

**FRAMING A SINOCENTRIC NARRATIVE? CHINA'S PUBLIC  
DIPLOMACY IN AFRICA THROUGH GLOBAL, REGIONAL AND  
BILATERAL LENSES**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
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(International Relations)  
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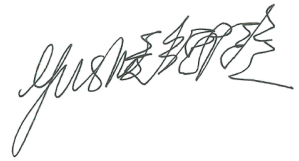
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April 2018

*The financial assistance of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, in collaboration with the South African Humanities Deans Association towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NIHSS and SAHUDA*

## Declaration

I declare that the thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree DPhil (International Relations) at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.



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## **Abstract**

This qualitative and exploratory study seeks to investigate how China's contemporary public diplomacy promotes its foreign policy interests in Africa, particularly in a post-2008 era. In order to answer this overarching research question, three interrelated purposes are pursued in this thesis. First is to uncover how China conceptualises public diplomacy in order to respond to concerns over its global rise. Second is the exploration of the relationship between the Sinocentric world narrative (that is China's historical position as the world's centre, which some scholars believe expresses itself in its outward communication) and the narratives adopted in its contemporary public diplomacy. Third is how China's public diplomacy adapts narratives in order to manage its foreign policy interests in Africa. Hence, the International Relations constructivist approach is adopted as a useful theoretical framework to explore issues of identity, context and socialisation. It also happens to fit the study of diplomacy well, as essentially a dynamic social process.

In order to understand what China is communicating about its rise through its public diplomacy in Africa, a selection of multi-level snapshots are adopted. They include China's communication towards Africa at the global level (the Belt and Road Initiative), regional level (through the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation) and bilateral level (South Africa). Together these snapshots reveal how China's public diplomacy uses historical narrative, promotes its interests and responds to dilemmas posed by recipient milieus.

In summary, it appears that China does not instrumentalise the Sinocentric world narrative as a signal of it seeking to create a world order in its image (although it does occasionally draw on narratives from that same historical period, to demonstrate its cooperative and non-threatening behaviour). Instead, it draws on narratives that speak to China–Africa links specifically, such as a shared colonial experience, solidarity politics during Africa's independence, China's support during the Cold War, and more contemporary links, like shared development aspirations. In turn, three broad findings are drawn from the study. First China's public diplomacy that helps meet its interests is conditioned by the African context and its ability to evolve. Second, since China–Africa relations exist in an interdependent world, combining domestic and global developments, as well as recipient-specific processes and factors, the narratives that China uses in Africa are conditioned by determinants whereby they become increasingly co-constituted. Third, it appears that as China's engagement in Africa deepens, the main challenge for its public diplomacy will be reconciling its rhetoric of symmetry with the growing awareness of its inherent structural power.

This topic is important, as much discussion exists on globalisation's impact on diplomacy and the need for increased public and outward engagement *vis-à-vis* public diplomacy. Yet less is understood about how policymakers – particularly in emerging and rising powers – are in fact making sense and responding to such changes (and what informs their choices). In particular, the study situates itself within important IR discussions on China – including the debate over its rising trajectory and whether it seeks to shape the world in its own image (as reflected by its calls for national rejuvenation, which links China to its past imperial splendour), or if it is actually integrating deeper into the Westphalian world order. The study will also advance from discussions on who China will become, to importantly, *what* it thinks and how it merges its past and self-perception today. Lastly it seeks to investigate China's increased engagement with the Global South, especially Africa, which provides a glimpse into the normative drivers of its diplomacy, and specifically the subset, public diplomacy, as well as contributing to the debate on its conduct in global affairs.

**KEYWORDS:** Diplomacy; Public Diplomacy; Foreign Policy; China–Africa relations; South Africa; Belt and Road Initiative; Forum on China–Africa Cooperation; International Relations

## **Acknowledgements**

My sincerest gratitude goes to my co-advisor, Professor Chris Alden, who motivated my original interest in and publication on issues around China–Africa diplomatic relations. It is through his encouragement that I managed to take the deepening relationship between Africa and Asia, beyond something I merely observed growing-up in South Africa; to an area I wish to contribute more to. Thank you to my other co-advisor, Professor Maxi Schoeman – and the support of the University of Pretoria – who have ensured my experience as a doctoral candidate to be both meaningful and memorable. I would also like to give special thanks to Dr Yolanda Spies, for her encouragement during the start of this thesis.

I can only hope that I too am able to instil as much passion and integrity into my work and life, as these respected academics do.

I also acknowledge that my own achievements and the work presented here could not have been possible without the unfaltering support of colleagues at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA). I'm indebted to the institute for providing me countless experiences, which I believe have built the foundation for my career, whatever route it takes.

A final thanks goes to my family and extended family. To Lieschen Reyneke, thank you for recognising my ability to analyse. I owe my early interest in history and people, to your own dedication to education and your ability to capture the humanness in every person. To my mother, Suh-Yung – whom I respect deeply for breaking so many traditional moulds and for her tireless work ethic – I'll never forget what you once said: to be a successful parent is to make sure your own children achieve more and live better than yourself. Last but not least to Serafim. Thank you for encouraging me to take on this PhD challenge and believing in me, sometimes more than I do. Your patience and support does not go unnoticed.

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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ANC	African National Congress
AU	African Union
AWF	African Wildlife Foundation
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CADFund	China–Africa Development Fund
CASS	The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CIs	Confucius Institutes
COSIIF	China Ocean Strategic Industry Investment Fund
CPC	Communist Party of China
CRI	China Radio International
DIRCO	Department of International Relations and Cooperation
EU	European Union
FOCAC	Forum on China–Africa Cooperation
GDP	gross domestic product
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IR	International Relations
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOU	Memoranda of understanding
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NDB	New Development Bank
NGO	Non-governmental organisations
OBOR	One Belt, One Road
PIC	Public Investment Corporation
PRC	People’s Republic of China
PTUZ	The Progressive Teachers Union Zimbabwe
SACETA	South Africa-China Economic and Trade

	Association
SANEF	South African National Editors' Forum
SACP	South African Communist Party
SARFT	State Administration of Radio, Film and TV
SCIO	State Council Information Office
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
TAZARA	Tanzania-Zambia Railway
TCA	The Chinese Association
TICAD	Tokyo International Conference on African Development
UN	United Nations
UNESCAP	UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WTO	World Trade Organisation
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front
ZTE	Zhong Xing Telecommunication Equipment

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Contextualisation

The world has become increasingly complex and interconnected. While there is a large body of literature that explores the impact of globalisation – the process of international economic integration – on policymaking, less is understood about *how* countries are responding, in varying ways, through diplomatic agency, roles and relationships (Wiseman 1999: 36 & 42). One of these diplomatic choices, an increasingly specialised field in both theory and practice, is public diplomacy: government’s strategic diplomatic interaction with global and domestic non-state actors.

Within the international relations (IR) field, academic research on public diplomacy – as the latest diplomatic ‘advancement’ – remains dominated by a Western perspective, especially as an American-coined term. Yet the reality is that more and more non-Western countries, in particular emerging powers such as Brazil, India, Qatar and Turkey, are promoting their own narratives through public diplomacy, as part of what Zakaria (2008) calls ‘the rise of the rest’. The increased number of players suggests that this is not a uniform practice; rather there are different objectives and approaches that inform it, determining its relative success.<sup>1</sup> Similarly the specific strategies employed also reveal insight into a country’s identity itself – and how societal dynamics are projected through their larger foreign policy (Brett, 2000: 102).

This study will join the discourse on the public diplomacy of emerging powers, a new and understudied area of international relations. The justification is as follows.

Not long ago alternative forms of organising the world, as deviations from the traditional Westphalian world order,<sup>2</sup> were explained as irrational and psychological rather than intellectual – but the world is also witnessing the rising wealth, power and confidence of Asian nations (Kissinger, 2014: 173; Moody, 1994: 734). This leads to the question of whether such nations are modernising and seeking to challenge the current world order, and how they communicate such interests to the world. One compelling element of historical East Asian politics is the relationship between imperial China and its periphery, characterised by a tributary system, with a unique set of ideas and practices

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the mission statement of Confucius Institutes (that promote Chinese language and culture broad) premises that enhancing people relations can improve understanding of China and in turn state-to-state relations, whereas agencies like USAID and the British Council have a good governance (and democracy) promotion component in their mission statements and activities, which are not necessarily complementary to state relations.

<sup>2</sup> Defined by Kissinger (2014: 9) as a concept held by a region or civilisation on the nature of just arrangements and the distribution of power, believed to be applicable to the entire world.

and the assumption of China's centrality in such a system – referred to as the Chinese or Sinocentric world order (Feng, 2009: 601-602). In fact this system was 'developed and perpetuated by the rulers of China over many centuries' (Fairbank, 1968: 1) and while it came to an abrupt halt in the 1800s, it remains one of the most historically enduring puzzles. The significant question that follows in contemporary IR is the extent to which China, a rising power, will be socialised into, or deviate from, the current global system (Ikenberry, 2008). The progression of questions from whether China is even an important player (as was the case in the 1990s), to what its rise means this time around, is reflective of its significance in international relations today (Wang, 2004: 312; Evans, 2010: 42).

At present, emerging powers are considered some of the most formidable defenders of the Westphalian system of sovereignty (Saran & Rej, 2016). Yet China is also displaying increased interest in 'alternative diplomacy' (Wang, 2015) – as evidenced by its active support for parallel platforms like the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) grouping – and the associated New Development Bank (NDB), the multilateral development institution called the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The latter, proposed in 2013, is a trans-regional initiative, inspired by the ancient Silk Road (around 200 BC), a network of overland and complementary ocean trade routes. There are even concerns about it seeking to 'take the future of Asia back to its past', since there exists real academic interest, within China, in rediscovering its intellectual and physical heritage and 'to re-imagine the future world order' (Zhang & Buzan, 2012: 5). Chinese policymakers even cite historical texts reminiscent of the past when addressing domestic and global audiences. This rediscovery of theory and traditional practices has sparked concern of an 'unspoken political agenda' to re-invent the Sinocentric world order, along with the utilisation of historical injustices experienced, to raise nationalist sentiment (Zhao, 2004a: 248; Zhang & Buzan, 2012: 6). China could thus be challenging the liberal order as a pinnacle of human development, which it did not help design (Kissinger, 2014).

Simultaneously, however, in a period where the US (under President Donald Trump) and the UK (following Brexit) are gazing further inward, China's initiatives also display interest in driving globalisation – as emphasised by China's President Xi Jinping's statement at the World Economic Forum (2017) in Davos: the world should abandon protectionism and commit itself to growing an open global economy.

Either way, China can no longer keep a low profile: as the second-largest economy in the world and home to a fifth of the world's population, it is compelled to become more confident in its foreign policy and interact more actively abroad (Leonard, 2012: 21 & 24). Even more acutely, the 2008

financial crisis put the spotlight on China's own economic resilience and with that, added global attention to it. In response and underlying its various initiatives is also its use of 21st century public diplomacy. As a rising power in the information age, China's communication with foreign partners and publics is necessary – in order to gain popular support and socialise others into its worldview (defined in Chapter 3 as broadly the construction of an image of the world). Of course international regimes also influence the evolution of foreign policymaking in China, through 'the establishment of new institutions, the emergence of new foreign policy actors and the development of new ideas, values, or orientations among Chinese decision-makers' (Economy, 2001: 231). Therefore, the current world order is reliant on both active participation and communication, as well as influenced by shifting alliances – leading Chin (2015: 223) to describe it as a negotiated world order.

With this context in mind this study seeks to understand the nature of China's public diplomacy engagement in the Global South, and Africa in particular, providing a glimpse into the normative drivers of the country's diplomacy, and contributing to the debate on China's conduct in global affairs. At the same time the changing sphere of political influence and diplomacy under new configurations of global power, also includes the arena of evolving intra-Global South relations, where government–public engagement remains relatively new and underrepresented (Wu, 2014) (albeit there is slow recognition of such communication gaps).<sup>3</sup> Examination of China's public diplomacy will contribute much-needed knowledge on the complex relations *between* developing countries and rising powers, in the context of a developing IR issue, thus deviating from the bifurcated 'West versus the Rest' analysis trend within IR.

China's relations with Africa are of particular interest as it is actively seeking to engage the continent (as reflected in the number of visiting delegations and think tanks that have visited African counterparts in recent years). Yet from a non-Chinese perspective, there is less understanding of and even a measure of alarm over China's approach, outlook and agenda. Clearly, more empirical understanding of China's worldview – as expressed in its public diplomacy – and how it responds to foreign policy dilemmas in recipient environments, is required. As a participant at a China–Africa Business Forum in 2014 stated: mastering the Chinese language is not sufficient in engaging China – understanding the culture and way of thinking is just as, if not more, important.<sup>4</sup> Without understanding how various political actors make sense of the world, it is very difficult to understand

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<sup>3</sup> As reflected by the BRICS' first attempt at including civil society into formal processes, through the 2015 BRICS Civil Forum in Ufa, Russia.

<sup>4</sup> China–Africa Business Forum, Henley Business School, Johannesburg, 18 September 2014.

particular choices and even the source of conflicts that arise, through singular perspectives (Ringmar, 2012: 2).

Indeed China's engagement in Africa has increased in depth and breadth. The continent is increasingly incorporated in its global ambitions from the BRI to its UN participation. The sixth triennial Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), promoting and directing China–Africa relations since 2000, was hosted in South Africa in December 2015.<sup>5</sup> In fact, a recurring theme in the FOCAC declarations and action plans has been the conduct of public diplomacy, through building people-to-people links and exchanges. This also leads to questions about China's engagement at a bilateral, country-specific level that is exemplified by its relations with South Africa.

South Africa happens to have the largest number of Chinese cultural activities, students, tourists, Confucius Institutes (CI) and sister cities; it is also home to the largest Chinese community, consisting of generations of Chinese families (Liu, 2014: 31–32). China has also increased its engagement bilaterally, by co-organising the 2015 'China Year in South Africa' (a series of cultural events), reportedly only the second country after Russia to host a China year. It is for these reasons, as well as South Africa and China's shared membership of the BRICS and role as FOCAC co-chairs (2012–2018) – providing further platforms for public diplomacy engagement – that make South Africa a compelling instance of China's public diplomacy in Africa. (The author has an added advantage of being based in South Africa, which provides access to information and events on the bilateral relationship). This interaction at the bilateral level will usefully highlight the extent China adapts its public diplomacy, along processes and responses emanating from the recipient environment.

This study therefore seeks to contribute to the understanding of China's public diplomacy in three ways: (1) how China conceptualises public diplomacy in order to respond to concerns over its rise, as an overarching theme; (2) the relationship between China's historical Sinocentric worldview and the narratives adopted in its contemporary public diplomacy; and (3) how China's public diplomacy adapts narratives in order to manage its foreign policy interests in Africa. In order to address the specific phenomenon of China's public diplomacy in Africa, a level of analysis will be undertaken to ascertain its engagement in initiatives at the global (the BRI initiative and its link with Africa), regional (FOCAC) and country-specific (South Africa) directed levels.

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<sup>5</sup> As the first FOCAC summit on African soil.

## 1.2 Literature survey

This literature survey establishes the importance of the study on China's public diplomacy in Africa (and what informs it). The trends, salient issues and gaps around interrelated debates in IR, China's rise and diplomacy, as well as its relations with Africa will be outlined.

First, prominent IR scholars are recognising the need for more cultural sensitivity towards understanding international systems, which Zhang and Buzan (2012: 4) state has been 'bedevilled by presentism, ahistoricism, Eurocentrism, anarchophilia and state-centrism'. In reflecting on the present and future trajectory of diplomatic studies, Melissen (2011: 724) – echoed by Moody (1994: 734) – observes that research has predominantly adopted a Western worldview; and this has also been led by a select number of scholars and practitioners. Yet new avenues of inspiration, as offered by Asia's rise as a powerhouse in the 21st century, is important but requires greater cultural and historical sensitivity within IR analysis (Melissen, 2011: 724). Similarly, globalisation is often explored as a process where the rest of the world becomes westernised (free markets, democratic norms and privatisation) (Jacques, 2009: 8). Likewise, global shifts have motivated studies – such as Piccone's (2016) book on the fate of the international liberal order, specifically democracy and human rights. However, more could be explored regarding the impact of Asia's rise on diplomatic practice and how understanding cultural differences could potentially ease international conflicts (Evans, 2010: 54).

In fact the rise of the English School, constructivism and postmodernism in the 1990s has opened the possibility of thinking beyond relations between sovereign states to relations between polities – and even emphasising the overlooked aspect of rituals and ceremonies of power (Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 13 & 22). Indeed Qin (2016) finds that IR theory is predominantly Western-based in that individual rationality, an important concept in Western culture, is a core focus. Instead, he proposes a relational theory of world politics, which derives from Confucianism. This means that states are not just 'independent entities interacting in an egoistically rational way', rather their identities are a result of their very interrelatedness and interdependence (Qin, 2016:37). Hence state actions are also based on relations with others, which are constantly in motion. While Qin encourages cultural sensitivity and understanding when engaging IR theory, he does not actually contradict the study's selection of constructivism (explored in section 2.2). Rather his work is a refinement of this approach, by emphasising states as social actors who are affected by social relations.



Second is the debate on China's contemporary rise, where scholars and policy analysts continue to take different positions on its trajectory (Ikenberry, 2008). There is consideration that China's present rise is simply its re-emergence as a great power – a significant position it once held prior to its integration into the Westphalian system (Zhao, 2000: 4; Ford, 2013). This view is at the core of Chinese nationalism; and Chinese policymakers regularly enunciate it, as reflected by the calls for national rejuvenation (Zhao, 2000: 4; Zhao, 2015). The habits and customs of the East Asian tributary system seem, for Jacques (2009: 419), to have never quite disappeared under the current system. Hence, Fisher (2013) and Callahan (2008: 749) believe that China's historical interest in Sinocentrism (the view of itself as the world's cultural centre) is being revived. There is, however, disagreement on how modern China will behave, and scholars outline two scenarios (Zhao, 2004b: 3; Kissinger, 2014; Grant & Barysch, 2008; Zhang & Buzan, 2012: 5).

Some consider that an assertive rising China 'will wish to restore itself to the pinnacle of affairs in East Asia, and that it will seek to maximise its power' (French, 2017: 266). There is concern that China's rising economic and military status – by its own accord and interests – is a threat to regional and global security, as it will disrupt the balance of power and create realignments in the world (Zhao, 2004b: 3). Moreover, rising powers like post-Meiji Japan, Napoleonic France and the former Soviet Union have historically been prone to violence; yet at the same time, little is known about the behaviour of states that are emerging for a second time (Shambaugh, 1996: 185–186; Hsiung, 2010: 467). Nevertheless, in an article titled 'If China Ruled – a thought experiment', Ford (2013) finds that China's official communication is filled with exceptionalism. This includes 'Aspirations of Primacy' – where he sees China as revisionist and shaping the global system in its image. He even infers that Chinese scholars are more vocal on its return to prominence and interest in modifying, and even replacing, the current world order. Other worrying indicators raised by Ford are 'Idiosyncrasies of Control' (signs of Sinocentrism and emphasis on hierarchy) and the balance of 'Harmony and Force' (that is achieving harmony through the threat of military power).

Others explain China as a conservative power seeking cooperation and multilateralism as it adapts to a multipolar world (Jacques, 2009: 417; Zhao, 2004b: 3; Kissinger, 2014: 225; Medeiros & Fravel, 2003: 22; Zheng, 2005). These scholars consider that China will likely maintain the global status quo in the foreseeable future, as it increases its membership and integration into multilateral organisations. For instance, it advanced from a member of 21 international governmental organisations in 1977 to 52 in 1997 (Economy, 2001: 230). This also places constraints on China's

foreign policy and provides incentive to adapt to (aspects of) prevailing international relations' norms – this suggests a more 'peaceful rise'.

A third area is the study of the nature of China's foreign policy and diplomacy. Evans (2010: 54) outlines the work of John Fairbank and Wang Gungwu, two prolific historians on China who assert that historical and cultural factors do matter in China's contemporary identity. Instead of accepting universal values and Western supremacy, these academics believe in the importance of understanding what makes countries like China different, and how they blend heritage and modernity. Sharp (2011: 717) agrees that there is no better time to study diplomacy, as China is inscribing the institution with its own characteristics.

Furthermore at the start of Jacques' (2009) book titled *When China Rules the World*, he considers the premise that US-dominated institutions are being challenged by Asia, and specifically China's economic trajectory, that will catapult its military, cultural and political influence. Yet at the conclusion of his book, Jacques rightly notes that viewing China's rise in purely economic terms is a gross underestimation of what its rise represents. Hence it is important to move the discussion about emerging powers – such as formative discussions on the BRICS grouping and projections that China will overtake the US by 2030 (Guerrero, 2013) – away from a purely economic lens.

This study will also build on others' approaches to China's foreign policy. Analysis in this area has taken an international system approach, whereby China's foreign policy is a function of its capability (or attributes) in relation to other states (Zhao, 2004b). This was the approach taken in Zhao's (2004) edited volume *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behaviour*. Other studies seek a domestic-centred approach, which focuses on ideological preferences and objectives of key decision-makers and their factional politics, thus explaining Chinese foreign policy as an extension of domestic politics (Zhao, 1992; Zhao, 2004b: 4; Shambaugh, 2011: 8). Although Zhao (1992; 2004c: 140) does state that studies on China's foreign policy do not have to take an 'either or' option; instead the international system approach can act as a 'first cut' in the analysis of China's foreign policy, before other explanations are offered. Taking on these points, this proposed study will consider both approaches in order to understand the wider impacts on China's identity construction.

Fourth, and a subset of the above, is China's public diplomacy, as a negotiation instrument to communicate its worldview and engage in global discourse. While there exists much debate over whether the Westphalian system is the best response to the current global context, China is wary that it has yet to earn the acceptance of its normative values (Ringmar, 2012; Godehardt, 2016: 5; Dreyer,

2015: 1015; Callahan, 2008: 750–752). Many early articles emphasise China's 'soft power' – the notion of attraction versus coercion, coined by Joseph Nye – and assess the various resources available to help it achieve its foreign policy interests and whether they are successful or not (Huang & Ding, 2006; Gill & Huang, 2006; Shambaugh, 2010; Kalathil, 2011). While others have sought to study particular instruments, like Sun's (2010) article on globalisation and Chinese media, as well as Hartig's (2012) and Paradises' (2009) examination of CIs. Scholars have reviewed and assessed China's public diplomacy from an international relations angle (d'Hooghe, 2007; 2008) and even considered the impact of domestic factors (Wang, 2012). There are also regional-specific studies. Kurlantzick (2006) focuses on China in Southeast Asia and Ding (2008) on China's soft power in the Global South. The latter work even suggests that the shared international marginalisation between China and African and Latin American states, has cultivated a more 'harmonious' relationship.

What is missing, however, is the understanding of how China's public diplomacy engagement – and its preferred narratives – change over time and are informed by context, rather than remaining a fixed communication strategy. Here Strauss' (2009: 778–779) work on China's use of historical rhetoric towards Africa provides deeper impetus for this study, which in part, looks at the use of narratives. She sees the gap between what is said and what is done, as hardly novel to China – but common among all post-Westphalian states. While scepticism has been raised about China's rhetoric of unconditional and 'mutual benefit' in Africa, similarly so, is the US assertion that military involvement in Iraq was the desire of the Iraqi people and under the terms of democracy (Strauss, 2009: 778). The author reaffirms that the exploration of China's framing of policies helps highlight elite aspirations and their sense of place in the world. Of course, rhetoric also changes and this helps emphasise the actual multi-layered environments China engages in. Moreover, the fact that some narratives have been retained since the 1950s is just as revealing.

Several scholars agree with Strauss. Ringmar (2012: 18) sees international politics itself as a discourse where political actors make use of frames, particularly performances, as 'ways of showing' in order to bring about structure in intersubjective relations. Ford (2013) believes China is seeking to 'control the discourse' on the international stage, as an aspect of its 'return to greatness', by disseminating its own messages and agenda-setting in global affairs. This is what Hartig (2015: 248–249) calls 'strategic narratives'. In an online journal article, d'Hooghe (2013) cites the former State Council Information Office (SCIO) director, Cai Mingzhao: China must not only insert its message in foreign discourse, but he suggests introducing its own discourse, with new concepts, that better fit

its policies and worldview. Thus exploring the dynamics of discourse is the best way to understand how political actors make sense of the world.

Jacques (2009: 416), however, inserts an important warning. Measuring China with a ‘Western yardstick’ is understandable – but it remains flawed to think the Western experience and lexicon is universal. (Of course, it is also unfair to apply the blanket term ‘the West’.) Measuring China’s practice with others’ context-specific experiences will not capture the originality of its own diplomacy. So rather than assessing whether China’s public diplomacy is successful or not, it is also important to understand *how* its engagement is informed (socio-historical context), if it is different to traditional practice, and whether it is still able to contribute to achieving its particular goals.

The fifth aspect identifies trends in two interrelated areas: China–Africa relations and China’s public diplomacy in Africa. Discussions on China’s rise have notably been focused on its impact on the US (French, 2017: 267; Kissinger, 2014: 226) and broader East Asian region – and less is noted on the effects on regions, like Africa, which also did not help build the Westphalian order. Importantly Grimm (2012) and Zhang (2013) find contemporary China–Africa relations have developed since the launch of the FOCAC in 2000, as co-operation between the two sides became more coordinated and multidimensional.

Large (2008: 56–57) states that while media coverage and international interest on the relationship has increased since 2006, a host of research questions remain on the gap between perceptions and reality in relations and more sensitively, the nature and impact of China’s social presence across the continent. Huynh (2012: 6) agrees that much research, since FOCAC’s inception, has taken on a political economy prism; however, the interest of scholars from anthropology, history and other disciplines has opened the field ‘to examine crucial connections’ in the relationship. These approaches are of particular salience, as others have pointed out that African civil society and not just external parties are challenging formal representations of relations as ‘win-win’ (Fritz 2009; French 2014). On the China side, Hall and Smith (2013) see Beijing appealing to ethnic Chinese abroad due to their rising influence in other states, while d’Hooghe (2008) and Alden and Hughes (2009) see the growing role of Chinese non-state actors, from medical professionals to businesspersons, in general.

Park’s (2009) and Park and Alden’s (2013) work on Chinese migration in Africa and a survey by Gadzala and Hanusch (2010) to determine popular African perceptions towards China also speak to the research gaps mentioned. More recently an edited volume by Du Plessis (2015) and an article by

Metz (2017) uncover the links between Chinese (Confucianism) and African indigenous (Ubuntu) values. Such studies are also addressing Monson and Rupp's (2013: 22) observation that China–Africa studies have predominantly focused at national levels, yet the community and individual levels are just as important.

Scholars have also begun to explore the topic of China's public diplomacy in Africa. Research exists on China's image building in Africa as an overarching strategy, like Fijałkowski's (2011) work titled *China's 'Soft Power' in Africa?* Moreover, there are works that seek to understand the nature of African media reporting on China, such as Wekesa (2013a) and Jura and Kaluzynska (2013), as well as studies by Wasserman (2015) and Finlay (2013), who question whether China's soft power is actually changing African reporting and perceptions.

Meanwhile, a body of work exists on the types of public diplomacy instruments that are being adopted by China. Li and Rønning (2013), Wu (2012) and Wekesa (2013b) investigate China's public diplomacy through state media, which Halper (2010: 9) and Ding (2011: 300) believe is part of a wider external publicity project that began when Washington and London were focused on their own stimulus plans in 2009. Smith (2012: 80) and Allison (2013) identify educational exchange programmes that could influence future opinion leaders, *inter alia* with scholarships offered to African students. As indicated by scholars (Bolewski & Rietig, 2008: 92; Paradise, 2009: 647–648; King 2010: 82–83; Procopio 2015), China has spent a large amount of money to attract foreign students to its culture and language, including the establishment of CIs abroad, which Pan (2013: 29) describes as 'a form of state-sponsored, university-piloted cultural diplomacy'. These are complemented by intellectual exchanges with foreign civil society, think tanks and researchers, as indicated by Sidiropoulos (2013) and Huynh (2012: 9).

Scholars have also begun to emphasise the impact of context and African determination in developing relations. For instance, Monson and Rupp (2013: 24-25) warn that the study of China–Africa is in danger of being analysed in isolation and should not omit or diminish the understanding of global and national contexts under which such relations exist. Furthermore, while Snow's (1988: 25) *The Star Raft: China's Encounter with Africa* is one of the most comprehensive historical texts on the relationship, they find the study tends to frame African relations in such a way as to cast China as the active partner. Further nuance could be determined through the 'Africa–China' perspective. This includes unpacking the detail of African government reactions and the unfolding institutional responses to China's diplomacy (Large, 2008: 59). Notably, scholars such as Corkin (2013), Mohan and Lampert (2012) and an edited volume by Gadzala (2015) have explored African

responses to China's presence and in particular, the degree of African agency that exists when engaging the continent's largest trading partner, beyond elite state level.

It is with these trends identified that this study seeks to engage in wider discussions on alternative worldviews in diplomacy and IR, China's rise (beyond the economic lens and as a threat or cooperative), as well as the drivers, composition and nuances of China's contemporary diplomacy (namely public diplomacy). Last is the context-specific investigation of China's engagement with the developing world, especially Africa – and the impact of the recipient environment – in order to highlight how these mentioned aspects play out empirically.

### **1.3 Formulation and demarcation of the research problem**

Much discussion exists on globalisation's impact on diplomacy and the need for increased public and outward engagement *vis-à-vis* public diplomacy. Yet less is understood about how policymakers – particularly from emerging and rising powers – are making sense and responding to such changes and what informs their choices. China in particular is at an intersection. It is deepening its role in the global system and institutions, yet at the same time demonstrates leadership ambitions through initiatives such as the BRI, causing some to believe it is seeking to recreate the historical China-centred world order. Africa is an important laboratory, highlighting China's own learning and exposure – since it has accelerated links with the continent since the 2000s – as well as offering a window into how China portrays its global rise. This study thus seeks to uncover China's self-perception and interests, as expressed through narratives utilised in its public diplomacy with Africa. It therefore explores how China promotes or communicates its interests, in a post-2008 era, particularly within a negotiated world order created by globalisation. The main research problem is therefore expressed through the overarching research question:

*How is China's contemporary public diplomacy influencing its ability to achieve its foreign policy aims in Africa?*

This question will be addressed by the gradual enquiry of three main objectives of the study, as outlined earlier (1.1), to understand:

- (1) How China conceptualises public diplomacy in the context of its rise;
- (2) The extent the Sinocentric world narrative informs its public diplomacy; and/or
- (3) How its public diplomacy adapts narrative in order to promote its interests in Africa.

As an exploratory study, a modest preliminary thesis is provided, that China’s public diplomacy, aimed to help meet its interests in Africa, is conditioned by context and its ability to evolve the narratives used. Furthermore, in order to answer the main question, China’s public diplomacy will be studied through three selected engagements at the global, regional and bilateral levels, linked to Africa. These levels will be dealt with methodologically not as case studies but as snapshots (that is contextual ‘laboratories’). Each snapshot will demonstrate a particular initiative or example at the level mentioned. Moreover, ‘snapshots’ are applied due to the limited timeframe of the study (noted below) and at the same time, an awareness of the ever-changing nature of China’s engagement and relationship with Africa – which will likely develop further beyond the scope of the study. Table 1.1 offers justifications for each snapshot choice that will help focus this investigation.

**Table 1.1: Units of analysis for China’s contemporary public diplomacy conduct in Africa**

<b>Snapshot</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Specific period/focus of snapshot</b>	<b>Reasoning:</b>
China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Africa.  (Officially proposed in 2013)	Global/cross-regional	2013 –2016 (to include inception; when the official white paper was published in March 2015 and subsequent implementation)	The 2015 white paper published has a section dedicated to people exchanges and the need for public support, as a new initiative. There are also clear links to a historical narrative (namely the historical Silk Road of 200 BC). Yet as a relatively new initiative, less is known about how China has garnered support for it and the possible impact on relations with Africa.
FOCAC (2000 – present)	Continental/ Africa	2009–2016. While FOCAC began in 2000, it was during the 2009 FOCAC that China’s public diplomacy in Africa accelerated (following the launch of its global public diplomacy drive). 2016 also marks a year after the sixth FOCAC Summit, allowing for adequate analysis.	FOCAC continues to be the main platform for high-level interaction between China–Africa. While the key priorities change every three years, there has been consistent reference to people exchanges in official documentation. This suggests interest in increasing public awareness and support for the relationship. China’s engagement in FOCAC also provides a glimpse into how it manages relations with the developing world.
China-South Africa (1998– present)	Bilateral	2009-2016 (indeed prior context and history of relations will be considered)	South Africa is a compelling case (noted in section 1.1). It is also a context where bilateral public diplomacy initiatives and broader China engagement in Africa (as South Africa hosted the 6 <sup>th</sup> FOCAC) have taken place. Yet less is known on the differentiation between China’s formal public diplomacy engagement and the role of wider factors, such as how the formal and informal spaces of relations interact.

The proposed timeframe of the analysis falls between 2008 and 2016: from when China started engaging purposefully in global public diplomacy (in a post-financial crisis era) to 2016 – allowing for reflection on important 2015 events (such as the implementation of the BRI initiative and

FOCAC Summit) and a reasonable endpoint to allow for analysis of key events. Since this study includes understanding China's historical worldview and relations, particular historical aspects will also be purposively drawn upon for context. Notably the snapshots represent instances where China has pledged funds or explicitly committed towards increased public engagement. They are related to a high-level endorsement of activities that involve the intention of public engagement (explicit or implicit); moreover, they are contexts where China is using historical narratives to gain support for its interests.

#### **1.4 Limitations and contribution**

It is recognised that this study has inherent limitations. First is the chosen timeframe. Given that all the snapshots selected are ongoing (and some of their related initiatives are still unfolding), the study is unable to capture new debates and developments that took place beyond the scope identified. Second, given resource constraints, only three snapshots (one at each level of engagement) related to China's public diplomacy in Africa, were selected. The author was also unable to travel to China during the course of this study and had to rely upon previous trips (2010, 2012, 2013 and 2014) as well as email or Skype discussions to engage on the topic. Due to such time and resource constraints, the study is also only able to address a particular element of China's public diplomacy (which is itself a subset of diplomacy) – that is the narratives it uses and adapts in its relations with Africa. Hence, it does not seek to assess the success or failure of particular public diplomacy instruments, which as the literature overview indicates, many studies have successfully done before. Third, having mainly resided in South Africa, the author's proficiency in reading and writing Mandarin is limited, which has limited the sources at her disposal.

At the same time, she has a conversational command of the language and is sensitive to Chinese cultural behaviour, which helped counter foreseeable cultural and language barriers while undertaking the study. As a result of China's rising global status and public diplomacy, a wide array of Chinese scholars' work, as well as official documents, is available in English. Sun (2015a: 402) even finds that Chinese writings on China's public diplomacy, published in China, tend to be far less critical as authors and institutions are often state affiliated and funded. Fourth, given that the study focuses on an aspect of diplomacy between China and Africa, not all official agreements or individuals approached for discussion were available. Instead, publicly available documents and announcements were used for analysis where possible.



At the same time, this study hopes to make the following contributions. First, as noted in the literature survey, the study of diplomacy tends to adopt a Western worldview – and what is required is more cultural and historical sensitivity. This is particularly true for the study of public diplomacy that often emphasises the US experience (against which successful application is measured). Hence this study will consider China’s contemporary public diplomacy – and the extent its historical experience has influenced its external communication. This leads to a second contribution, which looks at China – a rising power whose diplomacy, especially in Africa, is the subject of much apprehension and, perhaps, ill-informed speculation. By specifically exploring *how* China conducts public diplomacy in Africa, the understanding of this relationship beyond a predominantly economic lens will also be advanced. Third, and related to how China practises public diplomacy, is its perceived purpose, which will be uniquely demonstrated using specific snapshots (as mentioned) and empirical research. Fourth, is adding to the timely discussion on China’s rise. In comparison to scholars that find China is seeking to take the world back to its imperial splendour, this study seeks to look at its rise as neither a threat nor peaceful – by applying the constructivist approach. This suggests that in the context of a negotiated order, China’s identity is as much shaped by the environments and contexts it seeks to influence and engage in. Indeed Africa represents a relatively little understood region with regard to discussions on China’s rise.

## **1.5 Research methodology**

To reiterate, this study is mainly exploratory, since public diplomacy (namely the narratives used) and the reasoning behind it, are relatively new elements in the context of China’s rise. It therefore seeks to add value to existing literature and build a foundation for future investigations. The study is also inductive and empirical, and will use qualitative analysis to permit the exploration of dimensions in the social world – like experiences, understandings, social processes, institutions and discourses – and the meanings they create (Kinmond, 2012: 29). This analysis adopts the process-tracing method, which Collier (2011: 823) defines as the ‘systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator’ with the goal of uncovering causal mechanisms, thus the linking of causes to observed outcomes.

Methodology is an all-encompassing term that includes the basic assumptions about the world we study, which inform the specific techniques undertaken or the data collected by the researcher of the study (Pouliot, 2007: 360). The postulations of the IR constructivist approach, outlined in Chapter 2, inform the larger conceptual framework of this study – which is also closely linked to the process-

tracing method – because at the core of explaining causal mechanisms, is the use of contextual case studies and historical analysis (George & Bennett, 2005: 206). Since China’s 21st century public diplomacy is still developing and is under continuous intersubjective construction, constructivism is useful in emphasising the identities, values and interests that drive its engagements in various contexts – and how this plays out in reality will be of particular interest.

Pouliot (2007: 371–372) provides three useful steps to consider in constructivist methodology – namely the inquiry into objective and subjective social and international life – in order to maintain objectivity. First is to uncover the meanings agents attribute to their reality (their ‘way of being’): this can be achieved by historical interpretations, participant observation and consultations. Second is intersubjective structure, where he suggests determining whether beliefs and the sources that inform them are becoming widely institutionalised or replacing dominant beliefs. Lastly, he suggests placing meaning into context (time and history). Pouliot also emphasises that these steps need not be followed in order and are instead mutually reinforcing. This approach is particularly useful in understanding how China expresses its perceived identity and interests through narratives and whether they become ‘institutionalised’ or not.

The methodology has thus informed the choice of secondary and primary sources that will be used in this study.

*Secondary sources* will include a critical review of theory, specifically the IR constructivist approach and its link to diplomacy and the specific phenomena in question. Existing literature will also be reviewed in order to define the key concepts of this study (such as ‘Sinocentrism’ and ‘China’s public diplomacy’) – and to avoid bias, competing explanations on China’s worldview and diplomacy will be explored, especially the review of key studies that specifically relate to the snapshots in question. Examples are works on the historical Silk Road and developments of the current BRI; publications on FOCAC, such as Li and April’s (2013) edited volume on the topic; and works on China–South Africa relations, such as Le Pere and Shelton (2007). While this study does not depend on quantitative research, it will also cite reputable surveys in order to guard against subjective opinions. Finally, the use of books, journals, newspapers and online articles will inform the above aspects and supplement the primary sources below.

*Primary sources* such as policy documents and speeches will assist in providing the intersubjective meaning of key ideas, including China’s public diplomacy approach, narratives selected and worldview. An example of a primary source that will be drawn upon is China’s President Xi

Jinping's (2014) book compilation of 79 speeches, as well as his historic address at the United Nations General Assembly (2015). As a study that adopts process tracing, the intention is not to undertake a comprehensive discourse analysis of all speeches related to the snapshots between 2008 and 2016 in order to determine 'how many times' a phrase was used. Rather it studies selected documents linked to significant events or policy windows, in order to explore whether China's narrative and approach changes within shifting contexts. It therefore answers the common 'what for?' question applied in IR-related discourse analysis. Indeed, Chinese speeches are almost always about reading between the lines (Bulloch, 2017).

Examples of important primary sources that will be used in each snapshot include:

A 2015 white paper *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* (and other institutional publications and foreign policy position papers) will be drawn upon, in order to determine China's BRI intentions and perception. This provides a basis for understanding how the initiative developed since its official announcement in 2013 and how it has been promoted, adjusted and implemented up to 2016.

Regarding the regional perspective and specifically China–Africa relations through FOCAC, the initial declaration of 2000 will be used as a starting point. While all the subsequent declarations (and documents) related to FOCAC are important, those following the 2009 FOCAC will be of particular interest, as a marker of the start of China's official global public diplomacy drive. Of course, FOCAC declarations are written by both China and its African counterparts; thus, in order to determine what aspects are true to China's perspective, the two *China's Africa Policy* documents from 2006 and 2015 published in parallel to the FOCAC will also be explored as well. While public diplomacy is but one element in these documents, they provide a blueprint of China's relations with Africa and point to the particular types of public diplomacy platforms and narratives it opts to engage with Africa. Online blogs and podcasts – such as *The China-Africa Project* – will be a useful supplementary source of academic and official interpretations on China–Africa related issues.

Finally, the bilateral element of China–South Africa relations will include official pronouncements that indicate 'milestones' in the relationship such as the 2010 *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement* and the *5–10 Year Framework on Cooperation*, signed in 2014. Official speeches that relate to the relationship and public diplomacy activities (like the 2015 China Year in South Africa events speeches that are available online) and the Chinese embassy in Pretoria's email communications to its database will be used.

This study is also not based on individual accounts, and will thus use unstructured, *ad hoc* consultations with relevant stakeholders, undertaken in person, over Skype or email correspondence, to supplement the above sources of information. For example, they will help clarify the meanings ascribed to phenomena and events; and provide advice on relevant sources – all of which will help further refine the conclusions of the research. As no human participants will be used as units of analysis and only information in the public domain will be used, the ethical implications of the research are minimised.

It is also in the interest of diplomatic studies, arguably IR more broadly, to branch out beyond academia to include other perspectives. For example, significant learning also takes place outside of academia in international organisations, think tanks and related events (Melissen, 2011: 723). It is anticipated that the author's involvement in learning and research at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), between 2010 and 2017 on elements of China–Africa relations and public diplomacy, will strengthen this study. Previously established networks as well as observation and participation in conferences and seminars, visits to China (as noted in 1.3) and previously published research will also be drawn upon.

In sum, this study seeks to maintain objectivity by using established literature and a range of sources, as well as the application of the constructivist approach – which is itself driven by context than a specific belief. However, it is also accepted that no research can achieve true certainty and can only confirm commitment to the rules of scientific inference to seek validity and reliability (Gerring 2006: 714; King et al. 1994: 17). The importance of academic distance cannot be understated, but the concern of cross-contamination rather than cross-fertilization, runs the risk of studying diplomacy as if it is merely an activity of another place and another time (Melissen, 2011: 723).

## **1.6 Structure of the research**

This study consists of seven chapters. The first chapter has offered an introduction to the topic of China's public diplomacy in Africa. To this end, it offered a contextual background to the topic, identified gaps and trends on the topic, demarcated the research question and snapshots under study, emphasised the inherent limitations and contributions of the study and lastly explained the methodology of the study.

Chapters 2 and 3 describe the study's conceptual framework. Chapter 2 is the theoretical chapter. It outlines constructivism as the main theoretical approach and conceptualises diplomacy and public

diplomacy. Chapter 3, the contextual chapter, looks more closely at China's experience. It outlines the Sinocentric worldview and links it to China's contemporary diplomacy and public diplomacy. Having set the foundation for the study, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 represent the snapshots of China's public diplomacy in Africa, as expressed through global, regional and bilateral level efforts. The final chapter will then draw together the key ideas and main conclusions of the study.

## Chapter 2 Conceptual framework: constructivism, diplomacy and public diplomacy

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter forms the first part of the study's conceptual framework. Its main purpose is to situate the topic of China's public diplomacy in Africa within the IR discipline, by drawing connections and relationships between key concepts and ideas. It is an important reference point in order to make meaningful interpretations of the study's snapshots, as well as to inform the broader theoretical and practical findings.

The following approaches and concepts will be explored. Firstly, constructivism – with its core propositions and variations – will be drawn upon as the chosen theoretical approach, to provide coherence for the study. Secondly, this chapter provides a conceptual analysis of diplomacy, particularly its roots and evolution. Thirdly, public diplomacy is presented as the core concept of this study and a more recent innovation of diplomacy. Having outlined these elements, the current debates around public diplomacy that have direct relevance for the topic will be highlighted.

### 2.2 Constructivism

#### 2.2.1 Constructivism in International Relations

The world is an increasingly complex place and in order to make sense of the overflow of information is the need for theories to provide an organising principle (Flockhart, 2012:79). Importantly there are three main IR paradigms, which hold different perspectives on world politics. They are realism, liberalism and constructivism, as highlighted in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Summary of the Main IR Paradigms

	<b>REALISM</b>	<b>LIBERALISM</b>	<b>CONSTRUCTIVISM</b>
<b>MAIN THEORETICAL PROPOSITION</b>	Self-interested states compete for power or security	Concerns for power overtaken by political and/ economic considerations. Desire for prosperity and commitment to liberal values.	State behaviour is shaped by elite beliefs, collective norms and social identities
<b>UNIT OF ANALYSIS</b>	States	States	Individuals (i.e. elites)
<b>MAIN INSTRUMENTS</b>	Economic and military power	Varies (i.e. international institutions, promotion of democracy and economic exchange).	The impact of ideas and discourse
<b>MODERN THEORISTS</b>	Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz	Michael Doyle, Robert Keohane	Alexander Wendt, John Ruggie
<b>POST-COLD WAR</b>	Resurgence of great	Increased cooperation (as	Agnostic (cannot predict

	<b>REALISM</b>	<b>LIBERALISM</b>	<b>CONSTRUCTIVISM</b>
<b>PREDICTION</b>	power competition	liberal values free markets and international institutions spread)	the content of ideas)
<b>MAIN LIMITATION</b>	Cannot account for international change	Ignores the role of power	Better at describing the past than predicting the future

Source: Walt (1998: 38)

Slaughter (2011) includes other schools of thought that have branched from these primary theories, such as Institutionalism (mainly realist assumptions, but relies on game theory and microeconomic theory, to highlight that cooperation between states is possible); the English School (that shares some of constructivism’s criticisms of rationalists, although it emphasises the centrality of international society and social meanings in world politics); and finally, critical approaches (which include scholars in the Marxist, post-colonial, feminist and ecological fields, who are concerned with the construction of power, which rationalists take for granted).

Indeed, the changing international landscape has prompted a re-examination of the dominant IR paradigms – the rationalist theories of realism and neoliberalism – which were unable to explain the end of the Cold War and the rise of previously side-lined states (Guzzini, 2000: 151; Lantis, 2002: 89; Bicakci, 2008: 93). Murray (2011: 720) further asserts – supported by Cooper and Hocking (2000: 363) – that understanding modern diplomacy requires ‘acknowledging and overcoming the culture of theoretical resistance’, as in a globalising world, eclectic and innovative theoretical approaches describe reality more accurately than traditional IR theory. Melissen (2011: 723) states that only in this way can the field perform as a two-way conduit between scholars and practitioners. It was under such circumstances and concerns that constructivism rose in the IR discipline during the early 1990s. As a product of various fields, including structural linguistics, critical theory, postmodern political theory, literary criticism and cultural and media studies, it became a research strategy rather than a theory emphasising specific issues.

Like other reflectivist theories, constructivism challenges rationalist assumptions, such as the anarchy of the international system and the ‘selfish rational actor’, and has also introduced new elements to diplomacy and IR (including issues around culture and identity as well as the concepts of ‘soft power’ and the ‘clash of civilisations’) (Villanueva, 2010: no page available). In fact, Lantis (2002: 93 & 96) states that the rise of constructivism has ensured cultural factors remain relevant in the discipline, by uncovering particular features of culture that are important to state identity and action in global politics. Unlike rationalists, who assume states are the primary actors in the international system, this approach considers the role of structures (including norms) and other actors

and how they are mutually constituted (Checkel, 1998: 328; Wendt, 1992: 392). Constructivism is essentially interested in the underlying reasons of how social and political reality functions, thus addressing what rationalists ignore, the sources of state interest and the social aspects of world politics (Checkel, 1998:325).

Constructivism thus fills a unique gap in international relations studies and theory, as it does not apply a set of analytical assumptions, but is instead described as an approach that tries to understand and explain a particular context. It is then a sociologically sensitive scientific approach to IR and can be summarised as ‘the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world’ (Adler, 1997: 322 & 334).

In summary Walt (1998: 29-30) highlights what each IR paradigm would emphasise regarding the ‘China rising’ debate. Realists would view China’s ascent as part of its rising power interest in challenging the global balance of power, and its growing influence will only make it more ambitious in the longer term. Liberals will emphasise that China’s behaviour can be conditioned by the integration of global markets and the eventual spread of democratic principles.<sup>6</sup> Finally and importantly for the purposes of this study, is constructivism, which emphasises China’s international relations as shaped by issues around culture and identity. This is demonstrated by Walt’s (1998: 30) investigation over whether China views itself as part of the global community or as an exceptional actor that should be treated otherwise. This approach does not oppose realist and liberal views but offers the strongest explanatory power for the sources of state interest. In this case are the factors that influence China’s interpretation of the world and how it in turn communicates its worldview through public diplomacy instruments.

### 2.2.2 Selected aspects of constructivism summarised

There are four key interrelated constructivist propositions, which Flockhart (2012: 82) summarises as:

- Reality as socially constructed (thus social facts are important);
- The role of identity and ‘logics of action’ in shaping political choices;
- The importance of both ideational and material structures;
- Agents and structures as mutually constituted; and

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<sup>6</sup> A similar outline on realist and liberal views on China is offered by Li (2004: 23–24).



- An addition to this list, debate around the issue of ‘change’.

Firstly, scholars note that knowledge and even material structures, which retain meaning through the context and facts that they interpret, are *socially constructed* (Adler, 1997: 323; Pouliot, 2007: 361). Wendt (1992: 396-397) agrees that actors approach each other, and objects, according to the meanings they hold for themselves. For example, states will approach others whom they perceive as their friends differently to their enemies. Meanwhile Hopf (1998: 179) finds that state foreign policy actions are constrained and empowered by social practices at home and abroad; and Bolewski's (2008: 146) work on cultural variations in diplomacy adds that national identity itself is a compilation of a state's cultural, political, economic, social and historical practices. Indeed the international relations system itself can be viewed as perpetuated and socially constructed through diplomatic practices (Guzzini, 2000: 169).

Linked to the construction of reality is the *role of identity*. Flockhart (2012: 85) states that constructivism is particularly interested in identity, which is an ‘agent's understanding of self, its place in the social world, and its relationships with others’. Notably domestic society and politics – and broader tradition, history, culture and organisational process – are elements that inform a state's identity and action in global politics (Hopf, 1998: 194–195; Lantis, 2002: 96). So, rather than understanding state interests as identical, different identities will inevitably hold different interests, as their choices are conditioned by particular preferences and behaviour, and in respect to other actors (Hopf 1998: 175 & 195). Of course the understanding of self is also dependent on the ‘other’ for its composition; and while identity is relatively stable, it is always in a process of reconstitution and is supported by a narrative, to ensure biographical continuity, making change seem almost natural (Flockhart, 2012: 85). Hopf (1998: 174) finds that investigating identities are important in IR and national politics, as they ensure some level of predictability and order.

Thirdly is the importance of *ideational and material structures*. Checkel (1998: 326) and Cho (2009: 79) reiterate the point that constructivists view material structures beyond biological necessities; material significance is instead mediated by the ideas that give them their meaning. For instance, security environments in which states are embedded are institutional and cultural, and not just material (Cho 2009: 79). Similarly, Adler (1997: 336) and Hopf (1998: 177) point out that power is not merely the resources required to impose a state's views on others, it is also about the relative authority it holds, in order to determine shared meanings that inform identities, interests and

practices of other states (like the ability to create the ‘rules of the game’ through culture, ideology, ideas, knowledge and even language).

Constructivists also value the interplay between *agents and structures*. Wendt (1992: 399) and Lockhart (2012:86) describes agents and structure as mutually constitutive, as social facts are externalised and habitualised through practice and they become embedded in day-to-day routines. While they may appear independent from the agent, it is agents who construct social facts and influence structures through their practice. Therefore, the perceptions, values and beliefs of agents matter because they become the conditions under which institutions or norms are developed and sustained (Checkel, 1998: 327; Lockhart, 1999: 886). Thus, structures are meaningless without an intersubjective set of practices (Hopf, 1998: 173; Adler, 1997: 327). The concept of ‘sovereignty’ is an example, *which* rests on the mutual recognition of one another’s right to exercise exclusive political authority (Wendt, 1992: 412).

Adding to Flockhart’s summary of the features of constructivism is the notion of *change* in global affairs, as noted by various authors. In Almond’s (1983) work on the success or failure of communist regimes in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, cultural tendencies are viewed as being the result of historical experience and contemporary structural constraints and opportunities. When the communist revolution took place, certain attitudinal changes were supposed to accompany the shift, yet instead, pre-revolutionary economic and political attitudes remained, despite 30 years of communist party control. A prior set of attitudinal patterns persisted over a significant period, despite efforts to change. Although the author does consider the conditions and possibilities for attitudinal change, their work does not identify what such factors are. This example reveals that political cultures – defined as the values and norms of a society, in a given time or social space, towards politics – are not easily transformed (Almond & Verba, 1963: 90; Kamrava, 1995: 693; Hudson, 1999: 767; Wiseman, 2005: 411).

In Werlin and Eckstein’s (1990: 250) study, however, they note change was deemed impossible in China: it would never gain independence, Chinese communism would never become a force to reckon with and the Chinese Communist Party would never be seriously challenged from within – yet this was untrue (Werlin & Eckstein, 1990: 250). The authors conclude that slow cultural change is natural, understandable and useful, like economic transformation in Taiwan and South Korea that came without major political unrest in the 1950s to 1980s, while sudden cultural change is unsustainable, dangerous and unusual (as demonstrated by the Chinese Cultural Revolution) (Werlin

& Eckstein, 1990: 250). Nevertheless, a likely determining factor of change for the authors (1990: 252), irrespective of pace, is also economic and political impetus.

### 2.2.3 Conventional and critical constructivism

Hopf (1998: 172) usefully divides constructivism into two main variants known as *conventional* – which is also referred to as *social* constructivism (Flockhart, 2012: 82) – and *critical* constructivism. The latter is closely associated to critical social theory, which includes the works of Habermas and Foucault and is part of a broader family of critical international theories, including postmodernism and feminism. While the conventional variant originates from and is actually a distilled version of critical theory, critical theorists are nevertheless concerned that it lies too close to positivist and rationalist thinking – which are state-centric (Hopf, 1998: 181; Price and Reus-Smit, 1998: 260). Moreover despite Hopf's division of constructivism being the approach chosen for this study, there are other ways constructivism can be categorised; for example, Adler (1997: 335-336) looks at constructivism variants according to his methodologies.

#### 2.2.3.1 Key differences

A major proposition held by constructivism (and all its variants) is that reality is a project constantly under construction and a major task for constructivists is to 'denaturalise' the social world – or contextualise data – and empirically explore how institutions, practices and identities are a product of human agency and social creation (Hopf 1998:182; Flockhart 2012:82). Yet conventional constructivism is analytically neutral and is mainly useful as an interpretive tool that seeks to examine the world rather than change it (Cho, 2009: 76 & 82). This approach is described as a middle ground between rationalist and interpretative approaches, as it disagrees with the presumption that world politics is homogeneous and that universally valid generalisations can be made. Yet it also disagrees with critical constructivists that the world is so heterogeneous that only the unique and differentiating should be sought after (Adler, 1997: 319 & 327; Hopf, 1998: 199).

A defining character of critical constructivism is the recognition of its own (or an actor's) role in producing change through participation in reproducing, constituting and fixing the social entities they observe (Hopf, 1998: 185). Thus, knowledge is not value free. The critical variant tends to merge theory and practice, and seeks to develop theories that denaturalise dominant constructions and facilitate the imagining of alternative worlds (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998: 261; Cho, 2009: 93). Kissinger (2015: 350) adds that an agent's role in producing knowledge is even more prevalent today, because problem solving is less about conceptual thinking; instead solutions to problems are

simply ‘looked up’ on the internet. Yet the customisation function of the internet means that no two people who engage a search engine on the same topic, will derive the same answers; instead ‘the concept of truth is being relativized and individualized – losing its universal character’ (Kissinger, 2015: 352).

Cho (2009: 83 & 96) provides a further fundamental difference between the two variants of constructivism. The conventional variation tends to treat social structures, like culture or norms, as a static explanatory variable that in turn informs identity (highlighting causation rather than constitution); while critical constructivists believe identities themselves need to be explained (as culture is not static and is context sensitive). Therefore, the latter views the ‘state’ or ‘nation’ as imagined subjects of identity, which are never constant and always in process (Cho, 2009: 88 & 90). It appears that state identity and interests are altered and formed by interactions with other states and the varying degrees of power between them, as well as the impact of the domestic foreign policymaking process (Wendt, 1992; Checkel, 1998: 343; Cho, 2009: 88). So state identities are not simply explanatory variables of phenomena; rather their origin and evolution are also emphasised by critical constructivists, in order to uncover the cultural production of such phenomena (Cho, 2009: 93; Checkel, 1998: 342). Hopf (1998: 184) sums up that critical theory seeks to uncover the myths associated with identity formation (like how people came to believe in a single version of the truth), while conventional constructivism treats identities as causes of action. Hence, the new knowledge on power relations that this variant produces can help uncover new and intangible variables using empirical testing (Devine, 2008: 465).

Weiner and Puetter (2009: 5) demonstrate the use of critical constructivism in academia, through their empirical research on globalisation that reveals a far less harmonising impact on elites than expected. Instead, they highlight that individual experience matters. The authors (2009: 6–7) state that in order to achieve cultural validation, three aspects need to be considered: first, the potential for shared social recognition; second, the degree of persuasion through collective deliberation and finally, understanding generated through the interactive process of cultural validation. The latter aspect also happens to be the most complex, particularly when the former two aspects are absent, as individuals or a specific milieu will likely turn to their respective culturally constituted knowledge and experiences. In turn, the communicating party is required to adapt or evolve their behaviour to reflect a level of appropriateness. Geldenhuys (2012: 31) agrees that the receiving country of an engagement can indeed affect the very engagement choices available, just as identities of nations together shape the pattern of interaction between them. Thereby critical constructivists are

particularly interested in the following: specific contexts and how inter-subjectivity plays out, as well as the interdependence of structure and agency – and more specifically, the changes that evolve from this interplay (Weiner and Puetter, 2009: 8).

Despite constructivism's emphasis on the mutual constitution of structure and agency, the traditional variant still seems to emphasise causation and structure over constitution and agent. Conventional constructivism even acknowledges the difficulty of bringing about change in world politics, simply because actors create their own constraints through daily practice (Checkel 1998:240-341; Lockhart 2012:87). Indeed Price and Reus-Smit (1998:286) prove this is changing; while state-based agency remains important, scholars have also begun to study non-state agency (non-state actors who are redefining international norms and shaping state domestic and international practices).

