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Narratives of contemporary Africa on China Global Television Network's documentary series *Faces of Africa*

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Abstract

This paper examines the documentary series *Faces of Africa*, broadcast on CGTN Africa, the African branch of China Global Television Network (formerly known as CCTV International) since 2012. Using in-depth interviews and content analysis, we canvas the layers of supervision, censorship, agency and cross-cultural collaboration that lead to a creative dialogue between filmmakers and Chinese commissioning producers. We argue that, compared to news programs on both CGTN and other global networks, the documentary series allows a more positive and humane portrayal of African people. However, given that CGTN often engages non-Chinese filmmakers and seeks to emulate global production values to attract non-Chinese viewers, the extent to which CGTN's documentaries on Africa contrast to those of other global networks remains a question for further debate.

Keywords

CGTN-Africa, China, Africa, documentary, representations, *Faces of Africa*

Introduction

Launched in 2012 in Nairobi, CGTN Africa¹—China’s first overseas broadcasting and production centre—is the most visible example of China’s increased mediated engagement with Africa since the turn of the century (Franks and Ribet, 2009). For decades, representations of the continent in the global television industry have been dominated by international broadcasters of former colonial powers such as the BBC or France24, as well as other global news outlets like CNN (Bunce et al., 2016; Hawk, 1992). However, as Wasserman (2015) and Zhao (2015) have suggested, the rise of BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in recent years, and the ensuing shifts in the geopolitics of information are partly challenging these assumptions. China’s Party-state media, a new actor in the global television market, has attempted to reverse dominant representations of Africa, which have for a long time been considered primarily negative (Scott, 2017), by providing an alternative voice that, Beijing claims, focuses on positive stories and on a rejuvenated Africa.

Studies on Africa-China media encounters, although on the rise, remain limited in scope and focus. Scholars have primarily looked at the production of news (Gagliardone, 2013; Zhang, 2013); the nature of the content being produced (Marsh, 2016; Zhang and Matingwina, 2016); the impact on African and global audiences (Gorfinkel et al., 2014; Madrid-Morales and Wasserman, 2017); the political economy of the internationalization of Chinese media (Morin-Allory, 2011); and, more recently, on newsroom ethnographies (Gagliardone and Nyíri, 2017; Lefkowitz, 2017a). This study departs from previous publications in two ways: it concentrates on documentary films, a genre that has played a pivotal role in the history of Chinese television and yet remains largely understudied,² and explicates content from the point of view of producers.

More specifically, we explore the stories constructed since 2012 as part of CGTN Africa's weekly documentary series *Faces of Africa*, commissioned primarily to independent Kenyan and South African production houses. We focus on how producers and editors at CGTN Africa, and independent filmmakers outside the station depict social, economic and cultural transformations in Africa in the context of one of China's global media networks. CGTN is the international arm of China Central Television (CCTV), a massive network that also operates domestically in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and which is run under the control of the Chinese Communist Party and state apparatus. CGTN is part of the Chinese state's attempt to increase their influence, soft power and positive image overseas, and help the world better understand China by creating a space to air its 'voice' (Gorfinkel and Su, 2016; Sun, 2010). Given the direct political links between the television network and the central government, CGTN has struggled to gain credibility internationally as a reputable objective producer of programming (Zhu, 2012). This article questions the purpose of CGTN with regards to its underlying role in 'external publicity work' (Zhu, 2012) in the case of one programme that focuses on positive representations not of China, but of Africa.

The article begins by situating CGTN Africa and the documentary television genre within global televisual representations of Africa. Drawing on a content analysis and on six in-depth interviews with media professionals who have been involved in the production of films for *Faces of Africa* (two from China, two from Kenya, one from South Africa and one from the United Kingdom), we then canvass the layers of supervision, censorship, and cross-cultural collaboration in the filmmaking process. We argue that the documentary series opens a space for a more positive and humane portrayal of African people than that found on CGTN's and other global news programmes. While there are elements in the selection and production process that must

conform to the norms of the Party-state media apparatus, given the small number of people working on supervising the documentaries, there is flexibility in the creation process, allowing African filmmakers to engage in a creative dialogue with CGTN Africa staff based in Nairobi and exercise their agency in crafting a hybrid Sino-African narrative on contemporary Africa. Yet, given that CGTN often engages filmmakers from Europe and the US, that it seeks to emulate global production values in order to attract non-Chinese viewers, and that it even broadcasts some films originally commissioned for other major networks like the BBC, the extent to which CGTN's documentaries on Africa contrast to content on other global networks, and the extent to which they are comparatively more 'positive' remains debatable.

