

# ***A constructed (un)reality on China's re-entry into Africa: the Chinese online community perception of Africa (2006–2008)\****

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## ABSTRACT

China's 21st-century re-entry into Africa has been made with considerable new fanfare and in a manner that contrasts sharply with the Maoist ideologist policy of the 1960s. However, how the Chinese perceive Africa, as expressed by the online community, has been little studied. In a country where full democracy and complete freedom of expression are still lacking, online communication arguably plays a particularly significant role. When it comes to topics in China which are not frequently addressed in the public domain, the flow of information among the online community is paramount in shaping public perceptions. The result of systematic qualitative research on the online community in China, this paper aims to bridge the gap between formal studies of Sino-African relations and online perceptions. Reconstructing the online image of Africa is essential in understanding not only contemporary Sino-African relations from the popular perspective but also the distorted nature of information that circulates in Chinese cyberspace.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the internet, as we now know it, officially started in 1994, its use in China has developed at an exponential rate. At the end of 2007, there were approximately 210 million online citizens in China, only slightly fewer than in the United States (CNNIC 2008). In China, where full democracy and complete freedom of expression are lacking, online communication

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arguably plays a more significant role than it would do in countries like the United States. When it comes to topics that are not frequently addressed in the authoritarian public domain of China, the flow of information within the online community, even though it is frequently biased and surreal, is paramount in shaping perceptions among the ever-growing number of internet users.

To Beijing's way of thinking, China has never left Africa. However, the general perception is that after the end of the Cultural Revolution in China and with the reversal of a Chinese foreign policy that had heavily patronised African countries under the slogan Third World Unity during the Maoist era, Sino-African relations were given little attention in the 1980s and 1990s. Following China's much-heralded 21st-century re-engagement and re-entry into Africa, for reasons greatly different from those of the 1960s, the Chinese perception of Africa, as expressed by the online community, exemplifies this lack of relationship continuity. In the academic domain of African studies, the opinions of Chinese internet users have been little investigated; in the domain of internet politics, the reconstructed image of Africa by Chinese internet users and its inherent misperceptions have also been neglected.

This paper is the result of systematic qualitative research on the online community in China, and aims to bridge the gap between formal studies of Sino-African relations and their perception online by reconstructing the online image of Africa as created by Chinese internet users. Such a reconstruction is instrumental in understanding not only contemporary Sino-African relations from the popular perspective, but also the distorted nature of information circulating in Chinese cyberspace. The paper is in three sections. The first reviews relevant literature on past and contemporary Sino-African relations, details the studied images of Africa in China, and examines the involvement of the online Chinese community in Chinese diplomacy. The second analyses the different aspects of Africa as modern Chinese internet users imagine them to be, represented by how they stereotype the Africans as inferior Chinese partners, disciples of the Chinese, low priority financial recipients, and automatic supporters of China who are generally 'poor', 'lazy', 'sexist' and 'threatening'. The final section examines the implications for Sino-African relations and the online Chinese community.

*Primary sources to be studied*

The timeframe of the article covers the period from November 2006, when the third Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China–Africa

Cooperation (FOCAC) was held in Beijing and when the first heads of state summit was also held, until August 2008, when African leaders met Chinese President Hu Jintao after the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, and before the Obama fad gained momentum in China in October 2008. Within this period, the paper identifies below the internet discussion forums in China that were used to gather empirical data.<sup>1</sup> Online discussions over the almost two-year period on the chosen topic, which amounted to approximately 1,000 directly relevant threads, have been carefully studied.

If the topic of study were a geographical area more familiar to Chinese online users, like the USA or Japan, locating the right online forums as primary sources would be relatively easy. However, when the topic is Sino-African relations, relevant discussion appears in different forums only in a far more scattered and spontaneous manner. From such constraints, the forums that we have chosen primarily include:

- The *Qianguo Luntan* (*Strong Nation Forum, SNF*), arguably the most famous meeting point of Chinese nationalists since the Kosovo War in 1999 [<http://bbs1.people.com.cn/boardList.do?action=postList&boardId=1>];
- The *Feizhou Buluo Wang* (*African Blog, AB*), a single-focused forum on issues relating to Africa [<http://www.africaren.com>];
- The *Tianya Xiequ* (*Tianya Community, TYC*), one of the most visited mainland Chinese websites by Chinese in Hong Kong and overseas [<http://www.tianya.cn>];
- The *Wangyi Luntan 163* (*Easyweb Forum 163*), a combo website featuring all sorts of information for general readers [<http://bbs.163.com>];
- The *Maimop Da Zhihui* (*Collection of Cats' Wrestling, DZH*), a leisure-oriented social issue forum targeted at teenagers [<http://dzh.mop.com>];
- The *Liuliu Wang* (*Go Go Web, GGW*), a forum on international travel [<http://www.guolv66.com>];
- The *Tiexue Shequ* (*Community of Iron and Blood, CIB*), a forum focusing on military affairs [<http://bbs.tiexue.net>];
- The popular worldwide web 2.0 audio-visual interactive website YouTube has also been consulted in the hope of understanding how the Chinese select visual presentations on Africa online (although actual materials on the topic on YouTube are severely limited) [<http://www.youtube.com>].

The above websites do not cover all online Chinese discussion on the perceptions of Africa. Yet, collectively, given their popularity among

Chinese, they nonetheless form a comprehensive macro picture. For instance, *SNF* and *TYC* are the two major websites that are visited daily by many young Chinese internet users. With registered members numbering more than 570,000 (as of November 2007 for *SNF*) and 20,000,000 (as of 30 June 2007 for *TYC*), and a daily hit rate of 1,500,000, a small thread on Africa on these forums may create a great perceptive impact (*Qiangguo Xiequ* 2007; *TYC* 2008a, 2008b). During our research, we found that the perceived image of Africa in the more specifically Africa-focused websites like *AB* was very similar to that expressed in the generic websites.

