

Digital Public Diplomacy: Integrating Africa in the New *Tianxia*

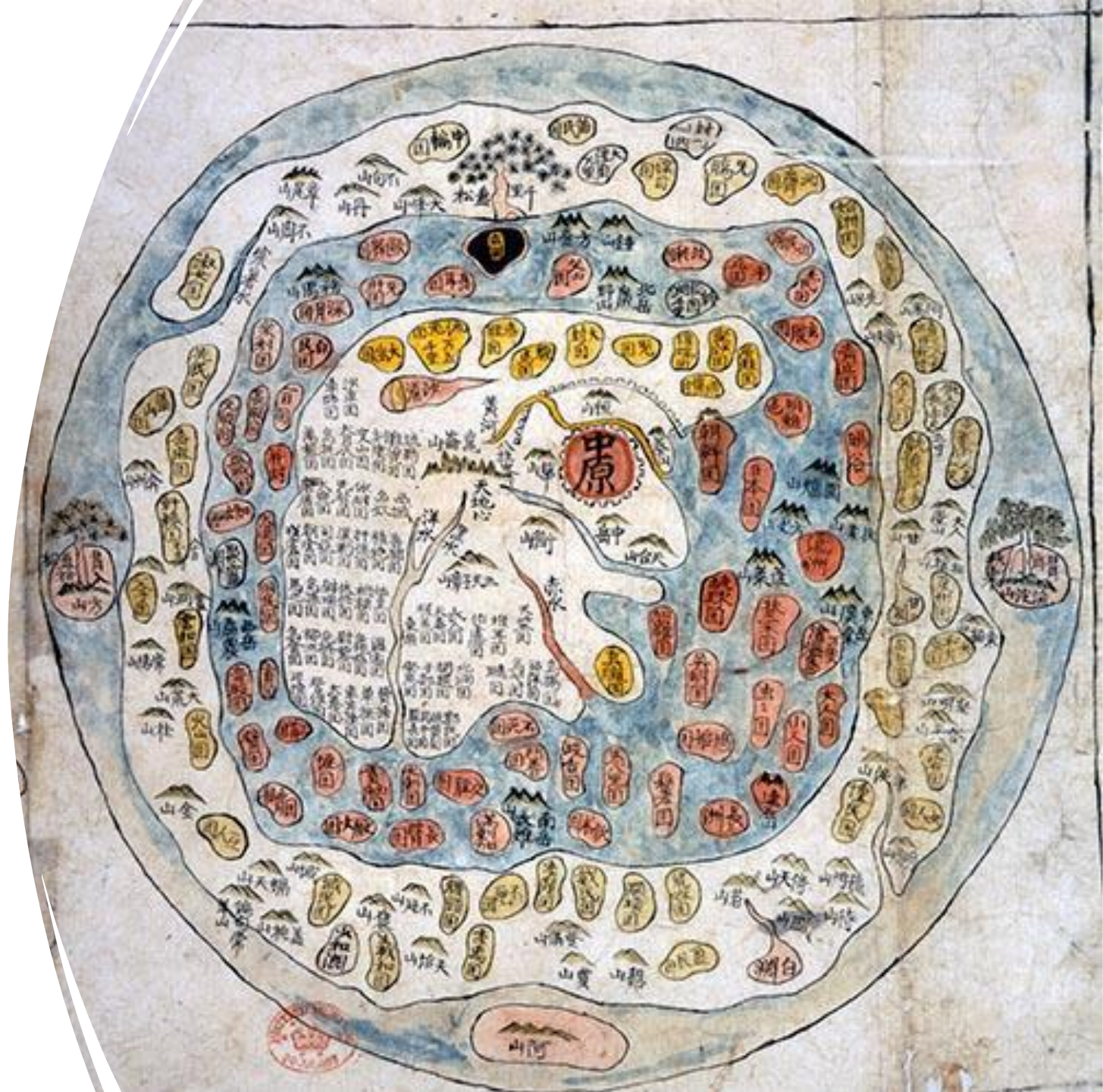
CHINA SESSIONS - "Digital

Public Diplomacy: China's Engagement in Africa"

