

# International dimensions of the China Dream: A case study of media coverage in Kenya

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## Abstract

This paper examines media coverage of China-sponsored development projects in Kenya to understand more deeply China's global soft power strategies. Kenya is a hub for China's media presence on the African continent and an important node in China's Belt and Road Initiative. Examination of Kenyan news content in the period immediately following the 2012 launch of Xi Jinping's signature concept, the China Dream, as well as regression analysis of newspaper article characteristics, finds that the China Dream concept has not been adopted in a meaningful way by host country media outlets. This highlights the challenges facing China's leaders in shaping public narratives within countries characterized by strong independent media traditions.

**Keywords:** *China dream, development aid, media strategy, Kenya, Sino-African relations, soft power*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, China's leaders have sought with increasing determination to shape international perceptions of China's global rise. While the dramatic economic successes and military modernization under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule more readily seize the attentions of global audiences, these have been accompanied often by mistrust (Lieberthal & Wang, 2012), fear (Heer, 2022), and even envy (Klein, 2023). While many worry over the implications of renewed great power competition in a world anchored by the US and China as opposing economic and military powers, perceptions of China in countries outside of this bilateral relationship are critical to understand. China's influence throughout Afro-Eurasia bears scrutiny, especially the reception of Chinese narrative-building efforts in countries that are key to China's global development efforts within its Belt and Road Initiative.

Under Xi, the Party has staked new territory in its framing of China in the world. This confidence in China's leadership was expressed, albeit briefly, during a period of "wolf diplomacy" in which newly strident Chinese diplomats presented a more aggressive and overtly demanding public face to the world. Such wolfish assertiveness was quickly rolled back in favour of emphasizing China's soft power, or attractiveness to global audiences. This tradition of enhancing China's soft power in the world is evident in global promotion of newer concepts such as the "China Dream," which offers a more positive and optimistic vision for China, and its supporting cast of international partners, to enjoy a prosperous and dignified future.

To evaluate the international impact of the China Dream concept, this paper will explore media coverage of China in Africa, with a focused case study of China-Kenya relations. Africa is a continent of vital importance to China's economic development and symbolic of China's desire to promote "win-win" ties with the developing world. The importance of Africa for these endeavours is reflected in various official measures. During the period 2013 to 2018, Africa received 45 percent of total Chinese foreign aid, compared to 37 percent to Asian countries and 7 percent to Latin America (PRC State Council, 2021). Chinese FDI in Africa reached 4.2 billion USD in 2020, up from 2.7 billion USD in 2019, and it has cooperative tourism agreements with 31 African partners

(*Ibid.*). Further linking the regions are flows of credit: Chinese loans to African governments reached a peak of 28.4 billion USD in 2016 (Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2022).

Beyond tangible exchanges of monies and people, there exist additional channels by which China has sought to shape African narratives of China's rise. Events such as the China-Africa Media Summit, Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation, and Belt and Road Media Community Summit Forum have bound the media messengers of each region more closely together (PRC State Council, 2021). In recent years, training sessions for African journalists have attracted scholarly and popular attention (Eisenman, 2023; Jiang et al., 2016; Jowi, 2020). Media exchanges have focused on building rapport with African journalists and explaining Chinese media frames, such as the publishing of "constructive" news pieces which offer a more positive spin on China-related developments (Zhang & Machila, 2019). And as evidence is emerging of the adverse effects of Chinese aid on state-society relations in Africa (Atitianti & Asiamah, 2023), Chinese leaders must double down on the tools available to them to reshape China's image to African publics.

Drawing from qualitative and quantitative analysis of an original dataset of media stories covering China's development projects in Kenya, this study aims to explore the marriage of China's narrative-building efforts with hard development finance. It will focus on a case study of media efforts in Kenya, a strategic site for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Africa and explore whether and how the China Dream concept has been introduced to international audiences as a new narrative for material prosperity and well-being. Examination of news content, as well as regression analysis of newspaper article characteristics, finds that the China Dream concept has been pushed out intermittently via Chinese media sources but not adopted in a meaningful way by host country media outlets, except for op-eds placed by Chinese diplomats. This highlights the challenges to China's global soft power strategies as it seeks to coordinate the material side of its global development work with the dissemination of more attractive messaging.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Origins of the China Dream

