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The Cultural Dimensions of the African Diaspora as a Route to "Softpower"

Based on the chapter
"Models of Development: finding relevance for Africa in China's experience of
development"
in Kitissou M. (ed) (2007) "Africa in China's Global Strategy"
Adonis and Abbey, London

Abstract

The term 'soft power' (Nye 1990) describes the ability of a state or other political body, to indirectly influence the behaviour or interests of other political bodies through cultural or ideological means. Soft power distinguishes the subtle effects of culture, values and ideas from more direct means, such as military or economic incentives.

Africa too has an opportunity to utilise soft power in dealings with trading partners. The continent offers key natural resources to the world economy, but has other cultural resources of its own that may be of greater value in the new "world order" emerging from China's development.

There is a soft power dimension to interactions with the African diaspora; the overseas population carries their culture to remote locations, generating both markets for cultural goods and demand for physical visits, this paper compares these opportunities with established examples.

Miller and Slater (2000) have shown how information and communication technologies can assist the maintenance of identity in diasporic communities. The use of the internet as a social space by Trinidadians away from their home is mirrored in the use of the internet in support of both cultural and business activities in the African diaspora (Little, Holmes and Grieco, 2001).

The global success of the Fairtrade movement represents a campaigning use of soft power, and the response of corporations can be seen in the raised profile of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. The success of the campaigns of African activists, leveraged by the internet, over access to Aids medication (Grieco and Little in press) demonstrate the potential of soft power to change both self perceptions and material conditions.

In an age of global integration and increased flows of resources, including human and intellectual and social capital, Africa, and in particular sub-Saharan Africa, has been marginalised in a system dominated by three major nodes of development. Ohmae (1995) speaks of the end of a cold war bipolar divide and its replacement by the triad of Europe, North America and East Asia. China is now supplanting Japan as the key economy of the East Asian node, if not in terms of current size, in terms of perceived growth and potential for investment.

While the Cold War lasted, African nations were courted by both sides of the ideological divide. With the resolution of that form of conflict, Africa became relatively neglected. However, the rapid growth of China and that country's need for resources has altered this situation. During the cold war China's interest in Africa was restricted by distrust of the Soviet Union and states aligned with that country. However, while Japan pursued a low key and economically directed aid programme (Yasutomo 1986), China offered education and the high profile Tanzam railway project, a political and economic resource in the struggle against minority white rule. China's current interest in Africa rekindles competition for African resources and attention, contributing to an end of post Cold War neglect. Both Africa and China have to some degree dealt with the development and infrastructure consequences of infrastructure optimised around the outward movement of resources rather than internal development (Headrick, 1981).

Wissenbach (2007) reviews the dramatic recent increase in trade between China and Africa. He argues that pragmatic approach taken by China means that the European Union must formulate a strategy for 'soft power' (Nye, 1990a) based on more than development aid. China offers its alternative route to successful development with fewer conditions that the engagement offered by western Europe and the United States.

The China Africa summit of November 2006 announced plans for a new strategic partnership between China and Africa featuring "political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win co-

operation and cultural exchange" The economic declaration covered agriculture, investment, business co-operation, trade, finance, infrastructure construction, energy and natural resources.

Such improvements in capacity and capability through contact with alternative models are a key to the problem of the knowledge divide (Chataway et al, 2003) which restricts indigenous development and integration into the global economy from the African side.

For Africa contact with new partners, and China in particular, offers the obvious economic benefit of trade and inward investment into resources, and an alternative market to that offered by the West. However, China's own approach to the problems of rapid growth and development may also have value for Africa, despite obvious and significant differences. China's internal processes of development must tackle problems familiar to African policy makers, despite the different resources available. Recent Chinese policy statements have acknowledged uneven development and the need to redress both the outcomes and the governance of the development process. These and related issues are highlighted in the 11th five year plan announced in 2006.

