

# China's Public Diplomacy in Rwanda: Features, Impacts, and Implications since 2013

Mr. Eric SHEMA<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Frank Stephano Mabagala (PhD)<sup>2</sup>,  
Mr. Donald Malangwa Moses<sup>3</sup>

Jilin University

Jilin University, Changchun, China

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**Abstract:** Public diplomacy refers to the efforts employed by a certain country or government to communicate directly with foreign publics aiming to achieve its foreign policy objectives. It incorporates numerous initiatives, leveraging approaches, and well-designed tools to shape public opinion of other countries, build positive relationships with the foreign populations, and create a favorable national image to promote its national interests. Therefore, public diplomacy plays a vital role in international relations by shaping and promoting mutual understanding between nations. Major countries use public diplomacy to increase their influence and enhance their soft power in the foreign countries; Public diplomacy aims to shape a country's image and reputation abroad by showcasing its cultural, political, and social values, it seeks to influence public opinion in other countries, often to secure support for its foreign policies, initiatives, or positions on global issues. Since the last decade, People's Republic of China has utilized public diplomacy efforts toward Rwanda to foster the bilateral relations between the two countries by employing multifaceted approaches. All the initiatives that China has utilized have shaped favorable China's image within Rwandese society as a reliable partner. This research intends to provide a more nuanced theoretical and practical knowledge about Chinese diplomatic intentions and its foreign policy objectives, providing valuable insights for Rwandan policy makers and future researchers about Sino-Rwandan relations through examining China's public diplomacy efforts toward Rwanda since 2013.

**Keywords:** Public Diplomacy, Sino-Rwanda Relations, International Relations, Impacts, Implications, Jilin University.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

International affairs have witnessed new merging ways of practicing public diplomacy, the entry of digital platforms such as Social media websites, and technological advancement have led to digital public diplomacy, particularly in the 21st century. Scholars such as Manor (2019) highlight the transformative impact of digital diplomacy, pinpointing that it has democratized public diplomacy whereby smaller countries now influence global narratives. People's Republic of China as the second largest economy has enhanced good relations with many countries particularly developing countries. With its foreign policy incorporating five principles of peaceful coexistence and its public diplomacy implications, China aims to shape its international perceptions, foster mutual understanding, and employ its foreign policy goals. China seeks to boost its economic expansion and global image, particularly through soft power, resulting from its public diplomacy engagement. Therefore, China introduced its public diplomatic leverages uniquely based on its national interests and Africa has been among their main area of interests. Rwanda, with its tragic history and remarkable 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi's recovery, has become the center for international partnerships and has strived to grow its economy. Consequently, public diplomacy has catalyzed the open-arms Rwanda to foster its relations with China, Being among the most dominant countries in the world, China has showcased and forged newly remarkable methods of executing its public diplomacy, noticeably in Rwanda. Moreover, since the entry of digital public diplomacy in the early 21st century, Rwanda has endeavored to change genocide narratives and reshape its newly outstanding image internationally as a nation of hope and vision. In doing so, China, through its foreign policies and public diplomacy engagements, has tremendously helped Rwanda to recover its economy over the last two decades. Public diplomacy indeed as a vital tool of international relations has become the

backbone of foreign ties in contemporary global politics, therefore, China uses public diplomacy to cement its soft power and foster its diplomatic relations.

China's diplomatic approaches and the goals of its public diplomacy have impacted significantly many African countries, and the Rwandan case offers a unique opportunity to understand the impact of Chinese public diplomacy efforts, especially for a genocide recovering nation. This study will examine China's public diplomacy engagements toward Rwanda since 2013, and how those engagements affected Rwanda's global standing and its economic and political development in the last decade.

### Research Questions

What are public diplomacy efforts has China employed to engage Rwanda since 2013?

How have they impacted Rwanda's cultural, economic, and political landscape?

### Main Argument

China's public diplomacy efforts towards Rwanda since the beginning of the last decade have significantly impacted Rwanda's economic, cultural, and political transformations. China has primarily focused on cultural diplomacy; the establishment of Confucius Institute in Rwanda has been an instrumental contribution to cultural diplomacy initiative, promoting Chinese language and culture, educational capacity-building initiatives that provide scholarships and training programs. Moreover, media communications where Chinese media outlets like Xinhua News Agency and China Global Television Network have cemented their influence in Rwanda. Finally but importantly, people-to-people diplomacy involves Rwandan youth exchange programs to visit China and interact with Chinese elites has strengthened bilateral ties and promoted China's image as a development partner. All these initiatives have expanded China's influence and promoted the effectiveness of Chinese soft power in Rwanda creating a cultural understanding and mutual trust between Rwandan and Chinese people at large.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of public diplomacy has evolved considerably in the last two decades; the technological era has yielded new ways of employing public diplomacy strategies through digital diplomacy. Scholars like Manor (2019) argue that the past decade has increased interest in digital public diplomacy since it has contributed abundantly to the shift of traditional public diplomacy which utilized state-centered approaches to modern digital and people-to-people engagement. Numerous scholars have explored the role of public diplomacy in shaping international relations, particularly in Africa where major countries like China intend to secure influence through their foreign policy initiatives. This review demonstrates how other scholars view China's public diplomacy efforts in Africa, focusing on Rwanda, a post-genocide country.

