

China's Projection of Soft Power in terms of Constructive
Journalism:
A Media Content Analysis of Constructive News Coverage of South
Africa by *China Daily* and *South China Morning Post*
in 2015 and 2018

Franki Jenkins¹

Abstract: China is an increasingly major player in the latest global economic configuration. As a formerly developing nation, China has the potential to view the world through a lens distinctive from current Western hegemonies in its news media and soft power strategies. China has already invested heavily in the African continent and South Africa specifically, including in its news media. Some research has suggested that non-Western, non-democratic countries might have a different approach to international news coverage, including more positive and constructive coverage that diverges from Western news coverage (which is often seen as unnuanced and unequal). A content analysis of Chinese print news media thus examined if Chinese news media's construction of South African reality differs from previous Western social constructions. The research analysed *China Daily*, a newspaper closely affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party, as well as *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, an independent, privately-owned publication from Hong Kong. It investigated whether these papers use constructive journalism to cover South Africa, and how their coverage diverged and overlapped. The research found that there are observable differences on an ontological scale, and that both papers have different foci of interest and affective slant which diverge from Western news sources. However, similar to Western sources, both papers are largely not constructive on topics relating to South Africa, and are overall disinterested in local events in South Africa, reproducing the same inequalities in news reportage that exist with the current global hegemonic order.

The global economic order is undergoing an ontological transformation. By 2050, it is projected that China and India will be the top global economies by GDP, followed by the US, Indonesia, and Brazil (Hawksworth, Audino, and Clarry 2017, 4). China's global economic influence is growing, notably in Africa, where it has become the continent's largest trade partner. Within Africa, South Africa stands as China's largest trade partner (Kynge 2018), and as the second largest receiver of Chinese overseas direct investments (ODIs) (Chen, Dollar, and Tang 2016, 12).

An increasingly imperative facet of international foreign policy is to compete in a "globalising marketplace for ideas" that is dominated by the USA (Thussu 2016, 34), and as such China is also incorporating soft power strategies on the continent, which include sharing its worldview as news

in English as part of its so-called Going Out Campaign (Zhang 2016). It is estimated that China spent nearly \$9 billion on its international broadcasting and news between 2009 and 2010 (Khalatil 2017), including direct investments into the South African television producer TopTV (renamed StarSat), and collaboration with South Africa's Bua News Agency to produce content. Moreover, China trains 1000 African media practitioners per year based on journalistic norms quite different to the liberal-democratic tradition, instead adopting a "more persuasive and generally positive tone" favouring government perspectives, which is more critical of "Western involvement in Africa" (Khalatil 2017) and which "promises to present Africa in a more positive light than the stereotypical representations of the continent that have often historically characterised Western coverage" (Paterson et al. 2018, 3). These stereotypical representations might include a focus on negative themes such as deviance, crisis or conflict (Golan 2008, 53), significantly lower coverage than Western nations (Wanta et al. 2004, 370), or less thematically diverse and nuanced coverage than for example Western Europe, which could have more news on culture and values (Beaudoin and Thorston 2001, 100). China's growing economic power, its self-positioning as a fellow "third world country" that is up against "imperialist" "first world" nations (Ran 2016, 48), and its alternative model of international news reporting could signify a gradual shift in epistemology, which could be traced empirically.

In light of this epistemological shift, and given South Africa's economic importance to China on the continent, the primary question of this article explores whether China's construction of South African reality in its print news media differs from previous Western social constructions. In order to do so, the paper studies news items from *China Daily*, the largest Chinese state-owned, international newspaper (Zhang and Matingwina 2016, 25) and the only daily newspaper from China in English language (Lai 2019, 83). Additionally, it studies news from *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), a newspaper registered in Hong Kong which, prior to 2020, was allegedly not beholden to Chinese media censorship. Di Salvo and Negro describe SCMP as "liberal traditional media" (Di Salvo and Negro 2016, 809) and write that Hong Kong press practice, "[is] historically much more liberal and independent from the Chinese Mainland one" (Di Salvo and Negro 2016, 817). Since being acquired by the Chinese company Alibaba in 2016, the newspaper's mission is to "Lead the global conversation about China" (South China Morning Post 2018), and has seen circulation more than tripling (Der Spiegel 2018).

As a secondary question, then, this paper asks how two Chinese newspapers write about South Africa, and given a relative lack of media analysis literature describing more than one news source by China, it seeks to add complexity to the notion of "Chinese news" by asking how SCMP and *China Daily's* coverage diverges and overlaps.

The idea of "development" journalism was popularised by the former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew's "Lee Thesis", which argued that certain Asian economies were thriving due to distinctly Asian models of development that prioritise economic growth and social cohesion (Ismail 2013; Sen 2001). "Asian values" have similarly been described in research on Asian news media, particularly trends such as "harmonious" (non-confrontational) and "supportiveness" (of national leadership) within Asian countries that do not have press freedom (Massey and Chang 2002, 988). Zhang and Matingwina apply a similar concept to China, suggesting that Chinese news media employ "constructive" journalism that is solutions-oriented (Zhang and Matingwina 2016, 28). Following this claim, and in order to better understand a potential epistemological shift in news on the African continent, this paper asks whether SCMP and *China Daily* use constructive journalism to cover South Africa.

To proceed with its central and supporting questions, this article relies on an understanding of constructivist journalism based on the principles of the Constructive Institute, which was founded by the former Executive Director of News at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, and Founder and Director of the Constructive Institute, Ulrik Haagerup. Wasserman (in Zhang and Matingwina 2016, 24) associates constructive journalism with development journalism. However, Haagerup's constructive journalism is from a Scandinavian perspective and, unlike development journalism which emphasises developing nations and regional differences, constructive journalism is presented as a global style of journalism to combat "increasing tabloidization, sensationalism and negativity bias of the news media today" which the Constructive Institute's website holds "is more interested in entertaining and creating controversies than informing the citizenship" (Constructive Institute, n.d.). Yanqiu Zhang (director of the Africa Communication Research Centre at the Communication University of China) uses this theory to give background and validation to China's "going out" strategy globally - and specifically in Africa via its news media" (Zhang 2014, 9), and this research thus also uses this international framework for its analysis. Constructive journalism emphasises journalism's "democratic" function. While it would be challenging to apply to Chinese news on China, due to China's internal censorship system of journalism that requires relevant officials, but not all citizens, to be aware of controversial issues (Lin 2010, 278), it can arguably still be applied to China's reporting on a foreign country where domestic issues are much less likely to be involved.

