



Is this not colonization? Framing Sino-South African relations in South Africa's mainstream press

AUTHOR(S)

Allen Munoriyarwa

University of Johannesburg

ORCID: 0000-0001-5064-3192

Albert Chibuwe

University of Free State

ORCID: 0000-0002-3905-6541

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Abstract

Drawing on a media-centric framing theory, and utilising qualitative framing analysis, we examine how selected mainstream newspapers in South Africa framed Sino- South Africa relationships. We observe the ubiquity of negative anti-Chinese frames in the South African mainstream media. We demonstrate that these largely negative frames on China clustered around key issues: its economic relationship with South Africa; human rights issues; and China's political ties with African regimes. We argue that the negative frames were a result of newspapers' sourcing routines. Furthermore, we argue that anti-Chinese frames in the South African media sync neatly with a growing negative public perception of China, sustained by global media especially in the West and the US.

Keywords

Sino-South Africa relations; framing theory; frame analysis; mainstream press; China; Africa

INTRODUCTION

The mainstream media have always been central in defining and articulating for the public, the history between, and among nations and the relationships between or among countries (Kastner and Saunders, 2012). This is because of the lack of detailed foreign policy expertise among many people in most societies (Goldsmith and Horiuchi, 2019), making it difficult for them to rely on their own judgement. In addition, foreign policy issues rarely occupy the public agenda (Baker and Rudoren, 2015), unless they are brought up by the media. For example, the visit by an influential leader of one country, to another, always sparks frenzied media attention and analysis of existing inter-state relationships (Kastner and Saunders, 2012), and thrusts foreign policy onto the public agenda, if only, for the moment of the visit.

In the coverage of inter-state relations, the media play different interpretive roles (Hulme, 2001). In some instances, the media have supported their state's positions (and sometimes, the propaganda) on inter-state relations (Burton, 1993). Yet, in others, they oppose and question the value of specific relations (Gilboa, 2001). For instance, sections of the United States media broke ranks with other mainstream media's support of Israel during the Israeli Prime Minister's visit to Washington in June 2015 (Baker and Rudoren, 2015). They started to question the sustainability of the US-Israeli relationship and its future efficacy (Baker and Rudoren, 2015). This was a rare break away from the 'bipartisan foundations' (Lipner, 2015, n.p.) of Israel's support generally shared by US politicians and the mainstream media. Similarly, on the occasion of Xi Jinping's visit to Russia in June 2019 some sections of the Russian media questioned the future and durability of the Sino - Russian relationship in the face of a vicious trade dispute between

the two in Asia (MacFarquhar, 2019).

In June 2018, the Chinese President paid a state visit to South Africa, which was also hosting the Brazil-Russia-India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) Annual Conference. The visit generated significant media interest in South Africa. It was one of those events where journalists found themselves woven into the complicated dynamics of inter-state relations. In such moments, foreign policy views come under intense media scrutiny (Kodila - Tedika and Khalifa, 2020). In this paper, the visit by the Chinese president is treated as a media event that created a media hype. A media event, '...commands attention 'universally' and simultaneously in order to tell a... story about current affairs' (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Furthermore, a media event is, 'Like a ray of light passing through the prism of public discourse...' (Kunelius et al, 2017), generating heightened media attention, and where historical and current inter-state relations are revisited by the media and political elite. By 'media hype', we mean the visit triggered much media attention; was suitable for media debate; and could be covered from a variety of perspectives by the media (Wien, Elmelund- Praestekaer, 2009). It is not on a quotidian basis that media outlets in South Africa cover issues to do with China, or Chinese relations with South Africa. Major events such as visits by heads of state provide an opportunity for significant news generation through the significant media hype and generate news that is worthy scholarly exploration (Kunelius, et al, 2017).

Despite China's growing economic and political influence on the continent, there is no known research, to date, that has examined mainstream media framing of Sino-South Africa relations. In this vein, this paper seeks to answer the question: In what ways did South African mainstream press frame President Xi Jinping's visit to South Africa in June 2018? The paper utilises three mainstream newspapers. These are: *The Mail & Guardian (M&G)*, *City Press* and *The Sunday Times*. It adds to existing research on Sino-African relations in the media (Wasserman, 2012; 2016; 2018; Madrid-Morales, 2016). This existing literature, while related to media, does not examine the mainstream media frames through which Sino-South Africa relations have been framed by local media. It is important to explore these frames, considering the global controversies associated with Chinese presence in Africa (van Dijk, 2009; Mlambo, 2011). The controversies have ranged from China exploiting African natural resources (Mlambo, 2011), to China attempting to export its political ideology to African countries (Taylor, 2007). For instance, there has been two recent incidences that have brought the Sino-Africa relations back into public discourses¹. In the context of South Africa, the opposition political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters' (EFF) criticism of the Chinese is known.

