



# Influence of Chinese managerial soft power on African skills development

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## ABSTRACT

Through the prism of soft power theory, this paper examines the influence of Chinese managerial soft power on the development of management skills by Africans who had previously studied in China before returning to Africa to run their own businesses. From a thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data, we identify themes emerging from the cognitive repertoire of African managers after their cultural adaptation in China. The themes include network development, risk-taking, optimism and pragmatism. The results of this study help to shed light on how international activities such as study abroad programs affect business management skills and provide new understanding of soft power for the field of business studies. The study shows that China influences not only through aid, foreign investments and its economic model but also through the diffusion of its management ideas via soft power.

## 1. Introduction

Neorealist and liberal institutionalist approaches are two dominant frameworks used for the analysis of international politics and power (Wilson III, 2008). Neorealist approaches emphasise hard power, which is the ability to compel nations to do one's will through military intervention, coercive diplomacy and economic sanctions (Campbell & O'Hanlon, 2006). In contrast, liberal institutionalist approaches emphasise soft power that is based on immaterial resources such as culture, ideology and institutions (Nye, 1990). Both approaches involve the influence of a nation on the international scene and its image as perceived by international stakeholders (Fan, 2008; Hagström & Nordin, 2019).

In recent years, increased attention has been paid to the internationalisation of the Chinese state and its cooperation with countries in the Global South such as those in Africa (Bocchese & Linn, 2016). Evidences of the manifestation of Chinese hard power in Africa are numerous and well-investigated. For example, China's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Africa increased from 74.8 million USD in 2003 to 37 billion USD in 2013 (Chinese Ministry of Commerce [MOFCOM], 2017; China-Africa Research Initiative, 2018). By the end of 2016, the total stock of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in Africa was 40 billion USD. By 2018, China's growth rate with Africa was the highest in the world. China's total import and export volume with Africa is approximately 204 billion USD. Currently, more than 3000 Chinese companies are present in 52 African countries (MOFCOM, 2013), with another set

of 60,533 companies that China authorised in 2018 to establish abroad.

In addition, the Chinese government, through loans, contributes to the financing of telecommunication equipment as well as information and communication technology (ICT) in Africa through Chinese companies such as Huawei and ZTE (Agbebi, 2019; Gagliardone & Geall, 2014). China has increased its direct involvement in peace and security issues by sending more than 2500 military personnel to six United Nations peacekeeping missions in Africa and establishing a military base in Djibouti (Lahtinen, 2018; Parente, Rong, Geleilate, & Misati, 2019; Tumanjong, 2014).

China's investment capacity in natural resource extraction, infrastructure construction, peacekeeping in African countries and its growing commercial power are all important factors contributing to its increasing manifestation of hard power in Africa (Davies, Edinger, Tay, & Naidu, 2008). Indeed, China's hard power in Africa is well-documented by experts in natural resource extraction (Taylor & Xiao, 2009), infrastructure projects (Bräutigam, 2009; Kaplinsky & Morris, 2009), and military exchanges (Eisenman & Kurlantzick, 2006; Kinyondo, 2019).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is also marked by an unprecedented presence of Africans in China, and in the same token, that of Chinese in Africa (Haugen, 2019), with such exchanges providing fertile ground for the exercise of Chinese soft power. While many Chinese travel to Africa for business, market and resource opportunities (Cheung, De Haan, Qian, & Yu, 2012; Kolstad & Wiig, 2012), most Africans go to China through training grants and workshops opportunities (Abegunrin & Manyeruke,

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2020; Benabdallah, 2019). Between 1995 and 2015, the number of African nationals in China increased 14-fold and reached 580,000 admissions in 2015 (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

With tens of thousands of professional training programmes being offered in the country, China is now the largest contributor to African capacity building programmes, surpassing Germany, France and the United Kingdom, which have traditionally been considered as the main actors in human capital development (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2018). According to the Chinese Ministry of Education (2019), by 2018, a total of 81,562 African students were studying in 1004 higher educational institutions in the 31 provinces. In addition, the number of Confucius Institutes (CI) in Africa has increased from 0 to 48 in 2004, and to 59 by December 2018 (Hanban, Confucius Institutes Headquarters, 2019). Confucius Institutes (CI) and international higher education promotion are considered by authors as the expression of Chinese soft power because they promote Chinese language and cultural values (Akhtaruzaman, Berg, & Lien, 2017; Huang, 2018; Lahtinen, 2015; Nye, 2005; Wenping, 2007).

Collaboration between China and African countries allows the parties to acquire skills through social interactions. Criticizing the mixed impacts that colonial and neo-colonial influences have had on Africa's development, Jackson, Louw, and Zhao (2013) had earlier on raised the question of the impact of Chinese organizations on development in Africa. It goes without saying that China's engagement with Africa allows it to maintain its growth. To meet the development need, the creation of joint ventures between African and Chinese companies, creation of new or expanded Chinese-State owned companies in Africa, Chinese purchase of shares or bonds in African companies, management of African public sector facilities (power plants, railways, communication systems, etc.) are all conditions that allow Africans to improve their effectiveness (Brautigam, 2010; Elliot, Zhu, & Wang, 2019).

At the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation held in Johannesburg in 2015, the Chinese president hinted that he would like to train 200,000 technicians and provide 40,000 training opportunities for African workers in China (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2015). The Chinese government has further emphasised the need to strengthen interpersonal ties between the two countries, ties that serve as the foundation for stronger political and economic relations (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). Education, training and the transmission of cultural values are then seen as great assets and means of facilitating political and economic developments of both Africa and China.

Some authors have also reported that Chinese multinationals in Africa are building vocational training schools, while they are also recruiting and training local manpower to actively fill the gap in the labour market, promote the development of emerging technologies, provide favourable conditions for staff development (for example, Huawei offers housing loans to its employees) and stimulate inter-continental trade (Cooke, 2014; Elliot et al., 2019; Farhiya, 2019; Ndzendze & Monyae, 2019; Powanga & Giner-Reichl, 2019).

