

# Images of 'Africa' in China–Africa cooperation

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## Abstract

The question of who represents Africa and how Africa is represented to global audiences continues to be hotly debated in academic publications and in the media. The majority of these discussions critique Western representations of Africa, or set up the West as the implied Other in debates over Africa's right to self-representation. In recent years, however, Africa has found itself increasingly represented by the People's Republic of China. This article examines the visual representations of 'Africa' that are used in promotional material produced by China in connection with official China–Africa cooperation. The article finds that one of the dominant stereotypes used by China is that of natural, 'primitive' Africa, a stereotype that has historically been strongly associated with the imperial gaze of the West. This is seen as potentially undermining key elements of China–Africa discourse, notably China's emphasis on respect for its African partners. At the same time, the article highlights similarities between the imperial gaze and the tourist gaze, and considers the possibility that China's representations of Africa might be compatible with a tourist gaze on Africa.

## Keywords

China–Africa relations, representation of Africa, imperial gaze, colonial gaze, tourist gaze, stereotype

The question of who represents Africa and how Africa is represented to global audiences is a topic that has long been hotly debated in academic publications and in the media. Jean-Loup Amselle encapsulates these debates when he describes Africa as 'a floating signifier, a performative, which belongs to all those who lay claim to it, whether they live on the African continent, in Europe, the Americas, or Asia'.<sup>1</sup> Amselle's emphasis

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on the global geographical origins of those who might lay claim to Africa is significant, standing in contrast to the majority of discussions which limit themselves to critiquing Western representations of Africa or setting up the West as the implied Other in debates over Africa's rights to self-representation. Daniel Mengara, for example, argues that 'the Africa we know or hear about today is, essentially, a European-made Africa',<sup>2</sup> and book-length studies of Africa's media image focus predominantly on Western media representations.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, however, Africa has found itself increasingly represented by the People's Republic of China (PRC), notably in the contexts of the institutionalization of Africa–China relations and of Chinese media reporting on Africa.

The question of how China represents Africa is intricately tied up with the way in which China represents itself to a global and more specifically African audience. In recent years, China has invested considerable resources in improving its global image, or what Tara Mock terms 'brand-China',<sup>4</sup> aiming to be seen as a 'stable, reliable, and responsible economic partner',<sup>5</sup> and a 'trustworthy and responsible member of the international community'.<sup>6</sup> In the context of China–Africa relations, two additional features of China's global image exist somewhat problematically side by side. On the one hand, China stresses that its partnership with Africa is a case of South–South cooperation,<sup>7</sup> positing itself in other words as a developing country; on the other hand, it presents itself as a model for development, emphasizing its economic and technological achievements.<sup>8</sup> As Chris Alden and Ana Cristina Alves argue, this apparent contradiction is held together in part by an emphasis on China and Africa's common past and an accompanying 'rhetoric of third world solidarity'.<sup>9</sup> Key to this discourse – which is adopted by leaders from both China and Africa<sup>10</sup> – is that China is different from the West: it engages with Africa on equal terms, underpinned by respect; it has never and will never colonize Africa; it does not exploit Africa for its own gain.

Despite the prevalence of this discourse, recent studies focussing on the images of Africa projected by China have found that many of the stereotypes that feature in Western representations of Africa are also found in Chinese representations. Notable extreme examples concern cultural events and products targeting Chinese domestic audiences, such as the skit about China–Africa friendship broadcast by Chinese state television as part of its 2018 New Year Gala. This featured a Chinese actress in blackface with large fake buttocks, accompanied by a monkey puppet played by a black actor. In the skit, the blackface character declares her love of China and her gratitude for all that China has done for Africa.<sup>11</sup> Other instances include an African art exhibition showing side-by-side comparisons of Africans and animals,<sup>12</sup> and an advert that 'portrays a laundry detergent so strong that it can wash away the skin color of a black man'.<sup>13</sup> Reflecting on these and other examples as part of a study of the construction and reception of brand-China in Africa, Mock argues that 'contemporary official rhetoric on Afro-Chinese as a relationship amongst "brothers and friends" is complicated by the use of hegemonic colonial discourse and cultural stereotyping in individual and corporate Chinese depictions of Africa'.<sup>14</sup> Beaton Galafa's analysis of one such depiction of Africa, namely that found in the Chinese box office hit *Wolf Warrior 2*, reaches stronger conclusions:

