



Diplomacy with Chinese characteristics

A Case Study of Sino-African Relations

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Abstract

The continuous rise of China in the global context leads to the pressing need to construct a Chinese International Relations (IR) paradigm. This thesis delves into the intricate relationship between constructing the Chinese IR paradigm and China's foreign diplomacy. As China ascends as a global power, understanding the ideological foundations that shape its interactions with the international community cannot be overstated. Drawing on a significant case study, Sino-African relations, this research explores how China's evolving IR paradigm informs its diplomatic strategies, priorities, and behaviour on the world stage, providing crucial insights into China's global role that is of utmost importance in today's rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

This study meticulously traces the historical development of China's IR paradigm and its implications for foreign diplomacy through a rigorous analysis of primary sources, including official government statements, academic writings from reputable Chinese and international scholars, and policy documents from Chinese government agencies. By examining key concepts, such as sovereignty, non-interference, and peaceful development, within Chinese political discourse, this research seeks to elucidate the underlying principles that guide China's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa.

This research aims to uncover the distinctiveness of China's diplomatic approach and its implications for global governance, offering a fresh and insightful point of view. Through its comprehensive and meticulous analysis, this study aims to enhance our understanding of the intricate interplay between ideology, theory, and practice in Chinese foreign policy. By illuminating the connections between the construction of the Chinese IR paradigm and Chinese foreign diplomacy, this research not only aims to contribute to the broader study of Global China but also elucidate key cultural aspects and patterns essential in the dialogue between China and Western countries, thereby enriching the academic discourse in this field.

List of abbreviations

AfDB	African Development Bank
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa
CARI	China Africa Research Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIDCA	China International Development Cooperation Agency
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IR	International Relations
IRT	International Relations Theories
MOFCOM	Ministry of Commerce
OBOR	One Belt One Road (Belt and Road Initiative)
PPs	Primary Products
PRC	People's Republic of China

SPLM

Sudan People's Liberation Movement

SSA

Sub-Saharan Africa

UNCTAD

United Nations Conference on Trade and
Development

WTO

World Trade Organization

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Rise of China and China's Soft Power

The rise of China in the global context has caused growing concerns among the international community, with “China’s peaceful rise” perceived as a fundamental threat to the current world’s system (Zhou, 2010). Indeed, China has grown enormously economically, enhancing its hard power and transitioning from the “world’s factory” to a global power, finally becoming an indispensable country (Li, 2019). Consequently, as China has grown, it has started to refine its diplomacy, incorporating and valorising all those “Chinese characteristics” that distinguish China’s approach from the Western established paradigm. To conceptualise Beijing’s perception within the international system, it is necessary to recall China’s worldview during the Empire. In the past, the Dragoon used to place itself as the centre (zhōng 中) of the world, being the nerve point of a complex system of relations at the regional level, thus perceiving itself as the hegemon within a hierarchical system. Indeed, for centuries, the Chinese Empire has been the “Middle Kingdom” (zhōngguó 中国) within a Sinocentric system established in the Asian region, where the remaining countries were granted the status of tributary kingdoms (Fiori et al., 2022). To fully understand this worldview, which can be conceptualised as concentric circles with China as the centre, the term *Zhongguo* must be placed alongside the *Tianxia* (天下) concept, meaning “everything under heaven”. It exemplifies the boundaries between a civilised world, whose social order contrasts everything that does not fall under the same heaven. *Tianxia* thus delineates the boundaries of a world that can only exist having an entity that constitutes its centre with stability and credibility (ibid).

This historical worldview is relevant to understanding China’s approach to foreign diplomacy. Chinese intellectuals have employed it as a theoretical concept to construct a unique Chinese International Relations (IR) paradigm. This discourse is a significant aspect of China’s rise globally and will be further explored in [chapter 3](#).

Another relevant element of China’s rise is the strategic enhancement of its soft power. As China’s hard power increased globally, Beijing recognised the importance of image and perceptions. While China’s economic development impressed much of the world, the repressive political system affected its reputation. Thus, Beijing launched a significant public relations offensive (Shambaugh, 2015). In this context, the concept of discursive power is particularly

relevant to the discussions concerning the global projection and the development of Chinese soft power. The Chinese leadership has publicly committed to a strategy to bolster national soft power, involving the media apparatus's reorganisation and internationalisation. Beijing established several hundred Confucius Institutes worldwide to enhance its culture, entering the realm of global popular culture. In the past two decades, the enrolment of international students in Chinese universities has significantly increased, and China has deeply invested in attracting students worldwide thanks to generous scholarships. China Radio International has increased its broadcasts in English to spread the voice of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Moreover, it has joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and various regional organisations, such as the East Asian Summit. Finally, China has participated in critical multilateral projects, enhancing cooperation among States (Nye, 2012).

Implementing this strategy on an international scale involves utilising mechanisms of external propaganda and image-building alongside the natural aspiration for a more substantial Chinese presence within the global discourse (Riva, 2021). President Xi Jinping's call to the entire nation to improve the country's international discourse power (guójì huà yǔ quán 国际话语权) is aimed at enhancing the national cultural soft power (wén huà ruǎn shí lì 文化软实力). On December 30, 2013, during the XII Collective Study Session of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCP), the President of the People's Republic of China and the General Secretary of the CCP emphasised the need to strengthen the construction of international communication capabilities (guójì chuán bō néng lì 国际传播能力) and to build a "foreign discourse system" (duì wài huà yǔ tǐ xì 对外话语体系) to establish China's status of a "socialist cultural power" (shè huì zhǔ yì wén huà qiáng guó 社会主义文化强国) and to ensure to "tell Chinese stories well, spread Chinese voices well, and interpret Chinese characteristics well" (jiǎng hǎo zhōng guó gù shì, chuán bō hǎo zhōng guó shēng yīn, chǎn shì hǎo zhōng guó tè sè 讲好中国故事，传播好中国声音，阐释好中国特色) as they should be (ibid).

The development and implementation of many of the policies of the Chinese soft power are related to the cultural sphere. These policies serve a dual function: they are a tool for better domestic management and aim to increase Chinese charm worldwide (Riva, 2021). Thus, rhetoric plays a pivotal role in China's strategy to enhance its appeal, with Beijing's foreign diplomacy infused with significance by integrating Chinese distinctive characteristics in its approach to other countries. In this context, the need for a Chinese IR School becomes relevant

to understanding Chinese manoeuvres internationally, highlighting Chinese exceptionalism and its refusal to define itself through Western attributes. However, constructing a distinctive school of Chinese IR raises the question of China's national interests as a determinant in the search for an "alternative" to the Western-based paradigm. The stages of the emergence of a Chinese IR School are clarified in the following paragraph.

1.2 The Rise of Chinese IR

The need for a distinctive Chinese approach to IR was made clear during China's first national conference on IR theory in Shanghai; since then, Chinese IR scholars have committed themselves to formulating "IR theory with Chinese characteristics" or establishing a "Chinese School of IR theory" (Wang & Han, 2016).

In the 1990s, Chinese scholars started incorporating Chinese cultural concepts into traditional IR studies. Paying more attention to ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts, they attempted to apply their ideas to Chinese foreign policy practice and IR theorisation. Among these projects, the most distinctive ones are Zhao Tingyang's conceptualisation of international society based on the *Tianxia* world system, Qin Yaqing's Relational theory of International Relations, and Yan Xuetong's moral realism (Hu, 2016). The *Tianxia* system is a potentially more harmonious approach to global governance, recalling, in essence, the historical conceptualisation of China's worldview illustrated in the previous paragraph.

Zhao Tingyang's research provides exciting insights into Chinese scholars' rising knowledge-oriented theory-building efforts (ibid). Yan Xuetong's work represents the growing interest of Chinese intellectuals in a revival of traditional Chinese thinking combined with modern IR studies, which they use as the primary source of inspiration for constructing Chinese IR theories (ibid). Unlike the historical and cultural approaches mentioned above, Qin Yaqing's theory is developed in parallel with Western theories, based on "processual relationalism". Western mainstream IR theories have all missed an essential dimension in their models, namely the study of processes in the international system and the relational complexity in IR. Reviving Chinese philosophical thinking, recalling the notion of *guanxi* (relationship) and *zhongyong* (the doctrine of the mean), Qin Yaqing argues that the core of the IR process consists of relations. (ibid)

It is possible to distinguish between two types of IR theories, namely the “action-oriented theory” and the “knowledge-oriented theory”, which, according to Qin Yaqing, represent two inseparable types of theories. The action-oriented theory works as a guideline for action, like the “leaning toward one side” strategy and the “three worlds” theory by Mao Zedong. Knowledge-oriented theory, instead, represents an understanding of the world from a precise point of view, being a theorisation of IR action. Therefore, theory-building is a process that lies into practice, and “we should seek truth from the fact (Shíjiàn shì jiǎnyàn zhēnlǐ de wéiyī biāozhǔn 实践是检验真理的唯一标准)” (Hu, 2016, p. 69).

Being highly integrated into world affairs and enhancing both its hard and soft power, China has learned both action-oriented and knowledge-oriented theory. In constructing an IR theory, we constantly lean on our notion of “truth”, and we apply it as a lens to judge the “truth” and “non-truth” applied to the outside world (Hu, 2016). Therefore, the theory-building process is an epistemological process that allows us to understand the world correctly. Chinese epistemology is shaped by a pragmatic approach applied to the understanding of the world (Shíjiàn lùn 实践论). Indeed, knowledge is acquired from active engagement and practical experience. According to this perspective, theory construction resembles a cycle of “practice – understanding/cognition – further practice – further understanding/cognition (shíjiàn, rènshí, zài shíjiàn, zài rènshí 实践, 认识, 再实践, 再认识)” (Hu, 2016, p.71).

Within the debate on building an “IRT with Chinese characteristics”, the increasing self-consciousness and self-identity based on China’s cultural traditions, foreign policy practices, and post-1949 international experiences proved to be incisive factors. The rise of China into the global context, after the economic reforms and opening up, as well as the learning from Western theories and Marxist perspectives on international politics, prepared the ground for the development of IR in China (Hu, 2016). The uniqueness of China generates several challenges for IR theories: “*The exceptionality lies in its peaceful rise, though China’s practice and behaviour are consequential of how others react to China’s rise in world politics and there are frictions and even conflicts when China comes to defend its national interest and territorial integrity*” (Hu, 2016, p. 78). China’s position on sovereignty and national interest, the dynamics between a rising power and current existing powers, China’s approach to human rights, its resistance to hegemony and contestation to Liberal World Order, the attractiveness of the Chinese development model, all represent relevant topics that have generated fruitful research within IR and that have the potential to enhance Chinese IR theoretical discourse (Hu, 2016)

Forging Chinese own concepts and terminology for IR, Chinese scholars have denied the applicability of “Western” thought to the Chinese case. This narrative serves two purposes: within Chinese society, it reinforces the perception of an autonomous Chinese political approach. It legitimises China’s developmental strategy by framing it in historical and traditional contexts. Chinese IR concepts aim to alleviate the perception of threats when communicating with the international community, particularly China’s neighbouring states. Consequently, the use of strategic narratives such as “peaceful rise”, “harmony”, “mutuality”, and “peaceful coexistence”, all concepts retrieved from the Chinese cultural background, serve as tools for enhancing soft power and engaging in public diplomacy (Noesselt, 2015).

1.3 Chinese relationship with the Global South and Sino-African relations

The debate on “Chinese” IR is strictly related to the world order dimension, including issues on ordering principles, power distribution and the overall structure of the world system (Noesselt, 2015). China is an emerging hegemon positioned in the conjuncture of a world order moving from traditional to interdependent hegemony. This concept refers to a situation where multiple powers share influence and control in a global system. Following its positional upgrading in gaining wealth and power in the world system, China’s continuous rise will enlarge the room for manoeuvre and increase the upward mobility of semi-periphery and periphery countries (Li, 2019). China as a hegemon must be understood not as a new member of the core but as a nation whose power is characterised by global relationships and relevance. Indeed, China is becoming indispensable to all countries of different stratifications. The consensus is that the rise of China’s capital and trade expansion in developing countries of the Global South provides them with both opportunities and challenges (ibid).

The emergence of China within the global context is not just a shift in power but a transformative event reshaping the international structure. It is transitioning the world from unipolarity to bipolarity, demanding recognition as a great power, and significantly extending its influence on its neighbours and allies: the “Community of Common Destiny” (mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ 命运共同体) envisions not just a new regional order but also an economic and infrastructural one, with projects like the One Belt-One Road (OBOR) Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Ariase, 2016). In addition to the OBOR Initiative that enables faster and broader connections between East and Southeast Asia through Central

Asia, the Indian Ocean, and Europe, Beijing has put much effort into taking care of its relationship with Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa (BRICS), a group of five major emerging national economies. (Yuan, 2016)

It is possible to interpret the rise of China as part of the never-ending cyclical rhythms of the system; that is an example of the resilience and efficacy of the system itself in extending capitalism to the periphery regions, maintaining the underlying structures of inequality within the system. In this sense, even if China successfully moves toward the core, it still needs semi-periphery and periphery (Li, 2019). As the following diagram elucidates, it is possible to understand how China occupies a dual position: from the Global South's point of view, it is perceived as a successful model of development, thus as a reference point for developing countries, being the central point irradiating an interconnected web of South-South relations, a term that refers to the exchange of resources, technology, and knowledge between developing countries. On the one hand, China is challenging the core, emerging as a counter-hegemony questioning the current global order, while it is also appearing as a new rising hegemon to the semi-peripheral and peripheral spheres. Consequently, the economic relations between China and the developing world can be defined as a combination of increasing North-South trade and investment relations and growing South-South cooperation (Li, 2019). Indeed, China is an indispensable country for both the Global North and the Global South, as China's vision of a "Community of Common Destiny" inevitably involves all the world's strata. On the other hand, China represents a new development model for developing countries while presenting itself as a rising hegemon within a new regional order. Simultaneously, Chinese projects, such as the OBOR Initiative, inevitably drag the core countries into a North-South trade, where Beijing represents the nerve point. Therefore, China positions itself in a transitional juncture, providing more room for manoeuvre and upward mobility to semi-peripheral and peripheral countries through initiatives such as infrastructure development, trade agreements, and financial aid (Li, 2019). In this asset, understanding the moves behind Chinese foreign diplomacy and how the construction of a Chinese paradigm of international relations affects Chinese engagement with other countries seems to be a relevant issue in assessing the future of the Global Order.

