Language, Visuality and Representation of Nigeria - China Relations in Nigerian Digital Space

Paul Onanuga* and **Victoria O. Gbadegesin****

Abstract

Nigeria – China relationship has witnessed significant upsurge in the last decade. The budding relationship however continues to attract diverse perceptions as reflected in digital spaces. In this study, ten images – cartoons – from the Internet were subjected to Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. The depictions of Chinese influence and activities in Nigeria are engaged and representations that oscillate from financial/economic concerns to issues around sociality and culture are identified. Within the discourses around economy, China is revealed as a superpower attempting to exert its influences through subtle force to take over national sovereignty, while Nigerian leaders are shown as complicit in the exploitation of their citizens. In the context of sociality and culture, China is represented as a thriving society which is worthy of emulation although issues around racism and discrimination are also tackled. The diversity of representations manifests the complications that continue to engage issues of globalisation, fear of domination, and China's rise in Africa.

Keywords: Language, Visuality, Multimodality, Nigeria, China, Media Politics

Introduction

Chinese presence in Nigeria, and by extension the African continent, has witnessed significant upsurge in the last decade. This can be hinged on Chinese prosperity, the unrelenting wave of globalisation as well as China's emergence as a super-power (Botma, 2013). One must also not lose focus on the resources – human and material – which the African continent possesses in humongous quantities and which continue to reinforce the irony of its endemic poverty. This reality, as well as individual government's push for foreign direct investments, continues to encourage international interventions and presence on Nigerian soil. Although Oduro-Frimpong (2021) contends that the academic examination of Sino-Africa relations are scarce, the last five years have seen a significant rise in the scholarly engagements of the relationship between the continent and China. Wasserman (2018: 108) for instance identifies that China 'exert[s]

---

*   Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State;
       emperornugadellio@yahoo.com
**   Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State.

its 'soft power' in Africa as part of its outward-looking international relations policy'. This is realised chiefly through its business relations and loans, media as well as cultural programmes through, for instance, the Confucius Centre. Nigeria on the other hand, is perceived as a giant which has failed to realise its potentials. In trying to change the narrative, successive government administrations have sought international interventions in order to access the vast human and material resources. The implication is that the intersection of these different national outlooks and the narratives surrounding them bring forth multiple potentialities of meaning formation and perception analysis.

In this study however, attention is given to the pictorial representations and the implications of the accompanying semiotic resources in the portrayal of Nigeria-China relations in the Nigerian digital space. Harrison, Yang and Moyo (2017: 25) assert the place of visuality in interrogating public perception particularly within the subject of China affairs when they submit that 'visual images are significant in framing and shaping representations of China and Chinese people within Africa'. Such representations sometimes reinforce existing stereotypes while in some other times, there are more nuanced and complex portrayals. Zheng, Cheng and Coetzee (2021: 119) also draw attention to the Africa-China relations being narrowed to 'scholarship on soft diplomacy and the knowledge produced in the service of advertising or business interests'. Through these forms of publications, there is the foregrounding of the uneven positionalities that manifest in Africa-China collaboration. Madrid-Morales and Gorfinkel (2018) also examine how Africa is portrayed on Chinese media. The study relied on data from the documentary series *Faces of Africa*, broadcast on CGTN Africa, the African branch of China Global Television Network (CGTN, formerly known as CCTV International) since 2012. It concluded that 'compared to news programmes on both CGTN and other global networks, the documentary series allow a more positive and humane portrayal of African people' (Madrid-Morales and Gorfinkel, 2018: 917).

The significance of interrogating national depictions and renditions is invigorated by Dumitrica (2019) which identifies the ideological implications and power dynamics that are imbricated in the centralization of nationhood within the context of branding and globalisation. This resonates with Thurlow and Jaworski's (2003: 600) term: 'globalization of nationality', an expression which encodes the diversity of global mobility – of goods, people, tastes, etc. The resultant effect is 'repeated encounters with difference in the banality of everyday life' (Ong 2009: 460) and these ultimately find representation in the media. How then do the Nigerian non-mainstream media especially on the Internet represent the constant contact and manifestations of Chinese presence in the Nigerian environment? Within which facets are these representations dominant? How do these representations resonate or reflect the prevailing attitudes in the larger Nigerian context? I answer these questions by analyzing from a multimodal semiotic perspective how language is used in the representations of China-Nigeria relationship in ten (10) online images.

China, Nigeria, Business and other things involved…

Historically, beyond sharing the same national days – October 1, there was no official interaction between the governments of Nigeria and China until February 1971, and this 1971 meeting led to officials signing off on Nigerian–Chinese trade and economic cooperation agreements in 1972. As a sign of improving relations, Nigerian head of state Yakubu Gowon visited Beijing in 1974, meeting with Mao Zedong (Ogunbadejo, 1976). These bilateral relations had been on and off until 1999, when, with the return to democratic rule and the need to open up the Nigerian economy, President Olusegun Obasanjo made high-profile visits to solicit Chinese presence and assistance. These visits, largely under the auspices of Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) yielded fruits as Chinese loans as well as Chinese business presence began to appear on the Nigerian scene. The approaches towards more Chinese presence persisted with the subsequent administrations of Presidents Umaru Yar'Adua and Goodluck Jonathan. This was taken to a larger level by the immediate past administration of President Muhammadu Buhari that promised to undertake a diversification of the Nigerian economy. Shehu (2018) refers to the Chinese investment drive in the Nigerian economic space as 'harvest from China' and represents them as part of the gains of the current administration. Although Shehu who was part of the media team of the Nigerian presidency then regarded the relationship between China and Nigeria as a 'Win-Win cooperation', there are growing concerns over the debt profile of the country as well as the reliance on loan acquisition to fund many of government activities. This concern is not limited to Nigeria.

One identifies the manifestations of such concerns from several other African countries. For instance, Diakon and Röschenthaler (2017) explored the spectrum of Chinese representation and influence in the Malian media space. In their analysis, there was reliance on newspaper reports and radio broadcasts. They (ibid: 96) concluded that 'despite a widespread appreciation of China's infrastructure projects and affordable consumer goods available to Mali's population, there is also much suspicion that ranges from uncomfortable feelings to outright criticism of the grand 'win–win' narrative'. Thus, although 'trade and mutual benefits' (van de Looy, 2006: 6) have significantly replaced hitherto aid interventions in the cooperation between African countries and China, there are still fears of the ramifications of these relations especially within the spheres of neocolonialism. Osei-Hwedie (2012: 2) also documents concerns over 'unbalanced economic and political ties' between Africa and China. Lammich (2019: 100) further asserts that Chinese involvement 'is not based on any long-term strategy but rather reflects the changing interests of various Chinese actors engaging in Africa'.

