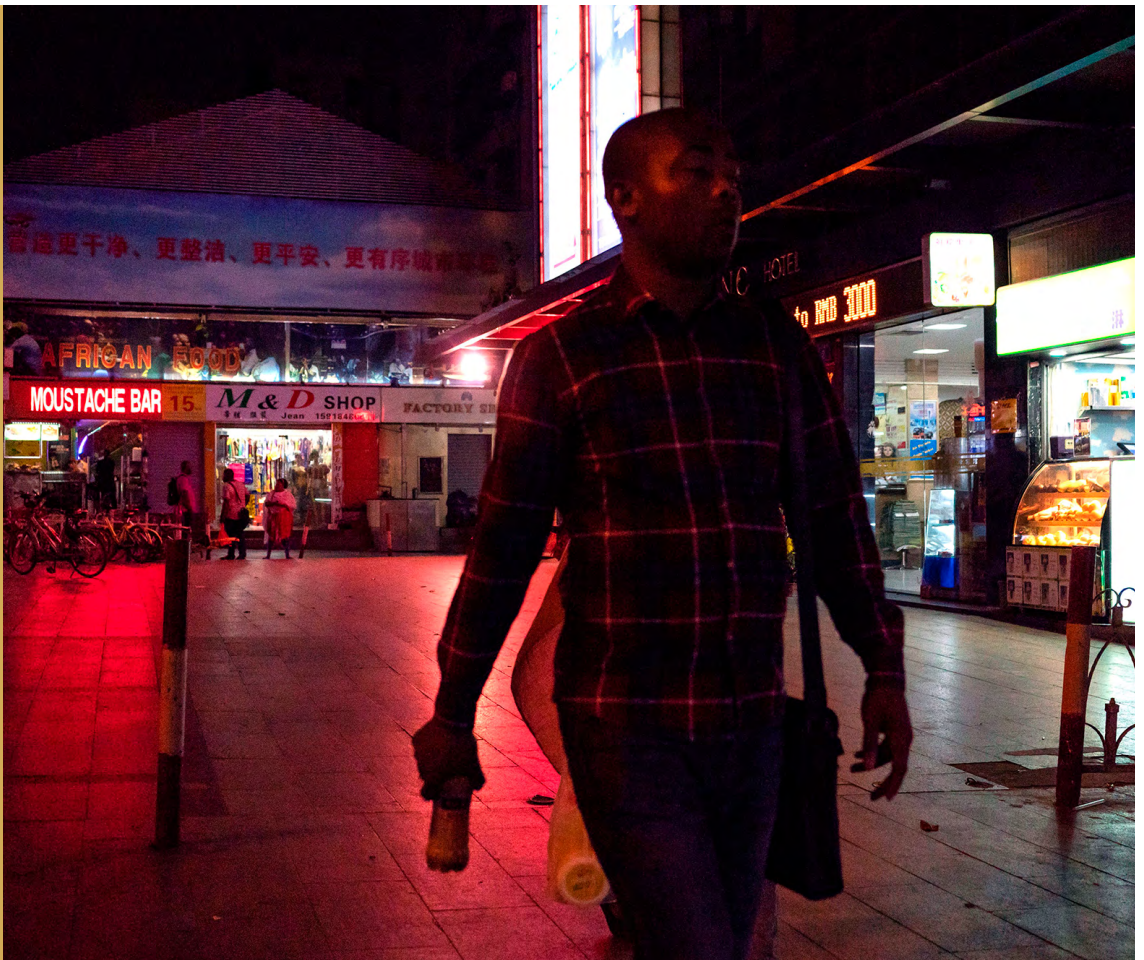


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Mistreatment of Africans in China during the COVID-19 outbreak: When economic interests supersede all others

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Abstract

There was a huge outcry when videos of mistreatment of Africans in the Chinese city of Guangzhou went viral on social media in April 2020. This was after authorities in Guangdong province introduced stringent measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. Africans living there said they were forced to undergo mandatory testing and quarantine, were evicted from their homes, and turned away from



public places. In subsequent days the central government in Beijing intervened and promised to bring the situation to an end. Not much has been done to understand that rationale behind the actions of China and affected African countries. In this essay, I opine that the change of heart by China, which is known for strict enforcement of its rules and regulations, came as no surprise. Beijing realised that the mistreatment of Africans in Guangzhou was detrimental to its economic interests. Many African countries were affected, but the focus of this essay is Nigeria. I further argue that Nigeria was reluctant to put pressure on China, despite reports of the continuation of mistreatment of Nigerians in Guangzhou. It did not want to jeopardise its economic relations with China, I argue. This essay relies on online news articles by *The Punch* and *Vanguard* in Nigeria and *Global Times* and China Global Television Network Africa in China.

