

Advancing China's Cultural Influence in Africa: Innovative Approaches in Cross-Cultural Communication

Zhang Tingyue

Xi'an Fanyi University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China

Keywords: China-Africa cross-cultural communication, cultural differences, cultural soft power, educational cooperation

Abstract: This study focuses on China's efforts to enhance its soft power through cultural communication with Africa, thoroughly exploring innovative pathways and the challenges they entail. In the context of globalization, cultural soft power has become a key instrument for international competition and cooperation. China actively promotes cultural exchange with Africa through various channels, including Confucius Institutes, the export of cultural products, and digital communication platforms. However, factors such as cultural differences, limited international discourse power, and restricted communication channels continue to constrain the influence of Chinese culture in Africa. Building on these practical issues, this paper proposes strategies such as establishing a multilingual communication framework, advancing digital innovation, and deepening grassroots cultural interactions to further strengthen China's cultural influence and discourse power in Africa.

China and Africa are both cradle lands of human civilization. Despite the vast geographical distance between them and the notable cultural differences that exist, civilizational exchange remains a bridge and bond in China-Africa relations. In terms of China's cross-cultural communication studies, research in this field remains limited, fragmented, and lacks systematic, theoretical exploration.^[1] This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for China's cross-cultural communication efforts with Africa. Consequently, how to reduce cultural barriers and promote mutual understanding through effective cross-cultural communication has become an urgent issue for academics and policymakers alike.

In the context of rapid globalization and digitalization, cross-cultural communication has become a crucial means for countries to deepen cooperation and enhance soft power. As the world's largest developing country, China is playing an increasingly significant role on the global stage. Meanwhile, the African continent, as a key driver of global economic growth, has seen its ties with China deepen in recent years. Since the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China-Africa relations have made substantial progress across various fields, including politics, economics, and culture. Against this backdrop, cross-cultural communication has become not only a core component of China's diplomatic strategy but also a fundamental pillar for the sustainable development of China-Africa relations.

1. Current State and Characteristics of China-Africa Cross-Cultural Exchange

China-Africa cultural exchange is advancing at an unprecedented pace and scale, with distinctive features such as deeper educational cooperation, diverse cultural activities, vibrant grassroots exchanges, joint cultural heritage preservation efforts, strengthened youth exchanges, harmonious development of digital education, comprehensive expansion of people-to-people interactions, enhanced cooperation mechanisms, and an expanded dialogue between civilizations. These mechanisms extend beyond traditional arts and educational spheres, actively encompassing digital media and modern technology, thereby reflecting the breadth and contemporary relevance of China-Africa cooperation.

Through initiatives like Confucius Institutes and the “Luban Workshop” programs, the linguistic and vocational training needs between China and Africa have been effectively addressed, fostering extensive educational cooperation.^[2] Additionally, events such as the China-Africa International Film Festival, China-Africa Art Exhibitions, and the China-Africa Art Festival enrich the forms of cultural interaction, highlighting the diversity and dynamism of these exchanges. Youth-oriented projects, such as the China-Africa Youth Gala and the China-Africa Youth Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum, further cultivate mutual understanding and friendship among the new generation.

In the digital education sphere, China-Africa collaboration focuses on enhancing educational quality and building digital literacy. For example, the establishment of the China-Africa Digital Education Regional Cooperation Center helps improve digital competencies among teachers and education administrators in African countries, facilitating the widespread adoption and application of digital education. Through comprehensive cultural exchange and deepening dialogues between civilizations, China-Africa cultural exchange demonstrates renewed momentum and broad prospects. In addressing global challenges, China and Africa exhibit a spirit of solidarity and mutual support, further strengthening the depth and mutual trust within their relationship. This extensive and profound cross-cultural interaction is poised to drive the development of global South-South cooperation and cultural exchange.

