

DOCTORAL THESIS

Efficacy of China's Soft Power in Africa: News and Views

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Abstract

The art of persuasion and the enigmatic role the human cognitive process play in the transformation of persuasive messages into attitude formation and behavioural disposition have for a long time, been objects of fascination among social and behavioural scientists, so much so that they have been investigated in a variety of social contexts. More so, nations and governments have always leveraged various diplomatic initiatives as persuasive strategies to advance their interests and to evoke favourable perceptions among foreign publics. Over the last two decades, Africa, has witnessed an increase in Chinese interests manifested through accelerated diplomatic efforts in the fields of economic, cultural, media, and technological initiatives, geared towards projecting Chinese values and winning the hearts and minds of Africans. However, there is little understanding about the acculturation of Chinese values and the effectiveness of China's soft power in Africa. Soft power instruments have rarely been studied for their persuasive effects on the attitudes of foreign publics, despite the assumption that they are deployed to generate attraction and positive attitudes.

Thus, drawing on bodies of literature from social psychology, public diplomacy and communication studies, this dissertation investigates how cognitive, affective, and behavioural intentions of Nigerians towards China are influenced by the persuasive strategies (soft power instruments) employed by China in the continent and by media exposure to Sino-African-related information. This research develops a theoretical model to explore the relational linkages between engagement with soft power instruments (awareness and interaction with soft power instruments), media exposure, and the three attitudinal components. To further provide a holistic view to this discourse, this study investigates how the Nigerian media portray China and its activities in Africa and explores the articulations of Nigerian elites about the impact of Sino-African engagements on Africa's development. This provides a basis from which inferences can be drawn about how public dispositions towards China are affected by the salience conferred on Sino-African issues by domestic African media.

To achieve the stated objectives, this research, adopts a multimethod approach by combining three separate, yet complimentary studies, a content analysis of Nigerian newspaper coverage, a survey of Nigerian publics, and in-depth interviews with sections of the Nigerian elites. Findings reveal that Nigerians' attitudes and behavioural intentions towards China are multidimensional and majorly predicted by their personal experience (engagement with China's presence) and their second-hand experience (exposure to China-related news in local media), rather than by the intensity or tenacity of China's diplomatic efforts and strategies in the country. Evidence across the three studies further demonstrate, on the one hand, an admiration for China as a country; and on the other hand, a deep-rooted discontent about China's activities in Africa. On a theoretical level, these findings highlight the interconnection between public diplomacy, sociopsychology, and communication fields of study. And on a pragmatic level, they expose the inadequacies of China's soft power strategies in Africa as its projected international message of mutualism and partnership is counteracted by its perceived practices of ruthlessness, exploitation, and economic sabotage.