

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# African Students Watching CCTV-Africa: A Structural Reception Analysis of Oppositional Decoding

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The ‘going global’ strategy of China’s outbound media has been running for about ten years. The main beneficiary, China Central Television (CCTV) has enhanced its global presence through institutional expansion. The growing influence of CCTV-Africa, as one of CCTV’s major media hubs overseas, is arousing wide discussions in regard to its agenda and journalistic practice as one part of the state media of China. How the role of CCTV-Africa is interacting with the grander structure of Africa-China multilateral relations has been the main focus of scholars’ discursive enquiries. Despite the increasing focus of scholars on the institutional behaviours or media content of CCTV-Africa, the subject of audience reception is under-studied. This research aims to contribute to the field by analysing media reception of a specific group of African students in China from the perspective of structural theories of international communication. Based on the findings of in-depth individual interviews with 38 interviewees (with a particular focus on the oppositional decoding of four interviewees) and frame analysis of CCTV-Africa news, this research reached a theoretical conclusion, concerning the articulation of the alternative reception of transnational audiences. Although the decoding positions of such an audience can be polynary the objective environment (intranational political and economic agenda as structural dominance) limits the projection of alternative opinions into constructive articulation in real life.

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**Keywords:** CCTV-Africa; audience reception; oppositional decoding; Stuart Hall; Chinese-African relations

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## Introduction

In addition to China’s growing economic influence in Africa, Chinese media (mainly state-run media) are also making great efforts to promote their presence there, representing the interests of the Chinese government. Large projects have been initiated by the Chinese government to facilitate its state media going global (Zhu, 2012). One major player is China Central Television in Africa. (The empirical work for this research was conducted between May and July 2016, several months before the station was renamed CGTN-Africa: therefore CCTV-Africa

is referred to throughout.) Penetration of Chinese media was expected to alter the perception of local Africans towards China positively (Zhang and Matingwina, 2016). Meanwhile, increasing multilateral cultural interactions between Africa and China have been creating opportunities for more African and Chinese locals to be exposed to each other's media content. By 2017, 50,000 African students were studying in China (Tong, 2017) compared with 8,799 in 2008 (Liu, 2013). Such enormous growth indicates a significant enhancement of the interests of African students in China. Therefore, the research subject of this paper is African students studying in China and how they receive the messages of CCTV-Africa. The subtle and complex connections between their personal experiences of China in Africa with the messages they decode from CCTV-Africa form a fascinating and valuable case for us to study. This paper seeks to discover: 1. how the African audience (studying in China) genuinely decode the content of CCTV-Africa and; 2. how their perceptions are conditioned by their understanding of the reality of China in Africa.

### **Chinese media in Africa Studies: Sonar with weak reflection**

An increasing number of publications relating to the soft power of Chinese media in Africa have been evident in the past few years (Gagliardone, 2010; Li and Musiitwa, 2017; Wasserman, 2015; Wu, 2012; Zhang and He, 2015; Zhang, Wasserman and Mano, 2016). Xiaoling Zhang analysed the media discourse of Chinese state media and reached the conclusion that 'China is trying to build up its challenging power, but no substantial content can be found from the discourse of a state media as an alternative to the West' (2013, 28). Similarly, Herman Wasserman outlined in his studies on the journalistic practices of African media that the Chinese media has not been considered to offer a credible source nor localised enough to root its agenda in the ground of African societies (2015, 11). On the contrary, Gagliardone predicts that 'Positive reporting may challenge certain established notions of the Western liberal model of journalism in the medium to long term' (2015, 33). Zhang Yanqiu and Simon Matingwina claimed that the constructive journalism of Chinese media in Africa not only 'contribute to positive change in the lives of media users' but also 'moves further to place the emphasis on possible solutions' (2016, 23–24).

Besides the growing emphasis on studying Chinese media content, a few researchers have chosen to tell the story from the other side. In the paper 'China in Africa: Presence, perceptions and prospects' published in 2014, Fei-Ling Wang and Esi Elliot depicted the image of China in the eyes of Africans from eight sub-Saharan African countries and 'a great dichotomy in African perceptions about China's presence' (2014, 1022). Wang and Elliot also found that in different African countries, the image of Chinese differs slightly (2014, 1024–1029). Furthermore, based on their case study in Uganda, the work of Goretta Nassanga and Sabiti Makara demonstrated how the perceptions of most Africans on China are influenced by local media: 'Despite increasing unease about China's "go global" strategy, China globally enjoys a positive image' which are majorly contributed by two African nations 'Nigeria with 82% and Kenya having 77%' (2014, 10).

The field of Chinese media in Africa studies is still in its infancy such that it needs not only empirical studies but also theoretical development to grow stronger. Scholars are trying to integrate the field with studies of political economy, history and culture (Yan and Sautman, 2017; Li, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015; Hartig, 2010). In terms of media reception studies of Chinese media in Africa, the current references in this field seem insubstantial in terms of providing empirical evidence and solid theoretical argument to underpin the exponentially growing attention from academia on this subject. Studies on either Chinese media in Africa or Chinese soft power in Africa are currently faced with a dilemma that as more focus is placed upon the subjects of China or Chinese media there is less attention on how such

initiatives of the Chinese government are resonating in the local societies of Africa. It is like using sonar to detect the depth of ocean: reflections are compulsory. In order to depict or study the panorama of Chinese media in Africa, both the subject and the object are of great significance. This research aims to contribute to the topic of audience reception of Chinese media in Africa whilst pursuing a specific theoretical origin of structuralism in the context of transnational audience studies.

### **Revisiting structuralist reception theories and reapplication in Africa-China**

The core critical conceptions of the new leftism, which emerged in the 1970s when the UK was under the influence of the anti-imperialist and de-colonizing campaigns of the 1960s (Dworkin, 1997, 45), were international and concerned with developing countries, which makes these ideas of great relevance in the current context of the rising Global South as manifested in the case of enhanced Africa-China multilateral interactions. Stuart Hall's central significance as one of the major thinkers of new leftism is due to his rethinking of the structuralist determinism of Louis Althusser (1970) whose ideas were regarded as the authentic heritage of Marxism. Yet in *The Problem of Ideology – Marxism without Guarantee* (1986), Hall pointed out that 'the theory of ideology helps to analyse how a particular set of ideas comes to dominate the social thinking of a historical bloc ... it has also to do with the processes by which new forms of consciousness, new conceptions of the world, arise, which move the masses of the people into historical action against the prevailing system' (1986, 29). On the one hand, Hall admitted the objective dominance of structure underpinned by the economic base. On the other hand, he also believed that there is room for articulation of new ideas. And such dialectical thinking is also reflected in the communication model of 'encoding/decoding'.