Representations of Africa in the media

During the twentieth century, media representations of Africa were dominated by Anglo-American media corporations and, to a lesser extent, by media belonging to former colonial powers, such as France or Germany (Fiedler and Frère, 2016; Paterson, 2016). The literature on mediated imagery of Africa is extensive and notably convergent on a number of topics.³ Previous research has suggested that Africa's presence in the media tends to be scarce when compared to other world regions (Kalyango Jr. and Onyebadi, 2012; Terrell, 1989; Wilke et al., 2012), narrow in the topics covered and frames used (de Beer, 2010; Fair, 1993; Hawk, 1992; Mellese and Müller, 2012), predominantly negative (El Zein and Cooper, 1992; Golan, 2008; Schraeder and Endless, 1998) and, as just mentioned, dominated by 'Western' perspectives (Malaolu, 2014; Paterson, 1994). These characteristics have been identified across media, in both news and entertainment, and across genres. In a discourse analysis of two British newspapers, Brookes (1995: 461) noted the predominance of a "neo-colonial racist

representation of Africa and Africans” and concluded that the continent is often portrayed as “uncivilized, barbaric, irretrievably savage, superstitious, corrupt, underdeveloped and generally chaotic.” After looking at 30 years of television news on Africa in US networks, Kalyango and Onyebadi (2012: 685) suggested that coverage was primarily focused on “crises such as coup d’états, civil wars, terrorism, and health pandemics.” And, a study of five blockbuster films set in Africa produced in the US in the early 2000s, revealed new sets of stereotypes: “the emblematic child soldier, the corrupt official, the meddling multinational, and the sacrificial white do-gooder,” which resulted in “an Afropessimistic outlook” (Evans and Glenn, 2010: 32).

The validity of these assumptions about how Africa is represented in the media has been recently called into question by Scott (2016, 2017), who, after a scoping review of academic literature in the US and the UK, described our current knowledge about media representations of Africa as a myth. Scott’s analysis reveals at least three flaws. First, studies generally discuss only a small number of African countries and rarely cover extended periods of time, providing no evidence to suggest that what holds true in a country or moment in time can be assumed to hold for others. Second, in the selection of sources, scholars tend to favour certain media and genres and recurrently sample similar publications and news stations. In the US, *The New York Times* appears in 88 per cent of the analyses (Scott, 2017). Third, findings in studies referring to a single country or event are often understood as representative of the entire continent. Further supporting Scott’s argument, Nothias (2016a) uses data from news stories about Africa published in eight British and French broadsheet newspapers to claim that the practices of racialization, homogenization and selectivity, which are largely assumed to be widespread, are less prevalent than could be expected. In recent years, evidence has also emerged suggesting that Afro-pessimism in the media (Nothias, 2012; Wasserman

and De Beer, 2009) has been substituted by an emerging Afro-optimism (Bunce, 2016; Bunce et al., 2016; Nothias, 2014). In an analysis of magazine covers from the US, UK and France, Nothias (2014) found that media representations in which “Africa was hopeless, in despair, starving [and] lagging,” were being substituted by a narrative of a “hopeful and rising” Africa that, far from being discursively disruptive, was caught between “colonial imagination and neoliberalism” (p. 335).

These ongoing epistemological and ontological debates help shed light on three existing gaps in the scholarship on Africa and the media. As Scott (2017) notes, a genre that has been generally omitted by scholars is documentary, despite evidence that documentary films are on the rise and that they are becoming increasingly popular (The Economist, 2013). Also, except for some studies about journalists and foreign correspondents (see, for example, Bunce, 2010; Nothias, 2016b; Rodney-Gumede, 2016), little is known about those involved in the production of media texts about Africa that are not news. Finally, given the fast-paced changes in the geopolitics of information and entertainment (Wasserman, 2015), exemplified by the rise of new power blocs such as the BRICS nations and the internationalisation of their media activities (Nordenstreng and Thussu, 2015), it appears long overdue to look in detail at how Africa has been represented in the globally-oriented media emanating from new rising powers, such as China. This paper sets out to fill in some of these gaps by looking at the joint production of documentary films on Africa by African production companies and China’s CGTN Africa.