Chinese leader Xi Jinping first used the term "China Dream" or "Chinese Dream" (*zhongguo meng*) in November 2012, early in his term as the newly selected CCP Party Secretary. During an official visit to the National Museum of China, he gave a speech in which he employed the phrase and invoked familiar themes of national resurgence and patriotism (Pattberg, 2013). The site for the unveiling of this new concept was well chosen; Xi delivered his remarks after reviewing the museum exhibit, "The Road to Rejuvenation". This permanent exhibit highlights the Chinese "century of humiliation" and frames it as a time of deep national trauma but also latent with the potential for present and future triumph. In his brief, seemingly extemporaneous, speech at the event, while joined by the CCP Politburo Standing Committee, Xi mentioned "rejuvenation" (*fixing*) more than half a dozen times (Xi, 2012 November 29). The idea of national rejuvenation had become a central concept within the China Dream, but rejuvenation as achieved within a global context.

The term China Dream had been in use for years before its articulation by the Party's top official. Former vice principal of the CCP's Central Party School Li Junru published a volume titled *The Chinese Dream* in 2006, and Li cites Chinese policy advisor Zheng Bijian as the forerunner for this book (Li, 2014). Both Li and Zheng were interested in building an intellectual foundation to frame China's rise in the world, which they labelled "peaceful development". In a pivot away from such diplomatic niceties, retired PLA colonel Liu Mingfu's book, also entitled *The Chinese Dream*, focused on articulating more assertive strategic positioning for China in a "post-American era" (Liu, 2010). Pre-2012 invocations of the China Dream focused on the consumer culture and material prosperity that are at the heart of the American Dream. The China Dream as articulated by Xi contains an amalgam of these Chinese and non-Chinese strands of thought, as Xi's China Dream embraces both material goals as well as assertions of national resurgence and China's rising global status.

After its initial public airing by Xi, the China Dream has been pushed out via all manner of public messaging channels available to the Chinese state: in posters, state-produced videos, official speeches, songs,

and mass media platforms, among other media. Materials have been generated for display in official spaces and to the general public, with online downloads available from the China Civilization Office of the CCP central propaganda ministry (Landsberger, n.d.). A particular target has been universities and the Communist Youth League (Tsai, 2020). Name recognition was achieved relatively quickly; by 2013, less one year after Xi's launch of the phrase, a survey conducted across 17 Chinese urban centres found that an impressive 92.4 percent of survey respondents were familiar with the term (Lu, 2015).

Since 2012, the China Dream has been unpacked further. It serves as shorthand for a comprehensive agenda of national prosperity. Following Xi Jinping's speech, the China Daily elaborated, "[The China Dream] embodies achieving prosperity for the country, renewal of the nation and happiness for the citizens. Only when the country is doing well, can the nation and people do well," (China Daily, 2014). There is an outward facing component to the concept, as it calls upon the Chinese people to have confidence in the Chinese system and Chinese path, given the pressures of a competitive global system (Zheng, 2014).

To lend the concept more heft for international audiences, in 2013 the China Daily published online a series, "Global view on the Chinese Dream," comprising brief essays by foreign policy experts such as Martin Khor, executive director of the Geneva-based South Centre, Jusuf Wanandi, affiliated with Indonesia's Centre for Strategic and International Studies Foundation, and Kenneth Lieberthal, senior fellow at Washington DC-based Brookings Institution. In Lieberthal's assessment of the China Dream, he highlighted the ambition underlying it and practical challenges: "This is a Dream that foresees massive adjustments in China's governance, even while maintaining the absolute supremacy of rule by the Party. It will require extraordinary skill to manage the politics of turning this broad Dream into operational programs that can successfully be implemented," (Lieberthal, 2014).

In 2017, during the convening of the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the concept of the China Dream was incorporated into the CCP Constitution, where it is mentioned twice as part of the foundation of party rule (CCP, 2017). The inclusion of the term China Dream in this key party document marks the elevation of this concept to a more permanent status and its centrality to Xi's leadership and eventual legacy (Economy, 2018). It has become a signature concept under Xi Jinping's leadership, with everything from individual flourishing, national prosperity, and banner global projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative falling under its remit.