### The Position and the Role of Rwanda in International Relations

Rwanda, after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, has significantly turned the page and held a unique position in African and global relations due to its strategic focus on economic development, security, and governance. Reyntjens (2015) highlights how Rwanda has managed to reshape its image globally as a post-conflict success story, gaining substantial foreign aid and investment, which has led to being transformed as a hub for East African trade, innovation, and diplomacy engagements, strengthening its relations with major powers to achieve its vision 2050 goals of becoming a high-income country and achieving improved standards of life for Rwandans. Rwanda's role in international relations is marked by its contribution to ensuring peacekeeping missions in Africa and beyond, as well as countries like Sudan, Central Africa Republic, Mozambique, and Haiti. Scholars like Bellamy, Williams, and Griffin (2004) in their highly cited book entitled "Understanding Peacekeeping" highlight the tragic failure of the international community to prevent Genocide in 1994, the lack of United Nations assistance missions during the period of the Genocide was due to unclear mandates and a lack of political will from member states. Therefore Rwanda drew a serious lesson from its tragic past and, has shown willing interest in contributing to peacekeeping efforts across Africa and beyond. Hence, its advocacy for African self-reliance and willingness to adopt innovative policies attracted foreign investments and China's public diplomacy initiatives to consider Rwanda a gateway to the broader region. China has been the among the major countries that remained supportive after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi providing medical assistance, constructing infrastructures, renewing the image of Rwanda in the eyes of international community. Top Scholars identified China's public diplomacy initiatives towards Rwanda as the cornerstone of good relations and mutual trust and cooperation between both countries.

### **Effectiveness of China's Public Diplomacy Efforts toward Rwanda**

China's public diplomacy initiatives and goals are noteworthy and remarkable in Rwanda aligning China's foreign policy with Rwanda's development trajectory. Most scholars argue that China focuses on infrastructure development, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges. Benabdallah (2016) claims that China's public diplomacy combines economic investment with cultural diplomacy to foster bilateral relations and shape China's image in Rwanda. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Confucius institutes, and low-interest loans, China has built major projects in Rwanda such as constructing roads and bridges, Government buildings, and energy infrastructures to enhance its soft power. Sun (2014) discusses the importance of media, cultural exchange, and Chinese language centers in Rwanda to soften the language barrier and increase China's influence in Rwanda. The result of China's efforts to improve Rwanda's economic development is very evident and visible, aligning perfectly with Rwanda's development-focused agenda.

Additionally, Chinese public diplomacy engagement has shown no interest in engaging in Rwanda's internal politics which appeals to Rwanda's political interests for autonomy in its governance choices and China's non-interference in domestic affairs. Scholars like Campbell (2007) discuss the relationship between China and Africa as a reliable and respectful one, he emphasizes how China was never a participant in the inglorious transatlantic slave trade, secondly, there has been no tradition of Chinese colonialism, or occupation in Africa. This mutual respect and friendly partnership reflected how China has always respected each African country and its sovereignty, including Rwanda, since November 12, 1971, when the two countries first established diplomatic bilateral relations. Liu (2013) argues that establishing the Confucius Institutes is a pivotal tool for strengthening Sino-Rwandan relations and promoting the Chinese language and culture. He emphasizes that this institute is important for China's soft power strategy in Rwanda and Africa. On top of that Peizhao (2024) argues that in 2009, the University of Rwanda inaugurated its Confucius Institute, marking it as the first and sole Confucius Institute in Rwanda. Therefore, in the last ten years, enrollment at the Confucius Institute has consistently grown, along with a rising interest among locals in learning about China. According to Xinhua News Agency (2024), Luban Workshop in Rwanda has recruited and trained 210 students and carried out Chinese and vocational skills training for nearly 10,000 people, providing important support for the talent training of Chinese-funded enterprises in Rwanda and the improvement of the employment capacity of Rwandan youth. According to the Chinese embassy in Rwanda, Ambassador Xuekun (2024) pinpoints that the Chinese embassy in Rwanda is committed to advancing friendly cooperation between China and Rwanda, enhancing friendship between the two peoples, and promoting the development of bilateral relations.

### **The use of Chinese soft power toward Rwanda**

China has remarkably adopted soft power as a crucial tool for disseminating its public diplomatic initiatives and asserting its global influence in Rwanda. Nye (2004) describes soft power as the ability to obtain one's own goals because others admire your ideas and want to emulate your example. Through cultural and educational approaches China utilizes these techniques to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion. Atkinson (2010) argues that hosting educational exchange programs is a way of socializing others to your norms, ideas, and procedures, and it is the process of building soft power. (Joseph Nye quoted in "Does the soft power matter?"). China's soft power in Rwanda embodies a mix of economic, educational, and cultural exchange programs. (Bräutigam 2011) pinpoints the role of Chinese support for Rwanda's economic development and infrastructure projects, shaping Rwanda's perception of China as a remarkable development partner. Additionally, King (2013) emphasizes China's soft power initiatives in Rwanda; he believes that programs such as the Confucius Institute and scholarships for African students pathed a long-term relationship with African countries including Rwanda. He argues that these initiatives are not only just about learning the Chinese language but also about experiencing the Chinese culture, King concludes that these educational opportunities create a good Chinese image that could influence future African leaders and elites. Tang (2024) underscores China's role in developing digital infrastructure in Africa, such as Internet connectivity and ICT systems. She argues that Rwanda's initiative of establishing innovation hubs and technology parks, supported by Chinese investment and expertise, is a major step forward to contribute to Rwanda's socio-economic development. Therefore China earns remarkable respect from Rwandan citizens which paints a good image of Chinese soft power towards Rwanda. China also has provided military training to Rwanda's Defense Force personnel, contributing to a more secure Rwanda. Atkinson (2010) argues that countries participating in military exchange programs are more likely to get attached to the political and cultural framework of the host country. As a result, China has served as a backbone pillar of post-genocide developing Rwanda in terms of its national security. On that account, Rwanda considers China a major partner in its economic development and sustainable growth.

### **Challenges and Critiques in China's Public Diplomacy toward Rwanda**

China has contributed significantly to the renewal of Rwanda, and its soft power influence echoes in every corner across urban and rural areas of the land of a thousand hills. However, some scholars have argued about the challenges and critiques of China's public diplomacy employment in Rwanda. (Shambaugh 2013) critiques China's global public diplomacy strategy as inconsistent and often transactional. In the Rwandan context, he suggests that China must not only focus highly on economic diplomacy to neglect public diplomacy because it might suffer a lack of sustainability in strengthening long-term trust. Also, (Kurlantzick 2007) argues that China's public diplomacy efforts are critically weak compared to economic-focused diplomacy. He claims that China's foreign policies tend to overlook the issues that involve general public like human rights and governance, which may affect its long-term influence in Rwanda.