*Wolf Warrior 2* . . . fails to create a credible impression of egalitarian Sino-African relations, largely due to its infantilization of Africa and its adoption of the White Saviour Complex transplanted to Chinese heroes. From the critics' perspectives, these elements cast ambiguity on the

status of existing relations between China and Africa. But to an African viewer, there is no such ambivalence. . . . *Wolf Warrior 2* is the rebirth of the colonial narrative of Africa, or rather its translation into a Chinese milieu, as ‘The Heart of Darkness’.<sup>15</sup>

While the majority of existing studies have explored these issues in connection with Chinese news reporting on Africa,<sup>16</sup> Chinese political speeches,<sup>17</sup> or cultural products primarily targeting Chinese domestic audiences,<sup>18</sup> this article investigates the extent to which such hegemonic colonial stereotypes of Africa are present in publications whose primary audience is high-level African politicians and diplomats. More specifically, I examine three items produced by the Chinese state apparatus for Forum of China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) events and disseminated to African leaders. The FOCAC was founded in 2000 as a ‘platform . . . for consultation and dialogue’ between the PRC and the African countries with whom the PRC has diplomatic relations.<sup>19</sup> Official FOCAC discourse stresses the reciprocal nature of FOCAC agreements at every turn,<sup>20</sup> and as such, the products analysed might be expected to reinforce the themes of mutual benefit and respect in every aspect. As I shall argue, however, there is something of a disjunction between the verbal components of the FOCAC products and their visual content, the latter showing a tendency to repeat the colonial stereotypes criticized by Galafa and others. The first part of this article thus presents an analysis of the visual aspects of the FOCAC products, contrasting them with their verbal and aural dimensions. The decision to focus on visual material can be justified in two ways. First, as Giovanna Puppini notes, very little attention has hitherto been paid to (audio) visual material in scholarly studies of China–Africa mediated relationships,<sup>21</sup> and this study thus complements Puppini’s and others that seek to remedy this gap. Second, visual material is known to have considerable influential potential: it is more likely than verbal material to be ‘readily absorbed in an unmediated manner’, since it is often perceived as more factual than verbal content; it also appears to be especially memorable and salient.<sup>22</sup> The second part of the article discusses the implications of the findings, asking whether the presence of colonial stereotypes in these products implies that China’s present-day gaze on Africa can be construed as an imperial one. In this part of the article, I draw attention to the similarities between the ‘imperial gaze’, a concept developed in postcolonial studies, and the ‘tourist gaze’, developed in tourism studies, in an effort to complicate any easy lines that might be drawn between stereotypes and the gazes that produce them. These concepts are outlined in further detail in the next section.

## **Methodological and theoretical framework**

### *Terminology*

In this article, I am using the term ‘image’ in the sense in which it has been developed in international relations, namely as the ‘cognitive representation that a person holds of a given country, what a person believes to be true about a nation and its people’,<sup>23</sup> adapting this definition to encompass cognitive representations of ‘Africa’ as a whole.<sup>24</sup> Although images are usually designed to serve particular interests, as notably argued by Edward Said,<sup>25</sup> like Julia Gallagher I see images as ‘relational’:<sup>26</sup> never fully controllable,

images are the co-creation of those who produce the visual and verbal content that prompts them and those who observe or consume that content.<sup>27</sup> To avoid confusion, when discussing visual images such as photographs or film sequences, I will use the term 'visual content'. However, we should note that the distinction between visual content and cognitive representation is not always clear-cut, since it is quite feasible that some cognitive representations may be pictorial.<sup>28</sup>

Insofar as images of Africa are concerned, the 'European-made Africa' critiqued by Mengara and others is conceptualized in postcolonial studies as the product of the imperial gaze, an 'active instrument of construction, order, and arrangement',<sup>29</sup> which renders the unfamiliar familiar, thus conveying 'a sense of mastery over the unknown'.<sup>30</sup> Images, in other words, in the sense in which we have defined them earlier, are produced by the gaze, a process of seeing and selecting that is inseparable from power dynamics, even if these are open to resistance and subversion.<sup>31</sup> The concept of the gaze has been found to be productive in a variety of domains, but it is in the field of tourism studies that we find an important second perspective for our study of China–Africa cooperation. Like the imperial gaze, the concept of the tourist gaze as developed by John Urry and Jonas Larsen is premised on the Foucauldian idea that the gaze is 'socially organized and systematized',<sup>32</sup> functioning by selecting a small subset of signs to represent entire cultures, places, or peoples. It is also strongly associated with a particular set of power relations, whereby the gazer – historically, the male Western upper-class traveller, today a more heterogeneous but nevertheless relatively wealthy group – occupies the more powerful position, even if those dynamics are similarly open to subversion.<sup>33</sup>