### **Soft power, discourse power**

Scholars outside China who have analysed the China Dream take seriously the efforts by China's leaders to shape the world of ideas through powerful narrative frameworks. Some have noted the emergence of the China Dream as an alternative to the American Dream, in which a united – though insecure – Chinese nation might be contrasted with the destructive hyper-individualism of the United States (Callahan, 2015, 2017). Some have also interpreted it as an assertion of Chinese resurgence within a resistant global order (Callahan, 2016; Li & Shaw, 2014).

In media studies, scholars have framed the rollout of the China Dream by Chinese media as a "strategic narrative." Narratives (and narrative control) serve key political purposes for the party's leaders. In this regard, "strategic narratives" are "formed through communication media to structure expectations and behaviour in international systems ... and defin[e] and defend China's international image," (Hinck et al., 2018, p. 99). Propaganda campaigns surrounding the China Dream reinforce core party values and serve a powerful, popular legitimizing purpose for the party (Miao, 2020). In extending the "strategic narrative" framework from the domestic realm to the international, this study focuses on media coverage of the China Dream outside of China and its deployment to key international audiences.

Strategic narratives are nested within China's efforts to build up its soft power. China's leaders and elites have long sought to increase China's soft power in the world, conceptualized as the attractiveness of all things China-related to outsiders. During the 1990s, concurrent with the rise of soft power discussions in the US (Nye, 1990), China's leaders were "going global" and pushing an agenda of international investment, global market

expansion, and international people-to-people exchange (Shambaugh, 2013). A top-down effort to build China's soft power and international influence ensued (Li, 2008). At the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2002, General Secretary Jiang Zemin, in a nod to the influence of soft power, declared "in the present-day world, culture is interactive with economic and political activities, and its status and functions are becoming more and more outstanding in the competition in overall national strength," (Jiang, 2002). At the next Party Congress in 2007, General Secretary Hu Jintao invoked the term soft power in his political report, stating, "We must ... enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests," (Hu, 2007). Early in his tenure, Xi Jinping declared the need to "increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world," (as quoted in Shambaugh, 2015, p. 99). Paired with the belief that the international system was in a period of flux, with the US and Europe in decline, the time had come for China to correct the mismatch between the outsized soft power of weakening powers and China's own under-developed global influence.

One means for increasing a country's soft power is control over the discourse surrounding that country's culture, global influence, political system, and economic achievements. A related strategy in the CCP's vision for achieving greater legitimacy and authority is building up its "discourse power," or the ability to shape perceptions of China in the eyes of the Chinese public and the world (Rolland, 2020a, 2020b). This is evident in a focus on "speaking rights" in Chinese intellectual and policy circles and assertion that these rights connect to a country's material and ideational power. Discourse power can shape decisions and the resources and action that follow. Importantly, it draws attention away from critics of the regime. It is also a strategy for achieving what the Party believes can shore up its legitimacy, namely, framing China and its ruling party in a positive light and highlighting its myriad achievements over its enduring failures.

Soft power and discourse power alone are insufficient to advance a country's agenda on a noisy global stage. Instead, a combination of a country's hard and soft capabilities – so-called "smart power" – stands a better chance of achieving objectives. Deploying smart power, in turn, calls for "contextual intelligence" in which leaders utilize resources associated with soft power, such as diplomacy, media, and cultural outlets, together with institutions of hard power such as the military and instruments of economic power (Nye, 2009; Nye & Armitage, 2007). Smart power has been applied to recommendations for the reengineering of a given country's foreign policy. Within Chinese intellectual circles, soft power is intertwined with elements of hard power such as economic leverage and military presence; it is also the projection of China's culture and civilization along with its contemporary model of reform and opening up (Repnikova, 2022).

One test of China's ability to deploy the mix of resources implied by smart power is whether it can pair discourse-setting concepts such as the China Dream with its foreign aid and development finance agenda. If it is able to do so effectively, it can shape perceptions of its global rise. China's foreign aid offers a logical starting point for this assessment. Like other powerful countries, China deploys foreign aid with the intention of increasing its influence with partner countries and overall global legitimacy (Regilme & Hodzi, 2021). While military power is the clearest example of hard power, this has not been China's preferred method of making its global mark. Instead it has relied on ambitious foreign aid and development finance programs, which have traditionally been construed as hard power but may also have persuasive aspects of soft power to them (Blair et al., 2022). To the degree that aid is bestowed as a means to sway or co-opt a foreign entity, it has some of the qualities of soft power, but when proffered with punitive conditions or to gain real leverage over a country, it retains hard power qualities. Whether and how Xi's signature China Dream concept has been linked with foreign aid, especially to key international audiences, offers a test of China's ability to shape the global narrative in its vision.