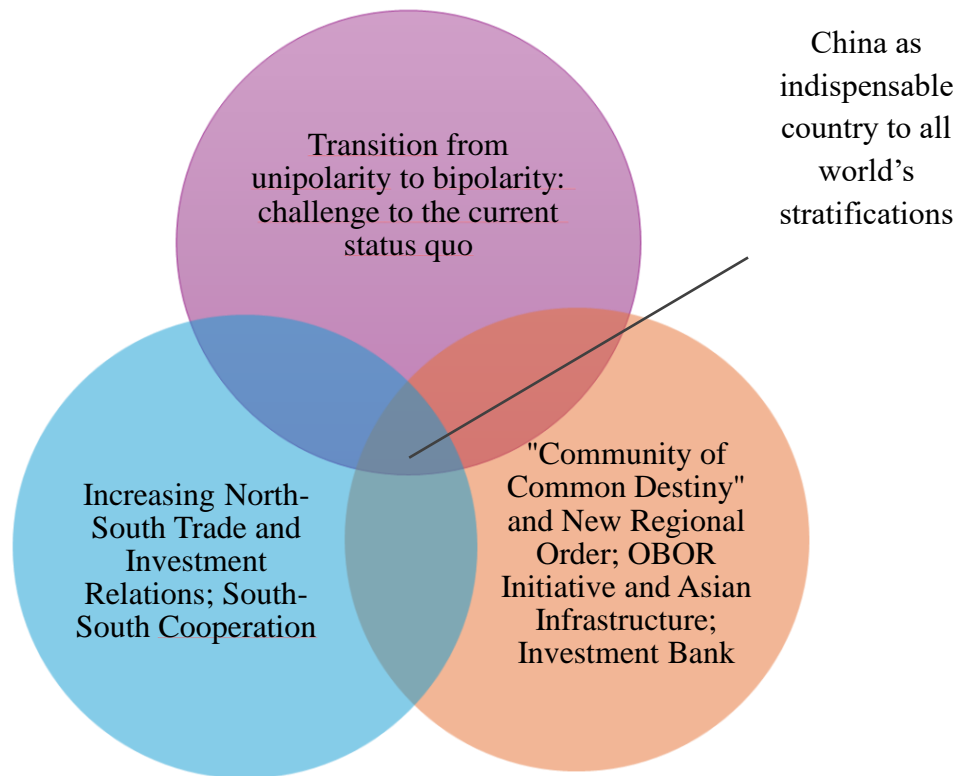


Figure 1. The Central Role of China

A clear example of how Chinese diplomacy is constructed and implemented is Sino-African relations, which are understood as part of a process that wants to export the Chinese development model, particularly the Chinese dream (zhōngguó mèng 中国梦), signature of Xi Jinping's presidency. As a result, China's approach to African countries follows a *modus operandi* constructed on the distinctive features of Chinese diplomacy. Common themes exported by the PRC include the principle of non-interference, the notion of a harmonious world, support and mutuality, friendship and brotherhood among developing countries (Fiori & Rosen, 2019). More than any other continent, Africa has benefited from Beijing's economic growth and soft power. It represents a strategic partner for China, offering a fertile ground for realising its economic projects regarding resources and investments (French, 2014). This symbiotic relationship underscores the mutual benefits and shared interests that underpin Sino-African relations. Indeed, Sino-African relations have played a pivotal role in China's foreign policy since the end of the Civil War in 1947. During the Cold War, Chinese foreign aid was instrumental in establishing diplomatic relations with African countries. In return, these countries supported Beijing's successful bid for a seat at the United Nations in October 1971

(Fiori, Rosen, 2019). This historical context highlights the long-term commitment to Sino-African relations and the strategic importance of China's foreign policy, characterised by a marked emphasis on South-South cooperation based on perceived similarities and comparable historical experiences that contribute to reinforcing the solidarity between the two parts, highlighting Beijing's "anti-imperialist" and "anti-colonialist" position, distancing itself from Western powers. It is "Poor helping the poor", referring to the words used by the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai during his tour of Africa in 1976 (Agbebi, Virtanen, 2017).

In this light, China underscores the mutual benefits and cooperation that underpin Sino-African relations, presenting a narrative of long-term friendship based on understanding and shared challenges. President Xi Jinping has heralded a "new historical starting point" (xīn de lìshǐ qǐdiǎn 新的历史起点) where compatible strategic interests and win-win cooperation have galvanised "the Chinese and African people to stride forward together with greater determination" (gèngjiā jiāndìng dì bìngjiān kuà bù qián xíng 更加坚定地并肩跨步前行) (Graziani, 2021). In [chapter 2](#), Sino-African relations will be further discussed as a designated case study of this thesis.

To conclude, china's ascent on the global stage has sparked a demand for Chinese International Relations theories to provide a lens through which to fully comprehend Beijing's world order perspective. Notably, as developing countries are the primary recipients of China's hard and soft power, in the context of bolstered South-South cooperation where China is seen as an alternative for developing countries, it becomes imperative to scrutinise the role of Chinese IR and its impact on Chinese foreign diplomacy.

1.4 Research Question

The rise of China has undoubtedly created different concerns about the future of global order. As China elevated itself to the status of world power, many political scientists discussed the applicability of Western IR to the Chinese case. The development of international relations theories generally reflects real-world developments. Citing Cox, “theory is always for someone or some purpose” (Acharya, Buzan, 2007., p. 17). Indeed, there is a political interest in exploring the potentiality of Chinese IR and understanding what contribution it can bring to the future world order. In this context, it is relevant to understand the rationale behind constructing a Chinese IR paradigm. Therefore, this thesis aims to understand to what extent the existence of a Chinese School of International Relations is reflected in Chinese foreign diplomacy. Thus, the research question *"How is the construction of the Chinese IR paradigm connected to Chinese foreign diplomacy?"* wants to investigate how creating a Chinese School of IR, or IR theories with Chinese characteristics, plays a fundamental role in shaping Chinese foreign diplomacy. Thus, using Sino-African relationships, explicitly addressing the Sub-Saharan region (SSA), as a single case study, this thesis attempts to answer the proposed research question and understand by which means the impelling necessity of Chinese IR theories construction is linked to Chinese foreign diplomacy.

2. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological rationale behind the thesis. The first paragraph presents the research design used to conduct this study. The second paragraph exemplifies the theories used to address the research question proposed. The third section discusses data collection and introduces the chosen case study. The fourth section delineates the analytical approach that drives this research. The last paragraph elucidates the limitations of this thesis.

2.1 Research design

The approach driving this thesis is qualitative. The study is based on existing qualitative and quantitative data. The research question is developed following two different *momentums*. Firstly, it discusses China's IR theories. In this phase, the problem formulation will be driven by a non-Western theoretical apparatus relevant to determining how much Chinese IR influences Chinese foreign diplomacy. Secondly, the findings are verified by analysing a single case study.

The primary intent is to combine two different methodological approaches in addressing the problem from a structural perspective. Indeed, the question about the connection between Chinese IR and Chinese diplomacy unfolds critical aspects within the global setting. However, the problem is addressed from the Chinese angle to provide a more holistic understanding. Therefore, this thesis is theory-driven, and understanding the perspective of Chinese IR is essential to address the research question. The objective is not to provide a unique answer, especially since Chinese IR is still developing. However, the goal is to address the problem using the theoretical framework provided by Chinese intellectuals to interpret different aspects of Chinese foreign diplomacy, presenting systematic evidence collected through the case study chosen. Therefore, the chosen case study is used to verify the research question as it is “a work that focuses its attention on a single example of a broader phenomenon” (Gerring, 2004). The rationale behind the chosen case study is elucidated later in [this chapter](#).

2.2 Choice of theory

This thesis revolves around three Chinese theories and studies on how they are connected to understanding the impact of the rise of a distinctive Chinese IR on Chinese foreign policy.

Since the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Chinese engagement with the global epistemic community has intensified. This allowed the proliferation of universities and research institutes for international studies due to the urgency of developing an IR paradigm with Chinese characteristics (Jiangli, Buzan, 2014). In order to establish the Chinese School's distinctive foundations, filling the gap that Chinese scholars were claiming about mainstream IR, Chinese sources were used as the substratum for the new paradigm. Moving towards classical Chinese thinkers, such as Confucius, Mencius, and Sun Tzu, the epistemic community justified the label of the "Chinese School" of International Relations, simultaneously inspiring a flourishing normative debate on the appropriateness of this terminology. (ibid) Among the Chinese IR theories, this section elucidates the three most exemplificative in the context of this research. Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia concept, Qing Yaqing's Relational theory and Yan Xuetong's Moral Realism are presented as the theoretical framework that drives this thesis.

Finally, at the end of the [theory chapter](#), a comprehensive summary will address the highlights of the three theories. This researcher believes a concise recap helps better apply the theories to the analysis. Therefore, from the summary, the main concepts and values will be implemented in Sino-African relations: the designated case study.

2.2.1 Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia

Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia theory is a unique conceptualisation of international society, rooted in the traditional Chinese notion of *Tianxia* (天下). It presents a departure from the current international order, starting with a reinterpretation of *Tianxia* and the Westphalian system. This exploration highlights the perceived incompatibility between "Chinese" and "Western" ordering principles, offering a fresh perspective on global politics (Noesselt, 2012).

This conceptualisation encompasses reflections on the original State of society, the analytical units of global politics, institutional structures, conflicts, cooperation, globalisation, and global governance. *Tianxia* represents the basis for understanding other Chinese IR theories and provides a holistic understanding of how China views the world. Zhao Tingyang outlines a worldview that evolved into what he terms the All-Under-Heaven theory, which, in the past,

has been influential both within and beyond China, being the fundamental structure on which the empire was constructed (Jiangli, Buzan, 2014). Indeed, understanding Tianxia's concept is essential to comprehending both Qin Yaqing's Relational theory and Yan Xuetong's Moral Realism.

2.2.2 Qin Yaqing's Relational Theory

Qin Yaqing asserts that China's rich historical legacy necessitates the development of its unique IR theory, referring to it as the Chinese School. This endeavour serves not only to foster self-awareness within China but also to contribute to global discussions in IR theory (Jiangli, Buzan, 2014). Qin's approach, known as process-oriented constructivism, seeks to combine Western theoretical frameworks with Chinese traditions. He terms his approach as an integrative analogical interpretation (ibid). Qin Yaqing's theory is an excellent example of the difference between the Chinese IR theory and the Western theories that designate the State as the unit of analysis. Central to Qin's relational theory is an emphasis on the behavioural patterns inherent in Chinese and other Asian cultures, contrasting with what he perceives as the dominating influence of rational choice theory in Western IR. Indeed, he counterposes the logic of relationalism to rationalism, arguing that a synthesis of these two would offer a more nuanced theoretical framework for understanding the actual dynamics of International Relations. This approach facilitates the incorporation of Chinese concepts and perspectives into the broader landscape of IR theory (ibid).

2.2.3 Yan Xuetong's Moral Realism

Yan Xuetong, a professor of international politics at Peking University, has conducted an extensive study on ancient Chinese philosophy dating back to the pre-Qin period, examining its relevance and adaptation to the complexities of the twenty-first century (Noesselt, 2012). Apart from providing comparative analyses of various Chinese philosophers' political ideologies, Yan's research delves into the legitimate rule, the nature of the State, and the international order. Through this analysis, Yan offers insights into the theoretical foundations of modern Chinese international relations, providing a theoretical foundation for modern Chinese IR and offering practical insights. His work illuminates China's assertions of a "harmonious world" and its commitment to a "peaceful rise", reframing them from mere political rhetoric to fundamental pillars of an alternative model for the international system. This model, proposed by China, could potentially guide other nation-states in navigating global affairs in the contemporary era (ibid).

Yan Xuetong's approach has sparked a lively debate within the academic community, particularly regarding the methodological foundations of his study. This debate, animated by Professor Yan himself, has clarified his position on the label "Chinese School" and further enriched the understanding of his work. Chapter 3 explores these critical issues, providing a comprehensive view of the academic discourse (Yan, 2023).

2.3 Choice of Data and Case Study

Data collection is the process of gathering, measuring, and analysing data using various sources to generate answers to the research question and evaluate outcomes (Paradis, 2016). This section elucidates how the data supporting the research is gathered. It explains the data collection process, the case study, and the data analysis methods.

The data for the analysis is selected according to its relevance. Both primary sources, which are original data or information collected firsthand from original or direct sources, like official government documents and records or interview reports, and secondary sources are employed in this research. Mainly, secondary sources are data not collected directly by the researcher. Conversely, it is created by others, such as published research articles or studies conducted by researchers. Thus, to confirm the trustworthiness and quality of the secondary sources, this research relies exclusively on academically approved databases. Specifically, quantitative data are not generated by the researcher through fieldwork. Instead, it is gathered from official existing databases, and, therefore, it is created by others.

This thesis designates Sino-African relations as a single case study to verify the main arguments the chosen theories address empirically. Indeed, Sino-African relations represent one of the most significant examples of Chinese diplomacy. However, to better understand the narratives in play, this thesis' case study is limited to Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), one of the main areas where it is possible to observe Beijing's presence. Therefore, by confining this study to a specific geographic area, this thesis aims to realise a detailed study that intends to generate answers to the research question. Africa has become a key element in Chinese foreign policy, especially regarding soft power. Primarily, Chinese engagement with African countries is concerned with the economic sphere. Indeed, Beijing has emerged as the primary destination for exports from numerous African countries, causing concerns among Western powers (Fiori & Rosen, 2019). The engagement in Africa aligns with significant political goals for China, the most important of which is the consolidation of support for its "One-China Principle". Moreover, China has committed itself to providing aid to African countries. However, this represents primarily a political strategy rather than purely humanitarian, devoted to bolstering China's soft power. Additionally, China is actively working towards promoting education to cultivate a skilled workforce capable of utilising advanced Chinese industrial technology within Africa (ibid). Overall, in shaping its relationship with Africa, China is using what is called "smart

power", a combination of the charm of culture (soft power) and economic power (hard power) (Itugbu, 2021).