This paper is structured as follows: the next section provides a literature review on the media representation of Africa-China relations. It is followed by the theoretical framework. The paper utilises Entman's (1993) frame theory. The theoretical section is followed by a note on methodology. This paper adopts a qualitative framing analysis. The methodology section is followed by a findings section, followed by the discussion and conclusion sections respectively.

MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF SINO-AFRICA RELATIONS: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The field of media representation of Sino-Africa relations is still relatively virgin. The little literature in existence can, broadly, be divided into two categories. First, there is emerging literature on China's media investments in Africa (Wasserman, 2018; Umejei, 2018; Wu, 2016; Grill, 2019). Second, there is also emerging literature on African media coverage of China (Nassanga and Makara, 2016; Wasserman, 2012

¹ In May 2020, a Chinese national was caught on camera insulting Kenyans, and the country's President, calling them stupid monkeys. He was immediately deported (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45433434>). In another incident, a Chinese national was arrested in Zimbabwe, after shooting two of his mine workers who were demanding their salaries (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/zimbabwe-chinese-miner-shoots-injures-employees/1886773>). The two incidences were widely covered in the mainstream media across the continent

and 2018). Wasserman has been, arguably, the most prolific researcher in this relatively burgeoning field. He explores the influence of Chinese media in Africa. He argues that Chinese media in Africa are helping extend Beijing's 'soft power' on the continent. He notes that between 2010 and 2012, South African media covered China's involvement in a balanced manner. He argues that 'The coverage...in outlets with the highest volume of reports has been fairly balanced in this period, with almost an equal balance in positive and negative statements...' (Wasserman, 2012, p.31). He further argues that, in the coverage of China in Africa, Chinese media do not seem to influence the media coverage overly. Moreover, South African journalists do not overly cite Chinese sources in this coverage. This is because some journalists were critical of Chinese media (Wasserman, 2012). Coverage in this period focused more on China's economic relationship with South Africa (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman, 2017). This is similar to Ugandan media's coverage of China (Nassanga and Makara, 2016). Nassanga and Makara (2016) find that media images about China were generally positive in the Ugandan media. But, like Wasserman, they also find instances of negative portrayals. Nassanga and Makara (2016) note that several negative portrayals were related to issues of the transparency of Chinese companies.

In agreement with Wasserman, Wakesa (2017) notes that some sections of the South African intelligentsia have generally welcomed the entry of Chinese media in Africa while others oppose it. Umejei (2018, p.105) notes that China's state-owned media has expanded in Africa, chiefly to '...[reframe] the Western media narrative of the donor-recipient relationship between China and Africa.' Grill (2019) agrees, noting that in recent years it has been Chinese state television that has expanded significantly on the African continent. Grill (2019) agrees with Wasserman (2018) and Uchehara (2009) that the expansion of Chinese media in Africa is part of a Chinese 'soft power offensive' to spruce up the Chinese image amidst growing disenchantment on labour and other human rights and associations with brutal African regimes. Wu (2016) notes that China's state media investment is growing in Africa because, '...media engagement in Africa is a component of China's contemporary strategy of public diplomacy which is aimed at pursuing deep bilateral, diplomatic and economic relations...' This media works hand in glove with China's pursuit of economic influence and positive public perception (Wu 2016). As Lee (2016, p.163) observes, this media investment on the African continent syncs with Beijing's efforts to '...attempt to influence African media in the context of the post - Cold War geopolitical environment...' These media investments are, according to Franks and Ribet (2009), meant to validate China's global ascendancy as a superpower.

Much of this emerging literature derive largely from political economy and foreign policy perspectives. There is still a lacuna in scholarship on how, from a more mediacentric perspective, China is framed. Using the press as the focus of analysis specifically and Xi Jinping's visit to South Africa as the media event of analysis, this article seeks to make a scholarly contribution to what Wasserman and Madrid - Morales (2018) and Wasserman (2012, 2016, 2018), and others, have researched in regard to China-Africa media relations and coverage. Very little is known about media framing of these relations. It is also crucial to interrogate the African media framing of the relations since the Chinese have made a deliberate effort to invest in their positive portrayal by the African media. In countries such as Zimbabwe, for example, the Chinese media investment involves their embassy sending journalists and media/journalism trainers on a tour of China's media institutions (see Taylor, 2007). The intention is to influence the local media's coverage of the Chinese especially amidst public resentment towards them (Mlambo, 2011). The resentment emanates from alleged labour rights violations, environmental degradation associated with their mining activities, theft of local wildlife and herbs, and their close association with the allegedly dictatorial ruling party regimes (see Mlambo, 2016). The Chinese are also thought to be looting African resources and promoting elite corruption such that some citizens, especially on social media, argue that the continent has become a Chinese colony (see Mlambo, 2011; Uchehara, 2009). All these factors are sources of disdain against the Chinese (Grill, 2019; Uchehara, 2009). This present article seeks to fill the void noted above, and in the process, it will infer whether the framing indicates success or failure of the Chinese media strategy geared towards positively influencing African perceptions towards them.