2. Challenges and Issues in China-Africa Cross-Cultural Exchange

With the deepening of globalization, exchanges between different cultures are becoming increasingly frequent. Although significant progress has been made in China-Africa cross-cultural communication in recent years, various challenges persist in the practical implementation of these efforts. Against the backdrop of intensified global cultural competition, these challenges hinder deeper mutual understanding and cultural integration between China and Africa. The main challenges in China-Africa cross-cultural exchange are as follows:

(1) Cultural Differences

As two distinct cultural systems, China and Africa exhibit substantial differences in cultural core, characteristics, and expressions. In cross-cultural communication between China and Africa, narrowing cultural gaps and reinforcing shared values are essential. For instance, sub-Saharan Africa, known for its low-context culture, often relies on direct verbal communication, where the literal meaning of words is emphasized in interactions. In contrast, China, as a high-context culture, favors indirect and nuanced expression. Additionally, most African nations display pronounced linguistic diversity, with Hausa and Swahili serving as common languages across ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa, playing an irreplaceable role in the region's integration.^[3] Despite recent advances in the promotion of Chinese language education in Africa, its influence remains limited compared to English, French, and Arabic. Instruction in African Confucius Institutes typically uses English or French as a medium, which somewhat restricts the depth and breadth of cultural

communication. Successful China-Africa cooperation hinges on the two sides' ability to navigate differences in culture, language, traditions, customs, social norms, and interaction styles, thereby achieving genuine adaptation and mutual learning in cross-cultural exchanges. This is crucial for fostering understanding and maximizing the bridge-building role of cultural and civilizational exchanges.

(2) Limited Discourse Power

Western countries hold a dominant position in global communication frameworks, leveraging their vast media resources and influence over global political, economic, and cultural discourse. Around 80% of international news coverage on Africa originates from outside the continent. Although China's influence in global media has grown, it has yet to reach the prominence enjoyed by Western developed nations, particularly in international discourse. Chinese-language media accounts for only about 4% of global information, underscoring the challenges faced. In recent years, China's Hausa-language broadcasts have been revamped, with the creation of websites and international social media accounts, but these efforts still fall short of the reach and impact of Western media outlets.^[4] Meanwhile, African nations occupy an even weaker position within the international communication system, constrained by economic, technological, and resource limitations, rendering them vulnerable to Western media's dominant narratives. This imbalance exacerbates the passive role of African countries in global discourse, limiting the visibility and acknowledgment of their authentic voices and cultural narratives on the international stage.

(3) Insufficient Influence of International Communication

International communication, as the most direct and effective means of inter-state exchange, is both a key avenue for shaping a country's image and an important measure of national soft power. In the African cultural context, China faces challenges in building discourse power, which extends beyond recognition of cultural messaging to encompass limitations in communication methods. While China's infrastructure development and economic investments in Africa are widely recognized, the promotion of Chinese culture has not achieved the same depth. This is partly due to cultural differences between China and Africa and partly due to China's reliance on official channels for cultural communication, which often lacks an organic integration with local African culture and community needs. For example, while Confucius Institutes provide a platform for language learning, they focus primarily on language instruction, sometimes overlooking diversity and innovation in cultural communication, thereby missing opportunities to engage African audiences, especially the youth.^[5]

China's cultural outreach to Africa remains relatively limited in terms of channels, primarily relying on government-led media and institutions like Confucius Institutes and China Global Television Network (CGTN). This top-down approach struggles to meet the needs of African audiences, particularly younger generations, who increasingly prefer flexible and diverse sources of information, such as social media and the internet. In contrast, Western nations leverage a wide array of communication forms, including films, music, social media, and creative industries, which have successfully captured the attention of large African audiences and strengthened their cultural presence. To effectively promote Chinese culture in Africa, China needs to adopt more flexible and diversified communication channels and content while actively exploring areas of resonance with local African cultures, thereby enhancing cultural adaptability and inclusivity.

3. Future Directions and Pathways

Whenever two cultures interact, there is often a tendency to judge the other through one's own cultural values. This unconscious ethnocentricity can create challenges, but it also provides opportunities for improvement within the framework of deepening global and regional cooperation.

Despite the current challenges, there remains substantial room for enhancing China-Africa cross-cultural communication. Future efforts should address existing shortcomings, seek diversified communication methods, strengthen discourse power, enhance international communication capabilities, and foster mutual understanding and recognition between China and Africa. Specific directions and pathways for advancing China-Africa cross-cultural communication are as follows:

(1) Emphasizing the Role of Language

To overcome language barriers in cross-cultural communication, China must establish a more multilingual communication system. Africa's linguistic diversity makes it difficult to rely solely on English or French for outreach. China can collaborate with African language experts to train more talent proficient in local languages, aiming to eliminate linguistic obstacles in China-Africa exchanges. By developing cultural outreach projects tailored to local languages, China can ensure that its messaging aligns with Africa's cultural background and linguistic preferences. Creating and publishing cultural content in major African languages, such as Swahili, Arabic, and Hausa, would make China's cultural exports more relatable, expansive, and effective. With rising internet penetration and social media growth in Africa, digital platforms have become key to cultural outreach. China should actively leverage these emerging platforms to produce content that resonates with African youth in the digital age.

