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Soft Power Strategies and Reshaping of Global Affairs: A Comparative Analysis of China and Nigeria in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This study does a comparative analysis of the soft power strategies of China and Nigeria, highlighting their unique resources, approaches, and challenges in the 21st century. It explores how China leverages initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, media influence, and cultural diplomacy to assert global influence, while Nigeria struggles to capitalize on its rich cultural heritage. Drawing on reports, literature, and 12 qualitative interviews as primary data, the paper analyses how economic, social, and political factors shape each country's soft power. A key finding reveals that China's centralized coordination enhances its soft power impact, whereas Nigeria's fragmented institutions hinder its effectiveness.

Keywords

China, Cultural Diplomacy, Developing Nations, Foreign Policy, Nigeria, Soft Power.

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Introduction

The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye in the late 20th century to denote a nation's ability to influence others through attraction instead of coercion. Global affairs increasingly rely on international cooperation and treaties as against traditional hard power strategies like military warfare. Soft power is therefore a critical tool for navigating the global scene and forging lasting alliances (Nye, 2023). The aim of this study is to compare and contrast the soft power resources of China and Nigeria as well as the milestones achieved and the challenges faced by both of them.

This is an important topic today because nations no longer rely on coercive means as was formerly the norm to achieve their goals or protect their national interests. This brings to fore the idea of soft power as a means for perpetuating influence and achieving foreign policy goals. While China has been understudied and analyzed based on different parameters such as trade, economic interests, infrastructure development, and military might, its soft power strategies that have aided its rise globally have not been adequately studied.

Nigeria, the other state under consideration is chosen for its regional placement and influence within the African continent, however, it seems to be grappling with how to harness its rich soft power resources effectively to compete on the global stage. Understanding these dynamics in both the developed and developing contexts is crucial for future policy planning and international diplomacy.

This study is relevant in the context of international relations, as both China and Nigeria are shaping global politics in distinct ways. As China emerges as a key player on the global stage through its Belt and Road Initiative and a strong international presence, Nigeria, with its diverse culture and population can leverage its cultural and regional influence. The research question follows thus: how do China and Nigeria utilize soft power to achieve foreign policy objectives in the 21st century? Analysis of the two (2) states will reveal the dynamics of the deployment of soft power by developed and developing nations to achieve their foreign policies, informing ideas that could shape global best practices.

2.1 Literature Review

According to De Martino (2020), soft power is as old as human behavior. Military stratagems in ancient China had traces of soft power on them before Nye's conceptualization of the term. Nye's work is fundamental in contemporary global relations because it gives a foundational understanding of the concept. Soft power is the ability of a nation to influence others relying on cultural diplomacy, political values and foreign policy (Nye, 1990). These components work together to shape perceptions and promote international cooperation. Critiques of soft power suggest that it oversimplifies the complex realities of global politics, failing to account for power imbalances and the instrumentalities of soft power for coercive purposes (Vines & Wallace 2023). Soft power assumes that cultural appeal, political values and diplomacy can independently shape international relations which rings true as long as people are more favorably positioned towards the state based on the projected cultural or value traits that resound with them. The negative effects of hard power are thus highlighted as in the cases of the U.S in Iraq,

Yemen and Afghanistan where the use of hard power did not directly lead to favorable outcomes in establishing democratic political systems in those countries and led to resentments in the hearts of some of the citizens (Seymour, 2020; Nadison, 2023).

Gomichon (2013) distinguishes between three types of power: hard power, soft power, and smart power. Hard power refers to coercion through force or threats, while soft power is the ability to attract and persuade others to align with your goals without the use of force. Smart power is a combination of both hard and soft power. Soft power is increasingly important in global politics as it enables influence without conflict, costs, or significant resources and relies on attraction, persuasion, and credibility, though it can also be misused for propaganda purposes (Nye, 2023).

The concept of soft power in the view of Gomichon (2013) aligns with the liberal tradition of international relations, contrasting it with hard power by emphasizing cooperation over conflict. The role of democracy, economic interdependence, and international institutions in promoting peaceful relations is brought to the foreground. Democracies tend to use soft power, with their transparency and internal criticism enhancing their credibility. Economic resources can both attract and coerce, and institutions like the IMF or WTO promote soft power by legitimizing a nation's values and policies (Li, 2009; Ham, 2010; Nye, 2023).

