



China’s Belt and Road Initiative: A Soft Power Influence in Africa		Vol. 3, No. 1, 2025 (Pp. 79-88) https://journal.upy.ac.id/index.php/qrobss https://doi.org/10.31316/crobss.v3i1.8860 E ISSN: 3031 4968
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Received: October 2025 Revised: October 2025 Accepted: October 2025 Online: November 2025	ABSTRACT	<p>China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a strategic tool of soft power, shaping diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations between China and Africa. This paper examines how the BRI enhances China’s influence on the continent through infrastructure investments, trade partnerships, and governance cooperation. It explores the economic benefits of the initiative, including job creation, enhanced connectivity, and industrial development, while also addressing concerns regarding debt sustainability, environmental impact, and political dependence. Furthermore, the research assesses African perceptions of the BRI, analyzing both its long-term benefits and potential risks. Additionally, it highlights the role of cultural and educational exchanges in strengthening China’s soft power presence in Africa. The findings reveal that while the BRI significantly contributes to Africa’s development, it also raises challenges related to governance, economic dependence, and transparency. The study concludes that for the BRI to be mutually beneficial, both China and African nations must adopt sustainable financing mechanisms, prioritize local economic participation, and foster deeper cultural engagements. These measures will ensure that the initiative supports Africa’s long-term growth while advancing China’s soft power objectives.</p>
Keywords: <i>Belt and Road Initiative, Soft Power, China-Africa Relations, Debt Diplomacy, Neo-colonialism</i>		

1. Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a strategic tool of soft power, particularly in Africa, where it has significantly influenced economic, infrastructural, and diplomatic relations. Since its inception in 2013, the BRI has been instrumental in expanding China's influence by constructing roads, railways, ports, and energy projects, thereby fostering economic development and strengthening bilateral ties. Soft power, as conceptualized by Nye (2004), refers to a nation's ability to shape others' preferences through attraction rather than coercion. In this context, China has leveraged the BRI to present itself as a development partner, offering alternatives to Western-led financial institutions and development models (Brautigam, 2020). The BRI has had a transformative impact across various regions, with Asia among its primary beneficiaries. For instance, in Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has led to the development of Gwadar Port and extensive road networks, enhancing connectivity and trade between the two nations (Ali, 2019). Similarly, in Southeast Asia, the Laos-China Railway has facilitated economic growth by linking Laos more closely with China’s economic system (Huang, 2016). These projects not only bolster China’s economic interests but also reinforce its soft power by portraying China as a reliable development partner.

Africa, however, stands as one of the most significant beneficiaries of China’s BRI and its use as a tool of soft power. Infrastructure projects across the continent have been pivotal in addressing Africa’s longstanding infrastructural deficits. The BRI in Africa has facilitated the

construction of over 12,000 kilometres of roads and railway tracks, approximately 20 ports, and more than 80 power facilities (Alden & Large, 2019). These projects are not only closing Africa's infrastructure gap but also increasing China's influence by positioning it as a key development partner. However, China's BRI in Africa has not been without controversy. Critics argue that the initiative has led to debt dependency, with some African countries accumulating significant liabilities to Chinese lenders (Brautigam, 2020). Despite these concerns, many African governments view the BRI as an opportunity to bridge their infrastructure gaps, accelerate economic growth, and diversify their global partnerships. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been defined by various scholars and institutions, each highlighting different aspects of its economic, geopolitical, and infrastructural significance. Grand economic diplomacy strategy aimed at strengthening China's influence by fostering transcontinental trade networks (Huang, 2016). Finally, the BRI represents China's ambition to establish itself as a global leader in international development, using investment and diplomacy as tools of engagement (Alden & Large, 2019).

1.1. China's Soft Power Strategy in Global Politics

China's soft power strategy in global politics has evolved as a fundamental aspect of its foreign policy, aimed at enhancing its global influence through cultural appeal, economic partnerships, and diplomatic engagements rather than coercion or military force (Shambaugh, 2015). Nye (2004), who coined the term "soft power," emphasizes that a nation's ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce is crucial in contemporary global politics. A key component of China's soft power strategy is its investment in global infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has enhanced its diplomatic ties across Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Callahan, 2016). Additionally, its establishment of Confucius Institutes worldwide serves as an instrument of cultural diplomacy, promoting Chinese language, history, and values to foster positive perceptions of China (Hartig, 2019).