Introduction

The outbreak of the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wuhan Province, China, in December 2019 and the subsequent increase in imported cases pressured other provinces in China to take action against rising infection rates. Guangdong is one of the Chinese provinces that had to put stringent measures in place to curb the spread of the virus. It is home to an estimated 20,000 Africans, mainly from West Africa, the majority of whom reside in the city of Guangzhou, according to Daoda Cissé (2013) (cited Li Zhigang et al, 2007; Bodo, 2010).

Some of the stringent measures that Guangdong authorities put in place to curb the spread of the virus included mandatory testing and an additional 14-day quarantine for all people of African descent, regardless of whether they had previously been tested (Li, 2020). This was not well-received by some Africans, who resorted to social media to express their frustration. Videos showing Africans evicted by their landlords from their residential areas and barred from entering grocery stores and restaurants went viral on social media.

Many African countries, including 20 Africa ambassadors in China, were similarly outraged and issued strong-worded statements on the matter. This essay focuses on Nigeria, as it is one of the African countries with a high number of its citizens living in Guangzhou (*Sundiata Post* 2019) and its officials were very vocal on the matter.

This essay is divided into five subsections. The first subsection looks at the economic relationship between Africa and China, while the second looks at Beijing's public diplomacy policy in Africa. I argue that these two factors played a role in their own responses to the mistreatment of Africans in Guangzhou city; the third and fourth subsection looks at this response. The final subsection looks at how the four leading online publications in Nigeria and China framed their reporting on the mistreatment of Africans in China. I conclude, based on the media's framing of the mistreatment of Africans in China, that the economic relationship between Nigeria and China is so deeply entrenched that they are willing to turn a blind eye to other interests.

China's relationship with Nigeria and Africa

China's formal relationship with Africa dates back to the second half of the 20th century. This was the period when many African countries were fighting for their liberation from colonialism, and Beijing played a crucial role in giving financial support and military training to many of the liberation movements. China also supported newly independent countries by building their infrastructure, with the most notable example being the 2000km railway line linking Zambia and Tanzania (Wenping 2006).

China is also Africa's largest trading partner, with trade volume reaching around \$170 billion in 2017 (Shanshan 2018). However, this trade is skewed in favour of China because it exports secondary goods, while Africa mainly exports primary goods. Nonetheless, the economic relationship has been beneficial to both Africa and China. The latter has been able to use primary goods or raw materials from Africa to feed its manufacturing sector and to grow its economy by double digits for several years. Conversely, Africa, through loans and financial aid from China, has built thousands of kilometres of roads and railway lines, as well as schools and hospitals. Even the world-class multibillion-dollar African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, was built by China (Aglionby 2018).

However, scholars argue that the China-Africa trade relationship is problematic as it is skewed in favour of China. Many countries on the continent are heavily indebted to China, and Nigeria is a textbook example in this regard. It exports primary goods, mainly mineral fuels, oil and distillation products (*Trading Economics* 2020). Conversely, China exports secondary goods to Nigeria and has invested heavily in infrastructure development in various parts of the West African nation.

Indicative of this, between 2015 and 2018 the trade deficit between the two countries was around \$17.5 billion in favour of China (Oshodi 2019). Moreover, Nigeria's debt to China is estimated to be over \$3 billion (Debt Management Office Nigeria 2020). There are several other sub-Saharan African countries in a similar position with China. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in 2012, China owned around 15% of Africa's external debt.

China's image and public diplomacy in Africa

China understands that its economic relationship with sub-Saharan Africa and other countries is a cause for concern. It has thus embarked on a public diplomacy and soft power mission to counter its negative image. China's public diplomacy is premised on the principle of 'telling a good story of China', according to one of the leading scholars on China's international relations (Yiwei 2016).