Over and above, some scholars claim that Confucius Institutes in Rwanda face challenges such as the dominance of Western languages namely, English and French, especially in the Rwandan academic curriculum. Opobo (2014) critiques that one of the biggest challenges that Confucius Institutes face in Rwanda is that the National Curriculum has not yet included the Chinese language. Consequently, this hinders the enhancement of the Chinese Language in Rwandan Academia. Some scholars are so critical of the educational scholarship program, Myungsik and TOLENTINO (2018) claim that although the Chinese government has increased dramatically the number of scholarship students since 2005, it is doubtful that all scholarship recipients especially from developing countries including Rwanda, are academically equipped to meet the requirements of China's national scholarship Program.

### **Theoretical Framework of the Research**

This research employs constructivism theory as its theoretical framework by pinpointing that ideas, norms and perceptions shape international politics. Unlike realist and liberal approaches, constructivism theory believes that international relations can evolve according to the shared norms and identities. The central structures of international politics are based on social norms and shared identities rather than strictly material (Wendt 1999). Rwanda and China share too much in common particularly China brands itself as a developing country rather a colonial power which appeals to the brotherhood of the two countries. As an African developing country as well, Rwanda views China as a pragmatic partner that promotes mutual benefits. Therefore both countries share the same identity as developing countries. Furthermore, both nations share the same vision of being tech-driven and corruption-free states appealing to the constructivism theory through sharing the same identity. Rwanda and China also share the same historical grievances of being victims of the western imperialism. China does not follow the old path of some countries to achieve modernization through war, colonization, and plunder. China's history of development testifies that peaceful development is a fully accessible path to modernization (Xuekun 2024). Rwanda views China as a brotherly partner who seeks mutual benefit and respect indicating how both countries share common values. Moreover Rwanda embraces firmly China's "no string attached" policy and non-interfering model of respecting other countries' sovereignty which pinpoints how both states share the same political agenda. In addition to that, both countries have strongly established keen interest in promoting local manufacturing industries, both "Made in China" and "Made in Rwanda" showcase the identical political ideologies of the two nations appealing to the constructivists' ideas of how shared ideas, norms and identities shape international politics.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

This research adopts the methodological approach for examining China's public diplomacy efforts toward Rwanda since 2013. It presents the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques that were taken into account to guarantee thorough and reliable research.

#### **Research Design**

The research utilizes a qualitative research framework. This method facilitates an in-depth analysis of the public diplomacy approaches employed by China toward Rwanda. The emphasis is on comprehending the fundamental key features, engagements, and impact of the Chinese public diplomacy initiatives regarding China's public diplomacy end goal.

#### **Data Collection Methods**

This research will utilize official government documents, policy briefs, press releases, speeches, and public diplomacy reports from China and the Rwanda embassies. This part will also include a media content Analysis, Examining articles, editorials, and reports from Rwandan and Chinese media outlets to capture public perceptions and narratives. Thus, the research will review scholarly articles, books, and research papers on public diplomacy of Sino-Rwanda relations.

#### IV. FINDINGS

A few decades ago China emerged as a major country in international affairs, with its distinctive public diplomacy engagements and leveraging foreign policies. Through different public diplomacy efforts, such as Confucius institutes, scholarships to international students, and people-to-people diplomacy, China has shaped its global image, enhanced mutual understanding, and fostered Chinese soft power and, Rwanda offers a nuanced example. In that case, China's global building of a good image reflects its soft power effectiveness. All the public diplomacy efforts that represent China to the outside world are key tools in shaping global public perceptions. The relationship between Rwanda and China has been preserved amicably which appeals to the success of the Chinese foreign policy in Rwanda. Despite being a small country, Rwanda has emerged as a vision-oriented country with the fastest economic growth in Africa which accounts for its commitment to cooperating with major countries like China to enhance its global recognition. China's approach towards Rwanda reflects the broader framework of Sino-African relations where Rwanda has benefited significantly from the Cultural exchange programs and the Chinese educational assistance.

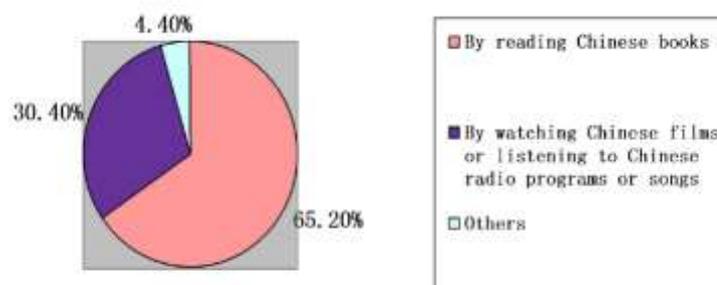
##### i. Key Features of China's Public Diplomacy toward Rwanda

China's public diplomacy efforts toward Rwanda have been the backbone of Sino-Rwandan relations since the early 2010s. The soft power of a certain country relies on three main resources, national culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye 2008), and all the public diplomacy efforts that represent China to the outside world are key tools in shaping global public perceptions (Myungsik, HAM, and Elaine TOLENTINO2018). Therefore, the key features of Chinese public diplomacy in Rwanda have embodied cultural diplomacy, media cooperation and partnerships, educational exchange programs, and people-to-people engagements. These initiatives have contributed to the welfare of Rwandan communities and strengthened the perception of China as a sustainable and committed partner among Rwandans. Through cultural diplomacy initiatives, Rwanda and China have enhanced the promotion of mutual respect and understanding by learning about each other's traditional culture and norms. As a result, these initiatives have fostered long-term relationships between the Chinese and Rwandan people. Moreover, the employment of people-to-people diplomacy serves as a bridge between the two countries' people to deepen their connection and boost shared values. The following are the key features of China's public diplomacy toward Rwanda since 2013.