While there are thus many points of connection between the imperial and the tourist gaze, the most important one for the purposes of this study is that of the overlap between the stereotypes of Africa on which they rely. The imperial gaze on Africa, for example, has historically portrayed Africa as a land of open spaces, wild animals, primitive or backward peoples, exotic and authentic cultures.<sup>34</sup> The tourist gaze on Africa, whether produced from within or outside Africa, relies on many of the same stereotypes: at the time of writing, for example, the Kenya Tourist Board's website carries photographs of open spaces, animals, and a close-up of an individual in traditional dress.<sup>35</sup> The overlap is however not complete: the many negative elements of the imperial gaze – Africa as poverty-stricken, violence-ridden, in need of saving – are absent from the tourist gaze, which typically sees (and wishes only to see) a safe, sanitized version of the tourist destination, whether in Africa or elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> We will return to this distinction in the discussion section of this article.

## *Methodology*

The three products analysed in this article were all produced by the Chinese state apparatus for distribution at FOCAC events attended by high-level African delegates. The first two were obtained during fieldwork trips undertaken in 2014 and 2015, at which I or another member of our research team was physically present, having gained permission to observe the event in question as journalistic or academic researchers. Preliminary analysis of these two products, which we had in some senses happened upon whilst

observing the FOCAC events, led to the formulation of the research question outlined in this article, and the third product was selected with a view to providing further material for investigation of the question. The selection criteria for the third product were comparability and accessibility: as a film that was shown to delegates at the 2018 FOCAC, the dissemination context of the third product was similar to that of the first two; it also had the advantage of being available to us, thanks to its preservation on the Internet, even though we were unable to observe the 2018 FOCAC in person. Further details about each of the products is provided in the relevant sections of this article. Each product was analysed using a close reading approach.

## **Analysis of Chinese representations of Africa in FOCAC products**

### *African Cultures in Focus brochure (2014)*

The ‘Cultures in Focus’ initiative was formalized in 2009 as part of the Action Plan deriving from the 2009 FOCAC summit. It is described as a reciprocal arrangement whereby “‘African Cultures in Focus’ events will be held in even number[ed] years in China and “Chinese Culture in Focus” in odd number[ed] years in Africa’.<sup>37</sup> In reality, as noted in the context of a study of the 2013 and 2014 programmes,<sup>38</sup> the bulk of activities in both odd and even years involved showcasing Chinese culture in Africa rather than the other way around, and almost all activities were sponsored and organized by China.

In this section I analyse the brochure that was produced for the 2014 African Cultures in Focus. This appears to have been one of the few years for which an official Cultures in Focus brochure was published: produced by the Chinese Ministry of Culture, the 72-page brochure consists of month-by-month listings of events in Chinese and English and ostensibly targets a Chinese audience. However, we know that the brochure was distributed to African cultural ministers and ambassadors present at the round-table meeting for Sino-Africa culture industries held in Beijing on 27 May 2014, and it thus seems likely that one of the intended functions of the brochure was to showcase, for high-level African dignitaries, the attention being paid to the Cultures in Focus initiative.

The verbal content of the brochure offers a reasonably diverse image of African cultures: among the 19 events profiling African cultures in China are performances by the Algerian National Ballet Troupe, the Egyptian National Opera Troupe, and the Algerian Symphony Orchestra; a South African writers’ delegation is also scheduled to attend the Beijing International Book Fair.<sup>39</sup> However, the visual content of the brochure focuses solely on Africa’s traditional cultural expressions and natural fauna. The front cover features silhouetted outlines of wild animals – two elephants, a gazelle, and a giraffe – as well as a man on a camel and two palm trees, all set against a dark red background. It thus closely echoes the theme and style of the visual content displayed on posters around the 2006 FOCAC summit held in Beijing,<sup>40</sup> or projected onto the Africa Pavilion at the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai,<sup>41</sup> and repeats tropes famously satirized by Binyavanga Wainaina:

Readers will be put off if you don't mention the light in Africa. And sunsets, the African sunset is a must. It is always big and red. There is always a big sky. Wide empty spaces and game are critical—Africa is the Land of Wide Empty Spaces.<sup>42</sup>