For Sun (2017), Chinese private companies and entrepreneurs set up technical education centres in Kenya, and eventually hired 75%–90% of the local manpower. Some other authors conclude that Chinese companies contribute to the development of qualified local personnel through the transfer of knowledge and skills, training, demonstration and collaboration (Farhiya, 2019; Xiaoyang, 2019).

Thus, strengthening relationship through cultural exchange programmes would afford African countries the opportunity to catch up in terms of education, science, and technology, and to initiate the industrial transformation of the continent (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). China is called the 'world's factory' (Zhang, Yang, & Wang, 2011) because of the abundance of 'made in China' products; this abundance is due to the level of education of the Chinese. Several studies demonstrate statistically that there is a significant relationship between education and entrepreneurship on the one hand (Bae, Qian, Miao, & Fiet, 2014; Martin, McNally, & Kay, 2013), and the set of values and

attitudes that are identical in each society, pushing it to have a taste for entrepreneurship, on the other hand. Thus, entrepreneurial culture, networking, hard work, competition and risk-taking are distinguishing attributes of the Chinese (Chen, Chen, & Huang, 2013; Wilson & Brennan, 2010). Acquaaah, Zoogah, and Kwesiga (2013) and Ekuma (2019) assert that what Africa seriously lacks is the entrepreneurial competence to create marketable economic and social values for the benefit of the society. They further argue that education and mentoring can enable young Africans to manage innovative start-ups.

To truly understand the impact of Chinese soft power (exercised through education, training and cultural exchange programmes) on African entrepreneurs, it is important to examine how such entrepreneurs perceive their experiences while staying in China. Have African entrepreneurs acquired skills during their stay in China that could influence the business practices of Africans in the future? Does China serve as a new source of managerial inspiration for Africans trained in the country? In essence, have African entrepreneurs been influenced by the Chinese deployment of soft power, and, if so, how? Those are the vital questions that this study seeks to answer.

The objective of this research is to explore the managerial skills acquired by African entrepreneurs during their stay in China and the extent to which Chinese managerial ideas have influenced the business practices of those Africans. There are very few ethnographic studies on personal interactions between Africans and the Chinese that focus on the lived experiences of the actors (Kabwete, 2015; Monson & Rupp, 2013). This study attempts to contribute to this limited body of knowledge by applying the international relations (IR) concept of soft power to the case study of African students who studied in China and returned home to run their businesses.

In seeking answers to our research questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with former African students and applied thematic analysis to study the interview data. The study shows that China influences not only through its hard power (aid, foreign investments, and its economic model) but also through the diffusion of its management ideas via soft power.

This article is organised as follows. After this introductory section, the next section (2) reviews the existing literature on soft power and its manifestations, followed by a discussion of Chinese managerial soft power as an important dimension of human resources management. Section 3 details the study's methodology, including methods of data collection and analysis. Section 4 presents the results of thematic narrative analysis, while Section 5 explores the implications of our findings. Section 6 concludes with a discussion of the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of our study and identifies future avenues of research.

## 2. Manifestations of Chinese soft power: from Nye to Kurlantzick

To put Chinese soft power in proper perspective, it is necessary to critically conceptualise the notion within the context of current academic literature. Joseph S. Nye (who actually coined the term) and Joshua Kurlantzick, among many others, are two scholars who have demonstrated keen interest in the International Relations (IR) concept of soft power (Hunter, 2009).

According to Nye (2008), soft power exists as a State's ability to compel other nations to want to do what it wants through attraction and persuasion. In other words, soft power is the ability to influence other States' behaviour and preferences in order to achieve a desired result without coercive measures such as military force or economic sanctions. In international politics, the immaterial resources that constitute soft power stem largely from a country's cultural values, practices and internal policies, as well as in the way it handles its relations with other nations (Nye, 2008). Culture, as Huntington (1996) argues, has a particularly important influence on international relations. Multifaceted, soft power may be constituted by cultural (e.g., language, media, religion, education, etc.), ideological or ideational resources

**Table 1**

Conceptualisation of Chinese Soft Power.

Source: Adapted from available literature on soft power.

	Behaviours	Primary currencies	Government policies
Soft power	Attraction Agenda Setting	Values, culture government policies, Confucius Institutes and other institutions	Public, bilateral and multilateral diplomacy
Economic power	Inducement (e.g., Chinese FDI in Africa)	Financial assistance	Foreign aid and corruption
Military power	Protection Deterrence	Force	Alliances

embedded within international institutions. America and Great Britain are often regarded as nations with immense soft power because of, inter alia, the liberal and democratic character of the American and British economic systems and the influence and popularity of Hollywood films and British universities. As seen in these examples, if a country's culture and ideology are attractive, other countries will be more willing to follow or emulate the country with such soft power.

Although China has a strong cultural presence worldwide (e.g., Buddhism, tourism, film) and the advantages of its aid interventions (Tella, 2016), Nye claims that it has failed to sustain the impact of these enterprises due to its domestic problems, including human rights violations, environmental degradation, and the suppression of minority cultures. He further argues that states that are more likely to succeed in projecting soft power in the information age are those whose dominant ideas are closer to global standards of liberalism, pluralism, and autonomy (Nye, 2008).

China, from Nye's perspective, is not as likely to succeed in this respect. Indeed, China faces serious criticism for its lack of democracy and press freedom. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, China ranks 130 out of 167 countries on the 2018 Democracy Index with a score of 3.32/10. China also ranks 87 out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index with a score of 39/100 (Transparency International, 2018), and 100 out of 180 on the 2019 Economic Freedom index with a score of 58.4/100 (Heritage Foundation, 2019).