##### Confucius Institutes and Kung Fu Teaching

Chongqing Normal University in 2009 partnered with the University of Rwanda and established the Confucius Institute. Since its establishment, the Confucius Institute has been the central tool in expanding extremities to disseminate China's culture and promote the Chinese language through language education for university students, government employees, local teachers, and the business community willing to learn and speak Mandarin Chinese. The initial goal of the Confucius Institute, which operates at the University of Rwanda, is to teach the Chinese language and Kung Fu to Rwandan-born participants. The most important part of this initiative is that those teachings are taught by students from universities in China (Stambach, Amy, and Kevin Wamalwa 2025). Zeng Guangyu, Director of the Confucius Institute at the University of Rwanda in the interview with Xinhua News Agency, pinpoints the significance of understanding each other's culture and how it cements the good relationship between Rwanda and China. He illustrates that each country's culture promotes business and working connections (Xinhua News Agency. 2022). The figure below showcases the learning strategies of Chinese language learners at the Confucius Institute centres in Rwanda.

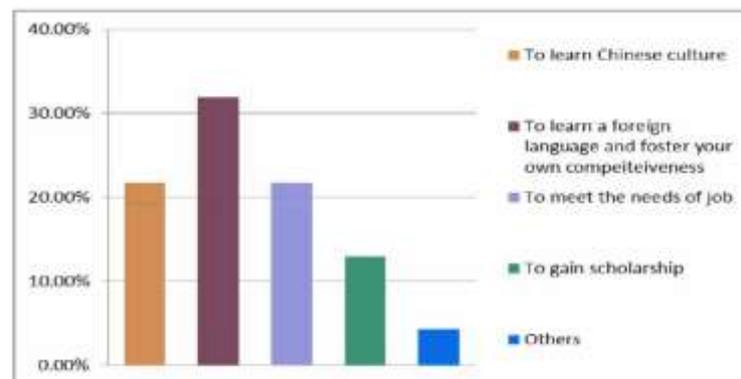
**Figure1. Learning Strategies of the Chinese Language Learners in Rwanda**



Source: Adopted from Lin Ling's research (2016)

The establishment of the Confucius Institute in Rwanda has grown into 14 institutes across the country since 2009. Young and older participants grab the opportunity to learn how to write, read, and speak the Chinese language. Half of these institutes are in different universities while the other half are in primary and secondary schools. As a result, learning Mandarin Chinese has benefited the economic ties between the two countries, spanning various sectors such as construction, agriculture, medicine, and infrastructure. Fortunately, Chinese enterprises in Rwanda hire students who learn the Chinese language to bridge Chinese enterprises with Rwandan communities thanks to the Confucius Institutes. Moreover, Kung Fu is another key element in disseminating China's culture through sport. Hundreds of young players from all around the country usually participate in the Rwanda National Kung Fu Championship. Kung Fu plays a vital role in strengthening bilateral relations for the exchange and mutual understanding of the two peoples of Rwanda and China. The Chinese language competition also known as "Chinese Bridge" themed "One World, One Family" hosted by the Chinese embassy in Kigali in collaboration with the Confucius Institute at the University of Rwanda, has inspired numerous Rwandans to participate in the Chinese language teaching programs. The Bridge Competition does not solely target language proficiency but also embraces the enhancement of the rich culture of China (People's Daily Online 2024). Through the "Chinese Bridge," Rwandan students in good numbers have been awarded an opportunity to visit China and experience the Chinese culture. This opportunity was an eye-opening and lifetime experience after spending a few years back learning Mandarin Chinese. Inside the University of Rwanda, the Remera campus often holds knowledge seminars to raise awareness of the similarities and distinctions between Rwanda and Chinese culture. These seminars provide a broader understanding to develop mutual respect between the two peoples. The Confucius Institute is one of the key elements of China's public diplomacy initiatives in Rwanda that has contributed significantly to disseminating China's culture and language promotion in Rwanda. It serves as a cornerstone for enhancing China's soft power in Rwandan society. The figure below indicates different motivations of the Chinese language learners in Rwanda.

**Figure2. Motivations of the Chinese Language Learners in Rwanda**



Source: Adopted from Lin Ling's research (2016)

### Cultural Exchange Programs and People-to-people Exchange

Cultural exchanges have played an important role in fostering a mutual understanding of the two countries cultures at the significant level. Through cultural festivals hosted by the Chinese Embassy in Rwanda, cultural delegations from China have showcased traditional Chinese music, cultural heritage, culture-oriented artistry, and cultural music dances leading to a deeper understanding of the Chinese culture for Rwandans. Meanwhile, Rwanda has sent several cultural artists to China to participate in cultural festivals. Moreover, Rwandan students who study in China have been showcasing the Rwandese culture in art exhibitions, music festivals, and dance performances. Cultural exchange programs and events such as academic conferences and tourism programs have deepened the mutual understanding between the two peoples of Rwanda and China. The Rwandan embassy in China occasionally in collaboration with the Rwandan community living in China (RCA/China) organizes cultural events to celebrate and showcase Rwandan heritage. For instance, on 14th, December 2024 such an event was held in Beijing. In his remarks, Rwandan Ambassador in China James Kimonyo pinpointed the role of cultural exchanges in enhancing mutual relations. Furthermore, in 2017 Rwandan Delegation attended home-grown Products in the Cultural Exhibition of Countries along the Belt & Road Initiative hosted by the Beijing Foreign Cultural Exchange Centre in cooperation with the Information Office of the People's Government of Beijing Municipality and China Council for the Promotion of International Trade Beijing Sub-council. The Rwandan embassy showcased the uniqueness

of the Rwandese culture contributing to the cultural differences awareness efforts (Kimonyo 2024). On July 5, 2018, The State Council Information Office (SCIO) with the Chinese embassy and Xinhua News Agency organized three-day cultural exchange activities and media cooperation in Kigali. The exhibition developed a nuanced experience between the Chinese and Rwandan history of fruitful relations and, strengthened mutual understanding (Xinhua 2018).

