Through African Eyes:  
Representations of China on the African continent  

Chris Alden  
LSE  

Paper presented at SciPo/Fudan/LSE conference  
October 2006  
NOT FOR CITATION WITHOUT PERMISSION  

‘We look again to the East where the sun rises,  
and no longer to the West where it sets.’  
Robert Mugabe¹  

China’s growing public presence in Africa, coming as it does against the backdrop of a sustained Western media campaign of ‘shock and awe’ at China’s new-found power, raises important questions about the nature of this emerging relationship. Once an avowedly anti-imperialist force on the continent with aspirations to ‘third world’ leadership, Beijing’s recent foray into Africa has been characterised by a singular focus on resource acquisition and commercial opportunism that, for some observers, belies its rhetoric of partnership. Two way trade, which stood at less than US$1 billion in 2000, has surged to nearly US$40 billion in 2006 while in the same period China’s share of Africa’s trade has jumped from 2.6% to over 6%, making it the continent’s third largest trading partner after the United States and France. Africa has featured on the Chinese diplomatic circuit, benefiting from no less than three major tours in the last year by Chinese leaders as well as a heads of state summit in Beijing this November. And, while a decade ago there was little evidence of China in Africa, today there are hundreds of major Chinese businesses, bolstered by tens of thousands of Chinese labourers, retailers and tourists.  

At the core of China’s rapid insertion into African markets is its deliberate promotion of a foreign policy of ‘no political strings’ which, when coupled to Beijing’s willingness to provide direct aid and concessionary loans, has proven to be tremendously appealing to Africans. At the same time, while African resources are increasingly important to the health of the Chinese economy, the continent also occupies an important place in China’s global ambitions as well. China’s emergence as a key player in Africa, the impact of its presence and its challenges to traditional Western pre-eminence in African economies all form critical components of this dynamic new relationship.  

At the same time, for China to make the inroads into what has traditionally been a Western dominated (with a significant South African dimension) economy in Africa, it has felt the need to embark on a campaign of raising African elite, as well as public, awareness as to its own importance as a foreign power with different intentions and
aspirations towards the continent than the West. Thus much of the thrust of their public statements are aimed at presenting themselves as an alternative to the West but one which has both shared understanding of ‘third world’ concerns with Africans and is in a position to help Africa through its investment and ODA. This approach feeds into its longstanding official recognition ‘battle’ with Taiwan, involving Beijing officials and their representatives in a public relations contest with counterparts from Taipei. Taken together, these factors have shaped the construction of China’s public image across the continent as it expands its reach into Africa.

The question, however, remains as to how is China’s new engagement experienced by Africans? Is the image of partnership, a key feature and aim of the Chinese diplomatic initiative on the continent, being recognised by African governments and the wider public? Do African elites hold to the view that China is an economic competitor? How are Africans generally reacting to the emergence of new Chinese products and communities in their midst? And, finally, is the Western ‘discourse of fear’ on China and its alleged hegemonic intentions being absorbed into the African discourse on China?

This paper will seek to provide some answers to these issues through an examination of the scholarly literature on images, public opinion and foreign policy; the construction of China’s new foreign policy of engagement with Africa; and a review and analysis of the African media, public statements and related materials to assess China’s image in Africa. It should be stated from the outset that the methodology employed here is based on a non-exhaustive survey of African media and public statements primarily by elites and, as such, cannot be considered definitive. Nonetheless, it does, in my opinion, offer some important and worthwhile insights into African attitudes and responses to Chinese foreign policy.