Soft Power Strategies of Specific States

The US, UK and India are chosen for this review because they are among major global powers that have longer history of their culture and institutionalized governance. A few others are China, Germany and Japan with over ten millennia of history combined, though China is sometimes considered as a rising power (Eiilm University, 2025). The United States exemplifies the effective use of soft power in a globalized world, particularly in addressing challenges like climate change and cybersecurity that necessitate multilateral cooperation (Daalder & Lindsay, 2024). Despite diverse origins, political systems, and values across countries, soft power is often more sustainable than hard power due to the internationalization of local issues (Lemnios, 2024). However, critics argue that Nye's U.S.-centric analysis may lack theoretical consistency and downplays the role of military force (Gaid, 2022; Saifullah & Qaisrani, 2022). Cevik (2024) suggests soft power frequently overlaps with hard power, making it difficult to isolate its effects on foreign policy. While realism emphasizes material power, soft power aligns more with neoliberal values, highlighting cooperation and shared norms. Gallarotti (2022) notes that realism's dismissive stance on soft power overlooks its historic success. Post-BREXIT, the UK sought to redefine its global role, integrating development, trade, foreign policy, security, and defense under Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The UK's foreign policy pivot included greater attention to China and the Indo-Pacific region (Smidak, 2020). While recognizing China's bilateral potential, the UK remained cautious due to its authoritarian regime and differing values (Wu, 2019). Demonstrating commitment, the UK deployed the HMS Queen Elizabeth to the Indo-Pacific to reinforce defense ties with the US (Puri, 2025). The UK also deepened relations with ASEAN and joined the CPTPP, reflecting a strategy of aligning with value-based alliances (Korteweg, 2021). Despite the economic

drawbacks of BREXIT, this move diversified UK trade partnerships and ensured regional policy influence. Increasing defense spending above 2% of GDP positions the UK as NATO's leading European ally (Zreik, 2021). In a region comprising 30 countries, including China and India, the UK's diplomatic engagements and CPTPP membership help protect its interests. Britain's soft power strategy focuses on alliance-building through shared democratic values and mutual global interests. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India institutionalized soft power by highlighting its civilizational identity. It promoted its ancient scientific and cultural contributions to gain international recognition (Observer Research Foundation, 2025). Initiatives such as International Yoga Day and the International Solar Alliance aimed to present India as a culturally rich and environmentally responsible state (Kocamaz, 2019). India's diverse soft power assets include Bollywood, classical arts, and spiritual traditions, which have helped extend its global reach (Chaudhary & Agarwal, 2022). Yoga Day, recognized by the UN in 2014, is celebrated in over 170 countries. India also leverages its diaspora via events like Pravasi Bharatiya Divas to strengthen ties with the US, particularly in defense, education, and technology. While India's cultural diplomacy has enhanced bilateral relations, better coordination among agencies is needed (IAS Gyan, 2022). Analysts urge a more holistic approach combining cultural initiatives with transparent governance to enhance soft power effectiveness (Observer Research Foundation, 2025). Aligning internal policies with external messaging will further amplify India's global impact (Observer Research Foundation, 2025). Australia embeds soft power into its foreign policy as an ability to attract through values and ideas (DFAT, 2017). In 2018, it initiated a Soft Power Review to assess and improve its global influence, leading to more integrated international engagement strategies (DFAT, 2018).

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Constructivism

This study uses Constructivism as theoretical foundation. Constructivism focuses on how identities, norms and ideas shape international relations (Wendt, 1992). It suits this study as it helps to explain how the identities and histories of states shape their approach to using soft power to achieve foreign policy goals. Alexander Wendt expounded this theory to explain how international relations is shaped not just by material power but also interactions, ideas, and socially constructed interests on which states act. While constructivism is criticized for being useful only in retrospect and useless in predicting the future and for being difficult to measure since it uses terms such as norms that may not be universally acceptable, it remains useful in examining international relations because it explains evolution of norms and change in ideas that inform the actions of state and non-state actors. (Yilmaz, 2008). This theory helps to explain how China and Nigeria individually use their identities, cultures and values to project and protect their national interests abroad.