### **Educational Diplomacy and Scholarship Programs**

Education is another key element of China's public diplomacy initiative in Rwanda and serves as a cornerstone for disseminating China's soft power in Rwandan society. Since the 1980s China has been offering scholarships to Rwandan students to pursue and broaden their academic horizons at different levels such as bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and doctorates. Educational exchange programs play a significant role in enhancing a long-term relationship between China and Rwanda. For that purpose, Rwandan students act as ambassadors of Chinese culture upon their return from China and develop a mutual understanding between the two countries. In his speech at the farewell ceremony of the 2024 awardees of the Chinese scholarship program, the Chinese Ambassador in Rwanda His Excellency Wang Xuekun underscored the significance of educational scholarships in tightening the longstanding friendship between Rwanda and China. By offering scholarships, the Chinese government creates a good perception successfully appealing to its socialization of soft power and fostering tools of its national comprehensive power (HAM, and Elaine TOLENTINO 2018). As a result, Rwandan students have socialized with Chinese culture, visited museums, and understood the traditional heritage of China, making it easier to contribute to cultural difference awareness.

### **China-Rwanda media diplomacy and cooperation**

Media outlets have been key players in China's public diplomacy engagements in Rwanda. China's international media outlets such as CGTV Africa and Xinhua News Agency have increasingly grown their presence in Rwanda, leading to the dissemination of Chinese culture and historical narratives among Rwandan citizens. Moreover, the cooperation between Rwanda and China's media agencies has provided a mutual understanding at the broader level.

For instance, on July 5, 2018, a China-Rwanda media forum was held in Kigali whereby 10 Chinese and Rwandan media representatives discussed how to tighten the promotion of media cooperation and exchanges between the two countries. This media forum was hosted by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) of China and organized by Xinhua News Agency. While giving his remarks, Guo Weimin, vice head of the State Council Information Office of China underscored that the aim of establishing such a media forum is to strengthen understanding, mutual trust, and long-lasting friendship between the two peoples. Among the attendees included representatives from the Rwanda Broadcasting Agency and The New Times which are considered as leading media houses in Rwanda (CGTN Africa 2018). Under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) media training and exchanges have been provided to African journalists including Rwandan journalists. On that account, 28 journalists from 27 African Countries including Rwanda attended the seminar. This annual program which is organized by the China Africa Press Center (CAPC) in Beijing and sponsored by the China Public Diplomacy Association (CPDA) has strengthened mutual understanding through Media exchanges and training (Gaye, Fredrick P. 2016).

Undoubtedly, the media has the power to create and build relationships between China and Rwanda. By promoting cultural understanding through documentaries, culture-related films, and news stories that portray the rich culture of the two countries. The most important role of media between Rwanda and China refers to the enhancement of mutual understanding, and building long-term friendships. Media works as a mirror that reflects the relationship between both countries, for that purpose China-Rwanda media partnership has fostered China's public diplomacy efforts in Rwanda through sharing the news stories that contribute to enhancement of Chinese soft power within Rwandan general population.

### **ii. Impact of China's Public Diplomacy in Rwanda since 2013**

At the beginning of the 21st century, China emerged as a dominant and major country in international affairs. Its public diplomacy initiatives have targeted cultivating international partnerships and enhancing its national image on a global scale. On that account, Rwanda has benefited from the expansion of Chinese public diplomacy initiatives notably since 2013. This period marks a pivotal phase embodied by well-designed efforts to promote and strengthen the friendly relationship between the two peoples of both countries. With many changes in contemporary international relations, cultural diplomacy looks beyond developing ideological restraints. Reflecting the fundamental principles and goals of Chinese diplomacy, Deng underscored that China should not involve itself in any international interest groups but instead establish diplomatic contacts

with all countries (Yongtao, Liu 2015). China's public diplomacy in Rwanda has utilized robust approaches to deepen cultural relations, enhance the Chinese soft power in Rwanda, and improve the mutual understanding between Rwandans and Chinese people, yet it has appreciably impacted the Rwandan general public in terms of economic development and strengthened bilateral relations between Rwanda and China. Establishing the Confucius Institute, the employment of educational exchange programs, and people-to-people exchange initiatives have led to the significant and life-changing outcomes. This chapter provides a deep understanding the various dimensions of China's public diplomacy approaches since 2013, exploring their impact and tangible benefits to the Rwandan general public.

### **Language Promotion and Employment Opportunities**

China's cultural diplomacy has been the pivotal element of its public diplomacy efforts in Promoting the Chinese language within the Rwandan general public. Learning the Chinese language through the Confucius Institute has changed the lives of Rwandan individuals. Primarily this research intends to assess the benefit of Rwandan students, government officials, and business-oriented individuals who pursued the Chinese language teachings under the Confucius Institute. According to the Confucius Institute in Rwanda the increase in the number of participants each year, the registration of Rwandans willing to learn the Chinese language has skyrocketed, indicating Rwandans' interest in speaking Mandarin Chinese. June 10, 2024, marked 15 years since the establishment of the Confucius Institute at the University of Rwanda. Over these 15 years, more than 40,000 Rwandan students have participated in learning the Chinese language according to the Chinese Ambassador in Rwanda Wang Xuekun (huaxia. 2024). The Confucius Institute has opened 14 teaching sites in Rwanda, including one Confucius classroom, seven university teaching sites, and seven secondary school sites. Among the college teaching sites are in national universities, vocational and technical universities, international schools, and secondary schools. According to the Director of the Confucius Institute in Rwanda Zeng Guangyu, the number of people registering to learn the Chinese language increased remarkably whereby now over 5000 students each year enroll in the above university teaching sites which is 20 times the number in 2009 (Guangyu, Zeng. 2022). The Confucius Institute in Rwanda has established teaching sites even in secondary schools in different areas around the country. Now there are seven high school teaching sites. Beyond teaching and promoting the Chinese language and Culture, the Confucius Institute in Rwanda has innovatively established various training courses using the Chinese language. For instance, the formation of Chinese plus special courses such as medical training and agricultural technology training courses has changed the lives of Rwandan students who have attended these special courses since 2016. Furthermore, the Confucius Institute at the University of Rwanda in 2019 started to work hand in hand with the Chinese companies operating in Rwanda whereby the students who graduate from the Confucius Institute get the opportunity to be hired or get internships in those Chinese companies recommended by the Confucius Institute at University of Rwanda. Some students who performed excellently and had high scores in the Chinese proficiency examination got jobs as Rwandan Chinese language teachers at different teaching sites nationwide. According to the Chinese ambassador in Rwanda Wang Xuekun, 30 Chinese companies operate in Rwanda, and over 90 percent of staff the most Rwanda-based Chinese companies are Rwandans since China is the main source of Rwanda's imports (huaxia 2013). On that account, Chinese companies in Rwanda operate in almost all sectors including mining, infrastructure, and agriculture. The increase in Rwandan students' eagerness to learn the Chinese language has skyrocketed from 200 in 2009 to 5100 students in 2019 indicating how this initiative has impacted the general public through learning Mandarin Chinese at the teaching sites.