China also utilizes its media networks, such as CGTN and Xinhua, to shape global narratives and counter Western media dominance (Repnikova, 2017). Through film, literature, and academic collaborations, Beijing seeks to craft a favorable image that aligns with its political and economic ambitions (Barr, 2022). Furthermore, China's humanitarian assistance and medical diplomacy, especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, reinforced its soft power by portraying itself as a responsible global actor (Huang, 2016). Despite these efforts, China's soft power strategy faces challenges, particularly concerns over debt diplomacy and political influence in recipient nations (Brady, 2015). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a global development strategy launched by China in 2013 with the primary objective of enhancing international connectivity through infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and economic cooperation (Huang, 2016). The initiative also seeks to strengthen cultural and diplomatic ties through people-to-people exchanges, educational collaborations, and tourism (Du & Zhang, 2018). However, the scope of the BRI extends beyond economics. It also has significant geopolitical implications, as China expands its influence in strategic regions such as South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (Rolland, 2017).

1.2. China-Africa Relations Before the BRI

China-Africa relations date back centuries, with early trade exchanges occurring through maritime routes and diplomatic engagements. However, modern China-Africa relations were solidified in the mid-20th century, particularly after China's founding in 1949 and Africa's wave of independence in the 1950s and 1960s. China positioned itself as a strong supporter of African nations' struggles against colonialism and imperialism, offering diplomatic, economic, and military assistance. The Bandung Conference of 1955 marked a significant moment in these relations, as China and newly independent African states emphasized principles of non-alignment and mutual cooperation (Adisu et al., 2010). Throughout the Cold War, China sought to counter Western and Soviet influence in Africa by providing aid, infrastructure projects, and military support, notably by assisting liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe (Brautigam, 2009).

China's engagement with Africa before the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was characterized by large-scale projects, including railway construction, power plants, and telecommunications networks. The Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA), built in the 1970s, exemplifies China's early infrastructure investments in Africa (Monson, 2009). Unlike Western donors, China provided financial support without political conditions, thereby appealing to African governments seeking alternatives to structural adjustment programs imposed by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Mlambo et al., 2016). However, concerns over debt sustainability, environmental impact, and labor practices were raised even before the BRI was launched. Some critics argued that China's engagements replicated extractive economic patterns observed in colonial times, whereas others highlighted the benefits of China's pragmatic, development-oriented approach (Oqubay & Lin, 2019).

1.3. Cultural Diplomacy and Educational Exchange Programs

Cultural diplomacy and educational exchange programs have become crucial instruments in international relations, fostering mutual understanding, soft power projection, and long-term diplomatic ties between nations. Cultural diplomacy involves promoting a country's values, traditions, and way of life to influence global perceptions and enhance cooperation. Educational exchange programs, on the other hand, facilitate academic mobility, skill development, and intellectual collaboration, strengthening bilateral and multilateral relationships (Nye, 2004). These initiatives play a significant role in shaping global politics, particularly among emerging powers such as China, the United States, and the European Union.

China has extensively employed cultural diplomacy and educational exchanges to strengthen its global influence, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Through the Confucius Institutes, China promotes its language, culture, and history in over 160 countries. These institutes, modeled after the British Council and Goethe-Institut, aim to improve China's image and deepen cultural engagement with foreign populations (Gill & Huang, 2006). Similarly, the Chinese government has increased scholarships for international students, particularly from Africa, through initiatives such as the China-Africa Friendship Scholarship Program. This has led to a significant increase in the number of African students studying at

Chinese universities, fostering a new generation of leaders with strong ties to China (King, 2013).

The United States has also leveraged cultural diplomacy through programs like the Fulbright Scholarship, the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), and the Peace Corps. These programs aim to enhance educational cooperation, leadership training, and people-to-people exchanges. The Fulbright Program, for example, provides scholarships for international students and scholars to study and conduct research in the U.S., promoting academic excellence and cross-cultural understanding (Schneider, 2009). Similarly, the European Union has its Erasmus+ program, which fosters student exchanges and research collaboration across member and partner countries (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Additionally, African governments have partnered with foreign institutions to expand academic exchange programs. For example, the African Union's Agenda 2063 prioritizes educational collaboration with global partners to enhance the continent's human capital development (Mkandawire, 2015).

