

## China's Public Diplomacy in Zimbabwe: perceptions, opportunities and challenges

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### Abstract

Contemporary Chinese engagements in Africa have been described in many terms by scholars and media practitioners. One of the threads in the China-Africa discourse is the role of public diplomacy and the desire by the Chinese government to engage African governments and citizens. Using insights from the concept of public diplomacy and new public diplomacy, this study seeks to understand China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe by analysing news stories from the Chinese Embassy Website in order to discern the key actors and instruments used. Furthermore, the study uses the media reports from the private and public media as a barometer to form valuable insights on how the Chinese engagements and public diplomacy initiatives are perceived. Focus is particularly placed on convergences and departures between official Chinese public diplomacy narratives and the local media perceptions. The study finds that China has maintained the traditional state-centred public diplomacy model and that it has extensively focused on relationship building in its public diplomacy approaches in Zimbabwe which is in line with new public diplomacy. However, there are divergences between the themes prioritised by China and those prioritised by the local media which points to a possible communication gap. The study, therefore, proposes a proactive approach by China for effective public diplomacy in Zimbabwe.

## Introduction

Zimbabwe established diplomatic relations with China on 18 April 1980 after attainment of independence. The establishment of diplomatic ties with the new government in Zimbabwe signified the formalisation of a relationship that had been established in the 1960s. Then, China, together with other nations, supported the armed struggle waged by the nationalist movements to unseat the oppressive colonial white regime. Historians have gone further to trace the links between China and Zimbabwe to the pre-colonial period. The government of Zimbabwe's official website (2016) notes that discovery of Chinese dishes among other artefacts at the Great Zimbabwe archaeological sites points to the existence of a gold trade network that occurred in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and extended as far as China and India with the facilitation of Arab traders. The history is corroborated by Li Anshan (2015: 49) in his acknowledgment of the study by Ma Wenkuan (1985) which noted discovery of 43 pieces of porcelain from the Song Dynasty in a cave at Great Zimbabwe.

Contemporary Zimbabwe-China relations have been characterised by officials from both sides as an 'all weather friendship' on the basis of the rich history of cooperation founded on shared interests and principles. The relations have gone beyond the initial historic trade links and blossomed as evidenced by increased cooperation in the political, socio-economic, security and cultural sectors. Two significant developments are attributed to the growing relations between Zimbabwe and China. The first is the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 which created a framework for closer cooperation between China and African countries. The second is Zimbabwe's adoption of a 'Look East' Policy in 2004 which was a deliberate decision to focus on China and other Asian countries after the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) bloc imposed unilateral sanctions on Zimbabwe. As a result, China has become the top foreign direct investor in Zimbabwe.

The African country is the 15<sup>th</sup> highest recipient of Chinese funds on the continent with over US\$ 1.7 billion disbursed between 2000 and 2014 (Hwang et al., 2016). The period 2014-2015 also marked a significant increase in cooperation as testified by the exchange visits between the presidents of Zimbabwe and China. The visits

were not only political events but were crowned with the signing of ‘mega-deals’, hence, the leaders defined the phase of engagement as a ‘new strategic partnership’.

The trend of increased cooperation with China has not been unique to Zimbabwe but to all African countries operating within the FOCAC framework. However, despite the deep historical ties and evidence of growing cooperation, the relationship has faced both domestic and international criticism from politicians, media and academics. In Zimbabwe, Mano (2016: 172) shows that the majority of the citizens in the capital city perceive the Zimbabwe-China economic engagements as not benefiting Zimbabwe and the same theme is dominant in the privately-owned media. Other observers have criticised China for supporting Zimbabwe which they perceive as undemocratic, thus, questioning China’s policy of not attaching political and human rights conditions to its financial support to African countries. Shinn (2008: 2) advances that the relationship between China and Zimbabwe posed a special human rights problem for Beijing and that ‘China’s policy of no strings attached to its aid fits neatly into Mugabe’s concept of a desirable foreign partner’. Brautigam (2009: 3) adds that there has been condemnation of China’s policy of engaging with all countries that grants it diplomatic recognition, and its pledge not to interfere in domestic affairs in such countries as Sudan and Zimbabwe.

Against the background of such negative and critical views of China’s policies in Africa, in general and Zimbabwe in particular, the role of public diplomacy becomes important in order to win the support of the local population. Henrikson (2006: 4) captures the important role of public diplomacy stating that communication of ideas and information has now become the most powerful form of action such that public opinion is now both a measure as well as a source of power. China has awakened to the centrality of public diplomacy and communication in contemporary China-Africa relations as acknowledged by the Public Diplomacy Association vice president, Gong Jianzhan, when addressing a group of African journalist. He noted the negative and biased coverage of Africa and China by the Western media and advocated cooperation among media from both sides in order to change the narrative (Chikova, 2016).

The practice of public diplomacy is, however, far more complex than just sending out information as captured by Melissen (2011) that while governments have increased budgets for public diplomacy, in the majority of cases, there was little or no clear cut proof that it was working. The sentiment is echoed by Pammet (2011) and Wang (2011) who demonstrate the difficulty of public diplomacy evaluation by characterising it as the 'Achilles heel' and 'holy grail' of public diplomacy respectively. Banks (2011: 9) notes the complex nature of public diplomacy evaluation and suggests a number of approaches in order for individual countries to draw the benefits of public diplomacy. In China, the complexity is acknowledged by Director of the State Council Information Office (SCIO), Cai Mingzhao, who points out that policy-makers should pay more attention to the receiving side of public diplomacy and take a closer look at how Chinese messages are received by audiences abroad (d' Hooghe, 2013).

