

## Analysing the Phenomenon of Guanxi on Zambia/China International Relations in Infrastructure Development: A Reality or Rhetoric?

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**Abstract:** This paper analysed the effect of the phenomenon of Guanxi on Zambia/China international relations by linking it to infrastructure development specifically to its buildup. In order to do this, the paper focused on the China-Zambia international relations that started immediately after Zambia gained her political independence in 1964 from the British colonial hegemony. Firstly, the Zambia-China international relationship emphasized support of the acquisition of political freedom from British. Embedded in political emancipation for Zambia and China are the cultural words Guanxi for China and the Nichekeleko phenomenon for Zambia. Zambia was supported by China through economic support in infrastructure development after getting her political freedom in 1964. The Zambian government began to invest in transportation infrastructure, to help the economic growth of the country and support political freedom movements in the region of the Southern African Development Community. China considered the infrastructural development of the railway link as an opportunity to strengthen ties with Zambia. In this regard, the first Republican President of Zambia (Kenneth Kaunda) visited China in 1967 for the finalization of the railway project (TAZARA) with the approval of the parties involved. This reflects a wider interest of China during Zambia's development cooperation, as a long term plan to aid African countries with infrastructural development and political emancipation. Nevertheless, what is ignored on international diplomacy is the effect of Guanxi similarly translated as Nichekeleko in Zambia. This paper provides both a sociological, cultural and economic analysis on the effect of Guanxi on infrastructure development between Zambia and China. The argument is the failure to acknowledge the cultural significance of the Guanxi practice as being critical in the China international diplomacy with Zambia that has exacerbated corruption increase in infrastructure development between the two countries.

Theoretically, the paper uses social capital theoretical exports from Bourdieu's (1986) sociology to analyze Guanxi on infrastructure development embedded in diplomatic relations between Zambia and China. Social capital in this paper was used because it reflects the social obligations or connections between Zambia and China in infrastructure development. This shows how social capital in Zambia and China has developed into "the structure of positive relations" between the two countries towards the building of infrastructure, despite the negative media reports about corruption in infrastructure.

Methodologically, the paper adopted an inductive approach to analyse Guanxi and Nichekeleko in Zambia and China. This is simply because the aim of the paper was to analyse the effect of the relationship between Zambia and China reflected in the diplomatic policy anchored on two cultural concepts. Therefore, the main point is to analyze what the relationships are, as well as if there are certain unidentified cultural relationship effect (i.e., apart from Guanxi and Nichekeleko) promoting the deeper ties between Zambia and China.

Equally, this paper has shown that China's historical engagement with Zambia dates back to the last six decades and they both had well-nourished economic and political relations. But what is not clear is whether Guanxi and Nichekeleko is embedded in Zambia and China's diplomacy to influence the buildup of infrastructure in Zambia. Nothing has been written on the importance of and benefits brought by both Guanxi and Nichekeleko to the Zambia and China development cooperation. In reality, this paper has filled that gap by analyzing diplomacy using two cultural concepts, the Guanxi and Nichekeleko phenomenon in international relations

**Keywords:** Guanxi, Nichekeleko, Corruption, Social Capital, international relations theory

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses China's development cooperation to Zambia from the perspective of political economy, embedded in the Chinese and Zambian language concepts- *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* in infrastructure development. To do this the paper demonstrates that China's international cooperation

in Africa are the consequence of the former's economic needs, its political goals and, not least, its specific comparative advantages on the African continent. Importantly, China has already become a significant investor in Africa and is expected to become even more so in the future. Therefore, this paper argues that Western donors would do better to take the cultural findings as a cornerstone of China's development cooperation in Africa rather than the negative perception of *Guanxi and Nichekeleko* on the media. Culturally, Guanxi is a cultural commodity of unsolicited generosity that has permeated China's international development cooperation with African countries for many years.

