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**CHINA** *local global*

# African Media Cultures and Chinese Public Relations Strategies in Kenya and Ethiopia

Hangwei Li and Yuan Wang



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## China Local/Global

China has become a global power, but there is too little debate about *how* this has happened and what it means. Many argue that China exports its developmental model and imposes it on other countries. But Chinese players also extend their influence by working through local actors and institutions while adapting and assimilating local and traditional forms, norms, and practices.

With a generous multiyear grant from the Ford Foundation, Carnegie has launched an innovative body of research on Chinese engagement strategies in seven regions of the world—Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, the Pacific, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Through a mix of research and strategic convening, this project explores these complex dynamics, including the ways Chinese firms are adapting to local labor laws in Latin America, Chinese banks and funds are exploring traditional Islamic financial and credit products in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, and Chinese actors are helping local workers upgrade their skills in Central Asia. These adaptive Chinese strategies that accommodate and work within local realities are mostly ignored by Western policymakers in particular.

Ultimately, the project aims to significantly broaden understanding and debate about China's role in the world and to generate innovative policy ideas. These could enable local players to better channel Chinese energies to support their societies and economies; provide lessons for Western engagement around the world, especially in developing countries; help China's own policy community learn from the diversity of Chinese experience; and potentially reduce frictions.

Evan A. Feigenbaum

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## Summary

This year marks the tenth anniversary of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This multibillion-dollar initiative funds roads, bridges, railways, seaports, airports, and other mega infrastructure projects, which are primarily constructed by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), also known as China's "national champions" in the international contracting industry. Increased attention has been paid to the changing involvement of host country actors (such as political patrons, elites, and institutions) and how they use the BRI to achieve their specific ends. But there is a dearth of qualitative evidence that illuminates whether and how the behavior of Chinese SOEs toward these host country actors has evolved over time. The media's framing of the BRI plays a significant role in shaping the public's understanding and attitudes toward China. Yet despite Chinese state media's expansion in the Global South and its continued efforts to "tell China's stories well,"<sup>1</sup> international scholars and journalists have stated that corporate communication in many Chinese SOEs operating in BRI countries has been relatively rudimentary and generally unresponsive. This has led to the image of a "silent China" against some accusations in international media.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the authors' years of fieldwork and research in Africa have revealed that Chinese SOEs' overseas operations and adaptations are more nuanced and complex than popular narratives suggest.

This policy paper focuses on the corporate communication strategies of three Chinese SOEs involved in two flagship BRI projects in Africa: the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) in Kenya, constructed by China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), and the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway (ADR) in Ethiopia, constructed by China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) and China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC). We explore the changes, or lack thereof, in the three Chinese SOEs' corporate communication strategies, specifically public relations (PR) strategies. We also examine whether and how these companies' PR strategies have evolved since the commencement of these projects in 2014, and whether their utilization of localized PR strategies is primarily motivated by business or political considerations.

Based on fieldwork observation and interviews, we argue that these companies have exhibited divergent paths. CRBC has learned and adapted corporate behaviors in Kenya, largely because of the presence of the host country's vibrant media environment and watchdog journalism, whereas CCECC and CREC have been less inclined to learn new ways of conducting outreach and PR in Ethiopia, largely because of the absence of naming and shaming by local media. In other words, Kenyan journalists have demonstrated greater journalistic agency by leveraging media norms that promote and facilitate criticism, allowing Kenyan news media to play a more active role in monitoring the railway project than their Ethiopian counterparts. This has, in turn, induced a shift in the corporate strategies of the Chinese SOE.

In sum, our comparative study suggests that Chinese SOEs' PR strategies in Africa are predominantly influenced by the media landscape and ecosystem of their host country. We therefore refute the notion of the "Chinisation of Africa"<sup>3</sup> and emphasize that African non-state actors, such as the media, can have a considerable influence in shaping certain behaviors of Chinese actors within the asymmetric China-Africa relationship. Our study contributes to the broader debate about Chinese SOEs' overseas learning and African agency, and it offers practical insights for both Chinese companies and African media houses.

## Introduction

The overseas expansion of Chinese companies, not least to Africa, has inspired a proliferation of research on the interactions between Chinese and host country actors, especially in the Global South.<sup>4</sup> Many of these studies have shown that host country actors can and do shape Chinese government policies and the behaviors of Chinese public and private actors. But most of this research has spotlighted the agency of leaders,<sup>5</sup> elites,<sup>6</sup> and bureaucrats.<sup>7</sup> Significantly less attention has been paid to how *non-state* actors in these countries shape the behaviors of Chinese counterparts. There has also been little documentation of how these Chinese actors' behavior has changed over time.

This paper explores how local media in two East African countries, Kenya and Ethiopia, have influenced Chinese SOEs' PR strategies. Public relations is "the management of communication between an organization and its publics."<sup>8</sup> This paper sheds light on three critical questions: First, how have Chinese SOEs' PR strategies evolved in East Africa? Second, which East African actors have influenced and even shaped these Chinese PR strategies, and what tools have they used to do so? Third, since Chinese SOEs do not just aim to make a profit but also function as policy arms of the Chinese state, is their learning and use of localized PR strategies motivated by business or political concerns?

Specifically, the paper investigates the evolving PR strategies used by Chinese contractors on a railway in Kenya and a railway in Ethiopia. These two projects have attracted extensive media attention since their initiation in 2014. The Kenyan railway was contracted to the state-owned CRBC. This SOE has demonstrated a steep learning curve in PR strategies over the project's lifespan. The Ethiopian railway was contracted to CCECC and CREC. But in these SOEs have shown no discernible evolution in their PR strategies since construction began in 2014. In short, one major Chinese state-owned contractor has learned and adapted in Kenya, while two other Chinese state-owned contractors have failed to do so in Ethiopia. What explains the diverging evolutionary trend of these companies' PR strategies? Why did CRBC become better socialized to Kenyan practices than its two counterparts in neighboring Ethiopia?

The answer lies in the distinct circumstances of these two very different African countries. In Kenya, there is considerable local journalistic agency, and the media landscape is considerably more vibrant, complex, and multifaceted. In Ethiopia, no such media conditions prevail. Context influences the degree and scope of Chinese adaptation. So, one lesson is that Chinese strategies and choices *can* be shaped in more open and contested local media environments. In the African context, these two comparative cases demonstrate that the PR strategies of Chinese SOEs in Africa are predominantly shaped by the mediascape of their host countries.