Some authors argue that Nye's view of soft power is too simplistic and that some of his arguments are not consistent with the reality of international politics (Zheng & Zhang, 2012). Nye sees soft power as a mere extension of cultural power. Although culture is an important aspect of soft power, the successful deployment of soft power is based on a combination of attractive international policy, productive economic development, the creation of and participation in international institutions, and the provision of development aid (Tella, 2016).

Furthermore, Nye's definition of soft power continues to polarise the world via dichotomies such as capitalism versus socialism and democracy versus totalitarianism. Going by Nye's approach to soft power, countries that view communism as destructive will inevitably become willing allies of democratic countries. While this may have held true during the Cold War, today, the global context has changed significantly. Relations between countries have deepened and broadened, with the global worldview having undergone a major metamorphosis in the era of modern globalisation (Cooke, 2018). In addition, China's economic success has brought about a change in the world's power game (Heywood, 2014). Presently, China is the world's second largest economy (IMF, 2017) and seeks to build a positive image abroad in a multipolar and multicultural world. Its rise does not take place in the context of competition between different political systems, as was the case during the Cold War period (Kivimäki, 2014). Since power games between nations are dynamic in nature (Keohane & Nye, 1977), soft power equally needs to be reconsidered. According to Huang and Ding (2006), the economic prosperity of a nation may be a more attractive factor than culture, and therefore economic development is the core of soft power. In contrast, Hymans (2009) argues that consensual, cooperative and peaceful policies are the essence of soft power.

Nye's restrictive conception of the concept of soft power has prompted a debate on the application of soft power to Chinese foreign

policy. In order to broaden the concept of soft power and remove it from a pro-Western vision that views Asian and African governments as authoritarian and therefore devoid of any soft power capabilities, Kurlantzick (2007) argues that "for the Chinese, soft power means anything outside of the military and security realm, including not only popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers like aid and investment and participation in multilateral organisations." (p. 6). Indeed, China uses several instruments to implement its soft power. Chinese soft power includes, inter alia, trade, investment, foreign aid, its economic model, cultural exchange programmes, Chinese language schools and scholarship awards for university training programmes (Kurlantzick, 2007; Shah, Hasnat, & Rosefielde, 2017; Suzuki, 2009). Chinese soft power, as illustrated in Table 1 below, is multidimensional and manifested in several ways, including China emerging as a major player in terms of economic assistance in the Global South (Ding, 2008). Most Chinese academics who write on soft power agree on the validity of a broader understanding of the concept.

### 2.1. Manifestations of Chinese soft power in Africa

Africa remains the second largest market for projects contracted by China abroad. The 2006 publication of the book titled China's African Policy has reinforced and consolidated the strategic vision of China in Africa. China's role in Africa challenges conventional stereotypes and perceptions (poor labour conditions, unsustainable environmental practices, job displacement) of current events (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). In fact, China is both a long-standing diplomatic partner and a new investor in Africa. China's manifestations of soft power in Africa are diverse and multifaceted. For African countries, China serves as a new source of funding, leading to the proliferation of infrastructure projects across the continent. Furthermore, China promotes an optimistic vision of Africa's future that is based primarily on cultural exchange, health, aid, humanitarian, security and trade development programmes (Cooke, 2009; Hanauer & Morris, 2014; Huang, 2018), as well as attempts to address global issues related to climate change, food security, and renewable energy consumption (Ding, 2008).

To increase the positive effects of its soft power resources, China has implemented interpersonal relations initiatives through Confucius Institutes, research programmes, and strategic inter-company alliances. According to The Financial Times (2015), China was the largest investor in mergers and acquisitions in Africa, accounting for 37 % of all value transactions in 2013. Other interpersonal relations initiatives include granting scholarship awards to Africans going to study in China (Ding, 2008). These training scholarships are geared towards African human capital capacity building (King, 2013).

The exponential growth of Sino-African relations in recent years has provoked mixed reactions from African researchers and civil society alike. Currently, there is no common African perspective on Chinese presence in Africa (Wasserman, 2016). Nevertheless, opinion polls conducted by Afrobaromètre (Okuru & Samson, 2016) and the Pew Research Agency (2016) have shown that 63 % and 59 % of Africans from 36 countries have a positive perception of Chinese influence, respectively. The Chinese development model is not only becoming increasingly popular in Africa but is also being cited as a development

model to follow, after the United States'. The results of these surveys suggest that the cornerstone of China's new foreign policy is soft power (Ding, 2008; Kennedy, 2016).

2.2. From Chinese political soft power to managerial soft power?

Several existing studies examine China-Africa interactions through the prism of soft power theory (Cooke, 2009; Hanauer & Morris, 2014; Huang, 2018). To adapt the dominant conception of soft power found in IR research to the Chinese context, we put forth a new conception of soft power termed 'managerial soft power' (MSP). Managerial soft power is demonstrated by the ability to influence other people's management practices without coercion, and to transform the management practices of other cultures through perceptions of one's own practices as being positive and attractive. For example, from Dahl (1957) conceptualization of power, if there are two entities A and B, A may transform B's management practices, managerial thinking and organisational vision that B considers fundamentally important. Managerial soft power can subsequently shape B's beliefs, perceptions and preferences to create a positive image of A. In the context of China, changes in African management practices can bring tangible and intangible benefits to China. For example, future generations of intellectuals and African political elites with knowledge of Chinese language, society, managerial culture, history, and politics are more likely to be sensitised to Chinese interests, with such knowledge also strengthening the mutual friendship and understanding between the two countries.

