

## **Chinese Peacebuilding in Liberia as soft-power projection: perspectives from Monrovia\***

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### **Abstract**

This article describes Chinese peacebuilding efforts in Liberia and presents views expressed by Monrovia as assessment of projections of Chinese soft-power in post-conflict Liberia. Monrovia are overwhelmingly positive towards China, which is represented by Chinese construction companies who have been the mainstay of infrastructure rehabilitation in this small, West African state recovering

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from civil war. As a part of the Chinese practice of peacebuilding and central to its soft-power projection in Africa, we can tentatively regard the strategy of infrastructure-led aid and peacebuilding to have achieved its objectives.

## **Introduction**

Beijing conducts its foreign policy, provides aid and participates in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) in order to promote its national interests. For Beijing, China's African policy has primarily been driven by the need to win diplomatic recognition and legitimacy against competitors, whether it was the Soviet Union, the United States or Taiwan (Brautigam, 2009:34). While Africa has never been nor will it ever become a top priority for China's economic, foreign or security interests, it has always served an important instrumental role -as allies providing political support- against US and Soviet competition (Kuo, 2012).

In competition with the Soviet Union, Beijing's African policy from the 1950's to the 1970s was to support liberation movements that were in competition with movements supported by the Soviet Union. In this regard, China supported liberation movements such as Mugabe's Zimbabwe African Nations Union, Algeria's National Liberation Front and Eduardo Mondlane's Mozambique Liberation Front (Shinn, 2008; Taylor, 1998, 2000). When Deng Xiaoping came to power in the late 1970s, he made the decision to change China's strategy from challenging the world order and promoting world revolution to focus on domestic economic growth. According to realist international relations terminology, China changed its posture from a revisionist to a status quo power. Driven by a desire to increase its comprehensive national strength and focusing on economic development, Beijing began to emphasize the principle of non-interference and respect for sovereignty. The promotion of the principle of non-interference served to promote a peaceful international environment whereby it can continue to grow economically.

At the onset of the second decade of the twenty-first century, both China's circumstance and the international environment have changed. China has evolved from an underdeveloped, isolationist and belligerent Maoist state to become the second

largest economy impatient for political influence and status commensurate to its economic bulk and historical greatness (see Deng, 2008). As China transitions from a third world country to a great power, a great deal of policy shifts and adjustments from China is being made. This is in response to both in its own grand strategic reassessment as well as in response to the growing expectations of the international community. Foremost and the most visible shift in Chinese collective security policy is in her increasing participation in UNPKOs in Africa. With the West turning its attention towards former Soviet states and the terrorist threat post- 9/11, African countries have increasingly turned to China to play a greater role as peace-maker (Sudan and South Sudan), peacekeeper and peace-builder.

A good deal of research has been published describing and analysing Beijing's evolving position on UNPKOs from one of distrust prior to the 1980s to one of reluctant acceptance in the 1990s to a fully participating member in the 2000s (Taylor-Fravel, 1996; Tzou, 1998; Gill and Reilly, 2000; Stahle, 2008; He 2007; Wu and Taylor, 2011; Zhao, 2011; Kuo, 2012; Aubyn, 2013). We now understand that the evolving Chinese attitude towards UNPKOs from the 1980s to the 2010s reflects China's evolving role from an aggrieved outsider to an accepted member of the international community. However, China is not simply being socialised into the western liberal OECD norms in aid, it has always followed its own practice of aid (Brautigam, 2009). In fact, alternative practices in aid and peacebuilding by BRICS countries have already begun challenge liberal OECD models of aid and peacebuilding (Chin and Quadir, 2013; Richmond and Tellidis, 2013).

Beijing has recognised the central importance of "soft-power" projection. At the Seventeenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, the Communist Party of China recognised China's cultural soft-power (*GuojiaWenhuaRuanShili*; 国家文化软实力) as an important part of its comprehensive national strength (*ZhongheGuoli*; 综合国力) and an indicator of its international competitiveness. Subsequent to this, Wei of the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China argues that foreign aid in Africa in particular can be

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a part of Chinese soft-power projection. She provides three reasons for this. First, it was useful in constructing a Chinese image as a peaceful, co-operative, win-win focused and responsible power. Second, it was useful in helping Africa and the world to understand China, Chinese policies and Chinese activities in Africa. Third, it would stimulate competition in aid to Africa with the resulting benefit for African development (Wei, 2011: 32-22).