When the Chinese firm operating in Kenya was hit with negative news on issues such as operational transparency, racism, and damage that its operations may inflict on local businesses, CRBC made clear adjustments in an effort to gain a so-called social license to operate. Its adaptive practices have included engaging with local media, educating Chinese employees on anti-racism, and proactively mimicking the ways in which local and Western companies accustomed to dealing with Kenya's relatively freewheeling media have harnessed PR to buttress their local operations. CRBC has had to climb a steep learning curve in terms of its PR strategies; it began with a closed-door approach on certain issues, typical of the operations of many Chinese companies in China, but it later transitioned to a more open media strategy after frequent interactions with Kenyan media. The most reliable predictor of whether and how CRBC would adapt was whether and to what extent it was being named and shamed in the local Kenyan mediascape.

This has been enabled by Kenya's unique media environment. In Kenya, watchdog journalism—a term for local journalists' scrutiny of institutions of power, including government and business—is embedded into the landscape. Kenyan journalists critically report issues of public concern in a timely manner,<sup>9</sup> and this has a strong naming and shaming effect on local and multinational businesses. This brand of local journalism has forced CRBC to work with local media groups and socialize with Western and local companies.

But the Ethiopian story is different precisely because the country's media ecosystem is so different. There, journalism tends to emphasize the importance of an implicit media partnership with the government and foster harmony between the press and the authorities.<sup>10</sup> In this very different media context, journalistic reports about Chinese business operations in Ethiopia—nearly all of which are embraced by the Ethiopian government, not surprisingly—are less critical of Chinese behaviors, creating fewer incentives for the Chinese firms to adapt or learn new ways of conducting outreach and PR.

Ultimately, CRBC's adaptation in Kenya shows what happens when a Chinese firm becomes internationalized, operating in a context very different from the one it is accustomed to at home. Not all Chinese companies will adapt, of course. But content analysis of the Chinese company's public discourse in Kenya shows that these adaptations to local PR formats were motivated heavily by a desire to improve business prospects—a practical goal that required practical adaptations to local realities. The company did continue to frequently mention Chinese developmental and ideological concepts in its PR, such as “Chinese Technical Standards” (中国标准) and the “Mombasa-Nairobi Model” (蒙内模式), but these aimed primarily to target a domestic Chinese audience to justify the company's overseas success, rather than to cultivate local Kenyan or international audiences. None of these Chinese concepts have been strongly received in Kenya nor were they intended to be adopted by host countries. And this was the case in Ethiopia too. There, references to the “Addis-Djibouti

Model” (亚吉模式) and “Luban Workshop” (鲁班工坊), CCECC’s initiative to promote Chinese vocational training, can be shown clearly to be directed at audiences in China, not at locals.

Both railways are flagship projects of the BRI, financed by loans from the Export-Import (EXIM) Bank of China and built and initially operated and maintained by the same Chinese SOEs that did the construction. Construction on both projects began in 2014; 2019 marked the completion of SGR Phase 2A in Kenya, the end of the authors’ fieldwork in Africa, and the start of the Ethiopian political crisis. The analysis below is based on over one hundred in-depth interviews with Kenyan and Ethiopian journalists and media managers, host country government employees of different levels, representatives from the three Chinese SOEs on the railway projects, and local civil society groups. The interviews took place primarily in Kenya, Ethiopia, and China in 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

The highly salient Chinese-sponsored SGR project in Kenya has, since the commencement of construction in 2014, attracted the media’s spotlight. The media attention reached its height during the 2017 Kenyan general election campaign. The SGR is the largest and most expensive infrastructure project in Kenya since the country won its independence from Great Britain in 1963, and it is symbolically resonant of that independence because it runs parallel to the dilapidated colonial meter-gauge railway.

The ADR, like its counterpart in Kenya, is a project of significant political and economic importance for Ethiopia. Prior to the escalation of the country’s political crisis in 2019, the ADR project had been a government priority to connect the landlocked country to the Port of Djibouti and prepare for the country’s industrialization. It therefore became a priority project in Ethiopia’s Growth and Transformation Plan I, the country’s five-year development strategy.<sup>11</sup> Despite the political and economic salience of the project, Ethiopian media reports on the railway project have been relatively quiet and positive. The construction and initial operation of the ADR involves two Chinese SOEs: CREC and CCECC. The railway was CREC’s second project in Ethiopia (the first being the Addis Ababa Light Rail Transit system), while it was the market entry project for CCECC in Ethiopia. CCECC has extensive overseas experience and has few domestic projects left in China; CREC’s projects, on the other hand, mainly rely on the Chinese domestic market. Table 1 presents the detailed information for both projects.

**Table 1. Project Information Regarding the Kenyan SGR and Ethiopian ADR**

Project/ item of comparison	Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway (SGR)	Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway (ADR)
Contract amount	\$3.804 billion	\$3.4 billion
Funding agency	The Government of the Republic of Kenya (15 percent); The Export-Import Bank of China provided loans for the Kenyan government (85 percent)	EXIM Bank of China provided a \$2.94 billion commercial loan; the rest is provided by funding from the government of Ethiopia
Client	Kenya Railway Corporation	Ethiopian Railway Corporation
Engineering, procurement, and construction contractor	China Road and Bridges Corporation (CRBC)	China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) and China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC)
Characteristics	480 kilometers in length; single-track non-electric SGR from Mombasa to Nairobi (phase 1) and Naivasha (phase 2A); travel speed at up to 80 kilometers per hour (freight) and up to 120 kilometers per hour (passenger)	750 kilometers in length; single-track electric SGR from Port of Djibouti to Addis Ababa; travel speed at 80 kilometers per hour (freight) and 120 kilometers per hour (passenger)
Date of construction commencement	December 2014	December 2012
Date of inauguration	May 2017 (phase 1), October 2019 (phase 2A)	October 2016 in Addis Ababa (operation started January 2018)

*Source: Authors' composition based on information from CRBC's SGR corporate social responsibility reports, interviews, and media reports.*

The next two sections present detailed case studies on Kenya and Ethiopia, exploring how the contractor firms interacted with local media groups and the distinctive media ecosystems of each country. These sections examine how Chinese companies develop or maintain their PR strategies. The following section summarizes these two cases and discusses whether the companies learned from local media forms and practices and the extent to which that learning may represent a step toward the internationalization of Chinese SOEs. A concluding section offers some implications of these African experiences for other countries.