I Images, Public Opinion, the Media and Foreign Policy

Foreign policy is the product of human agency in two inter-related senses. First, it is individuals in a leadership position identifying foreign policy issues, making judgments about them and then acting upon that information that form the basis of foreign policy decisions. It is this fundamental insight, the product of the critique of rationality in decision making, which initiated a concentrated study of the impact of individual psychology on foreign policy. Underlying this approach is the recognition that individual leaders of states exercise a seminal influence over the foreign policy process by dint of their experience, outlook and limitations, and were therefore worthy of special attention. Amongst the diversity of psychological factors said to play a role in shaping foreign policy are the influence of individual perceptions and human cognition. Secondly, foreign policy decision makers and the decisions they take are themselves influenced by an array of societal perceptions, variously referred to as public opinion. Public opinion, a notorious slippery concept, in turn shapes – and is shaped by – the media. This inter-play between decision makers, societal forces and the media constitute the overall environment of decision making, setting the parameters for choice and action for a given state’s foreign policy.
For proponents of the psychological approach, foreign policy decision makers operate in a highly complex world and their decisions carry with them significant risks. These include linguistic-cultural barriers, stereo-types, the high volume of and incomplete information available to them. Hence through processes of perception and cognition, decision makers develop images, subjective assessments of the larger operational context, that when taken together constitute the ‘definition of the situation’. These definitions are always a distortion of reality as the purpose of perception is to simplify and order the external environment and can therefore never be completely rational in applying the maximisation of utility approach to decisions.

In dividing the setting of foreign policy decision making between the ‘operational’ and ‘psychological’ environments, Margaret and Harold Sprout opened up the possibility of FPA scholars investigating the interior life of the mind of individual foreign policy makers. Robert Jervis produced one of the most influential studies in this area on the role of ‘misperception’ and foreign policy, which he says stems from the fact that leaders make foreign policy based upon their perceptions rather than the actual ‘operational environment’. For Kenneth Boulding, this suggests that foreign policy decisions are largely the product of the aforementioned ‘images’ which individual leaders have of other countries or leaders and, therefore, are representations based upon stereotypes, biases and other subjective sources that interfere with their ability to conduct foreign policy. Both scholars see leadership as bringing their particularistic experience and outlook, perhaps shaped by individual and societal prejudices or media imagery, to the foreign policy process and thus introducing distortions to ‘definitions of the situation’. Building upon these insights, other behaviourist scholars in FPA have highlighted the distortions on rational foreign policy imposed by the search for cognitive consistency by individual leaders. Leon Festinger’s concept of ‘cognitive dissonance’, that is the effort by which a decision maker deliberately excludes new or contradictory information, in order to maintain his existing image or cognitive map is one example of this. Jervis’ investigation into ‘cognitive consistency’ points out that foreign policy makers habitually screen out disruptive effects by finding a logical way of incorporating it into the individual’s rationale behind a given foreign policy choice.

A further dimension of foreign policy is the role that public opinion and, in conjunction with that, the media play in shaping perceptions of. Public opinion is a broad term that constitutes the mass, attentive public and various interest groups and lobbies. Public opinion can be said to be a ‘background constraint’ on foreign policy in the form of setting parameters on the decision and the approach to be adopted. The classical view of public opinion holds that it has no role or influence over foreign policy and it is largely indifferent and ignorant of foreign policy issues. Christopher Hill, in his study of British public opinion on foreign policy, echoes this sentiment when he characterises public opinion as ‘the Loch Ness monster’, something often spoken of but never seen. James Rosenau disputes this position and sees public opinion in pyramidal terms with the top level being the elite (constituting the government, the legislature and the media); the second being the attentive public (intellectuals and business); and the third being the rest of the public (who are indifferent). The key determinant of this public concern seems to
be ‘issue saliency’, that is the idea that public interest is issue-dependent. Routine issues of diplomacy do not penetrate the normal array of public concerns but economic and trade issues as well as matters of war and peace do arouse interest.

For this reason it is clear that the media plays a crucial, if controversial, role in the foreign policy process as the information bridge between the public, decision makers at the state level and international actors and events. The media’s influence on foreign policy can be seen from three basic perspectives: as an agenda setter (an example being William Randolph Hearst, an American media mogul who promoted war through his newspapers); as a ‘clearinghouse’ for information (essentially a neutral provider of news for the public); and as a propaganda tool for governments. More recently, FPA scholarship has debated the ‘CNN effect’, the degree to which the media spotlight on a given matter can actually force a state to take action, through research into government responses to portrayals of humanitarian crises. Noam Chomsky characterised the process of opinion formation in democracies as ‘manufactured consent’ whereby the state and media elites shape citizens’ outlook to conform to their particular interests so as to win support for pursuit of foreign policy. Following on this insight, scholarly studies have gone on to suggest that only when elite opinion within a state is itself divided over a particular foreign policy issue do the media actually exert influence over public opinion.

