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Academic diplomacy and policy borrowing: media content analysis of Chinese soft power in Morocco

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China's Soft power in Africa has garnered increasing attention since the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) in African countries. This study examines the framing and interpretation of the discourse on Chinese soft power in Moroccan online media in the context of policy borrowing and policy lending. Content analysis was performed on media reports published in three French outlets regarding the Belt and Road Initiative, Programme for International Student Assessment, CIs and related research items over the period of 2010–2019. In total, 153 online news articles were analysed, which yielded interesting results about how media outlets are calling for borrowing policy from China as a reference country. The three most common themes in the discourse behind policy borrowing were as follows: (i) human capital soft power; (ii) university ranking; and (iii) lessons learnt from the Chinese educational system.

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Introduction

The growing power of the People's Republic of China has made the country an attractive destination, and interest in Chinese culture and language has increased globally. Confucius Institutes (CIs) are non-profit educational organisations affiliated with China's Ministry of Education; they were established to promote Chinese language and culture worldwide and foster educational and cultural exchanges with other countries (Yi & Shunu, 2024). The first institute was established in Seoul, South Korea, in 2004 under the leadership of Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao as part of China's broader strategy to increase its soft power and global influence (SUNY et al., 2009, p. 114). The headquarter of the CIs is known as *Hanban* (汉办) and was founded to oversee their establishment and operation and provide resources, teachers, and funding. By 2020, over 500 CIs and nearly 2,000 Confucius Classrooms (CCs) were distributed in primary and secondary schools across more than 140 countries (Confucius Institute Headquarters/ Hanban, 2020).

China has made inroads into education in Africa and the Middle East, where it provides educational development support, technical training, and scholarships for African students to study in China. Shifts in the nature of China's educational support to Africa closely mirror those in its domestic and foreign policy (Hodzi, 2020). Chinese President Xi Jinping has praised the role of CIs in promoting Chinese Culture (Wu & Liu, 2017). China's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative has opened paths for expanding CIs to promote China's soft power as they are considered a component of the country's cultural diplomacy. The institutes also serve as 'an important part of China's overseas propaganda setup' (A Message from Confucius - New Ways of Projecting Soft Power, 2009).

With the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or *yidaiyilu* (一带一路), China aimed to establish 500 CIs throughout the world by 2017 and maintain 1,000 by 2020 to tap into the growing demand to learn Chinese overseas (Jakhar, 2019). The BRI has opened a new path for expanding CIs to promote China's soft power by promoting Chinese culture in areas including American universities (Luqiu & McCarthy, 2019). According to Xi JinPing (2019), 'Culture is a country and nation's soul. Our country will thrive only if our culture thrives, and our nation will be strong only if our culture is strong…'.

The exponential growth of CIs has made them a significant topic and has generated discussion among scholars regarding their purposes, agendas, disclosures, and paradoxes (Lo & Pan, 2016). Attention has also been drawn to their challenges and potential under the scope of soft-power education theory, policy borrowing, and lending theory. Higher education is one aspect of soft power in a global context (Luqiu & McCarthy, 2019). Winkler and Nye (2005) define soft power as cultural attractiveness, political values, and foreign policies, which are increasingly important components of a nation's power. In the case of education, soft power depends on the structure of the international education system, which comprises international education norms, rules, and institutions (J. Li et al., 2018, p. 7).

CIs are considered a form of soft power in education. Some studies have deeply examined the institutes' success (Hartig, 2015; Lien & Miao, 2018; Luqiu & McCarthy, 2019; Wheeler, 2014a; Yang, 2010; Ye & Edwards, 2018), whereas others have criticised the project's dilemmas (Lo & Pan, 2016; Gil, 2015; Ye & Edwards, 2018; Yang, 2010). CIs are considered a tool of China's public diplomacy in Africa (Wheeler, 2014a) and influence economic relationships. They have changed students' perceptions of learning Chinese, and the quality of the programme content they offer to African students is attractive owing to the quality and reputation of higher education in China as a study destination (Wen & Hu, 2019, p. 9). The Chinese government initiated the CI programme not only to 'spread its language and culture and to increase collaboration with foreign academic institutions' but also to brand the country as an essential educational destination (Wen & Hu, 2019).

