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Studie

China-Africa Relations through the Prism of Culture – The Dynamics of China’s Cultural Diplomacy with Africa

Haifang Liu

Abstract

China’s use of cultural diplomacy dates back almost to the beginning of the founding of the People’s Republic of China; it is not something invented by the Chinese government in the last few years, as the popular myth of China’s engagement in Africa via a well-established “grand geopolitical strategy” suggests. This study begins by providing a deeper historical understanding of China’s diplomacy and China’s Africa policy, and discusses at length the importance of cultural diplomacy as a path breaker and a lasting instrument of foreign policy. Focusing on several cases of current cultural diplomacy, the second half of the article explains the underlying reasons for and functions of these prominent practices, concluding that cultural diplomacy is a useful prism through which to observe the very nature of Sino-African relations and that the study of it is the right way to explore the special diplomatic culture the Chinese government has been practising. (Manuscript received February 26, 2008; accepted for publication April 3, 2008)

Keywords: China, Sino-African relations, cultural diplomacy, cultural strategy, affinity to the people

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Studie

Die chinesisch-afrikanischen Beziehungen aus dem Blickwinkel der Kultur – Die Dynamik der chinesischen Kulturdiplomatie mit Afrika

Haifang Liu

Abstract

Chinas Gebrauch von Kulturdiplomatie geht fast bis in die Gründungszeit der Volksrepublik China zurück. Damit handelt es sich nicht um eine Neuerfindung der chinesischen Regierung in den letzten Jahren, wie ein populärer Mythos suggeriert, der Chinas Engagement in Afrika im Rahmen einer „großen geopolitischen Strategie“ lokalisiert. Die vorliegende Studie liefert zunächst ein tieferes Verständnis von Chinas Diplomatie und Chinas Afrikapolitik im historischen Kontext und diskutiert ausführlich die Rolle von Kulturdiplomatie als Wegbereiter und anhaltendem Instrument von Außenpolitik. Die zweite Hälfte des Aufsatzes konzentriert sich auf gegenwärtige Fälle von Kulturdiplomatie und erklärt die Hintergründe und Funktionen dieser prominenten Beispiele. Die Studie kommt zu dem Schluss, dass Kulturdiplomatie eine nützliche Perspektive darstellt, um die sino-afrikanischen Beziehungen in ihrem eigentlichen Wesen zu erfassen, und dass das Erforschen der Kulturdiplomatie den richtigen Weg darstellt, um die diplomatische Kultur zu erkunden, wie sie von der chinesischen Regierung praktiziert wird. (Manuskript eingereicht am 26.02.2008; zur Veröffentlichung angenommen am 03.04.2008)

Keywords: China, sino-afrikanische Beziehungen, Kulturdiplomatie, Kulturstrategie, Volksnähe

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Introduction

In recent years, in media ranging from newspapers to individual blogs, and from high-ranking officials (Meng 2006) to academics (Wang 1993; Yu 2007) and active “net citizens”, the Chinese have begun to talk loudly and eagerly about China’s cultural diplomacy. This has been especially the case since 2004, when President Hu Jintao publicly put forward cultural diplomacy as a priority of diplomatic work (*People’s Daily* 2004). For example, in CNKI, a well-established, widely available, and authoritative Chinese academic database, 118 articles can be found using the search term “cultural diplomacy”, including at least fourteen MA and PhD theses, for the period from 2005 until the end of 2007 (CNKI 2008). Some Western scholars have described China’s cultural diplomacy as a “charm offensive” (Kurlantzick 2007), while Chinese scholars seem to prefer to identify it as “soft power” with a strong traditional cultural background (Yu 2007); both views emphasise the fact that China’s cultural diplomacy is very important in developing its foreign relations, particularly with Africa (*African Business* 2006), and that such diplomacy dovetails with the booming interest in China’s economy and its presence on the African continent. Therefore, a comprehensive study of China’s use over time of this cultural soft power in its relations with African countries is needed – a study using a wide-angle view that can thoroughly investigate both the continuities and the transitions in China’s relationship to Africa.

Culture is a complex concept; almost no single definition has yet been unanimously acknowledged in the literature. According to Aman Garcha (2007), culture is used to describe “the basic things in human mentality and behaviour such as language, tradition, ideology, approaches and style”. There are three general categories in the definition of culture: the perfection of art, the records of human beings, and people’s way of life (Williams 1961:41). The researcher of this study borrows Guy Fauré’s definition as a working concept: “Culture is a set of shared and enduring meanings, values, and beliefs that characterise national, ethnic, or other groups and orient their behaviors” (Fauré & Rubin 1993:3). That is to say, in this study, culture is not only defined narrowly as arts performance with the function of education and entertainment, but is also used as a general term to describe a system of widely accepted beliefs, values, meanings and so on, combined with a set of self-justified assumptions which are represented by all kinds of discourses, in particular the official discourse in the

Chinese context.

This dual working definition of culture per se is identical to the popular explanation of cultural diplomacy, which according to American scholar Milton Cummings Jr. is a term used to describe “the exchange of information, art, lifestyles, other aspects of culture and of ideas, value systems, traditions, beliefs ‘among collectives’ to foster mutual understanding” (Cummings Jr. 2003:1). This paper¹ will therefore trace China’s general use of cultural diplomacy in specific international and domestic contexts, then, against this background, analyse its specific use of such diplomacy in African countries. This research will make extensive use of the “discourse analysis” method in order to analyse how different kinds of discourses, especially those of the official level, act on or react to cultural diplomacy and China’s Africa policy. Finally, the paper will look at recent Chinese cultural diplomacy initiatives towards African countries through several case studies in order to understand the underlying theory of the diplomatic strategy.

The paper concludes that there has been continuity in China’s cultural diplomacy towards Africa over time, though the form of this relationship has shifted as China has reformed domestically and has re-evaluated its overall foreign relations in a succession of political stages. Yet regardless of how much of the overall landscape is under transition, it is hard to see that the Chinese government has a clear strategy for developing culture in its own right. Rather, it aims to use culture to serve political or economic goals. The significance of this study is that China’s cultural diplomacy towards African countries can be seen as a useful prism for understanding current China-Africa relations, in particular the real underlying demands pushing this approach forward from the Chinese side.