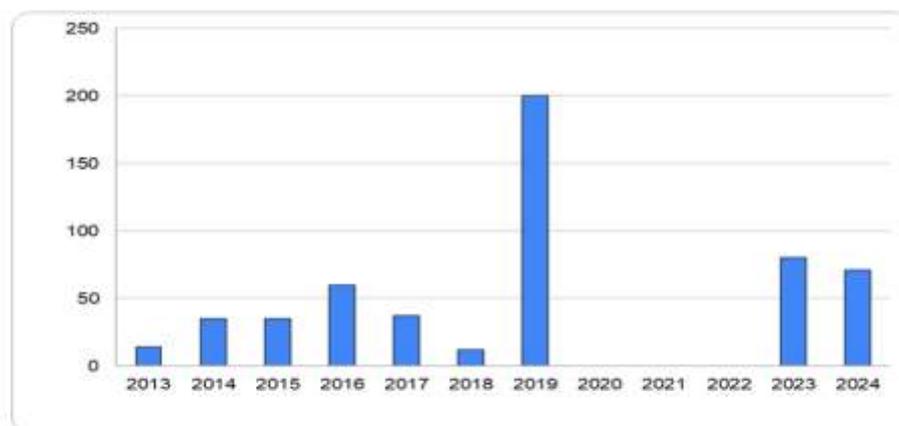
Under Confucius Institute through partnership with the Chinese embassy in Rwanda, "Chinese Bridge" competition has served as a pivotal tool of disseminating Mandarin and Chinese notably. On 10th, June, 2024, the "Chinese Bridge" Chinese language competition for foreign college students was held on Sunday in the Rwandan capital of Kigali. Hosted by the Chinese Embassy in Rwanda under the theme "One World, One Family," the event was organized by the Confucius Institute at the University of Rwanda, featuring a speech session and a talent show. The Chinese Bridge competition is not only about language proficiency but also about understanding and embracing the rich culture of China. These competitions provide a unique opportunity for Rwandan students to demonstrate their Chinese language skills and showcase their understanding of Chinese traditions, arts, and history. "It is a celebration of excellence and a testament to the dedication of the Confucius Institute's students and educators" said by Chinese Ambassador in Rwanda. "The Ministry of Education is ready to continue to support this good partnership between the government of Rwanda and China" Wang Xuekun stated. He also commended the Rwandan Ministry of Education for its support to Chinese language education. Since 2013 more than a 1000 Rwandan students have competed in the Chinese Bridge language proficiency and some of them who emerged to be the most fluent have been given the opportunity to visit China enabling them to experience the Chinese language and

culture on a broader understanding. These efforts have boosted Rwandans' eagerness to learn Chinese language and created the groundwork of the long-term relationship between Rwandese and Chinese citizens. Moreover, Confucius Institute has changed significantly lives of the individuals who are now employed by Chinese firms operating in Rwanda appealing to the impact of employment opportunity through its Chinese language promotion. In addition to that, promoting the Chinese language in Rwanda has created an effective communication between Rwandan business owners who were taught Mandarin via the Confucius Institute and Chinese business owners, softening international trade between Rwanda and China.

### Capacity Building and Chinese Soft Power Enhancement

The impact of educational exchange and academic cooperation between Rwanda and China can be assessed through three major educational programs namely Chinese government scholarships, vocational training for Rwandan students in Chinese academic institutions, and joint programs fostering a mutual understanding and strengthening the Chinese soft power in Rwandan society. Hon. Joseph Nsengimana, Rwandan Minister of Education underscored the significant role of China's support towards Rwanda through its government scholarships and vocational training projects in deepening good relationships between the two countries pinpointing that Rwanda is willing to enhance the educational cooperation with China (Wang 2024). Since the 1980s, more than 1,500 Rwandan students have completed their studies in China after being awarded Chinese government scholarships, according to official data from the Chinese embassy in Rwanda. Since 2008, Chinese government under Ministry of Commerce started to foster mutual relations by enhancing capacity building of top government officials and managerial personnel from the recipient countries including Rwanda also known as MOFCOM scholarship program. The following chart indicates the number of Rwandan students awarded by Chinese government schools from 2013 until 2024 unfortunately (2020-2022) no data presented due to COVID 19 Pandemic.

**Figure 3 .Number of Rwandan students awarded Chinese government Scholarships since 2013**



**Source: Author's chart based on the data from the Chinese Embassy in Rwanda (2025)**

By offering one year and two year master programs as well as three year doctoral programs to Rwandan top government officials, private business owners, and Rwandan future elites, China has established the groundwork of a long-term friendship between Chinese people and Rwandan general public creating a favorable Chinese image within Rwandan society and enhancing the Chinese soft power mechanism in Rwanda. MOFCOM scholarship initiative has contributed significantly to the development of Rwandan education sector equipping Rwandan young scholars with skills and insightful knowledge that will provide the most qualified labor force to boost the Rwanda's continued development framework. This type of academic assistance has been instrumental in promoting mutual understanding due to the number of Rwandan students who were granted this opportunity to broaden their academic horizons at different prodigious universities in China, experiencing Chinese culture, visiting ancient Chinese sites such as Great Wall of China, Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven to name but a few, giving them a deeper understanding of Chinese traditional values and culture.