As 'part of the wider debate within Marxism' (Gray, 1999, 27), the theoretical foundation of the encoding/decoding model was derived from the epistemology of *Capital*, which sees the industrial production of broadcasting as 'the "labour process" in the discursive mode' (Hall, 2006, 164). 'The production structures of television originate the television discourse' which constitutes an open system interacting with 'other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are differentiated parts', and in this dialectical open system, the role of audience can be both the information 'source' and 'receiver' (2006, 164–5). The premise here is that the meaning of television discourse can 'be transported into practice or consciousness (to acquire social use value or political effectivity)'. By integrating 'text and audience studies', Hall welcomed the opportunity for Cultural Studies to examine empirically how 'the degrees of "understanding" and "misunderstanding" in the communicative exchange depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the "personifications", encoder/producer and decoder/receiver' (Hall, 1980, 131). The 'Encoding/decoding' model therefore provides us with a structural process to systematically analyse the interaction between audience and media content and the ideological formation of audience reception.

Does CCTV in Africa have an ideological agenda? In numerous studies, official Chinese media have been observed to retain their role as government and party mouthpieces where China's interests are concerned (Zhang 2013; Zhu 2012). In order to understand the specificity of the ideological dominance produced by CCTV-Africa news and to extend the communication model of Hall to a transnational dimension, another critical theoretician of structural imperialism – Johan Galtung – is here introduced.

Galtung's 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism' published in 1971 provides a systematic and comprehensive study of the issue of global dominance in almost every aspect, including economics, international relations, communication, science and technology, education and

psychology (1971, 87). In this article, Galtung raises the idea of vertical imperialist structure between centre and periphery (1971, 89). Galtung develops this unique intra-structural perspective by outlining the concepts of 'centre of the Centre' (Cc), 'periphery of the Centre' (Cp), 'centre of the Periphery' (Pc) and the 'periphery of the Periphery' (Pp). Accordingly, he provides an intra-structural definition of 'Imperialism'. One crucial feature of this structure is that: 'there is harmony of interest between the centre in the Centre nation and the centre in the Periphery nation' (Galtung, 1971, 83). 'Harmony of interest' is vital to the maintenance of imperialism, which can be achieved at the level of communication through the agenda-setting function of international news flow:

... the Core's definition of news will be reflected in the news in the peripheral nation ... Information is transferred to the Southern elite in such a way that primary importance is attached to the same issues the developed world sees as important ... The identity of interests between the centre of the Centre and the centre of the Periphery greatly influences the acceptance of an international agenda (Thussu, 2006, 51).

Growing Global South has remapped the power structure of the global system, which is quite different to that of the 1970s. Yu Xiang has revised the vertical imperialism structure of Johan Galtung by adding to the model the actors of semi-peripheral countries (Xiang, 2017a). Currently, the position of China in the world system is more akin to a semi-peripheral country, which is *between* the centre and periphery (Xiang, 2017a, 214–215). Conditioned by their unique and specific political economic realities, the alignment of interest between Semi-Periphery and Periphery is different from that between Periphery and Centre. The significance of Xiang's revision to Galtung lies in the realisation that emerging semi-peripheral countries and their interactions with the peripheral countries can break the static dependent relation between Centre and Periphery and bring in scope for discussing the possibilities of an alternative development path. For example, the harmony of interest between the 'centres' of China and many African countries goes beyond the desire for 'the desire for the "top living conditions" for elite classes only' but is also about facilitating each other to complete their own economic transitions (Xiang, 2017a, 216). Such strategy is termed by political and business elites – the centres of Semi-periphery and Periphery – 'win-win' policy.

From Stuart Hall to Johan Galtung, the dialectical structuralist approach of this research aims to situate audience reception in a grander context of Africa-China political and economic cooperation, which conditions the ideological agenda of CCTV-Africa. This research thus investigates the oppositional decoding of the dominant agenda of CCTV-Africa by African students in China: this is what Hall understood could be the foundation for the articulation of new ideas. But firstly, we need to have a general sense of what messages are encoded in the news of CCTV-Africa.

### **CCTV in Africa: Elite-targeted discourse and development-oriented discourse**

Zhang assumes that the news of CCTV-Africa should ideally satisfy the definition of Jay Rosen of 'constructive journalism' which is 'Distinguished from watchdog journalism ... [and] would lead to a solution' (Zhang, 2014, 8). In a comparative study of the news frames of CCTV-Africa and BBC, Vivien Marsh observed certain patterns that can be associated with the specific agenda of CCTV-Africa. Marsh has demonstrated that 'constructive' news produced by reporters of CCTV-Africa inclines to emphasise and support the opinions of local authorities, and overall the Chinese English-language media shows a tendency of helping to promote stability in local African societies (Marsh, 2016). Marsh concluded that 'CCTV's tendency to prioritise

officials and government pronouncements ... [favours] a dialogue of the elite rather than providing a truly alternative perspective' (Marsh 2016, 184).

In addition, the optimistic attitude of CCTV-Africa regarding the social development of local societies is welcomed both by neoliberal reformers in China who are seeking opportunities abroad to speed up the economic transition of China from Semi-Periphery to Centre and African elites who long to get rid of their status as third world countries and follow China's path to economic success. Mutual consent in Africa-China cooperation is therefore manufactured by the harmony of interest of compatible goals. The ambassador of Zimbabwe in Beijing, Paul Chikawa, has expressed his dislike of the BBC's documentary *The Chinese are Coming* at a Chinese-African official event (a private workshop in Beijing funded by the Gates Foundation and supported by the Chinese government). He contended that the negative construct set up by that documentary undermined the harmonious and mutually beneficial cooperation between the two countries, and further emphasised that 'China and Africa should talk to each other directly' (27 July 2016).