Before looking at these sources, we must first acknowledge the methodological limitations of the paper. The internet aims at promoting a free flow of information across geographical boundaries and beyond known identities. Yet we can only assume those using simplified Chinese characters (coded in ‘GB2312’) in the above forums to be Chinese cybermen, although in reality internet users of other nationalities may also post messages there. Moreover, threads in the forums – *TYC* in particular – sometimes contain fictionalised messages in a half-novelised manner when they touch on Africa, making the credibility of the content difficult to verify.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, these messages are still valuable in understanding the perception of the Chinese of Africa, even though some of the stories are likely to have been fabricated.

SINO-AFRICAN RELATIONS AND THE ONLINE CHINESE  
COMMUNITY: LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE ‘MISSING LINK’

*The online Chinese community and Chinese foreign policy*

Many researchers have studied the online Chinese community and its relationship with domestic politics and democratisation. Most take the line of Geoffrey Taubman (1998), who predicts that the internet will challenge the ideational and organisational control of China’s party-state. Sometimes, this challenge can be indirect and subtle, as dissidents may use the strategy of *dachabianqiu* (kicking the ball from the side) to criticise the party-state by using remote topics (Chase & Mulvenon 2002). Characterising the internet as serving Habermas’ conception of a ‘public sphere’, Yang Guobin (2003: 461) argues that the relatively free chat rooms, listservs, newsgroups, electronic magazines and bulletin boards are already forming such an arena in China. Most analyses of the online community in China focus on its impact on information flow and the growth of Chinese civil society, or even the popularisation of dissenting ideas, such as Falun Gong (Qiu 2003; Zhao 2003).

Online discussion of Chinese foreign policy is believed to have had an impact on the topics of discussion in the following ways. First, as Peter Gries (2005) and Liu Shih-Diing (2006) respectively argue, when a series of anti-Japanese demonstrations broke out in China in April 2005, online mobilisation was the major catalyst. They claim that this online mode of mobilisation bypasses the censorship of the party-state in China, and represents a bottom-up approach of popular nationalism (*renmin minzuzhuyi*) (Chan 2005). Second, online discussions may have specifically influenced the policy-making elites in China, who may adopt ideas first aired by internet users to formulate Chinese foreign policy. For example, Chinese scholar Zhou Me (2007) argues that the sudden cancellation of her scheduled meeting with the Japanese prime minister Koizumi, as well as the schedules of other high-level meetings, can be viewed as being influenced by Chinese online protests about China's foreign policy. Third, some radical users may hack into what they see as anti-Chinese websites, involving 'collectivist tendencies and links to state and corporate establishments', and pose a potential danger for Chinese foreign relations (Qiu 2003: 16). However, how such discussions of foreign affairs reinforce the stereotypical image China has of the outside world remains an issue to be studied (Warschauer 2000). For seemingly remote regions such as Africa, studies on how online discussions among Chinese users influence their perceptions of the African continent are at best given scant attention and at worst almost non-existent.

*A new phase in Sino-African relations for the twenty-first century: re-entry or re-charge? Academic explanations in the non-online community*

Contemporary Sino-African relations date back to 1955, when Premier Zhou Enlai of the People's Republic of China attended the Bandung Conference, followed by the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between China and Egypt in 1956. When the PRC was admitted into the United Nations in 1971 at the expense of the Republic of China (Taiwan), African votes were crucial. During the Cultural Revolution, China's support of her African comrades against imperialism (best symbolised by the huge investment in, but poor outcome of, the Tanzam Railway [*Tazara*]) was a cornerstone of Chinese diplomacy (Gao 1984: 248–9; Jackson 1995). Sino-African relations started to wane after 1976, as most of the political and economic investments made by China in Africa proved to be of doubtful value. Fighting for formal diplomatic recognition from the Africans for the purpose of competing with Taipei's diplomacy also became increasingly unnecessary. However, after China's economic

reform produced its early successes in the late 1990s, rapprochement between China and Africa was achieved. May 1996 can be identified as the milestone marking China's re-entry into Africa, when President Jiang Zemin visited Africa and presented a Five-Point Proposal for Sino-African relations, namely 'reliable friendship, sovereign equality, non-intervention, mutually beneficial development and international cooperation' (Alden 2005: 147). This position, as Alden argues, is a significant move away from Mao's legacy, replacing the ideological motor with the concept of mutual benefit (*ibid.*: 147–8). What, however, are the reasons that lie behind Beijing's new African campaign? Although the explanations offered are interrelated, rather than coming from totally opposed schools of thought, the existence of non-monolithic views and interest groups on Africa within and beyond the Chinese borders has meant that different scholars have given different emphases.