It is indeed important to give emphasis to the agent. In Ringmar's (2012: 2) comparative study of international systems,<sup>7</sup> he states that:

In the past couple of decades, various pioneering scholars have suggested that more attention should be paid to the ways political actors make sense of the world they inhabit. To make sense of the world is to interpret it by means of a discourse. This focus on discourse is explicit in postmodern and constructivist approaches ... [y]et a focus on discourse is at the same time bound to obscure many pressing research questions – notably issues of agency. After all, discourse denotes a structure of signification, a system of meaning, and as such it has no subjectivity and cannot act.

Since discourse is itself a structure, investigating the ways that agents draw on discourse and engage it (in this case China) to make deliberations, can make for useful social explanation.

#### 2.2.4 Merging constructivism variants

Constructivism remains predominantly an approach rather than theory, whose purpose is to problematise what is taken for granted and provide alternative explanations to the central themes in international relations, including the link between state identity and interest (Flockhart, 2012: 80). On the other hand, it does not point out who the primary actors and what the main problems or issues in the field are, nor does it provide any policy directions. This leads Hopf (1998: 171) to raise concerns about constructivism's inability to advance a research program – describing it as closer to a social theory than a theory of politics (Adler, 1997: 323; Flockhart, 2012: 80). Yet no theoretical approach can provide universal truth about world politics, as each approach rests on different

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<sup>7</sup> Specifically the Westphalian system and two East Asian systems: the Sinocentric and Tokugawa perspectives.

assumptions and epistemologies, and is even constrained by its own analytic goals (Walt, 1998: 29; Slaughter, 2011).

While constructivism does not provide an ideal political order per se, its ‘underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions are normatively predisposed to questions of change, just as contrasting assumptions ethically bound rationalist theories within certain limits’ (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998: 288). Walt (1998: 44) agrees that constructivism, through its evolution and convergence in variants, remains the best-suited approach for analysing how identities and interests are able to change over time. He proposes that this approach is even able to produce subtle shifts in state behaviour and in even more unexpected cases, create shifts in international affairs. Likewise, Jazbec (2013: 88) and Wildavsky (1987: 12) find constructivism particularly useful in the study of diplomacy, because it is itself a dynamic social process that enables foreign policy actors to engage one another, in spite of their vast differences. Jackson and Sorenson (2003: 253) add that this approach is not only interested in the differences between societies and how such differences are institutionalised and regulated; but it also seeks the ways that social, political and economic relations can still thrive despite these variances.

Checkel (1998: 339) even provides suggestions for alleviating concerns over the constructivist approach. This includes avoiding over-determination that is often the case in single case studies and considering cross-national or longitudinal designs. Additionally he notes that while constructivism is useful in explaining identity and interest formation, once interests are stable, rationalist thinking could also offer better explanation of state action (1998: 346).

This study will draw from both conventional and critical constructivist variants, noting works by Price and Reus-Smit (1998) and Simmerl (2011), who respectively highlight how the former can help strengthen the latter variant, and vice versa. Constructivism naturally lends itself to the purpose of this exploratory study, as such an approach emphasises empirically informed analysis; it is question versus method driven and explores issues around identity formation – and in turn, the resulting policy choices made. At the same time, the critical constructivist variant is useful in that it questions positivist’s claims of an objective, natural and social world, as well as rationalist claims of human nature and action (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998: 260–261). (Although the intention of this study is not to seek theories to denaturalise structures of domination, as the approach advocates). Moreover Price and Reus-Smit (1998: 287–288) view constructivism as an offshoot of critical theory, which is in fact a continuation of critical thought rather than opposing it – as both emphasise culture and identity as additional sources of politics. They even note that critical constructivists’ interest in

changing world structures still relies on mutually constituted and empirically informed dialogue. For example, counter-hegemonies may seek to supersede hegemonic interpretations, but they are still required to engage on the basis of previously established normative concepts – such as ‘sovereignty’, ‘Westphalian system’ and ‘human rights’ – in order to bring about any change (Simmerl, 2011: 25).

On the other hand, Simmerl (2011: 4) finds that notable constructivists, like Checkel and Wendt, admit that their approaches have relied too heavily on positivist epistemology, treating meaning as an object and ignoring the role of the social sciences in shaping social reality, as well as the issue of linguistics. He thus suggests (2011: 5) three ways to invigorate the basic strengths of constructivism. First is to consider language and communication, second to emphasise discursive structures (in producing subject positions and intersubjective understandings as the basis for social order) and lastly, the awareness of power relations in the process of construction.

Therefore the constructivist emphasis on changing and constructed identities, as well as the complex relationship between agents and structures, contribute to the formulation of this study, which explores the link between China’s notion of self, and in turn its contemporary strategic communication through narratives. Both of these have influenced shifting representations of its place in the current world system, in order to promote its interests as a rising power.

## **2.3 Diplomacy**

There is an intimate link between diplomacy and constructivism. As noted diplomacy is essentially a social practice – it functions according to particular social and historical situations that determines the mode, form and substance of engagements – and cannot be removed from the social world; it is thus a nested phenomenon (Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 22; Jazbec, 2013: 88).

### **2.3.1 Defining diplomacy**

Kleiner (2008: 324) provides the conventional definition of diplomacy as ‘the management of a country’s [or international governmental organisation’s] policy by official agents via communication with state and non-state actors of other countries and with international governmental organizations according to established rules and practices’. Meanwhile Sharp, in Murray, Sharp, Wiseman, Criekemans and Melissen (2011: 717), adds that diplomacy is the actual institutions and processes by which states (and increasingly others) represent themselves and their interests to one another. Thus it is broadly described as an instrument of statecraft (Kleiner, 2008: 322), or a sophisticated system that handles states’ affairs, as Cohen (2001: 23) sees it.

More broadly Barston (2014: 1) describes diplomacy as largely ‘concerned with advising, shaping and implementing *foreign policy*’, which is the sum total of decisions made by a state (or political unit) entailing its aspirations and aims towards its external environment (Smith, Hadfield & Dunne, 2008: 487; Kleiner, 2008: 321). Hence, diplomacy (the means) is a dependent variable of foreign policy (the goal) that is usually set out by a foreign ministry (Kleiner, 2008: 322). Of course, apart from a foreign policy tool, diplomacy is also a profession that requires particular knowledge and skills (Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 2).

The key tasks of diplomacy broadly include communication, negotiation, representation and advancing national interests (Sending, 2011: 644 & 650; Ruël, 2013: 17). Barston (2014: 2) provides a comprehensive list of diplomatic tasks (refer to Table 2.2) but specifies that the significance of each will vary according to different states’ needs.

**Table 2.2: Tasks of Diplomacy**

<p><b>Ceremonial</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protocol</li> <li>• Representation</li> <li>• Visits</li> </ul> <p><b>Management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Day-to-day problems</li> <li>• Promotion of interests (political, economic, scientific, military, tourism)</li> <li>• Explanation and defence of policy</li> <li>• Strengthening bilateral relations</li> <li>• Bilateral coordination</li> <li>• Multilateral cooperation</li> </ul> <p><b>Information and communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment and reporting</li> <li>• Monitoring</li> </ul> <p><b>International negotiation</b></p> <p><b>Duty of protection</b></p> <p><b>Contribution to international order</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Normative</li> <li>• Rule making</li> <li>• Mediation/pacific settlement</li> </ul>
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Source: Barston (2014: 2)

Central to any study on diplomacy – and specifically this study – is Pigman’s (2010: 6–7) view that diplomacy is a constant bridging endeavour because distinct political collectivities exist and require means to find common ground between and among respective contexts. Kleiner (2008: 323–324)



agrees that communication is a key element of diplomacy, which involves various forms, such as interaction through a common language among diplomats, the actual activity of negotiation, as well as communication within the confines of specific laws and regulations (i.e. the host country). Therefore diplomacy is described as a regulated process of communication (Pynzari, 2013: 133; Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 67); and even likened to a communication system through which state and other actors elect and appoint officials to express and defend their interests (Gilboa, 2001: 1).

### 2.3.2 The development of modern diplomacy

Historical records of organised polities exchanging envoys can be traced as far back as the third millennium BC, to the cuneiform civilisations of Mesopotamia (Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 10). In the first millennium BC India, China and Greek city-states created complex patterns of diplomatic practices and communication, which were held together by common linguistic and cultural infrastructure (Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 11). (Notably the Chinese experience of foreign relations prior the Westphalian system, will be discussed in Chapter 2). Ciprian-Beniamin (2014:41) usefully divides the history of Western diplomacy into three broad phases: the first was the disrupted diplomacy of the Middle Ages, when embassies shared irregular contact; the second was the period between the Middle Ages and the first part of the 20th century and the last period started after World War II.

#### 2.3.2.1 Foundations of modern diplomacy

Pynzari (2013: 133) and Jönsson and Hall (2005:11) believe that modern diplomacy originates from Renaissance Italy in the 13th century through to the 15th century. Two reasons are provided. First, commercial relations between nation-states led to the appointment of ambassadors and second, costly wars were common in this period, which led to conflict resolution through negotiation (Pynzari, 2013: 133). By the 16th century, clerics continued to play an important role in diplomacy and Latin became an important language in international relations, through the drawing up of treaties and agreements (Pynzari, 2013: 134).

Kissinger (2014: 25–26) adds that the Peace of Westphalia (1648) – the sum of three separate but complementary agreements, signed in different cities – affirmed that the state (versus religion, dynasty or empire) and its sovereignty would become the building blocks of the European order. Thus ‘classic’ diplomacy established by the French in the 17th to 18th centuries, was characterised by elaborate ceremonies, secrecy and eventual professionalisation (Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 11). The concept of ‘diplomatic corps’ was introduced in Vienna during the 18th century to include all

‘ambassadors, envoys and other diplomatic personnel of foreign missions present at the seat of any given government’ (Pynzari, 2013: 134). However, it was from the 19th century, through the codes of conduct enshrined in the Congress of Vienna of 1814–15, and later in the Vienna Conventions of 1961 and 1963, that norms of diplomatic protocol were adopted by nations globally (Kelley, 2010: 287).

By the mid-20th century the Westphalian system was in place all over the world and has since remained ‘the scaffolding of international order’, such as it now exists (Kissinger, 2014: 27). Kissinger (2014: 27) adds that the genius of the system and its spread across the world was because its provisions were mainly procedural. If a state accepted certain basic requirements, it could be recognised as an international citizen as well as maintain its culture, politics (and internal policies) and religion. The structure established was therefore a first attempt at institutionalising an international order, based on agreed rules and limits (Kissinger, 2014: 30). Bátor and Hynek (2014) sum up modern diplomacy as distinctly medieval, but appropriated by Westphalia.

#### 2.3.2.2 World Wars I and II (1914-1945)

The actual scope of modern diplomacy has broadened over time and context. Relations between states leading up to World War I (1914–1918) were predominantly bilateral in nature, defined by Wiseman (1999: 37) as the official relations between two states. Moreover, French remained the preferred language of diplomacy, conducted in confidentiality beyond the ‘glare’ of public scrutiny, by ambassadors and other envoys (Ciprian-Beniamin, 2014: 41; Baigorri-Jalón, 2014: 46; Wiseman 1999: 39). English became an international language after the war, when the US acquired a growing role in international affairs, while the League of Nations adopted both French and English as its official languages (Baigorri-Jalón, 2014: 47).

It was the unprecedented power and highly personalised diplomacy of dictators (like Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin) that to a degree led to World War II. The experience of war – along with the impact of the Russian Revolution and Wilson’s objection to treaties involving secret deals – led to the establishment of multilateral diplomacy through platforms, such as the United Nations in 1945 (Wiseman, 1999: 39–40; Kissinger, 2014: 256). This type of diplomacy is the simultaneous diplomacy by three or more nations at ad hoc or permanent international conferences and has become a permanent feature of diplomacy, as a recognition of increased supranational challenges and the need for greater transparency (Wiseman, 1999: 37). It was also referred to as ‘new diplomacy’, which is the break in bilateral alliances in favour of a universal association of states that pledge to

comply with a set of general principles, as embodied in international law (Pynzari, 2013: 134). Nevertheless Wiseman (1999: 39) and Ciprian-Beniamin (2014: 42) find that public involvement was still relatively limited at this stage, as multilateral treaties were still negotiated exclusively among state representatives, and made public only once agreements were finalised.

#### 2.3.2.3 Diplomacy: adapt or diminish?

Cohen (2001: 23-24), supported by Kleiner (2008), believes that while the global system has evolved and there is indeed a marked difference between ancient and modern diplomacy, there is remarkable resemblance in diplomatic tasks and procedures across various historical periods and geographical locations. These include sovereign entities communicating and negotiating through representation; negotiating and writing binding commitments that regulate relations; and collecting information or conveying messages and passing obligations from one generation to the next. Cohen (2001: 36) concludes that 'diplomacy is neither self-evident nor serendipitous, but a complex ecology of conduct produced by civilisation over a long period'. Kelley (2010: 287–288) also believes the institution of diplomacy has remained unchanged, despite remarkable global changes in the early 1990s. This is supported by the fact that states have retained control of the international agenda (deciding priority-issue areas and how to address them) and that policy still drives diplomatic action (and not vice versa).

Still, it would appear that diplomacy's longevity lies in its ability to move beyond a state-centric approach. Manojlovic and Thorheim (2007: 7) agree that diplomacy will only remain relevant if the function of resolving tension through peaceful means is regarded as a universal practice, rather than strictly reserved for the ministry of foreign affairs.

#### 2.3.3 Contemporary diplomacy

Both multilateral and bilateral forms of diplomacy have remained in international relations; but their importance has shifted according to context. For instance, during the Cold War rivalry, a bipolar system persisted, which created a trend back to bilateral relations, as global diplomatic centres transferred from New York and Geneva to a focus between Washington and Moscow (Wiseman, 1999: 40). It was also the very threat of force (rather than diplomacy) that formed the basis of foreign policies in this period (Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 1). At the same time, the superpower contestation and experience of global decolonisation spurred creative and multilateral responses, such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as a voting bloc in the UN and the evolution of the European Union (EU) (Wiseman, 1999: 40).

In contrast, Sharp (in Murray et al., 2011: 717) finds that the post-Cold War era began to unfreeze ‘diplomatic thinking from the grip of grand strategy’. Moreover, another layer has been added to the diplomatic repertoire – known as polyilateral diplomacy – which has risen in line with the ‘erosion’ of state sovereignty and rise of transnational forces, in the post-Cold War era (Melissen, 2011: 3; Wiseman 1999: 36–37). Wiseman (1999: 41) defines polyilateralism as ‘the conduct of relations between official entities [such as states or several states acting together and state-based international organisations] and at least one unofficial, non-state entity’. He adds that there is mutual expectation among such actors to report, communicate, negotiate and represent; however, such interaction does not necessarily involve the recognition of sovereign, equivalent entities.

So, while Cohen (2001: 23–24) believes that the institution of diplomacy has endured through the ages, such a system’s resilience is being tested as never before, as the contemporary environment is eroding state control of diplomacy (Wiseman, 1999: 49; Langhorne, 2005). In particular is the puzzle of how polyilateralism will affect prevailing state-based diplomacy and whether non-state actors should be ‘absorbed, co-opted and regulated by the norms and practices of the state system’ (Wiseman in Murray et al., 2011: 712).

Sharp (2011: 717) finds the contemporary revival of diplomatic studies derives from a growing sense of power and wealth distribution and changes in the way actors represent themselves. These trends largely derive from a dynamic, globalising world. Scholars identify two specific developments that have complicated traditional diplomatic practice: the role of technology, specifically communication technology, that has increased cross-border flows of goods and services, cultures, ideas and labour and the role of non-state actors (Cooper & Hocking, 2000: 362; Pigman, 2010: 5; Sharp, 2011; Baigorri-Jalón, 2014: 47). Of course, there are a host of other interrelated factors, such as intrastate conflicts and a deregulated international environment, as exemplified by the global economy (Ruël, 2013: 16; Wiseman, 1999: 41).

Communication technologies have for Pigman (2010: 11 & 121) influenced diplomacy in the decades following World War II, as the increased number of platforms (from television to mobile communication and internet) has in turn increased the need for diplomatic actors to selectively represent themselves, with the increased attention of the public. Dinkov (2011: 162) and Wu (2013: 6) add that in an information era, communication technologies have changed the meaning of space, time and government–public interface to the extent that new collective identities have emerged. Yet Kissinger (2014: 356) warns that the same technologies that convene demonstrations are also the very ones used to track and suppress them. This leads him (2014: 330) to conclude that

like religion in the medieval period or nationalism in the 19th to 20th century, science and technology have become the governing concepts of our era.

Pigman (2010: 11) also asserts that in a postmodern era, the field of diplomacy has opened to actors beyond governments of nation-states to include sub-state governments (such as Quebec), supranational authorities (like the EU), multilateral organisations (like the United Nations), civil society organisations (such as the Red Cross) and the private sector, notably multinational corporations. Kelley (2010: 296) adds intelligentsia, religious leaders and celebrities. Thus, Masters (2012: 33) (echoed by Heywood, 2002: 203) argues the need to increase public awareness and knowledge of international relations, bringing in once-peripheral actors – notably the media – to the centre of foreign policy making. It is also the very communication technology platforms that have empowered such actors, which have become increasingly proficient in loosening the control that governments once had on media and content (Kelley, 2010: 290).

Alexandroff and Brean (2015: 2–3) add that contemporary world politics – shaped by globalisation and characterised by new actors and interconnectedness – is exemplified in the rise of global summitry (this involves architecture, institutions as well as political and policy behaviour of actors engaged in the ‘influence of outcomes of common concern’). While the importance of summits was already appreciated by Churchill in the 1950s, the authors believe that global summitry has particular salience in a world of polyilateralism. They are platforms inclusive of actors beyond state units who are able to influence the agenda and the organisation and execution of global politics and policy (Alexandroff & Brean 2015: 2). In summary, the role of global summitry has risen in international relations as an inclusive supplement to the formal state-based institutions created after World War II. The very participation of a range of key actors on a particular international issue is recognition that the current world order is characterised by blurred national and regional boundaries (Alexandroff & Brean, 2015: 4).

So while traditional forms of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy remain, Wiseman (1999: 39 & 42) asserts there is less agreement on their effectiveness, as new patterns of power and dialogue require innovation and adaptation through new concepts, skills and instruments. A primary reason for Barston (2013: 1) and Pigman (2010: 4-5) is that the functions of diplomacy have broadened to include the management of relations (between multiple actors), as well as changes in representation and communication, while Pigman (2010: 109) adds the scope of diplomacy has also expanded to include previously side-lined areas, like culture.

In turn, there is the lingering debate over the nature of the international system and the predominant theory that best explains a globalised world. Keohane and Nye published *Power and Interdependence* in 1977, where they introduced the concept of ‘complex interdependence’ (situations that cause reciprocal effects on states or actors), which is said to have anticipated globalisation (Rana, 2015: 290). In a subsequent publication by the authors, they similarly assert that the world system is increasingly less hierarchical and multiple channels connect societies, which have dramatically diminished the centrality of military force (Keohane & Nye, 1987). It is also here that the authors note that the concept is more liberal than realist in nature.

Yet subsequently Keohane and Nye (1998) have found that the information revolution has enhanced interdependence, by minimising the cost of communication and the use of force (heightening intangible power). They also find that the information era has not actually fully transformed world politics, as states still occupy the political spaces where information flows. Rana (2015: 291) stresses that complex interdependence today is the vulnerability to each other’s actions, which is characterised by cooperation, dependence and interaction – but also conflict, because the threat of military force remains, at times, a powerful bargaining tool. Criekemans in Murray et al. (2011: 713) agrees that elements of realism still exist in an interdependent world, while it was believed globalisation would in the early 1990s create a truly global village, territoriality had not actually vanished. Instead the opposite happened as re-territorialisation (of spheres of influence) highlights that geopolitics still matter.

Thus Alexandroff and Brean (2015: 2) conclude that today's global order combines geopolitics and global governance – moreover ‘order and disorder, power and cooperation, are always tied together’. If both liberal and realist views are able to explain elements of the current world order, the question is under what circumstances or reasons would states choose their immediate interests over cooperation and vice versa – and how do they make trade-offs between the two? Understanding identity and the factors that inform state choices then becomes salient in explaining particular foreign policy outcomes.

#### 2.3.4 Diplomacy and constructivism

At the beginning of this section on diplomacy, it was mentioned there are close linkages between diplomacy and constructivism. At the same time a constructivist perspective is able to emphasise the deeper complexities regarding the role of diplomacy, specifically identity formation (and preferences), structure and agency.

#### 2.3.4.1 Identity formation and choices

In a study on South Africa's own participation in global summitry, Alden and Schoeman (2015) demonstrate that a country's participation (and hosting) of global summitry is not actually value neutral. Instead, these platforms are symbolic and offer opportunity for the expression of self-perception, evolving identity and position on the global stage. For South Africa, this is the migration from its historically grounded Western orientation and apartheid history, to norms and interests rooted in Africa and the Global South. This reinforces the idea that while actors engage in international relations due to particular interests, global platforms also offer opportunity for the participation on discourse related to a state or society's identity and worldview.

Cooper and Hocking (2000: 361) provide the conventional view that at an international level, the state is at any moment, supposed to speak with a single voice. However, they agree with the above and question such an assumption, because a rigid state-centred framework distorts the complexities in world politics (2000: 362). Rather the factors that influence state actions need to be considered, such as the role of global structures and international civil society in agenda setting (Cooper & Hocking, 2000: 362; Keohane & Nye, 1987: 745); the impact of domestic dynamics (Hopf, 1998: 194-195) and even geopolitical considerations (Murray et al., 2011: 713).

Murray et al (2011: 719) similarly find that since its inception, diplomatic theory has been largely 'grand, monolithic, and rationalist and sought to explain, describe, and prescribe the elite practice of official state-qua-state diplomacy', thus focusing on the state and diplomats as units of analysis. Indeed such a grand theory cannot speak to the reality of modern-day diplomacy that requires exploring the philosophical, sociological, or psychological aspects of the practice (Murray et al., 2011: 720). Moreover, contrary to an assumed global diplomatic culture – the common values and ideas possessed by state representatives as a collective (Wiseman, 1999: 43) – is the need to include perspectives outside traditional centres of influence (Linklater, 2010: 2). Bolewski (2008: 146) affirms that while there are similarities in the diplomatic profession across nations, there still exist culturally diverse identities, which make it difficult to define a common culture of diplomacy.

Moreover, critical constructivists find it necessary to explore *who* these identities – shaped by cultural, political, economic, social and historical elements – are. On a domestic and societal level, Geldenhuys (2012: 30) notes the study of political cultures cannot abandon a range of other domestic factors that exist, like the negotiation over legitimacy, interests, identity, national attributes and expectations. Thus, diplomacy cannot be divorced from the domestic political process. Kappeler

(2004: 80) affirms that there are indeed within culture differences between individuals, groups and countries, especially when linked to particular issues, while Heywood (2002: 209) sees politics becoming progressively fragmented, due to the growing moral and cultural diversity within modernising societies, as a result of globalisation. Overall Kamrava (1995: 700) notes some countries have developed 'timeless' political cultures and are less subject to change, while others (namely new democracies) are still seeking nationally accepted political cultures.

Jönsson and Hall (2005: 21), drawing on James Der Derian's work, highlight that diplomacy is essentially mediation between politics or people. It is not characterised by 'great men' or 'great events' but rather by day-to-day petty rituals, and thus closely integrated with other social practices or at least shares the same socio-political space (Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 22). It is thus the constructivist approach that can unpack such taken-for-granted rituals and factors that make identities.

#### 2.3.4.2 Structure and agency

Wiseman (in Murray et al 2011: 712) admits that diplomatic norms and daily practices have become so internalised over time that scholars no longer appreciate their 'regulative, evaluative, constitutive, and practical effects'. Indeed, elsewhere (1999: 43) he makes a similar claim about diplomatic culture as conservative and resistant to change. Kelley (2010: 286) agrees that no other institution has remained as stable and enduring as diplomacy. Moreover, Jazbec (2013:97), Wiseman (2005:412) – in his summary of the traditional English School – and Linklater's (2010: 7) outline of Hedley Bull's 'cosmopolitan culture of modernity', collectively imply that *diplomacy influences politics*. They emphasise an international society where elites share closer association through their profession and commitment to modern societies than to their respective cultures; thus an overarching diplomatic culture exists. Yet there is also concern raised by Linklater (2010: 7) and Kappeler (2004: 80), that such an approach assumes acceptance of Western ideas and practices, as historically, international law and organisations originated from Western European and American political culture and do not reflect contemporary geopolitical shifts.

Nevertheless third generation English School scholars have incorporated global realities and have converged the above perspectives with constructivism, introducing new elements and concepts, *inter alia* culture and identity, to diplomacy and IR (Lantis, 2002: 96; Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 21; Villanueva, 2010). In recognition that it is impossible to understand why some cultures prefer certain institutional arrangements and instruments, without understanding socio-historical context, Pye



(1991:494) also emphasises the equal impact of structure and agency – including the structure of culture and the personality of individuals, as factors that shape state behaviour. Wiseman (2005: 411) agrees that culture is ‘learned, directed, produced, and ordered in some way and by somebody’. Moreover, traditional diplomacy has been forced, as noted earlier, to open up to the public, and even become enmeshed in the public domain (Kelley, 2010: 289). Hocking et al. (2012: 53) thus highlight the importance in determining who and what processes inform a national diplomatic system, including preferred agencies (such as foreign ministries) and structures for a country’s diplomacy.

Sending (2011: 646) then provides a balance between structure and agency. Diplomacy is described as ‘a thin intersubjective social space’ and its minimum requirement is that parties continue talking. There is in turn, a premium placed on consultation and consideration of others’ concerns. In sum, ‘diplomacy is about (re)producing – through the attention to protocol, form, and recognition of difference – culture in the form of a minimum set of intersubjective tools for communication between distinct units’ (Sending, 2011: 647).

## **2.4 Public diplomacy**

Wiseman (1999: 41) finds that new concepts have been devised in order to capture shifts in global dialogue (*vis-à-vis* diplomacy). He includes here ‘multi-layered diplomacy’ (involving non-central governments); ‘second track diplomacy’ (that is diplomacy outside the formal governmental system, often initiated by non-state actors and involving diplomats in their personal capacity); and ‘niche diplomacy’ (the ability of small and middle powers to provide initiative and leadership in specific international areas), among others.

Pynzari (2014:135) adds that the broadening of the diplomatic sphere has included specialists other than professional diplomats, who perform specific functions. Similarly, niche types of diplomacy have arisen, such as ‘economic diplomacy’ (Ruël, 2013: 19; Pynzari, 2014: 135), which is largely concerned with economic tools (like trade agreements) to achieve a state’s interests; ‘trade diplomacy’ (Pynzari, 2014: 135), that is diplomatic efforts to support a nation’s trade and financial sectors; as well as ‘sports diplomacy’ (Jackson, 2013: 278; Murray, 2013: 12) that is utilising sport as a strategic part of diplomacy. Jackson (2013: 276) adds that different types of diplomacy – from political, economic, military to cultural (which even includes food, education, popular culture, religion and sport) – actually work in tandem, as specialisations, rather than in isolation. However, despite changing patterns of diplomacy, states continue to remain key actors in the process and still set the terms of reference through which other stakeholders engage (Beacom, 2012: 1).

Kelley (2010: 288) concludes that the very survival of diplomacy, in the midst of global changes, is its ability to evolve into ‘newness’ and expand in content. While states cannot control factors beyond their reach, they still have the power to actively transform their institutions and practices (Kelley, 2010: 295). The rise of public diplomacy is illustrative of this.

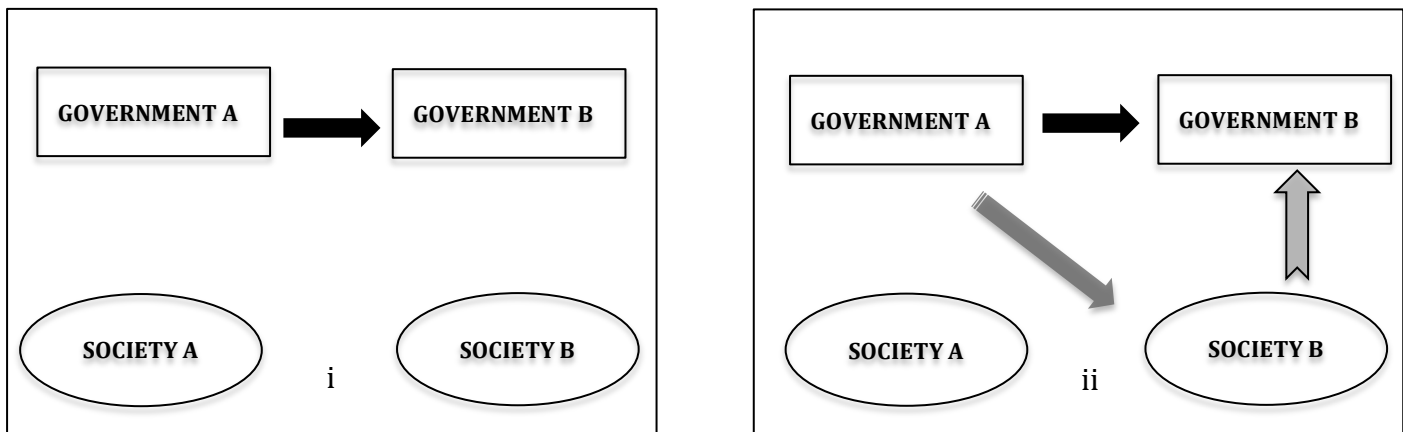
#### 2.4.1 Public diplomacy defined

There is broad agreement that Edmund Gullion officially coined the concept of public diplomacy, a subset of diplomacy, in 1965 (McDowell, 2008: 7; Cull, 2009: 19; Pigman, 2010: 121). In particular, Cull (2009: 19) sums up Gullion’s definition as

the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications.

This interpretation views government actions (through communication channels or instruments) as informing and influencing foreign publics on the formation and execution of foreign policies. Indeed the practice has expanded over time and contemporary public diplomacy, according to McDowell (2008: 7), includes the *transnational impact* of government and private activities; of course a degree of government intention or participation remains, since the concept is essentially the ‘public face’ of diplomacy (Wang, 2005: 32). This practice has largely grown due to the very presence of new actors such as mass media, transnational corporations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and even individuals (Pynzari, 2014: 135). Others even find that public diplomacy includes targeting transnational *or* domestic levels, as it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between public affairs (aimed at domestic audiences) and public diplomacy (aimed at foreign publics) in a transnationally connected world (Melissen, 2005: 9; Spies, 2015).

McDowell (2008: 8–9) provides a simple model explaining the evolution of diplomacy and the role of public diplomacy. Figure 2.1(i) illustrates traditional diplomacy where government A engages government B directly, and neither society A nor society B is involved. Figure 2.1(ii) – an amalgamation of two figures supplied by McDowell – demonstrates government A directly seeking to inform and influence public B (this could be attracting the public for investment, tourism or to promote trade). At the same time, this particular engagement could be used to indirectly influence government B.



**Figure 2.1: The evolution of diplomacy and the role of public diplomacy**

Source: McDowell (2008:8-10)

McDowell (2008: 9–10) cautions that government A’s direct contact with society B could stray into propaganda – but adds another emergent avenue, which is the impact of society A on society B that could include activities like film festivals or exchange programs. Of course, there need to be few barriers (like the political environment) so that society B can influence its own government too (McDowell. 2008: 10).

There are thus new elements involved in the contemporary understanding of public diplomacy. It is an instrument used by states and associations of states (including and sub-state and non-state actors) (Gregory, 2011: 353), who seek indirect or direct influence (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992: 138) in order to understand cultures and attitudes, influence public attitudes and opinions (or mobilise action) and build and manage relationships – and in turn, the ability to advance interests or values (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992: 138; Gregory, 2011: 353; Melissen, 2005: 8). Moreover, these actions can influence another government’s thinking and foreign policy decisions (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992: 138; Gilboa, 2001: 4). Thus Gregory (2008: 274) states it is difficult to find generally accepted academic contours for the study of public diplomacy because its very definition is by nature evolving and contested. Nevertheless Gilboa (2008: 58) offers a simplified, contemporary understanding as state and non-state actors using instruments (like communication) to influence public opinion, particularly in foreign societies.

#### 2.4.2 The evolution and re-emergence of public diplomacy

Even though the terminology of public diplomacy (coined in the 1960s) is somewhat new, the activity clearly is not (Cull, 2010: 11; Kleiner, 2008: 326; Cull, 2009: 19–20). Melissen (2005: 1)

rightly states that image cultivation, propaganda and other activities that fall within the ambit of public diplomacy, are nearly as old as diplomacy itself (he specifically refers to ancient Greece and Rome, Byzantium and the Italian Renaissance). However, the author (2005: 1) finds that it was not until the invention of the printing press during the 15th century that the significance of official communication with foreign publics was heightened. Cull (2009: 19–20) adds that the application of the public diplomacy term dates as far back as 1856, when it surfaced in the *Times* of London and again in 1871 in the *New York Times*.

When World War I began, the concept was applied to a handful of new diplomatic practices and was synonymous with the notion of ‘open diplomacy’, exemplified by President Woodrow Wilson’s ‘Fourteen Points’ speech in 1918 (Cull, 2009: 20). Nye (2008: 97) even emphasises the relative lateness of the US in adopting the use of information and culture for the purposes of diplomacy, noting Wilson had only created a Committee on Public Information the year before. Nevertheless, Melissen (2005: 2) affirms that the war officially gave rise to the professional image cultivation of states, across national borders.

The 1920s is hence a useful starting point for the study of modern public diplomacy, because the end of the war was coupled with the end of the 19th century world order (Gregory, 2008: 276). Moreover new narratives – like Wilson’s principles for world peace and Germany’s National Socialism – were being amplified by industrial age communication technologies such as telegraphs, short-wave radios and undersea cables. Cull (2009: 20) adds that the term temporarily lost its use during World War II (1939–1945), and it was only following this period and with the reassessment of Wilson’s ideals, that the term re-emerged. Yet this time it shifted into the domain of international information and propaganda, due to the broader shift in diplomatic practices (Cull, 2009: 21).

It was during the height of the Cold War that Gullion’s definition of public diplomacy emerged, as Washington needed a term that was less negatively charged than propaganda (Cull, 2009: 21; Szondi, 2008: 2). Moreover it was the US and Soviet Union rivalry that saw a rise in the adoption of radio (such as *Voice of America* and *Radio Moscow*) and the enlisting of Hollywood (where US officials offered script suggestions), as instruments for shaping public attitudes and conveying ideologies (Gilboa, 2001: 5; Egner, 2010: 19).

Melissen (2005: 13) concludes that the origins of contemporary public diplomacy and its current debates are dominated by the US experience. In particular, its public diplomacy stems from a history of propaganda engagements (during the world wars and Cold War), while in contrast, the European

perspective (derived from a much longer and varied experience) tends to approach the concept as a national image management strategy<sup>8</sup> – particularly in the context of declining state influence and European integration (Kaneva, 2011: 125–126; Melissen, 2005: 15–16; Melissen, 2011: 8).

#### 2.4.2.1 Contemporary public diplomacy: linking past to present

Szondi (2008: 2) summarises three distinct phases in US public diplomacy. The first stretched over four decades, namely during the Cold War, which significantly shaped the evolution and practice of public diplomacy; the second phase was marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall, where less resources were dedicated to public diplomacy activities – also reflected by Nye (2008: 98). While government pulled back their efforts, the impact of media on international relations, as demonstrated in Gilboa's (2005) study of CNN's 24-hour news coverage of the Gulf War (1990–1991), became apparent. The third and current phase, is where public diplomacy re-emerged as an important political communication issue, as a result of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon (Szondi, 2008: 2; Snow & Taylor, 2009: ix; Melissen, 2011: 12).

The turn of events and a traumatised US diplomacy from the 'war on terror', spurred a worldwide debate and revival in public diplomacy, which had been notably neglected by states globally (Melissen, 2011: 8; Kelley, 2010: 293). This event, coupled with the unpredictability of new global trends (including new actors and communication platforms), led Sharp (2011: 718) to confirm a revival in diplomacy, because a blank canvas and fertile ground to create new frameworks had been opened. Moreover, the rise of non-state actors and communication technologies has shaped a set of new factors influencing diplomacy, such as the increased importance of public opinion and global transparency, an increasingly intrusive media and the rise of a global culture (and the reflexive desire to protect cultural diversity) (Gilboa, 2008: 58).

Melissen (2005: 3) finds the changing nature of diplomacy, once based on secretive engagement in the interest of national security, is increasingly public in nature as the contest of ideas is taking place within a global dimension, what Hoffman (2002:84) calls 'the global fishbowl of life'. The tradition of diplomacy – as the clearly defined and delineated roles and responsibilities of actors – has been complicated by a world of postmodern, transnational relations (Melissen, 2005: 5; Bolewski 2008: 151). New diplomats are required to 'delve into transnational advocacy networks' and seek moral legitimacy, in comparison to their predecessors whose role was to build coalitions between

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<sup>8</sup> Nye (2008: 96) provides such an example, where the French government sought to repair the nation's prestige after it lost the Franco-Prussian War. Thus the *Alliance Francaise* was created in 1883, to promote the country's language and literature.

states and who relied on political legitimacy for reinforcement (Kelley. 2010: 293). The best way to respond to such a context is to adopt innovative, adaptable and change-orientated institutions (Wiseman, 1999: 45; 2010: 30). Notably the increase in public diplomacy use is illustrative of a response to such changes (Sharp 2011:718).

Therefore, through the evolution of the international environment, public diplomacy is increasingly linked to an eclectic range of stakeholders and is clearly becoming ‘woven into the fabric of mainstream diplomatic activity’ (Melissen, 2005: 7). In fact, this subset has become a common feature in the training curricula of junior diplomats (Melissen 2011:1).

#### 2.4.3 The relationship between public diplomacy and other concepts

The foundations of public diplomacy include propaganda studies (which is itself composed of different approaches<sup>9</sup>) and even public opinion studies, which continues to influence the practice (Gregory, 2008: 277).

Welch (1999:26) defines modern *propaganda* as:

[T]he deliberate attempt to influence the opinions of an audience through the transmission of ideas and values for a specific persuasive purpose, consciously designed to serve the interest of the propagandists and their political masters, either directly or indirectly.

There is commonality with public diplomacy in that both concepts rely on indirect communication, such as engaging public opinion, than direct government relations (Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 90). Yet they differ in that public diplomacy is based on two-way communication (a process of mutual influence), while propaganda is a one-way street (Cull, 2010: 6; Pigman, 2010: 122). Several authors (Jönsson & Hall, 2005: 90; Melissen, 2005: 20; Gregory, 2006: 2) agree that contemporary scholarship tends to set the concepts apart, as propaganda was a phenomenon that fell into disrepute in the 20th century, due to memories of Nazi and communist propaganda and Cold War activities. Meanwhile Welch (1999: 24) insists that the historical role of propaganda conduct was not always dishonourable. In any case, Manojlovic and Thorheim (2007: 29) feel that propaganda no longer suits the political context today. People are not as susceptible to propaganda-style messages as before, because the access to information to verify such messages and the broadcasting of public views is much more widely available, making it more difficult to convince and grab public attention.

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<sup>9</sup> Some view propaganda as political advocacy with hidden or hostile intent; while others view it as a neutral instrument that all political actors use.

The changes occurring in the *public relations* field mirror those in public diplomacy, which migrated from the one-way communication of propaganda to relationship management (Manojlovic & Thorheim, 2007: 31). Strictly speaking, Pigman (2010: 126) sees public relations involving communication between private actors (such as firms and civil society organisations), while public affairs is the communication between governments and their own publics – both of which differ from public diplomacy. Still he agrees that the boundaries between these practices are increasingly hazy, as a message today can be intended for a range of audiences. Gilboa (2008: 57) adds that there is indeed similarity between the two concepts, as they seek very similar objectives and employ similar tools. Public relations also provides lessons for public diplomacy, for instance an organisation can benefit from maintaining mutually beneficial relations with *key publics*, because the quality of relationships today are not how much one side gains but the real value is in fostering and maintaining *long-term* ties, where both sides gain (Manojlovic & Thorheim, 2007: 31). Moreover, the techniques of public relations (such as media strategies) are deemed useful in public diplomacy practice (Pigman, 2010: 124).

*Nation branding* as was noted, holds deeper European roots and appeal (as a largely British practice), while public diplomacy has been paved by American scholars and practice (Szondi, 2009: 1). The former is for Kaneva (2011: 118), ‘a compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms’. In practice, there is agreement that nation branding is reliant on visuals – like national logos, symbols and slogans – and core concepts that encapsulate a country’s unique attributes and assets (Kaneva, 2011: 118; Zaharna, 2009: 90; Szondi, 2008: 16). It is also sometimes seen as a separate concept to public diplomacy, as Zaharna (2009: 90) points to Simon Anholt, a leading advocate of nation branding, who sees public diplomacy as one of four complementary dimensions of nation branding – that also include tourism, exports and foreign direct investment. Importantly nation branding also views domestic and foreign audiences as equally important targets (Szondi, 2011: 12). Thus, it involves greater mobilisation of national forces, while public diplomacy is traditionally limited to those who practise diplomacy (Melissen, 2005: 22). However, Szondi (2008: 12) sees governments as important initiators or coordinators of nation branding, even though they are not directly linked to such activities. Moreover, from an instrumentalist perspective, both public diplomacy and nation branding are tools used to strategically manage reputations and gain a competitive advantage, as nation states operate in a globally competitive context (Kaneva, 2011: 125). Thus, both are interested in strategically designing and disseminating information to targeted audiences (Zaharna, 2009: 90).

Finally, Gilboa (2008: 58) differentiates between public diplomacy (namely state or non-state actors influencing foreign public opinion); media diplomacy (where officials use media to investigate and promote mutual interests, conflict resolutions and negotiations); and media-broker diplomacy (where journalists are temporarily diplomats and serve as mediators in international negotiations).

In conclusion, Pigman (2010: 72 & 123–126) finds that while there are differences between concepts like public relations, public diplomacy and propaganda – and how governments and private actors administer them – these lines have indeed blurred in the context of the information age. For Fouts (2009: 9–10) and Wu (2013: 6-7), this is demonstrated through social media, where a convergence of influential voices and practices are increasingly taking to online platforms (such as Twitter) to engage and disseminate information to audiences. This is also known as ‘digital diplomacy’.

#### 2.4.4 Public diplomacy instruments

In his article on diplomacy in the media age, Gilboa (2001: 4) admits that the mass media (namely international broadcasting) are but one important public diplomacy channel and other instruments are also useful – like cultural and scientific exchanges of students, scholars, intellectuals and artists; participation in festivals and exhibitions; building and maintaining cultural centres (some of which teach languages); and establishing local friendship leagues or trade associations.

Meanwhile Zaharna (2009: 93) sees public diplomacy initiatives in terms of the level of participation (individuals, institution or community); degree of coordination; scope (single or multi-issue); time duration and policy objective involved (political or apolitical) – and thus usefully categorises these initiatives into three tiers. The first tier of relationship building initiatives includes exchanges (cultural and education) and leadership visits, which are a regular feature in traditional public diplomacy and whose complexity derives from the fact that the main participants in this tier are individuals (scholars and officials) (Zaharna, 2009: 93). The second tier involves broader public participation and a longer time frame, which also requires a larger degree of coordination (Zaharna, 2009: 94). This includes cultural and language institutes; development aid projects; ‘twinning arrangements’ (such as ‘sister cities’ or provinces and countries); relationship building campaigns (that are about building relationships with publics and organisations, including exhibitions, discussion forums and concerts); and non-political networking schemes (where public diplomacy officers create networks of like-minded individuals or institutions working on various issues such as health, science or environment). The final tier involves policy-networking strategies, such as coalition building with other countries and non-state actors, in order to achieve policy objectives.



It should, however, be emphasised that the particular choice and grading of instruments will depend on the actors and context involved. For instance, Karen Hughes, the former US Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, stated to the United States Senate (2010) that the US public diplomacy activities include four main categories: communications (how it frames diplomatic activities); education and exchange programs ('the heart of public diplomacy'); the deeds of diplomacy ('concrete things we do' like health and economic development); and lastly, international broadcasting. Yet despite the categories mentioned, Melissen (2005: 10) sees public diplomacy's importance predominantly at the bilateral level of relations, even though it is being pursued by international organisations. Furthermore, McDowell (2008: 12) states 'despite the larger government's greater resources, the small country may be at an advantage because it can control its message'.

What is apparent, irrespective of the channels concerned, is the view offered by Pigman (2010: 124) that one of the most successful approaches to fostering a positive image is the promoting of a country's values through cultural diplomacy; which is in this case an instrument or activity of public diplomacy (Schneider, 2005: 147; Kang, 2013: 3). The roots of cultural diplomacy (and activity of cultural exchange) can be dated back to the Olympic Games in ancient Greece, where the games were held in honour of the Greek gods. The revival of the games in 1896 by a French nobleman, Pierre de Coubertin, was to honour the talents of athletes from different nations – and more specifically to return France to its former glory, following its defeat in the Franco-German War in 1870–1871 (Krüger, 2002: 3). Pynzari (2014: 135) sees the role of cultural diplomacy today as 'to promote the cultural, scientific, technical, social, and humanitarian achievements of the state abroad as part of a larger program of gaining allies and developing friendly relations with those countries'. A similar definition is offered by Schneider (2005:147). Thereby culture and history is in this context, interpreted and mobilised for specific diplomatic purposes. Kang (2013:3) adds that this view sees the concept as a variety of programs and initiatives (such as cultural exchanges) facilitated by government. Moreover, the objective of cultural diplomacy is two-fold: first, culture is used as a tool for diplomacy, and second it emphasises a nation's competitiveness in the creative economy (Kang, 2013: 4).

#### 2.4.5 Current debates

This section highlights some of the key debated issues regarding public diplomacy in the 21st century that inform this study. They include:

- debate over the utility of public diplomacy;
- the complicated link with the ‘soft power’ concept;
- new actors in the public diplomacy space; and importantly
- discussion on how to gain influence.

#### 2.4.5.1 Utility of public diplomacy

Baigorri-Jalón (2014: 47) considers that not all experts believe in the utility of public diplomacy or even multilateral summits, as quiet diplomacy (without publicity) remains an imperative and effective approach. There is also disagreement from traditionalists over whether investment in the arts for the benefit of diplomacy should be a priority (Brown, 2009: 58), while some civil society actors believe that arts and culture should not be manipulated as foreign policy tools.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Melissen (2005: 5) believes that public diplomacy is here to stay, and finds the apprehension originating in the fact that the concept does not fit comfortably with traditional diplomatic culture, and is viewed as ‘intrusive, threatening and undermining’ countries’ stability (Melissen, 2011: 6). Karen Hughes (United States Senate, 2010) agrees: ‘to view [public diplomacy] as an international popularity contest is a fundamental misunderstanding’ – engagement with publics is vital to foreign policy. Rasmussen and Merklezen (2012: 811) add its importance to national security, asserting that security risk has been redefined to include reputational risk. Thus, public diplomacy cannot be practised successfully, without accepting that the games of nations and the international environment have fundamentally changed (Melissen 2005: 30).

A middle ground between the acceptance and rejection of public diplomacy is to view it as part of a larger ‘diplomacy toolkit’ that states use in order to achieve foreign policy objectives. Public diplomacy is a ‘first line of defence’ (Melissen, 2011: 2) that can respond to short-term political agendas and events. It ‘involves building long-term relationships that create an enabling environment for government policies’ (Nye, 2008: 101). The appeal of emotion and empathy, as an alternative to confrontation and force, is imperative in a globalising world, where gaining support for particular policies matters (Pigman, 2010: 122; Schneider, 2009: 2). Thus, as noted earlier, public diplomacy provides a platform to gauge opinions and is useful as a linking instrument (Neag, 2014: 166). Murray et al. (2011: 718) provide a different perspective, where public diplomacy is seen as a

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<sup>10</sup> As expressed by Valmont Layne, Secretary General of the Arterial Network (South Africa), during a report back on the Civil BRICS Forum in Moscow, Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Pretoria, 14 August 2015.

response to the unknown or current political climate. It is the ‘latest wave’ in the innovation of diplomacy and it will eventually lead the way into a context where it is no longer needed.

#### 2.4.5.2 Soft power

The notion of soft power – coined by Joseph Nye (2012: 151) to explain power that attracts rather than coerces to achieve particular foreign policy objectives – has become ‘the most referenced term in [the] public diplomacy lexicon’ (Snow, 2009: 3), although Pan (2013: 23) sees the term as an extension of Carr’s 1954 ‘power over opinion’ and Luke’s 1974 ‘third dimension of power’. There also remains little agreement on soft power’s definition and application, as reflected by the South African case, where there is limited consensus over the concept and its importance among foreign policy practitioners (Smith, 2012: 70). Also soft influence cannot help achieve all state objectives, as demonstrated in the cases of North Korea’s nuclear aspirations or winning support for the Bush administration’s ‘global war on terror’ (Nye, 2008: 96 & 2012; Pigman, 2010: 131; Schneider, 2009: 2). Some even perceive soft power as a Western-derived concept – and together with the difficulty in measuring its impact, it becomes prone to subjective and political application (Van Staden, 2013: 5; Wu & Alden, 2014). Hence, Stuenkel (2016) suggests that soft influence is relational and it depends *who* is being asked; for instance BRICS countries may generate appeal through their economic models in Africa but their impending socio-economic challenges remain unattractive to Europeans.

With regard to public diplomacy, Nye (2008: 96) suggests three primary sources of state soft power: culture (in places where it is attractive to others); political values and ideas (and when they are lived up to at home and abroad); and foreign policy (which appears legitimate and has moral authority). McDowell (2008: 11-12) provides further commentary on the link between these sources and public diplomacy. Firstly, governments have limited impact on culture and are one of many promoters of it; secondly, government’s do not create values or ideals but promote and disseminate them; and finally, public diplomacy remains a subset of diplomacy, which in turn is one aspect of government activities. Nevertheless, public diplomacy is still one of soft power’s key instruments (Melissen, 2005: 3). In fact, governments have the impetus and capital to kick-start activities that help a nation gain soft power (Wu & Alden, 2014).

While soft power remains a loosely defined and politically charged concept, there is nevertheless sustained interest in it, and its potential wielding through public diplomacy. In the UK, for example, the House of Lords formed a ‘Committee on Soft Power and the UK’s Influence’, which later

produced a report (United Kingdom, 2014). In an attempt to overcome the measurement challenges of soft power, ‘the Soft Power + Digital Diplomacy Index’ was launched in the UK in 2015 (McClory, 2015). Furthermore, the British Council’s CEO, Ciarán Devane, also made a presentation titled ‘Why soft power and cultural diplomacy matter’, in South Africa.<sup>11</sup>

#### 2.4.5.3 New players: non-state actors and emerging state actors

As mentioned, an outstanding puzzle is how states should engage non-state actors and whether they should even be brought into formal diplomatic structures. Pigman (2010: 124 & 128) and Nye (2008: 103) agree that on one hand, non-state actors have become useful human resources to a country’s public diplomacy activities; and on the other hand have forced diplomats to change their practices and engage in dialogue. The polyilateral dimension of public diplomacy is evident in the sense that it is not a zero-sum game and its success depends on the ability of stakeholders to reach compromise. Hence long-term policy cooperation is about not only the changes in diplomatic practices, but also the ability of non-state actors to adjust their tone and the nature of their engagements with governments (Wiseman, 1999: 50). Diplomats, on the other hand, are more likely to engage non-state actors when ‘low politics’ are at issue, but not necessarily when security-orientated ‘high politics’ are at stake (Wiseman, 1999: 48).

Melissen (2005: 15 & 2011: 12) sees countries ranging in size and affluence beginning to adopt communication strategies, despite the fact that public diplomacy started as a US practice. This is reflected by the increase in English language state media (aimed at global audiences) such as Russia Today, Qatar’s Al Jazeera and China Central Television (CCTV) (Massey, 2011; Gilboa, 2005: 337). As a result, during 2013, the German international broadcaster, Deutsche Welle, held a panel specifically titled ‘New Players in Developing Media Markets’<sup>12</sup> at its annual Global Media Forum in Bonn (Walsh, 2013). The University of Southern California (2014: 2) further highlighted this fact as it hosted an international conference titled ‘A New Era in Cultural Diplomacy: Rising Soft Power in Emerging Markets’ and introduced an academic minor in public diplomacy, in recognition that the theme was timely and important, as underlined by the large budgets emerging economies are dedicating to the practice. Similarly, Syracuse University published a volume titled ‘Public Diplomacy in Emerging Nations’ in an attempt to study public diplomacy through a non-American perspective.

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<sup>11</sup> This event took place at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 25 June 2015.

<sup>12</sup> The author participated in this panel.

Van Wyk (2012: 285) asserts that states are to an extent obliged to follow the norms that relate to the practice of diplomacy; yet it appears that public diplomacy, a subset of diplomacy, remains open to interpretation, because of the range of actors involved. This is supported by Szondi (2008: 9) who adds that unlike nation branding – which follows standard practices – public diplomacy is influenced by the way respective governments define it and its contextualisation is influenced by the history and culture of the country in question. Therefore the relationship between soft power and public diplomacy will be contextualised in a non-Western context (namely the China experience), as one of the issues to be further elucidated by this research.

#### 2.4.5.4 Discussion on public diplomacy and influence

As previously mentioned, diplomacy is the negotiation and communication between people or polities which underlies the importance of understanding and explaining culturally diverse identities. Relations between countries are essentially cultural relations, as preferences and options are in essence, culturally informed (Frankel, 1969: 593). Cohen (2000: 317) finds that cultural and language differences can actually be exacerbated in the context of globalisation; and Huntington (1993: 22) proposes that such differences (including religion) are the very source of international conflict. Gregory (2008: 283) asserts that people have multiple, shifting identities today and are shaped by a range of factors such as class, gender or nationality. Thus, constructivism remains the best approach to providing insight into the strategies of political actors.

How does this link to public diplomacy? The very differences in political, social and economic systems – and even rooted tensions between states and other actors – provide the impetus for the need for public diplomacy (Szondi, 2008: 3). Frankel (1969: 593) reports ‘cultural differences do not make cooperation impossible, but they set the conditions within which it must be sought’. Tannen (1999: 208) agrees that similar ends are indeed achievable through different approaches. Livermore (2010) even sees cultural understanding as a key attribute of leadership in a globalising world, which has led to his development of a four-step program to develop ‘cultural intelligence’.

At the same time negotiation across cultures remains particularly challenging when emotive and complex subjects arise – like human rights and humanitarian intervention (versus objective negotiation over goods and prices) (Cohen, 2000: 317). Further complexities are the varying ways that cultures communicate or reason, and even prefer certain institutional arrangements and foreign policy instruments to others (Wildavsky, 1987; Formisano, 2001; Hall & Hall, 2003). The issues that arise are how nations should undertake public diplomacy in a manner that is not perceived to be

infringing on another's affairs (Melissen, 2011: 6). Moreover, what makes a public diplomacy engagement successful? Scholars describe two techniques of influence, as follows.

The first is what Polletta and Ho (2006: 188) describe as **framing**: 'the ways in which political actors package their messages', namely by demarcating and punctuating (or repeating) important aspects of reality in order to persuade an audience. Framing is essentially characterised in two words – *selection* and *salience* – and true to constructivist notions, it helps construct a notion of social reality in order to achieve a particular interest (Entman, 1993: 52; Egner, 2010: 6). In fact 'to be powerful is less important than to appear powerful' (Ringmar, 2012: 19). An example is the frames adopted in different world systems to describe a situation. For instance, the Westphalian system portrays the world as an 'anarchy', while the Sinocentric world is a 'hierarchy' (Ringmar, 2012: 7).

Framing has, since the 1980s, been used by a range of disciplines from media studies (as a form of second-level agenda setting, whereas the first level would be the amount of coverage a story gets), international relations, decision-making, policymaking and social movements (Egner, 2010: 24–25; Polletta & Ho, 2006: 188). Frames also manifest in various ways – for example in the case of media content, frames are transmitted through word choice, metaphors, arguments, descriptions and visual aids (Van Gorp, 2007: 64). Indeed the selection of particular narratives – as will be explored in this study – is also subject to an actor's normative values (Polletta & Ho, 2006: 195).

More significantly, public diplomacy is considered an important vehicle to produce and disseminate frames, as well as emphasising particular aspects of a policy or moral dilemma (Egner, 2010). Together, its disparate activities produce and disseminate a fairly coordinated system of frames (like particular beliefs or interests) that help a state build support for its interests (Egner, 2010: 70).

Still, framing can help persuade a target audience – but it cannot necessarily convert them. Consideration needs also to be given to the fact that audiences may not interpret and process information the way it was intended (Entman, 1993: 54). Thus, the framing process is a dynamic negotiation, between sender and receiver (Van Gorp, 1993: 64). In turn the sender is also subject to be influenced, because once they identify which frames provide the most policy support, the more likely they will continue to use such frames, than those of personal preference (Egner, 2010: 15). Hence, frames are considered both independent and dependent variables. Polletta and Ho (2006: 191) caution that frames and ideology are not synonymous; the former are an aspect of ideology and are a strategy – they cannot replace engaging in discourse, which is imperative in the information age.

The second aspect – and leading from the problems over audiences accepting framed messages – is **engaging discourse**. Scholars note that public diplomacy is most successful when it involves listening and talking to disparate views – and in turn, collecting and analysing public opinions and then adjusting accordingly (Nye, 2008: 103; Cull, 2010: 12). In fact, it provides a platform where intersubjective meaning plays out and where legitimacy and identities are negotiated.

An instance is Zöllner’s (2006: 166) study on Germany’s public diplomacy, specifically international broadcasting, towards the Arab world in post-9/11. The author describes two schools of thought regarding the objective of public diplomacy, which are first, to exert influence on foreign publics’ attitudes, using persuasion and propaganda for short-term gains; and second a cultural function, to create a climate of mutual understanding, where truth and veracity override persuasion tactics (a negotiated approach). They further describe Habermas’ notion of communicative action, which is based on ‘processes of understanding during which actors may make mutual claims of validity of their utterances’ that can either be accepted or rejected (Zöllner, 2006: 168).

Habermas himself outlines a typology of *action situations* (as non-social and social) and *action orientations* (success and understanding), which are represented in Table 2.3 (Zöllner, 2006: 168). Non-social action orientated towards success would be called ‘instrumental action’ (an example is the use of ideology), while a non-social action that is orientated towards understanding, would not exist. Meanwhile social action situations can be orientated towards success (‘strategic’ action) or understanding (‘communicative’ action). Thereby the negotiated approach provided by Zöllner and social action situations, are the best options for creating situations of success and understanding in a globalised world. This is because communicative action presupposes that actors, who are on equal footing, are capable of mutual criticism (Zöllner 2006: 168).

**Table 2.3: Habermas’ typology of action situations and action orientations**

	<b>Non Social</b>	<b>Social</b>
<b>Success</b>	Instrumental action	Strategic action
<b>Understanding</b>	None	Communicative action

Source: Zöllner (2006: 169)

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter provided an important analytical basis. It positioned the study in the larger IR discipline by drawing on notable works and debates with respect to two main functions – to provide an overarching theoretical approach and to clarify key concepts in the study.