The management knowledge acquired by Africans in China, even if it took some time and energy, was developed without any coercive action, hence our reference to Chinese managerial soft power (CMSP). China is not only known for trading products sold all over the world, but for its culture of hard work, extensive business networks, entrepreneurship, respect for hierarchy (i.e. the separation of power) and its internationalisation of local businesses (Gu, 2009; Shen, 2012; Xing, Liu, Tarba, & Cooper, 2016). These values and practices are intrinsically soft and positive in nature and are considered by several scholars as the core of China's organisational culture (Ardichvili, Maurer, Li, Wentling, & Stuedemann, 2006; Liu, 1998). Many people have been influenced by Chinese values (Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Wang, 2012).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This qualitative study explores the management skills developed by African entrepreneurs during their stay in China through a narrative analysis of interview data. This study was driven by the hypothesis that Africans who studied in China acquired other skills in addition to academic knowledge. Qualitative research is very useful for exploring the meanings of phenomena, as well as the interactions generated by these meanings. Qualitative approaches such as the one adopted in this study attempt to increase the understanding of perceptions, 'to explain how people in particular settings understand, consider, act on, and manage their daily situations' (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Narratives are considered as sources of understanding individual and collective

human experiences that are rarely accessible to other forms of epistemological analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). Thus, the study of narratives makes it possible to understand actors' interpretations of a given phenomenon (Chreim, 2007; Maitlis, 2005). In addition, because of the absence of previous research on this subject, a qualitative research approach can provide new insights into the impact of Chinese soft power on the management capacities of Africans who studied in China.

3.2. Data sample and collection

This is mainly an exploratory study. Data collection was based on key principles of qualitative research. The main data for this study were collected via 62 interviews with African students who had spent time studying in China. Participants were drawn from seven African countries: Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea Conakry, Niger, Sénégal and Togo. The interviews were conducted over a 6-month period (May-October 2016), and allowed us to collect rich data by looking at the social context from the former students' point of view, which was essential for this study. The interviewees had spent at least two years in China and had been back in their countries of origin for about two years prior to the interview.

In selecting the informants, we used a stratified and refined snowball sampling approach whereby participants from different groups are selected (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was intended to facilitate comparison between groups, and according to countries. This approach was also to avoid including people who returned to their countries of origin several years ago or who had been to other countries before returning home permanently in the survey. In each of the African countries visited, we had the opportunity of meeting with the President of Old Students Association of China who recommended and connected us to participants for the interview. Conducting an interview with a member recommended by the Old Students Association of China enabled us to identify other members. Similar snowball sampling was followed for all the participants. A semi-structured interview approach allowed for some flexibility on the part of the interviewer, leaving room for additional probing or comprehension questions.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 min. All the interviews were audio recorded. Some of the major ideas, reflections, and emerging ideas as well as our key decisions and insights were kept in a research journal, as recommended by Bringer, Johnston, and Brackenridge (2004). During our fieldwork in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, we engaged in an informal conversation with six other key informants who were either employees or business partners of our interviewees; the ideas and themes that emerged from our interactions with them were also written down. Ultimately, data for this study comprised 630 pages of transcription from formal interviews with former African students in China, and 23 pages from informal conversations with employees. Table 2 provides demographic information on the participants.

3.3. Data analysis

Qualitative data collection is a long process that provides dense and rich data that need to be codified and analysed for it to make sense in the research context. Narrative analysis presupposes that there is

Table 2 Respondents' profile.

	TSC* < 3 n = 16	3 < TSC < 5 n = 19	TSC > 5 n = 27
Industry	Consumer Products n = 12	IT services n = 35	Business services n = 15
Country of origin	Bénin n = 16 Guinée Conakry n = 7 Togo n = 11	Côte d'Ivoire n = 5 Niger n = 11	Ghana n = 8 Senegal n = 4

\* TSC = time spent in China.

**Table 3**  
Participants' experiences regarding network development.

Aspects of networks developed	Respondents' statements
Social network	<p>The Chinese have influenced me a lot. I am always with the Chinese; I ate with them every day. [Niger, August 18th, 2016]</p> <p>It was great with the teachers. I consider my supervisor as my father all my life... We consider them as our parents because outside the class, teachers gave their telephone numbers at the first meeting, to call them, even to discuss problems that have no relationship with the class. [Guinea Conakry, October 28th, 2016]</p> <p>It was very good with the teachers. I have kept a good relationship with them so far. Even with Chinese friends, I felt very good. I have never clashed or had misunderstandings with the Chinese community. [Senegal, July 20th, 2016]</p>
Business network	<p>The managerial practice that inspires me the most is the place of the boss in a Chinese company. It is difficult to identify the boss on his work team. At times, I eat together with the workers. This allows [me] to be closer to the employees and to have the best performance from them. [Togo, 26th, 2016]</p> <p>By the networks especially that of the teachers, I learned humility; they do not over inflate... I do not complicate life to my employees. But I like the respect of the hierarchy. [Niger, August 25th, 2016]</p> <p>In China, it's practically different. Contacts are particularly important. I learned a lot about maintaining my relationships regardless of their level or area of activity. Because you never know. We often need someone smaller than ourselves. [Ghana, June 30th, 2016]</p> <p>I made many friends during my stay in China. It allowed me to work even though it was forbidden for foreign students. I worked with many factories, many companies. We were practically intermediaries between companies and foreign economic operators who came to China. I even acquired some experiences that I use today. Networks are crucial to the success of my businesses. [...] The business network I built in China is totally useful. First, with my teachers and my Chinese friends, I improved my Chinese language. This allows me to perform exceptionally. During the holidays, I was doing translation for the Africans especially West African traders who came to China for business. I developed this network since the time I was studying in China. Currently, I'm just boosting my business. [Benin, 11th, 2016]</p> <p>I had many Chinese friends that allowed me to find odd jobs to do even though it was forbidden, and it allowed me to travel a lot in China, to know the Chinese culture. I stayed in touch with my friends and it helps me. We write on We chat or QQ. I travel regularly to China for business opportunities (laughs). [Senegal, July 24th, 2016]</p> <p>My network today is made up of the Chinese, Africans, Europeans and Americans because my stay in China gave me the chance to collaborate with people coming from several countries. [Ghana, June 2nd, 2016]</p> <p>Thanks to the network I established with many cultures due to my studies in China, I had the chance to make more than 300 business trips. I speak several languages. Chinese, English, French and several African languages. It helps, the network. [Togo, June 11th, 2016]</p> <p>The collaboration between the boss and these people is important. I had no idea before traveling to study in China ... it is in China that the staff will even share their family problems with me. Today, in my company, we manage things together... It's because I gave this space there. That's why they're here, it's now 6:30 pm, so we finish at 6 pm. It's because I created this environment. [Ghana, June 2nd, 2016].</p> <p>When the Chinese want something, they are motivated. They know how to make friends. In fact, I will not say that it is corruption, it is gifts, kind gestures... and it is common in China. This practice, I find it quite well. Now, when I go to any ministry, I am positively appreciated because I give a lot of gifts. In fact, you have to know how to maintain human relations. [Benin, May 7th, 2016]</p> <p>I cannot say everything about our company. But my boss is exemplary. For him, nothing is to be neglected, especially our customers, and other relationships are privileged. We are a family. He has the build of a good manager, so there is nothing wrong with him (colleague). [Senegal, July 22nd, 2016].</p>