The role of the media is, due to its role as agenda setter, clearinghouse and opinion shaper, the proper starting point for a study of public opinion. This is especially the case in an investigation into African views on the heretofore unexamined subject of beliefs, outlooks and reactions to Chinese engagement in Africa. With the phenomenon of a significant Chinese presence being relatively new to Africans, it enhances to centrality of ‘opinion shaping’ devises such as newspapers and elite statements as instruments for the coalescing, interpretation and encouraging the formation of normative representations of this novel experience. Moreover, for the Chinese government, the Africans’ construction of images of this ‘new other’ and the situating of these in relation to established foreign actors and experiences such as those of the West is crucial to the overall success of its ‘thrust’ into Africa.

II Constructing a Foreign Policy of ‘Rayonnement’ for Africa

Since the Chinese leader, Jiang Zemin, visited the African continent in 1996 and officially set relations on a non-ideological footing with an emphasis on resource acquisition, the challenge of Chinese foreign policy towards Africa has been to frame this new approach in terms that would appeal to sceptical African governments. Having been only a minor external actor in the past – and virtually out of sight with the advent of the Cultural Revolution and concurrent closure of most diplomatic missions to the continent – Chinese leaders needed desperately to raise its profile if China was to succeed in its aims. In their favour, unlike Western countries, was a solid record of support for liberation struggles and independence (though, one blemished by occasionally backing the wrong liberation movement as in Angola). Moreover, though acknowledged as small in overall quantity, the efforts in building the Tanzam railway, the role of barefoot
doctors and agricultural specialists in West Africa were remembered positively amongst Africa. Finally, the last challenge facing the Chinese government was to communicate the fact of China’s rise as a major economic power and the accompanying capacity of its emergent multinational corporations to compete successfully with long established Western partners.

Three quotations capture the Chinese government’s attempt to construct a relationship with African states which is founded on a mutual development agenda, shared values and, in the global context, a common analysis of threat. China’s foreign policy white paper on Africa, a seminal document in the sense that it is the only one ever publicly released by the Foreign Ministry, was released in January 2006 to counter negative perceptions of its role in Africa. Drawing from public statements on China-Africa relations made by Chinese officials over the past decade, the White Paper declares:

‘Sincerity, equality and mutual benefit; solidarity and common development: these are the principles guiding China-Africa exchange and co-operation.’

The emphasis on self-interest mingled with shared experiences and developmental aims is seen to be the ‘common project’ that encapsulates the rationale for a renewed engagement between China and Africa. A leading Chinese scholar on African affairs, He Wenping, adds,

‘Common sense about human rights and sovereignty is only one of the common values shared by China and Africa.’

This suggests that the Chinese government sees an abiding cultural as well as political context, borne of a common historical experience felt both by Chinese and Africans of the international system, for interpreting the relationship between individuals and the state.

And finally Wen Jiabao, the Chinese premier, stated at the China Africa Co-operation Forum in Addis Ababa in 2003 that the broader global strategic purpose of forging closer ties with Africa was to counter Western dominance. He said pointedly, ‘Hegemony is raising its ugly head,’ a position which certainly resonates with many African elites, for whom the unadulterated use of conditionalities by Western donors have been seen as a threat both to their own position and the African political system generally.

These fundamental principles form the basis of the new terms of engagement as expressed by China. However, as presented, they still did not address what is an unprecedented and concerted surge of investment, political ties and migration by Chinese interests into Africa. For this, the authorities in Beijing turned to the historical past for inspiration.

