China’s soft power in Africa
A qualitative content analysis on China’s strategic narrative projection in Ethiopia and South Africa

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Abstract

China is believed to employ soft power in international politics to facilitate its peaceful rise and enhance its global appeal by leveraging numerous soft power resources. This study challenges the prevailing resource-centric understanding of China’s soft power by employing a constructivist framework wherein soft power manifests via the deployment of strategic narratives. The analysis of China’s strategic narrative projection and its influence on African leaders’ policies and perceptions of China is explored with a specific focus on Ethiopia and South Africa using a qualitative content analysis. The findings reveal that China's narrative projection plays a significant role in shaping the portrayal of Beijing's initiatives in Ethiopia and South Africa. The narratives emphasize a historical connection and shared identity, presenting China as a reliable partner committed to trustworthiness and solidarity with the African populace. The study highlights the importance of soft power narratives in the context of multiple powers vying for influence in African countries. Overall, this research provides valuable insights into the deployment of strategic narratives and their impact on shaping perceptions of Sino-African relations.

Key words: China, Africa, soft power, strategic narratives

Word count: 13,114
List of Abbreviations

AU – African Union
BRI – The Belt and Road Initiative
CARI - China-Africa Research Initiative
CCP: Chinese Communist Party
CI – Confucius Institutes
CCGTON – China Global Television Network Africa
EPRDF – Ethiopian Popular Revolutionary Democratic Front
FOCAC – The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
PPEM – High Level People-to-People Exchange Mechanism
SOE – State Owned Enterprises
UNSC – United Nations Security Council
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1. Introduction

The dawn of the 21st century witnessed a profound transformation in international relations, prompting a significant shift in the assessment of a nation’s global influence and the prioritization of shaping a favorable ‘nation brand’ for international audiences. This was primarily catalyzed by the unexpected conclusion of the Cold War and the resultant ideological confrontation, the global consensus on the exorbitant costs associated with the relentless pursuit of hard power capabilities, and the scholarly intrigue surrounding the US’ remarkable accumulation of power, which ultimately cemented the world’s political order into a unipolar system (Nye, 2004). These pivotal developments ignited discussions concerning the concept of soft power and its implications.

Furthermore, the confluence of international affairs and security concerns has thrust the spotlight on the advantages of employing ‘strategic narratives’ in the formulation of foreign policies, serving as a means for political actors to construct shared interpretations of past, present and future global politics, managing expectations and shaping the behavior of both domestic and international actors (Roselle et al, 2014). In this evolving landscape, China has embarked on an endeavor to enhance the country’s repertoire of soft power assets. The concept of soft power has assumed heightened significance in the contemporary world order, emerging as a critical element in the exercise of state power. Soft power often finds itself dismissed on the grounds of its normative behavior, the challenges associated with quantification, and skepticism regarding its effectiveness vis-à-vis hard power. While these concerns hold merit, it is important to recognize that soft power is indispensable for the achievement of specific state objectives, and when harmoniously paired with hard power, it becomes a prerequisite for any nation aspiring to attain true global prominence. Soft power, at its core, embodies the art of persuasion through attraction, effectively encapsulated by Nye as "getting others to want the outcomes that you want" through the communication of objectives and adept leadership (Nye, 2004: 5). Consequently, soft power can be construed as the power of attraction, manifesting in a nation's ability to captivate and influence others.

China’s engagement with Africa has piqued the interests of scholars, particularly within the context of post-Cold War power dynamics. The unprecedented acceleration in the deepening of Sino-African relations and allegations of China’s supposed ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ resulting in unequal power dynamics has prompted a reevaluation of these interactions (Carmody et al, 2021). China’s rapid growth through initiatives such as the Belt
and Road Initiative (BRI) has created concerns and perceptions of a ‘China threat’, complicating its quest for global influence (Zhou and Esteban, 2018). In light of this, China is steadfast in its efforts to enhance soft power, driven by a dual objective. This endeavor not only burnishes China’s global image and international reputation as a peaceful, benevolent, and responsible actor, but also wields persuasive influence that compels other nations to acknowledge and accept China's ascending status within the international community. In doing so, China aims to facilitate a peaceful and harmonious progression towards global prominence (ibid).

Considering this, the research problem guiding this thesis will examine the utilization of soft power by China as a means to achieve strategic objectives. The aim is to shed light on the mechanisms through which soft power is wielded, specifically through strategic narratives, in order to mold perceptions. This analysis is conducted within the specific contexts of Ethiopia and South Africa. The goal of this study is to contribute to an understanding of how communication, persuasion and influence operate in international affairs, specifically the interplay between soft power and strategic narratives, with a particular emphasis on their application in the context of China’s interactions with Ethiopia and South Africa. The research question this thesis seeks to answer is as follows: ‘How does China’s soft power influence African leaders’ policies and perceptions of China’s expanding presence in Africa?’ In essence, this inquiry delves into the influence of China’s strategic narratives on the viewpoints of Ethiopian and South African leaders.

1.1. Thesis structure

The subsequent chapters of this thesis will be organized as follows. In the second chapter, a literature review concerning the nature of Sino-African relations, China’s utilization of soft power and the application of the constructivist approach to soft power will be presented concluding with the theoretical stance adopted in the analysis. Within this chapter, a comprehensive discussion will ensue of diverse methodologies and theoretical frameworks employed by scholars in their scrutiny of the focal subject matter of this thesis. The third chapter delves into the rationale behind the selection of qualitative content analysis as the chosen research method and will outline how the data has been gathered and processed. This will be followed by the fourth chapter, where an in-depth analysis of the data collected will transpire. China’s strategic narrative will be traced from its projection to its reception by Ethiopian and South African leaders. The analysis is subdivided into three distinct sections,
each pertaining to specific soft power resources. Lastly, the fifth chapter will offer final reflections on the principal discoveries and address the research question. Additionally, this section will proffer suggestions for future research endeavors aimed at further advancing the field within which this paper is situated.

2. Literature review

This section serves the purpose of presenting and reviewing previous research and theoretical approaches that are of relevance to the research question. The literature review is organized into three themes that are related to the research question. (a) an overview of the debate surrounding the nature of Sino-African relations; (b) China’s soft power strategy; (c) the constructivist approach to soft power; (d) summary of the literature review and theoretical framework.

2.1. The nature of Sino-African relations

The rise of China has resulted in increased engagement with Africa in terms of growing political and economic ties. This theme is relevant to this thesis as it provides different views of the long-term impact of China’s increased activities in Africa as well as the main driving forces of Sino-African diplomacy. The literature on Sino-African relations has sought to generate debate on the nature of this engagement with regards to socio-cultural, economic and trade dimensions. These factors have been debated in the literature with mixed findings and differing viewpoints: Sino-optimism, Sino-pragmatism, and Sino-pessimism. To clarify the various standpoints this theme will be divided into two sub-sections: (1) presents the debt-trap diplomacy narrative and critiques; (2) the emergence of African agency.

2.1.1. Debt-trap diplomacy and neocolonialism

The development of bilateral relations with the East, particularly China, has sparked a broader discourse concerning issues of equity and justice within the context of global economic relations. Within this discourse Sino-pessimism has emerged, wherein scholars criticize China’s intentions and its potential exploitation of African resources. While Sino-African relations are often portrayed as fostering ‘win-win’ development with a focus on cooperation and connectivity (Carmody et al, 2021), this characterization has been challenged by various scholars (Bbaala, 2015; Kinyondo, 2019). Drawing inspiration from neo-colonial scholars and neo-Marxist dependency theories, Bbaala (2015) identifies the emergence of
certain neo colonial patterns indicative of a new form of exploitation. A noteworthy pattern highlighted in the study demonstrates that, despite the widespread distribution of China’s exports to Africa, imports are disproportionately concentrated in a handful of resource-rich countries. Several scholars contend that Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private enterprises operating in Africa aim to secure access to natural resources in order to sustain their robust economic growth (Bbaala, 2015; Drogendijk and Blomkvist, 2013). The resource-centric nature of Sino-African relations is posited as a catalyst for the exportation of raw materials and the importation of finished products with minimal technological transfer (Bbaala, 2015). When coupled with the adoption of the Chinese development model, this dynamic is argued to foster long-term dependency on China among African states while concurrently inducing a decapitalization effect (ibid; Drogendijk and Blomkvist, 2013).