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Some critics argue that cultural diplomacy and educational exchange programs can be used as instruments of ideological influence or political propaganda. China's Confucius Institutes, for example, have faced criticism in some Western countries for allegedly promoting state-controlled narratives (Brady, 2015). Nevertheless, cultural diplomacy and educational exchanges remain practical tools for fostering international cooperation, economic partnerships, and peacebuilding. As globalization deepens, these initiatives will play an even greater role in shaping cross-cultural interactions, economic collaboration, and diplomatic ties among nations.

1.4. Media, Technology, and China's Soft Power Influence in Africa

A key aspect of China's media influence strategy is its training programs for African journalists. Several programs, such as those hosted by the China-Africa Press Center, bring African journalists to China for months-long fellowships where they learn about Chinese governance models, media ethics, and development policies (Gagliardone, 2019). Additionally, Chinese media outlets have partnered with African newspapers, radio stations, and online platforms to distribute Chinese-produced content. For instance, Xinhua News Agency has signed content-sharing agreements with numerous African media outlets, enabling Chinese narratives to be republished in local newspapers and on websites. However, scholars such as Nyabola (2023) caution that this arrangement risks reducing the diversity of viewpoints in African journalism and amplifying a pro-China stance that may not always reflect the interests of African societies.

1.5. China's Political Influence and Governance Partnerships in Africa

One of the main avenues through which China exerts political influence in Africa is through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Established in 2000, FOCAC serves as the primary platform for China-Africa engagement, bringing together African leaders and Chinese officials to discuss economic cooperation, governance partnerships, and development strategies (Alden & Large, 2023). Unlike Western-led summits that often include political conditions, FOCAC emphasizes China's commitment to supporting Africa's development without interfering in domestic affairs. China's political influence is further

reinforced through its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and development aid programs. Unlike Western development assistance, which often comes with governance and transparency conditions, Chinese aid is largely unconditional. This has made China an attractive partner for African leaders who prefer development assistance without external political interference (Brautigam, 2023).

1.6. Challenges and Criticisms of China's Soft Power in Africa

Countries such as Zambia and Kenya have struggled with mounting debt burdens, raising fears of economic overreliance on China (Brautigam, 2023). Beyond debt concerns, Chinese investment projects have been criticized for their impact on African labor markets and working conditions. This has led to tensions between African communities and Chinese business owners, particularly in sectors like mining and construction, where workplace safety issues have also been raised. Such concerns challenge China's narrative of being a benevolent development partner and highlight the limitations of its soft power approach.

Soft power is one of the most influential concepts in international relations, offering an alternative to traditional notions of power based on military and economic coercion. Soft power operates through cultural appeal, political values, and diplomacy, making it a crucial tool in global affairs. Power in international relations is not solely determined by military strength or economic dominance, but also by a state's ability to attract and persuade others. He emphasizes that in an interconnected world, nations that can shape global narratives, influence cultural trends, and project an appealing image will have greater success in achieving their foreign policy objectives. Soft power is built on three main pillars: culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2004).

The second pillar of soft power is political values, which relate to the attractiveness of a nation's governance model and institutions. Countries with strong democratic traditions, human rights protections, and transparent governance structures tend to have a higher degree of soft power because they inspire admiration and trust (Nye, 2011). However, if a country's actions contradict its stated values—such as the U.S. promoting democracy while engaging in controversial military interventions—its soft power can weaken. The third pillar is foreign policy, particularly a country's ability to engage with others cooperatively and responsibly. Diplomacy, development aid, and participation in international organizations contribute to soft power by fostering goodwill and trust.

2. Method

This research employs a historical research design, which involves the systematic gathering and examination of records and events to uncover trends, causes, and implications of historical developments. The approach is suitable for this study, as it aims to trace the origin, implementation, and impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Africa, serving as a means of projecting soft power. Through the analysis of historical records, official documents, treaties, policy papers, and scholarly works, the study reconstructs the progression of China–Africa relations under the BRI framework. The study applies content analysis as its primary method of data analysis. This technique allows for a systematic interpretation of textual materials to detect recurring patterns, themes, and insights that reflect China's use of the BRI

as a tool of soft power. The historical approach is particularly appropriate as it facilitates an understanding of both past and ongoing developments in China–Africa relations, revealing how the BRI has evolved into a strategic mechanism of influence. Content analysis complements this design by providing an organized method for examining historical and contemporary sources, thereby ensuring that findings are based on credible and verifiable evidence.