The question of how China's messages and public diplomacy initiatives are structured, designed and received in Zimbabwe forms the basis for this study. Using insights from the concepts of public diplomacy and new public diplomacy, this study seeks to understand China's engagements in Zimbabwe and discern some of the Chinese public diplomacy instruments and principal actors by analysing news stories from the Chinese Embassy Website. Media reports from the private and public media are used as a barometer to form valuable insights on how the Chinese engagements and public diplomacy initiatives are perceived with focus on convergences and departures between official Chinese public diplomacy narratives and the local media perceptions. The study is significant in that it casts light on the practice of China's public diplomacy in a particular context, Zimbabwe. Resultantly, the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge that has generalised the study of China's public diplomacy. Unpacking of the official China's public diplomacy initiatives and how local media perceive and represent the different Chinese engagements in Zimbabwe is important in filling the void on the outcomes of public diplomacy. The finding of the study will inform the discussion on the opportunities and challenges for effective Chinese new public diplomacy in Zimbabwe.

## **Public Diplomacy and New Public Diplomacy as conceptual frameworks to understand China's public diplomacy**

There are numerous definitions of public diplomacy such that Lane (2006: 2) contends that there still remains lack of clarity on what it is and how its tools might be used. The different perspectives on public diplomacy continue to expand the knowledge on the concept and its practice in international relations and international communication. This article will not retrace the debates on the nuances of the definitions of public diplomacy but seek a common thread and understanding of public diplomacy and the transition to new public diplomacy which serve as theoretical frames for further discussions. Understanding public diplomacy and its recent transformation forms the backbone of understanding Chinese public diplomacy in general and specifically in Zimbabwe.

According to Gilboa (2001: 4) public diplomacy involves activities that are directed at foreign citizens in order to affect their thinking and ultimately that of their governments. He notes that these activities are in the field of information, education and culture and expands on the definition by identifying three variants of public diplomacy based on the characteristics of the participants, their goals and methods. Gregory (2011: 353) captures these different perspectives and defines public diplomacy as an 'instrument used by both state and non-state actors 'to understand cultures, attitudes and behaviours; build and manage relationships and influence thoughts and mobilise actions to advance their interests and values.' It is evident that there are two major distinctions of public diplomacy which are based on the central players or drivers of public diplomacy. Hocking (2005: 35) acknowledges these 'two worlds' of public diplomacy and notes that they are often at odds and in unison. On the one hand there is the traditional 'hierarchical' model which stresses inter-governmental relations. On the other hand there is the 'network model' where there are government and non-governmental actors and the emphasis is on building long term relationships based on understanding the values and culture of the publics. Melissen (2011) views the network model and entry of new actors as 'democratisation' of diplomacy and concurs with the Wiseman (2010: 24) concept of 'polylateral diplomacy' which means collaboration between state and non-state

actors. The difference between the hierarchical and network models is one of the key distinctions between traditional public diplomacy and new public diplomacy.

The transformation of public diplomacy has been attributed to globalisation and developments in communication technologies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, hence scholars and practitioners have been challenged to consider new approaches to public diplomacy (Snow and Taylor, 2009; Arseneault, 2009; Pammet, 2013). In distinguishing between 'old' public diplomacy and the 'new' public diplomacy, Pammet (2013: 8) describes the former as a one-way flow of information (hierarchical model) which relied more on persuasion models of communication. On the other hand, the defining feature of new public diplomacy is dialogue as opposed to monologue, which is facilitated by the network model of communication (Melissen, 2005; Snow and Taylor, 2009). Further to these new features of new public diplomacy, Cull (2009: 13) adds that new public diplomacy places emphasis on relationship building based on people-to-people interactions and it makes use of real time technologies to communicate. He contends that the major paradigm shift is the break from broadcasting models to new models that incorporate new communication technologies for two-way engagement with the public. However, Pammet (2013: 9) is quick to note that such definitions and conceptions of new public diplomacy remain normative in nature because they describe desired or 'ideal approaches to public diplomacy rather than reflect how public diplomacy is widely practiced'. To this end, Brown (2004: 9) points out that the challenge, therefore, is to test the new public diplomacy concepts against empirical evidence.

Using public diplomacy and new public diplomacy as theoretical frames allows the study to understand the diverse public diplomacy initiatives by China in Zimbabwe and also provides an opportunity to test the concepts against empirical evidence. Three broad approaches are identified in the evaluation of public diplomacy and these are outcome analysis, network analysis and perception analysis. This paper focuses more on perception analysis as some form of evaluation of Chinese public diplomacy in Zimbabwe with particular focus on the official representations against the local media representations. This approach exposes how the media in Zimbabwe and their audiences are responding to China's public diplomacy initiatives.

## China's public diplomacy and practice

The relationship between Africa and China has continued to scale new heights in different sectors since the establishment of FOCAC in 2000. Since then, every FOCAC meeting has outdone the previous one in terms of the financial commitments and areas of cooperation. At the Sixth FOCAC meeting held in December 2015 in Johannesburg, South Africa, the President of China, Xi Jinping, committed a staggering US\$ 60 billion. Yun Sun (2015) observed that China went beyond the traditional doubling of financial commitment to Africa at each FOCAC meeting by tripling the commitment at the Sixth FOCAC meeting. Evidence of this growing cooperation is seen in the statistical data that shows that China has maintained its position as the biggest trading partner for Africa (Chen et al., 2015). In light of this growing cooperation between Africa and China, it is worth reviewing how China is using public diplomacy in Africa and other parts of the world and how it is perceived in order to inform the study of China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe.