Beyond the fears of economic imperialism, the reticence among the masses can be grasped from the non-democratic tenets which the Chinese communist government upholds in its dealing with the Chinese citizens. Reports of state control and media-gagging are rife. It is worthy to point out that the Nigerian government in banning the use of Twitter in 2021 was reported to have considered negotiating with the Chinese Cyberspace Administration office on the building of a Nigerian internet firewall, with the purpose of guarding against '*comments that "harm*

national security" or "harm the nation's honour and interest"' (Ukpe, 2021). The ban came into effect on June 5, 2021 after Twitter deleted one of the president's tweets for violating the rule – issuing threats capable of inciting public violence on the platform. Consequently, the fear is that more African governments might be willing to embrace state control despite the economic and social challenges that continue to manifest in their countries.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. One must recognise the historical basis for Africa-China cooperation. Arising from widespread perception of Western domination, China and Africa had to synergise in order to chart a way through perceived repression and control which western nations wielded over developing countries. Thompson (2005: 1) acknowledges the long-standing relationship when he states that:

> China's influence and sound relationship in Africa are the result of many years of investment in building relations through aid, trade, and cultural and technical exchange – not just the by-product of China's recently booming economy and soaring demand for African raw materials.

This investment drive is also couched in anti-western rhetoric. In fact, China leverages this by asserting that it provides a more rewarding partnership with African nations; it also contextualises its relationship by pointing to its ability to grow from being 3rd world to becoming a superpower as a way of validating its interest in helping African countries. Indeed, some scholars contextualise Chinese extension of its spheres of influence as a challenge to longstanding Western domination (Large, 2008; Galchu, 2018). However, China recognises the soft power implications of its alternate 'saviour' ideology through its 'Going Global' strategy (Li and Rønning, 2013) which is often used to overshadow whatever negative press instigated against its presence on the African continent.

The Digital Media and Nationalist Discourses

Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2020) draw attention to the possibilities of digital media influencing the rise and propagation of nationalist discourses. This reputation, the authors attest, is hinged on the Internet's central role in viralising the discourses of populism as engendered by 'the communication strategies of populist leaders and parties worldwide who … spread nationalist rhetoric' through the use of digital media platforms (331). Rongbin (2018) navigates this reality through reference to 'discourse competition' as a way of mapping the institutions and actors that influence online nationalist discourse. Indeed, Schnieder (2018) examines the implications of the digital media scape on the entrenchment of popular nationalistic fervor, using China as a case study. The study avers that digital technologies are used in encouraging nationalism, fuel user participation, as well as contribute to government algorithm filters for social control. Wu (2007) also avers that nationalism continues to enjoy prominence on online ecosystem. While attention is often paid to the negative affirmation of nationalist discourse online, Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2020: 332) stipulate that digital platforms

have merely stimulated and established a resurgence of 'more visible and exclusive forms of nationalism'.

The inevitability of cross-cultural and cross-territorial interventions within the context of nationalist discourse online was remarked by Eriksen (2007: 1) who submits that 'the Internet has in the space of only a few years become a key technology for keeping nations (and other abstract communities) together'. Through these inter-relationships, it is thus relatable to examine how perceptions manifest within differing contexts of digital engagement especially as these realisations mirror the lived realities of the actors. Since digital platforms enable global connectivity and the diversity of online ecologies, it is inevitable that the coming together of multiple identities, ideologies, cultures and national orientations invigorate, and have implications on the constructions and perceptions of power, hegemony and identities. Nations also acknowledge these possibilities as they frame online nationalism as well as employ propaganda in accentuating performative actions that construct sovereignty (Arsène, 2020). One must note however, that while nations may seek to influence the narratives around their identities and public perception, other nations also weigh in by depicting their beliefs and prejudices about such nations. Such a narrative forms the focus of the current study as the current study interrogates the public representations and perception of China and the Chinese in Nigerian cartoons.

Methodological Details

Ten images – cartoons – are culled from the Internet for the study. This is realized through a streamlined keyword search using expressions: Nigeria + China +cartoon + newspaper – on Google Image webpage between January and March, 2023. These keywords helped to delimit the image entries and specifically addressed the areas of data selection interest. The entries were then sieved to ensure that the selected images are from within Nigeria. The final selected images extended from newspaper graphics to those shared by cartoonists and private users online. As non-state agent generated images, it is believed that the images can be considered as replications of popular public perceptions. The ten images, purposively selected since they reflected the focus of the study, also represented manageable data since multimodal analysis would incorporate the multiple modes of meaning identifiable in an image. Selecting more than ten images would have made the analysis unwieldy.

The selected images were subjected to the tenets of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). MCDA systematically studies how multiple semiotic modes – a mode being a meaning-making element in communicative practices – beyond written or spoken language are used in media text (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). Such modes range from images to photographs, diagrams, posture, gaze, graphics, colour, font choice, video, and audio (Kress, 2009). These modes are often used complementarily in texts. Although there is usually a primary or dominant mode in the multiplicities of modes, MCDA identifies the different modes of a text and interrogates how they function together in order to project a central meaning

(Kress, 2000). The implication is that there is an acknowledgement of the interaction, co-occurrence and co-deployment of these modes for meaning formation (Jewitt and Kress, 2003). In the application of this theoretical orientation to the data for this study, there is specific engagement of linguistic form in terms of written text, gaze, posture, colours, and images, and how these interact within the narratives around Chinese representation in Nigerian digital space.

Analysis and Discussions
In this section, attention is paid to the analysis and discussion of selected images. These are achieved through a thematic frame, that is, the overarching topics that bind similar images together are used in their categorization, after which the specific contexts of each image is provided. Economic considerations rank high, followed by references to sports, culture and other social issues. These are discussed forthwith.