The inside pages of the brochure are decorated with Africa-themed border art. At the top of each page there is a print in the style of Tingatinga, an East African art form founded by the Tanzanian artist Edward-Saidi Tingatinga and commercialized in response to its popularity with tourists and overseas audiences, including, in recent years, China.<sup>43</sup> Each page also features the African Cultures in Focus 2014 logo, which takes the form of a Malian mud cloth-style print design in the shape of an eye, the latter being somewhat reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian Eye of Horus. Along the bottom border, there are wooden figure sculptures of the kind widely sold as souvenirs in East Africa. Thanks to the popularity of these art forms on tourist markets, these visual elements thus present a view of African culture that is likely to be familiar and comfortable for the Chinese audience. In addition, one corner of each page is further decorated with a background picture. These encompass woodblock-style prints of a giraffe and a lion; cave art; drawings of Ancient Egyptian gods; traditional masks; further wooden sculptures; a totem pole; and a cartoon-style drawing of a woman wearing a grass skirt and ankle decorations. Whilst some of this visual content has a clear link with Africa, other elements evoke an exotic Other that is much more vague: the cave art, masks, totem poles and grass-skirted woman, in particular, might just as easily be associated with Oceanic cultures or the Americas. In this sense, the visual content of the brochure evokes what Richard Watts terms an 'easily assimilable form of otherness', conveying a familiar, generalized image of African cultures.

### CHINA-AFRICA 500 (2015)

In 2015, the Secretariat of the Chinese Follow-up Committee of FOCAC published a 200-page book entitled *CHINA-AFRICA 500: Facts About China, Africa and Relations Between the Two*.<sup>44</sup> The *Beijing Review* – which belongs to the China International Publishing Group, owned by the Communist Party of China – contributed to the compilation and translation,<sup>45</sup> and the foreword to the book was written by Li Zhaoxiang, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and President of the China Public Diplomacy Association, a backchannel diplomacy organization established in 2012 following the elevation of public diplomacy to national policy.<sup>46</sup> The book is thus in all senses a product of the official Chinese state apparatus. The book was disseminated via two official China–Africa cooperation events held in 2015: a launch event held at Peking University in Beijing in September<sup>47</sup> and the FOCAC summit in Johannesburg in December.<sup>48</sup> The target audience was primarily African and Chinese ministers and diplomats, although the Beijing launch event also included Chinese African studies experts and African student representatives in China.<sup>49</sup>

*CHINA-AFRICA 500* is of particular value for giving insight into how China uses the contrast between China and Africa and the phenomenon of China–Africa relations to construct its image of Africa, projecting in other words an image not only of what Africa is, on its own terms, but also what it is *in relation to China*. The book is divided into

three sections: '200 Facts about China', '200 Facts about Africa', and '100 Facts about China–Africa relations'.<sup>50</sup> Each facts list is preceded by 15 to 18 high-quality colour photographs on the section theme. The use of the word 'facts' in the title and in each section of the brochure represents a powerful discursive gesture, encouraging readers to see the book as a neutral, truthful representation of Africa and China–Africa relations rather than a subjective, partial sketch. It can of course be nothing of the sort, for even if many of the facts might uncontroversially be described as facts rather than opinions,<sup>51</sup> the selection of certain facts over others results in a representation that is far from inevitable. This point is as applicable to the selection of photographs used to represent Africa, China, and China–Africa relations as it is to the selection of facts themselves.

An analysis of the subject matter of photographs in the 'China' and 'Africa' sections reveals a striking contrast between the two. As in the case of the 2006 FOCAC posters and to a large extent the African Cultures in Focus brochure, the image that is projected of Africa is that of a traditional place, relatively untouched by modernity. There are just two photographs of urban scenes, and no photographs depicting technological advances. Instead, the focus is on wildlife and scenery: there are elephants and zebras; desert and coastline; Virunga National Park; Table Mountain; the Sphinx with the pyramids; and jumping Maasai dancers.<sup>52</sup> The photographs of China, in contrast, underscore China's urbanization and technological advancement: they include Beijing's Central Business District, the Shanghai Bund, Shenzhen Civic Centre Square, green energy projects, high-speed trains, luxury executive cars, the Tianhe II supercomputer, and two photographs of the Shenzhou VIII unmanned spacecraft.<sup>53</sup> While there are some photographs that portray a traditional and natural China (e.g. Mount Qomolangma, the Great Wall, Terracotta Warriors, and Qinghai Province scenery), they are outweighed by those that foreground technology and development. The contrasting images that are projected are clear: China is modern; Africa is traditional.