The nature of the institutes' relationship may differ between countries. From a policy-lending perspective, this may be due to the nature of policy lending between China and other countries, which may be coercive or voluntary. In the case of Africa, the transfer is seen as coercive since China is spreading specific information in African countries, which is leading many of them to follow Chinese preferences rather than creating their own ideas about the new initiative (Mayer, 2018, p. 71). Thus, countries are rethinking the position of African decision-makers in the BRI.

China's soft power through CIs has received discerning criticism in receiving countries and even in China itself. In a deep analysis and literature review, Lo and Pan (2016) criticised the programme and stated that it is a form of coercive borrowing policy where universities receive a certain amount of money to set up the institutes and promises of a certain amount for a few years thereafter. They highlighted that the receiving universities should be willing to accept assessment, oversight, evaluation, and certification by *Hanban*. Similarly, the Chinese government's agenda and operation on university campuses interfere with academic freedom (Yang, 2010). The CI has been viewed as a 'network-based cultural diplomacy project' that underscores the growing importance of relational processes.

In contrast, Ye and Edwards (2018) perceived the associated funding and teaching resources as valuable resources for setting up new courses to strengthen attractiveness to overseas collaborators. China can fulfil needs in the Middle East and North Africa region and is ready to dominate the region's markets (Pintér, 2017). Figure 1 shows the total number of CIs distributed in the region.

Because of these economic interests, the number of Arab students studying in China has been increasing dramatically (Lim, 2015). As part of Sino–Middle Eastern relationships, Morocco has
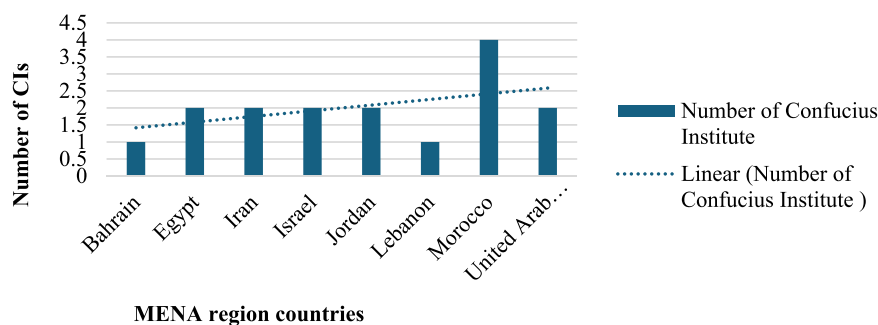

Fig. 1 Number of Confucius Institutes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Pintér, 2017, p. 249, 250).
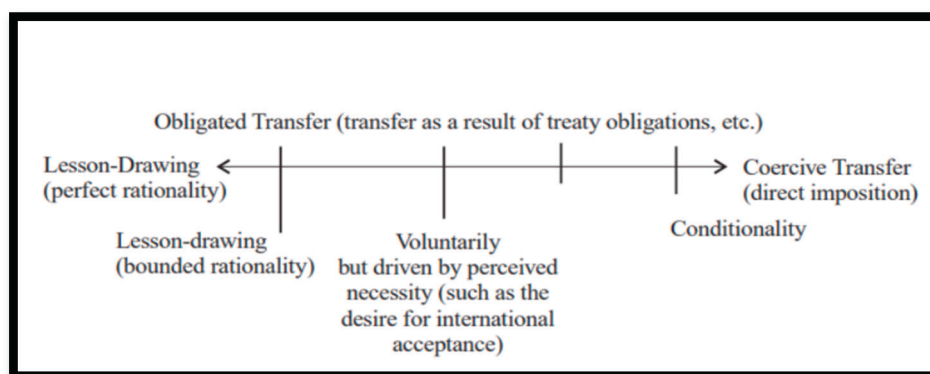
Fig. 2 The original continuum of policy transfer adapted from Dolowitz & Marsh (2000, p. 13).

been involved in China's 'OBOR' initiative as well. The number of CIs in Morocco is increasing, with the first three having been established in major cities: Tangier, the economically important city Casablanca, and the capital city Rabat (Pintér, 2017, p. 249). Recently, another CI has been established in Agadir, a major port city in the south. However, research on the policy borrowing from Chinese higher education and on how media discourse is boosting China's soft power in African countries is scarce.