Culture as a Forerunner for Foreign Relations – “Culture Serves Socialism, Culture Serves the People”

In April 1951, the new Chinese domestic cultural policy was for the first time

¹ Haifang Liu acknowledges her deep gratitude for the great help, encouragement and hospitality of her ISS colleagues, especially Professor Gerrie ter Haar, Prof. Louk Box and Dr. Stephen Ellis from Leiden University. Furthermore, the author wishes to express her heartfelt thanks to senior diplomat Wang Qinmei for sharing personal documents with the researcher in a most generous way. Special thanks also go to Prof. Jamie Monson of Carleton Colleges and Dr. Steven B. Davis of the Center for Scholarly English for their timely comments and patient editing of this article. Finally, she wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers and Dr. Katrin Fiedler for their critical review and invaluable opinions on how to correct this article.

expressed by Mao Zedong as “let a hundred flowers blossom” (*baihua qifang*) and “weed through the old and bring forth the new” (*tuichen chuxin*); 1956 saw its refined formal representation in Mao Zedong’s statement “on the ten major relationships”, which was the “double-hundred principle” (*shuangbai fangzhen*), namely, *baihua qifang* (let a hundred flowers blossom) and *baijia zhengming* (let a hundred schools of thought contend) (Fu 2004). Apparently, this policy embodied sufficient enlightenment about and openness towards the circle of cultural meaning to acknowledge the existence of other cultures outside of the mainstream ideology, to encourage competition between different styles of thought and cultures, and to allow for a

[d]ialectic thinking of the relationship between adherence to inheritance and reformation of tradition, and that respect for the tradition, in order to bring forth a flourishing socialist culture (*fanrong shehui zhuyi wenhua*). (Zhang 1994:16)

Yet in reality the philosophy of the new government was to transform everything, including culture, and to make a brand new society; the underlying assumption was Mao Zedong’s analogy of “being poor” with “a blank sheet of paper, which is good for writing on” (Mao 1964:726; Chen 1979:361).

As a logical extension of this spirit, the function of culture was prescribed as “two directions” (*erwei fangxiang*), namely “culture serves socialism, and culture serves the people” (Mao 1964:727). That is to say, the new government’s intention to carry out cultural policy was more to pursue pragmatic functions than for the sake of culture per se. Therefore, in order to make culture suitable for political needs, resorting to the necessary political means “to weed through the old and bring forth the new” turned out to be the more dominant and important practical principle of the new government’s cultural work, while the more enlightened “double hundred principle” became empty talk. For example, “reform opera, reform people, and reform system” became the motto of governmental work on operas. As a result, the traditional Beijing Opera was transformed into the Modern Beijing Opera, the most important forum for “revolutionary literature and arts” at that time. For other local operas, so many plays were curtailed because they were regarded as not compatible with “socialist thought” that almost all local operas withered and died (Fu 2004). Consequently, traditional cultures were entirely transformed from a self-disciplined, spontaneous space into a government-dominated ideological tool (Liu 1997); the government became a producer of culture instead of a

provider of a freely competitive platform as had been intended by the “double hundred principle”.

Following the same train of thought as that regarding the function of government in domestic culture, the new Chinese government then formalised its external cultural policy, with similar political characteristics and functions. Responding to the direction of “making the past serve the present” (*gu wei jin yong*) in domestic cultural policy, Mao Zedong in 1964 crystallised “making foreign things serve China” (*yang wei Zhong yong*) as the orientation of external cultural policy (Mao 1964). Yet in reality the openness did not manifest itself as it was supposed to. At the beginning, the usual term in official discourse was “to have cultural contact with friendly countries” (Chen 1956); then in the middle of 1950s it was transformed into “to have cultural exchange” with the outside world (Ding 1959; Chu 1964). This indicated that on the one hand the Chinese government had gained some self-confidence, but on the other hand that it was prudent to avoid any potential foreign cultural influence. Therefore, it was not difficult to understand that once the new Chinese government was established it implemented a total foreign policy to “clean house thoroughly” as a precondition for “making a fresh stove” (*lingqi luzao*). That is to say, before establishing new foreign relations, almost all of the cultural and educational institutions “left by imperial powers” were banned, including US American media agencies and the British Council; meanwhile, independent religious institutions were established, for example, “self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting Chinese churches” (*san zi jiaohui*).

Just before establishment of the new government, Mao Zedong set three tasks for Chinese cultural and arts official delegations travelling abroad: to publicise (the great success of Chinese Revolution); to develop friendship (to reinforce relationships with youngsters from other countries); and to study (new ideas from the Soviet Union). Of the three, “to publicise” was the most important (Wu 1993). Zhou Enlai later elaborated the three principles as the “desires for friendship, peace and knowledge”. Thereafter, “to publicise” and the “three desires” became the principle guidelines for Chinese cultural workers who visited other countries (Wu 1993).

Obviously, given their origin, cultural exchanges with other countries were not simply for the sake of culture per se; on the contrary, they had been formulated as political tasks from the beginning. This was very obvious in 1951 when China signed its first ever formal cultural agreement (with the Polish government – and

later with all other socialist countries). The goal of cultural diplomacy towards socialist countries was to introduce the great success of Chinese Revolution and consolidate diplomatic relations; consequently, cultural exchanges with all socialist countries took place in all subject areas from literature, arts, education, physical education, and publishing to media, broadcasting, movies, libraries, museums, and the preservation of relics.

The underlying reason for the more intensive cultural diplomacy was inter-related with the international isolation the new Chinese government was faced with. By the end of 1954, only 19 socialist and neighbouring countries had established relations with the Chinese government. Premier Zhou therefore strongly advocated civil diplomacy (or people's diplomacy), aiming to increase civil economic relations and cultural exchanges with those countries that had not yet established diplomatic ties. Thus the lean-to-one-side route (referring to leaning towards socialist countries) began to change, and with it the goal of cultural diplomacy (Miu 2006:70). In 1956, at the Second Conference for Chinese Diplomats, Zhou Enlai pointed out the necessity of cultural diplomacy and emphasised that the most imperative work for all Chinese diplomats should be the improvement of cultural (and trade) relations, in order to address the country's international isolation (Song et al. 1997:255). Chen Yi, the foreign minister since 1958, also stated that cultural diplomacy should go ahead as a means of facilitating the normalisation of China's foreign relations (Wu 1993).

Thereafter, cultural diplomacy developed very quickly. Between 1952 and the end of 1958, 1,700 cultural and arts delegations (involving more than 17,400 people) accounted for more than 70 percent of all the delegations sent and received by the Chinese government (Ge 2000:32). No wonder that on many occasions Zhou Enlai emphasised the fact that cultural relations were one of two wings of foreign affairs (the other was economic relations) (Fan 1999). In 1963, American scholar Herbert Passin published his illuminating book *China's Cultural Diplomacy*, in which he traced the prominence of China's cultural diplomacy with very detailed statistics indicating the importance and influence of this priority in that period of time.