Mounting the Economic Saddle: Representations of Nigeria-China Relations
Economic cooperation lies at the centre of the collaborative ventures between Nigeria and China (Melber, 2007; Udeala, 2010). The Chinese model of economic prosperity represents a template which many developing countries seek to emulate. Therefore, a significant number of the images are expressive of the burgeoning Chinese economic impulses in Nigeria. Representative images are used in discussing how visuality as semiotic resource intersects perceptions within the context of Nigeria-China relations.

Image 1: *Cooking the 2016 budget*

Image 1 is constructed within the context of the 2016 budget preparation. The then Nigerian president, President Buhari who served between 2015 and 2023, is sitting on a stool with the budget on a blazing stove. Two children, both with plates, stand in front of the president, obviously expectant on the proceeds from the budget. The malnourished children represent Nigerians. The president however persuades them to be patient since the budget is still being

sorted. While budget preparation is usually expected to be largely a national affair, the president's remark that 'too many hands were involved in preparing this food' suggests that there were both domestic and foreign influences which had to be satisfied in the budget preparation. 'Food' in this context sustains the Nigerian political metaphor which refers to public funds as national cake, to which political office holders have access and consistently misappropriate (Nche, 2011). One of the children however asks 'What is Baba cooking?' The second child's response: 'He just returned from China. It must be Chinese cuisine' introduces the Chinese dimension to the Nigerian 2016 budget. The current Nigerian presidency emerged in 2015. It also coincided with increase in access to Chinese loans (Balogun, 2023). In fact, Raji and Ogunrinu (2018: 124) state that 'more than 200 Chinese companies are currently operating in Nigeria, thus making the country the largest recipient of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) – about $15 billion out of its $26.5 billion investments in Africa as of 2016'. Thus, by contextualising the budget within Chinese-Nigeria relations, the children's remark represents the perception of growing reliance of the Nigerian economy on Chinese financial interventions. The president's response that: 'too many hands were involved in preparing this food' further indexes the children's take on Chinese activities in diverse facets of Nigerian contemporary realities.

Image 2: *Nigeria as dumping ground*

A persistent government narrative in Nigeria is the need for industrialization, in order to diversify from the nation's reliance on oil exportation. Efforts towards achieving this have hardly yielded significant benefits, with crude oil still maintaining its status as the major source of the country's revenue. Indeed, the dire economic situation and the tough condition of doing business in the country have stifled indigenous businesses while many foreign investments have relocated to more comfortable climes[1]. The result is a largely consumer-oriented national economy with little or no competitive production. An interesting dimension emanates in Image 2 when Chinese subtle business engagement is indicated through an open and overly filled container with an inscription: China's used cars. The Chinese flag is above the inscription. According to Mubarik (2020), Nigeria is the third largest importer of used cars in the world

and the largest in Africa. The criticisms of this intervention are hinged on the reality that instead of China siting factories and manufacturing industries in Nigeria, it has merely turned the country, its African business 'partner' into a dumping ground for its used products. Image 2 also has the presidents of both countries in the middle of the container and a dumping site. The Chinese president has a broom with which he intends to clear the path for the offload of the 'used cars'. The Nigerian president however directs: Just dump them here! This attitude is in tune with the widely believed complicity of Nigerian leaders in the exploitation of their country and the citizens. The trope of Nigeria as a dumping ground is therefore not essentially an international perspective foisted on the country; indeed it has roots in the attitudes of Nigerian leaders who often times do not care how their country and citizens are treated as long as they (as political leaders) enjoy the powers and perks of their offices. Thus, while the Chinese president probably had intentions of doing the proper thing: clearing the dumpsite, since he would have expected same to be done in his country, the Nigerian president dissuades him from doing so.

One further notices, in the sub-text, the subliminal message of identity and its crisis in the Nigerian setting. While the container or shipment from the Chinese president bears the Chinese colours and emblem, clearly showing an identity, the shapeless dump upon which 'Nigeria' is written has nothing that particularly presents the identity of the country. The attachment of the denotative 'dump' as used by the Nigerian president to reference his domain also has emotive implications: Nigeria is a dumpsite. And since dumpsites do not reject thrash, it means any nation can dump its wastes in Nigeria, as China is being welcomed to do.

Image 3: *China Playing Games in Africa*

The 'imperial gaze', alternatively called the 'colonial gaze', a trope which has persisted in the positionality of the African continent with respect to wealthier and more technologically

advanced contexts, comes to play in Image 3. This form of gaze represents the hierarchy of relations – one which places locations with the colonial experience at the bottom of the rung, at the mercy of the more powerful and hegemonic social groups or nations. Fasan (2021) advances a 'common interest' formulation in the collaboration between Nigeria, and Africa by extension, and China – a recommendation consented to by Cheng (2021) who also suggests the 'mutual gaze' in order to bring a balance to the relationship. However, the reality suggests otherwise. Image 3 has the African continent on the foreground, aided by the Chinese president at the north of the image while dice in the colours and image of China lie below. The Chinese president says: 'our turn to roll the dice in Africa'. 'Our turn' references the earlier European colonisation which ravaged the African continent and which still has neo-colonial implications on the continent. In the use of 'our', there is a manifestation of an unchallenged right. The president's gaze – face up – as well as the open-body posture suggests assurance and confidence. This is affirmed with his palm and fingers – rendered as significantly larger than the hand – which are used to throw the dice. The four dragons of unequal length on the African continent also signal the spreading influences of China. The sub-text in the image is the allusion to the Chinese incursion as a game of power and influence. The dragons and the rolling of the dice accumulate towards the game of snakes and ladders – only that the current game involved dragons and hegemony! The Chinese 'turn' implies contestation for access to what were hitherto Western spheres of influence on the African continent.

Of course, one may further interpret Image 3 as China not only staking its claim for access to African resources – human and material – but also doing so while evoking a spirit of benevolence. By throwing the dice, there is a suggestion that the activities of the Chinese are only by dint of luck. However, the ubiquity of the dragons on the African map suggests otherwise. The ladders also lean forward, suggesting a foothold on the continent.