Other major impact of offering government scholarships to Rwandan students refers to the China's continued unwavering support to Rwanda's human capital development and created a pool of Rwandan professionals with first-hand experience of China. Rwandan students who completed their studies in esteemed Chinese universities were equipped with improved skills, knowledge and overall capabilities of individuals to enhance their productivity and economic potential. This

educational support has boosted Chinese favorable image within Rwandan community due to its impact in changing their daily lives, and shape China as a reliable partner in the continued Rwandan development (Mugabo 2022). Therefore, Scholarship initiative enables China to cement its soft power-building mechanism in Rwanda and forge a long-term relationship between the two nations.

### **Media Cooperation and Information Influence**

Rwanda and China have established media partnerships and cooperation that created a strong bond between giant Chinese media houses and their counterparts in Rwanda. Through the China-Rwanda Media Forum which was launched in 2018, Chinese media owners of the biggest media outlets in China like Xinhua News Agency, China Global Television Network, and China Daily established this forum alongside their counterparts from The New times, Rwanda Broadcasting Agency, and Kigali Today opened the space for the media of the two countries to collaborate and exchange narratives. The partnership aims to share news content where Chinese media outlets provide Rwandan media houses with reports on China's policies and global initiatives. Meanwhile, Rwandan media creates narratives about the progress and opportunities for such cooperation. Moreover, the China-Rwanda media forum created a training exchange granting Rwandan journalists a media tour in China while Chinese journalists come to Rwanda to exchange knowledge (Ngabonziza 2018). During his historical visit to Rwanda, Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2018, Chinese media has been providing capacity building training to Rwandan journalists benefiting the media industry in Rwanda. Media partnerships between China's giant media outlets and the dominant media houses in Rwanda have generated a broader understanding of the cultural differences between both countries enabling each media to shape public opinions of another country.

Rwanda has been dominated by Western media narratives due to the colonial legacy and influence, therefore to ensure the sustainability and expansion of the Chinese public diplomacy, Chinese media outlets partners with their counterparts from Rwanda to balance Western media narratives, particularly information and news consumption. Western media outlets have asserted dominance in Rwanda since early 2000s, allowing Western countries to shape public perceptions by creating narratives that favor Western interests. Media outlets like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) of England, Cable News Network (CCN), of the USA and France 24 of France strongly influence Rwandans through news stories and digital content. Since the end of the Cold War in 1991, US media outlets have increasingly portrayed China from a monotonous angle, covering news stories of the Chinese rise and showcasing factors of politics and human rights issues and less China's rich culture and harmonious society (Roy, Teesta 2023). To balance this Western dominance, Rwandan media outlets have tightened media cooperation with China's global media houses to disseminate more narratives that appeal to the Chinese unwavering support towards Rwandan continued development. Moreover, Chinese global media outlets such as CGTN Africa, Xinhua, and China Daily have established a media forum with Rwandan media houses like Rwanda Broadcasting Agency, the News times and Kigali Today to strongly expand their news coverage in Rwanda while countering Western media narratives.

The impact of media cooperation can be measured in terms of how both media outlets have created a mutual understanding and shared trust between both general public enhancing the good relationships between the two countries through creating media narratives that disseminate each country's culture and promote a shared commitment to deepen longstanding friendship between Rwandan people and the Chinese people. Furthermore, numerous Rwandan journalists have received media insights and knowledge from the China-Africa Media Forum usually held in Beijing. Fostering knowledge exchanges and media partnerships, Rwanda and China create an interconnected and informed global media environment, strengthening transparency and journalistic standards crucial in fostering a deep connection between both nations.

## **V. IMPLICATIONS**

The Rwandan general public's perception of China lies in the consideration of China, being primarily a major economic actor in the Rwandan continued development journey and reconstruction after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. Despite the positive impact of the Chinese contribution to Rwandan development through its public diplomacy efforts, China's economic diplomacy emphasis toward Rwanda might overshadow its public diplomacy efforts. For that reason, the Rwandan government should encourage its people to participate and support these Chinese public diplomacy initiatives by hosting so many culture-oriented festivals and road show events to raise awareness of how impactful and beneficial China's public diplomacy has been to the continued Rwandan development. These implications will ensure the visibility of these initiatives within Rwandan community especially in local areas fostering the dissemination of the Chinese soft power and countering misunderstandings about the Chinese intentions toward the Rwandan general public from the Western media

and narratives. The Rwandese government must make sure that there is no mismatch between China's public diplomacy's ultimate goal and the initial outcomes of these continued initiatives, aiming to enhance mutual understanding, build trust, and long-term relationships between both peoples of Rwanda and China. This research intends to highlight the lessons and implications to be drawn by the government of Rwanda to provide conducive means for the China's public diplomacy to ensure the sustainability of these efforts and facilitate China's foreign policy framework to achieve its goals.

### Strengthening Bilateral Cooperation with China

Cultural differences and language barrier remain major limitation to the full success of China's public diplomacy efforts toward Rwanda. Although the establishment of the Confucius Institutes has managed to minimize the gap via cultural and language promotion, the Rwandan government needs to expand bilateral cooperation with China regarding cultural diplomacy promotion, and educational partnerships. The Rwandan government should host more cultural events such as Chinese movies festivals, art exhibitions, and Mandarin language programs to cement mutual understanding and enhance people-to-people ties. Moreover, Rwandan ministry of education can ensure the development and expansion of the Confucius Institute throughout the country to promote the Chinese language by making it the credited course in high schools and university colleges to enlarge the number of Mandarin Rwandan speakers as English and French are being taught in all national schools, therefore Chinese language has to be included in national curriculum. Gradually, this will encounter the language barrier issue and sustain the success of Confucius Institute initiative. Since Colonial era Rwanda has been using Western languages as its national languages. Apart from Kinyarwanda the mother tongue, French had been Rwanda's official language since the colonization until the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. Hence many Rwandans still utilize this language as their alternative for international language usage. Africa is a huge continent consisting of 55 sovereign countries according to the African Union, with over 1.2 billion population from over 3000 ethnic groups speaking more than 1000 Indigenous languages plus six European languages namely (French, English, Portuguese, German, Spanish, and Italian) resulting from colonization (Matondo 2012). Since 2008 English has become Rwanda's official language and has widely accumulated many Rwandans due to becoming the medium of instruction in all schools. The following figure is a graphic that indicates how Rwandan students view their proficiency in languages acting in code-switching.