Of all the explanations, two prime rationales repeatedly appear: those of energy and market. Scholars who support the resource maximisation assumption, such as Erica Downs (2004, 2007) and Ian Taylor (2006a, 2006b), argue to different degrees that the campaign primarily results from considerations for the supply of natural resources. As one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and the world's second-largest consumer of oil, China is attracted to Africa's abundant resources to help solve its own economic problems; it has been a net importer of petroleum in general since 1993. According to a projection by the International Energy Agency (2007), China's net oil imports will jump to 13.1 million barrels a day by 2030. Chinese oil-imports from African countries have increased from one fourth of the total in 2004 to one third in 2006. Recognising the urgency of these issues, China's Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (MOFTEC) has twice explicitly encouraged Chinese investors to go to Africa, in 2003 and 2005, in the hope of securing a long-term supply of resources (PRC ECCO 2003; PRC MOFTEC 2005). In November 2003, Chinese president Hu Jintao declared that oil and finance constituted the two major components of China's national economic security (Shi 2004). China used to rely heavily on the Middle East for oil, which provided 40–50 % of China's total oil imports, but over 75 % of this went through the Malacca Strait, a sea route which is vulnerable to hostile action by external powers and terrorist attacks (Lanteigne 2007). As David H. Shinn (2007) argues, the contribution from the African continent to China will continue to increase, as 'China is reluctant to become excessively tied to the Middle East as a source of oil. China also lacks refinery capacity for the heavier crude that comes from the Middle East.' Yet, we should acknowledge the fact that, as noted officially, the concurrent flames

of a 'China threat' and a conspiracy of 'plundering' African natural resources have been discussed by many Africans, especially of the younger generation.<sup>3</sup> Anti-Chinese feeling has already led to protests and scattered violence in Africa, for example in the Zambian copper belt and Lesotho. Partly as a result, kidnapping of Chinese is more frequently reported in recent years.

While acknowledging the role of energy, other scholars such as Andrea Goldstein *et al.* (2006) and Domingos Jardo Muekalia (2004) give equal weight to the lure of the potential markets and investment opportunities in Africa to explain contemporary Chinese interest in the continent. According to Goldstein *et al.* and Muekalia, Sino-African trade could make a significant impact on the Chinese domestic economy. For instance, low-cost Chinese merchandise could be sold through the growing network of trading posts across urban and rural Africa. Through direct investment in Africa-based firms, the Chinese could take advantage of the mutual agreements between Africa and the USA (like the United States' African Growth and Opportunity Act, AGOA) and between Africa and the European Union (like the Cotonou Agreement), in order to export textile and agro-industrial products to other parts of the world via Africa (Muekalia 2004). They argue that this is why both the Beijing government and Chinese companies of different sizes have an interest in developing Sino-African relations, even though the general public may not share the same vision.

At the same time, forging strategic partnerships with the Africans is seen by many Chinese scholars, such as Luo Jianbo (2006) and Zhang Yongping (2005; see also Xu 2007), as Beijing's means of launching, or responding to, a diplomatic battle with other status quo powers, especially the USA. Besides the competition in economic and geopolitical terms, the African votes in multilateral forums represent scarce goods that Beijing is keen to obtain. Indeed, China and most African states share similar viewpoints on issues like human rights, democracy and sovereignty. Gaining African support on such issues might effectively put China into a leadership role of the Third World.

On the less tangible but equally important identity-building front, we should not neglect the fact that symbolic diplomacy and developmental assistance are still part of the key issues behind China's interests in Africa. Scholars such as Barry Sautman and Yan Hairong (2007) point out that the contemporary Chinese position originates from its identity as a developing, socialist and former semi-colonial country. Compared with other foreign interests in Africa, China is, quite often, believed to be thought of by the Africans as the 'lesser evil', allowing Chinese leaders

to claim the Africans as ‘all-weather friends’ (Liu 2005). The direct funding from Beijing to African civil services or the Chinese debt-waiving agreements with the Africans all serve such public relations purposes. These measures are meant to project a special message for the Africans. Unlike the assistance given from Washington, that from Beijing does not come with attached reforms aimed at changing tradition in Africa, and thus should be seen by Africans as a more welcome alternative. Whether this suggestion is overwhelmingly accepted by contemporary Africans or not, which is not very likely, it is indeed the rationale behind Beijing’s recent ‘peaceful development’ (*heping fazhan*) diplomatic slogan – the latter replaced the more zero-sum implied ‘peaceful rise’ (*heping jueqi*). The slogan was coined in the hope of claiming more credits for China as a responsible state in the global arena, without violating its principle of non-interference in the domestic politics of other sovereign states.

Probably all these rationales were in some way behind Beijing’s calculation to re-enter Africa in the late 1990s. The Chinese government has not denied any of these reasons for its African interest. As Andreas Lorenz (2005) reminds us, PRC leaders always work as traditional rationalists, pursuing only eternal interests but not eternal friends. But subtle questions remain. How do ordinary Chinese, as represented by the online community, view China’s re-entry into Africa? Do their perceptions fit any of these academic assumptions, or do they come up with other justifications? Might their perceived images of Africa affect Sino-African relations? These are the questions to be addressed by this article.

### *Constructivism and internet response*

Viewed as an ‘off the map’ continent by most Chinese, Africa has undeniably failed to draw particularly fervent attention from internet users. Most Chinese know little about African history and politics besides what is portrayed in popular culture. High-level political exchanges between China and Africa, such as the ministerial conference of the FOCAC, have gained little attention online. Even the recent kidnapping, and deaths, of Chinese workers in Ethiopia and Nigeria aroused relatively little controversy online, especially when compared with the heated internet response to every tiny move of the Japanese rightists. Nonetheless, online discussions on the topic may be found with prudent research. What then are the key differences between the internet opinions on China’s re-entry into Africa, and the academic explanations cited above? Putting aside the energy, market, partnership or friendship issues, when commenting on



China's re-entry into Africa, it was largely the constructivist line that caught the nationalist fancy of Chinese internet users.

