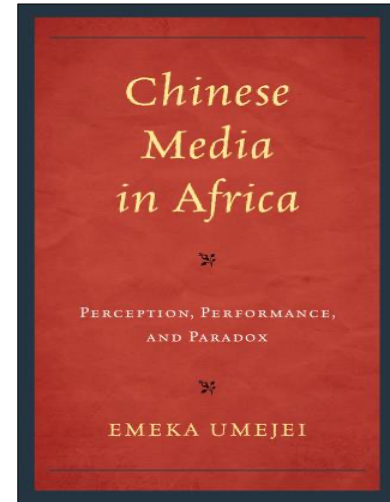


Emeka Umejei, **Chinese Media in Africa: Perception, Performance, and Paradox**, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2020, 132 pp., \$90.00 (hardcover).

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Debates about Chinese interests in Africa that have emerged in the wake of unprecedented financial investments are often peppered with tales of postcolonial narratives. In communication scholarship, such debates are often characterized by a schism among African scholars who believe that China is there to uplift the African media through “constructively reporting” Africa, versus those who argue that China’s purported generosity is a “soft-power” strategy, as Caruso (2020) alluded (p. 55). In their studies, for example, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2018) and Benabdallah (2020) were able to demonstrate that China’s impact in the African media, and especially on journalistic values, is still questionable. These conclusions are mostly based on the study conducted in South Africa. There is still a dearth of scientific communication research documenting negative results, despite the underpinning theoretical assumptions. However, some dissertation work conducted in Zambia, where China now owns more than 60% of the government media, provides evidence of Chinese influence in the Zambian media. In my own forthcoming study, (Gondwe, forthcoming), I was able to demonstrate that China’s position in Zambian newsrooms has steadily been shifting toward a positive perception through the measure of sentiments and the interconnectedness of issue attributes (network agenda-setting). Regardless, these approaches take a Manichean prism that highlights the fears and hopes of Chinese presence in Africa. It is for this reason that **Chinese Media in Africa: Perception, Performance, and Paradox** becomes a must-read.



The author has succinctly “succeeded in weaving the mosaic divergent thoughts undergirding the debates about China’s role in the African media” (p. 1). Particularly, the book manages to draw insights from both sides of the debate and argues that the most likely outcome of China’s presence in the African media will be the hybridization of journalism practice and, thus, an alternative narrative of Africa to the world. In other words, Umejei conceives of a media informed by various values from the West (as it has always been for the most part), China, and Africa. This argument becomes the central theme of the book, undergirded by empirical evidence collected through intensive interviews among African journalists working in Chinese-owned media. The book is divided into eight chapters, with chapter 1 providing a roadmap for understanding the debates in the book and mapping out the future direction of the journalism practice in Africa amid China’s influence. Through specific examples about how Chinese media organizations cover the unique cultures of the African continent, this chapter “provides insights into the dualism that underscores journalism practice in the Chinese media in Africa” (p. 2). To counteract this perspective, the author emphasizes the need for moving beyond the comparison of Western versus Chinese influence in Africa, so that we begin to conceive of an African-grown global media corporation despite the ingredients.

The second chapter highlights the complex topic of media and democracy in Africa, and the position of China in such a conundrum. By analyzing data from journalists working in the Chinese media, Umejei was able to document limited professional autonomy in reporting certain aspects of democracy, especially if they conflict with Chinese policies. As he argues, "When African journalists cover certain events, they are either subjected to content manipulation or total erasure of the sections referring to democracy" (p. 23). In the third chapter, the author explores the policies of Chinese media organizations operating within Africa, and whether they respect and recognize existing African cultural values informed by customs and belief systems. The findings suggest that "African-based Chinese media organizations promoted ideological biases which excluded reporting on the unique custom values, beliefs, and cultures of the African people" (p. 36). A typical example is that of African journalists being restricted from reporting about the Pope's visit to Kenya, even when Africans are "notoriously religious," and most in Kenya are Christians. This chapter is tied to chapter 4, where the author examines journalism practice in Africa under the spectrum of role conception and role performance. The author finds a schism between the two roles, arguing that the claim by journalists that they practiced the watchdog role is not reflected in reality. In other words, most African journalists working for the African-based Chinese organization play a Jekyll-and-Hyde role when it comes to journalistic role conception versus role performance.

Chapter 5 explores gatekeepers in the African-based Chinese media. The author identifies two dichotomies he refers to as "upstairs" and "downstairs" (p. 55). The dichotomy exists in the sense that two different types of gatekeepers exist within the same framework—those concerned with letting in issues that pertain to Chinese economic and political interests (Chinese gatekeepers or upstairs gatekeepers) versus African editors (downstairs), who are given the mandate to control information not pertaining to China, or not harmful to Chinese policies. This chapter is also tied to chapter 6, which explores how journalists navigate through investigative reporting. As he argues, "African journalists who go beyond official redlines are likely to face sanctions" (p. 81). Chapters 7 and 8 are a hallmark for the book, as they bring about the need for hybridization. In chapter 8, for example, the author explores the implications of having two or more cultures in the newsroom—in this case, the African and Chinese cultures. This question is answered in chapter 7, where the author calls for a hybridization of different media cultures and values, so as to come up with one unique media system to call "the African system," characterized by the coexistence of African, Chinese, and Western values (p. 96).

Overall, the author has attempted to fill a number of gaps in the literature about the impact of Chinese media in Africa. His hybridization perspective provides a nuanced approach to the understanding of Chinese influence, especially that most studies take a Manichean prism. Further, the use of interviews gives strength to the study, in the sense that we are able to hear the voices of journalists. Nonetheless, the book cannot go without criticism. The first observation is that Umejei's empirical findings seem to clearly suggest that the presence of Chinese media in Africa has more negative implications than positive to journalism in Africa. Throughout the book, Umejei was able to show the challenges that African journalists are facing at the hands of the Chinese media. This brings into question the perceived possibilities of a hybridized media system, in which it is clear that one media culture shows superiority over the other. For example, there is clear evidence that the Chinese media did not promote African culture, nor did they encourage reporting on its culture. Second, the idea that there are two gatekeepers is suspicious enough about hybridization—if anything, the arguments support a dual perspective. Third, African journalists are faced with challenges that

are different from Chinese journalists—that is why most of them moonlight or see corruption/kickbacks (brown envelope journalism; BEJ) as an acceptable norm (Gondwe, 2014; Kasoma, 2010; Mabweazara, 2010). There is a need to understand the implications of such differences, and how African journalists navigate through issues of BEJ while working for the Chinese media in Africa. Further research should continue to empirically explore the implications of China in the African media, and especially through cross-national comparisons.

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