Theoretical position: Frame theory

Media have always used frames to promote certain perceptions about events, issues and actors (Entman, 1993). In most instances, the choice of frames by any specific media entails yet another choice – the choice to adore or demonise actors, issues or events (Entman, 1993). Entman (1993, p.52) defines framing as a news production process where journalists and editors ‘... select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and or treatment recommendation.’ Miller (2001, p.246) says frames ‘...provide central themes that organise information and supply a context for understanding its meaning.’

The centrality of frames in media lies in the fact that they shape public opinion about certain events and issues (Reese, 2001), and, furthermore, they are utilised by the media in their attempt to construct reality (Gamson and Wolsfield, 1993; Iyengar, 1994) Tuchman (1978, p.156) asserts that through framing the media ‘...narrow the available political alternatives.’ The coverage of inter-state relations is a form of political communication and carries with it, the same intentions of framing as defined by Entman (1993). How we understand the relationship between and amongst states, is a consequence of how the media frame them. The process of framing inter-state relations is usually ‘active’ during inter-state visits by heads of states or governments (Chang, 2008). At this time, “diplomatic relations become topical in the media, and images [about other countries] are shaped... (Chang, 2008, p.12). Pan and Kosicki (1993), assert that how the media and journalists frame issues impact public understanding and policy formation. For instance, what Americans think about North Korea, and how the US government should treat it, is a result of the ways in which influential media frame the relationship. Frames utilised in the reportage of inter-state relations are arguably geared towards setting a particular agenda and influencing foreign policy (Russell, et al, 2017).

Any subtle differences in media coverage and framing may alter the way people understand problems (Altheide, 1996). Framing works at a dual level, that is both theory and method. This means, at theoretical level, it provides lenses through which to understand media's construction of the events, like the visit by one national leader to another. At a methodological level, it is used to analyse media's construction by examining the texts. Framing at both levels, has always been a controversial process. Part of the controversy lies in whether frames are to be treated as ‘super themes’ (Altheide, 1996, p.31), or whether focus should be on what frames entail, or what they also omit (Sreberny, 2000). But Tankard (2001) acknowledges that framing is highly ideological. The ideological beliefs of journalists (whether right wing, left-wing centrist etc) has an influence on how they frame news (Munoriyarwa, 2020). These have an influence on how journalists select, emphasise, exclude, and elaborate, and these are the processes of frame-building. Because the analysis in this paper focuses on a specific event, (the visit by Xi Jinping), we find Entman's (1993) definition of framing, also articulated by Gamson and Modigliani (1987, p.143), more persuasive. They define frames as ‘A central organising idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events.’ We acknowledge that the definition is not materially different from those proffered by other scholars, but it emphasises frame construction of meaning from events through texts. This is important because this paper seeks to flesh out Sino-South Africa relations as constructed in the mainstream media through framing analysis. Scholars (Iyengar, 1994: Reese, 2001) have noted that there are generic frames that the media often use in covering event. These are: human interest, morality, conflict, and economic consequences frames. Our study partially affirms these generic frames as we note that the economic consequence frame which these scholars find in most news frames, was also prevalent in South African media framing of Sino-South African relations. But we however, deviate by noting frames that are specific to this relationship. Even the economic consequence frame, while partially similar, also manifested itself in specific journalistic styles, other than what Reese (2001) and Gitlin (2001) and Iyengar (1994) had argue.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative, text-based research that adopts a constructivist paradigm. It is constructivist because it seeks to flesh out meanings from texts. For analysis, it adopts a qualitative framing analysis which is justifiably buttressed by the theoretical preference of the article as articulated above. Articles were purposively sampled from three leading newspapers in the country over a period of one month prior to the visit of Xi Jinping to South Africa. These newspapers not only have a huge readership and circulation base, but they also cover foreign affairs issues widely. These are privately-owned newspapers. Articles were sampled as they appeared online, and the sampling criterion was purposive in that the articles were supposed to be about Sino-South Africa relations. Altogether, 38 articles from the three newspapers were identified. Of the 38, 12 were from *City Press*, 14 from *The Mail and Guardian* and 12 from *The Sunday Times*. It was noted that the visit was generally covered on a 'rolling basis' where stories were quickly updated as events around the visit unfolded, starting when the government of South Africa announced the visit on 30 May 2018. Also, the news stories tended to repeat the very same issues by updating them in real time. In the framing analysis, the research sought to identify the angle that journalists adopted in their approach to a story. This angle is achieved by journalists' use of language devices such as, among others, metaphors, catchphrases, depictions, and exemplars. Framing will also be interested in the news sourcing practices in sampled newsrooms (Gitlin, 1980), news selection (Gamson, 1989), and what a news story elaborates and emphasises (Entman, 1993). Stories were sampled from hard news stories, news commentaries, opinion pieces and feature stories.

