

# Chinese Television in Africa

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Sciences Po Bordeaux

Theory, Culture & Society  
2021, Vol. 38(7-8) 233–250

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DOI: 10.1177/02632764211012033

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## Abstract

On the basis of the results of an ongoing research project on the activities of the Chinese media company StarTimes in Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, this paper analyses the fluid and fragmentary dimension of the engagements between Chinese media and African publics, while equally emphasizing the power dynamics that underlie them. Focusing on a variety of ethnographic sources, it argues for an approach to the study of Chinese media expansion in Africa able to take into account, simultaneously, the macro-political and macro-economic factors which condition the nature of China–Africa media interactions, the political intentions behind them (as, for example, the Chinese soft power policies and their translation into specific media contents), and the micro dimension of the practices and uses of the media made by the actors (producers and consumers of media) in the field.

## Keyword

African media, audiences, China–Africa relations, Chinese television, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, soft power

Over the past 20 years, research projects on the analysis of China–Africa relations have multiplied, generating the emergence of what has been seen as a new field of studies (Alden and Large, 2018). The growth of interest in this topic reflected the exponential increase in the interactions between these two regions of the world, which had already been in contact for centuries (Siu and McGovern, 2017). If the first generation of researchers focused mostly on the geopolitical and macro-economic aspects of China–Africa relations, more recent works began to explore the dense and complex landscape of human interactions, focusing on the analysis of migration patterns, diasporic engagements, and forms of cultural exchange. As part of this trend, the analysis of the media representations of China–Africa relations and the study of the expansion of Chinese media in Africa became a particularly relevant topic. This mirrored the growing effort by China to positively transform the

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international image of its presence in Africa by investing massively in the expansion of state media companies across the continent and by supporting private media enterprises targeting the African markets. The importance of this sector for China became such that since 2006 reference to it appears 'in all the action plans of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation [FOCAC] guiding Sino-African relationships' (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2018: 2214).

The majority of the earlier studies about this phenomenon adopts the analytical lens provided by Joseph Nye's soft power theory (1990), a paradigm widely popular in China among government officials and scholars after the translation of Nye's work into Mandarin in 1992 (Lai, 2012). These studies mostly focus on the expansion in Africa of Chinese state media companies, such as the Xinhua news agency or the China Global Television Network (CGTN),<sup>1</sup> and tend to read their activities through the prism of the Chinese government's political intentions in the continent. Following a trend established by much of the researches belonging to the first generation of China–Africa studies, these works produce a top-down approach that positions China at the center of the picture, marginalizing the role of African actors and overlooking the qualitative variety and multiplicity of the small-scale interactions happening in the field (Mohan and Lampert, 2013; Jedlowski and Röschenthaler, 2017). In so doing, these studies have participated in producing a polarized understanding of China–Africa media interactions, more preoccupied with evaluating the outcomes of China's media expansion in Africa in positive or negative terms than with the elaboration of more sophisticated theoretical and methodological approaches able to grasp the complexity of these engagements (Wekesa, 2017; Alden and Large, 2018). These studies have thus contributed in circulating what Julia Strauss defined as 'incommensurate simplifications' (2013: 158) about the realities of China's media involvement in Africa.

If the analysis of the plans outlined throughout the 2010s during the various FOCACs held in China and in Africa (in 2012, 2015, 2018) confirms the Chinese government's explicit efforts to expand its media influence in Africa by financing broadcasting infrastructures, media content production and exchange, and the training of African media professionals (Jiang et al., 2016), recent researches show the importance of nuancing and complexifying the top-down analysis presented in earlier studies. Paola Voci and Hui Luo (2018: 7), for instance, emphasize how, despite the importance of the role that the state might play, the kind of cultural influence that China aspires to develop in Africa might emerge rather as the result of the 'heterogenous, ambivalent and unpredictable relationship' between independent cultural actors and 'the officially articulated vision' of the Chinese government. In this sense, the analysis of Chinese media expansion in Africa should not abandon its focus on

official soft power policies altogether, but it should re-examine the reality of the ongoing interactions ‘beyond the top-down perspective’ in order to reconceptualize them so as ‘to include not only bottom-up perspectives but also parallel and rhizomatic interpretations’ (Voci and Luo, 2018: 8). This reconceptualization can also help to deconstruct the monolithic China that is often implicit in the first generation of China–Africa studies, and to highlight the adaptability of Chinese official and private actors to the local political, economic and social contexts in which they operate. As Iginio Gagliardone has shown, in fact, ‘China has demonstrated an incredible ability to fit into distinct projects developed by different African states, supporting nationally rooted visions [...], rather than promoting template approaches’ (2019: 7), and there is the need for more research to unveil the mechanisms of these adaptive processes.

