

FIXING CHINA'S IMAGE, ONE AFRICAN STUDENT AT A TIME

By Simon Allison

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SIMON ALLISON is a senior reporter with Daily Maverick, a South African news and analysis publication. He holds a Master's degree from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and has worked extensively across both Africa and Asia. He is interested in examining the China-Africa relationship from the perspective of Africans in China, and in how China complements its economic muscle with 'soft power' initiatives such as the scholarship programme for African students to study at Chinese universities. In 2013 he visited Beijing on a Wits China-Africa Reporting Project grant to research this programme, meeting with students, lecturers and administrators to understand how it works and what its goals are.



The entrance to Peking University in Beijing.

In Africa, China has an image problem. You've read the headlines: China is flooding our markets with cheap fakes; it is callously poaching our rhinos; it is building stadiums and roads that don't last a decade; it is undercutting our labour; it is stealing our diamonds; it is coming to colonise us all over again.

Some of this is sometimes true. Much of it is not, or not completely, the product of nervous imaginations and a well-founded fear of foreign nations who take from Africa more than they give. But image is not about substance, it is about perception and, after decades of doing things its own way – consequences be damned – China is wising up to the importance of fixing its controversial image in Africa.

A few initiatives are worth noting. The expansion of Chinese media into Africa can't be ignored. State news agency Xinhua has become the largest wire service operating in Africa, while the Chinese public broadcaster's new Africa channel (CCTV Africa) is headquartered in Nairobi with a full complement of African staff. Likewise, there has been a significant cultural investment in the

form of Confucius Institutes (cultural and language centres designed to rival the British Council or Alliance Française) sprouting all over the continent.

In the long term, however, perhaps the most influential and certainly least examined initiative is the Chinese government's mammoth scholarship programme, which has grown exponentially over the last decade. There are an estimated 12,000 African students studying right now in China with the support of the Chinese government. This is an astonishingly high figure, dwarfing scholarship programmes offered to African students by any other country.

So, questions need to be asked: What are African students doing there? How are they being treated in China? And who really benefits?

Coming in from the cold

To figure this out, I thought I'd better ask a few African students who are actually in China.

Sydwell Mabasa welcomes me into his room at the Communication University of China (CUC). He's clearly happy to see a fellow South African, and over a hot cup of rooibos – “the taste of home,” he says – we chat about politics and Oscar Pistorius and why exactly those textbooks aren't being delivered in Limpopo, his home province. I'm just happy to be inside, Beijing in winter is cold and blustery. This is about as far from the warm, blue skies of Africa as it is possible to get.

Mabasa, who works in provincial government at home, is one of 21 African students on a new Master's programme in international communication (almost all the scholarships are awarded at post-graduate level; the idea is to get people who are already well educated and established in their home countries). He hasn't contributed a cent to his postgraduate studies, because China is footing the bill.

The course is paid for, as are flights, accommodation, food and even a monthly stipend of US\$250. Not too shabby. Neither is his room, a spacious studio with two single beds, a desk, a couple of chairs and an en-suite bathroom (on some mornings, students are even woken up with tea delivered to their door). It's housed in the 10-storey International Students Centre, a former hotel on campus where all the foreigners stay. “To prevent them infecting the citizenry with their foreign liberal ideas,” jokes a colleague.

It's a flippant remark, but it's a serious issue: what kind of education can Africans really get in China, a country



The campus of Communication University of China, Beijing.

where censorship is rife and Facebook and Twitter are still banned? “The education system is good,” Mabasa says. “Most professors who are part of this programme studied in the US and Canada and other areas. We get to explore both sides of the world.”

His sentiments were supported by other students I spoke to, all of whom noted that the course presented both Western and Chinese theories, allowing the students to choose what they think works best. “There is a kind of framing sometimes, trying to push you into viewing the world in a certain light,” said Saleh Yussuf Mnemo, from Tanzania. He's a journalist with experience at the state-owned Zanzibar Broadcasting Corporation, and also a lecturer at the Zanzibar Journalism and Mass Media College. Saleh says this ‘framing’ is not unique to the Chinese: “Our education in East Africa was mostly influenced by the British, the French, the Germans. Now we are here we get a real insight into what the Chinese perspective is.”

For many of the students, understanding China is just as important as the education itself. There seems to be a recognition among young Africans that China is going to be around for a while, and that there are relatively few Africans who can relate to China at all. Europe and America are known entities, with deep cultural or

historical ties to African societies, but China is still a mystery. To understand China, to be a China expert, is therefore a marketable skill which is valuable regardless of the content or quality of the degree.

This is encouraged by the university, which includes Chinese language, culture and history courses as part of the core programme. “It’s kind of a life-changing experience for them,” comments Professor Zhang Yanqiu, director of the African Communications Research Centre at CUC. She’s also the resident coordinator for the African students in the communications programme, and helps organise trips and cultural experiences – excursions to Shanghai or the Great Wall, for example, or tours of Chinese broadcasters. “They know more about China. Now they know it, they know China personally.”