This research thus organises news items in the following three categories, Constructive, Neutral, and Negative:

Constructive	Neutral	Negative
Critical and balanced, non-sensational, "forward-looking and future-oriented," "facilitating well-informed debate," and not divisive.	Does not offer analysis (such as an announcement of events, headline news blurbs, facts without comment, results of sports events, summaries of the findings of a census or a report stated as-is), or on a very narrow topic (such as cooking or the training routine of a sports person).	Does not conform to constructive guidelines by being divisive, promoting a specific agenda (such as of one company or country), obscuring critical viewpoints or "advocating one solution over another."

The next section will describe the methodology of content analysis used to explore these research questions, outlining the particular parameters coded for in the research. The second section explores the low intensity with which South Africa was covered by the two daily newspapers, as well as the predominantly Chinese geographical focus in articles. The third section looks into the thematic trajectories pursued by both papers, identifying different thematic foci. The fourth section delves into what readers might learn about South Africa by reading these papers, analysing the low importance given to South Africa within each article, as well as the different affective slants, which could trigger positive or negative effects in readers. The final section outlines the findings on constructive journalism, and finds that neither paper can be termed constructive, even if coverage overall has a more positive slant than has come to be expected from coverage on an African nation.

Methodology

To understand whether China's construction of South African reality differs from previous Western social constructions, the research made use of content analysis on two Chinese daily news publications. Content analysis "makes replicable and valid inferences on the basis of data derived from text or images" (Krippendorff 1982, 18) via "the systematic counting, assessing, and interpreting of the form and substance of communication" (Manheim and Rich 1995, 184). The unit of analysis in this study are print news articles retrieved from the LexisNexis database using the search term "South Africa" for the one whole year of 2018 (1 January - 31 December 2018). This research was preoccupied with understanding *SCMP* and *China Daily*'s specific journalistic styles, and thus focused on news items written by their own staff reporters or editors, excluding content created by news agencies.

The research focused on English-language dailies. *China Daily* is the only English-language daily available in mainland China (by the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China) and *SCMP* is the most prestigious English-language daily available in China, it is founded and circulated in Hong Kong SAR. While articles written in Traditional or Simplified Chinese would arguably offer a deeper insight into local coverage, the English language, due to its global reach, offers a more international perspective. Both papers are still read by local elites (including students), and they are also read both by foreigners (residing in China, or observing events in China from abroad), and media professionals based outside of China, in order to better understand local coverage and events. This provides a material opportunity to explore a transnational forum between China and the rest of the world. It shows not only what the editorial staff of the respective newspapers wish to convey to local as well as international readers, but also, in the case of *China Daily*, the image that the Chinese Communist Party is conveying to the world - in the words of Zhou Shuchun, the publisher and editor-in-chief of *China Daily*, the newspaper "play[s] a role in bridging China and the world" (China Daily 2018).

In total, the dataset collected and analysed 452 news items from the two newspapers in 2018. The articles were coded along the parameters of Domesticity, Degree of Centrality, Framing of Actions, Sub-frame, Sub-sub-frame, Evaluation, and Constructive Evaluation. An explanation for each parameter is outlined in more detail alongside its respective finding.

Krippendorff describes media content analysis as "probably the most widespread of use of content analysis," often "motivated feeling that journalistic standards are inadequately applied. For example, concerns for fairness are implied... the imbalance in the favorable and unfavorable treatment of an issue, public figure, or foreign country" (Krippendorff 1989, 404). While this systematic treatment of a large number of news items allows for substantial quantitative findings that an "unaided understanding a text" (Krippendorff 1989, 405) would not allow, the definition of categories into specific or diametric groups, and the subsequent human researcher's distinction between them while coding news items remains equivocal. For that reason, a second reviewer randomly checked articles and their corresponding coding throughout the coding process to limit bias, and to ensure logical consistency was applied to definitions. In cases where articles covered more than one category (for example, if it was unclear whether a news item was about politics, or economics), both were counted in the coding process.

Understanding the above limitations, and using this unique set of empirical data, this paper will apply both qualitative and quantitative analysis to better understand how the two newspapers are covering South Africa, and how their coverage compares.

Limited, Natiocentric Coverage of China's Largest Trade Partner in Africa

This section outlines the extent to which South Africa was covered by *SCMP* and *China Daily* in 2018. It reveals that Chinese coverage of South Africa is sparse and natiocentric (that is, not vested in South African internal affairs).

To start a conversation about coverage of South Africa, we can turn to the sample total. For the search term "South Africa" in 2018, the sample totals 293 news items in *China Daily*, and 159 for *SCMP*. *China Daily*'s higher figure totals less than 1 news item per day. As Wanta et al. (2004, 370) and Di Salvo and Negro (2016) found in their research on Western global news publications, this research concludes that South Africa has low visibility in both these Chinese papers, in spite of its economic importance to China on the African continent.

Based on coverage by local media outlets in South Africa, the research identified key domestic news themes for the year. It is notable that none of these topics were covered by *China Daily*, while several of them were covered by *SCMP* (specifically, the Cape Town drought, corruption charges against former South African President Zuma, internal land expropriation, and former US President Trump's comments on that matter). Thus, to a certain extent, *SCMP*, while largely focusing on softer topics such as entertainment and sports, follows South African events and agendas more closely, while *China Daily* is markedly more interested in promoting a Chinese government agenda, or events in which the Chinese government is directly involved.

Apart from the difference in agenda-setting, the writing style between the papers diverges - *SCMP*'s editorial style is accessible, the language used in *China Daily* is more formal and stilted. While Ran holds that China's communication strategies after the Cultural Revolution tried to pander to wider audiences by pursuing more accessible topics, a formal writing style could be a barrier to gaining a popular readership (Ran 2016, 49) and by extension influence.