In addition, the visual content of the 'China–Africa relations' section reinforces the contrast between China and Africa by casting Africa as the beneficiary of Chinese technology. There are seven photographs of infrastructure projects in Africa built and/or financed by China, two photos of agricultural projects in Africa led and/or financed by China, and one photo each of a Chinese-owned car factory in Africa, Africans receiving medical training in China, and medical aid for Africa from China.<sup>54</sup> The captions that accompany each photograph in the brochure render China's involvement in the depicted project explicit in each case. Of the 18 photographs of China–Africa relations, just 4 do not depict China aiding Africa in some way. These latter photos are of political meetings (the 1971 UN General Assembly session and the 2006 FOCAC summit) and cultural cooperation (a joint Chinese–South African performance of Swan Lake and a tea ceremony demonstration at the Confucius Institute in Dakar).

### *A Shared Dream, a Shared Future (2018)*

The promotional film *A Shared Dream, a Shared Future* similarly showcases Chinese investments and trade-related activities in Africa, foregrounding the ways in which Africa is benefitting in concrete terms from the partnership. The 13-minute film was produced by the state-owned China Media Group for the 2018 FOCAC summit in Beijing

and was first aired at the opening ceremony.<sup>55</sup> Available at the time of writing on YouTube and the CGTN website, the film is divided into 14 distinct sequences, each of which is given unity through the musical soundtrack and addresses a particular theme. There is a strong emphasis on construction: the sequences depict Chinese investment in construction projects for infrastructure (air, roads, railways); extractive industries (oil, mining, ports); energy (hydropower, wind power); agriculture and water supply; cultural and conference centres; and sports stadia. There are also sequences highlighting China's contributions to the textile and fashion industry, banking, medical and pharmaceutical work, and peacekeeping.

Africans are depicted as embracing and benefitting from this modernity: they are reunited with family members in airports; they speed down highways in smart cars; they take photos of zebras out of express train windows; listen to music on their mobile phones; watch television; swim in pools; turn on light switches; they smile and give the thumbs-up. There is, in this respect, a significant amount of footage which shows a dynamic, modern Africa at work and at leisure. The frequent use of shots depicting travel and forward movement (whether of vehicles, people or animals) presents the changes as positive steps in a journey of progress. There are also many shots which emphasize the solidarity between Chinese and African people: they greet each other warmly, labour together on building sites, or pose for the camera in mixed groups. Such shots reinforce the message of China–Africa friendship and common endeavour, as is also stressed in the title of the film. However, the shots of Chinese and Africans working together almost invariably present Africans in the learning role and Chinese in the teaching one: Chinese foremen explain things on construction sites or in factories or in power plants, or look on carefully as Africans wield tools; Chinese researchers teach Africans as they work at computers or look into microscopes. While the film thus depicts Africans and Chinese as working together, the collaboration is not one that is based on 'learning from each other and seeking common development' as per the official discourse in China's 2006 White Paper on African Policy.<sup>56</sup> Rather, it is China that is shown to be contributing to Africa's development, and not vice versa; it is China that is seen as leading and teaching, while Africa follows and learns.

Alongside the image of modernizing, developing Africa, the traditional, even primitive image of Africa is also strongly present. The two-minute introductory sequence consists entirely of repetitions of this latter type of image: it features nine different individuals or groups of Africans drumming in scenic locations (desert, mountain range, beach, waterfall, etc.), all wearing traditional attire. The sequence is bookended by two shots of African bushmen (one with a sword, one with a spear), also in traditional attire, silhouetted against the rising or setting sun, alone in empty African landscapes. Throughout the film, the image of traditional, timeless Africa is re-evoked, both through visual content and through music: the second sequence, for example, which is on the theme of road construction, opens with close-ups of ground being broken on construction sites, then intersperses shots of traditional Africa that include Maasai dancers jumping and a man in traditional dress carrying a drum up a sand dune, before returning to shots of construction workers in hard hats. The sound track follows the same pattern, the initial diegetic sounds of the construction site disappearing behind non-diegetic traditional African singing, clapping, drumming, and ululating, which itself then merges into



the aspirational, airport-style music that accompanies the rest of the sequence. Similar interspersions featuring wildlife, drumming, dancing, and traditional clothing are found throughout the film. Across the film the image of Africa that is swiftly modernizing, thanks to Chinese expertise, is thus juxtaposed with an image of Africa as static and primitive.

