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CHINESE SOFT POWER WOOS AFRICA



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It's just one sign of China's growing influence and spending power in the world that announcements at London's Marylebone Station are now made in Mandarin as well as English. It's for the benefit of hoards of middle-class Chinese shoppers heading to Bicester Village, the out-of-town retail complex where they can buy luxury brands of iconic British and European goods.

China's new-found wealth is perhaps even more evident in Africa where it has overtaken the United States as the continent's largest trading partner. According to data from John Hopkins University's China Africa Research Initiative China's exports to Africa have risen to \$103 billion this year compared to the US's \$27 billion.

Although the US is still the largest investor into Africa, China's economic muscle is impressive. Last year alone venture capital raised in China tripled in one year to over \$250 billion.

Africa has been identified by China as a key arena for the global influence it seeks. Mineral-rich Africa sits at the end of China's new Silk Road Economic Belt policy with which it plans to arrive as a dominant world power through trade and soft power. Its Africa ambitions are broad and stretch way beyond natural resources to embrace human resources.

China has launched a massive initiative to become Africa's leading partner across a range of soft power areas from education and culture to scientific research and innovation. It aims to harness the potential of Africa's emerging democratic revolution which will see the continent's population double in size to around two billion by 2050.

Africa already has the world's youngest population. The average age of an African is now just seventeen and that average age is dropping year by year. It is already a continent with a young demographic and another billion young people to be born in the next generation will put Africa's already beleaguered education systems under even further pressure.

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If Africa is to develop and tackle its endemic poverty and unemployment issues then education will be vital to develop the skills and training necessary to create jobs for this growing population. China has seen an opportunity here by developing a Scholarship programme for African students which is remarkable in its scale and ambition.

China's African Scholarship initiative now outstrips both the United States and the United Kingdom as the top destination for African students. By 2015 some 50,000 African students were studying in China, up from a modest 2,000 in 2003.

This dramatic increase follows pledges made at the China-Africa Cooperation Summits (FOCAC) to promote learning opportunities for African students at Chinese universities. Estimates based on FOCAC data suggest that Chinese Government scholarships have grown from 5,500 in 2012 to 18,000 in 2015, with commitments to increase this to 30,000 Government-sponsored African students by 2018. Private sector scholarships are expected to augment this figure to as many as 78,000 Africans studying in China by next year.

Compare this to the United Kingdom which in the same period has actually seen a decline in African student numbers from 35,070 in 2015 to 33,610 last year. If we look at figures for Indian students in the UK the decline is even more stark with a drop of more than 50% in the number of Indians studying in the UK since 2010 from 23,000 to just over 10,000 as the UK government continues to class overseas students as "migrants" and imposes harsher visa restrictions.

Given the UK's historic colonial links with Africa and India and the global reputation of the UK's Higher Education sector it is quite dramatic how China has now become a more popular destination for English-speaking African students.

Only France with 95,000 African students attracts more students than China. That may be because French-speakers from West Africa's Francophonie do not seem to have been incorporated into China's Scholarship system where English is used on several courses. Also most African students tend to study engineering courses which are taught in English.

China sees this massive investment in African education as an extension of its soft power to cultivate the next generation of African leaders and make the continent's emerging elites view China favourably as a good partner to do business with.

There's also a trend in Africa to "look east" to China's political and economic model which has lifted millions of people out of abject poverty in recent times. China is as keen to promote its political system as it is to increase its trading dominance.

A more cynical view suggests that China is using the Scholarship programme as a carrot to reward economic access and cooperation from African political leaders – often offering the scholarships to their children in return for government contracts.

However there is no doubt that this massive educational investment is part of a wider Chinese campaign to grow its influence in Africa. This campaign already has its facts on the ground: The Chinese State broadcaster CGTN has a wide spread of 23 bureaux across the continent, presenting what it describes as a more positive view of Africa than that provided by western media, and the Chinese equivalent of the British Council –The

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Confucius Institute- has centres in twenty African countries which offer Chinese language courses and exhibitions to promote China-Africa art and cultural links.

In government circles the South African government now sends its officials to attend summer schools in China, Kenya's President Kenyatta has adopted what he calls a "Look East" policy, while Zimbabwe has long-established military, political, and mining links with China.

The rest of the world is waking up to how China has risen to prominence in Africa. In response to this China's Asia regional rival Japan has pledged to invest \$30 billion into Africa over the next three years through its Japan-Africa Economic Forum, India has announced a \$15 billion investment into Africa this year through its India-Africa Business Forum, and Germany launched its multi-layered "Marshall Plan For Africa" at the World Economic Forum On Africa this year. Germany's plan is modelled on the US Marshall Plan that helped rebuild Europe after the second world war, and it hopes to work with its G20 partners to implement a "Compact With Africa" later this year.

This new scramble for Africa is well underway but while others try to catch up with China's economic dominance in Africa, it is perhaps China's educational and cultural ambitions that will prove be the more crucial factors in China's rise to world hegemony.

The question then will be what of Africa's coming billion young people? How will they benefit from this renewed interest in their continent?

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