



Benevolent or Detrimental? Text Analysis of China-Related Reports by Francophone Senegalese Mainstream Media

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Abstract

As China and African countries deepen their economic and political ties, critiques arise from the Western side, suspecting China's intention of involvement in African affairs. Nevertheless, if China and the West are both seemingly biased while proclaiming their standpoint, Africa as a first-hand witness would be most neutral in its point of view. In this paper, I deliberately choose Senegal as an example to conduct text analysis on China-related reports of Francophone mainstream media. Word frequency, topic modeling and sentiment analysis are the three technical approaches adopted. According to the results, Senegalese media reports are neutral regarding China and inclined to welcome China's presence in Africa. From a deeper level, the reports tend to emphasize the voice of Africa, showing the rationality of the African media and Africa's strong willingness to seek a diversified range of partnerships and its own path of development.

1. The Growing Impact of China in Africa and Senegal

Nowadays, with growing economic impact in Africa, China considerably contributes to the development of African countries. According to statistics provided by John Hopkins University SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative, Chinese exports to Africa increased from 1.25 billion dollars in 1993 to 164.2 billion dollars in 2022. Meanwhile, China's imports from Africa also grew rapidly, from 0.49 billion dollars in 1992 to 96.7 billion dollars in 2022.^① The primary exports from Africa to China consist of natural resources, notably crude oil, and other fossil fuels as well as raw unprocessed minerals and other intermediate goods. On the other hand, Africa mainly imports from China primarily manufactured goods and machinery, as well as items that are generally further along in the global value chain.^② Among all African countries, Senegal is not an exception.

2. Western Criticism of China's Presence in Africa

However, notwithstanding the deepening of China-Africa economic relations, China is facing increasingly severe critiques, especially among Western countries.^③ Although there are many media organizations in Western countries that hold supportive points of view towards China's presence in Africa, the overall perspective is rather binary. Many outlets publish articles that offer a negative perspective on China's involvement in Africa. Due to the existence of these perspectives, Western outlets that wish to be objective must publish positive news stories with caveats that discuss the existing criticism of China's involvement in Africa. This means that there is a relative lack of news stories that portray a viewpoint that is entirely positive. The most prominent unfavorable perspectives can be summarized by the four following statements.

First, Western scholars have alleged that China is pursuing neo-colonialism on the African continent.^④ It is claimed that China enters Africa only to exploit natural resources. Some western economists, such as Esposito and Tse, have written articles depicting China as expansionist, wanting to buy up Africa's land.^⑤ Concerning the market operation mechanism, Chinese entrepreneurs have also previously been criticized for their preference toward using Chinese rather than local labor employment.^⑥

^① Anonym, "Data: China-Africa Trade," *China-Africa Research Initiative*, <https://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade>.

^② Wenjie Chen et al., "Navigating the Evolving Landscape of China and Africa's Economic Engagements," *International Monetary Fund*, February 23, 2024, file:///Users/yingehu/Downloads/wpica2024037-print-pdf.pdf.

^③ Maria Barbal Campayo, Changfeng Zhao, "The portrayal of Sino-African relations in the Western Media: Who is actually neo-colonializing Africa?," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, Vol 5, No. 5 (2016): 66-73.

^④ Ben Willis, "China, Africa, and Neo-Colonialism," *E-International Relations*, January 22, 2014, <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/01/22/china-africa-and-neo-colonialism/>; Barry Sautman, Yan Hairong, "African Perspectives on China-Africa Links," *The China Quarterly*, No. 199 (2009): 728-759; Ehizuelen Michael Mitchell Omoruyi et al., "Understanding China-Africa Cooperation: Development Partnership or Neo-Colonialism," *Journal of Cultural and Social Anthropology*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (2019): 13-24.

^⑤ Mark Esposito and Terence Tse, "China Is Expanding Its Economic Influence in Africa. What Is Africa Getting Out of It?," November, 2015, <https://slate.com/business/2015/11/china-s-role-in-africa-is-exciting-for-china-but-is-it-as-great-for-africa.html>.

^⑥ Mark Esposito, Terence Tse, "China Is Expanding Its Economic Influence in Africa. What Is Africa Getting Out of It?," *Slate*, November 24, 2015, <https://slate.com/business/2015/11/china-s-role-in-africa-is-exciting-for-china-but-is-it-as-great-for-africa.html>.