According to Melissen (2011), the need to project an attractive and friendly image to the world has inspired China's new public diplomacy. The scholar contends that in the face of critical views on China's approaches to the 'triad of democracy, human rights and rule of law', the challenge is to find a strong and competing storyline in Western countries. In the developing countries, he argues that China is less hindered because foreign aid and public diplomacy go hand-in-hand. While this is largely true, it is worth noting that there is also growing scholarship on negative public opinion of China in some African countries, highlighting the triad of issues noted by Melissen and other issues such as environment protection and labour rights among others. In line with this view, Zhang (2016: 9) notes that the official view of China is cosy and positive but the unofficial perspectives tend to be critical of China's actions and policies. Naidu (2010: 33) attributes the growing negative perceptions of China to the traditional state-to-state model of engagements which alienates the ordinary citizens. She cites the cases of conflict between Chinese citizens and locals in countries such as Zambia, Nigeria and Ethiopia and points out that these have less to do with anti-Chinese sentiments than with the frustration directed at African political

and economic elites.

The media in Africa have over the years proved to be important sites to understand the perceptions of China in different countries. A number of studies have been conducted in order to understand how the media in Africa depict the relationship (Nassanga and Makara, 2016; Wasserman, 2012). In a study on the representation of China in South African media, Wasserman (2012: 343) observes that an analysis of academic literature and international media shows a binary representation of China. On the one end is the benevolent, development partner and on the opposite end, the relationship is depicted as a new form of imperialism. The study shows that, diverse as the media is in South Africa, the coverage for the year 2010 was balanced in terms of positive and negative statements. In 2011, the top two outlets, SABC 3 and Business Day had a majority of neutral statements (ibid: 348). The scholar posits that the balance in the representation of China may suggest an understanding 'that China's role in Africa is a complex one, which cannot be pigeonholed in either a "bad" or "good" news story'. On the dominance of neutral stories in 2011, he suggests that it may be a reflection of the growing influence of professional journalism ethics such as objectivity among South African practitioners (Wasserman, 2012: 351). In the case of Uganda, Nassanga and Makara (2016) note that the local perceptions of China were largely neutral and positive. The study, therefore, concurs with earlier studies which note the differences between Western and African perceptions of China (ibid: 24).

Such evidence serves as some form of gauge of the public opinion of China's engagements in Africa. Public diplomacy would, therefore, seek to address the negative perceptions by creating knowledge and understanding of China's values thereby enhancing its appeal to foreign publics. In the face of negative perceptions of China's economic rise and programmes in Africa and driven by the desire to project a friendly image, Bolewski and Rietig (2008: 84) note that China has embraced new public diplomacy in order to enhance its appeal to foreign publics. The scholars concurs with Rumi (2004: 10-11) that the three main characteristics of China's public diplomacy are 'the management of public opinion abroad through external publicity and external cultural exchanges, the spreading of information to the outside world, and



the focus on selected issues in its public diplomacy'. It is evident that information is critical in effective public diplomacy and China has taken positive steps to ensure that it has the capability to spread information to the outside world through a media going out strategy. In the case of Africa, the strategy has seen China expanding the number of bureaus for established media such as Xinhua and China Radio International (CRI) as well as setting up new media outlets such as China Central Television Africa (CCTV Africa), and China Daily in 2012 (Zhang, 2016: 7).

On the structure of China's public diplomacy, d'Hooghe (2013) notes that the Chinese government has over the years selected some Western approaches and adapted them to the Chinese political and cultural context, resulting in 'public diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'. To this end, a number of scholars agree that it is state-centred with a minimal role for non-state actors who are not fully independent (d'Hooghe, 2007; Melissen, 2011; Zhang, 2016). This centralised public diplomacy style is questioned by Melissen (2011) who casts doubts on its effectiveness in a world of ever-changing transnational relations. While questioning the Chinese public diplomacy style, he concedes that there are however experiences of China and other East Asian countries that can enrich the debate on public diplomacy which has largely centred on Western traditions and practices. The view is reinforced by d'Hooghe (2007: 36) who argues that the centralised system is both a strength and a weakness for China's public diplomacy. She notes that in the Chinese centralised system the chances of conflicting messages from different actors are avoided but there are also missed opportunities from the lack of full participation of non-state actors.

On the instruments used by China, Bolewski and Rietig (2008: 91) posits that public diplomacy is used as a tool in Chinese soft power which is conceived as 'all means of power outside the hard military power'. To this end, China has effectively used economic engagements as one of the key instruments of public diplomacy. According to Hocking (2005: 34), China's use of economic engagements in public diplomacy has made the country more successful at attracting political partners than the US. Further, d'Hooghe (2013) observes that the 'Chinese government has embraced the ideas of soft power and public diplomacy to an extent not often seen in China with regard to political concepts from abroad'. Other instruments used in China's public

diplomacy include Confucius Institutes (CIs), student exchange, media publications and building long term relationship or 'guanxi' which is an inherent Chinese custom (d'Hooghe, 2013). These insights on the objectives, structure and instruments of Chinese public diplomacy provide an important framework to understand China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe.

### **Research Questions and Methodology**

In light of the insights from the literature on Zimbabwe-China relations and the practice of China's public diplomacy, the study seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

**RQ1: How is China practicing public diplomacy in Zimbabwe?**

The question seeks to understand the actors and the instruments used in China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe in view of the new public diplomacy concepts.

**RQ2: How is China represented in the public and privately-owned media in Zimbabwe?** The question seeks to find the convergences and departures on themes on China between official Embassy narratives and those in the public and private media.

**RQ3: What are the opportunities and challenges for China's new public diplomacy in Zimbabwe?** The questions forms the basis for the discussion of the findings and attempts to identify those areas where China has excelled and those that could be improved in its public diplomacy efforts in Zimbabwe.

