Film Diplomacy: An Approach to International Relations: A Case of Nigeria and China

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Despite the efforts of African countries' governments and foreign countries' governments, there are cautions between the people of Africa and the people of other countries. The cautions are based on the ideology of misconception, which comes from the narratives about Africa and African people and other people. Film is a mass medium of educating people about people in foreign countries they have never been to. Negative or misconceived narratives of a people by another people will affect the relations between the peoples, notwithstanding the politics of their governments. Using the popculture medium of film as a diplomatic tool will promote mutual understanding and respect among people of different countries, and this will change the negative narratives between the peoples.

Keywords: Film Diplomacy; Film Industry; International Relations; Narratives; Partnership. **Word Count:** 116

Introduction

There have been efforts by African countries' governments and foreign countries' governments to promote understanding between Africans and people of foreign countries, using various means. These efforts are to promote mutual understanding and respect between Africans and people from foreign countries. During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there emerge several videos from China for example, showing how Africans living in China were been maltreated and forced to comply with the Chinese government's COVID-19 protocols. Despite the Chinese government's denial of such, citing their economic investments in Africa as proof of their goodwill for the people of Africa, the hostility between the two people keeps escalating.

However, there have been warnings and objections from the Western powers, seeing China's effort in Africa as a predetermined trick of the Chinese government to re-colonize Africa, using the bait of economic assistance. While this Western powers' observation and claim is arguable, the bulk of how true this Western claim depends on how the Africans and the Chinese understand and treat each other, also the level of trust and acceptability of each other's unique features, which comes from the narratives available to the peoples. These narratives about Africa

come from two sources: One from foreigners, and the other from Africans. Both are propagated through the media and the educational system.

The narratives about Africa are mostly negative and stereotypical. These stereotypes and negative views of Africa do come from Africans and foreigners alike. Africa is mostly negatively viewed by most of the foreigners who have never been to Africa, whose knowledge about Africa is based on their history classes in school or hearsay. Also, some Africans sell the continent cheap, by telling the kind of narratives the foreigners want to hear.

The questions are: Do these foreigners really know Africans, and do the Africans know these foreign people too? What are the narratives about Africa in foreign films, and how do they present Africans in their film? The hypothesis is that, if the negative narratives about African people are changed in films, the perceptions and the narratives by foreigners about African people also change.

The objectives of this paper are:

  i. To examine the narratives about Africa and China from the two peoples; ii. To inquire into the consequences of the narratives; and iii. To proffer unconventional diplomacy as a solution to change the negative narratives between nations.

This study methodology is an evaluation descriptive research method, that assesses people's experiences and the narratives about Africans and Chinese. This complex social issue study explores the film content and linguistic context as instruments for gathering data and analysis. The scope focuses on Nigeria and China for some reasons. First, Nigeria is the most populous dark skin nation in the world, just as China is the most populous nation in the world. Secondly, Nigeria is the number one economic nation in Africa which makes it more attractive to investors. Thirdly, the Nigerian film industry, often referred to as Nollywood is widely accepted as the African film industry outside Africa, and it is the second-largest film-producing country in the world in terms of content. Lastly, this research work is carried out in Nigeria and China, and the primary method used is obtained from different parts of Nigeria and China. Using these samples to represent the position of the African continent as a whole, and China representing all the foreign countries.

China and Africa share one-third of the world population, which makes good understanding between the two peoples a great benefit for mutual economic and social benefits. The Chinese government always refers to China as a developing country, as opposed to Africa and the rest of the world's perceptions of China. Therefore, Africans' expectations of the relations are based on their perceptions of China. Africa is a continent richly endowed with human and natural resources, which is well known by foreign governments. Africans want development, and wish Africa can be at par with China; but despite the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, some issues challenge the trust between the people of Africa and China. Such

issues include the ideology of misconception, mutual understanding of national and cultural values, economic contributions and benefits, and technology transfer issues.

The Chinese government has made known the country's willingness to work with countries, organizations, and individuals to enhance consultation and coordination with African countries and to promote peace, development, and progress according to the Chinese Government White Paper (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2012). The objective of this paper is to look at the issues challenging China-Africa relations, especially between the Chinese and African people; and the role of the media, most especially film and television, in enhancing the relations between the two peoples. There is no doubt the relationship between China and Africa will be of tremendous benefit mutually, but this can be a long-lasting relationship only if both sides can understand each other differences, make amendments where required, and build their relations on mutual trust. The media have great responsibility required to foster mutual understanding, trust, and love within and outside of China and Africa.