We constructed a sample from the three mainstream newspapers on the whole month of June. Our manual coding procedure follows Basit's (2003) coding methodology where news texts were assigned categories that were generated through (re) reading them '...to identify varying-sized words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs, connected to specific settings...' (Basit, 2003, p.144). Manual coding is possible when dealing with a manageable set of textual data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Initially, we had more than 50 stories. But, after re-reading them, we reached a point of 'data saturation' (Faulkner and Trotter, 2017), where we were not yielding any new themes, as more articles confirmed the themes we had found. And, for a research that sought depth of meaning, rather than representation, we were satisfied we had collected enough data for our purpose of identifying frames. As an analytical methodology, framing utilises thick descriptions of texts. This is achieved by quoting verbatim from the unit of analysis - i.e. the texts being researched, and making reference by paraphrasing. In this article, we adopt the same approach to demonstrate the existence of the frames we identify in the story.

FINDINGS

Available research (Wasserman, 2012 and 2018; Madrid-Morales and Wasserman, 2017) has shown that there is significant media coverage of China's economic role on the African continent in many African news media. Between 2010 and 2011, 'China is not represented in either starkly negative or starkly positive light...it would seem a cautiously optimistic characterization of South Africa's media coverage...' (Wasserman, 2012, p.35). Eight years after Wasserman's (2012) findings, this study finds that there is now a clearly distinguishable divide of the economic frames into; on one hand, starkly positive frames of Sino - South Africa economic cooperation and; on the other hand, starkly negative economic frames of China's economic colonisation and 'vulturism'. Furthermore, this research notes that frames of China's political interference in South Africa are growing and becoming more belligerent in the media. This is a result of news sourcing routines and preferences of the media organisations sampled.

Frames of economic cooperation

Frames of economic cooperation are still dominant. These frames present China-South Africa relations more positively. Under this frame, China is presented as an 'economic saviour', providing South Africa with

much-needed economic investments, job creation and infrastructural development opportunities. This frame was evident across many news stories sampled. The story of China's investments in South Africa was covered as 'Ramaphosa makes it rain as he secures \$14.7-billion from China' (*The Sunday Times*, 23 June 2018) and 'Ramaphosa strikes deals in China to bring jobs, factories to Musina-Makhado corridor' (*The Sunday Times* 20 June 2018), *The Mail & Guardian* (24 June 2018), wrote, 'China commits to more investments in South Africa.' This article had the following excerpt that furthered the positive economic cooperation frame:

Ramaphosa also announced China's commitment of \$14.7 billion in investments and was ready to invest and work with South Africa in sectors such as oceans.... (*The Mail & Guardian* 24 June 2018)

News stories that adopted an economic cooperation frame broadly relied on three major sources of news. First, they relied on state and government sources. Second, they relied on Chinese embassy officials, and other visiting Chinese delegates, and lastly, they relied on State - Owned Enterprises (SOEs) as sources. Senior officials in government framed the relationship in very positive terms. For instance, in one news story, South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa praised the relationship in lofty terms that underlined the economic cooperation frame in stating "The relationship between China and Africa has now entered a golden age. A real fantastic age of deep cooperation..." (*The City Press*, 3 June 2018).

Official government position lauded this cooperation through senior spokespeople. Cooperation frames were also replete at the highest level of Chinese political leadership. For instance, President Xi Jinping himself said, '...we love Africa... China dreams of national renewal and Africa of unity.... the principle of greater good and shared good faith...' (*City Press*, 23 June 2018).

Newspapers also sourced from SOEs and provincial leaders who had immensely benefitted from financial deals because of Sino-South Africa relationships. There was, for instance, stories from the South Africa power supply company Eskom, hailing the cooperation between South Africa and Chinese banks which had resulted in the company getting US\$ 2,5 billion in loans (*Mail and Guardian*, 23 June 2018). Limpopo province premier, Stan Mathabatha was also a source that positively framed the economic cooperation between the two countries. Chinese company executives quoted emphasised the economic benefits of the cooperation. Another notable framing feature was a reliance on political and academic experts who tended to frame the relationship in the same ways as government officials, Chinese officials and SOEs executives. Political elites borrowed from history in order to legitimise the Sino-South Africa relationship by tracing it back into earlier historical epochs. China was framed as an 'all-weather friend' that has been cooperative from the anti-apartheid era. These frames were prevalent in South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC) hierarchies. For instance, on the eve of Xi Jinping visit, the ANC released a statement, covered by the sampled newspapers in which it, '...hailed China's unconditional support which dates back to the liberation struggle...' (*City Press*, 22 June 2018). The economic cooperation frame was therefore juxtaposed to historical political cooperation that the elite said had always existed between the two countries. This relationship was framed as the cornerstone of present economic cooperation and the basis of all future relationships between the two countries. In other words, China's historical support for the ANC during the anti-apartheid struggle became a legitimisation tool for the current economic ties. Arguably, raiding history in order to justify the present relations, was designed to dispel fears and/or accusations of Chinese economic vulturism, a narrative that China's long-term western ideological nemeses have pushed vigorously in their attempts to weaken her increasing economic and political influence in Africa. Prominent words and catchphrases that underlined its reportage included, 'all-weather friend', 'unconditional friend', 'Chinese investment initiatives...' Elite speeches preferred framing it in stronger terms like, for example, 'ally' instead of 'friend'. In describing the cooperation, even stronger terminologies were preferred. For instance, *City Press* preferred the word, 'pour' instead of investing. The story was framed, 'China will pour billions of dollars in investments...' (*City Press*, 11 June 2018). The three sampled newspapers commonly used the word 'pledged' instead of 'promised'. 'Pledged' carries with it the unconditionality of these investments, which further strengthened the economic cooperation frame. This frame was more prominent in hard news stories covering the visit.

