

Complexities of South-African-Chinese Educational Collaboration: Decolonising or Recolonising?

BRAD D. WASHINGTON
University of San Francisco, United States

Abstract

This study surveys the arc of Chinese-South African relations in the 21st century to discern the political motivations, cultural engagements, and economic drivers that have forged those nations' partnerships through the lens of education. In reviewing literature that documents the continued relationship between South Africa and China, the research addresses in what manner has education, specifically student voice, historically driven political change in each country, and to what degree do those narratives inform the narrowing voice of communities in the role of education in exchange for government driven decision-making. Through addressing themes of educational access, global negotiation, and socio-economic class, the study attempts to develop a foundation for further investigation on the ramifications of balancing educational planning with diplomatic ties.

Keywords: South Africa, China, education, politics, relations

Introduction

As the twenty-first century progresses, there continues to be a consensus by global organizations and nations that the People's Republic of China (PRC) will be a new world leader economically, politically and militarily (Arredy, 2013; Perlez, 2014; Reynolds, 2014). Yet, with the rise of world power, comes the inevitable question of intent: what is the People's Republic of China's foreign policy objectives towards the rest of the world? More acutely, how has China's ambition and relations with the continent of Africa over the past decade informed the nature of its intent globally? Though each retains its own special set of circumstances at different times in history, nations that have previously been considered the world's most prominent powers are remembered for their ability to flourish economically though questioned for their willingness to act upon some ambitions with military force and political manipulation (Li, Li, & Mark, 2007). It is a critique the PRC is well aware of, and one coming to a head in its dialogue with the Republic of South Africa.

The complexities of the partnership between the RSA and PRC are partially born out of the political internal/external trauma both countries have had historically in mitigating injustice and oppression relevant to the global community (Ubi, 2014). Wasserman (2015) stated that in the 21st century, it was China that advocated for South Africa's inclusion as a member of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China,

South Africa), representing the future regarding leadership of the global economy. According to Wasserman, the significance of South Africa attaining political clout via membership as a BRICS nation is much more in regional and global posture than newly acquired authority. However, it does clearly underscore the People's Republic of China's belief in the influence of the Republic of South Africa globally, but more importantly within the continent of Africa as a leader in working with other African nations.

It is here where some of the most severe criticisms of the South African government appear as blindly following the lead of China (Corcoran, 2015; Grammaticas, 2012), as well as catastrophic warnings that South Africa is complacent towards China's ambition exploiting the resources of an entire continent. The African National Congress (ANC), historically led by Nelson Mandela was once heralded as taking the role leading South Africa to be the largest economy of the African continent. The ANC and President Jacob Zuma are now being scrutinized for reverting back to oppressive and destructive policies that defined the apartheid era of the South African National Party (Cooper, 2015; Epstein, 2015; Macharia, 2015; Malik, 2015; Tinhu, 2015).

In its 21st century relationship with the continent of Africa, the Chinese government has focused on economic trade, while giving minimal consideration to the socio-political record of African nations it aligns with in determining partnerships ("Chinese trade with Africa," 2013; Szftel, 1998; Zhen, 2015). Yet, growing tension has been found in the area of educational relations between China and South Africa. As Chinese investment and development becomes more ubiquitous in South Africa, educational ties have come not only in the form of construction of schools, but most recently in the form of offering the Chinese Mandarin language as an optional language in its curriculum. One of China's instruments of soft power has been its international Chinese language teaching centres, the Confucius Institutes (Falk, 2012; Ngamsang & Walsh, 2013; Yang, 2010). The addition of Mandarin to the school curriculum and, the construction of Confucius Institutes in the country has led teacher unions in South Africa to speak out against what they see as an infringement among South Africa's rich and diverse linguistic history, and to caution against the government supporting any nation's attempt to alter the national curriculum. According to Essa (2015):

The union's general secretary said introducing Mandarin would not raise the level of education and that it was still in the best interests of the country to prioritise mathematics and science in childrens' mothertongues [sic]. South Africa has 11 official languages, with English and Afrikaans dominating economic and political life. (para. 11)

As Chinese aid grows, there is an ever-present question within South Africa pertaining to the purpose of distribution, and what can be highlighted from investments in terms of collaboration and reciprocity. King (2014) states that the historical role of Chinese educational investment has rarely come in multilateral partnership with other nations or global institutions, and more often operates in bilateral communication to forge agreements. This approach in fact has previously left other African nations that work with China to question its investment in their own national educa-

tion policies (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). Thus, while the South African government seeks alternate sources of investment to escape its former dependency on the USA and western Europe as part of its efforts towards decolonization, it needs to take care that the pathway of collaboration with China does not become a new form of dependency, or even neocolonialism.