III. Remembrances of Things Past
As Beijing is adamant in pointing out, China’s contemporary engagement with Africa is not ‘new’ but in fact has its roots in as policies pursued since the mid 1950s as well as earlier historical precedents. Africa in the Cold War era was seen primarily by Chinese leaders as a terrain for ideological competition with the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as the remaining European influences. This took the form of Chinese diplomatic and military support in Southern Africa, for example, for liberation movements which were ideologically committed to Maoist China as opposed to the Soviet Union. Moreover, Chinese officials recognised that, with its numerical advantage in the General Assembly and anti-colonial perspective, independent African states held the key to removing the Republic of China from its official status as occupant of the coveted permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

While the onset of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s put paid to overt Chinese political activism on the continent, Chinese overseas development assistance (ODA) continued to be a feature of relations. The most notable expression of this was the construction of the TanZam railway, linking Zambia to the coastal port of Dar es Salaam and thus breaking the dependency on white-ruled Rhodesia. Apparently the decision to build the railroad grew out of a direct request from Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda, seconded by his Tanzanian counterpart, Julius Nyerere (who greatly admired Mao’s collectivisation strategies and applied it with equal ‘success’ in his country) to Mao. Interestingly, many of the aspects of Beijing’s current approach to African relations reflect the impulses and decisions of that era. This includes the government’s responsiveness to an African priority, the use state resources and preference for Chinese labour to construct infrastructure projects and the signature of a high profile prestige project to mark relations.

Finally, the saliency of the past for contemporary China-Africa relations is reflected in the degree to which Chinese officials feel compelled to summon it in their dealings with African states. In Sudan, for example, Beijing peppers its bilateral diplomatic events and official communiqués with references to General Charles ‘Chinese’ Gordon, who helped suppress the Taiping rebellion in the 1860s, and upon being transferred to the Sudan, was put under siege and killed by the forces of the Mahdi in 1885. The Chinese claim that this event, which ‘finally punished’ the imperialist, brings the two states closer together. Equally, the Chinese government likes to underscore how African slaves, who escaped from their Dutch masters on the then colony of Formosa, ‘fought shoulder to shoulder’ with the Chinese General Zheng Chenggong’s forces in 1664. And, the forging of Chinese relations with the coastal states in East African and Southern African is characterised as merely the revival of ties instigated in the late fifteenth century by the Ming dynasty’s Admiral Cheng Ho/Zheng He. Crucially, as Chinese officials are quick highlight, the presence of what was the world’s largest fleet with 63 junks and 28,000 men did not result in conquest or humiliation of Africans but rather a brief trading and diplomatic venture. The analogy with the contemporary relationship is, of course, never far from the surface.

IV. Winning Markets, Changing Minds and Opening Hearts
How have Africans taken to China’s entreaties? Individual leaders have, nearly without exception, spoken quite favourably of China at least in the initial contact period that accompanied China’s ‘outward movement’ after 1996. No survey data exists as yet on public attitudes towards the Chinese in Africa so the nearest equivalent is recourse to representations through public discourse, primarily gleaned from elite interviews, public statements and local media. Moreover the rapidity of growth in China’s presence on the continent has been such that it has taken time for African sources to develop an image of China. That being said, at this point one could determine that there are three basic portrayals of China within Africa that has emerged from an analysis of the aforementioned public representations. These are: ‘China as Africa’s development partner’, ‘China as Africa’s competitor’ and ‘China as hegemon’.

China as partner

China is, in all likelihood a position shared by most Africans, portrayed to be a positive force in continental affairs. Underlying this attitude is an appreciation of China’s willingness to invest financial and political capital at a time when the traditional Western sources were withdrawing from the continent. Crumbling infrastructure, ineffective telephone systems, colonial era government buildings have all been replaced through Chinese grants and loans as part of the overall package of incentives which have come with the fostering closer ties with Beijing. Moreover, the now ubiquitous Chinese retail stores found in much of rural Africa today has brought low-cost consumer goods to a population which, until recently, had no access to such items. And, persistent, high level diplomacy by Chinese leaders has reinstated a sense of dignity and importance to the leadership and bureaucratic functionaries of an otherwise neglected continent. At the core of this representation of China as development partner are a number of features which Africans make specific reference to. These are the ‘no conditionalities’ policy; anti-colonial solidarity; and the success of the Chinese model of development.