Image 4: *The Mirage of 'Equal partnership'*

Image 4 brings into closer focus the relationship between Nigerian political office holders and Chinese diplomats. While the public rhetoric affirms that the collaborative efforts and bilateral agreements between Nigeria and China are made on equal footing, the reality as evinced in the image suggests otherwise. A Nigerian political figure shakes the finger of a

Chinese official while beaming: We are equal partners. The equational status which the Nigerian official seeks to project is however untrue. While the Nigerian official and his retinue are dwarfish, the Chinese is so huge that the Nigerian leader can only shake one of his fingers. The image is embedded in irony: beyond the textual profession, there is obvious inequality. Indeed, the Chinese has to bend in order to greet the Nigerian entourage. His use of a finger is intentional, especially as the other fingers are clasped tight. The offer of the index finger which is usually used as a pointing finger in order to give direction is an acknowledgement of the limitations of the Nigerian partner. According to Brusati, Enenkel and Melion (2011), the index finger represents power and is as well considered as a sign of teaching authority. The Chinese use of the index finger is therefore testament to powerful authority, in contrast to the Nigerians.

Added to the preceding narrative is the identification that the Nigerian team is in a line with their faces up, as they meet the Chinese. This further contextualises the conundrum which 'we are equal partners' presents. The face-up gaze suggests inferiority and the need for direction from an acknowledged superior. One may also regard the framing of the entourage as one reliant on outsider validation.

Image 5a: *Africa, Leadership Crisis and Chinese Intervention*

Image 5 is more brazen in its portrayal. Again, the financial powers of China is foregrounded. A giant bowl with the inscription '$60 Billion' is in the foreground. This bowl is surrounded by three African leaders – the then Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari (he left office in May 29, 2023), his Ghanaian counterpart, Nana Akufo-Addo, and the now late former Tanzanian president, John Magufuli. The three presidents are elated – signified by the money in the air as well as the dancing moves in their gestures. The Nigerian president is depicted in a popular Nigerian dance move – shaku-shaku – popularised by the now global Afrobeats genre. The Ghanaian president is also in a victory pose – fist clenched in jubilation. The same can be said of the Tanzanian president who wears a wide smile. At the background however is the Chinese president, Xi, who, with a wheelbarrow that has 'China' on it, carts away the African continent. The continent is presented in dark colours, probably a rehash of 'the dark continent' used by Henry Morton Stanley during his exploration during pre-colonial administrative times (Pimm,

2007). While Stanley's epithet was in view of the little knowledge any outsider had of the continent at the time, the current depiction is in recognition of the continent's fertility (rich human and mineral resources). Thus while the African leaders rejoice over the $60 billion Chinese largesse, the Chinese man wheels away 'the continent'. The dearth of quality leadership, which Onanuga (2018) argues lies in the heart of the development conundrum on the African continent, is again at play. Tied to the giant bowl containing the billions of dollars is a chain with the label: DEBT, suggesting that the largesse is a loan which is to be repaid. However, the leaders are presented as clueless while the Chinese are represented as deceptive, cunning and with an ulterior motive. Several news reports catalogue what has been remarked as the 'Chinese debt-trap', a situation which already affects about 15 African countries (Servant, 2019). Dokand Thayer (2019) recounts the words of Guy Scott, a former Zambian agricultural minister in an interview with *The Guardian*: 'We've had bad people before. The whites were bad, the Indians were worse, but the Chinese are worst of all.' In addition, China's activities in Kenya through loans and constructions are also under scrutiny as there are fears that the port of Mombasa may be seized in view of the terms of the contract which states 'neither the borrower [Kenya] nor any of its assets is entitled to any right of immunity on the grounds of sovereignty, with respect to its obligations' (Dokand Thayer, 2019). Agabi (2020) records the possibilities of the same happening in Nigeria as the Nigerian Minister of Transportation, Mr. Rotimi Amaechi, was reported to have said: 'if Nigeria defaults on loans repayment, China has right to take over those assets and run them until it recovers its money'. These are amidst allegations that China had at different times infiltrated the communications servers of the African Union building, a project sponsored and built by China to aid Sino-Africa relations (Dahir, 2018). The $60 billion in Image 5a is thus a Greek gift to aid Chinese infiltration and unrestrained access to the mineral and material resources available across different African countries.
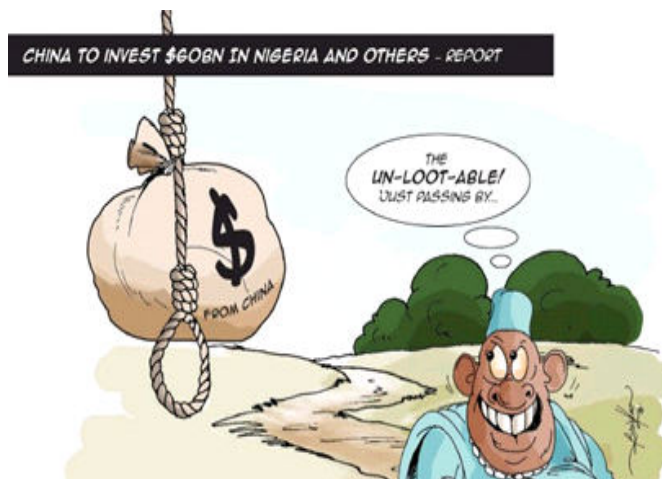

Image 5b: *Chinese Fund is 'unlootable'*

Related to Image 5a is Image 5b since they both reference the $60 billion earmarked as investment fund by the Chinese government. In Image 5b, the money is tied in a sack and close to it is a noose. A Nigerian public figure – politician, civil servant or business person – is shown eyeing the hanging bag of money. The bulging eyes, the erect ears and the wide grin show that the man is obsessed with financial gratification. However, the man's thought is indicated above his head: 'the un-loot-able! Just passing by…'. The hangman's noose and the image character's remarks constitute positive framing of Chinese attitude to financial recklessness and corruption. Wang and Dickson (2021) document how China fights institutional corruption by revealing the scandals of corrupt government officials. Saleem, Jiandong and Khan (2020) also acknowledge the existence of anti-corruption frameworks in Chinese administration, although they also identify systemic corruption. Kwok (2018) however testifies that despite allegations of dictatorial tendencies by the Chinese president Xi Jinping, there is widespread affirmation of his interest in stamping out governmental and corporate corrupt practices. The president's interest is hinged on his project of asserting China's place as a super-power and as an enviable nation. One can submit that this viewpoint is already yielding fruits as the Nigerian politician's fear of looting Chinese intervention funds is based on the no-nonsense approach to corrupt practices. For the Nigerian politician therefore, the arrest and trial of Chinese politicians and business people in China signal that the Chinese government is ready, willing and able to stamp out corruption and would not be deterred to question complicit foreign citizens. The persona in Image 5b therefore prefers to 'pass by' rather than succumbing to the temptation of looting.