**Figure 4: Graphic representation of Rwandan students' perceived proficiency in languages acting in code-switching**



**Source: Adopted from Aloys HATEGEKIMANA's article (2024)**

So far, Rwanda has four official languages. Kinyarwanda is the most widely spoken, English and French are the most important languages acquired as second languages through formal education, and Kiswahili is spoken as a commercial language. The status of Kiswahili is rising in Rwanda due to infrastructure projects that connect Swahili-speaking areas. For the Chinese language to gain more Rwandan speakers, the local government might endorse the initiative of incorporate the Mandarin into the national curriculum encourage Rwandese students to learn it from the high school level as they do with English and French. It is difficult to understand each other when people can't communicate due to the language barrier issue, hence misunderstanding originating from the failure to communicate with each other serves as the biggest challenge in building sustainable friendships (Aljarelah 2024). For that reason, Rwanda and China can collaborate more to certify the continuous success of the Confucius Institute.

### Leveraging Chinese Public Diplomacy for National Development

Rwanda is notably benefiting from Chinese public diplomacy efforts; hence it is very crucial to leverage these efforts to make sure they contribute accordingly to its national development. For instance via scholarships and training programs offered by the Chinese government, Rwandan institutions in charge of education such as ministry of education and High

Education Council should choose students according to their academic capabilities to be recommended as beneficiaries of this program to secure future professionals from Chinese educational institutions who will contribute remarkably to the Rwandan national development. Regarding educational exchange programs, Rwandan students are still pursuing their education in Western countries in numbers. For instance, in the 2019-2020 academic year, Rwandan students increased by 1,444 students to study in the USA according to the US Embassy in Rwanda in 2019. Other Western countries that host many Rwandan students include the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Germany which might hinder the smooth running of the Chinese initiatives especially the expansion of the Chinese soft power in within Rwandan community. Therefore, Rwanda government should leverage Chinese public diplomacy by utilizing cultural exchange events and tourism as a tool of attracting more Chinese tourists to come and visit Rwanda. By leveraging Chinese public diplomacy, Rwanda can promote its tourism attractions like silver-back gorillas, Rwandan national parks, and cultural heritage sites. This might not only improve Rwandan national development but also enhance cultural exchange and people-to-people connections through tourism. Furthermore, by leveraging China's public diplomacy by Rwandan government will attract more Chinese investors to come in Rwanda and establish their companies which will expand both countries 'economic cooperation and boost the Chinese soft power mechanism within Rwandan community. Moreover, Rwanda can utilize "Visit Rwanda" campaign to attract Chinese population to come and visit by promoting Rwandan culture in different culture-related events that might be hosted by the Rwandese embassy in China. "Visit Rwanda" has been the backbone of the tourism sector in Rwanda through attracting foreign tourists and it serves as a pivotal tool of branding the Rwandan image worldwide precisely Europe in sports advertisement. Utilizing this campaign to showcase Rwandan beauty and culture through video promotion can enhance cultural exchange programs between Rwanda and China and counter the challenge of cultural differences while contributing to the Rwandan national development.

#### **Balancing Relations with China and Western Countries**

Rwanda has built strong diplomatic ties with major countries including China, the USA, England, Germany to name but a few after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. Rwanda's recovery from its tragic past has been considered as a phoenix that rose from the ashes and making it a country that has triumphed ethnical conflicts and divisions to become one of African countries with the fastest growing economy. Rwandan foreign policy refers to the non-aligned framework that collaborates with each country regardless its political agenda and ideology and maintains neutrality. This foreign policy intends to balance how Rwandan government interacts and communicates with global powers to achieve its foreign policy goals. Consequently, Rwandan government can use its foreign policy model to find equilibrium between China and Western countries to avoid the imbalance that might occur in these major powers 'public diplomacy efforts. Moreover, Rwanda, having a longstanding connection with Western countries due to colonization and religion has to be balanced to ensure the fairness and equality in its diplomatic relations between China and Western countries. The employment of Rwanda's diversification to balance China and Western countries can expand its soft power engagement and global recognition. In addition to that, Under President Paul Kagame's leadership, Rwanda has established a solid reputation for its innovation, economic expansion, and excellent administration. Diverse international partners have lent their support and investment to this soft power.

#### **VI. CONCLUSION**

China's public diplomacy since 2013 has evolved notably expanding the Chinese soft power in Rwanda, enhancing mutual understanding, and shaping China's national image favorably within the society of Rwanda. Therefore, there is no doubt that China's public diplomacy efforts will keep pushing the limits and tackling existing limitations to ensure the success of the mentioned initiatives. All and all, with the Confucius Institute initiative, cultural exchange events, media partnerships, educational exchange, and an increase of people-people exchange programs such as vocational training approaches China has shown a significant commitment to strengthening the good relationship between Rwanda and China. Rwandan people have witnessed the willingness of China's government and the Chinese people to foster longstanding friendship and a shared future partnership that embodies mutual trust and benefit. Also, China's public diplomacy efforts in Rwanda have noticeably shaped its national image, strengthening China's good reputation among Rwandese Community. Last but not least, It promoted its rich culture tightening the Sino-Rwandan cultural understanding. With the continued effort to enhance media cooperation between the two states, China will counter the misinformation and political perception from the Western media that might hinder its soft power-building in Rwanda. Rwanda and China have built mutual and beneficial relations that will ensure a deeper connection between Rwandan and Chinese peoples.

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