### **The China Dream in Africa: A case study of Sino-Kenyan Relations**

Kenya looms large in China's Africa presence. It is a key link in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and serves as a major hub for Chinese media operations in Africa. BRI, which officially launched in 2013, strings together a breathtaking array of development projects across Afro-Eurasia, Latin America, and the Arctic. Kenya's

ports, especially those in Mombasa, are a critical node on the Indian Ocean leg of the BRI. The country is the most significant East African hub in the BRI's "maritime silk road," which connects China to Southeast Asia, the Asian subcontinent, Africa, and northwards to Europe.

Kenya was also the initial site for China's media push into Africa and remains the epicentre of the Chinese media presence on the continent. Nairobi became the home of China Radio International's (CRI) first overseas FM radio station in 2006, which was also the year when Xinhua transferred its regional office from Paris to Kenya's capital city. China Global Television Network (CGTN) Africa, an English-language subset of state-owned China Central Television (CCTV), is based in Nairobi and enjoyed the completion of new production facilities in 2012.

Kenya has been receptive to Chinese development aid, investment, and finance for a variety of reasons, including an interest in broadening its donor portfolio and the attractiveness of China's statements of non-interference and respect for the sovereignty of recipient countries (Otele & Etyang, 2019). At the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Xi Jinping elaborated "that China follows a 'five-no' approach in its relations with Africa: no interference in African countries' pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions; no interference in their internal affairs; no imposition of China's will on them; no attachment of political strings to assistance; and no seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation," (Xu, 2018, Sept. 4). The "no strings attached" approach has led to tangible shifts in Kenya's debt profile: by 2021, China was orders of magnitude the largest holder of Kenya's public bilateral debt. China held 67 percent of Kenya's external bilateral debt, trailed by next-largest lender Japan at 14 percent (Republic of Kenya National Treasury, May 2023, p. 25). Beyond financial entanglements, there is also a deeper affinity that dates to mid-twentieth century efforts by China to build solidarity with countries of the so-called Third World.

As a robust democracy, Kenya presents a challenging case for CCP officials wishing to shift the media and public narratives in a pro-China direction. The press remains a critical voice within civil society, and the public is accustomed to access to information, especially concerning matters such as public malfeasance and corruption. In response to this climate, Chinese firms have adjusted their messaging and outreach strategies, for example taking a more adaptive and proactive approach to turn media voices and public opinion in their favour (Li & Wang, Feb. 2023). This has not been limited to firm-level strategy on the part of Chinese companies. Chinese officials have taken their case to major media platforms in the country, for example Chinese diplomats from the ambassador to consular officer level have regularly published English language op-eds in prominent Kenyan newspapers in favour of a strong Chinese presence in Kenyan affairs. These op-eds are packed with specific examples of the ways in which Chinese largesse benefits Kenya, whether in the form of development loans (Guo, 2016, May 25), food aid (Guo, 2017, Apr. 20), or people-to-people exchange (Guo, 2018, Dec. 3; Liu, 2017, Sept. 8).

Given Kenya's central role in China's BRI and its selection as a base for Chinese media expansion on the continent, it is a prime test case for evaluating the power of Chinese narrative-building efforts abroad. The media rollout of the China Dream concept in Kenya can offer insights regarding the means by which China's leaders have drawn concrete connections between the aspirations of the China Dream and material resources such as development aid.

## **METHODS**

To explore China's narrative-building effort, this study focused on media coverage of development aid directed to Kenya between 2013 and 2017, the years immediately following the introduction of the China Dream concept. Media outlets included two prominent English language newspapers in Kenya, Daily Nation and The Standard. In surveys of newspaper readership in Kenya conducted in 2018, 2020, and 2021, the readership of these two papers was well above 50 percent among surveyed respondents for The Standard and nearly 80 percent for Daily Nation (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022). News coverage of Kenya-related projects that were reported in English-language Chinese global media outlets, including Xinhua, People's Daily, and China



Daily, was also obtained. China Daily has a very small audience in Kenya, ranking in the single digits as a percent of newspaper readership, according to surveys conducted during 2018-2021 (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022; Zhang & Mwangi, 2016). Still, Chinese officials exercise the greatest control over content in Chinese media outlets, so they are included for analysis and to compare with Kenyan-generated content.