## CRBC's Learning of Public Relations Strategies in Kenya

Kenya's media landscape features pluralism and hyper-commercialism; the local media are frequently termed representatives of a form of watchdog journalism. Despite incessant assaults on press freedom, the Kenyan media industry is widely viewed as vibrant, well-developed, and fast-growing.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the country's media is highly competitive and diverse, with over one hundred FM radio stations, more than sixty free-to-view TV stations, and copious newspapers and magazines. The most influential players are the state-owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and three private multimedia organizations: the Nation Group, the Standard Group, and the Royal Media Services. The *Daily Nation* and the *Standard*, owned by the Nation Group and the Standard Group respectively, dominate Kenyan newspaper readership at a collective 88.9 percent.<sup>13</sup> Other local media outlets, such as the People Daily, Citizen TV, and Capital FM, also play active roles.

The media landscape in Kenya is especially characterized by hyper-commercialization and commodification of news, which have led to *tabloidization*, which is often “sensational, sometimes skeptical, sometimes moralistically earnest. . . [and] populist.”<sup>14</sup> The University of Hamburg's Judith Lohner and her collaborators have described Kenyan journalism culture as being somewhat ambivalent, “switching between critical and concordant, clientelist reporting.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite criticism that Kenyan journalists and media have been plagued by credibility problems due to numerous malpractices, such as formulaic sensationalism and frivolous entertainment, watchdog journalism is still viewed as one of the most influential journalistic norms in the country.<sup>16</sup> For instance, a national survey of 504 Kenyan journalists found that 53.7 percent of respondents indicated the most important role of their work is the watchdog role (relating either to government or to business elites).<sup>17</sup> They aspire to be “professional journalists” by being objective and neutral,<sup>18</sup> and it is common to see critical investigations of government and business operations, disclosures of corruption and misconduct, and more in major Kenyan media outlets.<sup>19</sup>

Due to the British colonial legacy in particular, Western media systems and models (including watchdog journalism) and standard Western journalistic practices have exerted extensive influence in Kenya and played a crucial role in shaping the agenda of the Kenyan media.<sup>20</sup> Journalists in Kenya, like in many other African countries, have long been trained with Western curricula, which has produced a media system that is “an appendage of the Western model.”<sup>21</sup> The teaching materials, journalism theories, textbooks, and points of reference used by Kenyan journalism schools are largely from the West.<sup>22</sup>

## The Evolution of CRBC's Public Relations Strategies

Since its initiation, the Kenyan SGR has drawn media scrutiny. President Uhuru Kenyatta, who left office in 2022, was the political patron of the SGR project and highlighted the project as a signature achievement in his electoral campaign platform for the 2017 elections when he sought a second term. The opposition criticized the project in an effort to undermine the incumbent Kenyatta government.<sup>23</sup>

The SGR has been highly politicized, and various aspects of the project have been under considerable media scrutiny. Issues such as corruption, challenges to wildlife preservation, a problematic tendering process, complications from land acquisition, racism among CRBC employees, issues with local procurement and subcontracting, and the question of debt sustainability have all been issues frequently spotlighted and discussed in major Kenyan and international media outlets.

Under media scrutiny, along with business pressure from the constant derailing of the project by the political opposition and negative media coverage, CRBC demonstrated a steep learning curve as it shifted its attitude and learned to address negative news. Although CRBC had operated in Kenya for almost three decades prior to the SGR, previous projects had been much smaller in scale and less politically explosive, thus attracting less media scrutiny.

Early in the SGR preparation phase, CRBC's interaction with local media remained minimal to nonexistent. The company's preferred PR strategy was to lean on Chinese official media stationed in Kenya. For instance, in July and August 2014, Kenyan media such as *The Star* and *Business Daily* reported that CRBC would hire five thousand Chinese workers for the railway project due to start in October, which would in turn mean that the company would *not* be creating local jobs.<sup>24</sup> Many international media outlets, including BBC, cited the story.<sup>25</sup> CRBC leaders' first reaction was to publish a clarifying article in the Chinese language via Chinese state media. The Chinese outlet *Global Times* published a piece titled "Two Thousand Chinese in Kenya to Build Railroads, U.S. Media Reflects on Their Country's Neglect[s] of Africa," emphasizing geopolitical competition and trying to leaven the situation by suggesting that only two thousand Chinese people would be employed instead of five thousand.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, such a clarification in Chinese neither was intended to reach Kenyan media and audiences nor could be effective in countering negative local perceptions.

Thus, as politicized criticism of the SGR project intensified, CRBC increased its investment in PR and established regular communication mechanisms with Kenyan mainstream media channels. The company also established and cultivated a strong external relations department. The department expanded from six staff members in 2007 to ten upon the completion of the railway's Phase 1 in May 2017.<sup>27</sup> The department was given four main tasks: land acquisition and compensation, media



relations, coordination with the design team, and publishing documents for external audiences.<sup>28</sup> Over several years, the department has become familiar with the rules of the media game in Kenya, accumulating local media contacts and actively reaching out to them, rather than retaining the closed-door attitude that prevails among so many Chinese companies in Africa.<sup>29</sup> CRBC's external relations department deployed several new PR strategies during railway construction in response to local media scrutiny, including increasing transparency through press briefings and corporate social responsibility (CSR) releases and reports, establishing a more proactive strategy to address negative news, and hosting public events .