This study examines Morocco as a case study of a North-African country to elucidate policy borrowing through the soft-power lens and for several reasons. Morocco has the highest number of CIs in North Africa, and it is emphasising its strategic role in China's cultural and educational diplomacy (Yellinek et al., 2020).

The Kingdom of Morocco is regarded as a key partner for China's 'going-out strategy', specifically in policy dissemination and strategic influence. This positioning is largely owing to its unique geographical location as a gateway between Europe and Africa, which enhances its critical role in the growing Chinese influence across the African continent. Moreover, Morocco's burgeoning importance within African economic and political frameworks solidifies its status as an appealing partner for China's expanding initiatives in Africa. The country also has the distinction of maintaining one of the oldest Sino–North African relationships, with diplomatic ties traced back 66 years to 1958 (Nejjar, 2022). Morocco was the second African nation after Egypt to establish formal diplomatic relations with China, which highlights the longstanding and significant partnership between the two nations (Yellinek et al., 2020). Recent developments indicate that Morocco has been reforming its migration policies while concurrently seeking a leading role in Africa, leveraging both economic and geopolitical strategies to enhance its influence and position on the continent (Nejjar, 2022). Last, the presence of four CIs in Morocco likely reflects China's recognition of the country's strategic importance in Africa and its potential as a market for policy exports. This aligns with China's broader strategy of using educational and cultural initiatives (Lien et al., 2012) to enhance its global influence and foster economic ties.

Literature review and theoretical framework
Policy borrowing and lending. In this era of globalisation, policies are circulating between countries. The birth of the term *policy borrowing* in the educational sphere dates back to 1800 (Portnoi, 2016a, p. 147), when representatives of countries were traveling for the purpose of learning from foreign educational systems. Scholars use the term interchangeably with 'policy transfer', 'policy lending', 'policy learning' and 'policy diffusion'. Studies have used the term 'policy borrowing and lending' instead

of 'policy learning' and 'policy transfer', which are commonly used in the field of political sciences (Portnoi, 2016b, p. 149; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012, p. 6). 'Policy transfer' is one of the terms that scholars and policymakers use to describe the process through which policies move across borders.

'Policy borrowing' implies that countries explicitly seek to appropriate a policy and tailor it to the local context, whereas 'policy lending' connotes that governments or global governance organisations provide policies to a receiving country with or without consent (Samoff, 2003). Policy lending occurs when a country receives international attention due to positive results in regard to international metrics and implicitly lends its policies to another country with the aim of using it as an example model. Policy borrowing has been referenced when describing the idea that education is nationally bound, as reforms and practices in one locale can significantly impact other locales, which favour the learning and borrowing from one another (Castells, 2011). Therefore, in today's globalised world, educational systems are pushed to look at what others are doing and perhaps to use the experiences of other systems to improve their local systems (Eta, 2015).

The borrowing process has different forms, and the original continuum of policy transfer developed by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, p. 13) distinguishes both 'voluntary' and 'coercive' forms. The continuum helps to deepen our knowledge of the process. The model explains how policies can range from being borrowed purposefully to being negotiated under constraint, required under constraint, or fully imposed (Fig. 2).

Based on the continuum, for some cases, policies may be expressly borrowed, sought, or lent, depending on the purpose. For instance, if some countries are facing problems related to the use of technology in learning, its policymakers may borrow the integration of information and communications technology (ICT) in teaching and learning policy to address the issue. On the other hand, some countries may be forced to enact certain policies in their educational system with the aim of receiving loans or funding from international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. Therefore, some scholars prefer to use the term 'borrowing' when explaining the convergence of the policies between countries. The argument is that 'borrowing' implies that what is borrowed has to be returned (Dale, 1999).

Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) argue that borrowing policy and transfer can also be a mixture of both 'voluntary decisions' and 'coercive pressures' instead of being fully voluntary or fully coercive. This conclusion was the result of a series of questions addressed in their works aiming to explain whether a transfer can be a success or failure. Usually, the mixed form of transfer is demonstrated during international conferences. For instance, as

members of an international organisation, nations are forced to comply with the organisation's policies and directives, which can be termed coercive transfer. On the other hand, because nations voluntarily join the organisation and together shape its dictums, the transfer could viewed as both obligatory and negotiated (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). In other words, countries attempt to lend policies only for the purposes of gaining legitimacy in the home country or borrowing superficially for symbolic purposes (Chung, 2016; Portnoi, 2016b, p. 157).

In this study, soft power is seen as a foundation of China's public diplomacy initiatives. By promoting Chinese culture and language through soft power, China aims to create a favourable global image and build influence (Winkler & Nye, 2005). CIs are a direct tool of public diplomacy in this regard. Policy borrowing and lending are strategic tools through which China is adopting successful elements of cultural promotion from other countries and adapting them to its own strategy. This approach is helping to establish CIs effectively in different cultural contexts (Phillips & Ochs, 2004).

China's 'Going-In' and 'Going-Out' strategies. The 'Going-Out' strategy (走出去战略) refers to China's policy of encouraging its enterprises and cultural institutions to expand their operations internationally (Jihua & Ocón, 2023). This approach is integral to China's efforts to enhance its global influence and project its soft power abroad. In the context of media policies in Africa, the strategy involves several key elements.

The first element is media expansion. Chinese state-run media organisations, such as China Global Television Network (CGTN), Xinhua News Agency, and China Radio International, have established bureaus and operations in various African countries. These outlets aim to provide an alternative to Western media narratives and promote a positive image of China (Gagliardone, 2013). Second, cultural diplomacy involves cultural programmes and initiatives, such as CIs, through which China seeks to promote Chinese language and culture. These institutes offer language courses, cultural events, and educational exchanges that foster greater cultural understanding and appreciation of China among African populations (Zhao & Xiang, 2019).

The third element is economic partnerships. Chinese companies, particularly in the telecommunications and technology sectors, have invested heavily in Africa. Companies like Huawei and ZTE provide infrastructure and technology services, which are often accompanied by Chinese media content and cultural promotion. The element of content production involves Chinese media outlets producing content that highlights China's development model, technological advancements, and success stories. This content is often tailored to resonate with African audiences and emphasises shared experiences and development goals (Li et al., 2020).

The 'Going-In' strategy (引进来战略) complements the 'Going-Out' strategy by focusing on attracting foreign resources, expertise, and cultural elements into China (Jihua & Ocón, 2023). While this strategy is less prominent in the context of Chinese media policies in Africa, it still plays a role in the broader framework of enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation. Through cultural exchange programmes, African students, journalists, and cultural representatives are invited to participate in exchange programmes, training, and educational opportunities in China. These programmes aim to foster positive perceptions of China and build networks of influence (Shambaugh, 2013).

Media effect on China's branding and exertion of soft power in Africa. Public diplomacy and nation branding are closely tied to the idea of soft power (Svensson, 2013). After its media 'Going-Out' policy, China has increased the global interest in 'Going-In' policy, which has led to a core set of policy expressions such as 'peaceful rise', 'soft power' and 'harmonious world' (Hu & Ji, 2012). Another important dimension of the policy is the expansion of the multilingual broadcasting services by China Central Television (CCTV). The system provides telecasts in Mandarin, Arabic, English, French, Spanish, and Russian. Thus, as an illustration of shaping its national brand, China has demonstrated how it can powerfully turn a nation into 'economic wonder and cheap shopping paradise' (Svensson, 2013, p. 94).

China has partnered with African nations through the presence of CCTV (Bailard, 2016; Gagliardone, 2013). CCTV has been examined as a tool of public diplomacy that facilitates access to African minds in countries such as Zimbabwe, Uganda (Nassanga & Makara, 2016), Nigeria, and South Africa. Ye and Edwards (2018) have examined the national expansion of CCTV and Chinese soft power in the 'media going-out' landscape to shed light on the development of the CGTN – Español as a vehicle of China's multichannel, multiform, and multilevel soft power strategy. Extensive literature has demonstrated the role of media as a vehicle of branding messages of countries and integral pillar nation branding and soft power (Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018; Jiang et al., 2016; Wasserman, 2016; Zhang, 2010). In the same vein, Jiang et al., 2016 states that the branding can take the form of public diplomacy, political value-sharing programmes and economic aid, as emphasised in the country's foreign aid to the African region (J. Li, 2015).