Zhang, however, is the first to admit that there’s an element of self-interest in this as far as China is concerned. “Between China and Africa they do a lot of business and there is a lot of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of each other. But this programme offers a new channel for Africans to know what’s happening in the real China. For us, it’s a successful programme. The students work like a bridge between the two countries. I think we achieved our goal to let people understand China more, to know the real China.”

The real China

But the real China is flawed, and it can, at times, get in the way of the education. I went with the students to a lecture on new media, a fascinating topic in today’s digital world. The lecture, in English, was sharp, and the discussion freewheeled between analysing the influence on public opinion of US political dramas like *West Wing* to the skills needed in crafting 140-character tweets. Except they weren’t tweets, of course, because Twitter is banned; they were entries on China’s heavily censored homegrown

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equivalent, Sina Weibo. Homework for the students, along with an impressive amount of reading, was to set up a Weibo account and start microblogging.

Easier said than done. “Whatever I say, they delete most of it,” says one student, referring to the army of censors working in real-time to monitor the social network. Mabasa refers to the restrictions as “social networking with Chinese characteristics”, a clever riff on the ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ that forms the basis of the Chinese state’s ideology.

Not that Twitter and Facebook are completely off-limits. Getting round the censors by using a free proxy server is not difficult. I was able to access my Twitter account via a simple Google search for “free proxy server”, and students have even more sophisticated ways to evade the Great Firewall. Even some lecturers – employed by the state – have no qualms about telling foreign journalists like me to connect with them on Facebook.

Still, teaching a course on new media when the most influential new media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WordPress, are technically off-limits necessarily compromises the course. As does teaching classes in international journalism when media in China is similarly controlled and driven by the central government, and international news heavily restricted (the *New York Times*, for example, is unavailable in China).

When put to her, Professor Zhang accepts this criticism, but is quick to point out that the West has its own, different problems when it comes to the media. “We can see that Western media reports on China and developing countries are not very balanced. For both the teacher and the student we need to balance the coverage. I think the developing countries are in one camp, they are not in the camp for Western countries, so we should understand each other, pay attention to each other, produce coverage on each other and keep the information flow very balanced. Although it’s hard to achieve, we have to help each other.”

This is a refrain I hear again and again from Chinese academics and government officials: China and African countries are in the third world together, they are all countries discriminated against by the West; they are brothers or partners or whatever other word describes a friendly, mutually beneficial partnership between two regions of equal stature and development.

Walking around Beijing, it’s hard to buy this narrative. The city is modern, clean and efficient, with world-class public transport. The sheer number of glistening skyscrapers here is overwhelming, more than in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa combined, and they’ve all

got electricity and running water. There is a conspicuous absence of the kind of obvious poverty that blights most African cities. Even the smog points to an industrial capacity that Africa can only dream of. Sure, this is just one city, but China's got plenty of other developed, industrialised metropolises: Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Chongqing, to name but a few. Africa, as continent, has a lot of catching up to do.

"When I came here, actually it's quite different from home," says Saleh. "China has gone very far ahead. My expectation is that the Chinese themselves can feel like maybe they are in heaven." Heaven might be stretching it, but the point remains: China and Africa are, quite conspicuously, not at the same level of development, no matter how often African and Chinese leaders express their fraternal solidarity.

This cognitive dissonance between the image projected by China in Africa and the reality experienced by students can generate feelings of wariness and caution. Gloria Magambo, who is a manager in the performing arts section of the National University of Rwanda (which is state-run, naturally, there is a theme here), found that her perceptions of China changed dramatically when she arrived in Beijing.

"Before I came here, I didn't know much about China and didn't even fear China at all and didn't even care. But now that I know China and actually get to discover who the Chinese are and what they are doing, that is when my fear is rising instead. I have discovered the strength of the Chinese, they are very determined people, and by studying their history I know that whatever the Chinese want they can get it... People with such determination, if their inner motive is colonisation, we're in trouble, we cannot beat them."

The geopolitics of brand-building

To find out more about China's motivations, at least as far as its African scholarship programme is concerned, I went to speak to Professor Liu Haifang at Peking University (it's always Peking University, not Beijing University, a mistake which got me hopelessly lost in the city's northern suburbs).

Peking University is China's oldest, and it shows; while there are plenty of the big utilitarian concrete buildings which dot other campuses, here there are also grand old halls, pretty frozen-over lakes and elegant footbridges which lend it an academic gravitas shared by some of the

world's very best universities, like Oxford or Princeton. It also hosts its fair share of African students, some of whom are taught by Professor Liu, who also happens to be one of the leading Chinese experts on the educational links between China and Africa.