The period of the study was that period bracketed by the exchange visits by the two Heads of States from Zimbabwe and China (August 2014 and December 2015). The period is, therefore, considered significant in the relationship between the two countries and more media reports of the relationship were expected to be in this period. The Chinese Embassy Website was selected as an official account detailing the news and events of importance in the China-Zimbabwe relationship. In the case of the relationship between Zimbabwe and China, Mano (2016: 171) observes that *The*

*Herald* represents the relationship as beneficial to Zimbabwe while the privately-owned media such as *Daily News* and *NewsDay* depict it as the reenactment of colonisation. The selection of *The Herald* and *NewsDay* to represent the public and privately-owned media is important in order to capture all the different views on China in Zimbabwe.

Key words such as ‘*China-Zimbabwe*’ and ‘*China*’ were used to search for stories on the newspapers’ online archives. Purposive sampling was used to select all the stories relevant for the study from the Chinese Embassy Website and the two local media houses. The criteria for selecting the stories was that they focused on the China-Zimbabwe relationship in order to capture all the reported engagements between the two countries. Another criteria was that the stories had to be published during the period of the study. A total of 42 stories were selected from the Chinese website, 56 from *The Herald* and 30 from *NewsDay*.

Content analysis was used to interpret the instruments used in China’s public diplomacy in Zimbabwe. According to Kerlinger (1986) content analysis is ‘a method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, objective and quantifiable manner for the purpose of measuring variables’. In using content analysis, the entire collection of stories was considered as the unit of analysis. The approaches by Cull (2009) and Fitzpatrick (2010) provided a framework for coding the range of instruments used in both public diplomacy and new public diplomacy. Further, new instruments were included to capture some of the engagements that emerged from analysis of the stories. For instance, China has included economic activities and relationship building initiatives in its soft power and public diplomacy strategies and it was, therefore, important to consider these as additional components of new public diplomacy. Below is an example of the distinction made in the definition of codes for such instruments as listening and relationship building:

- Listening is the collecting and collating of data about the public and their opinions. It included public opinion polls, image surveys and media analysis. In this study it was extended to include seminars, conferences and public lectures where there was interaction and exchange of ideas.

- Relationship building is a feature from new public diplomacy and involves all efforts aimed at establishing and maintaining long term relationships between China and the citizens in Zimbabwe. The activities include long term livelihood projects which empower citizens with skills, equipment and infrastructure to transform their lives.

It is acknowledged that in one story there might be a number of possible public instruments discernible but the challenge was overcome by focusing on the main thrust of the story as drawn from the emphasis placed on the headline and the text within the story. For example, at face value, it would be easy to associate the story such as *'Press Briefing on China's Donation of Wildlife Protection Equipment to Zimbabwe'* (7 August, 2015) with relationship building. However, close analysis of the story shows that focus is on advocacy. This is evident in statements within the story such as; 'the donation also symbolises the great importance China has attached to wildlife protection. The Chinese government is very strict when it comes to wildlife conservation and has put up policies and laws to govern the issue'.

In determining the themes from the stories from the Embassy and local newspapers, thematic analysis was used. Braun and Clarke (2006: 93) note that in thematic analysis the researcher requires to understand the implicit and explicit ideas within the data. In all the stories analysed for this study, it was important to identify the dominant themes and come up with mutually exclusive categories to which each story belonged. The themes emerged from the stories, hence, it was possible to have a theme that is evident in one newspaper but is lacking in others. An example is the theme of 'corruption' which is discernible in *NewsDay* but is absent in *The Herald* and Chinese Embassy stories. Furthermore, it was possible to distinguish between such themes such as 'exchange programmes' and 'people-to-people relations' by restricting the definition of exchange programmes to official visits and courtesy calls by officials from the two countries while people-to-people relations only focused on interactions outside official programmes such as cultural engagements. This distinction was particularly important in light of the observations earlier noted by Naidu (2010: 33) on the pitfall of the China's emphasis on state-to-state model of engagement. It was, therefore, prudent to separate the state-to-state exchange programmes

from the people-to-people relations.

The study will further interrogate the instruments used in China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe using the three-dimension model of public diplomacy advanced by Leonard (2002: 10). The model shows that the main dimensions are reactive, proactive and relationship building. According to Leonard (*ibid*) reacting means those actions triggered by news events while proactive means creating a news agenda through activities and events which are designed to reinforce core messages and influence perceptions. The last is relationship building which aims to establish and maintain long term relationships with populations overseas to win recognition of our values and assets and to learn from theirs. Proactive and relationship building dimensions, therefore, have similarities with the key elements of new public diplomacy that place emphasis on engagement, dialogical communication, partnerships and relationship building.

### **China's public diplomacy actors and instruments in Zimbabwe**

The study sought to understand China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe by analysing the actors, instruments used and representation of the initiatives from the Chinese perspective as compared with that in the public and privately-owned media in Zimbabwe. This section presents the findings of the study.

#### ***A State-centred model in China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe***

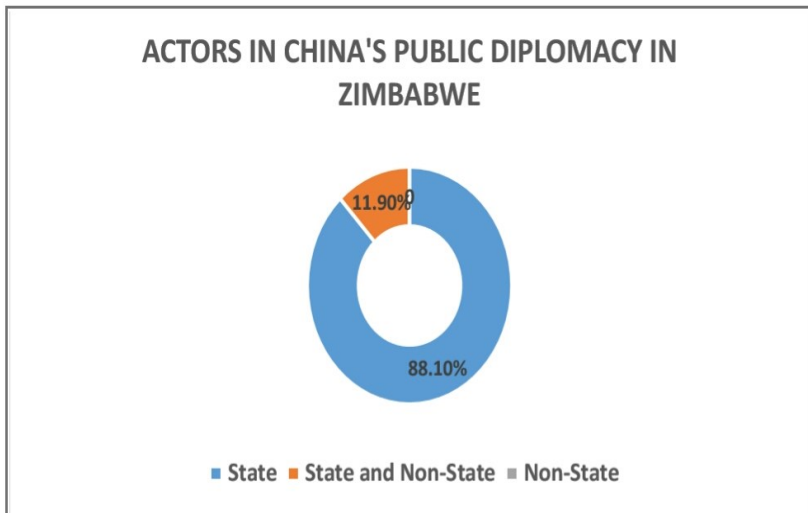
The study finds that the structure of China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe does not depart from the findings of earlier studies which note the dominance of the state as the principal actor (d'Hooghe, 2007; Melissen, 2011; Zhang, 2016). Below is a table and figure which show the actors in China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe.