Expanding on these emerging trends, the research presented here takes into account, simultaneously, the macro-political and macro-economic factors that condition the nature of China–Africa media interactions, the political intentions underlying them (as, for example, the official Chinese soft power policies and their translation into specific media contents), and the micro dimension of media practices and uses made by media producers and consumers in the field. It does so by focusing on specific case studies: the expansion of the Chinese television company StarTimes in Nigeria and Côte d’Ivoire, and the reception of its activities by local audiences and media producers. In particular, it focuses on the analysis of the commercial strategies adopted by this company in the two countries, and connects it to the responses that it generated among local audiences and media producers in Nigeria and Côte d’Ivoire. These two countries has until now remained at the margins of existing studies on Chinese media expansion in Africa, but they host very dynamic media industries and are regional hubs for the production and circulation of both local and international contents and technologies (both in the Anglophone and Francophone subregions). What happens in these two countries has wide regional and continental repercussions and might set trends that can influence political and popular responses to similar phenomena in neighbouring countries. At the same time, despite the comparable role they play in their respective subregions (Anglophone and Francophone West Africa), Nigeria and Côte d’Ivoire are also extremely different in size, political structure, colonial history, and current economic outlook. A comparative look at these two countries thus allows us to observe the impact that different media landscapes, political histories and contemporary contingencies may have on the way the entry of a new player (such as StarTimes) is received by local audiences and media producers.

This analysis is grounded on the preliminary results of an ongoing research conducted mainly in Lagos and Abidjan. Since the research is still ongoing, this essay uses mostly secondary data coming from the

analysis of already published researches and news reports (published in African, European and Chinese news outlets), official policy documents (from Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire and China) and online materials (advertising campaigns, social network feeds, YouTube videos and users' comments to them), and combines these data with a few interviews conducted in Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, and with fieldnotes taken during ethnographic observation in the two countries. Over the past few years, within the framework of previous research projects, I conducted several periods of ethnographic research about screen media production and circulation in Lagos (since 2009) and in Abidjan (since 2014), interviewing more than a hundred film and media professionals in both countries and collecting notes about media production and distribution processes, and on local audiences' tastes and choices. Much of the ethnographic materials that I use here (fieldwork notes, interviews, notes taken during casual conversations) were collected during these researches, which focused mostly on the economic structure of the Nigerian and Ivorian screen media industries, and on the impact of technological innovation on their transformations. It is while conducting these researches that I came across StarTimes and I began to appreciate the impact of its activities, and more generally, the impact of Chinese media expansion in the two countries. I thus went back to these already-collected materials and used them as a starting point for the research project on Chinese media in Africa, whose preliminary results are presented here.

### **The Expansion of StarTimes in Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire**

Despite being one of the leading Chinese media companies in Africa, StarTimes has not yet been made the object of any in-depth research. This satellite television company occupies a particularly interesting role in the landscape of China–Africa media interactions. It was established in 1988 in China and is the only Chinese private company in the radio and television industry authorized by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce to undertake projects abroad. StarTimes began developing its African markets in 2002 and obtained the first digital TV operator license in Rwanda in 2007. Currently, it has registered companies in more than 30 African countries, including Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, reaching tens of millions of households. In recent years, StarTimes has significantly expanded its audience base and is now close to becoming the largest satellite and cable operator in the continent, bypassing the dominant role of the South African satellite television company DSTv-Multichoice in English-speaking Africa, and preparing to challenge the hegemony of the French company Canal Plus in French-speaking Africa.