Image 6: *Picking between paying debt or losing sovereignty*

If the preceding discussions on Chinese loans and other forms of interventions have revealed some ambivalence on the perception of and fears around Chinese presence in Nigeria, Image

6 complicates the narrative. Here, the Chinese president is shown on a robot-like machine – which also looks like a massive bomb – which, apart from having the Chinese flag attached, has a debtors' list written on it. The list has eight names, all of which are African countries. The Chinese president is depicted as peering down on a list in his hands. The document is titled 'Debt Profile'. The Chinese president is also pulling a national flag while a personality rendered as 'African leaders' is shown struggling to hold on to the flag, a symbol of sovereignty and national authority. The robot used by the Chinese president has however held the legs of the bawling 'African leaders', thus he is unable to get to his feet. From the base of the robot, there is a flowing glue which holds down 'African leaders' helplessly on his back. The robot represents the technological advancement of the Chinese and indicates that China does not need to physically ensure compliance before it gets its will done by these debtors. The unperturbed facial expression of the Chinese president shows he is unmoved by the weak protestation by the leaders. Instead, he is ready to forcefully take over these countries. The bye-line beneath the image attests to this: Your sovereignty or you pay your debt now! The exclamation affirms that the only condition for these African leaders to maintain their sovereignty is by clearing their national debts. This concern dovetails with existing concerns over the magnitude of international debts owed by many African nations. Many of these countries are so much indebted that most of their annual budgets are only sustained by foreign aid and more loans! The reality therefore is that many would be unable to pay 'Now!' if they ever found themselves in the situation depicted in Image 6.

Across Images 1 to 6, one identifies tropes that reify the dichotomy of 'Benevolent vs receiver'. Within these, Nigeria in particular is represented as reliant on Chinese benevolence in order to thrive. Through these, one identifies the re-enactment of the colonial and postcolonial 'White saviour mentality' where foreign interventions are portrayed as beneficial despite the obvious exploitation and despoliation that follow. There is no doubt, as also represented in Images 2 and 6, that Nigerian leaders are complicit in the foreign exploitation of indigenous resources. Their actions are exacerbated by the mindless looting and mismanagement which follow some of the loans which these governments take. Regardless of this complicity, China and the Chinese are represented as poised to take over Nigerian sovereignty while the Nigerian government and its officials are revealed to be docile (at one extreme end of the spectrum) and overt accomplices in the repression of their citizens.

Beyond Economics and Loans: Manifestations of China in Sports, Culture and Other Social Issues

Although economic issues are dominant in the narratives around Nigeria-China relations, there are other social issues which manifest therein – even if they continue to reflect dependency signaled by borrowing. Jackson (2019: 40) corroborates this when he states that 'the relationship is much more complex than the simplistic idea of "resource diplomacy"'.

Image 7: *Medals at the Olympics*

Image 7 navigates through the context of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games which because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic held in 2021. Nigeria eventually placed 78th winning two medals – one silver and one bronze, despite fielding 55 participants across several games. China on the other hand won 88 medals, placing 2nd. Image 7 was however constructed while the Olympics was ongoing. At the point, China led the medals table while Nigeria was yet to win anything. In the image, an aide to the then Nigerian president presents the table to the President and also projects the possibility that Nigerian athletes might not win any medal. The aide however mentions to the president: Your Excellency, Sir, are you thinking what I am thinking? The president's response that: 'Exactly! At the end of the games, we borrow medals from China' ridicules the penchant for borrowing from China. For one, it foregrounds the cluelessness often attributed to the Nigerian political class which has since abdicated its function of properly running the country. Instead, these leaders are more concerned with their international image and the perks that come with their offices. President Buhari's 'borrow medals from China' reminds one also of his predecessor's 'America will know' slip. President Goodluck Jonathan had responded to the allegations of massive corruption involving billions of US dollars during his administration by saying: "If you steal $20 billion today, America will know"[2]. Through their remarks and attitudes, one identifies willful abdication of responsibilities on the part of these leaders. Further to the identifications in Image 6, the blank paper in front of the then Nigerian president also indicates that he is not exactly bothered with the onerous task of leadership, especially as the prevailing thought is that China can always intervene.

Image 8: *Chinese businessman is made Chief*

In April 2019, news broke that a Chinese national was to be made a chief in a Northern Nigerian community. Further clarification showed that Mike Zhang, a Chinese trader in Kano, was to be conferred with the title of "Wakilin Yan China". The event which involved his turbaning held on April 25 at the Emir's palace in Kano. In many Nigerian communities, chieftaincy titles are given in recognition of a person's contributions to the society. When they are conferred on people who are not traditional landowners, they are usually used to promote social integration and stimulate productive relations. Mike Zhang was recognized as a chief and leader of the growing Chinese community and, by the instalment as Chief, was expected to act as the representative of the Chinese community in the Kano royalty. While the attempt to recognise and integrate the ever-growing Chinese community is commendable, the reality is also subsumed in larger economic and identity politics. It is therefore not surprising to find in one of the news reports that:

> While this is not the first time a foreigner from another country has been given such a position by the Emir, the selection of a Chinese chief still comes with mixed feelings for several people as the Chinese have been accused of slowly taking over the continent. (Johnson, 2019)

This 'mixed feelings' and fear of domination by the Chinese are acknowledged in Image 8. The Emir who is conferring the title watches – gazing upward – as the Chinese who adorns the attire for the ceremony edits the Nigerian flag by painting in the Chinese stars on the flag. 'Chinese integration' – which is given prominence as it is written on the Chinese man's regalia – is presented as having implications for Nigerian sovereignty. The Chinese person leverages 'Chinese business' since the aim of attracting business opportunities and commercial gains is the reason for the Nigerian move to integrate foreign collaborators. However beyond the

