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**China's Battle for Hearts and Minds in Africa:
Reflections on Beijing's Soft Power in the "Hopeless Continent"**
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As China becomes an increasingly important player in the developing world, it has used soft power as a tool for gaining influence and access to needed natural resources. This is certainly true in Africa where China maintains diplomatic relations with 53 out of 54 African nations and has made significant investments in infrastructure and education in recent years. The term “soft power” was coined by Joseph Nye to describe the ability to achieve desired goals through persuasion or attraction without the necessity of force. In recent years China has developed its own interpretation of soft power that it uses to its own advantage around the world. Today China’s soft power strategy in Africa can be classified as attempts to gain soft economic, political and cultural power in the region.

In May 2000 an Economist cover declared Africa to be the “hopeless continent.” While the West may have considered Africa to be hopeless, Fiori claims that was never the case for China. Instead China considers Africa to be an important region for its own future. China has a historical relationship with Africa that, according to some scholars, began as early as the Tang dynasty. Today the relationship can be described as both intimate and pragmatic, as demonstrated by the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. Recent years have seen a significant increase in investment as well as China-Africa trade. China has even built its first military base outside of the mainland in Djibouti.

China has vied for economic power in Africa through “win-win” agreements where African nations export natural resources such as oil and shale in exchange for infrastructure projects. As oil consumption and energy needs of the population continually grow in China, they require dependable and diversified sources of energy. In addition to funding significant infrastructure projects in the region, Fiori explains that China also offers low interest soft loans and debt relief. As opposed to the loans offered by the IMF and the World Bank, China’s loans often have few conditions for the borrower country.

China has also expanded its presence in Africa through political soft power. They have used their influence in the region to promote the One-China Policy and today Swaziland is the only country in the region that recognizes Taiwan. The sheer number of countries in Africa that count themselves as China’s allies is also helpful at the United Nations, where China has garnered influence through the UN’s “One State, One Vote” policy. China’s government is dependent on the “non-interference principle” in which it does not aim to promote good governance, human rights, democracy or even economic development through its use of soft power. This has led to critics claiming that China favors the often-corrupt and undemocratic governments of developing countries over the well-being of the people living there.

China also uses cultural soft power in its “battle for minds, not hearts” which includes investment in education and media in Africa. China funds scholarships for large numbers of African students at its universities and sends instructors to Africa to provide education. It has also opened 70 Confucius Institutes in the region, with the largest center in Nairobi. The aim of these programs is to improve China’s image abroad and create a workforce that is capable of using high tech Chinese products. The Chinese state-run news agency Xinhua have expanded into the region, which can be used to improve China’s image overseas. China is also the most important contributor to the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces, though they often strategically deployed to resource-rich countries.

While China has its own national interests first, Fiori made the case that this should not be labeled as a “second scramble” for Africa. While some have critiqued the Chinese infrastructure projects in Africa for their low quality, it fills a gap left by the United States and Europe. As China gains more experience with these types of investments, it is learning to project the image of a rich country with high quality projects. Others have leveled criticism for not contributing to sustainable development in the countries in which it acts and perhaps even hindering development because of ineffective, rent-seeking governments.

The actions that China takes in Africa reflect their internal affairs and the “Chinese Dream” of transforming the country into a world superpower that can contribute to expansion of other developing countries. Their unique approach to soft power will allow China to continue expanding its influence abroad while also guaranteeing access to the natural resources that it needs for its continued economic growth.