CRBC's PR strategies emphasized two principles: professionalism and localization. A senior manager of CRBC explained how the company's approach evolved during an interview with the authors:

Although there have been some negative and critical reports, we still believe that we can improve our image in Kenya through professionalism and localization. Professionalism refers to dealing with situations and managing professional ties in a professional way. To improve the professionalism of our colleagues, we have invested in training and encouraged our colleagues to enhance their soft skills. Localization is also important. We are developing a localized PR approach, which we attained by working with local PR agencies and developing our PR team by empowering local employees.<sup>30</sup>

This two-track approach was reinforced by Ren Wen, the deputy secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Committee of CRBC, during a forum in Tianjin in 2021 on the "International Communication Capability of Central Enterprises." Ren said:<sup>31</sup>

We should insist on carrying out brand outreach [*pinpai waixuan*, 品牌外宣] throughout the project's life cycle, and present different stories at different points; we should strengthen our publicity through omni-channel distribution, expand communication impacts, strengthen cooperation with local media, think tanks, public relations companies and NGOs, adopt local expressions [in our materials and releases], [and] unite local forces to spread and expand the communication effect through "other-shaping [*tasu*, 他塑]."<sup>32</sup>

CRBC worked with the project's sponsors in the Kenyan government to brief local and Chinese media on progress with the SGR. These press briefings to provide SGR-related updates to local media were outsourced by the company to the Kenyan Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure or Kenyan Railway Corporation (KRC), the project's collaborators. Local Kenyan journalists were frequently invited to attend these press briefings.<sup>33</sup>

On April 29, 2015, for example, KRC invited major Kenyan media, such as the *Daily Nation*, *Business Daily*,<sup>34</sup> the *Star*,<sup>35</sup> and the *Standard* to visit the SGR construction sites and factories producing sleepers and girders in Kathekani and Emali to learn about the project's progress and the employment of local workers.<sup>36</sup> This strategy yielded positive news stories within a day, with quotes citing KRC and CRBC and glowing headlines such as “40km of New Nairobi-Mombasa Railway Built.”<sup>37</sup> These stories pumped up CRBC's ability to meet deadlines and complete contracted projects on time. They also stressed the project's benefits to Kenyans—including the purported efforts the Chinese firm was making to work with Kenyans, noting that the project had “employed 10,000 Chinese workers with over 30,000 local workers.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time, KRC “has been having a challenge compensating land owners within some parts of Mombasa and Athi River due to ownership wrangles.”<sup>39</sup>

But in addition to increased transparency, CRBC's external relations department also learned to directly address negative news, ditching its former closed-door attitude.<sup>40</sup> One manager in CRBC's External Relations Department evaluated how the firm's capacity to deal with negative news had improved in this way:

At first, we had no channel, but gradually we accumulated some local media contacts. Kenya has a media regulation called “the right of reply,” and learning to use local media rules is also growing on our side. We have met more reporters, accumulated more channels, and been able to have better communication with the Kenyan media.<sup>41</sup>

Kenya's “right of reply” rule is anchored by the country's Access to Information Act, which guarantees every Kenyan the right to seek access and obtain information from public entities. The act supports freedom of expression and access to information by setting a time limit of twenty-one days for all public entities to respond to public requests for information.<sup>42</sup>

On July 8, 2018, a media report on racism in CRBC's management culture pushed the company under the public microscope and exposed it to unprecedented public scrutiny in Kenya. Paul Wafula, a Kenyan investigative journalist, published an article titled, “Revealed: SGR Workers Treated Badly by Chinese Masters” in the *Standard*.<sup>43</sup> This article revealed that CRBC's local employees had faced unpleasant experiences inside the company due to racial discrimination during the SGR operations. The article raised a dozen racial discrimination cases, including one incident in which Chinese staff did not share tables with local employees at the staff restaurant and treated locals and Chinese people differently in general. The article was shared by other international and local media platforms including *Quartz*, the *Daily Nation*, and others. The article soon generated societal outrage about Chinese racial discrimination against local workers. After the article's publication, Wafula and the *Standard*

received “both political pressure from the President’s office” and “commercial temptation from the CRBC.”<sup>44</sup> Senior officials from the State House and the PR team from CRBC attempted to pressure the *Standard* to withdraw Wafula’s the article. Robert Toroitich, on behalf of the *Standard Digital*, soon launched a hashtag campaign on Twitter branded #IStandWithWafula. In defense of a free press, thousands of Kenyan netizens posted their support both for Wafula and freedom of speech. The *Standard’s* decision not to withdraw Wafula’s article and the organized Twitter campaign that followed demonstrated Kenyan journalists’ agency in protecting the freedom of the media.<sup>45</sup>

The Chinese company was forced to respond quickly, not just by shifting its narrative but also by altering some elements of its operations. KRC gave CRBC seventy-two hours to respond to claims of mistreatment of local staff and launched its own investigations into alleged incidents of mistreatment.<sup>46</sup> On July 10, 2018, CRBC’s general manager wrote to KRC regarding an adverse report that had appeared in the *Standard* two days earlier, with a four-page attachment on the nine issues raised in Wafula’s original report, an analysis of the current status of each issue, and actions CRBC had already taken or planned to take.<sup>47</sup> A CRBC manager explained to the authors how the company addressed the adverse report by changing corporate internal dining culture:

We told local employees that they could dine with the Chinese, and we consciously let Chinese employees dine with the local employees. Our General Manager also took us to Huawei to learn their culture. But Huawei’s [Chinese] employees are more eloquent in English. In our company, even if we sit at the same table with local employees, we can’t really engage in conversations with them in English. Eating habits are also different: speed, tableware, etc., also need to be coordinated. As a result, eating a meal became very tiring.<sup>48</sup>

Although CRBC’s interactions with local media have improved over time, its interactions with Western media have been passive and avoidant. Over the years, journalists from Western media have complained that their emails or cold calls to CRBC have often gone unanswered or ignored. A senior CRBC manager explained the company’s rationale for adapting to Kenyan media norms while still cold-shouldering Western outlets:

Western media have long been biased against China and Chinese enterprises, and have been continuously criticizing the railway. This will not change no matter how good we are. So, for us, we cannot do anything about the Western media, even the Foreign Affairs department cannot do anything, but we can engage with the local media since we are based in Kenya and we have a professional team here. Sometimes, negative stories in the Western media come from Kenyan media, so if the Kenyan media cover stories more positively, there will be less negativity in the Western media.<sup>49</sup>

CRBC also used a variety of creative methods to enhance its corporate image. One method involved hiring a group of local professional PR companies,<sup>50</sup> including the PMS Group, a renowned firm in East Africa. These PR companies helped CRBC with tasks such as writing and circulating press releases to local and international media, crafting media invitation and mobilization, and lobbying for positive media coverage. In addition, CRBC, along with the Kenyan Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure and the Kenyan railway authorities, organized two national photo contests in 2015 and 2017, encouraging professional and amateur photographers to showcase the SGR's progress and its contribution to communities. These twin competitions also provided the public with the opportunity to vote online and were covered extensively in Kenyan media outlets including KBC and the *Daily Nation*.<sup>51</sup>