Chinese media and Africa

The argument that Africa is routinely talked about negatively in the media has also been at the core of publicity campaigns by media outlets outside the US and Europe. Al

Jazeera, for instance, in its commercials and promos has positioned itself as a counter-hegemonic provider of narratives on contemporary Africa (Paterson and Nothias, 2016). Likewise, Chinese State-owned media, whose presence in Africa has been growing since 2006, when the Xinhua news agency moved its regional headquarters from Paris to Nairobi and China Radio International (CRI) opened a local FM station in the city, has been particularly vocal in its criticism of existing media representations of Africa (Zhang et al., 2016). Although China has a history of media exchanges with Africa that can be traced back to the 1950s (Wang, 2001; Xin, 2009), what is significant about the current upsurge is the intensity of interactions, the co-existence of public and private enterprises, the aim of Chinese media to reach global audiences and the substantial material capabilities with which they operate. When CCTV opened its Nairobi broadcasting and production centre—what is now CGTN Africa—the key message managers conveyed to foreign media interested in the launch was that the station would offer a positive portrayal of the continent (Jacobs, 2012; McKenzie, 2012). Five years into the launch of CCTV’s African operations, the idea of Chinese media favouring positive portrayals of Africa is still regularly mentioned by the station’s top managers in international forums (Lu, 2017; Mlilo, 2017).

Given the prominence given by CGTN and other global Chinese media to the need for more positive news on Africa, a sizable amount of scholarship has been devoted to scrutinizing the extent to which content actually matches the description. Madrid-Morales (2016) analysed Xinhua’s coverage of Africa over a period of 30 years and found that while in 1982 positive stories outnumbered negative ones, in 2012, negative ones were more prevalent. These findings match those of Zhang (2013: 84), who analysed news bulletins on CGTN Africa in 2012 and found that “on many days negative reporting outweighed positive reporting,” and Marsh (2016) who concluded

that there is no preference for “positive news” on CGTN’s coverage of Africa. A different case could be made for CGTN’s *Faces of Africa* documentary series. In the only attempt to analyse its content to date, Zhang (2013: 98) noted that the programme “not only effectively balances out the unusually negative reports on Africa in the news programme,” but it also “gives a social and cultural perspective to the African narrative.” This article builds on Zhang’s research with a more up-to-date analysis and by also including interviews with production staff, including non-Chinese filmmakers.

The documentary genre occupies a privileged position in the history of Chinese television (Cao, 2015). From the political in-fighting sparked by *River Elegy* (*Heshang*, 1988), to the reappraisal of China’s historical grandeur in *Silk Road* (*Sichou Zhilu Xilie*, 1980), a coproduction between Japan’s NHK and CCTV, or the ode to national cohesiveness and the embracement of diversity in resemblance in *A Bite of China* (*Shejian Shang de Zhongguo*, 2012), documentaries might not enjoy the popularity of television drama, China’s paramount television format (Hong, 2002), but they do play a significant role in the making of modern China. Besides the films featured in *Faces of Africa*, which are created with international audiences in mind,⁴ China’s national broadcaster has produced several documentaries about Africa in recent years targeting domestic audiences, such as *A Passage to Africa* (*Zoujin Feizhou*, 2003), *African Chronicles* (*Feizhou Jishi*, 2011) and *Chinese in Africa* (*Zhongguoren zai Feizhou*, 2015). Ferry (2012) has said of the first of these productions, that it “serves as an educational model for social development at home by highlighting Chinese entrepreneurialism abroad while reconfiguring cultural and historical knowledge of the self and other in preparation for a renewed cosmopolitan return.” (p. 215) In Puppin’s (2017) analysis of *African Chronicles*, we are presented with the narrative strategies employed to create an “emotional bond” between China and Africa. In the present

study, we look beyond domestic narratives of Africa in China, and consider how Chinese media depicts Africa in documentaries for African and global audiences.

Methods

In this article, we used in-depth interviews and content analysis to address the following research questions: Who is involved in the production of *Faces of Africa* documentaries? What types of stories are covered? And, to what extent do stories present a ‘positive’ view of Africa and African people?