'neither a single, absolute truth in human reality nor a correct reading or interpretation of a text' (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Our analytical focus was on the content and context of the themes related to the sense given by African entrepreneurs who had lived in China. Our approach was to identify the central themes of interest and the intertextual occurrences of these themes (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001). In coding related themes regarding the construction of meaning, we assigned descriptive codes that strongly reflected the participants' themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Subsequent iterations of data analysis allowed for the use of inferential coding supported by the researcher's interpretation, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994). For example, the theme 'I have changed a lot' provided by several participants indicates the potential influence of Chinese soft power on African entrepreneurs who studied in China. In our data analysis, we also discussed the construction of meaning and its relationship to the skills developed by the participants as a way for them to adapt to Chinese culture.

### 3.3.1. Ethical and validity considerations

In this research, several measures were taken to avoid bias (Poupart, 1997). For example, our interview guide, which contains clear questions, was approved by the Laval University's Research Ethics Committee. This ensured that the same questions were consistently put to the 62 respondents. Some ethical considerations were respected, especially with respect to anonymity of the respondents (Krefting, 1991).

It is important to note that social desirability can play a strong role in certain cultures (Collins, Shattell, & Thomas, 2005; Fontana & Frey, 2000). In several African countries, asking entrepreneurs to express an opinion on their stay in China could often appear as an inquiry into their privacy and success in China. To avoid answers shaped by the cultural value of social desirability and to ensure the credibility of our

analyses, indirect questions and the use of secondary data made it possible to reduce the distortion of private opinions of the participants as recommended by Fisher (1993). During the interview sessions, several questions were put to the participants in different ways to check the consistency of the answers. This triangulation of data aimed to increase the richness and validity of the participants' responses, with the goal of reducing social desirability and self-monitoring biases.

To increase the reliability of our results, a certain number of steps (such as selection of Africans who have studied in China and who have owned an enterprise since their return to their country of origin, analysis of transcription, etc.) were followed, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This study combined formal narrative analysis with thematic coding to analyse data, using specialised NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software (Kikooma, 2010). NVivo enabled us to establish saturation because we were able to study emerging ideas without interrupting the study's document database (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). The categorisation of coded passages was verified by a second researcher who was not involved in the interviews. After reading the 62 interviews transcription, he categorised each coded interview segment. The reliability of coding was calculated by the degree of inter-coder agreement obtained using Cohen (1960)'s Kappa coefficient. In this study, the coefficient was equal to 82.8 %, indicating an excellent degree of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). The calculation of the Kappa coefficient made it possible to ensure that judgements were consistent and to avoid possible errors that could hamper the analysis of our assessment. This coefficient was consistent with similar qualitative studies (Judge & Douglas, 2013; Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007).

**Table 4**  
Participants' Experiences Regarding Risk-taking.

Respondents' statements
What I notice about China is that it's a country that has almost the same reality as us, or like many African countries. We are developing countries ... What I notice is that, unlike us, every day, young Chinese people make an effort to create businesses. We complain every day. We do not want to take the initiative or make the sacrifice to innovate. These are the realities that led me to not waiting for a job from the government. [Benin, May 9th, 2016]
I am an entrepreneur. I consider the economic and financial market as a war like the Chinese. [Togo, June 12th, 2016]
China has changed me a lot. In China, I see them undertake all kinds of activities ... After two years of job searching, I established my company and today I have no regrets. [Ghana, June 3rd, 2016]
Yes, Chinese culture especially influenced me. What I'm doing today is not what I went to study in China. I learned a lot when I met the Chinese business culture. It was a great opportunity to have chosen China as a destination for our studies. [Côte d'Ivoire, July 16th, 2016]
As we had to do with a lot of businessmen in China, that's what we try to do here; this willingness to undertake by oneself and imitate them, to do like them, to risk a little and see what that can give is what we are doing, and we hope that gives good results. [Senegal, July 22nd, 2016]
Since my return from China, I established my company. I won the market thanks to my relationships. I try to sell products from China. When I was in China, I never thought of starting a business ... China influenced me a lot in this regard. [Niger, August 19th, 2016]
Well, I had pointed it out at the outset that he is a truly exemplary superior. I do not know if it is his stay in China that influences him. He is truly exemplary and working with him is really a joy. He is visionary. (Colleague). [Guinea Conakry, October 28th, 2016]

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Network development

One of the factors that facilitate the cultural adaptation of immigrants in their host country is their ability to make new friends. In China, the social network called *guanxi* is an important sociocultural factor (Zhu, Cooper, Fan, & De Cieri, 2013). *Guanxi* reflects delicate fibres woven into every person's social life and every aspect of Chinese society (Park & Luo, 2001, p. 456). *Guanxi* has been deeply embedded in Chinese culture for over 5000 years. It is similar to the Western concept of social network, but it remains distinct in the context of China (Chua, Morris, & Ingram, 2009). *Guanxi* can be understood as social ties of varying strengths that are cultivated and maintained through the continued exchange of favours between different parties to achieve instrumental purposes and 'a strategic mechanism to overcome competitive and resources disadvantages' (Park & Luo, 2001, p. 1). Some studies claim that African entrepreneurs do not devote a prominent place to the development of networks (Irwin, 2011). The semantic illustrations of the former students surveyed show that they focus on the development of networks in their daily activities, especially for the development of their businesses (see Table 3). Several excerpts from the participants' responses illustrate the fact that, during their stay in China, entrepreneurs were influenced by the importance that the Chinese attach to the development of social and business networks. Most of them have not only maintained social ties with their Chinese friends and those of other nationalities but are also building others.