Second, China's presence in Africa purportedly negatively affects the organic functioning of the market and weakens local competitors.^① For instance, the Carnegie Endowment Centre states that "China's low-cost manufacturing exports have undercut local manufacturing firms, especially those engaged in the labor-intensive production of clothing and footwear".^② Western media and scholars believe that substandard services and products made in China flooded African markets, leading to vicious market competition.

Third, China-Africa relations lack transparency.^③ It has been claimed that fraudulent African officials allow the Chinese to operate in Africa. Some Western media agencies even went so far as to accuse China of contributing to bureaucratic corruption in Africa.^④ For instance, a 2021 article by Bloomberg stressed the Chinese link to a fraud case concerning former Congo President Joseph Kabila.^⑤ News articles like these depict China as a country that solely cares about profits and neglects market regulations.^⑥

Lastly, China's involvement in African affairs is argued to have hindered the development of human rights.^⑦ China has been criticized for regularly offending the local laws and customs. African scholars, like Adaora Osondu-Oti, have pointed to the fact that "Western officials and human rights organizations are expressing alarm at China's willingness to invest in countries with questionable human rights records."^⑧ Such accusations against China have even been exaggerated, and rhetoric blaming China for human rights violations against the African people is widespread.

^① George Ofosu, David Sarpong, "China in Africa: On the Competing Perspectives of the Value of Sino-Africa Business Relationships," *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2022): 137-157;; Adi Kraut-Adler, "Sino-Africa relations through the lenses of Western, African and Chinese media," *Ifriqiya*, Vol. 4, No. 6 (2018): 1-5.

^② Nida Jafrani, "China's Growing Role in Africa: Myths and Facts," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 9, 2012, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/02/09/china-s-growing-role-in-africa-myths-and-facts-pub-47140>.

^③ Timothy S. Rich, Sterling Recker, "Understanding Sino-African Relations: Neocolonialism or a New Era?," *Journal of International and Area Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2013): 61-76; Madison Condon, "China in Africa: What the Policy of Nonintervention Adds to the Western Development Dilemma," *The Fletcher Journal of Human Security*, Vol. 27 (2012): 5-25; Richard Hudson, "Chinese Investments in Africa: The Ethics of Transparency," *Seven Pillars Institute*, April 7, 2014, <https://sevenpillarsinstitute.org/chinese-investments-africa-ethics-transparency/>; Jana De Kluiver, "Navigating the complex terrain of China-Africa debt relations," *Institute for Security Studies*, November 2, 2023, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/navigating-the-complex-terrain-of-china-africa-debt-relations>.

^④ Edward Wong, "Competing Against Chinese Loans, U.S. Companies Face Long Odds in Africa," January 13, 2019, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/13/world/africa/china-loans-africa-usa.html>; Michael J Kavanagh, William Clowes, "China Cash Flowed Through Congo Bank to Former President's Cronies," November 29, 2021, *Bloomberg*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-11-28/africa-s-biggest-data-leak-reveals-china-money-role-in-kabila-s-congo-looting>; Yves Montenay, «Présence chinoise en Afrique : vers une Chinafrique ?», *Contrepoints*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.contrepoints.org/2018/10/29/328983-presence-chinoise-en-afrique-vers-une-chinafrique>.

^⑤ Michael J Kavanagh, William Clowes, "China Cash Flowed Through Congo Bank to Former President's Cronies," November 29, 2021, *Bloomberg*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-11-28/africa-s-biggest-data-leak-reveals-china-money-role-in-kabila-s-congo-looting>

^⑥ Philippe Hugon, « La Chine en Afrique, néocolonialisme ou opportunités pour le développement ? », *Revue internationale et stratégique*, Vol. 4, No. 72 (2008): 219-230.

^⑦ Ian Taylor, "Sino-African Relations and the Problem of Human Rights, African Affairs," Vol. 107, No. 426 (2008): 63-87; Mersch, Celine Zaza, "China in Africa: bracketing human rights?," *Global Campus Europe: EMA*, 2008, <https://repository.gchumanrights.org/items/2d826067-8f10-4ae9-96e6-7c0300e064c3>.