## Discussion

This survey of FOCAC products has shown that much of the visual content foregrounds those elements that have long formed part of stereotypical representations of Africa, namely wildlife, open spaces, and traditional culture. African bodies are a key part of these representations, semi-clothed in traditional outfits and head gear, moving rhythmically as they dance or drum. I have suggested that the image projected by these stereotypes is that of primitive Africa, rich in natural resources and wildlife, and yet to join the modern world. In *A Shared Dream, a Shared Future*, however, this image of timeless, primitive Africa is juxtaposed with a dynamic one, namely that of Africa as a place that is moving towards and embracing modernity. In this respect, *A Shared Dream, a Shared Future* has much in common with the CGTN Africa's documentary series *Faces of Africa*, analysed by Dani Madrid-Morales and Lauren Gorfinkel: the Africa in the CGTN series is replete with 'successful entrepreneurs and innovators', and is a place where 'African and Chinese people . . . are pursuing their dreams'.<sup>57</sup> However, unlike the *Faces of Africa* documentaries, *A Shared Dream, a Shared Future* emphasizes the connections between African success and Chinese leadership, depicting the direction of learning and benefit as entirely one-way. This particular finding corroborates earlier studies such as Martha Saavedra's, which explores the dynamics depicted in a Hong Kong soap opera set in Kenya: 'The Hong Kong-based characters are clearly the benefactors to a needy partner . . . There are African employees at the mission, but they are all nurses, drivers and other assistants – no trained doctors to challenge the Hong Kong doctors.'<sup>58</sup> Such inequalities potentially undermine the image of China–Africa relations as South–South cooperation, premised on reciprocity. As we have seen, the images of China as developing country and as development model are difficult to reconcile. The FOCAC products show us that it is the second of these images of China that is prioritized when African audiences are targeted, a fact that is unsurprising in light of scholarly and journalistic reports of the strong appeal of China's development model among African leaders.<sup>59</sup> From a dependency theory perspective,<sup>60</sup> China's success should arguably make African leaders more wary of China, yet as Jörg Friedrichs observes in connection with the Belt and Road Initiative, this does not seem to be the case:

Now that China is part of the industrial core, developing countries have every reason to be on their guard. . . . Yet, Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative remains largely uncontested in the Middle East. There has been little backlash in Africa, either.<sup>61</sup>

In a sense, the tireless repetition of China's benign intentions towards Africa in official China–Africa discourse can be seen as a sustained effort to negate anxieties that might arise out of the foregrounding of China's image as a development model. In *A Shared*

*Dream, a Shared Future*, for example, these dual messages are overlaid on each other: the visual content foregrounds China's technological superiority as already discussed, while the Chinese voiceover of the opening sequence, taken from President Xi Jinping's speech at the 2015 FOCAC summit and subtitled in English and French, foregrounds China–Africa friendship and South–South solidarity: 'China and Africa have always been a community of shared future. Similar historical experiences, common development tasks, and shared strategic interests have bound us together.'<sup>62</sup> The same can be observed in *CHINA-AFRICA 500*, which overwhelmingly projects the image of China as leader in China–Africa cooperation, as already noted, but affirms peaceful, equal partnership through the visual content and symbolism of the front cover. This depicts a group of African and Chinese children huddling closely together, cradling and kissing a white dove. The theme of friendship is also affirmed through the verbal content of the foreword, which is tellingly entitled 'Chinese and Africans are brothers and sisters'.<sup>63</sup>

While the potential for China's development model image to undermine official China–Africa discourse is thus held in check to some extent via reinforcement of South–South solidarity messaging, the image of Africa as primitive arguably poses more significant problems. As we have seen, a commitment to mutual respect forms a fundamental part of China–Africa discourse, and relies at least in part on contrasts that are drawn with the West's historical and present-day engagement with Africa. Yet China's projection of a primitive Africa – and the sharpness of the contrasts that are set up with a more advanced, modern China – potentially renders China vulnerable to accusations that its gaze on Africa is in fact indistinguishable from the West's imperial gaze. The latter notoriously conceived of the African as 'natural man in his completely wild and untamed state'<sup>64</sup> and of Africa as 'the land of childhood, ... lying beyond the day of self-conscious history'.<sup>65</sup> As noted in the introduction, existing studies of cultural products targeting Chinese domestic audiences suggest that Chinese representations of primitive Africa are not infrequent. Chinese media reports of African Cultures in Focus events held in China appear to confirm their prevalence: drumming, dance, and 'tribal' dress feature prominently, and this remains remarkably constant over the years. The image used to represent the African Cultures in Focus contribution to the 2012 Meet in Beijing Arts Festival, for example, shows a man in feathered tribal headgear with a fierce expression staring straight at camera, an image that is starkly in contrast with the photographs of ballet performances by Chinese and Argentinian groups that sit alongside.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, a report on the 2014 Year of South Africa in China opening ceremony (part of the 2014 African Cultures in Focus programme) includes photographs of the African and Chinese performances, the African one showing seven semi-clothed dancers brandishing what might be a hunting spear with an animal skin.<sup>67</sup> Semi-clad African dancers also feature in the *China Daily* report on the 2016 African Cultures in Focus opening ceremony, as well as in a report on a 2017 African Cultures in Focus event that appears on Beijing's National Centre for the Performing Arts website.<sup>68</sup> The dancers at the 2016 event perform in front of a projected photograph of giraffes, combining tropes of traditional culture expression and emphasis on wildlife. These visual media traces of African Cultures in Focus events thus overwhelmingly reinforce the image of Africa as an exotic, traditional (or even primitive) place, filled with drumming and dance.