economic undertone, there is also the fear of cultural imperialism. Johnson (2019) refers to the accusation that the Chinese are 'slowly taking over the continent' and this submission finds expression in existing viewpoints. Sishuwa (2019) and Khodadadzadeh (2017) remark the increasing influence of China on the African continent and point out the percolating implications of its soft power. In fact, there are insinuations that China is nothing but a new colonizing power, seeking to exploit Africa while also subtly imposing its cultural norms. Shaji (2014) projects that while there is a perception that Chinese incursion may diminish Western influences on Africa, the reality is that the hitherto existing binaries which play up hierarchies in collaboration will manifest in the near future.
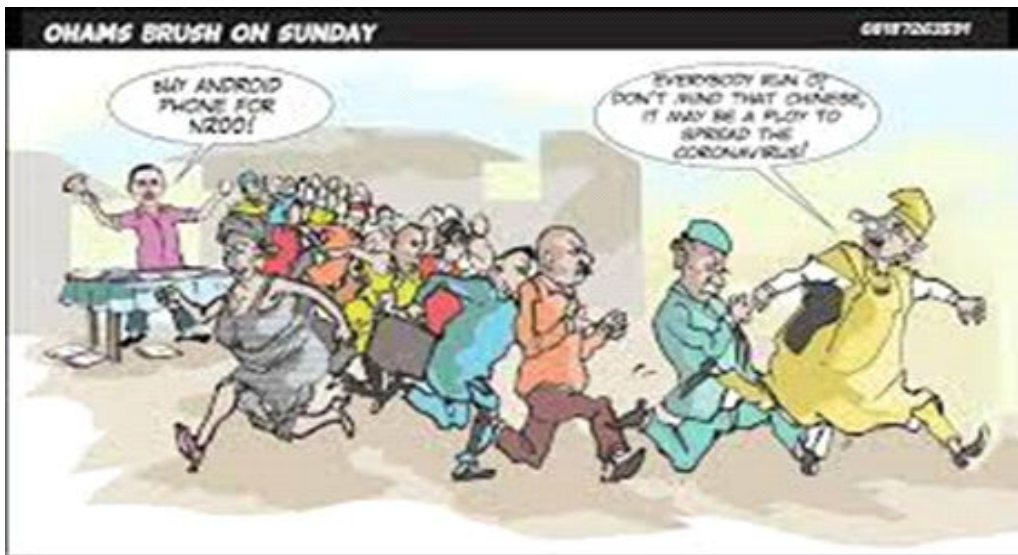
Image 9: *Coronavirus pandemic and discriminatory practices*

Adebayo (2021) documents the widespread discriminatory practices which are visited on African residents in China. He historicises this reality by specifying that the prejudices and marginalisation visited on Africans in China during the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic have roots in pre-existing attitudes with 'other' people with black skin. Cheng (2011), Hood (2013) and Adebayo and Omololu (2020) are some other studies which have explored the typecasting and marginalisation which Africans are subjected to in China. In Nigeria, as well as in many other African countries, foreigners especially those with white skin enjoy significantly positive social identities and privileges. The politics of identity is framed within narratives where the colour of the skin as well as nationality in terms of economic prestige and geopolitics become pedestals for the individual. In Image 9 however, one encounters an alteration, a change even, to the subsisting narrative. A Chinese man is shown marketing an android phone for a ridiculously cheap price: ¦200 (approximately 49 cents). Ordinarily, this would have elicited instant patronage. However, one of the Nigerians around screams: 'everybody run o.

Don't mind that Chinese, it may be a ploy to spread the coronavirus'. Unsurprisingly, other people around flee. One of the downsides to the coronavirus pandemic are the discriminatory practices, xenophobic and political rhetoric, and racist language which rapidly rose amidst the pandemic. This unwholesome representation is however not limited to Nigeria. Addo (2020), Hahm *et al* (2021), He *et al* (2021) and Gao and Liu (2021) attest to the widespread discrimination and name-calling which Asians as a demographic were subjected to as an aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic across different countries and in different facets of human activity. These realisations contextualise the politics of identity and representation, and how social realities influence people's attitudes. Thus, while the business acumen of the Chinese is normally hailed, using the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic to victimize the Chinese/people of Asian origin negatively affected the existing collaboration.

Conclusion

Nigeria-China relations is a very topical issue, particularly when one engages the discourse from the context of Chinese incursion into Africa as well as the Chinese scramble to flex its muscles as a global superpower. In this study, an interrogation of the representation and perception of Chinese presence in Nigeria through online images – cartoons – has been undertaken. This was necessitated by the increasing presence of Chinese influence and activities in the country. Different perspectives were identified to the portrayals. A dominant positive motif present in the representations of Chinese presence in Nigeria, and by extension the African continent, is the acknowledgement of the contributions to industrialisation, although that too is enmeshed with the politics of local content since many Chinese companies prefer to bring in Chinese nationals to fulfil tasks that might be beneficial to local communities. There is also notable acceptance of the necessity for loans in order to facilitate infrastructural development. The concerns however lie in the mismanagement of the loans as well as fears of Chinese domination. Regardless, one must however note a recognition as well as appreciation of Chinese interventions in infrastructural development and the stimulation of manufacturing development in Nigeria.

On the other hand, in the discussions, one further identifies a tentativeness and suspicion of the motives of Chinese presence in Nigeria. In addition, there are shreds of distrust most of which stems from the practices of Chinese employers who usually are oppressive of their workers and who rarely work in line with established labour laws (Ayeni, 2020; Abolade, 2020). Furthermore, through the representations in these images, one recognises latently existent colonial hangovers which suggest fears over the possibilities of a Chinese takeover and re-colonialisation. The colonial experience and the postcolonial and neo-colonial lived realities continue to haunt many Africans – Nigerians inclusive – who are thus wary of foreign interventions.

References

Abolade, Lukman (2020). 'Slaves in their country: Story of hardship by Nigerian workers in Indian, Chinese factories'. *International Centre for Investigative Reporting* (ICIR), 28th December, 2020. Retrieved on 20th November 2021 from: https://www.icirnigeria.org/story-of-hardship-by-nigerian-workers-in-indian-chinese-factories/

Adebayo, Kudus Oluwatoyin (2021). Racial Discrimination in Uncertain Times: Covid-19, Positionality and Africans in China Studies. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 33 (2): 174-183. DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2020.1824769

Adebayo, Kudus Oluwatoyin, and Femi O. Omololu. (2020). "'Everywhere Is Home': The Paradox of'Homing' and Child Upbringing among Nigerian-Chinese Families in Guangzhou City."*International Sociology*, 35 (3): 241–259.

Addo, Isaac Yeboah (2020). Double pandemic: racial discrimination amid coronavirus disease 2019. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 2 (1): 1-4. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2020.100074.