In addition to literature in English and Chinese accounting for *why* China participates in aid and UNPKOs in Africa; case study based comparative research has begun to appear examining Chinese aid projects in Rwanda (Grimm et al, 2010), DR Congo (Pollet et al, 2011) and Ethiopia (Hackenesch, 2013). In addition, multi-country surveys of civil society attitudes towards China and Chinese presence in Africa has appeared (Vaes and Huysse, 2013). However, little is known about *how* China participates in comprehensive peacebuilding and even less is known about *how* locals in post-conflict contexts in Africa perceive Chinese contributions. In other words, given China is interested in projecting soft-power and presenting a peaceful rising image of itself in Africa, how effective has this been? Is the Chinese approach to peacebuilding an alternative to the liberal peace? Is China, so to speak, "winning hearts and minds" of the locals in a post-conflict setting?

### **Sino-Liberian relations and the Chinese participation in the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL)**

Liberia established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China on 17 February 1977. When Samuel Doe announced that Liberia was establishing relations with Taipei, Beijing responded by severing official relations with Liberia on 9 October 1989. In 1993, when Amos Sawyer's Interim Government of National Unity came to power in Monrovia, the PRC resumed diplomatic relations. On the 5 September 1997, Charles Taylor announced that Liberia recognised 'two Chinas'. This led to the PRC's severing of relations on the September 9<sup>th</sup> of the same year. Relations resumed between the PRC and the Republic of Liberia on the 11 October 2003. Liberia has therefore taken full advantage of competition between

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Taipei and Beijing for recognition in Africa and one can arguably describe Sino-Liberian relations as un-substantial and non-existent prior to and during the two Liberian civil wars between 1989 and 2003. While Sino-Liberia bilateral relations is new, this did not stop China stationing its largest contingent of Chinese peacekeepers anywhere in the world (see table 1).

Beijing voted in favour of Security Council Resolution 1509 (2003) which authorised UNMIL and has sent peacekeepers to UNMIL since December 2003, consistently maintaining approximately 550-570 personnel. The Liberian mission is the largest of the Chinese missions anywhere in the world (564), followed by South Sudan (348) and Darfur (323). In Liberia, as is the case in all the larger Chinese peacebuilding missions elsewhere, the Chinese contingent provides transport, engineering and medical support to UN peacekeepers. In UNMIL, the Chinese transport unit consists of 240 peacekeepers, tasked with providing transportation and supplies for UNMIL operations. The engineering unit consists of approximately 275 peacekeepers and is stationed in the south-east of Liberia, in Zwedru, in UNMIL Sector Four. Its mission is the (re)construction of roads, bridges, UN camps and related basic infrastructure. The 43 person medical unit staff, a UN Level-2 field hospital is also in UNMIL Sector 4. In addition, there is a 25 person military police unit tasked with human resource management, police support, information collection, criminal investigation, traffic management, and emergency responses (UNMIL, 2011; “Zhongguo Zhu LibiliyaDashi Lin SongtiantanWo-weiheBudui”, 2004). The Chinese also provide five military observers and nine staff officers to the UNMIL mission. Chinese peacekeepers are rotated every eight to ten months; by July 2011, China had contributed 6, 138 personnel (Zhongguo Di Shi Yi Pi Fu LibiliyaWeheBuduiHuoLianheguoXunzhang, 2011).

The nature of Chinese peacekeeping missions in larger African missions, consistently applied in Liberia, is that Chinese peacekeepers do not carry weapons. Chinese peacekeepers focus on the highly visible activities of constructing roads and infrastructure and providing logistical support to the main mission.

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## **Peacebuilding with Chinese characteristics: infrastructure, transport and health care**

Post-cold war peacebuilding has been dominated by the liberal peace. It is state-building and post-conflict reconstruction based on the liberal values of democracy and neoliberal economics<sup>1</sup>. While there is evidently an unique Chinese approach in providing aid assistance to and engaging in investments in African countries (Brautigam, 2009), the fact that the Chinese peacebuilding participation is still new and emerging means that it may still be too early to pronounce on precisely what the Chinese approach to peacebuilding is (Kuo, 2011). Within UNMIL, Chinese participation has focused on infrastructure reconstruction and providing basic health care. Relative to Western countries, China and Chinese nationals are largely absent in UN -related agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme, the UN World Food Program as well as other INGOs.