Social or business network is one of the major behavioural activities needed to develop business. The use of networking in African countries is perceived as evidence of business success but it remains less optimised (Tvedten, Wendelboe Hansen, & Jeppesen, 2014; Xing et al., 2016). It should be noted that network development between the Chinese and Africans will enhance mutual understanding and will have practical implications for business. Networking provides information, resources and other economic benefits for business survival and success (Li & Liang, 2015; Li & Zhang, 2007).

### 4.2. Risk-taking

Several studies have been conducted on risk as a specific trait of entrepreneurs (De Pillis & Reardon, 2007; Zhao, Seibert, & Lumpkin, 2010). Risk-taking is considered to be one of the most distinctive characteristics of entrepreneurs. According to Kermisch and Labeau (2010), cultural theory holds that risk perceptions are an integral part of cultural values, and in the same way as other values and beliefs, they help to stabilise the social forms in which they develop risks. Thus, each form of social life has its own portfolio of risks, its own hierarchy of risks and its own relationship with risk.

In their review of cultural and entrepreneurial potential, Thomas and Mueller (2000) note that some cultures might be expected to be more closely associated with some entrepreneurial orientations than others. Risk, therefore, is never perceived the same way across time, space or groups of individuals. Indeed, Chinese entrepreneurs perceive more opportunities than threats when engaging in risk assessments (Cheung & Chow, 2006; Rozell, Meyer, Scroggins, & Guo, 2011). They base their judgement on their experiences, habits acquired by past generations who have experienced misery and famine, cultural traditions (e.g., Confucianism, Taoism, etc.) as well as their personal experiences (Tang, Tang, Marino, Zhang, & Li, 2008). Several studies show that Chinese entrepreneurs have a propensity to take risks in their entrepreneurial decision-making process and in maximising the opportunities available to them (Cai, Yu, Liu, & Nguyen, 2014; Zhang, Ma, Wang, Li, & Huo, 2016).

African entrepreneurs, on the other hand, take fewer risks. The results of Fatoki and Chindoga's studies (2011) identify risk as one of the main obstacles for young African entrepreneurs. Cultural adaptation of Africans in China allows them to develop risk-taking propensities, a fact that is justified by several interviewees' statements shown in Table 4. Such statements suggest that they have adopted patterns of thinking, feeling, reacting and problem-solving that are similar to the Chinese.

### 4.3. Optimism

Optimism is the tendency to have a favourable outlook of life and being confident of a positive outcome of an event (Martin-Krumm et al., 2015). Optimism is also associated with desirable characteristics such as perseverance, accomplishment and the ability to remain motivated, accept failures and learn from mistakes (Cooper, Woo, & Dunkelberg, 1988). This echoes the Nietzschean phrase 'What does not kill you makes you stronger'. Optimism or pessimism is influenced by cultural values (Scheier & Carver, 1985). In the present case of China, optimism is influenced by Confucian cultural values (Kirby & Fan, 1995). Some studies have shown that Chinese entrepreneurs had several psychological skills related to optimism, such as the tendency to see things in a positive way (Taormina & Lao, 2007), determination, patience, and perseverance (Li & Liang, 2015; Wang, Tee, & Ahmed, 2012). They see themselves as lifelong learners (Seow Wah, 2010).

Unlike their Chinese counterparts, African entrepreneurs, despite being hard-working, have been reported to hold pessimistic attitudes at the start of a business (McDade & Spring, 2005). They are said to be not only reserved but also inclined to adopting fatalistic and avoidant strategies (Edoho, 2015). However, our results contradict such studies. As shown in Table 5, statements by Africans who studied in China suggest that, just like the Chinese, African entrepreneurs who studied in China are endowed with the spirit of optimism.

**Table 5**  
Participants' experience regarding optimism.

Respondents' statements
In Africa, we lack confidence in ourselves. This is very important for the Chinese, and it is what we need in Africa. [Benin, May 9 <sup>th</sup> , 2016]
It would be necessary to look at the Chinese who are all the time committed to all their plans. They undertake, and they fail and start again. I spent my free time looking for good entrepreneurial ideas. [Togo, June 11 <sup>th</sup> , 2016]
Competition is fierce in China for entrepreneurs. They do all kinds of games, it's Chinese, there are all kinds of competitions because everyone wants to succeed. [Ghana, June 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 2016]
Life in China is a daily challenge. You must be tough. You must not let go. You must not be discouraged. Going to China is like going to a competition. You must come back with a trophy. I have my degree, and I have a company that I build. [Côte d'Ivoire, July 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2016]
After my studies in China, when I returned home, I found out that things were not moving. Even at the beginning of my company, we did practically nothing; things were not moving. And because you have already seen the Chinese in action over there, you do not get discouraged, as, over time, it worked. [Senegal, July 22 <sup>nd</sup> , 2016]
The Chinese are very far away. They followed steps. Today they have mostly cars. But before, they were driving bicycles. At home, we do not want to take steps. The development is following the scales, and that's what I applied. [Niger, August 19 <sup>th</sup> , 2016]
To overcome my obstacles requires hard work. Above all, one must have courage and perseverance like the Chinese entrepreneurs. [Guinea Conakry, October 28 <sup>th</sup> , 2016]

#### 4.4. Pragmatism

Pragmatism, a term commonly used in management, has been developed by several important theorists such as Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910), and John Dewey (1858–1914). The common vision of these pragmatists was to design a logical framework that uses knowledge based on experience to improve performance. Pragmatism is about linking theory to action, thought to fact, experience to the outcome of directed action (Thayer-Bacon, 2010). Menand (2001) defines pragmatism as an account of how people think, the way they come up with ideas, form beliefs and arrive at decisions. Thus, pragmatism simply refers to an approach in which the organisation is open to the use of a variety of means to achieve set objectives based on what is most appropriate according to situational factors (Alford & Hughes, 2008).