While the differences between Africa and China in scale and economic activity, population and global influence are obvious, there is a shared understanding of the impact of external intervention and incursion, and the subsequent legacy of patterns of development influenced by external interests. These similarities and differences are examined next.

Asia and Africa: similarity and difference

Despite the diverse problems of the mid 1990s, the East Asian development model retains its allure for much of the world (Thorpe and Little, 2001). The fact remains that in 1960 Ghana had a higher per capita Gross Domestic Product than South Korea but that by 1997 Korea had broken the US$10,000 barrier and the country had embraced manufacturing successfully and moved into key fields of high technology and innovation. There are, however, both internal and external dimension to the development trajectory pursued by the nations of East Asia.

Internally African and Asian countries share the problem of uneven development between centre and periphery and the need to reconsider the policies and technologies deployed. While the twenty-first century may rightly be described as the 'Age of Migration' (Castles and Miller, 1993), for both China and Africa the major flows are internal ones brought about by uneven development, resource shortages and, in Africa's case, related conflict.

Externally China's entry into a networked global economy has been as the manufacturer for the world. While Africa has been able to learn from East Asia in the past (Kaplinsky, 1994) the advantage of scale and incumbency that China has created may well have removed this strategy from serious consideration by any potential competitor in Africa. However, the role of the overseas Chinese communities in this engagement with the world economy remains of relevance to Africa, as a continent with an equally impressive set of diasporas.

China provides an opportunity for Africa to observe an alternative pathway to a high technology, high performance economy from predominantly agricultural base that that followed in the West. China is dealing with the problems of development driven by the pull of its huge market potential for inward investment, and its low cost infrastructure for global manufacture

A key difference between China and Africa is that between a territory government by a single state and one with more than fifty sovereign countries. Ohmae (1995) advocated regional synergies, across national boundaries and there is evidence of a toleration of local policy determination within the Chinese structure of government that can be regarded as a softening of central determination in favour of de facto federalism (Zheng, 2006). However, for Africa dealing with issues at a scale which is internal for China requires cross-border regional collaboration. The implications of this can be seen in policies and outcomes in a number of sectors.

Water policy in Africa and China is one area that reveals both similarities and differences between the two locations. Lee (2006) provides an account of the political economy of water policy in the Shanghai region. Increasing awareness of water degradation in area of key economic development shows Chinese awareness of the need to combine environmental protection and reinstatement with sustainable economic development. Both central and local government, nascent ngos and the emerging civil society are engages in a process which indicates an appreciation of the longer term cost of short term solutions. Africa is facing similar problems of equity of access to available water

supplies, and the policies of liberalisation and privatisation o water resources have come under increasing scrutiny (Swatuk, 2002).

While large scale power and irrigation project such as the Kariba and Volta dams have lost favour in Africa, China remains attracted to mega-projects (Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius and Rothengatter, 2003), even those first proposed in the 1950s. Following the Three Gorges project, the South-North Water Transfer project to move water to relative arid north began construction at the end of 2002. It involves three canals running 1,300 kilometres across the eastern, middle and western parts of China, linking the country's four major rivers -- the Yangtze, Yellow, Huaihe and Haihe The project is expected to take 50 years to complete and cost 59 billion US dollars. .

Whether or not projects of this scale are appropriate to African needs, Gathanju (2006) demonstrates the problems facing them by describing the jurisdiction of the Nile waters. Post colonial problems have been created by adherence to a 1929 treaty drawn up by the colonial power, Britain. This privileges Egyptian use of Nile water over the claims of ten upstream countries including Ethiopia, Sudan and Kenya. Such legacies require sensitive negotiation around conflicting interests, yet even where cross-border interests are not in conflict, working across separate national jurisdictions can cause difficulties.