On the IR theoretical approach, constructivism provides strong explanatory power for a nation's self-perception, choices and communication. As an approach rather than theory, it emphasises that reality is socially constructed, that identity shapes political choices, that ideational and material structures are equally important and finally, it provides explanations for political change. Critical constructivists also assert that identities are not fixed but are amorphous, and are thus more than just explanatory variables of a phenomenon. Notably the complementarities between constructivist strands naturally lend to the main purpose of this study, which is exploratory and is question rather than method driven.

The chapter also sought to provide clarity and common understanding on particular concepts, namely diplomacy and public diplomacy, which are themselves an embodiment of constructivism, as essentially social practices that seek to bridge different entities. The development of these concepts gave impetus to this study. The literature emphasises the need to move away from perspectives that derive from traditional centres of influence, since there is hardly one culture of diplomacy, underlain by the same values and ideas. Diplomacy is also an evolving practice and with the advent of a more interconnected world, is the growing importance of public diplomacy – which links governments to foreign audiences. Yet the very public diplomacy strategies, sources and instruments used are particularly revealing of the identity of the state in question. Current debates on the practice, were also drawn upon and include the utility of adopting public diplomacy; the politicisation of soft power; new public diplomacy actors; and discussions over how influence can be achieved (such as the use of frames and discourse).

With these points in mind, the next chapter is contextual, and explores the specific diplomatic experience of China, particularly its interpretation of the world (and the historical impetus behind it) and how it communicates this through narratives in its public diplomacy.



## Chapter 3 China's historical Sinocentric worldview and contemporary public diplomacy

*The history of a concept is significant because it allows us to observe the matrix in which an important idea first arose, and the ideological company it has since kept*

– Wolters (1989: 14)

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter constitutes the second part of the conceptual framework and explores the nature of China's diplomacy, and specifically public diplomacy approach. It largely responds to two of the three thesis objectives (linked to the main research question on how China's public diplomacy promotes its interests in Africa): first is the extent to which the historical Sinocentric world narrative informs China's contemporary public diplomacy; and second, how it conceptualises public diplomacy in the context of its rise. Hence China's public diplomacy will be investigated by unpacking (a) the historical Sinocentric world order that structured China's external relations; (b) how such an outlook manifests in its diplomacy today; and (c) China's public diplomacy – a recent addition to its external engagements – that transmits its worldview and assists it in navigating an interconnected world.

#### 3.1.1 Defining a worldview

The Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant coined the term 'worldview' (also known as *Weltanschauung* in German) in the 1700s and it was also applied in philosophy, theology, anthropology and education (Wolters, 1989: 15; Vidal, 2008: 2). By the 19th century, the German term denoted 'a global outlook on life and the world', which was closely associated to philosophy and furthermore began to diffuse into 'virtually every speech community in the Western world' (Wolters, 1989: 15). Yet not all philosophers viewed worldview and philosophy as compatible. Worldview denotes a personal, particularistic and historically relative perspective, while philosophy, in its classical form, is associated with universal validity and scientific and rational thought. At the same time, Vidal (2008: 7) asserts that humans are creatures that evolve through the use of brainpower; and thus worldviews are necessary for our survival, as they allow us to interact with the world and to use it as a template to acquire more knowledge. The term can thus be classified under 'philosophical worldviews', which are rooted in rationality and validity (Vidal 2008: 8). This is related to Egetemeyr's (2007: 7) belief that worldviews provide 'logical' assumptions about the

political world, which become the key ingredients of a political culture and conditions the political discourse of a social group.

Hence, the term ‘worldview’ in this context refers to a coherent collection of concepts that allows for the construction of ‘a global image of the world’ in order to ‘understand as many elements of our experience as possible’ (Aerts et al., 2007: 8).

### **3.2 China’s historical worldview**

A wide array of scholars has explored the existence of the Sinocentric world order. Zhang and Buzan (2012: 12) find that there was an indigenous social order – also known as the Chinese world order or East Asian order – made of established practices and institutions. It was informed by a unique history and culture to confront issues around security, cooperation and coexistence. Edward Wang (1999) highlights the significance of the Han dynasty (that existed in parallel to the Roman Empire), whose worldview was shaped by Confucianism and relations with its neighbours. In fact, it was the invention of paper in this period that allowed Confucian classics to be readily reconstructed, knowledge to be spread and the development of a stable bureaucracy (Du Plessis & Raza, 2015: 50).

This period is also considered the origin of the Chinese tributary system (chaogong tizhi 朝貢體), which Ringmar (2012) refers to as the Sinocentric international system – and is described as an embodiment of a set of institutional frameworks (or social and diplomatic norms) that organised China’s external relations (Cranmer-Byng, 1968: 166; Zhou, 2011; Zhang & Buzan, 2012: 20; Zhang, 2013a). There is also broad agreement that China’s foreign relations were largely an external expression of the practical principles governing the domestic social and political order in Chinese society, such as the emphasis on hierarchical relations (Fairbank, 1968: 2–3; Wang, 1999: 287; Kissinger, 2014: 179; Zhao, 2015: 965). Hence, it ‘did not contradict the Chinese worldview’ (Zhang & Buzan, 2012: 21).

Meanwhile Hsü (1983: 6) and Kissinger (2014: 11) explore Chinese society and its particular governing principles. They agree that China’s political system, social structures, economic institutions and even intellectual views remained relatively constant for about 2,000 years (prior to the 1800s); and even though political contests were common, sometimes resulting in non-Chinese dynastic rulers, they essentially sought to control an already established order. Fairbank (1968: 4) agrees that the Chinese tradition of governance and foreign relations, like the Sinocentric terminology in all aspects of the tributary system, were remarkably preserved, even though there

were slight variations in the way each dynasty managed their foreign relations (Ringmar, 2012: 4; Dreyer 2015: 1025). Other underlying traits included a dynasty ruled by an imperial family, an agrarian and self-sufficient economy, a society organised around the gentry and importantly, the system remained intact due to the Confucian orthodoxy (Hsü, 1983: 6). The system also had its dominant roots in Confucian thinking – that includes the belief of a virtuous sage-ruler (or ‘Son of Heaven’) that guides the hierarchical social and political order (Wang, 2013: 211; Zhang & Buzan, 2012: 13; Murthy 2002).

### 3.2.1 Overview of the assumptions of the Sinocentric worldview

The notion of China as the world’s centre was so ingrained that no concept existed, in China or the West, until scholars later coined it (Kissinger 2014: 213). It was the collection of essays edited by John Fairbank (1968), titled *The Chinese World Order* that explored China’s foreign relations with non-Chinese during the Ch’ing dynasty (1644–1912), where the concept of a traditional Chinese world order was coined and its normative patterns outlined. Hence the volume became integral in understanding China’s historical worldview as it explored the system at its height, which scholars believe fell between the 14th and 19th centuries, under the Ming and Ch’ing dynasties (Khong, 2013: 9; Wang, 2004: 312; Zhang & Buzan, 2012: 22). The former’s great maritime voyage (1405–1433), which reached India, the Persian Gulf and East Africa, was also an important factor in further extending the system of Chinese foreign relations (Cranmer-Byng, 1968: 168-169).

The system laid down a specific set of assumptions about the world. For instance, Fairbank (1968: 2) asserts that China’s foreign relations with non-Chinese ‘were colored by this concept of Sinocentrism and an assumption of Chinese superiority’. He also outlines a broad 15-point framework on the assumptions of the historical Chinese world order in the same publication. As a means to find out about China’s self-understanding and public policy, scholars like Callahan (2008); Wang (1999: 286); Zhao (2005) and Zhang and Buzan (2012), have explored the Confucian concept of *Tianxia* (‘all-under-heaven’), a cosmic-social order that emphasises universal kingship,<sup>13</sup> to understand imperial China’s historical diplomatic relations with its neighbours, as well as the whole world. There was the assumption that a shared culture of Confucianism and a hierarchical worldview, helped facilitate mutual understanding and minimise warfare in China’s neighbourhood (Wang 2013: 213). In this sense ‘power comingled with culture’ (Evans, 2010: 46). Meanwhile Zhao (2015: 972-973) adds that an emphasis on harmony also included practical elements, such as the

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<sup>13</sup> Zhang and Buzan (2012:13) state that the ‘cosmic order’ was informed by a prevalent moral conviction that the universe is a peaceful, harmonious whole between heavenly and earthly forces.

consideration of reciprocal dependence and China's non-interference in the internal affairs of tributary states, which also contributed to the stability of the international system. In summary, imperial China viewed the world as harmonious and only misunderstandings and lack of virtue created conflict (Ringmar, 2012: 14).

The fact that the universe was believed to be characterised by 'heaven's domination and earth's subordination', meant that China's superiority derived from its proximity to heaven and hence its view as the centre of the world (Wang 1999: 291). There is agreement that the Chinese world was organised through a grade system similar to Chinese society – where hierarchy was arranged around the Han Chinese culture or Confucianism, emphasising China's significance through culture rather than ethnic, racial or national lines (Cranmer-Byng, 1968: 167; Wang, 1999: 287; Zhang & Buzan, 2012: 14; Dreyer, 2015: 1016). In particular Fairbank (1968: 2) – concurred with by Khong (2013: 11), Zhao (2015: 965) and Kissinger (2014: 363) – states that China, inspired by Confucianism, grouped the world into tributaries (namely three main zones or a 'concentric hierarchy'), defined by their closeness to its own culture. The first was the Sinic Zone that included Korea, Vietnam and the Liu-ch'iu or Ryukyu islands (and Japan intermittently, having borrowed from the Sinic culture), who fell closer in physical proximity and were viewed as culturally similar, as they once fell under the Chinese empire. The second was the Inner Asian Zone (such as Mongolia, Tibet and Central Asia), which included the nomadic and semi-nomadic people of Inner Asia who were neither ethnically nor culturally Chinese but remained on the nearby 'fringe of the Chinese cultural area'. Third was the Outer Zone that included further distances over land and sea – which later included Japan, as well as Southeast and South Asia states and Europe – who were expected to pay tribute to the centre.

Consequently, the Sinocentric international system was both hierarchical and centripetal. China (also known as 'Middle Kingdom' or 'Central Country') and its emperor were located at the centre – as the source of virtue, good governance and intellectual wisdom – which constituent units encircled (Ringmar, 2012: 5; Khong, 2013: 10; Perdue, 2015: 1005).

### 3.2.2 The tributary system in practice

Having explored China's assumptions about the world, it is necessary to explore how its foreign relations functioned in practice.

Khong (2013: 11–12) believes that the distinguishing characteristic of the Chinese tributary system was the set of rituals that secondary states were expected to perform, in order to pursue relations with

China. He outlines four key rituals: the first was the uni-directional sending of missions by secondary states to China; second was their performance of the *kowtow* ceremony before the emperor to acknowledge their subordination; and third the presentation of tribute (namely native goods like gold, pearls and wildlife), while the emperor presented his gifts in return. The last ritual was investiture (a ceremony where China recognises the ruler of the tributary as the sovereign of his country). Zhang and Buzan (2012: 19) take the view that ‘in the structural sense, the tributary system is almost inescapably Sinocentric’, particularly as relations in this system were strictly bilateral, between China and the secondary state, and never multilateral. So the tributary system was essentially a mechanism to manage diplomatic and trade relations and rituals, which in turn reaffirmed the ‘universality’ of the Confucian order (Evans, 2010: 46).

Indeed the validity and existence of China’s worldview was affirmed to a degree through the simple act of tributary participation in the system – thus a conquest by osmosis, rather than expansion (Kissinger, 2014: 216; Ringmar, 2012: 4). Zhao (2015: 964) agrees, while there was definitely benefit (like trade with China) that came with the presentation of tributes, China also ended up paying more financially than it received (in order to gain acknowledgement of its cultural superiority). Through the recognition of a ruler as sovereign of his country by the emperor himself, the system provided symbolic value for both China and the secondary state (that is they were mutually constituted) (Ringmar, 2012: 5).

The question remains whether the sense of cultural superiority through the adoption of persuasive instruments rather than coercion was more successful in meeting China’s interests. Perdue (2015: 1003) finds that China did influence its neighbours through culture rather than through military force. Cranmer-Byng (1968: 166-167) adds that the object of ‘Sino-barbarian’ relations was an act of ‘Sinising’ others into China’s worldview:

[T]o wean barbarians away from their habits of dangerous and unpredictable behaviour by influencing them to turn towards the Middle Kingdom so that they would ‘come to be transformed’ by Chinese culture.

There was the belief that others can be moved through the conduct of virtuous norms (Khong, 2013: 12). Wang (1999: 288-289) further concludes that sinisation was an effort to preserve China’s cultural superiority. In particular, the Han Chinese believed that while they were unable to fend off invasions, they would be able to captivate their conquerors through their culture and lifestyle. Indeed he also cites Fairbank, who lists other methods to achieve satisfactory outcomes such as buying opponents off, using diplomatic manoeuvres and in extreme cases accepting

‘barbarian rulers at the apex of the Chinese world’, which suggest a sense of flexibility and indeterminacy in foreign relations. Similarly, China’s impressive economic culture cannot be discounted as an influential factor in ‘absorbing’ its neighbours (Kissinger, 2014: 220; Wang, 2004: 313). Wang (1999: 299-301) adds caution, as there were in fact variations between the Tang to Ch’ing dynasties, where there was pendulum between a culturalist approach and the need to fulfil practical geopolitical considerations (like relative naval power), across dynasties.

Zhao (2015: 970) agrees that imperial China used persuasion as well as resorting to military force, particularly when its neighbours did not accept the territorial domain prescribed by its cultural principles. Kissinger (2014: 214-215) states that China preferred to entice its adversaries (referring to the ‘five baits’ during the Han dynasty) more often than force, which was used sparingly. More simply put is the practical dilemma that China faced, which is how to maintain cultural superiority in situations of military weakness (Cranmer-Byng, 1968: 167). In an effort to encapsulate all these views, Wang (2013: 213) concludes there needs to be careful understanding of rhetoric and reality when studying the tributary system, what is said publicly is not always the same as what is agreed privately – thus ‘splendid rhetoric is frequently used to mask the raw reality of power’.

Realistically not all parties were readily accepting of the Chinese worldview. It is even misleading to view the Sinocentric system as an all-encompassing framework that was peaceful, stable and benign (Wang, 2013: 213-214; Dreyer, 2015: 1024). Feng (2009) agrees that only analysing China’s foreign relations through the tributary system is a mistake, as it ignores relations outside of the normal tributary politics. In fact participating states in the system interpreted ritual relations in their own way and not in terms of hierarchy and subordination (Perdue, 2015: 1002; Fairbank, 1968: 12). While the tributary system was almost exclusively informed by Chinese culture and civilisation, its values were accepted to varying degrees, as participation in the institutional framework of the system provided the platform to contest and socialise intersubjective ideas, beliefs and understandings between imperial China and participants (Zhang & Buzan, 2012: 18; Kissinger, 2014: 181). Thus, the system was not just ‘pure cultural arrogance’ on imperial China’s part, as without social recognition, acceptance and contestation – to which China responded and modified ideas to its own ends – the Chinese worldview would not have come into ‘substantive existence’ in East Asian international relations (Buzan & Zhang, 2012: 16 & 18)

An important point to be emphasised about the system is its function as an intersubjective space. The mentioned rituals confirm for Ringmar (2012: 2–3 & 19) the notion that international politics is indeed a performance on a world stage, providing a ‘quasi-theoretical setting’ where actors interact

before the world. Moreover, staging performances are how social actors put their society's shared meanings into action; they borrow meanings from discourse, and reaffirm them through performance, after which they are returned to discourse as actors interpret the events staged before them. Alden and Schoeman (2015: 189), however, discuss another function of global summitry in relation to state identity: it is not only a performance through state representatives but also an act in itself, as the hosting of such events communicates something about a state and even its role in the international community. Scholars also raised the idea that the system was not just a result of 'rational choice' (created for the purpose of trade or security) in China's international relations, but an articulation of the existence of an international society in East Asia, informed by the English School of IR as well as constructivism (Zhang & Buzan, 2012: 8 & 25; Wang, 2013: 208). This means institutions are a product of the normative foundations of international society, which are a social construct.

Imperial China's identity was also fluid. Wang (1999: 286) attests that it is very difficult to define what 'China' was during particular historical periods. It was not a fixed entity, being overrun by various foreign people who later assimilated into Chinese culture (even becoming successors and promoters of Chinese civilisation). While 'Chinese' or 'Han' suggests an ethnic definition, it refers to the people, who at one time or another, lived on the land around the Yellow and Yangzi River. He adds (1999: 288) that Chinese culture is a hybrid cultural tradition based on Confucianism and elements of other cultures and not just a simple product of Han culture. In fact, the Han Chinese understood that in order to sinicise the barbarian rulers, they needed to de-emphasise ethnic attachments, even though the centre-periphery thinking remained (Wang, 1999: 305). At the same time are the 'elusive subterranean currents' of history as a shaping force (Hsü, 1984: 8). While autocracies like the Ch'ing existed and no opposition was allowed, the vital role that underground activities played in unfolding history cannot be discounted. It is these interactions that shaped China's worldview and helped it cope with changes in the world.

In summary this section parallels the findings of Zhang and Buzan (2012: 30-31): the Sinocentric world order was an enduring order in imperial China and made up of specific institutional practices – but also a conceptual construct that was fluid and never stable – constantly challenged, broken down, reconfigured and rebuilt.

### 3.2.3 Turning point for the tributary system

There is broad agreement that China's encounter with the West during the mid-19th century, and its specific defeat by the British, influenced it to reluctantly abandon the Sinocentric international society and eventually become disciplined and socialised into the Westphalian world order (Buzan, 2010: 9; Evans, 2010: 47; Cranmer-Byng, 1968: 166; Zhao 2015: 976). Cooper (2010: 25) specifically states, China's association with the West began violently and the collision led to nine foreign nations marauding through its territory. On the other hand, others find the process was already set in motion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and just intensified by the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hsü, 1984: 4). Although European nations largely submitted to the rituals of the tributary system, they were primarily interested in engaging East Asia for concessions on trade and the right to proselytise – with the exception of the British, who sought to be regarded as equals to the Chinese (Ringmar, 2010: 16).

Zhao (2015: 978) provides a useful summary of the interaction between the British and China, noting that the former became a dominant global force in commerce by the 18th century, but had found the Chinese (Guangzhou) system 'increasingly intolerable'; and while they bought many products from China, they could not find products that China would purchase from them. Eventually they sought to trade opium as a new commodity that could open the Chinese market and balance their debt. The trade flourished but caused harmful consequences to Chinese society and its wealth. In turn, the Opium War broke out in 1840 as a result of China's resistance to the trade and the British insistence of its expansion into China.

Two wars were eventually fought over opium (from 1840 to 1842 and 1856 to 1860), which saw the British defeat China with their superior technology and weapons; furthermore, the conflict underlined the clear incompatibilities of the Sinocentric and Westphalian systems (Ringmar, 2010: 16; Kissinger, 2014: 216-218; Dreyer, 2015: 1016). The belief of the centrality of culture during the Ch'ing dynasty was the very reason for China's lack of maintaining security forces to fend off European entry (Khong, 2013: 14). By 1861, China was persuaded to engage in the Westphalian system, which had become the basic structure of the international order, and was forced to accept permanent envoys in Peking, and to send representation abroad (Cranmer-Byng, 1968: 169; Zhao, 2015: 976 & 979). This kick-started the process where its foreign relations were adjusted from a culturally centred to a nationalism-centred international system; thus its imagining of states – as relational and defined by a centre and whose borders were porous – was replaced by legally demarcated territory (Anderson, 2006: 19; Ringmar, 2012: 13).



Although China accepted the notion of equality among states and defended sovereignty, it was not necessarily treated equally by imperialist nations (as reflected by the unequal treaties signed at the time). More broadly, Asia, with the exception of Japan, became a victim of the international order imposed by colonialism, rather than becoming an actor in it (Kissinger, 2014: 174). Thus many Chinese perceive this period, between the 19th through to the mid-20th century (which included the Sino-Japanese War in the 1880s and the anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion in 1900), as the ‘century of humiliation’ (Buzan, 2010: 9; Zhao, 2015: 980 & 981; Le Pere, 2015: 157).

China was left to search for a new identity in a world that was thrust upon it, coupled with the difficult task of determining how much of its tradition and heritage should be discarded and how much of the modern West needed to be accepted, for it to become a respected member of the international community (Hsü, 1984: 9-10; Chin & Thakur, 2010: 122). This dilemma, particularly the active struggle to meet both foreign and domestic challenges, has remained an important shaping force in the path towards a modern China (Fairbank, 1968: 4). In fact, official Chinese textbooks even highlight the Opium War as the watershed moment between traditional and modern China (Zhao, 2004a: 17). Yet Evans (2010: 46) provides further nuance on the erosion of the system than only Western intrusion. The Confucian tradition was unable to modernise China – like the conceptions of nationalism, science and industrialisation.

### **3.3 China’s contemporary diplomacy**

Since the 19th century, China has embraced the Westphalian system to varying degrees. After it joined the system, a revolutionary period (1949) followed, where it opposed Western capitalism; while in the late-1970s it accepted the system, as China began to socialise into a globalising world (Buzan, 2010: 8). Just as China is changing, so are international social structures evolving and being contested – as indicated in works on China’s socialisation into international society (Buzan, 2010; Suzuki 2009: 4).

With regard to China’s diplomacy, since it embraced the system in the 1970s, Bolewski and Rietig (2008: 84) believe it has evolved over two periods. The first followed the 1989 Tiananmen incident, after which China sought to move from isolation, restore its international image and secure its economic interests. The second is China’s global rise, particularly its emphasis on outward diplomacy and trade since the 1990s, which for Kurlantzick (2007: 224) means increased engagement with developing countries; and for Xu and Du (2014: 12) – and China’s foreign minister Wang Yi (2013a) – specific emphasis on relations with its neighbours. Medeiros and Fravel

(2003: 22) find that in the early 21st century, China is embracing (albeit incrementally) international institutions, rules and norms.

Despite the variations in China's external relations over time, does historical experiences (and the values that exemplified the imperial order) still have any bearing on China's identity and diplomatic choices today? China's President Xi Jinping has regularly adopted the phrase 'renewal of the Chinese nation' in his speeches<sup>14</sup> – a phrase that has been echoed by Vice-President Li Yuanchao (2015) – to depict China's rise and return to primacy. The phrase resonates the call for China's rejuvenation, which has been previously applied by Chinese leaders since Sun Yat-sen, the father of modern China (Zhao, 2004a: 12 & 250). Indeed the alluding to the restoration of past grandeur informs the core of Chinese nationalism, and appears to be tinted by Sinocentrism (Zhao, 2000; Chin 2015). China's history can reveal a lot about Chinese leaders' concepts. For instance, former President Hu Jintao's 'harmonious world' concept, which was first outlined at the United Nations (2005), is described as a contemporary version of *Tianxia* or a Chinese-style solution to world problems (Callahan, 2008; Ford, 2013).

The next section will apply the analytical insights of the constructivist approach; including the recognition that ideational factors have an important impact on international political behaviour (Suzuki, 2009: 5). Also critical constructivists prompt for deeper analysis, highlighting that the very elements shaping China's identity are important (such as history, nationalism and external dynamics). Wang (2004: 312) agrees, understanding that the nature of China's current rise requires exploring the contemporary characteristics of its identity, including how Sinocentrism (an aspect of China's identity) is related to its diplomacy and specifically, public diplomacy.

### 3.3.1 Between cultural inheritance and a break from the past

Despite the disintegration of the Chinese-centred world order, several scholars believe that a degree of continuation and an enduring set of values remain. A large body of literature points to China's inheritance of traditional culture, which Wang (2004: 311) explains as conventionally 'a culture of values seen through the people's religion, social cohesion, education and the creative arts, but also offer some thoughts on political culture and the culture of trade, industry and economic development'. So culture is, as Uemura (2015) describes, broadly concerning human behavioural patterns.

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<sup>14</sup> Refer to collection of speeches between 2012-2014 in Xi, J. 2014. *The Governance of China*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

There is also the notion that a state's identity is influenced by political culture, what Almond and Verba (1963: 13) define as specific 'political orientations-attitudes towards the political system and its various parts, and attitudes towards the role of the self in the system' or for Hofstede (1991: 180) the 'collective programming of the mind' distinguishing one nation from another. Shih (1990: 38) finds the main sources of Chinese collective programming originating from the three teachings (of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism), folk novels and textbooks currently used in China. Analysts even agree that Confucianism is the long-standing theoretical framework and cement for Chinese political and social life (Murthy, 2002: 16; Du Plessis & Raza, 2015: 71).

Metz (2015: 79) defines a particular value as Chinese when it is recurrently encountered and noticeably held in high esteem, in contrast to other societies. In summary, scholars point to four main cultural values from a Confucian perspective. The first is the *collective versus individual* emphasis, as the basic unit in Chinese society is the family, rather than the individual (Hsü, 1984: 69; Shih, 1990: 39). Second, *social hierarchy* (or harmony between self, society and the cosmos) is an important trait in collectivist cultures such as China (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998: 428; Tannen, 1999: 213; Le Pere, 2015: 158; Murthy, 2002: 17). Third is the essential concept of *guanxi* (friendship), the Chinese notion of personal connection, as discussed by Shih (1990: 40) and Buttery and Leung (1998: 382), who find relations are not simply about getting through one negotiation but long-term relationship building. Fourth is the idea of *Mianzi* or saving-face and is explored by Murthy (2002: 18-19) who explains how the informal pressure of the community and the concomitant risk of an individual being shamed, keeps people from transgressing moral codes.

Cooper (2004: 31) sums, the strength of Chinese culture is almost supernatural when considering how well core values have 'survived intense, sustained and direct assaults', even though what has eroded is China's sense of superiority. The much repeated 'with Chinese characteristics' (that is linked to various official initiatives), even reinforces a type of nationalistic exceptionalism and a culturally unique way of approaching global and development issues (Buzan, 2010: 21). Indeed, cultural traits matter and have at times influenced China's foreign policymaking (especially the concept of *guanxi*) (Uemura, 2015). For example Cheng and Taylor (2017:5) explore 'friendship' as an analytical concept in their work on Chinese aid in Africa. As mentioned, Confucianism views society as an important element of the state, hence the friendship between people as well as states are treated as integral. Therefore a stable international image is viewed as one balanced between self-interest and the consideration of others (Cheng & Taylor, 2017:6). The concept of friendship is then an aspect of China's national interest, not in the Western values sense but rather a moral pursuit that

is part of Chinese culture (Cheng & Taylor, 2017:7). Thus, there is merit in the assertion that China's grand strategy is not just subject to material variables but cultural ones too (Johnston, 1998).

In terms of China's diplomacy, Bolewski and Rietig (2008: 85) state that its 21st century diplomacy remains highly influenced by aspects of Chinese cultural tradition, for example the preference for a high-context negotiating style (that is communication is implicit and close-established relations are favoured). China's State Councillor<sup>15</sup> (Yang, 2013) also confirmed the closeness between tradition and diplomacy during his speech titled 'Innovations in China's Diplomatic Theory and Practice under New Conditions'. Shih (1990: 190) even adds that China's diplomacy reflects its leaders' worldview, which links to the traditional emphasis on hierarchy and international relations centred on the emperor.

Hudson (1999: 768) in turn describes culture as a series of strategic 'action templates' that help its members respond to situations in the most advantageous way. Countries will turn to their 'on-the-shelf' adaptive responses when confronted with an unknown context, because of familiarity and a sense of security, as Heywood (2002: 209) explains. When a situation is repeated, however, the same response depends on specific needs, as Chinese cultural values are increasingly competing with modernisation (Hudson. 1999: 768; Wang. 2004: 320; Le Pere. 2015: 157). Having said this, Hudson (2008) also highlights the work of Feng Huiyun, who finds that the former Chinese presidents Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao all showed similar and stable worldviews; highlighting that a unique strategic culture indeed existed (even if there is little relation to the past).

It is clear that scholarship agrees that elements of Chinese culture and values have stood the test of time; however, there is less consensus over whether China is interested in recreating its historical Sinocentric system – despite official statements on the renewal of the Chinese nation. In other words, is it indigenising or adapting its diplomacy over time?

Scholarship is divided. Cooper (2004: 2–4) points to the example of China inspiring a unique development model and alternative approach to global order based on pragmatism equity and quality growth, called 'the Beijing Consensus', which is changing the 'physics of development and power'. Callahan (2008: 749; 2015: 999) and Ford (2015: 1044) even confirm that Chinese-style IR does indeed look to the Sinocentric world order, which is being revived and is relatively popular among officials and public intellectuals. In contrast, Callahan (2015: 999) identifies scholars who disagree

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<sup>15</sup> This is a position held in China's State Council (i.e. the central government's executive organ, also known as a cabinet). In ranking terms, it falls under vice-premiers and above departmental ministers.

that China is seeking to restore the imperial world order. Khong (2013) even sees the US as having instituted the most successful form of a traditional tributary system (an extensive network of formal and informal networks), even though the concept is associated with China's international relations. There are also those who believe that the tributary system no longer exists in any shape or form. Fairbank and his co-authors contemplated the impact of the imperial order on communist China in the 1960s and proclaimed the tributary system 'dead' by 1911 (Evans, 2010: 47). In fact, the final chapter of the volume by Benjamin Schwartz adds the moment when the empire was weak, China's worldview had little influence on the outcome of events – reinforcing that the most salient factor is actually power – also reiterated by Dreyer (2015: 1024).

### 3.3.2 The instrumental use of historical narrative

In order to find an explanation for China's approach to the past, Zhao (2004a: 4-5) provides two variations of China's contemporary identity (namely its nationalist orientations), and hence how it could be expected to engage internationally. The first is *primordialism*, which is akin to the above descriptions – of an unchanging identity, where people's loyalties are dependent on physical, emotional and cultural ties. The second form of identity is *instrumentalism* that considers primordialism as subject to manipulation. This means that patriotism is situational and can be stimulated through common signs, symbols and values (Zhao, 2004a: 4; Le Pere, 2015: 161) – this is also echoed by Anderson's (2006) *Imagined Communities*. Zhao (2015: 982) sums up:

Chinese historical discourse in the twenty-first century has refocused on imperial China and its continuous glory, interrupted only by Western imperialist powers, to advance the claims of China's peaceful rise. This type of connection between imperial China and China's peaceful rise is obviously to serve the political objectives of the Chinese government rather than a reflection of historical facts.

There is no disagreeing that both forms of national identity exist, as cultural context conditions politics, while politics can also preserve or alter culture (Moody 1994: 732). However, the latter is a more powerful explanation, particularly for a study on China's public diplomacy – notably a negotiation instrument in its larger foreign policy toolkit, which utilises certain frames (see framing under 2.4.5.4) including narratives, to respond to present dilemmas. Several scholars support this. George Orwell (in his dystopian novel *1984*) stated 'he who controls the past controls the future' (Dreyer, 2015: 1031); Holden (2013: 13) also adds that cultural and historical references help create 'mood music' as a way to manage a state's image in international relations. While Kissinger (2014: 220) views China's rise as distinctive – involving an inherited ancient civilisation but also a contemporary power operating within the Westphalian model. Zhao (2004a: 49) even believes that

‘the Chinese elite never gave up the deep-rooted Sinocentric image of the outlandish barbarian’; but when it entered the nation-state system, the knowledge that China was lagging behind the West became an important driver.

### 3.3.2.1 Instrumentalist examples: Deng Xiaoping (1978-1989) to Hu Jintao (2002-2012)

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the *Tianxia* discourse gave way to Marxist-centred universalism under Mao Tse-Tung, who was essentially radical and inherently anti-tradition (and anti-Confucian) (Dreyer, 2015: 1021; Le Pere, 2015: 167-169; Zhao, 2000: 8). Mao’s campaigns emphasised politics over economics that eventually led to food shortages and frustration during the Great Leap Forward, as well as cynicism among the Chinese people regarding the party’s credibility during the Cultural Revolution (Le Pere, 2015: 168–169).<sup>16</sup> So the Communist Party later found itself in a post-Mao era where it could no longer claim loyalty from a declining communism, which was richly informed by the Soviet experience (Zhao, 2004a: 8)

By 1979, China followed state-led pragmatism and opening up that entailed a non-ideological foreign policy and peaceful rise within the status quo, in order to achieve economic reforms. There was also increasing reference to Confucianism under Deng Xiaoping (followed by Jiang Zemin), which replaced Mao’s anti-Western and nativist policy (Le Pere, 2015: 173; Kissinger, 2014: 175; Buzan, 2010: 12). While Confucianism was revisited, China’s survival also required it to adapt to new realities, including that the centre of the world lay westward (Evans, 2010: 47). So Deng encouraged China to keep a low profile and not flaunt its power; instead, the emphasis of economic power and development was favoured, as means and end of foreign policy (Zhao, 2004a: 276; Buzan, 2014: 387).

Ford (2015: 1032-1033) in particular, provides a succinct study on the instrumental use of Confucianism by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>17</sup> He notes that early on in Deng’s leadership, quasi-Confucian theories were explored as a supplement for discourse on legitimacy (and morality) for the party-state. In particular, the student protests of 1989 ignited a patriotic campaign to revive the nation’s spirit and China’s unity (Zhao, 2004a: 9). By the early 1990s, a ‘re-Sinicisation’ – what Dreyer (2015: 1017) calls a ‘re-traditionalisation’ – of political narratives took place, as ‘useful tools from which to counter any tendencies to embrace Western-style political reform’ (Ford, 2015: 1032).

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<sup>16</sup> A form of ideological purity that turned the Chinese political and social universe upside down

<sup>17</sup> The CASS set up an ‘Academy of Chinese Culture’, with the mission to study how Confucianism could promote China’s modernisation, while a Confucius School was established in Qufu University in Shandong, where the sage was born (Dreyer 2015:1017; Ford 2015:1033).

The product of a politicised Confucianism was that Confucian theory was updated to suit modern conditions and used (and encouraged) to legitimise party power (Ford 2015: 1037). Jiang Zemin continued this theme, particularly before he was about to leave office in 2002 (Ford, 2015: 1035-1036; Economy, 2010). For instance he began to speak in Sinicised civilisational terms by highlighting the goals of ‘stability and harmony’, building a ‘socialist political civilisation’ and the importance of ‘ruling with virtue’.

Hu Jintao, having been selected by Deng, followed and officially introduced the ‘harmony’ (*he* 和) concept – considered to be based on a long history of Confucian thought (Kissinger, 2014: 227). This led to two key policies in 2003, the ‘harmonious society’ and ‘harmonious world’ (Nordin, 2015: 7). The concept is a blend of past ideas like ‘the five principles of peaceful coexistence’, ‘multipolar world’ and ‘independence and autonomy’ (Gurtov, 2015: 76). It also rose in a context where China was achieving steady economic growth but it faced social unrest, rising inequalities and environmental degradation, while internationally, it sought to alleviate concerns by emphasising harmony between civilisations and the acceptance of differences, rather than conformity and sameness (Nordin, 2015: 7; Godehardt, 2016: 16). Hu also replaced the notion of ‘peaceful rise’ with ‘peaceful development’<sup>18</sup> in 2003–2004, to alleviate concerns over China’s rise that could potentially damage its foreign relations and economic development (Buzan, 2014: 384&386). More broadly has been the use of Sun Tzu and his writings as a source of contemporary soft power for China’s peaceful development strategy, which almost conjures the ancient strategist as a ‘modern day CCP official’ (Whyte, 2015).

In turn peaceful development was identified as means to achieve a harmonious world, as reflected in Hu’s UN speech to ‘Build Towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity’ in 2005 (the term was also regularly referred to during the 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2010 Shanghai World Expo) (Nordin, 2015: 7; Gurtov, 2015: 73). The popularity of ‘harmony’ was evident as it received endorsement at the 4th Plenum of the 16th Central Committee in 2004;<sup>19</sup> at the same time, the Central Party school began to include Confucian classics as part of its official curriculum (Ford, 2015: 1036). Callahan (2015: 996) sees the harmonious concept as a very detailed set of policies that looked to the party-state to solve social and economic challenges, emphasising a

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<sup>18</sup> Two white papers on ‘peaceful development’ were published in 2005 and 2011 respectively; for the most recent white paper see: China, the People’s Republic. 2011. ‘Full Text: China's Peaceful Development’. *Information Office of the State Council*, September, [http://www.gov.cn/english/official/2011-09/06/content\\_1941354.htm](http://www.gov.cn/english/official/2011-09/06/content_1941354.htm), accessed 22 July 2016.

<sup>19</sup> The meeting of top CCP leaders to discuss important policy issues.

‘blend of socialist modernity and Chinese tradition’.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless like the past, achieving ‘harmony’ or ‘win-win’ relations did not actually rule out the use of force, making China neither uniquely violent nor benevolent (Ford, 2013; Zhao, 2015: 961).

The concept of ‘harmony’ became a norm that gained relative acceptance in a particular system (China), and displayed instrumental undertones in order for China to win global support (Scott, 2015: 256 & 259). This does not, however, mean that elites have a monopoly in articulating concepts, since every concept has different meaning for different people (Nordin, 2015: 9). Still, what is of interest is how political elites deploy particular terms, in order to manage their diplomatic affairs – as tradition-orientated political discourse has become instrumentalised in China since the 1970s.

### 3.3.2.2 Factors causing Chinese leaders to use the past

A recurring trend since Deng has been the reconstruction of the past to advance a contemporary agenda, but the reasons for using the past are many-fold (Zhao, 2015: 961). Unpacking these underpinnings is vital, since China’s rise is recognised as too important to narrow down to simple theoretical framings or singular nationalistic understandings (Buzan, 2010: 7). Four interrelated motivating factors are considered here – and they further reiterate the points made by constructivists about state identity (see 2.3.4.1): states rarely speak with a single voice and are shaped by a range of cultural, political, social, historical and economic factors.

Evans (2010: 47–48) asserts that it would be wrong to think China’s foreign policy has no historical underpinning. China’s socialisation into the Westphalian system was ambivalent, well aware ‘of the history that brought it to enter into the international system’ and its exclusion from making the rules of that system (Kissinger, 2012: 225). This is also echoed by Cooper’s (2004: 43) conversation with Chinese officials. Beyond China’s ethnic claims on territories (like Macau, Hong Kong and Taiwan) is also the inseparable legacy of Japanese imperialism or the US’s role in China’s civil war (Zhao, 2004a: 281–282). Zhao (2015: 981) adds that there is nothing wrong with looking to China’s past to understand its future, since its ancient civilisation is inscribed in its being – but selective use of the past to advance an agenda means that history has become politicised.

Evans (2010: 54), citing Harding, offers five ways in which history has affected China’s contemporary relations. First are an inherited set of unresolved problems – which Chin and Thakur

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<sup>20</sup> Interestingly he also notes that English language sources stress the concept’s Confucian roots, while Chinese texts describe it as ‘harmonious socialist society’.



(2010: 122) identify as a triple challenge of nation-building, state-building and economic development. Second are the images that China holds of others and vice versa. Third are contentious issues in bilateral relations. Fourth are broad and specific narratives applied for the purposes of contemporary politics. Lastly are the positive and negative lessons drawn from past strategies and policies. Perdue (2015: 1014) raises an important caveat here. Like all historical interpretation, China draws from the past to respond to the current world; however, this can lead either to ‘cherry-picking’ in order to justify prejudices or to useful critical distance from present concerns.

The second defining force is *nationalism* – or what China referred to as ‘patriotism’ between 1949 and 1971 (Chen, 2005: 41).<sup>21</sup> Zhao’s (2004a: 249) *A Nation by Construction* is particularly useful here, since it describes nationalism as ‘the political expression of a desire among people to defend their national self-determination in a territory peculiarly identified with their history and their fulfilment’. He highlights that Chinese nationalism was a new phenomenon that only emerged after China joined the Westphalian system, replacing the cultural framework of Confucian ideas, with imported ideas. Nationalism was born objectively out of the necessity to modernise in a world of nation-states, but also subjectively used by the state to justify certain policies and win popular approval (Zhao, 2004a: 16–18). An example of the latter is the patriotic education campaigns of China during the 1990s (Zhao, 2000a: 18 & 218; Chen, 2005: 49).

However, Fewsmith and Rosen (2001: 158) are very careful in stating that the expression of nationalistic feelings is more than just the reading of old or new ideas – but a ‘transformation of previously existing emotions’, while several authors see nationalism as no longer just a top-down instrument but increasingly a double-edged sword that can legitimise CCP rule or lead to public judgment on leadership’s performance (Buzan, 2014: 398; Chen, 2005: 50; Zhao, 2004a: 265). Therefore, as China continues to rise, nationalism will remain a challenge for its international relations, particularly on issues that trigger past sensitivities (Shambaugh, 1996: 2009).

Chinese political elites have historically grappled with three types of nationalism: nativism (this is anti-imperialist and calls for the return of the Confucian tradition); anti-traditionalism (tradition is the source of China’s weakness); and finally, pragmatism (China has been vulnerable to foreign intervention because of its lack of modernisation) (Zhao, 2000: 5–9). Although China is vulnerable to the various types at any given moment, its leadership has indeed drawn on pragmatism since the 1980s, as it plays a favourable role by removing differences and seeks common political values, and

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<sup>21</sup> The Soviet Union had rejected nationalism in socialist states and China was supportive of communist internationalism.

is thus for Zhao (2000: 16; 2004: 288-289) and Chen (2005: 46) reflective of a realist worldview. Policymakers have motivated modernisation by using China's past humiliation to highlight contemporary weaknesses; sought to maintain political legitimacy by emphasising stability as key for economic development; and sought convergence between domestic and international challenges (Zhao, 2004a: 226 & 258–259; Fewsmith & Rosen, 2001: 158). China's core interest of stability and economic growth has not changed, but what has altered is the leadership's understanding of how to achieve them (Economy 2010)

*Domestic complexities* also need to be considered. For instance, official stability preservation projects have also created social tensions – as reflected by China's policy towards Japan and the backlash of populist sentiments and youth demonstrations (Leonard, 2012: 16; Fewsmith & Rosen, 2001: 162). Indeed China's external relations are constrained by domestic conditions, like the deeply divided domestic discourse on China's role as a rising power (d'Hooghe, 2007: 9; Jiang, 2011: 341; Shambaugh, 2011: 8). In turn, China's expanding external engagements appear to speak with a broad range of voices (Lampton, 2001: 1–2). This re-affirms the constructivist notion that domestic society and politics have an impact on state identity and action (see 2.2.2).

At the same time actors like individuals, localities and organisations – who were once not part of the formal policy processes – are, as a result of globalisation, acting increasingly internationally (influencing central government's agenda and even opening the policy space) (Lampton 2001: 4). Indeed three key levels of public opinion that affect China's foreign policy exist – namely the elite, sub-elite and popular opinions (though this classification is not strictly 'public' in the Western sense) – and play an important, interrelated part in negotiating China's contemporary relations (Fewsmith & Rosen, 2001: 152). For instance, Song (2001: 68) finds that Chinese scholars (particularly younger scholars who have studied abroad) have even questioned the scientific validity of phrases like 'Chinese characteristics', stating that IR research needs to be divorced from policy. Indeed China's process of non-crisis, day-to-day diplomatic decision making has also become increasingly bureaucratic and more specialised and compatible with global systems, as individuals become more educated (gaining qualifications abroad) and cosmopolitan (as more mid-level officials are spending time overseas) (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003: 30).

Heightening dynamics is the role of the internet, especially social media, and its impact on policymaking in China (Wu, 2013; Economy, 2010). The fact that China is home to such a significant number of internet users (more than the entire US population) means that the government is compelled to engage with and respond to popular sentiment. This is not to say that public opinion

directly determines foreign policy, but it is important, since government is concerned about political stability, and public opinion can help justify specific policies (Fewsmith & Rosen, 2001: 155). (Of course, the reverse question can be raised about the impact of limited public interest or less emotively driven policy issues, such as China's role in Africa).

Hence, four interrelated processes are influencing China's foreign policy today: professionalisation, corporate pluralisation (the system is more open to a myriad of experts), decentralisation (namely economic power, diffused from central government to society) and finally, globalisation (Lampton, 2001: 4). Nevertheless Lampton (2001: 2) highlights that grand strategy and crisis management are still led by a few key policymakers and remains highly personalised, and for Shambaugh (1996: 196 & 201), reliant on how the leadership is socialised. Lu (2001: 39) therefore sees three vertical systems that persist in China's governing regime that include the CCP, the government and the military; while Shambaugh (1996: 188) sees China's foreign policy influenced by 'domestic politics, the decision-making milieu, and the elites' worldview'.

The *international environment*, which includes leadership's assessment of that environment, is the last factor explored (Fewsmith & Rosen, 2001: 151). Chin (2015: 218) agrees that Chinese leaders' strategies are not just formulated by their own perspectives but are shaped by their interaction with real-world dynamics. Indeed China's public diplomacy, as will be demonstrated, is a response to external as much as internal factors. Importantly, Lampton (2001: 24–25) finds that globalisation has since 1978 influenced China's foreign policy in different ways. It has eroded China's narrow set of interests and practice of *realpolitik*, as it fosters greater interdependence and cooperation. China's negotiation style has even altered to match current interests and globalised practices, even if some traditional particularities persist (Bolewski & Rietig, 2008: 87–90). Chin and Thakur (2010: 126) even point to China's 2001 joining of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as the 'high point of its socialization to global practices and norms'.

However, multilateral cooperation can be explained as a means to achieve China's national interests. For instance, China can only maintain economic growth for socio-political stability, if it finds ways to expand its domestic market. Additionally, China's diplomacy is not only based on cooperation, but on practicality and activism, couched in its own interests and worldview (Bolewski & Rietig, 2008: 84; Buzan, 2010: 19). Its ability to embrace globalisation through localising ideas, products and ways of life, also reflects how China is transforming and being transformed by global economic links (Cooper, 2004: 32; Evans, 2010: 50).

### 3.3.3 China's diplomacy under Xi Jinping (2013–2016)

This section highlights the manner in which China employs the past, under President Xi, as well as the main characteristics of its contemporary relations with the world.

#### 3.3.3.1 How Xi views the world and the past

Several commentators have likened Xi's character to Mao – decisive, strong and powerful leaders, who adopt similar strategies to unite the masses, like ideological education classes for cadres and the belief that hostile external forces (namely Western values) are disrupting China's exceptionalism and stability (Beech, 2016: 23–24; Callahan, 2015: 988; Swaine, 2015: 8; Zhao, 2015: 11). Ford (2015: 1036-1037), however, does not believe that Xi rejects Chinese tradition in the manner that Mao did. In fact a Confucian political discourse has continued under Xi, who regularly cites Confucian classics and references the past to explain China's domestic and foreign policy positions; thereby maintaining uncontested CCP rule (Willy Lam interviewed by Johnson, 2015).

China's contemporary diplomacy is articulated in Xi's (2014) *Governance of China*, a collection of 79 of his speeches between 2012 and 2014. Various officials highlight its importance. Wang Yi (2013a; 2014; 2016) states that the ideas compiled in the book remain an important vehicle to understand China and its modern diplomacy. Yang Hengjun (2015), a Chinese scholar who once worked in the foreign ministry, also finds the book compelling in comparison to the rhetoric of former leaders' books on China's political programs (such as Mao's and Deng's); quite simply, many of the things that Xi has done to date, 'he's already talked about' doing. The former foreign minister, Yang Jiechi (2013), made a similar observation: Xi is notably linking theory and practice and integrating domestic affairs with international affairs. Thus as new institutions such as the NDB and AIIB reflect, Xi's China is serious about putting money and practice into what it says (Shambaugh, 2015).

There is also a public-facing element involved in publishing such a book; notably former leaders (like Jiang and Hu) did not publish such speeches (Swaine, 2015: 47). The book is available on online market spaces (like *Amazon*) and in a variety of languages (such as Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish), reinforcing the active interest in communicating about China. This was confirmed at a 2015 event where the senior English translator

for Xi's book, Huang Youyi, spoke of his experience.<sup>22</sup> He stated that domestic citizens and the world should understand Xi and China better; he also added it is the first time in 60 years that a Chinese president has proposed initiatives (like the BRI) that include so many countries. The book also provides a useful resource in outlining the historical narratives (an interest of this study) used in Xi's speeches. An example is his address at Peking University in May 2014 (2014: 190) that included phrases such as 'everyone is responsible for his country's rise and fall', from classical works like Gu Yanwu (1613-1682) and Confucius; he even added that these ideas still 'demonstrate distinctive national features, and have the indelible values of the times'.

A phrase that Xi is popularly known for coining is the 'Chinese Dream', which holds varying (but related) interpretations. Callahan (2015: 984)<sup>23</sup> cites Xi's emphasis of the dream as 'achieving a rich and powerful country, the revitalization of the nation, and the people's happiness'. Zhu (2014) refers to the first time he used the term in 2012, during his visit to the 'Road to Rejuvenation' exhibition at the National Museum of China, where the 'Chinese spirit' or patriotism was referred to as the core of the dream. So as part of the 'rejuvenation of the nation', the dream is a response to the broader moral crisis debate occurring in China, three decades after reforms and opening up (Callahan 2015: 984). Kuhn (2013) outlines four parts of the Chinese Dream: a strong China (politically and economically); civilised China (such as a rich culture); harmonious China and lastly, beautiful China. Finally, Xi (2014) links the realisation of the dream to two specific national development goals. In the medium-term, is the hope to become a 'moderately prosperous society' by doubling China's 2010 gross domestic product (GDP) and per capita income by the time of the CCP centenary in 2021; and in the long term, become 'a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious by 2049'.

Xi's outline of the dream at the national museum is not just a coincidence, as it is the 'institutional home' of China's national humiliation (Callahan 2015a: 222). In fact, he made reference to China's history as not just a great civilisation but also 170 years of humiliation by imperial powers. Callahan (2015a: 222) finds that this history conjures a response to the 1989 student protests and beyond, directing sentiment from domestic to foreign issues. Lee (2014), however, makes the most explicit link between instrumentalism and a 'manufactured dream'. Like the mass campaigns in the Mao era, the posters under the 'China Dream' campaign have a distinct design (white background and red text,

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<sup>22</sup> Mr. Huang Youyi, former deputy minister of China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration, remarks on 'The Governance of China': *Governance of China and Africa Relations Symposium*, HSRC, 17 September 2015, Pretoria, South Africa.

<sup>23</sup> The author (2015: 987-988) also notes that Xi's slogan is an adaptation of the military intellectual, Liu Mingu – whose Chinese Dream for the PRC was based on a strong military power.

designating the folk art style and government body involved), which evoke a sense of nostalgia and populism. While the slogan ‘One World, One Dream’ was adopted during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the author finds Xi’s dream based on ‘a harmonious future bound by shared ethnocultural identity’ that is negotiated through traditional tropes, such as the Confucian virtue of filial piety. Indeed Lee also questions the longevity of such a slogan, once Xi leaves his post in 2022. (This may no longer be the case, as of 2018 developments).

At the same time, in Xi’s (2015) speech at the UN General Assembly in 2015, he expressed that China cannot realise its dream without the support of a stable international environment. This was also reflected in his May 2013 speech titled ‘The Chinese Dream Will Benefit Not Only the People of China, But Also of Other Countries’ (Xi, 2014). Hence, the slogan is not just of domestic concern but holds international ramifications, described by foreign minister Yi as the leaders’ conceptual innovation for Chinese foreign affairs (Callahan, 2015: 997). Moreover, the ancient trope of *Tianxia* has become closely associated with Xi’s dream. For example, China promotes the idea that it led a unique regional order in the past, which was both peaceful and harmonious (Ford, 2015: 1045-1046). Thus, the theme of harmonism continues (Nordin, 2015: 8).

There is indeed instrumental interpretation of the past. While the imperial system is not replicable in a world of sovereign states, China appears to attain symbolic acknowledgement of its position in the world through ‘idiosyncrasies of control’ (Ford 2013). This includes demanding ‘a right to expect control over how others approach dealing with, and apparently even speaking and thinking about, China itself’ (including its history and internal affairs) (Ford 2013). Of course, Buzan (2014: 399) warns that China needs to be cautious in the way it controls such attitudes, as this will affect its national image.

Still China’s contemporary diplomacy does not explain the embedded contradictions of its history (Carter, 2013). When Xi, as first secretary of the CCP, promised the ‘renewal of the Chinese nation’ and made reference to the Opium War, it is unclear *what* nation he was referring to. The founding of the Chinese Republic in 1912 was built on anti-Manchu nationalist sentiment, yet the boundaries of modern China were established by the Ch’ing dynasty, which was in fact Manchu, not Chinese (Carter, 2013). Moreover the important geographical cultural centres of the PRC today – including the Yellow River, Beijing/Tianjin, Guangdong, Xi’an and Sichuan – were essentially parts of other states at some point in history. These nuances are a reminder of the manner in which contemporary phrases invoke particular narratives, yet are not complete explanations of deeper cultural and

political realities. Hence, the international ambitions of China today cannot be removed from the manner in which China politicises Confucianism (Ford, 2015: 1045).

### 3.3.3.2 New currents in China's external approach

More than two decades ago, Shambaugh (1996: 187) stated that the world would shape China more than China would shape the world. Undeniably, the latter trend has become more visible of late. China's composition of leaders demonstrates an evolution of participation and shaping of global affairs (Kissinger, 2014: 228). This is no different under President Xi, who comes at a time when China's patriotic campaigns of the 1990s have already led the country to become more internationally engaged; and the leadership has gained a confidence that China could become a world power (Kurlantzick, 2007: 222). China's assertiveness has also developed from the 2008 financial crisis and associated weakening of US power (Buzan 2014: 396). Yet it also displays caution (as reflected by its response during the Iraq crisis of 2002–2003) (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003: 23). Nevertheless, the slow and subtle changes in its external relations are considered significant.

Zhang's (2015) study – *China's new foreign policy under Xi Jinping: towards 'Peaceful Rise 2.0'?* – acknowledges that China's diplomacy is indeed more assertive, particularly in the case of the Asian Pacific and as reflected by officials and scholars. It was believed that Xi would begin his term focusing on domestic issues, highlighted by an aggressive anti-corruption drive, and maintain a passive international posture (Zhang, 2015: 8). Instead, he has adopted an active 'head of state diplomacy' and made important changes to China's foreign policy and its guiding principles, which could elevate China's strategic positioning in the world (Zhang, 2015: 8).

First China is continuing the 'peaceful development' policy in order to maintain a stable external environment for its rise; however, this is regarded as 'peaceful development 2.0', as unlike before, Xi has introduced more assertive elements (Zhao, 2015: 9–10). He has been much more explicit in linking the concept to China's national and foreign interests. In fact Xi's 'bottom-line thinking' approach, sets out that China will draw a red line which other countries should not cross – this is reflected in its uncompromising stance towards maritime territorial disputes (Zhao, 2015: 13). Thus while China may not be interested in direct control and would prefer political deference, it also does not rule out military power as an option, particularly at the regional level (Buzan, 2010: 15; Ford, 2013; Kissinger, 2014: 218).

Second is China's commitment to 'peaceful development', but premised on other countries' reciprocal strategic commitments, since all countries have a role to play in ensuring its commitment; and third, its emphasis on top-level strategic planning in order to shape the international environment in a way that serves China's development (Zhao 2015: 9). Hence, Gurtov (2015: 78) sees China's foreign policy conduct as professional and bureaucratised, but also existing alongside high-profile diplomacy.

Fourth is China's global involvement. It cannot continue to rise as it has been and it is required to make important foreign policy decisions, which lead to greater involvement in global affairs (Buzan, 2010: 2; Wang, 2012: 107). Looking further afield, China has also redefined its relations abroad, drawing on progress being made under Hu Jintao (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003: 32). Its 'new type of great power relationship' – which was initiated during Xi's 2013 visit to the US – is a response (though not exclusively) to the complex US–China relationship (Zhao, 2015: 14; Swaine, 2015: 5). At the same time, China is creating a more comprehensive global strategy, unlike the US–China focus under Jiang Zemin (Cooper 2004: 40). The notion of a 'community of common destiny' – initially mentioned by Hu and then regularly adopted by Xi – was formed to strengthen links with a broad range of neighbouring and developing countries (Zhao, 2015: 4; Xu & Du, 2014). This particular concept is considered a Chinese solution to world problems, with Chinese wisdom – and is already moving beyond mere rhetoric to concrete plans, as the BRI-related initiatives demonstrate (Zhao, 2015: 15). Still Xi's thinking remains nearly indistinguishable from that of his predecessors; for instance, his interest in developing closer links with the developing world is reflective of China's long-standing interest in garnering support for a more equitable world system (Swaine, 2015: 3; Freeman 2015: 1).

Buzan (2010: 18) – supported by others (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003: 33; Dreyer, 2015: 1027; Cooper, 2004: 37; Chin & Thakur, 2010: 120) – therefore describes China as a *reform revisionist*. It accepts some international institutions (for instrumental reasons), such as its enthusiastic support for the Westphalian principle of sovereignty, and recognises the leading role of the UN; however, it resists and seeks to reform others and desires a seat at the table, to be able to rewrite certain global norms and practices. Indeed China's support for the establishment of new economic initiatives has 'rumbled over the existing order like rolling thunder' and are an indication that it is rethinking the rules, principles and norms of global development to possibly include 'distinctive Chinese features'; although it underplays the geostrategic calculations (Chin, 2015: 217&223).



It appears that China is interested in an international order where power is dispersed. However, it realises it cannot yet challenge US power and so adopts alternative diplomacy as a means to weaken American influence (Shambaugh, 1996: 187; Buzan, 2010: 18; Wang, 2015). Still there are material and cultural challenges involved in the establishment of reciprocal ties and mutual respect between China and the U.S. China does not yet have enough material power over the U.S., which could win it a morally superior position; nor is it willing to be a junior partner (Uemura, 2015: 361). Moreover, the countries share very different cultural identities and perceptions of one another.

Since the modern world system is made of shifting alignments and China cannot simply exert its ambitions on new institutions in isolation but through interaction – it is thus counterbalancing the status quo with the language of ‘shared destiny’ or ‘south–south cooperation’ (Chin, 2015). It is notably using bilateral and multilateral ties, which have expanded as a result of a more sophisticated diplomacy, to counter Western interests (Gurtov, 2015: 80). In fact shared platforms are helping China legitimise and universalise its interests – such as exposing some of its ‘going out’ projects to international organisations – in a way that reassures the world about its growing power (Chin, 2015: 219).

Ultimately China is comfortable with pluralist, coexistence institutions but still resists liberal political institutions and Western (or global) civil society, which are key drivers of the normative deepening of international society (Buzan, 2010 & 2014: 393; Kissinger, 2014: 229). It is also ambivalent about the Westphalian notion of a great power leadership. So while China has pursued economic integration and embraced globalisation, it has sought for a stable blend of modernising with ‘Chinese characteristics’ and continued to emphasise the principle that different political systems should not affect relations between countries (Buzan, 2010: 13; Zi, 2004: 240). The caveat for China is what Godehardt (2016: 11) calls becoming ‘the absolute other’ in the international order, with which Kurlantzick (2007: 231) agrees, as China’s diplomacy in the 2000s rested on portraying itself as qualitatively different to Western powers. This suggests that China’s worldview is not only formed on its own but could be affected by its very interactions.