In summary, the agenda of CCTV-Africa follows the political and economic ambitions of China in Africa to promote a new discourse of encouraging entrepreneurship, focusing on economic and social development and highlighting the opinions of political and business elites that are defined as the 'central' population of their countries. This discourse resonates with the ideology of Deng Xiaoping that would, 'keep economic development as the central task and solve problems cropping up on our way forward through development' (Hu, 2012). Whether in the area of journalistic practices or social development, CCTV-Africa's endeavour is to plough an alternative new path for Africa-China cooperation. It is believed by governmental officials from both sides that such cooperation is bringing the continent of Africa new opportunities that were not available previously from other major countries of the West (Wang, 2018). But to understand how exactly such messages are being decoded by local African audiences remains as yet not analysed and this is the significant contribution this research aims to provide.

### **Investigating decoding: Hypothesis and method**

In his well-known book *Nationwide Audience* (1980), David Morley conducted an exemplary study of the audience reception of news programme *Nationwide* following Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model. In contrast to Morley's work (which provides a panorama of various audience types) this study focuses on a group of African students studying in China as one potential elite target audience of CCTV-Africa. Instead of drawing a general picture about audience reception from different social backgrounds, this study focuses specifically on African students in China and the elements influential in the process of their reception as they were formed – elements such as gender, scholarship, degree subject and so on.

### **Encoded messages**

In order to base the interviews on media content so that the interviewees could elaborate their opinions explicitly through their interpretation of the news, the researcher provided the interviewees each with two news videos to watch, downloaded from the Africa Live section of CCTV's website. Every interviewee was shown videos from his or her home country. There were 36 videos in all, dating from May to July 2016, each lasting on average 2 minutes 15 seconds. Thirty four of them were news reports and the other two were features, for countries for which no news reports were available. To provide each interviewee with a balanced impression of CCTV-Africa, the two feature videos consisted of one relatively negative topic and one relatively positive topic, as assessed by the researcher.

The author examined each CCTV-Africa video for the presence of the frames shown in **Table 1**. Definitions of news frames are based on the studies of Vivien Marsh (2016) following the work of Semetko & Valkenburg (2000) on frames of political news, and Xin Zhao & Yu Xiang (forthcoming) on the subject of CCTV in Africa and the journalistic approach of China's outbound media. The encoded messages of CCTV-Africa are reflected in the news frames deployed. Most videos contained more than one frame. The analysis is qualitative and therefore the figures shown in **Table 2** are simply indicative of the relative prevalence of frames.

As we see from the above tables, the encoded messages of CCTV-Africa can be manifested in six frames which are 'Conflict (cause-oriented)', 'Conflict (solution-oriented)', 'Social Stability', 'Human Interest', 'Economic Development' and 'China's Positive Involvement in African countries'. Questions regarding how viewers understood the news content following these frames and how they thought such narratives reflected the agenda of CCTV-Africa and also China in Africa were asked by the researcher during the interviews (detailed questions are to be found in Appendix). As we can see from **Table 2**, the frames of 'China's positive involvement' and 'economic development' occupy a significant proportion of the news coverage of positive topics. Such a finding resonates with the point made in the last section. Therefore, the hypothesis of this research is that: conditioned by their personal interests in the relationships promoted between China and African countries, African students studying in China

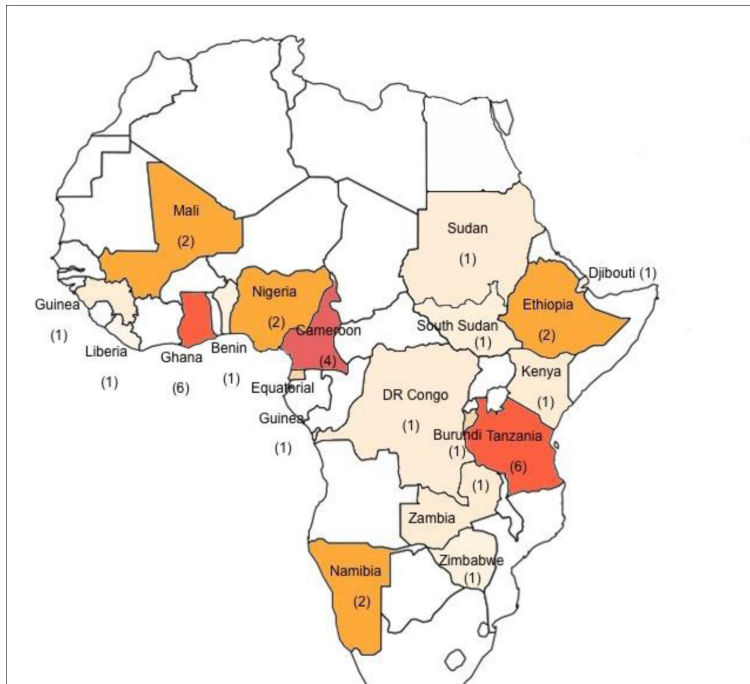
**Table 1:** News Frames Deployed by CCTV-Africa.

News Frames	Definitions
Conflict (cause-oriented)	Reference made to the cause of a conflict between different parties on a problem or issue.
Conflict (solution-oriented)	Reference made to the solution to a conflict between different parties on a problem or issue.
Social Stability	Reference made to issues related to the stability of a society, a government or a country.
Human Interest	Human angle of covering the individual perceptions and effects of certain issues.
Economic Development	Reference made to the growing development of local economy in African countries.
China's Positive Involvement in African countries	Reference made to the involvement of China which contributes to the positive solution or result.

**Table 2:** Proportions of Different Frames used by CCTV-Africa.

Overall Frames (84)	Positive Topics (43)	Negative Topics (41)
Human Interest (27%)	Economic Development (30%)	Conflict (cause) (34%)
Conflict (cause) (17%)	Human Interest (23%)	Human Interest (32%)
Economic Development (15%)	China's Positive Involvement in African Countries (21%)	Conflict (solution) (24%)
Social Stability (15%)	Social Stability (21%)	Social Stability (10%)
Conflict (solution) (14%)	Conflict (solution) (5%)	Economic Development (0%)
China's Positive Involvement in African countries (11%)	Conflict (cause) (0%)	China's Positive Involvement in African Countries (0%)





**Figure 1:** Distribution of interviewees' nationalities.

tend to follow the dominant codes of CCTV-Africa. Even though there are indeed interviewees who decode the messages of CCTV-Africa in oppositional positions, they are more likely to face contradictions if constructively projecting their dissenting opinions within the 'reality' of their daily lives.