Similarly, Kinyondo (2019) conducted a comprehensive analysis of Sino-African cooperation with a specific focus on the potential existence of neocolonial dynamics within their diplomatic relations. This examination drew upon interviews with key stakeholders in Tanzania, as well as primary data derived from Afrobarometer and the China-Africa Research Initiative (CARI). Kinyondo (ibid) discerned a pronounced concentration of Chinese loans within nations endowed with abundant natural resources, with particular emphasis on the power and mining sectors. Notably, instances such as Djibouti and Angola are cited to contend that countries burdened by substantial debt found themselves compelled to make cash payments to China or cede control of critical infrastructure to Chinese SOEs (ibid). Kinyondo (ibid), in conjunction with Bbaala (2015), underscored the concept of debt-trap diplomacy as a means by which China expands its hegemony over Africa. Both scholars described Chinese SOEs as a strategic instrument enabling China to advance its political and strategic objectives, thereby bolstering its political influence. Advocates of the debt-trap diplomacy narrative argue that, given the prevailing trade imbalance favoring China and the crippling debt borne by African states, there exists a discernible trajectory towards the reassertion of colonial influence by China on the continent.

The discourse surrounding debt-trap diplomacy and neocolonial contentions does not stand uncontested. Critics of the debt-trap narrative concur that it primarily rests on conjecture driven by racialized fears about Western displacement (Addis and Zuping, 2018; Brautigam, 2019; Carmody, 2020). Carmody (2020) and Addis and Zuping (2018) posits that the depiction of a Chinese threat unravels when looking at public opinion polls. Empirical evidence fails to substantiate the assertion that Africans themselves perceive exploitation;
conversely, there exists a favorable disposition towards China, with the majority regarding it as an attractive partner for their development. Moreover, critics who ascribe neo-colonial attributes to China paradoxically neglect to acknowledge the array of benefits offered by China, which encompasses comprehensive support such as large-scale infrastructure development, aid provisions, technical assistance, scholarship opportunities, debt relief and cancellations, concessional finance, interest-free loans, and the establishment of industrial zones across many African states (Addis and Zuping, 2018)

Although the debt-trap narrative gains credence from the escalating African dependency on China and its burgeoning ‘commodity power’ on a global scale (Carmody, 2020), it is essential to recognize that China may not be deliberately pursuing debt-trap diplomacy. Nevertheless, the intentions may be of secondary significance when assessing outcomes. In cases involving substantial outlays and infrastructure financing, the potential for project failures, misallocation of funds, and a problematic surge in debt that could impede other forms of expenditure invariably exists (Lagarde, 2018, as cited in Brautigam, 2019). Such concerns, however, are not exclusive to China and Chinese companies, but pertain to most nations and commercial entities engaged in financial transactions. Consequently, it would be disingenuous to single out China for such critique. Furthermore, the characterization of China’s diplomatic overtures in Africa as predominantly ‘resource based’ could be scrutinized when considering Ethiopia as a case study. Ethiopia, despite its status as a landlocked nation with limited resource endowments, neither yields pivotal raw materials of strategic importance to China nor participates extensively in bilateral trade with China. Nevertheless, China has made significant strides in expanding and deepening its bilateral relations with Ethiopia.

2.1.2. The emergence of African agency

Recent scholarship on Sino-African relations has begun to shift its focus from narratives of neocolonialism and excessive debt burden into literature defined by an emerging dynamism supporting the resurgence of African agency, interests, and objectives (Besada and O’Bright, 2016; Kalu, 2020). In similar lines as critics of the debt-trap diplomacy narrative, scholars of this strand argue that Sino-African relations reflect globalization rather than colonization and that China’s active engagement with Africa is part of its emergence as a global actor and no different from the traditional behavior of other major powers. Kalu (2020: 344) and Besada and O’Bright (2016) argue that China’s approach in communicating its engagement with
African states is a crucial facilitator and the growing influence of China in African countries is ‘not only a product of what China is offering to Africa, but also how China is presenting its offers to these countries’. The symbolism of frequent reciprocal official visits by the highest political leaders from each respective side is used as an example of how China builds political trust (Kalu, 2020). In addition, it is argued that a crucial part of China’s soft power approach to African relations, and what sets them apart from other major powers, is that their diplomacy is anchored on the ‘five-no approach’ (ibid). This approach aims to signal respect for African sovereignty and self-determination by non-interference in internal affairs and by imposing no good governance conditionalities, contrary to Western major powers (ibid; (Besada and O’Bright, 2016).

While the expanding body concerning African agency is valuable and provides an all-encompassing view, it often presupposes its validity without outlining the specific contextual interpretations and applications of the concept (Besada and O’Bright, 2016). As emphasized by Folashadé Soulé (2020: 646), the great focus on the rivalry between traditional and emerging powers on the continent results in the tendency to marginalize African actors and offer limited inquiry of their motivations and strategic considerations and fails to fully capture the reality of inter-state relations. Therefore, it is imperative to reposition African actors at the forefront, recognizing them as key agents in the decision-making process and analysis. Using Wight’s three-level framework for analyzing state agency, Mohan and Lampert (2012) examine the role of African agency within the national structural context, specifically focusing on political elites and bureaucrats in Angola. Their discoveries underscore the deliberate creation of a hybrid system of institutional arrangements by Angola, aimed at centralizing negotiation proceedings to steer interactions with China (ibid). However, beyond acknowledging the deliberate intentionality attributed to the Angolan state, the means by which agency is ultimately enacted remains vague.

Others, such as Kragelund and Carmody (2016) contend that the recent emphasis on African agency, though insightful, may inadvertently bolster ‘internalist’ explanations for African underdevelopment. The reliance of China on African oil and mineral resources has engendered interdependence and provided African states with substantial leverage, however Kragelund and Carmody’s (ibid) argue that the influence wielded by African elites is limited to bargaining rather than structural change. To mitigate internalist viewpoints, they introduce ‘flexigemony’ or ‘flexipower’ which delineates how Chinese actors adapt their strategies to align with the distinctive histories and geographies of the African states they engage with
The impact and effectiveness of Chinese soft power in Ethiopia and South Africa depends on both China’s ability to convey its narrative and how these countries receive it. Considering the concept of ‘flexigemony’, which acknowledges the African leaders’ role in shaping their relations with China, it is essential to approach the analysis with an understanding of the interplay between African agency and Chinese soft power. This dynamic plays a key role in understanding how African political leaders interpret China’s narratives and its role given their bargaining power and motivations.

2.2. China’s soft power strategy

The term ‘soft power’, as originally conceptualized by Nye (2004: 2), refers to the capacity to achieve one’s objective through attraction rather than coercion or financial incentives, essentially persuading others to share one’s desired outcome. Soft power draws upon three key resources: cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policy. China has strategically harnessed these elements in its pursuit of cultivating soft power and normative influence, thereby bolstering its political identity, and molding global perceptions of itself. Nye (2012: 155) argues that the cultivation of soft power emerged as a discerning strategy for China, allowing it to adopt the persona of a global responsible stakeholder without heavy reliance on coercive or hard power tactics. This observation is consonant with the consensus among scholars, who contend that China’s soft power strategy primarily aims to convince others to acknowledge and accept its rising power status as peaceful (Zhou and Esteban, 2018). Within this context, the body of literature on China’s soft power, both globally and in specific African contexts, such as Ethiopia and South Africa, holds particular relevance.

The prevailing body of literature predominantly underscores the significance of economic engagement in the forms of financial assistance and investments, as exemplified by Morgan (2018), whose study delves into the diverse perspectives held within African states concerning China’s economic statecraft. Drawing upon public opinion surveys, Morgan’s analysis discerns an overall favorable perception of Chinese economic involvement (ibid). Populaces harboring positive views of China tend to endorse governmental policies that align with Chinese interests and detrimental aspects primarily revolve around small-scale traders and investors involved in Chinese manufacturing (ibid). However, these factors do not exert substantial influence on the perceptions of Chinese aid and infrastructure investments, which are generally met with approval and contribute to China’s soft power appeal (ibid). Similarly, Blair et al (2021) investigate foreign aid as a tool for cultivating soft power, comparing
Chinese aid to Africa with the competitive aid framework and geopolitical influence of the United States. In contrast to the findings of Morgan (2018), their research does not furnish substantial evidence to support the assertion that Chinese aid bolsters its soft power at the expense of diminishing American influence (Blair et al, 2021). Apprehensions pertaining to the quality of infrastructure projects financed by China have created a perception of substandard Chinese construction, consequently diminishing affinity for China and amplifying sentiments favoring the US (ibid).

Scholarly discourse surrounding China's diplomatic engagements with South Africa and Ethiopia frequently underscores the significant role played by the Chinese flagship initiative BRI. This initiative is intertwined with China's soft power projection and has witnessed rapid expansion within the sub-Saharan region. Notably, the BRI has emerged as a pivotal instrument in the enhancement of Sino-Ethiopian bilateral relations. This is exemplified by Ethiopia's status as the foremost beneficiary of Chinese financial support, particularly in the realms of developmental assistance and infrastructure development endeavors. A noteworthy illustration of this collaborative synergy can be observed in the implementation of transformative projects, including the construction of the Light Railway Transit system in the capital city of Addis Ababa. (Bharti, 2023: 8-10). South Africa was also amongst the countries included in the China Railway Group’s $5.5 billion worth of deals for railway projects in 2015 (Alden and Wu, 2016). Economic engagements also include aid, trade and investment with China being the largest trading partner in both Ethiopia and South Africa (Bharti, 2023; ibid).