### **3.4 China’s public diplomacy: as negotiation instrument**

Having established how Chinese leaders have used the content of the past to address contemporary concerns, is the exploration of China’s public diplomacy – an instrument that helps frame, negotiate and convey its interests.

China's public diplomacy cannot be divorced from its diplomacy and foreign policy (d'Hooghe, 2005: 89). Their link is clear in the instance where government budgets determine the very direction of external activities, such as directing funds from one region to another, in order to deepen relations with audiences in a region deemed strategic (Holden, 2013: 13). Similarly China has ambitions of competing in the international cultural market, as a 2011 China Daily report reflected, its 12th Five Year Plan had plans to increase the cultural sector from 2.5% to 5% of the country's GDP by 2015 (Holden, 2013: 13). Indeed China's public diplomacy is a strategic tool that fulfils various interests like publicising government statements to the outside world; to create a desirable image of China; to respond to external criticism; to increase China's global integration (by explaining its positions and policies); and to gain acceptance in a non-threatening manner (d'Hooghe, 2007: 14 & 17-18; Pan, 2013: 29; Deng, 2009: 69; Wang, 2008: 268; Bolewski & Rietig, 2008: 90; Sun, 2010: 58; Cha, 2008: 106; Rawnsley, 2009: 282). An underlying impetus for developing innovative diplomatic strategies is to also fulfil practical needs; as China became the second largest global oil importer in 2003, it managed to win resource deals through diplomacy (Kurlantzick, 2007: 223&230).

The use of public diplomacy is also inextricably linked with influence (see 2.4.5.2). Callahan (2015a: 216) argues that the ability to influence is like a sense of identity or security; both are social constructs and are not necessarily based on the presentation of facts. So rather than asking quantitative questions like 'how much' influence does China have, the emphasis should be 'what it means' for China and the world (Callahan, 2015a: 216). Public diplomacy reveals how Chinese policymakers and intellectuals are constructing China in the world. It is also useful in creating a conceptual network or space to share ideas and responses to joint problems, in an international structure that is 'complicated, uneven, contested and always evolving' (Buzan, 2010: 7; Evans & Steven, 2010: 18).

The *Tianxia* system may have been useful when China was a powerful entity, with no competing paradigm until the Opium War. However, this does not characterise contemporary international relations where several states claim to have superior civilisations and organising principles of their own (Dreyer, 2015: 1027). What matters is also the manner in which a rising power responds to global shifts that can both preserve its identity or adjust it. In this way, China's public diplomacy is a negotiation instrument rather than just a sum of its various activities, which allows it to engage in discourse about its position in the world (between past and present or its own interests and global integration).

It still needs to be emphasised that public diplomacy is *one* important aspect of the larger toolkit available to China in its effort to achieve political and economic objectives. For example, its deeper engagement in multilateralism is another way to assure the international community that it is willing to cooperate on international issues, on a regular basis (Scott, 2015: 253). Similarly, it was outlined in Chapter 2 that soft influence is not useful in all scenarios. Hence influence is likened to a ‘manufactured commodity’ or ‘political currency’ that is deeply relational and issue-specific, meaning that the ability to shape foreign preferences depends on a host of factors, such as leadership personality, cultural proximity and history (Creemers, 2015: 307 & 313).

#### 3.4.1 Attributes of China’s public diplomacy

The literature points to four characteristics of China’s image-building exercise. First, public diplomacy is traditionally about the engagement with a foreign public in order to present the values and interests of those being represented. Yet there is a strong domestic element in China’s image projection that at times, influences China’s foreign policy (Li, 2009: 28; d’Hooghe, 2007: 5; 2008: 38; Callahan, 2015a: 217; Keane, 2010: 520). Uniquely, the publicising of foreign policies and activities to the Chinese public – which would be labelled ‘public affairs’ in the US – is considered an important component of China’s public diplomacy (Wang, 2008: 260; d’Hooghe, 2008: 6). However, this is not an extraordinary development, as China has always proclaimed foreign policy as an extension of domestic policy (Wang, 2008: 260; Wang, 2012: 459). It seeks to bring external and internal views of its status closer; since in an interconnected world, China’s image has a direct impact on its modernisation (Callahan, 2015a; Rawnsley, 2015: 276). Public diplomacy also directs sentiment away from domestic issues and maintains party legitimacy by making culture and tradition attractive to a public growing weary of traditional ideology (Wang, 2008: 267-268; Glaser & Murphy, 2009: 20). This explains why the discourse around China’s image includes traditional civilisation as a resource for its contemporary values. Callahan (2015a: 219) even points that a primary challenge for China’s relations with the world today, is not how it fits in multilateral organisations but rather the identity politics of answering ‘who is China?’.

The second aspect presupposes that China already does have some influence since its image projection has increased outward (for example its growing public diplomacy activities), and its wealth and confidence grows (Callahan, 2015a: 225). Nye (2008: 96) has made the point that a state’s soft power traditionally rests on three aspects: its culture, political values and foreign policies. However Kurlantzick (2006: 1) – as do d’Hooghe (2005: 94) and Rawnsley (2009: 283) – observes that China and emerging players articulate a broader idea of soft power because their attractiveness

includes investment, development aid and business; particularly among nations who desire China's aid, trade and recognition, and are more susceptible to its influence. Nye (2012) later agreed that economic resources are also a form of attraction.

This is demonstrated by Chin (2015: 220) who finds China's willingness to kick-start the cost sharing of new institutions as favourable for its image, while Breslin (2010: 7) sees the appeal of China's economic model as a basis for the creation of the ASEAN-China free trade agreement. Similarly China's impressive growth story, the practical Beijing Consensus and its non-interference policy, are also instances of attractive features (with the latter being particularly appealing to authoritarian elites) (Cooper, 2004: 27–28; Kurlantzick, 2007: 224; d'Hooghe, 2007: 15; Zhao, 2009: 247). These attributes have been discussed in relation to its closer relations with Asia, Latin American and Africa since the 2000s (Kurlantzick, 2007: 221). Still such praise for China is at times perceived as a reaction to the Washington ideas of development, and Chinese policymakers themselves remain undecided about using its development model as a source of influence, as the country itself is transforming (Cooper, 2004: 27; Li, 2009: 29; Pang, 2009: 125–126).

China's 'economic muscle' has even earned it 28th place in the 2016 *Soft Power 30*,<sup>24</sup> a comprehensive soft power index rating the top 30 nations, created by the strategic communications consultancy, Portland Communications. Certainly China's growing economy could bring global prosperity and increase human knowledge and technology; yet despite an abundance of resources, there still remains a relative deficit of global political or cultural influence (Buzan, 2010: 33; Gurtov, 2015: 81; Wang, 2008: 261; Sun, 2015a: 401). China is not yet able to influence the behaviour of other states and is yet to become a normative and strategic power (like providing credible security) in the global order (Zhao, 2015: 7&17). Moreover, the leadership needs to be seen as evolving credibly and openly, in order to stay in power (Buzan, 2014: 409). Thus, Chinese discourse increasingly speaks of the need for 'comprehensive national power' that requires the use of various forms of influence (Pleschová & Fürst, 57: 2015; Li, 2009: 22). Wang (2012: 111) concludes that China can only become a leading force in international relations if it increases its role in international politics, economics, environmental protection and military security and importantly engagement with society and culture. Achieving true influence 'requires a subtle balance of restraint, force and legitimacy' (Kissinger, 2014: 233), or what Nye (2008: 94) calls 'smart power'.

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<sup>24</sup> For the 30 countries ranked, see: <http://softpower30.portland-communications.com/ranking/>

In third place, public diplomacy is important for China, as it searches for a clear grand strategy which (Wang, 2011) defined as ‘articulating a set of core aims, or ends, [made of various plans and policies] that define the national interest’, linking domestic goals to how a state relates to the world (Buzan, 2014: 385). Some authors believe that China has already articulated one through its ‘peaceful development’ concept (Buzan, 2014: 383–384). Moreover, Xi’s ‘China Dream’ is linked to making China a prosperous society by 2049. These concepts give an idea of where China sees itself in the world but remain unclear as direct ends or merely means to achieving other goals, and there is uncertainty over whether they can be implemented through coherent strategies (Buzan, 2010: 31; 2014: 401). Moreover, the concepts only provide aspects of China’s reality. It proudly claims itself a great civilisation and the largest developing country, reflecting its foreign policy orientation; but its real status is a middle power in political and military terms but a great power in economic terms (Gurtov, 2015: 83; Zhang, 2015a: 67; Wu, 2004: 58). Thus, China is still coming to terms with its global role (Kissinger, 2014: 328).

Others believe it is pragmatic that China does not own a clear grand strategy. Nordin’s (2015) study on China’s harmonious concept even applies the notion of ‘autoimmunity’, where a system can contradict and ‘attack’ itself – that is go against its very own principles – in order to maintain its very existence (such as the US’s ‘global war on terror’ as a means to preserve democracy) (Nordin, 2015). Perhaps then, the lack of strategy is in line with China’s contemporary approach, which is a contrast to Mao’s ideologically led style (Kurlantzick, 2007: 224). China is constantly evolving and redefining itself and its interests, and is essentially a compilation of competing identities, voices and actors (Buzan, 2014: 382; Shambaugh, 2011: 7). Even though it has not spelt out a strategy or provided a clear alternative order, public diplomacy helps it engage in discourse about its identity; as well as amplify its preference for a multipolar world with economic dynamism and cultural diversity (Chin, 2015: 218).

Fourth, globalisation is affecting China in unique and similar ways to the broader practice of diplomacy. Rawnsley (2009: 282) asserts that ‘globalisation has forced the Chinese government to pay more attention than ever before to public diplomacy and soft power’, as reflected by the amount of Chinese elite discourse on the topic. Still global forces are affecting China in contradictory ways, as its own cultural and creative industries have become subject to both conservative and liberal, and political and economic forces (Botma, 2013: 14). China’s public diplomacy is embodied in its complex identity and interaction with the world that stands between opening up to the world and mutual adaptation (Wang, 2012: 465). When China does emphasise public diplomacy engagement,

Wang (2008: 259) and Li (2009: 25) find that it tends to focus on people-to-people exchanges and cultural diplomacy (like France) rather than ‘American-style media diplomacy’. Holden (2013: 13) explains that the US’s cultural dissemination is more commercially than state-sponsor driven. This reiterates the point made in section 2.4.4 that the specific use and grading of public diplomacy instruments depends on the actors and context involved.

Yet the tragic events of September 11, 2001 and the 2008 economic crisis also raised doubts about the prevailing world order (and a heavier state hand in Western democracies), providing an environment where a host of emerging players began to expand their public diplomacy activities (Botma, 2013: 6; Holden, 2013: 17; Chin & Thakur, 2010: 126). Ford (2015: 1044) mentions the emerging Sino-US competition is in fact not based on violence but a battle for hearts and minds; and Nye (2008: 100) speaks of a broader contest of credibility. More specifically the former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, signalled that the new battlefield is the progressively ‘crowded field of state-financed satellite television news’ (Massey, 2011). The state media players involved – as mentioned in Chapter 2 – include but are not limited to China’s CCTV that was rebranded as China Global Television Network (CGTN) in early 2017, Russia Today, Al Jazeera and even France24; all of which have their own public and national interests at heart. Funded by governments, these channels, directed at international viewers in a style akin to their competitors, provide their views on events and stories otherwise portrayed in a critical light by traditional Western media (Rawnsley, 2015: 275). Today a virtual presence is necessary to take national voices to international audiences (Ding, 2014: 4). Likewise a British Council report makes similar remarks, as emerging powers (namely the BRIC countries, South Africa omitted) display a seriousness and expenditure on developing broader cultural relations (Holden, 2009: 3–4 & 17).

Global forces are also affecting diplomacy and the way China relates to others. This includes China’s complex ties with the Chinese diaspora, tourists and students abroad – who all have an impact on its image (d’Hooghe, 2007: 27; Ding, 2014). China’s quest for global influence is also affected by the need for Chinese diplomats to overcome their ‘overcautious’ stance – as seen during the 2003 SARS crisis where China’s secrecy made the public suspicious; and secondly, addressing ‘the burden of a huge language and cultural gap in communicating with the world’ (d’Hooghe, 2007: 36). These aspects complicate how Chinese political discourse is translated. Still the very fact that policymakers are engaging more in 21<sup>st</sup> century global issues like climate change, which involves various non-state actors, is by extension dealing with public diplomacy (Evans & Steven, 2010: 22). Hence,

globalisation has changed the conditions of influence by promoting public engagement through diplomacy.

### 3.4.2 The development of China's contemporary public diplomacy: Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping

There is consensus that China's quest for influence has deep historical roots. While the 'soft power' concept was not recognised in China at first, the practice is not new; for example, the strategist Sun Tzu (6th century BC) advocated mind over force (Ding, 2008: 195–196; Nye, 2012: 151; Wu, 2012: 6). This also suggests that societal values and culture influence how countries exercise power (Lantis, 2002: 93; Li, 2009: 7). Meanwhile a more recent historical context of China's public diplomacy includes Mao's 'ping pong diplomacy' (where the US table tennis team visited China) and 'panda diplomacy' (where pandas were sent abroad as signs of goodwill) in the 1970s (Rawnsley, 2009: 285). Formalised public diplomacy was already taking shape in 1983, during China's reform and opening up (through a system of Chinese news spokespersons) (Wang, 2012: 461).

D'Hooghe (2007: 21) makes reference to the Office of Foreign Propaganda of the CCP (which consists of senior party leaders) and the more public-facing SCIO, established in 1991, as an indication that China sought to expand its publicity work, in the post-Tiananmen era. Importantly, since the creation of the SCIO, there has been a steady stream of white papers explaining China's position on various topics and educational and cultural exchanges abroad, as well as collaboration with different government bureaucracies, like the foreign affairs and the *Hanban* (the Chinese Language Council International) section of the Ministry of Education (d'Hooghe, 2007: 22; Creemers, 2015: 308). Therefore, the creation of the SCIO has formalised China's public diplomacy, as the leading section on China's cultural diplomacy and exchanges (Hu, 2013: 263). While China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not develop the strategies, it – together with the diplomats deployed – remains an important player in the conduct of public diplomacy (d'Hooghe, 2008: 42).

More significantly, China's public diplomacy became more active in the 2000s. Since September 11, 2001 China has paid serious attention to public diplomacy and even hosted a series of events that were jointly organised by the Department of Policy Planning and the MFA (Wang 2008: 260). In fact, by March 2004, the MFA established a new Division for Public Diplomacy. Yet various scholars believe that 2007 was the first actual public pronouncement by Hu Jintao, on the practical application of soft power (*ruan shili*) in Chinese foreign policy (Lye, 2010: 548; Li, 2009: 23; d'Hooghe, 2008: 39). This is reflected in the 2007 White Paper on Chinese Foreign Affairs and in

Hu's keynote address at the 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress, on the importance of culture as a foundation for creativity and national cohesion (Lye 2010: 549; Keane 2010: 521).



**Figure 3.1: 2008 Beijing Olympic grounds, 2010, China**

Source: Author

China even began working more closely with established global initiatives and increased its skills in mediating conflicts. However, the awareness of an image deficit was most acute when the international media put the spotlight on it at the time of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In particular the country's internal ethnic conflicts and its controversial role in the Darfur crisis (among others) were highlighted, even though China had sought to use its hosting of the games to showcase its rise and goodwill to the world (d'Hooghe, 2008: 54; Sun, 2010: 54; Ding, 2011: 294 & 298). Specific high-profile examples regarding the Darfur crisis included Mia Farrow's (2007) opinion piece, 'Genocide Olympics' that was published in the *Wall Street Journal* and Steven Spielberg's open letter to President Hu, pressuring China to influence Sudan to accept a UN peacekeeping force in Darfur (Nye, 2012: 152).

The negative international commentary and China's perceived soft power weakness led it to seek a more balanced discourse environment, which could in turn assist its global development.<sup>25</sup> Chinese policymakers felt that the country was incorrectly portrayed in the international media and concluded that media portrayal mattered (Chen, 2013; d'Hooghe, 2007: 17; Wang, 2008: 265; Rawnsley, 2015: 279; Sun, 2014: 1894). As a result, China started providing frequent official communication

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<sup>25</sup> Discussions with Zhang Yanqiu (Deputy Dean of Journalism and the Director of the Africa Communication Research Centre, Communications University of China, Beijing), Skype, 27 March 2017.



on the Darfur crisis and even appointed special envoy Liu Guijin (Wu, 2012: 8-9). Moreover there were official pronouncements, such as the call of propaganda chief of the CCP, Li Changchun, for Chinese media to ‘go global’ in December 2008. The former premier, Wen Jiabao, even stated in the *People’s Daily* (2010) that China would engage in more cultural exchanges; while Hu Jintao directed Chinese diplomats ‘to strive to make our country more influential politically, more competitive economically, and help ensure that our country has a more friendly image, with greater moral appeal’ (Chin & Thakur, 2010: 121).

The abovementioned developments point to the defensive nature of China’s public diplomacy – with an element of ‘talking back’ on issues pertaining to it – and the recognition that China needed to facilitate its rise (Wang, 2008: 263; Rawnsley, 2009: 282). Yet it also became simultaneously difficult for the world to engage with, as it took harder stances in its neighbourhood and towards the US and EU (Shambaugh, 2011: 7). There were also signs of instrumental use of diplomatic rhetoric or reassurance terms (like ‘harmonious society’, ‘multipolarity’ and ‘peaceful rise’) that linked to China’s interests (Scott, 2015). Moreover, the Chinese government began to increase its output of information in English (Paradise, 2009: 648).

There are signs of continuation under Xi’s presidency. In late 2012 at the 18th CCP National Congress, China had signalled that public diplomacy would be formally integrated into its national strategy (Han, 2013). Xi (2014: 178) also revealed his interest on various occasions, such as his December 2013 remarks to the Political Bureau of the 18th CCP Central Committee, titled ‘Enhance China’s Cultural Soft Power’: ‘the strengthening of our cultural soft power is decisive for China to reach the Two Centenary goals and realise the Chinese Dream of rejuvenation of the nation’. During the same speech, he also emphasised Chinese culture and values:

We should disseminate the values of modern China.

During its 5,000-year history, the Chinese nation has created a brilliant and profound culture. We should disseminate the most fundamental Chinese culture in a popular way to attract more people to participate in it, matching modern culture and society

In order to carry this out, he explained at another national meeting on publicity, four special characteristics of China that required explaining to the world (Xi, 2014: 174). They included countries have varying traditions, cultures and conditions and thus having different development paths; Chinese culture holds the deepest cultural and ethical pursuits of the Chinese people; fine traditional Chinese culture is a great strength of China and its ‘most profound cultural soft power’;

and finally, socialism with Chinese characteristics is rooted in Chinese culture and is the aspiration of the Chinese people. Importantly, he added that the whole party and related committees were responsible for China's publicity work, and they should study and address major issues and coordinate and guide major strategic campaigns (Xi, 2014: 175). This was reiterated by Foreign Minister Wang (2013a): different occasions and platforms must be used by policymakers to explain China's dream and commitment to development 'with the view of enhancing and cultivating China's soft power'.

Indeed Ding (2014: 7) sees Xi Jinping as a pragmatic policymaker, that is 'firm but flexible', who will likely use prudent projection of hard power, along with the active wielding of soft influence. Moreover, the former director of the SCIO, Cai Mingzhao, remarked that the core of Xi's public diplomacy was that 'China must develop its own messages about itself to be able to better set the terms of international communication, rather than being forced to discuss itself in a vocabulary designed and controlled by others'. Public diplomacy also needs to be based on China's own political and cultural values, and to pay attention to foreign concerns (Ding, 2014: 8). This reveals that China is aware that rhetoric alone will not change the world's mind about it (d'Hooghe, 2008: 52). Perhaps one digression under Xi is that contrary to the reassurance rhetoric between 2002 and 2012, Chinese leadership seems more willing to project China as a 'great power' and seek recognition of its core interests (Scott, 2015: 261).

### 3.4.3 Disseminating discourse: selected public diplomacy instruments

Cull, as cited by Rawnsley (2015:273), outlines the key activities of public diplomacy as 'listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy and international broadcasting'. Yet China stands out because of the resources at its disposal. Although the exact numbers are difficult to determine, it is estimated that China spends about US\$9bn on external publicity work a year, as was the case between 2009 and 2010 (Nye, 2012: 154; Hall & Smith, 2013: 3). It also has the advantage of a massive population, which allows it to send teachers abroad (Wang, 2008: 264) and even commit to UN peacekeeping troops, as reflected by Xi's historic pledge of 8,000 troops at the UN General Assembly (2015) in September 2015. Hu's (2013: 256) article on Chinese and Canadian cultural diplomacy even attests to the notion that states' cultural diplomacy institutions are impacted by their own societal cultures. The former is considered more hierarchical and state-centred than other countries and while non-state actors are involved, they are generally subject to government objectives (Zhang, d'Hooghe & Pang, 2014).

Kurlantzick (2007: 226) adds that China's adoption of sophisticated diplomatic strategies, namely effective tools of influence, are divided into formal (including the win-win economics of investment, trade and even tourism) and informal instruments (namely cultural promotion as a public diplomacy component). Moreover the particular 'informal' channels that have been favoured include people-to-people linkages (as noted earlier), publicity campaigns – like the 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2010 Shanghai World Expo – and Chinese media expansion (Wang, 2012: 461). Kurlantzick also highlights particular interest in directing such activities towards the developing world.

This study seeks to understand how China is gaining support for its initiatives, through its changing public diplomacy strategies (and narratives), rather than assessing individual public diplomacy instruments. Nevertheless, instances of these instruments, as studied by others, are outlined below.

#### 3.4.3.1 People-to-people exchanges

People-to-people exchanges have a long history in China and were an important channel during its isolation from the world, particularly in the lead-up to the US–China rapprochement in the 1970s (d'Hooghe, 2007: 6). Xi continues to stress such exchanges.

The strengthening of public diplomacy and people-to-people and cultural exchanges were emphasised in various pronouncements in 2013. From Xi's speech on China's diplomacy towards its neighbours (Xi, 2014: 328); his speech on Latin America and the Caribbean in the same year (Xi, 2014: 342) to his visit to Tanzania (Xi, 2014: 339), which happened to be the first African country he visited as president. He also injected this emphasis into his March 2014 speech at the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) – a body that seeks collaboration between culture, science and education (China, 2014). Xi stated that only through exchanges and mutual learning have civilisations historically moved forward, making reference to the friendly exchanges during the Tang dynasty and under the famous navigator, Zheng He, in the Ming dynasty. He added that 'the Chinese civilisation has always kept to its original root. As the unique cultural identity of the Chinese nation ... contains our most profound cultural pursuits...' (China, 2014). Moreover, he emphasised 'inter-civilisational exchanges' in his 2015 speech at the UN General Assembly (2015) as a means to promote harmony, inclusiveness and respect for differences.

Indeed the scope of people links has expanded, to extend high-level bilateral dialogue to the areas of culture, media, education and youth and even dialogue between opinion leaders (Wang, 2012: 462). Although high-level visits appear removed from public diplomacy, they are common a feature of bilateral relations, as official visits are a means to advertise a state's policies (Kurlantzick, 2006: 3).

There is also an unofficial component, as exemplified by the much-reported first lady Peng Liyuan's accompaniment on Xi's foreign visits, also branded as 'first-lady diplomacy' (Wang, 2015). At another level is the role of think tanks that Morrison (2012), d'Hooghe (2008: 51) and Shambaugh (2002) consider to have increasing power in conceptualising major foreign policy initiatives and engagement with foreign counterparts. Callahan (2015: 990) agrees that there is a role for intellectuals in the conception of China's policies, as their input into the 'peaceful rise' strategy demonstrates.

Another important aspect is international education exchanges, which Cheng (2009) believes are an intellectual base of China's soft power and originate from the prioritisation of education during imperial times. Education is an effective means for image building, as students become 'information carriers' of their home and host countries' cultural and political values (d'Hooghe, 2007: 30; Ding, 2014: 14–15; Shambaugh, 2015). In recognition of this potential, the Chinese Ministry of Education started the Studying in China Scheme in 2010, which outlined the target of recruiting 500,000 foreign students (of whom 150,000 are in higher education) to study in China by 2020. Many of them have been recorded to be overseas Chinese (Ding, 2014: 15). Of course linked to people ties, is the previously noted unofficial role of the Chinese diaspora and tourists abroad as well.

#### 3.4.3.2 Confucius Institutes

Linked to educational exchanges and an instrument in its own right, is the expansion of Chinese language and culture, as exemplified through CIs. These institutes, named after the famous sage – an internationally recognised symbol – are non-profit education organisations (Pan, 2013: 27; Ding, 2014: 15; Hartig, 2015: 246). Several scholars have discussed the role of CIs in China's public diplomacy and their contribution can be summarised accordingly. Since the first CI was established in Seoul in 2004, the number of institutes has increased to an estimated 500; while Confucius Classrooms, the CI equivalent at primary and secondary school level, are at 1,000 (Wang, 2008: 265; Botma, 2013: 16; Hartig, 2016). Of course, Chinese language is not limited to CIs, as schools across the world are also including it in their curricula (d'Hooghe, 2007: 30). Yet the setting up of CIs around the world has the potential of becoming 'the global-local keystone for China's commercial, cultural, and linguistic proselytization' (Ding, 2014: 16).

Founded by the Ministry of Education and administered by *Hanban*, these institutes are loosely equivalents of the British Council or Germany's Goethe Institute – yet they do not stand alone like such institutes, but are jointly managed by Chinese universities and their local counterparts

(Rawnsley, 2009: 285; Pan, 2013: 27). Hartig (2016) notes that there are a larger number of CIs in North America and Europe – which Ding (2014: 16) estimated in 2014 at 113 and 149 respectively, in comparison to 31 in Latin America and 37 in Africa (standing at 48 as of 2017).<sup>26</sup> This is accounted for by the fact that there is also an element of local interest required, but it may also reflect that the areas of emphasis for China remain to the north. This is not to say that the developing world is not of strategic importance: only that such regions have established much more recent links with China (beyond economic and diplomatic links), and the setting-up of such institutes is still developing, as reflected by the more recent CI launch at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, in early 2016 (Wu, 2012; China, 2016).

The institutes have also received endorsement by Xi, who described them as ‘playing an important role in promoting mutual learning between and among various civilizations’ (Hartig 2015: 250). The Chinese central government is said to provide the preferred teaching (or narratives) of Chinese history, culture and language at CIs, and China’s policies have even been showcased at their organised conferences (Creemers, 2015: 310; Pan, 2013: 29). While people in the education field associated with CIs do not necessarily agree that such institutes are or should be anything else but vehicles for academic exchange and understanding (Paradise, 2009: 658), they nevertheless remain important spaces for discourse, by providing education about China at the doorstep of local audiences. Their personnel are also equivalent to ‘people diplomats’, as Chinese language teachers abroad are also able to build knowledge and understanding of the host country.<sup>27</sup> In the end, learning moves both ways in these spaces.

#### 3.4.3.3 The hosting of events and other forms of cultural diplomacy

The hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, 2010 Shanghai World Expo and the annual Boao Forum<sup>28</sup> (since its founding in 2001) – and even the upcoming 2022 Winter Olympics – demonstrate China’s interest and relative success in hosting big events and forums, in order to increase its global visibility and showcase its landscape and culture (d’Hooghe, 2007: 33; China, 2015). Besides the hosting of ‘home field public diplomacy’<sup>29</sup> events, there is also interest in disseminating cultural products as a component of China’s public diplomacy, such as the Shanghai Ballet Company’s performance of the novel *Jane Eyre* in the UK and the screening of government-sponsored films, with the assistance of

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<sup>26</sup> Discussion with Dr Monyae, Co-Director of the Confucius Institute, University of Johannesburg, 20 June 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Same as above.

<sup>28</sup> Known as the Asian World Economic Forum.

<sup>29</sup> Zhang Yanqiu (Deputy Dean of Journalism and the Director of the Africa Communication Research Centre, Communications University of China, Beijing), Skype, 27 March 2017.

the cultural departments of Chinese embassies and consulates (Wang, 2012: 462; Beck, 2013; Creemers, 2015: 310). One example is the Chinese film showcase launched in Pretoria in December 2014, as a prelude to the 2015 China Year in South Africa (which also marked the conclusion of the 10th Senior Officials Meeting in the lead-up to FOCAC). There are also events dedicated specifically to Chinese culture, such as the Chinese cultural weeks in the US in 2000 and Berlin in 2001 (d’Hooghe 2005: 98). These sets of events are a means to deepen bilateral relations. Another instance is the attempt to increase tourism, business and understanding between China and Russia by hosting the 2012 ‘Year of Russian Tourism’ in China and the ‘Year of Chinese Tourism’ in Moscow the following year (China, 2012c).



**Figure 3.2: South African pavilion, 2010 World Expo, Shanghai, China**

Source: Author

While officials tend to focus on traditional Chinese culture, cultural diplomacy includes an increasing state and non-state aspect. In fact, a new generation of artists, writers, filmmakers and films – such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* – have emerged out of China (d’Hooghe, 2005: 94; d’Hooghe, 2007: 16; d’Hooghe, 2008: 45; Rawnsley, 2009: 285). Moreover, cultural events have also attracted support and collaboration from the Chinese and international business community, which even helped organise the 2008 China Now Festival in the UK (d’Hooghe, 2008: 51).

Deng and Zhang (2009) point out that even though cultural products are traditionally difficult to measure, such engagement remains important for China, particularly in newer areas of strategic importance, such as Africa and Latin America, who have limited understanding of it, since economic relations have largely dominated their contemporary relations. Hence, China’s foreign cultural

activities fall largely under ‘government-supported culture and heritage’ that is useful for engaging foreign publics, in order to achieve broader national objectives (Holden, 2013: 8). This means that its cultural activities fall less under commercial culture (where the market of cultural goods supports cultural activity, as in the case of Hollywood) as well as homemade culture (online sharing of homemade products, such as Etsy.com).

#### 3.4.3.4 The ‘going out’ of state media

Of particular note is international broadcasting, viewed as the use of electronic media that a society employs to shape the opinions of another’s public and leaders (Rawnsley, 2015: 273). Notably the sending out of Chinese state media for the purposes of competing with other 24-hour news stations is the newest addition to China’s public diplomacy, and is even considered a primary public diplomacy instrument in the information age (d’Hooghe, 2013). The players involved include China’s own ‘voice of America’ China Radio International, Xinhua News Agency and CCTV, who provide broadcasting to satellite television subscribers, with their English language services (d’Hooghe, 2007: 31; Wu, 2012: 10). Print media includes *China Daily* – China’s first English daily newspaper that started publishing outside Asia since 2009; the Foreign Language Press and the official CCP paper, the *People’s Daily* (and its branch, *Global Times*) (Scott, 2015; Sun, 2015a: 408; Wu, 2016).

Such media efforts are activities over and above the Chinese broadcast media directed at the Chinese diaspora, as well as the Chinese media based abroad, with the mandate of reporting back to mainland audiences. For instance CCTV-4, is the international Chinese channel that caters to overseas Chinese speakers; while CCTV or CGTN, is the English news channel (Creemers, 309; Ding, 2014: 10).

In particular, in December 2008, at the 50th anniversary of the establishment of CCTV, the propaganda chief of the CCP, Li Changchun, asserted that the Chinese media should strengthen their communication capacity both internally and globally (Sun, 2010: 54). While such players had already been going out as early as the 1990s, but there has been a far more aggressive drive since 2009 (Ding, 2014: 9; Deng & Zhang, 2009: 152). In 2011, it was announced that Chinese media targeting overseas audiences would receive increased investment over the next decade in order to ‘present a true picture of China to the World’ (*China Daily*, 2011). By 2012 CCTV had expanded its global reach, having set up broadcast centres in Washington DC, Moscow, London and Nairobi (and even reporting in the local language, Kiswahili) – and thus expanding its regional-specific content, as well as sending an overarching China narrative to the world (Wu, 2016; Creemers, 2015: 309).

These broadcast centres have shown a gradual effort in improving the software of China's international broadcasting, such as rebranding CCTV to CGTN with a more 'international feel', increasing its broadcasts to a 24-hour cycle and including more international voices to reflect an international channel. This includes the variety of experts interviewed and the hiring of locals (Wu, 2016; Ding, 2014: 10; d'Hooghe, 2013). The interest in becoming a voice among voices was clear in 2013, when CCTV hosted a forum with its international partners such as Walt Disney, in order to discuss its brand and global competitiveness (Wang, 2013b). Sun (2014: 1905) considers that Chinese spokespeople have even become more amenable to press conferences. What is clear is that China hopes to make its media the main source of China-related news, shaping the world's view of it; and even becoming a key player in covering global events (Sun, 2015a: 406). Likewise Ding (2014: 9) reviews Shambaugh, who provides four reasons that Chinese media have been used for foreign publicity: to tell China's story to the world; to counter what is perceived as negative publicity (like the 'China threat'); to promote unification of its territories; and to disseminate its foreign policy.

Others have been more cautious about the rise of Chinese media. Even though China is competing in a newer space, Rawnsley (2015: 274) sees it still competing in 'old diplomacy' that is one-way communication; also a host of news media players are competing for the same audience in the information age. Some of these complexities also play out in China's public diplomacy in Africa, as subsequent chapters will demonstrate. Creemers (2015: 310-311) adds that apart from the large capital placed in these initiatives, less is known about the actual audiences paying and viewing Chinese media sources, as data is difficult to attain. This leads them to believe that the numbers are likely low, since the bureaucracy would readily publicise positive numbers – and they have not. Wu (2012: 18) sums up the main challenges for Chinese state media as follows: they have entered late in the game and are competing in a predominantly commercialised media space; they need to understand contrasting media markets within specific regions; and lastly, they need to grasp the impact of perceptions towards China's domestic dynamics and foreign relations, such as its links with authoritarian regimes. These concerns also relate to China's broader public diplomacy engagements.

#### 3.4.4 Questioning the impact of China's public diplomacy

China's public diplomacy instruments are quite similar to Cull's 'taxonomy' of public diplomacy, outlined at the beginning of this section. It is offering an alternative narrative about itself to everyday people, who traditionally learn about China through third parties. What is also unique is the amount



of resources China has committed to this engagement, over such a short space of time. Kurlantzick (2007: 229) even believes that China's new diplomacy (that is a softer and more pragmatic approach) has paid off to an extent, mitigating fears of its rise and becoming a serious alternative to country relations with the US, while Nye (2008: 101-102) emphasises three important dimensions of public diplomacy to include the daily communication of foreign policy decisions, strategic communication of themes through symbolic events and lastly, developing lasting relationships with key actors over time.

China has indeed stepped up its public diplomacy engagement, investing in a host of instruments to convey the worldview of its leadership and is thus actively taking part in the first two aspects of public diplomacy. Of course sending out messages through active communication and strategic instruments is only one part of the exercise, and less can be predicted about how its messages are received – or if China is achieving a desirable global image (Shambaugh, 2015; Rawnsley, 2015: 280). Indeed, the forming of lasting relationships is the most important but complex to achieve.

So the question is whether China is able to move its public diplomacy from the 'embryonic' phase – as largely reactive and in control of external criticism – to engagement (Li, 2009: 22; Sun, 2015a: 414). Song (2001: 73) finds that China's public diplomacy is not yet completely opening itself to discourse. For instance, international exchanges are characterised by scholarly interactions but not yet sufficiently based on the launching of joint projects; these exchanges are based on presentations or seminars, yet hold limited opportunity for theoretical discussions and dialogue between the two sides. In addition, d'Hooghe (2005: 89) believes that China's foreign policy strategy is still largely aimed at intergovernmental links and less on the modern network sense. This means that there is a smaller space for dissenting voices and more sensitive narratives, including the memory of the tributary system of its own neighbours, with which Chinese authorities prefer not to engage (Hartig, 2015: 253; Jacobs, 2015; Wang, 2008: 269).

Of course, public diplomacy is also based on the degree and willingness of China to learn about its target audience; for instance, Mandarin teachers at CIs are still required to be proficient in local languages in order to teach, which remains an outstanding gap (Pan, 2013: 23; Hartig, 2015: 251). Even more serious is the closure of CIs, for various reasons, as demonstrated by the universities of Chicago and Pennsylvania State in 2015, and the protests over the opening of new ones (Pan, 2013: 30; Volodzko, 2015). Therefore China's public diplomacy cannot just rely on historical narratives and ancient culture to generate contemporary influence, it also depends on the leadership's

ability to promote its cultural resources abroad (Deng, 2009: 73-74; Sun, 2015: 127; Wang, 2008: 261).

There are also domestic constraints on China's official narratives – institutionally, foreign engagement is uniquely managed by a central government with far-reaching control (Wang, 2012a; d'Hooghe, 2005: 89). At a conceptual level, there exists debate over what kind of identity China should be portraying about itself. Creemers (2015: 314) and Rawnsley (2009: 282) note that Chinese government departments, as well as scholars in China and abroad, disagree on China's image – between a predetermined and politically correct image (portraying strength, responsibility and affluence) and displaying the 'real', complex China. Moreover are external factors, like the fact that foreign institutions also manage their own China studies programs, which are not always in line with official rhetoric; moreover, there are the transitional and dual identities of the Chinese diaspora, which make their relationship with the mainland increasingly complicated (Ding, 2014; Paradise, 2009: 661).

Such critiques are well noted. Yet as a relatively new aspect of China's engagement with the world, and an area that has clearly inspired a lot of literature, it would also be inaccurate to believe that China's public diplomacy is static. Engaging in this space means that China has opportunities to access a greater number of diversified sources and policy analysis (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003: 29). This includes Chinese academics and think tanks participating in domestic and external exchanges to help leaders sensitise to new developments. Furthermore, perceptions towards China differ across national boundaries – with more favourable views in Latin America, Africa and some Asian countries in contrast to Europe and the US – and even across political and economic policy areas (Nye, 2012: 155; Creemers, 2015: 317). What is of interest in this study then, is to explore how China uses public diplomacy (in relation to Africa) to promote itself and how its engagement evolves to fit current interests – rather than the quantitative assessment of particular instruments. Public diplomacy is therefore viewed as an ongoing communication instrument to frame interests and engage in discourse, so as conditions change, so does China adjust its language and actions to complement its interests (Scott, 2015: 251-252).

### **3.5 Conclusion: from an imperial social order to modern-day public diplomacy**

Chapter 3 navigated from a discussion on China's imperial worldview to its contemporary diplomacy and specifically public diplomacy, emphasising significant phases of its relations with the world. The Sinocentric world order, an indigenous social order prior the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was informed by

Confucianism and was consequently organised as a concentric hierarchy, where China's superiority derived from its close proximity to heaven. This demonstrates how state behaviour is shaped by elite beliefs, shared norms and social identities (that is Confucian society) (refer to Table 2.2 on constructivism, under 2.2.1). Yet the survival of such a system was due to the social recognition, acceptance and contestation that existed between parties, which also reiterates international relations as an intersubjective space or 'stage' where interests are performed and negotiated. Only through this process, was China able to modify its ideas and provide substantive input into East Asian international relations. This suggests that the world order was an articulation of its very existence, rather than just the fulfilment of trade interests. Yet by the mid-19th century, China's encounter with the West, and its defeat in the Opium War, influenced it to reluctantly abandon the system and become disciplined and socialised into the Westphalian world order.

It is true that despite the sudden demise of the Sinocentred system, there remains 'supernatural' inheritance of Chinese Confucian values. Still the most suitable explanation for China's relationship with historical narratives is that policymakers use narrative and traditional values *instrumentally*, in their communication, in order to manage China's rise and contemporary interests, as well as the leadership's legitimacy within and outside China. There is continued employment of the past under President Xi Jinping; but he displays a much more assertive diplomacy than his predecessors, as he tends to put into action what he says.

It is the role of public diplomacy, to be an important vehicle to help frame China's worldview and to disseminate its foreign policy abroad, which has developed rapidly since China experienced global criticism during its hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and in the context of the financial crisis. Since then, the public diplomacy instruments at China's disposal have notably grown and expanded. Yet a host of challenges remain, as scholars find that China still adopts a 'speak-to' strategy rather than two-way engagement and there is contrast between official portrayal of China and dissenting voices – which influence the degree to which audiences are willing to receive framed narratives.

The subsequent snapshots seek to unpack more nuanced views towards China in Africa, where perceptions have been relatively positive or mixed. The critiques surveyed have largely taken place under the public diplomacy of Hu's leadership. Rather than emphasising particular public-facing instruments as 'successful' or not, as has been done by scholars before, the subsequent snapshots will mainly demonstrate the third purpose of the study: how China's public diplomacy *adapts* narrative in order to meet its interests in Africa. (Indeed further nuance will also be provided on the other identified objectives.) They will highlight the array of dilemmas China is responding to in Africa – at

the global, continental and bilateral levels; the specific narratives it uses; and the extent these narratives and its public diplomacy evolve along broader recipient determinants affecting China's interests.

## Chapter 4 China's public diplomacy at the global level: The Belt and Road Initiative and Africa

### 4.1 Introduction

As mentioned, one of the main hurdles for China's diplomacy at the global level is alleviating concern over its rapidly rising status, in order to achieve the country's aspiration of becoming a great nation.<sup>30</sup> Yet its normative values are not yet globally accepted and as China learns to engage the world, it needs to socialise others into its worldview. Hence, it supports platforms where global norms and practices are negotiated, and presents its interests through strategic narratives: that is through the use of framing mentioned in Chapter 2 and the instrumental use of history highlighted in Chapter 3. The focus of this chapter, as the first glimpse into China's public diplomacy in Africa, is the exploration of how China goes about achieving support for its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative – rebranded as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2016 – considered its grand vision for trans-regional, global integration.

This relates to the larger research question on how China's public diplomacy influences its ability to achieve its foreign policy aims in Africa (see 1.3). To achieve this, the following will be examined. First, after highlighting the unique attributes of the BRI, the historical narratives used in the initiative will summarised. Second, China's global BRI interests (both practical and normative) are explained, as well as some of the initial responses from other regions involved. With this template in place, the third step is multi-fold. In seeking how China promotes the BRI *in Africa*: (a) the type of narratives used in Africa and whether they relate to the broader BRI narrative; (b) the contemporary linkages between Africa and the BRI; and (c) the determinants affecting China's public diplomacy approach will be examined. By investigating these aspects the study's three main objectives, on how China conceptualises public diplomacy, the extent the Sinocentric world narrative informs its public diplomacy and how it adapts narratives in order to promote its interests in Africa will be explored.

#### 4.1.1 The background and unique attributes of the BRI

The BRI was officially proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, and consists of two proposals. The first was mentioned on 7 September 2013, when Xi (2014) gave a speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan – which symbolically lies on the ancient Silk Road route that linked Asia to Europe. Here, he proposed the building of a new economic belt – inspired by the same historical route that created a 'chapter of friendship that has been passed on to this very day' (Xi, 2014: 316). The second

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<sup>30</sup> Such as becoming a modern, prosperous, harmonious and culturally advanced nation by 2049.

initiative was introduced on 3 October in Jakarta, at the People's Representative Council<sup>31</sup> of Indonesia, where Xi's speech was titled 'Work Together to Build a 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road' (Xi, 2014; Wu, 2016a: V). Interestingly both speeches feature in Xi's 2014 book, under the theme of 'neighbourhood diplomacy'. Of course, the response to and implications of the 2013 speeches have reverberated far beyond China's immediate backyard.

The BRI is considered a new attempt at rebranding China's ambitions and objectives, as well as offering a peaceful image, in order to reinforce that it remains a responsible player in global affairs (Attanyake, 2016). The initiative can then be viewed as a space where China is publicly promoting its interests, engaging its partners and gauging audiences in order to help inform its decisions and future policies. Constructivists would also describe it as an intersubjective space (see also 3.5), where actors deliberate their own interests and even contribute to the ongoing debate regarding China's role in the world. This is because the BRI involves many regions and is still under construction, where new agreements continue to take place. Moreover, China's own identity is fluid. In an article aptly titled 'Learning by Doing ...' Jordan (2015) confirms that observing nations (mainly those in Africa) should not blindly adopt China's policies, because they are not static; rather they should study the 'processes and institutions by which China devises, adapts and evolves those policies'. Indeed, as was highlighted in the public diplomacy discussion in Chapter 2, the nature of diplomacy is itself changing to include a more public component, since the contest of ideas is no longer solely taking place privately but at a dynamic global level. Therefore, the use of change-orientated institutions along with public diplomacy is the best approach for China to engage its partners (that is the African continent), in order find compromise between its interests and image, in a negotiated world.

China's proposition of a new Silk Road is hardly novel – neither is it the first time that a Chinese leader has set out an alternative within or to the established world order (Summers 2016:1638). The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) already suggested a Trans-Asian Railway as early as 1959, although it had been stalled by major conflicts and insurgencies (Lin, 2011: 3). Several sources mention that, besides China, countries and regions (including the US, Russia, Europe, Japan and India) have sought to build their own versions of a Silk Road since the 1990s (Dong, Chen, Zhou & Zhang, 2015: 20). China was already speaking of a 'land bridge' over Eurasia as early as 2004 (Lin, 2011).

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<sup>31</sup> One of two elected national legislative assemblies

Hillary Clinton even referred to a ‘New Silk Road’ during her speech in Chennai, India in 2011, although this was focused on improving Afghanistan’s economy by linking the country to a north-south trade corridor (Fallon, 2015: 140–141). This announcement even stirred Chinese policymakers, who felt deep historical ownership of the Silk Road; one Chinese diplomat even stated (Fallon, 2015: 141): ‘When [the] U.S. initiated this we were devastated. We had long sleepless nights ...’ The US-sponsored initiative had barely taken off, when two years later Xi introduced the BRI, promoting it as a ground-breaking enterprise (Shepard, 2016). What then differentiates this vision from so many others?

First, China has advanced from rhetoric by providing funds and initiating new institutions such as the BRICS NDB (\$50bn), the AIIB (numbers vary between \$30bn to \$100bn) and even a free trade area in the Asia Pacific. It originally pledged \$40bn to the New Silk Road Fund, although this number has increased since (Shambaugh, 2015; Li, 2015a; Chhibber, 2015: 4; Liu, 2016). Another initiative was the launch of the China Ocean Strategic Industry Investment Fund (COSIIF) in Hong Kong, which was established to seek investment opportunities and provide financial services to Chinese firms operating along the Maritime Silk Road (Liu, 2016). COSIIF has two components: one is investing in businesses with profit potential, and the other is promoting the BRI by supporting countries along the routes, mainly through infrastructure (Liu, 2016).

Second, the BRI has impact beyond China’s immediate region and holds the highest level of endorsement, as Xi’s central foreign policy project (Fasslabend, 2015:293; Zhang, 2016: 120). China has already signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with over 30 countries to jointly build the BRI, while another 40 countries expressed interest in joining the initiative (Liu & Dunford, 2016: 3). This interest includes the BRI prioritisation of infrastructure development and connectivity, where the land aspect would link China to Europe, via Central Asia and Russia, while the maritime part would stretch from China and touch the Strait of Malacca to India, the Middle East and East Africa (Chinese American Forum, 2015). Even though coastal cities have always been central to China’s economy, China has never actually declared a national strategy with a maritime component until now (Yoon, 2015: 41–42). Hence, while there remains debate over whether the BRI constitutes a ‘grand strategy’ – as is the case for Yoon (2015) and Sia (2016) but not yet for Godehardt (2016:19) – it remains Xi’s biggest initiative yet. It is linked to other global initiatives (like the AIIB) and replaces the ‘harmonious world’ concept to help achieve the China Dream (Godehardt, 2016: 5-6).

The final unique trait of the BRI – that is integral for this study – is its strong public-facing component. Shambaugh (2015) states that Xi has advanced Hu Jintao’s 2007 ‘publicity blitz’, having

dedicated an entire plenary session (at the 17th Central Committee of the CCP) to building a ‘cultural superpower’; and the creation of initiatives from the ‘Chinese Dream’ to ‘the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road’ are all instances of China seeking to build soft power. The BRI is a fitting instance of how China is seeking to gain support through public diplomacy for a China-led initiative, which is still in flux.

There is contemporary ‘allusion to the ancient trade routes linking China to the Middle East and Europe that were established during the Han dynasty’ (Brugier 2014:1), which raises the question why China has the desire to recreate the ancient route. From the perspective of this study, China makes use of public diplomacy (such as speeches and official documents, events as well as broader framing of narratives) precisely because it is seeking support for the BRI, as it is still underway. Hence, the past creates a ‘natural channel’<sup>32</sup> for relations between such countries today. Aris (2016: 1) states that some sections of the BRI are already planned and under construction while ‘currently most only exist on the drawing board’. This is also echoed by Godehardt (2016: 6) who sees no official map of all the countries involved; rather any country interested can potentially be part of the BRI.

A consequence of the BRI creation has already been the exponential growth in ongoing scholarly and media commentary. This includes questions on the potential impact of the initiative on Europe (Fasslabend, 2015; Aris, 2016; Godehardt, 2016; Johnson, 2016), China’s neighbourhood (Brewster, 2016; Sia, 2016; Sukumar, 2016; Chhibber, 2015), Africa (Tiezzi, 2015; SAIIA, 2015), Australia (Wade, 2016) and even global governance (Chin, 2015). Yet as of 2015 there was still no clear policy response to the BRI by key global players like the US, Russia and EU (Fasslabend, 2015: 293). There are also varied opinions regarding China’s intentions. Some propose that if China’s vision were to come true, the BRI would equate to a ‘21st-century Renaissance’ (Feng, 2016), as China is seeking to challenge the current world order, and its creation of AIIB is indicative of the desire to alter global rules and norms (Shambaugh, 2015; Jash, 2016; Meidan & Patey 2016: 4; Godehardt, 2016: 20), while others see continuity, as China is reproducing capitalist globalisation and even deepening the current order, as demonstrated through its increased UN engagement (Summers, 2016:1628; Swaine, 2015:3). The potential impact on the world cannot be ignored and needs to be explored further.

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<sup>32</sup> Zhang Yanqiu (Deputy Dean of Journalism and the Director of the Africa Communication Research Centre, Communications University of China, Beijing), Skype, 27 March 2017.



China's BRI has successfully driven discourse on the historical route since 2013, yet what remains a mystery is the key determinants it is also subjected to and the processes that it has undergone and is undergoing, in order to advance itself. A primary challenge will be Beijing's ability to communicate the intentions of the BRI, as it largely represents China's 'views of its re-emergence as a regional and global power' (Meidan & Patey, 2016: 4). It is required to manage domestic and external concerns in order to turn them into support, and how it is responding to such concerns is indicative in its changing communication. Linked to the main research question then, is how China has promoted the BRI in order to gain support for its global ambitions – and in turn what the determinants and processes are, as outlined in the case of Africa, that speak to the reality of China's vision as a negotiated one.

## **4.2 Making meaning of the historical Silk Road narrative**

### **4.2.1 Symbolism of the ancient Silk Road**

Records of China's trade with Central and Western Asia date as far back as 2,500 years ago, but they officially took off when the Qin dynasty (221 BCE–207 BCE) reunified the warring states. Thereafter, trade routes were formally established from the Han (then Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming) to Qing dynasties. Although trade waxed and waned, it nevertheless linked major civilisations in Europe, Asia and parts of Africa (Zhang & Buzan, 2012: 20; Liu & Dunford, 2016: 3-4; Cheung & Lee, 2015). Of course the voyages of admiral Zheng He – the famous navigator who commanded fleets of exploration and commerce during the Ming dynasty – also helped project China's power and culture when his fleet engaged 'strategic frontiers', from the Middle East to Africa (Lin, 2011: 2). More practically, maritime routes were linked to the Silk Road, because large quantities of products, such as ceramics, heading for Europe were more difficult to transport over land (Tsao, 2015: 13).

Despite the fact that cultural and trade exchanges took place in Eurasia over such a long span of time, the symbolic representation of the trade network only followed after the coining of the term 'Silk Road(s)' by German geographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen, who organised two expeditions to China around the mid-1800s. The historical maritime routes were only included in the early 1900s, by the French Sinologist Édouard Chavannes (Liu & Dunford, 2016: 4; Fallon, 2015: 141). While the Silk Road has been portrayed and perceived as a largely Chinese product, it is also part of the larger cultural history of Eurasia 'connecting multiple countries/civilisations and facilitating religious, scientific, technological, people-to-people and cultural exchange' (Liu & Dunford, 2016: 4). Cultural

interaction thrived along the trade routes, as highlighted by Tsao (2015: 13), where for instance during the Tang dynasty (618–907), the capital Changan (today's Xi'an) was a metropolis where Japanese, Korean, Malay, Turkish and Iranian travellers interacted closely with Chinese culture. Tsao also highlights the role of the Mongols, led by Genghis Khan, who pioneered (and conquered) the routes from Asia to Europe, and thus reinforced the Silk Road. Of course there are also the romanticised tales of Marco Polo (1254–1324), the Venetian merchant who was one of the first Europeans to travel the Silk Road and stay in China, before returning home via the maritime route, through Sumatra and India (Tsao, 2015: 14).

#### 4.2.2 How the Silk Road was framed in Xi's 2013 speeches

When Xi (2014:315) visited Kazakhstan, he proposed reviving the overland Silk Road for the first time – and drew 'heavily on historical imagery of the 2,000-year-old Silk Road' (Aris 2016:1). For instance, he made mention of the imperial Chinese envoy, Zhang Qian, who was sent to Central Asia on two missions to foster friendship, and Xian, the Chinese composer, who spent time in Almaty, where he created some of his famous works. Xi (2014: 316) further remarked that this long-standing exchange between China and Central Asia:

[D]emonstrate[s] that on the basis of unity, mutual trust, equality, inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutually beneficial cooperation, countries of different races, beliefs and cultural backgrounds are fully capable of sharing peace and development ... we should pass on our friendship from generation to generation.

Evoking this past and emphasising collaboration is directly linked to China's contemporary interests in the Silk Road, as Xi (2014: 316–318) later stipulated the need to increase bilateral relations and engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO); facilitate cross-border transport infrastructure; promote 'unimpeded' trade; enhance monetary circulation and lastly, promote friendly exchanges and understanding between people. The substance of this speech was reiterated by China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, when he gave a summary of Xi's September 2013 trip to four Central Asian states and his attendance at the SCO Summit in Bishkek (China, 2013).

During Xi's Indonesia visit the same year, he appealed for the building of the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road. Curiously, there are two versions of Xi's speech, dated 2 and 3 October 2013, although it is not verified if he made two separate addresses (only the second speech is featured in Xi's book). Nevertheless, they affirm the historical framing of China's current interests. The former address affirms that Xi (2013) drew on the history of the Han dynasty, as well as the voyages of Admiral Zheng He, more specifically:

[He] made seven voyages to the Western Seas. He stopped over the Indonesian archipelago in each of his voyages and toured Java, Sumatra and Kalimantan. His visits left nice stories of friendly exchanges between the Chinese and Indonesian peoples, many of which are still widely told today.

Indeed, cordial relations were further evoked when Xi (2013) described the ocean as ‘the bond of friendship connecting the two peoples’. He made mention of the Chinese novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* that gave vivid accounts of treasures from Java, and finally he recalled the close diplomatic relations that China and Indonesia have shared, drawing on their jointly initiated Bandung Spirit at the 1955 Bandung Conference (along with other African and Asian countries). The mentioning of collaboration on the maritime route only featured in the latter half of his speech, where Xi discussed China’s broader relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), admitting that ‘China places great importance on Indonesia’s status and influence in ASEAN’. He proposed upgrading the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area; China’s initial plan to establish the AIIB (which he remarked would prioritise ASEAN needs); collaboration in ‘regional peace and stability’ issues and make use of the China–ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund (created by Beijing) in order to jointly build the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road. Xi also explicitly mentioned the need to encourage further friendly exchanges between youth, think tanks, parliament and civil organisations to generate support for ASEAN-China relations, highlighting that China cannot achieve this dream alone.

However, the speech dated 3 October 2013 made at the Indonesian People’s Representative Council is recorded as the official introduction of the building the Maritime Silk Road with ASEAN (Xi, 2014: 320–324; Wu, 2016a: V). It was specifically directed at ASEAN countries and rather than provide historical narrative, reiterated the five steps, mentioned the day before, to achieve the BRI. The following principles were stressed: build trust and neighbourly ties; work for mutually beneficial cooperation; stand together and assist each other (as both sides have historically ‘stood together’); enhance understanding and friendship (with the emphasis on people exchanges); and remain open and inclusive with respect to a diversified region (Xi, 2014).

The 2013 speeches were further reinforced by other officials, such as Foreign Minister Wang, who during his review of China’s diplomacy in December 2013, stated that ‘we will vigorously promote the development of the [BRI] ... and endeavour to achieve an early harvest on those initiatives’ (China, 2013a). By 2014 in a report on government work, China’s Premier Le Keqiang called for the ‘intensification of the planning and building’ of the initiative, which was followed by the signing of an MOU to establish the AIIB by 21 Asian countries and the announcement of the Silk Road Fund in

late October 2014 (Jash, 2016). Hence, a range of public official pronouncements laid a foundational narrative for the new initiative. The selection and emphasis of specific narratives reflect the use of framing (mentioned in Chapter 2 section 2.4.5.4) – or what Zhao describes as instrumental use of the past (Chapter 3 section 3.3.2), which helps construct a social reality in order to achieve particular interests.

#### 4.2.3 Building the BRI through public diplomacy

The above speeches have evoked the past to frame current interests, and are thus public diplomacy instruments in themselves. The Silk Road is depicted as a historical cultural heritage and symbol of communication and cooperation between the East and West (Issahaq, 2016). In fact the 2,000-year history and cordial relations narrative, as well as the BRI, have since been continually repeated at most of China's foreign policy meetings (Godehardt, 2016: 18; Tiezzi, 2016). This is even evidenced in Xi's (2014: 344–352) speech titled 'Promote the Silk Road Spirit' in China–Arab cooperation during June 2014, where he again drew on the narrative of the ancient route and 'maritime Spice Route'. He also announced that 2014–2015 would be the Year of China–Arab Friendship, where a series of friendly exchange events would take place. Zhang Dejiang (Zhang, 2016a), chairman of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress, also gave a keynote speech at a Belt and Road Summit in Hong Kong (May 2016), where he also mentioned China's imperial history and prosperity. These remarks led several scholars to believe that China is evoking its Sinocentric past and is seeking to resurrect its imperial identity as the Middle Kingdom, the centre of trade, commerce and civilisation – specifically reflected during the Han dynasty, when Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East were its primary focus (Pollock, 2015; Lin, 2011: 2 & 16; Zhang, 2016: 121; Mondejar, 2015). Others see historical narrative used as an instrument to simply rewrite the current geopolitical landscape (Fallon, 2015: 140).