While Beijing is eager to emphasise non-interference as its guiding foreign policy principle, the Chinese ambassador emphasized that, “non-interference does not mean being idle and doing nothing; nor does it mean China should be passive”<sup>2</sup>. In fact, the Chinese presence in Liberia is very much represented by its numerous, highly visible and very active construction firms on various sites. Also, Chinese blue helmeted transport unit and engineering battalions are also very visible battling with often impassably muddy roads to keep the supply lines open.

Infrastructure construction by Chinese construction firms in Liberia takes two forms: projects funded with bilateral aid, granted by the Chinese central government to Liberia as a gift; and World Bank-funded projects which Chinese contractors bid for<sup>3</sup>.

In the case of World Bank-funded projects, they are bid for by Chinese state-owned contractors on a for-profit basis. According to the Chinese embassy in Liberia, Chongqing International Construction Corporation won the World Bank tender for the US\$ 15.66 million 24.5 kilometre road rehabilitation project which began in Monrovia in November 2007 (Economic and Commercial Councillors

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Office of the Embassy of the PRC in Liberia, 2009). The China Henan International Group won the World Bank tender for a 56 kilometre road rehabilitation project between Monrovia and Buchanan, the second largest city in Liberia in 2011 (Economic and Commercial Councillors Office of the Embassy of the PRC in Liberia, 2007). Beijing's decision to focus on infrastructure, transport and healthcare is, according to the Chinese ambassador, China's traditional strengths.

In the case of its bilateral projects, Beijing overcomes inefficiencies and the potential for local corruption by not handing any money to African governments directly. Projects are decided with the relevant African government, and then all the project management – from tendering, the sourcing of materials and general management – is handled from Beijing through the Chinese embassy<sup>4</sup>. The construction of the new Fendall campus of the University of Liberia and the Tappita Hospital by the Guangdong Foreign Construction Co.; the refurbishment of the SKD Sports Complex in Monrovia; and the construction and supply of medical equipment to the Tappita Hospital are examples of Chinese bi-lateral aid in Liberia (Embassy of PRC in Liberia, 2007). While evidently quicker in providing results on the ground and employing far fewer personnel compared to the Western aid industry, this model of aid does however suffer from the problem of a lack of skills transfer in terms of both labour and management skills. It also does not employ local sub-contractors and therefore limits the social-economic impact and creation of jobs that large infrastructural projects usually provide. It was noted that communication between the site foreman and local workers could be a problem with the Chinese model of operation in infrastructure projects.

A local Liberian engineering consultant at the Ministry of Public Works confirmed that the language barrier is an impediment to working with the Chinese and that a lack of capacity building and skills transfer from Chinese firms was a problem<sup>5</sup>. However, on the issue of the widespread perception that Chinese firms carry out poor quality work in Africa (and in Monrovia, some of the main roads were in a very poor state during our visit), the engineer pointed out that the emergency road

rehabilitation work in Monrovia was commissioned on a lower load specification and without drainage because of the limited funding provided by the World Bank. It was in fact the limited funding provided that led to lower specifications for roads and their quick deterioration, and not sub-standard Chinese workmanship.

In addition to aid, the most significant Chinese contribution to Liberia to date is the US\$ 2.8 billion deal that China Union signed with Liberian government in 2009, making this deal the single largest investment in Liberian history (Creamer, 2009).

### **Chinese presence in post-conflict Liberia: Liberian perspectives**

In a context where Liberians generally express dissatisfaction at the failure of UN-MIL and associated UN agencies to deliver tangible material improvements after establishing a fragile peace, the visible presence of Chinese construction is widely appreciated. But many interviewees in Monrovia said that they thought the Chinese engagement in Liberia was not benevolent. They felt that the Chinese are acting in self-interest and that, given Liberia's weak state and the history of colonialism in Africa, the balance of the benefit of Chinese engagement will probably go to the Chinese. However, despite this commonly expressed sentiment, most Liberians express appreciation of the positive impact of Chinese-built infrastructure are having on meeting everyday needs of post-war Monroviens.