Luís Filipe Pestana, PhD candidate at Institute of Social and Political Studies (ISCSP)

Centro Científico e Cultural de Macau

September 2025



Introduction

Integrating Africa in a new cosmovision: **A community with a shared future for mankind (CSFM)** 人类命运共同体 (*rénlèi mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ*);

CSFM's synonym: *Tianxia* (天下 *tiānxià*) or **All-Under Heaven** and its reemergence;

Tianxia as a **novel international order** with China at its core;

China's historical ties to Africa;

Digital public diplomacy to **integrate Africa in the CSFM**.

What is *tianxia* and why does it matter?

Emerged during the Zhou dynasty (1045–221 BC)

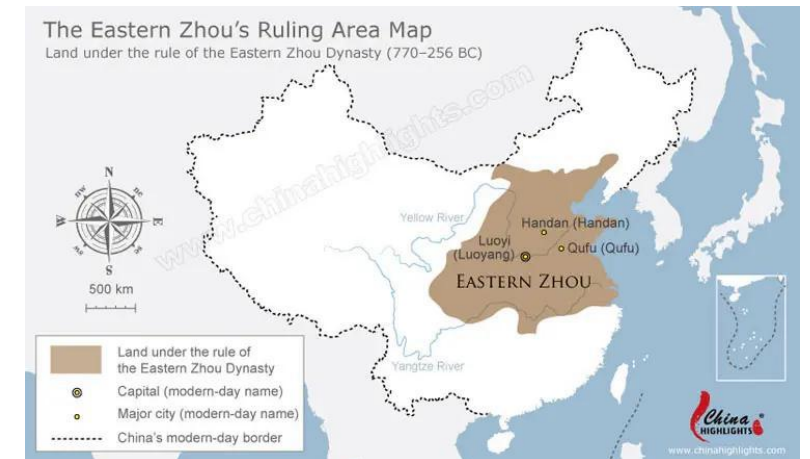
Included in political discourse in the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476BC) and commonly used during the Warring States Period (476–221BC) (Pines, 2002, p.102);

Originating from China's Central Plains (中原 *zhōngyuán*), the *tianxia* has mostly a cultural connotation (Levenson, 1952, p.449; Pines, 2002, pp. 101&102);

The **Emperor** or **Son of Heaven** (天子 *tiānzǐ*) was placed at its core as holder of the **Mandate of Heaven** (天命 *tiānmìng*).



Source: <https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/china-history/the-zhou-dynasty.htm>



Source: <https://www.chinahighlights.com/map/ancient-china-map/eastern-zhou-dynasty-map.htm>

What is *tianxia* and why does it matter?

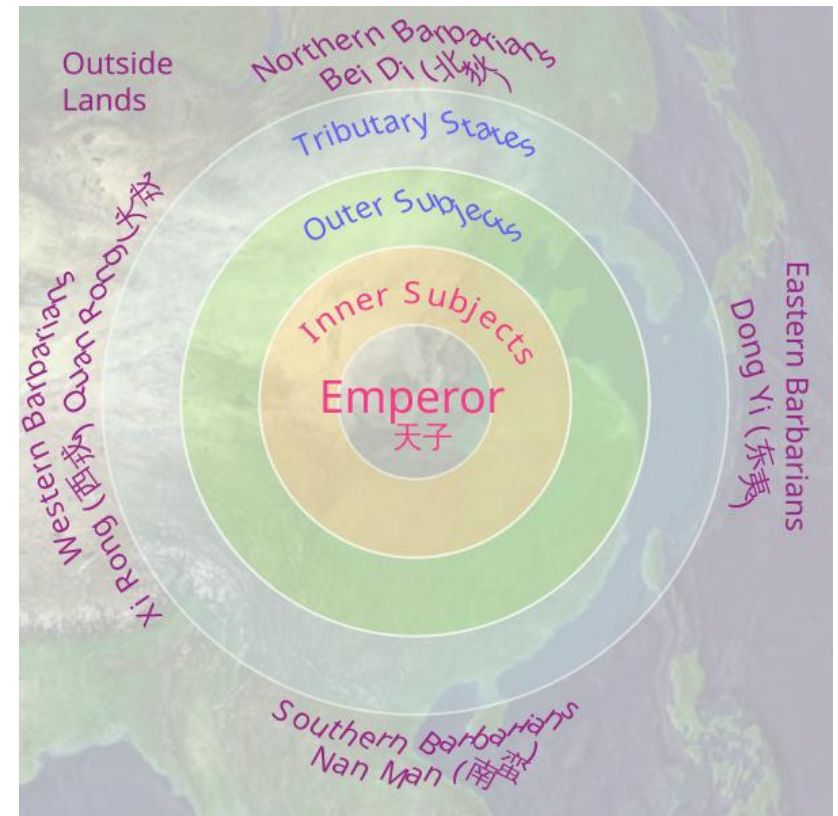
Sheng Hong (1996) first brought the term back into academic discussion;