Still, using historical narrative is arguably nothing novel. Greater research, writing and deployment of admiral Zheng He was already taking place from 2005, when China commemorated the 600th year of the admiral's voyage (Lin, 2011: 11–13). The image of China as a friendly, 'strong, seafaring nation', which would continue down this path, was apparent during the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony (Holmes, 2011). So while China adopts a range of maritime tools – from diplomacy to the use of military – Chinese diplomats tend to favour rallying figures like admiral Zheng as part of a 'charm offensive' (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008: 373; Holmes, 2011). This narrative has become a 'model for what China would do with global power-projection' (Ford, 2015:1043) and is 'a useful propaganda weapon in advancing maritime interests through soft power'

(Yoon, 2015: 53). Reinforcing this narrative, China even constructed a hospital ship known as the Peace Ark (*Dashandao*), which has since 2007 been providing medical aid and training to developing countries, particularly to East African nations in 2010 and 2011 (Zandari, 2016: 438). Conversely, the building of such narratives and activities has also set a higher benchmark for China, which others are watching closely (Holmes, 2011).

In accordance with the notion that the BRI is not yet fully envisaged, Godehardt (2016:18) observes that the initiative was initially ‘very vague in content’ and eventually grew into the primary representation for China’s foreign policy engagements. In fact, the BRI was labelled China’s main diplomatic focus for 2015 (Fallon 2015:141). Moreover, the initiative became increasingly framed as flexible, inclusive and beneficial for all countries around the world (Godehardt, 2016: 18; Wu, 2016a: vii). Seeking support for the BRI and supplying foundational principles in 2013, a more extensive document titled *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* (China, 2015), prepared by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce, was published.

In terms of content, the vision document adopts the same narrative of the past, as an indication of relations between great civilisations. However, it includes alignment with the UN charter – as well as harmony and cooperation – as part of its core principles, suggesting that China is not only seeking to provide a global alternative but also intends to work within current structures. Moreover, the five main cooperation priorities under the BRI are: policy coordination (which includes coordinating development strategies and large-scale projects); enhancing investment and trade as an important task of the initiative; financial integration (this includes bilateral currency swaps and further development of the BRICS bank and AIIB); infrastructure construction (that includes ports, railways and highways); and finally, increasing people-to-people links (including the use of cultural, party, think tank and academic exchanges, scholarships, tourism, information sharing, science and technology cooperation and practical cooperation, like skills development) (China 2015; Zhang 2016b). Hence, besides infrastructure, the BRI proposes broader socio-economic cooperation between countries (Liu & Dunford, 2016: 335).

This initiative is managed under the chairmanship of the Vice-Premier,<sup>33</sup> Zhang Gaoli (since 2013); while the departments which published the white paper have been delegated to deliver the initiative, with the NDRC as the coordinator (China–Britain Business Council, 2015:7; Li 2015:1). Still, it

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<sup>33</sup> A Premier is also referred to as the Prime Minister.

remains unclear which ministry leads the BRI, as the paper reads as a list of ambitions that includes a range of provinces and actors (Meidan & Patey, 2016: 3). Additionally it is unclear how China will implement official BRI projects through partnerships and whether partners should engage it bilaterally or through regional bodies (Brugier, 2014: 2).

Interestingly during the same month that the vision document was published, the Year of China-ASEAN Maritime Co-operation was launched in March 2015 in Thailand, where the new maritime route was pronounced as a natural continuation of its ancient counterpart (Chin, 2015a). Xi also addressed Asian nations at the Boao Forum, where he gave further justification for the BRI, referencing the past as a foundation for contemporary cooperation in Asia (SAIIA 2015; China, 2015b). For instance, he stated:

... all men under heaven are brothers.

... history has taught us that no country who tried to achieve its goal with force ever succeeded.

... we must see the whole picture, follow the trend of our times and jointly build a regional order that is more favourable to Asia and the world.

The 'Belt and Road' initiative is not meant as rhetoric. It represents real work that could be seen and felt to bring real benefits to countries in the region.

The 2015 white paper and parallel speech highlights China's acknowledgement that it cannot build the BRI alone – this is specifically reflected in statements like '[people bonds] provide the public support for implementing the initiative' and that the BRI should be 'jointly built through consultation' (China, 2015). It is also off this basis that there are objections towards labelling the BRI as a modern Marshall Plan – that it does not have political aspirations and is an inclusive and multi-layered platform (Zhang, 2016b: 123). Hence the vision document and speeches, which include the Silk Road narrative, are used as a 'soft' basis for China's cooperation with the world (Liu and Dunford 2016:4) – also described as China's 'new olive branch' (Gong 2014:235). The emphasis on 'people to people connectivity, cultural exchange and learning from each other's development experience' thus assuages fears of China's rise (Chhibber, 2015: 5). It is also noted that when speeches are directed at specific nations and regions, officials tend to draw on uniquely friendly aspects of historical ties. They promote the importance of respecting different development paths, as well as seek to link the Chinese Dream to the desires of other nations. In this way, China is portraying itself as a responsible global player (Swaine. 2015: 10; Dong et al., 2015: 20; Chin, 2015: 221; Summers 2016:1637). Hence, an important aspect of the 2015 vision document is the

building of a network of different partnerships, which requires backing from China's counterparts (Zhang, 2016: 123).

China has even put its people-to-people emphasis into action. The official Chinese news agency, *Xinhua* – a public diplomacy instrument, which happened to also publish the vision document online (Summers, 2016: 1630), has created a BRI website<sup>34</sup> where it highlights facts, interviews, economic cooperation and cultural exchanges. Regarding the last aspect, the website has a comprehensive list of public diplomacy initiatives related to the Silk Road such as a scholarship for students along the Silk Road, an International Cultural Expo and an exhibition fair along the Silk Road that started in Kyrgyzstan. Good news stories, which are not specifically related to the ancient Silk Road, are also included in this list, such as the article titled 'Along Belt & Road Feature: Learning Mandarin more than personal interest in South Africa' as well as endorsements 'Nobel laureate: cultural exchanges should be part of "Belt and Road"'. Even China's provincial governments, banks, CIs and national universities are now considered actors in the BRI, as most of their external activities are regarded as part of it (Godehardt, 2016: 20). There is even bilateral promotion of the initiative, as reflected by the Pakistan–China Institute, which launched the *Nihao-Salam* (2016) public diplomacy e-magazine, to promote the mutual friendship and publish articles like 'One Belt One Road initiative a national consensus in Pakistan'.

Naturally, the very idea of a new creative development scheme that includes Chinese trade, investment and loans is itself attractive for certain countries and regions, together with the fact that China is able to back its soft power ventures and BRI with serious funds (Shambaugh, 2015). Hence, a range of instruments has been used to promote the BRI, such as public speeches and visits, a white paper, media and people exchanges. This is recognition that communicating and promoting the BRI provides China the opportunity to expand its influence and showcase 'Beijing's softer side', in contrast to its military expansion in Asia and abroad (Jash, 2016). In any case, most of China's new and established bilateral, regional and multilateral relations and financial mechanisms are increasingly framed as part of the BRI, and successful projects are even said to be folded into it, hence ensuring it does not fail (Godehardt, 2016: 21; Fallon, 2015: 143).

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<sup>34</sup> The website can be found at this link: 'Belt and Road Initiative', <http://www.xinhuanet.com/silkroad/english/index.htm>.

#### 4.2.4 Why is China using the BRI initiative?

Chinese policymakers have explicitly mentioned that creating an open global economy through increased connectivity, integration and economic development is an important solution to widespread development and the underpinning of the BRI. More specifically, the overland route includes high-speed rail (while the ocean aspect is linked via ports), financial cooperation, development and the transport of energy, oil, gas pipelines, electric grids, cross-border telecommunication cables and green energy (such as solar power and wind power) (Tsao, 2015: 11; Zhang, 2016: 124). As outlined in Chapter 3, Xi has formulated new concepts, just like his predecessors, but what sets him apart is the fact that he firmly sets out do what he pronounces, emphasising results-orientated cooperation (China, 2015: 219). By February 2016 the first cargo train (carrying 32 containers) left from China for Iran's capital, Tehran; and in August 2016, a cargo train left Nantong, China, for Hairatan in Afghanistan, marking a milestone towards China's aspiration to link Chinese cities to Eurasia (Banchiri, 2016; Aneja, 2016; Shepard, 2016).

Regarding the BRI, there are four specific economic objectives for China (although they are not always explicitly stated) and are part of its new round of opening up (Zhang, 2016: 124; Li, 2016: 4). First is China's interest in using its excess industrial production capacity (namely steel, cement, glass, ships, iron and heavy equipment) abroad; this is in light of its slowing economy and seeking to rebalance itself from an investment-led growth model (Chhibber, 2015: 7; Zhang, 2016: 124; Li, 2016: 4). Second is the seeking of new markets for its goods and energy supplies (Aris, 2016: 3). Third is the strategic use of its foreign-exchange reserves (from which much of the BRI's \$40bn will be drawn), by investing in infrastructure projects abroad (Zhang, 2016: 124; Wilson, 2016). Fourth is the use of economic development to enhance national security.

Much of the last aspect links to developments in Central Asia, especially states that border Western China, such as the autonomous Xinjiang province (which has already been a notable focus since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992 and the SCO since 2001) (Brugier, 2014: 2; Fallon, 2015: 144). China is also seeking stability by emphasising economic development, like creating export hubs to receive Chinese goods and investment in infrastructure, as a means to address extreme separatism and terrorism and thus stabilise the region (Brugier, 2014: 2–3). These areas also link to China's domestic interests of maintaining stability through continued growth and economic development (Aris 2016: 3).



There is, however, another implicit interpretation of the BRI, the geopolitical component, as China's building of partnerships and economic cooperation has potential to turn into political influence (Summers, 2016: 1628; Li, 2015: 1; Zhang, 2016: 122; Fallon, 2015: 142). This takes place in a context where China shifts from its low-profile stance to becoming more assertive. An instance of both an economic and geopolitical issue is the seeking of safe energy supply lines, beyond Russia, which are increasingly dependent on sea routes across the Indian Ocean and South China Sea (Brugier, 2014: 3; Len 2015; Erickson & Strange, 2015: 74). Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasian group, acknowledges that opening new supply chains would create further implications, as China will likely be eager to protect them (World Economic Forum, 2016). Moreover, while the Chinese leadership is 'still chewing on the bitter memories' of the imperial era, China is today in a well-placed economic position to take charge and overcome its previous neglect of the seas (Yoon, 2015: 42). It is for this reason that concerns are also raised about China's military expansion. In fact, while it understands the world is interdependent, particularly in the economic sense, this strategy may not hold for traditional security issues, like maritime territorial claims, where China appears to take a zero-sum approach (Chin, 2015:219).

It has indeed become more assertive and concerns are raised about its real intentions. For instance Xi's report during the 12th National People's Congress (2013) made reference to China as a 'true maritime power' and this focused on defence and military modernisation – yet the year prior, the emphasis was on the development of the marine economy (Zhu, 2014; Yoon, 2015: 43). There are also allegations that China is seeking a 'string of pearls' strategy, based on the building of Chinese naval bases across the Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2016: 9). This gives rise to growing alarm among other countries, to the extent that the BRI can also be considered a counter-narrative.

The geopolitical aspect needs to be viewed beyond the BRI initiative as well. For instance, in 2008 China already started using anti-piracy escorts in the Gulf of Aden (Erickson & Strange, 2015: 72) and in 2010 admiral Zhang Huachen declared that China would migrate from coastal defence to far sea defence, as the country's economic interests and sea lanes expanded (Economy, 2010). The vision of a global military role was also advanced in the 2015 white paper titled 'China's Military Strategy', where 'active defense' and closer international security cooperation was emphasised (China, 2015c). Chin (2015: 221) even finds that China was already increasing its engagements in Central and West Asia, over the last two decades – but it was the Obama administration's 2011 'pivot' to Asia that sparked Beijing to launch its own initiatives. Of course, the BRI is also considered a response to the agreements that China had been previously left out of, such as the

Trans-Pacific Partnership countries, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the EU-Japan agreements (Cheung & Lee, 2015; Fasslabend, 2015: 301; Chhibber, 2015: 7).

There also appears to be a larger global interest at play here. The parallel setting up of the AIIB, headquartered in Beijing, is considered a mark of an eastward shift in global influence and power (Zhang, 2016: 126; Gu, 2015; Pollock, 2015). While China's inroads into bigger and richer – but cash strapped – European nations, holds both economic and diplomatic significance, as it accumulates political goodwill (Johnson, 2016; Fasslabend, 2015: 299). This suggests that China's interests extend beyond accessing raw materials and exporting goods and labour, including a more pronounced international role, such as agenda setting in the economic space (Gu, 2015: 2; Zhang, 2016: 125). Francis Fukuyama even observes that the advent of the BRI has created a contest of development models and a new phase in globalisation (Liu & Dunford, 2016: 325).

So the importance of the BRI for China lies in the fact that it links its domestic, regional and global affairs, ensuring domestic economic growth,<sup>35</sup> broader development and positioning China as a major global player (Aris, 2016: 1; Wu, 2016a: v).

#### 4.2.5 The BRI: preliminary processes and determinants

As a rising power, China is required to win support and partners for the still-developing BRI, since such a grand vision cannot exist on Chinese financing and construction alone (Aris, 2016: 2). It is also subject to a range of factors that could influence the initiative's very direction. Key selected factors include domestic and regional impacts and the challenge of varying perspectives towards history and current issues, as well as the very process of building the BRI through consensus.

As has been reflected in the previous chapter, China's external engagements hold a strong *domestic element*. In the instance of its actions *vis-à-vis* the oceans, the dissonance between China's emphasis as a benevolent power and its military expansion is partly explained as a result of the jostling at the domestic level; another view is that China's ambitious maritime strategies is an attempt to legitimise party rule at home (Holmes, 2011; Yoon, 2015: 46). There is also the notion that the BRI revives China's interest (since the 1980s) in developing its western region, through linkages with its neighbours, and that this only became more pronounced under China's 12th five year programme (2011–2015), an important economic and social policy document (Summers 2016:1632). At the same time domestic developments can also affect the BRI, since it is being driven at a time when Chinese

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<sup>35</sup> This point was further emphasised during discussions with the Guangdong Research Institute for International Strategies from China, Johannesburg, South Africa, 17 June 2014.

firms are becoming more risk averse, due to Xi's anti-corruption drive (including the stricter assessment of expenditure and travel) and the slowing domestic economy, where China is seeking to migrate its economy from being manufacturing led to being consumer driven (Meidan & Patey, 2016: 3).

There is also the issue of domestic climates in other countries involved in the BRI and beyond. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor has almost become the poster child of the initiative and both countries share close strategic relations (Zhang, 2016b). Yet the project faces obstacles. For example, there was domestic opposition to the project, internal disagreement on the allocation of investments in Pakistan and the possibility of security threats from groups like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and the Pakistani Taliban (Zhang, 2016b). Besides the inherent socio-political risks along the route, there are also regional disputes and financial and legal complexities that could impede progress (China–Britain Business Council, 2015:5; Zhang, 2016b). Likewise Sia (2016) raises three possible areas that ASEAN-China cooperation on the BRI will face: the extent to which the initiative will challenge ASEAN's own master plan on connectivity (its own enterprise to link the region); the socio-economic impact of Chinese labour working on BRI projects in the region (where there are already historical tensions); and lastly, the geopolitical challenges of ASEAN's balancing between the presence of China, India, the US and Russia.

China clearly emphasises its historical altruism in its speeches, as an indication of how it will engage in the future. Still there are also dissenting voices to this narrative – or *historical discord*. Summers (2016: 1631) affirms that there is something almost Sinocentric in China's vision document, by linking itself to various regions of the world and increasingly investing in its neighbourhood; and while China drives the BRI, the historical Silk Road was actually built by bottom-up trade activities, by nations besides itself (Zhang, 2016b).

Sen's (2014) article 'Silk Road Diplomacy – Twists, Turns and Distorted History' suggests that the popularisation of Zheng He's (1405–1433) expeditions as peaceful and based on friendship is problematic. This is reiterated by Ford (2015: 1043) and Lin (2011: 12), as he was also sent to 'spread a Sinocentric world order' and military force was adopted in places like Indonesia, Malaysia and India, in order to install friendly rulers (Zheng even brought prisoners back to the Ming capital, Nanjing). Similarly, China's incremental expansion of its strategic front via the BRI is not only described through its own narrative. Its investment in industrial infrastructure has also been likened to imperial Japan's 1930 Manchukuo policy – especially the development of infrastructure for

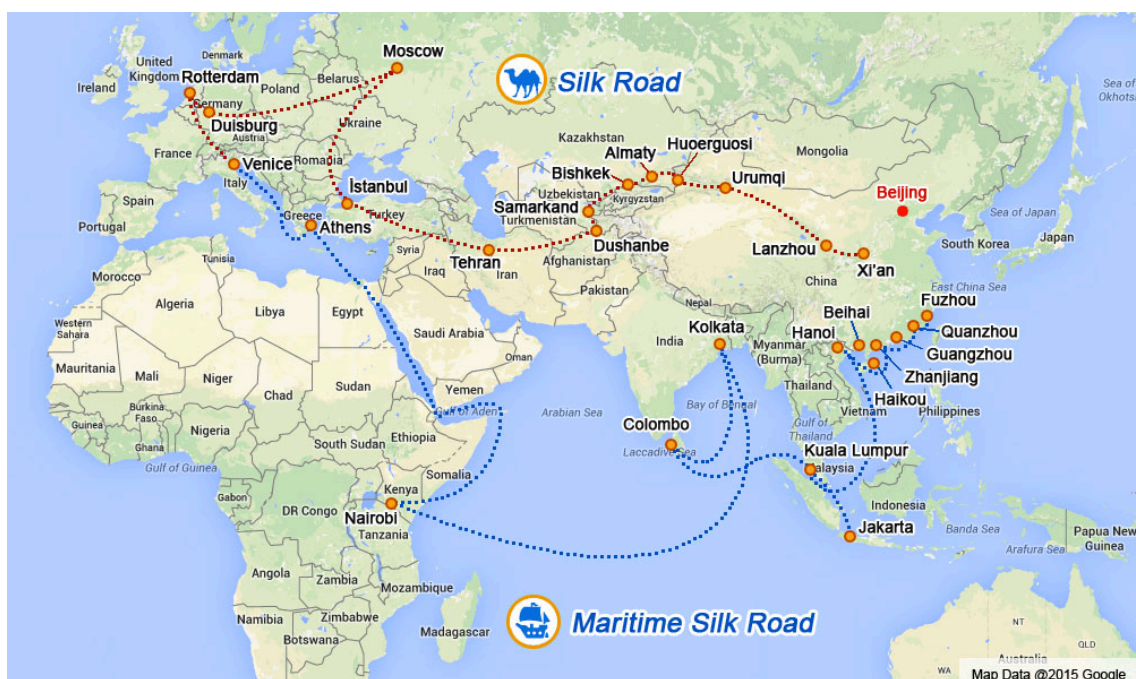
resources; military intervention to protect economic interests; and social-political absorption via a puppet government (Lin, 2011: 14).

Emphasising the Silk Road history in relation to the BRI, also runs the risk of disregarding the narratives of other historical routes, such as India's version of a Cotton Route (existing around the 10th century) and the Incense Route, which carried frankincense and myrrh from the Yemen and Oman to the Mediterranean, between the third century BC and the second century AD (Alden & Sidiropoulos, 2015: 5; UNESCO, 2015; Fallon, 2-15: 145). The historical Maritime Silk Road is also referred to by some as the Spice Route, a sea route that linked east to west, prompting various navigation inventions (Keay, 2007).

This is not to say that practical interests are trumped by history. China is also succeeding in building partnerships and has attracted investment, as reflected by the Singapore state-owned development board's agreement to partner with China Construction Bank to finance approximately \$22bn in BRI projects (Wilson, 2016). Colquhoun (2015) adds that the historical closure of routes along the Silk Road is unlikely in a globalised world; and the broadening support for the AIIB suggests possible success. The EU also published a joint communication in June 2016, to indicate their new strategy towards China that includes 'infrastructure, trading, digital and people-to-people connectivity between Europe and China based on an open rules-based platform with benefits for all the countries along the proposed routes' (European Commission, 2016). This suggests warming up to the BRI; however, there is not yet any EU coordination in the AIIB but rather the joining of individual countries such as the UK, France, Italy and Germany (Fallon, 2015: 146; Sukumar, 2016).

There are of course conflicting contemporary interests, as reflected by India who has joined the BRICS and AIIB but remains cautious over China's growing links with Pakistan (Chhibber, 2015: 2). China also faces disagreements with other claimants of the East and South China Seas, such as ASEAN and Japan (Yoon, 2015: 45 & 57). During May 2014, China's National Offshore Oil Corporation unilaterally moved an oil-drilling rig to the Vietnamese economic zone, planning to put it into operation, despite the widespread rioting in Vietnam that targeted Chinese-owned factories (Yoon, 2015: 57). Therefore, China's assertive stance on maritime issues can damage its image and how the BRI is received. At the same time, China's extending economic influence also subjects itself to more geopolitical and security challenges (Meidan & Patey, 2016: 4; Dong et al., 2015: 3; Zandari, 2016: 441).

The BRI is also a result of *process*. China is explicitly aware that it needs to build further consensus and support, which explains why there is yet to be a clearly defined map of the BRI. Fasslabend (2015: 295) does point to the 2015 Xinhua BRI map where the overland Silk Road starts in Xi'an (Shaanxi province) and moves west towards Xinjiang province, through Central Asia and Europe and finally ends in Italy (Venice). The maritime route starts in Quanzhou (Fujian province) and passes the ports of Guangzhou, Behai and Haikou until it reaches Vietnam (Hanoi). From the South China Sea, it passes the Malacca Strait all the way to Bangladesh. It then crosses the Indian Ocean, reaches Kenya (Nairobi) and then proceeds up the Horn of Africa and through the Suez Canal to reach the Mediterranean Sea, where it again ends in Venice.



**Figure 4.1: Xinhua Map of the Belt and Road Initiative**

Source: Xinhua News agency, Chronology of China's Belt and Road Initiative, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-06/24/c\\_135464233.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-06/24/c_135464233.htm), accessed 28 October 2016.

Despite Xinhua's concise map, Tsao (2015: 12) describes three routes to the land component: the Northern route (Beijing–Russia–Germany), the Middle Route (Beijing–Xi'an–Urumqi–Kazakhstan–Hungary–Paris) and a Southern route (Beijing–Kashi–Pakistan–Iran–Iraq–Turkey–Italy–Spain). The maritime component is made of two routes: South China ports linking to the Indian Ocean, Europe and Africa; and South China ports to the South Pacific. These descriptions show disparities about what the exact overland and maritime routes are. Summers (2016: 1631) even adds that the vision document does not actually include a map – instead the boundaries in the instance of Central Asia,

are broadly described along economic corridors; while other territories are even less specific and are described by region or continent.

The BRI should therefore not be viewed as fixed routes or participating partners; instead the routes are organising notions around which partnerships and cooperation could be orientated (Aris, 2016: 2). It is thus described as an omnibus, dependent on reciprocal engagement, rather than a static notion (Summers, 2016: 1639). This also explains why the initiative's name was changed from 'OBOR' to 'BRI' in 2016, since China felt the original term became misinterpreted as 'one' main overland and 'one' main ocean route (Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2016). Of course, China's flexible approach to policymaking – and the gradual formulation of the BRI – has also been met with ambivalence, due to the perception of the lack of information on, and true intentions of, the initiative (Li, 2016: 4).

Perhaps the level of discourse that the BRI has already inspired since its inception best reflects its relative success in building itself through process. A range of reports and academic articles related to the theme has been published since its establishment (even informing this chapter). On China's part, it is also actively seeking discourse on the BRI, as part of its emphasis on cooperation – for instance, it labels the Belt and Road as an 'initiative' rather than a 'strategy' (Tiezzi, Olander & Van Staden, 2016). It has also encouraged political institutions, provincial governments, think tanks, business and scholars to 'fill in the blanks' – or to add content to its aspirations and ideas (Aris, 2016: 2; Godehardt, 2016: 18). China also chose Hong Kong as the host of the 2016 Belt and Road Summit, signifying its important role in the BRI, which was also reinforced in China's 13th Five Year Plan (Zhang, 2016a). Of course, the proposal to include Hong Kong has been met with both optimistic and sceptical views (Ng, 2016; Wong, 2016).

Likewise, China is using events to solicit views and encourage support for the BRI. The *People's Daily*, China's largest newspaper, hosted a Media Cooperation Forum on the BRI in July 2016. This was an international platform, with the attendance of foreign media organisations (over 200 participants from more than 100 countries), which has convened since 2014. President Xi even sent a congratulatory message appealing to the media to play a more positive role in the BRI (Issahaq, 2016; Nihao-Salam, 2016). Similarly one of the main themes at the 2016 Boao Forum was the Maritime Silk Road (apart from tourism, new media, climate change and other topics) (Bwambale, 2016). The vision document even explicitly mentions the constructive role that forums and exhibitions can play, reiterating that the building of the BRI is a process and compromise, where China has laid the foundations.

Feng (2016) believes that increased interaction around the BRI is positive, for both China and the world, especially if they learn from the ancient Silk Road, which grew organically and was not driven by any one nation. Past civilisational contact forced China to learn and understand other cultures instead of remaining inward-looking; if this is revived, along with the success of the BRI, ‘it will undoubtedly constitute a major transformation of the Chinese mind-set, which is not only good for China, but for all humanity’ (Feng, 2016). Hence the BRI could become what constructivists view as a ‘socially constructed reality’ (see 2.2.2), as a result of the interaction between actors – who in turn approach each other and objects according to the meanings they hold for themselves. The BRI is thus not just a spatial concept, as it lays the foundations for negotiation and discourse on a further globalised China (Liu & Dunford, 2016: 336).

### **4.3 Africa and the BRI**

As China seeks to shape the choices and views of others through the BRI, wider forces are also shaping it. Alden and Alves (2016) agree that China holds a large amount of structural power in the regional forums it has initiated (like the Boao Forum) – but it is also limited, because such structures provide ongoing two-way socialisation between members, bringing them ‘in line’ with one another’s interests. Similarly, while the BRI is driving the connective infrastructure and providing start-up capital, the conceptual aspects and future of the initiative do not solely rest in its hands. China’s relations with Africa exemplify this.

When *China Daily* featured the BRI in a May 2015 edition, the cover story explicitly acknowledged that Africa’s link to the initiative remained a question mark (Catanzaro, Ren, Chen & Bu, 2015: 6). A 2015 event’s discussions on the initiative’s link with Africa reflected similar uncertainty, even noting its possible exclusion, since the continent only accounted for 4% of China’s global trade, and the BRI seemed to be based on historically created projects.<sup>36</sup> The information at the time also indicated that the continent hardly featured – with exception of Kenya, which was linked via the ocean route in the Xinhua map, even though it was not directly involved in the ancient Silk Road (Wekesa, 2015: 153).

Instead, when Xi visited Uzbekistan in June 2016, he maintained that Central Asia was the gateway of the ancient Silk Road and maintained that it remained a key cooperative region (China, 2016a). Like Africa, selected Central Asian countries are well endowed with resources like oil, gas, coal,

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<sup>36</sup> At the ‘Maritime Silk Road and cross-cultural communications’, seminar, 23 March 2015, The Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa

gold, copper, uranium and agricultural land (Colquhoun, 2015). Yet unlike Africa, China committed the AIIB to specifically respond to the Asia aspect of the initiative (Wekesa, 2015: 156). It is also true that Xi places unprecedented emphasis on reassuring China's neighbours of its intentions through concrete initiatives that will help stimulate development (Swaine, 2015: 6). The level of detail in Section VI of the 2015 vision document suggests a very strong sub-national regional dimension to the BRI (Summers 2015:1636). Others indicate the linking of China to Europe, through the land bridge and already completed projects, like the Chongqing-Duisburg railway line, as another much-emphasised element (Aris, 2016: 4).

Yet China is also making headway in regions not physically linked to the BRI. In 2016, President Xi pledged \$250bn to South America over the next 10 years, to include a high-speed railway across the Brazilian rain forest and the Andean Mountains, and a \$50bn canal through Nicaragua, which could rival the Panama Canal (Wilson, 2016). While there is much BRI emphasis, Xi has also established various partnerships with major countries all over the world and has elevated China's partnership diplomacy with developing countries and regional organisations, more so than his predecessors (Zhang, 2016: 121).

The question then is how does Africa relate to the BRI? While it has not featured much in original proposals, has China adapted the initiative over time, as a result of two-way socialisation? In short, the Africa factor has indeed altered China's vision to an extent, causing it to pursue synergies between the BRI and its engagement with Africa.

#### 4.3.1 China–Africa: inferring historical narrative in contemporary relations

While Africa is not formally linked to the historical route, China has been promoting its relations with Africa through particular narratives that predate and support the BRI. An example of a link between China's imperial past and Africa is the narrative of Zheng He. Historical accounts mention that about 300 Chinese ships were docked in East Africa (particularly Somalia and Kenya) in 1418 (Wekesa, 2015: 146). The historical contact between China and East Africa even inspired the search for artefacts and evidence to support this link. In 2010 Chinese archaeologists, led by Professor Qin Dashu from Peking University, arrived in the Kenyan towns of Lamu and Malindi, in search of a shipwreck that would signify China–Africa commercial links during the 15th century. A Chinese coin from this era was later discovered in the small Mambrui village (North of Malindi) (Rice, 2010; Su, 2010). Chinese authorities even ran DNA tests on the local villagers who claimed to have Chinese ancestry (Su, 2010).



These linkages have provided a power narrative or ‘soft power capital’ for China’s engagement in Africa – that its contact with East Africa predates the Portuguese by six centuries and symbolises that trade links were favoured over conflict (Wekesa, 2013; Lin, 2011:12). This history has been promoted in the media, even before the excavations took place, as indicated by a detailed 1999 *New York Times Magazine* article titled ‘1492: The Prequel’ – the year marking Columbus’ expedition to America (Kristof, 1999). The Chinese media have also reported this story. An example is a *China Daily* article that featured a young Kenyan, Mwamaka Sharifu, who is reportedly a descendant of Zheng He’s fleet and had taken up a scholarship in China to study Chinese medicine (*China Daily*, 2005). The expeditions remain a reported topic, as reflected by Xinhua’s 2015 story, which was re-featured by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China, 2015d), promoting the long-standing links, and a second phase of excavations of the shipwreck that would be followed with a public gallery. These reports reinforce the narrative of China’s benevolent history with Africa.

However, there has also been scepticism over the narrative, with local claims that DNA test results, linking Kenyans to China, have never been made available (York, 2011). Nevertheless these discoveries have raised much discussion, even inspiring the ‘Exploring China’s Ancient Links to Africa World Conference’ held in Ethiopia, where archaeologists debated the historical evidence of China’s cultural and commercial links with Africa (Abraham, 2015).

Invocations of the past are also regular features in China’s Africa diplomacy, as indication of the consistency in ties – and not actually to conjure a Sinocentric narrative (Alden & Alves, 2008). The Zheng He experience and the long-standing cooperation between China and Africa was noted in (but not limited to) a speech by Ambassador Liu Guijin (2004), at the Institute of Security Studies in South Africa. Similarly in 2010, at the reception of the Peace Ark on Kenyan shores, Chinese ambassador Liu Guangyuan linked the medical ship to Zheng He’s voyages, which he labelled as ‘Giraffe Diplomacy’ (one of the species that the admiral took home to China) (Wekesa, 2015: 149). Moreover, the former Chinese ambassador, Tian Xuejin (2012), stated in a speech at the South Africa Institute of International Affairs in 2012:

The China–Africa relationship is a centuries-old journey ... Chinese navigator Zheng He of the 15th century led fleets to the eastern coast of Africa, visiting places [that are] today Somalia, Kenya and Mozambique. Instead of establishing colonies or engaging in slave trade like western colonists of the time, Zheng He traded goods with local people and introduced the Chinese culture.

#### 4.3.2 China–Africa contemporary linkages to the BRI

China’s east coast has since the reform period remained the hub where its political, cultural, economic and military power is transmitted to its neighbourhood and even further afield to places like Africa. However, it is only recently that it has become economically viable to pay more attention to the oceans, opening a maritime component to China’s national strategy (Yoon, 2015: 42).

Some observers believe that Africa could eventually play an integral role in the BRI. Valentine (2016) raises the possibility of a future railway link between Yemen and Djibouti, which would bring Central Asia and Africa into closer proximity. Eyler (2014) sees the continent as part of a larger trade network that the initiative may facilitate. For instance, in 2014, Chinese and Thai officials agreed to create investment vehicles that would develop 12 strategic ports to distribute cargo along the Maritime Silk Road; and seven of these strategic ports are based in African states: Tunisia, Djibouti, Tanzania, Mozambique, Gabon, Ghana and Senegal (with the West African ports connecting as far as Latin American ports) (Eyler, 2014). However, this network of trade requires the cooperation of Southeast Asia. China has also enjoyed a trade surplus with Africa and so the new trading network would require South Asian products (such as food exports) to be traded with Africa, in order to rebalance the trade (Eyler, 2014).

China has also, since 2000, participated in large infrastructure projects in Africa, such as the AU headquarters (Du Plessis, 2016:2). More specifically the BRI’s current emphasis is on transport infrastructure projects, as reflected by the AIIB – and similar infrastructure emphasis is taking place in Africa, progressing beyond Xinhua’s original link to Kenya (Tiezzi, 2015). Table 4.1 represents selected examples of infrastructure projects that were announced between 2014 and 2016.

**Table 4.1: Selected China–Africa transport infrastructure projects underway, 2014-2016**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Country / level</b>	<b>Project description</b>	<b>Update/ foreseeable factors</b>
2014 /2015	Tanzania	In October 2014, China and Tanzania signed a \$10bn agreement in Shenzhen, for the construction of a port in Bagamoyo; as well as an associated export development zone.  The port is said to link to the TAZARA and the central corridor railways – and could effectively link with Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda (to name a few).  The project is funded by China (China Merchants Holdings International) and Oman (State Government Reserve Fund).	Elections in 2015 saw former President Jakaya Kikwete, who lay the foundation of the port project, hand over power to John Magufuli.  Construction was meant to start in mid-2015; this was reportedly suspended in early 2016; while other reports indicate construction started in the second half of 2016.  Bagamoyo also has historical links with Germany, which may require China to engage in further coordination with the EU. There are also sustainability concerns since agriculture; mangrove swamps and local fisherman surround the areas.

Date	Country / level	Project description	Update/ foreseeable factors
2014 /2016	Nigeria	In 2014 China Railway Construction Corp signed a \$12bn deal to build a railway off the coast of Nigeria (shortly after Mexico scrapped a similar deal with the company). This project is viewed as China's 'soft power push' in order to gain a foothold in resource rich states. However, this agreement (Lagos-Calabar) was only concluded in 2016 and is reported to have taken two years to complete.	At the same time, in early 2016 a high-speed railway in Nigeria, between Abuja and Kaduna, was completed by China Civil Engineering Construction Company. Although it was meant to be complete in 2014.
2015	African Union	In early 2015, China and the African Union (AU) signed a deal to connect the continent's capitals – like Addis Ababa to Nairobi and Johannesburg to Abuja –via railway, highway and air transport (to be built by China).	By October 2016, the China and the AU Commission signed a five-year Action Plan, responding to Africa's continental agenda 2063's flagship project of developing an Integrated High Speed Train Network.
2015	Kenya	In January 2015, China and Kenya signed an agreement for a project to link Kenya's port of Mombasa (on the Indian Ocean) to Nairobi.  The state-owned China Road and Bridge Corporation was building the railway, while it is 90% financed by China's Export-Import Bank.	Once the line is complete (this happened in May 2017) construction is said to begin on linking Kenya to the capitals of neighbouring Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan. All these countries are members of the East African Community.  Concerns over the project included the impact on Nairobi's wildlife sanctuary.  The project is also taking place in parallel to the Lamu port deal between the Kenya Ports Authority and China Communications Construction Company (2014), which is expected to be complete in 2018. The port is part of the \$24bn Lamu Port Southern Sudan-Ethiopia Transport corridor project that will help boost regional integration by 2030.
2016	Djibouti	In January 2016, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced an agreement with Djibouti to host its first base outside of the South China Sea – labelling it a logistics support and evacuation base (for Chinese armed forces on mission in the Gulf of Aden, as well as humanitarian support). While the possibility of protecting the BRI trade network has also been raised.  Apart from the base, the two sides have agreed to: develop a special economic zone; to expand Djibouti's role as a transshipment hub for trade between China and the world and lastly, create legal frameworks so that Chinese banks can operate in the country.	Besides China's base, is the presence of the US' military base – which is considered its main fully-scale military base in Africa – and Saudi Arabia's base (announced a few weeks after China's).  In October 2016, a \$3.4bn railway opened between Djibouti and Ethiopia, promoted as the 'TAZARA railway in a new era'. Chinese drivers will operate the line for an initial five years, until the local staffs are trained to operate the line.
2016 (still under-way)	Egypt	Xi visited Egypt in January 2016, where he made the suggestion of making the country an integral hub for the BRI – as it is strategically located on the Suez Canal and between the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea.	In October 2016, the China Fortune Land Development Company signed an agreement to start the second and third phases of Egypt's new capital city project (to be completed in seven years). Both sides also agreed to a \$230m Sino-Egyptian joint industrial zone, which will take 10 years to complete.

Source: compiled by author from the following – African Capital Markets News. 2014. 'Tanzania's \$10bn China-funded port will start in 2015', 30 October, <http://www.africacapitalmarketsnews.com/2506/tanzanias-10bn-china-funded-port-will-start-in-2015/>, accessed: 15 October 2016; Léautier, F.A., Schaefer, M and Wei, S. 2015. 'The Port of Bagamoyo: A Test for China's New Maritime Silk Road in Africa'. *The Diplomat*, 1 December, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/the-port-of-bagamoyo-a-test-for-chinas-new-maritime-silk-road-in-africa/>, accessed: 3 October 2016; Mirondo, R. 2016. 'Tanzania: Fate of Bagamoyo Port Clarified'. *AllAfrica*, 9 January, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201601090047.html>, accessed: 3 October 2016; Malone, J. 2016. 'Nigeria's high-speed rail project complete'. *International Construction*, 27 January, <http://www.khl.com/magazines/international-construction/detail/item114802/Nigerias-high-speed-rail-project-complete>, accessed 5 October 2016; Construction Review Online.

2016. 'China to construct the Lagos-Calabar coastal railway line in Nigeria'. 5 July, <http://constructionreviewonline.com/2016/07/china-to-construct-the-lagos-calabar-coastal-railway-line-in-nigeria/>, accessed: 5 October 2016; Chim, S.W. 2014. 'China signs its biggest overseas contract with US\$12b Nigeria railway deal'. *South China Morning Post*, 20 November, <http://www.scmp.com/article/1644534/china-signs-its-biggest-overseas-contract-us12bln-nigeria-railway-deal>, accessed: 5 October 2016; Ori, K.O. 2015. 'China signs deal with AU to connect Africa's big cities'. *The Africa Report*, 28 January, <http://www.theafricareport.com/North-Africa/china-signs-deal-with-au-to-connect-africas-big-cities.html>, accessed: 5 June 2015; *Talk Africa*, 2016. 'Africa's high-speed rail networks'. *CCTV*, 16 October, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSaOYV4Dwvg>, accessed 18 October 2016; AFP. 2015. 'China to build railway linking East Africa'. *Al Jazeera*, 12 May, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/05/china-build-railway-linking-east-africa-201451263352242135.html>, accessed 22 July 2016; Tiezzi, S. 2015. 'China's 'Maritime Silk Road': Don't Forget Africa'. *The Diplomat*, 29 January, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/chinas-maritime-silk-road-dont-forget-africa/>, accessed 3 October 2016; Parke, P. 2016. 'Kenya's \$13 billion railway project is taking shape'. *CNN*, 16 May, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/15/africa/kenya-railway-east-africa/>, accessed 15 November 2016; *Xinhua*. 2015a. 'Chinese-built Lamu port on course to transform Kenya, E. Africa'. 12 July, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/12/c\\_134405455.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/12/c_134405455.htm), accessed 3 March 2016; Braude, J. 2016. 'Why China and Saudi Arabia Are Building Bases in Djibouti'. *Huffington Post*, 26 September, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-braude/why-china-and-saudi-arabi\\_b\\_12194702.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-braude/why-china-and-saudi-arabi_b_12194702.html), accessed: 17 November 2016; Dubé, F. 2016. 'China's Experiment in Djibouti'. *The Diplomat*, 5 October, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/10/chinas-experiment-in-djibouti/>, accessed 15 November 2016; Tiezzi, S. 2016. 'China Has 'Reached Consensus' With Djibouti on Military Base'. *The Diplomat*, 23 January, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/china-has-reached-consensus-with-djibouti-on-military-base/>, accessed 4 October 2016; Todd, T. 2016. 'Chinese-built railway opens linking Ethiopia to Djibouti'. *France24*, 6 October, <http://www.france24.com/en/20161005-chinese-built-railway-opens-linking-ethiopia-djibouti>, accessed 16 November 2016; *FOCAC*. 2016. 'Feature: Chinese railway builders help locals along African railway'. 10 October, <http://www.focac.org/eng/zfgx/jmhzt/1404493.htm>, accessed 11 November 2016; Stefanidou, D. 2016. 'China's One Belt One Road policy makes big strides in Middle East with Egypt's city development project'. *ASEAN Today*, 9 November, <https://www.aseantoday.com/2016/11/chinas-one-belt-one-road-policy-makes-big-strides-in-middle-east-with-egypts-city-development-project/>, accessed 17 November 2016; Tiezzi, S. 2016. 'Xi's Visit Cements Egypt's Place on the 'Belt and Road''. *The Diplomat*, 22 January, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/xis-visit-cements-egypts-place-on-the-belt-and-road/>, accessed: 4 October 2016.

This list is by no means complete – and other agreements are underway (post 2016). Already when China's foreign minister Wang Yi held discussions with his counterpart in Mozambique, the country was being referred to as a 'natural extension of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road', as they discussed bilateral cooperation in the marine economy and port-related industrial parks (China, 2016b). This engagement parallels the view that while Kenya – mainly through Nairobi – was the original link between Africa and the BRI, and countries like Tanzania, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Mozambique are directly and indirectly being brought into the fold (Léautier, Schaefer & Wei, 2015).

Similarly, the BRI framework has proposed new projects such as deep water ports in the coastal cities of Tunisia, Senegal, Gabon, Mozambique and Ghana – in order to create transcontinental hubs for trade between Asia and Africa (following the example of the new deep water port of Kribi, Cameroon) (Chhibber, 2015:6; Lim, 2015). Chhibber (2015:6) does, however, view the railway corridor connecting Kenya and its neighbours as a key beneficiary and one of the main 'African gateways' for the Maritime Silk Road. China's current emphasis on East Africa is also reflected in the fact that the China–Africa Development Fund (CADFund) – originally set up in 2007, with representative offices in South Africa, Ethiopia, Zambia and Ghana – established a Nairobi office in 2016, which would facilitate trade and Chinese investment into Kenya and the region (Kimani 2016; Grimm & Schickerling 2013). Despite the fact that South Africa is considered a 'stable gateway' for foreign investors, East Africa is also becoming an attractive opportunity for investors due to growing

GDPs and markets, it is also a relatively integrated region and there is serious need for industrialisation and technological know-how, as many of these states are not well endowed with resources.<sup>37</sup>

These developments are also taking place within a context where power in Africa appears to be shifting away from petro-states, like Nigeria and Angola, to more diversified economies (Patey, 2016). Part of the reason is that China's economic restructuring means the country is importing fewer commodities; and these changes are pushing it to find opportunities beyond such trade (Calabrese 2016:5). For now, there is a predominantly East African focus on China's BRI-related engagements and infrastructure projects that also appear to be largely bilateral in nature – notably, China's military base in Djibouti was agreed upon on the side-lines of the FOCAC Summit in late 2015 (Kleven, 2015).

What is clear is that China is taking a gradualist approach in building its vision of the BRI, and thus the manner in which it is engages could shift over time (Alden & Sidiropoulos, 2015: 4). Africa hardly featured in the original speeches and the vision document of the BRI – that is, it is almost rhetorically separated from the Maritime Silk Road (Tiezzi 2015) – yet it is nevertheless being incorporated, as the above projects on the continent reflect China's vision and interest in becoming a leader of the BRI. The remaining question is how processes and determinants in Africa – which consists of different sets of relations with China and which shares limited imperial historical links with it – affect China's original narrative and promotion of the BRI.

#### 4.3.3 Push and pull factors for the BRI in Africa

Even though China is disseminating a broad narrative on the ancient Silk Road, Africa is largely absent from this history – besides Zheng He's contact with Kenya and the occasional docking of fleets in East Africa, during the trade between Asia and Europe.

This history has not, however, excluded Africa from the contemporary discourse. For instance, in March 2015 the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), co-hosted a seminar in Pretoria, South Africa on the 'Maritime Silk Road and Cross Cultural Communications', as part of a broader joint project on the ancient Silk Road and the lessons for cross-cultural collaborations.<sup>38</sup> The discussion was almost a prelude to the vision

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<sup>37</sup> Discussion with the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), 25 November 2016, Johannesburg, South Africa.

<sup>38</sup> 'Maritime Silk Road and cross-cultural communications', seminar, 23 March 2015, *The Human Sciences Research Council*, Pretoria, South Africa.

document, which came out a few days later, as one participant noted that China would be promoting the BRI in a ‘comprehensive way’, while others emphasised the Silk Road history, traced Zheng He’s travels, and even mentioned the Moroccan traveller, Ibn Battuta, who travelled the overland route and East Africa in the 1300s. One Chinese participant even highlighted that all sides should work on this topic ‘hand in hand’. Similarly, a symposium titled ‘The New Silk Road and China–Africa Economic Relations’ in Kenya brought together 30 scholars to discuss their different understandings of the BRI (Gong & Ding, 2015).

The initiative has even maintained a relatively good image in Africa and is welcomed by policymakers (as well as regions outside of China’s neighbourhood). One explanation is that Africa is relatively insulated by the contemporary geopolitical presence of China, unlike China’s role in the South China Sea; rather China’s presence in Africa speaks largely to economic concerns, than anything else (Ferchen, Olander and Van Staden 2016; Tiezzi et al 2016). In fact under the section ‘Ocean Economy’ of the 2015 FOCAC Johannesburg declaration, it was explicitly stated that (FOCAC 2015):

[T]he African side welcomes the Chinese side's championing "the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road", which includes the African continent, and the two sides will promote mutually beneficial cooperation in the blue economy.

The welcoming of the BRI could also elevate the continent’s role in it, since the positive reception means that implementing related projects in Africa will be easier than has been the case for China in its own region.<sup>39</sup> Africa could thus potentially become the ‘best practice’ example for China’s role in the world. Notably China, like other members of the BRICS, is considered an attractive partner because of its development experience and ability to provide financial assistance – this is particularly true among lesser-developed nations, who are seeking to meet socio-economic challenges (Steunkel, 2016: 356). Certainly, the attractiveness of China is relational.

These views are supported by a 2016 Afrobarometer survey (Lekorwe, Chingwete, Okuru & Samson, 2016). Even though China (24%) comes second to the US (30%) in terms of the popularity of its development model, it was the most popular in terms of how its influence is perceived in Africa (63% of respondents) and how its development assistance is meeting African countries’ needs (56% of respondents). China’s positive image is attributed to its development and infrastructure assistance and investments in Africa, as well as the cost of its products; however, its image is also

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<sup>39</sup> Remarks made during discussions with a senior fellow, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, Johannesburg, 14 July 2017.

marred by perceptions over the quality of its products, while political and social factors actually ranked low in terms of their impact on China's image. In terms of global governance, the fact that China is seeking to build a platform perceived as inclusive and beneficial for more regions in the world is also a positive factor and welcomed by some policymakers (Liu & Dunford, 2016:3).<sup>40</sup> For instance, Africa's incorporation in the BRI means that it would also be linked to other regions besides Asia, like Europe, integrating it even deeper into the global economy (Wu, 2016b: 34). It is perhaps because of this kind of reception that China's promotional public engagements related to the BRI need not be as vigorous in Africa.

Yet how has the BRI been enfolded into the China–Africa relationship? Lim (2015) confirms that China's infrastructural investments in Africa are filling a development gap that has been previously ignored. The BRI also shares close synergies with Africa's current development interests. These interests were expressed in the much-reported speech by former South African president Jacob Zuma's 2012 in Beijing, where he remarked that China–Africa relations – characterised largely by unbalanced trade – were unsustainable as they stood, and what was needed is diversification, beneficiation and investment in areas such as infrastructure development (South Africa 2012). China has since then, sought to respond to such concerns.

China's second Africa Policy paper was published in December 2015 (the first was published in 2006), as a guideline for its engagement in Africa. Importantly, the BRI is not actually mentioned in this policy (Tiezzi, Olander & Van Staden, 2016). Instead, the closest link is the section on 'deepening economic and trade cooperation', where its sub-headings are very similar to BRI interests. The areas include boosting African industrialisation (labelled as a key focus area of China–Africa cooperation); boosting African agricultural modernisation; participating in African infrastructure development; strengthening financial cooperation, facilitating further trade and investment; bolstering resource and energy cooperation; and lastly, expanding marine economy cooperation (Xinhua, 2015). The lack of reference to the BRI could reflect the low level of Africa's incorporation into China's vision but it is also curious that China is actually tailoring its engagements to Africa's contemporary interests, namely industrialisation, which could gain it more support, rather than conjuring a historical narrative that Africa has limited links with. This is an example of how China has adapted narrative (the use of 'industrialisation' rather than the 'Silk Road' narrative) in order to promote its interests, one of the main objectives of this study.

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<sup>40</sup> These views were expressed by a South African diplomat: DIRCO, consultation, 7 November 2016, Pretoria.

Careful attention to Africa's industrialisation interests was also highlighted in former ambassador Tian Xuejin's speech at the launch of Xi's book, where he stated (Tian, 2015):

China has put forward the "One belt, One road" initiative, proposed and pushed forward the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and BRICS New Development Bank, and now is actively promoting international industrial cooperation, especially with Africa.

Similarly, at a seminar on China–Africa modernisation and agriculture, he also acknowledged the importance of these two event themes in the AU's Agenda 2063 and among the 10 cooperation plans that Xi pledged at the sixth FOCAC Summit (Tian, 2016). It is also no coincidence that the 4th China–Africa Think Tanks Forum meeting in September 2015, where scholars and think tanks from both sides discussed pertinent China–Africa issues, was themed 'New Development Trends under African Vision 2063' (Lu, 2015).

Hence, China's BRI and its parallel boosting of industrialisation engagement in Africa will likely affect one another. Chinese representatives consider Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and the Republic of Congo as the main demonstration countries for industrial cooperation. South Africa remains a locomotive for the continent's industrialisation efforts, while Angola, Egypt and Mozambique will be partners for production capacity cooperation (China, 2016c; Kagwanja, 2015). Likewise, the recognition of development through the oceans is also an important component of Agenda 2063, which could link with China's BRI (AfDB, 2014).

What has so far been noted is that the initiative has the potential to reinforce the long-standing China–Africa relationship, especially as it speaks to Africa's contemporary interests. However, China's vision and how it progresses in Africa are also subject to wider determinants. These are both factors that bring Africa and the BRI closer, as well as wider forces that could influence the cooperative narrative between China and Africa.

Despite Africa's unclear role in the BRI from the start, proponents, namely policymakers and advisors, have encouraged its inclusion. Even before the vision document was released in March 2015, the former World Bank chief economist, Justin Lin (2012), had already been encouraging Africa to capture new industrialisation opportunities as countries like China have advanced away from labour-intensive manufacturing industries. He is also a supporter of the incorporation of Africa into the BRI. In a 2015 opinion piece, Lin maintained that this incorporation would not only boost African development but also prompt Chinese enterprises to explore the international market, because the two main areas of cooperation in the years to come include African infrastructure



development and the transfer of labour-intensive industries to Africa (Lin, 2015; He, 2015; Sun, 2015c). Moreover, African partners have been reaching out to China, in the hope of deeper inclusion into the BRI. The president of Togo, Faure Gnassingbe, offered his country as an anchor point for the Maritime Silk Road in West Africa, while China is also already involved in ports in Tunisia, Ghana, Senegal and Gabon (*Mail & Guardian Africa* writer, 2016). Nigeria is also seeking to leverage bilateral relations in order to tap into the BRI (Bakare, 2016). Even at the time of writing, there were reports on Morocco's interest in building an industrial and residential city with China's assistance (Hammond, 2016). The BRI in Africa could thus be shaped by the extent China feels it should respond to such invitations.

Meanwhile, a conference on 'The One Belt, One Road and a prosperous Africa' was held in Durban, South Africa, during 19–21 November 2015, ahead of the FOCAC Summit. This event was co-hosted by South Africa's HSRC, Durban University of Technology (DUT) – and adjoining Confucius Institute at DUT – and the Department of International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO), as well as the China Institute of International Studies. It also drew on a broader set of scholars, think tanks and policymakers (Wei, 2015; Durban University of Technology, 2015). One important component of the high-level conference was for both sides to understand more clearly the role of Africa in the BRI. Participants also noted that the conversation was only the beginning and would need to solicit further inputs from academia (Durban University of Technology, 2015). Interestingly by December 2015, when President Xi arrived in South Africa for the FOCAC Summit, China and South Africa had signed 26 bilateral agreements, one of which was an MOU for 'Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road' (South Africa, 2015). Although no concrete plans were mentioned, the MOU commits to upholding the spirit of the Silk Road – that is the principles of openness, peace, win-win and mutual learning and benefit, as well as coordinated development – and commits both sides to explore jointly the converging points between the BRI and South Africa's development (South Africa, 2015).

Another point of intersection between the BRI and South Africa is the fact that the latter is part of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), made up of 20 member countries along the Indian Ocean rim, of which eight are African states (Benkenstein, 2015: 1–2). South Africa will also be IORA chair between 2017 and 2019, where its interest in developing the Blue Economy could be further developed (Bohler-Muller, 2014). At the same time China, who happens to be an IORA dialogue partner, is interested in increasing its military and commercial interests in the Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2016: 2). This could explain China's cooperative approach. As part of China's financial

contribution to the IORA in 2015, the Chinese government helped fund a two-day workshop – the second of three proposed by South Africa in 2014 – focusing on ‘Maritime Connectivity and Financing for Development in the Indian Ocean Rim’ during July 2016 in Qingdao, China (IORA 2016). This workshop was also co-hosted by China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. China’s role as a dialogue partner and experience in the ocean economy was even praised by the South African side (IORA 2016).

The real question is whether such developments will progress beyond MOUs, to actively include African nations into the BRI or if commitments are largely diplomatic framing, to advance bilateral relations. Brugier (2014:2) makes a similar query on the BRI, globally, on whether related projects will be implemented bilaterally or through regional bodies such as ASEAN. In any case, Godehardt (2016:6) acknowledges that China’s bilateral relations are also increasingly enfolded into the initiative. Sun (2015) believes that the BRI will not change the direction of China–Africa relations. However, being included in China’s grand vision could bring more attention and perhaps even government funding to implement projects. The extent of Africa’s involvement in the BRI is still uncertain, particularly the manner in which Silk Road Funds (estimated at about \$1 trillion in future funding, as of 2017) will be spent across regions and how it relates to China’s Africa initiatives (Tiezzi, Olander & Van Staden, 2016; Wu, Alden & Sidiropoulos, 2017). Interestingly the first investment committed by the Silk Road Fund was actually to the Middle East and North Africa in early 2015 (*China Daily* 2017). Of course, there were also preliminary announcements in late 2016 that indicated the AIIB was considering expanding its portfolio to projects in Africa (Suokas, 2016).

At the same time, there are also wider developments that could shift the direction of the BRI in Africa. The first, like the case of Central Asia, has to do with the political climate in African countries that could offset China’s engagement on the continent. One instance is the role of the militant group, Al Shabaab, in East Africa, as well as Africa’s vibrant advocacy and civil society groups who challenge formal representations of the China–Africa relationship as ‘win-win’ (French, 2014; Korybko, 2016). As China’s economic interests deepen in Africa, so it is becoming exposed to the political climate on the ground. The increased economic linkages through new initiatives like the BRI have also raised concerns over the deepening unbalanced structure of trade between China and Africa – where the latter is exporting predominantly raw materials to the former (Wekesa 2015:155). This trend was even described by the former Nigerian central bank governor, Lamido Sanusi, as a ‘new form of imperialism’ (Sanusi, 2013). China has also been criticised for its willingness to do

business with rogue and pariah states (such as Sudan and Zimbabwe) in Africa, thus reinforcing such regimes (Dittgen, Lalbahadur, Sidiropoulos & Wu, 2016).

Moreover, China's infrastructure engagement has not always been welcomed on the continent. This is exemplified by the case of Botswana, where after a series of difficult experiences with Chinese investments (including technical and environmental malpractices associated with the Morupule B power station project), former president Ian Khama announced that projects would no longer be awarded to China (Kotch, 2013). Yet in 2016, an unexpected turn of events revealed that the Botswana government was considering selling the Morupule B Power Plant to China National Electric Equipment Corporation, the original contractor commissioned to build the plant (Letswamotse, 2016). Similarly, there was controversy surrounding the new standard gauge railway line between Kenya's port of Mombasa and Nairobi, as sections of it run through protected national parks (Kushner, 2016).

Of course, there is also disagreement on broader issues, which have on occasion affected diplomatic relations between the two sides. For example, in 2016 China reportedly closed its embassy in Botswana's capital, Gaborone, following the African government's open condemnation of China's actions in the South China Sea (Ontebetse, 2016). Likewise, the Ghanaian judge, Thomas Mensah, acted as one of the five international judges who decided against China during a 2016 case at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague, where the Philippines contested China's claim on the South China Sea (Flitten, 2016), while a former Chinese consul general maintained that China's position held widespread African government support – including from Tanzania, Gambia to Uganda (Lu, 2016). Another potential area of contention is the presence of illegal Chinese fishing trawlers off African nation coasts. This caused much media attention in South Africa during May 2016, when nine Chinese fishing vessels were spotted engaging in 'suspicious activity' and similarly, Greenpeace reported in late 2016 that China was the largest fishing player in West Africa (Cornelius & Loewe, 2016; BBC, 2016).

The above aspects underline that China and Africa may have found practical ways to collaborate through the BRI, but there remain areas of disagreement that require further engagement.

A second deviating determinant is the extent to which China and Africa are able to continue finding synergies – as the China and AU's agreement to link major capitals demonstrates – along Africa's own evolving development trajectory and oceans strategy. Conceptually, East Africa is seeking to create a formal federation through the East African Community and is, according to Korybko (2016),

also following the footsteps of the Eurasian Union, EU and ASEAN – and not just deepening links with China. The other caveat is the ability of recipient countries to pay back BRI project funds and how this could in turn negatively affect relations (Eisenman & Stewart, 2017).