Many states have harnessed their culture and values to attract partners and friends with varying levels of success. China re-joined the global stage in the early 21st century and has been proactive in telling its story and shaping the narrative through establish its own media houses and vying to host the World Cup. Nigeria is popular for its coordinated soft power strategies including educational exchanges that gave Africans scholarships and

peacekeeping missions across Africa (Gallarotti, 2011). These efforts highlight the place of constructivism in forging relationships and achieving foreign policy outcomes. As Nye posits, countries that effectively utilize soft power can establish deeper, more sustainable forms of influence. (Nye, 2004; Vuving, 2020).

Soft power therefore traditionally falls under constructivism. There is the need for a balanced approach in foreign policy, acknowledging both the benefits and limitations of soft power (Manor & Golan, 2020). Sustainability demands that states strategically deploy their resources to establish, deepen relationships as well as promote their interests in bilateral and multilateral relations.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive research design to describe the soft power strategies used by China and Nigeria to protect their interests achieve their foreign policies. This design aided the description of various foreign policies and the soft power strategies in place to achieve each of them. Various groups formed the population of the study. Data for the study were gathered from secondary sources such as journals, media publications and government reports. This aided the examination of Nigeria's and China's soft power strategies over time.

Sample Size

The study utilized twelve (12) stakeholders including policy makers and government think tanks, students and workers to understand how China and Nigeria deploy soft power to achieve foreign policy.

Sampling Technique

This study adopted criterion and maximum variation sampling to ensure that all participants meet relevant criteria while capturing a range of perspectives to enrich the analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Method of Data Analysis

The data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to categorize important themes in the data. The findings are interpreted in line with the research objectives.

4.1 Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents the demographic breakdown and data retrieved from key stakeholders in foreign policy making, implementation and outcomes.

Table 1: Key Stakeholders

S/N	Key Stakeholders	Number	Location
1	Officials	3	Lagos State, Nigeria
2	Members of Chinese communities	9	Ogun State, Nigeria
Total		12	

The stakeholders are from Lagos State and Ogun State because these are major cities where Chinese companies operate with various branches across Nigeria.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

China's Belt and Road Initiative

Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an ambitious global development strategy aimed at enhancing connectivity and cooperation across Asia, Africa, and Europe through extensive infrastructure investments, including railways, highways, ports, and energy projects (Britannica, 2025). In Africa, China's BRI has led to significant investments in energy, infrastructure and transport, boosting regional connectivity. The Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway in 2018 connected landlocked Ethiopia to the Port of Djibouti, facilitating trade and reducing resilience on congested road transport. It was funded by the China Exim Bank which provided over \$4 billion in loans and was majorly constructed by the China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC). In Nigeria, the Abuja-Kaduna Railway is one of the most prominent infrastructure projects. The purpose was to link the capital of Nigeria, Abuja, with Kaduna, a commercial city, easing road traffic and improving passenger and cargo transport. Other BRI projects in Nigeria include the Lekki Deep Sea Port, Lagos-Ibadan Railway and the Zungeru Hydroelectric Power Plant (Chiedozie, Aloh, Ibiam, Felix, Ikpolo & Iwuala, 2024). Respondents (3), (8) and (12) allude to the fact that the BRI has been beneficial to the Nigerian economy as the railway system in Nigeria has been revived and now facilitates the movement of people and goods.

The BRI encompasses two main components: the Silk Road Economic Belt, which focuses on linking China to Europe via Central Asia, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, aimed at connecting China to Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe through sea routes (Chatham House, 2021). China's motivations for the BRI are multifaceted, including the desire to export surplus industrial capacity, secure energy resources, open new markets for Chinese goods, and promote the global adoption of the renminbi. The BRI is also a platform for China to exert greater influence on a greater scale globally especially in economic governance (CFR, 2025).

The BRI has faced some criticism regarding the debt of countries involved and the possibility of dependence on the Chinese economy which the Chinese government could take advantage of. Respondent (1) shared this narrative, stating that China has asked countries like Sri Lanka, Uganda and Greece to give up strategic national infrastructure. This has however, not stopped the initiative as over one hundred and forty (140) states have participated and changed the trends of global trade. By June 2023, over one hundred and fifty (150) states and thirty (30) international organizations had signed the BRI cooperation. While some states may not renew the agreement like Panama did in 2025 due to diplomatic influence by the US, current member states span five (5) continents with 52 states in Africa, 27 in Europe, 9 in South America, 15 in North America and 12 in Oceania.

Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy is a strategic component of China's soft power. It encompasses various initiatives such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes globally and the signing of bilateral agreements which promote Chinese

language and culture, aiding cross-cultural understanding and strengthening bilateral ties (Nye, 2004). Respondents (2), (9) and (12) explain that China's intentionality in exporting its culture has given it a strategic advantage globally because citizens of other states interact with Chinese and understand them better, beyond the narratives across social media. Furthermore, these cultural initiatives are integrated with other strategies such as educational collaborations, media outreach and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that deepen political and economic ties and give China a favorable image globally. These cultural initiatives have received mixed reactions across different continents. In Central Asia, these initiatives faced challenges due to Sinophobia, showing that cultural diplomacy alone has not been able to overcome deep-seated perceptions and political hindrances (Wu & Wang, 2024).

Nevertheless, China hopes to project an image of a responsible power through cultural initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes that have been central to promoting Chinese language and culture worldwide. China's cultural diplomacy has undergone significant evolution, marked by expansion and adaptation in response to global perception. Cultural exchanges and exhibitions have faced scrutiny and closures in the US and Australia due to concerns about foreign influence and academic freedom (Wu, 2019). In states like Brazil and Saudi Arabia, the establishment of new Confucius Institutes indicates growing receptivity to Chinese cultural initiatives. While Chinese cultural elements have gained visibility on the global stage, their acceptance and integration are influenced by regional contexts necessitating continuous adaptation of China's cultural diplomacy strategies.

Media Influence

China has leveraged media influence as a main component of its foreign policy. State-controlled media outlets such as Xinhua News Agency and China Global Television Network (CGTN) were established in 1931 and 2000 respectively and expanded in the 2000s to include other languages in order to promote China's perspectives and policies internationally. These platforms help to enhance China's soft power by portraying it as a responsible and benevolent superpower. In regions like Africa where China has provided training for journalists, actively engaged in partnerships with local media organizations, and supplied content, Chinese viewpoints have been embedded within these local information ecosystems (Zappone, 2023).

This approach not only amplifies China's voice but also fosters relationships that can be instrumental in achieving diplomatic and economic objectives. Moreover, China's media influence extends to efforts aimed at undermining US leadership and promoting a multipolar world order, aligning with its broader geopolitical goals. However, these strategies have encountered resistance and scrutiny, particularly in democratic societies where concerns over media independence and propaganda are pronounced (Matura, Turcsanyi, Summers, Seman, Rühlig, Otero-Iglesias & Oehler-Sincai, 2021). Nonetheless, China's commitment to utilizing media as a tool of statecraft underscores its recognition of information as a domain of power in contemporary international relations.

China has invested heavily in cultivating its soft power through cultural exchanges, media presence education diplomacy (e.g. Confucius Institutes), and humanitarian aid initiatives. Respondent (2) considers China's collaborations with African journalists a medium to give various perspectives to matters of global importance. The BRI also plays a crucial role in China's soft power, creating a network of economic interdependencies that extend its influence globally. While these strategies have increased China's visibility and influence, challenges such as human rights concerns and political influence in Africa have led to skepticism and resistance in certain regions (Wu, 2019).

Nigeria's Soft Power Resources and Strategies

Nigeria organizes programs through various institutions in the fields of culture, foreign policy and business that help project her soft power resources. Prominent Nigerians across various fields have organized projects that promote Nigeria's soft power and on peacekeeping missions. Some of them include Tony Elumelu, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Philip Emeagwali, Davido, Amina Mohammed, Kanu Nwankwo, Tobi Amusan, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Genevieve Nnaji, amongst others. Their foundations, music, poems, books, and events have projected Nigeria more esteemed on the international scene (Farooq & Mansfield, 2023). The advocates of soft power recognize that military force may be required in certain situations, but soft power should first be prioritized (McIntyre, 2021; Farooq & Mansfield, 2023; Uste & Aydin, 2023).

