

**CHINA SHOPS AS AN INSTRUMENT
OF DIPLOMACY:
A STUDY OF CHINESE COMMERCIAL
PRESENCE IN NIGERIA.**

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Biodata

Chidi Boland Ikekpezazu holds Master's degrees in both Political Science and Economics. He has over twenty-two years of experience in Nigeria's private sector, where he developed a deep interest in policy, governance and development. A passionate reader and keen observer of global affairs, his growing interest in international relations—particularly China-Africa relations—motivated his return to academia. He is currently pursuing a Doctoral degree in Political Science at Lagos State University, with a research focus on China's impact on Africa's development.

Abstract

The existence of expansive piece of land housing Chinese shops and trade hubs in Lagos, Abuja and Kano has shown that raw military or economic power is not the only measure of a country's strength or the only means of a country exercising

power in the comity of nations. These shops and trade hubs and other ancillary additions like schools, films, are all intangibles and constitute what we call soft power. It is this soft power that is at the heart of people-to-people strategy of the Chinese nation in its African dealings and pursuits. The effect is that goods are imported from China and trade hubs established and those are sold directly to Nigerians at reduced prices thereby ensuring favourable opinion of the Chinese by ordinary Nigerians. The impact of this on the generality of our people is overwhelming. The research, therefore, aims to find out how China market shops – a group of Chinese retails outlets across Nigeria- function as instruments of China's soft diplomacy. Writers have written about infrastructure projects but this is about informal sector and the impact on the economy as Chinese entrepreneurs' interface with the local communities. The research draws on soft power theory, and employs a qualitative case study with emphasis on secondary data.

Keywords: Soft power, China-Nigeria Relations, China Shops, Informal Economy, Public Diplomacy, Commercial Diplomacy.

Introduction

Ever since the emergence of China on the global stage in 1971, it has tried as much as possible to assert itself in the international arena using every possible instrument at its disposal to achieve its national interest. This interest varies from time to

time but the major fulcrum has always been to erase the so-called hundred years of humiliation and assert the preeminence and predominance of the Chinese nation. The easiest way of asserting this preeminence in the comity of nations is through relations with other nations and these relationships can occur through the lens of trade, military, cultural and commercial sectors of the economy. In the area of trade, the economic relations of China with other nations ensures positive relationship and helps to foster economic growth and development which makes it possible for a nation to effectively play its role in the global economy. (Levy, 2013).

In Africa, soft power is a major area where the dominant world powers still compete but China as the leading power in Asia has special interest in order to tap natural resources to feed its industries back home. The large African market, the abundant natural resources in Africa and its expanding middle class all appeal to China and this made China to position itself as the continent's partner through investments in infrastructure, educational exchanges, cultural diplomacy, and trade networks. (King, 2013; Alden and Large, 2011). Despite the government-to-government contacts and relations, China's influence and penetrations reach almost all African societies through the Chinese media, and the rampant increase in Chinese businesses all over African major cities. These practices reflect China's way of projecting soft power and embedded in this

approach is state driven diplomacy and grassroots economic and cultural interactions.

Thus, in Africa, this soft power is felt at local level by the advent of many Chinese market clusters and shops which constitute major pillars of local economies (Gadzala, 2015). These market clusters impact directly on the citizens by offering affordable goods, visible infrastructure and social contacts with Chinese traders.

Economic and infrastructural investments apart, there are other small and not more visible forms of diplomacy manifesting in people to people interactions in the market place and these are observable and are everyday reality; there are also the many other cinema centres where Chinese films and by implications culture are shown daily; there are diverse language study groups domiciled in Confucian institutes in diverse universities in Nigeria and then there are the proliferation of gargantuan Chinese markets all over the Nigeria landscape in major Nigeria cities like Abuja, Kano, Lagos and Ibadan. Since Nigeria is one of China's largest trading partners and these markets are many, its impact on changing and reshaping consumer taste, consumer behaviour and finally consumer culture cannot be over emphasised. This study, therefore, situates China shops as a veritable instrument of soft diplomacy and probably serves as a vehicle of influencing perceptions and fostering cultural exchange. These markets are situated in strategic locations around the major towns of

Nigeria as enumerated before like Ibadan, Enugu, Kano and Lagos and serves as non - kinetic approach to winning the hearts of Nigerians. The result is that there is a favourable perception of the Chinese by ordinary people or citizens of Nigeria and this shows the place of commercial spaces or trade in public diplomacy.