Moreover, the continent is witnessing a proliferation of ocean strategies like the AU's ambitious '2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy', which is a comprehensive plan to address the common maritime challenges and opportunities faced by member states and covers a range of issues and sectors (Benkenstein, 2015: 1-2; Wu, 2016b: 34). However, the challenge is to ensure that any collaboration with Africa is not hampered by duplication and capacity issues (Benkenstein, 2015: 1–2). Moreover, the AU's drive and collaboration will only be as strong as the willingness of its member states to support and implement more training and employment in the maritime industry (AU 2016).

Linked to this are also the rise of national oceans strategies, such as South Africa's 'Operation Phakisa' launched in 2014, with a focus on growing the marine economy through marine transport and manufacturing industry (SAIIA, 2015; Alden & Sidiropoulos, 2015: 7). China and South Africa have already discussed the construction of a shipbuilding and repair facility in 2013, as well as an MOU on technical and professional exchanges in 2015 – yet there are also inroads being made by South Korea, with the announcement that it would assist South Africa in building a national shipping company (SAIIA 2015). Likewise, during former president Zuma's address on Operation Phakisa, he stated that the strategy is a direct adaptation of Malaysia's Big Fast Results Methodology, a performance and results-based approach to development through the marine space (South Africa, 2014). At the same time, not much movement was made on this initiative as of 2016.

Similarly, Japan is becoming more active on the continent and more recently in East Africa. This is supported by the fact that it hosted the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on Africa's Development (TICAD) – Japan's own premium event with Africa – in Nairobi in August 2016. The Japanese External Trade Organisation (2016) even set up a new office in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, to promote closer business exchanges and a commitment to investment in the country. Japan is also in talks with Djibouti to lease additional land so that it can expand its own military base, viewed as a counterweight to China's ambitions in the region (Kubo, 2016). Hence, the BRI itself could potentially offset increased external engagement with Africa.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted that China draws upon its imperial past for the BRI, namely its relations with the world through the ancient Silk Road and not specifically its past centrality. It has also framed (or instrumentalised) the past as cooperative. While the interest in reviving the ancient trade network is nothing novel, the BRI has been making important strides. China has set up institutions to finance projects along the route; there is an additional maritime component and there is a strong public diplomacy aspect, as reflected by the consistent high-level visits and speeches undertaken to highlight the BRI and other public-facing activities. There was also the publication of a 2015 vision document that outlined China's aspirations (which involve practical and geopolitical elements) and its awareness that widespread support and partnership is required for the initiative to succeed. China is thus undertaking public diplomacy in order to gain backing from strategic regions of the world. Especially as its own domestic circumstances (and those of other countries), differing historical interpretations and interests, as well as its own emphasis on opening up to others' input – are affecting the initiative's trajectory.

At a glance, Africa appears removed from the BRI, besides the early incorporation of East Africa. Similarly, public diplomacy engagements related to the BRI and specific to Africa, remain limited, besides official rhetoric and high-level government and academic exchanges on the topic. This suggests that China has yet to fully conceptualise (if it is deemed important), how to promote the BRI to African publics. Still, the synergies between China and Africa's interests are growing. China does not actually draw on its imperial past as readily with Africa, with the exception of Chinese naval expeditions to the continent. Interestingly, its initiative also enjoys a relatively positive reception on the continent; this is owed to its image as an economic partner, than historical relations. So while Africa has been mainly absent in the global BRI narrative between 2013 and 2016, Chinese official rhetoric on industrialisation and modernisation – which has resonance with Africa's current development interests – parallels the BRI's emphasis on the construction of cross-regional transport infrastructure. It was also noted that if Africa continues to receive the BRI positively, in comparison to other regions, the more China might find interest in engaging it, as a display of its positive rise. This reiterates the critical constructivist view that state interests can be altered by its interactions with others (see 2.2.3.1). Hence, China–Africa relations are being reinforced through new developments.

There remain defining factors that will determine the future success of the BRI in Africa. They include the extent to which China responds to the reaching out of African nations to join the BRI; the

political climate in African nations that impact China's engagements; points of potential conflict (such as China and Botswana on the South China Sea); the role of Chinese actors in Africa; the extent China continues to find synergies between itself and continental development strategies; and finally, China is becoming but one of a number of external actors partnering with the continent. These examples contribute to the constructivist notion of structure and agency being mutually constitutive (see section 2.2.1 and 2.2.2). It is precisely the fact that the BRI is still evolving and in a process of generating support that China's proposed norms (which was indicated in 2.2.1 as providing 'structure' for social interaction) are subject to the support of others ('agency'), demonstrated by the factors mentioned.

Like the reality of the Sinocentric order, the BRI is an intersubjective space where China's engagements are shaped, advanced and adjusted from their original (but vague) standing. In both cases, international relations are a performance where actors put their interests and meanings into action. At the same time this snapshot reiterates another important constructivist assertion (highlighted in 2.2.1 and 3.2.2) that international relations are shaped by issues around culture and identity, and not only explained by selfish rational actors. Likewise, the BRI is shaped by China's economic and geopolitical imperatives, as well as its perception of itself, and its past and current place in the world. Moreover, the more China engages in the initiative and seeks support for it, the more its own identity could be shaped.

In order to further explore China's interest formation and promotion *vis-à-vis* narratives and public diplomacy, the next chapter will examine China's engagement with the continental FOCAC process.

## **Chapter 5 China's public diplomacy in Africa and the FOCAC process**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter forms the second snapshot of China's public diplomacy in Africa, aimed at the continental level. Since 2000, China's economic and political presence in Africa has progressively expanded and become more structured, through the FOCAC process – a triennial platform for collective dialogue and the enhancement of practical relations between Africa and China. By the third iteration, held at summit level in Beijing in 2006, the relationship set off widespread debate from Africa's traditional partners and international media – but more importantly, African civil society and sectors not associated with the formal relationship as well. Anxieties were raised over several issues including China as a predominantly resource-seeking partner, contributing to a new form of colonialism or exploitation; its non-interference policy believed to perpetuate human rights violations, corruption and authoritarian regimes. Chinese firms were also accused of violating environmental standards and labour laws, as well as the flooding of local markets with cheap goods that would damage local industries (White & Alves, 2006:60; Kornegay, 2008:3; Ampiah & Naidu, 2008:3-4; Alden & Hughes, 2009:569 Meredith, 2014). Together these issues contribute to discussions over China's impact on Africa's development trajectory, and even as a signal of its threat to the established global order.

Having outlined the dilemma of China's image in Africa, this chapter will highlight the main question under investigation on how China has responded with public diplomacy in order to promote its interests. It will begin with a summary of historical links, followed by the formative FOCAC years (2000–2006). The preferred narratives instrumentalised by Beijing when engaging Africa – and its associated interests – will be highlighted. The discussion will then move onto China's public diplomacy, by which narratives are disseminated, through the FOCAC years, and since 2009. Indeed the forum is both a public display of the relationship and where related official documents exhibit China's increased adoption of public diplomacy over time. A preliminary assessment of this engagement, as well as how China has responded over time (suggesting a co-constituted FOCAC agenda), will then be provided.

## **5.2 The history of China–Africa relations: 1950s to the formative FOCAC years (2000–2006)**

### 5.2.1 Brief history

The China–Africa historical relationship can be summarised as episodic between the 1950s and 1990s (Alden, 2007: 9). It is categorised into three phases: the first was between the 1950s and 1970s, which was characterised by China’s political links with a newly independent Africa; the second was the 1980s, when China prioritised relations with industrialised nations; and last was the 1990s, when China’s gaze shifted back to Africa, as economic and political relations grew beyond the historical links already forged with African leaders (Zhang, 2013: 11; Kurlantzick, 2009: 168). These phases are discussed in more detail below. In addition, the context in which FOCAC was established, an important emphasis of constructivists as noted in Chapter 2, is outlined.

Relations began in 1949, upon the founding of the PRC; at the same time, Africa was emerging from colonialism in the 1950s, while the world slipped into the Cold War (Kobo, 2013; Le Pere & Shelton, 2007: 18-19). It was during this time that the Bandung Asian–African Conference (1955) between 29 Asian and African nations took place in Indonesia; its principles – of respect for equality, common prosperity and the development of the developing world – remain relevant for China’s foreign policy towards Asia and Africa today (He, 2008:147; Ampiah & Naidu, 2008:6). This conference also helped open official political relations with Africa, as China and Egypt established diplomatic links in 1956 (Alden & Alves, 2008: 47; Van , 2011: 393).

By the 1960s, at the height of the Cold War, China’s emphasis on third world solidarity – that is racially non-white and historically colonised – became more intense (Monson, 2008: 199). Africa offered potential ideological support (against the US and even the Soviet Union) and also support for the removal of the Republic of China (ROC) from its UN seat, which China eventually attained in October 1971 (Alden & Alves, 2008: 48&51; Le Pere & Shelton, 2007: 19). This development also set in motion the diplomatic recognition of Beijing, instead of Taipei, among African nations. In turn a clear response to the political context of the Cold War came in the form of China’s development assistance, namely in terms of finance and supervision, on the construction of the TAZARA (Tanzania–Zambia) – or ‘Great Freedom’ – Railway between 1970 and 1975 (Monson, 2008: 217). China, as a developing country, sought to distinguish itself from traditional foreign aid, as its own engineers and construction labourers worked alongside local Zambians and Tanzanians, helping landlocked Zambia open its mining economy (Monson, 2008: 199–200; Kobo, 2013; Lim, 2015).



From 1978 through to the 1980s, ideological interests gave way to economic imperatives, and China's relations with the developing world came to a standstill, as its foreign policy focused on economic modernisation and thus trade and investment relations with the US, Europe and Japan (Taylor, 1998: 443; Alden & Alves, 2008: 52-53). China also to a degree supported the US-led global order at the time (Lee, 2007: 9). Still these links were later compromised in 1989 when it became a Western pariah, following the Tiananmen Square demonstrations and shootings (Alden & Alves, 2008: 53; Van Beek, 2011: 395). It then began to re-evaluate its foreign policy, and its anti-imperialist rhetoric re-emerged, along with renewed emphasis on relations with the third world, who had been more sympathetic and supportive after the 1989 event (Taylor, 1998: 447). It was at this point that the foundation for modern China–Africa links began to take shape.

There are various explanations offered for why relations eventually developed and culminated in the creation of FOCAC. The foundation of contemporary relations deepened along two macro-processes in the 1990s (Taylor, 2010: 22). Africa's economic reform programs were gaining momentum and this opened commercial opportunities for external partners like China. Meanwhile China's own rapidly developing economy provided impetus for engaging in deeper links with Africa. For instance, it was transitioning away from being an oil exporter to importer, which meant that energy resources (as well as timber, agriculture and fisheries to a lesser degree) would become an important component of China's investments and diplomacy in Africa (Alden, 2007: 11-13). Despite the fact that Africa accounted for a mere 1.4% of China's global trade in 1995, trade actually increased by 431% between 1989 and 1997 (Taylor, 1998: 454).

While the economic impetus for China–Africa relations remained a defining factor, the political climate was also notable. China's closer links with the developing world were an attempt to offset the unchallenged global order. More specifically, it was seen to position itself in contrast to the hegemonic status of the US, portraying itself as a responsible power that favoured coalition-building instruments in its diplomacy (Taylor, 2010: 24).

Another explanation was that China needed to respond to the increasing set of external partners deepening links with Africa. This included the US which had published the 'Blueprint for the Partnership between the US and Africa in the 21st Century', as well as France which was noticeably engaging beyond its traditional links with Francophone African countries, reflected by its 'Franco-African Summit Conference' in the late 1980s (Li, 2014: 272). There was also the TICAD, held in Tokyo in 1993, which was run by the Japanese Government, together with the AU and UN (Li, 2014: 273-274). In fact, the second TICAD in 1998 witnessed unprecedented representation from 11

Asian countries, 51 African countries, the US and 18 European nations, as well as 44 international organisations (Li, 2014: 274). It is due to such developments that some believe FOCAC was conceived in response to established partnerships, like TICAD – although the former is described as a bilateral arrangement and the latter an international conference, which includes regional and international bodies.<sup>41</sup> These various explanations thus reiterate the point made in section 2.2.2, that knowledge and structures (in this case FOCAC) retain their meaning through the *context* they exist as well as the facts used to interpret them.

China–Africa ties began to deepen on the high political front, as former President Jiang Zemin undertook an African tour in 1996, where he provided a Five-Point Proposal that would guide relations<sup>42</sup> (this vision later contributed to the framework of the FOCAC) (Le Pere & Shelton, 2006: 37-39; Alden & Alves, 2016: 157). By 1997 Chinese scholars and even business recognised the need for a ‘master plan’, for the communication and practice of cooperative relations between China and Africa (Li, 2012: 11). At the same time, China was making diplomatic inroads into Africa, as South Africa and the Central African Republic<sup>43</sup> shifted their recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1998 (Taylor 1998:456). Accounts also credit the active push from the African side for the formation of a permanent, multi-party mechanism to manage relations between China and Africa (Li, 2014: 276&279).<sup>44</sup> As a result, leaders on both sides agreed that relations needed to be regularly consolidated; they agreed that they required deeper understanding of one another and lastly, they could work together for a more equitable international political and economic order (Le Pere & Shelton, 2007: 19 & 141; Van de Looy & De Haan, 2006: 563; Enuka, 2010: 211).

### 5.2.2 China–Africa relations: FOCAC 2000–2006

By 2000 China–Africa relations were being further fast-tracked, through the global market (including China’s eventual ascension to the WTO in 2001) and the role of government facilitation, as noted above (Zhang, 2013: 11; Dollar, 2016). Importantly the FOCAC platform – alternately hosted in China and an African country – marked an expression of the willingness on both sides to engage in dialogue and address ongoing concerns (Delgado 2015:8). The origins and initial focus of FOCAC remained high level and based on traditional diplomacy, as Beijing sought to gain a foothold

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<sup>41</sup> Discussions at the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo, 13 December 2012.

<sup>42</sup> The principles include equality; common development on the basis of mutual benefit; consultation and co-operation in global affairs; respect for sovereignty and non-interference and the long-term creation of an equitable and fair world order.

<sup>43</sup> And more recently in 2016, São Tomé and Príncipe.

<sup>44</sup> Zhang Yanqiu (Deputy Dean of Journalism and the Director of the Africa Communication Research Centre, Communications University of China, Beijing), Skype, 27 March 2017.

on the continent. It emphasised the winning of the hearts and minds of a sympathetic African elite. At this point, fewer strides were made to reach out to African publics. Although it was not the first time China engaged in trans-regional cooperation with Africa (Bandung being an example), this drive was far less ideologically driven and affected by Cold War politics, instead commerce became an initiating impetus.

**Table 5.1: List of FOCAC events held since 2000**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2000 – FOCAC I, Beijing, China</li> <li>• 2003 – FOCAC II, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia</li> <li>• 2006 – FOCAC III, Beijing, China</li> <li>• 2009 – FOCAC IV, Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt</li> <li>• 2012 – FOCAC V, Beijing, China</li> <li>• 2015 - FOCAC VI, Johannesburg, South Africa</li> <li>• 2018 – FOCAC VII, Beijing, China (forthcoming)</li> </ul>
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Source: *South African Institute of International Relations*. 2017. 'Factsheet: China–Africa Relations'. 15 February 2017, <https://www.saiia.org.za/opinion-analysis/factsheet-china-africa-relations>, accessed: 28 February 2017.

The initial FOCAC sought to set the foundation for the development of a new, long-term partnership between China and Africa, and thus the agenda was broad. It focused on trade and development cooperation, as well as covering general statements related to the importance of the UN in global governance and support for Africa's role in the UN Security Council (Alden & Alves, 2016: 157). In 2001, the FOCAC follow-up committee was established to ensure agreements were followed up at country level; it included China's Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Commerce and Finance (Li, 2012: 12). Furthermore, the FOCAC gained more relevance for China in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, which altered global opinion on a US-led world, providing the opportunity to reinforce closer relations with strategic regions of the world (Lee, 2007: 10). In fact, China created another platform, the SCO, to help project itself as a rising power in Eurasia (Lee, 2007: 10).

An important emphasis of the 2003 FOCAC event in Addis Ababa was to review the progress already made in implementing previous agreements (Le Pere & Shelton, 2006: 41). China committed to increasing two-way trade by the next FOCAC; to forgive the debt owed by 31 African nations; to support African regional organisations and the UN in promoting peace and countering terrorism; as well as counteracting hegemony in global affairs (Alden & Alves, 2016: 8).

The third FOCAC held in November 2006, however, attracted the world's attention, as it marked the 50-year anniversary of China–Africa diplomatic relations and gathered the most African leaders at a summit outside of the continent at the time (Alden & Alves, 2016: 158). Angola surpassed Saudi Arabia as China's largest foreign oil supplier (Alden, 2007: 8). Relations intensified, as China

announced it would set up the China–Africa Development Fund (CADFund), to ensure Chinese firms made greater direct investments in Africa, and the China–Africa People’s Forum for greater cultural and people-to-people interaction was formed (Le Pere, 2008: 14; Le Pere, 2015: 370). The forum was even described as an enrichment and practice of Hu Jintao’s ‘harmonious world’ concept, as China renewed its commitment to cooperating and consulting Africa in international forums, in order to craft a just global order (Alden & Hughes, 2009: 564; Le Pere & Shelton, 2007: 159). At the same time, relations were noticeably one-way, as the African perspective was less noticeable.

It was at this point that China’s first Africa Policy White Paper (2006), created to consolidate the burgeoning cooperation and friendship, was published. This formulated China’s second actual policy towards a continent – the first being its 2003 EU policy (Yang, 2006: 24). The Africa White Paper highlights the need for increased solidarity and support in terms of political, economic and developmental cooperation; and the following areas of engagement were mentioned: political and economic cooperation; education, scientific and culture cooperation; health and social cooperation; and peace and security cooperation. The formative years of FOCAC demonstrate it as a socially constructed entity (see 2.2.2 for more on aspects of constructivism). It is ideational rather than material since the forum is not specifically represented by a physical building; rather its meaning is mediated through the interaction between China and Africa, which is reflected by associated official documents, activities and meetings.

Indeed the forum’s focus remained largely economic and developmentalist. For instance, already in January 2006, then President Hu remarked to the Central Foreign Affairs Leadership Group that China’s international reputation depended on its demonstration of hard power – that is economy, science, technology and defence – although he did make some mention of soft power in the form of culture (Li & Luo, 2013: 31). Similarly, there is consensus that the direction of FOCAC between 2000 and 2006 focused on building political relations and enhancing pragmatic economic cooperation (Yang, 2006:26; Shelton & Paruk, 2008:63). Even in the case of China’s media engagement with Africa, it was not yet providing its own voice or content but instead focused on media infrastructure assistance (Wu, 2012:13).

So, while there was awareness of the need for ‘softer’ emphasis, there was not yet concerted effort to close the disparate views over China’s real intentions in Africa. There also remained limited African and Chinese NGO participation (Alden 2007:2). Curiously, this began to change. Even though Africa accounted for a small percentage of China’s global economic relations, the growing relationship influenced China to adopt more symbolic forms of diplomacy, including higher levels of

engagement, stronger communication and public outreach emphasis. This was a clear departure from the ideological emphasis between the 1950s and 1980s (Enuka, 2013: 209; Corkin, 2014: 58).

### **5.3 Beijing's China–Africa narrative**

Although the wide selection of public diplomacy instruments at China's disposal are a recent development, the actual narratives disseminated are not. Already in the 1990s China's re-engagement with the continent faced challenges, as its emphasis changed from ideological ties to resource acquisition, requiring it to frame its interests in a manner that would be acceptable to sceptical partners (Alden, 2007: 15; Delgado, 2015 :3). Of course, its use of objective history was also coloured with its own self-perception and relation to the world (Alden & Alves, 2008: 44). Since then Chinese policymakers – and even their African counterparts (Pahad, 2007: 9) – have regularly adopted narratives in their speeches that remind audiences of the long-standing China–Africa friendship and their shared historical experiences. As these links are relatively newer than China's relations with East Asia, the narrative of friendship under the historical Chinese tributary system is minimised, with exception of the Zheng He narrative from the Ming dynasty. Hence, the accounts frequently invoked here derive from the 15th and 19th centuries, as well as the Cold War era (Alden & Alves, 2008: 43).

The 15th century narrative surrounding the voyages of Zheng He's fleet to Africa, as a link between China's imperial past and the continent, has already been established in Chapters 3 and 4. As noted, the admiral is often represented as an icon of the organic friendship that has endured over time; his voyage also serves as a reminder that China was not motivated by any settler project (Le Pere & Shelton, 2007: 18). Thus, the forging of contemporary relations is underlined as merely a revival of the intermittent trade and diplomatic links under the Ming dynasty (Alden, 2007: 18).

In second place is the history of the 19th century, where both China and Africa shared experiences of colonialism, which differentiates the former's engagement from Africa's Western partners. An example is the comments made by President Xi, at the 2015 China–Africa Business Forum (China, 2015e):

Back in the mid-19th century, the overwhelming military might of foreign powers forced China to open its door and began what was called “self-strengthening movement” in an early form of industrialization.

The narrative of solidarity politics is even frequently drawn upon in China's broader relations with the developing world, framing its position as one between developed and developing countries

(Power & Mohan, 2010; Van Beek, 2011: 393; Alden & Alves, 2008: 55). Specifically, China's discursive construction of the past regarding Africa regards the continent as strong force for peace and development, being the largest number of developing nations in one region (Delgado, 2015: 8).

Additionally Africa's own tumultuous relationship with Western partners – for the US, this was the Cold War (Shelton & Paruk, 2008: 134; Sidiropoulos 2006:100) – opened opportunities for China's engagement with the continent. Explicitly China's policy of non-intervention, win-win cooperation and emphasis on consultation and dialogue seemed particularly attractive to African nations, who did not share the economic and security concerns that their Asian counterparts felt regarding China (Kurlantzick, 2009: 170-171). These developments have also played to China's advantage. The fact that it never colonised Africa is used as indication that it never will (a common response to criticism over its role in Africa) (Alves, 2008: 31). Notably the ideological and diplomatic stance against Western imperialism, for like-minded African political elites, continued during the Cold War period (Taylor, 1998: 448; Ampiah & Naidu, 2008: 334).

The colonial experience is also often conflated with events in the 1950s (Africa's decolonisation). For instance, Ji Peiding, the former vice foreign minister to China, remarked at an event in November 2016<sup>45</sup> that during the 1950s and 1960s Chinese and African leaders opened the road of friendship between people of both sides; and China even stood firmly with Africa, in the struggle against imperialism and into its liberation. This remark points to the third era, the shared contemporary history of the 1950s, where China supported Africa's liberation. Similarly, the African–Asian solidarity that came out of Bandung in 1955 is regularly mentioned and contributes to China's emphasis on South–South cooperation (Power & Mohan, 2010).

The solidarity of the first generation of Chinese and African leaders and the cooperation during the liberation struggles is neatly demonstrated in the first China–Africa Policy (China 2006):

[The] China–Africa friendship is embedded in the long history of interchange. Sharing similar historical experience, China and Africa have all along sympathized with and supported each other in the struggle for national liberation and forged a profound friendship.

Similar sentiments were expressed in speeches by Hu Jintao at the opening of the 2006 FOCAC Summit (Le Pere & Shelton, 2007:153) and China's former ambassador to South Africa, Tian Xuejun (2012), when he stated that 'the Chinese government and people have firmly stood with the

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<sup>45</sup> 'China–Africa Industrialization and Agricultural Modernization Seminar', *Human Sciences Research Council*, Sheraton hotel, Pretoria, 9-10 November 2016.

African people in your fight for national independence’. This is echoed in President Xi’s (2014: 334) 2013 speech in Tanzania, titled ‘Be Trustworthy Friends and Sincere Partners Forever’, which marked the start of his first Africa tour as president of China.<sup>46</sup>

Ji Peiding’s speech also happened to note that the TAZARA railway remains to this day a monument of China–Africa’s friendship; conjuring a contemporary version of Zheng He’s expedition. Likewise ambassador Lin Songtian, former Director-General of the African Department at the MFA (and ambassador to South Africa as of 2017), reaffirmed ‘everyone knows that China contributed [to] the construction of [TAZARA] for Africa which has been written into the annals of history of China–African relations’ (Lin, 2016b). Of course the TAZARA narrative is part of China’s emphasis on the legacy of development cooperation and friendship with Africa; and it is difficult to find a public speech on Chinese development cooperation in Africa that does not mention this history (Monson, 2013: 45 & 47). Strauss (2009) agrees, despite the fact that the conditions of China–Africa relations have changed; there remains an unbroken rhetorical lineage that dates back to the 1960s and even earlier. In fact, the project has been notably divorced from China’s own domestic processes at the time, including the factionalism that existed in Chinese politics and even the height of the Cultural Revolution (Strauss, 2009: 786).

More recent displays of friendship, which reinforce relations, have also been invoked. Again ambassador Tian (2015) wrote an opinion piece in *The Thinker* – a Pan-African quarterly – where he reminded that China will never forget ‘how our African brothers celebrated China’s restoration of its lawful seat in the United Nations with dance and singing’ and similarly, thanked African countries for their support after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. Thus, China and Africa share more than six decades of history, which serve as a significant basis for China’s diplomacy on the continent. While newer versions of complementarity have been invoked, they build on, rather than replace, such long-standing historical narratives (Strauss, 2009: 792). These examples support the idea that China adopts narratives in an instrumental manner – that is, it uses framing to select and emphasise aspects of history (see sections 2.4.5.4 and 3.2.2).

### 5.3.1 The contemporary interests underlying China’s use of narrative

It is clear that the ideological emphasis in China’s Cold War external relations has changed to an approach that is practical, more agnostic and interest-driven (Le Pere, 2015: 360). China’s interests

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<sup>46</sup> While Xi’s speech was made the same year as the BRI launch, the initiative was not actually mentioned – although he (2014:337) did add that ‘[t]here is no one-size-fits-all development model’, which is an important premise of the initiative.

are justified through rhetoric (as well as economic and political clout), which includes drawing from the past to highlight a long-standing friendship and differentiating China from other external partners, and moreover the cultivation and internationalisation of its image as a responsible partner that is historically different to others (Corkin, 2014: 58).

With regard to Africa, China emphasises aspects of relations that are conducive to achieving its economic interests (access to resources and export markets) that in turn aid its development and growth (Alves, 2008: 28; Le Pere, 2015: 360). The evolving narrative of the BRI to include Africa, discussed in the previous chapter, attests to this. Furthermore, Beijing does not actually hide its interests but rather frames them in terms of mutual benefit and cooperation (Shelton & Paruk 2008:67).

There is also an important political element. The first is continuing to challenge Taipei's diplomatic relations with African nations, which has been relatively successful, as São Tomé and Príncipe made the most recent switch from Taipei to Beijing in December 2016 (Alden, 2007: 32-33; Shinn & Eisenman, 2008: 2; Ives, 2016). More broadly is drawing diplomatic support as China seeks to become an important player in global affairs (Le Pere, 2015: 360; Alves, 2008: 28). These interests are acceptable to African leaders, as China's model of cooperation does not necessarily condition them to alter their own interests, territorial integrity or behaviour (Delgado, 2015: 6). Rather China appears supportive of Africa's interests. The third FOCAC declaration explicitly stated: 'China reaffirms its support for African countries in their efforts to strengthen themselves through unity and independently resolve Africa's problems' (China, 2009). China has also been openly supportive of Africa in the drive for permanent African representation in the UN Security Council (Le Pere & Shelton, 2006: 49).

One reason that China emphasises itself as a member of the Global South is that if it were to assert itself too strongly without diplomatic support, it could potentially exacerbate concerns of a 'China threat' (Corkin, 2014: 52; Le Pere & Shelton, 2006: 33). Hence, China's links with Africa, through the FOCAC, are an important stage where it can display itself as a responsible partner. At the 10th Senior Officials Meeting of the FOCAC in November 2014, it was even remarked that China–Africa ties offered a model for South–South cooperation (China, 2014a). Indeed, there remains tension between China's interest in remaining low key on the international stage, as well as it seeking to regain its rightful place in the world (Corkin, 2014: 59). One instance of it asserting itself is noted in the TAZARA narrative – a physical symbol that distinguishes China's aid from the West (Strauss, 2009: 786).



This does not mean, however, that China's identity formation in relation to Africa is always agreed upon. As mentioned, it often describes Africa as the continent with the most developing nations and China, the largest developing country in the world (Sidiropoulos, 2006: 97; Alden & Alves, 2008: 45; Delgado, 2015: 6). The reference to both sides as 'developing' countries, who face similar development challenges, was even declared in the sixth FOCAC declaration in 2015 (China, 2015f). Yet there remains discrepancy between China's self-perception and that of African leaders, where the latter points to the former's rising status in global political and economic affairs, which places it beyond 'developing' (Alden & Alves, 2008: 45–46).<sup>47</sup> Still, African leaders find China's self-perception acceptable, precisely due to the importance of its rising status, capital and political clout (Alden & Alves, 2008: 45–46).

It is also worth questioning why China uses certain narratives over others. From a constructivist perspective, actors do not merely look to the material capabilities of their partners or undertake a cost benefit analysis; they are also shaped by their own context, aspirational needs as well as the recipients of their engagement (Strauss, 2009: 779; Delgado, 2015: 16). The developing world solidarity emphasised by China is an important component of its own perceived identity. Yet like the Sinocentric reading of China's harmonious relations with its neighbours its interpretations can also be considered idealised (Delgado, 2015: 16). How China reconciles its impressions and the context of the recipient milieu is of interest in subsequent sections.

#### **5.4 China's public diplomacy in Africa**

China's emphasis on a historical friendship with Africa has been discussed and what remains is exploring its public diplomacy, the very channels upon which narrative is expressed. It is important to note that even though the FOCAC is promoted as a joint China–Africa collaboration, the Chinese government still drives most of the associated activities (Li & April, 2013: 3). While China's relations with Africa are complex and varied at the bilateral level, the FOCAC is overall also reflective of its diplomatic approach towards the wider continent (whereas partners such as France opt to engage with specific countries according to language and history) (Li & April, 2013: 4). The FOCAC then demonstrates China's public diplomacy in two important ways. First, the platform itself functions as a public diplomacy mechanism and secondly, it reveals the expanding scope of

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<sup>47</sup> The African view of China as modernised and developed was reinforced during an African research delegation to China (which the author participated in), during September 2012. The delegation was taken to Ningxia province and shown how farmers were able to overcome obstacles and grow agriculture on desert land. Some African participants commented that this was what their own countries desperately needed and remarked that China was clearly developed, in relation to their own home countries.

China's public diplomacy in Africa over time. This will be further investigated in subsequent sections.

#### 5.4.1 The FOCAC as a public diplomacy mechanism

The FOCAC platform and associated publicly available official documents play an important public diplomacy function. It was in fact the looming criticism coming from local civil society and elites – and not just Western counterparts – that induced China to produce its first Africa Policy in January 2006, which was then followed by three high-profile visits and the FOCAC Summit in November 2006 (Alden 2007: 118-119). A prominent example of criticism originating from Africa came from former South African president, Thabo Mbeki, in December 2006, when he warned that Africa needed to guard against becoming merely a supplier of raw materials to China, in exchange for material goods (Alden & Wu, 2016: 207). FOCAC is a stage where China can respond, as well as pledge funds and make commitments to the continent every three years and, importantly, make known its normative intentions. Its view of an equitable world order is particularly given open expression (Alden & Alves, 2016: 151-152). By 2015 China was even able to reiterate that '[t]he forum has been a bridge for closer people-to-people exchanges and friendship between China and Africa' (Xinhua, 2015).

Furthermore, the FOCAC ministerials and summits can be considered 'controlled events' – in that the agenda, declarations and problems are predetermined for the world and media to witness (Wekesa, 2014: 59 & 66–67). They also set the stage upon which China makes pledges to Africa. Of course, FOCAC-related events also provide stages where officials are able to 'enact' and remark on the significance of China–Africa relations. For example Foreign Minister Wang Yi remarked at a FOCAC follow-up meeting in 2016: 'China and Africa have increased high-level mutual visits and enhanced political mutual trust... with over 100 visits at or above the provincial and ministerial level, creating a rare boom in mutual visits' (China, 2016d). (Indeed the timeframe of these visits was not provided). This conjures the over two decade-long tradition where China's foreign ministers undertake Africa tours, as their first set of overseas visits each year, reinforcing the importance of China's relations with the continent (Xinhua, 2016; Eureka, 2010: 210). Like the use of historical narratives, these examples reflect the use of framing (2.4.5.4) through the emphasis on specific aspects of relations.

Lastly, the forum is considered an 'international brand'. This is owed to China's impact and image on the continent (Li & April, 2013: 2–3). For instance, the forum has allowed China to rise in

popularity among African elites as it emphasises practical engagements over lectures; perceived as an alternative to the Bretton Woods institutions of the 1990s (Alden, 2007: 103; Chin & Thakur, 2010: 126). China's increased active engagement in multilateral spaces, like the FOCAC and UN, also contributes to its overall positive image (Corkin 2014:53). Therefore, the forum reflects the view in Alden and Schoeman's work on global summitry (see 2.3.4.1): it is a symbolic platform that offers opportunity for the expression of self-perception, identity and position on the global stage.

#### 5.4.2 The broadening scope of public diplomacy in the FOCAC: selected examples from 2009 to 2016

As China–Africa relations and China's various engagement points become more coordinated under the FOCAC, so have there been references to building relations through the use of public diplomacy. At the beginning, people links only featured in one line at the first FOCAC.<sup>48</sup> Even though China's initial Africa Policy (2006) mentioned media cooperation and people-to-people exchanges, as important aspects of building social relations, little action was taken. Even in the case of media exchanges, China's actual engagement from 2000 to 2006 focused on technical assistance, in the form of building broadcasting stations, providing media equipment and technical training (Wu, 2012: 13–16). It was only in 2006 that exchanges advanced. For instance, Xinhua News Agency invited African journalists to Beijing and China began to express its opinion on media practices with Africans (Wu, 2012: 16; Banda, 2009: 53).

However, it was under the auspices of globalisation that China sought to become a comprehensive competitive global player, seeking to provide its narrative and cultivate a favourable image. As established in Chapter 3, China's global public diplomacy drive began in 2009, following events around 2008. Likewise, in the case of Africa, two interrelated factors are significant.

First was the 2008 financial crisis that galvanised China's relations with Africa. While other partners cut back their expenditure in Africa, China became the continent's largest trading partner, opening opportunities to expand relations beyond its traditional scope (Wu, 2012: 7; Alden & Wu, 2016: 214). Trade relations increased tenfold in the period between 2000 and 2010 (Ojo, 2016: 38). More generally, the crisis weakened confidence in the Western liberal economic and political order, while China's swift response to crisis situations gained prominence in Africa (Van Beek, 2011: 405).

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<sup>48</sup> Observation made by Professor Li Anshan (School of International Studies, as well as Center for African Studies, Peking University) at the 'China–Africa Relations Roundtable Conference', Johannesburg, South Africa, 1 December 2015.

Second was China's hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, where there was specific concern over its close links with the ruling elites in Angola, Sudan and Zimbabwe, raising outcry over its non-interference policy (Kornegay, 2008: 3; Le Pere, 2008: 16). Chinese respondents tended to emphasise China's positive role in supporting Sudan to become an oil exporter and Angola in post-war reconstruction (Corkin, 2014: 54). There were also broader 'China in Africa' narratives circulating in mainstream media that characterised China's engagement as 'grabbing land, extracting resources and neo-colonialism [force] in Africa' (Chen, 2013). Another instance is the 2011 BBC documentary titled 'The Chinese are Coming' that echoed the belief that China's interest in Africa was tied to its deep appetite for land, resources and markets (Kobo, 2013).

In turn, these perceived biases motivated China to undertake its own rebranding efforts and to address misunderstandings, as it sent a special envoy to mediate the Darfur issue in Sudan and state media abroad to provide favourable content on China's perspective in strategically important regions, including Africa (Wu, 2012: 9). It is thus no coincidence that, in an ambassadors meeting held in August 2009, President Hu Jintao made an important speech on the importance of cultural and public diplomacy (Ma, 2010: 32). Parallel to these events, scholarly discourse on China was also evolving, from a resource- and trade-focused approach to wider areas of engagement, in the early 2000s (Large, 2008: 55). For example, works originating from the continent began to unpack and respond to the alarming narrative on China as a neo-colonial partner; and focused rather on the strategic significance of China–Africa relations (examples include Le Pere & Shelton, 2007: 14 & 135; Ampiah & Naidu, 2008: 336; Alden 2007; Kornegay, 2008: 4).

The stage was thus set for a more vocal China, prompting it to ensure that relations with Africa advanced beyond high economic and political interests. The FOCAC processes of 2009, 2012 and 2015 and beyond, demonstrate the growing public diplomacy engagement of China in Africa. Moreover, in line with the critical constructivist view, these examples demonstrate China's own role in generating change 'through participation in reproducing, constituting, and fixing the social entities' it observes (see section 2.2.3.1). Here the broad definition of public diplomacy from Chapter 2 is used, as instruments of direct and indirect influence adopted to build and manage relations, influence public opinions (or mobilise action) and lastly, to understand attitudes, so that interests or values can be advanced.

#### 5.4.2.1 2009

China's emphasis on developing closer people-to-people links with Africa ran in parallel to its global public diplomacy drive in 2009. The fourth FOCAC, held in the same year in the Egyptian resort town Sharm El Sheikh, noted the need to develop civil society links between China and Africa (Marks, 2009: 4). The 2009 Sharm El Sheikh Declaration provided a list of 10 points, on how the 'new type of China–Africa strategic partnership' could be progressed (China, 2009a). One of the points mentioned the importance of developing deeper people links, cultural cooperation and the broadening of exchanges (across societies and fields from medical care to sport) (China, 2009a).

The activities and details on people engagement in the 2009 documents were also more advanced than the first FOCAC. Multi-country cultural exchanges took place, as China held the 'Chinese Culture in Focus' in over 20 African countries; a year after the 'African Culture in Focus' was held in Shenzhen in 2008 – which was sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Culture (China, 2009; Huynh, 2012: 9). The Action Plan further stated that these 'Cultures in Focus' years would continue alternately between China and Africa (China, 2009b; Li & Rønning, 2013: 3). Additionally while there were only four cultural centres attached to Chinese embassies in Africa in 2001, the number of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms rose to 23 in Africa in 2009 (China, 2009; Brown, 2012: 41).

At this point, the management of China's image through international media also became an important component of its public diplomacy (Zhang, 2016d: 1). Besides China's assistance in building African media infrastructure, the 2009 Action Plan referred to increasing cooperation and exchanges between media workers and officials; through visits, training, workshops and producing programming (Wu, 2012: 13). Finally, the proposal of a joint research and exchange programme, as a platform for exchanges between Chinese and African scholars and think tanks for better cooperation policies, was also made at the FOCAC meeting (Huynh, 2012: 9; China, 2009b).

#### 5.4.2.2 2012

The fifth FOCAC, held in Beijing in 2012, was preceded by the AU joining as a new member in 2011 – and furthermore, China helped fund and build the \$200m AU headquarters (Le Pere, 2015: 359; Alden & Alves, 2016: 9). The event itself was significantly held just before President Hu departed from office, contributing to the forum's theme of building on past achievements and opening up to new prospects (Le Pere, 2015: 371). The ministerial ended with the expansion of FOCAC's scope from fields such as trade, financing and infrastructure, and was supplemented with the deeper development of cultural and people-to-people exchanges (and even peace and security

relations), through the pledging of more financial resources.<sup>49</sup> For example, China pledged to provide an annual \$2m to education development programmes in Africa, through UNESCO's trust fund (Li & Luo, 2013: 28–29).

Additionally, the six priority areas under people exchanges in the Beijing Action Plan for 2013–2015 included culture, education, press, publishing and media, exchanges between academia and think tanks and an emphasis on athletes, women and youth (Li & Rønning, 2013 :2). Two aspects are further discussed here.

Under the joint research and exchange programme for academia and think tanks, the China–Africa Think Tank Forum (CATTF)<sup>50</sup> first held in Zhejiang province – which promotes knowledge exchange and a shared research agenda – was institutionalised through the FOCAC framework since 2011 (April, 2013: 45; Lu, 2015). Likewise, the China–Africa People's Forum began the same year in Nairobi, Kenya (Zhang, 2015b). The CATTF opened a space for interaction between Chinese and African research institutes, who could jointly submit projects to FOCAC for eligible funding (Alden & Alves, 2016: 160). It was hoped that the forum would serve as a space to foster mutual understanding, shared values, new theories and new ideas on how to deepen ties;<sup>51</sup> furthermore, China would be able to strengthen its understanding of African affairs, while Africans could raise their concerns and expectations (Alden & Aves, 2016: 160). The importance of academic and think tank exchanges was made explicit in the 2012 Beijing Action Plan (China 2012; April, 2013: 45):

The two sides noted with satisfaction that the China–Africa joint research and exchange plan has been successfully launched and implemented, which has effectively strengthened cooperation and exchanges between scholars and think tanks of the two sides and provided strong intellectual support to China–Africa cooperation.

A second platform, launched in 2012, was the joint press exchange centre in Beijing for African journalists visiting and reporting on China (Wu 2013:5). Information on the centre is limited. Although a book by Julius Enehikhuere (2015) titled *China in the Eyes of an African Journalist*, is useful in explaining the author's participation in the China–Africa Press Centre, through a 10-month exchange program by the China Public Diplomacy Association. He also provides visual aid of his

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<sup>49</sup> As stated by a counsellor at the Department of African Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the China Foreign Affairs University, Beijing, August 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Up until 2016, five CATTFs had been hosted in Hangzhou and Jinhua, Addis Ababa, Beijing, South Africa and Yiwu, respectively.

<sup>51</sup> Remarks made by Lu Shaye (Director-General of African Department of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs), at the Third China–Africa Think Tank Forum, 21–211 October 2013, Beijing.

experience in China. Likewise, the 2012 Action Plan made detailed reference to media and press collaboration (China 2012):

A China–Africa Press Exchange Center will be established in China. The two sides will promote exchanges and mutual visits between Chinese and African journalists and press professionals and support exchange of correspondents by their media organizations. The African side welcomes the opening of CCTV Africa in Nairobi, Kenya.

This particular excerpt also refers to the engagement of Chinese state media who were setting-up regional centres in Africa – taking place parallel to the FOCAC process. It is true that players like Xinhua News Agency were already established in Nairobi, Kenya since 2006 to compete with other international news wires providers (Wu 2012:17). However China’s ambition to compete in the global news market was made even clearer after the 2012 launch of CCTV’s (or later CGTN’s) regional broadcast centre in Nairobi, which complemented regional centres in London, Moscow and Washington DC (Wu 2012:17). Tellingly an opinion piece in the *China Daily* – China’s English language daily that launched its Africa edition in late 2012 – highlighted China’s motivation (Deng 2012):

The development of the Chinese mass media lags far behind its economic and political development. This would explain why Chinese are often silent when people from other countries, including some from Africa, misinterpret or even attack China for its benign and beneficial role in Africa. To make the rest of the world aware of China's role in Africa, the Chinese mass media have to break the monopoly of their Western competitors in Africa and spread the facts, as well as the views of the Chinese government and think tanks across the world.

This perspective was reinforced by Liang Xia Tao, President of China International Television Corporation, who specifically noted that CCTV Africa would expand its Chinese and English broadcasts ‘with footage from the continent to China, Africa and the rest of the world’ (Odeny, 2011). What this uniquely reflects is the interest in providing China *and* Africa’s narratives to the world (Jiang, Li, Rønning & Tjønneland, 2016: 4). Of course, the role of Chinese state media and FOCAC’s own official website, have been integral in disseminating information and the full texts of official speeches and documents.

#### 5.4.2.3 2015

Between the 2012 and 2015 FOCAC meetings, events that had significance for China’s public diplomacy in Africa, took place. In 2013, Xi Jinping took office as China’s new president and continued to emphasise people relations during his historic visit to Africa the same year. In his

speech in Tanzania, Xi (2014: 337-338) confirmed that building a ‘close bond of friendship with Africa’ – through cultural and people exchanges, as well as public support – remained key for the relationship. Likewise, in his speech in the Republic of Congo a few days later, he emphasised examples of friendship between the two sides, since ‘people-to-people ties and exchanges are the fundamental basis for China–Africa relations’ (China, 2014b).

Another important moment for China’s public diplomacy came in 2014, where it demonstrated its goodwill in the midst of the Ebola crisis in West Africa – labelled by the UN as a threat to international peace and security (Anthony, Esterhuysen & Burgess, 2015: 4). While other foreign powers like Japan and the US committed notable funds to the crisis, China was commended for its significant role on the ground; especially the involvement of the People’s Liberation Army and Chinese government agencies, specialists and personnel (Penfold, 2014; Goldstein, 2015). Besides personnel, it also pledged about \$140m in aid, disease prevention and the construction of medical facilities (Anthony et al., 2015: 4). The measures that China had taken to combat Ebola were also readily communicated. For example the Chinese embassy in South Africa provided updates over emails (and likewise on their website) through articles such as ‘China Stands with West African Countries Till We Win the Battle against Ebola’ (China 2014c) and ‘163 Chinese Medical Staff Arrived in Liberia’ (China, 2014d).

By the time the sixth FOCAC occurred in late 2015 in South Africa, President Xi remarked (Niu, 2015):

The Chinese government and people took the lead in helping Africa fight Ebola and led the international community in its efforts to assist Africa to combat the epidemic, demonstrating the bond of brotherhood between China and Africa in time of difficulty.

This event also took place when China was undergoing major economic restructuring – and its economic slowdown had direct impact on the continent, as trade reportedly fell by 38% and investment by 40% (Gcoyi, 2016). However, as Africa remained a relatively important political priority to China, the latter sought to ease concerns through the use of communication – particularly that its commitment and friendship was unwavering. This is reflected in the statement (2016a):

Against the backdrop of weak global economic recovery...and when China itself is also facing downward pressure for economic growth, China has not reduced its support and input to Africa. On the contrary, China has worked out a comprehensive planning and provided the largest-scale funding support.



Apart from the 2015 declaration and Action Plan, China even released its second Africa Policy paper, where it stated it necessary ‘to further clarify China's determination and goodwill to develop friendly and cooperative relations with Africa’ (Xinhua, 2015). Likewise, it emphasised the principle of honouring its commitments to Africa. The actual FOCAC event reflected China’s continued commitment, as President Xi pledged \$60bn worth of varied financial support to the continent (Niu 2015). Moreover, his speech mentioned 10 important cooperative areas of focus that included a China–Africa industrialisations plan; implementing an agricultural modernisation plan, an infrastructure plan, a financial plan (such as currency swapping), a green development plan, a trade and investment facilitation plan, a poverty reduction plan, a public health plan, a people-to-people cooperation plan, and lastly a peace and security cooperation plan (Niu, 2015).

A new element that emerged from China’s communication with the continent was its support for Africa’s long-term development priorities and industrialisation, namely the AU’s Agenda 2063, which was adopted in 2015. The 2015 CATTF held in South Africa was themed ‘New Development Trends under African Vision 2063’ (Lu 2015). At this forum, one African representative highlighted the significance of the AU’s agenda and that Africans needed to take pride in their history and seek the best solutions to their own problems.<sup>52</sup> China’s response to this agenda was supportive and of the view that both sides were undergoing complementary development processes – as reflected in various speeches (China, 2015f; China, 2015g) and ambassador Tian’s (2015) opinion piece:

China and Africa share common aspirations. The new leadership of China has put forward the vision of the Chinese dream and is leading the Chinese people in forging ahead for the great renewal of the Chinese nation. The African Union has drawn up the Agenda 2063, which is an ambitious blueprint for Africa’s development ... China–Africa cooperation will help make our dreams come true.

This FOCAC demonstrated how China sought to respond to its changing economic environment (reflecting how context was influencing its engagement). Expectedly, it began to emphasise relations beyond commodity and energy ties<sup>53</sup> to emphasis on Africa’s development objectives, infrastructure engagement and the importance of developing people links for better relations.

Again, China’s highlighting of people-to-people relations was noticeable during the FOCAC. The second Africa Policy reflected continued emphasis on fostering people links, stating ‘people-to-

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<sup>52</sup> Joel Netshitenzhe (Executive Director Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA)) remarks at the 4th Meeting of the China–Africa Think Tanks Forum (9-10 September 2015), the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Pretoria, South Africa.

<sup>53</sup> Emphasised during discussions with representatives from the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, Johannesburg, South Africa, 12 October 2015.

people and cultural exchanges have flourished with nearly three million visits made between China and Africa every year, garnering greater social and popular support for China–Africa friendship’ (Xinhua, 2015). Updated elements to this engagement were also made in the FOCAC Action Plan and declaration (China, 2015f; 2015g).

For instance, on press, radio, film and television it was mentioned that there would be continued ‘sound support’ of the China–Africa Press Center and even assistance for Africa’s television and radio digitisation; and the hope to provide training to 1,000 African media practitioners a year (Jiang et al. 2016: 2; China, 2015g). The exchanges of think tanks, universities and the broader public continued to receive special mention. As part of boosting relations, Xi announced that China would train 200,000 technicians through regional vocational centres, as well as offer 2,000 opportunities for degrees and diplomas (Bothwell 2016). The improvement of tourism facilitation, such as visa applications, was touched upon; and finally, was cooperation on culture and sport. Linked to education and culture, China pledged to continue setting up more Confucius Institutes, a decade after the first institute was set up in Nairobi (Xinhua, 2015; Sishuwa, 2015). Apart from the Chinese or African ‘Culture in Focus’, it also made mention of organising the ‘Year of an African country’ in China and ‘Year of China’ in Africa. (Notably South Africa, the host of the sixth FOCAC, held its own year in China in 2014 and China followed with its year in South Africa in 2015 (Wu, 2015), further discussed in Chapter 6).

#### 5.4.2.4 Post-2015

It is worth noting that China’s public diplomacy engagement continues beyond the sixth FOCAC. In August 2016 the first China–Africa Public Diplomacy Forum – drawing on diplomats, officials, businessmen and media representatives – was hosted in Tanzania. This event was part of the implementing of FOCAC 2015 outcomes, as an effort to address misperceptions between China and Africa, where the media was specifically encouraged to help bridge the gap between both sides (Xinhua, 2016a).

China continues to emphasise itself as a responsible partner, by responding to key African concerns. Its communication seeks to reassure about its economic performance, as reflected in the press release ‘China Will Seek Progress While Maintain Stability in Economic Growth Next Year’ (China, 2016g). Another concern raised about relations between China and Africa is that the operation of FOCAC projects is not adequately monitored (Naidu, 2015: 7; Alden & Alves, 2016: 8). In response have been various remarks by Chinese policymakers, where the priority of implementation is

emphasised. Foreign Minister Wang Yi highlighted this in a plenary session on the follow-up actions of the Johannesburg Summit (China, 2016d):

We hope that this Coordinators' Meeting will go a long way to facilitating full implementation of the Summit outcomes in a more timely and effective manner and further enriching China–Africa comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership.

Likewise at a 'China–Africa Industrialization and Agricultural Modernization Seminar', held in South Africa in November 2016, a former Chinese official emphasised the need for *input* on how best to implement the projects raised during the FOCAC.<sup>54</sup> Hence, China remains committed to managing its relations with Africa through various public diplomacy instruments. It also suggests that this engagement will remain a common feature of its diplomacy in future. The implication here is that the more China participates in an evolving forum, influenced by interests on both sides, the more its own identity and interests could be altered (see critical constructivism, 2.2.3.1).

#### 5.4.3 Preliminary assessment of China's public diplomacy in Africa

FOCAC and China's framing or narrative of issues on the continent are only one aspect of its overall image and relationship in Africa. CIs – as part of China's global public diplomacy mentioned in Chapter 3 – remain important conduits between China and Africa. The first institute in Africa was launched at the University of Nairobi (Kenya) in 2005; and under the management of FOCAC and its commitments to education and social development, 42 CIs across 29 African countries were established by 2015 (Sun, 2015b). There are 48 CIs as at 2017.<sup>55</sup> Unlike China's reactive response to criticism that set its 2009 public diplomacy drive, these non-profit educational institutes have been proactively popularising Mandarin and the understanding of Chinese culture, deepening China's relations with the world, as well as promoting multiculturalism by partnering with local universities.<sup>56</sup> These institutes are not only educating local publics, since the continent has a far less developed China studies record than other regions like Europe (Hartig, 2015: 53) – they have also been involved in mediating relations between China and Africa. An example in August 2015 was the cultural performances by the CIs in Kenya to 400 Chinese and local staff from the Nairobi–Mombasa Standard Gauge Railway project. The Chinese embassy to Kenya noted that one of the main

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<sup>54</sup> Ji Peiding, former Chinese Vice Foreign Minister, 'China–Africa Industrialization and Agricultural Modernization Seminar', *Human Sciences Research Council*, Sheraton hotel, Pretoria, 9-10 November 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Discussion with Dr David Monyae, Co-Director of the Confucius Institute, University of Johannesburg.

<sup>56</sup> As remarked by the director of the Confucius Institute at Eduardo Mondlane University, Mozambique during the *Voice of China in Africa Conference*, Institute for Social and Economic Studies and Chr. Michelsen Institute, 19-20 February 2014, Maputo.

purposes of the event was to gain public support for new developments, such as the railway project (China, 2015h).

There is even the opinion that CIs are China's most important public diplomacy instrument in Africa. While they have been strongly criticised for their content in places like the US, they are considered relatively successful in aiding local university capacity demands and providing access points for learning Mandarin in Africa.<sup>57</sup> Moreover as of 2016, selected CIs (such as those in Mozambique and Botswana) are together with their local university partners, launching diploma and degree courses in Chinese – which include opportunities for learners to visit Chinese universities and to become translators at local Chinese firms (Mu 2016). Although the local response and how these institutes integrate into the local environment remain less understood. (The case of South Africa will be touched upon in Chapter 6).

As noted in previous chapters, China's image is also built upon engagements beyond an emphasis on culture, values and people. Chinese media players, for instance, are disseminating China's perspective on global issues. They are also building a reputation as digital TV providers (such as the case of StarTimes) and even contributing to Africa's telecommunications – from companies like Huawei and Zhong Xing Telecommunication Equipment (ZTE), who provide the very services and hardware that aid a connected Africa (Zhang, 2016d: 1). It is these new media engagements that Professor Zhang Yanqiu of the Communication University of China, describes as 'a new model of China's public diplomacy in Africa' (Zhang, 2016d: 1). Thus, the boundaries between commerce and national interest are increasingly fluid in the global market place. However, this also means that China's public diplomacy could depend on the economic performance of these amorphous players.

As mentioned, development assistance, while not strictly public diplomacy instruments, has also helped foster a relatively positive image of China in Africa (Kurlantzick, 2009: 171). The appeal of economic relations with China since the 1990s has provided it a foundation for further projection in Africa (Taylor, 1998: 459). Likewise, it has been noted that public opinion surveys in Africa tend to reflect a relatively positive view towards China – sitting higher than other nations in Asia, Europe and the Americas (at about 70% positive in 2016) (Dollar 2016). Equally, African policymakers like Ibrahim Miyaki (2016), CEO of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, welcome China's partnership, stating: 'We are counting on China to continue promoting industrialization in Africa.' However, these perceptions are largely driven by China's economic performance, yet it is still

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<sup>57</sup> Reiterated in discussions with Zhang Yanqiu (Deputy Dean of Journalism and the Director of the Africa Communication Research Centre, Communications University of China, Beijing), Skype, 27 March 2017.

premature to determine China's success as a partner for Africa's industrialisation, which is still unfolding.

China may be at an advantage in comparison to Western players, since it lacks a colonial link to Africa. However, it still needs to maintain contemporary relations, meet expectations and prove its good intentions (Burgman, 2013; Kurlantzick, 2009: 175–176). There is even the view that the lack of colonial links is precisely what places China at a disadvantage today. It faces more 'natural barriers' or lack of deep understanding of the environment – including culture, language and religion – than European partners, some of which maintain a healthy link with African countries (White & Alves, 2006: 58). Likewise Chinese officials have been encouraged to broaden relations beyond African political elites; yet their lack of previous links and the need to build trust with people remains an inhibiting factor (Kurlantzick, 2009: 180).

There have even been hints of racism between both sides, such as those reflected on social media commentaries (Suzuki, 2013: 106; Rothschild, 2015). It is thus understandable why China places much emphasis on the need to develop closer people links, a remaining gap in its relations with Africa. It is also recognised that for FOCAC to create meaningful impact, Africans and Chinese need to better understand one another (Li & April, 2013: 7). The caveat here is that structurally, China remains the stronger partner who funds most FOCAC activities – and therefore drives the narratives portrayed and preferred joint research agendas, reinforcing views of an asymmetrical relationship (Ampiah & Naidu, 2008: 334). While China's engagement has created some African responses, these remain uncoordinated and ad hoc (Alden, 2007: 76). Yet its own foreign policy towards Africa has become more consolidated through the FOCAC. The China–Africa story is hence at risk of creating a narrative where Africa's own determination remains lacking. This is reflected by the recently re-launched Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway in October 2016, where media reports readily stated the project as Chinese financed, built and operated, while local players, like African government involvement, were disregarded (Sanchez, 2017). Yet as the next section highlights, there are also continental determinants that affect the manner in which China uses its diplomacy.

Compounded with this are the contradictory views towards China – as a development partner, economic competitor and a coloniser (Alden, 2007: 5-6) – that persist across African societies. Even when surveys do applaud China's beneficial influence on continental economics and politics, the issue of perceptions is still a challenge, such the low quality of Chinese products (Lekorwe, 2016: 1). Moreover, long-standing African concerns over China's engagement include the support of autocratic regimes, corrupt business practices, poor labour conditions, perpetuating colonial

structures of dependence (as reflected by the long-standing trade imbalance in favour of China), damage to the environment and even issues of human rights (Alden, 2007: 90-91; Le Pere, 2015: 375). There are also observers that emphasise China's own domestic circumstances that affect perceptions in Africa, sharply stating that China could use some of its 'so-called' moral virtue in Africa back home (Chan, 2013).

The heavy burden for China is the extent to which it is able to respond to these criticisms and concerns, particularly those emanating from the continent. In fact, its relations with Africa are not as coordinated as expected, but are a result of complex internal dynamics. For example, while Chinese policymakers have over the years become more transparent about their policies towards Africa and even encouraged Chinese companies and citizens to respect local customs and laws, they have little power in actually enforcing these laws (Kurlantzick, 2009: 175).

In addition media headlines continue to perpetuate alarm over China's role in Africa, including its growing appetite for African-produced food products and land (Brautigam, 2015:2). Still, China is learning that it cannot just be responsive to negative press but needs to continue firmly developing its national identity.<sup>58</sup> Fittingly, China's former envoy to Africa, Liu Guijin,<sup>59</sup> summed up China's image in Africa as affected by three variables: the actions of China itself (through its citizens and enterprises); second is the intervention of third parties in its relations with Africa and lastly, the changing African environment itself. It is this last aspect, as a compilation of processes and determinants that affect China's communication, which will be further interrogated in the next section.