^⑧ Adaora Osondu-Oti, "China and Africa: Human Rights Perspective," *Africa Development*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2016): 49-80

3. China's Image: An African Perspective

How does African public opinion evaluate China's presence despite the prevalence of Western media's negative comments? If the Western views of China's involvement in Africa are biased, perhaps the people of Africa, who experienced China's involvement firsthand can provide the most accurate perspective.^① In the 2021 AFR analysis of African polls, perceptions of China in Africa were promising. On average, 63% of African populations agreed that China is a "somewhat" or "very" positive influence in their country. Moreover, China ranked 2nd as a development model after the United States.^②

In this paper, to further analyze how Africans perceive the involvement of China in the continent, I endeavor to narrow the scope of discussion to a specific case study of Senegal media report. The reason why I chose Senegal as an example of media report text analysis is threefold. First, Senegal has strong political and economic ties with China. Since 2016, the two sides have expanded bilateral relations into a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. Senegal was also the first West African country to sign the cooperation agreement for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with China.^③ Second, Senegal is a country of significance in West Africa, playing an important role in regional cooperation, with exceptional historical and cultural heritage. Third, Senegal maintains a tight relationship with Western countries, specifically France and the United States. As a former French colony, Senegal aims to seek a balance between the established colonial framework, the Washington consensus and the Beijing consensus, which endows it with a special international and political identity.

This paper mainly focuses on text analysis of two mainstream media agencies in Senegal: Le Soleil (The Sun) and Sud Quotidien (Southern Daily). Both are French media agencies. Le Soleil is a state-owned newspaper with 30,000 copies published daily and is the most widely printed and cited newspaper in the country. Sud Quotidien, on the other hand, is an independent newspaper, with 20,000 copies of publication per day.^④ I browsed the official websites of the two newspapers and obtained a total of 35 samples from 1 January 2023 to 1 January 2024 with a text filter condition that "Chine" (China) must be included in the content of the news report.

It is important to note that due to resourcing issues, it is common for national media outlets to republish articles originally written by major international media publications. In the case of Le Soleil and Sud Quotidien, these papers frequently draw from French-language and Chinese international media, with editors selecting the articles that best fit with the sentiments and guidelines of their own outlets, occasionally making edits to the original content. Of the 35 news reports analyzed by this paper, 12 are cited from Le Soleil and the other 23 from Sud Quotidien. To be precise, among the reports of Le Soleil, one is copied from CGTN (Chinese media), and one is copied from AFP (French media). Among the reports of Sud Quotidien, one is copied from CGTN and 6 from AFP and RFI (another French media agency). However, though 9 of the total 35 reports are copied from either Western or Chinese media agencies, the author finds that the republished reports also represent Senegalese attitudes since they are cautiously filtered and selected from the Senegalese side.

^① Especially in the U.S. and France, which are China's major market competitors in Africa.

^② Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny, Edem E. Selormey, "AD489: Africans welcome China's influence but maintain democratic aspirations", *Afrobarometer*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/AD489-PAP3-Africans-welcome-Chinas-influence^J-maintain-democratic-aspirations-Afrobarometer-dispatch-16nov21.pdf>.

^③ 宋斌：《中国与塞内加尔合作成果不断涌现》，载《中国网》，2021年11月，http://ydyl.china.com.cn/2021-11/29/content_77899039.htm。

^④ The daily newspaper publication data is obtained from Factiva database.

Through the analysis of high-frequency words, it can be concluded that Senegalese mainstream media's coverage of China has the following characteristics. Firstly, it focuses highly on China's relations with Senegal, with Africa and with the world in general. Secondly, it is concerned about the influential role of key political figures, especially Chinese State Leader Xi Jinping on China's internal affairs as well as China-Senegal and China-Africa relations. Thirdly, attention is paid to the positive effects of win-win cooperation with China. Finally, there is a strong thematic emphasis on politically and economically relevant issues.

4.2 Topic Modeling

The 35 news reports can be broadly categorized by theme as described below.^①

Table 2: 6 major topics of China-related reports of Francophone mainstream media in Senegal (2023)

| Main Topic | Report Number (Le Soleil) | Report Number (Sud Quotidien) | Total Report Number |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| China's internal affairs | 3 | 6 | 9 |
| Sino-African relations | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| Sino-Senegalese relations | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| Sino-US relations | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Pandemic in China | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Chinese aid/loan projects in Senegal | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Other | 1 | 1 | 2 |

In general, Senegalese state-owned and private media reports on China cover similar topics, mainly concerning the following six aspects: China's internal affairs, Sino-African relations, Sino-US relations, Sino-Senegalese relations, the Pandemic in China, and Chinese aid/loan projects in Senegal.

Among them, Senegalese media paid particular attention to China's internal affairs, China-Africa relations and Sino-Senegalese relations. It is worth noting that the Senegalese media's China-related reports are generally objective, but some reports also show a positive inclination towards China. For example, Chinese aid to Senegal is reported favorably.^② Another example is that when reporting admission of the African Union (AU) to the G20, Senegalese media suspected

^① Among them, 7 reports are reprints of Western media and 2 of Chinese media. However, the fact that above mentioned reports are copied by official Senegalese media agencies demonstrate that the reprinted version of reports also represent Senegalese media perspective, as previously argued.