Economic vulturism and colonisation frame

The data points to a growing discontent within South African media about the role of China in the country. The growing discontent was manifest in opinionated journalism, more than it was in hard news stories. China is presented as an 'economic vulture' rapaciously stealing (South) African natural resources in the guise of economic cooperation. News reports that framed this relationship in such frames saw a toxic economic relationship in which China was the sole beneficiary. China was framed as 'an economic scavenger' (Okonta and Douglas 2003; iv) inexorably drawn to African natural resources. The frame assumed a number of negative dimensions. First, it was framed around frames of human labour exploitation. Secondly, there were frames on the devastation of the environment due to wanton exploitation by Chinese companies. The 'vulturistic' character of China is compared with the colonial exploitation of the 19th century. Under this frame, China is reported as actively engaged in a colonial-like kind of exploitation, meant to reap natural resources proceeds. The frames suggested China was in South Africa for economic pillage.

Some of the frames around China's alleged vulturistic attitude and economic natural resources exploitation were harsher than this, and they saw the economic exploitation as part of a broader 'African problem' rather than isolated to South Africa alone. For instance, *The Mail and Guardian* (23 June 2018), carried an opinion piece entitled, 'China's overfishing in Africa: the lure and the lies.' The story read,

New research shows stocks of round sardinella, a species that migrates along the Atlantic coast between the Gambia and Morocco, have plummeted due to overfishing. The beaches that were once beloved by tourists are covered in reeking fish carcasses. The toxic water reaches local farming and harvests go to waste... (The Mail and Guardian, 23 June 2018),

South Africa, and more broadly, Africa, was framed as a hapless victim, more of a 'natural resources carcasses' for China. China is depicted as practising an 'ignominious trade', which ravages Africa, displacing its labour, and natural resources, in the process, appropriating enormous profits for the Chinese companies. For instance, the same story reads,

'We want to stop exploitation...but we stand no chance against the Chinese corporations ...Those who speak out against the Chinese factories say they risk intimidation or harassment... (The Mail and Guardian 23 June 2018),

There were frequent references to the exploitation of Africa's natural resources at a continental level. South African newspapers framed this relationship of exploitation and (African) vulnerability as growing beyond the country perhaps, to underline the emphasis that exploiting Africa's natural resources was China's modus operandi and went beyond South Africa only. For example, the *Mail and Guardian* reported in a story with the title, 'Marxists plot new course for Mzansi', in which it quoted, 'China's illicit natural resources accumulation' had vast tentacles across the African region (*Mail and Guardian*, 20 June 2018) This story gave an example of Zimbabwe. In the same story, the paper harshly criticised Chinese economic relationship with South Africa,

The Chinese corporations in Africa, are too often indistinguishable from massacre-minded Western capitalists and South African compradors such as those so well known in the Lonmin... axis... (Mail and Guardian, 20 June 2018)

To shore up a positive economic frame of Sino- south African relations, ruling party elites often had to defend Chinese presence in the country. For instance, *The Sunday Times* ran a story under the same title, 'President defends the Chinese government's multi-billion-rand investments in South Africa.' The president was defending Chinese business relations with South Africa after a barrage of criticisms from

opposition politicians like the then Democratic Alliance leaders who had stated openly, 'Chinese aid is not sincere...their relationship with us is damaging...' (*The Sunday Times*, 24 June 2018). In another story, *City Press* had a headline titled, 'DA to question Ramaphosa's R370 billion Chinese 'gift' (*City Press*, 23 June 2018). Placing the word 'gift' in quotes demonstrates the newspaper's strong conviction that the 'gift' was not a 'gift' but a debt trap. Parts of the story quoted the then DA leader Mmusi Maimane saying,

It would be naive in the extreme to think that this 'gift' from the Chinese comes with no strings attached...the Chinese have a *history of getting more than their pound of flesh* is worth out of Africa... (*City Press*, 23 June 2018).