No conditionalities:

‘The US will talk to you about governance, about efficiency, about security, about the environment. The Chinese just ask: “how do we procure this license?”’ says Mustafa Bello, head of Nigeria’s Investment Promotion Centre.14

‘If a G8 country had wanted to rebuild the stadium (in Freetown), for example, we’d still be holding meetings!’ Sahr Johnny, Sierra Leonean ambassador to China.15

‘After discussions with his President Yoweri Museveni, the Chinese Prime Minister agreed to give us Shs24 billion to extend the Parliament. The money is to construct the new parliament chambers and offices for government officials and Members of Parliament. I have spoken with the Chinese ambassador and our experts are liaising with the experts from China who will be in the country to start
work in a few weeks.’ Ezna Suruma, Uganda’s Finance Minister, address made to the applause of the Ugandan parliamentarians.

Solidarity:

‘China has been our friend since the dawn of the liberation struggle,’ reports the Zambian ambassador to South Africa at a closed meeting of African diplomats and their Chinese counterparts in January 2006.

‘(China’s) strategic business engagement with Africa has been underpinned by a general closeness due to a “cultural fit” between the Chinese and Africans – driven to a large extent, by their common status as peoples historically exploited by imperialistic forces and their shared status as developing economies.’ Kobus van der Wath, South African businessman

Development model:

‘Never in modern history has a nation successfully made such a determined and massive effort as China has in achieving progress within such a short span of time. Ethiopia has been following this remarkable achievement with great interest and admiration.’ Ato Addis Dinesa, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ethiopia

‘South Africa believes that China can play a crucial role in the area of economic co-operation with Africa and is therefore confident that China will give full support to NEPAD and partner with us in the realisation of dreams of African renewal.’ Thabo Mbeki, December 2001

‘China promotes the state-led gradualist reform agenda with remarkable social protection for the mass of potential losers, as opposed to Nigeria’s “shock therapy” reform in which a few winners are indulged while the mass of losers are left bare.’ Daily Trust (Nigeria)

China as competitor

‘China is both a tantalising opportunity and a terrifying threat’ is the view expressed by Moeletsi Mbeki, a prominent South African businessman.

For some Africans, especially those with established business interests that are able to compete internationally, China represents an enticing, if sometimes daunting, challenge. Like their counterparts in the West (and in parts of Latin America), the twin spectacle of China’s apparently insatiable need for resources coupled to its 1.3 billion consumers is a potent force for firms wishing to export to China. South African firms in construction, mining and telecommunications have found that they have lost business to Chinese competition but, more recently, some have embarked on strategies of co-operation to ameliorate this problem through, for example, joint ventures.
At the same time, for many African businesses, trade union officials and workers the arrival of China as an economic force on the continent has meant strong competition and, in some cases, personal hardship. The lower cost of production have put hundreds of thousands of African textile labourers out of work as well as brought about the closure of factories. Other local industries, notably automobile manufactures and digital identification technologies as well as construction firms (all South Africa based), are being challenged by Chinese products and firms. The reaction amongst African businessmen has differed from that of the labour sector.

‘The Chinese have a strong work ethic, and we hope that this will be assimilated into the trainees that we send over (to China). They also need to be exposed to the sometimes arduous working conditions that can be associated with this industry.’ Briss Mathabathe, Imbani Consortium (joint Chinese-South Africa venture to expand Richards Bay shipping facilities)

‘They are very hard working. In Africa, our foundation was a lazy foundation. We used to have land, we used to have food, so people did not bother about working hard. Africans have to pull up their socks to meet the standards of the current world situation.’ Mohammed Kadala, Tanzanian trader working in Hong Kong

The worries of trade unionists and others, however, is reflected in the jobs losses experienced in African industry as well as treatment of African employees.

‘Jobs are being lost on a daily basis in the textile industry due to the massive and uncontrolled import of cheap Chinese textiles.’ Willie Madisha, President of the Congress of South African Trade Unions

‘We are exporting jobs to the Chinese while our people are unemployed.’ Dumelang Saleshando, MP, Botswana

‘The (Zambian) employees are even subjected to serious beatings due to lack of communication. They (the Chinese) can’t speak English to give proper instructions…’ Letter to the editor, The Post (Lusaka)

In the retail trade, where Chinese shop keepers have used their acumen and superior connections to put rival Africans out of business, there is some concern which has, in the case of Nigeria, led to summary government closure of Chinese wholesalers and retailers in three shopping centres in 2005. At the same time, there are supportive comments by some Nigerian wholesalers who purchase goods in Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

‘There are many things you can take from here that are good. They (the Chinese) don't work on bribes. I have not come across bribery here. Never.’ Chima Henry, Nigerian trader who buys mobile telephones for sale in Lagos.