Levers such as the latter are also used by China to build its soft and normative power through the creation of regional multilateral organizations and institutions. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is the primary multilateral mechanism through which China coordinates economic activities and diplomatic efforts with the region to support its interests and is one way in which China targets regional powers for a strategic partnership to build spheres of influence (Murphy, 2022). China’s strategic partnership is also seen with its effort to strengthen Ethiopia’s and South Africa’s positions in global affairs and as diplomatic hubs in Africa (ibid; Alden and Wu, 2016; Bharti, 2023). This is exemplified with China’s commitment to finance the construction of the African Union’s (AU) headquarters in Addis Ababa and South Africa hosting the FOCAC VI summit in 2015 (ibid). China also cooperates with South Africa in BRICS and G20 which have further enhanced the representation for
emerging countries which aligns with China’s aim to shape the global agenda while advocating for its own interests (Maphaka and Shai, 2021: 7-11).

In addition to the realm of economic statecraft, scholars have directed their attention toward cultural instruments of soft power, exemplified by the case of Confucius Institutes (CIs), which are arguably one of the most extensive endeavors for the promotion of language and culture on a global scale (Li, 2021). Based on in-depth interviews conducted across seven CIs situated in four African nations, Li (ibid) asserts that CIs have played a pivotal role in establishing a network of Chinese influence within the African continent, thereby exemplifying the distinctive facets of China's soft power in practice. According to Li, the objectives of CIs transcend the mere propagation of the Chinese language and culture; instead, they facilitate the acquisition of Chinese knowledge and identities among local individuals. This, in turn, enables their employment by local CIs and Chinese enterprises in Africa, thereby contributing to the development and expansion of these entities and further bolstering the Chinese presence on the African continent (ibid). It is important to note that China's exercise of cultural soft power has not escaped criticism, as articulated by both Li (ibid) and Zhou and Luk (2016). These scholars contend that authentic soft power entails an open society, diverse subcultures, and the propagation of shared values that align with global standards, all of which China is purportedly deficient in, as it predominantly promotes cultural values rooted in its traditional heritage. The promotional and outreach activities of CIs by China are argued to bear semblance to a "hard power" approach, akin to the strategies employed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which exhibits elements of the ‘Great Leap Forward style’ propaganda initiative (ibid).

Based on the literature covered in this theme, the examination of China’s soft power exhibits two significant shortcomings. Firstly, the existing literature places a great emphasis on the various soft power resources and tools deployed by China, yet it allocates relatively little attention to the mechanisms through which these capabilities impact the perceptions of African actors. Notable instances of this approach are observed in the works of Morgan (2018) and Blair et al (2021), who employ surveys to gauge such influence. As posited by Nye (2004), soft power is fundamentally a relational phenomenon in which paramount emphasis should be placed on the reception of the target audience. The current literature continues to grapple with the concept as it remains contentious due to its unclear causal linkage with transformative changes in the recipient nations. Secondly, while both Western and Chinese soft power serve as instruments for enhancing their respective global power
status, it is important to recognize that these two entities are conceptually distinct. Notably, scholars like Zhou and Luk (2016) and Li (2021) contend that the critique leveled against China’s soft power revolves around its contained political circumstances, particularly its non-democratic nature. It is pertinent to acknowledge that Chinese soft power does not evoke the same attraction as its Western counterpart has since the Cold War. This disparity arises from the fact that building relations with China no longer hinges on cultural and political congruence, but rather on principles of complementarity and mutual benefits, as previously highlighted in Section 2.1.2. of this thesis (Kalu, 2020; Besada and O’Bright, 2016). Nye (2004) himself explains the successful exercise of soft power by linking it to the case of the US’s propagation of universalistic liberal democratic values. However, China’s objective differs because the aim is not to sell the ‘Chinese way’ but to sell cooperation with China (Fliegel and Kříž, 2020). The literature thus underscores certain underlying issues within Nye’s conceptualization of soft power, necessitating a more nuanced exploration of the concept in the subsequent themes, wherein alternative approaches to soft power will be presented and interrogated.

2.2.1. Rethinking soft power

The literature concerning the efficacy of China’s soft power predominantly adopts a resource-centric perspective. This resource-centric perspective aligns with the conventional realist framework in international relations theory, where power is traditionally conceived as a collection of tangible assets. Nye’s conceptualization of power exhibits some parallels with the resource-centric approach as his argument centers on the significance of “intangible assets” such as values, institutions, policies, and an appealing culture (Nye, 2004: 6). While Nye’s perspective inherently underscores the relational aspect of soft power by emphasizing the audience’s reception, Nye’s use of terms such as ‘resources’ or ‘assets’ has had a great impact on empirical studies. The majority of empirical studies draw a distinction between soft power and hard power, often through explicit or implicit associations with resources. Consequently, the discourse on soft power has been disproportionately dominated by a focus on the various resources and instruments affiliated with soft power, rather than paying attention to the consequential impact of such capabilities (Roselle et al, 2014)

Furthermore, while scholars have acknowledged the concept of soft power as the ‘power of attraction’ there remains a notable point of contention regarding Nye’s conceptual framework. This contention pertains to the inconsistencies in his theoretical treatment of the
nature of attraction and the absence of a clear explanation of how attraction translates into a transformation of behavior. As pointed out by Mattern (2005: 591), Nye’s conception exhibits a dual ontological character by including elements of both nationalism and interpretivism. On one hand, Nye characterizes attraction as a ‘natural’ and objective phenomenon such as democracy, peace, and cosmopolitanism and on the other hand, Nye alludes to attraction being a ‘social construct’. The logic of natural attraction implies a stable and unchanging world order, as it requires no cultivation of attraction while the latter suggests extensive possibilities for persuading others regarding the appeal of one’s values and culture (ibid).

The dual ontological framework Nye attributes to attraction creates a certain degree of perplexity concerning the practical implications of soft power. This uncertainty is especially disconcerting for scholars seeking to ascertain the extent to which soft power can exert influence and shape dynamics of global politics. It is equally troubling for scholars endeavoring to optimize the utility of soft power (ibid). The aforementioned issues have consequences that are of relevance to this paper as they have predominantly driven much of the scholarly discourse on China’s soft power to focus too much on capabilities and resources. As Henne (2021: 99) aptly points out, “the imprecise nature of discussions on Chinese soft power makes it difficult to clearly analyze the nature and impacts of its policies”. The challenges identified makes Nye’s conceptualization difficult to use to investigate how China’s soft power shapes the attitudes and policies of Ethiopian and South African leaders. To address these issues, a broader understanding of soft power is warranted. The subsequent theme introduces constructivist perspectives on soft power which offers a more promising framework for this thesis.

2.3. Constructivists approach to soft power

According to constructivists theory, power should not be solely assessed in terms of tangible capabilities but should also be considered in its capacity to perpetuate the shared subjective meanings that underpin both social structures and individual actors. In this regard, meaningful behavior or actions can only be comprehended within the context of intersubjective social frameworks (Hopf, 1998: 178). Constructivist assumption also pertains to how a state perceives other states based on the identity it ascribes to them, all the while perpetuating its own identity (ibid: 175-178). Constructivists approach soft power by placing identity and interests at the core, allowing for an examination of how specific interests
emerge and why certain interests do not. Furthermore, constructivism treats identity as an empirical matter to be explored within a historical context, which is particularly pertinent in understanding Sino-African relations, as it is characterized by a deep sense of camaraderie rooted in shared revolutionary history (ibid; Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017).

Mattern (2005) contends that attraction is constructed through communicative engagement characterized as ‘verbal fighting’. In this context, an actor persuades their audience to adopt a particular subjective viewpoint through what Mattern refers to as ‘representational force’. This form of force represents an unyielding and coercive element designed to severely restrict the choices available to the targeted audience (ibid). Mattern’s argument is exemplified using the US’s framing of the war on terror as a morally justified response to the events of 9/11, and subsequently presented this narrative in a binary fashion: ‘individuals are either allied with us or with the terrorists’. Consequently, nations such as Jordans found themselves linguistically compelled to endorse the US’s interpretation of reality and actively participate in the war (ibid: 608-609).