The 'vulture frame' thrived on catchphrases and words like: 'China is gobbling up Africa's natural resources...' 'Gobbling up' is a strong phrase that underlines the (economic) predatory and savagery nature of this relationship. Other phrases and words inflected in some of the stories include: 'vicious', '... Chinese gangsters hunting down animals...' etc. This accusation of Chinese as depleting the wildlife, flora and fauna of Africa reverberates throughout the African continent. In Zimbabwe, for example, the Chinese are not only accused of labour exploitation, environmental degradation, and tax evasion among other ills but are also accused of stealing wildlife sometimes aided by corrupt elite players. The *City Press*, for instance, reported of, '...A Chinese triad operating in South Africa with a global backing...[which] is fueling organised crime... fronted as legitimate business...' (*City Press*, 25 June 2018). Even untoward behaviour by South African corporates was framed from a broader frame of 'Chinese misdemeanors. For instance, *The Sunday Times* (13 June 2018) reproduced a story from *The Cape Business News* in which it reported that electricity giant, Eskom, '...was killing South Africans with its Chinese-level pollution...'

The fact that members of the National Assembly of South Africa, (for example, Mkhuleko Hlengwa of the Inkatha Freedom Party and Mmusi Maimane of the Democratic Alliance), and others questioned this relationship, means that perceptions of economic colonisation and China's natural resources vulturism are becoming dominant at an elite level, and are therefore, being drawn increasingly into mainstream news narratives and elite levels of policymaking. We argue that the fair balance of representation that Wasserman (2012) had identified in the news content regarding the coverage of China in African media between 2011 and 2012 has, eight years down the line, shown a more nuanced tilt towards more negative frames. This negative frame was sustained more by opinionated journalism stories than hard news. For example, *The Mail* and *Guardian* stories expounding this frame relied on opinions from academics and civil society activists. Wherever it was framed from hard news stories, the sources and voices represented were those of elite opposition leaders in the South African National Assembly. This can be viewed as a confirmation of Tuchman's observation that media tend to rely on official sources. Herman and Chomsky (2012) agree, noting that the media avoid running into trouble with the establishment. Opinion columns sampled also sustained a negative frame of Chinese vulturism. Paradoxically, there are negative anti-Chinese frames from the ruling party, ANC, which has a historic relationship with China. These negative frames, for example those articulated by the Minister of Trade, seem to have emanated from Chinese economic conduct with South Africa, which even some within the ruling party viewed negatively.

Political interference frames in Sino-South Africa relations

There are broadly three types of news frames that fall into this category. The first set of frames perceived China as attempting to politically control its partners through the creation of huge debts (debt colonialism frames). The second news frames of political interference saw China as attempting to interfere with (South) African politics more directly. The third set of frames generated perceived China as a 'political tyrant', exerting authoritarian influence on her motley provinces.

The political control frame showed how an increasing debt threshold with China would lead to South Africa allegedly losing its assets and political independence. This frame was not localised. China's 'debt trap' was often covered in the news stories as a global predicament. Like the 'economic colonialism and Chinese vulturism' frames discussed earlier, this frame was sustained by an assorted mixture of

news sources ranging from opposition party elites to economic experts. Broadly, the frame expressed, '...skepticism with China's distribution of loans to Africa..' (*The Sunday Times*, 21 July 2018). *The Mail & Guardian* (22 June 2018) newspaper, for instance, quoted the then opposition DA leader, Mmusi Maimane as saying,

If the President is confident that the agreement is in the best interest of the South African people, it should surely be open to public scrutiny...It is difficult to imagine that the Chinese Development Bank approved a R33 billion loan to Eskom with no strings...attached...

The ideological differences between the ANC and the DA could explain why the opposition elites viewed China as an economic vulture. The DA is pro-capital and pro-west whilst EFF is arguably Pan-African and anti-imperialist. The frame was also built through an overt reliance on economic experts from other parts of the world. For example, *City Press* (7 June 2018), quoted a Kenyan economist saying,

The future of China-Africa relations is going to depend entirely on how China manages this which is spiralling out of control.

It reinforced the frame of China's debt trap and served to demonstrate that it was an Africa-wide problem. The debt trap frame was thus presented as a (global) and deliberate act by the Chinese government to politically colonise other nations by deliberately indebting them to it. To sustain this narrative, the voices of governments and China's officials were often ignored or backgrounded. For instance, in an updated story in *The Sunday Times* (10 June 2018), the voice of Hua Chunying, China's foreign ministry spokeswoman, who persistently, and vehemently denies accusations of debt-colonialism, was buried in the last paragraph of the story. In another updated story, the voice of the Chinese ambassador to South Africa, Ambassador Lin Songtian, who specifically addressed the debt trap issue, was given very little space – perhaps as an afterthought – at the end of the story (*Mail and Guardian*, 13 July 2018). This is even though the Ambassador highlighted two crucial points: that countries were asking for loans and grants on their own volition; and that the Chinese repayment terms were far softer than the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank terms. We, hence, argue that parts of the sampled media news stories parroted Western media frames of China.