Reaffirming Chinese **exceptionalism**;

Zhao Tingyang (2019; 2021) views *tianxia* as the **ideal system to tackle global issues**;

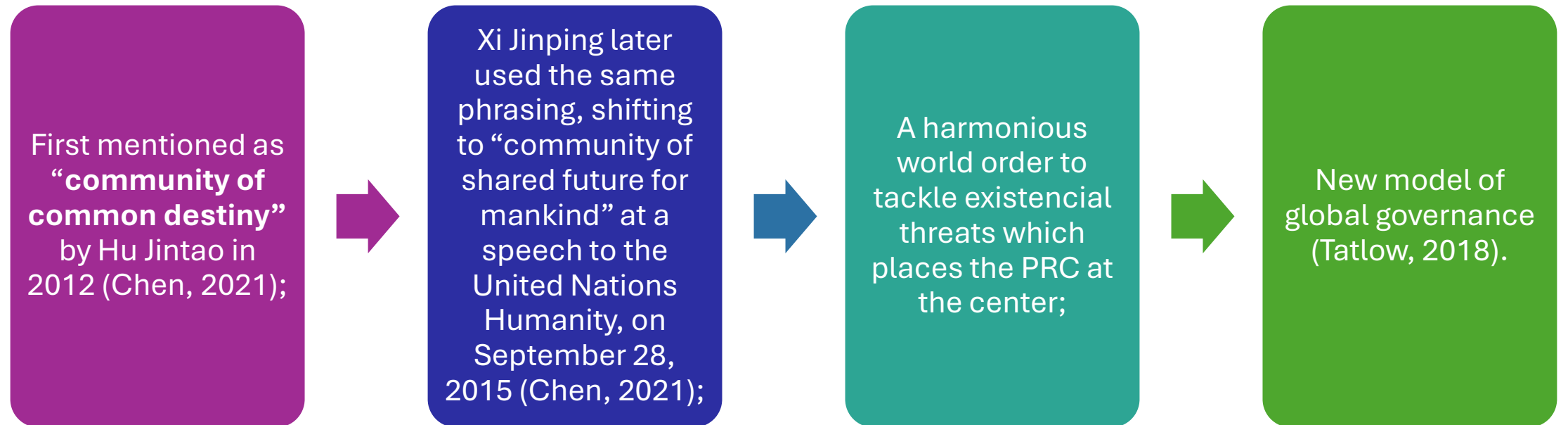
World government vs. competing states: the *tianxiaist* dicotomy (Puranen, 2019);