Sreberny-Mohammadi, following a global study by UNESCO and the International Association for Mass Communication Research in 1976, used the notions of "foreign news abroad" and "home news abroad" - the latter signifying "international" events that are connected to domestic issues, either directly by the approach of the article (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1984, 121).

Arguably, "pure foreign news" that does not link news events from abroad to the home country can show a cosmopolitan leaning within a newspaper and readership, but can also alienate readers by offering no local reference point to encourage empathy or understanding. Similarly, a consistent coverage only of foreign news with links to domestic issues can be termed "nation-centric coverage" that could position the foreign country as having no value if not connected to domestic affairs (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1984, 123). Previous research on *China Daily*'s African coverage found that the paper focuses predominantly on "China, BRICS, Africa" (Zhang, Wasserman, and Mano 2016, 6) To bring this theory into the context of this article, the research coded for "external" and "domesticated" news to understand whether Chinese news media treated South Africa as a "distant other" or as a country that could influence domestic events. The four categories used are as follow:

South Africa	China	Global	Third country
About events occurring in South Africa. For example, an article about a BRICS summit that takes place in Durban.	The news story which mentioned South Africa took place in China, linking South Africa to domestic issues or bringing it closer to China by other means, such as an article about succulent enthusiasts in China that first learned about these plants in South Africa.	About international events with no links to a specific country. For example, an article on global market volatility.	From the perspective of a third country (such as Kenya, or the UK). Describe South African events in terms of how they affected the third country. For example, South African jockeys in the UK, or the South African president meets with Xi Jinping in Kenya.

The analysis found that both publications primarily frame South Africa as an actor in its relation to China and/or Hong Kong (52% of articles in *China Daily*, and 65% of articles in *SCMP*). *China Daily* portrays South Africa at home to a larger extent (around 3 times the proportion). While both publications have similar proportions of articles presenting South Africa as a global player, *China Daily* has a larger focus on South Africa as an African actor, and as an actor within the BRICS countries (coded as “Third Country” according to the chart above).

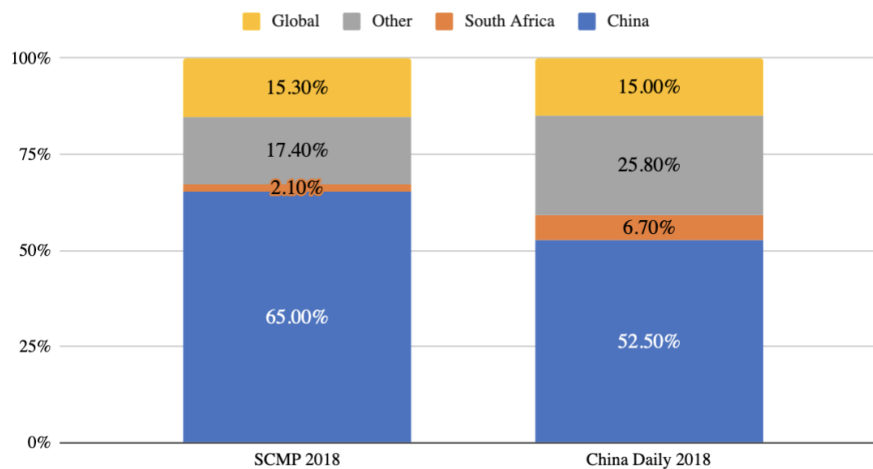


Figure 1: Domesticity of Items - China Daily and SCMP in 2018

These findings about *China Daily* show a continuation of China’s original foreign communication strategies from Mao’s time, where China aligns itself with the “Third World” and does not include the “superpowers” in the conversation (Ran 2016, 49), rather presenting South Africa as China’s doorway to Africa, and constructing a positive image of Africa as Zhang, Wasserman and Mano found (2016).

The *China Daily* articles that depict South Africa at home are about tourism, China-South African relations (including articles of politicians and the South African President defending South Africa’s relationship with China), the BRICS summit in Johannesburg, and Chinese companies in

South Africa (such as Huawei and Industrial and Commercial Bank of China). Notably, these are issues which are linked to Beijing, further signalling natiocentric coverage, and newsworthiness of South Africa only insofar as it relates to China.

In 2018, *SCMP* articles that depicted South Africa as an actor within its own borders were about the Cape Town water crisis, the BRICS summit (quoting Xi Jinping in conversation with Cyril Ramaphosa, not vice versa), and foul play in cricket, which shows partial alignment to a Chinese government agenda, but also with interest in South African affairs as they stand on their own. This section thus shows a limited interest by these papers in covering South Africa at all, and reveals a further erasure of South African reality by offering few local reference points, rather anchoring topics to Beijing.

In light of these findings, the next section will discuss the content and theme of news items in both papers in more depth, revealing key differences between the two publications.

Diverging Thematic Trajectory

This section further probes the two publications' journalistic coverage by exploring the thematic choices they exhibit. It finds that the papers have diverging thematic foci, as *China Daily* focuses on economic and political news, and *SCMP* on social coverage.

Frames used for this research were "Political" (when South Africa was described in a political context, such as an article discussing the Apartheid government in South Africa), "Economic" (when South Africa was described in an economic context, such as as a member of BRICS, or as a trade partner of China), "Social" (when South Africa was in a context of social issues, such as sanitation, education, or tourism), "Cultural" (when South Africa as in a context of music, art, or other cultural forms), "Environmental" (when South Africa's environment was mentioned in an article, such as illegal wildlife trade, or succulents from South Africa), "Developmental" (where South Africa's development is mentioned), "Science and Technology" (articles that situated South Africa in a context of science and technology, such as articles that referenced South Africa as one of the partners and sites for the Square Kilometre Array telescopes), "Normative" (articles that discussed South Africa in the context of norms and values, such as what we can learn about Nelson Mandela's pacifist wisdom), "Geography" (articles that positioned South Africa as a place on a map, or a country of origin for a plant, animal, or person), "Military" (articles that framed South Africa in a military context, such as describing South Africa as the only country globally that has disarmed its nuclear capabilities). Following the primary frame, articles were also coded for a sub- and a sub-sub- frame to give a more detailed understanding of the themes of the articles in which South Africa comes up.

