ground

Yet another element of China's influence in Africa is seen in the implementation of a kind of diplomacy that African countries, generally marginalized in the international arena, are very sensitive towards. China promises to contribute to the promotion of South-South cooperation with a view to improving the position of developing countries on the international political and economic chessboard. Both partners also fight for the democratization of international relations and equity in the international order through the reform of international economic and political decision-making bodies (e.g., the UN). Consequently, African leaders that despite China's emergence to the ranks of a world power, its commitment to the interests of developing countries will remain unwavering. This is unclear, however, as the history of great power politics shows us.

Its quest for great power status in the international system, China will need “Africa's political and moral support.” Thus, the Chinese leadership is looking for durable alliances and intensified South-South cooperation as it wishes to settle for a position itself as a “moral defender of the African people.” In general, Africans are very receptive to Chinese policies, which are aimed at building a kind of global partnership to ensure peace and mutual benefits. However, excessive optimism must be surrounded with caution. It is important to take into account all of the interests pursued by China. Overall, though, China’s aims to build a “sincere friendship, ensure mutual advantages on an equal footing, cooperate in solidarity and work towards a shared development.”

In addition to the diplomatic symbolism of choosing Africa as the destination for their official foreign visits at the beginning of each of Beijing. The Sino-African summit in Beijing in November 2006, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, declared “China is a source of inspiration for all of us.” Like other African leaders, he is satisfied with the promises made by the Chinese leadership. China can indeed pride itself on a number of economic, political and diplomatic successes in Africa; successes which seem to be a result of the Chinese initiatives that were intended to charm and seduce Africa.

The attractiveness of China surpasses material considerations, such as aid and financial support, and forms part of China’s “soft power” in Africa. Africans identify more readily with China, which is seen as a benevolent mentor. This is partly due to its nature as a developing country. It is also because China has not put into practice the neoliberal recipes of the international financial institutions. In addition, it does not impose conditions on African states and it seems more willing than other overseas actors to contribute to the industrialization of Africa.

It is not our aim to judge the effectiveness of this “Chinese Model”, although through China’s actions, we have seen a relative increase in the political, cultural and economic status of China. Indeed, the presence of China is real and it plays a role in the way in which African countries now evaluate their relations with their other partners. China is clearing a path for other countries that are trying to find their own avenues and means for development and trying to position themselves on the international stage while maintaining their independence and protecting their way of life and their political choices in a world dominated by the West.

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Notes
13. Interview with Air Force Officers from Cameroon and Gabon who participated in this training, on board an Ethiopian plane flying the Addis Ababa—Liberia—Douala route, 18 July 2008.
China's political elites are accustomed to emphasizing the distinctiveness of China's approach to Africa to refer to themselves as members of the Third World community; China is "the biggest developing country in the world and very attached to peace and to development, (and) is putting a foreign policy of independence and peace." Similarly Africa is "the continent regrouping the greatest number of developing countries, [and] constitutes a weighty force in the realisation of peace and development throughout the world." However, China's self-identification as a Third World country is motivated by the pursuit of national interests. It has contributed to the accomplishment of fundamental national objectives that have remained the same over the different leadership periods: preserving security and national unity; and promoting China's place and role in the world. Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, China has often used its relationships with the Third World, particularly Africa, to better its own position vis-à-vis the United States or the Soviet Union. For example, Mao's theory of the Three Worlds and his opposition to American hegemony after the Cold War was an uncontested American hegemony that could have had its historical foundations of the past, the use of history also serves to found modern China. The Chinese leadership has clearly to position itself as a moral defender of the African people. In general, Africans are very receptive to Chinese policies, which are aimed at building a just and equitable and mutual respect. However, excessive optimism must be treated with caution. It is important to take into account all of the interests pursued by China. Overall, though, China's aims to build a sincere friendship, ensure mutual advantages on an equal footing, cooperate in solidarity and work towards a shared development; look very attractive to African countries, long trapped in a subversive relationship with the Western powers.

Conclusion
After the Sino-African summit in Beijing in November 2006, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, declared that "China is a source of inspiration for all of us." Like other African leaders, he is satisfied with the promises made by the Chinese leadership. China can indeed pride itself on a number of economic, political and diplomatic successes in Africa; successes, which seem to be a result of the Chinese initiatives that were intended to charm and seduce Africa. The attractiveness of China surpasses material considerations, such as aid and financial support, and forms part of Chinese "soft power" in Africa. Africans identify more readily with China, which is seen as a benevolent mentor. This is partly due to its nature as a developing country. It is also because China has not put into practice the neoliberal recipes of the international order to preserve Chinese interests in these institutions. In addition to the diplomatic symbolism of choosing Africa as the destination for their official foreign visits at the beginning of each Beijing summit, it seems to be positioning itself as a moral defender of the African people. In general, Africans are very receptive to Chinese policies, which are aimed at building a just and equitable and mutual respect. However, excessive optimism must be treated with caution. It is important to take into account all of the interests pursued by China. Overall, though, China's aims to build a sincere friendship, ensure mutual advantages on an equal footing, cooperate in solidarity and work towards a shared development; look very attractive to African countries, long trapped in a subversive relationship with the Western powers.

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