It is worth noting that at the time the assumption justifying cultural diplomacy was that "[w]e place our hope only in the People" (Wu 1993); cultural diplomacy was therefore explained by the Chinese government as a way to develop civil (people-to-people) diplomacy, and civil (people-to-people) diplomacy was considered to be diplomacy with common people, non-governmental people,

as both its subject and object (Miu 2006:23). It is still identified as a special creation of the Chinese government by Chinese scholars (Song et al. 1997:255). Many Chinese scholars regard it as an important testimony to Zhou Enlai's art of diplomacy in the context of China's isolation from the world (Xu 1999). The establishment of China-Japan diplomatic relations is explained as having been a typical case of civil (people-to-people) diplomacy – that is, the establishment of cultural (and economic) relations at first, then “half-official diplomacy, thus breaking through America's control of Japan, and finally [...] state-to-state ties between [the] two countries” (Waijiaobu he Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi 1990:228-229).

Equating cultural relations with civil (people-to-people) relations was obviously the logical extension of Mao Zedong's domestic culture policy: culture serves socialism, and culture serves people. The Chinese government's foreign cultural policy was therefore intertwined with China's domestic cultural policy, and the underlying assumptions to justify the two were the same, particularly those on the functions of culture and the role government was supposed to assume. To choose cultural diplomacy as the preferential course was a have-to choice for the Chinese leaders in combating China's international isolation in 1950s.

The New Prominence of Cultural Diplomacy since the 1990s – From “Stage Set” for Business to “Culture Walk Out” Strategy

Since 1978, the whole chessboard of external cultural relations, along with domestic political and cultural policy, has been reconfigured. As economic development has increasingly become the clear priority of the Chinese government, the emphasis on political ideology has decreased significantly, and traditional culture and values have been rediscovered and highlighted. As the “four modernisations” policy has triggered the adoption of Western, mainly European, ideas, exchanges with Western countries in the fields of science and technology and business management have greatly increased (Meissner 2002). This has been the most important and obvious change in the whole landscape of Chinese diplomacy. Exhibitions of ancient artworks – including bronze utensils, ancient paintings, and terracotta – and traditional music performances have begun to occur more often through all kinds of cultural exchanges, especially through national and local art festivals (for example, tours to view ancient sites and relics like the Silk Road and opportunities to practice art forms such as calligraphy and brush

painting). The initial intention of all these art performances, exhibitions, and other types of cultural diplomacy has been to attract overseas Chinese with the same language and cultural roots, and to thereby build a platform for investment and business (Miu 2006:65). Recently, official discourse has explicitly termed this function “culture setting up the stage, and economy putting in the show” (*wenhua datai, jingji changxi*); the targeted group has now expanded from the Chinese diaspora to include foreign investors (Wang 2008; Chen 2006).

Since the 1990s, as China's economy has boomed at an accelerated pace, all kinds of discourses on culture have suddenly and incessantly emerged: ordinary people talk more about “great China's culture”, which indicates that China's economic ascent has provoked the cultural nationalism of the common Chinese and the pride of an imagined “Chinese culture” because “Chinese traditional culture” is actually an invention or reinvention based on numerous different cultures originating from different regions (Knight 2006). As culture has emerged as a catchword, its incorporation in the Chinese government's official discourse has initiated a heated debate at the academic level on “Cultural China”. In 2000, President Jiang Zemin articulated “the orientation of advanced culture in China” as one of the “three represents” (*sange daibiao*) (Ye et al. 2000), which was said to arise “from the need for culture-building and the necessity of revealing China's own cultural achievements” (Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi 2003:37). With the aim of “setting up a strongly supportive international public opinion matching with China's prestige and position” (Jiang 1997), official discourse has thereafter constantly referred to “big culture” (Sun 2007) or “Cultural China”, a term coined by Chinese US American scholar Du Weiming in the 1980s which emphasised a cultural perspective on China both as a nation and a country (Du 1996, 1999). The intention to re-explore the political functions of culture both domestically and externally has therefore begun to manifest itself, while the emphasis on “letting culture be a bridge for business” continues.

The first goal of this culture-building movement is to present a positive image of China. Accordingly, large-scale cultural activities (such as Chinese cultural festivals) have become important stages for showcasing China. The African Thematic Year of 2004 was one such programme relating to Africa. It featured events such as “Chinese Culture going to Africa”, which lasted for seven months and travelled to 22 African countries including South Africa, Cape Verde, and Mali. This kind of programme has an intensive and sensational effect on the common people in Africa and China alike.

The second official goal of culture-building is to anchor China's "peaceful rising" in the ideal of a "harmonious world". In short, cultural diplomacy is meant to show China's "peaceful rise", or a special way to "go global" (*zouxiang quanqiu*) (*Beijing Review* 2005). In 2004, when the huge gap between rich and poor in China became a more serious problem, Chinese leaders introduced "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*) as a slogan; at almost the same time, faced with rapidly spreading voices regarding "China's threat" worldwide, the Chinese government's "peaceful rising" (later changed into "peaceful development") discourse took shape. At the end of 2005, the Chinese government for the first time issued a white paper on peaceful development, in which "harmony" (*he*) was described as the ultimate goal of China's development – to build a peaceful and prosperous world. The following year, President Hu Jintao officially put forward the "harmonious world" as China's philosophy of the world for the twenty-first century, a philosophy which is "completely in line with the construction of harmonious society" and has become the essential principal of the Chinese government's foreign policy (Yu 2007). Thereafter, the academic discourse on cultural diplomacy began to play a very significant role in interpreting the "harmonious world" theory, with an eye towards both foreign and domestic audiences (*People's Daily* 2006b). The idea of "harmony" (*he*) is regarded as one of the major components of traditional culture; the "study of harmony" (*hexue*) has therefore emerged as a major theme on the academic level (Zhang 2007).

The third political goal is related to the economic interest in developing China's cultural industry, with the goal expressed as a "culture walk out" strategy. From 1978 to the present, China's reform of the cultural system has been divided into three episodes in the mainstream official discourse (Cao 2007). This kind of reform was explained as being intended "to give sovereignty back to culture, and let culture develop according to its inherent law of culture". In October 2002, when the Chinese Communist Party held its 16th congress, culture-building and "remarkable strategic reform of the cultural system" were raised to "an urgent strategic position" since a "serious excess of imports over exports" and the "extremely high deficit" in external cultural exchanges posed "severe challenges to the Chinese government" (Cao 2007). The cultural industry, different from cultural public affairs, was unanimously regarded as "one important element of any country's total national power" by academics and officials, and in particular high-ranking officers; promoting the development of the cultural industry was

therefore seen to be the right solution to the difficult situation (Li 2004). All of these views were summed up in the “White Paper on Programs of Cultural Development” as part of the 11th State Council’s “Five-year Plan” issued in September 2006.