Senge (1990) coined the term 'learning organisation' to refer to an organisation that improves organisational performance based on the beliefs, learning and knowledge of individuals and teams. The best-known pragmatic approach to quality improvement is Total Quality Management. Pragmatist leaders and entrepreneurs seek to offer solutions to problems rather than creating a broader vision (Mumford, Bedell-Avers, & Hunter, 2008).

In China, during the period of political and economic reforms, two expressions of Deng Xiaoping had an impact on Chinese management: 'Cross the river by feeling the stones' [摸着石头过河]- and 'It does not matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice; it is the cat that catches the mouse that is a good cat' [不管黑猫白猫, 捉到老鼠就是好猫]. These two expressions symbolise Chinese pragmatism and, at the same time, constitute a deeply rooted culture of progressive change. Chinese pragmatism aims at adopting different policies to accelerate China's development (Zhao, 2005).

**Table 6**  
Participants' experience regarding pragmatism development.

Respondents' statements
In fact, what I have learned in China, basically, can help me in Benin. It is about ceremonies within the organisation. The Chinese are very good at organising official ceremonies. I'm going to say something about it and it will surprise you... In Benin, it is almost at the last minute that you put the pressure on it, and you must 'go out of yourself' to be able to achieve what you want to do... When you want to do something, you must be very fast so as not to waste time. When the machinery is set in motion, we do not stop to ask questions. Everyone applies. We no longer ask questions; we advance unless there are very important details that can influence the activity. [Benin, May 5 <sup>th</sup> , 2016]
The Chinese are serious. They are precise and rigorous in their management of foreign students. There are no wacky problems. Problems are automatically resolved, and that becomes an asset for other similar problems. [Togo, June 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2016]
For a long time, it is said that the Chinese work fast. They started working well and soon after. They have an organisational culture behind that. In my company, I can satisfy my customers in time. Partners' satisfaction takes precedence over organisational rules. [Ghana, June 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 2016]
You see when the director of the Chinese cultural centre was changed, the newcomer stays in contact with the former for months before they separated. While with us, after the transfer of service, we could say that it is finished. [Niger, August 19 <sup>th</sup> , 2016]
In fact, I will say that it is a superior who does not carry himself too much like the superior. He does not behave like a boss. It is understandable. He is there when you need something about your job. He makes quick decisions. He is willing. He makes himself available to satisfy you so that the work can progress well. He does not say he is the boss, but he is very rigorous. (Colleague). [Benin, May 8 <sup>th</sup> , 2016]
His dedication to work is uncommon and he always asks for the opinion of colleagues on decisions so as to have a perfect job. (Colleague). [Guinea Conakry, October 28 <sup>th</sup> , 2016]

Thus, in China, most organisations do not have a formal or explicit organisational chart. They also lack a structuring of activities, have low task specialisation with practically no clear description of tasks and procedures, and have no written policies and rules (Li & Liang, 2015). These organisational and cultural practices lead to a seamless adaptation and adoption of many of the qualities of learning organisations that enable them to achieve results without formalism (Elkin, Cone, & Liao, 2009). Hall and Ames (1987) use the term 'aesthetic order' to describe the Chinese society which is not open to the use of rules and norms but emphasises harmony. Even Deng did not have a final plan to improve production, but he rather preferred to adjust the plans based on actual situation (Xiaoyang, 2020).

In Africa, management is tied to the development mission of Africa that Western actors themselves have set through the implementation of Western practices in Africa. It is driven by bureaucratic and formalistic logic (Claeyé & Jackson, 2012), although, nowadays, there is a re-appropriation of genuinely African cultural practices (Cooke, Wood, & Horwitz, 2015; Walumbwa, Avolio, & Aryee, 2011) that include Ubuntu's humanistic logic of organisational performance (Jackson, 2002). Ubuntu – the notion that people are people through each other – is not far from Confucianism that focuses on interpersonal relationships in the Chinese context. Xing et al. (2016) show the existence of cultural proximity between Ubuntu and Confucianism. The two concepts refer to certain virtues which are convertible under managerial principles such as entrepreneurship, leadership, network development and organizational management (Fink, Holden, Karsten, & Illa, 2005).

Our interview results suggest that Africans' stay in China can strengthen their perception of Chinese pragmatist management (see Table 6).

In Table 6, we can see that by adapting to Chinese culture, African entrepreneurs developed different capacities. From their interaction

with the Chinese, Africans have been able to develop the capacity to construct representations and to share knowledge, which, in turn, have positively influenced their businesses. Through encounters with CMSP, Africans in China were able to develop and mobilise resources that have shaped their management skills.

## 5. Discussion

The results of this study offer a systematic model for further investigation into the impact of soft power and its managerial outcomes. Research conducted in the 1990s and 2000s construed China as a nation that the superpowers (such as the UK and the US) need not to worry about. Indeed, the belief was that due to economic and social hardships such as famine (Brown, 1995), China should not be considered as a competitive market, a great power or as a source of ideas (Segal, 1999). Furthermore, very few economists trusted data coming from China, which they said contained major exaggerations about the real growth of the Chinese economy (Rawski, 2001). Its entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001, which has favoured the internationalisation of the Chinese state, is considered to be the origin of its weakness (Gordon, 2001).