Roselle et al (2014) criticize Manner (2005) and maintain that there is no foolproof method to exert complete control over narratives at every level. Instead, Roselle et al (2014) introduces ‘strategic narratives’ as a form of power resource that delineates the defining characteristics of any given state, it “explains the world and sets constraints on the imaginable and actionable, and shapes perceived interests” (ibid: 76). Narratives at various levels can also be regarded as potential sources of power. To illustrate this, it is argued that the democratic structure can be perceived as a narrative in its own right by championing freedom and expression. Contrary to Manner (2005), not all narratives are necessarily employed strategically by political actors; instead, strategic narratives deployed at one level may impact narratives at other levels, thereby constraining future policy decisions and behavior (Roselle et al, 2014: 77). Consequently, political actors are both architects and products of these narratives in a strategic fashion.

Drawing upon the insights of Roselle et al (2014), Sverdrup-Thygeson (2017) looks at ‘historical narratives’ as a tool in China’s Africa policy. It is argued that historical narratives can be harnessed as a strategic tool in the realm of international politics, wherein the role of history is perceived as a socially constructed process of ‘re-telling’. This process simultaneously influences and is influenced by political dynamics. Within this framework, historical narratives are conceptualized as a form of discourse that organizes discrete historical events into a coherent structure, thereby shaping a meaningful story (ibid: 57).
According to Sverdrup-Thygeson (ibid), historical narratives can be defined as historical events and occurrences that frame contemporary policies within a broader temporal narrative. When applied to the Sino-African relationship, it is contended that, as a component of Beijing’s charm offensive, specific historical narratives are deployed to convey a particular interpretation of African history to African audiences (ibid: 55).

2.4. Summary: Theoretical position and argument

This chapter has identified the existing literature addressing China’s soft power projection and its effectiveness in polishing perceptions of its global image as well as the nature of Sino-African power relations with regards to how the Chinese engagement is shaped and driven in important ways. This section serves to inform how the literature is guiding the rest of the thesis to answer the research question ‘How does China’s soft power influence African leaders’ policies and perceptions of China’s expanding presence in Africa?’ Nye’s conceptualization of soft power assumes a pivotal role in this thesis, as it is evident that China’s exercise of power is shrouded in the adoption of a soft power strategy to facilitate the convergence of interests and shape African states’ perception of its image. However, the existing literature on China’s soft power not only fails to adequately address my research question but also rests upon a problematic conceptualization of soft power.

In the quest to develop a more suitable theoretical approach for addressing the research question, I employ a constructivist approach to soft power. Within this approach, the cultivation of attraction can be more comprehensively understood through the framework of language, which implicitly functions as a rhetorical instrument capable of extending an invitation to acknowledge a collective experience of perspective. Roselle et al (2014) framework offers a comprehensive foundation for a thorough assessment of China’s soft power, emphasizing its influence on the perceptions and behavioral patterns of Ethiopia and South Africa through narrative communication. Soft power operates through narratives; this process constitutes a form of symbolic, influence-driven communication that operates within both the passive and active dimensions of soft power. The research design for this thesis is predicated upon the methodology recommended by Roselle et al (ibid), which entails a meticulous process of tracing China’s narrative projection and looking at South Africa’s and Ethiopia’s reception through discourse and content analysis. While Sverdrup-Thygeson’s (2017) concept of ‘historical narratives’ does not form the central theoretical tenet of this thesis, it remains a valuable tool in certain contexts. This tool will aid in situating China’s
narrative projection within a more extensive historical context to examine how historical narratives shape the discursive framework of African states' perception and behavior and how China seeks to build goodwill and trust in Ethiopia and South Africa. This includes China’s promotion of a narrative of it as a responsible global actor with a long history of engagement with Africa.

3. Methodology

This section seeks to provide clarification about the proposed research design that will be used to answer the research question: ‘How does China’s soft power influence African leaders’ policies and perceptions of China’s expanding presence in Africa?’ This study employs a qualitative content analysis to analyze what evidence there is to show of Ethiopian and South African leaders being shaped by China’s soft power. It is important to clarify that while this thesis has a comparative nature with the use of two countries, I will not conduct a comparative study. The purpose of this thesis is not to compare the narrative receptions of Ethiopia and South Africa to each other, but rather to obtain an in-depth appreciation of the issue. In order to create an understanding of the conduct of inquiry and to present how the gathered data will be analyzed, this section is structured as follows: (1) research approach; (2) case selection and data collection; (3) the coding frame; (4) limitations.

3.1. Research approach

As established in the literature review, African political elites’ attraction to China should be understood as something that is created through language in strategic narratives. According to Roselle et al (2014), strategic narratives can be explained as a spectrum which consists of three levels: the formation of strategic narratives, projection and lastly reception. The choice of method depends on what level and process of a strategic narrative the researcher wishes to analyze, and as this thesis focuses on narrative projection and reception it is suggested that either a content, discourse or big data analysis is used (ibid: 79). Previous studies on soft power and China’s engagement with Africa have mainly used comparative and qualitative approaches in the form of discourse or content analysis, and interviews. Considering the theoretical position of this thesis and the methods employed in previous research, this thesis will employ a qualitative content analysis as explained by Halperin and Heath (2020).
Qualitative content analysis is concerned with the latent content and “allows the researcher to expose the meanings, motives and purposes embedded within the text, and to infer valid hidden or underlying meanings of interest to the research” (Halperin and Heath, 2020: 376). The interpretivist nature of the method serves useful purposes in drawing out the rhetoric tools and narrative components of the data to uncover where shared meaning and mutual interests are constructed. In addition, qualitative content analysis is generally more sensitive to the context in which texts are produced, which is useful to this thesis as context serves as an important component of narratives by shaping meanings, values, norms, motives, and purposes (ibid). As stated by Roselle et al (2014: 75), “the setting or the environment is packed full with assumptions, assertions and underlying principles and rationales” and by using qualitative content analysis we can analyze South African and Ethiopian political leaders’ speeches to identify whether their outlook on international affairs and China is shaped as intended by China.

Furthermore, qualitative content analysis has been recognized as the most beneficial for this thesis as it is an unobtrusive method of data collection with the most important advantage being that it can reduce bias. Whereas obtrusive methods of data collection such as interviews, can be expected to have people with biases and prejudices that are also exposed to the ‘Heisenberg Effect’1 (ibid: 374). In addition to reducing bias, qualitative content analysis allows us to analyze leaders’ statements which would have been inaccessible through direct contact. The strength of qualitative content analysis also lies in its ability to ‘synthesize two contradictory methodological principles: openness and theory-guided investigation’ which allows one to establish relations between empirical observations and theory (Kohlbacher, 2006: 12). This is done with the coding frame, the heart of this method, which is used to assign successive parts of the material into categories to later be examined and compared, both within and between categories. Figure 1 illustrates how the coding frame is used for this thesis.

1 The ‘Heisenberg Effect’ refers to those research occasions in which the very act of observation or measurement directly alters the phenomenon under investigation.
Furthermore, qualitative content analysis is very systematic in that it requires a certain sequence of steps to be followed, the first one being the selection of material. Therefore, the entire structuring of the coding frame will be explained in greater detail after the data collection is established.

3.2. Case selection and Data Collection

This section serves to clarify what data will be used and how it has been collected as well as the reasoning for the case selection. The research question is analyzed based on the two cases, namely South Africa and Ethiopia. Both countries share several important characteristics, the most apparent one being that China has an expanding presence in both states with respect to several key policy areas such as development cooperation, foreign aid, and trade. However, China’s expanding power in Ethiopia and South Africa competes directly and indirectly with Western powers, especially the U.S. (Blair et al, 2021). While both China and the U.S. prioritize economic development, their soft power projection differs; the U.S. express greater rhetorical emphasis on democracy, liberal values, and good governance whilst China rejects
Western ‘ politicization’ and encourages the ‘five-no’ approach which does not impose any conditionalities and intends to reduce interference in African states’ domestic affairs (ibid: 1356). The efficacy and impact of soft power narratives become especially important when multiple powers with conflicting foreign policy agendas seek to use it to gain affinity in the same countries which is why Ethiopia and South Africa are useful for this thesis.

The material used for this thesis mainly consist of primary sources in the form of speeches, statements, and an interview transcript, made by key political leaders of China, Ethiopia, and South Africa. The data selection was determined based on two primary reasons. Firstly, this thesis contends that attraction is better understood through language. Secondly, political content and action in both multilateral and bilateral contexts has been heavily influenced by political leaders. Therefore, interpretations of African states’ perceptions need to be informed by an understanding of the role of African leaders as actors both defining and mediating external expressions of state preferences. By focusing on leaders’ speeches, this thesis will be able to analyze how the specific choice of words and language employed: (1) is used in China’s narrative projection to shape and set constraints on perceived interests; (2) reveals what values Ethiopian and South African leaders espouse, how they interpret specific qualities of China and if shared experience of being and perspective is recognized.