For example, culturally, in China, when a visitor knocks at the sturdy screen door of a concrete apartment complex and the inhabitant hurriedly runs to the door to answer, first opening the solid inner door to see the familiar face of the visitor. Of course, the inhabitant then immediately opens the screen door to allow the visitor to enter. They do not shake hands because the visitor is clutching a watermelon against his chest with one arm, and holding the stringed handle of a square, glossy white paper bag that contains a bottle of wine in the other. Immediately upon entering, the visitor attempts to hand the wine to the inhabitant, but the inhabitant vociferously refuses. The visitor moves further in and puts the watermelon down while once again offering the wine, pleading with the inhabitant to accept. Again, the inhabitant refuses, but after the third begging offer, the inhabitant finally accepts the wine, thanking the visitor repeatedly. Later, they share a meal with the many others present, and, after fighting over who pays the bill, the inhabitant is given the honor. This dance of unsolicited generosity, repeated refusals, and profuse thanking happens constantly throughout China and is mandated by the cultural practice of *Guanxi*.

#### **Problem statement.**

This paper aimed at analyzing the impact of the *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* phenomenon in infrastructure institutions in Zambia. In order to do this, the paper provided concrete evidence, for the institutional impact, as well as areas that are potentially vulnerable for this institutional impact anchored on two cultural words, *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko*. More specifically, it looked at Chinese development cooperation in Zambia and the possible institutional impact that stems from China's cultural commodity (*The Guanxi phenomenon*) as a state in development cooperation.

#### **Theoretical framework: Social Capital**

This study used a social capital theory as a framework for studying the Zambia-China development cooperation focusing on infrastructure that created and established networks and resources that facilitate *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko*. In agreement with Phiri, Musi, Munkoyo *et al* (2023), on theoretical frameworks, is that they assist to understand, describe and explain behaviour. Therefore, through Social capital theory this paper contends that social relationships are resources that can lead to the development and accumulation of human capital. Due to infrastructure development contracts, are the initial aspirations that sounded as mere networking, but lead to the on the state of the art in Zambia. For example, the China-Zambia development cooperation has supported the development of highly valued infrastructure, such as the TAZARA and Tanzania and Zambia management pipeline Tanzania (TAZAMA). Succinctly, social capital is any feature of a social relationship that yields reproductive benefits. Therefore, in understanding Zambia-China international development cooperation, it is critical to analyze it through social capital theory. Embedded in social capital theory are the two cultural concepts, *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* parallel to what today is called China-Zambia development cooperation. According to Savage and Kanazawa (2002, 2004), humans have evolved preferences for companionship in general, and specific preferences for cues that signal higher levels of social capital. The glue binding Zambia and China development cooperation are the two cultural concepts, *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* that are both material and non-material. These types of relationships would be especially adaptive for government officials by providing legal assistance to infrastructure build up. Zambia is expected to benefit more from Zambia/China membership through larger multinational corporation involved in the transportation industry. These social capital networks initially constructed from weak ties constitute, political alliances, ideologies and supporting parties. Chinese citizens, equally, benefit from different forms of social capital that would confer natural resources and social status to our country. The distribution structure of the different kinds of capital corresponds to the inherent structure of the societal world or social fields. Zambia and China have different types of social fields, with different kinds of capital appear in various amounts and have different values. For example, what once was purely political cooperation with Africa, is today

development cooperation with economic expansion as the driving force (Mhandra *et. al.*, 2013). China-Africa trade has been increasing steadily, from barely US\$10 billion in 2000 to almost US\$100 billion in 2009, simultaneously bypassing the US as Africa largest trading partner. For instance, it is clear that during the Cultural Revolution in China, China's prime minister offered the two countries to build Africa's longest railway of 2000 kilometers, going all the way from Zambia through Tanzania. This is capital that has developed the highest effectiveness in a both the social and economic field. Core to this is the costs of transformation social capital that arise in the conversion process embedded in cultural concepts, *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko*. The societal groups in social fields of Zambia and China have always aimed to reproduce themselves. For example, businessmen want to reproduce their wealth and academics want to assure their domination of the legitimate culture. It is important to note for Africa and for the outside world that the TAZARA project created backward and forward linkages. Embedded in these projects are the *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* phenomenon creating a backward and forward linkages. This is why the China and Zambia develop strategies to acquire specific goods materially and symbolically embedded in *Guanxi*. Culturally implied in *Guanxi* was the buildup of TAZARA and other infrastructures in Zambia. This contribution of *Guanxi* relates to intensifying labour and putting local people into work. This infers that there is forward linkage for intensifying labour are the skills learned that these workers gain and may perhaps take into other companies in the future.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This paper was an exploratory research that mostly relied on qualitative methods of research and analysis in order to explain and understand an on-going process of China-Africa relations focusing on completed and ongoing infrastructure projects, such as the TAZARA and TAZAMA pipelines. By visiting development projects that has already been undertaken on this matter, a short literature review was offered early on in the introduction. This included data from primary and secondary sources arriving from authors and experts on this subject and institutions such as government department. Reports and statements from the data on this subject from the World Bank and the Road Development Agency is provided. The in depth part of this paper was a case study of different infrastructure projects such as TAZARA, HEROS stadium and the Confucius institute at the University of Zambia itself, schools, health clinics etc., that demonstrated a small part of the reality of this topic. From these case studies an identification of backward and forward linkages reflecting the *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* phenomenon was provided and discussed.