Agabi, Chris (2020). Nigeria: Loans - China Can Seize Assets If Nigeria Defaults –Amaechi. *Daily Trust*, 30th July, 2020. Retrieved on 3rd November, 2021 from: https://allafrica.com/stories/202007300138.html

Arsène, Séverine (2020). Complicating Digital Nationalism in China. *China Perspectives* 2: 53-57. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.10196

Ayeni, 'Tofe (2020). 'China-Africa: Spotlight turned on abuse of Nigerian workers'. *The Africa Report*, 3rd September, 2020. Retrieved on 20th November 2021 from: https://www.theafricareport.com/39952/nigeria-spotlight-on-abuse-of-local-workers-after-public-allegations/

Balogun, Folake (2023). Nigeria's borrowing from China triples to $4bn under Buhari. *Business Day Nigeria*, April 24, 2023. https://businessday.ng/big-read/article/nigerias-borrowing-from-china-triples-to-4bn-under-buhari/

Botma, Gabriël J. (2013). Cultural flows in the Chinese empire: The case of Africa. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, 34 (3): 6-24. DOI: 10.1080/02560054.2013.834833

Brusati, Celeste, Enenkel, Karl A. E. andMelion, Walter (Nov 11, 2011). *The Authority of the Word: Reflecting on Image and Text in Northern Europe, 1400-1700*. Brill. p. 168. ISBN 978-9004215153.

Cheng, Yinghong (2011). "From Campus Racism to Cyber Racism: Discourse of Race and Chinese Nationalism." *China Quarterly*, 207: 561–579.

Cheng, Ying (2021). What Can We Learn from Africa? Teaching African Cultures in China.*Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 33 (2): 140-151. DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2020.1824776

Dahir, Abdi Latif (2018). China "gifted" the African Union a headquarters building and then allegedly bugged it for state secrets. *Quartz Africa*, January 30, 2018. Retrieved on 3rd November, 2021 from: https://qz.com/africa/1192493/china-spied-on-african-union-headquarters-for-five-years/

Diakon, Birama and Ute Röschenthaler (2017). The Chinese presence in the Malian mediascape, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*,29 (1): 96-113. DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2016.1241705

Dok, Akol Nyok Akol and Thayer, Bradley A. (2019). Why China Is Taking over Africa's Resources One Country at a Time. The National Interest, July 31, 2019. Retrieved on 3rd November, 2021 from: https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/why-china-taking-over-africas-resources-one-country-time-70526

Dumitrica, Delia (2019). The ideological work of the daily visual representations of nations. *Nations and Nationalism*, 25(3), 2019, 910–934.DOI: 10.1111/nana.12520

Eriksen, T. (2007). Nationalism and the Internet. *Nations and Nationalism*, 13 (1): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2007.00273.x

Fasan, Rotimi (2021). African Studies and Sino-Africa Collaborations: Towards Our "Common Interest" *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 33 (2): 194-200. DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2020.1824768

Galchu, J. (2018). The Beijing consensus versus the Washington consensus: The dilemma of Chinese engagement in Africa. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 12(1): 1-9.

Gao, Q., and Liu, X. (2021). Stand against anti-Asian racial discrimination during COVID-19: A call for action. *International Social Work*, 64(2): 261–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820970610

Harrison Philip, Yan Yang and Khangelani Moyo (2017). Visual representations in South Africa of China and the Chinese people. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 29:1, 25-45, DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2016.1253460

Hahm, H.C., Xavier Hall, C.D., Garcia, K.T., Cavallino, A., Ha, Y., Cozier, Y.C., and Li, C.(2021). Experiences of COVID-19-related anti-Asian discrimination and affective reactions in a multiple race sample of U.S. young adults. *BMC Public Health* 21(1563): 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11559-1

Hood, Johanna. (2013). "Distancing Disease in the Un-Black Han Chinese Politic: Othering Differencein China's HIV/AIDS Media." *Modern China*, 39 (3): 280–318.

He, L., Zhou, W., He, M., Nie, X., and He, J. (2021). Openness and COVID-19 induced xenophobia: The roles of trade and migration in sustainable development. *PLoS ONE*, 16(4): e0249579. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249579

Jackson, Steven F. (2019). Two Distant Giants China and Nigeria Perceive Each Other. *Journal of European, Middle Eastern, & African Affairs*, 1(2): 40-74. https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JEMEAA/Journals/Volume-01_Issue-2/JEMEAA_01_2_Jackson.pdf

Johnson, Elizabeth Ofosuah (2019). 'Chinese man made chief in northern Nigeria'. *Face2face Africa,* April 23, 2019. Retrieved on 20th October, 2021 from: https://face2faceafrica.com/article/chinese-man-made-chief-in-northern-nigeria

Jewitt, C. and Kress, G. R. (Eds.). (2003). *Multimodal literacy*. New York: Peter Lang.

Khodadadzadeh, Omid (2017). China in Africa: A Modern Story of Colonization? A case study of China's engagement in Angola. A Master's thesis submitted to the Department of Government, Uppsala University. Retrieved on 21st October, 2021 from: https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1191904/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Kress, G. (2000). Multimodality. In Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures, (Edited by Bill Cope & Mary Kalantzis). London: Routledge, 182-202.

Kress, G. (2009). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. London: Routledge.

Kress, Gunther R., and Theo Van Leeuwen. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication.* London: Arnold.

Kwok, D. (2018). 'An Investigation into Best Practices and Lessons Learnt With Respect to China's Crackdown on Corruption'. *Joseph Wharton Scholars*. Available at https://repository.upenn.edu/joseph_wharton_scholars/49

Lammich, G. (2019). Stability through Multilateral Cooperation: China and Regional Security in Africa. *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, 9(1), 100–123. https://doi.org/10.2979/africonfpeacrevi.9.1.05

Large, Daniel (2008). Beyond 'Dragon In The Bush': The Study Of China–Africa Relations. *African Affairs*, 107/426: 45–61.DOI: 10.1093/afraf/adm069

Li,Shuboand Helge Rønning (2013). China in Africa: Soft power, media perceptions and a pan-developing identity. Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) Report. Retrieved on 10th November, 2021 from: https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/%204943-china-in-africa-soft-power.pdf

Madrid-Morales, D., and Gorfinkel, L. (2018). Narratives of Contemporary Africa on China Global Television Network's Documentary Series Faces of Africa. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 53(6), 917–931. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909618762499

Melber, Henning (2007). *Current Africa-China Issues*. Stockholm, Sweden: Elanders Gotab.