Briefly, constructivism emphasises the role of constructed images and self-image imposed on other nations, rather than absolute interests. According to leading constructivist Alexander Wendt (1992), 'anarchy is what states make of it', because 'there is no "logic" of anarchy apart from the practices that create and instantiate one structure of identities and interests rather than another; structure has no existence or causal powers apart from process'. Realist interpretations of national interest-maximisation in the international order did exist to a certain extent, but, as explained by constructivist Douglas Porpora (1993), they were only useful in explaining international relations when they were 'embedded' into the 'social knowledge' of a country. Politicians, as well as fellow internet users, could well apply constructivism to explain the mechanism of international relations as a strategy: a strategy designed to construct an image of reality. When a nation wishes to advance its national interests by constructing a desired national image to be taken up by the international system, it may intentionally use constructivist techniques – such as reconstructing reality – to create a more appealing national image, which however often deviates from the public perception found in the same nation. When China constructs itself to become a responsible state that is allegedly peacefully rising or peacefully developing, whether the Chinese in reality present such an image is quite another issue. The online Chinese perception on Africa and the Africans can be regarded as a typical example of this deviation.

#### THE DOMINANCE OF CONSTRUCTIVIST ARGUMENTS: ANALYSING ONLINE RESPONSES TO SINO-AFRICAN RELATIONS

Based on the history of Africans living in China, as well as the Chinese experience in Africa, the traditional Chinese stereotyping and discrimination of Africans in general is best studied from the works of scholars like Philip Snow, Frank Dikötter, Emmanuel Hevy, Barry Sautman and Adams Bodomo. In his classic book *The Star Raft*, ideas in which are echoed by some of the aforementioned scholars, Snow (1988) gives readers a three-staged historic development of the image of Africa in China up to the end of the Cold War. Since Snow's depiction is repeatedly referenced in our online study's constructed image of Africans, his work deserves to be discussed first and foremost here.

According to Snow, in the first stage of Sino-African relations in pre-colonial times, the dark-skinned Africans were known to the Chinese

by the name of *Kunlun* (*ibid.*: 18–19; Dikötter 1992: 16). By the ninth century, the word *Kunlunmu* (*kunlun* = slave) was attached to the Africans who were brought by the Arabs to China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). These *Kunlunmus* were fictionalised in different short Chinese stories as talented and skilful, loyal to their masters and having mysterious magical power (Snow 1988: 17). However, this image was marred by the prevalence of the slave trade in the Song Dynasty (960–1279). Although to the Chinese, Africans were still categorised as strong and stalwart retainers, they failed to become as heroic and magical as before. Instead, they gained reputations for being ill-adapted to their Chinese surroundings: they ate raw food, had unintelligible speech and desires, and could only understand, but not speak, Chinese, even after being ‘domesticated’ for a long time. After that, the *Kunlunmus* were no longer considered as humans, but were instead referred to as *sheng fan* (savages) or *guinu* (devil slaves) (*ibid.*: 19). That the Africans were also called *yeren* (wild men) or *heigui* (negroes), suggests that the perception of ‘Blacks are equal to slaves’ was well established in the old Chinese mentality (Dikötter 1992: 9; 15–17). The Chinese once simply characterised Africa as a land of *hundun* (chaos), i.e. at a very primitive stage of civilisation (*ibid.*: 50).

In the second stage of Sino-African relations, both parties came under the influence of Western colonialism. Chinese people began migrating to Africa to seek a better living, and in the mid eighteenth century a small Chinatown emerged in Mauritius. At that time, the Europeans found Chinese labourers to be more capable than the Africans, while the Africans were known as being relatively purer morally and less wicked (Snow 1988: 46). Even so, a sense of brotherhood gradually developed between Chinese and Africans as they sought mutual support from each other, especially in the international arena, to fight against colonialism (*ibid.*: 66).

This sense of brotherhood apparently came to the fore after the rise of Communist China in the third stage of Sino-African relations. Snow (1988: 71) argues that the Chinese after 1949, driven by a sense of mission, saw themselves as obliged to give lessons to the Africans, believing that the African colonies or newly independent nations were simply re-enacting the brutal feudal past of China. For instance, as Dikötter (1992: 194) recalls, the Chinese once posited themselves in a play performed in Rwanda as the saviour of an African throne from European invasion. Coupled with the internationalist doctrine proposed by Chairman Mao, the Chinese once again saw themselves as superior to their ‘African buddies’. The old image of the Africans was thus reinstated.

*'Poor', 'lazy', 'sexist', 'threatening': stereotyping Africans as inferior Chinese partners*

These Chinese images of Africa portrayed by Snow and Dikötter can repeatedly be found in our research. To start with, there may be on the internet one or two random postings portraying the romanticised image of Africa: the 'sincere faces and soft music', the romance of Casablanca, the spectacular Victoria Falls and the like (Message ID 7835502, 2007; Message ID 142695, 2008). However, the almost-overriding perception of Africans that we gathered online from China is that they are generally economically and spiritually poor. Even the sympathetic users stereotype Africans as their 'poor buddies' (*qiongxiongdi*), a term coined in the Maoist era. While poverty in Africa is not without factual support, the general online Chinese view that the Africans are 'lazy' is more problematically grounded (Message ID 166266, 2007; Message ID 2627, 2007; Message ID 85548424, 2008). For example, when commenting on the purpose of the African summits in which China has participated, most Chinese internet users reiterate that Africans are 'lazy and inefficient at their workplaces', and draw a sharp contrast with the industry of Chinese workers (Message ID 534, 2006). This is also the general impression given by Chinese who claim to have actually visited Africa (Message ID 708, 2007). Understandably, many Chinese internet users see illegal African immigrants present in China as 'paralysing' Chinese society by unfairly tapping into the resources of the socialist welfare system (Message ID 58305, 2006). Even the few comments in defence of the Africans are often social Darwinist-based; they claim that the laziness of Africans can be explained away as 'owing to the hot weather in Africa' (Message ID 200781164714, 2007). As a follow-on to this logic, those Africans who choose to remain in China illegally are assumed to be doing so because they wish to stay in such a 'paradise' forever (Message ID 84, 2007). The dissentients of poorly educated Africans can always be recognised by the terms they attribute to them, which is the main focus of Dikötter's study already discussed.