(2) Enhancing Cultural Soft Power

Expanding the educational content of Confucius Institutes through interactive online and offline learning would foster a broader understanding of China's culture. Adding more courses on African cultures, history, and topics of mutual interest could deepen the relevance and appeal of these programs. Confucius Institutes could further integrate into African education systems by partnering with local schools and universities to implement two-way exchange programs, fostering deeper academic collaboration. Through increased academic exchanges and research partnerships, China-Africa educational interactions can become more robust, promoting mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's cultures.

As internet access and social media continue to grow in Africa, digital platforms have become essential for cultural dissemination. China should harness these platforms to create culturally engaging products for African youth. For example, short video platforms like TikTok, which have quickly gained popularity in Africa, could be used to share content on Chinese culture, history, tourism, and modern life. Additionally, online education platforms can further popularize Chinese language and cultural studies, broadening China's cultural influence. Enhancing cultural soft power requires a commitment not only to diverse communication methods but also to enriching the quality and variety of content. China can expand its influence in Africa by investing in cultural products such as films, TV series, music, and literature. Co-producing films or documentaries showcasing China-Africa cultural stories and lifestyles can help bridge cultural distances and bring Chinese and African communities closer.

(3) Exploring New Cultural Communication Pathways

With the progression of global digitalization, cultural communication is no longer confined to traditional media, with new methods constantly emerging. Establishing online platforms, apps, and other tools to promote Chinese content tailored to African cultural contexts is an effective strategy. For instance, offering free Chinese language learning tools, e-books, and culturally-themed games through mobile applications could facilitate engagement. Additionally, employing technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) to showcase Chinese cultural landmarks and historical sites could increase the interactivity and immersive quality of cultural exchange with African audiences.

Tourism serves not only as an important economic sector but also as a significant channel for cross-cultural exchange. By collaborating with African countries to develop tourism projects, China

can enhance its cultural outreach and strengthen grassroots exchanges, bringing the two cultures closer. Encouraging more Chinese tourists to visit Africa to learn about local culture and history can foster respect and understanding for African cultures. Likewise, attracting African tourists to China to experience Chinese history and modern developments promotes mutual appreciation. This bidirectional cultural exchange is poised to bring about deeper interaction and integration in China-Africa relations.

4. Conclusion

Through analyzing the current state, challenges, and future pathways of China-Africa cross-cultural communication, it is evident that there is vast potential for growth in China-Africa cultural exchange. Although cultural differences, limited discourse power, and challenges in international communication present obstacles, strengthening discourse power, enhancing communication capacities, deepening educational cooperation, and exploring innovative communication approaches can infuse new vitality into China-Africa relations. Within the context of globalization, cultural exchanges between China and Africa can not only boost economic cooperation but also deepen mutual understanding and recognition, laying a more solid foundation for the future of China-Africa relations.

References

- [1] Wei Baige. *Practical Exploration of China's Cross-Cultural Communication with Africa from the Perspective of Cultural Identity Theory* [J/OL]. *West Asia and Africa*, 2024, (02): 145-170 + 176 [2024-09-20].
- [2] Li Yujie. *Multiple Perspectives on China-Africa Educational Exchanges and Cooperation* [J]. *China Journal of African Studies*, 2021, 2(04): 76-98 + 146-147.
- [3] Yang Li. *The Role of Swahili in the Construction of African Nation-States* [J]. *Journal of Tianjin Foreign Studies University*, 2018, 25(01): 111-119.
- [4] Yang Mengdie. *Analysis of China's Hausa-language Broadcasting and Its Soft Power Development in Africa* [J]. *Journal of Communication Studies*, 2018, 2(17): 29-30.
- [5] Chen Jing. *Research on Strategies for Confucius Institutes in Africa to Spread Chinese Culture in the Context of New Media* [J]. *Journal of Heihe University*, 2024, 15(04): 13-15.