Problem Statement

In the following discussion, the People's Republic of China's diplomatic and educational relationship with the Republic of South Africa will be explored. The perception of Chinese presence in South Africa (Fisher-Thompson, 2006) will be compared to how the Chinese government views its intent in the nation. China's relationship with the Republic of South Africa was selected for study to review Chinese policy on the African continent for several reasons. First, the Republic of South Africa has a special meaning for Africa in terms of its demonstrated leadership in the African Union. In addition to working with African nations to peacefully negotiate conflict between warring factions, the RSA has also used its standing to protect people displaced by military conflict (Idris, Mutum, & Doki, 2015). Second, South Africa has been considered *the most viable* (in terms of protecting Western interests) African nation globally. This is of particular significance considering how the global media's perception of South Africa is as a country that best represents political and economic stability on the continent ("Chasing the Rainbow," 2006). Finally, the dual relationship South Africa has with China seen through economic strife over trade but harmony with cultural exchange presents a unique opportunity to observe a first-hand African account of Chinese influence in the continent.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's ("UN decade," 2005) statement on education over the decade spanning 2005-2014, "Education for sustainable development is a life-wide and lifelong endeavor which challenges individuals, institutions and societies to view tomorrow as a day that belongs to all of us, or it will not belong to anyone." If education is the key to sustainable development, how do diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of South Africa influence those nations' approach to education?

Rationale of Presentation

The topic of education in international relations between the PRC and the RSA will be viewed through the stages of comparative history, diplomacy, and cross-cultural understanding. The history of China and South Africa, from the late 1940s to the end of the 1980s will be taken into account to observe the role of education in pivotal events that shaped the future of each nation. Next, diplomatic ties from 1990 to the present will be explored to decipher how the period following the Cold War allowed for reinterpretations of each nation's understanding of the other. Finally, an analysis on the future role of education between China and South Africa will be presented.

How Education Made History

Apartheid and Political Education in South Africa

The rule of law in the Republic of South Africa was founded in its legislative capital of Cape Town, and enforced by the presence of armed military and public officials. Upon the conception of Apartheid in South Africa (1948), a law of governance that forbade Black South Africans (from civilizations indigenous to the African landscape) from being educated within the same institutions as White South Africans (of European ancestry) quickly took hold of the entire nation (Abdi, 2000). The political strangulation of Apartheid greatly shaped the educational aspirations of Black South Africans.

Systematically, Apartheid reduced and removed Black South Africans rights while simultaneously limiting educational opportunities. The White minority of South Africa controlled much of the nation's wealth by prohibiting Black South Africans from entering the urban centers of the country. Black South Africans lived in the rural areas of the nation, which were impoverished due in part to limited access to clean water and lack of employment. Through the development of what was categorized as nine indigenous *homelands* (Moodley & Adam, 2004), Black South Africans were partitioned into the populace of newly independent provinces in South Africa. Yet, without access to natural resources, the political will to organize their homelands equitably (in part because many people were struggling to survive on a daily basis), and no formal relationship with other nations and governments on the continent, Black South Africans were isolated. To add to the daunting challenge of Black South Africans, English, the primary language of government, education, and employment in the country, represented the third or fourth language for many indigenous people in the homelands (Brock-Utne, & Skattum, 2009). More difficult still was the fact that there were few teachers of the English language to reach out to the homelands.

The tide of change against Apartheid emerged in the form of what Moodley and Adam (2004) describe as political literacy:

Only by a critical exploration of how democracy functions in the everyday reality of the political community in which learners live--by comparing the ideals with the practice—can we hope to motivate students to narrow the gap and become active, engage citizens (Moodley & Adam, 2004, p. 171).

It was the perspective of the authors that political literacy was crucial for the development of South Africa because understanding the rule of government empowered Black and White South Africans to become activists. Alliances between Asian (mostly Indian), Black, and White South Africans at segregated university institutions pressed for change (Higgs & Wyk, 2006). If the White minority was in a position of power, and the Black South Africans lacked educational opportunities to gain employment not to mention becoming political activists of their own volition, how did such an alliance emerge?

By the late 1970s, political leaders in the homelands were able to organize to assist in the transition of other White minority governments in neighboring countries like Zimbabwe and Namibia to Black indigenous control. Though not the whole of an explanation for the loosening hold of Apartheid in South Africa, the White minority government in the Republic of South Africa began to "recognize the need to cooperate with the leaders of their [B]lack homelands if they [were] to enhance the likelihood of stability throughout southern Africa" (Butler, Rotberg, & Adams, 1977, p. 72). In the decade to follow, demonstrated will and leadership by all South Africans ended Apartheid. The retelling of the atrocities suffered by the nation under the forced segregated system was published and open for the world to see (Palmary, Clacherty, Núñez, & Ndlovu, 2015) as the nation began to seek how to create a new identity for itself and its neighbors. However, with a peaceful transition of policy and government, there appeared to be a symbolic end to the wrongs of the past as the world began to be educated on a new and liberated South Africa. Unfortunately, by the mid-1990s, it became clear that the new history of the Republic of South Africa was not as transparent as first anticipated.