Related to this is the diversity of reactions to Chinese consumer goods on the part of Africans. Reflecting the positive are comment below.
‘Before the Chinese came, very few people wore shoes. At least now they have shoes,’ comments in Cape Verde.29

‘(Algerians buy) Chinese cars because of their quality and their reasonable price.’ Marwani Halabi, China Cherry Automobile representative in Algeria, explains their phenomenal appeal.30

On the other hand, there is an undercurrent of criticism of Chinese products, at least amongst the better off. ‘Zhing-zhang’ goods, the disparaging phrase for Chinese manufactured consumer items coined in Zimbabwe (based on earlier racist phraseology) and used throughout the region to describe low-quality goods found in some Chinese shops. 

**China as hegemon**

There is a minority perspective which sees in China’s rising global power, a potential hegemon with continental aspirations for Africa. This is seen, perhaps ironically, in both a positive and negative light within Africa. One must keep in mind that hegemony, while it may have a pejorative connotation in some usage (see below), is defined as a relationship of asymmetrical exchange by neo-realists and neo-Gramscians with clear benefits for all participants.

Hegemonic states are those who have been able to use their superior attributes, be they material, technological or in the realm of social organisation, to attain a position of dominance relative to other states in the international system. Hegemonic states pursue, according to Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane, foreign policies which are concerned with the construction and maintenance of an international system such that it continues to serve their national interests (‘hegemonic stability’).31 The organising of a system of states, whose economic fortunes are tied to that of the hegemon through a variety of instruments (including trade agreements, financial devices, multilateralist institutions as well as a shared ideological outlook at least amongst the elite) is done in exchange for a guarantee of stability and prosperity has been an acknowledged feature of the international political economy of the last few hundred years. A negative interpretation of hegemony sees it through a one-dimensional framework of compellance by one dominant state over that of other less materially powerful states solely aimed a benefiting the dominant state.

Benevolent hegemon:

‘This 21st century is the century for China to lead the world. And when you are leading the world, we want to be close behind you. When you are going to the moon, we don’t want to be left behind.’ Olusengun Obasanjo, President of Nigeria.32
‘China provides a new alternative direction…the foundation of a new global paradigm,’ declares Robert Mugabe, President of Zimbabwe.

Here the view is that China will, in keeping with the ‘no-conditionalities’ policy mentioned above, serve as a possible alternative pole within the international system to the heretofore dominant role of the West (since the end of the Cold War). It is arguable that, with its history of weak states and failed development, the abandonment by the West has brought about an instinctive reaction on the part of African elites to seek out new form of patron-client relations. This conforms broadly with the notion of ‘extraversion’ which, according to Jean-Francois Bayart, is a time-honoured strategy of African elites to extract foreign resources in the service of their domestic struggles. The rapid gains made by China, attributed to facile and astute diplomacy by Beijing, may in fact have much more to do with African receptiveness at the particular time (the mid 1990s and the high point of Western ‘Afro-pessimism’) than is commonly acknowledged.

Malignant hegemon:

‘They (the Chinese) are all over the place. If the British were our colonial masters yesterday, the Chinese have come and taken their place.’ Trevor Ncube, Zimbabwean newspaper mogul

‘The danger is that China will politely rip off Africa, just as the West did.’ The Nation (Kenya)

As with the case of the ‘benevolent hegemon’, the vision of a malignant hegemon is already implied in earlier representations such as that of the competitor. Pariah state policy produced a backlash amongst some who have been dismayed at China’s support for these regimes. This echoes much of the anti-China discourse emerging from the conservative think tanks within the American academic and research milieu.