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted in Kenya and South Africa between August and November 2015. Three of the informants were contacted through LinkedIn, a business-oriented social networking site, and the rest were referred to the authors by the other informants. Our sample included four females and two males. The nationalities represented were two Chinese, two Kenyan, one South African and one British, and the job positions included an editor, three producers/directors and two managers. Three of the informants were employed by CGTN directly, while the rest worked for the two production companies that have made most of the films featured on the programme. Four of the interviews were face to face and two were conducted over the phone. Interviews lasted between 21 and 60 minutes. Interviewees were guaranteed anonymity, so information that could lead to their identification is withheld.

This article also used data downloaded from CGTN Africa’s YouTube channel at the end of 2016. We used Google’s API, a programming interface to query the platform’s databases, to obtain quantitative data (views, comments, likes, date) for all *Faces of Africa* films posted on the platform between 2012 and the end of 2016. By the end of December 2016, the aggregated number of views of all *Faces of Africa* films on YouTube was 6.6 million.⁵ The average number of views was 46,700 per video. The

most watched film online (*The hyena men*, 2013) had over 737,091 views, while the least watched (*Grace Under Pressure*, 2012) had 239 views. Between the launch of the series on January 16, 2012 and December 25, 2016, *Faces of Africa* has been on air 259 weeks. However, if reruns are excluded, the number of films that have aired is reduced to 156. While a new film premiered every week in 2012, the average in 2016 was just one new film per month. Using the brief synopsis attached to each video, one of the authors manually coded films for three variables: topic, country and gender of the protagonist. When the value of any of the variables could not be clearly determined by reading the synopsis, a small fragment of the film was reviewed. In coding topics, we used a reduced version of the list of topics listed in Stevenson and Shaw (1984) with six possible categories: politics, economy (that we renamed “business and innovation” given that economy related stories in *Faces of Africa* exclusively refer to entrepreneurs and start-ups), social issues, culture and arts, sports, and technology. After an exploratory round of coding, two new topics were identified: nature and environment, and stories about everyday life that would not fit any of the other categories. Additionally, for each film, we used the closing credits to collect information on the production company and the director/producer (gender and nationality). The full dataset is available from the authors.

Producing *Faces of Africa*

The CGTN *Faces of Africa* team comprises only two employees: a Chinese supervisor and producer, and a Kenyan editor and researcher. In the production of this series, CGTN mainly operates as a film commissioner, working primarily with two companies based in Nairobi (A24 Media and Cinematic Solutions) and one in South Africa (Fireworx) to outsource production. While the station is part

of China's public diplomacy efforts and responds to foreign policy interests, with *Faces of Africa*, China is mostly supporting the production of documentaries by Africans, not by Chinese. Around 66 per cent of *Faces of Africa* films were directed by African filmmakers. The large majority were Kenyan (53 films) and South African (39). Three films were directed or co-directed by an Egyptian filmmaker, and one each by a Zimbabwean and a Namibian. The rest were directed by non-Africans (i.e. Belgium, UK, Netherlands, Canada and US) and only one, *When Chinese Meet Zambians*, had a Chinese director. Men directed two thirds of the films (104), while women directors account for the remaining third (52). While the thematic scope of *Faces of Africa* is determined by CGTN Africa's predefined set of preferred themes and characters, the outsourcing of filmmaking, while allowing for a reduction of costs, decreases CGTN's agency in the production process.

Moreover, while CGTN touts itself as a provider of an alternative viewpoint to that of Anglo-American media, some films in the series were initially produced by companies in the UK, the US and Canada, and redistribution licenses were acquired by CGTN in international content markets. In 2012, for example, *Faces of Africa* aired two series, "African Schools" and "Africa on the Move", which were commissioned and subsequently broadcast by the UK's BBC and Canada's CBC respectively. The four documentaries in the series "Africa on the move" also aired on Al Jazeera. The multiple levels at play in the relationship between CGTN Africa as a commissioner, the production companies and the filmmakers, raise an interesting question: whose representation of Africa is in fact being presented? To that question, a CGTN employee had this to say:

“When you are watching *Faces [of Africa]*, I think you won’t be able to trace there are Chinese producers behind it, and you won’t be able to trace a particular influence of China over the documentary. Because our target audience is global, we try to present something that can be of their liking. You won’t feel there is influence from China at all. You will just fully enjoy the story, the joys and sorrows of a character. You get touched by it. You get a new idea about Africa. That’s the goal” (Informant E).