The analysis revealed that *China Daily* frames South Africa primarily as an economic actor - with 42% of articles depicting it thus. Next, as a political actor, with 24% of describing South Africa from that perspective. Finally, as a social actor in 16% of articles. Meanwhile, *SCMP* frames South Africa largely as a social actor - with 62% of articles presenting the country thus. 18% of news items present South Africa as a political actor, while 11% present it as an economic actor.

Within the social frame, sports were the favoured topic, with *SCMP* also heavily emphasising the topic of horse-racing in Hong Kong, as many jockeys and race horses competing in the city

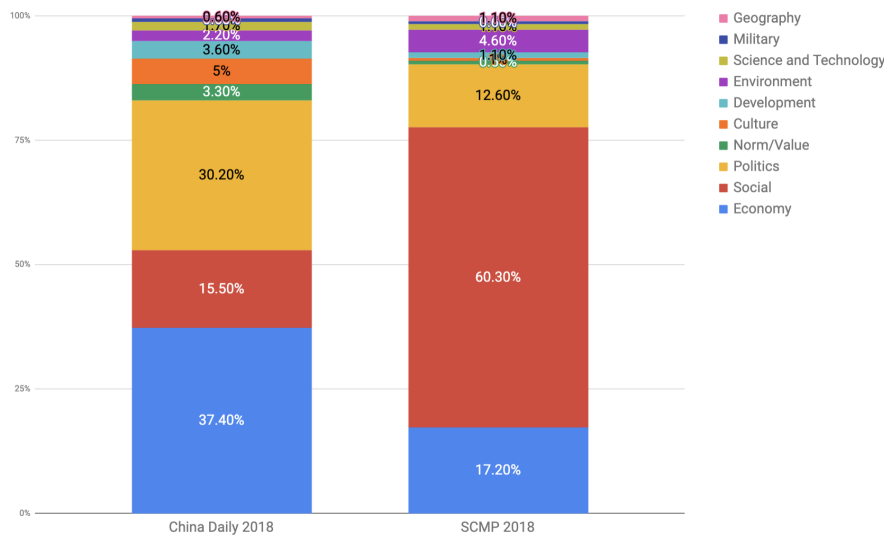


Figure 2: Framing of Actions, China Daily and SCMP in 2018

originate from South Africa, while *China Daily* prioritises lifestyle articles (16% of news items), and social issues such as education (10.7%) and healthcare (8.9%).

Within the economic frame, the research coded whether economic coverage was external (relating to economic affairs outside of South Africa) or internal (relating to domestic economic events). This analysis revealed a diverging editorial focus between the two papers. *SCMP* pays significantly more attention to local economic issues in South Africa (16.1% of all economic news items) than *China Daily* (5.8% of all economic news items), which mostly focuses on South Africa in relation to Chinese economic topics and issues.

Furthermore, in the 94.2% of *China Daily* articles describing economic events outside of South Africa, only three articles in total referenced South Africa's economic dealings with countries outside of China and BRICS. These articles about South Africa as an international economic actor focused mostly on its ties to China, with heavy coverage of Chinese manufacturing bases in South Africa, or Chinese businesses operating in or expanding to South Africa. Articles also show South Africa as a trade partner of China, mostly around the news topics of BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative.

Similarly, articles in *SCMP* that positioned South African economic dealings internationally only involve countries outside of China in 4 articles. The majority of coverage is about South Africa as a participant in BRICS economic activities, and as the potential recipient of a large loan from China. Unlike in *China Daily*, however, impacts of South Africa's economic difficulties are also shown to have international ripple effects, including an international shortfall of platinum, and potential ties between Hong Kong banks and corruption by former South African President Jacob Zuma. The articles about internal economic activities in South Africa are largely about negative themes such as mine closures, recessions, and uneven balance of trade with China. *China Daily's* coverage of economic activities is a good representation of China's "Going Out Campaign," which explicitly aspires to raise global perceptions of China to the level of its economic promi-

nence (Shambaugh in Zhang 2016). *SCMP* also largely focuses on South Africa in relation to China here, but it straddles the line between pro-China messaging and some criticism of China's dealings with the country.

It is noteworthy that in the second most dominant frame of *China Daily* - Politics - articles are 100% external. That is to say, articles that frame South Africa as a political player are not concerned with domestic politics in South Africa. Instead, they focus on South Africa in relation to politics abroad - especially articles that described South Africa in its political relation to China. This is in line with China's "non-interference" policy, where coverage of local political events in South Africa by a state-owned paper could suggest interference from Beijing.

Most of the articles in *China Daily* describe South Africa's political activities in relation to BRICS, and to its involvement in the FOCAC forum. It is noteworthy that *China Daily* often quotes South African politicians, especially with an approving message of the China-South Africa Friendship. Articles mostly celebrate China-South Africa bilateral ties, as 2018 was the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. They also discuss South Africa as a member of BRICS. Several articles also allude to South Africa as the catalyst to accelerate BRICS' Africa engagement.

Political articles, the third most common framing in *SCMP*, are 72% about external politics, and 28% internal South African politics. Articles about internal political affairs in South Africa largely focus on the former Apartheid regime in South Africa, as well as the (then) current corruption probe against President Jacob Zuma. Articles that frame South African political dealings on the global stage are mostly about BRICS, and participation in the FOCAC forum – thus connecting South Africa to China. Chinese diplomatic visits are also covered. As with the Economy frame, only a small proportion of articles describe South Africa's dealings with a third country.

Through this China-centric political coverage, both papers still present China's "positive construction" of the image of Africa as found by Zhang et al. (2016), and likewise *China Daily* shows a sense of "camaraderie" with the country by showing approval of China through quotes from local politicians (Zhang et al. 2016, 9), once again pursuing an agenda of promoting Beijing through economic and political topics. *SCMP*'s focus on soft news such as sports and entertainment could also lead to an oversimplified construction of South Africa by the paper.

“People Learn From Their Media Encounters”

The following section describes the centrality of South Africa within news items studied in this research, as well as the affective triggers produced by the slant of all news items.

I argue that, if people “learn from their media encounters” (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992, 115), in these papers they will learn that South Africa's relevance depends on its relation to China in *China Daily*, and Hong Kong in *SCMP*. Beyond that, I find that coverage in both papers largely has a neutral slant, with *China Daily* demonstrating a more positive tendency.