## **3. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **Laying the ground work of development cooperation in Zambia: The *Guanxi* phenomenon**

The actual consequences of development cooperation under the Beijing Consensus has been well documented. This is because Chinese development projects are largely catered towards energy and infrastructure aimed at connecting African markets with the Chinese economy and enhance its access to natural resources embedded in the culturally accepted concept localized in China as the *Guanxi* phenomenon. Nevertheless, in Zambia, when it comes to Chinese investment in the infrastructure sector, it can be tracked back in history as far as 1976 when a railway was completed for Zambia. In those days, one can easily trace the *Guanxi* ideological motives that seemed to have been the dominant factor behind infrastructure development in Zambia. Since then, the relationship between China and Zambia has grown massively and during the 1990s the trade between the two countries increased by 700%. Furthermore, the forum for African and Chinese cooperation was established in 2000 and in 2006 implicitly confirming the *Guanxi* phenomenon as the key element for improving of infrastructure. Moreover, in 2007-2009, the Beijing Action Plan notes a specific reference to a development process of a continuing cooperation in the construction and infrastructure sectors (Corkin, Burke *et al.*, 2008).

However, it is very clear to note that the *Guanxi* phenomenon has had a profound economic, social and culture effect in the development cooperation between the two countries, China and Zambia. Historically, China traces the *Guanxi* phenomenon back to the Confucian concept of *lun*. The concept of *lun* encompassed the importance of human relationships, maintaining social order, and moral principles governing interactive behavior. The *Guanxi* practice begins with developing a relationship in terms of family ties, familiar connections or people of different cultures and places. It is the culture

of reciprocal gifting to build relationships, including gaining social introductions to government officials that has been documented for centuries.

Worthwhile noting, is that, the *Guanxi* practice has helped to confirm the reality of the theory backward and forward linkages in business or in international cooperation leading to the completion of the TAZARA railway line in 1976 in Zambia. Essentially, *Guanxi* has helped to describe the economics relationship between Zambia and China, contrary to the assertions that *Guanxi* should be perceived as corruption. Now, it has been said that *Guanxi* produced these linkages and the arguments that have created more linkages at project level hence the better understanding of Zambia-China international cooperation to a win-win situation. Therefore, it is no wonder the majority of investments are boosted using the *Guanxi* phenomenon creating a long standing international cooperation for Africa, in the midst of adversaries. This is also confirmed by Hirshman (1969) when trying to understand a long-term, ongoing process such as infrastructure projects. The theory is a good way to demonstrate in real terms international relations between China and Zambia embedded in them is the *Guanxi* for China and *Nichekeleko* phenomenon for Zambia in terms of what these projects actually result in to.

### **Similarities between the *Nichekeleko* and *Guanxi* phenomenon in Zambia and China.**

In Zambia, *Nichekeleko* means social support in the sense of gift-giving or helping one another when looked from a framework of “cultural” and “linguistics” analysis in the meaning of the word (Phiri, 2017). This is contrary to the negative reports in print and electronic media that the phenomenon is illegal, without reflecting on its literal meaning as perceived by those involved in it. This implies that the meaning is what the sender expresses in his message to the receiver, and what the receiver assumes from the current and previous context. Therefore, *Nichekeleko* by implication in development cooperation between Zambia and China must be understood within the context of social and economic support in infrastructure, embedded within it as a shared cultural fact such as gift giving through infrastructure development at the University of Zambia.