The different levels of reform across borders are compromising attempts to deliver critical telecommunications infrastructures in an affordable format. The set of projects intended to provide a circum-continental undersea fibre optic trunk are a key step in bringing to Africa the communication infrastructure enjoyed by competing regions. However, the control of access to the cable by incumbent telecommunications carriers has led both to criticism, and to a project by Globacom which will duplicate the initial SAT-3 cable along the west cost of Africa, at least as far as Nigeria with a competing cable. Such competition may be regard as healthy in more developed locations, but in Africa it represents unnecessary duplication. The business plan for the proposed East African Submarine Cable System (EASSy) has drawn similar criticism from NEPAD. While the intention is to prevent the dominance of one partner, there remains a disagreement over the definition of "open access", with NEPAD and other ngos arguing that this means all operators having equal access in terms of capacity and pricing to bandwidth and the 31 telecommunication companies in the EASSy consortium of investors seeing "open access" meaning that every country has a stake in the cable, which does not necessarily include access to equal capacity and prices (Gedye, 2006).

The rapid development of communication infrastructure in China points to a more successful transition from state monopoly control to a regulated market environment. Nevertheless, where access to affordable and reliable technologies is available, African users have demonstrated a capacity to make effective use of them. In this regard, both the Economist (2005) and Vodaphone (2005) have argued that cell phone technology has been highly effective in triggering grass-roots economic activity across Africa, with rapid and high levels of take-up and widespread access. In many respects Africa has matched China in accessing the potential benefits of mobile telephony particularly for small indigenous enterprises.

Internal development

As with many African countries, growth and development within China highlights the problems of unevenness of infrastructure with a bias towards the best connected and outward facing coastal provinces. Developing adequate infrastructure and maintaining human resources for the development of interior regions is problematic.

Give its size and population it is not surprising that China faces significant geographical challenges to its development. Access to information and communication technology is variable, with a wide "digital divide" between urban and rural regions. The number of Chinese Internet subscribers and users is large but still small in relation to the total population. The 111 million subscribers online in 2005 represented just 8% of the Chinese people, compared with around 50% in OECD countries. However, closing this digital gap has become government policy. (OECD Observer 2006)

China shares with Africa a history of foreign intervention and the current imbalance of development mirrors the post-colonial situation in many African countries, in particular the draw of China's developed costal regions compares with the draw of many capital cities and their immediate surrounds in African countries.

As noted above, Africa' transport both ground transportation in the form of railways and air transportation in the form of post-colonial airline routes has been patterned around external priorities. China has set an example of how to establish a major airline system geared to current priorities in a relatively short space of time.

As the driver of the national economy, the Shanghai region has long been favoured; manufacturing has become concentrated in southern China, with high technology industries clustered around Beijing. The pressure on these growth centres, and the movement of population towards them has led to significant problems of urban poverty (Wang 2004). The threat to national cohesion posed by a continuing imbalance is well understood. Increasingly foreign investment is being directed to areas away from the most developed coastal locations with a view to redressing imbalances.

Comparable development poles for sub-Saharan Africa can are emerging in Nigeria and South Africa. The regional policies being developed in China may offer insights into the prospects for more multilateral patterns of development across the African continent.

The formal policies of the Chinese government offer a means of benchmarking that country's performance against aspirations. The 11th five year plan devotes chapters to 'Promoting Balanced Development among regions' and to 'Building a harmonious socialist society' It emphasises overall planning of both urban and rural employment and improving the employment support system for 'disadvantaged regions, sectors and groups.

The Five Year Plan highlights a number of concerns of equal relevance to African countries. The practicalities of servicing outlying regions may hold examples and approaches relevant to African context – poor infrastructure, cultural diversity and underdevelopment of human capital.

The needs of China's remoter areas are being met through alternative routes, with extensive deployment of solar technologies in Tibet and other western areas. China's high technology agenda and the scale of application mean that the cost of these technologies to countries in Africa will change dramatically. Equally, the commitment to coal fired power generation for the foreseeable future has led to significant advances in clean combustion technologies, which will allow African reserves to be considered in future planning.

China enjoys greater leverage with potential collaborators than any African nation and can negotiate transfers of knowledge and technology to address problems. For example, pressure is being put on international companies around issues of corporate social responsibility (Zheng and Chen 2006). However, it may be possible to develop an African agenda around equivalent demands for the reciprocal input of intellectual capital into the development equation.