### **In-depth individual interview**

The qualitative research method deployed by this research was the in-depth individual interview. This method – interviewing – is the most common qualitative research method. 'In qualitative research interviewing, the researcher wants rich, detailed answers' (Bryman, 2012, 470). In-depth interviewing is therefore ideal for digging into the deeper and complicated subjective consciousness of interviewees. The focused interview is designed 'to determine responses to particular communication ... which have been previously analysed by the investigator' and crucially provides a means of focusing on 'the subjective experiences of persons exposed to the pre-analysed situation in an effort to ascertain their definition of the situation' (Morley, 1980, 32–33). The case study of CCTV-Africa and the selection of a group of students exclusively form a focused topic. African students' subjective interpretation of the media content of CCTV-Africa is, therefore, the central outcome that this field research is seeking.

Thirty-eight interviewees were from 19 different African countries (**Figure 1**). All of the interviewees were studying in China at bachelor, masters or doctoral level. As an international student in China, almost every African student is provided with a television with access to an international news channel in his or her en-suite dormitory. CCTV-Africa's daily news programme on the English channel CCTV-News was scheduled at 0100 Beijing time. Some interviewees found the broadcasting time suited their lifestyle as they usually slept quite late and liked to watch news about their own countries before going to bed. Others preferred to acquire news from phone applications although they found this difficult as many foreign news

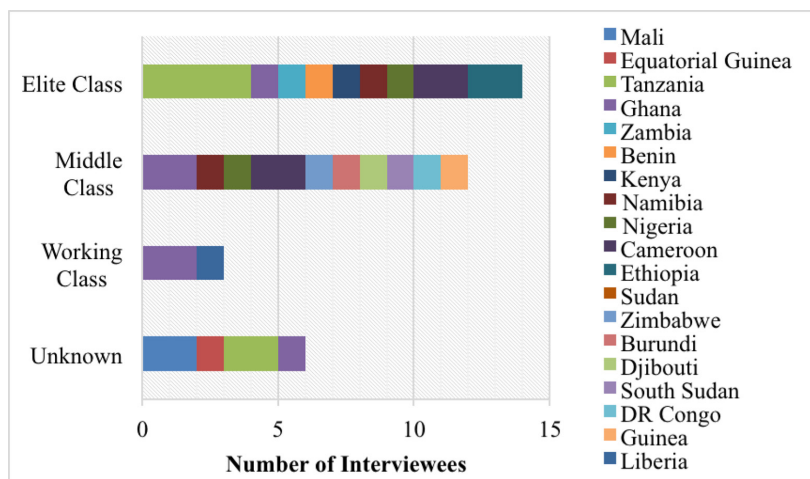
sources are banned in China. Each interview lasted between 40 and 120 minutes. Interviews were conducted in locations familiar to the interviewees (campus café, study room, dormitory hall and so on). All interviewees watched the videos before the interviews started.

### The sampling of African students in China as an audience of CCTV-Africa

As introduced in the earlier sections, the target audience of CCTV-Africa is transnational elite classes or, according to the terminology of Galtung (1971, 84), the central people of their countries. Such an orientation is conditioned by CCTV-Africa's agenda as state media representing the interests of multilateral governmental and business elites. Also, according to the theories of development and modernisation paradigm of international communication studies, the spread of ideas for social changes in developing countries is facilitated by both education (literacy) and increased media exposure. African students in China are not only receiving Chinese knowledge but also are more likely to be exposed to Chinese media content. It is widely believed that 'within the next couple of years, many of these (African) graduates are going to be in positions of power and influence' (Allison, 2013). As the future elites of their countries, African students who are studying in China satisfy every requirement for a target audience of CCTV-Africa: well educated and part of current or potential governmental elites. As shown in **Figure 2**, 37 per cent of interviewees recognised themselves as elites of their countries and 31 per cent saw themselves as middle class members. Their roles as future African leaders also means that they are a 'captive' future audience for CCTV and China's cultural messages. According to the survey conducted by Xiang in 2014, 72 per cent of African participants held positive attitudes towards CCTV-News and 80 per cent of them thought very positively about the image of China on CCTV-News; no African students had very negative views of CCTV-News and the image of China (2018, 151). To some extent, this illustrates the ideological preferences of this group of people who choose China as the object of their study and half of whom were funded by scholarship provided by Chinese official institutions (see **Table 3**).

### Polynary reception of African students in China

The findings of individual interviews display a complicated and diverse panorama of African audiences' reception of CCTV-Africa news content. Based on the assumption that the ideological agenda of CCTV-Africa is to promote audiences' agreement towards economic development

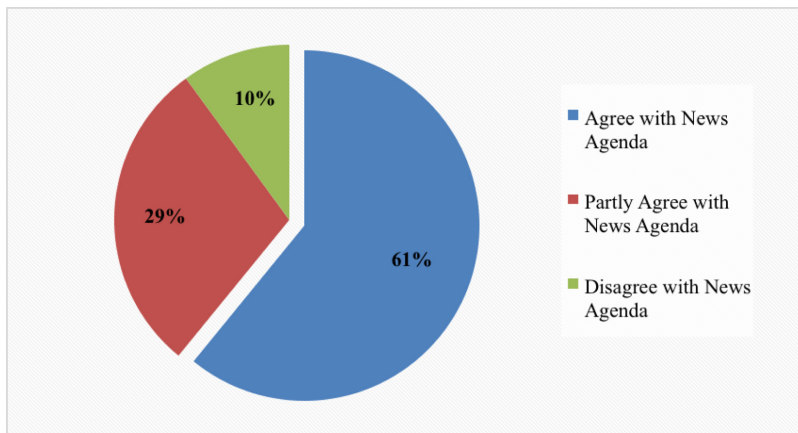


**Figure 2:** Social Classes of Interviewees (Self-Recognition).



**Table 3:** Information about the 38 Interviewees for this Research.

<b>Gender</b>	Male (24 Interviewees)	Female (14 Interviewees)	
<b>Education in China</b>	Bachelor's Degree (21 Interviewees)	Master's Degree (15 Interviewees)	Doctoral Degree (2 Interviewees)
<b>Funding Sources</b>	Chinese Government (18 Interviewees)	African Government (1 Interviewees)	Self-Funded (19 Interviewees)
<b>Watching Habit</b>	Regular Audience (12 Interviewees)	Non-Regular Audience (26 Interviewees)	