Cultural Diplomacy towards African Countries – Love You Little, Love You Long

Because of the high speed with which diplomatic relations developed, in particular through cultural diplomacy, the Chinese government refers to the period of the mid-1950s as the second “hot tide” of establishing foreign relations, a tide that led increasingly to relationships with developing countries. With regards to all Asian, African, and Latin American countries, the external cultural policy was “to make friends at first, then to reinforce understanding, and finally to establish official relations naturally” (Waijiaobu he Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi 1990:406). Indeed, during the process whereby the Chinese government established foreign relations with all these developing countries, cultural exchanges served the function of good-will envoys. For example, in 1956, the Chinese government sent cultural and arts delegations to visit four countries in northern Africa, along with Ethiopia; the following year, a Chinese acrobatics delegation was dispatched to visit northern Africa and Ghana. These cultural events prepared public opinion for the establishment of formal relations between China and the increasing number of newly independent African countries (Miu 2006:70).

Meanwhile, as the number of counterpart countries with diplomatic relations was increasing, the Chinese government used the Asia-Afro Bandung Conference in 1955 as a catalyst to develop cultural diplomacy from general cultural exchanges into cultural cooperation. At the conference, Zhou Enlai pointed out the following:

We Afro-Asian countries need to develop economic and cultural cooperation with each other, in order to eradicate the lagging behind status from the long-term exploitation and oppression by colonialists. (Song et al. 1997:314)

His call for cultural cooperation was written into the Final Communiqué of the Asia-Afro Bandung Conference.

In contrast to the “revolutionary performance and culture” dispatched to socialist countries, the content of Chinese cultural diplomacy towards African,

Asian and Latin American countries tended to be traditional cultures and performances with local colour. Some Western scholars identified this as a showcase of the Chinese policy regarding minor ethnicities in order to leverage support from outside (Meissner 2002); in Chinese academic discourse the content was explained as being due to the fact that there were various political systems, ideologies and international surroundings among these countries, so to choose the traditional content was rather neutral and safe. This would thereby increase the level of affinity in the relationship, thus leading to a greater sense of international proletariat solidarity.

Most forms of cultural diplomacy between China and African countries that were pioneered in the 1950s remain, while new forms have emerged as new drivers have come to the forefront, especially since 2000 (Liu 2006). Among the continuities, the old style of “permanent running water, non-broken line” (originally meaning to go about something little by little without ever stopping the connection) remains almost completely intact. The Chinese government currently allots 5-6 million CNY every year as the official budget (excluding expenditures for big events like The Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation of 2006) for cultural diplomacy with African countries (interview with Xie Fei, official in charge of the Department of External Cultural Relations, Ministry of Culture, on 8 Jan. 2007).

This sum is normally divided into two parts: the first is for people-to-people exchange (including cultural officials, performing troupes, academic exchanges, artists and performers sent to each other) and the second (approximately 1-1.5 million CNY) is for regular cultural donations (including books, booklets, DVD players, stage stereo systems, light apparatus, and small grants). Since the late 1980s, the number of Chinese performing troupes sent to Africa has been kept at two to three troupes visiting three to four countries per year (Interview with Xie Fei). It is not easy to keep this up, especially given that there is no direct financial profit. Hence the so-called “love you little, love you long” approach.

Since the end of the 1990s, in keeping with the development and convening of the Sino-African Forum and the ever-advancing economic relations, cultural diplomacy has been hurriedly and energetically steered into many new channels. First of all, a new but overarching element has been the emphasis on the cultural marketplace. On 24 October 2000, just after the first Sino-African Forum, the New Century China-Africa Cultural Exchange Symposium was held. It was attended by cultural officials from 22 African governments and the Organization

of African Unity (OAU), and their Chinese counterparts. At the conference, Chinese representatives emphasised the provision of cultural aid without any of the usual political conditions attached (Meng 2000). There was a great push by the Chinese side to send expert teams to Africa to do surveys of the cultural market; the intention to introduce African arts and culture to Chinese audiences in an intensive and comprehensive way was also announced very clearly in the conclusion.

Secondly, large symposiums and forums attended only by African scholars, artists, officials, and diplomats and their Chinese counterparts are increasing. To cite some of the more prominent examples: the Symposium of Sino-African Human Rights (Beijing, October 2004), the Conference of Sino-African Cooperation for Environmental Protection (Nairobi, February 2005), International Symposium on African and Chinese Music (Beijing, October 2005), the Forum of Sino-African University Presidents (Zhejiang, November 2006), the Symposium of China and Africa, Shared Development (Beijing, December 2006). Compared with previous eras, when ideology was too often attached, these conferences, with focuses ranging from scholarly topics to music, journalism, environmental issues, education, and even human rights, have contributed to establishing wide-ranging relationships in a softer yet possibly stronger and longer-lasting way, especially given the ever-increasing people-to-people contact.

Thirdly, after the Overseas Chinese Project began to be implemented (in 2004), the Chinese government launched the National Volunteer Project to send “volunteers” abroad to teach Chinese and train new professors (*People's Daily* 2007). This kind of international volunteer project in Africa was kicked off in 2005 with the sending of the first eleven Chinese youth volunteers to Ethiopia. In 2006, in a public speech in Africa, Hu Jintao said that China planned “to encourage Chinese youth volunteers to participate in construction careers in Africa”; then in the Beijing Declaration of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, it was announced that 300 Chinese youth volunteers were to be dispatched to Africa by 2010. In sum, there are now 87 youth volunteers living in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and the Seychelles who are working as Chinese teachers or in the, industrial technology, medical, agricultural, and country-building fields (data of December 2007).

All these volunteers, since the beginning, have been selected by the Association of Youth Volunteers, under the central Communist Youth League. The strict selection process includes a written exam, an oral exam, a physical examination

and a political investigation. Before leaving for Africa, volunteers have to finish training, which includes knowledge of the host countries' customs, foreign affairs and etiquette; local languages; and emergency first aid. Host countries generally provide local accommodations to these volunteers, and the Chinese government provides 200 USD per month as an allowance (Beijing Gongqing Tuan 2005). Chinese volunteers, considered to be the Chinese version of the Peace Corps, are undoubtedly the most important medium for propagating Chinese culture in Africa. They are increasing the number of people-to-people contacts, and are "polishing China's global image" in the process (Kurlantzick 2006).

Fourthly, while most initiatives have been government supported, non-governmental actors are increasingly getting involved. Some singers and actors affiliated with philanthropic organisations have started to go to Africa. Some individual entrepreneurs have also made charitable and environmental contributions. Luo Hong, CEO of the Chinese company Holiland, is a good example. He has travelled to many African countries as an amateur photographer, making friends with local people and donating money in the public interest, for instance, to an environmental protection project on Lake Nakuru in Kenya.