Neuman et al. argue, “people learn from their media encounters – perhaps, not a lot each time, but the result of a habit of news attention is an accumulation of political information” (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992, 115). The research thus analysed the degree to which South Africa is represented by coding the degree of centrality of South Africa per news item, coded into

three categories:

Main Perspective	Secondary Perspective	Minor Perspective
A story focuses solely on South Africa, South Africa is a main theme.	South Africa is described as equally important to other actors in the story.	South Africa has been alluded in passing as a minor reference angle in reporting.

For all news items studied, 71.7% of articles depict South Africa as a minor player in *China Daily*, and 71.1% in *SCMP*, with secondary coverage for 26% and 25% of papers respectively.

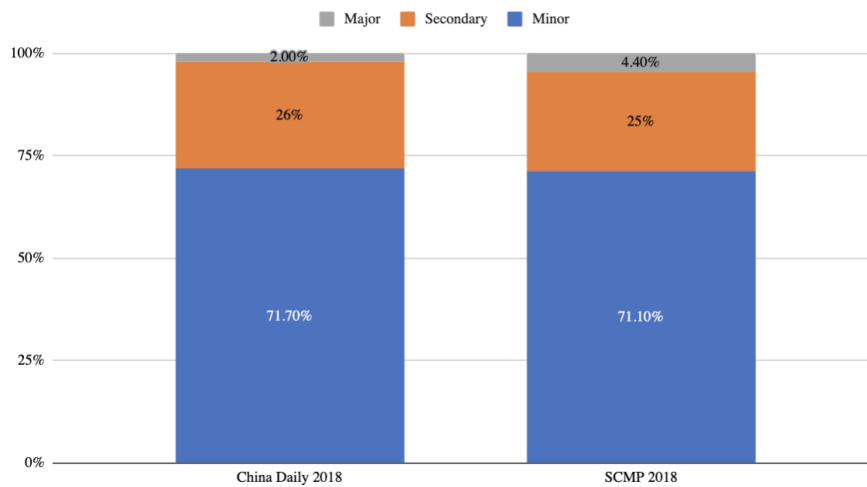


Figure 3: *Centrality of Actions - China Daily and SCMP in 2018*

The topics covered are, again, very different. In 2018, *SCMP*’s articles that covered South Africa as a Main actor are about rugby, horse racing, or about the drought in Cape Town. The articles in *China Daily* that describe South Africa as a Main actor are about South Africa as a friend of China – celebrating the 20th anniversary of China-South African relations, praising transnational cooperation such as BRICS, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Three of the total of five articles use the words of South African officials to make a wider point about the benefits of multilateralism. Two of the articles are about South Africa as a tourist destination for Chinese nationals. For coverage mainly about South Africa, therefore, *China Daily* works along government lines, while *SCMP* does not seem to.

To further explore what readers might learn about South Africa from reading the two publications, the research analysed the evaluation codes of articles.

A tool for “interpreting discursive representations” (Ross 2006, 197), evaluation codes the articles for their slant, or the affective reactions they are meant to trigger. Affect is separated from emotion here, following Ross (2006) who argues that “[W]hereas feelings are subjective ideas, affects cut across individual subjects and forge collective associations from socially induced habits and memories. Moreover, they are experienced by decision-makers and publics alike” (Ibid., 199).

Scholars have argued that historically African nations are often depicted negatively (i.e. as

being politically unstable, rife with crime and disease, or poor). While negative things to be reported on happen in all countries, scholars have pointed to a discrepancy in coverage of different countries, with fewer positive articles being written on African nations (Beaudoin and Thorston 2001; Wanta, Golan, and Lee 2004). The evaluation parameter looks at the message the author is trying to convey beyond the nature of the story - for example, an article about tourism to South Africa may seem positive if only coded by theme, but if the article emphasises means of avoiding crime while visiting, the slant will reflect that South Africa is positioned negatively in the article. The positioning and descriptions of South Africa in articles were thus assessed for their slant, and put into one of three categories to understand how South Africa is depicted over a year:

Negative	Neutral	Positive
Articles wherein South Africa is described negatively, for example as poor, dangerous, diseased, e.g. an article highlighting poor sanitation or xenophobic attacks.	A factual account that involves South Africa, but without any judgements on the country itself, such as a report on exchange rate of the currency, or an objective report of the number of casualties in an accident.	Such as a description of South Africa as a promising emerging market, or valuable partner to China, or as a beautiful holiday destination.

The analysis showed that *China Daily* is much more positive than *SCMP* when reporting South Africa - a clear diversion from the negative coverage of the news media from the USA or Europe observed in the literature (Golan 2008; Beaudoin and Thorston 2001; Khalatil 2017). However, *SCMP* is more balanced, with nearly equal proportions of negative and positive reporting on South Africa.

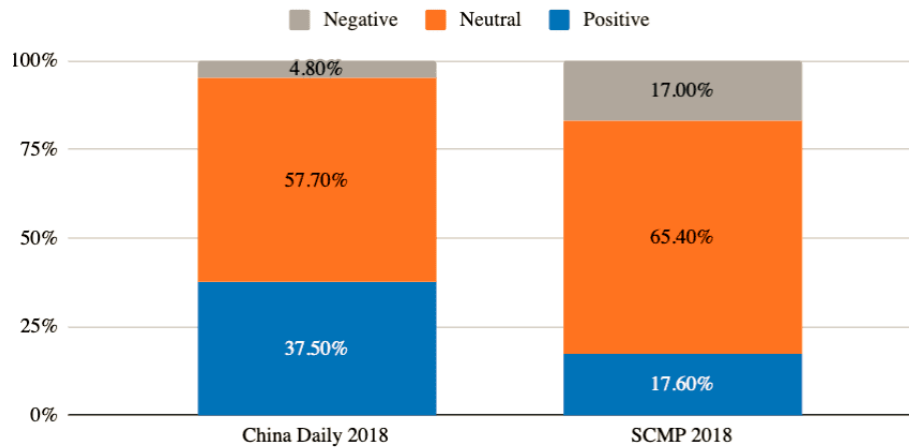


Figure 4: Evaluation, China Daily and SCMP in 2018

Thematically, *China Daily* is positive largely about South Africa as a BRICS member (including articles about it receiving an National Development Bank PLC (NDB) loan, and people-to-people exchanges within the bloc), a FOCAC member (including Ji Pinping’s joint news conference with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa). Another large portion of positive coverage was about China-South Africa relations, with an emphasis on China: pieces celebrating Human Rights Progress in China, with references to foreign relations with countries such as South Africa (including a human rights endorsement from South Africa), South Africa purchasing trains from