For commissioned films, the production process starts with the selection of the main characters, some of which are suggested by CGTN, while others are pitched by producers, who are required to produce extensive treatments. The pre-approval process appears to be lengthy and many proposals are rejected without clear reason (Informant B). Once a character is given the green light, CGTN’s supervision recedes during the pre-production and production stages, and resurfaces when a rough cut of the film is ready. For each film, production companies receive a lump sum of money that varies depending on the location and the story. A filmmaker who shot several stories in West Africa, said the budget for each 30-minute film was between 5,000 and 6,000USD, excluding salaries. The same producer, who had been recently begun producing a film for Al Jazeera’s documentary series *Witness*, said the commissioning process was “basically the same” with Al Jazeera producers getting involved “right from the start, as they asked for a proposal, budget, [and descriptions of] characters, even before you start filming.”

Faces of Africa’s supervisor, a Chinese national based in Nairobi, is responsible for reviewing and commenting on the first rough cut. All interviewees

agree that rarely does a film get approved immediately. In some cases, films require up to ten revisions, most of which are about selections of shots, sound bites and content of the script. After a film is approved by the supervisor, it is then viewed by CGTN's deputy managing editor or by the bureau chief, a former CCTV documentary director, and then by an unidentified individual at CCTV's headquarters in Beijing. At this stage, editorial interference might occur, although it does not appear to be very widespread. An interviewee recalled having had to remove footage of South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu from a documentary that had been approved for broadcast by the staff in Nairobi, after Beijing notified them that "you cannot have Tutu in a documentary" (Informant F). When pressed to elaborate further on why such a rule existed, the interviewee was reluctant to provide any additional details. A possible reason could be Tutu's support for the Dalai Lama, who is seen by China as a campaigner for Tibetan independence. Another external producer described editorial control as minimal:

"To be honest I haven't felt overpowered by them ensuring that we go with communist lines or anything like that. There was one time we were making a film about Egypt and there was a reference to the Arab Spring that needed to be changed. That's the only time" (Informant D).

The view of limited editorial interference was shared by another producer, who included some criticism about China's environmental record in Africa in a film and, to the crew's surprise, it was never removed from the final edit (Informant C). There were, however, instances of self-censorship. A filmmaker working on a profile of a political figure in West Africa recalled having avoided controversial

questions during an interview because “you want to be a good employee and you want to satisfy the requirements of your bosses” (Informant B).

The *raison d'être* of *Faces of Africa* is “to profile and to celebrate key African figures that had done something great for the continent” (Informant B). This idea is shared by those working within the organisation, such as informant E, to whom the role of the show “is to review the strength of African people, their wisdom and their resilience and whatever other aspects that are positive which are not covered enough before,” and by those hired externally:

“I wasn't told specifically, but it's the impression you get with the kind of people they [CGTN Africa staff] have chosen. They are people who have accomplished things, who are well known, people who will give a positive image of Africa, of course. A lot of them had inspiring stories about people who overcome obstacles” (Informant C).

The preference for positive stories is not unique to *Faces of Africa*, but shared across programmes produced in Nairobi, as one of CGTN Africa's managers explained:

“We try to focus on the positive stories because back in China we have seen too many negative stories about Africa. That is not fair, because it is very misleading. I didn't know Africa was like this before I came here, so we decided to change that, to deliver more objective reports. (...) Of course, we do not stay away from negative stories, but we don't want to report it every day” (Informant A).

The need for such positive portrayals is often justified as a form of balancing out

what interviewees perceive as predominantly negative coverage by other media organizations.

“If your reporting is about explosions in Mogadishu, there won’t be much difference between CNN or Al Jazeera. It’s just an explosion there. If you find a softer angle, a positive angle, maybe you find the owner of a restaurant who wants to stay in Mogadishu because he needs to feed his people despite the threat from Al-Shabaab. So, for the same subject there are very different angles to approach it, so I think the mind still needs to be changed on how to report positively. (...) For *Faces of Africa*, we have a chance to do more humane stories because we have time to prepare, we can go in depth, we have time to interact with the characters and so you are able to do more humane stories, more positive stories” (Informant E).

When pressed to elaborate further on how different CGTN’s work is to that of other broadcasters, most interviewees claimed to have little knowledge about how others report on the continent, thus suggesting that there is a preconceived idea of how Africa is represented in the media which gets reproduced even without direct experience.