Liberian interviewees tend to contrast the newly arrived Chinese with Westerners. A local journalist provided a vivid contrast and said that:

*"[the] Chinese man comes down to my level! He comes to my neighbourhood and hands out flyers for house renovations. A Westerner will never do this! And this is good, it encourages competition!"<sup>6</sup>*

Generalising and comparing Chinese with Western presence, a Liberian NGO manager summarised the difference as follows:

*"The Chinese are not for human rights and democracy [...] but infrastructure*

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*in Liberia is a problem and the Chinese are good at infrastructure [...] the Chinese work in the communities and interact with the people, and this is different from the standard Western aid workers.”<sup>7</sup>*

The observation that Chinese presence in post-war Liberia is focused on infrastructure and not on “capacity building” (as the West does) was an obvious and common observation by many interviewees. Both the Liberian government and civil society see their relationship with China as based on economic gain. A Liberian official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed out that Africa needs foreign direct investment and China needs resources, in this way the two are a good match for one another. Given the infrastructure deficit in Liberia, China is filling a gap that is not filled by Western donors. Contrasting Western and Chinese engagement, this foreign affairs official points out that conditionalities imposed by the West directly translates to not enough infrastructure being built. Voicing a common complaint in Africa, he said that international NGOs do not “pay regard to local reality” and that “we need to satisfy international whims”.<sup>8</sup>

It is in contrast to the dissatisfaction with the West-led liberal peace that many interviewees express the opinion that the Chinese are more respectful of local conditions, do not dictate terms like the West and are directly making a difference to lives of ordinary people.

The perceptions of the Chinese approach to peacebuilding by international NGOs, international financial institutions and western governmental aid organisations are mixed. An official at an international financial institution, with reference to its own good governance and capacity building programmes, pointed out that the Chinese model of management from Beijing was not building capacity in the Liberian government and therefore was unsustainable<sup>9</sup>. Managers at a Western government aid agency pointed out that the Chinese do not get involved with other international (western) donors<sup>10</sup>. Another official at a Western government aid agency however conceded that it was noticing how much infrastructure was appreciated by everyday Liberians and was learning lessons from the Chinese model<sup>11</sup>.


**Chinese participation in United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in Africa**

	<b>Mission</b>	<b>Initial authorization</b>	<b>Police</b>	<b>Experts</b>	<b>Contingent troops</b>	<b>Total Number of current uniform personnel</b>
1	United Nations Organization Stabilization in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO)	November 30, 1999	0	16	218	19,055
2	United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL)	September 19, 2003	17	2	564	8,962
3	United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)	April 29, 1991	0	10	0	230
4	African Union / United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID)	July 31, 2007	0	0	323	21,493
5	United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI)	February 27, 2004	0	6	0	10,4000
6	United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS)	July 5, 2012	28	3	348	7,099

Table 1Source: UN Mission's Summary detailed by Country Month of Report: October 31, 2012.

## Understanding Beijing's approach to peace building

In her book discussing Chinese aid to Africa, Brautigam wrote:

*"China's aid and economic cooperation differ, both in their content and in the norms of aid practice. The content of Chinese assistance is considerably simpler, and it has changed far less often [compared to traditional Western aid]. Influenced mainly by their own experience of development and by the requests of recipient countries, the Chinese aid and economic cooperation programs emphasized infrastructure, production, and university scholarships at a time when the traditional donors downplayed all of these"* (Brautigam, 2009:11).

The present examination of the Chinese approach to peacebuilding in Liberia largely confirms Brautigam's description for Chinese aid in Africa generally. China, like other countries, provides aid for three reasons: strategic diplomacy, commercial benefits, and as a reflection of its values (Brautigam, 2009:15). Through its bilateral aid projects and its multilateral engagements through its engineering, medical and transportation units, Beijing is successfully building a good relationship with the Liberian government; is opening new markets for its construction firms; and showcasing Chinese values of hard-work and respect for other cultures. In terms of China's normative perspective and soft-power projection, China is particularly keen to project its developing world credentials by emphasizing by both word and deed that it is willing to work the more 'dirty jobs' as opposed to office posts in the capital. In this way, Beijing is emphasizing its value difference to the West.