These described perceptions of Africa are also found in some circulating Chinese publications. However, the extremely politically incorrect sexual references to Africans are more predominantly an online Chinese product, even though the origins of these seem to lie in the old *Kunmunlu* metaphor discussed by Snow. Some Chinese internet users believe that the physical strength of Africans is an indicator of their having sexual organs of 'abnormal size' (Message ID 82043, 2008). This is despite the fact that Africans' mystical strength, as viewed in the Tang Dynasty, is not necessarily commented on negatively online. During the Beijing Olympics

in August 2008, for example, many online messages expressed amazement at the African athletes, saying things with racial overtones like ‘it seems that the darkest among the Negroes are the most powerful ones’ (Message ID 148612, 2008). But the level of sexual misperception becomes much more racist once the topic is raised online. In a message warning fellow Chinese women to ‘beware of the Africans’, various internet users said:

The Negroes love to go clubbing. But their desire is not limited to dancing or drinking. Those Negroes will first try to flirt with our Chinese girls, by all possible means to flirt with us. If there had been only Negroes inside the clubs or discos, raping would have happened already (Message ID 58305, 2006). To my fellow female citizens: for the sake of your personal safety and health, for the sake of not giving birth to a black baby who will be discriminated against, for the sake of your happy marriage, please don’t hang out with a Negro! (Message ID 84, 2007)

In a further posting commenting on illegal African immigrants in China, another user warns fellow Chinese girls that the main purpose of the Africans in China is to look for sexual partners:

Perhaps because their society is relatively open, they love to have sex; and they cannot stand having no sex for more than a week. They will try to flirt with those young ladies, but seldom succeed. Even if they have a stable partner, they will still look for hookers. If they are out of money and girls, they will go for raping! (Message ID 84, 2007)

Thus, the allegedly unreasonably active sexual behaviour of the Africans, as some Chinese internet users perceive it, presents a threat to morality and health within Chinese society. For instance, there is a story circulating online that ‘10 out of 40 Africans who go for medical checks in China are found to have sexually transmitted diseases’; reports that Chinese university students have been infected with HIV by fellow African schoolmates are frequently found (Message ID 58305, 2006; Message ID 86455443, 2008). Such alarming statements prompted even the sympathetic Chinese, like the following Guangzhou user, to be alert:

We should help and develop our friendship with the African buddies. However, this does not mean that we should allow the Negro population to grow so rapidly and unreasonably in Guangzhou. AIDS won’t be spread unless there is emancipation (Message ID 86616883, 2008).

Worse still, this stereotype is extended to those Chinese who have established close relationships with Africans. Chinese girls who have fallen in love with Africans are often described as ‘horny’, ‘female liberals’ (*nu xiaoyou*) or ‘too open’. Sentiments expressed in the following posting are typical:

I ran into a girl who was wearing the black uniform of the Inland Revenue Bureau. I found her respectful when I first saw her. But I was shocked when

I noticed the person beside her – a Negro! Yes, a Negro who was dressed like a gangster. Oh my God! The lady in uniform, do you want our Chinese to lose face just because you were hanging out with this freak? (Message 58305, 2006)

Given the above stereotyping of Africans, which clearly reflects attitudes similar to those studied by Snow in the first stage of Sino-African relations, what contribution do Chinese internet users see Africans making to China? When commenting on the kidnapping of Chinese in the Niger Delta in 2007, a user offered an innovative option for the Africans; this was to fight for China on inhospitable terrain, like the Indonesian jungle (Message ID 2\_2104481, 2007). Another user suggested the Africans would only be useful to China if they could help kill ‘US spies’ in Nigeria, so as to defend Chinese interests in the area (Message ID 85595517, 2008). Compared with the superior civic virtue and cultural attributes of the Chinese, the strength and force of the Africans seem to be their only valuable assets in the eyes of online Chinese (Message ID 2627, 2007). In other words, even though the Chinese users do not see Africans in a very positive manner, they still rather wishfully keep certain stereotypical positions for Africans to fill in the international arena – presumably for China’s benefit. Interestingly, it seems to Chinese internet users that Africans have little choice but to cooperate with the Chinese as an inferior, junior partner in the world. This perceived relationship between Chinese and Africans is nothing odd to Chinese internet users. It can, to a certain extent in their view, be readily compared with the relationship between the dominating ethnic Han Chinese people (who are perceived as more ‘civilised’) and the ethnic minorities (who are perceived as ‘barbaric’) that existed in the dynastic feudal China of the past. As a result of contemporary pride experienced in China, brought on by recent economic success, this centric-peripheral worldview, with its roots in China’s ancient ‘Middle Kingdom’ complex, can still be applied to the present day (Christensen 1999; Nathan & Ross 1997).