V. Old Enemies and New Friends

Of course, some of the most enduring representations of China for Africans are a product of the Chinese diplomatic struggle to win official recognition against that of the Republic of China, or Taiwan. In this respect, with 53 countries, Africa has been at the forefront of a longstanding conflict as the two have sought to make diplomatic gains at the expense of the other. During the Cold War period, representation was primarily based on ideological claims, with Beijing openly declaring its support (as noted above) for African independence while Taipei emphasised its allegiance to the United States.

In the contemporary period, this dispute is refracted through Africans in an interesting manner which reflects changes to the global environment and in relations between the two rivals themselves. For instance, the question of diplomatic relations in South Africa in the two and a half years after the onset of democratic elections in 1994 which saw Pretoria unexpectedly maintain ties with Taipei, produced a flurry of diplomacy by both
sides. In addition to promises of foreign aid and other material enticements to switch (or maintain) official recognition, what is particularly striking is the effort by Beijing and Taipei to use local African voices as well as make use of the media to shape elite decision making and public opinion generally. In the South African case, this resulted in numerous study tours for politicians, journalists and academics, as well as funded conferences and the production of books and newspaper articles. An influential publication produced at the height of the recognition debate, drawing upon arguments for both protagonists, is *South Africa and the Two Chinas Dilemma*.36

The primary themes presented by pro-Beijing sources at that time emphasis that China is the world’s most dynamic economy, is a development success with applicability to the African situation and has had a resolutely pro-independent Africa foreign policy throughout the history of the People’s Republic. Furthermore, it is an emerging global power with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and, increasingly, an active multilateralist. Though published well after the start of formal diplomatic relations in 1997, *China Through the Third Eye: South African perspectives* capture much of the praise and wonder expressed by notable South Africans as to Chinese development, business and culture.37

The primary themes presented by pro-Taipei sources at that time focused on its development success and its applicability to the African situation, and sometimes dwells on the promotion of democracy in post-1986 Taiwan and its saliency for African states (though, this portrayal is promoted only selectively as it resonates only with a few political systems such as post-apartheid South Africa). Taiwan’s acknowledged achievements in technological areas as well as its close ties with the United States are further points raised by its proponents. See, for example, *The Taiwan Experience: implications for South Africa* and *Look East: Republic of China through the eyes of SA journalists*, both published in 1995.38

A point worth observing is that, once the debate within South African was decided in late 1996 in Beijing’s favour, it seems that the characterisations and portrayals of Taiwan (or promoted by Taipei) have not lingered in the local media. Indeed, given the high profile that Taiwan once had in the South African media, it is notable now how absent it is subsequently whereas, as is the case with much of the international media, China continues to loom large. This points to the shallow social roots of the Taiwanese experience in Africa, with a limited foundation that has enabled it in other post-dercognition settings such as the United States or Singapore to continue to feature in the public discourse (albeit under different terms).39

VI. Conclusion: China Imagined and Its Foreign Policy Implications for Africa

Contemporary representations of China in Africa, based on this admittedly somewhat arbitrary and attenuated ‘tour’ of the African media and public utterances by African elites, suggest that China’s new engagement with Africa is being met with a complexity of responses across the continent. Arguably, the differences in African outlook on China
presented here are reflective of social segmentation, with government officials and business generally positive about China and the possibilities that it offers while trade unionists and local NGOs are more likely to voice criticism to the African press as to China’s engagement. Again, this conforms to the old foreign policy adage that ‘where you stand is where you sit’ on a particular issue. Nevertheless, in the approach used here the voice(s) of the ‘masses’ is not particularly articulated, especially when one considers that the media of choice for the population remains radio rather than newspapers (or television). There is a clear need to gain some understanding beyond the anecdotal of the responses of ordinary Africans to China’s rise, perhaps best done through public opinion survey work. One cautionary point is that, if this approach is pursued, it needs to be done in conjunction with a comparative survey of the Francophone African press as well as the role other foreign countries to allow for better contextualisation of reactions (e.g., examining images of Portugal in a Lusophone country, the US, etc.). At the same time, the fact remains that any analysis based solely upon perceptual tools such as images and portrayals by the media are by definition flawed. And yet, as all politicians know (and some academics might concur), the power of perceptions to shape outlooks – both society’s and individual decision maker’s – is undeniable. The discourse of fear in many circles within the West, and its counterpart in some nationalist circles within Asia, is but one concrete example of this phenomenon.