Social Upeaval in the Universities of the People's Republic of China

By the year 1965, the People's Republic of China was balancing an insurgence of frustration over access to education with a forceful revolt against social class identification. On the brink of what has become to be known as the Cultural Revolution, China's government was facing the daunting task of deciding who should be educated. Due to extraordinary challenges to the national government and economy, investing into the youth of the entire nation was no longer an option. In the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1959), few policy makers had the will to place what were now very limited economic resources in China's vast rural lands and population. The failed attempt by the government to force "colleges and universities [to undergo] rapid and uncontrolled expansion during the Great Leap Forward" (Kulander, 1998, p.173) resulted in a defined political policy not only designating who should be educated, but where students should be taught.

Like the Republic of South Africa, the People's Republic of China focused on education in its urban areas. Unlike the RSA, the rural citizens of the PRC were still (legally) able to pursue higher education, though access to such opportunities was at best limited. Still, change in Chinese higher education came to fruition in part by a type of political literacy embodied by students that believed the heart of their nation's struggles lay with educational class distinctions.

Instead of embracing the current educational system, Chinese students questioned policies that determined the entrance of students into national universities. Class distinctions in the People's Republic of China had played a pivotal role in defining one's stake in society (e.g., farmer or economist), as well as the quality of education students were to receive. Within the debate of class distinction was the question of Chinese nationalism. More pointedly, what was at stake was a definition of what was the most important aspect of learning for the development of China, and how that pursuit would serve a stronger and more equitable future.

During the Great Leap Forward, education in rural communities was to be beneficial to the entire nation. However, the pretense of education in rural China was economic success nationwide. In 1968, what Chinese citizens were willing to do to prove their loyalty to their nation morphed into a constant inquiry on what one was willing to do for her or his social class. The result of this shift was an attack on educational institutions by political forces and people representing the wealthier middle class. The measurement of one's stature in society was dependent upon your family's societal background. Families with traditions as farmers and military personnel were given the highest regard, while families with a history of economists or professors in their blood line were seen as deviant and portrayers of the republic. Jonathan Unger (1982) provides one summation of middle class students in the People's Republic of China during the Cultural Revolution: "As awareness of *class* heightened, the system of politically *educating* them did not push them toward activism or a stronger commitment to the national values; it pushed most of them in the opposite direction" (p. 104). Education (as it existed in the 1960s) was not a vehicle for change, but a nuisance that was to be done away with.

The educational solution for Chinese university students came in the form of Chairman Mao Zedong's vision to determine the entrance of students into post-secondary schools by class background. As a result, entrance examinations that had determined enrollment at the university level were abolished, leaving many students from the middle class without an opportunity to attend an institution of higher education. As the second phase of the Cultural Revolution began to take shape, attendance at universities dwindled. The new generation of university students was from agricultural families that Chairman Mao had convinced that the nation far exceeded any level of validation they could achieve from performance in the classroom. As students left their studies to *feed* the nation by working in the rural communities of China, higher education in the People's Republic of China came to a complete stand still for over a decade leading into the 1970s (Meng & Gregory, 2002).

During this period in Chinese history, students who had not have the privilege to pursue education were not blindly following an ideology to usurp the status of the middle class, but to rather find ways to voice their demands for social justice. Due in part to multiple factions who expressed grievances against political leadership, as well as societal pressure to align with the ideology of Beijing governance in the 1960s and 1970s, military force was often used to suppress discontent, and reinforce inequality (Wu, 2014). The reverberations of the Cultural Revolution, and how it shaped the future model of higher education in the People's Republic of China is still relevant today. Societal change, especially in people's relations with each other, was forever changed.

Diplomatic Perceptions, Educational Realities

Both the Republic of South Africa and the People's Republic of China went through an extraordinary series of changes in its respective societies. Because many dramatic changes in either country happened over a truncated period of 20-25 years, it is difficult to gauge whether everyone within their nations were able to grasp the magnitude of the reforms, or what it would mean on an individual level. As each nation began to grow in stature in the late 1990s, there was a common understanding

that their education on world affairs had to change. For the Republic of South Africa, the Black majority that was now governing the country learned of foreign condemnation of Apartheid, but witnessed little action in the way of bringing the segregation practice to an immediate end. In the People's Republic of China, fragile alliances with the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and negotiations with the United States of America (USA) had surmounted to no more than a role as a buffer between competing ideologies. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, China and South Africa began a more aggressive form of diplomatic education between each other sharing culture, negotiating trade, and planning for a new direction for global politics (South Africa - China Economic & Cultural Exchange, 2002).