*Doomed disciples with the same history: the fatalist Africans should learn from the Chinese experience*

Why are these African stereotypes being reinforced within the online Chinese community? One rationale of the users seems to be to employ the African image to highlight China’s recent contrasting success. Indeed, most online messages describe China as an ancient nation sharing a similar history with Africa. To them, contemporary Africa is just like the China of old. Equating Africa today with China’s dynastic past or the chaos of its Cultural Revolution, the modern-day Chinese can easily enjoy

a sense of superiority. This sense of superiority is comparable to the core missionary feature described by Snow in his third stage of Sino-African relations. For instance, a user commenting on the ‘clash of civilisations’ in Africa says:

Some Africans do not allow photo-taking because of the backwardness of their villages. This is exactly how we behaved during the Cultural Revolution ... Behind their pride and arrogance is the deep sense of inferiority in their soul – which is similar to our own contemporary history (Message ID 167971, 2007).

As another example, a sense of timelessness is often projected for Africa:

I saw many villagers. Most of them were sitting under a tree and chatting with each other. It made me feel like coming back to the 1970s in the Chowyue Village (where I had my earliest memory) ... but this is Nigeria in 2006 (Message ID 166266, 2007).

Sometimes, such historic analogies restrain users from making critical comments about Africans (*ibid.*). But they are not in the mainstream. Even though Africa is seen as sharing a similarly traumatic history with China, most Chinese internet users do not believe that Africa can eventually catch up and emulate the current Chinese miracle. Such a belief is firmly entrenched in the online Chinese stereotype of the African, as discussed in the last section. The ‘internal problems of the Africans and the African culture’ are frequently cited by the Chinese users to account for the ‘impossibility’ of Africa catching up with China (Message ID 2627, 2007). The following message from someone who allegedly had working experience in Africa is frank about the sense of doubt in the ability of the Africans:

At the time of my arrival in Africa, I truly respected the Africans and showed sympathy towards them, thinking that they were really as friendly as described by the official Chinese discourse. But after I had arrived, I realised I was wrong. The Africans are selfish, witty, dishonest, free-riding ... they always gave me the impression of being lazy and inefficient. Their society was corrupt and hopeless. I confess that before the opening up of China, we may also have given similarly hopeless impressions to Westerners. But now even the foreigners know that one day Chinese economic performance will surpass the Americans (*ibid.*).

Another internet user who allegedly observed the Chinese training of African military in Nanjing believes the same. To this user, the Africans are all but inferior:

Every procedure is clear and fast in China. The African fellows feel scared and nervous, thus they wholeheartedly give applause to the Chinese trainers. During training, the Chinese military demonstrated to the Africans their advanced mine-sweeping machines and vehicles, which had been developed in China, shocking fellow Africans over the advancement of Chinese technology (Message ID 7918396, 2007).

The sense of disapproval also has roots in what some Chinese users generically term 'the African socio-political system'. Although the Chinese socio-political system does not have full democracy either, to many internet users, China's authoritarian model seems to be able to offer a perfect substitute for the chaos in Africa:

To conclude, development in Africa is trapped in a vicious cycle: development – democracy (or dictatorship) – wars and chaos – development – wars and chaos – democracy (or dictatorship). It is just like the history of dynastic change in China when peace and chaos alternated. So how can Africa really advance in economic and social conditions? (Message ID 2627, 2007)

*Cutting costs – low priority should be given when money is involved: online calculation about realist-driven Sino-African relations*

Given the above impression of the inferiority of Africa and the stereotypically assumed impossibility that Africans could catch up with the Chinese, either economically or politically, many Chinese internet users express cynicism and scepticism about developing a closer relationship with African nations, particularly when money is involved. To the users of *SMF* in particular, the implied benefits the Africans brought in the past, especially during the peak of Sino-African friendship during the Maoist era, have already been dismissed (Message ID 85014172, 2008). They see the 'real intention' behind African nations' befriending of China as being almost totally interest-driven, rather than looking upon the Chinese as their 'real friends' (Message ID 85217128, 2008).

Since the intentions and the sincerity of the Africans are predominantly interpreted in a realist manner by the online Chinese community, whether Chinese investment in Africa can bring reciprocal realist returns for China is of prime concern for the internet users. Most of them do not think that China's re-entry into Africa is of benefit to their nation, at least not in monetary terms. Some argue that Africa is the only continent available for the Chinese to explore 'simply because the Westerners have no interest in it at all' (Message ID 85611130, 2008). Quoting the famous realist doctrine of 'no eternal friends but only eternal interests', some users propose 'constructing our eternal interests with the US instead of making friends with several poor African buddies', since 'both of them are bad guys anyway' (Message ID 534, 2006).

The aid that China gave Africa in the Maoist era remains for many a sore issue. Consequently, discussing China's current aid programme, many have expressed doubts as to whether the 'huge Chinese aid' given to Africa would be redeemed this time also; they think that China's African

campaign is far from being cost-effective (Message ID 2308022, 2007; Message ID 85498640, 2008). After the Sichuan earthquakes in May 2008, some internet users bluntly asked: 'Which is more important, the huge developmental aid for Africa or the provision of free elementary education for our kids?' (Message ID 2308022, 2007; see also Message ID 86205651, 2008; Message ID 86244154, 2008). In such a context, because of the lack of comprehensive socio-economic ties between China and Africa at the popular level in society, assisting Africans out of diplomatic and selfish needs, or assisting Sichuan's inhabitants for humanitarian and livelihood needs, is framed under a dialectical dichotomy, selecting a dichotomised answer from the two options poses no difficulties for almost all online Chinese users. In comparison, when natural disasters, such as earthquakes, occur in Taiwan, the same dichotomy is less easily imposed because the humanitarian needs of the Taiwanese are directly tied to their family or business affiliates in mainland China.