Finally, sister cities have become another important way of strengthening cultural relations in recent years. Since the first relationship between Changsha (Hunan) and Brazzaville was established in 1982, 73 cities from 28 African countries have entered into sister-city relationships with Chinese cities (Zhongguo-Feizhou Youxie 2006). In the Beijing Declaration of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, sister cities were said to be an important platform for Chinese local governments and for cooperation with African countries. In the Symposium on Sino-African Sister Cities held in May 2007, the operative principle of this platform was summed up as follows: "to promote the establishment of sister cities through economic projects, while promoting cooperation and development through a sisterhood relationship" (Wuhan Shi Waiban Wangzhan 2007). Therefore, since such sister relationships first began the function of this platform has been transformed into creating economic ties between Chinese provincial and municipal governments and their African counterparts, even though the organisation in charge is the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), which used to be a purely cultural association (named the Chinese Association of Friendship and Cultural Relations of Foreign Countries) and still declares cultural relations to be its main task.

Case Studies on New Cultural Diplomacy to Africa

A series of cases will now be analysed in order to learn how new drivers of cultural diplomacy are not only enriching but also rewriting the older landscape of Chinese-African cultural relations.

Popularising Africa to the Chinese – Approaching Africa

In March 1999, a year ahead of the Sino-African Forum, a “Great Exhibition of African Arts”, with 100 pieces of wooden, stone and bronze sculptures and paintings from eleven African countries, was kicked off at the Chinese National Art Gallery. (One month later, the exhibition began a tour in different cities throughout the country which lasted for more than one year.) Given that China has no African museum at all and that this was the first exhibition of African art on this scale, this exhibition proved to be a sensation among the Chinese common people. Since then, more small shops specialising in African art works have appeared in the business area of Beijing, and the remote continent has become ever more tangible to the common Chinese.

The most influential event to popularise Africa among Chinese audiences was the serial TV programme “A Passage to Africa”, which was filmed and shown in 2003. Within 97 days, the film crew, composed of staff from Chinese Central TV Station (CCTV), Phoenix TV Corporation (the most popular Chinese media in Hong Kong), two popular singers, and a historical geography professor, travelled to 30 countries and covered more than 80,000 miles, making this project the largest reportage about Africa in the history of Chinese media (Zhongyang Dianshitai Dili Pindao 2003). Through the lens of these Chinese media workers’ cameras, Africa appeared as a huge, wild garden full of minority colours, marvellous natural scenes, and diverse human beings and lifestyles. This was very evident from the subtitles of this series of reports, which made the explorers’ adventures sound very attractive: “Aria of Carthage (ancient Carthage imperial city in northern Africa)”, “People with the Veil”, “Country of Gold”, “Homeland of the Ostrich”, etc. The number of Chinese tourists in Africa has increased greatly thanks to this programme, which was an eye-opener for Chinese audiences (the 2005 figure was double that of 2004; the number of tourists to South Africa reached 47,000 in 2007, an increase of 12.9 percent from the year before (*Jingji Cankao Bao* 2008)). According to the leader of the media project: [Since] China’s economic capacity now could support this kind of avant-

garde and pioneering event, the original aim of this action was to show Chinese Telecast workers' new ambition through Chinese eyes, which would be rather different from those images of suffering viewed through other media's cameras. Thus the focus of this report was not the political situation, but long-standing cultural things. (CCTV BBS 2003)

Given the Chinese media's constant principle of reporting on "friendly countries" (the definition of this term in Chinese official discourse has varied in keeping with the changing international situation) – the more positive, the better – this "cultural flavour" was quite understandable.

This TV programme derived from China's rise in the world and its ever-advancing engagement in Africa; a new, proud feeling was emerging, which manifested itself not only in the leader talking about the telecast workers' ambitions and the quite stimulating title *Zongheng Feizhou* (to Sweep Through the Length and Width of Africa) (CCTV BBS 2003), but also in the interviews with those Chinese living in Africa, who were thought to have had legendary lives in Africa and thus to be good models for other Chinese. There were two good examples of this: One was the harsh life a Chinese medical team experienced. The other, with the touching subtitle "Love in Niamey", was about a Chinese woman who moved to Niamey twelve years ago because of her love for an African man named Abu Barker. National pride and the self-confidence to be Chinese were here depicted very well through the account of a contemporary Chinese woman seeking a worthwhile life in a "real Africa", regardless of the hardship.

A similar version of a "popularising Africa" case is the "Baoding Villages" story, which appeared online in 2006, then spread from the Internet to most major media, including CCTV, *China Daily* (Zhongguo Ribao Xinwen 2007), Xinhua News Agency, Beijing Youthnet (Beijing Qingnian Zaixian 2007), and Sina Blog (Xinlang Boke 2007). This is the story of how over 7,000 Chinese farmers from Baoding City (in Hebei Province) moved to Africa and successfully built 28 Baoding Villages (Liexun Junqing Wang 2007). Ironically, more and more media have investigated the truth of this serial report, while warning all Chinese people that Africa is not a land full of gold and that it would be risky to attempt to imitate the story of the "Baoding Villages". Regardless of the truth of the story, what is noteworthy is the magnetic power of the idea, which made so many big media vie with each other to report and investigate it: to approach Africa, a dreamland full of potential.

Why Inviting In? Cultural Variety = Affinity to the People

In 2004, nine performance troupes, from the main guest continent Africa, were invited to China to take part in the large-scale gathering “Meet in Beijing” (this cultural programme has been held seven times since 2000, with one continent or country as main guest each year). In the official discourse of the Chinese government, this once-a-year programme stresses the subject of:

Affinity to the People, [because of] its richness in cultural variety and universality, exemplifying the unification of creation, communication and cooperation, and also the organic oneness of harmoniousness, concord and peacefulness, which are the pursuits of the Chinese government, and the embodiment of the spirit of the People's Olympics. (Beijing Shi Wenhuaawang 2007)

This is a remarkable story about “cultural variety” and the “theme of affinity to the People”, which repeats the same underlying logic that equated cultural diplomacy with civil (people-to-people) diplomacy in the 1950s. “Affinity to the People” as a slogan developed from China's international relations in the 1950s, has been rediscovered and re-emerged as the core theme of the political culture of the Chinese government – especially since the huge gulf between rich and poor has become more serious and the CCP has emphasised the concept “people-oriented” as a central value of “harmonious society” (Xie 2007).