China-African Relation

China-Africa cooperation, according to Chinese government white papers (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2010), is said to promote balanced development of trade, expand mutual investment fields, attach importance to infrastructure construction, strengthen the building of development capacity, help to improve the people's livelihood, broadening the scope of China-Africa cooperation, and to give full play to the guidance role of Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). While the documents regarding China's interest in Africa have assured Africans that the motive for partnering with Africa is for mutual benefit appears difficult to accept hook, line, and sinker according to Schiere (2011), a look at the investment profile and activities of Chinese in African space and Africans in Chinese space requires a thorough analysis. Despite the efforts of the Chinese government and African countries' governments, there are cautions between the individual citizenry of China and Africa.

During the COVID-19 period in China, there were several reports on social media about the negative treatment of Africans in China, which led to African government leaders summoning Chinese ambassadors to various African countries. In the Chinese language, Africa is called "非洲 (feizhou)" which according to the Hanping Chinese dictionary is an abbreviation for "a fei li liazhou". Comparing the Chinese characters "非洲 (feizhou)" and the Philippines, "菲律宾 (feilu bin)". The two characters "fei" though slightly different in writing, have the same intonation and pronunciation, but different meanings. According to the Chinese language, "Fei (非)" used for Africa means "to reproach or blame; wrong; incorrect; not; non-; un-; in-; simply must (Hanping, n.d.). The Chinese character "Fei (菲)" used for the Philippines means, according to the Chinese language, "luxuriant; rich with fragrance; phenanthrene (Hanping, n.d.). With the understanding of

the Chinese language, some Africans question the Chinese character "fei" which is used for Africa, as derogatory. This is seen as affecting the perception of Chinese people about Africa. Interviews with Africans who have lived in China, show that the majority of Chinese people do not know what Africa looks like. Some Chinese believed that Africans live on top of trees!

African people believed that anything Chinese means fake! This assumption is derived from the products imported to African countries from China, which mostly are inferior goods compared to those imported from other countries, like Japan, the U.S.A., or European countries. In Nigeria, inferior goods are called "chinko", the same name given to the Chinese people. From the findings, Chinese products in Europe and the USA are quality, which is due to the quality standards set by those countries. This means that China also produces quality goods, but most Africans do not know this. Their judgment is based on their little knowledge about the Chinese people in Africa and the imported Chinese products.

In the Chinese film Wolf Warrior 2 (Chinese: 战狼 2) (Jing, 2017), African water was presented as unsafe because of piracy and the cities under the attacks of rebel forces. The Europeans are presented as the ones causing wars in Africa. The Chinese are presented as the business owners in Africa, and the saviors of African people. The patriotic plot of the movie makes it receives praise from the Chinese people, who consider themselves as the ones who can challenge the West. Stanley Rosen, in the New York Times, narrated this as a very individualist personal quest, which is much more of a Hollywood thing, downplaying the Communist Party in favor of patriotism and defending Chinese people and Chinese interests all over the world (Buckley, 2017). When people believe they are superior to others, it leads to conflict.

Unconventional Diplomacy

When there are conflicts of interest between nations, diplomacy is often a preferred solution. Conflicts between governments are easy to address, while conflicts between peoples are difficult to address, most especially when the government leadership of the peoples involved thinks is not much of a great deal, then it becomes a cold war between the peoples. According to Ayo Akinwale (2013), the issue of diplomacy between countries is to promote relationships and to boost the image of one country (people) before the other country. This is what he referred to as "cultural diplomacy". Onions (1970:514), as cited in Akinwale (2013:17), defines diplomacy as the "skills or address in the conduct of national intercourse and negotiations." To negotiate befitting narrations in the eyes of other nations, cultural diplomacy is the skill to address such issues.

The most unconventional diplomacy ever used in resolving national intercourse and negotiation is known as "Ping Pong Diplomacy". Ping-pong diplomacy was used in solving the "cold war" between the United States of America and China in 1971. The leaders of the peoples of the two countries were amazed at the outcome of the ping-pong diplomacy in normalizing the relationship between the two countries. Marking 50 years of ping-pong diplomacy, Chairman Mao

Zedong was quoted concerning the effect of ping-pong diplomacy and made a metaphorical remark, "The little ball moves the Big Ball" (Su, Yang, & Xu, 2021). President Richard Nixon of the United States in his remarks about ping-pong diplomacy stated that "An exchange of ping-pong teams had initiated a breakthrough in our relations." (Evan, 2016). Film as a medium for popular culture is another unconventional diplomacy with such potency in normalizing relationships between peoples of different countries. The United States of America has used Hollywood productions to project Western culture to the world to acculturate other nations.