Although some of these comments acknowledge the abundant supply of natural resources in Africa, even the most positive comments on China's economic expenditure in Africa only see Africa as a 'gold-mining route' for ad hoc individual Chinese pioneers or desperados (Message ID 809662, 2006; Message ID 85548424, 2008). The potential realist benefits for China in gaining access to a cheaper energy supply from the continent as a whole, and the strategic importance of Africa to Chinese diplomacy, are not fully attended to by the Chinese users (Message ID 85428195, 2008). Most online messages simply equate the current African campaign of China with that of the Maoist era, the uneconomical returns from which still haunt collective Chinese memory. The gains China stands to make in the campaign, as studied by Peter van Ness (1993), are unknown to the users.

*Africa 'cannot be abandoned': constructing China's national pride and benevolent identity via Africa*

Paradoxically, despite these sentiments, the Chinese do not wish their country to abandon Africa either. If somehow the Chinese are seen as 'losing face' in Africa, the internet users will respond rigorously and complain that Beijing has not done enough. Any negative behaviour, or simply negative comments, coming from Africa about China are taken seriously by the Chinese internet users:

Originally I believed the Africans had a good impression of the Chinese. Owing to the aid we've offered and our economic development, the Chinese should have their respect. However, my African friend showed nothing towards us but



disdain. 'The Chinese people disappointed me', she said seriously. I was silent and my heart was broken (Message ID 85594156, 2008).

Despite this confession, quite often Chinese users simply deny that Africans might have any bad impressions about the Chinese. For example, when discussing why there had been kidnappings of Chinese in Ethiopia and Nigeria in recent years, some postings expressed the belief that the sole reason for this was that the Chinese workers had been mistaken for Japanese (Message ID 85420541, 2008). A more popular belief is that the Western conspiracy of portraying China as an aggressive country in Africa led directly to the kidnappings (Message ID 2\_2104481, 2007). The reasons elaborated upon in Western media to account for these abductions, such as being a backlash to the flood of cheap Chinese products into Africa, are largely ignored by the online Chinese community.

When unfriendly African gestures are levelled at the Chinese, the internet community will mount a certain degree of pressure on the government. For instance, when a Chinese freighter – trying to deliver supplies to the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe – was prevented from coming into port in South Africa and subsequently expelled by the South Africans (under American pressure) in April 2008, many users were furious. They assumed South Africa to be like any other African nation and used to being befriended by Beijing. Few of them seemed to know that South Africa was highly critical of Beijing and maintained formal diplomatic relations with Taipei until 1997. They exclaimed that 'even the Africans do not allow our ships to anchor, and bully us', calling this 'shameful', finding it surprising that 'even our African friends are not welcoming us now' (Message ID 85496103, 2008; Message ID 85496042, 2008). To most of them, it simply meant that 'our African policy is not working well', and they asked government officials to 'make a deep reflection' and to go to Africa to sort it out. They also expected 'official protests' but none was forthcoming (Message ID 85496042, 2008; see also Message ID 85498640, 2008). This example shows that emotionally the Chinese cannot afford to be brushed off by the Africans, whom they perceive as being inferior to themselves in many ways. Without this junior partner and admirer of China reflecting China's relative success, the Chinese users find it hard to flaunt their sense of superiority.

This is why, even though many Chinese internet users have asked the government to reduce the scale of their engagement with the Africans, the Chinese commitment in Africa still gives them a sense of national pride. Although they do not like the Chinese government investing so heavily in Africa, they still hope Beijing will continue some 'benevolent policies' in

Africa in order to help Chinese nationalists sustain their self-esteem (Message ID 156285, 2007; Message ID 85548424, 2008; Message ID 86932074, 2008). Indeed, the Chinese users often compare the Chinese aid offered to Africa with that offered by the USA, the European Union or Japan, claiming that the intention of these countries is 'never sincere' (Message ID 86541820, 2008). They believe that the unconditional aid offered by the Chinese 'is not another form of colonialism' but grants the Africans 'a sense of confidence that cannot be gained from the Europeans' (Message ID 1469849, 2007; Message ID 86541820, 2008). To them, the contribution of China in the development of Africa is more beneficial to the Africans than that offered by the Europeans (Message ID 86906864, 2008). Even the USA should 'take the Chinese train' if they want to enter the African market (Message ID 86682113, 2008). This image of China, which is built upon but goes beyond Snow's categorisation, fits quite well with the recent official rhetoric to construct China as a 'responsible state' in the global arena.<sup>4</sup> In short, most Chinese internet users agree with the strategy of constructing national pride by using relations with Africa to project a benevolent image to the world. The issue is simply how to do it in a more economical manner.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE VIRTUAL CHINESE PERCEPTION ON THE AFRICAN REALITY

Granted, the online expression in China about Africa does not represent the perception of the whole nation. One cannot expect internet users to offer theoretical analyses as scholars do, or to spell out politically correct statements as the government does. At times, what is expressed online is totally different from what the same person may express in real life. However, the Chinese image of Africa expressed online undoubtedly represents a significant portion of overall Chinese popular perceptions about Africans. An analysis of the major characteristics of the perception and how these may in turn influence actual Sino-African relations follows.