The company also promoted the photo contests through social media, specifically through a dedicated Facebook page named "SGR Photography Competition"<sup>52</sup> to attract more participation from younger Kenyans. In response to media and public concerns regarding the potential damage the railway might cause to animals and the environment, CRBC created a series of animations to show how animals will migrate through different corridors, explaining how the railway design would, in its view, protect the environment and care for animals. All of this was done with the aim of gaining more community support.<sup>53</sup>

## CCECC/CREC's Public Relations Strategies in Ethiopia

Ethiopia demonstrates the effects on Chinese choices and behavior in a vastly different media environment and journalistic culture. Although Ethiopia and Kenya are neighboring countries, journalism in Ethiopia is tightly controlled<sup>54</sup> and propaganda-driven. This media style is frequently termed developmental journalism. Despite "the ambiguity of developmental journalism as a concept and practice,"<sup>55</sup> it is an appropriate depiction of the dominant model of journalism in Ethiopia, which emphasizes social responsibility and calls on journalists to form partnerships with governments to bring about socioeconomic development.<sup>56</sup>

### The Ethiopian Media Landscape and Local Coverage of the ADR

The Ethiopian government has adopted the development journalism model in its official policies as well as in the editorial policies of state media outlets, asserting that journalists should play a "positive role" in the country's development scheme.<sup>57</sup> Such a journalism model echoes Ethiopia's overall development model (before 2019), which prioritized economic growth ahead of liberal values, such as democratization, citizen participation, and human rights. While private media exist in Ethiopia and are generally more critical of development journalism and subscribe to liberal values,<sup>58</sup> in practice the general environment does not allow them to behave significantly differently from government-owned media.<sup>59</sup>

Government-owned media play a dominant role in Ethiopia, which is a major difference from the media landscape in Kenya, where private and commercial media are strongly represented. Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), the Ethiopian Press Agency, the Ethiopian News Agency, and the *Ethiopian Herald* are state-owned outlets and major forces in Ethiopian news production. While the state controls most news outlets, there are a few private TV and radio stations, such as Zami Radio, Sheger FM, Fana TV, and Walta TV. Some commercial newspapers and magazines, including *Capital*, *Addis Fortune*, the *Daily Monitor*, and the *Reporter*, also retain a voice.

Some media scholars argue that Ethiopian journalism is propaganda-driven and exhibits weak journalistic professionalism, pointing to low journalistic autonomy, journalists' role as publicists for the state, and weak professional associations.<sup>60</sup> Accepting brown envelopes (more commonly referred to as *buche* in Amharic, meaning "snatching something") stands in stark ethical contrast to performing good journalism and yet is prevalent among both private and state journalists in Ethiopia.<sup>61</sup>

Comparing the country's landscape to Kenya's, Ethiopia's media features weaker influence from the West and accepts stronger influence from China. Kenya's British colonial history has had a significant impact on the country's media environment, but this is not the case in Ethiopia, which stood as one of the two African countries that were never colonized. Ethiopian journalistic norms, values, and practices largely reflect the country's own social, cultural, and literary traditions.<sup>62</sup> Western media organizations, along with Western journalistic concepts and practices such as watchdog journalism, have continued to face tension with the Ethiopian journalistic approach.<sup>63</sup>

Watchdog journalism has been considered counterproductive for Ethiopian development purposes and is less favored among Ethiopian journalists and journalism educators.<sup>64</sup> The Ethiopian government frequently jams Western broadcasting services, such as the Voice of America and Deutsche Welle, to curb the flow of foreign news.<sup>65</sup> Such tensions have further escalated since the onset of the Ethiopian political crisis in November 2019, during which Ethiopian officials repeatedly accused the Western media of spreading false information.<sup>66</sup>

In November 2021, the Ethiopian Media Authority said it would consider revoking the licenses of a number of Western media organizations, such as CNN, BBC, Reuters, and the Associated Press.<sup>67</sup> Chinese media has a stronger influence than Western media in Ethiopia. Chinese media, especially the official state news agency Xinhua, has become the primary source of news for Ethiopian state media.<sup>68</sup> Two scholars, Terje Skjerdal and Fufa Gusu, argue that "Ethiopia is attracted by Chinese media philosophy because of its development orientation."<sup>69</sup> According to them, rather than the critical style of reporting associated with Western media, Ethiopian citizens desire a journalism style in which media and other actors unite to secure economic and social development.<sup>70</sup>

## The Stagnancy of CREC's and CCECC's PR Institutions and Strategies

CREC's and CCECC's interactions with the Ethiopian media are much less frequent when compared to CRBC's regular contact with media in Kenya. A major reason for this is that Ethiopian media coverage of the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway has been overwhelmingly positive since the beginning, not least because the narrative is connected to the preferred messages of the Ethiopian state. This means that Chinese contractors do not have to spend as much effort responding to negative reports as they do in Kenya and other countries with more open media cultures. This, in turn, shapes and drives their media engagement and PR strategies in general.

Indeed, in Ethiopia, critical coverage of the ADR has been extremely rare. One senior editor at the *Reporter* explained:

Any negative news in local media about the Addis Djibouti Railway project is like a slap in the face to the Ethiopian government. Most Ethiopian journalists would not write those negative stories that damage the country's image.<sup>71</sup>

Another journalist at *Addis Fortune* echoed:

We do not usually do critical stories about the Addis Djibouti Railway, because those stories might get us in trouble. If you want to be critical, you cannot just criticize the Chinese, because it will also involve the Ethiopian side, especially the Ethiopian officials.<sup>72</sup>

But self-censorship isn't all. In fact, Chinese state media have become Ethiopia's primary news sources for covering issues related to Chinese-Ethiopian relations.<sup>73</sup> China is the number one news source for major Ethiopian state television, including Ethiopian TV (ETV), which relies on Chinese media for its coverage of development projects.

When analyzing Ethiopian media coverage of the railway, therefore, the authors noted that Ethiopian media (and especially state media) frequently cited Chinese state media, particularly official sources such as Xinhua News Agency and CGTN. It is unsurprising, then, that our interviewees at CCECC and CREC, as well as at the Chinese embassy in Ethiopia, expressed their satisfaction with Ethiopian media coverage regarding the ADR. In effect, the local media simply tells China's story.