There are a couple of things she is eager to set straight. First of all, she says, it's important to understand that Africans have been coming to study in China for decades, and that there are plenty of African students who are here on their own initiative, without any government support. The figures she quotes take me by surprise: 18,000 self-supporting African students in China compared to the 12,000 on scholarships.

And the more scholarships China gives out to Africans, the more Africans come on their own, thanks to word-of-mouth networks – although, Professor Liu points out, this is a subsidiary benefit of the programme, and not a motivation for it. (I met one of these self-supporting students. He is Kenyan, and was most bemused when he was sent to study in China. His brother had been sent to the US, but, he said, his mother didn't know which way the world was going and wanted to hedge her bets.)

The other issue she wanted to clarify is that the central government is not the only driver of the scholarship programme. Increasingly, local governments and companies are seeing the benefits of expanding their ties with Africa, and sponsoring a few scholarships is seen as a relatively easy way to do this.

But, overwhelmingly, the scholarship programme is still a central government effort, and Professor Liu is crystal clear about what's in it for China: "The benefit is image, image-building among Africans. If there is a better image about the Chinese government and its support of education among youth, then young people can come to work for Chinese companies and spread good messages to their community."

This makes sense. Professor Joseph Nye famously coined the expression 'soft power' to talk about the more intangible influences of culture and media in international relations. It's something the US, with global icons like Hollywood, McDonald's and Michael Jackson has in spades, while many people would struggle to name five famous Chinese people.

As China's military and economic might has increased dramatically over the past two decades, its soft power has not kept pace. By training a new generation of Africa's best students, China hopes to change this and exponentially increase the number of people who feel that they understand China and would orientate themselves

in China's direction, a necessary complement to China's ambitious economic engagement in Africa.

But, being China, it's doing it its own way, and this is something that Professor Liu worries could one day undermine the whole effort. Her concern lies in how scholarship students are chosen; more specifically, that attempts to introduce a unified, merit-based system to award scholarships have foundered. In fact, responsibility for selecting students is often delegated to individual African countries, meaning there can be large disparities in selection criteria, creating a system that is ripe for abuse.

Although she was careful not to say it directly, Professor Liu implied on several occasions that in some countries, the process was not as transparent as it should be, and she was not the only one. One researcher, speaking to the Daily Maverick off the record, said that some Chinese diplomats use the scholarship programme as a carrot with which to reward co-operation from African governments.

"The traditional mindset among some Chinese officials is that they still think the most important thing is to leave enough quota, enough scholarships to give to special persons, the elites. They go to officials' children or special connections." The researcher added that this attitude is not always supported by the central government, who are taking a long-term view of the scholarship programme and what its benefits should be. "If you only give scholarships to so-called special relations, then you cannot keep the benefit at all. He will go, he will leave the relationship, and then you have to give to another person, and another person, and it can actually be a very bad cycle."

A rare publicised example of how this occurs was revealed by Namibian tabloid *Informante* in 2009. "High-ranking government officials are grabbing educational scholarships offered by China for their children and close relatives," wrote the paper in a stunning exposé.

"Investigations show that high-profile figures ranging from former president and founding father, Sam Nujoma; current President Hifikepunye Pohamba; government ministers overseeing procurement of multi-million dollar deals with the Chinese government; senior military and several government officials are snatching the scholarships which are supposed to benefit mainly students from less privileged families for their children and relatives."

Four years later and this scandal continues to dog the Namibian government. The country's main independent newspaper, *The Namibian*, recently published a strongly-worded editorial demanding some kind of inquiry into the abuse of scholarships, and *The Namibian's* editor,

Gwen Lister, told Daily Maverick that she'd seen nothing to persuade her that the situation had changed.

Playing the long game

The big question, really, is will it work? China's scholarship programme to Africa is remarkable in its scale and intent. At its worst, it's a brazen attempt to hijack the loyalty of Africa's ruling classes by going after its youth; at its best, it is a genuine effort to give thousands of Africa's brightest students the extended education they can't afford to get anywhere else, and prepare them for a world in which Africa's orientation will inevitably shift eastward.

Either way, it's a long game. The programme started in earnest in 2009, and most graduates from it are still in their 30s. China's selection criteria (favouring both previous work experience and, at times, political connections) means that, within the next couple of decades, many of these graduates are going to be in positions of power and influence. Their experience in China will leave them well-equipped to deal with Chinese businesses and officials, and perhaps favourably disposed to do so. They will also be in a position to tone down some of the hyperbole that dominates the China-Africa political discourse.

But China shouldn't expect to have it all its own way. "We'll be influenced by our time here, but that does not mean we'll be totally in favour of them," says Saleh, the Tanzanian student. "It's not like a father and child. We are the future leaders of our countries and we'll have to look for the future benefit of our countries. We know what we are doing."