Today, according to the International Monetary Fund (2016), China dominates the world economy. This economic hegemony will continue until 2019. With regard to other economic measures such as consumption, China competes well with the USA and several industrial countries (Brown, 2005). Through FDI, aid, infrastructure construction projects, and other development projects, China's presence is felt in most African countries. Not much is known yet about how Chinese management culture influences Africans, in general, and those who had lived in China in particular. This study, therefore, is one of the first to explore the influence of Chinese managerial soft power on Africans who studied in China.

Through this study, we are able to see how CMSP enables changes in African managerial practices in global political economy (Wood & Bischoff, 2020). China influences developing countries not only through its political system or 'made in China' products but also through its ideas and cultural values that are adopted by African entrepreneurs without any form of coercion. Scholarship awards offered to Africans enable them to keep a positive impression of China, and sometimes go as far as to defend China's cultural values. It could be argued that the Chinese have passed their own indigenous knowledge to Africans and that they have become cultural bridges for the development of new ideas.

The results of this study, therefore, provide an innovative approach to developing a coherent model of power that integrates soft power and Chinese management practices into the concept of CMSP. The influence of the Chinese in developing some management skills of those African students who had lived and studied in China, and later returned to Africa to run their businesses; that is what we call Chinese Management Soft Power. These practices are not only authentically Chinese, but also influence Africans who studied in China. The adoption of these management practices by Africans in managing their own businesses in their home countries is done without any coercive measures on the part of the Chinese, thereby constituting an example of soft power. By using theoretical approaches from other disciplines (cross-fertilization), this study enriches business management. Modelling how international interactions affect business management skills, Chinese Management Soft Power offers new understandings for the field of business studies. Moreover, drawing the attention to China soft power in testing this approach is an appropriate and opportune choice.

In practical terms, the results of this study based on CMSP provide information for educators and administrators in China and Africa that enables them to formulate effective policies that will improve the quality of services being offered to international students, not only from Africa but also from other countries. Moreover, the findings of this research may also help future African students going to China develop

readiness and awareness about cultural differences between China and their home country, so that they can experience a smooth transition in their academic and sociocultural lives. This study is very useful in managing business relationships between Chinese, Africans and other nationalities as recommended by Cooke, Veen, and Wood (2017). This research also helps to understand migrants' accounts of cultural acculturation and not just organisational acculturation. In so doing, our study helps to illuminate the complex process of cultural adaptation that so many people experience in the current era of globalisation.

This study has implications both for the public and the private sectors. For policymakers, this study sends a strong signal to leaders regarding the need to know how to leverage on the experiences of Africans trained in China to develop local businesses and improve co-operation between China and Africa. African governments need to pay more attention to international entrepreneurship networks, which are important resources for business growth. Sub-Saharan African countries have experienced remarkable growth in recent years, but most firms are contented with low value-added activities, whereas knowledge, innovation and technology are the main drivers of economic growth (Das & Drine, 2020). It is assumed that opening up African countries to China can help their technological advancement by reducing the excessive dependence on commodity exports because the presence of foreign companies, especially the Chinese, should generate potential benefits for domestic companies that can learn from their technology, production process, and professional training and management skills. The understanding of management skills acquired by Africans that were trained in China is also a leverage that African leaders must take advantage of, thereby promoting knowledge transfer within the context of Sino-African joint ventures, especially with regard to public works contracts.

## 6. Conclusion

Despite advances in research, the existing literature about China and Africa continues to struggle with the question of how exactly to assess the impact of China's presence in Africa. Many authors attest to the existing gap in the study about China-Africa relations (Asongu & Aminkeng, 2013; Bredeloup, 2014; Corkin, 2012; Gu, 2009; Kaplinsky, 2006; Slabbert & Ukpere, 2011). Very few studies have addressed the process through which soft power can be translated into management outcomes. This study is an attempt to fill this gap by exploring the influence of Chinese soft power on African students who studied in China. We have demonstrated that Africans studying in China are being influenced by CMSP. This study is valuable in that it allows for a systematic assessment of students' different perceptions of the acquisition of management skills during their stay in China. Their different perceptions could lead to different management outcomes of some African businesses in the future.

The findings of this study highlight how Africans develop different strategies to cope with Chinese culture, and how they develop additional managerial skills such as risk-taking and pragmatism. The results show how former African students in China were influenced by CMSP. Using the lens of soft power to explore the impact that Chinese management has on Africans' skill development, this paper makes an important contribution to existing IR and business management literature. This topic becomes increasingly important as China continues to emerge as an important player in international business. The development of CMSP framework allows us to understand the acculturative process undertaken by international students from a sense-making perspective. This research has high-impact contributions that will advance future theorising and empirical research in the fields of international relations, management and international business.

It is important to note, however, that the results of this research might not be generalisable since social reality itself is dynamic. Therefore, we must recognize some limitations of this study, the first being about the population of former Africans students in China, which

we sampled. Due to the existence of Chinese manufacturing companies and Sino-African joint ventures (Ado, Su, & Wanjiru, 2017; Brautigam, Xiaoyang, & Xia, 2018; Lawther, 2017), it would be interesting to include African businessmen who work with Chinese multinationals or who reside in some Chinese cities. Secondly, it is obvious that participants in our study were drawn mainly from West African countries. Going forward, it will be necessary to carry out the same study with participants from countries of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa because of the high level of their business relations with China. In addition, it should be noted that nationals of West African countries do not seem to have the same entrepreneurial abilities, depending on whether the country is a former French or English colony (Austin, 2010). Finally, the meaning given by African entrepreneurs who studied in China to their current actions is situational. In a nutshell, it would be interesting to conduct longitudinal research on the subject and extend the exploration of the impact of CMSP to other regions.

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

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