This is why the two companies' PR strategies have not changed much during the lifespan of the ADR's construction and early operation from 2014 to 2019. The result was a relatively flat learning curve. Lacking the naming and shaming effect that Chinese firms have faced from negative local and

international news coverage in Kenya, the Chinese contractors of the Ethiopian railway saw minimal necessity to evolve their PR strategies from Chinese norms. Both CREC's and CCECC's PR institutions and interactions with Ethiopian local media remained largely static. That may be why the department of CREC with responsibility for PR, the so-called integrated service department, is equipped with fewer than five employees. This department is responsible for dealing with administrative errands, employee safety, human resources, legal disputes, and, distantly behind these more operational functions, media relations. There is one Chinese manager in this operation who specializes in media relations. His specific tasks as media manager include reporting railway project updates to the CREC headquarters and its parent company, China Railway Group Limited, while also managing the relationship with the local media.<sup>74</sup> When the authors visited CREC's Addis Ababa office in May 2017, the staffing of this entire department was being reduced.

There is, however, one caveat to this static Ethiopian story: one internal policy report the authors acquired from CREC revealed that the company had become increasingly aware of potential criticism from non-Ethiopian overseas publications and made observing such criticism a priority for Chinese Communist Party operations within the railway project:

It is necessary to establish a comprehensive publicity system. This includes three tasks. First, overseas publicity should be incorporated into CREC's annual publicity assessment and as an important element of the overseas [Chinese Communist] Party-building work. Second, establish a comprehensive, scientific, and standardized workflow for the acquisition, writing, modification, approval, release and public opinion monitoring of news materials. Third, create incentives to improve employees' enthusiasm on overseas publicity and maintain stability of the overseas publicity team.<sup>75</sup>

According to CREC's company regulations, it is the corporate firm's Chinese Communist Party Committee, and the party secretary who leads the committee, that serves in the leadership roles for overseas publicity—leading the publicity department and, in this case, the integrated service department to coordinate domestic and international publicity efforts as well as project implementation units and publicity.<sup>76</sup> So, interestingly, PR, media engagement, and narrative-telling functions fall to the Communist Party branch and its leaders.

The most common method CREC's integrated service department uses for this engagement is to distribute press releases to local media or news agencies such as the Ethiopian News Agency and the Ethiopian Press Agency. When asked by the authors whether and how they engage with local media, one manager of CREC's integrated service department said: "When we did something good for the local community, and for major construction milestones, we invited local media groups to participate

in the reporting.<sup>77</sup> If local journalists requested an interview, the integrated service department would normally ask them to interview representatives from Ethiopian Railway Corporation (ERC), the government client of the railway project, instead of the Chinese companies.

When journalists were granted any interview with the company, the integrated service department itself set the scope of the discussion, including the parameters of what could and could not be filmed, the list of specific interviewees, and interview requirements. All of this would be done in a strictly controlled manner, leaving little flexibility if a journalist, whether Ethiopian or foreign, wanted to cover any story concerning the railway. Yet such strict and inflexible requirements faced few complaints from Ethiopian journalists, who have long been used to a complex and bureaucratic process whenever they seek and schedule interviews with Ethiopian government departments.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Ethiopian journalists have been very collaborative with the CREC media requirements, willingly sacrificing their ability to file a creative story or report a fresh angle. As a result, coverage by the Ethiopian media of the ADR appears highly homogenous. Milestone project events were publicized directly by China Railway Group, CREC's parent company, which has forty-six secondary subsidiaries including CREC.<sup>79</sup> China Railway Group also publishes People's Rail Magazine (人民铁道报), which has become another official Chinese channel for the publicity.<sup>80</sup>

In short, where Chinese corporates and media managers were compelled to adapt their engagement strategies to deal with Kenya's more critical media culture, the majority of Ethiopian media and journalists have been cooperative with the Chinese side's requirements. According to the authors' interviews with both Ethiopian journalists and officials from the Chinese embassy in Addis Ababa, most Ethiopian journalists have openly cooperated with the embassy itself. For example, when the Chinese embassy holds an event, many Ethiopian journalists routinely attend. According to one official, surnamed Zhang, who serves as the secretary to the Chinese ambassador in Addis Ababa: "Any media that receives an embassy invitation will send at least one reporter."<sup>81</sup> According to Zhang, the Chinese Embassy in Ethiopia has maintained intimate relationships with local media organizations. For example, in August 2019, the Chinese embassy in Addis Ababa organized an open tour for the Ethiopian media, during which nearly sixty local journalists from over thirty media houses visited the ADR. By contrast, this has not been the case in Kenya. Over a dozen Kenyan journalists told one of the authors that they would usually refuse or hesitate to even cover Chinese embassy events because they considered any and all activities organized by the Chinese embassy to be propaganda events.<sup>82</sup>

In Ethiopia, CREC and CCECC value endorsement from Chinese state-owned media more than local media reporting. According to our interview with a former PR manager of CREC, positive reports from Chinese state media are highly valued by CREC, and their importance even exceeds that of positive stories from the local Ethiopian media. This former CREC PR manager explained:



“Endorsement from Chinese state-owned media is like an endorsement from the [Chinese] government, so building a strong relationship with journalists and media managers from Chinese state media is a priority.”

During fieldwork in East Africa, the authors also witnessed senior managers of CCECC and CREC frequently arrange meetings and dinners with journalists from Chinese state media, including Xinhua News Agency, *Guangming Daily*, and China Central Television (CCTV).<sup>83</sup> But this is notably different from the case of CRBC in Kenya. At the beginning of the SGR project, CRBC prioritized engagement with Chinese media, but then shifted course after receiving frequent criticism from the local Kenyan media and began to make the Kenyan media its top priority.