According to Helge Rønning, the business model of this company in Africa can be described as follows:

‘it starts by offering cheap subscriptions through set-top-boxes that offer access to digital television and many more channels at a higher quality than the analogue possibilities that exist. At the same time the company enters into negotiations with state broadcasters and governments aspiring to obtain the contract for being the provider of digital migration before the deadline of the closing down of analogue signals has been reached’ (2016: 68).<sup>2</sup>

In Nigeria for instance, in order to carry out the digital transition, StarTimes managed to seal a partnership with the state broadcaster (the Nigerian Television Authority, NTA), of which it controls 70 per cent. In this way, StarTimes gained access to the capillary network of infrastructures developed by NTA since the early 1960s. This significantly accelerated its penetration in the Nigerian market and gave StarTimes the chance to make itself perceived by the Nigerian audiences as a local brand. However, as a few people pointed out to me during conversations in Lagos, StarTimes operatives overlooked the fact that, by the time the Chinese company sealed the partnership with NTA, the national broadcaster had lost the patronage of the most affluent segments of the Nigerian audiences, who had come to perceive NTA as the synonym of cheap, old-fashioned and state-controlled broadcasting. This revealed itself to be a factor that deeply influenced audiences’ perception about StarTimes and its activities in Nigeria.

In Côte d’Ivoire, to the contrary, StarTimes had to penetrate a media market dominated by the French company Canal Plus, and thus ended up occupying a rather more marginal position. But to a certain extent, precisely this marginal position as a newcomer, distant from the controversial political and economic networks linking Côte d’Ivoire to its ancient colonial occupier (i.e. the untransparent web of connections between Canal Plus’s owner, Vincent Bolloré, and key political and business personalities in many Francophone African countries), offered the Chinese company a comparative advantage. The company profited from the negative feelings of large segments of the audience against French interests in Côte d’Ivoire and, conversely, on the positive apriorism toward non-French actors in the region. As I will further discuss below, this example shows how important it is to complexify the analysis of China–Africa interactions by positioning them in the ‘system of multiple triangulations’ (Castillo, 2020) that influences the way these relationships are understood by both Chinese and African actors. As Roberto Castillo has demonstrated in relation to debates about ‘race’ and ‘racism’ in China–Africa relations, the interactions between these two regions of the world are shaped by the recurring, implicit or explicit references to a third party, be it the West, American imperialism, or the historical colonial powers (Castillo, 2020). The case of France is particularly relevant here. Not only because, as suggested by Yingjin Zhang

(2018: 256), this country's soft power policies can be meaningfully compared to those implemented by the Chinese government, but also because France is probably the country that, among the former European colonial powers, is more explicitly engaged in fighting the growth of Chinese political and economic influence in Africa. In this sense, the activity of Chinese media companies is often observed by local producers and audiences (particularly in Côte d'Ivoire) in triangulation with the analysis of what French companies are doing on the continent.

### **Marketing Strategies, Chinese Technologies and Audiences' Responses**

The growth of StarTimes's influence in the broadcasting sector in Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire took place in a specific context, dictated by the shift from analog to digital technologies, which marked a major transition for both media professionals and audiences in these countries. Thanks to the generous loans from the China Development Bank and the Chinese Export-Import Bank, StarTimes seized the opportunities offered by this technological and infrastructural transition to gain a dominant role in the continental media landscape. Following a policy that China has adopted in many other economic sectors, StarTimes invested in the infrastructures to gain a dominant position also in other areas, such as the production and distribution of contents. This strategy recalls the one adopted by Western colonial powers in Africa, a strategy which, as Brian Larkin (2008) has pointed out, was not only key in determining the infrastructural dependency of the colonies, but also in shaping the affective connection between colonial masters and their subjects. If in Larkin's early 20th-century northern Nigeria the single most powerful feature of this affective relation was the sense of wonder (what Larkin calls the 'colonial sublime') provoked among Africans by the colonial display of technological modernity and by the staging of great infrastructural achievements, in the context of the Chinese technological penetration in Africa what seems to have struck African publics more strongly is Chinese capacity to build infrastructures quickly and to make technologies affordable to the largest share of the local population.

StarTimes indeed distinguished itself from its direct commercial competitors (such as the South African company DSTv-Multichoice in Nigeria and the French company Canal Plus in Côte d'Ivoire) by developing cheaper technologies which made access to digital broadcasting (satellite and cable) possible for the less affluent segments of the local public. It also insisted on focusing on rural audiences, developing a program to bring digital television to thousands of African villages. In the early years of the company's penetration in Africa, this strategy was accompanied by programming choices aimed at keeping the cost of the subscription low, so as to make subscription fees accessible to the

majority of the local population. This quickly had an impact on the increase of StarTimes subscribers, but it also had a particular effect on the company's image, making it the synonym of 'cheap' contents and technologies. This can be observed, for instance, in numerous comments posted on the company's Facebook page, where Nigerian customers complain about the frequent breakdowns of their decoder and for the lack of responsiveness of the local helpdesk:

'Terrible service! Extremely poor customer service although the customer care representatives try to appear courteous.'