Furthermore, the data was gathered by searching for national addresses, statements or speeches made to the public by all three countries’ heads of government and political leaders. Where fewer than two formal speeches were available, I expanded the search to include statements from the government ministry and broadened the search even further to include press briefings (including only the introductory statements made by leaders and political elites), statements made to governing bodies, statements aimed towards the general public (e.g. media and video announcements), and statements made in multilateral forums (e.g. Forum on China-Africa Cooperation). A book written by Ethiopian Prime minister Abiy Ahmed was also included. A minimum of two speeches were gathered for each head of government, with the exception for China’s President Xi Jinping where only one speech has been selected due to the lack of open government data and reliable sources. One can critique the lack of material for China however, while it is important to pay attention to China’s narrative projection, the focus of this thesis is to address how this narrative is received by leaders of Ethiopia and South Africa and shapes their perception of China’s role. In addition, President Jinping’s speech is rather comprehensive which still allows for a thorough analysis.
The transcribed speeches have been gathered from the official websites for South Africa’s government, Ethiopia’s Office of the Prime Ministers and FOCAC. The exception is an interview conducted by China Global Television Network Africa (CGTN) with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed which was gathered from YouTube and has been transcribed. This study utilized keywords such as ‘Belt and Road Forum’, ‘China’, ‘development’, ‘Presidential [or Prime Minister] ‘speeches’ and ‘cooperation’ to narrow down the data and identify the relevant material to the research topic of this thesis. The primary material that has been gathered from official government websites and the official website for FOCAC are offered in English translations. The time frame for the data collection spans from 2017 to 2023 (except for the Pretoria Declaration from 2000), due to two reasons. Firstly, it is the most recent data available to the public considering that the current leaders of Ethiopia and South Africa (Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Cyril Ramaphosa) both took office in 2018. Secondly, the justification as to why the time frame is set from 2017 is due to the lack of open government data for speeches by leaders and the consecutive decision to widen the data to include statements from government ministries.

3.3. Coding frame

This section outlines the second step of qualitative content analysis, which is to establish a coding frame that serves as a means to process the data to create coherent knowledge. The coding frame was created as outlined by Schreier (2012) and involves the following steps: (1) building the coding frame; (2) segmentation; (3) trial coding; (4) evaluating and modifying the coding frame. The coding frame combines a concept-driven and data-driven approach to allow for flexibility and adaptation and therefore the categories are derived from prior theory while also allowing categories to emerge from the data. This is to ensure that the coding frame and the categories match the data (ibid: 171). Previous research has identified the use of soft power as an essential part of image-building and recognition of power. Thus, this study suggests the following three as the main categories: foreign policy, cultural attractiveness, and political values.

As this study also works in a data-driven way, the subsumption strategy was used to generate subcategories. The selected material was thoroughly examined until relevant concepts and passages were encountered and created as new subcategories. These new subcategories were then verified to see if it covers an existing category. If so, it is ‘subsumed’
under the respective category and if not, a new subcategory was created. This process was continued until a point of saturation, until no additional new subcategories were found.

Once the structure of the coding frame was established, one must ensure coding consistency which entails applying categories to the material in a consistent manner. Firstly, each category was defined in terms of what features are characteristic of the category and given a set of indicators, and if needed decision rules, to instruct when a given category is applicable. Secondly, the material was segmented into units of coding so that the material can be analyzed in a meaningful way with respect to the (sub)categories. The segmentation of the units of coding followed a thematic criterion which involved looking for topic changes and where one unit corresponds to one of the categories in the coding frame. Lastly, the coding frame was revised after some time had passed, to ensure that the categories did not overlap with each other. The software program NVivo allows researchers to work with rich text-based data to do thematic analysis, grounded theory and content analysis and was used for this thesis to organize the data according to the coding scheme.

Figure 2: Visual representation of the coding frame
3.4. Limitations

This section aims to address the limitations of the study concerning the theoretical and methodological choices made. Firstly, this study focuses on the phases of projecting and receiving strategic narratives. However, for a more comprehensive understanding of the deployment of soft power through strategic narratives, it would be advantageous to follow narratives from their inception (the formation stage) since these three levels are intricately interconnected. Moreover, given Roselle et al’s (2014) characterization of strategic narratives as immersions in a dynamic environment, it is advised to combine process tracing through textual analysis and interviews with the tracing of narratives within the media ecosystem. Due to constraints related to time and the scope of this thesis, the analysis is limited to performing a content analysis exclusively.

Secondly, the study is confined to two particular cases, namely Ethiopia and South Africa. This limitation is not intended to compromise the conceptual validity of the study, but rather to foster an in-depth understanding of these individual cases. Case studies are often subjected to criticism for their limited generalizability to broader contexts. It is crucial to recognize that the findings of this thesis pertain specifically to the cases under examination and possesses limited applicability in explaining the dynamics of narrative projection and reception in other advocate states.

Additionally, this study acknowledges the inherent difficulties in attaining full objectivity and transparency, as it is possible that biases may endure in the analysis and coding despite sincere efforts. The findings of this study possess validity and reliability to the extent that they are deemed plausible by others (Halperin and Heath, 2020: 385). To ensure transparency and reliability, the researcher outlines the coding protocol, the assertions made, and the systematic procedures employed in obtaining the results (ibid). Furthermore, intercoder reliability serves to demonstrate objectivity by illustrating the degree to which different coders, each assigned the same content, reach congruent coding decisions (ibid). Due to time constraints and the independent nature of this student thesis, the inclusion of multiple coders was not a viable option. Instead, intercoder reliability was maintained by re-evaluating the data after a month had passed, with a comparison to the initial coding results. This process facilitated the revision of codes and categories, thus ensuring more dependable findings. Lastly, the use of the NVivo coding program was instrumental in improving the validity of the coding and data analysis processes. Furthermore, the incorporation of data
from diverse sources facilitated data corroboration, thereby enhancing the internal validity of this study.

4. Analysis

4.1. China’s strategic narrative projection

According to the works of Roselle et al (2014) and Nye (2011), it is imperative to place equal emphasis on the projection of narratives and their subsequent reception and interpretation. This is important as the construction of meaning, as well as the cultivation of appeal, engagement, and the potential for persuasion, all reside in this dynamic interplay. To comprehensively address the impact of China’s strategic narrative on the attitudes of Ethiopian and South African political leaders, this section will provide a contextual framework for China’s strategic soft power projection, primarily by analyzing President Jinping’s inaugural address at the 2018 FOCAC summit. The coding process undertaken revealed multiple allusions to diverse soft power resources. Consequently, the findings presented in this section aim to foster a holistic understanding of the case at hand and offer further insight into the manner in which China’s strategic narrative is projected, framed and communicated. The section is structured into three distinct categories: foreign policy (variable 1), political values (variable 2), and cultural attractiveness (variable 3), serving as the criteria for coding whenever references were made to each soft power resource.

Variable 1 indicates that China’s planned initiatives place significant emphasis on the concept of ‘win-win cooperation’, a term frequently associated with the idea of a ‘shared future’ for both the Chinese and African populations. This can be discerned in the following statement: “With similar fate in the past and a common mission, China and Africa have extended sympathy to and helped each other throughout all the years. Together, we have embarked on a distinctive path of win-win cooperation” (Jinping, 2018). Furthermore, Jinping highlights China’s commitment to respecting sovereignty and adhering to a non-interference approach in its relations with African nations:

“We follow a “five-no” approach in our relations with Africa: no interference in African countries’ pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions; no interference in African countries’ internal affairs; no imposition of our will on African countries; no attachment of
political strings to assistance to Africa; and no seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation with Africa.” (Jinping, 2018).

The emphasis placed on political sovereignty in the context of Sino-African relations tends to obscure the absence of economic sovereignty, consequently diverting attention from narratives concerning the prevalence structures of dependency characterizing China’s activities across the African continent. Additional references found under variable 1, indicate that China has ascribed three distinct identities to African nations: brotherhood, friendship, and partnership. In the words of Jinping (2018), “We will fully honor the promises we have made to our African brothers (...) For China, we are always Africa's good friend, good partner and good brother. No one could undermine the great unity between the Chinese people and the African people”. Characterizing Sino-African relations as ‘brotherhood’ conveys connotations of mutual trust, unwavering support, and a shared sense of responsibility, thereby imbuing the relationship with a people-centric dimension. The term ‘friends’ suggests that China’s commitment is grounded in sentiments of sympathy and affection, rather than being driven by obligatory or strategic motives. Consequently, this portrayal of China’s foreign policy objectives endows them with moral legitimacy and enhanced attractiveness. Lastly, the usage of ‘partner’ and ‘partnership’ presupposes a parity of agency and power, implying that China perceives African states as equitable collaborators.