Both CREC’s and CCECC’s local media engagement strategies involve two major prongs: first, for major project milestones, they invite local, international, and Chinese media to report; second, they aim to publicize the contributions of the company to local people.<sup>84</sup> During one authors’ interview, a senior manager of CCECC expressed mistrust toward Western media in particular, saying:

We mainly hope that the locals will understand [what we are doing], not Westerners. The Western media have a lot of misunderstandings about us. They think that Chinese media reports are false if they say good things, while things are true whenever bad things are said. [We want to] send out the real voice and publicize our social responsibility.<sup>85</sup>

When occasional negative news reports appear, CREC’s and CCECC’s response is to turn first to local government clients to contact local media to deal with these stories. The former PR manager of CCECC explained:

When there are negative reports in local media, we will contact the Ethiopian Railway Corporation (ERC) directly. Usually through the joint efforts made by the ERC and the Ethiopian Ministry of Transportation, especially the general manager of ERC and sometimes the minister, issues can usually be solved quickly.<sup>86</sup>

Of course, this does not mean that China’s PR strategy in Ethiopia failed to evolve. But unlike in Kenya, where these strategies and PR tactics evolved in response to *local* media norms and thereby adapted to meet *local* needs, the Ethiopian case instead shows that observable improvements in CCECC’s PR campaign were in fact targeted at *Chinese* audiences instead of Ethiopians. The lack of a constraining local media culture meant that Chinese organizations could simply pursue well-established Chinese ways.

As part of its China-focused campaign, CCECC coined the phrase “Addis-Djibouti Model” (亚吉模式), which consisted of two components. The first was to use the ADR to drive the development of an entire economic belt along the railroad; the second was to export a complete industrial chain from China. The ADR applied Chinese design standards, financing plans, equipment and facilities, locomotives, construction, supervision, and operation management. The project also provided training to Ethiopian railway professionals.<sup>87</sup> And touting these twin pillars became the basis of a self-congratulatory narrative that the firm leveraged with important audiences in China.

The entire line of the ADR was designed according to China’s second-level electrified railway standard, financed by the EXIM Bank of China, constructed by CCECC and CREC, supervised by China International Engineering Consulting Corporation and Third Railway Survey and Design Institute Group Corporation (with rolling stock provided by China Railway Rolling Stock Corporation), and operated and managed by a joint venture of CCECC and CREC.<sup>88</sup>

## Chinese State Firms as “Learning Institutions”

Chinese SOEs constructed and operated the Kenyan and Ethiopian railways but pursued a distinct PR strategy in each country, demonstrating that external conditions and local factors matter greatly in shaping Chinese conduct, choices, and behavior. During the early stages of the two projects, all three SOEs focused their PR efforts on Chinese state media rather than local media. This identical initial instinct can be explained by the fact that these SOEs were new to the host countries and unfamiliar with their local political, media, and public-opinion environments.

But in time, CRBC shifted its PR priorities to the local context after the SGR project began to face frequent criticism from Kenyan media. CCRC and CREC, by contrast, did not alter their PR priorities because of the lack of any locally derived naming and shaming effect from a critical Ethiopian media. Instead, for the Chinese firms in Ethiopia, a pliant local mediascape has meant that endorsement from Chinese state media remains the most important indicator of the performance of the Ethiopian railway project’s PR team.

Beyond the local context, all three Chinese SOEs hold strongly negative views of Western and global media; this has not changed over time and has prevented them from effectively communicating their projects with audiences and stakeholders beyond East Africa.

Advice from the Kenyan government, as well as the need to comply with both formal local regulations and informal social norms, have been the main sources of the Chinese SOE’s learning. Kenyan government departments are familiar with the local environment, in which media and opposition

leaders alike are highly critical of national projects, including those involving Chinese entities and capital. They have extensive experience in interacting with the local media. And so one of the principal spurs to CRBC's evolutionary strategy of working with local PR firms instead of leaning on an internal Chinese department, as was the case in Ethiopia, was that a veteran Kenyan government official suggested that it could improve the image of the SGR locally.<sup>89</sup> CRBC faced a compelling and increasingly urgent need to respond to requests from local journalists in a timely manner under Kenya's "right to information" law and also needed to abide by Kenya's "right to reply" norm. Under the country's culture of watchdog journalism, removing negative stories from local media would be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. As a result, CRBC prioritized systematic and diversified engagement with Kenyan media. When negative stories emerged, CRBC gradually developed a variety of strategies in collaboration with a range of Kenyan partners. This allowed CRBC to launch a number of effective PR initiatives—all of them oriented toward local concerns—that not only increased positive media coverage over time but also improved some of its corporate management practices.

Ethiopian government officials, on the other hand, did not offer PR advice to CCECC or CREC. In fact, it could be argued that Ethiopian government officials are more than happy to work in a local media environment in which critical reports of the government are rare so that they do not need to prioritize PR or media outreach. When negative or critical news is reported in Ethiopia, the first reaction of CCECC and CREC was to simply try to remove the negative stories through the project's client, ERC. In the context of Ethiopian-style development journalism, instead of Kenyan-style watchdog journalism, ERC and other Ethiopian government agencies involved in the railway project influenced local media content by claiming that "negative reports about the ADR are harmful to the image of Ethiopia and Ethiopia-China relations,"<sup>90</sup> a particular theme in the authors' discussions with a senior official from the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In the case of the Ethiopian railway, systematic and diversified communication measures are quite simply not valued, and so the two SOEs in charge of the project continue to rely on traditional Chinese-style propaganda, leaving no space for debate or different local views. For example, communication between the two SOEs and local Ethiopian media relies heavily on the dissemination of pre-prepared press releases. As a result, these two SOEs have very limited interaction and communication with Ethiopian journalists, who are largely pliable to Chinese messaging.

## Learning Outside of China?

But all of this begs the question of whether learning in Kenya has been a superficial and cynical adaptation to local norms in order to more effectively export Chinese standards and messages, or,

instead, a genuine evolution of Chinese approaches to PR in one East African case? If it is the latter, then it would be a mark of the growing internationalization of Chinese SOEs and a potential step toward SOEs' adoption of not just local but also broader international norms.

The authors believe that CRBC, in fact, actively learned new ways of operating through its media engagement in Kenya. Concepts and narrative phrases such as “Chinese technical standards” (中国标准), the “Mombasa-Nairobi model” (蒙内模式), and the “Addis-Djibouti model” (亚吉模式) have fueled speculation about whether China is simply exporting its own China-derived narratives. But these concepts are being used mostly in China, not locally in Kenya, suggesting that Chinese firms are learning to bifurcate their narratives and make their messaging more locally adapted, sensitive, and complex.

For one thing, these phrases first appeared in SOEs' public documents in Chinese rather than English, indicating that Beijing, not Nairobi or the rest of Africa, was the primary target audience. This is also the case in Ethiopia. For instance, a Google search in Chinese on the term “Addis-Djibouti Model” yields articles from the Chinese State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission, CCTV, the China International Contractors Association, and other Chinese media platforms that fully explain the term; a Google search in English for the same phrase does not show any meaningful results.