It is also evident from the data that China formed partnerships with non-state actors to support particular programmes in line with the overall public diplomacy objectives in Zimbabwe. Some of the key areas that have been prioritised in China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe include improving the livelihood of disadvantaged peo-

ple and communities and the promotion of Chinese culture. Stories that reveal this partnership include; ‘*The Women’s Group of the Chinese Embassy Held a Christmas Party with Zimbabwe Parents of Handicapped Children Association*’ (25 December 2015) and ‘*The Chinese Embassy Successfully Hosted the First-ever Chinese Food Festival in Zimbabwe*’ (27 October 2014).

**Table 1.** Actors in China’s public diplomacy in Zimbabwe

ACTOR	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
State	37	88.10%
State and Non-State	5	11.90%
Non-State	0	0
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100%</b>

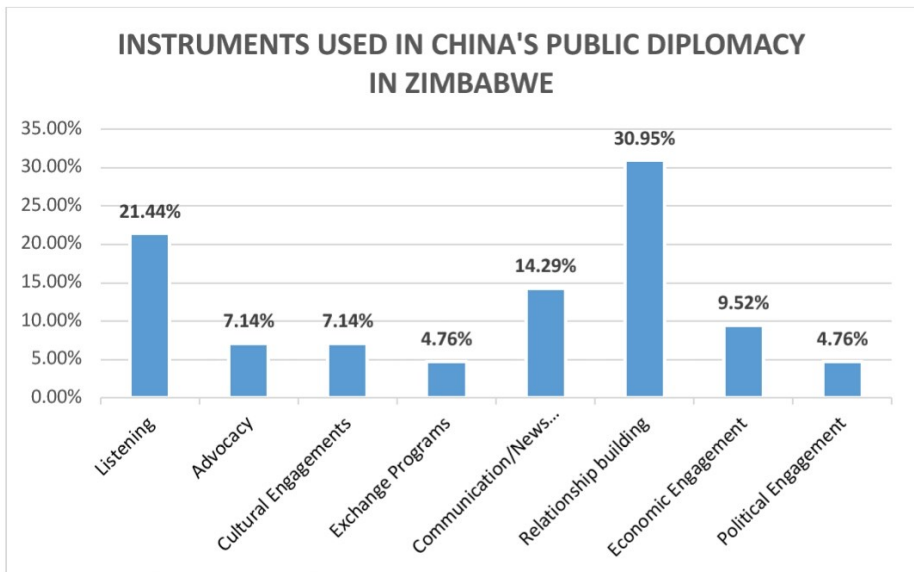


**Figure 1.** Actors in China’s public diplomacy in Zimbabwe

***Relationship building central to China’s public diplomacy in Zimbabwe***

The study finds that China has used the full range of traditional public diplomacy instruments, embraced some elements of new public diplomacy and also incorporated its own characteristics such as economic and political engagements in Zimbabwe. Below is Table 2 and Figure 2 which summarise the data on the instruments used and the frequency.

**Table 2.** China’s public diplomacy instruments in Zimbabwe



**Figure 2.** Instruments used in China’s public diplomacy in Zimbabwe

<b>PUBLIC DIPLOMACY INSTRUMENT</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE</b>
Listening	9	21.44%
Advocacy	3	7.14%
Cultural Engagements	3	7.14%
Exchange Programmes	2	4.76%
Communication/News Dissemination	6	14.29
Relationship Building	13	30.95%
Economic Engagements	4	9.52%
Political Engagements	2	4.76%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100%</b>

The inquiry into the instruments of public diplomacy used by China in Zimbabwe shows that China has heavily invested in relationship building which accounts for 30.95 per cent of all the stories published on the Embassy website for the period of the study. Relationship building is a long term investment which aims to create and establish deep and long lasting relations based on shared values and understandings. The stories that highlight China’s commitment to relationship building include: ‘*Chinese Embassy Implements Projects for People’s Livelihood*’ (5 September, 2014), ‘*Charge d’Affaires Cui Chun Attends Handover Ceremony of Rukururwi Primary School*’ (2 December 2014) and ‘*The Women’s Group of the Chinese Embassy Held a Christmas Party with Zimbabwe Parents of Handicapped Children Association*’ (25 December 2014).

Listening is described by Cull (2009) as one of the most important functions which precede any successful public diplomacy. The data reflects that China has attached as much importance to listening in its public diplomacy priorities in Zimbabwe. In the data, listening has the second highest frequency (21.44 per cent) of all the initiatives discernible from the stories on the Chinese Embassy website. The stories that



show this function include: ‘Ambassador Lin Lin Hosted Breakfast Meeting on the 4<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the 18<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee’ (23 December 2014) and ‘Ambassador Lin Lin Attends China-Zimbabwe Relations Seminar’ (20 May 2015). It is worth noting that participation of Chinese officials at organised events presented unique opportunities to interact and listen to the issues that are important to different sectors in Zimbabwe.