Issues of scale and cost will be crucial in the identification and selection of opportunities to adapt components of the Chinese approach where these are deemed appropriate from an African standpoint. The external connections to the global economy are a dominant issue for the continent, but management of internal relationships is equally important. The complex network of regional economic grouping and cross-border arrangements reflects the pre- and post-colonial origins of the nation states and their pathways to independence. Regional and continental collaboration has waxed and waned, but the revival of entities such as the East African Community (EAC) after a lapse of more than twenty years is encouraging. Equally important is the emergence of new forms of cooperation, such as the Interregional Route Development Forum which seeks to optimise African air routes for African needs, and to remove the remnants of colonial frameworks which has in the past required journeys within Africa to be made via Europe

Harnessing Diasporas: external dimensions of development

The success of the Asian economies and China in particular in capturing the major proportion of global manufacturing activity has depended on the widespread use of information and communication technologies. Dicken (1998) demonstrates that information and communication technologies underpin the global system, offering opportunities for participation in the "information economy" to peripheral areas. However, the reliable and economic physical movement of materials, products and labour is an equally essential element of the system, and this infrastructure of physical and electronic communication allows other forms of interaction and transfer, not least in culture and identity.

The Chinese diaspora played a key role in investment prior to the wider acceptance of China as an investment destination. Redding (1996, 1998) has analysed the nature or capital accumulation and the characteristics and of Chinese family business networks. In the past they have accomplished significant international mobilisation of capital. .

Financial remittances from international migrants have become recognised as a significant resource for development in less advantaged regions. Both foreign exchange and household income are enhanced in the country of origin. Ammassari and Black (2001) provide an overview of the complexities of migration and return flow in development in West Africa.

There are well established links between many African countries and their overseas population (e.g. Henry and Mohan, 2003). Such linkages are able to mobilise more than financial capital. The social capital created by movement between cultures and locations can provide a critical contribution to development and resource mobilisation.

Newland, (2004), in a review of the role of diasporas in poverty reduction in their countries of origin , argues that policy in support of such networks should take as much account of the social and political activities of these trans-national communities as the straightforward financial dimension of their interaction.. For many countries trans-national communities of professionals are a major source of foreign direct investment, market development, technology transfer and more intangible flows of knowledge, new attitudes and cultural influence. This human capital and capacity has been termed 'social remittance'. Levitt (1998) defines social remittances as the "ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital that flow from receiving country to sending country communities" (Levitt 1998 p.357). This social remittance is reflected by the emergence of various technological, scientific and social networks connecting migrants with each other and with home countries.

Saxenian (2002) suggests that Asian engineers working in 'Silicon Valley' retained and cultivated links with engineers and businesses back home through various social networks and aided development, particularly that of the Indian software industry by providing knowledge and market access. Kale et al., (2005) showed the important role of overseas Indian scientists working in the development of R&D capabilities in Indian pharmaceutical firms. Social linkages and return migration are a significant resource for development in both Africa and China, as 'brain drain' becomes 'brain circulation'.

China has benefited from the circulation of human capital since the Indemnity Scholarships, set up by the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century with money taken from China as compensation for the Boxer uprising. These skill transfers set a pattern for the return of educated individuals which continued after the Communist revolution in 1949. This intellectual capital flow contributed to key modernisations and technical developments in science and technology in the 1950s and continues with specific encouragement from the present government.

In this context the ability of African nations to attract return migration and foster overseas linkages becomes critical. The attractiveness to emigrants of return, either on a permanent or temporary basis becomes an important factor in harvesting social capital flows. Chinese input to African economies may make an important contribution to make return attractive

In the social sector, the action plan includes development and assistance, debt reduction, training of professionals, culture, education, public health, environmental protection, and tourism.