China, the 20th anniversary of South Africa and China's diplomatic relationship, how China has helped South Africa with power generation and telecommunications, the partnership between South Africa's Standard Bank and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, South Africa as a guest of honour at the China International Import Expo, and several articles about South Africa as a manufacturing base and export market for Chinese companies like the China Railway Sock Corporation, Beijing Automotive Group Co Ltd, Hisense Co Ltd, China Unicom, and Huawei. Positive coverage of BRI and South African endorsement of the initiative also featured. A smaller section of positive coverage related to South Africa as a tourism destination for Chinese tourists, Chinese traditional medicine's growing popularity in South Africa, South Africa adopting Chinese agricultural methods of growing high-protein grass, or as a destination for sports events - softer news stories which convey a very positive picture of China-South Africa reciprocity.

The inclusion of general-interest topics around culture and tourism confirm a desire to cater to wider audiences as put forward by Ran (2016), but notably, the majority of articles about China's relationship with South Africa, and business expansion into Africa, are written in a formal style that largely lays down the facts, and if analysis is offered, it is approval for how Chinese politicians, or Chinese businesses are successfully comporting themselves abroad. *China Daily* covers South Africa in a way that is analogous to Nye's definition of soft power - incorporating praise for China, its business, culture and foreign policy in its news media (Nye in Zhang 2016, 3) in relation to South Africa. However, *China Daily* does not push its political values much in its coverage of the country, rather emphasising positive actions from China, and beneficial engagement between China and South Africa - both on a macro and micro scale. While these articles do represent South Africa in a positive neutral light, they largely obscure critical viewpoints on China or South Africa's activities, as Wasserman warns might be the case with positive, or alternative coverage from China (Wasserman in Zhang and Matingwina 2016, 24).

The small pool of negative coverage in *China Daily* predominantly centers around South Africa's struggling economy (and how BRI can help), nature conservation, and unflattering comparisons with Russia as a FIFA World Cup host.

SCMP's smaller pool of positive coverage is largely about rugby and horse-racing in Hong Kong. A significantly smaller portion of items describe China-South Africa relations in the context of BRICS and the FOCAC Summit in Johannesburg. South Africa is also covered as a traditional ally to Beijing in coverage of its presence at the Shanghai Import Fair, and as a site of Chinese business expansion. South Africa is also shown positively with regards to social and cultural factors. For example, as a popular tourism and beach sports destination, including as a LGBT-friendly destination. A small pool of articles also described social involvement in Hong Kong by South African expats. Some articles commend South Africa's handling of the Cape Town water crisis, or use South Africa as an example of a country with impressive achievements and well-functioning Competition Tribunal. *SCMP* thus predominantly pays attention to social themes, and specifically sports, in its positive coverage of South Africa. While each news publication arguably prioritises different themes, exclusion of certain themes could imply a lack of nuance in coverage of a nation, as Beaudoin and Thorson argue (Beaudoin and Thorston 2001).

In 2018, articles in *SCMP* that depict South Africa in a negative light are frequently about internal issues in South Africa. The largest portion are anecdotal retrospective pieces set during the former Apartheid regime, for example:

August 30, 1978: A knock at the door panicked a young black woman into leaping to her death while trying to escape through a window of her white boyfriend's flat in

Johannesburg, South Africa. The woman apparently feared it was a policeman intent on breaking up her illegal romance. It turned out to be a friend of her boyfriend.

Former South African President Jacob Zuma's corruption charges were also part of negative coverage, as well as the drought in Cape Town, poverty, crime (relating to Chinese tourists and migrants) and currency devaluation (and how it impacts stocks in Hong Kong). Unlike *China Daily*, these articles show negative aspects of South Africa's domestic and transnational interactions, including with China. However, while the research found *SCMP* to be slightly more interested in South African news at home both positive and negative, it is also more interested in articles that show "deviance" (in this case crime, corruption and tragedy) as Golan found was a trend in Western news coverage of the African continent (2008), which could imply that *SCMP* still follows a liberal-democratic tradition of journalism to a larger extent than *China Daily*.

Constructive Evaluation

This section reveals to what extent the two publications incorporate constructive journalism practices in their coverage of South Africa. It finds that coverage does not report on "both the good and the bad in society" in *China Daily*, and largely does not in *SCMP* either. Moreover, both *China Daily* and *SCMP* distance the Chinese nation-state from its constructive coverage, preferring to be constructive on international news.

Apart from the general evaluation, this research also used the Constructive Institute's guidelines to code articles. This news style is non-sensationalist, anti-"negativity bias," and instead explains current affairs, puts them in perspective and helps readers create informed opinions. According to the website "it is 'two-eyed journalism', balanced reporting on both the good and bad in society" (Constructive Institute, n.d.). Constructive journalism emphasises journalism's "democratic" function; while it would be hard to apply to Chinese news on China, due to China's internal system of journalism that requires relevant officials, but not all citizens, to be aware of all problems, it can arguably still be applied to China's reporting on a foreign country. Following Zhang Yanqiu's argument that Chinese newspapers use this style in their coverage of African nations that contrasts with the negativity bias allegedly prevalent in US and European news sources, the research hoped to understand if this bears out in *SCMP* and *China Daily*'s coverage of South Africa. Articles were thus coded along these guidelines:

Constructive	Neutral	Negative
Articles deemed constructive were critical and balanced, non-sensational, “forward-looking and future-oriented”, “facilitating well-informed debate”, and were not divisive. For example, an article finding key learnings from the City of Cape Town’s tactics for approaching a water crisis, or an article analysing whether South Africa is worthy of being a BRICS member state.	Articles deemed neutral were articles that did not offer analysis, such as an announcement of events, headline news blurbs, facts without comment, results of sports events, summary of the findings of a census or a report stated as-is, or lifestyle articles about a very narrow topic, such as cooking or the training routine of a sportsperson.	Articles deemed negative did not conform to constructive guidelines by being divisive, promoting a specific agenda (such as of one company or country), obscured critical viewpoints (such as an article that describes Chinese investment in South Africa’s electricity supplier Eskom, and tells only the positive side of the story without alluding to domestic concerns in South Africa about Eskom and corruption), or “advocating one solution over another” (such as an article that outlines a problem, and offers only one solution instead of laying out the options).