With respect to the implications for China-Africa relations, the image that China has sought to project through its new foreign policy engagement with Africa is at increasing variance with the African response to that approach. The appeal of ‘no conditionalities’ and the employment of high level diplomacy, coupled to foreign aid (primarily low-interest loans) is highest with African elites in government and, to an extent, industry. A further source of support – though difficult to tally beyond the anecdotal in this paper – is that of ordinary African consumers who have clearly benefited from low cost goods. However, for some businessmen in direct competition with China, the role (or appearance) of connections with government officialdom has made them wary of China’s role. The more vociferous response of African trade unionists and their supporters reflects the challenges to their economic position. On the matter of ‘hegemony’, the African governing elite seems to view this development (if it indeed is an appropriate way of understanding the relations) as being essentially benevolent, though again some sectors (media) are less sanguine at the prospect. Finally, further work on the imagery and impact of the China-Taiwan recognition debate on African perceptions of China needs to be done, especially as this is a key foreign policy area in Chinese-African relations.

At this point in time, it is the employment of history that still dominates the shaping of African elite responses to China. Those elements within the West promoting a ‘discourse of fear’ which is manifested in its analysis of China Africa relations is largely absent from African sources (though this does not, as noted above, mean that there is an absence of criticism of China within African circles). In this regard, the West should not underestimate the near-universal displeasure, exhaustion and disappointment (if not outright hostility) that Africans feel towards it. A good measure of this can be seen, much to the dismay of his critics, in the consistently positive responses that Mugabe from fellow elites and the population as a whole (though not amongst fellow Zimbabweans!)
whenever he travels in other parts of the African continent. The West’s employment of conditionalities, merely the latest in the decades of humiliating experiences at the hands of former colonial powers and the United States, and echoes the humiliations of the ‘unequal treaties’ foisted on China by the West in the 19th century. Indeed, China’s ability to recognise this is part of the genius of its foreign policy endeavours towards Africa. While this invocation of the past in the service of contemporary interests is certainly no substitute for concrete actions, and increasingly Chinese foreign policy is being judged on Africans’ contemporary experiences of China, there is no doubt that it has enabled China to achieve an unparalleled prominence in Africa in an extra-ordinarily short period of time. Whether this invocation in its present form is sufficient to sustain African attitudes towards China, especially as relations move beyond the declaratory phase to complexity of longer term relations, remains to be seen.
Endnotes

1 Cited in Financial Times (London), 28 February 2006.
8 See Lance Bennett and David Paletz, eds., Taken by Storm: the media, public opinion and US foreign policy in the Gulf War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994).
16 The Monitor (Kampala) 15 July 2006.
17 Author observation, meeting of Chinese Ambassador to South Africa with senior African diplomats, Pretoria, 19 January 2006.
23 Cosatu estimates 60,000 textile workers have become unemployed directly and a further 200,000 indirectly in South African while Nigerian sources suggest 350,000 workers have lost their jobs in the textile sector due to Chinese competition.
24 Cited in Mining and Engineering News (Johannesburg), 9 June 2006.
26 Cited in Mail and Guardian (Johannesburg), www.mg.co.za, 21 September 2006.
27 Mmegi/The Reporter (Gaborone), 17 July 2006.
28 Mandy Mwaseba, The Post (Lusaka) 13 September 2006
29 Cited in Heidi Haugen and Jorgen Carling, ‘Chinese in Cape Verde: the lucky, the unlucky, the players and the dealers’, unpublished paper, p. 6.
30 www.elkharbar.com/FrEn/lire.php?id=41216&iic=52
31 Robert Cox says, ‘In a hegemonic order, the dominant power makes certain concessions or compromises to secure the acquiescence of lesser powers to an order that can be expressed in terms of general interests’ Robert Cox, ‘Social Forces, States and World Orders’, in Robert Keohane, ed. Neorealism and Its Critics (New York: Columbia UP 1986), p. 246
36 South Africa and the Two Chinas Dilemma (Braamfontein: SIIA/IGD 1995).
39 I owe this point to Francoise Mengin.