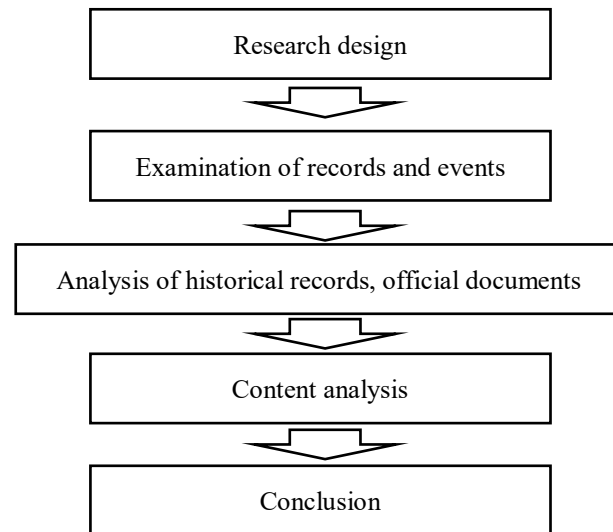


Figure 1. Research Method

3. Results & Discussion

3.1. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a Tool of Soft Power to Strengthen Diplomatic and Political Influence in Africa

China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a key instrument of its soft power strategy, enabling Beijing to strengthen its diplomatic and political influence in Africa through economic investments, infrastructure development, and strategic partnerships. The BRI allows China to present itself as a development partner rather than a hegemonic power, contrasting Western-led development models that often come with political conditionalities (Callahan, 2023). By financing large-scale infrastructure projects, such as railways, highways, ports, and energy projects, China gains political goodwill and deepens its diplomatic ties with African nations. One way the BRI enhances China's diplomatic influence is through elite engagement and high-level summits.

Additionally, China’s non-interference policy appeals to African leaders who prefer economic assistance without political interference, thereby strengthening China’s long-term influence in regional governance structures. However, some scholars argue that China’s soft power under the BRI is mixed with strategic political influence, particularly in securing access to natural resources and geopolitical leverage (Shambaugh, 2023). Despite this, the BRI remains a powerful diplomatic tool that enhances China’s influence across Africa, fostering deeper economic and political ties.

3.2. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Economic Development in Africa

China's BRI has significantly contributed to economic development in Africa by addressing critical infrastructure deficits, enhancing trade connectivity, and stimulating industrialization. Projects such as the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway have improved logistics and reduced transportation costs, thereby enhancing trade efficiency. The BRI has also enhanced Africa's energy infrastructure, promoting electrification and industrial development. China has financed and constructed hydropower plants, solar energy projects, and thermal power stations in countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Zambia (Brautigam, 2023). These projects help address Africa's chronic energy shortages, supporting local industries and improving the business environment. Another crucial aspect of BRI's economic impact is job creation and technology transfer. Chinese-funded projects have provided employment opportunities for thousands of Africans, particularly in the construction and manufacturing sectors. Additionally, Chinese firms have contributed to skills development through vocational training programs, although concerns remain about the limited participation of Africans in high-skilled jobs. However, the economic benefits of the BRI are often debated due to concerns over debt sustainability.

3.3. African Perceptions of China's BRI: Long-Term Benefits and Potential Risks

Another contentious issue is environmental and social impacts. Large-scale infrastructure projects have been criticized for displacing local communities, degrading ecosystems, and violating labor rights. For example, in Kenya, conservationists have opposed the construction of a Chinese-backed railway that would pass through Nairobi National Park, citing risks to wildlife. Despite these concerns, many African leaders remain optimistic about the long-term economic benefits of the BRI, especially in fostering industrialization and trade expansion. Countries with strong economic planning and governance frameworks are better positioned to leverage the BRI for sustainable growth, whereas others risk long-term economic dependence (Shi & Li, 2023).