This continuing development of human capital is important in its own right, but Florida (2002) argues that the presence of a creative class and related cultural activities contributes significantly to the attractiveness of a location for inward investment. Africa may find advantage here, having made significant contributions to global music and art during the twentieth century, both directly and through the diaspora. The continuing cultural creativity of Africa is a resource which can draw both returnees and new incomers, shifting their perceptions

The EAC revival has allowed the development of an East African Single Tourist Visa valid for the three current member states (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) which will make travel to that region easier and more attractive. The China Africa summit saw China to extend Approved Destination Status (ADS) to a further nine African countries bringing the total to 26. The number of Chinese tourists to Africa reached 110,000 in 2005, doubling the 2004 figure, according to the Exit-Entry Administration Bureau of the Public Security Ministry .(China Daily, 2006).

In an increasingly sophisticated market, tourist destinations need to develop their image, but in doing so can benefit not just incomers, but also established residents who may find a new

appreciation of their location and its qualities. The 'roots tourism' which attracts members of a diaspora to their point of cultural origin can also serve to reconnect with them. Tourism represents an opportunity to engage with negative images of Africa and to develop 'destination images' which motivate both diasporic and indigenous contributors to African development.

Learning from China and India: Africa's potential for 'soft power'

The term 'soft power' (Nye 1990) describes the ability of a state or other political body, to indirectly influence the behaviour or interests of other political bodies through cultural or ideological means. Soft power distinguishes the subtle effects of culture, values and ideas from more direct means, such as military or economic incentives. Thompson (2004) argues that China has incorporated this approach in their economic strategy in Africa and Wissenbach (2007) suggest that the European Union needs to reconsider the soft power element of it own policy in the face of this.

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Miller and Slater (2000) have shown how information and communication technologies can assist the maintenance of identity in diasporic communities. The use of the internet as a social space by Trinidadians away from their home is mirrored in the use of the internet in support of both cultural and business activities in the African diaspora (Little, Holmes and Grieco, 2001).

Africa has seen a major renaissance in the celebration of its indigenous culture and art, both traditional and modern, through the new communication technologies. Local African radio (JOY FM from Accra, Ghana) is available globally through the Internet; African dance can be viewed globally through the same mode, the texts and tales of oral legends and beliefs are now available on line and all serve the perpetuation of an Africa base to identity in the African diaspora (http://www.geocities.com/margaret_grieco/kente/kente.html). Not only can members of the recent diasporas from Africa access this identity base but so too can members of the ancient diasporas - black America now has an accessible, authentic, African cultural base which it can readily access in the reshaping of its form. Africa is not a simple recipient of culture across the Internet but rather a panoply of African voices are taking an active hand in the shaping of both the cultural and policy content of the Internet (http://www.ghaclad.org): similarly, indigenous African business is making use of the Internet for conducting commerce, most particularly the marketing of craft goods and the organisation of tourism.

This use of the latest generation of communication technology builds on the use of earlier technologies, such as the development of social capital around indigenous capacity in radio broadcast (Mytton, 2000) and African forms of social use for a technology – the portable radio – that has become a personal artefact in the West.(Spitulnik, 2000). Similarly there is distinctiveness to African usage of mobile telephony (Gough and Grezo, 2005). This appropriation of key technologies is essential to any knowledge-based self-development strategy (Okpaku, 2006).

An interesting and important use of the Internet in South Africa is found in the area of industrial relations (http://www.cosatu.org.za/): African unions are connecting up both internally within Africa and globally in the advancing of the interests of labour (http://www.geo-cities.com/unionsonline/). They are originators of action as well as receivers of the industrial relations agenda: the global coordination enabled by strategies such as 'web' or 'union rings' permits local determination in the context of global synchronisation.

All of this suggests that Africa is in a position to appropriate those elements of China's development policies that can be deployed in an African context. The 'information challenge' (Grieco Colle and Ndulo, 2006) presented by the demands of the global economy has been met by China and is Africa is engaging with it with increasing effectiveness for both economic and human development.

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