What are we to make of this? Does the presence of these stereotypes mean that China's gaze on Africa is an imperial one? As we have seen with regard to China's representation of Africa in *Wolf Warrior 2*, Galafa answers this question affirmatively and unequivocally, stressing the relevance of his own positionality to his conclusion. I will return to the relational aspect of the gaze in a moment. First, let us consider the possibility that China's use of stereotypes in its representations of Africa is evidence of a tourist, rather than imperial gaze, at least insofar as the FOCAC products are concerned. In an earlier section, I suggested that it might be possible to distinguish between these two gazes on the basis of the presence or otherwise of negative themes. More specifically, while the imperial gaze typically emphasizes poverty, corruption, war and disease, these elements are generally absent from the tourist gaze. Judged against this parameter, the gaze displayed in the FOCAC material would indeed appear to be a tourist one. None of the visual content evokes poverty: there are no shots of malnourished or poorly clothed children or of food aid being distributed to outstretched hands. On the contrary, the Africans that we see are happy, healthy, and have plenty to eat. Even where medical aid is being visually depicted, the Africans in the shots are either co-workers receiving instruction from Chinese experts or patients benefitting from the latest equipment in modern hospitals. While the verbal content of *CHINA-AFRICA 500* does include some mentions of poverty, famine, vulnerability to natural disasters and disease, these represent a very small proportion of the total facts and there is an effort to couch negative issues in positive terms. Thus Botswana and Cabo Verde are described as being 'the first to graduate' from the group of 'least developed countries',<sup>69</sup> while Africa is described rather incongruously as 'ahead of all other continents in terms of fertility, mortality and population growth rates'.<sup>70</sup> When measured against the parameter of negative images, then, China's gaze on Africa as revealed through FOCAC material would appear to be closer to a tourist gaze than an imperial one. In this, the FOCAC material is to be distinguished from the representation of Africa in *Wolf Warrior 2*, in which, as Galafa notes, 'war, death and disease plague the society'.<sup>71</sup>

The case for interpreting the Chinese gaze on Africa as a tourist gaze can be further strengthened by the similarities between FOCAC dance performances and those that are staged by African groups for Chinese tourists, which typically also feature traditional attire and drumming.<sup>72</sup> This suggests that China's gaze on Africa has much in common with the promotional campaigns orchestrated by African tourism boards and enterprises, and as such works in a way that potentially benefits the economies of the receiving countries. In this regard, it is interesting to note the parallels between my own findings and those of Saavedra: her study of representations of Africa in a Hong Kong soap opera notes that the Kenya Tourism Board collaborated on the production of the show 'with the aim of increasing tourism from China to Kenya', and 'show[ed] off major tourist attractions and amenities in Kenya'.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, China itself tends to foreground traditional rather than modern features when developing a version of Chinese culture for consumption by tourists or as part of its efforts to increase what it terms its 'cultural soft power'.<sup>74</sup> Confucius Institutes and China Culture Centres, for example, invariably emphasize traditional expressions of culture such as Chinese New Year celebrations, paper cutting, martial arts, and tea ceremonies. Such an approach is in concordance with President Xi Jinping's view that 'to build a

beautiful image of our country, we should display the Chinese civilization of a long history';<sup>75</sup> following this logic, emphasizing Africa's ancient civilizations and its associated traditional cultural expressions could be argued to be indicators of respect and affirmation of worth, rather than of denigration.

Whilst it may thus be plausible to interpret China's gaze on Africa along these lines, this interpretation assumes that a gaze is something which exists, independently of those who are its observers or its objects. However, as we noted with regard to Galafa's argument, the observer plays a crucial role in assigning meaning to the gaze and thus determining the type of gaze that is identified. In other words, just as images are relational, a co-creation of those who create the material that gives rise to them and those who observe or consume that material, so too is the nature of the gaze actively determined. Following this logic, the nature of the gaze cannot be determined on the basis of the stereotypes it generates. Instead, whether or not China's gaze on Africa is imperial depends on whether the observers or objects of the gaze are disposed to consider that as a possibility, something which will be determined by the observer's broader experience, political positioning, and receptivity to a range of competing narratives around the nature of China–Africa relations. While the historical record (and particularly China's tireless repetition of a particular version of that historical record) might make China's projection of primitive Africa less likely to be considered evidence of an imperial gaze than the West's projection of the same image, it does not rule it out, as Galafa's conclusions neatly illustrate.


