Media Portrayal of China: A Comparison of British and Nigerian Public Discourse on China's Increasing Financial Involvement in Africa

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Introduction

In recent decades China has been recognised for its economic growth domestically, as well as internationally. Its current, and largest, international project is called the Belt and Road Initiative which involves 64% of the world population and 30% of global GDP (Huang, 2016, p.314). The choice to focus on China's involvement in Africa was made as the continent was previously dominated by, and maintains close ties with Western countries, whilst also being a primary recipient of Chinese finance. This makes it a prime region to study when seeking to understand changing global power dynamics.

In particular, this project chose to compare public discourse from Nigeria, a direct recipient of Chinese finance, with the UK, a previous colonial power and continued rival for global influence. By including two such different perspectives, the project aimed to provide an alternative to previous studies which have focused mainly on Western viewpoints of China. Additionally, this supports postcolonial theory's plea to reform the discipline of International Relations, which it claims is currently too 'Eurocentric', and therefore inadequate for explaining global issues (Hobson, 2012).

Moreover, this study could be beneficial for providers of foreign aid, as understanding recipients' reception of Chinese aid, which has taken a rather different approach to Western donors, could raise awareness of the popularity of certain projects, and assist in shaping future aid programmes. However, it is necessary to mention that the findings derived from Nigerian public discourse on China, cannot be generalised to a broader 'African perspective', but rather interpreted as a valuable insight into one such perspective. This demonstrates the value and necessity of further empirical case studies. Overall this study aimed to address a gap in previous research, and subsequently provide a more comprehensive understanding of how China's growing influence is being received internationally.

Methodology

The Media:

In order to conduct a comparison between the public discourses present within Nigeria and the UK, the media was chosen as the most appropriate data source. This is because as Van Dijk (1992) emphasises, the media often creates the first narrative regarding an event; demonstrating its primary role in shaping public discourse. Additionally, it has been found to be particularly influential in shaping public perceptions of foreign nations (Wanta, Golan and Lee, 2004), which confirmed its appropriateness for examining public discourse on China.

Sample Collection:

The search engines Google News and Lexisnexis were employed for collection of appropriate media articles. Utilising two search engines increased the validity of the final articles, as the most appropriate sources were identified from both, rather than just one. The search engines were used initially to identify what news sources were reporting most frequently on the topic: 'China in Africa'. In the UK there was a rather narrow selection of news sources which reported on the issue, whereas most Nigerian news sources mentioned it to some extent. Therefore, background reading was conducted to understand the role that each newspaper played within society. Subsequently, three sources from each country were chosen, with the intention of including a wide range of perspectives, to best capture 'public discourse'.

Data Analysis:

Considering this project was aiming to interpret media frames and their portrayal of China, content analysis was selected as it is a well-known method for identifying themes of communication (Drisko and Maschi, 2016). The technique of "emergent coding" was utilised, which meant that common themes were identified after examination of the data, rather than having predetermined categories (Stemler, 2001, p.4).

Key Findings:

Themes from Nigerian media:
1. Nigeria's relationship with China is built on equal terms and cooperation, and is mutually beneficial.
2. Nigeria has control over its choices and is aware of some of the negatives associated with Chinese involvement.
3. Western criticism is hypocritical and just propaganda.
4. Nigeria associates China with opportunity and actively wants to attract Chinese investment.

Themes from British media:
1. African countries are helpless victims.
2. The West only wants what is best for African countries, and is trying to warn them of the threat of China.
3. China is taking over the world order.

It is clear that the themes identified within Nigerian and British media are rather contrasting. Firstly, Nigerian public discourse surrounding China in Africa is significantly more positive than the British

public discourse. In particular, the recurring themes suggest that Nigeria's relationship with China is one characterised by mutual respect and equality. Whereas, the British media refer to Africa's relationship with China in a concerned and condescending manner.

Previous scholars had suggested that British pessimism could be attributed to the fact that the West is beginning to feel threatened by China's growing influence. This study finds that the West may have a legitimate reason to feel threatened by China, as Nigerian positivity could suggest that global power dynamics are changing in favour of China over the West.

However, determining whether Western concern for African countries is sincere remains very difficult. If Western concern for African countries was legitimate, then it could be expected that they would turn their attention elsewhere when discovering that African countries, such as Nigeria, are mostly satisfied. However, considering African viewpoints are under-represented within international media (Rohn, 2010), as well as academia (Mkandawire, 1997) it is possible that Western countries could claim ignorance to their satisfaction. Therefore, greater awareness of how recipients feel about Chinese involvement will assist not only in informing people, but also in determining the sincerity of Western concern.

Recommendations:

❏ Considering the discrepancy between British and Nigerian public discourse surrounding this topic, future researchers should also aim to include varying viewpoints in order to avoid partial findings.

❏ This study has made a small contribution towards the postcolonial plea to provide all perspectives with equal weighting (Agathangelou and Ling, 2004). However, this is something which needs to be strived for internationally, as the world is only going to become a more equal and informed place, if the mutual benefits of shared knowledge are appreciated.

❏ Foreign aid providers may wish to consider the perspectives of recipients, as in this study it became clear that the UK was reporting on the impact of Chinese financial involvement very differently to how recipients were reporting on it. More specifically, they may like to consider the reasons why Nigerian public discourse was generally positive about Chinese financial involvement, and utilise this to inform future foreign aid projects.

❏ Individuals who have a desire for understanding the world should be aware that many different perspectives exist on different topics, and to be able to make informed opinions, it is necessary to look beyond the dominant discourse.

Conclusion

To conclude, it has been demonstrated that this study's inclusion of two very different perspectives, led to a more balanced overview of Chinese involvement in Africa than if it had solely relied on dominant discourses. In particular, it became clear that Nigerian public discourse was generally positive surrounding China, whereas British discourse remained rather pessimistic about its growing involvement on the continent. Overall, this study supports postcolonial theory's key argument, that there are benefits to be reaped from shared perspectives and experiences, and by suppressing viewpoints the international community is preventing optimal understanding.