As highlighted, Sino-African relations are a relevant example for understanding Beijing's approach to foreign diplomacy, which is related to Chinese IR theories. Therefore, using Chinese IR theories as a solid framework, this thesis aims to analyse the designated case study. The following diagram shows the main characteristics distinguishing Beijing's approach to African countries. These features are framed in the Chinese narrative of Sino-African relations, contributing to the construction of specific rhetoric discourses concretised through investments, infrastructure projects, aid, education, etc. These exceptional characteristics will be further elucidated in [chapter 4](#) in the context of specific data.

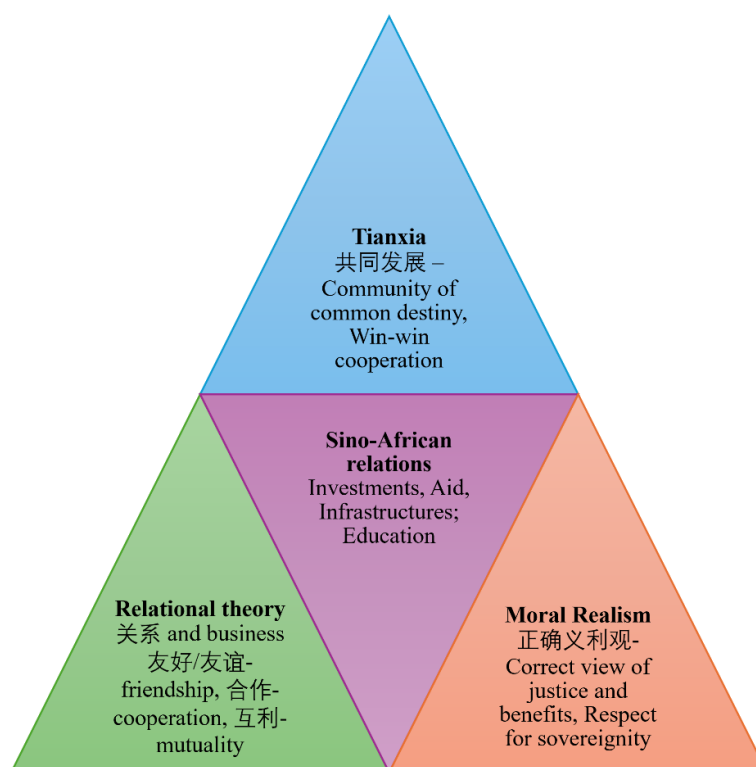


Figure 2. Chinese IR and Sino-African Relations

As the diagram above shows, this study explores the intricate interconnections between China IR theories and the designated case study, interpreting the Sino-African relations in light of China's specific approach. Therefore, this research investigates the connections between Chinese diplomacy and IR theories, using document and discourse analysis as qualitative data. As Strauss (2009) posited, rhetoric is the framework within which policy and initiatives are

developed, explained, and legitimated domestically and internationally. It is a critical tool in the complex game between the state and significant audiences, used to attract, persuade, mobilise, or consolidate support. In China, as in other countries, policy implementation often deviates from stated ideals, but the underlying rhetoric remains significant to various domestic and international audiences. Official rhetoric is also crucial as it articulates policy framing. Therefore, document and discourse analysis are vital in data collection (ibid). Specifically, document analysis allows researchers to gather information and obtain perspectives and insights from existing documents without being directly involved in data collection. In the context of this research, direct quotations from relevant speeches, such as President Xi Jinping's speech at the opening ceremony of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa, retrieved from original governmental sources, are employed as primary data. Other relevant documents, such as published research, reports from International Organizations, and journal articles from national journal agencies such as Xinhua and People Daily Online, are also addressed.

As highlighted in the [introduction](#), power discourse represents a relevant tool for Beijing to substantiate its position within a global context. Thus, this thesis employs discourse analysis to uncover the ways of viewing, talking about and understanding the world, finally unacknowledging that language plays an active role in shaping narratives and perceptions. Ancient Chinese thinkers, when contemplating language, primarily focused on its pragmatic use rather than its semantic connection to the external world. In contrast with the Aristotelian tradition, they valued language more for its normative role than its descriptive function. Rather than debating truth values, they prioritised the impact of specific beliefs on individuals and the moral and social consequences of certain propositions. Chinese thought thus distinguishes itself by viewing language primarily as a catalyst for behaviour rather than merely a vehicle for conveying meaning. For example, according to the Mohist Canon, in logic and ethics, the emphasis lies not on uncovering the truth but establishing norms and criteria to guide knowledge and action (Cheng, 2000).

The discursive power emerges as a fundamental component of soft power and overall national power because possessing it is equivalent to having “the ability to outline discussion topics, set standards and norms, and decide what is right or wrong in international relations”, “guiding public opinion (yǐndǎo yúlùn zǒuxiàng 引导舆论走向)”, and “shaping a positive national image (sùzào liánghǎo guójiā xíngxiàng 塑造良好国家形象)” (Riva, 2021). President Xi

Jinping's call to "tell China's story well" (jiǎng hǎo zhōngguó gùshì 讲好中国故事) underscores the importance of discourse analysis in understanding the widespread practice of storytelling in the construction of political messages. This practice is situated within the broader dimension of Chinese soft power, making discourse analysis an essential tool in this research and finally helping contextualise economic data (Miranda, 2020).

Having delineated China's position through discourse analysis, addressing its economic engagement in the region is essential. Therefore, for this research's purposes, it is necessary to delineate the economic aspects of Sino-African relations, limiting the study to SSA. By exploring Chinese economic ties with the region, the final objective is to understand how Chinese diplomacy engages with Africa and through which modes Chinese IR substantiates Beijing's foreign diplomacy. Therefore, quantitative data for the analysis is retrieved from the existing online databases. The primary source data from the International Monetary Fund regional economic outlook "At a Crossroads: Sub-Saharan Africa's Economic Relations with China" is addressed directly by the researcher. Additionally, data from the China Africa Research Initiative (CARI), which produces highly accurate and reliable estimates of Chinese engagement in Africa (Gilpin, 2021); AidData sources, statistics from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) as well as data from the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) are consulted through secondary sources. The data from economic activities not only serve as support to verify the research problem but also underscore the significance of this thesis's argument. It posits that the modes China approaches SSA are among the most significant examples of Chinese exceptionalism in interacting with the international community.

2.4 Method of analysis

In the context of analysing data within the designated case study, this thesis employs an interpretative approach aiming to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of the ongoing processes in international relations, finally gaining a deeper understanding of how systemic forces shape China's actions in SSA and to what extent China's actions, in turn, shape the construction of a Chinese IR. Indeed, China may see Sino-African Relations as a precious opportunity both for the recipient and for itself: spreading Chinese culture and values, educating and helping the recipient countries, and gaining economic and world order advantages while simultaneously helping old friends (Graziani, 2021). After all, one of the fundamental relationships, according to the Confucian canon, is exemplified by friendship.

In these terms, the interpretative approach highlights the significance of subjective perceptions, cultural contexts, and discursive practices, focusing on language, identity, norms, and ideas that influence actions and interactions among states and non-state actors. The interpretative approaches can contribute to elucidating the discourses and the practices shaping the world (Given, 2008). In the context of this research, interpretative approaches can help to understand the meanings, narratives, and power dynamics behind China's engagement in Africa, considering factors such as historical legacies, identity construction, and the impact on local communities. Therefore, the interpretative approach is used to gain insights into the social, cultural, and political dynamics shaping China's attitudes and behaviours towards SSA.

Finally, including an interpretative approach encourages reflexivity and critical thinking while promoting interdisciplinary approaches, drawing insights from sociology, anthropology, psychology, and history to provide a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the research problem.

2.5 Limitations

A limitation is described as matters and occurrences that arise in a study that are out of the researcher's control, limiting the extensivity to which a study can go and sometimes affecting the results (Goes & Simon, 2013). The following section acknowledges the limitations of this thesis.

Based on the aim to gain a deeper understanding of the modalities through which the construction of a Chinese IR shapes Chinese foreign diplomacy, the exclusive reliance on a Chinese-based theoretical framework represents the main limitation. Indeed, the theories chosen as representative of Chinese IR are not mature enough to underscore the patterns and connections between theories and power. Indeed, while assuming Beijing's perspective, the significant risk is to legitimise China's actions. However, analysing the issue from a Western point of view without giving importance to specific cultural elements would be reductive, with a significant risk of Orientalist resurgence. Even acknowledging this weakness, this student believes that in an attempt to draw an accurate picture of the Chinese case, it is essential for this thesis to assume Beijing's angle.

Another area for improvement of the study is the reliance on secondary data sources, such as published reports and existing research studies, instead of conducting original empirical research. This introduces the potential for biases or limitations in the original data sources, which could impact the reliability and validity of the findings (Mora, 2022). Moreover, the researcher's biases and values can influence the interpretation of the findings and conclusions. In this context, it is also necessary to acknowledge the limitations of the objectivity of the data used. Primary sources mainly refer to Chinese official documents and reports, which can be limited in accuracy. These biases have the power to shape narratives and affect the analysis of the data, potentially impacting the objectivity of the findings. Therefore, retrieving objective and unbiased information on complex subjects, such as global issues, the world's power structure and soft power issues, can be challenging, and this must be recognised as a limitation of this thesis. Time and resource constraints may also impact the scope and depth of the research, potentially limiting the ability to fully explore all relevant aspects of this research. Therefore, because of these constraints, it was impossible to collect first-hand primary sources, which could have provided valuable insights into the case study. The absence of such primary data collection may have limited the depth and richness of the research findings. Acknowledging

these limitations and their potential implications for the validity and generalizability of the study's findings in interpreting the research results and drawing conclusions is essential.

2.6 Thesis overview

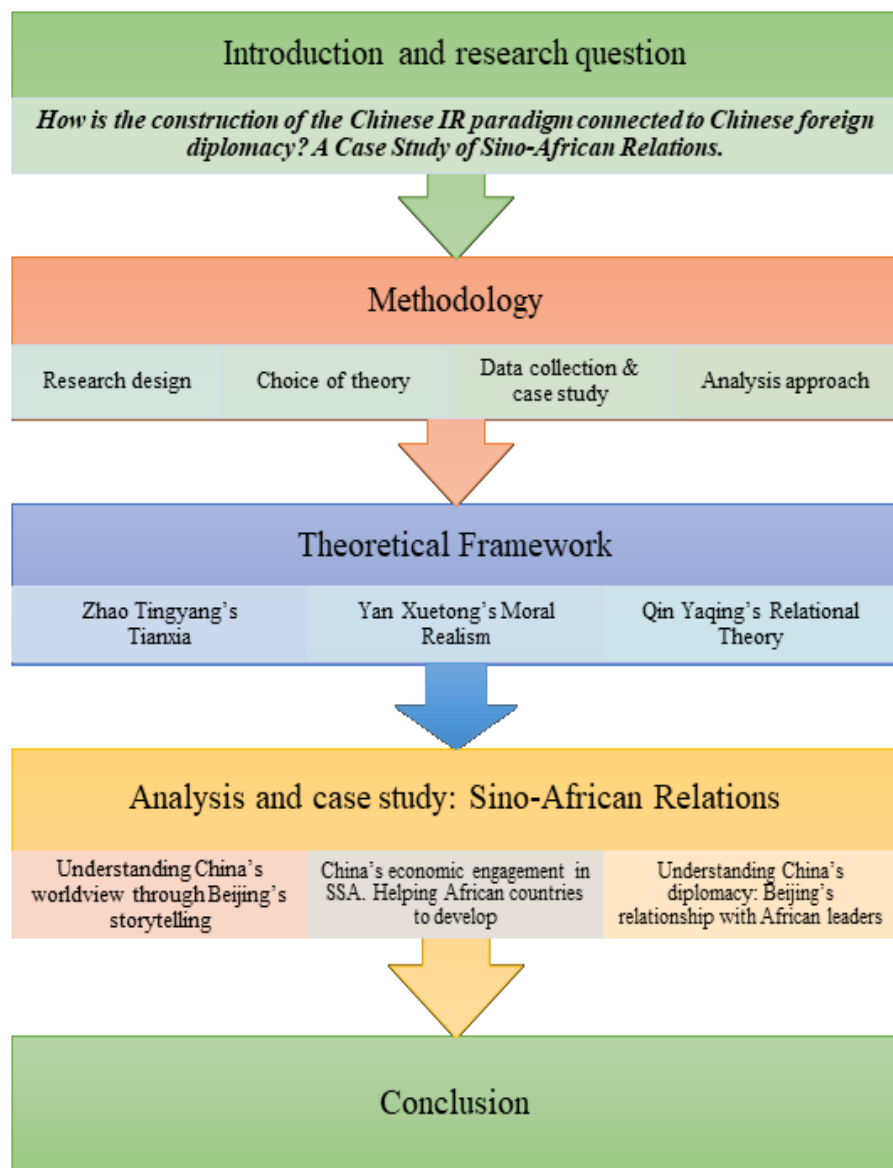


Figure 3 Thesis Overview

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia System

In 2005, the Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang made a significant contribution to the field of global politics with his book titled “Tianxia tixi: shijie zhidu zhexue daolun 天下体系：世界制度哲学导论” (The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of a World Institution). His work combines concepts from ancient Chinese thought with Western philosophy, offering a unique perspective on the current geopolitical reality.

Proposing a new paradigm, the author asserts that China should interact with the world through its distinct ideology. Despite the world perceiving China's ascent as a global threat, the country has started to view global issues as its own, assuming the duty of forging a global community with shared interests. In this light, the *Tianxia system* aspires to establish a political reality founded on the unity of people and cultures, advocating a worldview where individuality and personal interests give way to a more altruistic perspective rooted in philosophical, political, and social concepts that diverge significantly from those imposed by the Western world. Zhao Tingyang's traditional Chinese perspective underscores the significance of community and society over individual interests (Zhao, 2021).