**Figure 3:** Different Reception of Interviewees of CCTV-Africa.

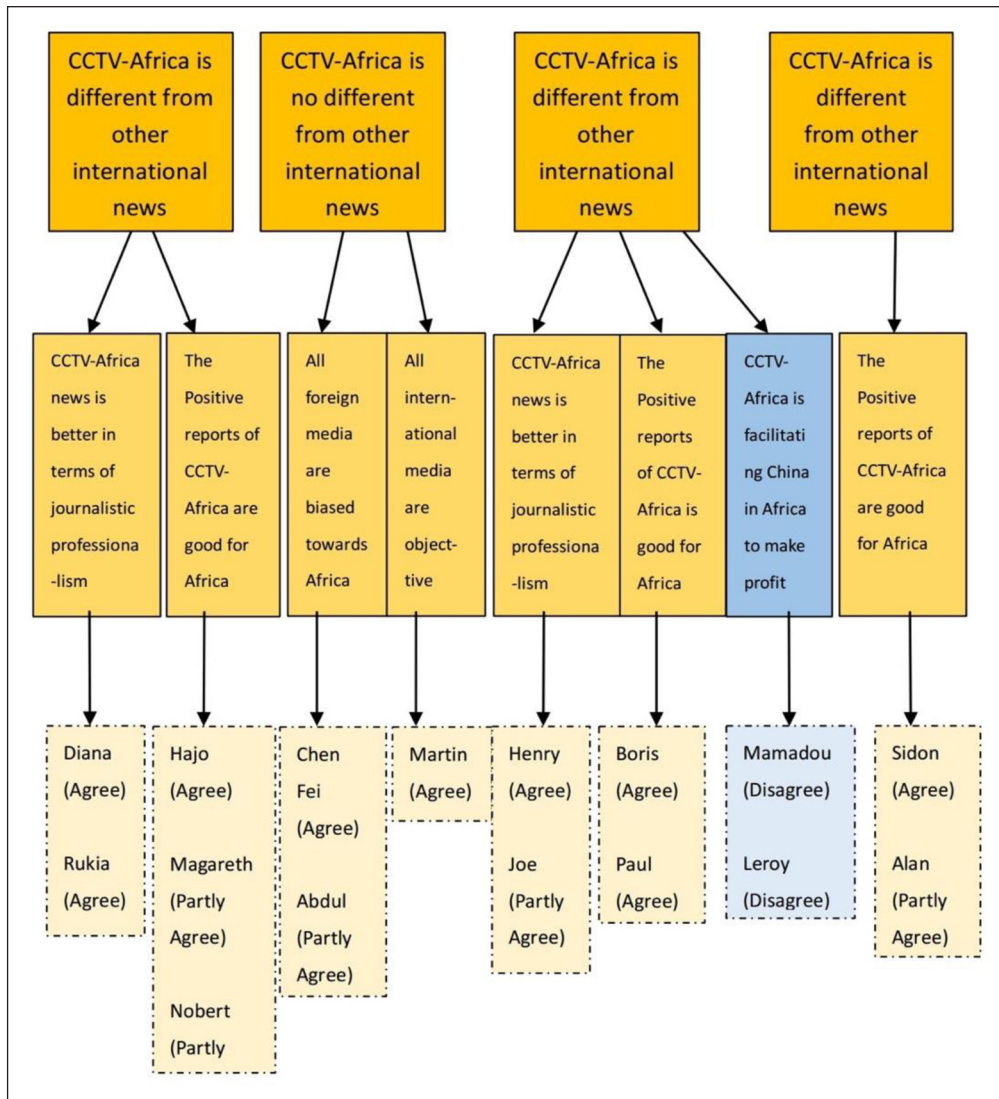
in local societies, interviewees of this research were expected to accept (on the whole) the dominant codes of this news. However, due to variables amongst the interviewees, such as nationality, degree subject, watching habits, previous knowledge of Africa-China relations and so on, the actual communication messages of CCTV-Africa as they delivered such an ideological agenda aroused a variety of responses amongst the audience from such different backgrounds.

The interviewees' reception of this research was considered in three categories. Based on Stuart Hall's three major decoding positions for audiences – dominant, negotiated and oppositional – the types of reception of this research categorised were 'agree,' 'partly agree' and 'disagree.' Sometimes it was complicated to draw a clear boundary between such different receptions. In some cases, the audiences' perception of the ideological agenda of CCTV-Africa could only be defined according to subtle differences of wording, speaking tone even facial expressions. Therefore, instead of mechanically defining and categorizing the audience's reception according to rigid standards, the typology deployed in this research to analyse the qualitative results of interviews mainly aims to depict a general view of the overall attitude and understanding of the audience.

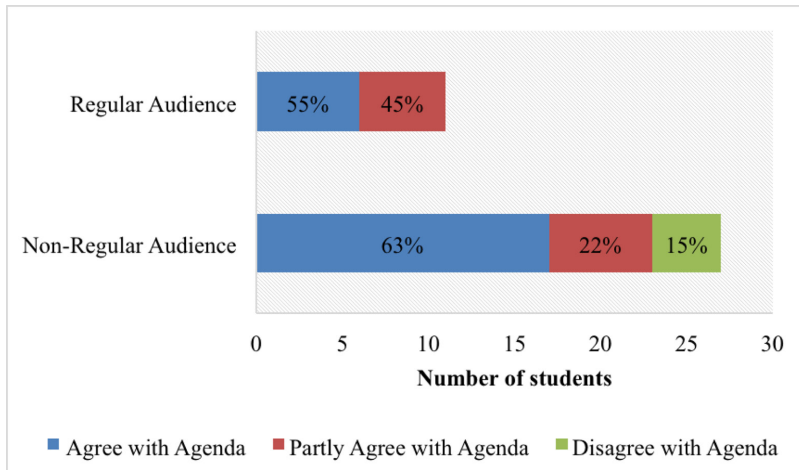
As indicated in **Figure 3**, about 61 per cent of interviewees agree with the ideological agenda that they observed from CCTV-Africa news. Twenty-nine per cent of interviewees in this study have a negotiated understanding of the news which means that they partly agree with the agenda they read or see from the news. Only 10 per cent of audiences held an oppositional perception against the values promoted by the news of CCTV-Africa. For the specific group of African students interviewed for this research, the dominant codes of CCTV-Africa promoting the agenda of prioritising economic growth proved to be persuasive. But this by

no means implies that their reception of CCTV-Africa was homogenized. They held different opinions regarding different issues. For example, as indicated in the summarised results of **Figure 4**, interviewees offered discursive responses to questions such as ‘does CCTV-Africa report news differently from other international media?’ and ‘what do you think about such difference?’