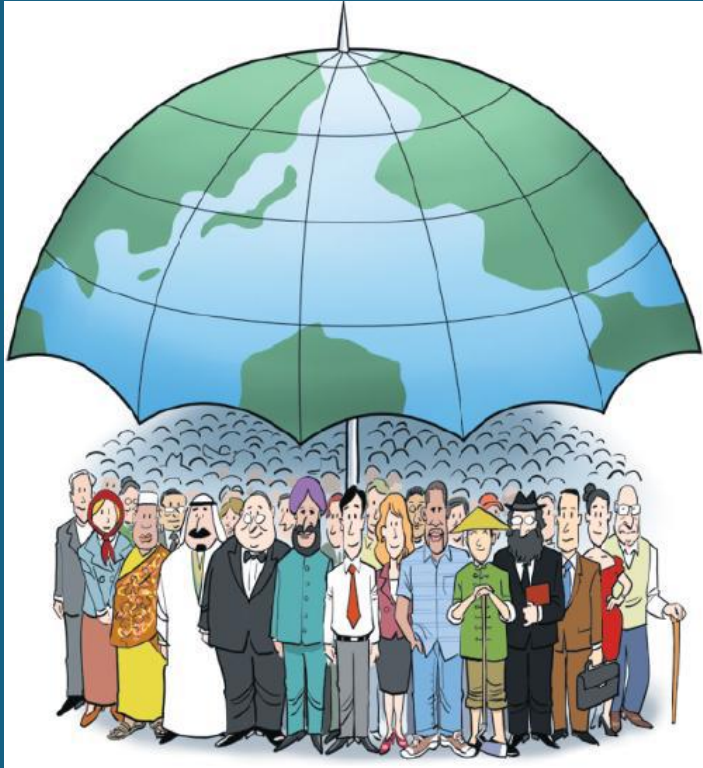
Wang and Babones (2017) formulated the American *tianxia* theory.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tianxia_en-zh-hans.svg

A community with a shared future for mankind (CSFM): *tianxia* 2.0





Cartoonist Luo Jie's representation
of "community with shared future"

Source:

<https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202009/23/WS5f6ae647a31024ad0ba7b46b.html>



Xi Jinping's speech at the 70th session of the
UN General Assembly (2015) Source:

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2015zt/xjpdmgjxgsfwbcxlhgc170znxlfh/202406/t20240606_11381579.html

China-Africa relations into the 21st century

1950s – 1960s: striving for international legitimacy of the People's Republic of China (Brautigam 2009, p.30; Cheru & Obi eds. 2010, p.55; Aarsæther 2011, p.5)

Late 1970s-1990s: attempt to improve ties with USSR and US (Taylor 2006, pp. 59 – 61)

1990s-today: more pragmatic approach, in many circumstances at the expense of the West;

Bilateral relations and multilateral mechanisms are essential, like in the case of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) first held in 2000 (Brautigam 2009, p.77);

More trade and foreign direct investment in Africa.