The advent of China retail shops and trade or commercial spaces in massive enclosed compounds in Nigeria selling all types of good from China at a lower price and drawing many Nigerians daily helps to position China in a favourable manner or way in public and even draws sympathy. The products sold at the China shop are usually of comparable quality to the one from the west. The favourable perception of China by the buying public of Chinese goods makes it easier for them to accept anything that comes from China as good, truthful and reliable.

Research Questions

1. What perception do Nigerian consumers and traders have about China market shops?
2. To what extent do China shops engender informal or cultural diplomacy in Nigeria?
3. Can we link local tensions or resistance or challenges to these China shops?
4. What policy or governance gaps exist in controlling this informal diplomatic network or space?

Significance of the Study

The research is significant or contributes to the advancement of knowledge because it shows that China does not only focus on mega projects and state -to -state diplomatic engagements but also on every day spaces that involve people to people interactions. It looks at the daily informal interactions between Nigerians and ordinary Chinese shop owners. It enhances synergistic analysis of Joseph Nye soft power by combining practical with theory by showcasing grassroots economic diplomacy. It also offers perspective on trade, informal and cultural interactions and people to people relations between China and Nigeria. These interactions and their consequences are what is at the foundation of what made it possible for China and Nigeria to sustain their relationship despite all turbulent turns in the relationship. One of these turbulent turns was during the civil war in Nigeria when China supported the Biafra side and this caused a strain in the relationship between both nations. This was later amicably resolved and relations came back to normal. This relationship has been marked by an upward trajectory that some scholars have asked whether this interaction can be linked to a tale of two great powers or, on the other hand, whether it is a tale of Nigeria, one of many small third world powers, serves to sustain the interest and status of China, a great power (Idrees et al, 2024).

Literature Review

Soft power and its foundations

Joseph Nye (2004), an undersecretary of state at USA department of state was the first to conceptualize and bring forth the idea of soft power as a counterbalance to the physical power of the state encapsulated in such known indices like military power, economic power and physical power. It emphasizes the power of a state to achieve stated outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or force. It relies on persuasion, normative values, legitimacy and culture. Consequent upon this postulation, other scholars and eminent academics like Kurlantzick (2007) has expanded the soft power concept to include public diplomacy and informal networks and Melissen (2005) opined that even non state actors and every day interactions should be captured. Another writer Cull (2009) was of the view that commercial culture or public culture that includes music, films, food, and all constitutes symbols of soft powers. The study is of the view that while China market shops serve as an instrument of economic importance at face value, but it also plays the dual role of diplomacy as it helps in changing the perception of Nigerians about China.

In Africa, the concept of soft power has always revolved around big and gargantuan ideas like the massive expansion of Confucian institutes in Nigeria and the recent addition of Chinese language to Nigeria secondary school curriculum and all are

geared to spreading the Chinese language (King, 2013). This also includes media diplomacy (Wasserman, 2016) and the institutionalization of the FOAC summits which helps in strengthening Sino-African relations. Some scholars are of the view that all the Chinese are doing is to offer a competitive and alternative model to Western development strategy (Alden & Large, 2019) and yet others are of the opinion that the effectiveness of soft power rests on the lived experiences and perception of Africans (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