'Without a strong antenna u can't get most channels, and why on earth will all your customer care lines not go through? someone recharges and still needs to call customer care to upgrade or inform them before you can start viewing, very very bad n frustrating.'

'I think you're cheats and thieves, God will catch up with you soon.'<sup>3</sup>

This situation ended up damaging the company's expansion among elite audiences. In the words of one of StarTimes's Nigerian employees I met in Lagos,

'StarTimes didn't manage to build a good reputation for itself as a brand [...] it's a brand associated with the poor, with the market women and the house helps. People don't want to be associated to that brand, even today that it has better products, people might watch it at home, secretly [...] 60% of the subscribers are there only because it's cheap' (personal communication, Lagos, 29 June 2017).

As this quote highlights, in Nigeria as elsewhere, audiences' approval of StarTimes' activities depends on the impact of context-specific social factors such as the interaction between audiences' consumption patterns and specific practices of social distinction. This confirms the importance, underlined in recent research on China–Africa interactions (Mohan and Lambert, 2013), of focusing on the agency of African actors, as it plays a key role in shaping the outcomes of Chinese soft power efforts.

Going back to the issue of the perceived quality of StarTimes products, it is interesting to note that in Côte d'Ivoire the company insisted precisely on its supposed technological reliability to gain new subscribers and win the competition against Canal Plus, its main commercial competitor in the country. In Côte d'Ivoire, the French company is

known for regularly experiencing the breakdown of its satellite signal during heavy rain. StarTimes picked up on this weakness to promote its cheaper and supposedly more reliable technology, which does not need a dish to receive the signal and is thus expected to remain stable even during tropical storms. In one of its most successful advertising campaigns in the country, StarTimes took the message that Canal Plus channels automatically display during breakdowns ('Reception problem. Please verify that your cable is connected to the antenna. If the problem persists, call the help desk') and substituted it with a slightly modified version, suggesting to switch to StarTimes rather than calling the customer service.<sup>4</sup>

This anecdote hides what has been described by many journalists and industry experts as a war for the control of the television market in Francophone Africa, a market that Canal Plus always considered to own by right. In the early years of StarTimes penetration in the continent, the French company managed to mobilize the French government to organize a few meetings with Francophone African ministers of communication in order to warn them against the dangers (in terms of national sovereignty and economic development) of allowing Chinese media companies like StarTimes to operate in their territories.<sup>5</sup> This warning was often taken seriously, and this prevented StarTimes from sealing, across Francophone Africa, partnerships similar to the one it managed to seal in Nigeria.

Here one can observe the deployment of a recurring rhetorical strategy that Western powers adopt to protect their strongholds in Africa: they accuse China of trying to become a hegemonic actor in fields where they have themselves being holding monopolies for decades – in this case the monopoly of the satellite television market (in terms of both contents and technologies) in Francophone Africa by French companies like Canal Plus. The success of this strategy in the case of many Francophone African countries appears to contradict the idea, well-summarized in the comment of a Nigerian diplomat reported by Deborah Brautigam, according to which 'the Chinese have an advantage of not having a colonial hangover' (2009: 10) – an idea that Chinese official discourse's recurring references to long-term relations of friendship and comradery between China and Africa equally perpetuate. This demonstrates the importance of looking at China–Africa media interactions within the context of the system of triangulations that influences their configuration. In fact, contrary to what is often assumed, at times, Chinese firms like StarTimes face obstacles in their expansion in Africa precisely because of the absence of a Chinese colonial past in the continent. As a matter of fact, they cannot rely on the support of long-term political and economic networks, such as those that define the so-called '*Françafrique*', to defend their interests.