3.4. China's Cultural and Educational Exchanges under the BRI and Their Impact on Soft Power in Africa

China's cultural and educational initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) play a crucial role in enhancing its soft power presence in Africa. Through language programs, scholarships, media partnerships, and people-to-people exchanges, China seeks to promote its culture and strengthen long-term relationships with African nations (Gagliardone, 2023). These media platforms portray China as a reliable development partner, reinforcing Beijing's strategic messaging. China also promotes cultural diplomacy through collaborations in sports, the arts, and technology. Moreover, Chinese companies, including Huawei and Alibaba, invest in digital infrastructure, expanding China's technological footprint while integrating African economies into Chinese-led digital networks (Huang, 2016). However, challenges remain in China's efforts to influence culture. Many Africans still perceive China as an economic partner rather than a cultural force, with language barriers and ideological differences limiting deeper engagement (Gagliardone, 2023). Some critics also argue that China's cultural diplomacy lacks reciprocity, as there is limited African cultural representation in China. Despite these hurdles,

China's cultural and educational exchanges under the BRI remain a significant component of its soft-power strategy in Africa.

3.5. Major Findings

The study revealed that the BRI projects have significantly contributed to infrastructure development and economic integration across Africa. Flagship projects such as the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti corridor, and Nigeria's Lagos-Ibadan Railway have enhanced regional connectivity and stimulated local economies. Additionally, Chinese-funded energy projects, ports, and industrial zones are helping to close critical infrastructure gaps often cited as barriers to Africa's development. These initiatives position China as a partner in Africa's industrial transformation. However, concerns persist about financial sustainability. Countries like Zambia and Kenya have experienced rising debt exposure tied to BRI loans, prompting fears of "debt-trap diplomacy (Azam, 2024).

The study found that perceptions of the BRI vary across African stakeholders. At the governmental level, China is generally viewed as a reliable, fast-moving, and non-intrusive partner. Among the public, however, sentiments are more complex. While infrastructure improvements and scholarships are appreciated, surveys indicate growing concern about labor practices, environmental degradation, and opaque contract terms. Protests in Kenya and Ghana against Chinese mining and construction practices illustrate grassroots resistance. Thus, while China has made significant inroads in state-level diplomacy, its soft-power narrative faces limitations in public opinion, particularly when BRI projects are perceived as extractive, exploitative, or exclusionary (Oberhauser, 2024).

4. Conclusion, Limitation, and Suggestion

This study has demonstrated that China's Belt and Road Initiative functions as a multidimensional soft-power strategy in Africa, leveraging infrastructure, culture, media, and diplomacy to cultivate influence and reshape perceptions. Through visible investments and relational diplomacy, China has positioned itself as an attractive alternative to Western development models. However, the findings also reveal that this soft power is not uniformly adequate, nor uncontested. While African governments often welcome BRI engagement for its pragmatism and scale, public sentiment is more fragmented. Concerns over debt dependency, environmental impact, labor practices, and surveillance technology complicate China's image as a benevolent actor. Moreover, the projection of soft power through state-driven media and cultural diplomacy faces credibility challenges in pluralistic and digitally connected societies.

Crucially, Africa is not a passive recipient in this dynamic. Local agency, regulatory frameworks, and political contestation shape the reception and outcomes of Chinese influence. The future of China's soft power in Africa will depend not only on Beijing's strategic calculus but on the ability of African states and societies to negotiate equitable, transparent, and locally relevant partnerships. In a world increasingly defined by contested narratives and multipolar influence, the BRI's soft-power footprint in Africa offers a lens into the evolving architecture of the global order, one in which infrastructure and ideology are inseparably linked.

This research is constrained by its dependence on secondary data, which might not adequately reflect the most recent dynamics in China-Africa relations. It relies mainly on

published and official documents, thereby omitting informal or unpublished viewpoints. Potential biases in government and institutional reports may influence the interpretation of findings. Additionally, the study's focus on specific African regions limits the generalizability of its conclusions across the continent. Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendation was made: that China and African nations prioritize transparency in BRI agreements to ensure fair contract terms, prevent unsustainable debt accumulation, and promote accountability. Independent monitoring mechanisms should be established to evaluate project financing and implementation.

BRI projects should create more opportunities for local businesses and workers by increasing technology transfer, skill development, and employment generation. African governments should negotiate for stronger local content policies to ensure long-term economic benefits. To address concerns over governance and environmental impact, China should collaborate with African institutions to improve regulatory frameworks. BRI projects should align with global sustainability standards to mitigate environmental degradation and social displacement. China should expand scholarship programs, language training, and cultural diplomacy initiatives to foster mutual understanding between Chinese and African societies. These exchanges will help strengthen China's soft power by building long-term people-to-people relationships rather than focusing solely on economic and political ties.

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