The media are an important tool in effective public diplomacy and this accounts for the third highest frequency (14.29 per cent) of the instruments used in China’s public diplomacy in Zimbabwe. To this end, the Chinese Ambassador had a number of exclusive interviews with both the public and privately-owned local media as well as Chinese media such as Xinhua. The data also shows that economic engagements have the fourth highest frequency (9.52 per cent) and advocacy and cultural programmes have the joint fifth highest frequency (7.14 per cent). Political engagements have the least frequency (4.76 per cent). Noteworthy is how cultural programmes between Zimbabwe and China have not featured highly and the minimal use of advocacy in China’s public diplomacy initiatives.

In the study, advocacy was used sparingly in articulation of China’s commitment to environmental protection and conservation. A number of platforms were used to demonstrate this commitment and this is evident in the stories such as: ‘Press Briefing on China’s Donation of Wildlife Protection Equipment to Zimbabwe’ (7 August 2015) and ‘Chinese Ambassador Lin Lin Attends Launching Ceremony of Sino Zim Wildlife Foundation’ (9 September 2015). In the press briefing the Chinese Ambassador states that ‘The donation also symbolises the great importance China has attached to wildlife protection. The Chinese government is very strict when it comes to wildlife conservation and has put up policies and laws to govern the issue’.

In view of the data on the public diplomacy instruments used by China, it is worth noting that the Chinese Embassy Website is a valuable and authoritative source for insights on China’s engagements with Zimbabwe. At the same time, the Website is also a tool for public diplomacy. It can, therefore, be argued that dominance of relationship building over other instruments of public diplomacy might represent the

way the Embassy has decided to shape public opinion in Zimbabwe. Against this view, it is significant to measure the representations by the Chinese Embassy against those by the local media in Zimbabwe in the following section.

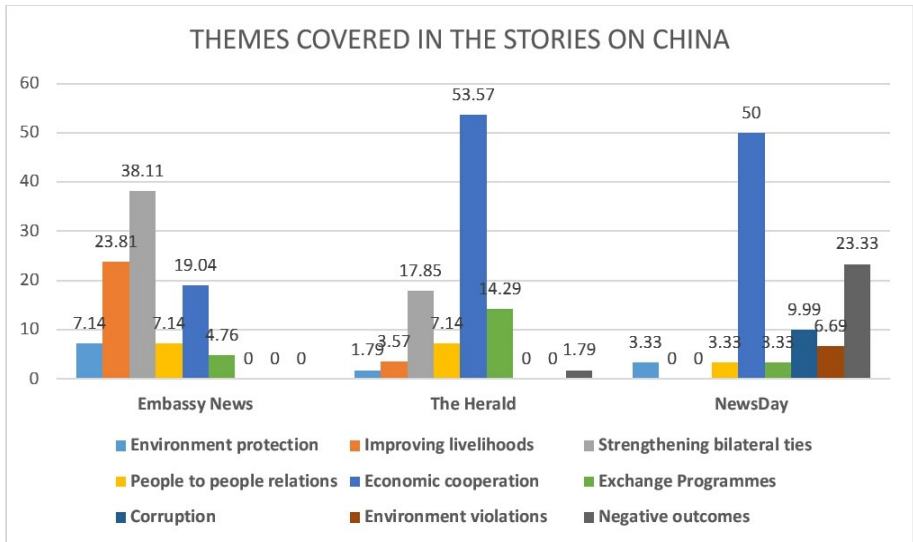
***Divergences on China’s public diplomacy themes and local media representations***

The study finds that there are divergences on the themes that are prioritised by China and those that are represented in both the public and privately-owned media. The findings are summarised in Table 3 and Figure 3 below.

**Table 3.** Themes covered by the media and frequency of coverage

<b>THEMES COVERED</b>	<b>CHINESE EMBASSY NEWS</b>	<b>THE HERALD</b>	<b>NEWSDAY</b>
	<i>% of 42 Stories</i>	<i>% of 56 Stories</i>	<i>% of 30 Stories</i>
Environmental Protection	7.14%	1.79%	3.33%
Improving Livelihoods	23.81%	3.57%	0
Strengthening Bilateral Ties	<b>38.11%</b>	17.85%	0
Culture and People-to-People Relations	7.14%	7.14%	3.33%
Economic Cooperation (Trade and Investment)	19.04%	<b>53.57%</b>	<b>50%</b>
Exchange Programmes	4.76%	14.29%	3.33%
Corruption	0	0	9.99
Environmental Violations	0	0	6.69
Negative Outcomes from Cooperation	0	1.79%	23.33%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Figure 3.** Themes covered by the media and frequency of coverage



A consolidation of all the major themes covered by the stories from the Chinese Embassy news, *The Herald* and *NewsDay* was done and analysis of the data shows that the two daily newspapers prioritised economic cooperation between China and Zimbabwe as the most important outcome of the relationship. *The Herald* had 53.57 per cent while *NewsDay* had 50 per cent of the stories focusing on the theme. Significant to note is that the stories highlight the numerous agreements and economic projects in the economic sphere such as trade, investment, equipment and technical support. Stories from *The Herald* include, ‘*Zim-China sign nine mega deals*’ (22 August 2014), ‘*China has shamed the West: President*’ (6 September 2014) and ‘*Zim-China economic ties growing*’ (16 January 2015). *NewsDay* equally has stories expressing optimism on the Zimbabwe-China economic cooperation and these include; ‘*Trade with China spikes*’ (17 March 2015) and ‘*NetOne receives state-of-the-art equipment from China*’ (25 May 2015).