According to Zhao, the purpose of history is not to celebrate individuals and their uniqueness but rather to achieve harmony, stability, and longevity in chaos. In this sense, the current world, organised into nation-states, lacks the foundations to establish a harmonious political order. The absence of a global political philosophy in the West has resulted in incomplete political theory. This deficiency has led to a situation where there is no universally accepted system capable of effectively managing the world as a political entity, inevitably leading to disorder and turning it into what Zhao calls a “non-world” (fēi shìjiè 非世界), a world without a unified political order (Zhao, 2009). The need for a world system arises from the inability of individual entities to manage their relationships in a larger political space successfully. To function effectively, the world system must demonstrate a positive response to the need for internal coherence (yīzhìxìng 一致性) and systematic transitivity (chuándì xìng 传递性) among its components (Zhao, 2021). Transitivity refers to the capacity of a political system to be applicable at different global and national political levels. To illustrate this point, the author provides an example of a democratic system. While the democratic system is widely adopted and functional at the

community and national levels, its effectiveness has yet to be proven on a larger scale, such as the global level. Therefore, it cannot be considered a universal system (ibid). Thus, Zhao proposes ideal levels for the global system that are retrieved from Chinese political philosophy: the *Tianxia*, the state and the family (tiānxià, guó, jiā 天下—国—家), in contrast with the ones on which the modern political framework is based, namely individual, community and ethno-nation-state (gèrén, gòngtóngtǐ, mínzú guójiā 个人—共同体—民族国家). These three levels represent different manifestations of the same system, each operating and managed differently but sharing a common essence. The world holds the highest value among these levels because developing an equally functional state and family systems can only occur once an effective world system is established. As a result, the transitivity of the political system can only move from top to bottom and not vice versa (ibid). In this context, coherence involves unity and symbiosis, which Zhao calls coexistence. This must be fostered among the various levels of the global political system, such as between the world, the state, and the family, and among individuals within each level. When all components recognise their value as part of a whole, the entire state and, consequently, global society can move towards harmony and peace (ibid). While the Western division emphasises the individual, the Chinese vision prioritises the family (jiā 家), stressing the sense of community within the country (guó 国). Instead of the nation, *Tianxia* holds prominence. These differences between the two tripartitions are fundamental to Zhao's belief that the *Tianxia* system operates globally, while the Western system is limited to the nation-state level.

As previously mentioned, Western politics revolves around individuality, leaving room for the pursuit of profit and personal interests. In contrast, Chinese political philosophy is grounded in principles that inherently exclude individualism and personal interests, prioritising the pursuit of harmony. According to this philosophy, achieving harmony begins with managing the family environment effectively (ibid). Confucian philosophy firmly asserts that the family is the fundamental unit of coexistence. It aims to expand an ideal form of harmony observed within family dynamics to encompass all levels of society, culminating in a *Tianxia* family as the ultimate unit of coexistence (ibid). Recalling Menius's words in the *Mengzi*, "The Poetry says: An exemplar in treating his wife and extending to his brothers, thus he ruled the family and the state" (*Mengzi*, 1A/7, p.23). In his dialogue with the king of Qin, Mencius wisely uses the Ode *Si qi* (思齊, Mao 240) to reinforce his statement that good governance means the ruler must set an example by extending his compassion and benevolence to his subjects. Only acting as a King is expected; the ruler is entitled to maintain his role, and governing by virtue, he "will be

able to govern the world as though you turned it in your palm (tiānxià kě yùn yú zhǎng 天下可運於掌)” (Mengzi, 1A/7, p.23). In this way, the *Tianxia* system set the ground for politics rooted in ethics and morality that go beyond pursuing national interests and fostering harmony across society, aiming to establish a global political system derived from Chinese philosophical tradition. The main difference between Chinese and Western political philosophies lies in their understanding of the self and the individual’s relationship with others. Chinese philosophy views the self as an integral part of a larger whole, while Western philosophy emphasises individuality and the pursuit of personal interest. This fundamental divergence has led to distinct political systems and priorities. The *Tianxia* system does not claim to eradicate evil from the world. Instead, it seeks to replace the typical issues that arise from power-centric politics with harmony based on altruism and unity (Zhao, 2021).

To conclude, Zhao Tingyang challenges the current world system by introducing *Tianxia* as an alternative to the modern nation-state and related political theories. He traces the origin of *Tianxia* back to the fall of the Shang dynasty, highlighting its departure from state-centred politics. As the Zhou kingdom rose to power, its authority focused on pacifying subversive forces and establishing the cultural concept of *Tianxia* (Wang, 2017). This system seeks recognition and effectiveness among all populations, providing a framework for social and economic life based on cultural authority, morality, rituals, and rites. *Tianxia* thrives on affective ties rather than coercion, drawing boundaries based on cultural competence rather than geography or ethnicity. Its mission is to gain support from all populations, win people’s hearts and minds (dé mínxīn 得民心), and provide a framework for social and economic life. *De mixīn* represents the primary source of legitimacy on which the *Tianxia* system is based, being still today a crucial aspect that guarantees the CCP the right to be in charge in ruling the country (ibid).

3.2 Qin Yaqing Relational Theory

By introducing Chinese ideas into International Relations Theory, Qin Yaqing proposed an alternative framework for understanding Chinese International Relations. Qin defines theory as a system of ideas, and theory construction involves organising these ideas into a structured system. Within theory, there are various components, the most crucial of which is the theoretical hard core. The hard core of social theory comprises both substantive and metaphysical complementary elements. However, what distinguishes one social theory from another is primarily the metaphysical aspect shaped by a particular community's cultural background and knowledge (Qin, 2016). Qin identifies Confucian cultural communities as providing the metaphysical foundation for a relational theory of world politics. This perspective encompasses a unique worldview that substantially diverges from theories of international relations centred on individual rationality. Therefore, the central concept of his work is “relationality”, which Qin repeatedly compares to the Western notion of rationality (ibid).

The relational theory is based on three fundamental assumptions; the first concerns international relations as a realm of interconnectedness. At the metaphysical level, the world consists of continuous events and ongoing relationships rather than fixed objects and separate entities. These dynamics and fluid relationships constitute the essence of the cosmos, eliminating the need for external forces to empower them. Rather than viewing states as static entities, this framework posits that states are best understood as dynamic processes in which relations hold ontological significance. He argues that structures are not fixed; conversely, they are constantly shaped by discursive practices (ibid). As Qin proposes, Relational Theory stands apart from mainstream IR theories in its rejection of ontological individualism and its embrace of a worldview where actors are interdependent and framed in complex relations with one another and the context (Ho, 2019).

The second assumption concerns individuals who are understood as actors in relation. This suggests that social actors' identities and roles are based on their interactions with others. No existence is conceived as an absolute, autonomous identity. Actors are interconnected with each other and, in a broader context, encompass the entirety of their relational networks (Qin, 2016). This signifies that Chinese society is context-oriented, where objects, individuals, and occurrences exist within a multifaceted web of relationships, without which none would have existence or significance. Even in Chinese, characters assume specific meanings based on the context in which they are inserted. Therefore, understanding the discourse is mostly contextual.

Qin argues that Chinese society cannot be categorised as individual-based (gèrén běnwèi 个人本位) or society-based (shèhuì běnwèi 社会本位) but rather as relation-based (guānxì běnwèi 关系本位) society. He asserts that relational theory emphasises the importance of coexistence over isolation and frames politics as managing relationships among actors within a specific temporal and spatial context (Ho, 2019). It may be helpful to consider the Confucian notion of humanity to explain this concept. In the *Analects*, Confucius never provided a definitive definition of humanity, but the Chinese character for humanity, “rén 仁”, may best exemplify what Confucius had in mind. The character consists of the radical 亻 rén “human” (a compressed form of “人” man) and the number two (èr 二). This character highlights how human beings fulfil their roles through their relationships with others. Therefore, according to Qin, individuals exist only within social relations, and changes in one’s relational network can reshape identity and behaviour (Cheng, 2000).

Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, “process” is a fundamental concept within relational theory. An actor-in-relation is inherently involved in the ongoing processes that shape and reshape their identities and roles. These processes should not be viewed as passive, where structures or actors achieve predetermined outcomes. Instead, they have intrinsic significance and play a vital role in International Relations and social dynamics (Qin, 2016). International society is better understood as a continuously evolving process than a fixed entity. Similarly, global governance is a process through which rules and norms are established to regulate ongoing relationships. Cooperation is also viewed as a process that involves a dynamic interplay between mutual change and evolution. It requires maintenance, management, and alignment of relationships among actors. From a relational perspective, the sustainability of cooperative processes often outweighs immediate and tangible outcomes (ibid). This can be seen in Sino-African relations, where the emphasis lies on nurturing and sustaining cooperative processes rather than solely focusing on achieving short-term goals. Qin emphasises that interests are inherently shared in relational terms, as actors are socially connected. Therefore, drawing from Chinese thinking, Qin argues against viewing human interactions as a zero-sum game and proposes that shared interests prevail over self-interest (Ho, 2019).

Qin’s theory assumes that Chinese leaders exercise power responsibly, making a centralised authority more effective in addressing abuses of power compared to external checks and balances in Western democracies. Actors must consider the relational environment when they

act rationally. Qin uses the example of China's patriarchal society, where a father's power over his son is absolute based on the Confucian father-son relationship. The same applies to the ruler-subject relationship and each unit's societal role (Ho, 2019). The father-son and the ruler-subject relationship are highly problematic at the international and national levels. Indeed, as Ho (2019) highlights from a Sinocentric perspective at the world level, China might hold power over its tributary states. Conversely, at the national level, it contributes to the legitimacy of a centralised authority invested in ruling over the population, carrying out prosperity and economic development. In this context, as emphasised by Qin, morality (dàodé 道德) in Chinese political life ultimately contributes to the legitimacy of Chinese leaders (ibid). By extending the example and acting according to rites, the ruler adheres to a moral standard, gaining the right to rule over the population. If the ruler fails to adhere to the moral standard, the heavenly mandate can be revoked (Cavalieri, 2019)

Qin provides two concepts at the epistemological level to better understand the dynamics of these relationships: meta-relationship and *zhongyong* dialectics. The former is the simplest form representing all relationships, whereas the latter provides a means to understand and interpret the nature of this meta-relationship. Relying on Chinese cosmology, he asserts that the most significant relationship is between yin and yang, which is a meta-relationship (Qin, 2016). The world is perceived as a totality starting from within itself, which is the meaning of the yin-yang relationship, representing the path that passes through the emerging and then the mature Yin and then reverses into Yang, ending up describing a circle, which is the quintessential image of totality (Cheng, 2000). The cosmological diagram they form illustrates the basic conceptualisation of the universe in Chinese thought. Any other relationship can be seen as deriving from this meta-relationship, such as male and female, strength and weakness, or East and West relationships (Qin, 2016). Conversely, in Western traditions, in which these pairs are understood as independent and dichotomous categories, Chinese thinking sees them as complementary. In this context, *zhongyong* dialectics emphasising inclusivity, complementarity, and harmony posit that each element in a pair is inherently inclusive of the other, despite their differences. *Zhongyong* dialectics present a "both-and" logic, acknowledging the immanent inclusivity of apparently contradictory elements (ibid). It is essential to understand that the interaction between yin and yang is an ongoing process of mutual becoming rather than fixed entities with distinct properties.

Zhongyong dialectics view the relationship between opposites as complementary rather than conflictual, advocating for the harmonious coexistence of opposing elements, with differences being the preconditions for harmony (ibid). The *Zhongyong*, the Doctrine of the Mean, is one of the four books of the Confucian canon attributed to Zixi. According to Confucius, reciprocity (恕 *shu*) guides a person's actions. The word “shù 恕”, whose character “rú 如” surmounts the element “xīn 心”, the heart, establishes an equivalence between two terms, introducing an analogical relationship between hearts. This implies considering others as one considers oneself (Cheng, 2000). This consideration of others is dictated by reciprocity and constitutes an understanding of humanity. Everything starts with oneself. The Doctrine of the Mean, “Zhongyong 中庸”, is the supreme good towards which every existence tends, whose practice necessarily passes through change and exchange (ibid).

In conclusion, Qin Yaqing's relational theory presents alternative perspectives on fundamental concepts in International Relations, such as power, governance, and international systems. This highlights culture's significance in shaping the theoretical frameworks' metaphysical aspects. While mainstream IRT predominantly revolves around individual rationality, relationality has emerged as a different paradigm for understanding human behaviour. Relationality does not reject the importance of rational thought but emphasises the importance of contexts and relations within decision-making (Qin, 2016). Therefore, according to Qin, integrating rule-based and relational governance approaches in International Relations may offer greater effectiveness in addressing complex global challenges.

3.3 Yan Xuetong Moral Realism

Yan's Moral Realism aims to understand why certain rising states achieve hegemony while others do not and why hegemony can persist or decline. Yan explores how a rising power can fill the power gap with existing leading powers by pursuing a "leading by example" policy that promotes international order while ensuring its own rise to global power and leadership. This approach is defined as Moral Realism, which focuses on understanding the behaviour of major powers when morality is a contributing factor in their strategic preferences (Acharya, 2019).

Yan's concept of morality revolves around "governmental morality" and its practical use. He emphasises that Moral Realism takes an instrumentally based approach, with morality guiding a state in making strategic decisions that maximise its interests. He considers "governmental morality as the standard", referring to a government's responsibility towards the population, which is public and universal rather than private or national (ibid). According to Yan, morality in this context applies specifically to governmental morality and involves evaluating leaders' actions based on accepted codes of conduct related to national interests and capabilities. He maintains the realist assumption that the international system is inherently anarchic and that power is crucial in maintaining international stability and providing public goods (ibid). A key element of Moral Realism is the notion of the "Kingly way" (wángdào 王道), which stresses righteousness and benevolence over Western notions of equality and democracy (ibid).

The advantages of adopting a morally driven foreign policy stem from strategic preferences rather than calculations of national interests. Moral realism underscores the significance of strategic preferences and asserts that a state's material capabilities objectively determine and define national interests. Consequently, morality influences policymakers' decisions on maximising their interests, often prioritising specific interests over others. Therefore, the essence of policymaking lies in strategic decision-making aimed at maximising interests (Yan, 2019). In the field of International Relations, discussions about "morality" pertain to governmental morality, in which leaders' actions are assessed based on accepted codes of conduct related to national interests and capabilities. Actions that align with universally accepted codes are considered moral, whereas those that do not are immoral. Evaluating the morality of a state's actions involves judging them based on universally accepted standards without subjective perceptions (ibid).

There is often a tendency to equate power with authority, considering them synonymous. However, in the Chinese language, the terms “quánlì 权力”, meaning power, and “quánwēi 权威” meaning authority, represent distinct concepts that are not interchangeable. The former refers to legitimate coercive rights, whereas the latter refers to prestige or popular trust derived from reputation or perceived authority. Increasing a leading state’s international authority depends on its power and strategic credibility, which is enhanced through moral actions and adherence to universally accepted moral codes (ibid). Strategic credibility is crucial for a leading state to establish international authority as it signifies reliability and fosters trust among other states (ibid).

