



Policy Briefing

How Genuine is China-Africa Cultural Cooperation?

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About the Research

Chinese and African leaders are generally keen to stress the mutually beneficial, win-win nature of China-Africa cooperation. China's 2006 White Paper on African Policy stressed the 'sincerity, friendship and equality' of China-Africa relations, and these sentiments are indefatigably repeated in speeches, media reports, and policy briefings. Cultural cooperation between China and Africa represents an important part of China-Africa relations and one of the primary means through which the friendship between the two sides is expressed. To gain insight into the true dynamics of China-Africa relations beyond the rhetoric, hype and scaremongering, we carried out research into the cultural cooperation and exchange activities that have taken place in recent years. In particular, we asked where the events took place, what kind of culture they foregrounded, and who the audiences were. Answering these questions allows us to get a clearer sense of who is benefitting from cultural cooperation and what role these kinds of activities are playing in China-Africa relations more broadly.



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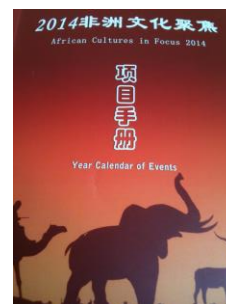
Policy Implications

China-Africa cultural cooperation is more about showcasing Chinese culture on the world stage than about creating genuine opportunities for cultural exchange

Our research findings show that China-Africa cultural cooperation is driven primarily by China: the majority of events are funded and organised by China and hosted in Africa. China-Africa cultural cooperation therefore seems to be more about showcasing Chinese culture on the world stage than about creating genuine opportunities for cultural exchange between Chinese and African people. In this sense, China-Africa cultural cooperation should be seen as part of China's cultural soft power policy, through which it aims to 'build a beautiful image' of China as a peace-loving, tolerant country. While some African countries – notably South Africa – are also trying to capitalise on China-Africa cultural cooperation to improve their own country brands, at present most of the diplomatic and strategic benefits of China-Africa cultural cooperation are accruing to China.

Key findings

One of the highest profile cooperation initiatives, the ‘Cultures in Focus’ series, is supposed to feature Chinese culture in Africa in odd number years and African cultures in China in even number years. However, **while 88% of the 2013 events took place in Africa as would be expected, only 22% of the 2014 events took place in China.** Most events are sponsored and organised by China, making the initiative as a whole far more one-sided than the descriptions of it would suggest. Overall, Chinese culture is being showcased in Africa much more frequently than African cultures are being featured in China.



Many of the events are not open to the general public, and are used to generate positive media coverage

The number of Confucius Institutes in Africa now stands at 46. In addition, there are five China Cultural Centres in Africa. These are the main routes through which African people are able to learn about Chinese language and culture, and are often valued for the career opportunities they open up. Opportunities for Chinese people to learn about African languages and cultures in China are far more limited.

Many of the cultural events are not open to the general public, and represent opportunities for generating positive media coverage rather than genuine cultural exchange between ordinary people. For example, the main part of the Beijing Winter Olympics exhibition that was held at the National Library of South Africa in September 2015 was by invitation only, and the audience consisted of Chinese and African dignitaries. Similarly, two hundred copies of an anthology of African poetry translated into Chinese were presented as gifts to African ambassadors at the Shanghai Expo in 2010, and very few copies were sold to general readers because of its high price.

Further information

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/ctccs/projects/building-images.aspx>

China-Africa Relations: Building Images through Cultural Cooperation, Media Representation and Communication, edited by Kathryn Batchelor and Xiaoling Zhang (Routledge, 2017)

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