^② Anonym, « Préparation des JOJ Dakar 2026 : la Chine offre son «savoir-faire» au Cnoss », *Sud Quotidien*, July 21, 2023, <https://www.sudquotidien.sn/preparation-des-joj-dakar-2026-la-chine-offre-son-savoir-faire-au-cnoss/>.

the effectiveness of such involvement. The media criticized that the West aims to strengthen an organization that distances itself from China and Russia.^①

4.3 Sentiment Analysis

I then utilize Cortext, a platform for French text sentiment analysis realized by Python computing language to conduct further analysis on China-related reports of the two mainstream medias in Senegal. The computer categorizes the target sentiment into three categories: positive, neutral, and negative. The algorithm measures the sentiment of articles on a scale of -10 (very negative) to 10 (very positive).

My processing of 35 texts using the Cortext platform resulted in 4 reports with a positive level of 1, 31 neutral reports (0), and no negative reports. Such result coincides with the public opinion polls provided by Afrobarometer, proving that China's image in Senegal is rather positive, at least neutral.

5. Insights

This article draws the following three insights based on a summary and analysis of Senegalese media coverage regarding China.

First and foremost, Senegal, as a weaker state, navigates U.S.-China rivalry in a delicate way. Senegal maintains a balance between Washington Consensus and Beijing Consensus. The Washington Consensus refers to a set of neoliberal economic policies advocated by Washington-based institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, emphasizing free-market principles, deregulation, privatization, and fiscal discipline. Meanwhile, the term "Beijing Consensus" refers to China's development model that favors robust government involvement that is capable of deploying significant resources to overcome any obstacles to growth or institutional transformation.^② As such, by striving to strike a balance, Senegal seeks to promote some Washington-style fiscal reforms while maintaining strong government control and centralized decision-making over resource allocation. In a similar fashion, when reporting on China related issues, Senegalese media seeks to maintain neutrality between the two sides by reprinting the most objective and fair articles that are available. For instance, following the US' denouncement of a major cyberattack sponsored by China, Senegal media endeavored to maintain neutrality by publishing a report by RFI. On the one hand, the report emphasized US perspective, quoting official governmental statements and comments from Microsoft and cybersecurity experts. On the other hand, the report specifically cited the proclamation of the Chinese government and announcements of diplomatic officials.^③ Taking both US and Chinese perspectives into consideration, the selected report depicts the arguments of both sides at relatively equal lengths, especially when compared to similar articles on the same topic by other French media outlets like Le Figaro and Le Point.^④ With regard to Taiwan-related issues, the Senegalese media reprinted a

^① Anonym, « Admission de l'UA au G20 : Abdoul Mbaye soupçonne l'occident de renforcer un groupe dont la Chine et la Russie s'éloignent », *Sud Quotidien*, September 9, 2023, <https://www.sudquotidien.sn/admission-de-lua-au-g20-abdoul-mbaye-soupconne-loccident-de-renforcer-un-groupe-dont-la-chine-et-la-russie-seloignent/>.

^② For more details, see Yang Yao, "Beijing Consensus or Washington Consensus", *World Bank Economic Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2011): 26-31.

^③ Anonym, « Les États-Unis dénoncent une cyberattaque d'ampleur parrainée par la Chine », May 25, 2023, *Sud Quotidien*, <https://www.sudquotidien.sn/les-etats-unis-denoncent-une-cyberattaque-dampleur-parrainee-par-la-chine/>.

^④ The report of Le Figaro put into more efforts in concluding the Western criticism towards China. Le Point, on the other hand, absolutely neglected Chinese response to Western criticism. See Anonym, « Les États-Unis dénoncent

French media report that concentrated on objective portrayals of Chinese military deployments, while avoiding all non-objective value judgments^① In both cases, the Senegalese media deliberately chose to republish the media reports which best represented the Senegalese attitude without bias or overly favoring either side.

Second, China-Senegal cooperation is in line with Senegal's national interests and development requirements. As illustrated by the Senegalese president of the National Assembly, “China has become Senegal's leading economic partner, a fruitful partnership underpinned by strong political and diplomatic impetus.”^② Thus, it can be concluded that Senegal’s perspective on China is based on both pragmatism and rationalism. Namely, the country puts national interest and regional benefit first.