[Insert Table 1]

Representations of Africa in *Faces of Africa*

Faces of Africa has featured stories from 28 of 54 African countries, appearing to suggest that the geographic scope of the coverage of Africa in the programme is not necessarily greater than that of other global media networks. Films set in East Africa are

predominant (46.79 per cent), followed by Southern Africa (28.85), West Africa (18.59), North Africa (3.85) and Central Africa (1.92). As shown in Table 1, from 2012 to 2016, there have been 33 films set in Kenya and 27 in South Africa, but only one in countries such as Lesotho, Morocco or Mali. This imbalance can be explained by the fact that CGTN works primarily with Kenyan and South African production companies. A24 Media, based in Nairobi, has made 41 per cent of the films, Fireworx, based in South Africa, 23 per cent, and, Cinematic Solutions, also based in Nairobi, 15 per cent (see Table 2). Only three films have been produced in house (*Kipchoge Keino: The runner*, 2012; *When Chinese meet Zambians*, 2015; *Conquering Kilimanjaro*, 2016).⁶ During interviews, staff at CGTN Africa expressed their concern about the overrepresentation of certain countries and regions, and shared their desire to see production companies covering a wider region (Informant E), but external producers acknowledged that the costs of long-distance travelling hampers their ability to widen the countries they focus on (Informant D).

Each *Faces of Africa* film follows an individual or a group of Africans whose contributions are deemed remarkable. As one member of the CGTN staff put it, “Africa has not given the world the impression of being full of talented people. But we want to tell the world that this is not true: there are lots of talented people in Africa, but they are not reported enough” (Informant E). The in-depth and more humane introspections into individuals’ lives are presented in a way that is different to the hardened political stories that are covered in news programmes, including those by CGTN. As shown in Table 2, most of these individuals are men (76.92 per cent), while female protagonists are only found in 14.10 per cent of films. The rest (8.98 per cent) feature both men and women as main characters. When it comes to topics, the most common are culture and arts (23.08 per cent), politics (20.51) and nature and the environment (16.03). While most

documentaries focus on contemporary Africa and on individuals who are alive, the majority of stories that talk about political figures refer to the past. These films are mostly commissioned to A24 Media, which was founded by the celebrated Kenyan photojournalist Mohamed Amin, whose photo and video archives are without par in the continent (Tetley, 1988). Although CCTV has also a rich video archive spanning several decades of Sino-African relations (Lefkowitz, 2017b), these are not made available to production companies working for *Faces of Africa* (Informants B & C).

Overall, the stories in the series are positive and uplifting. Most films highlight Africans who have overcome challenges and become independent, self-reliant and entrepreneurial. There is also a prevalence of stories that focus on successful entrepreneurs and innovators, a theme that resonates with the rise of business oriented narratives on Africa that Bunce (2014) has identified in recent news coverage of the continent. While the outcome of most stories is upbeat and hopeful, they do not shy away from hardships. Many protagonists come from under-privileged backgrounds, they rise out of poverty, overcome disadvantages and go on to help other disadvantaged individuals. The highlight is on individuals who have strong aspirations to make their communities and countries a better place. These include well-known figures such as Sierra Leonean economist and politician Kandeh Yumkella; Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie; Congolese musician Franco Luambo, and Wangari Maathi, a Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Peace Prize winner; but also, much less known figures such as a group of women farmers who grow shea nuts in Ghana and whose entrepreneurial spirit helps small rural communities increase their standards of living, or Tumanka, a 10-year-old Maasai schoolboy, who dreams of becoming a member of Parliament in Kenya.

[Insert Table 2]

Only one of the 156 documentaries in the series, *When Chinese Meet Zambians*, addresses Africa-China relations. The film, produced by three members of the CGTN Africa team, a Chinese director, a British videographer and Kenyan scriptwriter, follows Frank Fang, a businessman, and Dr Gao Kenan, a dentist, who moved from China to Zambia in the 1990s and have lived in the country ever since. The film pivots around three themes: the successful career of the two protagonists, which is described as having had a positive impact on local communities; the main characters' self-professed love for Zambia and for Africa, and the historical connections between China's present interactions with Zambia and those in the 1950s and 1960s, when Chinese doctors were sent to the continent and when Beijing helped build the TAZARA railway linking Tanzania and Zambia. In certain ways these themes elicit similar ideas to those described by Puppin (2017) and Ferry (2012) in their analyses of Chinese documentaries on Africa for domestic consumption. While *When Chinese Meet Zambians* is among the most popular films from *Faces of Africa* on YouTube—the only available source of audience data—and the one that has received the largest number of user comments (over 2,200 by the end of 2016), it remains an exception in the series given that it is the only one directed by a Chinese filmmaker and the only one discussing Africa-China relations. When asked if other similar in-house productions were planned in the future, informant F said that it was unlikely, not because of they lacked interest, but because of the lack of personnel assigned to *Faces of Africa*. The fact that the only film focusing on Chinese-African relations has been the most popular would suggest that there are audiences who are