China in Nigeria: Nigeria is the largest market in Africa and a gateway for Chinese merchandise in the continent. The focus has always been on mega and big projects and many have not taken pains to look at other aspects that emphasise intangibles. The big-ticket transactions like the Lagos -Ibadan standard gauge rail also serves as symbol of Chinese influence in Nigeria (Ogunlana, 2020; Olayiwola, 2021). Despite this mega projects China still interface through the shops with average people thereby building healthy image of the Chinese. Many scholars have studied the China shops and markets and believe that they represent more than trading or shopping outlets. Haugen (2019) in his studies showed how Chinese traders are entrepreneurs and informal diplomats and trying to shape perceptions through their daily interactions with native Africans, Nigerians inclusive. Tracking Chinese encounters in retail spaces and its “globalization from below” was done by Giese &

Marfaing (2019). Other scholars like Haugen & Carling (2005) are of the view that Chinese migrants use their shops as both business and cultural bridges to enhance the image of their nation. Wu and Sheel (2018) opined that products from China does not only have or serve utilitarian purposes or value but also embody or convey Chinese aesthetics, values, norms and practices. All these works prove that China employs soft diplomacy in actual practice in the course of its engagement with Africa. This involves spreading familiarity with China -made products, strengthening interpersonal ties and helping to change or dilute our appetite for western goods, thereby altering Nigerian's consumption pattern in favour of China made products.

Finally, all works have always dwelt on infrastructure but this work will dwell on soft diplomacy that takes into consideration the micro-diplomacy of everyday trade and commercial interactions. The study fills the gaps as it shows that China shops serve as grassroots or micro unit diplomatic outposts.

Theoretical Framework

Nye (1990, 2004) advanced the theory of soft power where he said that a country can influence others not only through economic or military coercion but also through soft power. The soft power he proceeded to categorise in terms of culture, political values and foreign policy. Principally, soft power has been explored in the dimension of state-to-state relation

with emphasis on elite diplomatic interactions, educational exchanges, media influence and cultural promotion. Yet, despite this, other scholars like Melissen (2005); Giese & Marfaing, 2019) etc. focused their work on non-state actors and people to people interactions which can also be seen as channels of soft power. The implication is that shops, traders and consumer goods are not only economic tools but diplomatic tools that transmit culture, business ways and patterns and ideas that affect African perception of China.

The shops in Nigeria helps in projecting Chinese power by cultural transmission via clothes, foods, machinery, films, electronics and aesthetics that creates everyday cultural familiarity. This makes it possible to attract Nigerians through the mass appeal of cheap, accessible goods from China.

The market shops also help in value projection and exposition. This can be achieved through business, interpersonal relations and negotiation styles. The Chinese convey attitudes of diligence, frugality, seriousness and workaholism. The corollary is that people to people interactions and encounters between Nigerian consumers and Chinese traders and all other people that come in contact with them are in one way or the other affected by this behaviour.

The ultimate effect of soft power is that the daily interactions between Nigerians and Chinese directly or indirectly rob off on the foreign policy of both

nations and reinforce perception or destroy stereotypes. It helps in constructing, reconstructing or deconstructing images, build trust, remove suspicion, deepen respect and expose dependency. Soft power theory helps to link empirical and practical cases like shops to issues of theoretical paradigm like cultures, values and policies. The shop serves as a rallying point for the community where it is sited and conveys a positive and favourable image of China to the people. The result is that people's lives are touched more by the ubiquitous shops dotted along the landscape of the country than by anything else.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research design and this involves:

1. Document Analysis: Reviewing existing academic works, government reports and media coverage on China - Nigeria relations and soft power.
2. Field observations: Conducting observations in, major Chinese market clusters like in Lagos in order to examine and understand market dynamics, interactions and movements.
3. Semi-structured interviews: Engaging traders, consumers and policy makers to explore perceptions and realities.