The Film Cultural Industry

African film industries are growing and expanding around the world. Nollywood for example, has grown to become the second-largest film industry in the world in terms of production. According to Koichiro Matsuura, former director-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):

> Film and video production are shining examples of how cultural industries, as vehicles of identity, value, and meanings can open the door to dialogue and understanding between people, but also to economic growth and development. (United Nations, 2009)

Barclays Ayakorama (2010) (as cited in Akinwale, 2013) agrees with the view of Koichiro Matsuura, by stating that countries are now selling their cultural values and images through their films. Are the African film industries selling valuable narratives about Africa to the world? Also, how is Africa represented in foreign films?

John A. Afolabi (2008) in his article on "The African Video Film and Image of Africa" stated that the content, theme, and narratives of many African home video films, especially Nollywood films should be of great concern on how Africans present African narratives to the world. Although, some Nollywood films such as Wedding Party 1 (Adetiba, 2016) & 2 (Akimolayan, 2017) project our culture in a contemporary period to the world positively, some Nollywood films like Living in Bondage: Breaking Free (Nouah, 2019) fail in projecting Africa positively to the world. Also, some foreign films, such as the American action thriller film Tears of the Sun (Fuqua, 2003) and the Chinese action film Wolf Warrior 2 (Chinese: 战狼 2) (Jing, 2017) narratives present Africa as the continent as a hopeless continent, ravaged by war, diseases, and poverty.

The African film industry is a growing and booming sector of the economy, accounting for billions in revenue and employing more than 5 million people according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2021). The Nigerian film industry is growing exponentially in Africa and around the world; and with the newly introduced Digital Broadcasting in Nigeria and other African countries, the challenge is, according to Mr. Emeka

Mba, the immediate past Director General of the National Broadcasting Commission, content development for the audience, which is the issues of film and television programmes production. Although, Nigeria is the second-highest motion picture-producing country in the world in terms of volume, quality, and standard are still things in progress.

Before the restructuring of the Chinese film industry in 2001, China's box office was nothing to write home about, but as of 2017, China's annual box office revenue has grown over fifty times (Taylor, 2018). An average of 15 new cinemas were built daily in 2017, which has increased the number of Chinese moviegoers. According to Taylor "The rise in Chinese box office sales has also been caused by the rise in American film imports" (2018:4), a change of policy from the previous China Communist Revolution closed-door policy against foreign films. China has grown to become one of the world's top film-producing countries, and is the second-largest market in the world by box office after the United States of America; with the largest number of film screens, China has been projected to become the largest film market soon. Regarding technology, China is considered one of the best in the world, which is evident in its film productions. China's box office hit US$4.82 billion (RMB29.6 billion) according to Patrick Frater (2017), and then surged to US$6.58 billion in 2016 and $7.55 billion in 2017, growing by 15%.

In recent years, there has been exponential growth in the Nigerian National GDP because of the contribution of the film industry. The Nigerian film industry is estimated to contribute over 1.4% of the national GDP (NBS 2013 and 2014). According to the United Nations and the World Bank, the Nigerian film industry is the second largest employer of labour, creating over 200,000 direct employments and over 1 million indirect employees. The film industry's contribution to the Nigerian national GDP in 2014 proves how youth are getting involved in the film industry, which helps reduce unemployment and increase national growth. Before the pandemic lockdown, the revenue growth has gone up by 21% in January 2020. In 2018, the total number of cinema screens in Nigeria was 218 which grew to 253 in 2020, grossing US$16.8 million at the box office (UNESCO, 2021).

Film Collaboration

Although the film industry in Nigeria started in 1947 after WWII as the Colonial Film Unit, there have been several involvements of both local and foreign companies in the industry since then. Some of the earlier foreign companies in Nigeria include the British firms of Pearl and Dean, and Niger Film of John Williams; FedFilms owned by the Lebanese, later joined the Indian companies, American companies, Brazilian companies, and others. These companies were able to bring to Nigerian cinemas oriental martial arts films from China and Japan, Indian films, and AngloAmerican films of all genres. According to Afolabi Adesanya, Anglo-American films were the most popular in the '50s and '60s, because they were made in English, the country's lingua franca, and were mostly free on mobile cinema all over the country. But in the '70s, Chinese films,

such as Bruce Lee's Kung Fu thrillers like The Big Boss, Fist of Fury, The Way of the Dragon, and Enter the Dragon, with Indian films, such as Jugunu, Albella, Tunsa Nahim Dekkha, and Sholay became box-office blockbusters in Nigeria.