interested in this topic. In future research, it would be worth delving more into whether or not there is a mismatch in what CGTN's commissioner perceives audiences want, and what audiences apparently choose to watch.

Conclusion

This paper has shed light on an often-overlooked representation of Africa in the media: that of documentaries. Using the case of CGTN Africa's *Faces of Africa* series, we offered answers to three questions. We showed that, as opposed to Chinese media's coverage of Africa in other genres (Madrid-Morales, 2016; Zhang, 2013), positive stories are the norm for documentary series *Faces of Africa*. We also demonstrated that, thematically, the documentaries touch on multiple diverse topics, including culture, arts and sports, which represent a departure from usual depictions of Africa that are mostly focused on hard news. Yet, films in the series reproduce some structural imbalances that are found in news coverage: they are geographically concentrated on key news hubs (Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa); only half of African countries have been featured in the programme; and, also, female protagonists are much less common than male main characters. As for the production process, we suggest that the organizational structure at CGTN Africa, which favours decentralized production, empowers filmmakers' agency to choose the topics. At the same time, however, we explained how creativity appears to be constrained, not by CGTN Africa staff directly, but by the norms and values of CCTV, the organization within which it is embedded, which is under direct supervision by the Communist Party of China. For instance, at least one contemporary political figure, Desmond Tutu, appears to have been restricted from inclusion in the series.

With *Faces of Africa*, China is undoubtedly contributing an additional narrative to global discussions on contemporary Africa. The stories represent a microcosm of the

positive development of African societies in a post-colonial context and mirror key themes of cultural and national rejuvenation which are popular in contemporary Chinese socio-political discourse. The story that Chinese audiences are fed in domestic CCTV music-entertainment programs, for instance, is that foreigners from around the world, including Africa, are strongly attracted to Chinese culture and society and are flocking to China to live and pursue their creative and entrepreneurial dreams (Gorfinkel, 2018). As if transplanting a similar discourse of rejuvenation, in *Faces of Africa*, Africa is constructed as the place where African and Chinese people (in the case of *When Chinese Meet Zambians*) are pursuing their dreams. Instead of leaving the country to pursue their dreams, they are returning to Africa (e.g. in the case of DJ Focus, who declined a scholarship offer to stay in the United States to pursue his studies at school and develop as an innovator) or choosing to help fellow country people at home rather than go abroad.

While CGTN and other Chinese media organisations consider their narrative to be new, alternative and counter-hegemonic, and diametrically opposed to that of other global media (Zhang and Matingwina, 2016), this paper calls for a critical reading of such descriptions for two reasons. One is that our knowledge about media representations of Africa appears to be smaller than we thought (Scott, 2017) and, two, because, as we have shown, the outsourcing of film production by CGTN Africa leads to reduced control over content and a dispersion of authorship. With the evidence in hand, we argue that the documentaries on *Faces of Africa* have been a hybrid between the stories filmmakers (mostly African, but also from the US and Europe) want to tell; the stories CGTN Africa deems fit to broadcast (generally positive); and the personal preferences of the programme supervisor, who wields significant influence on the production process. The fact that stories on *Faces of Africa* are often positive, regularly

highlight economic and entrepreneurial success, and share a very optimistic outlook for the continent, would seem to align the series with the narrative of Afro-optimism that Nothias (2014) describes. However, and probably because the documentary genre lends itself to more depth, issues of essentialization, homogenisation and racialization, all of which appeared in other genres, are not present in *Faces of Africa*. Future studies could consider comparative content analysis of documentaries in multiple international channels, including CGTN, to explore how distinctive is China's portrayal of Africa through documentary films, and to assess the degree to which content in global media goes through processes of domestication as described by Lee et al. (2002) or, whether narratives in global news outlets tend to converge, as recently suggested by Curran et al. (2017).