However, the Chinese Embassy news only has economic cooperation as the third ranked theme with 19.04 per cent of the stories focusing on the theme. The difference could be explained by the fact that the immediate challenge facing Zimbabwe and its citizens is economic development hence stories on the theme will not only capture the attention of the readers but also create hope of a brighter future for the citizens. On the other hand, China has realised that while economic engagements are important for the interests of the two nations, they, however, do not define the relationship. This realisation might have been a result of the negative criticism that China has faced in the past on prioritising economic cooperation which is described by Strange et al. (2014) as a 'lightning rod for criticism' in that it is one area that has attracted the most negative criticism. As a result, China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe has placed more emphasis on the strengthening of bi-lateral ties (38.11 per cent) and projects aimed at improving the livelihoods of the ordinary citizens (23.81 per cent) as the hallmarks of the China-Zimbabwe relationship. In contrast, the strengthening of bilateral ties is the second most covered theme in *The Herald* but does not feature in *NewsDay* while improving livelihood projects are ranked fifth in terms of frequency of coverage in *The Herald* and again do not feature in *NewsDay*.

The theme on the negative outcomes of the relationship in such areas as economic cooperation is extensively covered by *NewsDay* (23.33 per cent) which is the second highest frequency but *The Herald* has minimal coverage (1.79 per cent). In *NewsDay* the theme is evident in stories such as 'Zim govt sells out to China' (25 September 2014) and 'China can't feed us' (11 September 2014). In *The Herald*, there is one story that brings out the theme, 'China Cotton Africa fires senior managers' (12 November 2014). The stories reflect a mistrust of China often couched by the stereotype images of China in Africa that is projected by the Western media and academics. In addition, the stories also reflect the internal dynamics of Zimbabwe's political environment which in turn influences the media.

The third and fourth most covered themes in *NewsDay* are corruption (9.99 per cent) and environmental violations (6.69 per cent) and these themes are missing from *The*

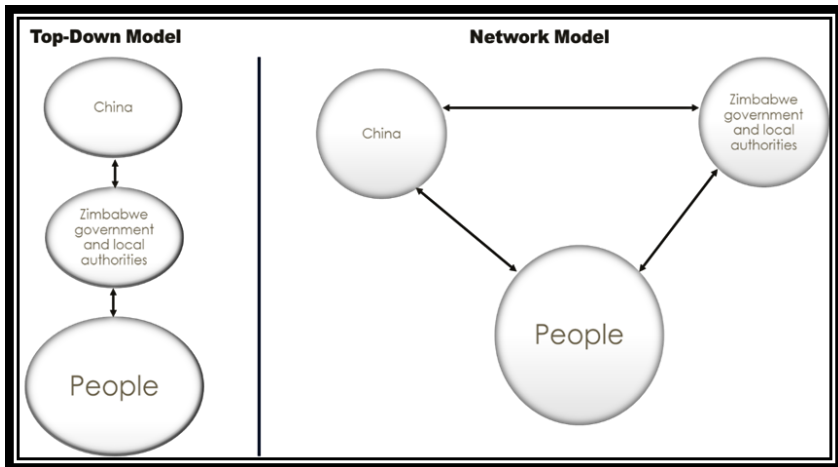
*Herald* and Chinese Embassy stories. The theme of Corruption has stories such as, ‘*China Exim Bank loan for Harare infrastructure abused*’ (16 July 2015). Environmental violations has stories on China’s purchase of young elephants from Zimbabwe which is presented as a wanton disregard for wildlife protection through headlines such as ‘*Zim’s baby elephants getting sold to Chinese zoo*’ (2 December, 2014) and ‘*Zim ignores pleas, catches 20 baby elephants, ships them to China*’ (24 March 2015). The negative stories on environmental protection in the *NewsDay* come against concerted efforts by the Chinese Embassy to emphasise its role in Zimbabwe’s efforts to protect the environment and wildlife as demonstrated by the frequency of 7.14 per cent which is the fourth highest in the themes covered in the Embassy news. In *The Herald*, the commitments by China towards environmental and wildlife protection have the least coverage of 1.79 per cent of all the stories published. Questions again arise on what needs to be done for the issues that are top priorities for China to reflect in the local media and by extension to shape public opinion.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In view of the findings from the study, further analysis of China’s public diplomacy in Zimbabwe reveal a number of characteristics worth discussing.

#### ***China side-stepping the limits of state-to-state model***

The data shows that relationship building is the most used public diplomacy instrument used by China in Zimbabwe with a frequency of 30.95 per cent. In rolling out the assistance programmes, China has also adopted the new public diplomacy strategies of networking and partnership. It is evident in all the projects that China established networks with the government, local authorities and the beneficiaries. In this way, the findings corroborate the observations by d’Hooghe (2007) that identify ‘*guanxi*’ as an inherent Chinese value that is used in its public diplomacy. Figure 4 below has the network communication model used by China in its relationship building programmes in Zimbabwe and this is set against the traditional top-down approach in public diplomacy.



**Figure 4.** The Top-down model (left) as opposed to the Network model (right) used by China in relationship building engagements as part of public diplomacy in Zimbabwe

The model is clearly discernible in the relationship building programmes and could serve as an important approach for all of China’s public diplomacy programmes in Zimbabwe. It is worth noting that the model is in line with the dialogical communication requirement under new public diplomacy and it is an effective approach to side-step the shortcoming of state-to-state engagements in Africa which were noted by Naidu (2013). The approach allows China to acknowledge the government and local authorities as important partners and at the same time facilitate direct interaction with the beneficiaries at the grassroots level.