Nigeria's approach to soft power is more focused on cultural diplomacy, leveraging its rich music, film, and entertainment industries (e.g., Nollywood and Afrobeats) to connect with global audiences (Olanrewaju, Nweke-Love, Ajagbe, & Julius, 2022). In addition, Nigeria's role as a key regional player in Africa, through leadership in the African Union and peacekeeping efforts, enhances its diplomatic standing. Aside the secondary data presented, Respondents (4), (5) and (6) also support this fact. However, Nigeria's soft power is undermined by domestic challenges, including corruption, political instability, and limited global economic influence (Chukwudi, Gberville, Abasilim & Imhonopi, 2019).

Juxtaposing Nigeria's and China's Soft Power Strategies in Achieving their Foreign Policies

China practices a centralized system of government and Nigeria practices a decentralized system of government. This accounts for inconsistent follow-throughs across different administrations and individual states in the federation. For example, in Nigeria, the \$100 billion Creative Growth Economy Plan was launched in 2021 beginning with the renovation of the National Theatre in Lagos. However, this high-profile cultural investment has been threatened by policy summersaults and frequent reversals in the creative sector strategies. Nigeria has significant soft power potential, particularly in leveraging its entertainment industry, including Nollywood and Afrobeats, to influence international relations. Despite its cultural advantages, Nigeria's soft power resources

remain underutilized also due to limited recognition and strategic deployment in foreign policy (Yange, 2024). While countries like China, the United States, and South Africa have successfully leveraged their soft power through cultural diplomacy and educational exchanges, Nigeria struggles due to corruption, a lack of strategic vision, and poor leadership (Anekwe, 2020).

Effective use of soft power requires converting assets into measurable foreign policy outcomes, which Nigeria must prioritize to enhance its influence both regionally and globally. This is possible through government bodies, civil societies and cultural organizations within a country whose activities could enhance the soft power of the country abroad. Also, there are new digital tools that have the potential to contribute to the evaluation of soft power. Nigeria must prioritize this to enhance its influence regionally and globally (Singh, MacDonald & Son, 2017).

Comprehensive indices of soft power did not emerge till mid-2000s, however, some states were already practicing the tenets of soft power in various capacities. Nigeria has positioned itself as a leader among African states and historically deployed soft power using cultural exports like Nollywood, SuperEagles (the national football club), Afrobeats, and literature of famous scholars like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Before the 21st century, Nigeria also used educational diplomacy, giving scholarships to African students and technical aids through the Technical Aid Corps (TAC) to other states in the Caribbean in 1976.

The term nation branding was championed by Simon Anholt in 2005 to describe a state's international image, with a focus on perception in culture, people, governance, exports, tourism, immigration and investment. The Soft Power 30 Index was one of the most cited soft power indexes in 2019 that ranked the top thirty (30) states based on culture, education, global engagement, government, digital and enterprise. China ranked twenty-seven (27) in 2019 despite setbacks like the pandemic, blacklisting of Huawei by the United States and anti-Beijing demonstrations in Hong Kong (Portland Communications, 2019). Nigeria was not among the top thirty states ranked. China ranked 8th in the Culture sub-index because of its rich culture. China has the highest number of heritage sites according to UNESCO and the second highest number of medals in the 2016 Rio Summer and 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics (Brand Finance, 2025). Two main weaknesses of China's soft power were the Government sub-index where it ranked low due to human rights concerns and Digital sub-index because of its non-existing presence on Facebook and low number of secure internet servers and Internet users (The Soft Power 30). The 2019 report is the most recent Soft Power 30 Index.

Nation Brands Index (NBI) measures the perceptions of nations across six (6) dimensions, namely; exports, governance, culture, tourism, people, and immigration or investment. Between 2019 and 2024, China ranked 23rd to 27th. In 2024, the NBI report did not specify China's ranking. Nigeria was not among the top sixty (60) countries ranked within this period. The Global Soft Power Index was launched in 2020 and ranks over one-hundred (100) states including Nigeria and China and covers pillars of soft power such as governance, international relations, culture and heritage, media and communication, education and science, business and trade and people and values. China ranked 5th in 2020, 8th in 2021, 4th in 2022, 5th in 2023, 3rd in 2024 and 2nd in 2025. According to UNCTAD's