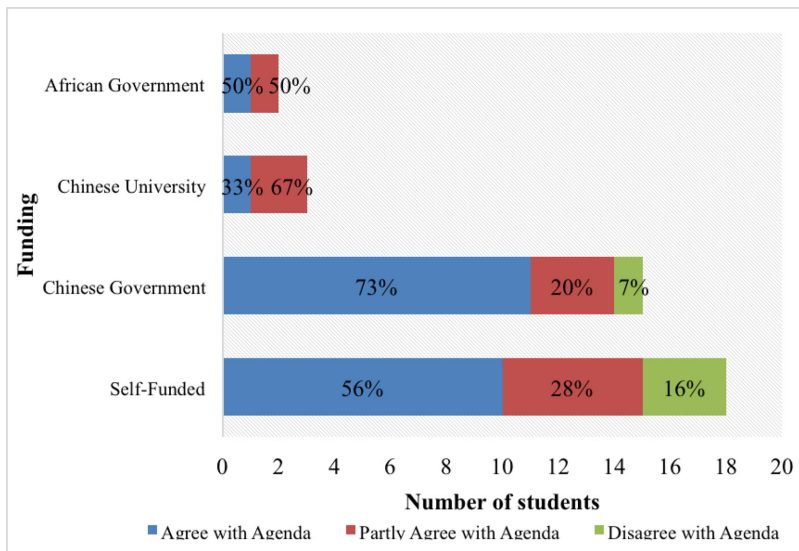
Such diverse understandings are underpinned by reasons such as the interviewees’ watching habits (regular or non-regular), funding source for their study and so on and so forth. As shown in **Figures 5** and **6**, we can see that interviewees who represent a regular audience are more likely to have negotiated decoding compared with a non-regular audience, and the group of self-funded students has a bigger proportion of dissenting audiences of CCTV-Africa than other groups. However, it is common sense to most of them that economic growth is vital to the development of their countries and China is a good example of an ex-peripheral



**Figure 4:** Opinions of Interviewees on Journalism of CCTV-Africa.



**Figure 5:** Student interviewees' responses to CCTV news agenda, stratified by watching habits.



**Figure 6:** Student interviewees' responses to CCTV news agenda, stratified by funding source.

country for them to learn from. Few dissident opinions (on issues such as neoliberal economic growth leading to social inequality and China's agenda in Africa) indeed emerged during the interviews. The author chose not to focus on the non-oppositional responses because dissident and critical opinions 'create room for social change' (Xiang, 2017b, 127). Furthermore, the articulation of alternative ideas during the process of mass communication is of great significance to the empowerment of marginal voices and the development of social progress. The oppositional responses were especially striking because the linguistic and connotative approach of CCTV-Africa is designed, as was observed in this research, not to provoke any negative feelings: in addition to which, African students in China enjoy privileges and scholarships.

It is hoped that the following analysis on the interviews with interviewees who disagreed with the agenda of CCTV-Africa can shed a light on how the autonomy of such an audience interacts within the grander dominant ideological structure of international media.

### The paradox of oppositional decoding

Amongst all the 38 interviewees who participated in this research, four people<sup>1</sup> expressed dissenting opinions about the agenda of the news that they watched for the interviews as indicated in **Table 4**. As far as these four interviewees are concerned, they not only disagreed with the narratives of the news but were also sceptical about the fundamental programme of the activities of China in Africa as manifested in the approach of CCTV-Africa news. Three out of four interviewees were self-funded students and all of them represented a non-regular audience of CCTV-Africa. Their answers to the questions asked by the researcher were dissected and analysed following the news frames deployed by CCTV-Africa as summarised in **Table 1**. Following subsections<sup>2</sup> display their responses re-categorised by the researcher in order to answer the research parameters of this study.

#### Leroy from Zimbabwe and his friend (30<sup>th</sup> May 2016): Suspicious involvement of China in Africa packaged as westernised news

To Leroy and his friend,<sup>3</sup> the 'cons' of China's involvement in the domestic issue in Africa outweighed the 'pros'. One of the two videos shown to them about an investigation into the diamond trade in Zimbabwe aroused strong responses in regard to the participation of Chinese companies in Zimbabwe. Leroy and his friend expressed a sceptical opinion on the 'improper' involvement of China:

... that's two hundred million dollars' diamonds disappeared. And they (the local government) just let it happen. China must have something to do with it.

The title of the news on CCTV-Africa was 'Zimbabwe Diamond Mining: Anjin investments denies smuggling diamonds to China'. Leroy and his friend noticed that instead of using the words 'diamond theft', CCTV-Africa used a rather neutral term 'diamond trade', which clearly showed the stance of the Chinese government on this matter. Leroy said that many local media in Zimbabwe bluntly accused China of salting away the diamonds when the government of Zimbabwe decided to nationalise the diamond company of Anjin, which previously was a joint venture of Chinese, and Zimbabwe private companies. The positive tone of CCTV-Africa not only did not change Leroy's opinion, but also reinforced his suspicion of the agenda of China in Africa as CCTV-Africa as state media of central government.