Ultimately, morality influences power and authority, directly affecting a state’s legitimacy and influence in the international arena. Adhering to moral codes enhances a state’s strategic credibility and, consequently, its international power. Leading states with established authority are likelier to maintain international leadership, highlighting the importance of strategic credibility and moral action in shaping global perceptions and alliances (ibid). A leading state can build trust and confidence with other nations through consistent and credible actions, enhancing its international authority and power. The degree of strategic credibility a leading state maintains is positively related to its global standing and the longevity of its leadership. It is essential to understand that international authority cannot be imposed on other states; it requires the voluntary acceptance of other nations (ibid).

A leading state is an example of another. In Chinese traditional culture, the principle of “yǐshēnzuòzé 以身作则”, or leading by example, holds significant importance. Instead of merely dictating or imposing, this doctrine emphasises the importance of demonstrating desirable behaviours through personal actions. This principle aligns with Confucius’ teaching, highlighting that individuals naturally gravitate towards learning from exemplary figures rather than being forcefully instructed (ibid). “It is known that people proactively come to learn rites from masters, but it is never heard that masters proactively go to educate others about rites (lǐ wén lái xué, bù wén wǎng jiào, 礼闻来学, 不闻往教)” (Yan, 2019, p.23) Yan employs modern international relations theory to elucidate the international political philosophy of pre-Qin thinkers, aiming to enrich contemporary theories with ancient Chinese thought. Unlike Western theories, which focus on material wealth and military strength, pre-Qin thinkers have attributed shifts in international power relations to ideas and morality (Bell, 2011). This perspective suggests that moral considerations may be more significant in

contemporary International Relations, particularly in addressing non-traditional security threats. Furthermore, the ethical level of a state, which is influenced by its leadership, affects its international authority and longevity. Pre-Qin thinkers advocate for hierarchical norms in International Relations, which differs from contemporary theories emphasising equality among states (Bell, 2011).

To conclude, as repeatedly highlighted by the author, his aim is not to produce a distinctive Chinese School of International Relations. Yan suggests that humane authority is more effective than hegemonic power in shaping the norms of the international system. He argues that political power is essential in international affairs and that a morally guided political leadership will eventually succeed. Thus, nations that adhere to moral principles are more likely to achieve success globally. Those resorting to tyranny ultimately fail, while those relying on hegemony can only achieve temporary success (ibid). Conversely, humane authority represents the key to becoming the world's leading power: "A humane authority under heaven relies on its ultrapowerful moral force to maintain its comprehensive state power in first place in the system." (Bell, 2011, p.12)

3.4 Summary

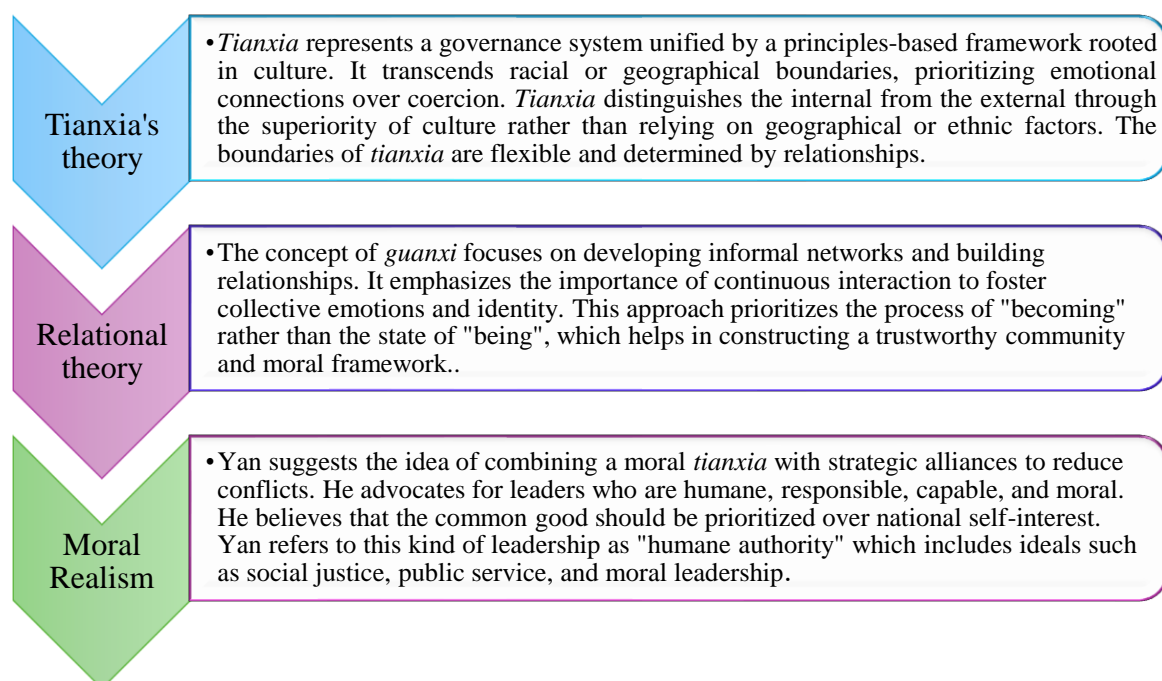


Figure 4. Theoretical framework summary

The three theories discussed above, deeply ingrained in Chinese culture, find a tangible reflection in Chinese diplomacy. China has not merely adopted these key cultural concepts but has transformed them into the pillars of its foreign and domestic policies. *Tianxia*, the all-encompassing concept, represents the starting point, proposing a unique worldview. In China's cultural universe, governance is synonymous with bringing order to the world, where the ruler educates people by extending them his virtue: to govern means to rectify (政者正也 zhèng zhě zhèng yě) (Cheng, 2000). The alignment of the sociopolitical sphere with the moral integrity of the ruler finds its application in the Confucian theory of the rectification of names (正名 zhèngmíng). The need to align names with reality represents the starting point for creating an inherently hierarchical relational order. In this sense, the ruler who bears the title of ruler (王 wáng) but does not act according to his role is an ordinary individual or a tyrant. The power given to the ruler (son of heaven 天子 tiānzǐ) is legitimate by the heavenly mandate (天命 tiānmìng). The ruler's ritual and moral virtue are the primary source of legitimacy for political power (Cavalieri, 2019). Therefore, the population spontaneously decides to submit to the leader until he guarantees the preconditions necessary for the population's support, which today

concerns economic prosperity and China's development, well synthesising in Xi Jinping's dream (the *zhōngguó mèng* 中国梦 has been introduced in [paragraph 1.3](#) and is further explained in [chapter 4](#)). Indeed, the relationship between ruler and subjects has practical applications in modern China, shaping its understanding of global realities and emphasising the importance of cultivating relationships and preserving morality framed by a view based on *Tianxia*'s concept.

To connect the theories mentioned earlier with the analysis section, the following proposition summarises the crucial concepts from Chinese International Relations theories applied in Chinese foreign diplomacy, particularly in the context of the chosen case study, which focuses on China's diplomatic relations with African countries.

- With a highly Sinocentric perspective, China perceives and understands the world according to the *Tianxia* system. China represents the departure point, irradiating an intricate web of asymmetrical and hierarchical relations.
- According to the *Tianxia* system, Chinese values have demonstrated their superiority and can now be extended beyond its borders. For example, extending the "Chinese dream" to Africa as China's success is an example for all the developing countries.
- As Zhao Tingyang addresses, harmonious and constructive cooperation is essential for a comprehensive "worldview" (*shìjièguān* 世界观) that considers the Global South's voice.
- Cooperation is viewed as a process that involves a dynamic interplay between mutual change and evolution. It is one of the main focuses of Sino-African relations.
- *Guanxi* (relationships) strengthens China's diplomacy: In the international system, trust is built on relationships, and China relies on *guanxi* with its partners.
- Mutual benefit implies that taking advantage of its economic engagement in Africa does not exclude the sincerity of Chinese actions. Therefore, morality is not affected.
- According to the Confucian relationship of friendship, which emphasises mutual respect and trust, China has successfully developed and is morally committed to providing aid to developing countries. This commitment is not solely based on economic interests but also on the belief in the importance of fostering harmonious relationships. Acknowledging its status as a developing country with a colonial past, China assumes a higher moral role in providing economic development and dignity to African countries, accordingly with the leading role envisioned by *Tianxia*.

4. Analysis

The analysis addresses the research question from the two sides using the prepositions listed at the end of [chapter 3](#) to understand how Chinese IR influences Chinese diplomacy. Firstly, starting with qualitative data, such as original speeches and governmental documents, the analysis elucidates how the key concepts from the theories are reflected in Chinese engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). To demonstrate how Chinese words concretise themselves, the second part describes the channels of economic engagement, such as bilateral trade, foreign direct investments, loans, and aid, together with other linkages, such as construction projects, and finally contextualises them within the OBOR. Therefore, using quantitative data retrieved from online accessible resources, such as IMF sources, the objective is to assess Chinese presence in the SSA through its economic engagement. Having clarified the Chinese economic presence, the last part of the analysis elucidates the relationships between Beijing and African leaders, delineating China's approach to foreign diplomacy, namely the non-interference principle. The aim is to elucidate how the concepts highlighted in the theories find practical application, starting with Chinese storytelling on Africa, passing through concrete economic data, and concluding by delineating the crucial characteristics of Chinese diplomacy in Africa, better synthesising within the principle of non-interference.

4.1 讲好中国故事¹: Analysis of Beijing's strategic storytelling on Africa

The narrative employed by China in Africa is crucial to the objectives of this thesis. As highlighted in the [introduction](#), China extensively uses relevant cultural aspects to conduct diplomatic relations with its partners. China has strategically used its extensive media apparatus to disseminate a positive image of its African engagement. With its weighty implications for China's foreign policy, this narrative is a complex interplay of official and semi-official representations, carefully contextualising present policies and initiatives using the non-interference principle (Strauss, 2009).

According to Yan's concept of human authority, leadership only succeeds when it acts according to established moral codes. In this sense, China persistently promotes a narrative that positions Beijing as a uniquely moral international actor. This stance, while seemingly

¹ Tell Chinese stories well, refers to Xi Jinping's call to spread China's stories correctly.

contradictory to external perspectives, especially considering China's overt support of authoritarian regimes like Sudan and Zimbabwe, is deeply rooted in the belief that China's exceptional moral stature stems from its unwavering adherence to underlying principles. China, a victim of colonial power, projects the perception that it is qualified to aid Africa due to a shared historical past of anti-colonial struggle and underdevelopment, coupled with the pride of being one of the world's most ancient civilisations (ibid). Furthermore, China underscores its repeated efforts to assist Africa based on equal friendship, highlighting its developmental focus on African self-reliance rather than perpetuating the colonial dynamic of superior-inferior tutelage; however, contemporary legitimising asymmetric relationships. As Qin's relational theory highlights, relationships are perceived as intrinsically hierarchical, representing small mechanisms in the broader context, which, when functioning correctly (based on Confucius's theory of the rectification of names, one must act based on the universal archetype assigned by their social role), contribute to the efficiency of the whole system. Indeed, following Zhao's conceptualisation of the world, according to *Tianxia*, China holds a central position, following a Sinocentric perspective, that charges China with the heavenly (and thus intrinsically moral) mandate. Therefore, as Qin highlights with the meta-relationship and the *zhongyong* dialectics, the asymmetric relationship does not affect the moral intentions of China's engagement in Africa since two opposing terms are understood as complementary in Chinese thinking. In this context, China proudly upholds the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs while championing norms of state sovereignty, asserting its moral superiority. These factors collectively form a developmental model for Africa that is implicitly different from Western experiences. Nourishing this narrative and portraying itself as a poor and developing nation that eventually succeeded in its developmental path, China presents a potential model for Africa. Drawing from a shared history of underdevelopment and colonialism, China is the only nation that can aid Africa based on mutual benefits and non-conditionality (ibid).

From this perspective, the narrative framing China-Africa relations is not just a collection of words but a strategic tool in China's broader diplomatic strategy. Official and semi-official rhetoric is not just a means of communication but a framework within which policies and initiatives are formulated, explained, and justified domestically and internationally. This storytelling is a complex interplay between the state and critical audiences, aiming to attract, persuade, mobilise, or consolidate support. It also plays a significant role in articulating policy directions, highlighting the strategic use of media in China's narrative (ibid).

In the context of China's media strategies in Africa, digitisation plays a crucial role in strengthening Beijing's discursive power (*huà yǔ quán* 话语权), primarily through new digital media. These digital platforms enable China to directly address the allegations of the Chinese threat while contrasting the hegemony of universal values. The ability to "tell China's stories well" implies a careful choice within the language: topics related to democracy and civil society are rigorously censored. However, African staff sometimes manage to insert references to anti-Chinese protests. The same level of censorship applies to the repression acts carried out by African governments. Indeed, friends are not criticised because the aim is to avoid indirect consequences for Chinese interests in Africa (Colarizi, 2022). Data underscores that most Africans are more inclined to believe Chinese propaganda conveyed by African state media than directly from Chinese official sources. This finding highlights the impact of Beijing's leadership experimenting with new strategies, such as providing free news feeds to African news sites and incorporating positive messages about Xinjiang. The deliberate obfuscation of the information source helps circumvent the credibility factor. In this context, creating the Belt and Road News Network, which includes 182 media organisations in 86 countries, enables Beijing to rely on OBOR partners to disseminate Chinese propaganda globally. A tangible example is the agreement between the state-owned China Media Group and 26 African newspapers and broadcasters signed just before the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics (*ibid.*).

In 2011, Li Congjun, the former director of Xinhua, expressed in the Wall Street Journal his desire to create a global media order guided by Chinese principles, emphasising respect for local conditions and the protection of each country's cultural uniqueness. In Africa, this message found favour among those who viewed the influence of the Chinese media as a valid tool to diminish the dominance of Anglo-French influences associated with African colonial history (*ibid.*). In the context of Beijing storytelling, the experience of Chinese socio-economic development is always highlighted first, and it is used as a link to explain China's continuous commitment to helping the Global South modernise. The success reached by China is tangible proof of the superiority of China's cultural authority, as envisioned by Zhao's *Tianxia* theory. As explained in the [introduction](#) and [chapter 3](#), in the *tianxia* universe, the centre, China, extends its virtue to the other nations per a system of hierarchical connections exemplified by the Confucian canon that finds its higher representation in the ruler-subject relationship. Therefore, the emphasis on the "Chinese development" within Sino-African relations reveals a significant aspect of the core ideology of Chinese diplomacy in Africa, namely, the "Chinese

model” or the notion of the applicability of the Chinese experience to developing nations (Graziani, 2021).