There is also a strong link between the *Ubuntu* ideology, *Nichekeleko* and *Guanxi* concepts when used in context. For example, Broodryk (2011:230) on *Ubuntu*<sup>1</sup> explored it as a “more complex of traditional behaviour developed by the human race that is successfully learned from one generation to another”. *Nichekeleko* is another way in which practice is acquired in the *Chewa*<sup>2</sup> tradition, remarkably similar in content to the word “*Ubuntu*, and *Guanxi*”. One learns *Nichekeleko* and *Guanxi* not only through written laws and regulations but also through codes, symbols and common *Chewa* and *Chinese* words. This probably explains the irreversibility of development cooperation on infrastructure development between China and Africa reflected in cultural and material cooperation

The philosophy of *Ubuntu* can be mirrored on the practice of *Nichekeleko* and *Guanxi* in terms of international cooperation for infrastructure development in materialistic and non- materialist ways. Thus, in order to get inside the idea of *Ubuntu* in infrastructure development, embedded in it are the *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* phenomenon, the article analyzed mere gestures and available data at the Chinese embassy, the Confucius Institute and the Road development Agency (RDA). These gestures made the authors gain understanding of the views of people who are involved in the *Nichekeleko* and *Guanxi* phenomenon to infrastructure build up. Sogolo (1993) stated the importance of having an understanding about *Ubuntu*, since its meaning is still relevant today. Broodryk also repeats this statement when he said: “*Ubuntu* is the completely intricate of traditional behaviours which has been developed by the human race that is effectively learned by each generation” (1997). For example, embedded in *Ubuntu* is the phenomenon of material and non-material support given to Africa in infrastructure development. This shows the similarities between *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* on development cooperation between Zambia and China.

The Chinese infrastructure investments in Sub-Saharan Africa between the years 2000-2012 in Energy, Telecom, Transport and Water Supply & Sanitation amounted to 8000 million US dollars (Gutman *et al*, 2015). This shows how transport (highly related to the infrastructure sector such as development of railways and roads) is the segment that China has increased its investments in by large numbers and between 2020 and 2022 it had reached its peak to an investment of 20,000 million

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<sup>1</sup> See, Chidongo Phiri (2017) who defines *Ubuntu* in isiZulu meaning the human kindness or care.

<sup>2</sup> The Chewa are a bantu speaking people of Southern



US dollars. For example, Tanzania and Zambia are considered to be China's oldest partners in Sub-Saharan Africa. During the Cultural Revolution in China, China's prime minister offered the two countries to build Africa's longest railway of 2000 kilometers, going all the way from Zambia through Tanzania and after many negotiations a contract was signed between the three parties in 1967. The building on grounds started in 1970 and finished in 1975 bearing in mind that this was two years ahead of schedule (Brautigam, 2009). The railway included ten kilometers of tunnels and 300 bridges, which have made other infrastructure projects, look very small. Currently, transport services are offered through two types of trains, including traffic and local traffic trains. Traffic trains convey cargo originating and local trains convey intermediate cargo. Furthermore, the railway also provides with other forms of train services depending on what the requirements of the client is. Furthermore, a report from the World Bank states that in 2001, China promised to provide financial support for the railway, however, it was not clear to the outside world whether this was actually happening (Foster *et al.*, 2008). Nevertheless, this implies that China has increased its presence in infrastructure development embedded in it is the *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* phenomenon. This is the actual consequences of development cooperation under the Beijing Consensus. The question to ask is how? Below is the answer to the development cooperation anchored on *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* phenomenon in Zambia

### **Institutional impact of *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* phenomenon in development cooperation**