The Chinese network model, however, differs from that generally perceived by new public diplomacy scholars where the state establishes a network with a number of partners who include state and non-state actors. In the model above, China partners with the government of Zimbabwe and government local authorities to directly engage with the public. This approach could be understood from the perspective of non-interference which is a cardinal principle of China’s foreign policy and in this case

China seeks to involve the host government in all its public diplomacy initiatives. China has, therefore, found a balance between the obligation to maintain cordial state-to-state relations and the desire to engage directly with the public at the grass-roots level in Zimbabwe. The success or failure of this approach cannot be easily ascertained as this is a long term investment but what is evident is that the programmes address the issues at the heart of the citizens and the interaction with the benefactor has the potential to establish a solid foundation for a long term relationship.

### ***Inadequate communication on key themes in China's public diplomacy***

China has implemented a number of livelihood projects which have the potential to empower people and communities thereby laying a solid foundation for relationship building. The importance attached to the theme of improving livelihoods by China has not been evident in the news stories in both the public and private media. The minimal coverage of the theme in *The Herald* (3.57 per cent) and total absence in *NewsDay* points to a gap in effective communication of China's public diplomacy priorities in Zimbabwe.

In such a scenario, a proactive approach, advanced by Leonard (2002), will create a news agenda to reinforce core messages and influence perceptions. It can be argued that the media will have their own priorities which differ from China's public diplomacy priorities and indeed this is a challenge that faces all public relations and public diplomacy efforts. It is in view of this challenge that advocacy and media relations or information dissemination are some of the instruments of public diplomacy. Failure to effectively communicate the key priorities of China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe will deny China the opportunity to showcase its face that is committed to protecting the environment and wildlife as well as empowering the less privileged and disadvantaged communities in the remote parts of Zimbabwe. Instead, the citizens who depend on the media for news and information will continue to see China from the perspective of economic engagements which is not the total sum of the relationship between Zimbabwe and China.

In addition to the traditional public diplomacy instruments that could be used to en-

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hance communication of China's priorities, new and interactive communication tools could be used in China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe. In line with the expectations of new public diplomacy which calls for the use of information communication technologies, China has made use of the internet technology and made available a website which is accessible to citizens. However, the website lacks interactivity to allow for dialogical communication with citizens. Cull (2013: 13) acknowledges the growing use of social media in public diplomacy and notes that it has brought two main advantages. The first is that social media is one of the communications that allows for dialogical communication and its use in public diplomacy allows for engagement of citizens in real time. The second advantage is that it is much easier to monitor public opinion from the engagements with the public. He, however, cautions that in quantifying public opinion, raw numbers of followers and friends do not equal engagement. In view of these advantages, the Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe can enhance its reach by making use of popular social media platforms in Zimbabwe.

### ***Underplayed value of culture as a potential asset for people-to-people relations***

China has underplayed the value and attraction of culture in public diplomacy initiatives in Zimbabwe with a frequency of 7.14 per cent making it the fourth in the order of priority themes. Melissen (2005: 94) identifies Chinese ancient culture as one of the main assets in the country's public diplomacy toolkit. In Zimbabwe, like many parts of the world, there is growing interest in Chinese cultural aspects such as alternative Chinese traditional medicine and Chinese cuisine. Another popular and probably one of the most successful public diplomacy programmes under the umbrella of cultural exchange is the Chinese government scholarship. However, these aspects of Chinese culture have minimal presence on the Embassy website and in turn in both *The Herald* and *Newsday*.

While cultural exchange is an important public diplomacy instrument, one of the prerequisites for credible and successful cultural diplomacy is the perceived distance from government. Distancing cultural exchange from government allows for the initiatives to be viewed and received as neutral and genuine interactions aimed at building people-to-people relationships (Cull, 2009). The study, however, shows that the



state has remained the key actor even in cultural programmes. It was shown that the Chinese Embassy in collaboration with local Chinese restaurants organised one event to promote Chinese cuisine to citizens in Harare. It is apparent that the state has not distanced itself from cultural exchange programmes thereby risking the credibility of the engagement. However, the Chinese centralised system could prove to be a valuable asset for planning and identifying those non-state actors that share the same interests with the state public diplomacy before allowing them to undertake the cultural programmes in Zimbabwe.

On the question of effectiveness of cultural diplomacy, Wekesa (2015: 199) argues that Chinese cultural diplomacy initiatives in Africa such as CIs and Chinese cuisine may become popular but it will not necessarily translate to acceptance of the Chinese state's interests. It is worth to point out that when cultural diplomacy is used in such short to medium term objectives, it will likely fail to achieve its public diplomacy goals. Instead, culture in public diplomacy should not be seen as a tool to convert people but rather to share experiences which will be valuable in future interactions as there is better appreciation of similarities and difference in values. Thus, such an approach is not limited to only facilitating acceptance of Chinese state's interests in Africa but to paving the road to deeper understandings among people. It is, therefore, the bridge that facilitates future interactions.

### **Conclusion**

The role of public diplomacy has been underlined by a number of distinguished scholars. New development in the geopolitical environment and technological developments have called for new and interactive approaches in the conduct of public diplomacy. The case of China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe and the perceptions and representations from the local media offers a glimpse into its conduct and the challenges and opportunities that arise. China has embraced a number of elements of new public diplomacy and fused them with some Chinese public diplomacy characteristics. Resultantly, the state remains the key actor but this does not preclude partnerships with some non-state actors. The relationship between the state and non-state actors in the Chinese system in Zimbabwe differs from the new public diplomacy

conceptions of networking in that the non-state actors are groups and associations that are affiliated to the state. On the question of outcomes of China's public diplomacy in Zimbabwe, the study shows that there are divergences on the themes that are prioritised by China and those by the local media. The challenges noted include media and political polarisation in Zimbabwe, inadequate measures to communicate the important themes by the Chinese Embassy and minimal use of culture to attract and engage the citizens in Zimbabwe. However, the Chinese adapted network model used in its relationship building programmes is a potential effective public diplomacy approach in Zimbabwe and other countries in Africa.

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