“As an ancient Chinese scholar once observed: only with deep roots can a tree yield rich fruit; only filled with oil can a lamp burn brightly” (Xinhua, 2018).

Reference to the past allows Beijing to highlight the historical continuity of Chinese engagement in Africa within the broader context of South-South cooperation among equals, finally projecting the nation as a “historic partner” of the African people, conveying its distinctive approach to aid with the principle of non-interference (Graziani, 2021).

“We follow a "five-no" approach in our relations with Africa: no interference in African countries’ pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions; no interference in African countries’ internal affairs; no imposition of our will on African countries; no attachment of political strings to assistance to Africa; and no seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation with Africa” (Xinhua, 2018).

The no-interference attitude has always characterised Chinese diplomacy. Within the *Tianxia* cultural system, the centre does not directly interfere with other countries’ national affairs; it limits itself to extending its virtue to other countries, according to the Confucian “leading by example” principle addressed by Yan Xuetong. Indeed, following the Chinese example, Africa might achieve prosperous economic development, as China did.

“China takes a people-oriented approach in pursuing practical cooperation with efficiency. With top priority given to the interests of Chinese and African peoples, China advances its cooperation with Africa to improve the well-being of Chinese and African peoples and deliver more benefits to them (...) Ultimately, it is for the peoples of China and Africa to judge the performance of China-Africa cooperation. No one could deny the remarkable achievements made in China-Africa cooperation, not with their assumption or imagination” (Xinhua, 2018).

The significance of the “two development narratives” (liǎng gè fāzhǎn gùshì 两个发展故事) used by Beijing, namely, the narrative of “Chinese development” (zhōngguó fāzhǎn 中国发展) and that of “Chinese aid and assistance to development” (zhōngguó rúhé bāngzhù fēizhōu fāzhǎn 中国如何帮助非洲发展), lies in their ability to effectively convey the Chinese stories, with a strong focus on the influential “social forces” (mínjiān lìliàng 民间力量) rather than governmental actors, and a clear preference for the “people-to-people” dimension of Chinese diplomacy (Graziani, 2021). The construction of “good” narratives of Sino-African cooperation is deemed to win the hearts and minds of the people and consolidate a Sino-African “friendship” that is rooted in the people (跟在人民 gēn zài rénmin), forgery enhancing friendship among the two sides (Graziani, 2021). As highlighted in [chapter 3](#), winning people’s hearts and minds (dé mínxīn 得民心) represents the primary source of legitimacy in the *Tianxia* system. Therefore, gaining popular consent is crucial in constructing relations with its partners, assuring China the role of a country morally committed to helping a friend, following the logic of relationality addressed by Qin Yaqing.

“Sincere friendship and equality is the basis of China-Africa friendship and cooperation. From the eight principles for foreign assistance put forward by Premier Zhou Enlai during his visit to Africa in the early days of New China to the principle of sincerity, actual results, amity and good faith and the principle of pursuing the greater good and shared interests proposed by President Xi Jinping, China-Africa relations have always been a paradigm of mutual respect, mutual understanding, and equality among big and small countries” (Xinhua, 2021).

In its second policy paper on “China’s politics in Africa”, published on the 15th anniversary of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China reaffirmed its commitment to building friendly and cooperative relations with Africa. China aims to achieve the “two centenary goals”, fulfilling its aspiration for national rejuvenation by implementing reforms, promoting governance based on the rule of law, and enforcing strict party discipline. Similarly, Africa is committed to its industrialisation and modernisation efforts, aiming to achieve the goals outlined in Agenda 2063 (a plan promoted by the African Union to transform the continent into a global powerhouse). Both China and Africa share the common goal of enhancing people’s well-being and happiness by fostering greater prosperity in their lives. Indeed, as the [theory](#)

[chapter](#) elucidates, people's well-being represents the precondition for the central authority's legitimacy; thus, carrying out African interests assures China's local population favour.

This shared aspiration for prosperity and development fosters a sense of unity and shared purpose in the audience (Xinhua, 2015). As explained in the document, China and Africa relations have reached “a new historical starting point” (xīn de lìshǐ qǐdiǎn 新的历史起点) thanks to their compatible strategic interests and win-win cooperation, which made “the Chinese and African people more determined to move forward side by side” (gèngjiā jiāndìng dì bìngjiān kuà bù qián xíng 更加坚定地并肩跨步前行). (Graziani, 2021)

“Win-win for mutual benefits and common development” is the distinct feature of China-Africa friendship and cooperation. From the construction of the Tazara Railway that China helped build by “tightening the belt” to the big family of Belt and Road cooperation participated by almost all African countries and the African Union (AU) Commission, China and Africa have worked to synergise development strategies, promote the growth of China-Africa cooperation from strength to strength, and contribute significantly to the development and revitalisation of both China and Africa” (Mission of the People's Republic of China to the African Union, 2021).

The Chinese storytelling of the Sino-African relationship emphasises the importance of cooperation (hézuò 合作), friendship (yǒuhǎo 友好/yǒuyì 友谊), mutuality (hùlì 互利) and joint development (gòngtóng fāzhǎn 共同发展). This narrative aims to strengthen the bond between the two sides while highlighting Beijing's stance against imperialism and colonialism and its support for the independence of African countries (Graziani, 2021). The focus is on South-South cooperation, with the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai's statement, during his tour of Africa in 1976, “poor helping the poor” as an example of China's high moral values. Following Yan's humane authority, having achieved significant economic and social development, China is now dedicated to helping its African friends (ibid).

“Working together to promote a just and equitable international order. We should carry forward the spirit of sticking together in times of adversity, practice true multilateralism, and unequivocally oppose vestiges of colonialism and hegemonism in all forms. We should firmly support each other in defending core interests, stand strong by the just calls

of developing countries, and work for a more just and equitable international order” (Xinhua, 2023).

The “new” Sino-African relations, as remarked by Beijing, are devoided from any ideological interests of the past, focusing instead on practical results, mutual benefits, and common development driven by China’s developmental objectives and new challenges, such as the increasing energy demand (ibid). This concept is expressed in the formula "upholding the greater good and pursuing shared interests" (zhèngquè yì lì guān 正确义利观) and it aligns with Qin’s third assumption on the cooperative process.

“The pursuit of the greater good and shared interests (正确义利观) should be aligned with the need to search for mutual benefit rather than being turned into a zero-sum game. China must provide assistance to poor countries within the limits of its resources. It is sometimes necessary to work for the greater good at the expense of self-interest and fulfil this obligation despite an unfavourable calculus in financial terms” (China Net, 2018).

Professor Zhang Ying explains that the Chinese term “yì 义” in “zhèngquè yì lì guān 正确义利观” refers to morality and justice, while “lì 利” means common interest. This exemplifies how the Chinese language can encode hidden meanings within its characters (Graziani, 2021). China’s approach to international relations prioritises morality, setting it apart from Western colonial powers that sought to impose their values on developing nations. China emphasises mutual benefits, win-win results, and the pursuit of mutual development, in contrast to Western powers’ prescriptive, intrusive approach (Agbebi, Virtanen, 2017). As Qin Yaqing highlights, International Relations must not be intended as a zero-sum game but rather as an evolving process whereby one may achieve mutual goals and benefits by cultivating the *guanxi*.

Sino-African relations also aim to fulfil mutual dreams, with the rhetoric of the Chinese dream (zhōngguó mèng 中国梦) closely linked to President Xi Jinping, who used the slogan for his presidential campaign. (Lin, Hart, Funairole, Lu, 2022). The emerging concept of the “African Dream” assumes critical significance in reinforcing the relationship and similarities between China and Africa, which ultimately perceive it as a promise of prosperous development and release from its condition of an undeveloped continent.

“More than 1.3 billion Chinese people are committed to realising the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and more than 1 billion African people are committed to realising the African dream of unity, self-improvement, development, and revitalisation. The Chinese and African people should strengthen solidarity and cooperation, strengthen mutual support and assistance, and strive to realise our respective dreams” (People’s Daily Online - China Communist Party News Network, 2015).

As Professor Julia Strauss elucidates, “mutual dreams” represent the collective aspiration for development and national rejuvenation. The globalisation era signifies the recognition of the growing economic complementarity between China and Africa (Graziani, 2021). Initially intended for the Chinese audience, the African dream has evolved from its original context, revealing disparities and asymmetries (Graziani, 2021). Thus, the narrative dimension is pivotal in international politics, serving as a tool for consensus-building through storytelling (Graziani, 2021). The Chinese government, with its unwavering commitment, strives to balance the global discourse and amplify the “voice of China” (zhōngguó shēngyīn 中国声音) through its discursive power (huà yǔ quán 话语权), thereby shaping international norms. Strategic narratives, a cornerstone of Chinese diplomacy, are not just narratives but powerful instruments. They disseminate “correct storytelling” in line with the Party’s ideology and promote crucial Chinese values and ideas, bolstering the Party’s legitimacy domestically while advancing its global interests (Graziani, 2021). Using the Chinese IR theoretical framework, it is possible to underscore precise narrative patterns, gaining an understanding of Beijing storytelling. It is clear how China’s cultural perspective is deeply rooted in the PRC’s diplomacy. Therefore, Chinese IR may set the guidelines to comprehend Beijing’s moves on the global stage.

4.2 Chinese diplomacy for African development

Chinese strategic narrative on Africa finds practical application in its economic engagement with the continent. By analysing quantitative data, it is possible to draw a clear picture of China's widespread presence in African countries, especially in the Sub-Saharan region. This data displays the Chinese commitment to fostering African development under mutuality and cooperation principles. Indeed, over the past twenty years, Sub-Saharan Africa has cultivated mutually advantageous economic connections with China, which has emerged as the region's primary trading partner, a significant creditor, and a major foreign direct investment (FDI) contributor. Indeed, approximately one-fifth of the region's total goods exports are directed to China (IMF, 2023).

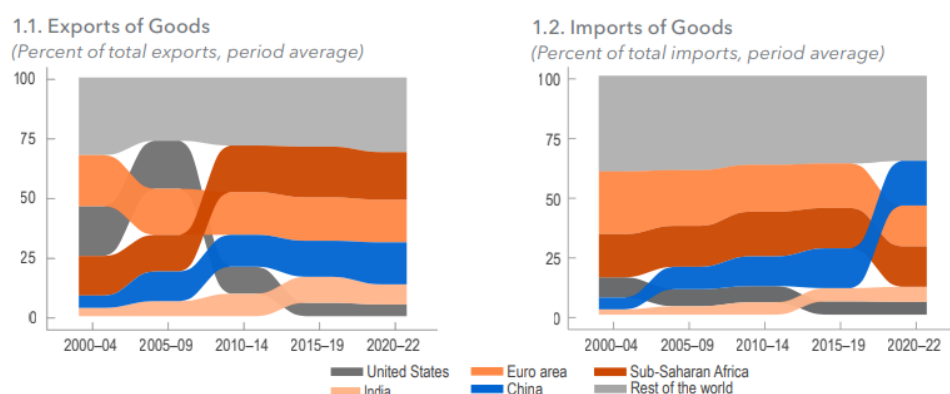


Figure 5. Sub-Saharan Africa: International Trade Partners, 2000–22 (IMF, 2023)

Approximately three-fifths of the region's exports to China are metals, mineral products, and fuel. Moreover, China has emerged as the primary source of imports for African countries, supplying them with manufactured goods and machinery. Since joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, China's rapid economic growth and demand for raw materials have driven a significant increase in African exports. Consequently, the trade has boosted the region's incomes primarily through higher export revenues (ibid).

Moreover, China has become a significant financial supporter of African governments since the early 2000s with the initiation of its “go out” policy. Chinese loans, mainly aimed at financing public infrastructure projects, have increased rapidly. Consequently, China's share of total SSA external public debt has risen from less than 2 per cent before 2005 to approximately 17 per cent in 2021. This flux of investments has provided African countries with an alternative source

of infrastructure financing, making China the largest bilateral official lender to countries in the region. However, the region's official debt owed to China is heavily concentrated, with five countries (Angola, Kenya, Zambia, Cameroon, and Nigeria) accounting for 55 per cent of the official bilateral debt to China, according to the World Bank International Debt Statistics (ibid).

Indeed, there is a correlation between bilateral trade prevalence and lending disbursements between China and the region's countries. Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in SSA has also increased significantly since 2006, representing approximately 23 per cent of annual FDI inflows to the region in 2021. However, when compared to investments from other regions, Chinese investments remain relatively small proportionally to the region's total FDI (ibid). Despite years of expansion, sub-Saharan Africa has experienced a reduction in Chinese investments and lending since 2017. At the 2021 China-Africa Cooperation Forum, China announced a reduction in financial support to Africa from \$60 billion to \$40 billion over three years. This reduction, partly attributed to a shift away from direct infrastructure financing towards trade credit, might be influenced by China's political priorities and the increased debt vulnerabilities of many African countries. Indeed, Chinese official total loan disbursements to SSA have sharply declined, now representing about one-eighth of their peak value of 1.2 per cent of the region's GDP in 2016 (ibid).

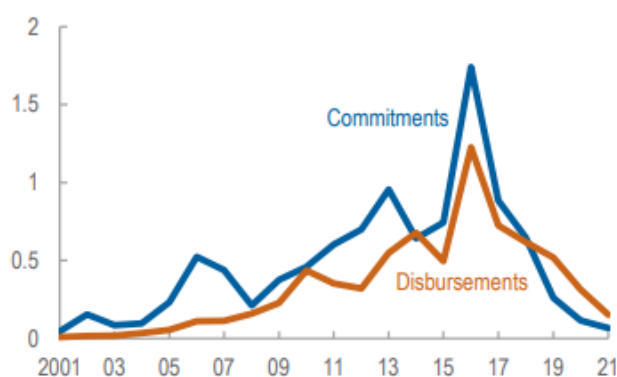


Figure 6. Lending from China to Sub-Saharan Africa, 2000–21- Percent of GDP (IMF, 2023)

The same can be noted for the total commitments to loans, which escalated from 0.2 per cent of the region's GDP in 2005 to a peak of 1.7 per cent in 2016. They have undergone a significant contraction to approximately 4 per cent of their maximum value. This decline is also visible in the gross revenues of Chinese companies engaged in construction activities in Africa, which

decreased by 30 per cent from the peak of \$53 billion in 2015, according to the China Africa Research Initiative (ibid).