To start with, Africans have become convenient straw men through whom Chinese internet users can project their wished-for Chinese identities. As Gerald Delanty and Chris Rumford (2005: 51) have studied, collective identity always concerns 'a relation of self and other by which the identity of the self is constituted in symbolic markers'. By labelling the Africans as Edward Said's (1979) orientalist concept of 'the other', Chinese internet users could reconstruct their own 'selves'. The identification of the African 'other' is indeed a discursive practice, and a mental construction and reconstruction of the definition of the Chinese in the online

community. To be more specific, as Tzvetan Todorov (1982) suggests, the construction of 'the other' can be systematically studied in three dimensions: the axiological level, the epistemological level and the praxeological level. At the epistemological level, the Africans are constructed as past friends of China, rather than present friends, as the Chinese internet users always stress how different they themselves are from contemporary Africans. At the axiological level, the Chinese internet users doubt the purpose of Sino-African relations. At the praxeological level, they express clearly that the emergence of an unfriendly African attitude towards China, or the catching up of the inferior Africans with the superior Chinese, are both unacceptable to such constructed 'selves'. Once Africa fulfils the imagination of the Chinese internet users, many side-products will have been created as a result of the construction of the 'self' against the 'other'. Several of the new generation of Chinese internet users adopt an online alter ego, to use as a platform for carrying out their public discursive rights. In turn, what they express online may be taken into consideration by the party-state when formulating future Chinese foreign policy.

The lack of attention to China's realist advancement in Africa is the most striking feature of Chinese online expression, as has been noted by Western scholars, for whom China is often depicted as the nation that has gained most in Africa in the recent decade (Alden 2005; Large 2008; Taylor 2006a).<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon suggests that the looked-for, unselfish, benevolent image of China in Africa is needed not only to convince the Africans, but also to try to pacify domestic audiences in China in order to grant them psychological comfort. The presence of China in other countries certainly would not receive the same online interpretation. If the above image is deeply entrenched in the Chinese mentality, few internal sanctions would be imposed on any future realist advancement made by Beijing towards Africa. This would lift a great weight from policy makers in Beijing, should they wish in the future to further develop oil diplomacy with strategic (and often controversial) African nations, like the Sudan.

In addition, our study suggests that the definition of a 'responsible state' is very differently interpreted by Chinese internet users and Western academia. To Western scholars like Rosemary Foot (2001), encouraging China to become a responsible state naturally implies the embrace by China of a set of universal values like human rights, democracy and concerted security. In contrast, while most Chinese internet users firmly believe that China has fulfilled its responsibility to Africa in a benevolent and non-colonialist manner, that impression is based primarily on China's materialistic assistance offered to the Africans. Adhering to a set of

universal values and pushing them in Africa is simply seen as irresponsible by the online Chinese. This suggests that China's policy in African regions like Darfur receives much backing from its online subjects, as these people expect Beijing to play a neutral role without obvious value judgement being applied to the Africans. In short, the 'responsibility' the West expects China to fulfil in Africa is ironically seen as 'irresponsibility' by the online Chinese community.

Finally, although Chinese aid and investment in Africa are not popularly supported by the Chinese internet users, a nationalist sense of glory guarantees the continued future involvement of China in Africa. If China becomes more affluent and maintains a strong position during the current global financial crisis, the Chinese users may well be more relaxed about investing in Africa, even though this may imply a financial loss. The existence of the online community may well push Chinese foreign policy towards Africa in an increasingly constructivist-driven manner, with the coining of more high-sounding slogans to satisfy the nationalist expectation of the masses. Instead of satisfying the nationalist ego, as the Maoists did by offering excessive economic assistance without considering national capability, contemporary China will focus more on constructing a righteous global image and a more cautious deployment of investment on the African continent.

However, if China experiences an obvious economic downturn, it is almost certain, as online responses have indicated, that expenditure in Africa would top the list of costs that Chinese would like seen cut. Coupled with the fact that the Beijing government has been cagey about its own initiative in scrambling for resources in Africa, the intrinsic value of China's presence in Africa is likely to be understood by the ordinary Chinese in a deflated manner. If one day views on Africa become too divergent among the party-state's diplomatic, military and economic sectors, as well as within public and private companies and the general public at large, the government would find itself subjected to increasing pressure to at least be more transparent about its realist intention in Africa. Failure to do this would result in the online civil society being unwilling to endorse such a campaign.

This said, we have to acknowledge the fact that the current political structure in China makes online discussion one of the few platforms where ordinary citizens can comment on current affairs. As Christopher Hughes (2005: 247) puts it, such discourse helps the Chinese internet users 'locate themselves in relation to the official discourse on nationalism by appropriating its themes in order to promote and legitimate a wide range of other discourses with which it can be bound up'. In other words, as their

largely muted voices on the subject of Sino-African relations in daily life reveal, Chinese internet users (at least as our case study has shown to date) have expressed little intention of pressuring the party-state to act on their opinions. Even if they had such an intention, without an established civil society and institutionalised democracy, their opinions are unlikely to directly influence the real practice of Chinese foreign policy, other than through the ways mentioned above. The impact of the online Chinese perception of Africa should not, therefore, be exaggerated. Nor, however, can it be casually dismissed or underestimated. It currently performs an irreplaceable role in subtly helping create a national perception of Sino-African relations in contemporary China, which forms part of the overall construction of the state identity of the People's Republic in the twenty-first century. It is essential for Africans to comprehend the overall importance of image-building in China's African policy, and that in this Chinese internet users have played a prominent role in shaping and reshaping their nation's perception of Africa.

## NOTES

1. The author had thought of extending the timeline to November 2008 in order to have a full two-year timeframe in the hope of gathering more post-Olympic comments. However, from September 2008 onwards discussion on Africa has been very extensively influenced by the Obama factor. This is a totally different topic worth a paper to itself.
2. See for example Message ID 156285, 'Shijie Gailan: Renzai Feizhou (Living in Africa: Overview of the World)', *TTC*, 27.7.2007.
3. See for example the new press for Premier Wen's trip to Africa in the *China Daily* (2006), and President Wu's trip in the same newspaper (2007).
4. See for example the interview of the PRC's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, *People's Daily* (2007).
5. For an extensive review of how Western academics view Sino-African relations see Large 2008.

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