After watching another news video about the economic growth in Zimbabwe, Leroy didn't change his perspective on CCTV-Africa. To Leroy, the reporting style of CCTV-Africa was no different from other western media that he has watched. But, at the same time, Leroy was also confused with the westernised style of CCTV-Africa. It seemed an unsuccessful approach

**Table 4:** Four Interviewees Espousing Oppositional Decoding.

Name	Age	Gender	Nationality	Diploma	Funding	Habit	Location
Mamadou	26	Male	Guinea	Master's Degree	Chinese Institute	Non-Regular Audience	Harbin, China
Vanessa	21	Female	DR Congo	Bachelor's Degree	Self-Funded	Non-Regular Audience	Tianjin, China
Leroy	23	Male	Zimbabwe	Bachelor's Degree	Self-Funded	Non-Regular Audience	Tianjin, China
Leroy's friend	20+	Female	Uncertain <sup>3</sup>	Bachelor's Degree	Self-Funded	Non-Regular Audience	Tianjin, China

to Leroy for a Chinese media with its own diplomatic mission to report international news in a Western tone:

It (the reporting style) is very westernised ...Why [are] all the presenters non-Chinese? If they want to express the Chinese opinion, the westernised style is definitely not helping.

Besides the murky diamond case of Anjin, Leroy and his friend had also talked about many troubling instances of Chinese investment in African countries. They did not show the supportive attitudes towards Africa-China cooperation, which were observed in many other interviewees. But their decisions to study in China make their dissenting attitudes in context quite interesting to reconsider.

**Vanessa from DR Congo (30<sup>th</sup> May 2016): Problematic governmental cooperation but inspiring cultural tradition**

When the interview was conducted, Democratic Republic of Congo (where Vanessa originally came from) was being badly affected by a series of unrest in the country. The news of CCTV-Africa concerning DR Congo had negative headlines.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in contrast to Mamadou, Vanessa didn't recognise differences of reporting style between CCTV-Africa and other foreign media in Africa. But she did notice that compared to other media reports she watched on the issue about the unrest, CCTV-Africa seemed reluctant to present the whole truth:

... the reality is much worse than what the news reported.

The gentle approach of CCTV-Africa to report negative topics (by leaving out disturbing pictures and information) resonates with its general agenda of constructing an investment-friendly image for African countries. Additionally, Vanessa also observed another feature of CCTV-Africa's media policy, which has been to target an elite audience. Although she was not a regular audience of CCTV-Africa, she seemed fully aware of how the agenda of this Chinese media works. It was obvious to her that the target audience for CCTV-Africa were the elite classes in local societies:

... given the fact that they (elite and middle classes) are the only ones watching. That's their agenda (to report news they care about instead of the public). They are the only ones who have access to it. It makes sense.

It is noticeable in **Table 2** that for news on positive topics, a major proportion of the news frame deployed is the 'economic development' frame. The positive reporting style of CCTV-Africa as a strategic policy to promote China in Africa is also welcomed by local African countries. Vanessa agreed that her government prefers positive reports about DR Congo rather than negative ones because:

if they (media) show the real deep stuff, that gives them (the government) a bad image, but that would be worse.

But people's preference for presenting a good image of their countries is more than just connected to political intentions. Vanessa thought that the preference to watch good reports about one's own country is a common thing for anyone who is, more or less, patriotic:

Anyone who is smart and has seen any news that is reported about the country would be happy to see they are reporting something positive, because 99% of the news about Congo is negative ... when they show the positive parts, especially [about] financial [development], my country [as] one of the richest countries in resources attracts investors.

But when considering how such economic growth pushed by foreign investment is really contributing to the benefits of ordinary people, Vanessa had a critical opinion about the 'human interest' and 'China's positive involvement' frames of CCTV-Africa. She doubted that the investment of China in DR Congo and the bilateral cooperation was really helping her country develop as much as many Chinese and African politicians had promised:

Chinese people go to our country. They come with their own food, with their own plants, with their own everything. They come with their own workers, especially for the lower classes. [Therefore], even if the economy is seemingly rising, right now there is serious financial crisis.

Vanessa was not only critical of the journalistic approach of CCTV-Africa when reporting the violent clashes between protesters and police in DR Congo at the end of May in 2016, but also doubtful about the economic alignment between Congolese and Chinese elite classes. In the opinion of Vanessa, the monetary aid and the wealth created by multilateral economic cooperation were more beneficial to certain groups of people than the general public:

[Africa-China cooperation] is a two-edged knife. Not everyone grips the benefit. It's good only for certain people ... Even if it does bring on money, the population would never get to see. Only the people in the elite class would be able to get access to it ... None of working classes gets it.

However, Vanessa was also supportive of DR Congo-China economic cooperation. When asked about how to rationalise her seemingly contradictory perceptions about China and China in Africa, Vanessa explained:

... you have to weigh the pros and cons (of dealing with China). When you invest into something, you have to see what the benefits are.

Although as a Congolese student studying medicine at Chinese University, Vanessa had encountered many cultural shocks she still believed that certain cultural characteristics of China showed a strong capability of resilience, which had been key to the revival of its civilisation:

One thing I admire about China is the unity among the people. Back home, this tribe is fighting against that tribe, this people want to kill that people. [If I'm the boss], you are my relatives and friend, you get employed ... The second thing I think China is smart and invests in many things.

**Mamadou from Guinea (27 May 2016): Doubt about China in Africa, no doubt about 'China Model'**

Mamadou was one of the interviewees who thought that the journalistic approach of CCTV-Africa was different to the other international media that he was familiar with. Mamadou pointed out the false picture painted by other foreign media in Africa saying that:



Sometimes what they say is just bullshit. So, they usually focus on the negative African news and how to try to help us but not doing it ... That's why I don't believe the news that the media give me.

It was clear as fact to Mamadou that the agenda of CCTV-Africa is to serve the interest of Chinese government in Africa. And he had a rather critical perspective on the narratives of CCTV-Africa:

...there is an agenda [of CCTV-Africa]. They have a plan. Somebody come up in that documentary ... the difficulty the Chinese people are facing in Africa. It's the bad side. It's quite interesting. If it only shows the positive side, you can't enjoy it. But if you are an open-minded person, you will find it critical and you can have some critics about it.

Despite the above Mamadou was conscious of CCTV-Africa's agenda to promote China's image in Africa and for him it was worth remarking that the news of CCTV-Africa was more solution-oriented when reporting social conflicts:

The way they (CCTV-Africa) report. They come to Africa with aides from China. If there is a problem, they bring the solution. China is proposing in order to help those countries. I think this is what happening now, Chinese companies are everywhere. They have cooperation with the governments.