Beijing's infrastructure-led aid and its efficient construction companies are certainly appreciated by Liberians. All things being equal, bridges, roads, hospitals and schools should facilitate economic development.

## Conclusion

Over the past three or four years, literature on Chinese developmental assistance in various African countries have blossomed. Based on fieldwork, they have brought

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refreshing information on Chinese developmental assistance in Africa which in fact has remained far more consistent in its guiding principles and practices compared with western aid. This new body of literature also provides excellent evidence against the charge of neo-colonialism against the Chinese emanating from the west. The emergence of China in Africa in the realm of aid and development has also shone a light on shortcomings of existing OECD aid in Africa. China's focus on infrastructure construction and emphasis on not imposing conditionalities very much appreciated by African governments and people though much derided by the West. While it is not the intention of this article to enter into the aid conditionality debate, China's emergence in development assistance has certainly provided healthy competition to the monopoly the OECD held –both in terms of norms as well as in practice- in the development marketplace. Instead of the ever positive assessments provided in glossy annual reports by the western aid industry itself, we are now better able to see western aid's shortcomings and how China's approach to development, backed by substantial financial muscle, provides a healthy alternative to neoliberal orthodoxy.

Related to development assistance is peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Given the slow but steady increase in Chinese participation in UNPKOs, we are beginning to observe greater Chinese presence in post-conflict Africa. The next step for the Chinese in Africa is to merge peacekeeping and development assistance in the form of a Chinese approach to peacebuilding. As far as China's contribution to Liberia's post-war re-construction is concerned, Chinese construction firms have made a significant difference in bettering the lives of ordinary Liberians and there were unanimous appreciation for this among Liberians interviewed. After the provision of basic security by UNMIL, the provision of basic infrastructure by Chinese construction companies is the most visible and arguably the next most important step in normalising the daily lives of everyday Liberians. In addition to the provision of basic infrastructure by its almost omnipresent construction firms, Chinese enterprises have also injected much needed capital in the form of foreign direct investment in Liberia, the most significant thus far been the

Bong Iron Ore deal signed in 2009. However, given the fragility of the Liberian government and the history of warlordism, it is not clear if a large extractive deal will be add to the conflict or be positive for Liberia's stability.

If the Beijing's aim in Liberia was to project an image where it is supportive, non-interfering, willing to roll up its sleeves and help with infrastructure construction and that it is a responsible, peaceful power; this aim is well met in the case of Liberia.

### Endnotes

1. There is a vast literature examining and criticizing post-cold war peacebuilding, termed 'the liberal peace' by its critics. See for example: Newman, E., Paris, R. and Richmond, O. 2009. *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press; Richmond, O. and Franks, J. 2007. *Liberal Hubris? Virtual Peace in Cambodia*. *Security Dialogue*. 38(27):27-48; Mac Ginty R (2010) *Hybrid peace: the interaction between top-down and bottom-up peace*. *Security Dialogue* 41: 391-412.
2. Interview with Zhou Yuxiao, Chinese Ambassador to Liberia, Monrovia, November 20, 2009.
3. Interview with Chinese Construction company manager, Monrovia, November 23, 2009.
4. Interview with Zhou Yuxiao, Chinese Ambassador to Liberia, Monrovia, November 20, 2009. Ambassador Zhou noted the Chinese approach as being more cost efficient compared to the western model.
5. Interview with, engineering consultant at the Ministry of Public Works of the Republic of Liberia, Monrovia, November 28, 2009.
6. Interview with Liberian journalist, Monrovia, Liberia, November 12, 2009.

7. Interview with Liberian NGO manger, Monrovia, Liberia, November 13, 2009
8. Interview with Liberian foreign affairs official, Monrovia, Liberia, November 28, 2009.
9. Interview with Internatioal Financial Institution manager, Monrovia, Liberia, November 23, 2009.
10. Interview with Western government aid agency manager, Monrovia, Liberia, November, 19, 2009.
11. Interview with Western government aid agency manager, Monrovia, November 19, 2009.

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