These same networks have an influence in shaping more general and diffuse perceptions about things Chinese (including media technologies and contents) among local populations, participating in the circulation of anti-Chinese sentiments, which can in turn have an impact on the expansion of a company like StarTimes. Indeed, as Steve Hess and Richard Aidoo have emphasized:

the varied and manifold nature of Chinese involvement in African societies presents political entrepreneurs [be them African or European] with a unique opportunity. They can unite diverse coalitions of societal actors around a common frame of opposition against a presumably monolithic ‘China’ that allegedly colludes with incumbent regimes in carrying out nefarious activities, such as exploiting and mistreating domestic citizens. (2014: 131)

This argument has been recurrently mobilized (mostly by Western political and economic entrepreneurs in Africa) in order to stigmatize Chinese media companies (including StarTimes) and their alleged role in either eroding African states’ sovereignty or in collaborating with African states in surveilling their citizens (see Gagliardone, 2019).

### **The Production of African Contents and the Dubbing of Chinese Series**

StarTimes has not only acquired a leading role in the business of broadcasting infrastructures in Africa but has also become a key player in the distribution and production of African contents on a continental scale. In Nigeria, for example, the company invested in the creation of several local language channels (in Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa)<sup>6</sup> as well as a channel (E-Star, and later Nollywood Plus, available also in French in Côte d’Ivoire) entirely dedicated to the broadcasting of Nigerian films, mostly acquired by StarTimes from local independent producers. It then developed a partnership with the company iROKO (the leading online distributor of Nigerian films, mainly geared toward diasporic audiences) to become the platform for the television circulation of iROKO contents in Africa – a continent where streaming has not yet demonstrated its economical sustainability and where iROKO has thus faced major challenges in developing a solid customer base. A similar deal was subsequently signed with EbonyLife TV, one of the leading producers of Nigerian contents.

In 2018, StarTimes finally began producing its own series (the Yoruba series *Alagbara*, produced in Nigeria) and its original TV shows (such as *Hello Mr. Right*, a format first launched in Nigeria and then exported to Zambia, Kenya and Côte d’Ivoire). In Côte d’Ivoire, even if StarTimes does not yet invest in producing local television series, the company

offers several African programs, including Nollywood films dubbed in French (on the channels iROKO Plus and, later, Nollywood Plus), and successful Ivorian news and entertainment channels. A particularly interesting move in this sense has been the inclusion of the independent television channel Afrique Media in its channel package. This is a popular channel with local audiences that StarTimes's rival Canal Plus excluded from its offer because of the tenor of its contents, which is often explicitly oriented against French policies and economic interests in Africa.

The focus on African contents leads StarTimes to invest also in the development of new avenues of distribution, within Africa and internationally. It participated, for instance, in boosting the dissemination of African contents in China through the promotion of the screening of African films in Chinese film festivals and the organization of a regular forum on Sino-African Film and Television Cooperation (in collaboration with the Center for African Film and TV Studies of the Zhejiang Normal University, a center cofounded by the company itself). It equally supported the circulation of African films within the continent through the creation of the first Pan-African Online Film Festival (PAOFF), in 2019 – an initiative created also in order to attract customers towards StarTimes's brand-new online app (StarTimes ON). Finally, the company promoted the collaboration between Chinese and African content producers and distributors, in order to boost coproduction initiatives and accelerate the circulation of Chinese contents in Africa.<sup>7</sup>

The latter activity appears to be strongly supported by the Chinese government which, since 2012, has invested in the selection, dubbing and distribution of Chinese TV series and other contents in Africa, through the creation of three funding frameworks: the China–Africa Film and Television Cooperation Project in 2012, the Contemporary Works Translation Project in 2013, and the Silk Road Film and Television Bridge Project in 2014 (Jin, 2018). As a result, the company quickly established a dubbing team to translate a large number of Chinese programs into English, Portuguese, French, and into several African languages, including Yoruba, Hausa, Swahili and Zulu, for circulation across the continent. Dubbing takes place in Beijing, where African actors recruited all over the continent are trained and then employed by StarTimes. In order to recruit potential candidates, the company regularly organizes dubbing contests, and offers to the winner the chance to move to Beijing for 12 months to attend a training program in dubbing.<sup>8</sup>