Findings, Discussions and Implications

This study looks at Chinese soft diplomacy through soft power theory which emphasizes attraction rather coercion as the basis of international influence and engagement. The findings reveal that the soft power exercised in Nigeria by China extends beyond official state policies, infrastructural projects, and Confucian institutes to the lowest unit of a society that rest on the micro-level spaces of everyday trade where ordinary Nigerians and ordinary Chinese interact. The first key finding establishes that China market shops are not merely commercial venues but grassroot sites of China- Nigeria engagement. These trading spaces facilitate direct source of interaction between Chinese entrepreneur and Nigerian consumers functioning as informal platforms for cross - cultural understanding and image building and refinement. It dovetails to what was called globalization from below to depict African-China market interactions and this is seen from the prism of economic and social exchange. The result is that soft diplomacy operates very well when it rhymes with daily human contact and not through elite or official channels. Also, it was discovered in the course of the research that Chinese goods and products are attractive because of affordability and accessibility. The corollary is that they became an integral part of life of low - income Nigerians. This represents economic attraction and shows that power extends beyond culture and ideology to

include material attraction that makes life worth living. This makes it possible to see China as a development partner in their lives. Sometimes concerns over quality of products and goods create ambivalence in the perception of China in the eyes of Nigerians and the consequence is that credibility issues may arise. What we are saying is that sustained soft power requires quality assurance and ethical business practices to stop or prevent gradual erosion of self-confidence.

It was also noted and found by the study that Chinese traders carry themselves as unappointed ambassadors of their country; embodying the ethos, norms and behaviours of real or official diplomats of their country. Daily interactions - ranging from haggling to customer service - become clever and subtle channels of diplomacy. When handled very well, they serve as avenue of mutual and beneficial understanding between Chinese entrepreneurs and Nigerian consumers. These contacts also showcase industriousness and discipline of the Chinese traders and their entrepreneurs. The end result is that diplomatic channels see and view the traders as strategic partners in image and brand management, providing them with cultural orientation, language training, and ethical templates that support positive representation. This positive representation translates to a deeper form of economic interdependence as China's trade presence lowers consumer costs and enhances market efficiency. On the other hand, it also entrenches dependency by

marginalizing local manufacturers and limiting and degrading local industrial growth and expansion. That is to say it empowers the Chinese and makes them to look attractive and indispensable as a trade and business partner and at same time ensures neo-dependency and economic vulnerability on the part of Nigerians. The other insight gained from the study is that the expansion of “China town” shops and markets in Nigeria ensures that it serves as an instrument for the advancement of the country’s foreign policy especially under the BRI policy. The traders may be rural -based yet their activities enhance their country’s presence in Nigeria urban economy without formal diplomatic intervention. This shows that Nigeria’s boundaries in commercial and diplomatic terms are now blurred as private traders and entrepreneurs from China are now playing unofficial role in shaping bilateral relations.

The study also found out that Nigerian’s perceptions of China and its people is from the everyday interactions and experiences in markets and shops than from official or cultural mediums. This shows that public diplomacy may advance but is not the only source of perception of Nigerians on China. Nigerians develop views, perceptions and ideas either positive or negative about China based on trader behaviour, quality of goods and personal daily encounters. China therefore, must continue to engage the public comprising the ordinary consumers and people ensuring that people to

people interactions align with broader image or brand exposures.

The study shows that China market shops as instruments of diplomacy are situational: the location, community and the experience of the traders and entrepreneurs about their environment. China's soft diplomacy must be localized and adaptive to the local community. This ensures that cultural sensitivities are observed.

Implications

The study shows that everyday interactions between the nationals of both nations are also a good pathway to diplomacy and influence. It proves that and sees soft power as a multi-level phenomenal theory that operates at state, corporate and grassroots level. It shows that Chinese diplomacy deserves strategic recognition and engagement. The training, regulation and cultural mediation for Chinese traders and entrepreneurs enhance the credibility of China's image abroad. On the part of Nigeria policy makers, balanced engagement will leverage on the benefits of Chinese trade while ensuring that local enterprises and industries are protected and ensuring that good product quality monitoring leads to mutual benefits. This study fills an academic gap by shifting attention from top level diplomacy to every day spaces of life.

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