It was during the '70s, in the course of the American film renaissance, that movie buffs in the country witnessed an unprecedented competition between American and Asian/Oriental pictures. This U.S.-Chinese rivalry still exists, even in this modern days. Chinese and American governments are using restrictions to limit the influence of each other on their cultural values, despite the economic benefits the film industry brings. This has made Chinese President Xi Jinping initiate a "global creative industry" on cultural exchange with other nations. This initiative has made Chinese companies involved in film productions, postproductions, and marketing, even with Hollywood production companies as stated by Wanda as "China's entry into Hollywood's film industry and generally promote Chinese culture abroad" as quoted by Taylor (2018).

The Nigerian government has always been open to foreign governments and individuals to be involved in moving the Nigerian film industry forward. As far back as 1961, Mr. J. W. Hweitson was seconded by the Canadian Film Board to advise the Nigerian government on the reorganization of the Federal Film Unit into a corporation. Recently, Nigeria's Ministry of Culture Permanent Secretary, Ayotunde Adesugba was at the Chinese Central Academy of Cultural Administration, where she expressed the desire of the Nigerian government to woo Chinese filmmakers to collaborate with the Nollywood filmmakers. According to Francois Dube in China-Africa magazine, Adesugba stated that the film industry is one of the most promising grounds for cultural cooperation between the two countries with the potential of huge benefits for the producers (Dube, 2016).

Some of the films co-produced by Nigerian filmmakers and foreign filmmakers include: Jaiyesimi and AropinN'teniyan co-directed by Freedie Goode(British) and Hubert Ogunde(Nigerian); Son of Africa produced by a Lebanese-owned company Fedfilms Nigeria Limited starring Funso Adeolu(Nigerian); Kongi's Harvest produced by Francis Oladele(Nigerian) and directed by Ossie Davies(American), Francis Oladele's Bullfrog was co-produced with CALPEN-NY(Americans); Are Agbaye produced by Moses Olaiya(Nigerian) and directed by John Williamson (Foreigner); Ola Balogun's film Alpha was financed by De Menil Foundation(America); Black Goddess was co-produced by Africult(Nigeria) and Embrafilms(Brazil); and Kusini was coproduced by Ladi Ladebo(Nigerian) and Kusini Company(USA).

Conclusion

The versatility of film as a pop culture medium can be explored as a diplomatic tool in changing the negative narratives through collaborative film production between African filmmakers and foreign filmmakers, especially Chinese filmmakers who are interested in investing in Africa for mutual benefits. Nigerian filmmakers and Chinese filmmakers can collaborate in film productions,

distributions, and exhibitions. According to Adesugba, as reported by Francois Dubé, China has more than 31,000 modern movie screens, while Nigeria has less than 100, and around 1,000 in the whole of Africa (2016). Francois Dubé, in his own words, believes that as the Chinese film industry is seeking to win over foreign moviegoers, Nollywood is now looking east to China as a promising market. There is a growing appetite for collaboration for economic benefits and mutual understanding on both sides.

The best way to change the narratives is through partnerships between film companies, film policies, and government agencies in charge of film and cultural affairs, and to encourage film investment between the African people and foreign governments. Also, the filmmakers must make a conscious effort to avoid the sentiment and to change the ideology of misconception that has hitherto severe the relationship between African people and people of other countries or races. Huahua Media, a Chinese entertainment group in 2019 signed a deal with Nigerian comedian Ayo Makun to co-produce a movie titled *30 Days in China*. Hoping the movie and other subsequent collaborations will correct the ideology of misconceptions about the two people. This will be an unconditional diplomatic way of improving the relations between the two peoples.

Recommendations

It is not just to sign co-production partnership agreements, but also to apply the following recommendations in the agreements:

 i. A government agency must be involved in the agreement to protect the people's culture and economic values.
 ii. The partnership must be well negotiated for mutual respect and benefits.
 iii. Technology and filmmaking knowledge must be shared openly to foster artistic and technological transfer and growth.

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