China has been grappling with a deceleration in economic growth since the early 2010s. This slowdown stems from a combination of factors: a downturn in the real estate sector, demographic shifts due to an ageing population, and, more recently, difficulties in the global environment, including trade tensions, economic fragmentation, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite China's average annual growth rate reaching around 10 per cent in the 2000s, it grew to less than 8 per cent per year on average throughout the 2010s. Furthermore, China's growth has declined post-pandemic, with the latest projections from the IMF indicating an average annual growth rate of approximately 4 per cent over the next five years, accompanied by discernible trends towards decreased investments and adopting more environmentally friendly technologies (ibid).

Given the substantial economic interdependence between China and sub-Saharan Africa, a potential further slowdown in China's growth in the medium to long term is also affecting its economic activity in the region. The negative consequences would primarily manifest through trade connections, encompassing both a deceleration in export volumes and declines in commodity prices (ibid).

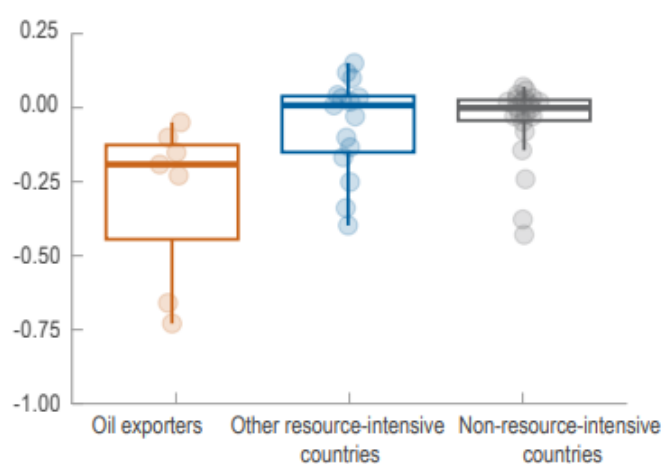


Figure 7. Sub-Saharan Africa: GDP Response to China's Growth Slowdown- Percent of GDP (IMF, 2023)

The decrease in China's real GDP growth rate translates into approximately a 0.25 percentage points reduction in the total GDP growth of sub-Saharan Africa within a year. This growth deficit escalates to over 0.5 percentage points for oil-exporting nations, while non-oil-exporting

countries experience an average growth shortfall of 0.2 percentage points. Consequently, nations with higher exports to China are more affected by the adverse effects of a slowdown in China. In addition, there might be potentially more intricate consequences, where the high geoeconomic fragmentation poses a significant risk to low-income countries, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa (ibid).

4.2.1 Trade

Trade is the core of the relationship between China and SSA. As China increasingly integrated into the global economy, its trade with Africa experienced significant growth. Before the 1990s, trade between China and SSA was limited. However, between 1999 and 2019, imports to China from SSA increased by more than seventy-fold, while exports from China to SSA expanded fifty-fold (Jenkins, 2022).

One critique of China's trade with SSA concerns its perceived "colonial" structure. According to UNCTADStat, over 60 per cent of Chinese imports from SSA between 2017 and 2019 consisted of primary products (PPs). Notably, Chinese imports from SSA predominantly revolve around resources and are concentrated in a few essential products, with fuels and minerals being the most significant. In recent years, approximately 85 per cent of China's imports from SSA regarded oil, minerals, and metals. The top six products imported by China from SSA during 2017–19 are petroleum, gold, base metal ores and concentrates, copper, iron ore and concentrates, and precious and semi-precious stones. Together, these six items constituted three-quarters of Chinese imports from the region (ibid).

Over time, export product diversification from Africa is expected as new trade connections facilitate the exploration of new markets in China. Indeed, China grants duty-free access to an expanding range of products from the least developed SSA countries, encompassing more than 4,700 tariff items by 2010. However, this initiative seems to have had little impact in fostering new exports, as over 90 per cent of exports to China in 2012 comprised products that China was already importing from the region a decade earlier (ibid).

In contrast to its imports, over 90 per cent of China's exports to SSA are manufactured goods. Capital goods have progressively constituted a more significant proportion of Chinese exports, doubling their share since the early 2000s, approximately a quarter of the total. Some of these exports are associated with the extractive sector, as Chinese oil and mining companies abroad import equipment and supplies from China. African producers find Chinese equipment

appealing due to its relatively low cost compared to Western imports and their suitability for small-scale production (ibid).

While China's trade with SSA is relatively limited, it is essential for the region. Trade with China has grown faster than with the rest of the world, allowing China to become the region's primary export market and source of imports. In recent years, nearly a fifth of SSA imports originated from China, while almost 17 per cent of exports were destined for the Chinese market (ibid).

4.2.2 Foreign direct investment

The increasing engagement of China in SSA is also evident in the rising presence of Chinese firms within the region. While Chinese FDI has undoubtedly experienced remarkable growth over the past decade, it is challenging to understand the extent of Chinese investment in the region (Jenkins, 2022).

Official estimates of China's FDI flows to SSA present many contradictions. One of the reasons is that the data from the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) only specifies the initial destination of Chinese FDI. Unfortunately, alternative sources of data on Chinese FDI present similar issues. Despite the data's limitations, they provide insight into the rapid expansion of China's FDI in SSA. According to the MOFCOM, the stock of foreign investment increased nearly ninety-fold between 2003 and 2019. Recent MOFCOM data suggests that SSA has represented less than 2 per cent of the global stock of Chinese outward investment. Overall, in 2018, China ranked as the fifth-largest investor in Africa, and by 2019, it accounted for over 6 per cent of the total FDI stock in SSA. Additionally, from 2018 to 2019, China contributed almost 12 per cent of new FDI inflows into the region (ibid).

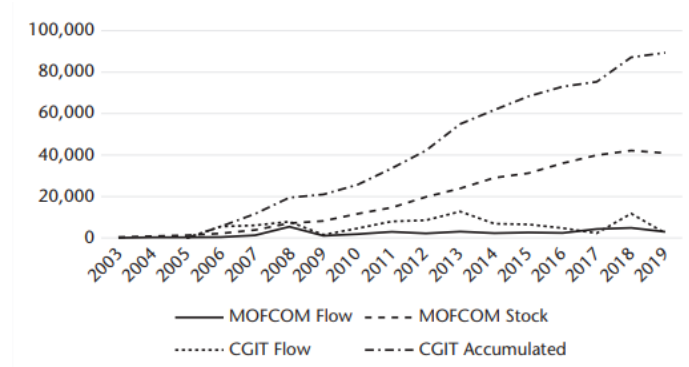


Figure 8. Chinese outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) stocks and flows in SSA, 2003–19 (Jenkins, 2022)

Chinese investment has reached forty-seven out of the forty-nine SSA countries. South Africa, the region's largest and most developed economy, is the primary destination for Chinese FDI in SSA. Following South Africa are the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Angola, Zambia, Ethiopia, and Nigeria. While the overall Chinese share of foreign investment stock in SSA remains relatively modest, it exceeds a fifth of total FDI in countries such as Zimbabwe, DRC, and Mauritius (ibid).

According to data from the China Global Investment Tracker, nearly two-thirds of Chinese investment in SSA between 2005 and June 2019 was in the oil, gas, and metals sectors. Official Chinese sources present a slightly lower estimate, with mining (including oil and gas extraction) accounting for 22.7 per cent of Chinese outward foreign direct investment in Africa by the end of 2018. This places mining as the second most significant sector after construction (32 per cent), but ahead of manufacturing (13 per cent) and finance (11 per cent) (ibid).

4.2.3 Contracted projects

Another side of Chinese engagement in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) manifests through overseas contracted projects that do not entail direct investment. Chinese involvement in constructing infrastructure such as roads, railways, dams, power stations, and public buildings across the region has been remarkably relevant. Official Chinese estimates indicate that the value of completed projects surged nearly twenty-fold between 2003 and 2019 (Jenkins, 2022).

China is the primary source of external financing for infrastructure development in Africa. Chinese firms contribute to over 60 per cent of the region's engineering, procurement, and construction activities among major international contractors. From 2005 to 2019, the region's most prominent markets for Chinese contractors were Angola, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya. Among these, three are significant oil exporters, while Ethiopia and Kenya undertook major rail projects funded by China. Together, these five countries accounted for almost half of the total value of completed Chinese projects in SSA over the specified period (ibid)

The China Global Investment Tracker indicates relatively fewer Chinese projects in extractive industries. Gas, coal, and oil collectively represent 8 per cent of the total value of contracts, while metals account for only 2 per cent of the total value. Consequently, all extractive industries combined represent around a tenth of the value of contracts announced between 2005 and 2020 (ibid).

Transport is the region's most significant sector in Chinese contracts, accounting for 40 per cent of the total value of contracts announced between 2005 and mid-2020. Rail projects stand out as the predominant type, constituting 40 per cent of the value of transport projects. Energy, the second most significant sector overall, primarily comprises hydropower projects, which account for over half of all energy contracts. This is noteworthy as it addresses local energy needs rather than solely focusing on resource exports to China. Finally, construction projects represent 11 per cent of the total value of contracts (ibid).

4.2.4 Chinese Loans and Aid

The Chinese government has committed to extending financial support to Africa. The most reliable recent data on Chinese lending to Africa is from CARI, which indicates a significant rise in annual Chinese lending commitments to SSA up to 2016, followed by a subsequent decline (Jenkins, 2022).

Angola is the primary recipient of Chinese loans in SSA, absorbing 30 per cent of all loans announced between 2000 and 2018. Angola, followed by Ethiopia, Zambia, Kenya, Sudan, and Nigeria, accounted for over 60 per cent of all lending to SSA during the specified period. From the perspective of SSA, the countries exhibiting the highest dependence on China in terms of the outstanding debt in proportion to GDP include Djibouti, the DRC, Angola, Zambia, and Mozambique, all with debt to GDP ratios exceeding 10 per cent in 2019 (ibid).

Chinese loans to SSA are predominantly concentrated in the transport and energy sectors. According to the CARI database, these sectors collectively absorbed 55 per cent of total lending between 2000 and 2018. Conversely, only a relatively small portion of Chinese loans has directly funded mining or oil and gas projects in SSA. Chinese finance in SSA is characterised by the widespread use of commodity-backed loans, also known as resources-for-infrastructure swaps, whose repayment is facilitated through future commodity exports to China. These loans, involving commodities such as oil, copper in the DRC, and diamonds in Zimbabwe, represent a significant portion of China's lending to Africa, accounting for over 40 per cent between 2004 and 2018 (ibid).

The terms of Chinese lending to SSA have drawn substantial criticism due to their conditions and the use of natural resources as repayment. Additionally, the lack of transparency in public debt due to the absence of systematic documentation by Chinese lenders has led to significant data gaps. Despite these challenges, according to the World Bank's International Debt Statistics

data, China offered some official loans on concessional terms, constituting less than 10 per cent of total bilateral loans received by SSA from China by the end of 2020. Moreover, countries in SSA facing debt distress account for approximately 40 per cent of the total public debt stock owed to China by the end of 2020 (ibid).

China has played a prominent role in recent debt restructuring and negotiations, particularly in the Debt Service Suspension Initiative, providing 63 per cent of suspensions in 2020 and 2021 while holding just 30 per cent of the claims. However, debt restructuring for some countries has been slow and challenging, primarily due to the diverse creditor base, including China, necessitating adaptation and coordination (ibid).

4.3 Under the same heaven: Connecting Asia to Africa

The paragraph above aimed to draw an objective picture of Chinese economic engagement in SSA. Having outlined the PRC interests in the SSA region and providing precise quantitative data, this section analyses the PRC's approach to SSA, particularly in light of the OBOR, and contextualises it within the framework of Chinese IRT.

One of the crucial aspects of China's commitment to Africa concerns what is commonly referred to as "aid". In the context of China's involvement in Africa, this term encompasses various forms such as "interest-free loans", "concessional loans", and "grants", representing a relevant factor within Chinese propaganda framed in the context of Chinese IR. It is essential to highlight that the Chinese approach to "aid" has faced several changes in recent decades, and quantifying the precise extent is challenging, given the frequent occurrences of debt cancellations on "zero-interest loans" that immediately transform that amount of money into a donation. According to the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), the Chinese entity tasked with overseeing the strategic direction of development cooperation, between 2013 and 2018, aid to Africa amounted to \$18.25 billion, constituting 45% of the total aid offered. While this figure is significant in absolute terms, it is relatively modest compared to gross national income, representing only 0.01%. For example, countries like the United Kingdom (0.13%), the United States (0.05%), and France (0.08%) have disbursed a more significant amount (Colarizi, 2022).

As highlighted in the first paragraph of the analysis, mainly referring to China's role envisioned by Zhao *Tianxia* system and Yan's Moral Realism theory, the PRC has stressed its moral commitment to provide aid to Africa, helping the continent in its development path, because of the shared colonial past. Following the logic of relationality addressed by Qin Yaqing's Relational theory, the partnership adheres to the rules of *guanxi*, creating relevant connections, fostering South-South cooperation, and pursuing mutual interests and benefits while acting morally by the friendship's relation.