The author collected newspaper articles, including straight news, feature stories, and op-ed pieces, for 56 Chinese development projects in Kenya. These projects covered the range of bilateral aid from China to Kenya, including major infrastructure projects, people-to-people exchanges, and donations for conservancy and education. A summary of these projects is given in Table 1, which presents a count of projects by type rather than their total monetary value. This is because the total value of monies committed to various projects is not reported consistently or transparently in government sources. By far the most common project area was education, with a total of 17 out of 56 projects (30 percent) focused on education-related matters. These included sending batches of Kenyan students on scholarship to China, construction of joint laboratories, or donating supplies to elementary schools. Another major group of China-funded development projects involved infrastructure. These were divided further into transportation-related infrastructure (e.g., highways, trains), energy-related projects, and health-related infrastructure (e.g., medical equipment and hospital construction). In total there were 21 infrastructure-related projects, of which 9 related to transportation (16 percent), 8 focused on energy and networks (14 percent), and 4 focused on health (7 percent). Development aid also served humanitarian objectives, for example assistance to drought victims or refugees in Kenya. Humanitarian projects numbered 7 total (12.5 percent). During this period there were a total of 5 conservation-related projects (9 percent) and 6 other development projects. This latter included unique projects such as loans to assist with the Kenyan government deficit, transfers to assist with Kenya's hosting of World Trade Organization ministerial meetings, and donations of weather equipment.

**Table 1: Chinese development aid projects in Kenya, 2013-2017, by sector**

Type of aid	Education	Infrastructure: Transport	Infrastructure: Energy	Infrastructure: Health	Humanitarian aid	Conservation	Other
Example (s)	Scholarships for study in China; training programs for officials	Construction of highways, construction of each phase of a train route	Construction of a power plant, dam, or electric vehicle network	Construction of hospital wings, donation of medical equipment	Food aid; donation of equipment after a building collapse; donations to refugee camp	Donation of anti-poaching equipment	Donation to host WTO meetings; donation of weather equipment; police station upgrades
Total number of projects (N=56)	17	9	8	4	7	5	6

Source: AidData. 2021. Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0

## Hypotheses to Test

One expectation is that media mentions of the China Dream would be most frequent while the concept is fresh and still newsworthy. Since its initial articulation in 2012 by Xi Jinping and subsequent rollout within China, the China Dream concept and language might be deployed most intensively abroad during this period as well. This suggests the following hypothesis:

H1: Media mentions of the China Dream are most frequent immediately after November 2012 and decrease with time as newsworthiness of the concept declines.

In considering development projects by sector, media coverage is more likely to include mention of the China Dream when the project relates to human capital development, for example how future generations may realize their dreams through the gift of education. While the material prosperity associated with the China Dream might plausibly connect to infrastructure projects, this is riskier because of the possible and real corruption scandals that might erupt around any given infrastructure project. Critical coverage of China-funded infrastructure was evident in Kenyan media outlets; the news angle on a Chinese-funded dam, for example, might focus on the land rights of those displaced by the project. The biggest and splashiest projects, such as the Kenyan Standard Gauge Railroad (SGR), received the most scrutiny, with national media coverage of legal challenges and issues with transparency and corruption on the part of Kenyan officials. This suggests a second hypothesis:

H2: Media mentions of the China Dream are more likely for education-related development projects.

A final dimension to consider in media coverage of the China Dream is who might be promoting this concept. The top-down nature of this concept, beginning with its articulation by Chinese elites and subsequent invocation by Xi Jinping in the presence of the Party's highest circle of decisionmakers suggests that it remains a lofty idea for high official use. One test is to see whether the China Dream might be used in news reporting or, even more, by interview subjects in Chinese and Kenyan media pieces, as this would indicate awareness of the concept at a more popular level. The most likely proponents of the China Dream concept, especially to an international audience, are Chinese officials briefed to do so. A third hypothesis derived from this reasoning is:

H3: Media mentions of the China Dream are most likely to be by Chinese officials.