As the research predicted, the stringent requirements of constructive journalism resulted in small percentages of the total articles meeting those demands, radically deviating from Zhang and Matingwina’s findings which showed that 62% of *China Daily*’s coverage of ebola was constructive (Zhang and Matingwina 2016, 28).

SCMP has a higher rate of articles coded as constructive, and *China Daily* has a very high number of articles coded as “negative” (nearly triple the amount of *SCMP*). *China Daily*’s “neutral” articles are nearly half of those in *SCMP*, most likely because *SCMP* features a large quantity of sports and entertainment articles, which are largely neutral. While the positive slant of Chinese news coverage might make it seem like there is a solutions-oriented or constructive news media bent to China’s “going out” strategy globally and in Africa specifically (Zhang 2014, 9), this research did not find that to be the case with *China Daily* nor *SCMP*’s reportage on South Africa.

Articles that feature South Africa, and are coded as constructive are very different in *SCMP* and in *China Daily*.

Constructive news in *China Daily* is mostly framed from an economic perspective (34.8%), a political perspective (21.7%), and a social or environmental perspective (13% for both), suggesting that the paper wants to offer solutions or enlighten its readers particularly on economic and political topics.

Economic articles are, for example, an analysis of African economic growth (by African experts), defending China against US criticisms of Chinese loans, China’s strong role in BRICS (and questioning whether South Africa should be part of the bloc, with Nigeria proposed instead).

Political articles here describe a new type of international relations between developing countries (and a discussion of how international problems can be solved by former Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation in South Africa), a case study of Chinese aid told through the stories of two Chinese workers one generation apart who both helped build infras-

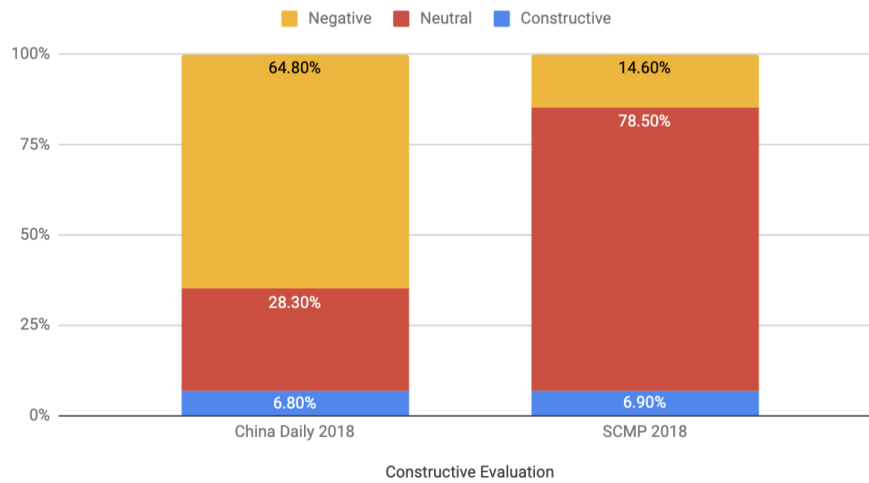


Figure 5: *Constructive News Items, China Daily and SCMP in 2018*

structure in Tanzania (the FOCAC Summit in Johannesburg is used as the news anchor), and a South African scholar hopeful that the Zimbabwean elections will bring stability to the Southern African region (they didn't). Many political constructive articles are about BRICS, such as a discussion of China's economic success and its role in BRICS, China-Africa relations at FOCAC (the words of the Chinese ambassador to South Africa), South Africa as BRICS' development agenda doorway to Africa (written by a South African academic), the BRICS bloc's future plans for development globally, and BRICS nations' rising international economic power.

More than half of constructive news (in the economic and political frames) in *China Daily* then, situates South Africa predominantly within its African context, and as an ally of China and doorway to China's other activities on the continent. While none of the articles coded as constructive explicitly promote the Chinese government, and instead are balanced and may even promote reader debate and engagement, the overall theme continuously orbits the topic of China, potentially dissolving the agency of South Africa to some extent.

Constructive news in *SCMP* in 2018 is mostly framed from a social perspective (60%), an economic perspective (15%), and an environmental perspective (15%), implying that topics on which the paper wishes to engage and educate readers are predominantly social.

Social articles are about mountain climbing risks in South Africa following the death of a Hong Kong tourist in Cape Town, the water shortage in Cape Town and what Hong Kong can learn from how the city warded off a crisis, how public transport infrastructure is important for the Fifa World Cup (with South Africa referenced as a place lacking in that regard), a South African expatriate running Krav Maga classes for self-defense in Hong Kong, the lack of skin cosmetics available for darker skinned people in Hong Kong, South Africa's fight against Rhino horn poaching (with fossilised mammoth tusks in Russia presented as an alternative), legalisation of marijuana, what we can learn from Nelson Mandela's support of Rugby, South Africa as an example of how a good Competition Tribunal should function, the Gates Foundation's sanitation work in South Africa, and the power of LGBTQI tourism (with South Africa referenced as a top destination).

Economic articles are about anti-money laundering processes of Hong Kong financial institutions (which allegedly helped former South African President Jacob Zuma's money-laundering). Some articles analysed China's financial involvement in the African continent, as well as the Belt and Road Initiative, in a balanced way, exploring both the uneven trade practices of other economically powerful countries towards African nations, and the potential of a debt-trap from China. Other articles are about denuclearisation in Korea, with reference to South Africa as the only country that has denuclearised.

