

Abstract

This research report examines the way the media framed the introduction of Mandarin to the South African school curriculum, and the relationship between frame sponsors and the frames employed by the media.

The dramatic growth of Chinese investment and its related social and political influence in Africa has been greeted by a mixed response. The media has often characterised the relationship in a binary way, as either Chinese imperialism or a developmental relationship. To improve China's image, the Chinese government has embarked upon a policy of soft power, which extends into influencing educational language policy, to encourage more people to learn Mandarin and understand Chinese culture. To explore the media articulation of the China-South Africa relationship media framing theory was employed.

The frame analysis was conducted by analysing the content of 50 articles published in the South African press between March and October 2015. The analysis found three mega-frames: imperialism, globalisation and nationalism. The imperialism and globalisation frames are consistent with other academic and media literature that considers the China-Africa relationship as either colonial or a natural outcome of global market dynamics.

The role of frame sponsors and their influence on the framing process was also explored. The majority of frame sponsors were official government, trade union and academic sources, suggesting an elite contestation. Notably absent were Chinese frame sponsors and the views of teachers, parents or learners. Government frame sponsors promoted the globalisation mega-frame while trade union sources promoted the imperialism and nationalism frames.

The results suggest that the South African media articulates the China-South Africa relationship using the binary of colonial predator or developmental partner, where a more nuanced reading may prove more fruitful in understanding the dynamics of their relationship.