Together, these three hypotheses explore the dissemination of the China Dream concept to a key international audience via mass print media outlets. Data analysis will probe variation in the usage of "China Dream" over time and explore whether it is more closely associated with certain development project sectors. It will also consider whether the China Dream is associated with elites or instead invoked at a more popular level.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

To test these hypotheses, the author collected English-language news articles in Kenyan and Chinese media outlets. News pieces were identified by searching for coverage related to Kenyan development projects listed in AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0, during the period 2013-2017. The totality of China's development aid to Africa, and specific African countries, is famously opaque, and AidData utilizes a transparent and replicable methodology to track these underreported flows of bilateral aid (Custer, 2021). The author then searched for newspaper coverage of each development project during the time period following a given project's known announcement or initiation date. A total of 246 relevant news articles were identified, of which 156 were published by Chinese media outlets (primarily Xinhua, People's Daily, and China Daily) and 90 by Kenyan media outlets (primarily the Daily Nation and The Standard).

Across the collected newspaper articles, the China Dream was mentioned in a total of three articles, amounting to a very scant invocation of this concept. Of those three articles, two were published by Chinese media outlets (China Daily and Xinhua). In a 2014 Xinhua article promoting PRC Premier Li Keqiang's tour of Africa, the article noted, "Africa is an important external factor for the realization of the 'Chinese Dream,' as it is a key destination of China's products, equipment, technology and capital. A booming China is a reliable cooperation partner to Africa and a staunch supporter of Africa's 'Dream of Development,'" (Xinhua, 2014, Apr. 30). Later in 2014, then PRC Ambassador to Kenya, Liu Xianfa, published an op-ed in the Daily Nation declaring, "China and Africa are closely connected and share similar dreams. China needs Africa, while Africa also needs China," (Liu, 2014, Sept. 30).

Broadening the search parameters to more suggestive, soft propaganda terms, the word “dream” – often referring to the aspirations of a subject in a feature story – was mentioned in 23 articles, or 9 percent of collected articles. All of these mentions were in Chinese news outlets or in op-eds written by Chinese officials for Kenyan newspapers. In only one instance did a Kenyan human interest news piece mention how “being able to learn Chinese is a dream come true” for a university student, in reference to the Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi (Daily Nation, 2020, July 3). Language related to the China Dream was generally absent in independent Kenyan media reports.

To test the hypotheses, ordinal logit regression analysis was conducted on the collected articles. The dependent variable was whether a given article mentioned the China Dream. Each article was coded depending on whether there was no mention of the China Dream, some related mention of Kenya or a Kenyan’s “dreams”, or a direct mention of the China Dream in relation to Chinese investment in Kenya’s development. Predictors included the year of article publication, development project sector, and whether a Chinese official authored the article. Results of the regression analysis are given in Table 2. Several predictors were statistically significant, and many are correlated with an increased odds of a China Dream mention in the media. This was the case for articles on education and energy-related development projects, with a much larger effect for education media coverage. Interestingly, the odds of a China Dream mention decreased significantly in articles focused on health-related projects. Turning to the three hypotheses stated previously, overall, there was mixed support in the data.

**Table 2: Ordered logistical regression results of China Dream media mentions**

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	China Dream media mention Odds ratio (S.E.)
China development project category: Education	9.161*** (0.428)
Health	0.096*** (0.311)
Transport	1.576 (0.594)
Energy	3.626** (0.640)
Humanitarian	1.445 (0.587)



Conservation	2.492
	(0.757)
Article year of publication	0.938***
	(0.0002)
Article authored by Chinese official	2.240*
	(0.422)
Observations	247
Log likelihood	-78.2144
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Sources: Author's dataset and AidData's 2021 Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 2.0

There was support for the first hypothesis, which surmised that media mentions of the China Dream would be most frequent immediately after November 2012 due to the relative newsworthiness of the term. Direct media mentions of the China Dream took place in 2013 and 2014. Expanding the search to media content invoking the “dreams” and aspirations of Kenyans and Kenya more generally, the most frequent mentions were in 2015 (5 articles) and 2017 (7 articles). Turning to the ordinal logit model results, the odds of the China Dream being mentioned in an article decreased by 6 percent each subsequent year (0.94 times less likely), and this was a statistically significant finding.