Creative Economy Outlook 2024, China was the largest exporter of creative goods such as jewelry, carpets, graphic design, interior design, printed music, visual arts, etc. In 2019, Nigeria's creative industries employed approximately 3.2 million people, which made up about 6% of total employment. Despite this, Nigeria's share in global creative good exports is relatively low, indicating room for market share growth.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry emphasizes soft power as a major component of its foreign policy, strategically deployed through the Confucius Institutes and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This statement is supported by Respondents (10) and (11) who consider China's cultural initiatives a huge part of its foreign policy. On the other hand, the Nigerian government highlights its use of cultural diplomacy, educational diplomacy, peacekeeping operations before the 21st century and diaspora engagement as key elements of its soft power strategies. While China was more of an isolated state before the 21st Century, it has opened up its borders and increased global commitments. On the other hand, Nigeria has recently soft pedaled with less focus on key elements of its soft power such as educational diplomacy through exchange and technical programs as well as scholarships that sent its indigenes abroad for studies. Furthermore, while the Chinese central government spearheads all soft power initiatives, the Nigerian political system as a federation is structured in such a way that local governors can determine the trajectory of each state's soft power initiatives (Chukwudi, 2022). Lagos State in 2025 held the Fanti Carnival that showcased Afro-Brazilian culture and the Eyo Festival. In 2023, the annual Osun-Osogbo Festival, recognized by UNESCO was held in August to promote indigenous spirituality. It attracted international tourists and reinforced cultural identity. The Calabar Carnival attracted over 300,000 tourists in 2023 boosting the economy within a few days (Lagos State Ministry of Innovation, Science & Technology, 2025). Various states also have scholarships for indigenes. Rivers State through the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and Kano State through the Kano State Scholarships Board (KSSB) have sponsored students for higher education in UK, US, Egypt, India, Ukraine, etc. Kwara State launched the STEAM UP Kwara Initiative in 2024, establishing STEM hubs and modern laboratories across the state. Before the 21st Century, the Nigerian federal government spearheaded most soft power initiatives (Chukwudi, Gberville, Abasilim & Imhonopi, 2019). Recently, in the 21st Century, state governments have been more active than the federal government in championing various soft power initiatives. There has also been the emergence of public-private partnerships in support of Nollywood and in the aspect of education.

China's strategic use of soft power has enhanced its global influence and counterbalanced the United States. China's focus on cultural promotion through initiatives like Confucius Institutes, China Cultural Centers, and diplomatic cultural exchanges, alongside economic strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and technological partnerships have resulted in increased global favorability in regions like Africa and Latin America, showcasing China's rise as a major player in international relations through both cultural and economic soft power (Chandra & Sinha, 2024).

Nigerian entertainment has become a critical soft power asset, driving admiration and influence across Africa and beyond (Salaudeen & Guo, 2024). With internationally acclaimed artists, award-winning films, and unique cultural

exports like Afrobeats and Nollywood, Nigeria showcases its creative prowess and potential for regional and global impact. Despite these strengths, Nigerian policymakers have yet to fully harness these cultural resources for strategic national and regional goals. Nigeria's thriving entertainment industry, especially its music and film sectors, though a significant tool for projecting its soft power, showcasing cultural diversity, and contributing to economic growth has encountered issues such as piracy, corruption, and inconsistent policy support from the government; thus hindering Nigeria's ability to fully leverage its entertainment industry for foreign policy objectives, despite its vast potential for global influence (Olanrewaju, Nweke-Love, Ajagbe & Julius, 2022).

China, with its long history began employing soft power in its international relations long before the 21st century. From the Tang dynasty dated 618-907 AD, the ancient Silk Road was the primary medium of interaction for Persian and Arabian states to interact with Chinese culture (Data Commons, 2024). China's understanding of the concept of soft power is shaped by two (2) Confucius concepts; namely: attractiveness and appeal. China has ridden on these two buses to sell its culture to nations that it relates with. Devoting significant time and resources to properly situate and deploy its soft power resources and strategies, China has established over twenty (20) institutes for this. Elements of soft power are also embedded in military strategies rooted in ancient Chinese literature of Confucius, Mencius and Lao Tzu (Natulya, 2020).

China's engagement with Africa is driven by multifaceted soft power strategies, which include economic diplomacy, cultural exchanges, and political influence. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects across the continent, positioning itself as a major economic partner. This approach has been successful in improving relations with numerous African countries, particularly through trade agreements, investments in key sectors, and efforts to address local needs such as healthcare and education, exemplified by China's donation of COVID-19 vaccines and support for infrastructure development (Vines & Wallace, 2023).