There was a tendency towards a framing practice by newsrooms that can be called 'news frame extravagance'. We define this as when a news frame is supported by news sources, routines and 'incidences' from beyond their context to support a certain framing perspective. 'News frame extravagance' is achieved through excessive elaboration and 'embellishments' of certain issues and events related to the preferred frame being constructed. The excessive elaboration was achieved in three ways. First, there was a preference to source news stories from 'expert Chinese' sources. The point was to prove that this practice was causing ire even amongst Chinese intellectuals. For instance, *The Sunday Times* cited widely, a prominent Chinese Law professor, Xu Zhangrun, who said, "Why is China, a country with over 100 million people who are still living below the poverty line, playing at being the flashy big-spender? How can such wanton generosity be allowed?" (*The Sunday Times*, 12 June 2018). Second, newspapers tended to cite from 'reputable' global institutions' research findings without interrogating the political economy of those institutions. For instance, both *The Mail & Guardian* and *City Press*, cited the London- and Washington- based Centre for Global Development (2019) whose research had described Africa and Asian countries' debts to China as 'unsustainable'. The Centre's report that was cited extensively by the newspapers read,

'...The list of nations burdened under the weight of Chinese loans continues to grow. Pakistan, Djibouti, Maldives, Mongolia, Laos, Montenegro, Tajikistan and

Kyrgyzstan are all struggling to repay loans... the situation is unsustainable..'

Third, there was a tendency by newspapers of citing examples, often unrelated to contemporary Sino-South Africa relations. For instance, *The Sunday Times* carried an opinion piece in which it used the example of Sri Lanka to buttress the point that the Chinese debt trap was a form of political colonialism. It reported,

...Take Sri Lanka for example; the nation snapped up a Chinese loan which has now resulted in debt exceeding \$13 billion. Unable to settle its ever-growing debt...the small island nation was...forced to sell Hambantota port to the Chinese. The port, which was constructed by the Chinese, with the use of Chinese funds and labour... Sri Lanka isn't the only nation to have surrendered a portion of its sovereignty – *China has helped finance at least 35 ports around the world and 14 of those constructed on African shores. (Emphasis ours).*

The addition of Africa at the end of this quote emphasises how the debt trap danger is not only peculiar to Sri Lanka but was a clear and present danger to Africa. This newspaper also highlighted the Malaysian story in which the latter allegedly cancelled Chinese investments for fear of the 'debt trap.' Catch phrases salient in the stories include, 'debt trap,' 'Chinese debt diplomacy,' 'debt distress' 'loss of political sovereignty' and many related phrases. The commentaries were triggered by Xi Jinping's visit and they emphasised the debt trap more than the visit itself. Political interference frames around the relationship between the Communist party in China (CCP) and the ruling ANC in South Africa were manifest. These frames emphasised the 'interference' of the CCP in South Africa's politics. Like the 'debt trap' frames, these frames were voiced by opposition party elite. While South Africa's ruling party framed the relationship as travelling back into history during the fight against apartheid, the opposition parties saw political interference of the Chinese in South Africa through the CCP's funding of the ANC. The newspapers gave salience to this frame by citing opposition leaders who often accused the ANC of being modelled along the lines of the CCP, to ensure the longevity of its rule. Chinese political interference frames were often associated with the fear of reduction of government transparency and a breakdown of institutions of democracy. For instance, an opinion column in *City Press* (8 June 2018) expressed this frame much clearer:

'The current trajectory does not bode well for South Africa. China seeks to export its ruling ideology to Africa. And, in other parts of Africa, presidential term limits have been removed following China. Beijing is exerting visible influence on how the ANC is organised. Who knows? Soon it will be our elections..'

This frame maybe understood as directed at the ANC, but its inclusion of China makes it fall within the broad anti-China frames discussed, gaining a much stronger foothold in South Africa's mainstream media since about a decade ago.

Furthermore, news stories around the visit of President Xi Jinping included frames that reported China as a tyrant because of its alleged suppression of its provinces especially Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The relationship was framed as 'illiberal, authoritarian and repressive.' In South Africa, it was largely the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) that was particularly, "concerned that China stands in the way of nationalities fighting to break free from its oppressive system..'. These frames described China's provinces in valiant terms like, 'restive people of Tibet..' who, 'struggle under the yoke of Chinese oppression..'. This conjured an aura of political dissatisfaction and impending apocalypse in China's political stability. It also created an impression that those who advanced the frame were aware of the chaos and agitation growing in these provinces supposedly oppressed by China. This frame bears similarities with how China is often

framed in some sections of the Western media especially the US media. Preferred catch phrases included, 'the Chinese communist regime! Regime as a word, carries with it, authoritarian connotations. There are also phrases like, 'China's atrocious human rights record...' that were used to frame the relationship between China and her provinces in the South African press.