In the context of political values (variable 2), the analysis demonstrates a notable association between the promotion of appealing political principles and Confucian values. Confucianism, guided by the principle of harmony, underscores the importance of harmonious relationships both among individuals and between humanity and the natural worlds. These principles serve as the foundational framework guiding China’s approach to international affairs, especially concerning matters related to peace and security, as exemplified by the statement: “Our goal is to make the world a place of peace and stability and life happier and more fulfilling for all.” (Jinping, 2018). In this statement, there is a subtle differentiation between Western powers, implicitly alluding to historical instances of colonialism and aggression. Simultaneously, it seeks to allay concerns about China being perceived as a menace to global peace and the existing world order, thus portraying China as a responsible and peace-promoting global actor. Additionally, China consistently emphasizes
the concept of harmony between humankind and the environment when addressing issues of sustainability.

“Let us build a China-Africa community with a shared future that promotes harmony between man and nature (..) China will work with Africa to pursue green, low-carbon, circular and sustainable development and protect our lush mountains and lucid waters and all living beings on our planet” (Jinping, 2018)

By underscoring the significance of nature within the context of Chinese historical heritage and tradition, President Jinping enhances the legitimacy of China's sustainability objectives. The emphasis on Confucian principles can be construed as an endeavor to heighten China's appeal to the African audience, portraying the various projects and initiatives as being grounded in moral values. This approach imbues the intentions behind these endeavors with greater credibility, in contrast to a presentation solely based on political maneuvering. Furthermore, the core values of harmony and sovereignty fortify the narrative of a non-interventionist cooperative stance, which assumes particular importance in the context of China's interactions with other actors of differing ideological perspectives.

Moreover, the coding analysis has revealed numerous references falling under the category of ‘cultural attractiveness’ (designated as variable 3). President Jinping delineates China's cultural appeal in two distinct manners: firstly, by alluding to the pursuit of heightened intercultural exchange, and secondly, in a more abstract fashion, by referencing ancient proverbs and traditions. President Jinping explicitly expresses a clear ambition for increased intercultural exchange:

“Let us build a China-Africa community with a shared future that enjoys cultural prosperity (..) By enhancing exchanges, mutual learning and harmonious co-existence of our civilizations, we will inject lasting impetus into invigorating our civilizations and cultures, enriching our artistic creations, and provide rich cultural nourishment for China-Africa cooperation. With more people-to-people exchanges in culture and art, education, sports, and between our think tanks, the media, and
women and young people, we will strengthen the bond between the people of China and Africa.” (Jinping, 2018)

The provided passage underscores China's utilization of soft power through cultural influence and signifies the expansion of its public diplomacy domain. The phrase 'are welcome' conveys the notion that host countries have harbored a desire for the proliferation of Chinese cultures. It also employs the win-win narrative by portraying intercultural exchanges as a mutually beneficial endeavor, wherein African influence grows within China as well. Furthermore, Jinping accentuates the presence of Chinese 'wisdom' through his statement: “As an ancient Chinese scholar once observed (...) Both China and Africa are proud of our splendid civilizations, and we are both ready to make greater contributions to promoting cultural diversity in the world” (Jinping, 2018). The emphasis on the allure of African culture perpetuates the narrative of China and Africa as collaborative partners striving for global representation.

A compelling narrative possesses significant influence and may serve as a potent tool. Subsequent sections will delve into the perspectives of Ethiopia and South Africa concerning these narratives and examine their respective contributions to the assessment of China’s strategic narrative.

4.2. Values

In the examination of China’s narrative projection, it becomes evident that its political principles draw from a rich foundation of ancient philosophy and fundamental socialist values. These principles emphasize ideals such as harmony, equality, and benevolence, which have consistently occupied a prominent position in China's international engagements. Notably, concepts of 'brotherhood' and China's involvement in African anti-colonial and developmental endeavors have played a significant role in shaping Chinese discourse. This encompasses the portrayal of China's substantial support for Africa in addressing these challenges, both in practical and moral terms. In a recent interview with CGTN Africa, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed articulated his perspective on this matter:

“The relationship between Ethiopia and China has deep roots as our two countries share history of being ancient civilizations, with rich
culture and history. The relationship between Ethiopia and China is strategic, but also based on shared history” (Ahmed, 2018).

Similarly, President Ramaphosa stated:

“Soon after Africa cast off the shackles of colonialism and imperialism, the Chinese government developed the Tanzania, Zambia and Mombasa Railways that were for a long time a symbol of political emancipation and South-South cooperation.” (Ramaphosa, 2018a)

These assertions suggest that China strategically employs a colonial narrative, which is reciprocated to a certain extent by South Africa and Ethiopia, framing China as an 'ally' during their respective historical experiences of colonialism and oppression. Both statements exemplify China's dual rhetoric, portraying China not only as a non-perpetrator but also as a victim who shared a common fate with Africa. The notion of a 'shared history,' as articulated by leaders such as Ramaphosa and Ahmed, underscores China's role as a champion and helper against oppression in Africa. It can also be contended that the remarks of Ahmed and Ramaphosa implicitly convey that China, in comparison to most other major powers operating in Africa, is uniquely positioned to comprehend the challenges faced by Ethiopia and South Africa, owing to its historical background and its status as an emerging economy. The colonial narrative's historical accuracy may be highly questionable, but it is in this context that the distinction between historical events and the narratives constructed around them becomes particularly evident, as highlighted by Sverdrup-Thygeson (2017).

As argued by Roselle et al (2014), soft power is most effective when actors perceive themselves as part of a shared socially constructed reality with shared values. The narrative linking Chinese and African history, established as the dominant version by Ethiopia and South Africa, serves their own interests due to its inherent qualities. In the case of China's projection of its colonial narrative, it encourages leaders in South Africa and Ethiopia to strategically align their interests with those of China, fostering a sense of 'our' interests rather than something imposed by China. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed further elaborates on the idea of building a shared future:
“In efforts to shape a comprehensive political and economic reform program which we launched in April 2018, we introduced our philosophy MEDEMER - an Amharic word for “synergy”. This home-grown philosophy challenges all of us to complement each other and to build on our individual and collective strengths. This for the purpose of securing our future together.” (Ahmed, 2019a).

The utilization of the colonial narrative has played a significant role in reinforcing and providing a conceptual framework to underpin the concept of South-South cooperation (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017: 63). South Africa's evolving alignment with China can be understood as a manifestation of its developmental requirements and, notably, the enhancement of its role as the 'African representative' in international forums, while concurrently bolstering its position within the Global South (Alden and Wu, 2016). This perspective finds resonance in President Ramaphosa's introductory statements made during the China-Africa Roundtable:

“We should seek an equitable world order underpinned by international law and based on the principles of the UN Charter. This includes upholding the rights and interests of countries of the Global South and respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity … China and Africa should cooperate in calling for the creation of institutional mechanisms that will have the stature, form and global trust to effectively manage matters of global peace and security” (Ramaphosa, 2023).

These expressions of reciprocal assistance and South Africa's endeavor to enhance its global standing gained substantive significance through specific multilateral forums, notably the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and FOCAC. During its membership on the UNSC from 2007 to 2013, South Africa demonstrated alignment with China on global matters, exemplified by their joint efforts to thwart Western-imposed sanctions, particularly in the context of Myanmar, as well as their support for Resolution 1973 concerning Libya. This collaboration ultimately led to a NATO-led change in regime. South Africa consistently adhered to positions in line with the approaches of the BRICS group within the UNSC (Alden and Wu 2016). In the framework of FOCAC, South Africa actively ensured the integration of
African perspectives into ministerial meetings. A significant milestone was reached when South Africa hosted FOCAC VI in 2015, marking the first FOCAC summit held on African soil. This event served as an additional platform for South Africa to exert its influence, as elaborated in the same source mentioned previously (ibid).

China's influence as both an economic and political ally of Ethiopia has witnessed a consistent growth, a trend that has notably evolved during the era of Meles Zenawi, the long-term leader of the Ethiopian Popular Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (Hess, 2015). Chinese authorities regard Zenawi as a proficient advocate, and even as a staunch supporter, of China's role as a partner in Africa. Zenawi's stance on China is articulated by his assertion that 'China is not engaging in exploitative practices in Africa' (Adem, 2012: 147). When it comes to addressing concerns over China's neo-colonial activities and its potential impacts on human rights and democratic principles, Zenawi expressed an even more resolute perspective, stating:

“I think it would be wrong for people in the West to assume that they can buy good governance in Africa. Good governance can only come from inside; it cannot be imposed from outside. That was always an illusion. What the Chinese have done is explode that illusion. It does not in any way endanger the reforms of good governance and democracy in Africa because only those that were home-grown ever had a chance of success” (Adem, 2012: 149).