## **5.5 China's public diplomacy in Africa as a product of processes and determinants**

Economic and political links, two interest areas of China in Africa, are deepening. On the economic front, China's domestic restructuring does not spell an end to the demand for commodities; instead its changing structure could mean the increased demand for a new set of minerals like platinum and copper (instead of iron ore and coal) (Harvey, 2015: 40-41). Politically, relations have also advanced as China and the AU become closer. Besides the AU becoming a full FOCAC member and China helping it build its headquarters, China deployed a permanent mission to the AU in early 2015

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<sup>58</sup> Remarks made by He Wenping, Professor and Director of African Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences at the Third China–Africa Think Tank Forum, October 2013, Beijing.

<sup>59</sup> Liu Guijin (China's former envoy to Africa), speech at the Third China–Africa Think Tank Forum, October 2013, Beijing.

(Alden & Alves, 2016: 9). China's responsiveness to engaging multilaterally in Africa is certainly useful in tempering concerns.

The caveat here is that FOCAC may help portray China as a responsible rising power but it cannot yet help it achieve its global objectives. While China and African states have identified the need for changes in the global order, from the UN Security Council to reforming global economic governance, this has remained largely rhetorical – as FOCAC remains predominantly focused on articulating a model of cooperation with Africa (Le Pere & Shelton, 2006: 49; Naidu, 2015: 8). Moreover, China's public diplomacy instruments – as conveying framed narratives and responses to concerns over ties with Africa – can only assist its branding efforts so far. It has the funds to build the very platforms or foundations for engagement and this is an important first step. However, it is unable to control the actual socialisation process (Alden & Alves, 2016). Still it can engage in it. In fact, the importance of discourse was emphasised in the 2009 FOCAC Action Plan (China, 2009b):

Recognizing the importance of increasingly diverse dialogue mechanisms to the deepening of the new type of China–Africa strategic partnership, the two sides resolved to give full play to the existing mechanisms, such as the bilateral commissions, strategic dialogues, foreign ministries' political consultations ...

Critical constructivism remains a useful approach to explaining the role of public diplomacy in helping China achieve its objectives in Africa. It emphasises the role of actors' participation in intersubjective identity formation, as well as the interplay of structure and agency (see 2.2.2). China's relations with Africa are also not fixed; the evolving FOCAC platform and its widening public diplomacy scope are testament to this. So engagement platforms provide spaces where China's narrative of relations with Africa is conveyed, contested and negotiated – and in the process, its engagement and self-perception is affected. Just as Delgado (2015) emphasises the impact of China's identity in influencing the discourse in relation to Africa, the same can be said about how dynamics on the continent are changing the terms of and discourse on the relationship. Former Chinese ambassador to Rwanda, Shu Zhan,<sup>60</sup> even highlighted this pertinent question to his peers: Can China respond adequately to a changing African landscape?

China's deepening involvement in Africa has meant that it is facing the same problems as those encountered by the developed world when operating on the continent, such as managing the concerns and interests of its African partners (Alden & Hughes, 2009: 563; Naidu, 2015: 10). However, the fact that China has invested heavily in the very spaces for socialisation, suggests that it will likely not

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<sup>60</sup> Remarks made at the Third CATTF, 21-22 October 2013, Beijing.

disengage the continent, and by implication will need to respond and manage relations accordingly. In addition, it was highlighted in Chapter 2 that measuring influence and the success of public diplomacy is relative and a difficult task – and thus it would be too simple to label China’s activities as simply successes or failures. Rather public diplomacy engagements can be viewed as contributing to conducive spaces, where discourse is continually occurring and relations increasingly co-constituted.

### 5.5.1 How China responds

In summary, China’s public diplomacy is able to contribute to achieving its interests in Africa, because it has simply created socialising mechanisms and developed over time, as and when needed. For instance, while solidarity politics remains an important link between the two sides, particularly as a reminder that relations will remain ‘win-win’, it would be short sighted to believe that relations have remained unaltered since the 1950s (Alden & Alves, 2008: 55). Instead, ties have existed throughout changing generations of African leaders and contexts (Zhang, 2013: 16). The growing spaces for engagement between China and Africa have also allowed the former to adjust its language and approach accordingly.

There are several examples where China’s engagement has been somewhat shaped by its environment, at times to the point that new items are included into the FOCAC process. Perhaps the very action that China took to increase its public diplomacy abroad in 2009, is itself an example where external forces moved it to engage in a manner it was previously unaccustomed to. Specific to Africa is the narrative of China supporting its industrialisation and Agenda 2063 that grew around the sixth FOCAC – albeit the role of South Africa in encouraging infrastructure investment through the FOCAC is duly noted (Naidu, 2015: 10).

Other instances of China’s amended communication and responses, in order to maintain relations, are considered in the rest of this section. The first is its engagement with Zimbabwe, where China has had to respond to a changing political landscape. The second is China’s peace and security engagement in Africa. Again, due to its own changing interests and continental developments, China is proactively responding with financial support and the formalisation of this area, by including it into the FOCAC agenda and engaging more readily with multilateral bodies. The last instance involves China’s interest in portraying itself as a responsible global player, which is expressed in part by its Africa-specific response to the illegal wildlife trade (mainly ivory). These examples support the critical constructivist view (2.2.3.1), mentioned earlier in this chapter and reiterated in the BRI



snapshot (4.4), that a state's identity and interests can be formed by its interactions with other actors and the varying degrees of power between them.

#### 5.5.1.1 Zimbabwe

Contrary to the notion that China only maintains relations with ruling political elites, there are also signs that it is diversifying its links somewhat. Alden and Hughes (2009: 583) argue that there is increasingly tension between state-centric principles (that have been at the core of China's foreign policy since the 1950s) and China's contemporary engagement in Africa. This is reflected in China's relations with Zimbabwe.

Zimbabweans accept that relations with China are necessary, but they are critical about the nature of the deals signed with the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) and direction of loans.<sup>61</sup> China's relations with the Zimbabwean public (as well as the private sector) are limited in comparison to the US and EU (Edinger & Burke, 2008: 25). Indeed its engagement remains principally at a formal political level. Nevertheless, to a subtle degree, China has since 2008 been forced to engage in and respond to wider interests through the development of relations with the longest-standing opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), whose strong domestic support made it a force that could not be ignored (Alao, 2015: 17). Similarly, the MDC understands the deep extent to which China is imbedded in Zimbabwean economic life, while other external players have maintained sanctions against the country (Alao, 2015: 17).

Closer relations are also the result of the opposition reaching out, expanding its basket of external relations. In 2012 former prime minister and head of the MDC, the late Morgan Tsvangirai, and a 31-member delegation visited China in an attempt to get Chinese businesses to invest in Zimbabwe's mining, agriculture and infrastructure (Conway-Smith, 2012), but in 2015, he also visited the US to discuss the deepening crisis in the country (Kwaramba, 2015). This is a signal of a paradigm shift, where the opposition and China are slowly including one another in their list of engagements.

This illustration points to a general determinant of the nature of China's relations in Africa: that is the reaching out to China by African policymakers for their own interests. Indeed Rawnsley (2009: 284) raises another instance – the African elite role in the China–Taiwan struggle is linked to how the issue could benefit their interests, and not driven by a deep historical friendship. Of course, a

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<sup>61</sup> Discussion with the Progressive Teachers Union Zimbabwe (PTUZ), Harare, 19 October 2015.

further underlying influence is the very dynamics between political proponents within African countries.

#### 5.5.1.2 Peace and security

China has been a notable participant in UN peacekeeping operations in Africa since the mid-2000s – in Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan (Alden, 2007: 26). In the 2009 FOCAC Action Plan, China affirmed that it would continue to support UN peace building (and the role of the Security Council) and subscribe to the notion of ‘Solving African problems by Africans’, while the African side welcomed the appointment of China’s Special Representative for African Affairs and encouraged China’s support in countering piracy off the Gulf of Aden and coast of Somalia (China, 2009b). At this point, China remained averse to any engagement that could be construed as direct interventionism and would only engage in UN activities with host state consent (Large, 2016: 50; Bowen, 2016).

However, its role in Africa’s security environment became more pronounced as new challenges arose, along with expectations for China’s role beyond economics (Enuka, 2010: 215). Although China’s expansion into this space was economically motivated, it faced various kinds of risks, ranging from reputational risk (by being associated with authoritarian regimes), risk to its businesses and investments in unstable environments and the safety of its citizens in Africa (Alden, 2014). Particular incidents that prompted a change in China’s approach included the evacuation of thousands of Chinese citizens during the Libya crisis in 2011. This was followed by threats to Chinese energy assets in places like Sudan and South Sudan, and then the 2015 hostage situation during the terror attacks in Mali, where three senior employees of China Railway Construction Corporation were killed (Wu, 2013: 17; Large, 2016: 50; Patey, 2016). China was thus led to seek balance between its stance of non-interference and non-indifference, a shift in thinking that the AU itself adopted (Large, 2016: 50).

By the 2012 FOCAC, both sides were aware of the security challenges on the continent threatening their interests. Chinese firms, for example, were no longer necessarily seeking new investment opportunities but rather seeking to protect the investments they had already made – and the events mentioned above were posing a threat to this. In turn, both sides committed to closer collaboration through policy coordination, preventive diplomacy, capacity building and other related areas, in order to combat issues like trade in illegal goods and small arms (China, 2012). The relationship in this respect became more institutionalised, as the Chinese side launched the ‘Initiative on China–

Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security' to provide financial and technical support to the AU's peace-support operations (China, 2012).

During September 2015, ahead of the sixth FOCAC, President Xi announced at the UN General Assembly that China would provide 8,000 troops to the peacekeeping missions of the UN (United Nations, 2015). By the FOCAC that December, both sides agreed that collaboration on peace and security issues was important in order to create ripe conditions for developing economic and cultural relations (Large, 2016: 50). Specifically, the declaration referred to the settlement of disputes through dialogue and consultation; emphasis on a collective response to non-traditional security threats (from terrorism to food security); and finally to implementing the initiative launched at the previous FOCAC that would support the AU's peace operations (China, 2015f). In addition was the setting-up of China's first overseas military logistics base, outside of South East Asia, in Djibouti (mentioned in the previous chapter). Notably China also became the second-largest financial contributor, following the US, to the UN peacekeeping budget in 2016 (Bowen, 2016).

The changing security context in Africa is considered a powerful motivating factor for China's adjusted engagements. While this area is not strictly related to public diplomacy there is an important public diplomacy element. First, African partners have welcomed China's role in this respect, as an advance from interaction in traditional spaces. Again, the security space demonstrates that the sources of China's image go beyond culture, tradition or values. Second, China readily emphasises its role in this area as a partnership, working with continental bodies and the UN. All China's military missions to date involve the UN and as of January 2017, it was involved in seven of the nine missions by the international body in Africa, more than any other Security Council member (Fox, 2017).

Last, as evidence of its goodwill, Chinese policymakers have emphasised their country's role in Africa's security environment. Wang Yi demonstrated this during a follow-up meeting of the sixth FOCAC (China, 2016d):

[S]ecurity cooperation has seen notable progress with markedly enhanced positive impact. China has been more actively helping African countries in strengthening their national defense, stability and counter-terrorism capacity building, supporting the AU in speeding up the building of the African Standby Force, and taking part in the effort of IGAD and the East African Community to advance the peace process in South Sudan and Burundi, greatly intensifying its constructive participation in the good-offices for resolving African hotspots.

### 5.5.1.3 The wildlife factor

The final example is a strong instance where China was required to manage its relations and image in Africa, in order to ensure its interests on the continent were not threatened.

It is recognised that concerns about China's role on the continent, in relation to its impact on the local environment – and export of its domestic malpractices – have been enduring (Kurlantzick, 2009: 177). However, the issue of illegal wildlife trade has become more acute under globalisation, with the increase in unregulated trade (Wu, 2015a: 2). Illegal wildlife trade is described as the fourth-largest illegitimate business globally, raising an estimated \$19bn a year, which is used to fund corruption and other forms of crime (Okore, 2014: 30).

In the midst of China having positively launched its public diplomacy initiatives on the continent and its own domestic anti-corruption drive, news reports alleged that the Chinese delegation (that included a handful of Chinese businesspeople) accompanying President Xi Jinping on his 2013 state visit to Tanzania, was involved in buying ivory illegally (Joselow, 2014). Whether the reports were true or not, it added to the suspicion over China's engagement on the continent, especially as similar stories circulated regarding the activities of Chinese nationals in Africa, such as 'Spotlight on Zambezi's ivory smuggling' (Huang, 2014) and 'Chinese crime rings and the global rhino horn trade' (Rademeyer, 2014).

By 2014, stronger local law enforcement response to such cases also emerged, for instance two cases of Chinese nationals attempting to smuggle ivory out of Kenya, were eventually arrested by authorities (Kaigwa & Wu, 2015). The role of civil society in the Kenya case was also significant, as a petition (started in 2013), calling on business and government leaders to label poaching a national disaster – as well as popular campaigns through online hashtags #HandsOffOurElephants – were created (Kaigwa & Wu, 2015).

The Chinese leadership seemed to have been awakened by the strong views coming out of Kenya and beyond. When Chinese premier Li Keqiang visited Kenya in May 2014, he was quick to emphasise China's commitment to wildlife protection, adding that environmental cooperation was a key area of future China–Africa cooperation; he and even pledged \$10m for wildlife conservation (Kaigwa & Wu, 2015). Li promised a China–Africa Joint Research Centre for the study of biodiversity, technology and environmental protection in Nairobi. A few months later, the Chinese ambassador to Kenya, Dr Liu (2014), published an article in the local *Daily Nation* where he summarised the premier's visit as:

[A]nother strong commitment to Kenya, to Africa and to the world. A number of policies have been adopted to promote ecological progress and incorporate it into the whole process of advancing economic, political, cultural and social progress.

Of course in the lead-up to the sixth FOCAC Summit news developments continued to circulate, such as the much-reported ‘Chinese Ivory Queen’ – described as a kingpin in the ivory trade in Africa – who was arrested after being caught smuggling over 700 elephant tusks from Tanzania (Smith, 2015). It is true that single incidents cannot be generalised or equated to an entire relationship, but merely one feature; however, perceptions are often at risk of being formed by single cases (Alden, 2007: 125).

The wildlife issue became more significant at the time of the summit in December 2016 and this is reflected by several panels and events related to the topic held in South Africa. An example was the China–South Africa Youth Volunteers Programme in Wildlife Conservation Forum held in Pretoria on 17 November (Wekesa, 2016). At the end of the same month, the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) and the Aspen Institute hosted a three-day dialogue at South Africa’s Kruger National Park. Including the participation of business leaders, former ambassadors and celebrities, a formal proposal was drafted at the event to encourage the inclusion of wildlife and environmental issues into the FOCAC agenda (AWF, 2015). The Kenyan–Chinese organisation, China House, also hosted an event titled ‘Is the China–Africa Nexus an Emerging Partnership to Combat Wildlife Poaching and Trafficking?’ on 2 December.<sup>62</sup> This event brought local stakeholders, Chinese businesspersons in South Africa and a retired Chinese ambassador in African to the table.

Notably, wildlife was for the first time addressed in the FOCAC, through the Johannesburg Action Plan. It specifically stated (China, 2015g):

The African side highly appreciates that the Chinese government supports Africa in its efforts to protect wildlife resources. The two sides will strengthen cooperation in the area of wildlife protection, help African countries to improve the protection capabilities, build the capacity of environmental rangers, provide African countries with training opportunities on environmental and ecological conservation, explore the possibility of cooperating on wildlife protection demonstration projects and jointly fight against the illegal trade of fauna and flora products, especially addressing endangered species poaching on the African continent, in particular elephants and rhinos.

The recognition of the need to address this area does suggest a change in the nature of China’s engagement (Wu, 2016: 35). This was even further emphasised when in September–October 2016, South Africa hosted the global Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild

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<sup>62</sup> The author participated in these discussions.

Fauna and Flora (CITES) conference, where the ivory trade and exploitation of other endangered species were highlighted. China was later congratulated by the CITES Secretary General, John Scanlon, for the measures it had taken to combat illegal wildlife crime (Li, 2016). By December 2016 – nearly a year after China and the US (two of the largest ivory markets) indicated near complete bans of the import and export of ivory – China finally announced it would shut down its domestic ivory trade in December 2017 (Actman, 2016). How this will be implemented remains to be seen.

It is clear that China can no longer ignore issues, like illegal wildlife trade, increasingly covered by the international media and emphasised by African civil society in their engagement with government. Its announcements on combatting this trade, namely ivory, reflect recognition of the serious reputational damage to its image, should it ignore the calls for action. The remaining trial that China faces in setting out on this path is the gaps between its official rhetoric and the actions of individual Chinese citizens, who communicate different faces of China in Africa.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The contemporary history of China–Africa relations, described as sporadic, began in the 1950s. Yet the actual basis for current relations started in the 1990s, as China’s interests transformed from ideological to include economic – and continued to develop beyond the inception of FOCAC in 2000. This forum was adopted as a snapshot for the chapter, as it reveals much about China itself, whose funding and driving of related activities provides it a degree of structural determination. However, the forum also represents a platform whose meaning is mediated by the interaction between China and Africa. This means it is essentially what constructivists view as a ‘socially constructed’ entity.

In terms of whether China uses its Sinocentric history or if it adapts its narratives (see objectives in 1.3), China continues to adopt the instrumental use of history or what is referred to as ‘framing’. Yet rather than relying on its imperial past (besides the narrative of Zheng He’s voyage to Africa), it draws on a shared colonial experience and more contemporary links, such as solidarity politics during Africa’s independence struggles, and China’s support of Africa during the Cold War (as exemplified by the TAZARA railway). It also emphasises particular aspects of relations over others, as the FOCAC demonstrates. These narratives help justify China’s growing economic and political interests in Africa, which at a global level provide a window into how it would perform as a

responsible power. Hence, China does not specifically rely on a Sinocentric world narrative – that is its past centrality in the tributary system – in this snapshot.

The use of public diplomacy in the FOCAC was then demonstrated in two ways, which provide deeper understanding on how China conceptualises public diplomacy in Africa. First, the triennial forums themselves are ‘controlled events’ where agendas are made publicly available and help temper African concerns, as well as becoming templates from which media and other observers take their cues. This emphasises the significance of global summitry (see 2.3.4.1) that is a symbolic platform for the expression of identity and interests. Second, the incorporation of people engagement began to take place incrementally – from the fourth FOCAC meeting, following the 2008 Beijing Olympics and global financial crisis. More funds towards developing people relations were pledged at the fifth forum in 2012. Not only did China seek to develop public diplomacy further by the sixth forum, it already had new narratives (like its assistance in the 2014 Ebola crisis) to draw upon, as well as a new set of issues (like concerns over its slowing domestic economy) to counter, under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Importantly China’s public diplomacy reflects the view of critical constructivists: actors themselves have a role in producing change through their participation in reproducing, constituting and fixing the objects they observe.

Even though China’s image in Africa – through its development model and economic engagement – has been relatively positive, it is still required to demonstrate that it can maintain an upward trajectory in relations. A primary challenge remains the ‘natural barriers’ of culture and language differences. The question then is how China can achieve its interests, particularly as a set of new factors – including a changing African environment – is affecting it. In responding to the main thesis question, this chapter highlights that while it is difficult to determine the success of China’s narrative and image building in Africa, the fact that it habitually uses public diplomacy (as noted by the FOCAC) and responds to continental developments (from changing political dynamics, the rise of peace and security issues and concerns over illegal wildlife trade), underlines its unmovable commitment, thereby promoting its interests in Africa pragmatically. The caveat is that China’s participation in negotiating its interests, within an evolving African context, could very well affect its own original intent. This reflects the view that a state’s identity and interests are influenced by its interactions with others (see 2.2.3.1), particularly as the FOCAC exemplifies an intersubjective space, where structure and agency are mutually constituted (see 2.2.2).

The bilateral level, represented by China's links with South Africa in the next chapter, raises the question over whether overarching public diplomacy strategies can help respond to particular nuances in relations at the local level.



## Chapter 6 China–South Africa relations: the local element of public diplomacy

### 6.1 Introduction

As the final snapshot of China’s public diplomacy in Africa, the special relationship between China and South Africa (the bilateral level) will be explored. South Africa happens to be a mature market and an important economic partner to China, with reliable regulatory systems, and is thus viewed as a ‘locomotive’ for Africa’s industrialisation efforts (China, 2016c). However, it is also a fledgling democracy and is governed by the rule of law (Sidiropoulos, 2006:104; Alden & Wu, 2016). Such traits have opened various entry points for China, leading to a relatively diversified – and sometimes, even equalised – relationship. Yet these ties have also created a dilemma for China’s diplomacy. In particular is the missing connection and long-standing perceptions that remain – which one diplomat even described as ‘venom’<sup>63</sup> – between both nations’ societies. In response and challenging persistent perceptions is China’s public diplomacy. In fact, as noted in 1.1, South Africa ranks first on the continent in terms of the largest number of Chinese cultural activities, tourists, Chinese students, sister cities and CIs and Chinese community (Liu 2015:31-32). The question is whether these components adequately meet China’s interests.

In relation to the main question under study (see 1.3), this chapter explores how China promotes its interests in South Africa through public diplomacy. It will: (a) address the historical relationship briefly; and (b) provide an outline of the contemporary relationship under South Africa’s former president Jacob Zuma, specifically between 2009 and 2016, when relations began to take a stronger turn towards economic emphasis. Having situated the background of relations, (c) the specific narratives commonly adopted by Chinese policymakers (and whether they apply a Sinocentric world narrative) will be investigated, followed by (d) China’s public diplomacy activities in South Africa – from 2009 to 2016. It is at this point that (e) the local determinants driving China’s public diplomacy and engagement in South Africa will become clearer. This chapter will thus reinforce the constructivist view expressed in section 2.2.3.1 – that the pattern of interactions *between* nations is essentially determined by both identities (Geldenhuys 2012: 31).

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<sup>63</sup> Remarks by DIRCO official at the China-South Africa Ambassadorial Forum, DIRCO, Pretoria, 19 September 2013.

## 6.2 History of relations

### 6.2.1 Pre-1994 history

Contact between China and South Africa can be dated as far back as the mid-17th century, when Chinese migrants were brought as labourers to Cape Town from the Dutch colony Batavia (present day Jakarta). Other groups arrived later, after the discovery of gold in Johannesburg around 1886 and again, after the shortage of labour following the South African War (1899-1902) (Harris, 2007: 5; Williams, 2016). By 1905, the Qing dynasty government had set up a consulate in Johannesburg to manage the affairs of the Chinese community, particularly mine labourers (Alden, 1997: 80). These early interactions do not feature prominently outside of historical and statistical records, which include prison inventories, notices of enslavement and court cases (Williams, 2016).

By 1931, South Africa and the ROC agreed to form diplomatic relations in the wake of global economic depression and the creation of the Commonwealth; and continued their interaction during the founding of the UN in 1945, although they were clearly divided by language, culture and geography (Alden, 1997: 80). The tides began to turn at the founding of the PRC under Mao Zedong, which challenged the nationalists under Chiang Kai-Shek, who eventually fled to the island of Taiwan (Alden, 1997: 80). The ROC was thus replaced by the PRC on the mainland.

South Africa maintained diplomatic relations with the ROC (and this continued through to the 1980s when both sides became internationally isolated), even though the newly elected Nationalist Party implemented a stricter racial policy towards 'non-whites' since 1948 (Alden & Wu, 2016: 205). At the same time, Beijing was behind South Africa's liberation struggle, as reflected by its support for the Pan Africanist Congress, while Moscow supported the rival African National Congress (ANC), along with the South African Communist Party (SACP) (Alden & Wu, 2016: 205). Nevertheless China's unwavering support led to ANC president Oliver Tambo's visit to Beijing in 1963 and his meeting with former Premier Zhao Ziyang in Lusaka in 1982, paving the way for closer party relations and some Chinese financial support to the SACP (Le Pere & Shelton, 2007: 161; Fransmen, 2015: xxii; Alden & Wu, 2014: 6). The SACP and CCP maintained close relations throughout the apartheid years and beyond (Fransmen, 2015: xxii).

By the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa's official relations with China were virtually non-existent; but then the China-Taiwan issue quickly became a major foreign policy issue for the new ANC-led government (Alden, 1997: 83; Liu, 2015: 26). Despite competing promises by Beijing and Taipei that led to intense internal debate over the 'two Chinas' question, there was strong

concern over the impact of Hong Kong's return to China in 1997 and South Africa's representation in it (Alden & Wu 2014:7; Wu 2016). South Africa's ambition to play a larger role in international affairs required it to build relations with China (like most of the international community), given the latter's status as a permanent member in the UN Security Council. There was also the practical calculation of the potential of economic relations with China in comparison to Taiwan and of course, the remnants of historical relations (Le Pere & Shelton, 2007: 162).

China and South Africa eventually signed a Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations in late 1997, where South Africa committed to the One-China policy, and official diplomatic relations were established by January 1998 (Naidu, 2008: 171; Spies, 2008: 78). Thereafter China's relationship with the ANC government began to flourish.

### 6.2.2 1998–2009: the formation of high-level links

The historical relationship accelerated the creation of deeper links, soon after official ties were set. In April 2000 the Pretoria Declaration, which was announced during President Jiang Zemin's official visit, highlighted the shared interest in constructive government-to-government dialogue and led to the creation of a bi-national commission (launched the following year) in order to improve areas like economic relations through trade and investment (Shelton, 2008: 260; Shelton, 2012: 230). Regarding Africa, there was mutual commitment to continental development and security, as well as promoting a more equitable global order informed by non-intervention and mutual benefit (Alden & Wu, 2016: 206). By 2004, relations were defined as a 'strategic partnership' based on equality, mutual interest and common development, which coincided neatly with the core of the ANC's foreign relations (Bradley, 2016: 882).

In practice, however, President Thabo Mbeki's diplomatic focus on continental initiatives – namely his interest in the African Renaissance – meant that his interests remained in fostering closer aid and investment relations with the G8 nations (despite the launching of FOCAC in 2000) (Alden & Wu, 2016). South Africa's new relationship with China also produced scepticism, as Mbeki himself cautioned that Africa should not become merely a raw material supplier to China (*Mail & Guardian*, 2006). This was further complicated by commercial competition between Chinese and South African firms, as well as varying diplomatic approaches towards issues, such as Zimbabwe and Sudan, on the continent (Alden & Wu, 2016: 208). However, the shared membership of the UN Security Council (South Africa as a non-permanent member) provided a space where both sides slowly compromised on their positions towards African issues (Alden & Wu, 2014: 8).

Bilateral relations developed as China's profile on the continent rose (Spies, 2008: 79). Commercially speaking, economic globalisation meant that Asian powerhouses in China, including Shanghai and Fujian, were increasingly replacing Taiwanese businesses in South Africa.<sup>64</sup> One of China's largest recorded investment stakes in Africa's financial sector was made in this period. In 2007–2008, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) invested a 20% stake (\$5.46bn) in South Africa's Standard Bank, with the hope of expanding its commercial interests in Africa, as well as its investment banking, insurance and private equity (Naidu, 2008: 187; April & Shelton, 2015: 1; Gelb, 2016: 32). Likewise just a decade after formal diplomatic ties, China became South Africa's largest trading partner (Alden & Wu, 2014: 14). Hence, economic relations deepened along closer and conducive political ties. While global factors, like China's 2001 WTO membership, reinforced Pretoria's decision to agree to a strategic partnership, the onset of the 2008 financial crisis also gravitated China towards the continent (Alden & Wu, 2014: 15). By the first half of 2009, South Africa's exports to struggling major import economies, such as the US and EU, had fallen by 32.8% (International Trade Centre, 2009: 4).

Yet the burgeoning political and economic connection remained at odds with the experience of South African civil society. One instance was the deep concern over the impact of Chinese imports on the manufacturing sector in South Africa in the mid-2000s, which led trade unionists to paint relations as perpetuating links with traditional industrialised economies (Alden & Wu, 2014). Perhaps the most significant civil society impact on China's engagement – which caused it to limit its arms sales towards Zimbabwe – is the 2008 case of a Chinese shipment of weapons destined for Zimbabwe's defence force at the height of sensitive elections in the country. This case saw regional civil society cooperation, where for instance, South African civil society played an integral role in the campaign to prevent the vessel, *An Yue Jiang*, from offloading weapons in a South African port (Fritz, 2009).

Another unexpected impact on South Africa's foreign relations was the ANC's abrupt decision to replace Mbeki's leadership, temporarily, with Kgalema Motlanthe in 2008 (Alden & Wu, 2016: 208–209). Yet the financial crunch reaffirmed China as a fitting partner to help weather the storm. Notably relations took a favourable turn, as Jacob Zuma – who during his presidential campaign praised the Asian-style development model – became president in 2009. (He later took a second term, expected to run from 2014 to 2019, although he resigned on 14 February 2018).

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<sup>64</sup> Discussion with Erwin Pon, Rand Merchant Bank Developer (China) and Chairman of The Chinese Association, Johannesburg, 24 January 2014.

### 6.3 Contemporary relations 2009–2016

#### 6.3.1 Diplomatic ties

The deep government-to-government ties, in relation to other aspects of relations, persisted under Zuma. Whereas the Mbeki administration emphasised continental and global activism, the Zuma government began to instrumentalise foreign policy for domestic development interests, which usefully linked to relations with China (Alden & Wu, 2016: 209). Also while South Africa's traditional Western partners were becoming inward-looking after 2008, there was opportunity for closer alignment of interests with China – which had the potential to strengthen South Africa's credentials as a continental 'representative' (Alden & Wu, 2016: 209&221). The Trade Minister, Rob Davies, stated that China's expanding presence meant that Africa no longer has to 'sign on the dotted line whatever is shoved under our noses ... we now have alternatives and that's to our benefit' (Van Beek, 2011: 403).

By Zuma's first state visit to China in August 2010, relations had been elevated to a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' – defined as the highest level of cooperation according to the maturity of friendship and cooperation, bestowed to those with an important status in various regions in the world (Bang, 2017: 5). The Beijing Declaration was also signed. This was an indication of the commitment to strengthen and deepen cooperation and exchanges between both sides, through concrete measures. In particular, the declaration outlined 38 bilateral cooperation agreements that included political dialogues, trade and investment, mineral exploration and agriculture – all elaborations of the 2004 strategic cooperation agreement (Alden & Wu, 2014: 10; Bradley, 2016: 882).

Another mechanism to manage relations was created in the form of the Joint Inter-Ministerial Working Group on China–South Africa Co-operation, in order to identify and address any obstacles in the implementation of bilateral commitments (Alden & Wu, 2014: 10). This arrangement envisaged bi-annual meetings between deputy presidents and annual ministerial meetings, to facilitate trust and cooperation; however, it was only ratified in 2013 and issues of implementation remained, due to issues like the lack of capacity on the South African side (Alden & Wu, 2014: 10).

A further underpinning for the advancement of relations was the shared interests at the global level, reinforced by economic interests and the desire of Beijing to strengthen planning and coordination between the two sides regarding international affairs (Alden & Wu, 2016: 209). The declaration made stronger emphasis on joint efforts at the regional (such as socio-economic development and

peace and security issues) and global levels (UN Security Council, G20 and FOCAC); there was also commitment to maintain contact between both presidents for increasing support and shared understanding (Stratsis Incite, 2010). One South African official even emphasised that both sides meet regularly at the margins of important international meetings.<sup>65</sup>

Most notable is the BRICS grouping, which South Africa joined, with the support of China, in late 2010 (Alden & Wu, 2014: 13). Although the group members have little in common, they collectively disagree with their historical marginalisation and Western domination of multilateral institutions (Qobo & Soko 2016). In short, they believe the status quo cannot persist and seek to address the inequities in the global system and the unbalanced global distribution of power (Naidu, 2015: 7). More recently, the BRICS are proving they are more than just an ideational grouping, as they – not without challenges – have sought for policy innovation through the creation of the NDB, an emerging finance provider (Qobo & Soko, 2016). This has led another South African diplomat to describe the group as ‘the most dynamic political and economic force of this century’.<sup>66</sup> It is clear that China–South Africa relations advanced during this period, because of a favourable context. Constructivists (see 2.2.2) would explain that this relationship retains its symbolic meaning through the very context and facts by which it is interpreted.

### 6.3.2 Economic relations

All the while, practical economic links have also progressed. The interest in this aspect was clearly demarcated during Zuma’s visit to Beijing, when he led a delegation of government ministers and about 300 business representatives (South Africa Info, 2010). Trade jumped from R121bn in 2008 to R270bn in 2013, reinforcing China’s status as the country’s largest trading partner (Ensor 2014). In relation to the continent, South Africa together with Angola, made up almost half of China’s trade with the continent (as of 2016), and both countries are also primary destinations for China’s foreign direct investment (Jiang et al., 2016: 3). Notably, Chinese firms have largely invested in the country’s mining. For example, a Chinese consortium owns a 20% stake in Sibanye Gold; another is involved in over 50% of Palabora Copper; while Jichuan Group and CADFund own a 45% stake in Wesizwe Platinum; and finally, Sinosteel owns 60% in Dilokong Chrome Mine (Crotty, 2015: 3). Still China’s investment remains modest in comparison – barring 2008 – to that of the UK, US and Germany (Shelton, 2012: 233; Sandrey, 2013: 3). There has also been relative South African success in investing in China (Naidu, 2008: 179; Alden & Wu, 2016: 214; Shelton & Kabemba, 2012: 77).

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<sup>65</sup> Discussion with DIRCO official, DIRCO, Pretoria, 23 September 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Remarks made by South African diplomat at the China-South Africa Ambassadorial Forum, DIRCO, Pretoria, 19 September 2013.

Yet the ICBC-Standard Bank deal – reported as one of the largest equity investments in South Africa – is still not classified as an employment-generating investment (Alden & Wu, 2016: 214). Both trade and investment links have been affected by dynamics emanating from both sides. For instance, off the back of China’s own domestic restructuring and the fall in commodity prices around 2015, imports from the continent fell at an alarming 40% (*Mail & Guardian Africa*, 2016). Similarly, China’s investments in South Africa are impacted by the fact that it is a relatively new player and the latter is a relatively mature, regulated and rigid labour market (Alden & Wu, 2016: 215). This explains why Chinese firms seek joint ventures, in order to counter the mentioned obstacles.

At the same time, this space is developing. Since around 2013, parallel announcements of Chinese acquisitions in other sectors have started to take place. This includes CADFund’s stake in one of South Africa’s largest media consortiums, Independent News and Media; StarTime’s bailout of On Digital Media’s pay-tv service, TopTV and also, the supply of telecoms equipment by Huawei and ZTE (Crotty, 2015: 3). Other developments are acquisitions of a vineyard (Val de Vie); a prospective mixed residential and retail facility in Eastern Johannesburg by Shanghai’s Zendai property (which is reportedly no longer taking place); and the revival of the Coega Industrial Development Zone near East London (Alden & Wu, 2016: 215-216). Notably, Beijing Automobile International Corporation stated it planned to invest around \$823m (about R11bn) in a new automotive manufacturing plant in the same zone (Sanchez, 2016). This suggests that China’s investments are not only targeting resource-driven African economies but also diversified economies (Carike, Elsabe & Henri, 2012: 11589).

### 6.3.3 Relations beyond rhetoric?

Despite the uncertainty of China’s economy and the pending outcome of its investments, bilateral relations have continued to strengthen. During Zuma’s second state visit to China in late 2014, he noted that South Africa is ready to ‘advance economic partnership with China in pursuit of inclusive growth and job creation’ (Naidu, 2015: 5). The visit also saw the adoption of the Five to Ten Year Strategic Programme for Co-operation, signed by both foreign ministers, which summarises what the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership seeks to achieve (for instance, the 2015 focus was on South Africa’s industrialisation, agribusiness and aquaculture, the establishment of science parks and financial cooperation).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Discussion with DIRCO official, DIRCO, Pretoria, 23 September 2015.

Additionally in late 2015, South Africa played host and African co-chair (2012–2018) to the sixth FOCAC – which happened to be the first FOCAC meeting held at summit level in Africa – where it sought to incorporate stronger African ownership, with mixed success. While on the side-lines of the summit, Zuma and Xi held bilateral discussions that concluded with the signing of 26 agreements, up to the value of R94bn (about \$6.5bn) (South Africa, 2015). By November 2016, South Africa’s then Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa met with his Chinese counterpart Li Yuanchao, highlighting and reinforcing the continuities of the relationship, as both sides met in the context of the Bi-National Commission.

The Zuma-led government had been vocal in its praise for China. The ANC’s National General Council discussion document described China as South Africa’s most important strategic ally, even calling the Chinese economy a ‘dawn of hope’, providing possibilities for a new world order (Bradley, 2015: 881). In 2014, the SACP even pushed for a street in the city of Tshwane to be named after Chairman Mao,<sup>68</sup> and in 2015, Zuma made special mention of China, more than any other partner, in his State of the Nation address (Wekesa, 2015a). The same could be said for his 2016 speech as well (South Africa, 2016). South African diplomats have also on occasion mentioned their appreciation for China’s engagement with the country’s view, regarding issues on the continent (Alden & Wu, 2016: 213).<sup>69</sup>

China–South Africa links have progressed in less than two decades of official ties. Both sides are also managing to fulfil their interests through this relationship; as in the case of South Africa, it is seeking to re-orientate itself away from Western-based values to development pragmatism (Alden & Wu, 2016:203). Therefore the bilateral relationship constitutes what is described as a ‘thin intersubjective space’ (see 2.3.4.2 and 3.5), where interests are performed and negotiated. However, the question is whether relations can maintain their upward trajectory, while emphasis remains around key individuals and sectors, without the incorporation or appreciation of broader society. It is this conundrum of preserving a comprehensive and strategic partnership that has sparked China’s interest in engaging in public diplomacy in South Africa.

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<sup>68</sup> As highlighted by a representative of the SACP at the ‘Evolving Dynamics of China–Africa Relations’ seminar, HSRC, Pretoria, 23 October 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Reiterated in discussions with DIRCO official, DIRCO, Pretoria, 23 September 2015.



## 6.4 China's public diplomacy in South Africa

### 6.4.1 Narratives in China's communication with South Africa

The narratives used at the bilateral level largely mirror those adopted in China's communication with the continent. As outlined in the previous chapter (see 5.2) they include recollections of China's voyages to Africa in the 15th century, the shared experience of colonisation in the 19th century and the friendship developed since the Cold War period. Chinese official speeches in South Africa also reflect a dual purpose, as they often address the specific bilateral relationship, as well as China's relationship with Africa, with South Africa noted as an important member.

A South African official at the Department of Arts and Culture noted this double purpose in the lead-up to the 2015 FOCAC Summit (Graham, 2016: 19). They described the 2015 Year of China in South Africa events as supporting aspects of the bilateral relationship and since South Africa was hosting the FOCAC, it presented the opportunity to strengthen China's relations with the continent. Likewise, when Ambassador Tian addressed a South African audience, during the launch of Xi's book, he began by remarking on Xi's close connection to South African and then later, highlighted the synergies in China's relations with Africa (China, 2015i). He later even said that 'China–South Africa cooperation plays an important part in China–Africa comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership' and that the 'relationship has become one of the best examples of cooperation between developing countries' (China, 2016e).

While the underlying messages of a close connection are similar to those at the continental level, there are also specific traits emphasised to reinforce relations. Some instances are provided, which highlight a long-standing historical link and continued synergies between both sides; a unique partnership; and lastly, a shared global outlook. The instrumental use of narrative (also referred to as 'framing' in 2.4.5.4) in order to fit the local context is an example of how China promotes its interests in Africa.

When former President Hu Jintao made a speech at the University of Pretoria, he began by reminding the audience of the historical friendship – particularly during South Africa's apartheid struggle – and said 'the Chinese people stood firmly with you, and our two peoples forged a profound friendship' (Le Pere & Shelton, 2007: 216). This speech is no exception and other officials have remarked on the strong historical connection between both sides, despite their geographic distance (Li, 2016; China, 2013b). This includes China's Vice-President, Li Yuanchao, who stated so in a 2016 opinion piece for the South African newspaper, *The Star*. Beyond historical links, there

have also been remarks on the shared aspirations of both sides, where China is seeking to fulfil the China Dream for prosperity and the renewal of the nation, while South Africa is seeking the best path of development (China, 2013b). Statements such as ‘China and South Africa are both in a key transitional period’ also reinforce this view of shared contemporary experiences (China, 2016e).

The bilateral relationship is also considered uniquely close, in comparison to the rest of Africa, since ties have leapfrogged to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership since 2010 (China, 2013b; China, 2016e; Li, 2016). As much as this reflects the manner in which relations have practically diversified over a short period, others highlight the normative underpinning of describing relations in this manner. Each nation engages the other for different reasons (Naidu, 2008: 186; Bang, 2017). China’s approach to South Africa aligns concretely with its Africa Policy and draws synergies to its interests at the multilateral and continental level, while the South African government started engaging China in accordance with its own foreign policy ideals of South-South cooperation, peace and stability and African development. Hence, there is no singular engagement instrument for this relationship and relations are instead pinned on like-mindedness (Naidu 2008:186).

In an article on China’s ‘state-speak’ and partnership classifications, Bang (2017) identifies that how China labels its relations matters. By creating a political mood (or ‘atmospherics’) – through sustaining and purposefully practising a relationship as consultative and a partnership (like the use of joint statements), rather than enforcement – the likelihood of receptivity to China’s political and normative power will be heightened. This approach is particularly useful (from a utilitarian perspective), when a relationship is still progressing, as the receiving state will perceive relations as more significant (Bang, 2017: 7). Partnership labels are a means to an end, but they also reflect the level of cooperation involved. Indeed the author also recognises that normative power is often more successful in cases of shared ideological and cultural templates. For China and South Africa, there are shared experiences of the past and like-mindedness on current global issues (Naidu, 2008: 189), even though there are still gaps in cultural understanding. This reiterates the point (see 2.2.1 and 3.2.2) that states are not merely driven by rational interests but also normative issues, like culture and identity.

This informs the third unique aspect of the relationship, which is a shared global outlook – that includes the historical, structural and systemic marginalisation of the South and advancing a new global governance agenda (Le Pere & Shelton, 2007: 84 & 166). In this way, the bilateral relationship takes on broader significance than merely trade, but rather a shared identity via the

FOCAC and BRICS framework.<sup>70</sup> Practically these platforms provide South Africa an amplified voice to assert itself and the African Agenda, while China can draw support from South-South solidarity and – in the case of the BRICS alliance – call for a reformed global order (Naidu, 2015; Bradley, 2016: 888).

As in the case of Chapter 5, China does not necessarily conjure a sense of Sinocentricism in its narratives with South Africa – but draws on historically specific links to the region. Rather China's central role is implicit in the way relations are structured in partnership classifications and through a shared view that the current global order remains unjust (and China could very well challenge it).

#### 6.4.2 Contemporary instruments

Official people-to-people relations were virtually non-existent prior to 1994 (Bradley, 2016: 887). Of course, as mentioned, there is a history of Chinese migration and Chinese association activities that predate formal ties, underlining the informal progress of links between both sides. In the context of public diplomacy, where government engages foreign publics in order to create a conducive environment or to help achieve foreign policy interests, relations only developed after diplomatic relations and more specifically in the 2000s. This began as a part of China's global and continental public diplomacy response.

As relations developed formally, the gap between the progressing political and economic links in comparison to public perceptions was glaring. South African's experience of China was being clouded by the clothing and textile sector debacle, as the local garment industry suffered due to the influx of cheap Chinese imports and undervalued currency (Naidu, 2008: 182). It was estimated that by the mid-2000s South Africa found itself in a conundrum, as 74% of its apparel imports came from China, and at the same time, an estimated 23,000 to 85,000 workers lost their jobs in the domestic industry (Naidu, 2008: 183). While officials on both sides were eventually able to negotiate trade limitations, it was clear that relations remained inherently unequal. Coupled with this, and parallel to China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics, was the Zimbabwe arms shipment case mentioned. This issue not only pitted South African and regional civil society against China but also created mixed responses within the national government itself (Dugger, 2008).

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<sup>70</sup> Discussion with Professor Zhang Yanqiu (Deputy Dean of Journalism and the Director of the Africa Communication Research Centre, Communications University of China, Beijing), Skype, 27 March 2017; also expressed by CPC representative at the Evolving Dynamics of China–Africa Relations' seminar (where SACP and CCP members were present), HSRC, Pretoria, 23 October 2014.

There were sporadic attempts to help relations prosper – through shared learning, exchanges and fostering understanding. An example was a Chinese journalist delegation that visited South Africa in 2008, followed by a South African delegation of senior reporters visiting China in 2009.<sup>71</sup> It was through these new forms of exchange that they sought to dispel preconceptions about one another, and more noticeable were the changes in the Chinese government’s outward communication.

It was clear that the rapid development of practical relations – underpinned by advanced political engagement and global market forces – meant that China remained an anomaly to the majority of South Africans. It was this impetus and a host of hot issues that motivated China to respond and create a friendly basis of understanding, in order to maintain what is described, as a ‘special relationship’ with South Africa. The examples that follow demonstrate diplomacy, specifically public diplomacy, as constructivists view it (see 2.2.4): a dynamic social process that allows actors to engage one another, despite differences. What is of interest then, is how these differences are institutionalised or responded to.

#### 6.4.2.1 2009–2013

In 2009, relations were largely celebrated for the fact that China became South Africa’s largest trading partner (and this eventually advanced to the upgrade of relations in 2010). Nevertheless, South Africa was not isolated from China’s growing interest in public engagement in Africa. For instance the 2009 FOCAC in Egypt was mentioned as a notable event where both China and African attendees highlighted the need to include civil society in the formal relationship; and the proposal of the joint research and exchange programme was also made (Huynh 2012:9). Yet as China’s public diplomacy expanded, so did engagement areas link more specifically with South Africa.

An instrument that China has used since the inception of its formal public diplomacy drive is the bid to host global mega-events, like the Olympics, in order to showcase itself as an economic power and global citizen (Yu, Wang & Seo, 2012: 48; Wu & Mothiane, 2014). Nevertheless, the importance of relations with South Africa was well highlighted during its hosting of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, which attracted about 73 million visitors over its six-month period (Arredy, 2010).

At the invitation of China, South Africa set up its own country pavilion (along with Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and Tunisia – and a larger ‘Africa pavilion’) to ‘re-brand’ the country (South Africa Info, 2010a). It participated in the Expo to showcase the ‘vibrancy’ of its cities, change perceptions in

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<sup>71</sup> Discussion with Hopewell Radebe, former secretary general of the South African National Editor’s Forum (SANEF), who participated in these exchanges, 16 April 2014.

China about South Africa and Africa, as well as to gain international exposure (South Africa 2010). The Expo also served as a platform to promote South Africa's own hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup; it featured the mascot 'Zakumi' and an hourly countdown clock to the opening of the games.<sup>72</sup> The event had even been touted as the single biggest South African presence, where there were 400 related events in China,<sup>73</sup> while on the sidelines of the Expo was Zuma's state visit to China. In South Africa, the Chinese embassy sought to celebrate the relationship and aimed for a wider local audience by collaborating in a special 2010 issue on the Expo, in the South African daily newspaper, *Business Day* (Alden & Wu, 2014: 24). (This was later followed by another special report in 2013 titled 'South Africa and China').

The events around the Expo highlighted the rising mutual interest in public diplomacy. It seemed there was the understanding that government-to-government transactions could potentially dissipate into mere paperwork if governments were unable to convince publics of their altruistic motives (Somasundram, 2012). Likewise, South Africa was seeking to expand its communication beyond policy circles. In August 2012, DIRCO launched the first edition of its quarterly magazine called *Ubuntu*. By 2013, the editor of *Ubuntu*, Clayson Monyela (2013: 10) – the department's public diplomacy head – explicitly pointed to then President Zuma's call for 'communication and marketing' in their work, following the tragedy where South African soldiers died in the Central African Republic. There was realisation that 'the minute you are elevated to a higher stature in international relations the brighter the spotlight on you' (Monyela, 2013: 10). DIRCO also launched the first 24-hour government-run online talk radio station, *Ubuntu Radio*, in October 2013, recognising that internet-based radio had picked up momentum over the previous 10 years (Gregory, 2013).

Even though the above initiatives are not specific to the bilateral relationship and are instruments to serve respective interests, it highlights the shared interests of both countries in communicating their perspectives and how this could factor into the relationship, another example of how context could have informed the relationship.

Meanwhile the instruments that specifically aim to foster people links and cultural exchange – and have received the most attention – are the CIs that China has set up abroad (Makoni, 2010). In the South African context, they have explicitly been referred to as playing a complementary role in enhancing relations, through their Chinese language teaching and cultural activities (Hartig,

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<sup>72</sup> Observed during visit to the South African pavilion at the World Expo, Shanghai, China, May 2010.

<sup>73</sup> Discussion with the SACPFA, Sandton, Johannesburg, 24 January 2014.

2014: 55–56). There were already four institutes established in South Africa by 2010, including the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University, Tshwane University of Technology and Stellenbosch University (Makoni, 2010). According to the official CI website, Rhodes was the first institute to start running in 2008 (after the agreement was signed in 2007). South Africa is also often cited as host to the most institutes in Africa (Kenya subsequently also became home to four CIs in 2015; but South Africa added another in 2016, after the signing of an agreement between the University of Johannesburg and Hanban)<sup>74</sup> (Hartig, 2014: 54; China Daily, 2015).

Still the South African context demands for engagement that extends beyond generalised content on history and culture. Particularly as a series of ‘hot issues’ emerged, including the Dalai Lama debacle – where he was denied a visa to the country for an anti-racism conference – ahead of the 2010 FIFA World Cup; to the 2011 execution of the South African citizen, Janice Linden, who was caught in possession of drugs on arrival in China (McGreal, 2009; Wu, 2013: 16). Notably these issues crept up at a time when the central government in China was carrying out plans to help foreign governments, cultural groups and individuals understand China. This resulted in the establishment of cultural sections in Chinese embassies abroad, collectively managed by the Bureau for External Cultural Relations (Hu, 2013: 263).

There were also attempts to place China’s engagement more prominently in the South African public light. Two weeks prior to the fifth FOCAC meeting in Beijing in 2012, the incoming ambassador, Tian Xuejun, made a public address at the South African Institute of International Affairs (Tian, 2012). He took the opportunity to explain China’s presence on the continent and provided justification for the deep friendship. Moreover he explicitly noted the level of importance that the Chinese government was placing on people-to-people and cultural exchanges and even appealed to publics on both sides to advocate, promote and participate in China–Africa relations (Tian, 2012).

To mark the 15-year anniversary of bilateral ties, a South Africa-China Ambassadorial Forum was also hosted in July 2013, which brought together former and high-level diplomats from both sides – including the acting mayor of Tshwane, where the event was hosted. Despite the global changes, such as the consequences of the financial crisis, the event reinforced the constant pace of China–South Africa relations; and was an opportunity for ambassadors to share their experiences with ‘the public’.<sup>75</sup> (This was largely participated in by academics and research organisations). Again, the

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<sup>74</sup> Discussion with Dr David Monyae, Co-Director of the Confucius Institute, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, 20 June 2017.

<sup>75</sup> As reiterated by speakers at the China-South Africa Ambassadorial Forum, DIRCO, Pretoria, 19 September 2013.

development of friendship was identified as one of the three ‘sails’ that would make the bilateral relations ‘smooth’ (China, 2013b). In more detail, the Chinese ambassador highlighted the need for youth to ‘carry forward the traditional friendship of the two countries’; and even mentioned the 2014 South Africa Year in China and 2015 China Year in South Africa events (China 2013b). It was predicted at the event that China would offer 200 scholarships over a five-year period to South African students studying in China (South Africa, 2013).

A representative on the South African side also commented that China remained alien to the majority of South Africans; this was why the South Africa-China Friendship Association (SACPFA) was launched.<sup>76</sup> The association was touted as ‘turning a brand new page in the history of non-governmental diplomacy between the two countries’ and would compile a list of prominent people with various areas of expertise (China, 2013c). SACPFA was launched in February 2013, with offices in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, in order to drive non-government engagements (Alden & Wu, 2014: 4). Modelled on the China–US or China–Japan Friendship Associations, it was created to promote economic and cultural engagements specific to China-South Africa; however, its website reflects honorary membership of key DIRCO personnel, South African officials and former Chinese diplomats.<sup>77</sup> (At the same time, the distinction between SACPFA and the African–Chinese People’s Friendship Association, which also has offices in Cape Town South Africa and Uganda, is unclear).

Perhaps the most far-reaching initiatives to date include the use of media instruments. For instance the *ChinAfrica* magazine – a monthly magazine published in English and French by Beijing Review and based in South Africa – was launched in 2012 as a means to promote ‘harmonious’ China–Africa relations and to also sound out African views (China, 2012a). Another instance was the e-newsletters that the Chinese embassy in South Africa has been sending to its local contact list since 2012–2013. These newsletters include disseminating information and press clippings on China’s international relations (from issues on Japan, Taiwan, China’s economy and the South China Sea) and on China’s engagement in Africa (from its involvement in the Ebola crisis, official visits and speeches, the FOCAC as well as responding to news developments like China’s role in wildlife trafficking in Africa) (China, 2014a; China, 2014c; China, 2014d; China, 2014e). Albeit the numbers of recipients who receive these email clippings and whether they use the newsletters, is unknown. There have also been cases where the embassy has actively responded to local media reports, such as the written

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<sup>76</sup> Remarks by ambassador Anil Sooklal at the China-South Africa Ambassadorial Forum, DIRCO, Pretoria, 19 September 2013.

<sup>77</sup> As reflected on its official website: [www.sacpfa.com](http://www.sacpfa.com)

response by the press counsellor, Pan Peng (2013), to the *Mail and Guardian* article titled ‘Rhino horn trade thrives in Johannesburg’.

It is clear that the local embassy became more active in its communication during this period. It continues to send regular updates to its database – such as during the sixth FOCAC in South Africa – and in some cases, still responds to local and international developments. However, it is also noted that the use of culture weeks or country year celebrations was given less attention in this period (Huynh, 2012: 9).

#### 6.4.2.2 2014-2016

The plans for increased public engagement between China and South Africa began in March 2013, on the sidelines of the latter’s hosting of the BRICS Summit in Durban. President’s Xi and Zuma broadcasted that both countries would respectively hold the 2014 ‘South Africa Year in China’ and 2015 ‘China Year in South Africa’. The aim of these reciprocal ‘years’, which would constitute a series of events, was to (Graham 2015:18):

- Raise the profile of and understanding between both countries;
- Promote their respective images by promoting economic, cultural, social and political collaboration;
- Cultivate a conducive environment for multi-sector cooperation, in order to realise bilateral agreements;
- Strengthen bilateral relations by creating a ‘fertile ground’ for cultural and public diplomacy to enhance official efforts;
- Facilitate collaboration in areas related to human endeavour; and
- Establish balanced bilateral trade and investment.

The above emphasises that cultural engagement is perceived as a conduit for longer-term strategic interests. Moreover from the Chinese official standpoint, there was interest in expanding the Chinese perception that South Africa was merely about nature, soccer, Mandela and crime; and the South African view that China is about cuisine and martial arts – rather both are modern and complex societies (*ChinAfrica*, 2015), though how this could be achieved was not mapped out.



By 2014, the South African year – touted as only the second country after Russia (in 2012) to have a dedicated year in China<sup>78</sup> – was underway. This was co-organised by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and South Africa’s Department of Arts and Culture, as well as the South African embassy in Beijing (*ChinAfrica*, 2015: 16). Examples of activities included a series of promotional events such as the opening ceremony at the Beijing Century Theatre, a Nelson Mandela exhibition at the trendy 798 Art Zone in Beijing, as well as inserting South African elements into Chinese festivals, like the Shanghai Film Festival and jazz festivals (Wu, 2015).<sup>79</sup>

Still China’s public diplomacy efforts outweighed those of South Africa. This is primarily due to the relative financial advantage and global reach that China enjoys – for example it has the capability to set up CIs all over the world, including presence in South Africa (Oluka, 2013). Whereas China began reaching out globally, in the heat of the financial crisis, the South African Broadcasting Corporation was closing bureaus in strategic locations, like Beijing (Kruger, 2009). Building the foundations for public engagement requires financial capability; and South Africa notably experienced budget constraints during its year events in China.<sup>80</sup> The other relative advantage that China enjoys is that, like other Asian societies, it is ‘generally more homogenous in [its] make-up ... therefore, there is strong correlation between goals of the country, the nation and the people’, whereas South Africa emphasises diversity.<sup>81</sup>

Yet a particularly important development occurred as 2014 drew to a close, which was the signing of the Five to Ten Year Strategic Programme on Cooperation between the two countries, during Zuma’s second China trip, as mentioned (South Africa, 2014). The agreement aims to achieve bilateral cooperation through building political trust and strategic coordination; developing mutually beneficial economic cooperation and trade; people-to-people exchanges and cooperation; as well as collaboration in African affairs, China–Africa Relations and cooperation in international affairs (including BRICS-related issues).<sup>82</sup> More specifically, the people-to-people component is broken into the areas of science and technology, education, public health – and lastly under one sub-section is sports, tourism, media, local government, youth and think-tank exchanges and cooperation.

By 2015, the China year events were launched in South Africa, coinciding with the FOCAC Summit. In early March that year, the Chinese embassy briefed journalists on the upcoming events, marking

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<sup>78</sup> According to a Chinese official from the embassy in Pretoria, Johannesburg, 23 April 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Examples of activities as outlined by discussion with SACPFA, 24 January 2014.

<sup>80</sup> Discussion with South African embassy official, Beijing, 9 September 2014.

<sup>81</sup> Email correspondence with Ramon Thomas, China Country Manager, Brand South Africa, 9 March 2017. Although he did mention that the South African Year events received more media attention than China Year events.

<sup>82</sup> Discussion with DIRCO official, DIRCO, Pretoria, 23 September 2015.

them a symbol of the comprehensive bilateral relationship (China, 2015j). (Local journalists took the opportunity to engage the embassy and raise their concerns over the bilateral trade imbalance and China's effort towards environmental protection.) A few days later, on 15 March, the grand opening of the China Year in South Africa took place at the State Theatre, with performances by the Shenzhen Symphony Orchestra and local musicians, as well as congratulatory messages from both presidents. Other events in 2015 included the participation of Chinese artists in local cultural festivals like the Johannesburg Arts Alive International Festival and a Puppet Art Troupe at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival (ChinaAfrica, 2015; China, 2015k). Moreover, the Joburg Ballet Company collaborated with Liaoning Ballet of China to perform *Swan Lake* throughout the country. Coupled with these events was the announcement by the South African Department of Higher Education that 53 students were awarded scholarships to study in China (Brand South Africa, 2015).