Mihelj, Sabina and César Jiménez-Martínez (2020). Digital nationalism: Understanding the role of digital media in the rise of 'new' nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism*, 27 (2): 331 – 346. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12685

Mubarik, Abu (2020). 'Nigeria is the highest importer of used vehicles in Africa, third globally'. *Face2Face Africa*, November 8, 2020. Retrieved on 20th November 2021 from: https://face2faceafrica.com/article/nigeria-is-the-highest-importer-of-used-vehicles-in-africa-third-globally

Nche, George Christian (2011). The Concept of National Cake in Nigerian Political System: Implications for National Development. Bassey Andah Journal, 4(1): 79-94. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280131102_The_concept_of_national_cake_in_Nigerian_political_system_Implications_for_national_development

Oduro-Frimpong, Joseph (2021). "We Dey Beg": Visual Satirical Media Discourses on Contemporary Ghana-Sino Relations. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 33 (2): 218-229, DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2020.1824777

Ogunbadejo, Oye (1976). 'Nigeria and the Great Powers: The Impact of the Civil War on Nigerian Foreign Relations'. *African Affairs*, 75 (298): 27.

Onanuga, Paul A. (2018). Exploring Post-Colonial Leadership Crisis in Africa: A Linguistic Stylistic Analysis of Osundare's *The State Visit* and *Two Plays*. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 34 (1): 133-149. DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2018.1447875

Ong, J. C. (2009). 'The cosmopolitan continuum: locating cosmopolitanism in media and cultural studies'. *Media, Culture and Society*, 31 (3): 449–466.

Pimm, Stuart L. (2007). Africa: Still the 'Dark Continent'. *Conservation Biology*, 21 (3): 567-569. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4620852

Raji, Shiitu Adewole and Adenike Ogunrinu (2018). Chinese Investment and its Implications for Nigeria's Economic Security. *Brazilian Journal of African Studies*, 3 (6): 123-142.

Rongbin, Han (2018). *Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience*. New York: Columbia University Press.

SaleemHummera, Wen Jiandong and Muhammad Bilal Khan (2020). Determinants of corruption in China: a policy perspective. *Journal of Chinese Governance*, 5 (3): 297-321. DOI: 10.1080/23812346.2018.1516388

Schneider, F. (2018). *China's digital nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Servant, Jean-Christophe (2019). China steps in as Zambia runs out of loan options. *The Guardian*, 11th December, 2019. Translated by Charles Goulden. Retrieved on 3rd November, 2021 from: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/dec/11/china-steps-in-as-zambia-runs-out-of-loan-options

Shaji, S. (2014). Asian Involvement in Africa: A Perspective on Emerging Binaries in the Global South. *South Asian Survey*, 21 (1–2): 151–163. https://doi.org/10.1177/0971523115592519

Shehu, Garba (2018). News Insight: Buhari's $10billion harvest from China. September 8, 2018. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/09/news-insight-buharis-10billion-harvest-from-china/

Sishuwa Sishuwa (2019). 'Cultural imperialism with Chinese characteristics'. *Mail & Guardian*, 31 May 2019. Retrieved on 21st October, 2021 from: https://mg.co.za/article/2019-05-31-00-cultural-imperialism-with-chinese-characteristics/

Thompson, D. (2005). 'China's Soft Power in Africa: From the Beijing Consensus to Health Diplomacy'. Retrieved on 12th October, 2021 from: https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-soft-power-in-africa-from-the-beijing-consensus-to-health-diplomacy/

Thurlow, C. and Jaworski, A. (2003). 'Communicating a global reach: inflight magazines as a globalizing genre in tourism'. *Journal of SocioLinguistics*, 7 (4): 579–606.

Udeala, Samuel Onuoha (2010). Nigeria-China Economic Relations under the South-South Cooperation. *African Journal of International Affairs*, 13 (1&2): 61–88.

Ukpe, William (2021). Twitter Ban: Report says Nigeria and China working on internet firewall. June 7, 2021. Retrieved on 7th October, 2021 from: https://nairametrics.com/2021/06/07/twitterban-report-says-nigeria-and-china-working-on-internet-firewall/

Van Hoeymissen, Sara (2021). China Studies in Africa. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 33:2, 201-209, DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2020.1824775

van de Looy, Judith (2006). Africa and China: A Strategic Partnership? *ASC Working Paper 67/2006 of the African Studies Centre*, Leiden, The Netherlands. https://www.ascleiden.nl/pdf/wp67.pdf

Wang, Y. and Dickson, B. (2021). How corruption investigations undermine regime support: Evidence from China. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 1-16. doi:10.1017/psrm.2021.27

Wasserman, H. (2018). China-Africa media relations: What we know so far. *Global Media and China*, 3(2), 108–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436418784787

Wu, Xu. (2007). *Chinese Cyber Nationalism/ : Evolution, Characteristics, and Implications*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Zheng Weidi, Ying Cheng and Carli Coetzee (2021). Thinking China from Africa: Encounter with the Other Other. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 33:2, 119-129, DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2020.1824779

Web Sources for Images
Image 1: https://www.nairaland.com/3058877/hilarious-cartoon-what-buhari-cooking
Image 2: https://punocracy.com/nigeria-peoples-republic-of-china-phase-ii/
Image 3: https://gga.org/cartoon-aif-41-looking-east/
Image 4: https://gadocartoons.com/china-africa-equal-partners/
Image 5a: https://sunnewsonline.com/africa-chinas-debt-diplomacy/
Image 5b: https://www.pressreader.com/nigeria/daily-trust/20160208/282033326237807
Image 6: https://ntm.ng/2020/09/07/cartoon-by-moses-ebong-3/amp/
Image 7: https://www.facebook.com/BestChoiceSports/photos/a.1596193617150122/3539996059436525/?type=3
Image 8: https://thisisafrica.me/politics-and-society/chinese-integration-chinese-businessman-named-a-chief-in-nigeria/
Image 9: https://sunnewsonline.com/cartoon-76/

Footnotes
[1] https://punchng.com/multinationals-exit-costs-nigeria-n94tn-in-five-years/
[2] https://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/05/bringbackourgirls-dont-know-location-abducted-girls-gej/