The second hypothesis, which predicted more China Dream references for education-related projects, is partially supported by the data. There were no direct invocations of the China Dream in media accounts of education and training programs. Instead, media accounts focused on the language of aspirations and win-win cooperation between China and Kenya. One example can be found in the media coverage surrounding China's investment in Kenya's Technical and Vocational Training Laboratories, a project beginning in 2010 and organized into phases during the subsequent decade. Regarding the second phase of the project, a Kenyan student was quoted in the China Daily, “I have been yearning to apply theories learned in the classroom to solve every day challenges affecting our society. Skills upgrade and modern machines provided by China will enhance realization of our industrialization dream,” (China Daily, 2017). Turning to the results of the ordinal logit model, education projects significantly increased the odds that language related to “dreams” and aspirations would be deployed. Language related to the China Dream was 9 times more likely in media coverage of a project focused on education, and this finding was statistically significant.

The odds of a China Dream mention in media coverage varied for other types of projects. If a project was focused on the health sector, for example the donation of scanning equipment or construction of a hospital maternity wing, the likelihood of China Dream language decreased (0.1 times less likely), a statistically significant finding at the 1 percent level. Conversely, the likelihood of a China Dream mention increased by 3.6 times if a development project focused on the energy sector, and this was statistically significant at the 5 percent level. Findings for development projects in the transport, humanitarian, and conservation sectors were not statistically significant. This highlights the uneven associations drawn between the China Dream and development efforts in Kenya.

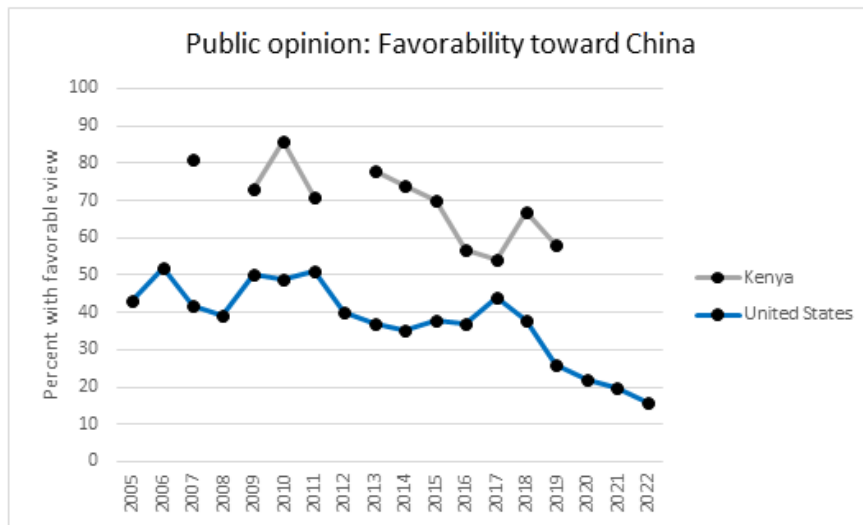
There was partial support for the third hypothesis. If a Chinese official submitted an article to a news outlet, either Chinese or Kenyan, the odds of that article including mention of the China Dream doubled (2.24 times more likely), though this was statistically significant at the 10 percent level. Of the three articles connecting the “China Dream” to Kenya’s development, two were written by Chinese officials, specifically the PRC Ambassador to Kenya at the time. An additional four articles referencing the “dreams” of Kenyans were written by Chinese officials, often consular officials stationed in Kenya. Turning to Kenyan counterparts, only four articles on China-funded development projects were authored by Kenyan officials – typically at the ministerial level – and none mentioned the China Dream or any related language.

## Discussion

While the China Dream concept is a lofty term invoked by high officials, it has not been applied frequently in mass communications around China’s development projects in Kenya. The preceding analysis reveals a gap between official documents and declarations, as one realm of public discourse, and narrative-building of a more pedestrian nature. Vision-setting documents such as State Council white papers have included China Dream language. In a 2014 white paper on foreign aid, the “Chinese Dream” was mentioned in the same breath as “respect and support [for] developing countries’ exploration of development paths suited to their own national conditions,” and China’s desire to “realize the world’s dream of lasting peace and common prosperity,” (PRC State Council, 2014). By 2019, a white paper on China’s global vision more clearly articulated the domestic aspects of a “Chinese dream of prosperity and rejuvenation for their country” and how this “is a dream shared by the Chinese with peoples of other countries,” (PRC State Council, 2019). A more recent 2021 white paper focused more narrowly on Sino-African relations emphasized the “community of shared future” concept, but all mention of the China Dream – or any dreams for that matter – was dropped (PRC State Council, 2021). Over the course of the 2010s, China Dream language had gained force, from Xi Jinping’s speeches to the CCP constitution to white papers. Yet during this period of peak concept-building, the application of this concept in media accounts of actual development work abroad was quite thin.