As the few existing studies on the dubbing of Chinese contents demonstrate, 'State-sponsored translation projects tend to translate films which demonstrate mainstream Chinese values and reflect Chinese contemporary life' (Jin, 2018: 199). In this sense, the dubbing of Chinese contents in African languages is intended to make Chinese culture more accessible and closer to the African audiences, with the aim of familiarizing them with the Chinese model of modernity, gradually normalizing

the perception of the Chinese presence in Africa and arousing a sense of 'enchantment' towards the model of society that China can offer (Dube, 2012). It is interesting to note that this strategy is unique if compared to what StarTimes's main commercial competitors have done in Africa over the past few decades. Indeed, neither the South African company DStv Multichoice nor the French Canal Plus ever ventured into dubbing foreign programs into local African languages. Quite to the contrary, Canal Plus has invested in dubbing Nigerian contents originally produced in Pidgin English, English or other Nigerian languages into French (for broadcasting on its channel Nollywood TV), so as to defend the use of French language in France's former colonies. While the analysis of these strategies goes beyond the scope of this essay, it is clear that they highlight two deeply different ways of conceiving the role of language in cultural diplomacy.

The strategy adopted by StarTimes seems to be inspired by the experience of the international success of kung fu cinema in the 1970s, when the dubbing of the films originally produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan had a key role in boosting their success in the US, and later throughout the world (Magnan-Park, 2018). Kung fu films have been one of the very first Asian media products to obtain international popular success, but despite this evidence, Chinese officials have until recently been very cautious in mobilizing this cultural capital in order to support Chinese contemporary expansion in Africa. As Wei Lei underlines, 'Chinese propaganda officials expressed their concern that kung fu movies and Chinese costume dramas would stereotype the Chinese as calculating and scheming, as a people who enjoy physical fighting' (2019: 33). This attitude has changed over the past few years and kung fu and martial arts films have become explicit tools of cultural diplomacy for China in Africa. If indeed these films have participated in creating easily recognizable stereotypes about Chinese people across the continent and in shaping emerging representations of Asian otherness in African popular media (Jedlowski and Thomas, 2017), they also have generated a sincere fan culture, too widespread and too deeply engrained in African popular cultures to be ignored by Chinese media companies investing in the continent. Côte d'Ivoire is an interesting case study in this sense, as the success of kung fu films in the late 1970s and early 1980s influenced the emergence of new forms of urban popular culture (such as the Ziguéhi movement) which still play an important role in urban Côte d'Ivoire today, contributing to the ongoing revival of popular interest in Asian martial arts and Chinese kung fu films (Jedlowski, 2021). In Côte d'Ivoire as in Nigeria, StarTimes invested in this cultural capital by sponsoring kung fu festivals<sup>9</sup> and martial art training programs, and by creating a channel (named 'StarTimes Kung Fu') dedicated entirely to Chinese martial art films. The channel, available even in the cheapest packages, rapidly became one of the most successful among those included in the

company's offer. The deployment of kung fu as a tool of marketing and cultural diplomacy insists on the pleasure that African audiences experience in relation to this genre, thus making an attempt at connecting it to a specific Chinese brand and, more generally, to the perception of Chinese presence in Africa.

As mentioned earlier, parallel to the investment on the legacies of kung fu films' widespread popular success in Africa, StarTimes has introduced a number of new Chinese and Asian contents dubbed in local languages.<sup>10</sup> While the strategy has been adopted by StarTimes for a few years, there is almost no research on local audiences' reception of Chinese series dubbed in African languages. The very few existing works tend to rely on Chinese state media reports or on interviews with Chinese and African officials directly involved in the dubbing and commercialization of these products. Their results thus risk being biased. On the grounds of these sources, Wei Lei suggests, for instance, that, 'in contrast to how poorly news programs produced by the Chinese state media in Africa have been received, Chinese television dramas have received a relatively enthusiastic reception in several African countries' (2019: 28). Even if this may well be the case, more in-depth research is needed to verify the claims made by the Chinese media and officials directly involved in these programs interviewed by Lei. In Nigeria, for instance, where Chinese and Indian series dubbed in Yoruba and Hausa have been introduced since the mid-2010s, the reception has been mixed. The most vocal reaction came from the main association of Yoruba filmmakers and producers, the Theatre Arts and Movie Practitioners Association of Nigeria (TAMPAN), which denounced StarTimes dubbing as a threat to Yoruba cultural preservation and called for the Nigerian Federal Minister of Information and Culture to ban the company. Tunde Kelani, one of the most prominent Nigerian filmmakers, who had collaborated with StarTimes for some time with his own Yoruba TV channel (Opomulero TV), reacted vehemently when asked about the company's dubbing program:

[they] have murdered our culture. This thing [they] are doing is criminal, putting Yoruba on the top of Indian and Chinese movies. [...] this generation will have no heroes left. Their hero will be a white, Chinese or Indian speaking in their own language. The level of destruction is unimaginable. (Kelani in Jedlowski et al. 2020: 12)

The issue equally raised hot debates on social media and online forums, as the audience reacted to dubbed films in discordant ways. Commenting on a news article about Yoruba filmmakers' reaction to StarTimes's dubbing strategy published in 2016 (Lasisi, 2016) on a

popular Nigerian online forum (*Nairaland*), audience members expressed contrasting feelings:

‘I love Yoruba movies. Just imagine watching *Titanic* or *Troy* in Yoruba. Sweeeeet. But Jackie Chan shouting *ma pa e*, sounds absurd.’

‘Nice move. . . This Chinese would go any length to force their trash down our throats. Sad that our youth now prefer ZEE [a 100% Indian contents channel], Telemundo, Philippines soap operas and Korean movies to our very own indigenous movies.’

‘What do you expect when the indigenous film makers concentrate on something their audience is not interested in? I prefer watching Indian-Hausa that shows some life similar to that of Nigerians than a Hausa film that has no meaning.’

‘But those films [Chinese and Indian films] are funny in Yoruba.’

‘I’m telling you. Have you seen the Indian ones dubbed in Yoruba? You will laugh your ribs out.’<sup>11</sup>

Indian films dubbed in Yoruba had already begun to appear on the Nigerian pirated DVD market in the mid-2000s, thanks to the initiative of local media entrepreneurs based in the large electronic market of Alaba, on the outskirts of Lagos. And their popular success among the lowest income segments of the local population had already raised eyebrows among local language film producers, who had hardly ever faced the commercial competition of foreign programs dubbed in a Nigerian language and were afraid of its impact on their audience shares.<sup>12</sup> What made filmmakers and producers react against StarTimes’s dubbing program is probably the fact that this commercial strategy was now being adopted by one of the largest media companies in the country, in partnership with the local national broadcaster NTA – a move perceived as an organized boycott of the local film industry. The direct involvement of StarTimes in the production of local contents mentioned earlier took place in response to this heated debate. It is indeed not a coincidence that the first ever African series produced by StarTimes is a Yoruba series (the already mentioned *Alagbara*), whose cast and crew are some of the most prominent members of TAMPAN. StarTimes had to go local and support the production of original contents in Yoruba in order to make the circulation of Chinese contents acceptable in Nigeria. This example confirms the findings of other China–Africa scholars who stressed that ‘in many African countries, a primary source of complaint against

Chinese businesspeople is that they enter into areas considered inappropriate” (Siu and McGovern, 2017: 344) as, in this case, the dubbing of foreign contents into African languages. At the same time, Yoruba producers’ reaction shows, once again, the capacity of African actors to turn a potentially disadvantageous situation to their profit – in this case, by forcing StarTimes to finance an original Nigerian series.

### **Conclusion: Towards the Analysis of New Geometries of Encounter**

In some cases, as a Nigerian StarTimes operative told me during an interview, in order to further consolidate their position in Africa and thus participate in the Chinese government’s hegemonic project on the continent, companies like StarTimes need to make their brand look less Chinese so that people do not shy away from them on the grounds of pre-existing stereotypes about Chinese people and products (personal communication, Lagos, 26 June 2017). This is, for instance, what StarTimes had to do in Nigeria in order to try to overcome elitist audiences’ preconceptions against Chinese brands, and pursue its objective of becoming what my interlocutor called ‘an aspirational product’ – something that people want to own in order to improve their social status. In other cases, the fact of explicitly endorsing stereotypical forms of Chineseness, as when insisting on kung fu films and their cultural legacy in Africa, played in favor of the company’s attempt at developing new ties with African audiences. In Côte d’Ivoire, this also responded to the specificities of a political context in which a segment of the audience has a positive apriorism for non-French economic and political actors.