DISCUSSION: SOURCING ROUTINES AND THE MUTATION OF SINO-SOUTH AFRICA NEWS FRAMES

The goal of this paper was to examine the ways in which South Africa-China relations have been framed in selected South Africa mainstream newspapers. It uses, as a point of entry, the visit by Chinese president, Xi Jinping to South Africa in June 2018. This article finds that there are, broadly, three competing frames. These are: frames of economic cooperation, economic vulturism and colonisation frames and political interference frames. Each of these frames assumed different faces. For example, it was noted that the political interference frame had three dimensions of its own: frames that perceived China as attempting to politically control its partners through the creation of huge debts (debt colonialism frames); frames of political interference that covered China as attempting to interfere with African politics more directly; and news frames that perceived China as a 'political tyrant' exerting authoritarian influence on her motley provinces. We argue that the frames used by mainstream news organisations to cover Sino-South Africa relations have mutated over time. In this article, we have noted that political frames are now salient in South Africa's mainstream press. We also note the growth of negative frames in the sample of stories we utilised. These are frames that constructed China as an 'economic vulture', a coloniser attempting to trap South Africa and Africa in general in huge impossible to repay debts.

The frames have therefore mutated from the balanced framing which Wasserman noted in 2012 to negative frames that have become ubiquitous in our sample. Our argument is that the negative frames have become salient because of news media's sourcing preferences. The dominance of the ANC's 'progressive internationalism' frame which emphasised positive economic relationship with China is now being challenged by opposition party leaders' negative narratives, independent researchers, and China-Africa experts. All these voices have become preferential sources in sampled mainstream media houses. We observe that negative frames have grown in the mainstream media because newsrooms' sourcing routines have widened to include an array of voices hitherto backgrounded in the coverage of the China-South Africa relations. The negative frames were also sustained by reference to the Chinese's poor labour relations record, alleged corruption, and plunder of natural and agricultural resources in other African countries such as Zimbabwe, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Hence, the use of foreign sources, specifically sources from other African countries where the Chinese have been involved in controversies such as racism and abuse of workers, gave prominence to the frame. The positive frames about Sino-South Africa relations were largely sustained by ANC sources. But the widening array of experts and non-ANC political elite who could talk about China drowned the positive Chinese frame.

We, furthermore, argue that the negative frames prevalent in our sample syncs neatly with a growing global tide of anti-Chinese sentiments framed and sustained by global media organisations (Silver, Devlin and Huang, 2020). In the West, negative views about China have grown by 89% (Rebo, 2020) in the past 5 years. In South Africa itself, only 16,8% of the population hold positive views about China's influence in the country (Keuleers, 2016). We argue that the negative frames we noted seem to cascade from growing Western and US anti-Chinese sentiments. A recent Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, 2020) notes that across Asia, positive frames of a 'lovable' China are becoming rare, if contrasted with the 'wolf warrior' frame. This, according to CSIS research, is a result of China's economic relations that are being condemned as exploitative. We, therefore, argue that these negative global level sentiments about China are being shared across many media platforms across different contexts. We also add that the increasing hostile rhetoric by China towards its semi-independent provinces like Hong Kong and Taiwan is adding further traction to these negative frames. China's relations with its provinces have become a global issue dominating many media agendas. In liberal-democratic systems, the media are likely to be less tolerant of any political conduct that suppresses and represses rights. This is what China finds itself

against in South Africa where the media is liberal-democratic. Thus, the declining relationship between China and the international media illuminates itself in the negative frames that we note in the South Africa press.

In addition, we note that news values, as noted by Entman (1993), have an influential role intimately defining what frames media adopted. For instance, we note that the elite news was preferred, as has always been the case across newsrooms (Reese, 2001). Thus, generated frames that had a bias towards economic consequences, and political interference frames. Thus, the media often focused on Xi Ping's visit from which most of the frames were generated. We, therefore, argue that the frames we find and discuss, have the hallmarks of elitism, as they were grounded in the events and hype generated by the visit of an influential political leader. This confirms Van Aelst and Walgrave (2016) assertion that mainstream news making are directly related to political elites.

CONCLUSION

Our research finds that South Africa's media frames about China are increasingly becoming negative and hostile. We find two main reasons for this. Firstly, we find that increasingly hostile and anti-Chinese news frames that are growing at a global level are feeding South African media rhetoric. Secondly, news sourcing routines and preferences tend to sustain these negative frames. Under this, we find that the sampled newspapers were frequently sourcing news from neo-liberal economists whose voices would naturally be ranged against political interference in the economy especially of the Chinese types. We note that the prevalence of sources by opposition parties' members increase the frequency of negative anti-Chinese frames. This research has provided very important insights in the framing of the relations between China and South Africa. While this research relied on a sample of newspapers that are mainstream and popular in South Africa, there is need in future research to increase the number of media outlets to make arguments more generalisable. Future research would also benefit from transnational media studies. China's influence is growing in Africa. A research that explores samples of China's coverage in media across parts of Africa would possibly yield insightful findings.

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