## Conclusion

Whilst the inherently uncertain process of drawing connections between content, images, and gaze makes it injudicious to characterize China's gaze on Africa in definite terms, this article has shown that the content of China-made FOCAC products repeats some of the same stereotypes as those deemed typical of the Western imperial gaze on Africa and associated with an image of Africa as primitive. On the other hand, the article has noted important differences between these images of Africa and the West's imperial gaze, particularly with regard to an absence of emphasis on poverty and other negative tropes, as well as to the inclusion of content that portrays a modernizing, hard-working Africa. The article has also suggested that China's representations of China–Africa relations in the FOCAC products undermine official discourse by depicting learning as unidirectional rather than mutual; at the same time, portrayals of China as a leader in technology and development underscore the pragmatic benefits for Africa of cooperation with China and in this sense strengthen China–Africa relations.

One further contradiction can be brought into play at the close of this article. On the one hand, China's production of material which affirms and valorizes China–Africa relations, such as the brochure, book, and film analysed here, may serve to underscore China's image as a partner that treats Africa with respect;<sup>76</sup> on the other hand, the very act of assuming the right to represent Africa once again renders China vulnerable to accusations that it is adopting a positional superiority reminiscent of the West's. In a contemporary context in which harmonious China–Africa relations have recently once again been threatened by racist incidents in China,<sup>77</sup> and in which China–Africa cooperation continues to play an important role as global power dynamics shift

seismically, it has never been more crucial for China to convince African leaders that its perception of Africa is as distinctive from the West's as its official discourse claims.

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## Notes

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6. *Ibid.*
7. See, for example, Characteristics of the FOCAC, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/eng/gylt/ltij/t157576.htm> [no longer available], last accessed 23 August 2020.
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15. Beaton Galafa, The new 'Heart of Darkness': Exploring images of Africa in *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 17, issue 4, no. 2, 2019: 10, <https://apjif.org/-Beaton-Galafa/5249/article.pdf>, accessed 6 December 2021.
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31. On the latter point, see for example, Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1994; Hamid Dabashi, *Reversing the Colonial Gaze: Persian Travelers Abroad*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
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50. For reasons that are not obvious, the actual number of facts in each section slightly exceeds these totals (219 facts about China, 201 facts about Africa, 102 facts about China-Africa relations). See Secretariat of the Chinese Follow-up Committee, *CHINA-AFRICA 500*.
51. For example, fact 20 about Africa states: 'The 6,670 km Nile is the world's longest river', *ibid.*, 83. An example of a fact that might more controversially be categorized as such is fact 201 about China: 'Taiwan has been a part of China's territory since ancient times', *ibid.*, 6.
52. *Ibid.*, 72–9.
53. *Ibid.*, 12–15.
54. *Ibid.*, 119–29.
55. China Global Television Network (CGTN), *A Shared Dream, a Shared Future*, 3 September 2018, [https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d674d3351544f79457a6333566d54/share\\_p.html](https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d674d3351544f79457a6333566d54/share_p.html), accessed 23 August 2020.

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67. See Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of South Africa, Year of South Africa grandly launched in Beijing, 8 May 2014, <http://za.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/20140508/t1153950.htm>, accessed 9 June 2020. The Chinese dancer also wore traditional dress but without any obvious connections to primitiveness; we will return to this and to the question of the extent to which traditional representations of Africa might be argued to be balanced by traditional representations of China later in the article.
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70. *Ibid.*, 92.
71. Galafa, The new 'Heart of Darkness', 7.
72. See, for example, Liu Jian, South Africa Week in China launches in Beijing, *ChinAfrica*, 12 September 2016, [http://www.chinafrica.cn/Lifestyle/201609/t20160912\\_800067496.html](http://www.chinafrica.cn/Lifestyle/201609/t20160912_800067496.html), accessed 23 August 2020; Sudeshna Sarker, Africans take on China's entertainment market, *African Business*, 7 January 2017, <https://african.business/2017/01/technology-information/africans-take-chinas-entertainment-market/>, accessed 26 November 2021.
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