Remaining Divisions between Education and Opportunity in South Africa and China

When comparing the international identity of South Africa with the nation's domestic reality, there appears to be a clear break in how the world learns about South Africa and how its citizens are educated about its challenges. Images of reconciliation amongst South Africa's diverse population, along with the ultimate symbol of peaceful redemption in Nelson Mandela quell the memories and horrors of Apartheid for many in the international community. As a result, confidence (especially the confidence of global investors in Cape Town's political landscape) keeps South Africa's economy and nation stable. Domestically, there is confusion on how to handle the exodus of White South Africans to other nations due to fear of alleged alienation and violence ("Fears over," 2006). The fear of White South Africans leaving their country is also entrenched in the belief that with them will leave *high-level* professionals (e.g., lawyers, doctors and economists) that could place an extraordinary strain on the nation's economic growth. That fear also reveals the historical lack of educational transition that has taken place from the White minority to the Black majority in the Republic of South Africa, especially over the last two decades, and brings up the issue of how long it will take to educate a new generation of professionals in the nation.

In the context of political literacy, the Republic of South Africa may have lost its desire to promote activism from university students. South Africa's leadership in the African Union, as well as its perceived ability to pressure other African nations to come together and negotiate for the better of the continent has been called into question. For example, the revelation that the government of South Africa has supplied arms to the Sudanese government (Fiske & Ladd, 2004) puts the RSA's leadership in a difficult position if their arms support could be connected to the ongoing crisis in Darfur.

It is at this point that China's role in the internationally community coincides with the stance of South Africa. Both nations share the ideology with the other that economic trade is at the heart of their relationship. Education, that is, how the RSA and PRC learn about each other, is intertwined with the image policy makers hope to promote. As cultural exchange programs promote Chinese university students studying abroad in other nations including South Africa, Chinese citizens may be isolated in their reality that a current governmental policy is adopting measures similar to

the Cultural Revolution's mass higher education policy (Hayhoe, 1995; Pocha, 2003).

The Future of Education in International Relations between China and South Africa

Throughout the discussion, it has been noted that education plays a role in international relations between the PRC and RSA not only in university institutions, but also in governmental policies. It is difficult to predict how these two nations will continue to build upon their relationship and educate the other on its history. Yet, there is evidence that suggests that South Africa and China may be willing to give up their historical use of education as a means for change in favour of increased diplomatic cooperation.

The People's Republic of China has long been invested in a project known as the *Three Gorges Dam Project*. The building of the gorges would in essence provide a large supply of energy for the PRC. However, the project is not without controversy, particularly because the flooding it would cause to certain areas of the nation would displace tens of thousands of Chinese citizens. Multiple dam projects like the *Three Gorges* could potentially displace at least a quarter of a million Chinese people from their homes. In a December of 2006, reports stated that a man from the Chinese province of Sichuan was executed for violently protesting the construction of one of these dams ("China executes," 2006). Though the construction of these projects is a source of major tension in the country, China's Xinhua news agency made neither reference to the execution nor the events that lead to the protest. Instead, reference was made to the need for a more unified support for dam projects that could promote a better way of life for many of China's citizens (Luan, 2006).

Given that RSA is considering similar major engineering projects, what should the Republic of South Africa's response be towards China's approach to the dam projects in the PRC? Facing many of the water management problems China is currently deciphering, the RSA is seeking the counsel of Chinese architects of the current dam projects (Muller, 2006). Though both countries are aware of the environmental and social criticism they receive internationally for embarking on such projects, it seems their understanding of the global community's action (or lack thereof) when they were in dire need of support supersedes any prospect of political backlash.

Conclusion

Historically, educational opportunities for people in South Africa and China were determined by the extent of an individual's locale in society versus one's supposed inherent intellect. Observing how some people benefit from their position in society is not a phenomena specific only to these two countries. However, the political consequences for aligning education with class distinctions were so powerful that it continues to shift the direction of domestic policy. As China and South Africa continue to grow in their roles as world leaders, negotiations on how they will learn about each other will continue to evolve. Ultimately, the education the nations ac-

quire about each other will continue to be historically selective with a diplomatic intent.

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Author's brief bio

Dr. Brad D. Washington, University of San Francisco, United States. Email: washingtonb@usfca.edu