Interestingly, the domestic slogan “the People's Olympics” was taken as a criterion of “political correctness” to explain why the programme “Meet in Beijing” should invite Africans! The dominant political discourse is still the same as that developed since the 1950s, and the set of self-justified assumptions for building relations with Africa is still based on “affinity to the People”, though the economic relationship with Africa is becoming increasingly prominent. Hence, according to the logic of the official discourse, inviting African countries bestows more validity, through more affinities to the people, upon the “Meet in Beijing” event, therefore making it acceptable to the common Chinese. This no doubt signifies another significant truth: cultural diplomacy towards African countries has two functions, externally and internally directed, because the growing civil society is demanding an increase in openness which extends to the areas of foreign affairs and diplomacy. People often wonder why in 2006 the Sino-African Summit was so sensationalised in the media regarding the high standard of its reception ceremony and etiquette for African leaders. The affinity-to-the-people logic

provides part of the answer. For the same reason, in the current Chinese context, the discourses of cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy not only coexist in an overlapping way, but are also used to justify each other (such as Liu 2002; Yang 2005). In the context of China, the definition of “public diplomacy”, which is obviously quite different from that of US American government, is more related to the public consciousness of the right to be informed, and its internally directed function is more prominent. Therefore, public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy are interrelated; they are both often equal to Zhou Enlai’s “civil or people-to-people diplomacy”, just as Yang Jiechi, the present minister of foreign affairs, has said: the people are the mentor and backing force of diplomacy (Zhonghua Wang 2007).

“Inviting In” Story I: The African Cultural Visitors Programme – A Twist From Culture Per Se to Cooperation on Cultural Industry

The African Cultural Visitors Programme, initiated by China’s Ministry of Culture, started in 2006, when four Africans with “cultural fame” were invited to China to visit many cultural sites in Beijing and other cities in order “to experience the culture of mass and entertainments in theatres, and also visit some cultural industries”. There was no official explanation of the criteria for selecting those with cultural fame. Among these four, three were officials in charge of the external cultural and tourism affairs of their own countries. The fourth was an actual artist from Kenya (Zhongguo Wenhua Wang 2007). According to Chinese official discourse, this programme is “an exchange tailored for the cultural personalities of African countries, aiming to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation between China and Africa” (ibid.).

In 2007, this programme was officially named The Cultural Visitor Programme, with “Cultural Policy and its Implementation in the Market Economy” as the theme. It was specifically designed for ten countries: Senegal, Benin, Mali, the Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Zambia, Botswana, and Uganda. Each country recommended two cultural officials, one from the central government and one from the provincial level. As a prerequisite, candidates had to submit an article on their own country’s cultural management system and cultural policies, and cases illustrating the results of implementing the cultural policies. In addition to cultural relics and “folk culture villages” ranging from southern Shenzhen to the historic Buddhist grottoes of Gansu Province in western China, the sites visited included many cultural industries, such as a rural cultural-

centre building, and a folk-culture villages theme park. The journey turned out to be “a great learning experience” for African cultural officials (MOFCOM 2007).

The Cultural Visitor Programme of China is not unique. Certainly, the US government invites many musicians, performers, film-makers, and arts managers to America “aiming to develop the visitors’ artistic talents or arts management skills while promoting an understanding of American society, culture, and values” (Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs 2007). The broad outline and intended goal of China’s Cultural Visitor Programme was to promote mutual cultural understanding, but this was still somewhat ambiguous and unfixed because it had not been officially announced, either in terms of the criteria or the definition of “cultural visitor” per se in 2006; yet in 2007, the intention and the underlying assumption were very prominent: the Africans with “cultural fame” had been replaced by cultural officials in higher positions, and the goal had also been transformed from tentative cultural understanding to cultural industry cooperation. The assumptions behind the self-justification of the programme have manifested themselves in the topics on which Chinese and African officials have exchanged ideas: the relation between development and preserving ethnic cultures (on this aspect China is believed to have many experiences to pass on to Africa) and the possibilities for Chinese-African cooperation towards achieving these goals (Chinese Radio International 2007). Culture in its own right was discussed only when it might go against development and as something to be mobilised as a valuable resource for development. This trend is a logical extension of the priority of the present Chinese domestic cultural policy: to develop the cultural industry.

For the African officials’ inaugural journey, the Chinese Ministry of Culture covered all the costs. After this journey, the Nigerian woman in charge of external cultural relations for the cultural ministry immediately promised to send a troupe to China to make a commercial performance. She also wanted to send some Nigerians to China to learn the art of producing animated movies. As for the general director of the National Theatre of Senegal, he said enthusiastically during the closing ceremony, “Now I came, I saw, and I was conquered!” (Zhongguo Wenhuaabu Wangzhan 2007).

There is no doubt that Africa’s market for Chinese cultural products is still very uncertain. Objectively, the language and cultural barriers to be conquered within the trade in cultural products are huge. What the Chinese government

could expect from the programme is the willingness to cooperate on “cultural development” in the long term, especially in the cultural industry, just as the aforementioned Nigerian woman stated. This intention, which had already been elaborated very clearly by the Chinese deputy minister of culture as early as 2000, has yet to be realised in the development of culture in both Africa and China (Meng 2000).

“Inviting In” Story II: Intellectual Cooperation – From “Poor Help Poor” to “Development and Cooperation”

Most countries agree that language teaching and educational exchange are important elements, and sometimes even the main tasks, of cultural diplomacy; As Louis Dolot, a pioneering French scholar of international cultural relations, said, these two activities are concerned with the basic education of local people, and cultural influence can not happen if training and education are not taken as priority tasks, at least in developing countries (Dolot 1964:15).

This type of intellectual cooperation between China and Africa has been embraced by the Chinese government for mutually beneficial South-South development – or as Philip Snow put it, “the poor help the poor” – since the formal relation started (Snow 1988). For African countries, this cooperation has been expected to contribute to ensuring “the full development of cultural identity” by overcoming the colonial traces in the content and substance of their educational experiences; China has therefore been viewed as holding “the potential to partake in this opportunity and make a significant contribution to an alternative decolonised pedagogical paradigm and rethinking of international academic cooperation” (Gillespie 2006).

In the first stage of this intellectual cooperation, exchanges were quite mutual. Not only did Africans visit China, but Chinese scholars and students, together with Chinese singers and dancers from oriental performance troupes, were also sent to Africa quite frequently to study languages and literatures, culture, ethnic performance, history and other humanities in Arabian, Hausa and Swahili. Many engineers, teachers, medical workers, and agriculture experts were also sent to Africa to contribute to the independence revolutions and social reconstruction. Directly after Somalia gained independence and became a field of the “aid race in earnest” among the big powers, the Chinese government offered human resource training in agriculture and helped the country develop its rice growing on large farms (Cooley 1965:33).

As of the 1980s, this mutual and balanced bilateral cooperation changed to become one-way intellectual aid to African countries, as China seldom sent students and scholars to Africa to either study or do research, and only a few African scholars came to give lectures to the Chinese (Li 2006). This situation has changed again since 2007, when the Department of International Cooperation at the Ministry of Education decided to establish a special scholarship to send Chinese students at the MA and PhD level to Africa.