Likewise, Ramaphosa adopts a position that challenges allegations of neo-colonialism directed towards China:

”In the values that it promotes, in the manner that it operates and in the impact that it has on African countries, FOCAC, refutes the view that a new colonialism is taking hold in Africa, as our detractors would have us believe” (Ramaphosa, 2018b)

In both statements, Ethiopia and South Africa articulate a moral differentiation in their stances towards China, and Western powers. The adept reception of China's colonial narrative and the ingrained values therein appears to be efficacious in subtly underscoring the Western
powers’ 'culpability', while simultaneously conferring legitimacy upon Chinese foreign policy and the principles it embodies. The strategic narrative effectively accomplishes its pivotal role in portraying Chinese political values as peaceful, imbuing principles like non-intervention with a veneer of moral rectitude that upholds the sovereignty of African nations.

4.3. Foreign policy

China’s articulation of its foreign policy narrative underscores its dedication to promoting collaborative partnerships based on the principles of equality and shared interests, rather than the imposition and enforcement of Chinese domestic governance models. This section aims to examine the motivating factors that underlie the diplomatic ties between China and both Ethiopia and South Africa, while also assessing the extent to which these nations align themselves with China in alignment with its narrative projection.

In the contemporary era, South Africa and Ethiopia witnessed a notable shift in their diplomatic orientations. For South Africa, this transition occurred during the post-apartheid period, while Ethiopia underwent a transformation following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. These two nations, South Africa as a fledgling democracy and Ethiopia as a state aspiring to modernize, experienced a pivotal juncture characterized by an increasing emphasis on addressing developmental needs and the emergence of fresh opportunities for the enhancement of their diplomatic and economic ties. Central to this realignment was the articulation of a narrative centered on notions such as 'win-win' cooperation, the concept of a 'shared future,' and a strong emphasis on safeguarding political sovereignty. These thematic elements were instrumental in establishing a foundation of mutual trust between the involved parties.

As previously mentioned, the Chinese approach to development cooperation and foreign policy vis-à-vis Ethiopia and South Africa adheres to the principle of non-interference, coupled with a desire to present an alternative to the Western model of conditional aid and investments often associated with the Washington consensus. Notably, leaders like Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia expressed a staunch critique of Western neoliberalism and resisted external pressures to liberalize Ethiopia's political and economic systems. Zenawi underscored the notion that “development is a political process first and a socioeconomic process second” (Hass and Aidoo, 2015: 89). As Ethiopia embarks on an intensified modernization process, it has accorded paramount significance to economic diplomacy in shaping its foreign policy, drawing valuable insights from China, particularly in
the economic domain (Tesfaye, 2020: 33). This sentiment finds expression in the following statement:

“Like China, Ethiopia made progress in bringing a significant proportion of our citizens out of poverty. However, unlike China, the foundation of Ethiopia’s economic transformation has yet to evolve. We believe China has set a successful model in which sustained investment in infrastructure and manufacturing, coupled with focused and competent leadership have played a transformational role. These are also Ethiopia's priorities today…this has also been one of my priority areas since I took office just over a year ago.” (Ahmed, 2019a)

Ethiopian leadership views China as an exemplar of nations that have successfully industrialized in the later stages while practicing a socialist market economy. Ethiopia’s inclination to draw insights from the Chinese economic model stems from several key factors. Firstly, it is driven by the recognition of socio-economic similarities between China and Ethiopia. Both countries share the status of being populous developing nations confronted with poverty and grappling with the transition from predominantly agrarian economies to manufacturing-focused ones (Tesfaye, 2020). Secondly, there is a notable parallel between Ethiopia and China in terms of political governance as both are governed by single-party systems. Hence China’s developmental trajectory is perceived as more relevant to Ethiopia’s unique challenges (ibid). While it is arguable that Ethiopia’s favorable disposition towards China is influenced by an affinity for authoritarian governance, as it serves the internal political and economic interests of the Ethiopian authoritarian regime in power since 1991, this thesis contends that seemingly contradictory narratives can coexist within a specific context. Specifically, the relationship between China and Ethiopia is underpinned by both an authoritarian affinity and a strategic pragmatic approach, which is further reinforced by China’s strategic narrative.

Section 4.2. highlighted South Africa’s strengthening of its global position and how the alignment of China’s narrative projection of values is reflected. Following its reintegration into the realm of multilateralism in 1994, South Africa underwent a substantial transformation in both its political and economic landscape. This transformative period was characterized by a strategic reconfiguration of its foreign policy and an economic diversification away from its
previous exclusive Western orientation (Shoba and Mtapuri, 2022). As a result of these developments, formal diplomatic relations between China and South Africa were established and solidified.

“The Governments of China and South Africa will, within the context of South-South Cooperation, endeavor to develop, strengthen and diversify their economic relationship … The two Governments will work hard to primarily encourage and support closer cooperation.” (Embassy of PRC in South Africa, 2000).

In pursuit of these goals, the diplomatic ties between China and South Africa transitioned from a strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Moreover, South Africa aspires to play a significant role in shaping global governance in the future. To realize this ambition, South Africa has effectively leveraged its strategic partnership with China by promoting its ‘gateway to Africa’ strategy, which has contributed to advancing both its economic and geopolitical interests. South Africa has formulated its foreign policy objectives in the broader framework of the African continent and its engagement with emerging powers and emerging markets, all within the context of cooperation among Global South nations. This strategic alignment is exemplified by China's endorsement of South Africa's BRICS membership, with South Africa's primary objective being the addressing of developmental challenges in Africa during its BRICS chairship. As articulated by President Ramaphosa in 2023, the aim is to "prioritize addressing African developmental challenges while building upon our existing partnership to deliver concrete benefits for Africa."

Moreover, it is noteworthy that both Ethiopia and South Africa underscore the significance of China's investment strategies and foreign aid framework in affording African nations the autonomy to determine their developmental trajectories. Notably, China is presented as a collaborative development collaborator, rather than a traditional aid contributor, according to both Ethiopia and South Africa, thereby avoiding a patronizing posture towards African states (Murphy, 2022). Furthermore, China’s economic soft power and the sentiment of a partnership and mutually beneficial cooperation is often linked with the principles elaborated in section 4.2.
“Projects such as the Addis Ababa - Djibouti Railway, part of the Belt and Road Initiative, are essential for the economic progress and prosperity of the two countries. But, for us, they are more than that. They are investments in closer relations between neighbors; they are investments in peace. By allowing us to trade together, these projects make each one a stakeholder in the peace and prosperity of the other.” (Ahmed, 2019a).

China's attempt to portray its extensive economic engagement in Africa as more than a neo-colonial endeavor designed solely to serve its own interests, but rather as a pivotal element in fostering development on the continent, has proven to be persuasive. It is worth underscoring that scholars have expressed apprehensions regarding the commercial rivalry that exists between China and South Africa across various sectors, including manufacturing and services, in which Chinese enterprises are viewed as direct competitors to their South African counterparts (Alden and Wu, 2016). Moreover, there has been a notable absence of proactive measures on China's part, such as the removal of import tariffs on specific goods, and efforts to address the underlying structural challenges contributing to the trade imbalance. For example, Ethiopia's constrained export capacity and dependence on primary commodities persist as unresolved concerns (Tesfaye, 2020). While these issues may not be readily apparent in the available data, they nevertheless represent substantive concerns raised by scholars, and their relevance lies in their potential to impact the perceptions of China held by both Ethiopians and South Africans.

As previously stated, the impact of Ethiopian and South African preferences, as conveyed through strategic narratives, is not geared towards propagating the Chinese paradigm but rather emphasizes the promotion of collaboration with China. China's foreign policy, rooted in normative principles, underscores the concept of 'cooperation,' a concept that necessitates alignment with the equally significant aspirations of other nations, all in pursuit of fostering 'mutual gains' and 'mutual benefit.' The Beijing Consensus, in contrast to Western demands for a uniform development model, is characterized by its malleability, adaptability, and absence of a paternalistic approach.

It is important to underline that while Ethiopia holds favorable views of China's economic model, China's strategic narrative does not include explicit political endorsements advocating the adoption of the Beijing Consensus as a Chinese blueprint for other nations. On the contrary, the domestic economic policies of South Africa and even other BRICS countries
significantly diverge from China's approach. Within the realm of China's soft power dynamics, the attraction of other states to China's domestic economic practices is not an imperative. Therefore, Ethiopia and South Africa, each driven by their distinct motivations and agency, are inclined towards cooperative endeavors with China. The Beijing Consensus, once again, stands out as a development paradigm that rejects the 'one-size-fits-all' ideology demanded by the West, emphasizing its adaptability, flexibility, and the absence of any paternalistic elements.