Beijing has established the Confucius Institute in several countries as part of its public diplomacy efforts to enhance its image, while at the same time protecting its economic

interests. The institute's primary goal is to teach the Chinese language, but the curriculum includes Chinese history and culture, which is indirectly used to tell 'the good story of China' (Hui and Wang 2015, 301). The annual Chinese Bridge Chinese proficiency competition is a good example of the Confucius Institute's public diplomacy efforts. China has also embarked on an exchange programme as part of its public diplomacy to improve its image abroad.

Beijing is also aware of the importance of the media in polishing its image in the international arena. At the beginning of 2012, it launched *CCTV Africa's* broadcast centre in Kenya. In December of the same year, the *China Daily Africa* newspaper was launched. These mediums are from time to time used to drive and promote the 'good story of China' to enhance its image on the continent in order to protect its economic interests (BBC 2012).

China's reaction to the mistreatment of Africans

The mistreatment of Africans in Guangzhou put the central government in China in an awkward position. It had, over the years, invested heavily in building good economic relations with many countries on the continent. It has also spent billions of dollars on its public diplomacy to counter the prevailing negative narrative about its relationship with Africa.

As a part of its mission to mend the relationship with Africa after the mistreatment of Africans, Beijing arranged a quick meeting with African ambassadors in China. It assured them it would address the matter. Shortly after the meeting, Chinese Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Xhen Xiaodong declared: 'The health management of African personnel except for confirmed patients and close contacts has been lifted, and an effective communication mechanism has been established with the African Consulate General in Guangzhou.' He went on to note that the problems in Guangdong were 'between the brothers' and could be resolved through friendly consultations. He blamed 'external forces for trying to sabotage the friendly relations between Africa and China'.

One can see from the tone of this statement that Beijing was not willing to sacrifice its relationship with African countries. It thus came as no surprise when the Chinese government forced Guangdong province to reverse its COVID-19 policy position on Africans, as it was clearly detrimental to its economic relationship with Africa, where it has invested billions of dollars. China needs Africa because it has primary goods, which it uses to feed its ever-hungry manufacturing sector. Equally important is the fact that China has invested heavily in its public diplomacy with Africa and could not afford any setbacks due to the incident.

Nigeria's reaction to the mistreatment of Africans

Nigeria is one of the African countries that was very vocal about the mistreatment of Africans in Guangzhou. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, even though there is no reliable data on the exact number, Nigeria is regarded as one of the African countries with a high number of citizens living in Guangzhou city. Secondly, there is a large Chinese community that operates many businesses in Nigeria. When the news about the mistreatment of Africans in China went viral on social media, the hashtag #DeportRacistChinese began trending in Nigeria, putting pressure on Nigerian authorities to act. The Nigerian government summoned the Chinese Ambassador, Zhou Pingjian, to explain the position of his government on the mistreatment of Africans in China (MSN 2020).

In addition, the Nigerian ambassador to China was one of 20 African ambassadors who wrote a strongly worded letter to the Chinese authorities over the mistreatment of Africans. After the Chinese authorities gave their assurance that these actions would be stopped, the Nigerian authorities stopped pursuing the matter further. Interestingly, many Nigerian citizens continued to complain about ill-treatment in Guangzhou city, even after assurance from Chinese authorities to the contrary.

Interestingly when Nigerian citizens were still crying for help in China in June 2020, President Muhammadu Buhari was addressing the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation meeting, thanking China for 'considerable assistance extended to Nigeria'. He never uttered a single word on the mistreatment of his people in China throughout his speech, and there is no evidence that there were bilateral talks on the matter.

Media framing on the mistreatment of Africans in China

The two Nigerian online publications, *The Punch* and *Vanguard*, were critical of China in their initial news articles published in April 2020.

A day after China issued a statement giving its assurance that the mistreatment of Africans was going to stop, both published stories using Beijing as a frame sponsor and stopped covering the story for about two weeks.

However, in May, about four weeks after the incident, *Vanguard* wrote a follow-up story. It quoted a leader of the Nigerians in Diaspora Organisation in Guangdong province, Festus Mbisogu, pleading with the Nigerian authorities to continue intervening in the plight of Nigerians in Guangzhou (*Vanguard* 2020a). In the same month, *The Punch* (2020)

reported that around 300 Nigerians were still stranded in Guangzhou city, despite denials by Chinese authorities.