From 2003 to 2006, China trained more than 10,000 Africans in many sectors, including 3,700 governmental officials, 3,000 professionals and others (Luo et al. 2005:44-54). Alongside the enormous increase in the number of scholarships (4,000 per year) announced at the Sino-African Summit held in November 2006, the Chinese government has promised to finish the task of training 15,000 Africans by 2010. All these apparently hectic and active training events, happening almost every minute, require close scrutiny.

Since the preferred way of providing education is to “invite in” for intellectual support, all kinds of training centres are mushrooming at many Chinese universities and colleges. Some of these training tasks are carried out by special African studies institutes, such as those at Beijing University and Zhejiang Normal University, but many other colleges and universities which now run such programmes have had nothing to do with African studies or education until now. An industrialised chain specialising in training Africans (initiated by various ministries but sometimes financed by local governments or big companies) is being shaped under such circumstances. Training is happening ranging from trade, computers, agriculture, medical botany, distance learning, vocational education, nursery education, economic management, and military administration to journalism, culture and tourism and even low-interest loan provision. As a result, within the last three years there have been four national working conferences about intellectual aid to Africa: one in 2005 at Suzhou University; two in 2006 at Yunnan University and Beijing University, respectively; and one in 2007 at Chengdu University of Electronic Science and Technology.

In general, African trainees from different countries are invited to China to take classes with different curricula according to the sectors with which participants are affiliated. For example, the Chinese government recently signed an agreement worth 500,000 USD with The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) to train midwives and nurses for African countries. During the training period, trainees will visit relevant companies and modernised cities such

as Shenzhen, and do some sightseeing as well. The training courses therefore have several functions, namely, gaining hearts (“come and be conquered”) (Zhongguo Wenhuaabu Wangzhan 2007), exhibiting Chinese businesses, and disseminating “China’s experience of development”; what the Chinese expect from the Africans is more business opportunities, acceptance of the notion of win-win for both China and Africa; acknowledgment of China’s rising state prestige (King 2006b), and the guarantee of “non-condition” conditionality (Taiwan issue).

Development per se provides a clue to the reason why intellectual training for Africans, China’s top priority for the time being, is so active and why in official discourse it is still deliberately addressed as “intellectual cooperation” instead of “intellectual aid”. Faced with the obvious asymmetry of power in its relationship with Africa and the increasing domestic demands for development, the Chinese government has moved from emphasising the “international proletariat solidarity” to emphasising the “strategic partnership between the largest developing country, China, and the world’s largest developing continent, Africa” (*People’s Daily* 2006a). In this relationship, the most essential theme is cooperation and development, instead of development cooperation (King 2006a) or, more precisely, pure development aid.

“Walking Out” Story: African Confucius Institute – “To Cross the River by Groping for Rocks”

Since “la langue est l’instrument essential des relations culturelles” (language is the essential instrument of cultural relations) (Dollot 1964:24), Premier Zhou Enlai gave instructions as early as 1961 to establish a special institution to organise programmes for teaching Chinese as a foreign language. By 1964, 86 people had become professional Chinese teachers for foreigners (Zhou 2003). In 1987, the Chinese government established The Chinese Language Council International (simplified form is Hanban in Chinese) under the Ministry of Education. By June 2004, after keeping a low profile for 17 years, Hanban was recomposed of members from twelve state ministries and commissions, and Madame Chen Zhili, a state councillor, was appointed as the president. Under Hanban, in November of the same year, the first Confucius Institute was established in Korea.

Most Open-minded Cooperative Model?

According to the constitution and by-laws of the Confucius Institutes, any foreign applicant with a certain instructional space, relevant equipment and facilities,

plus a Chinese counterpart organisation, can apply for permission to establish a branch of the Confucius Institute with full or partial financial support. The teachers are then sent from the Chinese counterpart organisation, as Chinese volunteers going abroad under the Chinese government's support (a national volunteer project was started at the same time). Hanban provides partial or full seed money for every new applicant and offers an annual budget for three to five years depending on the local financial status where the applicant institute is based.

The Confucius Institute was designed as a non-profit education organisation. Its main task is "to promote the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language and cultural exchanges and co-operations, such as in the education, culture and economics fields" (Confucius Institute Division 2007). Until now, only the tablet tailored by Hanban bearing the inscription of the Confucius Institution has remained the same; everything else varies from one branch to another: there are no universal textbooks and teaching programmes, and the long-term goals and operation modes are very different (host universities or colleges can decide all these by themselves). There are many debates regarding this trend of diversification. Pan Wenguo, an authority on teaching Chinese as a foreign language, has argued that the urgent task for Hanban is to unify, that is, to edit a set of authoritative textbooks, because most of the current ones are just for literacy and do not serve the function of spreading Chinese culture (Liu 2007). The Confucius Institute appears to be the most open-minded institution China has ever had due to this cooperative model as its distinctive characteristic.

It has been reported that, altogether, the Chinese government had spent 26 million USD on Confucius Institutes worldwide by the end of 2007 (Chinese News 2007). According to the deputy director of Hanban, before 2006 Hanban received 70 million CNY annually from the government, and this amount proved to be very limited, which meant there needed to be another operation mode such as cooperation with big enterprises or reorientation to a market mechanism. When the headquarters of the Confucius Institute was established in April 2007 (after over 140 Confucius Institutes had been created around the world), Madame Chen Zhili also pronounced that the operation model of the Confucius Institute should be transformed into a market mechanism.

From this brief history of the Confucius Institute, it is very clear that the booming phenomenon is a story of "crossing the river by groping at rocks" (Deng Xiaoping), an experimental and learning-by-doing approach, rather than some

initiative promoted through a well-established “grand plan of making cultural exporting” (Wong 2004). At the same time, Hanban’s vision of this institution is also broadening as it gains momentum smoothly and quickly. This is why as late as 2007, three years after the first branch was established, the mission of the Confucius Institute was pronounced in idealised terms to be to “help the world understand Chinese language and culture, enhance the development of multiculturalism, and contribute to the building of a harmonious world” (Hanban 2007).

Cultural Centre or Confucius Institute – To Borrow a Ferryboat and Go to the Sea

In April 2007, it was announced that the target figure for the number of Confucius Institutes would make a “great leap” from the 100 announced in 2004 to an ambitious 500 by 2010. But it was only after the establishment of 70 Confucius Institutes in other regions that the first African Confucius Institute finally came into being, and among the 245 existing Confucius Institutes worldwide (data of 11 June 2008), only the twelfth on the whole African Continent was unveiled on 26 November 2007 in Cameroon. The other African Confucius Institutes are located in Egypt (2), South Africa (2), Zimbabwe (1), Nigeria (2), Kenya (2), Madagascar (1), and Rwanda (1) (Hanban 2007).