The event details were largely reported by *ChinaAfrica* magazine and its website (albeit the magazine is available through subscription in South Africa).<sup>83</sup> In one report on a discussion with the Deputy Director of Bureau for External Cultural Relations at the Chinese Ministry of Culture, Zhao Haisheng, it was highlighted that the events in South Africa included 20 major government-led events (*ChinaAfrica*, 2015). However, he estimated about 100 events altogether, including medium- to small-sized events. Further information was made available on the Chinese embassy's website. The events take place across eight of the nine provinces in South Africa, and they were promoted as including the areas of 'culture, economy and trade, sports, think tank exchanges and environmental protection' (China 2015j). Minor reporting and visual aid of the opening ceremony was made in the South African government's *Ubuntu* magazine (South Africa, 2015a).

Coinciding with the China year events were other interweaving public diplomacy engagements in which both countries were involved. The first was the inaugural BRICS Civil Forum held in Russia in mid-2015, as a constructive space for dialogue between decision-makers and civil society from BRICS countries. The second event was the fourth meeting of the CATTF, held in September the same year (mentioned in Chapter 5). The CATTF is considered a FOCAC sub-forum and in this instance, researchers and think tanks from across the continent gathered to discuss the China–Africa relationship in Pretoria, South Africa.

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<sup>83</sup> See more: [http://www.chinafrica.cn/About\\_Us/](http://www.chinafrica.cn/About_Us/)

The collaboration in building discourse in the multilateral space was also evident when China, an observer member of the IORA – a transnational body made of countries along the Indian Ocean littoral – helped facilitate and co-host the second Blue Economy Core Group Workshop in July 2016. The workshop was co-hosted with the South African government, the HSRC and China Ocean University; and was the first exclusive IORA event to be funded by China, through its 2015 financial contribution to the group (IORA Secretariat, 2017).

The last instance is CIs. The most recent addition is the fifth institute in South Africa, established on 28 January 2016 (the agreement was signed in 2014) and is situated at the University of Johannesburg, in partnership with Nanjing Technology University (Hanban News, 2016; Ngozo, 2017). CIs remain primary conduits between people and cultures, as they were formed ahead of China's 2009 global publicity drive. The CI at Durban University of Technology described its role as 'continuously engaging in various events seeking to build positive relations between the [university], Durban and Chinese communities (Memela, 2015), while the new institute reaffirms that no CI is exactly like the other. Besides teaching Chinese and culture, it has a strong emphasis on Africa–China research collaboration, which is already taking place between both universities' engineering departments (and in the near future, health sciences).<sup>84</sup>

As of November 2016 when vice-President Li met his counterpart, Cyril Ramaphosa, it became clear that the year's events had usefully become part of the bilateral narrative, as they displayed the 'new' and 'dynamic' chapter in people-to-people relations (*The Star*, 2016). It was also during this visit that Li stated that people links make one of four important elements in this comprehensive relationship.

## **6.5 Process and determinants**

China's relationship with South Africa is not static and it has even taken measures to communicate and expand links. (In fact as critical constructivists note in section 2.2.3.1, states are imagined subjects of identity, who are never really constant but always in process). For example, despite previous concerns over China's limited investment in South Africa (Alden & Wu, 2014; Alden & Wu, 2016), the South Africa-China Economic and Trade Association (SACETA), described as a 'non-governmental organisation of Chinese enterprises', published a report in late 2016. It outlined that China's investments in South Africa accumulated to \$13bn in 2015 and had created about

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<sup>84</sup> Discussion with Dr David Monyae, Co-Director of the Confucius Institute, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, 20 June 2017.

24,000 local jobs (Zhang, 2016c). The report came out at a time when the global economy was sluggish, alongside falling commodity prices; and it aimed to provide analysis in order to help better facilitate bilateral trade. Chinese media outlets Xinhua (2016b) and China Daily (2016) even published on the report and emphasised how Chinese investments have actually helped improve the living standards of South Africans.

Likewise – and again against the trend of global economic conditions – it was estimated that Chinese tourists to South Africa increased by 60% between January and April 2016 (Moerat, 2016). Part of this had to do with the rising Chinese middle-class's income and the measures taken by South African tourism to engage tour guides and place better airport signage. Authorities on both sides began to take measures to expedite visa applications, such as setting up visa facilitation centres in Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou and Shanghai, and accredited travel companies in China would also be able to process applications on behalf of travellers (Moerat, 2016). These examples highlight an important tenet of critical constructivism (also see 5.5) – that China itself plays a role in producing change in this relationship.

The Chinese government's efforts in South Africa are notably expanding. Yet the question remains whether these efforts are sufficient, since broader dynamics are affecting its public engagement. As the previous section highlights, China's public diplomacy in South Africa targets specific stakeholders (from scholars, government officials to professionals), who are deemed important in the relationship. Yet neither China nor South Africa exists in a vacuum but along multiple and changing societal factors, which makes public engagement even more necessary.

The extent to which China's public diplomacy is able to help it achieve and maintain its interests in South Africa is thus subject to its ability to translate overarching strategies and symbolic language as well as manage new developments. Hence, an important aspect of this section is to explore the motivations *behind* local opinions towards China, because while government motivation and capital can help narrow the distance between dispersed publics, it can only act as a catalyst (Gadzala & Hanusch, 2010: 2–3; Wu & Alden, 2014). The selected intervening factors that affect China's publicity in South Africa include the existing frames upon which South Africans view China, consolidating informal and formal relations and lastly, the impact of market forces. These aspects also reinforce the constructivist view (see 2.2.1) that a state's interests and engagement are influenced by context (the recipient milieu); and rather than viewing the state as the primary actor in the international system (which rationalists do), China and other actors are mutually constituted (see 2.3.4.1).

### 6.5.1 Existing narratives

One of the most complex factors affecting China's image building in South Africa is the pre-existing perception of locals – based on interests, misunderstanding<sup>85</sup> and at times past experience. This in turn affects the reception of China's contemporary initiatives.

Rebol (2010) explains that there are three main perceptions of Africans towards China. They include: the friendship and mutual benefit that government officials often emphasise; the welcoming of economic relations with China – particularly those who benefit from the trade and investment relationship – and lastly, are concerns over China's impact on the social, economic and environmental landscape, which is largely emphasised by those who 'lose' from the relationship or have limited interaction with China.

South Africa reflects diversified views towards China, but there are also certain perceptions that have remained static since relations were formally established. An example is the notion that goods originating from China are of poor quality. The term 'Fong Kong' – suggesting merchandise that is cheap imitation and cannot be trusted – became synonymous with Chinese goods in the 2000s and has even become part of South Africa's lexicon (McNamee, Mills, Manoeli, Mulaudzi, Doran & Chen, 2012: 24). More recent local media headlines in 2016 adopt the term in sensationalist reporting such as 'Fong Kong prophets bust' and 'Watch: Fong Kong Water For Sale'. Likewise, in Zimbabwe, the phrase 'pata-pata' – the sound of rubber slippers – is used to describe cheap products.<sup>86</sup>

The phrase even became a popular Kwaito – a South African genre of music – hit in 2010, speaking to the transforming relations between the continent and China (Sosibo 2010).<sup>87</sup> These views have in turn affected China's presence in South Africa. Huawei (telecommunications) and FAW vehicle manufacturers, two notable Chinese companies who are competitive forces back home, stated in a 2014 article that their biggest challenge in South Africa – as a market dominated by Western products – remains the public's reluctance to accept Chinese goods (Xing and Li, 2014: 19; Li, 2014: 21). On the other hand, an online questionnaire on China's business practices in Africa, by the Ethics Institute of South Africa, found that the majority of the 1,056 respondents (from South Africa,

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<sup>85</sup> According to Dr Monyae these perceptions are often based on fear, ignorance and times, the following of Western reactions; instead of deep intellectual inquiry, Johannesburg, 20 July 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Discussion with Zimbabwean civil society member, Harare, 22 October 2015.

<sup>87</sup> Sosibo, K. 'Fong Kong hits a Chord', 16 July 2010, <http://mg.co.za/article/2010-07-16-fong-kong-hits-a-chord>, accessed 9 May 2014.

Nigeria and Kenya) were largely concerned over the business impact of China on the continent, with South African respondents as most concerned (Rossouw, Geerts & Xinwa, 2014).

At the same time, not all views towards China are negative; and perceptions of its infrastructure assistance as low quality, is changing, thanks to drives like the BRI.<sup>88</sup> However, local outlooks do generally take on an economic or pragmatic frame (Wu, 2013). A 2013 public opinion survey conducted on South African views towards the country's own foreign policy reflected that respondents chose China (53%) as South Africa's most important trading partner ahead of other partners, such as the EU or the US (Smith & Van der Westhuizen, 2013). At the same time, a majority of South Africans want to learn about alleviating poverty and unemployment from China (26%) followed by Brazil (20%). A particularly newsworthy topic for both sides remains economic stories and politically newsworthy issues, like the BRICS (Wasserman, 2012). Still, as reflected in interviews held with South African stakeholders, there is increasing awareness of global economic and political dynamics and the need to engage China pragmatically as both a partner and a market (Alden & Wu, 2014).

Apart from economically focused headlines, is the emotive factor, as the instances of the Zimbabwe shipment and Dalai Lama debacle demonstrate. In these cases, China is viewed as a threat to the preservation of South Africa's values and heritage. A further case that has caused heated public debate<sup>89</sup> was the introduction of Mandarin in selected South African schools, following the signing of an agreement between both sides in 2014 (Nkosi, 2015; Vlok, 2015). This agreement entailed the extension of teaching the Chinese language in schools, beyond the offering of CIs.

Several views arose out of this (Essa, 2015). The first was an inward perspective, with concern that the Chinese language was being prioritised over the many local languages. Some even commented on the asymmetry of relations, since China did not seem to reciprocate the learning of African languages (although the basic education department representative did reiterate that Chinese classes would not be compulsory but optional in selected schools). Others have held the view that learning Mandarin is necessary, as it is becoming an important medium in a globally connected world. While during a discussion on *Power FM* in March 2014, one parent even remarked that her children went to a local Chinese school; interestingly, the response by the host revealed their perceived 'strict' Chinese education system – this underlines wider concerns of cultural difference beyond language

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<sup>88</sup> Discussion with Dr David Monyae, Co-Director of the Confucius Institute, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, 20 July 2017.

<sup>89</sup> In fact, the debate made its way onto local radio stations, including the commercial talk radio station *Power FM* on 4 March 2014; and on the national radio station *SAfm* on 18 May 2016.

considerations. These views create complications for China's pledges, such as the 2009 FOCAC Action Plan (point 5.3.2), to increase the teaching of Mandarin in Africa.

The tensions between these perspectives reflect South Africa's own identity, as actively globalising and at the same time, focusing on a more narrowly preservationist and culturally defensive approach. Positively from an economic perspective, there appears to be a conscious reaching out to China, as much as China reaches out to South Africa. In this sense, the public's view towards China does not contradict that of the South African government, as both groups seem to understand that the opportunities in the relationship outweigh the threats.

Yet a deeper interest and understanding of one another's people, culture and values is lacking, as the South African case reflects that sentiment towards China is largely framed by economic and emotive issues. It is such perceptions that have motivated China, as officials stated in the lead-up to the China Year in South Africa, to exert a stronger people-to-people drive. However, the relationship between China and the South African public is recent and still developing; and it is still seeking ways to localise its overarching public diplomacy strategy (Toh, 2013). It is also a relatively newer foreign partner in comparison to players such as the EU countries, who have a longer history of engagement in South Africa and have a more established practice of public diplomacy (Wu, 2012:18).

Some South Africans are even wary that China's demand for understanding is not reciprocated. The article titled 'Welcome to China, now go home' underlines that even if China provides scholarships to South African students, the reality is that after these programmes complete, Africans are not always welcome as professionals and immigrants in China (De Wet, 2015). Pocket cases of racism (and worrisome sentiments driven by emotion and not facts) also exist on both sides and remain a sobering challenge for Chinese and South African policymakers.<sup>90</sup>

Some scholars are of the view that China is setting up the structures for public engagement in South Africa but has yet to emphasise the substance and impact of these platforms. This is true of the education exchange programmes, where the process of student selection remains opaque, making recording progress challenging (April, 2014: 138). Besides the setting up of CIs to provide language lessons across South Africa, there is also a lack of evaluation and emphasis on the actual education experience provided (Procopio, 2015: 120). Others believe it is too soon to determine their success, which depends on Africans not only mimicking China but also understanding, deeply, the areas of

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<sup>90</sup> Discussion with Dr David Monyae, Co-Director of the Confucius Institute, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, 20 July 2017.

convergence and divergence in relations.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, in terms of content, the CIs do not necessarily communicate propaganda, as critics may suggest; indeed they operate with much caution and tend to avoid overly sensitive but necessary issues (Hartig, 2014: 56–57).

### 6.5.2 The formal and informal spaces

China has thus far created platforms for its public diplomacy, but targeting and engaging the South African public is complex. This is partly due to the uneven development of aspects of the relationship, as well as division within the recipient milieu.

Firstly, China's relationship with South Africa is characterised by two broad levels. They include the upstairs (namely high-level political and economic links) and downstairs elements (Park & Alden, 2013). The latter refers to the un-orchestrated aspect of the relationship, where engagement is less developed and predictable, that includes a vocal civil society, trade unions and even the role of the mixed Chinese immigrant population in the country. The extent to which relations have developed at both levels is uneven.

To date the spaces to deliberate *between* the formal and informal levels – particularly those who critique the relationship – are limited. As mentioned, the SACPFA has high-level DIRCO officials as honorary members. While the 2013 Ambassadorial Forum involved stakeholders who were linked, at least loosely (such as research organisations), to diplomacy, and ambassadors and DIRCO officials also led the discussions. The same can be said about the limited extent to which there is attraction among the publics of BRICS countries, to which both countries belong, as the grouping is still seeking ways to increase interaction, from discussing visa regulations to expanding civil society engagement (Wu & Alden, 2014).

It is also undetermined whether the specific collaborations, during the China year celebrations, have enhanced the broader bilateral relationship. There is the view that relations between both sides remains somewhat superficial and while much emphasis is made on FOCAC and bilateral commitments, less emphasis is made on developing interpersonal relations (Liu, 2015: 32). More importantly, the Chinese government's cultural exchange activities need to pay more attention to promoting harmonious ties between China and local people (Liu, 2015a: 20). Another Chinese

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<sup>91</sup> Discussion with Dr David Monyae, Co-Director of the Confucius Institute, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, 20 July 2017.



academic highlights that what is outstanding is ensuring that alumni relations between former participants are maintained.<sup>92</sup>

The instance of the Chinese community demonstrates the complexity of informal ties, and even raises the question whether the Chinese diaspora is able to contribute to China's publicity. This links with a finding in Chapter 3 (3.4.1) regarding the difficulty in actually defining *who* China is today. Chinese migrants in South Africa stand at about 350,000–500,000 (as of 2012), although official figures are difficult to determine (Park & Alden, 2013; Kuo, 2017). Nevertheless, the informal spaces are also creating societal links for the relationship. For instance local South African Chinese associations, like The Chinese Association (TCA), have become interlocutors in relations and have even coordinated events like the Chinese New Year celebrations that help promote Chinese culture. It is in these spaces between people where foundations for deeper relations lie.

However, there are also limitations to the degree the diaspora can foster closer relations, since the role of the Chinese in South Africa is complicated. The community is made up of different ethnic Chinese groups who differ in their degree of political, economic and social assimilation towards South Africa, the mainland and even the Chinese government (Park, 2012).<sup>93</sup> The diversity within the Chinese community also reinforces the divided views on what being 'Chinese' means, between members of the diaspora and local people. This was the case during the Constitutional Court ruling that allowed South African Chinese to become eligible under the Black Economic Empowerment programme. The small numbers involved (under 10,000 Chinese) became locally misinterpreted as a concession and incentive to all Chinese entering the South Africa; this highlighted the sensitive and informal dynamics at play (Chang, 2008; Kuo, 2017).

Another area of tension includes the entrance of Chinese traders, in urban centres and rural trading posts, with whom local traders have been unable to compete (Naidu, 2008:185). However, the changing local environment may very well influence such trends. Some Chinese traders are reportedly seeking to move back home or advance to larger markets like Australia, since the competition from other African traders, a weak local economy and rising incidents of xenophobia across South Africa, are becoming hard to bear (Kuo, 2017).

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<sup>92</sup> Maintaining alumni relations is an issue that Professor Zhang Yanqiu has identified, whilst organising exchanges.

<sup>93</sup> In discussion with Erwin Pon, he summarised Chinese migration to South Africa into three phases: the first generation in the 1900s; the Taiwanese and Hong Kong nationals in the 1980s; and the influx of powerhouses (like Shanghai and Fujian associations) post-1994.

A second impact on China's publicity drive is the political schisms within South Africa. This suggests, as was emphasised in section 2.3.4.1, that diplomacy cannot be divorced from domestic political processes, where cultural differences and even disagreement over specific issues exist. The South African public's sentiment towards China is often linked to criticism towards their own ruling government. When Sekunjalo Independent Media consortium purchased the former Irish Independent Group's newspaper chain, Independent News and Media, in 2013, there was public outcry. This was because the purchase included a 55% contribution by Sekunjalo, 25% by the Public Investment Corporation (PIC) and a further 20% ownership by 'Chinese state instruments'<sup>94</sup> into one of the country's four largest media groups (Wu, 2016: 7 & 11). This created concern over government influence in South Africa's independent media landscape and fears of infringement on the freedom of expression, given the country's recent apartheid censorship experience (Lloyd, 2013: 22; Trehwela, 2014; Madrid-Morales & Wasserman 2017: 2). In addition there was alarm that the deal was political in nature, between China and the ANC (Johnson, 2015: 132).

Similarly, in May 2016 further public uproar took place when nine Chinese fishing vessels were located in an economic exclusion zone, off the coast of South Africa (SAMSA, 2016; Van der Walt & Pillay, 2016). Media reports documented criticisms over the non-compliance with the law by the Chinese vessels, which made their way to the Kei River Mouth marine protected area on the east coast, while local fishermen were still required to acquire costly permits (Van der Walt & Pillay, 2016). Some even criticised the South African navy's inability to protect the oceans, while social media comments (on Facebook and Twitter) included statements such as, 'are the ANC allowing the Chinese to rape our oceans and take our food resources?'<sup>95</sup> Following these developments and the detention of a Chinese vessel, the Chinese embassy to South Africa issued an email to its local recipient list stating that the incident was a misunderstanding (China, 2016f). They stated that the vessel was detained due to a language misunderstanding; it was on its way to the Republic of Congo for legal fishing but was diverted by weather difficulties. The embassy further pledged its willingness to work with local authorities.

Of course, South Africans have been just as vocal towards the ruling party's opaque relations with others, such as the Guptas, an Indian–South African family. Incidents include rumours of the government providing them with diplomatic passports, spending on advertising in the Gupta-owned newspaper, *The New Age*, and allowing the family to exert political influence in the country (Alden

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<sup>94</sup> Reportedly CCTV, CADFUND and/ or China Development Bank.

<sup>95</sup> For an example visit this Facebook feed from 11 May 2016:

<https://www.facebook.com/carteblanchetv/posts/1120925647950357>, accessed on 4 June 2017.

& Wu, 2016: 220). Indeed foreign influence is broadly ‘decoded through the lenses of domestic politics’ (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2017: 12).

The ‘unsettled’ domestic environment is a major challenge for the South African government as well, who ‘hasn’t done well communicating the [bilateral] relationship to the public’.<sup>96</sup> While the physical monuments built by China – like the TAZARA railway, AU building and national roads – symbolise some of its bilateral relations in Africa, the ties to South Africa are less physically noticeable and what is left is a relationship that is perceived as non-transparent. Although in late 2014 a minister in the South African Presidency, Jeff Radebe (2014), published a blog post on the government’s website explaining ‘Why China is Important to SA’.

It seems that relations will grow and develop as the formal and informal spaces interact. Further nuances can be expected as time goes by. This includes the impact of intra-government and opposition politics and a changing political environment, on China’s relations with South Africa. Equally important is the role of other publics observing the relationship, particularly those in neighbouring countries, as well as the African diaspora in South Africa. Hence, national foreign policy is very much contested by domestic elements (Alden & Wu, 2016: 222).

### 6.5.3 Interrogating wider interests: from national imperatives to market forces

The final factor that could affect China’s ‘state-speak’ is the role of broader interests, from South Africa’s own foreign policy to market trends. The relationship is not only affected by China’s own changing interests; but the fact that South Africa’s foreign policy has changed in emphasis over the years – between human rights issues, trade promotion, local development, the importance of allies (from the liberation and apartheid isolation era) to the degree political parties should influence foreign policy (Alden, 1997: 84). It is also necessary to understand where bilateral relations stand in South Africa’s broader interests. For example, the country has become aware that East Asia and Southeast Asia remain relatively untapped regions, where relations could be built upon.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, then Deputy President Ramaphosa paid a visit to Japan in August 2015, just a month after his visit to China, to promote trade and investment and consolidate African interests, by strengthening the TICAD partnership (Alden & Wu, 2016: 217).

Anthony (2016) even remarks that South Africa, like China, ‘talks left and walks right’. While there has been a raft of economic, political and ideological proclamations, suggesting a close-knit China–

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<sup>96</sup> Discussion with DIRCO official, DIRCO, Pretoria, 23 September 2015.

<sup>97</sup> Discussion with DIRCO official, DIRCO, Pretoria, 23 September 2015.

South Africa relationship, the EU and US are still important partners, whose investments are relatively stronger than China's. South Africa also attracts large numbers of tourists from the US, UK and Germany. Hence relations are subject to the latter's broader set of relations and foreign policy thinking. This means that the type of regime and economy that China is engaging with, in Africa, directly affects its role and interests (Sidiropoulos, 2006: 104; Alden, 2007: 59). In this case, South Africa is a vibrant democracy with a well-represented and active civil society (although there is a strong and symbolic elite link to China). It is also a mineral-rich country with a diversified economy; yet the rule of law and regulatory processes moderate the role of foreign investors and donors.

A second aspect is the broader market trends (or context) that affect relations. Directly linked to the above, is the notion that China, specifically its media, is a relatively newer player in the South African market, which has yet to develop credibility and financial viability (Wu 2016:8). China's CCTV (or CGTN) news channels are largely accessible through subscription to the Digital Satellite Television (DSTV) service – South Africa's main Satellite TV service provider (Gorfinkel, Joffe, Van Staden & Wu, 2014: 84). Yet due to the cost of subscriptions, most viewers are in upper-income households. Access also does not equate to a high viewership of these channels (Gorfinkel et al., 2014, p. 84). In 2013, China Daily also sent subscribers information about its Africa weekly edition's print and distribution operations, stating that 5,300 of the total 20,000 were distributed in South Africa. Still, the dissemination strategy of the paper mainly targets embassies, universities, financial institutions, think tanks and international organisations.

Contrary to the 2015 FOCAC Action Plan's point (3.3.8) on encouraging and supporting Chinese investment in Africa, there have also been challenges to implementing this. One project that has been reportedly halted is Shanghai's Zendai Development's project to build an \$8bn 'Manhattan' in northeast of Johannesburg (Ren, 2016).<sup>98</sup> The high revenue expected to be generated from the initial Standard Bank and ICBC deal later proved exaggerated (Alden & Wu, 2016: 214). The other complexity here is that it is unknown whether the local public can even differentiate between state projects and the actions of private Chinese entities (Wu, 2016: 9).

A final instance on the impact of market trends is the CIs, which have sought to leverage relations with local universities. The caveat is they too are subject to the standards and requirements of South African universities, who are seeking to build their own global statuses. Hence, the CI at the

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<sup>98</sup> This was also noted in discussions with a Chinese Consulate official, Johannesburg, 7 December 2016

University of Johannesburg is currently only allowed to offer short-term Chinese language programmes and not degree qualifications, as it cannot yet provide qualified Mandarin teachers with doctoral degrees.<sup>99</sup> (The heavy responsibility lies with Hanban to find qualified teachers for its hundreds of institutes, who would also require housing and transport).

Various degrees of competition exist in the relationship. This includes South African and Chinese firms, particularly those in the manufacturing and construction industries, competing with one another on the continent (Corkin & Burke, 2008:45; Alden & Wu, 2016). At the same time, Chinese firms, such as the telecommunications companies Huawei and ZTE, are also directly competing with one another in the oligarchic South African market (Sun, 2016: 1). Further, the size of China's economy, in relation to South Africa's, adversely affects the latter's relative diplomatic capabilities. In this regard, South Africa faces more challenges in coordinating delegations to and engagement with China, and its businesses have even been 'burnt' in China.<sup>100</sup> So the people-to-people relationship is at risk of being defined by one side.

There is also something to be said about the position of South Africa in relation to China's links with other African nations. For instance, as was stated in Chapter 4, many of the projects linked to the BRI remain largely centred around East African countries (which were reiterated as China's 'pilot' projects in Africa, in a meeting in 2015).<sup>101</sup> Similarly, the public diplomacy efforts of the Chinese embassies in Kenya and Tanzania are considered relatively successful examples; where in the latter country, there is the translation of Chinese soap operas into Swahili.<sup>102</sup> While other Chinese embassies have remarked that (despite being at an advantage to other emerging players), China is still learning and lags behind the capability of countries like the US.

## 6.6 Conclusion

China's ability to fulfil its interest through public diplomacy in South Africa, at the bilateral level, appears the most complicated. While diplomatic links were established in 1998 and progressed throughout the first decade, it was a culmination of factors during and after the 2008 financial crisis that relations really took off. Indeed constructivists explain that the symbolism of relations derives

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<sup>99</sup> Discussion with Dr David Monyae, Co-Director of the Confucius Institute, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, 20 July 2017.

<sup>100</sup> Remarks made by South African diplomat at the China-South Africa Ambassadorial Forum, DIRCO, Pretoria, 19 September 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Comments made by a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official at the 4th Meeting of the CATTF IV), Pretoria, 9 September 2015.

<sup>102</sup> Discussion with Professor Zhang Yanqiu (Deputy Dean of Journalism and the Director of the Africa Communication Research Centre, Communications University of China, Beijing), Skype, 27 March 2017

from the very context in which they are interpreted (section 2.2.2). The 2010 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was thus an indication of the reaching out from both sides, at the high political and economic levels. Public diplomacy rose out of the need to ensure that relations progressed beyond economic and high-political emphasis, the fact that informal spaces were influencing relations, as well as the need to maintain the links and interests already established. China's public diplomacy engagement therefore emphasises the critical constructivist notion, also emphasised in Chapter 5, that actors have a role in producing change in the relationships and objects they observe.

In promoting bilateral relations, China uses narratives between South Africa and the continent, interchangeably, since the former is an integral member and voice in Africa. This means that like the other snapshots, there remains limited use of China's historical central position as a narrative in Africa. There are also specific narratives applied in this snapshot to reinforce relations – such as a unique historical and contemporary friendship, synergies between development aspirations as well as a shared global outlook. This reflects China's adoption of framing (see 2.4.5.4), the selecting and emphasising of aspects of relations, in order to achieve particular interests.

Like the use of narratives China's public diplomacy activities in South Africa have included broad frameworks, as FOCAC activities attest. However, a range of specific instruments are also adopted in South Africa, from the setting-up of five CIs linked to universities, friendship associations, e-newsletters to the promotion of relations through premium events (like the 2014 'South Africa Year in China' and 2015 'China Year in South Africa'). Yet as shown in the previous chapter, China's ability to host such events dwarfs South Africa's, providing it structural advantage, and even allowing it to appeal to a wider audience, since the 2015 FOCAC Summit overlapped with the 'China year' celebrations in South Africa. China continues to use public engagement, as 2016 instances demonstrated. Following the analysis of this snapshot, the high-level South Africa–China People-to-People Exchange Mechanism (PPEM) launched its first meeting in April 2017. It is an attempt to formalise and deepen exchanges and understanding between both sides. There are only six other similar mechanisms between China and the US, Russia, UK, France, Indonesia and EU (South Africa, 2017). The extent that the platform can help deliberate issues of perceptions, bring together stakeholders from the formal and informal spaces and ensure an equal footing between both sides is still to be seen.

Despite the lengths and resources that China has taken to use public diplomacy, its ability to merge aspects of the bilateral relationship is complex. At the time of finalising this chapter, examples of emotive developments continued to exemplify public sentiment towards China. The 2017 news of

the smuggling of donkey hide from South Africa to China, for instance, saw the latter being described as ‘fuelling’ the criminal trade and the slaughter of donkeys, for medicinal purposes.<sup>103</sup> Another is exemplified by the op-ed ‘Did I Miss The Announcement About South Africa Becoming A Colony Of China?’ (Haffajee, 2017), that followed a large advert placed in *The Star* newspaper, where the ‘300,000 South African Chinese’ (although it was unclear who the Chinese were) gave a warning against Tshwane mayor, Solly Msimanga’s trip to Taiwan in December 2016. This last example continues to highlight the complex question of who constitutes ‘China’, and the role of the Chinese diaspora in it.

These above instances persist due to three interrelated explanations, emphasised in this snapshot: the issues of long-standing perceptions and practical economic interests that need to be addressed, the outstanding official and unofficial gaps that remain (which show that diplomacy cannot be divorced from domestic processes) and that relations are subject to wider global or market dynamics. Such developments and local determinants, along with China’s responses to them, underline the constructivist view of mutually constituted identities. The relationship thus exemplifies an intersubjective space where interests are continually performed and negotiated, and identities are never constant but in process.

This snapshot does not exemplify China’s public diplomacy in Africa but it does shed light on the complexities of translating overarching strategies into context-specific situations, particularly on issues that fall outside of the official ambit. China is required to respond to a set of factors in South Africa, which reinforce that realpolitik interests can sometimes override rhetoric. True to a globalised world, it is left to negotiate between the identity it opts to portray and the extent it allows the changing recipient environment to inform its perceived interests and individuality.

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<sup>103</sup> The story caused the Chinese embassy to respond to the ‘careless’ reporting by local and global media, as well as seeking to distance China from such criminal activities (China, 2017).

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

*Each generation learns that its final role is to be the doormat for the coming generation to step on*

John K Fairbank (1986: ix)

This chapter provides the theoretical and analytical findings of the study. As set out in the introduction, the study sought to explore the question: ‘How is China’s contemporary public diplomacy influencing its ability to achieve its foreign policy aims in Africa?’ In order to answer this question in the context of a rising China, which is increasingly adopting public diplomacy in its external engagements, three main interrelated objectives were identified (see 1.1 and 1.3). First, the study sought to understand how China conceptualises public diplomacy in order to help implement its foreign policy (an overriding theme across Chapters 3 to 6); it then identified the extent to which China’s public diplomacy engages in the Sinocentric world narrative and/or adapts narrative to achieve its interests in Africa.

As an explorative study that seeks to create a basis for future studies, a modest hypothesis to guide the study was provided – namely that China’s public diplomacy, aimed to help meet its interests in Africa, is conditioned by context and its ability to evolve. The subsequent sections on key ideas of the study and main findings in turn, support this statement.

### 7.1 Key ideas of the study

The IR constructivist approach was adopted in the conceptual framework, as a foundation for the topic on China’s public diplomacy in Africa. This is because rather than being a theory-centred approach (that is driven by or seeking to prove a theory), which makes analytical judgments on international relations, constructivism helped identify important nuances in diplomacy and IR by including issues around state identity, culture and new concepts – such as ‘soft power’ (see 2.2.1; for its link to diplomacy, see 2.3.4). While no theoretical approach can provide universal truth about the world, constructivism does point to important issues related to the objectives of the study, such as the dual influence of structure and agency, the importance of context and that reality is socially constructed. Moreover, critical constructivists question an objective social world and find that identities are not fixed variables (they are dynamic and changing). Even though differences between conventional and critical constructivism exist, they were found complementary in explaining the theoretical aspects of the study (see 2.2.4).



This leads to the contextual aspect of the study (Chapter 3). Critical constructivists find that state choices – such as preferred foreign policy instruments – are not just explained by their current identity but the evolution of that very identity. Likewise, the study explored the historical Sinocentric world order that was essentially a product of a dynamic social process (how constructivists happen to describe diplomacy), between China and other parties. This means that China's own identity and even interests were influenced by the participation of others in the tributary system. The system came into existence, not because China was necessarily the world's centre, but because it responded and modified ideas to serve its own ends.

Another important element highlighted in Chapter 3 was how China employs the past in its contemporary diplomacy – which indicates that its use of particular historical narratives is context dependent. Zhao's (2004a) work on Chinese nationalism explained two forms of national identity: primordialism (unchanging and an extension of culture and values) and instrumentalism (primordialism is subject to manipulation, persuasion and driven by pragmatism). While both attributes characterise China's identity today, the idea that it adopts the past instrumentally, in order to achieve contemporary interests, is a powerful explanation for its use of strategic narratives in public diplomacy. Moreover, the instrumental use of history links with the notion of 'framing' – that is the use of selection and salience to fulfil particular interests (see 2.4.5.4). As has been pointed out, 'splendid rhetoric is frequently used to mask the raw reality of power' (Wang, 2013: 213).

Three snapshots were then explored on China's public diplomacy in Africa at the global (BRI), regional (FOCAC) and bilateral (South Africa) levels. Together they helped add nuance to the study's objectives and shed light on the specific ways in which China conceives of and utilises public diplomacy.

The first objective relates to China's conceptualisation of public diplomacy. Like other states, China's public diplomacy has risen due to globalisation and the increase of new actors and access to communication technologies (see 2.4). Governments are generally required to respond in more public ways, but they have also gained new avenues to disseminate their perspectives and interests. This is true for China which has taken up public diplomacy (an engagement normally associated with the US), specifically since 2008 onwards, due to the financial crisis and events like the Beijing Olympics (noted in 3.4.2). In the instance of Africa, public diplomacy is used by China – to varying degrees – across all the snapshots studied, reaffirming its relevance, although it adopts this engagement for different and sometimes overlapping reasons, including gaining support for its

initiatives, advancing relations, promoting its interests, as well as maintaining achievements already made (see Table 7.1). These reasons are similar to those offered by scholars, on why states and associations of states use public diplomacy as a means to gain influence (see 2.4.1).

While the reasons for using public diplomacy may be similar among states, the impetus for China's use of public diplomacy and particular instruments is unique. Chapter 3 highlighted some aspects related to China's conceptualisation of and approach to public diplomacy and the way in which it is used by the Chinese. These include (3.4.1):

- An element of communicating to its own domestic constituency;
- Having a somewhat positive image due to its economic power, which it draws upon to gain influence;
- In light of the debate over whether China has a grand strategy, public diplomacy is a useful tool to engage in discourse about its changing identity; and
- To manage the effects of globalisation.

The snapshots on China's public diplomacy in Africa revealed further nuances in relation to the above aspects.

First, while the literature notes that China's own domestic audience are important receivers of its global public diplomacy efforts, this was less the case in the specific snapshots studied. This does not mean that China's engagements are not *driven by* domestic interests. For instance, the BRI promotes closer cooperation and security links with its neighbours, which is beneficial for its own security. Still the speeches and pronouncements studied appear to promote China's benevolent presence on the continent among African and global audiences, than its own public. This could partly explain why, besides the fact that relations are more recent; there is limited promotion of its 'imperial splendour' in Africa, as this narrative is usually adopted to spur domestic nationalism (3.3.2.2). Nevertheless, the continent could become more important in China's global public diplomacy due to its positive reception of projects, such as the BRI (4.3.3). The seventh FOCAC meeting will also be hosted in Beijing in September 2018, which could raise Chinese public awareness about the relationship.

Second, as the literature broadly suggests, China already enjoys a fairly positive image in terms of its economic engagements in Africa. This is confirmed in the snapshots and various surveys mentioned (see 4.3.3 and 5.3.3), where China has a relatively more positive image on the continent due to

economic relations, than other regions. The example of Africa reaching out to be part of the BRI is one instance of its positive reception (Chapter 4). Furthermore, the continent happens to be a testing ground for China's image, as it is more 'insulated' from geopolitics (such as the 'China threat') and both sides share less historical discord (absent from one another's colonial experiences). However, as will be indicated in section 7.2, there is still a need to foster people-to-people relations and traditional public diplomacy, due to a range of Africa-originating determinants.

The third aspect on the uncertainty over whether China has a grand strategy links with the fourth aspect, the context of globalisation. Both are unpredictable factors that require China to undertake an adaptive approach towards Africa. For example, there remains debate over whether China owns a grand strategy (the articulation of core aims or ends), as its own identity is a result of competing interests and identities (3.4.1). Globalisation has also affected China in contradictory ways. It is opening up and engaging in global trends like the practice of public diplomacy and at the same time, it is also adapting this practice. The snapshots confirmed that China does indeed use instrumental communication and an adaptable engagement in Africa, reinforcing the constructivist view that states are imagined identities and are never constant (see 2.2.3.1).

Scholars have also explained how China tends to use public diplomacy, often emphasising people-to-people exchanges and cultural diplomacy, while the US's cultural dissemination is more commercially driven than state sponsored (see Chapter 3). Yet the use of CIs and people exchanges may be China's preferred instruments, because of the very language and cultural gaps that still exist. Furthermore, the fact that people exchanges are arranged under formal structures, like the FOCAC, suggests there remains a large degree of state involvement in China's public diplomacy. (The attributes of China's public diplomacy will be further discussed in 7.2). It also needs to be re-emphasised, that the contours of public diplomacy itself remains unclear, as it is by definition evolving and contested (see 2.4.1). China's approach towards Africa reflects then, the literature on public diplomacy (2.4.4), as the preferred engagement instruments used, depends on the actors and context in question. Demonstrating this is that the more China's relations with Africa (through FOCAC, see 5.3.2) and South Africa (6.4.2) develop, the more public diplomacy and associated instruments are incorporated to advance relations.

As mentioned in the literature overview (see 1.2), the use of narratives in public diplomacy is also not unique to China. Yet its very choice of aspects of history and how it adapts it in Africa reveals much about its own unique experiences. For example, its narrative of a shared friendship with Africa since the 1950s is used as an indicator of China's unchanging commitment. This narrative also

demonstrates the Confucian value of building long-term relations or *guanxi*, which remains significant in Chinese social and political life. Similarly, the use of partnership classifications is important to China (6.4.1). The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between China and South Africa not only demonstrates the level of relations but also creates an ‘atmosphere’ of a consultative relationship, rather than one that is enforced.

The second objective of this study relates to whether China’s public diplomacy uses a Sinocentric world narrative, which some believe helps it create a world order in its image (Callahan 2008:749; Ford 2013; Fisher 2013). The snapshots revealed otherwise. The Sinocentric past only really features in global pronouncements related to the BRI (since Central Asia was an important feature of the ancient Silk Road), while in the African case, this period only features in occasional narratives, like Admiral Zheng He’s expeditions. These narratives are adopted, though, as evidence of China’s benevolence and cooperative stance, rather than an explicit claim of it being the historical world’s centre. Thus, China does not actually apply its imperial past when engaging Africa (see 5.2). Instead, it draws on a shared colonial experience, as well as solidarity politics during Africa’s independence struggles and the Cold War (as exemplified by the TAZARA railway). It also emphasises particular aspects of relations over others, such as its support during the 2014 Ebola outbreak or assistance in Africa’s industrialisation, a more recent emphasis of African policymakers. In China’s engagement at the bilateral level (with South Africa), the narratives promoted at the continental level are used interchangeably (see 6.4.1); and like the other snapshots there remains limited use of the Sinocentric world narrative. At the same time, specific narratives regarding bilateral relations are also applied as reinforcement – like a unique historical and contemporary friendship, synergies between development aspirations and a shared global outlook.

These snapshots reveal the third objective that China indeed adapts narratives to achieve (or justify) its interests in Africa; and this is a result of the context that it operates in. This reinforces the critical constructivist position that while the international system is a stage where actors play particular roles (Ringmar 2012), these very identities are not static. They are amorphous, since achieving desired outcomes requires managing particular determinants, actors and contexts.

**Table 7.1: Representation of selected snapshots of China’s public diplomacy in Africa**

	<b>Global: BRI</b>	<b>Regional: FOCAC</b>	<b>Bilateral: China-South Africa</b>
<b>Motivation for China’s public diplomacy (between 2009-2016)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To garner support: the BRI, proposed by China in 2013, is still developing and is thus seeking partnerships across the world.</li> <li>While China’s engagement is relatively welcome in Africa, the extent to which the continent is part of the initiative (in the period of analysis 2013–2016) is still being defined and thus requires careful management.</li> </ul>	<p>Despite the advent of FOCAC, concerns highlighted the asymmetrical economic links with the continent and questions over China’s intentions. Public engagement is also a newer space for China–Africa ties. Hence China seeks to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advance from traditional links and expand relations to include people engagement.</li> <li>The FOCAC also helps promote China’s intentions publicly.</li> </ul>	<p>China-South Africa relations rapidly developed to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2010. On the other hand, there remain clear gaps between state and civil society links with China. Hence public diplomacy is adopted to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expand relations, like the case of FOCAC.</li> <li>Maintain the achievements and interests already made.</li> </ul> <p>While structures to engage publics have been created, this environment has at times, influenced China to become more reactive in its response.</p>
	To provide the conceptual (BRI) and/ or structural (FOCAC) arrangements to better negotiate, disseminate and socialise changing relations (but also influenced by non-state actors).		
<b>Instruments used in each level snapshot</b>	Limited narrative of China’s imperial past utilised (besides the use of the Zheng He narrative).		
	<p>Globally directed engagements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Narratives emphasize friendship along the ancient Silk Road</li> <li>Intersubjective spaces (events)</li> <li>Media</li> <li>Speeches</li> </ul> <p>Africa:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Narratives are adapted to include links to the African Agenda 2063, industrialisation and regional integration</li> <li>Joint events</li> <li>Economic image</li> </ul>	<p>Narrative: shared colonial past, solidarity politics and Cold War relations. However, newer instances of unwavering friendship include China’s support following the Ebola outbreak in 2014, as well as China’s support for African development (like Agenda 2063).</p> <p>Instruments: Increased role of instruments from 2009 include but are not limited to academic/think tank exchanges; scholarships; media and the establishment of CIs.</p>	

		<p>FOCAC platform as public diplomacy instrument:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A ‘shared’ space to engage as partners.</li> <li>• Where important pronouncements regarding relations and milestones are made.</li> <li>• China’s intentions and policy towards Africa are made public.</li> <li>• The triennial FOCAC meetings as ‘controlled’ events.</li> </ul>	<p>Relationship specific narratives includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China support against the apartheid struggle and linkages with existing development aspirations</li> <li>• A unique Comprehensive Strategic Partnership</li> <li>• Shared global interests.</li> </ul> <p>Specific instruments: bilateral related seminars and events; media engagement such as e-newsletters and setting-up of platforms like SACPFA and PPEM. Moreover was the set of events coined the 2014 ‘South African Year in China’, as well as the 2015 ‘China Year in South Africa’ (that coincided with the sixth FOCAC)</p>
<p><b>Processes &amp; determinants impacting China’s public diplomacy</b></p>	<p>General:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China’s own domestic developments and partner countries’ circumstances.</li> <li>• Historical discord.</li> </ul> <p>Africa:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pull factors: equal interest; synergies between BRI and Africa; reaching out from African side to be part of it.</li> <li>• Push factors: African domestic politics; responses to China and extent synergies will remain as initiative develops.</li> </ul>	<p>Dynamics between Chinese players (officials and citizens), as well as the role of other external partners in Africa.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The African environment itself as outlined by: political changes (Zimbabwe example) as well as the changing FOCAC agenda to increasingly respond to African concerns (such as peace and security and illegal wildlife trade).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-standing local perceptions and practical interests</li> <li>• Remaining gaps between official and unofficial links</li> <li>• Role of respective national interests and market forces</li> </ul>

## 7.2 Main findings

At the start of the study, it was noted that public diplomacy is a new addition to China’s engagement in Africa, which requires deeper analysis. Indeed, by exploring the snapshots of China’s public diplomacy in Africa, three main findings were made. They together contribute to scholarly discussions on the complex relations between China, a rising power, and developing countries; the

nature of China's rise and its conduct of public diplomacy – as well as adding nuance to the main research question and hypothesis of this study: China's public diplomacy is conditioned by context and its ability to evolve the narratives used.

#### 7.2.1 China's conduct of public diplomacy is somewhat successful in Africa, to the extent that it continues to evolve along changing interests

As mentioned in 7.1, several scholars have highlighted the significance of public diplomacy. It helps states understand cultures and attitudes, influence public attitudes and opinions (or mobilising action) and build and manage relationships, and in turn, is the ability to advance one's own interests or values. These are the broad aspects contributing to the causal mechanism between public diplomacy and achieving interests. Does this represent how China applies public diplomacy in Africa?

*On understanding cultures and attitudes:* China is slowly learning through experience, engagement and the increased availability of African perceptions on its image. This aspect will only increase as its public diplomacy instruments bring both sides' people together. Yet there remain questions over the extent that China is seeking to learn local African cultures, values and languages as well – as it continues to promote itself on the continent. This requires fuller understanding of the subjective positions of Africans in shaping the context of bilateral relations (see for instance 6.5).

*On influencing attitudes and opinions:* the snapshots reveal that a range of issues is affecting perceptions towards China, along its own efforts. Its strength remains at the political and economic levels (where African policymakers have welcomed Chinese engagement in industrialisation and infrastructure). This could explain why 'people-to-people' links between China and Africa are applied loosely – for example China and South Africa's Five to Ten Year Strategic Programme for Co-operation includes vocational training and science and technology under such links (likewise the 2015 BRI whitepaper, mentioned in Chapter 4, includes practical cooperation under this area). This reinforces that practical needs and interests are as important as winning hearts and minds, in the recipient environments studied. The creation of the FOCAC and public diplomacy platforms also helps China better gauge interests and concerns routinely. Meanwhile the expansion of CIs and Chinese state media in Africa (as well as direct Chinese diplomat engagement in local media, such as opinion pieces) more recently, are instances where China recognises the need to promote its views and interests, as well as engage local publics, beyond the usual policy circles. At the same time the more relations are analysed at the local level, the South African case in particular, it is clear that current mechanisms are not fully adequate in addressing foreseeable obstacles in relations (see 6.5).

This also reinforces Rawnsley's view in Chapter 3 that in the information age, one-way communication is insufficient in already saturated markets.

*Building and managing relations:* This is probably the area in which China is most engaged regarding its public diplomacy in Africa. First, on building relations, the initiatives studied, as well as China–Africa societal links are relatively new. China is naturally emphasising people engagement, which previously did not exist at a significant level. Second, on managing relations, given the achievements made at the diplomatic and economic levels, China is also required to maintain achievements by responding to unfolding developments. Public diplomacy helps enhance the role of diplomacy as an ongoing communication endeavour by framing China's interests, reaching new audiences and engaging in discourse through regular platforms. It is agreed that as conditions change, so does China seem to adjust its language and actions to complement its rise (Scott, 2015: 251–252). This reflects the critical constructivist view that actors themselves have a role in producing change through their very participation in reproducing, constituting and fixing the objects they observe (2.2.3.1). Yet the fact that China responds readily to changing environments also means that its own identity and interests could be affected by its interactions (see 2.2.3.1).

Related to the main question of the study, on how China's public diplomacy influences its ability to achieve its foreign policy aims in Africa, its use of public diplomacy is, in short, relatively successful in helping it achieve its interests – by creating spaces for negotiation. As noted, China has regularly participated in platforms like the FOCAC, which are public diplomacy instruments themselves, to demonstrate its commitment to the continent and to remain engaged in African concerns (see 5.5). The question is whether it can continue this trajectory. China's public diplomacy fulfils practical needs and shows evidence of intention to adapt to local environments (the examples of the UJ CI and the addition of wildlife to the FOCAC agenda attest to this). Yet the more the continent evolves and becomes attuned to engaging with China, the more China would need to prove its intentions and refine its public diplomacy engagements and narratives.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the study of this topic helped highlight some empirical experience of public diplomacy beyond that of the US. Of course, the success of public diplomacy is still mainly measured along countries' 'soft power' and it is true that China's instruments are unable to compete with the efforts of say, Hollywood. However, China's efforts have helped developing partners and audiences conceive the possibility of an alternative reality. While it is yet to draw at audience's heartstrings, China does respond to and is willing to engage in practical interests – from shared development concerns, driving the BRI (and perhaps globalisation) to supporting the



establishment of the BRICS development bank. Moreover, the establishment of formal people-to-people platforms – and their advance over each FOCAC – sends the message that it does not wish to disengage as a partner.

#### 7.2.2 The narratives adopted by China in Africa are conditioned by particular drivers, whereby they become increasingly co-constituted

Linked to the above finding on China's evolving public diplomacy, is the adaption of narratives. It is clear that public engagement is both a useful and complicating factor in China's interest promotion. It is useful in creating conceptual frameworks and platforms for ongoing discourse (on shared narratives), providing China a better position to engage in issues directly of interest to it, on its own terms, as they arise. The creation of the BRI and FOCAC are instances of '*confined*' spaces where China's international relations and interests are usefully promoted and actively deliberated. The FOCAC platform itself (see 5.5) helps provide symbolic expression of its identity and interests. Other instances are China's 'update' of relations with Africa to include shared interest in the continent's development (that is the African Agenda 2063), as well as peace and security issues. In the South African case, it frequently emphasises the 2010 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and shared global aspirations.

At the same time, the bilateral level, specifically China-South Africa relations, highlights complicating factors for China's narratives and interests, as encapsulated in its more defensive public diplomacy approach. While structures for engagement are also created (such as Mandarin introduced in selected schools and the PPEM), the ability to target a critical public is the primary challenge – given the gap between formal and informal spaces, as well as the assumption that those participating articulate their interests, rather than engage for political ends. Structures are also yet to address the emotive issues that arise and fall outside of the official ambit (like poaching allegations and the Dalai Lama debacle, discussed in Chapter 6). Likewise this snapshot highlighted two issues raised in Chapters 2 and 3, regarding the difficulty in defining who represents 'China' (due to the complex role of the Chinese diaspora in South Africa) and the close link between diplomacy and the impact of domestic politics – in this case South Africa's – on relations. Hence, related to the finding above (7.2.1), China's public diplomacy is useful in creating overarching structures and engagement platforms, yet the South African examples notes the constant need to refine strategies in order to engage at a deeper level.

So China's public diplomacy engagement in Africa and its initial interpretation of relations, as narrated in pronouncements and official documents, appear to be conditioned by the very

environments and contexts it engages in (an important emphasis of constructivists – see 2.2.2). While narratives and public engagement may enable closer relations and understanding, China also competes with unique recipient environments – where, for example, relations are being shaped by spaces outside of government – reinforcing the dynamic between structure and agency. Indeed constructivists remind that influence is ever changing. It is not necessarily ‘a variable, which can be empirically measured’ (Callahan, 2015a); it too is a social construction where different performances and narratives come together. So one characteristic that links the imperial past to contemporary China–Africa ties, is the dynamic nature of China’s relations and the manner in which both sides have a role in shaping links. The more China was open to ideas in the past, the more influential it became; likewise, culture developed through exchange with the ‘other’ (Keane, 2010:543; Holden, 2013:32). Simply put, others play a role in validating China’s initiatives.

What is distinctive of China’s public diplomacy then, is that rather than making proclamations in its communication, it increasingly relies on narratives that are co-constituted. It is also for this reason that the African continent appears somewhat more receptive to China’s rising image in comparison to other regions engaging China, such as South East Asia. The implication of a co-constituted and process-orientated approach however, is the need to remain relevant; and this is mainly achieved through higher frequency of interaction with the recipient milieu. The challenge remains *which* and *whose* narratives take precedence.

### 7.2.3 China’s public diplomacy in Africa faces an ongoing dilemma: reconciling its rhetoric of symmetry and the growing awareness of its structural power.

The narratives used in China’s public diplomacy in Africa suggest that it is not actively seeking to create a world in its image, specifically the imperial Sinocentric world order, although its dominance manifests in other ways. As indicated in Chapter 3, the tributary system itself was proved as essentially a dynamic social process and China was unable to reinforce it without support. Similarly, China understands that in a negotiating world order, it is required to engage in discourse on its rise more than ever. Its instrumental use of narratives suggests it understands the need to tailor messages, to manage relations with Africa. This is not language that suggests it ‘owns’ the 21st century. China’s public diplomacy link with Africa also demonstrates it immersing itself in intersubjective discourse (notably its imperial past is only mentioned occasionally and there is little reference to the historical China-centred East Asian order), through the creation of co-constituted structures to negotiate its interests. Indeed its interests depend on the extent its narratives and justifications are

readily accepted. This is not to say that the African continent, with its own drivers, does not reach out and seek relations with China as well.

While China does not communicate its intentions to arrange the world in its own image, its central role is accentuated by the very manner in which its relations with Africa are structured. For example, China is only one negotiating partner in its bilateral links with over 50 African nations in FOCAC. Its interests are also more readily promoted, while the African side struggles to seek common interests and positions. In addition, China's public diplomacy efforts naturally outweigh countries like South Africa, in terms of funding capacity and size. Consequently, links are not truly two-way, as China is in a better position to determine the agenda of people relations. Multilaterally speaking, China emphasises international norms (like UN principles) in its BRI initiative, yet the discussions around the initiative largely emphasise China's relations with various strategic regions of the world, rather than the fostering of Africa's relations with other regions.

These examples reflect an important point made about IR theory (see 2.2.4): constructivism is useful in explaining identity and interest formation, and this was demonstrated. However, rationalist thinking should also not be excluded, as it helps explain state action. It is apt then to echo Buzan's (2010: 35–36) view: China's peaceful rise is possible and noble, and would be a historically significant achievement, However, it is not easy to achieve, as it relies on China's certainty over its identity and how it portrays it. It will remain important to trace China's increasing use of rhetoric in public diplomacy and the stark reality.

### **7.3 Forward looking: recommendations and concluding remarks**

#### **7.3.1 Areas for further study**

This study sought to address the question of how China uses public diplomacy to promote its interests in Africa. In the process of pursuing this answer, contributions towards understanding the cultural and historical impacts on China's public diplomacy were uncovered; along with empirical research on China's relations with Africa, beyond an economic prism, as well as greater understanding of China as a rising power, in relation to the developing world (in this case Africa). At the same time, inherent limitations of the study were also noted (see 1.3.1).

Nevertheless, interesting gaps and further areas of enquiry remain. Firstly, there are additional questions surrounding China's public diplomacy. This study did not undertake a strict discourse analysis of China's pronouncements but instead, sought to use process tracing and key speeches (or

documents) to uncover China's preferred narratives and how they changed at important junctures (that is the constructivist emphasis on explaining context). Indeed, further quantitative work on particular phrases used by China and how often, can add weight to this study.

Given that this study was also time bound (2009–2016), it would be useful to provide more clarity regarding how each level explored continues to develop: for example, does China's public diplomacy continue to evolve or does it eventually find a preferred practice? Importantly significant events have taken place since the conclusion of the study and others are pending. In 2017, China hosted the BRI Summit that drew global participation and interest; it completed the construction of the Mombasa-Nairobi railway and even deployed personal to its Djibouti military base. Meanwhile the next FOCAC, as mentioned, is scheduled to take place in late 2018, as does the 20-year anniversary of China–South Africa diplomatic relations. These are all engagements that could be used as symbolic platforms to express China's interests and position in the world.

The study of China's public diplomacy in Africa could also branch out into new snapshots on the continent, like its role in North Africa, in peace and security and relations with the AU. The question remains whether China will continue to use broad overarching initiatives such as FOCAC, or use more context-specific drives like the UJ's CI, where it is fostering collaboration with the engineering department at Nanjing Technology University (6.4). The latter aspect of context-specific activities would be interesting to compare with other cases. For instance, the CI at the London School of Economics has a business emphasis, while the CI at the University of California in Los Angeles emphasises issues around health and medicine (Paradise, 2009: 652). It would also be important to compare how China justifies its interests with other strategic regions of the world. This could in turn help derive findings that are not necessarily region-based.

A second set of questions relates to China's public diplomacy and international relations: specifically, how will China frame and narrate relations, as its own identity becomes increasingly divided between a more globally active player in multilateral institutions and norms, as well as a leading voice of the Global South? If it deepens its links at the multilateral level and moves towards accepting the current order, would it still be able to utilise its Sinocentric past to differentiate itself accordingly? Conversely, during China's 19th National Party Congress, held in October 2017, President Xi expressed in his speech that it is 'time for China to take centre stage', referring to it as a 'Great Power' more than two dozen times (Wu, 2017). The puzzle then, is whether China already sees itself filling a gap left by the US on the global stage, or if beyond rhetoric, it continues to socialise itself into an order traditionally led by US hegemony. These stances have wider impact on

how China uses public diplomacy for the purposes of negotiating its interests and winning global support for its rise or in fact, as a tool to express China's global leadership? A further consideration lies at the domestic level, where for example there has been debate since early 2018 over the extension of the presidential term limit in China, which could see President Xi leading the country indefinitely. How would these changes potentially affect China's relations with other regions, such as the African continent (where for instance the issue of third-term presidential bids have been hotly contested)?

Finally, beyond the study of China, is further enquiry into public diplomacy as a concept and practice. On the latter aspect, this study established that public engagement is not a homogenous practice, like that of the rules of traditional diplomatic engagement.<sup>104</sup> It is also important to recognise how public diplomacy itself has changed in application over time and context, such as the case of rising populism in established democracies today. Likewise, under the era of Trump's Twitter-style diplomacy, American public diplomacy has itself evolved and become subject to a wide array of factors. Furthermore, it is useful to understand how other emerging powers (like BRICS members) engage in their historical narratives and public diplomacy. The potential and impediments of their public engagement strategies, and whether their approaches differ to established practices, would be useful to explore.

### 7.3.2 Concluding remarks

This study, and particular snapshots, have provided deeper nuance on the hypothesis summarised as: China's public diplomacy is able to promote its interests in Africa, to the extent that it evolves and responds to specific contexts. Its adaptation is reflected by the fact that China does not necessarily utilise a Sinocentric world narrative in Africa, which some scholars believe is an important narrative in its global rise. Moreover, it relies on broad narratives and initiatives to justify its interests, which are then contested, negotiated and shaped to become instances of its support and unwavering friendship.

The research also provided further insight into China's role as a rising power and the nature of its public diplomacy. In summary, the findings noted that first, China's public diplomacy conduct in Africa, as the hypothesis suggests, is successful to the extent it responds to changing recipient

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<sup>104</sup> One South African diplomat even remarked that government and business relations with China are governed by certain procedures that help eliminate issues like cultural differences. (Remarks at the 'Africa-China Colloquium on Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies: The Role of Culture, Identities and Ideologies in Africa-China', Thabo Mbeki Foundation, Pretoria, 24 August 2017).

environments. This also highlighted that the motivations and practice of public diplomacy are unique to China's own experience and relations. Second, the narratives China uses in its public diplomacy are too conditioned by context and have become co-constituted in the African case. Finally, it was noted that the main challenge for China's public diplomacy endeavours is to match the rhetoric of friendship and mutual benefit, to the reality of structural asymmetry in relations with Africa.

This study has therefore raised deeper questions and discussion, beyond the polarised debate on China's rise as a threat or peaceful participant. The constructivist notion of mutually constituted identities fits well here: as China seeks to shape global thinking, its very participation places it in the process of being shaped too. This was exemplified in the study by a selection of China's public diplomacy initiatives at the global, regional and bilateral levels in Africa.

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