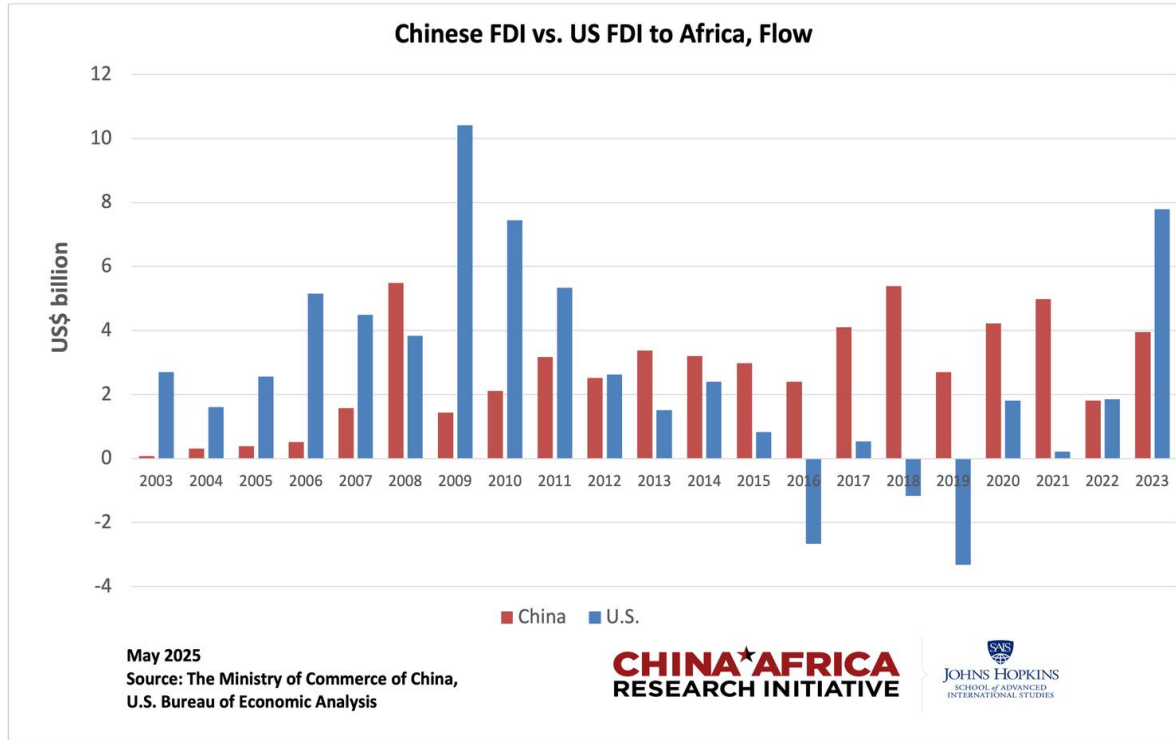
Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference (Noéma via Getty Images)