As this and the other examples presented in this essay show, a close look at the activities of one of the leading Chinese media companies in Africa demonstrates that what happens on the ground is far from the straightforward (positive or negative) outcome of a monolithic, government-led soft power strategy, as often described in existing studies about Chinese media expansion in Africa. As a matter of fact, despite their obvious links with government policies formulated in Beijing, the activities of Chinese companies in Africa do not respond to a single, homogeneous model of intervention, but are instead the outcome of complex, context-specific negotiations. In line with recent developments in the fields of China–Africa and Chinese soft power studies (e.g. Castillo, 2020; Gagliardone, 2019; Mohan and Lampert, 2013; Voci and Luo, 2018), the research presented here highlights the need to sharpen our understanding of these negotiations by paying closer attention to at least three overlapping dynamics.

First of all, the key role played by African actors in shaping the outcomes of Chinese activities in the continent. In what concerns the

expansion of Chinese media, this means focusing on the fundamental role played by African audiences and media producers in influencing the circulation and reception of Chinese media products and activities across Africa – something that existing researches have rarely done.

Secondly, the dynamism and reactivity of Chinese media companies and institutions in adapting their action to the diversity of specific African contexts, and thus their ability to come up with different media strategies and products adapted to the country in which they operate. This equally suggests the need to further develop comparative analysis of the activities of the same Chinese actors in different African countries so as to dismantle monolithic accounts about the influence of official soft power policies on the realities of Chinese media expansion on the continent.

Finally, the need to contextualize the present realities of China–Africa interactions within the larger landscapes of specific social, economic and political ‘historicity’ (Bayart, 2009) that define the way in which both African and Chinese actors position themselves in contemporary settings. These landscapes are notably influenced by specific systems of triangulation that connect (at times only discursively, at times in more concrete ways) the activities of Chinese and African actors to those of players belonging to other geographical regions, cultural traditions and political networks (notably, the historical Western colonial powers, but also other actors from countries such as India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Brazil). Future research could build on these grounds to offer a more nuanced and complex understanding of the new geometries of encounter emerging between China and Africa within the larger context of post-colonial Africa.

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## Notes

1. Formerly known as China Central Television (CCTV).
2. The deadline for the switchover, set by the United Nations’ agency for digital technologies (International Telecommunication Union – ITU), was initially June 2015 but it was missed by most African countries, which are now implementing the transition progressively, adapting it to the legal and technical specificities of each country.
3. Customers’ comments from the review section of StarTimes Nigeria official Facebook page: [https://www.facebook.com/pg/StarTimes-Nigeria-391442410882603/reviews/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/StarTimes-Nigeria-391442410882603/reviews/?ref=page_internal), (accessed 4 April 2020).
4. To view StarTimes’s advertising campaign see the following link: <https://stratmarques.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Startimes-attaque-canal.jpg> (accessed 1 April 2021).

5. See, for instance, the transcriptions of French officials' presentations during the conference 'Transition numérique en Afrique subsaharienne', organized in Paris in November 2013, available on the website: [www.economie.gouv.fr](http://www.economie.gouv.fr) (accessed 1 April 2021).
6. A presentation of these channels can be found following this link: <https://www.bellanaija.com/2017/07/enjoy-great-movies-in-your-local-language-on-startimes/> (accessed 1 April 2021).
7. An indirect consequence of these kinds of initiative is the emergence of co-production projects, such as the much-publicized film project '30 Days in China', co-produced by the Nigerian companies Corporate World Entertainment and FilmOne Entertainment, and the Chinese HuaHua Media, and starring Nigerian superstar comedian Ayodeji Richard Makun, popularly known as A.Y. This project should see the light in 2021.
8. See, for instance, the presentation of the program 'Voice to Fame' in Nigeria, <http://www.mediaguide.ng/vskit-partners-startimes-to-host-nigerias-first-ever-dubbing-tv-show-voice-to-fame/> (accessed 1 April 2021).
9. Videos of the kung fu festivals held in Lagos can be found on the StarTimes official YouTube channel; see, for instance, the following link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rfWh8KG\\_ik&t=16s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rfWh8KG_ik&t=16s) (accessed 1 April 2021).
10. For an example of an Indian series dubbed in Yoruba see the following link: <https://m.startimestv.com/browser/program/detail/8303> (accessed 1 April 2021).
11. Comments transcribed directly from the online forum Nairaland: <https://www.nairaland.com/3531860/film-makers-reject-dubbing-chinese-films/1> (accessed 2 April 2020).
12. A similar phenomenon has been observed in Tanzania and in Northern Nigeria; see Englert and Moreto (2010) and Adamu (2018).

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