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Notes

¹ CGTN (China Global Television News) is the brand name adopted by CCTV (China Central Television) for its international operations in late December 2016. When the African headquarters opened in 2012, the channel went by the name of CCTV Africa. This paper adopts the most recent brand name, CGTN Africa.

² A notable exception would be Lu Xinyu's (2003) work on China's new documentary movement.

³ There is a certain disparity in geographic definitions of Africa in the literature. While some authors focus exclusively on Sub-Saharan Africa, others also include North African countries. Even though this makes cross-study comparisons difficult, overall, findings do always seem to point towards a similar direction.

⁴ The primary target audience of CGTN News, to which CGTN Africa belongs, are overseas elites and opinion leaders (Guo et al., 2004; Jirik, 2008; Zhao, 2008). While *Faces of Africa* is dubbed into French and broadcast on CGTN's French language channel, the show does not air on CGTN's Chinese language channels. However, given that CGTN News is available in China, it is possible that a sizeable number of Chinese citizens follow the show. While no data on this is available on this, an online survey into CCTV's English language channel, formerly known as CCTV-9, in 2003 found that 58% were mainland Chinese viewers (Chen, 2006).

⁵ The films are also available online through other platforms (e.g. CGTN's website, mobile apps), so the actual number of viewers can be expected to be much higher.

⁶ *Conquering Kilimanjaro* was released as a two-part series, so it is counted as two separate films on Table 2.

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Tables

Table 1. Primary location of documentaries in the series *Faces of Africa* (2012-2016)

	2012 <i>n</i> = 49	2013 <i>n</i> = 37	2014 <i>n</i> = 29	2015 <i>n</i> = 26	2016 <i>n</i> = 15	Total <i>N</i> = 156
Kenya	21	7	1	4	0	33
South Africa	9	4	5	5	4	27
Uganda	8	3	0	0	0	11
Nigeria	2	3	2	1	1	9
Ethiopia	0	2	3	0	2	7
Ghana	1	0	4	0	2	7
Tanzania	2	2	1	0	2	7
Zambia	2	4	0	1	0	7
Egypt	2	1	2	0	0	5
Botswana	0	1	1	2	0	4
Liberia	0	2	1	1	0	4
Namibia	0	0	1	3	0	4
Mozambique	0	1	0	1	1	3
Senegal	1	0	2	0	0	3
Somalia	0	2	1	0	0	3
Zimbabwe	0	0	1	1	1	3
Burkina Faso	0	1	0	1	0	2
Democratic Rep. Congo	0	1	1	0	0	2
Cameroon	0	1	0	1	0	2
Malawi	0	0	0	2	0	2
Mauritius	0	0	0	2	0	2
Rwanda	0	1	1	0	0	2
Sierra Leone	0	1	1	0	0	2
Cote d'Ivoire	1	0	0	0	0	1
Lesotho	0	0	0	0	1	1
Mali	0	0	0	0	1	1
Morocco	0	0	0	1	0	1
Swaziland	0	0	1	0	0	1

Source: Compiled by the authors

Note: Reruns of films are excluded from the table.

Table 2. Main topic, gender of protagonist and production company of films in the series *Faces of Africa* (2012-2016)

	2012 <i>n</i> = 49	2013 <i>n</i> = 37	2014 <i>n</i> = 29	2015 <i>n</i> = 26	2016 <i>n</i> = 15	Total <i>N</i> = 156
Topic						
Culture & Arts	11	12	2	6	5	36
Politics	6	7	10	7	2	32
Nature & Environment	6	8	2	6	3	25
Social issues	6	4	6	4	1	21
Everyday life	11	0	0	2	2	15
Business & Innovation	5	3	5	1	0	14
Sport	4	3	4	0	2	13
Gender of lead character(s)						
Male	37	32	21	18	12	120
Female	10	4	3	4	1	22
Both	2	1	5	4	2	14
Production company						
A24	14	15	18	12	4	63
Fireworx	4	9	7	9	7	36
Cinematic	7	6	4	4	2	23
Other companies	12	7	0	0	0	19
Independent filmmakers	11	0	0	0	0	11
CGTN	1	0	0	1	2	4

Source: Compiled by the authors