Source: <https://www.noemamag.com/from-bandung-to-brics/>

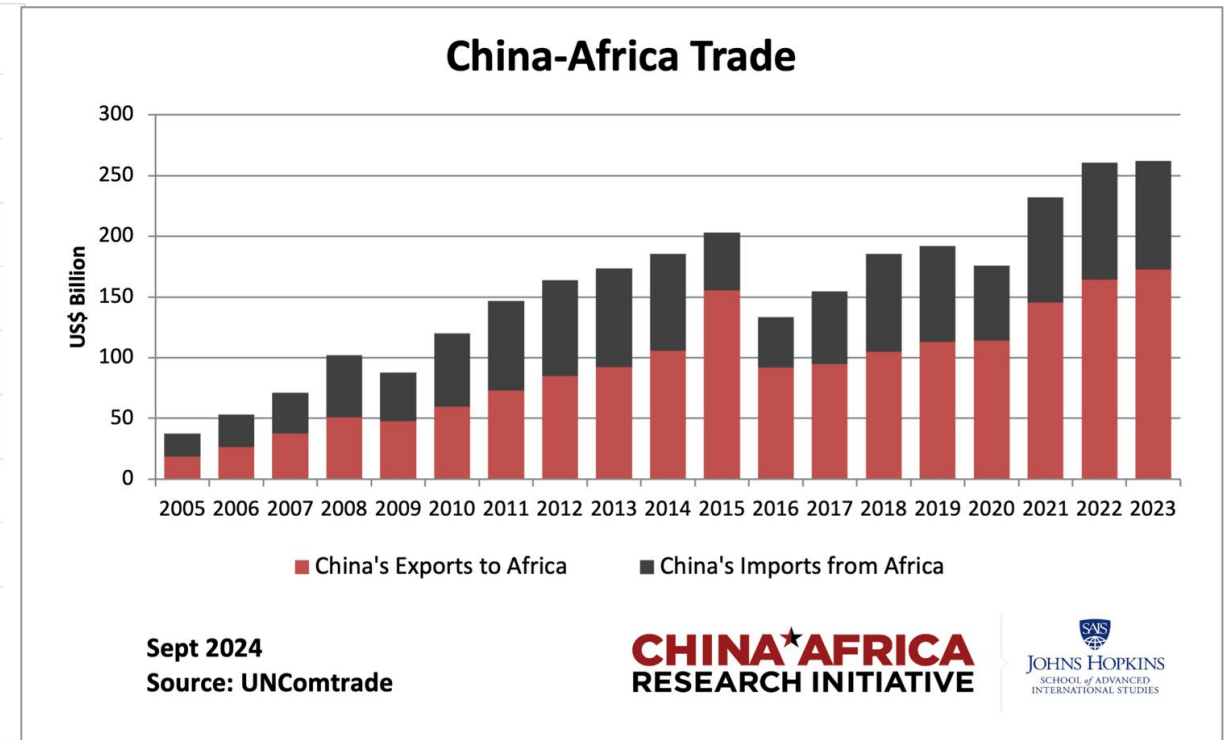


TANZAM railway, one of the first major Chinese investments in Africa (1970-1975)

Source: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/tanzania/tanzam.htm>



Source: <http://www.sais-cari.org/chinese-investment-in-africa>



Source: <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade>

Role of Digital Public diplomacy in drawing Africa into CSFM

Chinese social media: *Wechat* (微信) and *Xiaohongshu* (小红书);

Western social media: Facebook and X (Alden & Chan, 2021);

CGTN, *China Daily* and *Global Times* as vehicles of Chinese digital public diplomacy;

Covid-19: Africa and China united during the pandemic (Shumba, 2021).

Role of Digital Public diplomacy in drawing Africa into CSFM

Africa portrayed in a positive light;

“Wolf Warriors”: spearheading the confrontation with the West and reaffirming China’s position (Palit, 2024);

Large Digital Silk Road (DSR) investments (Eder, Arcesati & Mardell, 2019; CFR, 2020; Zhou, 2025).

Concluding remarks

China's place at the center of the CSFM/*tianxia* while co-opting other nations into accepting its role in international politics;

Africa included as part of shared future;

Building trust in China at the expense of the United States and Europe;

Digital public diplomacy as a tool to pit China vs. The West

References

- Aarsæther, Aslaug (2011). *Chinese colonialism or south-south cooperation?: the case of Chinese resources for infrastructure contracts in Angola*. Bergen: Department of Comperative Politics, University of Bergen
- Alden, Chris & Chan, Kenddrick (2021). Twitter and Digital Diplomacy: China and COVID-19. *LSE Ideas: Strategic Update*. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/LSE-IDEAS-Twitter-and-Digital-Diplomacy-China-and-COVID-19.pdf>
- Babones, Salvatore (2017). *The American Tianxia: Chinese Money, American Power and the End of History*. Bristol: Policy Press
- Brautigam, Deborah (2009). *The dragon's gift: the real story of China in Africa*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press
- Chen, Stella (2021). Community of Common Destiny for Mankind. *China Media Project*. Available at: https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/community-of-common-destiny-for-mankind/
- Cheru, Fantu, and C. I. Obi (eds.) (2010). *The rise of China and India in Africa: challenges, opportunities and critical interventions*. London: Zed Books
- Palit, Parama S. (2024) Public Diplomacy Through Social Media: the Chinese Way. *China Research Center*. Issue: 2024: Vol. 23, No. 1. <https://www.chinacenter.net/2024/china-currents/23-1/public-diplomacy-through-social-media-the-chinese-way/>

References

- Qin, Y. (2016). A Relational Theory of World Politics. *International Studies Review*, 18(1), 33–47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2475833>. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24758336>
- Sheng, Hong. 1996. “从民族主义到天下主意 [From Nationalism to Tianxiaism].” *Strategy and Management* 1 (February): pp.14–19.
- Shumba E. (2021). An investigation into ‘Wolf Warrior’ diplomacy in Africa via Twitter and Facebook at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 28(3), 471–483. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2021.1976267>
- Tatlow, Didi Kirsten (2018). China’s Cosmological Communism: a challenge to liberal democracies. *Merics - Mercator Institute for China Studies*. Available at: <https://merics.org/en/report/chinas-cosmological-communism-challenge-liberal-democracies>
- Taylor, Ian. (2006). *China and Africa: engagement and compromise*. London: Routledge
- Zhao, Tingyang (2019). *Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zhao, Tingyang (2021). *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*. Berkley: University of California Press