Advocating for the Digitization of the History of China-Africa Diplomatic Relations

Chensi, LI
MPhil student in Development Studies, University of Cambridge cl974@cam.ac.uk
Xi, CHEN
Assistant Professor, School of International and Public Affairs, Jilin University
freyafloat@163.com

Abstract:

This article delves into the examination of research pertaining to the historical establishment of diplomatic relations between China and African countries, intersecting with the domain of historical digitization, focusing on the fusion of oral history and the digital preservation of historical documents. After underscoring the significance of investigating the history of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and African nations, the study conducts a literature review, delving into the status quo of historical digitization research in both Chinese and African academies with both sides' current study on each other's history and Sino-African relations, thereby furnishing a robust technical and scholarly groundwork for this research. Afterward, the article deliberates upon the prospects and challenges intrinsic to digitizing the history surrounding the initiation of diplomatic relations between China and Africa. Conclusively, the article proffers recommendations aimed at catalyzing the digitization trajectory of this historical narrative, spanning two tiers, including the official multilateral cooperation mechanism and collaborative endeavors involving private academic institutions.

1   Introduction

The historical trajectory of China's diplomatic relations with African nations spans over 55 years, beginning with its inaugural establishment of diplomatic ties with Egypt in 1956 and culminating most recently with the formalization of relations with South Sudan in 2011 (MOFA, 2008). Examining the history of diplomatic engagements between China and African countries serves to illuminate the diplomatic historiography and foreign policy studies. At present, the historical narrative of China's diplomatic connections with African countries remains constrained, predominantly residing within official diplomatic archives and personal reminiscences. This domain of research witnesses limited enthusiasm and underdeveloped digital representation. Given the complexity of multi-party interactions within diplomatic relations, and recognizing that diverse anecdotes beyond formal negotiation documents harbor substantial research value, the imperative for the collection, organization, digital conversion, and secure archival of historical materials becomes increasingly apparent. The primary objective of this paper is to involve a comprehensive review of existing literature to elucidate the research foundation of both Chinese and African scholars concerning each other's historical contexts and the dynamics of China-Africa relations. Concurrently, the paper appraises the research outcomes and technical infrastructure fostered by scholars from both spheres within the realm of historical digitization. This dual exploration

establishes a basis upon which to propel the digital transformation of the history of China's diplomatic relations with Africa. Subsequently, the paper undertakes an analysis of the current collaborative endeavors between Chinese and African scholars in the domain of history, while concurrently delineating the resource assets at their disposal and the formidable challenges encountered in digitizing historical narratives. Drawing from the foregoing analyses, the paper concludes by offering recommendations for the digitization of China's diplomatic history with African nations from both official and private channels.

2 Literature Review

2.1 History Digitization

Chinese scholars have laid a foundation in historical digitization, primarily concentrating on oral history, architectural history, and explorations into technologies emblematic of historical digitization. A cohort of Chinese academics has recognized the pivotal role of digitization in the evolution of historical studies, progressively aligning with technological advancements. In the realm of oral history, Feng Yun divides the digital management and utilization of oral history resources into creation, collection, organization, storage, access, and safeguarding phases (Feng 2021). Chen Junhua and Gao Xiaojun argued that XML files encoded in the METS format should mainly be used to preserve and manage oral history (Chen and Gao 2010). In the context of textual history archives, Yan Zhong and Tu Xiaolan delve into the digitization project of historical archives at Sichuan University, underscoring the engagement of external professional data entities (Yan and Tu 2017). Li Erling proposes the establishment of a shared platform for historical research, utilizing oral history as an entry point to enhance its utility (Li 2022).

A parallel narrative of extensive research emerges within African scholarship, notably exemplified by Verne Harris. Harris underscores the dynamics of power and memory entailed in archival practices, notably within the South African historical context. Harris' contribution to the digitization of archives linked to Nelson Mandela serves as a testament to the profound import of historical digitization, magnifying its latent potential within the African milieu (Harris 2016). Furthermore, Nick Shepherd, in his work "Apartheid's Festival: Contesting South Africa's National Pasts" (2003), delves into the intricate interactions of diverse groups within public spaces to contest and redefine the trajectory of the nation's history (Nick 2019).

2.2 China-Africa Related History

Chinese scholars possess a plethora of studies on African history and the intricate dynamics of China-Africa interactions. To be precise, modern scrutiny of Sino-African relations emerged following the Bandung Conference in 1955. Subsequently, the Institute of International Relations of the Chinese Academy of Sciences was established in November 1956, accompanied by the initiation of the West Asia-Africa Research Group, dedicating efforts to matters concerning Africa. The China Institute for Asian and African Studies commenced its exploration of African nations' quests for independence and the burgeoning interactions between China and African counterparts in 1961. Against

this backdrop, research endeavors predominantly revolved around African national liberation movements, the foundational landscape of African states, and the interplay of global powers with Africa. The trajectory of China-Africa relations has engendered a more systematic and specialized approach to research. The establishment of the China-Africa Forum Cooperation Mechanism (FOCAC) in 2000 catalyzed diversification within the research disciplines encompassing Africa. In addition to international relations, economic, and social inquiries, Chinese scholars have directed their attention towards military security, cultural heritage, folklore, and anthropological dimensions of Africa (Zhang 2019).

Concurrently, African academia also have been contributing to the study of China-Africa relations. Eminent scholars such as Chris Alden has extensively examined China's policies towards Africa, as well as investments and trade dynamics (Alden 2008). Adams Bodomo, studied Africa-China relations in the work "Africa-China Relations: Symmetry, Soft Power and South Africa" from a perspective of soft power (Bodomo 2009). Lina Benabdallah, in the work "The Evolution of China-Africa Relations: A Historical Analysis", delves into the historical aspect of China-Africa relations. African scholars have approached the study of China and China-Africa relations from international relations frameworks, while also integrating more contemporary perspectives, shedding light on multiple facets of China's engagements with African nations (Benabdallah 2018).