However, challenges remain as regards debt trap diplomacy where China's loans to African states have led to accusations of economic coercion. Furthermore, while China has significantly expanded its cultural and political influence, it excludes local African workers from certain projects and is not so transparent in its financial dealings leading to questions about the fairness of China's involvement in Africa. Though these challenges are yet to be resolved, China maintains its position as a key player in Africa (Vines & Wallace, 2023).

China faces major competition with the US whose focus has shifted from fighting terrorism globally to fighting to maintain its status as a major power. In 2018, the U.S. National Defense Strategy shifted its focus from counterterrorism to great power competition, identifying China and Russia as primary competitors. In Africa, China has significantly more influence than the US, using financial investments, development projects, and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to strengthen its geopolitical strategy (Asoko Insight, 2018). To counter this, the U.S. has begun employing initiatives like Connect Africa, Power Africa, and Prosper Africa in the 21st Century to promote free trade, infrastructure development, and electricity access, emphasizing transparency and private-sector

growth. Africa, a strategic battleground due to its demographic boom, free trade potential, and stability challenges, remains central to U.S.-China competition for global influence (Madeira, 2020).

While China uses state-led, multi-faceted strategies involving large-scale infrastructural projects and educational diplomacy, Nigeria's soft power approach is more localized, relying on cultural assets and regional or personal leadership. China and Nigeria face unique challenges. China's soft power is undermined because it is government-controlled and Nigeria's soft power is often limited by domestic socio-economic dynamics.

5. Summary and Conclusion

Soft power is an essential tool for every nation, either developed or developing because it offers states the means to project their influence on the global stage without direct confrontation. China has been able to successfully combine cultural diplomacy, global governance and economic ties to project its soft power. Nigeria, though rich in cultural resources has not been able to coordinate these to produce global influence. Both nations need to navigate their unique challenges to produce diplomatic clout and achieve foreign policy goals. In conclusion, soft power remains a vital component of international relations and both states hold significant geopolitical and socio-economic capabilities. Their adaptation of soft power strategies must be continuously refined to suit emerging dynamics.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended:

Increased Transparency: China should improve its financial practices to be transparent by making every nitty-gritty clear and offering better loan restructuring terms. Local workforce should also be engaged in infrastructure projects to enhance the credibility of China's standing and reduce or possibly, completely remove accusations of debt trap diplomacy. Furthermore, China should realign the Confucius Institutes to ensure academic independence in educational partnerships. There should be balanced reporting and less of state-controlled narratives to improve global media influence.

Diversification: Soft power strategies can be diversified to include more cultural initiatives and environmental initiatives as well as humanitarian aid beyond economic investments. Human rights matters can also be addressed to manage concerns in that regard. Addressing these concerns, or at least, demonstrating a willingness to engage in dialogue, would improve China's standing, especially in democratic nations.

Nigeria should strategically institutionalize cultural diplomacy to increase effectiveness. Nigeria has a wealth of cultural assets, from Nollywood to Afrobeats, yet lacks a structured soft power strategy. Establishing a National Cultural Diplomacy Office probably as an arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to oversee global cultural outreach, film distribution, and strategic collaborations can help Nigeria maximize its cultural influence.

Furthermore, soft power can be leveraged to attract investments. Nigeria's entertainment industry already has a global audience, so the government can link this influence with economic diplomacy. International platforms such as Netflix and Prime Video, film festivals and global brands can be partnered with to enhance Nigeria's economic footprint while reinforcing its soft power. Addressing governance concerns such as corruption and instability by improving the application of the rule of law and ensuring policy continuity would improve her soft power ratings and reputation globally as well as achieve her foreign policy goals. Nigeria can also maximize educational diplomacy by establishing educational partnerships and exchange programs, scholarships and cultural studies centers in foreign universities. With membership of the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations (UN), Nigeria can use these positions to achieve its foreign policy goals through planning. Public and digital diplomacy should be engaged to tell the Nigerian narrative globally. This would help to counter negative stereotypes and highlight Nigeria's strength in innovation, arts, and other industries. While China's approach to soft power is structured albeit sometimes controversial, Nigeria's is organic but underutilized. China needs to balance cultural, humanitarian and economic engagements and Nigeria needs to institutionalize its cultural resources to elevate its soft power impact.

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