Although encouraged by the positive tone of CCTV-Africa news, the affirmative opinions of Mamadou on Guinea-China cooperation were not entirely optimistic. He had concerns about the growing expansion of China in Africa as well:

I really appreciate the help we get from the government, and Chinese officials. But there is one thing that what's going to be the payback? What are they expecting from us in the future after they help us? When we talk about this we usually think about the past when the French came into my country, they said that they will help you guys, they do everything, like teaching us language. But at the end of the day, till today, we want to free from these people. They exploited us in types of ways. They come to our country to exploit our gold. Our labour is cheap the goods is cheap. I just hope China won't do the same thing.

Such sceptical concerns common in local African societies were noticed in the interviews with many other interviewees of this research. This is surely due to the long colonial history of the continent. Mamadou disliked how Western countries have behaved in Africa since assistance from them has always been attached to heavy paybacks:

Nobody will ask for help when they don't need ... [they] only ask for help when they really need. At that moment, when we get help, we were happy. But after that ... sad. It's a bad process. Just like a loop. Same thing happens on and on.

On the other hand, concerns were aroused by certain controversial behaviours of Chinese companies in African countries. As far as Guinea is concerned, Mamadou feared that some of the negative stories of China in other African countries could also be occurring in his motherland:

If the government itself wants a win-win, while some officials just want their own interests, there can be bribe. The Chinese officials can pay the money to get the con-

tracts and do whatever they want to do ... it's happening. I know some proof about it. That's how Africa works ... Some Chinese companies in your country give a lot of bribes. I know a lot about this in Sudan and Nigeria. It was damage on environment do oil exploitation, so people protested it.

Mamadou said that he inherited his critical thinking from his father who used to be an independent journalist in Guinea and is obsessed with Confucianism. Therefore, Mamadou always had alternative opinions about foreign investment in his country. But his father told him to come to China to study because his father and many other Guinean people believed that the development model of China in the past three decades was the most practical example for them to follow:

I think we need to follow this [China] model. China comes from nothing. Decades ago, China and Africa were of the same level ... My dad always tells me whenever I come home that wherever you go, all the countries you been, always watch and try to imitate. And he always tells me that China's develop model is a good example.

To Mamadou, China brings solutions to certain economic problems of his countries. Some of the solutions may not be ethical and entirely appropriate. But he did not doubt the importance of cooperating with China. Mamadou just hoped that the 'Chinese and my government can work on ethical basis ... if both sides are unethical, the outcome will be something bad.' Yet it remains an unsolved puzzle to him how Africa-China multilateral cooperation that is obeying the neoliberal regulations of the global market can shake off the hegemonic influence of those traditional economic powers.

### **Conclusion: Oppositional decoding without guarantee**

As the above interviews have shown, there exists a contradiction between the viewers' understandings of the agenda of CCTV-Africa and the development path of the China Model. Especially to the audiences of oppositional decoding, the optimistic and positive tone of CCTV-Africa when reporting certain topics makes them sceptical about the agenda of Chinese media in Africa. On the one hand, they suspect that the economic penetration of China into Africa is another round of the 'scramble for Africa'. Although they blame their local governments for such negative consequences, they don't see Africa-China cooperation is transforming the exploited status of Africa in the global order. On the other hand, interviewees do believe the development model of China an alternative approach for their own country to excel in the global economic system. The contradiction can be further diagnosed in respect of their troubled opinions about how to rationalise the behaviour of China in Africa and consider the kind of future that their own countries are heading towards.

Mamadou expressed his doubt about external aid received from either China or the previous coloniser France and his concern is reasonable as China's economic growth was fostered by the global system framed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank that have prioritised the interests of dominant western countries. Although discussions on the nature of China's development model and its challenge to Western hegemony are wide-ranging and ever-growing (Bell, 2015; Horesh and Kean, 2018), the media practice of Chinese media in Africa is at least trying to build up a neoliberalist and vibrant image of fast developing African countries, which helps to promote its economic status in the world. To the interviewees of this study, it seems that the dominant global hierarchy and its structures are unlikely to be overthrown. Compared to the more distant idea of a fairer global system, it is more pragmatic

for these interviewees to imagine their countries becoming another emerging economy within the current structure.

The interviewees of oppositional decoding were a non-regular audience of CCTV-Africa and based their understanding about transnational media and fragmented knowledge about CCTV-Africa and the news videos shown to them on their common sense. Audiences' analysis of the ideological agenda of a news programme, as indicated in this case, is constituted out of a very complicated process. During this process, the role of media is incorporated into the whole mechanism of societal structures that shape the audience's knowledge about the objective environment. Therefore, the oppositional decoding of audiences of media content is to some extent their own ideological resistance against the unsatisfying world of reality. However, the interviewees' contradictory understandings of news and reality could be related to the more general failed articulation of resistant consciousness in the current 'post-truth' era.

The autonomy of active audience and its connection to realistic media practices are limited by the transnational allied elite groups through their institutional policies and regulations. Transnational audiences encounter the dominant ideologies of their local social context and also external pressures resonating with those ideologies. South-south cooperation and interactions are growing increasingly strong alongside the escalated expansion of globalisation. The old conundrum about globalisation, asked repeatedly by many scholars – whether it is a process that frees or constrains the subjectivities of people – is once again brought up in the case of China-to-Africa media flow. This paper provides a structural perspective to think about how to answer this question based on the specificity of people's oppositional decoding of CCTV in Africa. As the structural dynamics between Africa and China are still at an early phase yet to be thoroughly defined, transnational audiences' oppositional decoding of CCTV-Africa as the foundation for any alternative ideology is also without guarantee.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The names of the interviewees shown in this study were supplied by the interviewees themselves without further validation by the researcher. Consent was obtained by the author to use their names in this research.
- <sup>2</sup> In order to preserve the originality of the opinions of the viewers to the maximum degree, most of the interviewees are quoted directly with no grammatical changes.
- <sup>3</sup> Leroy's friend joined the interview voluntarily but did not clarify her name, nationality or age with the researcher except to confirm that she was from an African country and was studying Business and Commerce in China for a Bachelor's Degree.
- <sup>4</sup> Due to the fact that CCTV-Africa was reporting on all African countries in general, not all stories from any one nation are covered. Therefore, some news clips selected were not well balanced. For example, in the cases of Benin and Burundi, the former had no negative news and the latter had no positive news during the period when the interviews were conducted.

## Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Interview Questions. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpsc.274.s1>

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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