Instead of pushing the China Dream concept to Kenyan audiences, Chinese officials often tailored public diplomacy to local goals, for example framing Chinese and host country goals as in alignment. In a 2016 op-ed for the Daily Nation, the PRC Ambassador to Kenya Liu Xianfa strove to connect China and Kenya’s respective goals: “History and reality bear witness to the fact that China’s two centenary goals mirror the aspirations of Kenya’s Vision 2030. China is on its way to realising the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation while African people are working hard towards poverty eradication and socio-economic development. China-Africa cooperation enjoys great potential, vigour, and bodes well for a bright future,” (Liu, 2016, Aug. 18). China’s two centenary goals speak to development outcomes that China’s leaders would like to achieve by the one hundredth anniversaries of the founding of the Party and People’s Republic, in 2021 and 2049, respectively. Similarly, Kenya’s Vision 2030 is about elevating the standard of living in the country by 2030 through broad investments in public goods.

Perhaps the disconnect between high declarations of the China Dream and relative silence in messaging to a key international audience represents a missed opportunity. In the decade that the China Dream concept has served as a pithy catch-all for China’s aspirations, Kenyan public opinion of China has declined. According to the Global Attitudes Surveys conducted by Pew Research, Kenyan public opinion toward China peaked at a high of 86 percent favourability in 2010, to decline steadily over the decade to a low of 54 percent in 2017 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Public opinion toward China, Kenya and US compared, 2005-2022**

Data source: Pew Research Global Attitudes Surveys

Notes: Responses were based on the following question, “Please tell me if you have a very favourable, somewhat favourable, somewhat unfavourable or very unfavourable opinion of China.” Favourability percent indicated in table combines “very favourable” and “somewhat favourable” responses.

All of this highlights the challenges facing China’s leaders as they attempt to shape the discourse around China in the world and, importantly, international perceptions of China’s intentions and impact. During the period of study, Kenya’s media did not adopt language related to the China Dream propaganda push. The only instances where this language was placed in Kenyan media was via op-eds submitted by Chinese officials. Kenya presents a hard case, given its independent media landscape and traditions of critical inquiry. Yet it is also an important case given Kenya’s geopolitical position within China’s Belt and Road Initiative and its selection as the beachhead for China’s media presence on the continent.

## CONCLUSION

In exploring the rollout of the China Dream concept in Kenya, this study examined one aspect of China’s attempts to increase its global soft power. Through a focused case study of media coverage of the China Dream, as related to Chinese development projects in Kenya, this study found infrequent use of the term in major media outlets, both Chinese and Kenyan. Considering the breadth of Chinese development projects in Kenya, the China Dream was most likely to be connected to projects focused on people-to-people exchange, such as university scholarship programs and official training courses. Chinese officials, rather than everyday interview subjects, were most often the messengers employing China Dream language. Media coverage employed both direct mentions of the China Dream as well as adjacent language about “Africa’s dream of development”, though this was often in media outlets not widely read in Kenya.

These findings suggest additional avenues for research. Newspapers present one outlet among many for the dissemination of new ideas; more research might be conducted on messaging via video, radio, or other information and communication technologies such as social media platforms. Public opinion surveys directly measuring knowledge and perceptions of the China Dream among non-Chinese audiences would also ascertain the impact of Chinese narrative-building endeavours.

In comparison to the more bottom-up processes that led to global recognition of older catchphrases such as the “American Dream,” promotion of the China Dream has been top-down and state-led. The idea remains in its infancy, and perhaps its goals are unattainable in light of serious structural challenges within contemporary China, not least economic slowdown, demographic change, and yawning inequalities (Whyte, 2021). At the same time, there is growing scepticism in Africa with regard to China’s intentions and impact. The China Dream may nonetheless endure as a political slogan, since it has the formidable weight of China’s top leader behind it and the party’s propaganda apparatus to nurture it. Whether the term gains wider usage, recognition, and support may serve as a marker of China’s ability to impose its chosen vision on the world, and to do so on its own terms. In this sense there may be a dream within the dream.

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