Although both Chinese and African academics have carried out a great deal of research on China-Africa relations, relatively little research has been done on the process of establishing diplomatic relations between China and African countries, and it is not the focus of research on either side. However, with the gradual development of China-Africa relations, strengthening research on the history of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two sides will help us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of China-Africa relations and to digitally preserve and study the precious historical data of that period.

3 Analysis of History Digitization of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between China and African Countries

3.1 Existed Opportunities and Resources

Notably, today's studies pertaining to the historical trajectory of China-Africa diplomatic relations are diverse in content, while lack of digital expression. Nonetheless, ongoing research initiatives and established platforms have proffered a promising foundation for subsequent explorations in this realm. In terms of research on the oral history of China-Africa relations, the most representative project at present is the major project set up by China's National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences in 2016 - "Arrangement and Research of Historical Documents and Oral Historical Materials on China-Africa Relations" (NOPSS 2018). This project has encompassed a pivotal facet—the collection and meticulous organization of oral history materials pertaining to the evolution of diplomatic relations between China and diverse African countries. Although the implementation of

digitization methodologies within this ongoing project remains circumscribed as it mainly relies on literature work and the collection of oral history materials, the repository of interviews and audio recordings involving Chinese and foreign stakeholders that were implicated in the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and selected African nations confers invaluable historical resources for prospective inquiry.

Also, recent times have witnessed a burgeoning alignment between Chinese and African museums, particularly within the realm of cultural heritage. The China-Africa Museum Directors' Forum has emerged as a notable vehicle, affording an invaluable platform for collaborative exhibitions that illuminate the bilateral history. Illustratively, In 2010, the first African museum in a Chinese university opened at Zhejiang Normal University (ChinaAfrica 2011).

Likewise, China-Kenya Art Show was held at the at the Taifa Hall of Nairobi University (Chinese Embassy in Kenya 2019). These initiatives have not only bolstered historical exchanges between China and African counterparts but, crucially, laid the foundation for public exhibitions of the digitized history of diplomatic relations between the two entities.

3.2 Challenges Faced by Future Development

Presently, the study of the history of China's diplomatic relations with African countries confronts specific challenges. Primarily, the study of the history of establishing diplomatic relations, as a part of diplomatic history, involves parties with certain political backgrounds.

Consequently, endeavors encompassing interviews with pertinent stakeholders, the aggregation of oral historical data, and the digital preservation of extant documents necessitate a harmonious cooperation and endorsement from both the Chinese and African governments. This requires sufficient attention from the governments, which is still limited so far.

Secondly, it's undeniable that there is a certain foundation for China-African interaction in historical study, for instance, more than 70 African research centers have emerged in China after the establishment of FOCAC, and a growing number of Chinese scholars have conducted fieldwork in Africa instead of relying on Western historical materials as in the past (Bi 2022). However, the two sides have not established a concrete cooperation mechanism for the digitization of history so far, leading to a lack of comprehensive systems to support scholars. Last but not least, many details of the history of China's diplomatic relations with Africa involve the collection and collation of oral histories, which require interviews with a large number of people. The exigency of these interviews has become increasingly pronounced over time, given the advancing age of many involved individuals. Thus, the interviews, together with the compilation of oral histories need timely action on both sides to avert the risk of losing crucial primary sources.

4 How to Promote the Digitization of the History of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between China and African Countries

4.1 Make Full Use of Existing Multilateral Cooperation Mechanisms

At present, China and African countries

have established a number of mature multilateral cooperation mechanisms, such as the FOCAC and the BRICS mechanism, which have the potential to contribute to the digitization of the history of China's diplomatic relations with African countries in two main aspects. Firstly, the action plans of the above mechanisms emphasize the cooperation among universities, think tanks and research institutes, such as the Dakar Action Plan of the 8th FOCAC, which could provide the basis for a network of resources and financial support (FOCAC 2022). Further, the history of diplomatic relations is a diplomacy and political science oriented historical research, in which many of the protagonists of oral history are diplomatic officials of various countries. Therefore, the official framework of multilateral cooperation facilitates interviews with the relevant diplomatic officials, and scholars' access to the relevant foreign ministries' databases and official archives.

4.2 Strengthen Cooperation of China-Africa Intellectual Institutions

Cooperation between China and African countries should be strengthened in the areas of museums, archives, research institutions and universities. Although at present there is a certain degree of cooperation between each of the above four types of institutions, the integration of resources and multi-level co-operation and communication between these four institutions have yet to be realized. Currently, the cooperation between museums mainly focuses on anthropology and country history, the cooperation between archives is relatively small, while the cooperation between research institutes is mainly reflected in think-tank seminars, and the cooperation between universities is mainly focused on the exchange of teachers and students. China and African countries should set up a special working group to integrate the resources of experts and scholars in various fields as well as historical materials and archives, so as to carry out professional research on the history of diplomatic relations and digitize the archives. This will not only promote the cooperation between China and African countries on this topic, but also set a representative example for future cooperation between China and African countries in other digital humanities fields and even other disciplines.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, there is currently a lack of systematic research on the history of diplomatic relations between China and African countries, the process of digitization of historical materials is relatively trivial, and the resources of both sides have not been integrated in a multi-level and systematic manner. The preservation of historical materials on the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and African countries is of great significance to the study of diplomatic history as well as the study of foreign policies of various countries. Accordingly, in the future, the two sides should make full use of the existing multilateral cooperation framework at the official level. At the public level, both sides should integrate the resources of museums, archives, research institutes and universities, and set up a special working group to digitize the history of China's diplomatic relations with African countries and conduct further research.

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