4.4. Culture

In the context of China's strategic narrative, culture plays a pivotal role, underscoring the importance of fostering cultural cooperation and facilitating people-to-people exchanges. This aligns with China's overarching objective of instilling a sense of 'common destiny' in neighboring nations, as articulated by President Jinping in 2018. It is essential to note that China's primary aim is to secure recognition and comprehension of its values, culture, and visions as integral components of its identity. However, the objective does not entail a desire for external entities to adopt these values, culture, and visions, but rather centers on their acknowledgment and understanding. Moreover, China employs a unique approach to leverage its cultural soft power by directing its efforts predominantly toward its domestic audience. In the context of South Africa and Ethiopia, cultural diplomacy has predominantly manifested through the establishment of Confucius Institutes and fostering academic exchanges (Murphy, 2022). As a component of its broader strategy to enhance and broaden its ties with Ethiopia, China has embarked on an extensive outreach campaign, encompassing substantial training programs and initiatives in the realm of higher education. Notably, Ethiopian Prime Minister Ahmed underscores the significance of cultural interactions, as follows:

“It is also my expectation that in sustaining the Belt and Road Initiative, we will have to anchor it where it matters most - maximizing people to people connections and cultural exchanges. It is ultimately our understanding and acceptance of each other that will sustain our cooperation.” (Ahmed, 2019b).
Abiy Ahmed's focus on fostering people-to-people interactions and cultural exchanges, as noted in the previous citation, highlights the pivotal role that cultural diplomacy plays in laying the groundwork for sustained collaboration between China and Ethiopia. From the Ethiopian perspective, cultural diplomacy is perceived as a precursor to political and economic engagement, aimed at fostering an appreciation of national values and institutions. This, in turn, contributes to garnering support for broader political and economic objectives. At the local level, Confucius Institutes (CIs) in Ethiopia employ various strategies to attract and retain students. They portray China as a distinctive experience and emphasize its accessibility to Mandarin speakers. Additionally, they promote China as a gateway to employment opportunities in the Chinese job market within Ethiopia (Repnikova, 2022; Ahmed 2019b).

Chinese programs and the teaching of the Chinese language at Confucius Institutes (CIs) are presented as complementary to China's economic engagements in Ethiopia, offering advantages to students. Consequently, a cultural allure is established by incorporating practical incentives, particularly of an economic nature, within the framework of cultural outreach. In Ahmed's publication Medemer (2019), which translates to ‘synergy’, the philosophy serves as a guiding principle to underscore a shared comprehension across a diverse array of subjects, encompassing cultural exchanges, Ethiopian political matters, and economic aspects, all contributing to the development of a novel political framework. The discourse surrounding cultural diplomacy, as well as economic and political diplomacy, not only coexists in a mutually reinforcing manner but is also employed to mutually substantiate one another.

Moreover, South Africa inaugurated the ‘High-Level People-to-People Exchange Mechanism’ (PPEM) between South Africa and China, and is the only African country to have such a mechanism. PPEM is described as follows:

“Thus the High-level People-to-People Exchange Mechanisms between our country and the People’s Republic of China serves to: enhance mutual trust, friendship and strategic partnership and further deepen co-operation between our two countries especially in the areas of culture, education, communications, health, technology, sports, tourism, women advancement and youth.” (Mthethwa, 2017).
The objective of the PPEM initiative is posited as facilitating the exchange of information between China and South Africa. It is aimed at identifying shared goals and strategies, thereby fostering opportunities for individuals in both nations to reap the benefits of social, cultural, and economic capital exchange across various sectors, including government, academia, business, and civil society (Department of Tourism, n.d.). The PPEM initiative, viewed as a form of intellectual collaboration between China and South Africa, is embraced as mutually advantageous for South-South development. This underscores a shift in the predominant role of cultural and public diplomacy, emphasizing its significance in economic development and politics, rather than in culture per se.

A segment of China's narrative presentation portrays intercultural exchanges as a mutual endeavor, emphasizing the prospect of beneficial collaboration, a sentiment that is also evident in the declarations alluded to within this thematic context. The 'people-to-people' and cultural exchanges are oriented towards serving political or economic objectives, with culture itself primarily discussed as a valuable asset to be harnessed for developmental purposes. While the positive implications of China's cultural diplomacy, such as the Confucius Institutes (CIs), are acknowledged, there appears to be a lack of a 'clear synergy' and ambiguity regarding their impact on the attitudes and policies of Ethiopia and South Africa.

5. Conclusion

The realm of China's soft power has been extensively explored in academic discourse. Previous scholars have delved into the intricate ways of elucidating China's ability to wield soft power on the global stage, particularly in its interactions with Africa, by emphasizing attraction over coercion or financial incentives (Nye, 2004: 2). However, the predominant focus of these studies has often revolved around identifying the sources of China's soft power, primarily rooted in China's attributes. Moreover, they frequently neglect the pivotal role of African agency, failing to recognize that African nations' strategic objectives influence their perceptions and interpretations of China's strategic narratives. This singular emphasis on China's soft power resources and the neglect of African agency have fostered a somewhat simplistic understanding of attraction, disregarding the fact that these resources can be perceived differently by diverse audiences. This enigma served as the impetus for the present thesis.
While discussing and scrutinizing the concept of soft power, it became apparent that Nye's conceptual framework, which underpins much of the existing literature on China's soft power, grapples with fundamental issues. Viewing soft power as emanating solely from one's possession of soft power resources seems incongruent with the inherently non-coercive nature of soft power. Consequently, this thesis adopted a constructivist approach to understanding soft power, wherein soft power operates primarily through language and attraction, intertwined with the construction of shared consensus of meaning and state-level identities. Drawing upon Roselle et al.'s (2014) argumentation, which posits that soft power is generated through the discursive construction of strategic narratives, we identified this approach as a promising avenue to address the research question. Leveraging Roselle et al.'s (ibid) suggested methodological framework for studying strategic narratives and the methodological approaches employed by prior scholars, this thesis employed a qualitative content analysis.

In response to the research question ‘How does China’s soft power influence African leaders’ policies and perceptions of China’s expanding presence in Africa?’ the findings reveal that China’s narrative projection is instrumental in shaping the way in which Beijing's initiatives on the African continent are portrayed. These narratives underscore a historical continuum of harmonious relations, firmly grounded in a profound sense of shared identity forged through historical commonalities. Consequently, these narratives readily lend themselves to comparisons that underscore China as a reliable partner, one characterized by a commitment to trustworthiness and genuine solidarity with the African populace. Certain aspects of China’s narrative projection demonstrated significant efficacy in shaping the perceptions of Ethiopian and South African leaders. This is particularly notable in the articulation of an uninterrupted legacy of respectful and benevolent Sino-African relations. This narrative projection directly challenges prevailing Western stances by positioning them as the constitutive 'Other' in the overarching Sino-African relations, which revolves around a shared 'Southern' struggle against imperialism. Moreover, the underpinning of Sino-African relations within the context of shared historical and identity constructs has been perceptibly evident in the oratory of Ethiopian and South African leadership. They have underscored the imperative nature of aligning with China and fostering South-South cooperation in pursuit of their respective foreign policy objectives.

China portrays its extensive economic initiatives not as a form of neo-colonialism designed solely to cater to its own interests, but rather as a pivotal element in fostering
development within each respective nation. This perspective aligns with the foreign policy objectives of South Africa and Ethiopia, exemplified by South Africa's commitment to advancing South-South cooperation through platforms such as BRICS, and Ethiopia's enthusiastic efforts to emulate the Chinese economic model. In contrast to the alignment of values and foreign policy narratives, the cultural dimension of China's narrative appears less well-defined, and it is unclear how much of an impact it has in shaping their perception. While both Ethiopia and South Africa underscore the significance of cultural exchanges and maintain positive perceptions in this regard, these narrative perceptions are primarily oriented towards advancing political and economic goals, with the essence of 'culture' itself getting somewhat obscured in the process.

Finally, this study offers valuable insights into the conceptualization of soft power as an intricate discursive milieu shaped by the deployment of strategic narratives in the context of Sino-African relations. It highlights the prospect for scholars across disciplines, particularly those in international relations and public relations, to further explore the multifaceted dynamics of strategic narratives in the context of other nations and regions. Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that this investigation primarily centers on the aspects of narrative projection and reception. The existing body of scholarly literature in this domain would greatly benefit from the development and utilization of more robust methodologies and tools for comprehensively capturing and scrutinizing the intricate process of narrative formation. Lastly, while this study centers on the roles played by political leaders in shaping and mediating the external articulation of state preferences, it would be valuable for forthcoming research endeavors to delve into the realm of strategic narratives within the media landscape.
6. Bibliography


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