SCMP's focus on social issues aligns with Tong's findings of how Chinese media covered the complex topic of the global AIDS crisis – *China Daily* predominantly describes the crisis in social terms (Tong 2006). With regards to constructive articles, *SCMP*, in addition to the fact that its overall coverage of South Africa is largely social, may well also delve deeper and more critically into a social topic as they can be less sensitive than political or economic ones.

Constructive news in *China Daily* is 59.1% about news in a third country, 31.8% about Chinese local news, 9.1% about global news. In the total news items, news about a third country only accounts for 25.5% of items, while China accounts for 52.5% of the total – implying a de-emphasis of local issues where more complex analysis of events and concepts takes place.

In *SCMP*, constructive items are 33% about a third country, 29% about Hong Kong, 19% about global news, 14% about South Africa, and 4.8% about China as a whole. The overall domesticity of *SCMP*'s 2018 articles are 65% about China, showing an even greater de-emphasis of Chinese internal issues when analysis is constructive, with a preference given to more neutral spaces such as Hong Kong itself, or other countries. This suggests once again that the paper may well also delve deeper and more critically into social topics, as they can be less sensitive to Beijing than political or economic ones.

Non-constructive news vary between the two papers. In *China Daily*, many articles do not qualify as constructive as per the Constructive Institutes guidelines which states that articles should not “promote a specific agenda” – since *China Daily* is tied to the Chinese Communist Party it is perhaps not unsurprising that news items promoted government projects (such as BRI or the NDB, for example), as well as the successes of Chinese businesses abroad, with no criticism – which resulted in a high proportion of articles coded as “negative”. Of the articles that were coded as constructive, the focus is predominantly about economic and political issues relating to Chinese interests. Unlike *SCMP*, *China Daily* does not have articles about South Africa as a good example of any practices, nor of political events in South Africa. This strongly suggests that while Chinese media might be a “member of the society to monitor it through responsible engagement” (Zhang 2014, 8) domestically, the same cannot be said for its coverage of an outside nation. Moreover, while it can be said that “south-south” relationships (Jedlowski and Röschenhaler 2017, 3) are prioritised, they are only covered insofar as they relate to China – South Africa's south-south relationships with other countries are left unexplored.

SCMP has a higher proportion of news items coded as constructive, but covers a large amount of news summaries and sports coverage, which explains why it has a high proportion of “neutral” articles. Articles coded as “negative” are largely promotional articles, mostly for the private sector. While most constructive articles do focus on Hong Kong as a domesticity, or involve Hong Kong people abroad in South Africa, there are also several news articles about events in South Africa, or key learnings from how certain issues (such as a drought, or a Competition Tribunal)

were handled in South Africa. *SCMP* also references internal political affairs in South Africa such as President Zuma's alleged money laundering, whereas *China Daily* does not discuss these more negative topics. While *SCMP* still mostly focuses on "social responsibility" themes (Zhang 2014, 8) within Hong Kong, it shows some evidence of "responsible engagement" with South Africa, as it covers events there and how problems can be solved. However, while *SCMP* shows some evidence of constructive coverage of local events in South Africa, it is manifestly not the paper's primary interest. Neither paper can be said to be constructive to any degree. *China Daily*, however, somewhat follows a development style of journalism as put forward by Lee Kuan Yew, which fosters economic growth and social cohesion, but perhaps only social cohesion for China (Ismail 2013; Sen 2016), while *SCMP* somewhat follows a more liberal-democratic model that is more interested in "entertaining" (Constructive Institute, n.d.).

Conclusion

This paper investigated whether Chinese print news media's construction of South African reality differs from previous so-called "Western" news media's social constructions. South Africa is China's largest trade partner in Africa, which could engender more positive coverage in Chinese media. By promoting South-South solidarity, Chinese soft power strategies might counter "Western hegemony" in perception-making. The article shows, however, that this is not the case. South Africa is rarely the primary focus of articles. In comparison to literature on "Western" media, the two papers, and especially *China Daily*, are demonstrably more positive, often even obscuring negative viewpoints. Unlike *China Daily*, however, *SCMP* does not entirely shy away from negative coverage, and also presents some normative negative topics such as local corruption or crime.

However, neither paper's total coverage on South Africa for 2018 can be said to be constructive. In *China Daily*, the tendency was rather to be *un-constructive* due to a large volume of articles promoting one specific agenda, and obscuring potential criticisms of topics covered. Both papers could also be said to obscure more nuanced coverage of South African events, predominantly focusing on South Africa as it relates to China. In the case of *China Daily*, South Africa is presented in economic and political terms, and is situated as China's doorway to Africa as previous content analysis on the paper has found (Zhang, Wasserman, and Mano 2016). In the case of *SCMP*, coverage focuses on how South Africa relates to Hong Kong soft news, such as sports and entertainment.

Both *China Daily* and *SCMP* are English-language publications targeting international readers, and their respective approaches offer a different perspective to Western journalistic practices. As China's soft power strategies grow to match its (still rising) economic prominence, these publications might be increasingly quoted or re-published in less developed nations (who may lack resources to post journalists abroad or employ foreign correspondents), resulting in a unique Chinese soft power influence.

In his essay on Joseph Conrad's acclaimed novel *Heart of Darkness*, the Nigerian writer and Nobel laureate Chinua Achebe criticises the text (which follows a British seaman called Marlowe in the late 1800s, as he searches for Kurtz, an infamous ivory trader in colonial Belgian Congo) for using "Africa as a setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor," including the use of the continent "as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognisable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril," thus rendering Africa "as a prop for the break-up of one petty European mind" (Achebe 2016, 19). Whereas Western news sources have

been criticised for lacking nuance in their coverage of Africa, or prioritising death, disease, and poverty, this research could imply that South Africa is depicted as a background for Chinese economic successes and adventures in *China Daily*, and to some degree only as a prop in relation to entertainment or sports content in *SCMP*. Just as journalistic paradigms are not static, and can have new meanings attached to them as they spread across the globe, so can the erasure of the realities faced by developing countries be performed differently by different nations, news providers and cultures, which could be a phenomenon well worth studying further.

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Notes

¹Franki Jenkins holds a Master's degree in Global Studies from the Humboldt University of Berlin. Her research interests include news media, alternative forms of journalism, and digital engagement.

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