China has committed to pursuing a common approach to global challenges in the last decade. Indeed, the white paper "China International Development in the New Era" delineates new objectives, including climate, humanitarian assistance, and health, stressing a new multilateral approach which aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the role of the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR), a global development strategy

adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 (ibid). The OBOR, which has been mentioned 43 times, assumes a crucial role within the new design proposed by Beijing for international cooperation, transitioning from its previous primarily commercial focus, highly criticised by the Western powers, to a global vision where quoting Seneca nations are “waves of the same sea, leaves of the same tree, flower of the same garden” (Zhao, 2020). The concept of a Community of Common Destiny (rénlèi mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ 人类命运共同体) is fundamental to the country’s current foreign policy and is often mentioned by Xi Jinping and his administration. This vision promotes a global perspective that addresses future economic, political, cultural, environmental, and security challenges and aims to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships among nations (Savina, 2023). In this scenario, Sino-African relations are pivotal to Beijing’s diplomatic strategy. As the [theory chapter](#) highlights, the importance of ensuring the consent of the people represents the top priority for an enlightened ruler, who, solely by meeting the population’s consent, will be a virtuous model and will be able to fulfil the ruler’s aspiration of unifying the entire world under the same heaven (yī tiānxià 一天下). This unity is not just political but also social and cultural, as a single family (tiānxià yījiā 天下一家) under the same heaven, as reported in paragraph 4.1 quoting President Xi Jinping’s keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (see Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the African Union, 2021, page 38). Indeed, family is one of the three levels indicated by Zhao Tinyang, and as he stressed, it represents the starting point for creating a functional system. Not pursuing the well-being of the community in government action (bù shànzhèng 不善政), not winning the hearts of the people but losing them (shī mínxīn 失民心), means decreeing the end of the ruler’s mandate (Fumian, 2019). These principles have been fundamental to every form of government over the centuries, serving as the basis of the intellectual and spiritual formation of the enlightened ruler (míngwáng 明王) and the government that is inspired by principles of humanity (réncèng 仁政) (ibid). This idea, central to the government’s narrative, has influenced and been influenced by academic discourse around Chinese IR. Indeed, it advocates for viewing the international space as a domain for harmonious coexistence, aspiring to a more profound ethical and moral regeneration of humanity (Savina, 2023). Thus, it is clear how the framework supporting this vision is intertwined with Chinese IRT, which has its roots in Chinese cultural tradition and is extended to Chinese diplomacy.

China has mostly tried to portray the OBOR as an inclusive project, contrasting with the exclusivity of American initiatives imposing compliance with so-called “universal values” on participating countries. Indeed, during China’s presidency of the UN Security Council in May 2021, the Communist leadership launched the Initiative on Partnership for African Development, aiming to channel international resources into the region for a “post-epidemic reconstruction” (Colarizi, 2022). In this sense, China has demonstrated a willingness to support Africa with medical supplies, vaccines, and a relatively steady flow of investments. However, railways and ports remained fundamental to the OBOR, with recent projects like the Addis Ababa-Djibouti, Mombasa-Nairobi, and Luau-Lobito lines showcasing China’s integration of railway construction with seaport development, vital for African trade (ibid). Chinese involvement in ports ensures Beijing’s control over global trade flows and supply chains, maintaining uncertainty about whether Chinese investments follow a precise political agenda. Since August 2021, goods have swiftly reached the technological hub of Chengdu-Chongqing in southwestern China by stopping in Singapore and then continuing to the port of Yangon. This is facilitated by a new railway originating from the Chinese city of Lincang, situated on the border with Myanmar (ibid). Notably, this new railway line, the first to directly link China to the Indian Ocean, reduces the transit time for goods from the Global South by twenty days. Indeed, infrastructures are the focus point of the Africa 2063 plan, promoted by the African Union to emancipate the region economically and politically. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB), every year, the continent faces an infrastructure deficit ranging from \$68 to \$108 billion. Port expansion projects have thus become fundamental to fostering Africa’s growth and development, finally fulfilling Beijing’s project of creating an international family under the same heaven and a community with a shared destiny while pursuing China’s interests (ibid).

According to Zhang Hongming, a researcher at the prestigious Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China’s engagement in Africa, besides expanding and safeguarding Chinese interests in the continent, contributes to redefining strategic objectives within Chinese diplomacy. Indeed, Africa is crucial to substantiating the global status of Beijing, as China is not solely a participant within the global context but rather an active actor that has been delineating a new world’s vision. Today, more than ever, South-South cooperation is a fundamental concept in Chinese foreign diplomacy, materialising itself through China’s economic engagement with its partner countries, such as in the case of SSA (ibid). The economic aspect must be placed alongside the PRC diplomatic strategy, particularly China’s relations with African leaders. However, the term

cooperation does not imply *ex aequo* conditions. Indeed, Beijing's perspective may be different. In the context of OBOR, as highlighted above in this paragraph, President Xi Jinping used the term *Tianxia* to describe the cooperation between China and African countries. However, it is essential to remark that the concept "under the same heaven", conversely to its translation, does not stretch towards inclusivity. As explained in the [theory chapter](#), the term *Tianxia* is a principle according to which an empire becomes universal because of its cultural and moral superiority that can be extended beyond its borders. Thus, historically, it is an inherently hierarchical concept that imposes a relationship of subjection, as the father-son relationship used by Qin Yaqing, and that finally aims at the political recognition of the Son of Heaven (tiānzǐ 天子). Between 2009 and 2018, 53 African leaders made about 222 official visits to China, often without reciprocal visits from their Chinese counterparts. In return, they were repaid through increased trade, investments, and financing. Some have interpreted Africa's zeal as a new form of "neo-imperial subjection", wherein Chinese superiority is measured by its economic and political influence (Colarizi, 2022). Diplomatic relations with African leaders show clearly how *guanxi* is intended in China. Relationships are anything but egalitarian; conversely, they are based on a precise hierarchy legitimated by the Confucian order, as Qin's relational theory stresses. China rigorously implements this order within its borders and tries to extend it globally. It proposes a new vision of international relations with Chinese characteristics, where the so-called Asian values are often employed to understand Beijing's strategies.

4.4 無為而無不為²: Chinese's non-interference principle in Sino-African relations

China's engagement with Africa can be traced back to the Ming dynasty when a Chinese community was already established in the Lamu archipelago, a hub for East-West trade. This historical connection, often referred to as the Silk Road, forms the framework of the narrative on cooperation between China and Africa, based on the principles of non-interference and mutuality, introduced by Zhou Enlai in 1955, which continue to shape China's bilateral relations with the continent (Masini, 2022).

China enhances its charm in Africa by promoting its development model and constructing infrastructure like roads, railways, and educational institutions in exchange for natural resources. Indeed, as the Chinese IR theories elucidated above stress, a leader or leading nation must secure the population's support through practical and moral actions, enhancing its strategic credibility and ensuring political legitimacy. Notably, China has been winning the hearts of young Africans since the 1950s, supporting the education of young Africans through various training programs and scholarship, involving, among others, the Jubilee Party in Kenya, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, and the African National Congress in South Africa (Colarizi, 2022). In South Sudan, where approximately 80% of Sudanese oil reserves are situated, China has devoted itself to creating historical parallels between the Chinese Communist Party and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), an anti-imperialist socialist movement. Even before South Sudan gained independence, China entrained numerous initiatives and exchanges, including workshops addressing poverty alleviation, party governance, public opinion management, and media administration. Between 2011 and 2017, Beijing offered over 4,100 scholarships to South Sudanese students and officials (ibid).

Africa's strategic importance to China is evident in the China-Africa Action Plan 2018-2021. This plan outlines China's commitment to hosting 60,000 African students annually, providing 50,000 government scholarships to public servants, and offering around 5,000 training opportunities for military professionals. The shift in focus from competition over primary sources to Africa's demographic profile and growing demand for goods and services highlights the evolving nature of the China-Africa relationship (ibid). The Party's International

² Doing nothing but achieving everything refers to one of the core principles of Daoism.

Department coordinates Chinese exchanges with liberation movements, maintaining relationships with all African political factions, including the opposition. This approach reflects China's adherence to non-interference in internal affairs. The PRC consistently portrays its involvement in Africa as positive, progressive, and rooted in enduring principles such as non-interference, mutual benefit, unconditional support, friendship, and reciprocal understanding (ibid). This includes supporting vulnerable regimes and leaders before their downfall, openly supporting presumed revolutionary groups, and maintaining connections with regimes criticised for their human rights records while advocating publicly for non-interference and mutual benefits principles. Indeed, China's discourse on Sino-African relations reflects the leadership's efforts to reaffirm credibility and influence with its audiences both in China and Africa and to respond globally to the neocolonial accusations. Therefore, China has emphasised the opportunities it offers to the developing countries of the Global South, highlighting the exceptional nature of its presence and role in Africa. Thus, from the Chinese perspective, a different, equally exceptionalist view of Sino-African relations and China's role in the continent has emerged, winning the hearts and minds of African leaders who appreciate China's cooperative approach, grounded in the principle of non-interference in internal affairs (ibid). As elucidated in the third paragraph of the [theory chapter](#), a leading state is required to build trust and confidence with other nations through consistent and credible actions, fostering its strategic credibility. Indeed, Yan asserts that international authority cannot be imposed on other states as it requires the voluntary acceptance of other nations. Thus, a leading state needs to win the hearts and minds of the people (dé mínxīn 得民心).

Within this context, Africa emerged as crucial for Chinese public diplomacy, marked by the widespread presence of Chinese state media, which play a pivotal role in conveying China's perspective on its involvement with Africa. Moreover, China has actively sought to shape the values and practices of African media through initiatives such as the Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation, established in 2014, and exchange programs for training African journalists. The focus is on aligning Chinese and African media, fostering cooperation as a counter-narrative in response to Western allegations, with the final objective of informing public opinion towards a deeper understanding of Sino-African relations and reinforcing the concept of Sino-African friendship (ibid). Indeed, by informing public opinion about the success of the Sino-African partnership, media coverage represents a prominent tool to win the hearts and minds of people, securing the populace's support as stressed by Chinese IR and thus legitimising China's presence in Africa. In this context, as highlighted in the analysis of

Beijing's strategic storytelling on Africa, narratives hold relevance in understanding Chinese foreign diplomacy being strategic narratives a prominent illustration of Beijing's external and internal endeavours, finally shedding light on how Sino-African relations are perceived within and beyond China's borders. The primary motivation for fostering political ties lies in sharing expertise while cultivating valuable relations with future generations of leaders, thereby injecting a positive perception of China. The concept of *guanxi* exemplifies this approach; the intricate web of interpersonal relationships addressed by Qin Yaqing is culturally determinant in China's approach to both the domestic and the foreign level. Indeed, to honour their friendship with Beijing, several African countries ended their diplomatic relations with Taiwan, including Gambia, Burkina Faso, and São Tomé, in 2016, formally recognising the People's Republic of China. Indeed, while it is true that Chinese investment does not demand explicit ideological adherence, alongside the recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong and Xinjiang, the Chinese government pose the cessation of relations with Taipei as a prerequisite for its economic involvement. In exchange for political support, Beijing often ignores the actions of allied African leaders. In this way, China has demonstrated greater adaptability, consistently aligning its economic interests with each country's social, economic, and political contexts. (Colarizi, 2022)

This sense of adaptability makes China's engagement significantly different from that of Western colonial powers, who eventually failed in their dialogue with the Global South. Chinese adaptability works as the Dao of water of Taoist Masters. The “wuwei 無爲” (inaction), recognised even by Confucius, consists of pure action. It means refraining from any aggressive, direct, intentional, interventionist action, letting the absolute efficacy of the Dao's invisible power (Dé 德 morality) to act (Cheng, 2000). China has understood its position in the global context by cultivating an intricate web of precious relations, according to Qin's logic of relationality, acting in virtue of an alleged cultural empire exemplified by Zhao's *Tianxia*'s concept and ultimately embracing Yan's humane authority, filling the void left by Western powers. China has efficiently connected with African leaders while concretely carrying out Chinese interests. In this context, Chinese IR theories provide a theoretical framework that may account for consistent explanations of China's actions in the continent as a guide to understanding Chinese diplomacy. Therefore, critical concepts such as the *Tianxia* system, *guanxi* (relationship), and *morality* represent important notions of understanding and analysing China's *wuwei* in the region.

5. Conclusion

This thesis aims to elucidate the unique relationship between Chinese IR schools and Chinese foreign diplomacy by analysing Sino-African relations in light of Chinese IR theories. To answer the research question "*How is the construction of the Chinese IR paradigm connected to Chinese foreign diplomacy?*" this thesis sought to unravel the intricate interplay between Chinese IR theories and the Chinese government's diplomatic manoeuvres, revealing their historical, cultural, and philosophical underpinnings. The core of this investigation lies in the fusion of traditional Chinese political philosophy with contemporary diplomatic discourse. Drawing from well-known Confucian-Mencian ideas about *Tianxia* and cosmological thinking, Chinese IR theories reflect the historical ethos, finally working as a blueprint for contemporary foreign policy. As highlighted, distinctive concepts such as "harmony" and "peaceful rise" that find practical application in contemporary Chinese foreign diplomacy are retrieved from the Chinese cultural framework, aiming at a world order based on mutual respect and coexistence (Acharya, 2019).

Considering this convergence of theory and policy, questions regarding the extent to which Chinese IR theories serve as a legitimising tool for the current regime's hegemonic aspirations remain relevant. The linkage between theory building and power finds parallels in other contexts, notably in the United States International Relations community, where a constant exchange exists between policy and academia. Chinese IR theories, while subject to criticism for potentially legitimising the nation's regime, are not an isolated case. Indeed, numerous Western IR theories, like the Hegemonic Stability Theory, exemplify this trend by offering justifications for the hegemony of nations like Britain and the United States. For example, concepts like the "Liberal World Order" have legitimised the role of the United States and the West's dominance on the global stage. However, a crucial distinction lies in how the Chinese IR theory's emergence coincides with China's rise. Conversely, western legitimisation happened when the hegemon was already in charge or declining (ibid).

Ultimately, the juxtaposition of Chinese and Western IR theories underscores the diverse approaches to global governance, with Chinese theories advocating for moral norms, dialogue, and unity over power politics and competition (ibid). Moreover, the emergence of Chinese IR theories carries significant implications globally. As China assumes a more prominent role in shaping global governance structures, the dialogue between Chinese and Western IR theories becomes increasingly urgent. Indeed, Chinese IR may represent a fundamental tool for

analysing future global scenarios and interpreting China's moves on the world stage. However, while Chinese IR theories offer valuable contributions to the discourse on global governance, it is crucial to acknowledge the nexus between knowledge and power to avoid instrumental interpretations of global events. Indeed, as in the case of Sino-African relations, where the instrumentalisation of certain cultural aspects and theoretical concepts is finalised to legitimise China's position, it is also essential to recognise that the formulation of such concepts and, therefore, theories constructions offer the possibility for different narratives. Indeed, as China's position is becoming more and more relevant, especially in the dialogue with the Global South, it is crucial to include different points of view from the Western one in the International Relations discourse. The exceptionalism in Chinese IR reveals something substantially different from the ordinary. Thus, it deserves to be studied and understood. A more comprehensive and holistic view of International Relations, considering all the actors' voices and distinctive characteristics, may be crucial for a fairer and more sustainable world order.

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