Considering that they are equally funded by the Chinese government, why – if Africa is really singled out as a target destination for developing some “grand geopolitical strategy”, as many literatures are currently assuming and trying to prove – is the number of Confucius Institutes in Africa much smaller than that in other countries and regions? (The situation is the same in Latin America: there are five Confucius Institutes in Mexico, but not a single one in all the other Latin American countries.) The history of Chinese cultural centres in Africa can help to provide a clue.

In 1988, the first two Chinese cultural centres were unveiled in Benin and Mauritius, respectively, as the foremost bases for expanding Chinese cultural influence. Over the following 20 years, another cultural centre was built in Africa and eleven were built on other continents and in other regions. but among all these 14 cultural centres spreading from big countries developing countries and neighbouring countries respectively, only six are active (they are accessible through the website of ChinaCulture.org). The general goals and the main activities of the cultural centres in Africa almost completely overlap with

those of the Confucius Institutes. The only difference is that one group is under the Ministry of Culture and the other is guided by Hanban. If it is also completely funded by the Chinese government, why does the Confucius Institute seem to be taking the place of the cultural centre if both are intended to propagate China's culture? Or, more precisely, why has Confucianism, which had become one collection in the Chinese Historical Museum's showcase (Levenson 1969), now begun to be used as a tool to remobilise traditional cultural resources in order to serve the current strategy of the Chinese government, which used to reject tradition? (Gittings 2006:2-3).

The simple reason goes back to the domestic situation. Withdrawing old ideology leaves a huge spiritual vacuum for the renaissance of traditional culture from the grass-roots level, which actually signifies the necessity of re-establishing the national spirit and ethical morality after the absolute revolutionary experiment of creating a new socialist culture failed (as the metaphor "a blank sheet of paper" signified, Chen 2007). At the same time, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is putting great effort into establishing itself as a "ruling party" and is using Confucius as the label to "reinvent" various traditional cultural resources to serve it in the present, thus demonstrating the trend of the re-Sinicisation of the Chinese government under this party (Gittings 2006:4).

On this "booming Confucius Institutes phenomenon", one undeniable external factor that should be taken into account is the global "Chinese fever". The goal of the headquarters of the Confucius Institute has been expressed as *tongchou quanqiu hanyu jiaoxue* (to plan and run the entire project of Chinese teaching in this world) (Xinhua News Agency 2007). The Chinese government is trying to take this opportunity ("which might come once every 1,000 years") (Huanqiu.com 2007) to use the Confucius Institute as a pre-emptive initiative to help it occupy global markets as well as to influence the dissemination of Chinese culture. But, as a strategy, the initiative of the Confucius Institute has constantly been idealised in official discourse as a combination of "inviting in" and "walking out"; the latter is more important because developing the domestic cultural industry and cultural trade with other countries is the main means for Chinese cultures to go abroad (Meng 2004).

The executive director of Hanban, Xu Lin, has stated that the cooperative model (to take advantage of other countries' campuses and management) guarantees that the Confucius Institute is the best choice for the Chinese government to spend the least money and to gain the most. "Actually we are driven by

the great market demand to act so quickly”, she stated (Huanqiu.com 2007). A fashionable official slogan to describe these tactics is “to go to the sea by borrowed ferryboat” (*jie chuan chu hai*) (European Studies Team 2006). Africa is obviously still lacking this kind of ferryboat to be borrowed. On the other hand, as a national strategy for spreading cultural influence, the Confucius Institute has been constantly idealised in official discourse as symbolising the start of China’s peaceful ascent (Hunter 2006); the need to have branches in some well-placed Africa countries under full financial support needs hardly to be hinted at in view of the strategic position of Africa within China’s overall foreign affairs.

Conclusion

Forty years ago, George T. Yu, pioneer scholar on Sino-African relations, concluded:

Studying China in Africa is much like pursuing a dragon in the bush. The dragon is imposing, but the bush is dense, so that while one is conscious of the animal’s presence, visible or not, observation becomes difficult. (Yu 1968)

This vivid picture still somewhat resembles the contemporary situation, if not completely. It is not only because the dragon is imposing within a vast space, but also because its steps are rather puzzling and bewildering, even more so to older players in the same field. Further study of China’s “informal foreign policy”, as Yu termed it, or cultural “soft power”, as Alan Hunter concluded – or literally, its statecraft – is required in order to deepen the understanding of this increasingly complicated relationship as China’s all-around involvement with Africa unfolds.

This research is a very humble attempt to fill the gap in knowledge on Sino-African cultural relations. When the prominence of cultural diplomacy in China’s foreign policy in the 1950s and the late 1990s is contextualised and compared to the present, one could easily reach the conclusion that the function of cultural diplomacy is changing from being a political forerunner to the normalisation of state-to-state relations into a forerunner for business activities. Yet, as Maack has said:

Cultural diplomacy is defined as that aspect of diplomacy that involves a government’s efforts to transmit its national culture to foreign publics with the goal of bringing about an understanding for national ideals and institutions as part of a larger attempt to build support for political and economic goals. (Maack 2001:3)

Generally, beyond the goal of transmitting national culture lie the underlying political and economic goals, something which is very obvious from the activities of the American government or the French government. The Chinese government's use of cultural diplomacy with Africa, however, is rather lacking in a clear cultural strategy. Since 1978, after the Cultural Revolution, the cultural system has been reforming, and in this process the theme of culture itself has seemingly always been emerging; yet it has been hijacked again and again, either by political aims or business motivations. The cultural visitor programme was a very typical case, and even the Confucius Institute, as a programme of Chinese overseas strategy, has been strongly motivated by the market.

Looking at the multidimensional challenges contemporary Chinese diplomacy is faced with, we find that the tension between guaranteeing development and the responsibilities of a big power is very prominent (Wang 2007). In the foreseeable future, the former will no doubt still be the top priority for China's diplomacy. This seems to indicate that the dominant role for cultural diplomacy in economic development and politics, instead of in culture in its own right, will continue for a while.

Yet, something else worthy of a second look is that no matter how distinctly the entire context and specific intentions have transformed, there is continuity in the official discourse due to the emphasis on "affinity to the people". This term has played an important role as a label and is now being recycled to justify actions within the framework of Sino-African relations. Clearly it is a particularly "Chinese characteristic" of China's cultural diplomacy with Africa.

Beginning by looking narrowly at culture and how it serves political and economic functions, this study has then moved to the broader concept of culture as a belief, a special behaviour, or a value system itself, and the self-justified assumptions underlying this concept/culture. Therefore, this study of China's cultural diplomacy towards African countries is precisely the study of China's particular approach to Africa, with various official discourses serving as the assumptions to establish the legitimacy of the approach. Through this prism, Africa's increasing presence in the landscape of China's international relations can be better understood, as can the relationship between two sides, with its various transmissions and continuities.

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