It is common knowledge to argue that research on institutional impact have been divided into intended and unintended. Results on both intended and unintended impact is commonly found among scholars that examines institutional reform such as Andrew Matts (2013), using a more qualitative approach. Equally, unintended impact is also examined through qualitative studies but several scholars in the field of development economics are also putting effort into this area, often looking at the impact from aid. What has been ignored are research findings on a semiological approach to determine the impact of cultural words on development cooperation, which is core of this paper. This is in-cognizance of an academic-policy crossover conference on unintended effects of international cooperation that took place in 2017. This conference recognized that Western donors are severely lacking in terms of considering unintended effects of their development cooperation from an embodied position. Equally, USAID evaluations only pay attention to unintended effects in 15% of the projects. Similarly, every third of NORAD's evaluations does not mention unintended effects of cultural words to international development. For example, the conference led to several interesting working papers such as Marc Dierikx (2017) who illustrates, in a qualitative study, how local culture led to a particular outcome in a Dutch Fishery project in Lake Victoria. Another working paper from Djikstra (2018) examined aggregated unintended effects on governance from the lens of development economics and found that while negative effects often are exaggerated, donor's intentions mattered greatly in determining effects and nothing on localized concept on development cooperation. Therefore, in order to understand development cooperation between China and Zambia one must hold the knowledge of what China's view on itself about *Guanxi* and its effect for African development. For the Chinese, *Guanxi* focuses on interpersonal relationships, rather than obtaining benefits by unethical ways, such as misusing *Guanxi* (Yang, 1994). This implies that *Guanxi* participants exchange favours to build and keep *Guanxi* generating webs of social obligations concurrently, which also provides the foundation of social reciprocity. Therefore, *Guanxi* acts as cultural capital within the system of international development cooperation between Zambia and China. Cultural capital between China and Zambia is extended to all goods, material and symbolic without distinction in a particular social formation. This is actualized through *Guanxi*. *Guanxi* is a reciprocally committed relationship and is timeless. The presence of linguistic capital is an embodied behaviour acquired through *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* in development cooperation between China and Zambia.

Nevertheless, both concepts are not immune to misapplication in Zambia and China. For example, when the *Guanxi* concepts is inserted in the China/Zambia international diplomacy, it provides a platform for economic exploitation to Zambia by China. This is confirmed by a study done by PMRC (2018) indicating that, of the thirty-seven (37) sampled Chinese firms eighty-two (82) translating to about thirty (30) firms had no presence of a union. This is because there is no common view to what constitutes a *union* embodied in *Guanxi* in China's international diplomacy. *Guanxi* in China's international diplomacy would be interpreted as muddling in domestic affairs. Further, secondary data obtained confirmed that *Guanxi* adds to an increase in the political hypocrisy that had made the

decision makers in China ignore the political corruption that exists in Zambia. For the Chinese, *Guanxi* helps them developed and maintained relationships similar to Zambia's social support embodied in *Nichekeleko* cultural. Yet, both concepts do not suffice to explain what they mean when inserted into China/Zambia international relations. There is only one lexical area that *Guanxi* succeeds to provide an adequate explanation in China/Zambia international diplomacy. This lies within the system of cultural capital and material exchange. For example, the signing of the memorandum of understanding (MOU) to encourage exports of non-traditional nature to China, during the 2018 Forum of China- African Countries (FOCAC) where Zambia and China had signed a protocol on export of Zambia's honey to China which is key to the diversification agenda. The export of honey was officially launched on 12th of October, 2018 (Phiri, 2018).

To conclude, according to an analysis of the concepts of *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko*, anchored on social capital theory, it is clear that both concepts generally holds the characteristics of social and economic capital. Nevertheless, there are those who argue that China-Africa relations is a two-way relationship where both parties adjust to new policies and were the results of these new policies benefit both counters, some have come to argued differently and even the opposite. Whilst these critical perspectives vary amongst authors, the main criticism that has been ignored, core this paper, is that of failure to use accumulated cultural knowledge on the importance of *Guanxi* to international diplomacy between Zambia and China. The concept *Guanxi* and *Nichekeleko* have a metaphorical sense, for caring compulsion and economic support in material and non-material sense. This implies that the two words inserted in international relations between China and Zambia highlights assumptions of special relationships represented along the line of everyday political statement that says: "*An Old Friend, Real Friend and Good Friend of the Chinese People*" or "*Chinese are our all whether friends*" (Kenneth David Kaunda, 1980).

It is important to confirm that through Kaunda's statement one can argue that the words are a tool for an extended infrastructure development in Zambia by the Chinese government. Kaunda's statement is a product of international diplomacy actualized through the building of TAZARA. The literal meaning of Kaunda's international statement above has been interpreted in context of the *Guanxi* culture in China and *Nichekeleko* in Zambia hence the building of state-of-the art, the Mulungushi international conference centre by the Chinese government. This shows that language and patterns of thought are interlinked actualized in diplomatic theory especially the buildup of infrastructure in Zambia.

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