China has provided Senegal with substantial aid, loans and investments. In 2019, the inauguration of the Chinese-built Diamniadio Industrial Park drew a positive response from the Senegalese authorities.^③ Infrastructure collaboration has progressed steadily, highlighted by several significant projects following the inauguration of the Museum of Black Civilizations. These include the development of the Thiès-Touba, Dakar-Mbour, and Dakar-Thiès freeways, as well as the Grand Théâtre de Dakar and the Diamniadio Children's Hospital.^④ Additionally, Chinese expertise contributed to the establishment of the first Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system, which now serves the Senegalese capital and its surrounding suburbs.^⑤ Future cooperation opportunities are a realistic basis for Senegal's positive assessment of China.

Last, Senegal takes China as a positive model of global governance, political regime as well as pandemic prevention and control. Reports indicate that the Senegalese media have demonstrated confidence in China's international role and position in the post-pandemic era. Meanwhile, the reports also demonstrate Senegal's vision to increase its international influence. Senegalese report emphasized on the fact that “we're living in an era of heightened global competition for geopolitical influence, with fierce rivalries that ignore no region of the world, least of all Africa, which is becoming ever bigger and better in the sights of their respective diplomatic trajectories.”^⑥ With African perspective turning increasingly important in geopolitical landscape, “Africa has developed its own multipolar influence in the world, which Russia and China may find useful in

une cyberattaque d'ampleur parrainée par la Chine », May 25, 2023, *Le Figaro*, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-eco/les-etats-unis-denoncent-une-cyberattaque-d-ampleur-parrainee-par-la-chine-20230525>; Anonym, « Les États-Unis dénoncent une cyberattaque d’ampleur parrainée par la Chine », May 25, 2023, *Le Point*, https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/les-etats-unis-denoncent-une-cyberattaque-d-ampleur-parrainee-par-la-chine-25-05-2023-2521560_24.php#11.

^① Anonym, « La Chine simule un « bouclage » de Taïwan avec ses essais militaires », April 10, 2023, *Sud Quotidien*, <https://www.sudquotidien.sn/la-chine-simule-un-bouclage-de-taiwan-avec-ses-essais-militaires/>.

^② Anonym, « Coopération bilatérale : la Chine, premier partenaire économique du Sénégal », May 16, 2023, *Sud Quotidien*, <https://www.sudquotidien.sn/cooperation-bilaterale-la-chine-premier-partenaire-economique-du-senegal/>.

^③ Anonym, “The Opening Ceremony of Diamniadio Industrial Park Phase II Project in Senegal and the Matchmaking Symposium on Sichuan-Senegal Capacity Cooperation Were Successfully Held,” *SRBG*, June 25, 2019, https://www.srbg.com/out_news_en/show-31.html.

^④ Samir Bhattacharya, “China’s growing bonhomie with Senegal: Why the world should take notice,” *Firstpost*, June 16, 2023, <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/chinas-growing-bonhomie-with-senegal-why-the-world-should-take-notice-12729252.html>.

^⑤ Anonym, « Sénégal, pari gagnant pour la Chine et la BRI », Observatoire Français Nouvelle Routes de la Soie », December 29, 2019, *Observatoire Français*, <https://observatoirefrs.com/2019/12/29/senegal-pari-gagnant-pour-la-chine-et-la-bri/>.

^⑥ Anonym, « L’Afrique pourrait-elle aider la Russie et la Chine à contrer l’influence occidentale ? », March 22, 2023, *Sud Quotidien*, <https://www.sudquotidien.sn/lafrique-pourrait-elle-aider-la-russie-et-la-chine-a-contrer-linfluence-occidentale/>.

their quest for a new sustainable counter-culture to the long-standing hegemony of the West, which couldn't be more threatened by the Asian giants.”^①

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Senegal report texts seldom disseminate or reproduce the stigmatization of China by the West, but rather show a perspective that is based on Africa's regional interests and its respective countries' national interests. In reprinting the French reports, the Senegalese media were also cautious in choosing the most neutral and China-friendly rhetoric. When forecasting Africa's development prospects in world politics and the future of China-Africa relations, the reports tend to emphasize the voice of Africa, showing the rationality of the African media and Africa's strong willingness to seek a diversified range of partnerships and its own path of development.

^① Anonym, « L’Afrique pourrait-elle aider la Russie et la Chine à contrer l’influence occidentale ? », March 22, 2023, Sud Quotidien, <https://www.sudquotidien.sn/lafrique-pourrait-elle-aider-la-russie-et-la-chine-a-contrer-linfluence-occidentale/>.

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