Second, these Chinese narrative phrases and concepts are ambiguous, lack specificity, and therefore serve as slogans rather than roadmaps for exporting a putative Chinese standard, much less a coherent Chinese ideology. The term “Addis-Djibouti Model” refers straightforwardly to (1) exporting an entire industrial chain, including technical standards, design, construction, equipment, and operation through railway projects implemented with Chinese equipment, technology, and standards, and (2) promoting economic development along the line through railways.<sup>91</sup> The term “Mombasa-Nairobi Model” refers similarly to a project that uses Chinese standards, equipment, technology, management, and standards, while opening up a new model of overseas cooperation for the industrial chain of China's railway ecosystem.<sup>92</sup> The language of both concepts is highly general and not intended to be applied to the host governments and countries' economies more broadly. As a CRBC interviewee shared: “the ‘Mombasa-Nairobi Model’ is not replicable.”<sup>93</sup>

Third, the primary function of these concepts is to serve as a justification for these SOEs' influence in the host countries with audiences in Beijing. Developing these concepts has less to do with host country dynamics and more to do with competition between Chinese SOEs in China. When asked about the difference between the “Mombasa-Nairobi Model” and the “Addis-Djibouti Model,” despite the fact that the Chinese firms have been compelled to operate with different PR and engagement strategies in these two very different host countries, a senior manager of CCECC in Ethiopia

argued that the two models serve “the same effect with different names,” thus implying that the narrative’s target audience is in China, not among host country audiences.<sup>94</sup> These concepts were not picked up locally, nor were they intended to be. When the authors asked Kenyan and Ethiopian stakeholders, such as the railway corporations, journalists, and local businesses that supply or sub-contract to the railways whether they had even heard of these so-called models, most had not.

## Lessons and Implications

In both Kenya and Ethiopia, host country media norms have shaped the distinct PR strategies of Chinese SOEs on BRI signature infrastructure projects. But while the Chinese contractor for the Kenyan railway became a “learning institution” because it received and then was forced to respond to constant criticism from local media, this was not the case in Ethiopia’s more restrictive media environment. The salience of the Kenyan railway is that it is a high-profile target of media scrutiny and criticism from opposition political parties. But the PR strategies of Chinese contractors on the Ethiopian railway, by contrast, have demonstrated a relatively flat adaptation curve throughout their years of operation in the country.

Generally speaking, existing research tends to emphasize the asymmetry of power between Chinese and African players, as well as the supposed passivity and weakness of African non-state actors. But by analyzing the roles of African journalists and media workers in shaping the behaviors of Chinese SOEs in Kenya, it is clear that there *can* be African journalistic agency when the media in small African democracies leverage media norms that brook and encourage criticism to compel the insular corporate management culture of large Chinese SOEs to adapt.

But clearly, African agency is context specific. With growing confidence in Kenya’s rule of law, as well as the collective power of civil society and the media, Kenyan journalists have played a stronger role in monitoring the SGR project. However, for Ethiopian journalists who work in a more restrictive media environment, there have been few opportunities to be anything but supportive of the Chinese SOEs and the national government that supports these Chinese projects. As a senior editor at the Ethiopian News Agency explained to the authors: “Focusing on the positive and bright side is what development journalism is meant to be.”<sup>95</sup>

This has some implications for both Chinese companies and African media houses. Chinese companies dominate the development and financing of major infrastructure projects in Africa. It is therefore important for them to understand how to better engage with a diverse array of African stakeholders through collaboration, dialogue, and consultations in order to identify and promote joint interests.

For one, insufficient information and a lack of transparency often result in distrust, miscommunication, misinformation, and even fake news. Chinese companies should therefore leverage their advantages in meeting African countries' needs, with a particular focus on media relations and information transparency.

This means strengthening local stakeholder engagement, not least with African media. Chinese companies need to bring African stakeholders, especially non-state actors, into their decision-making processes. In particular, Chinese companies should formulate specific strategies and plans for fostering constructive relationships and interactions with local media outlets and NGOs in order to improve the design and implementation of their projects. Through engagement with these stakeholders, projects can be aligned with the specific needs and perspectives of local communities, thereby mitigating the potential for detrimental effects and complications.

Chinese firms also need to improve the quality of corporate social responsibility programs. Companies' reputations can be boosted by CSR efforts, especially when these efforts attract media attention. While the authors have observed certain CSR practices by Chinese companies active in Africa, it is necessary for them to incorporate CSR into their everyday operations, not just as occasional efforts.

Meanwhile, African media houses play a critical role in telling the stories of China-Africa cooperation and Africa's infrastructure development. But African media houses also occupy a unique position in shaping African governments' agendas through their own reporting. Thus, it remains vital to strengthen the capacity of local journalists to improve quality and accuracy in reporting and to ensure the triumph of watchdog journalism norms, as in Kenya, not state-connected developmental journalism, as in Ethiopia.

This will require considerable efforts to strengthen the capacity of African journalists through intensive training, especially on critical angles in domestic reporting related to China's economic engagement with Africa.

Above all, local media outlets need to increase the accuracy and journalistic quality of their coverage of Chinese activities. According to the authors' analysis of Kenyan and Ethiopian news content, it is clear that some of the news articles contained misleading information or lacked credible sources. Some of the headlines were highly sensational (primarily in Kenya) against the backdrop of an emerging phenomenon of anti-Chinese populism in Africa.

These kinds of reports reflect a popular critical attitude toward Chinese projects but, if based on inaccuracies or errors, may backfire by discouraging Chinese actors from engaging in deeper dialogues with African media that would enable better local reporting. There is simply no substitute for high-quality and fact-based local journalism.

African media houses could, for example, encourage their reporters covering China-related topics to diversify their sources. An array of sources, such as scholars, urban planners, researchers, and lawyers, should be used more often than currently. One productive way to do this would be for a conglomerate of cross-national African media houses from countries that have traditions of watchdog journalism and more open journalistic norms to establish an Africa-China source database to encourage journalists across borders to compare notes and diversify their sourcing, thus promoting and elevating the standard of journalism in covering China-related stories while injecting a comparative angle into critical coverage.

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## Notes

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