In June, another article from *Vanguard* (2020b) quoted a leader of the Council of Nigerian Citizens in China, accusing the government of Nigeria of ignoring their complaints regarding the maltreatment of Nigerians in China. In the same news article, another group representing Nigerians raised a similar concern about the Nigerian government. The leader of the Union of Progressive Nigerians in China was quoted saying, 'It was saddening that despite all the complaints by Nigerians and other blacks in China, Nigerian and other African governments chose to pander to the sentiments of the Chinese instead of the concerns of its citizens.'

Conversely, the Chinese online publication *Global Times* (2020) quoted the Nigerian Foreign Affairs Minister, Geoffrey Onyeama, refuting 'rumours' that some Nigerian citizens were ill-treated in Guangdong province. *CGTN Africa* online also quoted Onyeama countering the claims that African citizens were being mistreated in China: 'The strict move was misinterpreted to appear as if it was only targeting Nigerians and Africans although this was not the case.'

The media framing by all four of these publications suggests that the Nigerian authorities were no longer interested in pursuing the issue of mistreatment of their citizens in China after assurances from Chinese authorities. The framing by all the four publications suggests that the Nigerian authorities ignored the outcry by some groups of people representing Nigerian citizens in China. The local Chinese online media even quoted a Nigerian official denying that Nigerians were mistreated in China.

Neither of the two countries conceded that their response to the situation was determined by their economic interests. Their approach is not surprising because countries tend to be diplomatic in their approach to avoid any possible implications. However, if one looks at the economic relations and the response by the two countries, there is little doubt that it played a huge role. This view is also supported by Nigerian scholar Oshodi (2020). He argues that Nigeria had no choice but to ignore the cries of its citizens because it needs Chinese investment and loans more than ever due to the crash in crude oil prices and the global economic meltdown this year.

Conclusion

China and Nigeria are not on record saying their response to the mistreatment of Africans in China was informed by their economic relations. If, however, one looks at the economic relationship between the countries and their response, there is little doubt that it played a role. Prioritising economic relations is not uncommon in the international relations realm. Many countries are willing to sacrifice some of their policy priorities and principles in favour of other imperatives. This confirms the realism theory hypothesis that claims that states are driven by their national interests in the international arena (Morgenthau 1973).

It was in the national interests of Beijing to ensure that its citizens were protected from COVID-19. Therefore, it allowed Guangdong province to go ahead with stringent measures to curb the spread of the virus, which included singling out and mistreating Africans. The Chinese government only forced Guangdong province to reverse its decision after the international outcry. China realised that if it did not do so, the incident would have a negative effect on its economic interests with Africa and thus reverse the gains it has made over the years.

Nigeria was also forced into a position where it had to choose between its citizens in China and its economic interests. Indeed, it did summon the Chinese ambassador to show its disapproval, but subsequent events suggest it was simply playing to the gallery. The country did not pursue the matter any further despite the gravity of complaints of ill-treatment by some Nigerians in Guangdong. One can only conclude that economic interests far superseded other interests.

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African Journalism and Media in the Time of COVID-19

This essay forms part of the *African Journalism and Media in the Time of COVID-19* series. It is an output from a 2020 master's course in international communication at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University), where discussions revolved around the coverage of the African dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic by international and African media. After the completion of the course, students submitted assignments in the form of essays, choosing one African country and its media or any international media outlet as the focus of analysis. The students made presentations on their essays in a workshop program and received feedback from a group of 10 African journalism and media scholars under the auspices of the African Media Salon. These essays, therefore, constitute an early contribution of knowledge on the intersection of media and international communication, drawing on concepts such as public diplomacy, soft power and the international political economy of communication.

The series is a partnership of Wits University's Journalism Department, the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) and the Africa Portal, a project of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA).



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Photo credit: In this photo taken on 1 March 2018, people walk in the 'Little Africa' district in Guangzhou, the capital of southern China's Guangdong province. The commercial hub has long been a magnet for fortune-seeking Africans, but traders and students say they face unfavourable visa rules and increasingly heavy policing. (Fred Dufour/AFP via Getty Images)

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