Warren (2014, p. 117) has examined the linkage between mass media and what he called 'the production of the state loyalty' from a sociological perspective. Wasserman (2016) has attempted to answer the crucial question about the extent to which South African media amplifies Chinese soft power initiatives that are exercised through its media. One of the major findings is that Chinese soft power is achieved by using Chinese media as sources that allow local African stories to be framed by Chinese perspectives. However, China's attempts to use media to exert soft power in South Africa have been challenging.

Banda (2009) highlighted the cultural aspect of Chinese support of African media. Cultural penetration is mediated through education, and African students who are gaining Chinese governmental scholarships are bringing their unique experiences and diverse cultures to China. Through such cultural exchanges, China is 'reproducing' itself in Africa. Wang and Adamson (2015) used discourse analysis to extract themes from large amounts of written and spoken media connected to CIs and revealed that China promotes language through mass media. Several Chinese teachers working abroad in CIs have expressed the same motivations about the gross promotion of the country's language and culture (Wang and Adamson, 2015, p. 5). Given this background, the following research questions were examined in the context of Morocco:

RQ1: How is the image of China as a study destination portrayed in selected Moroccan media outlets?

RQ2: How and to what extent is China sending its education policies as a reference country using media as a main tool of its soft power?

Methods

Design. This study used a qualitative approach to analyse data from media reports related to Chinese soft power in Morocco and how they have informed the borrowing and lending policies between both countries. The use of these secondary sources can be justified on the grounds that they usually arise from an event that is sufficiently important to be deemed newsworthy by editors and reports. We examined three francophone daily newspapers:

one targeting the elite, *L'Economiste* (The Economist); the oldest French language newspaper in the country, *Le Matin* (The Morning); and the daily newspaper *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc* (ALM/ Today's Morocco). Articles from 2010 to 2019 were examined.

These three newspapers were chosen because they have national coverage, a high audience share, and significant circulation. These factors make them the three most important Moroccan media outlets for both the general public and the elite in Morocco. The reports contain quotations from stakeholders that reveal their views of CIs and clearly discuss related tools of Chinese soft power in Morocco, which were subjected to content analysis.

20,000 copies of the print version of *Le Matin* are circulated, while 10,000 copies of *ALM* and 16,162 copies of *L'Economiste* are circulated. We used search terms to retrieve results on coverage of how Morocco is borrowing and comparing itself to China in terms of educational policies, as well as how Moroccan media outlets are portraying China as a reference country and study destination. To extract local perceptions on Chinese education, the basic criterion was that the text should make an explicit reference to educational relationship between China and Morocco, or any items related to China as a global power in terms of education and Moroccan students in China.

To expand the search, we used five search strings: '*Enseignement en Chine/Education in China*'; '*Institut de Confucius/Confucius Institute*'; '*La Route de La Soie/The Silk Road*'; '*PISA*' (*Programme for International Student Assessment*), and '*Langue Chinoise/Chinese Language*'. We define each of the search term in the following:

Cis. Their presence in Africa exhibits notable characteristics, including rapid growth, substantial scale, and an effective operational system (S. Li, 2022). While delivering high-quality Chinese language instruction, CIs have increasingly become a crucial platform for Africa–China educational cooperation, interpersonal interactions, and cultural exchanges.

Education in China. It encompasses a broad range of topics, including the formal education system, educational reforms in China that might be seen by other countries as best practices.

The Silk Road/BRI. The BRI, also known as the New Silk Road or OBOR, is a global infrastructure development strategy launched by China in 2013 (Liu & Dunford, 2016). As a search term for collecting secondary data from newspapers, we used the keyword 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) to capture a broader range of relevant articles. The initiative spans three continents—Africa, Asia, and Europe—and involves numerous countries along the ancient Silk Road trade routes (Winter, 2021).

PISA. It is an international large-scale assessment that evaluates education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics, and science (Hopfenbeck et al., 2018). It is conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and has gained strategic prominence in education policy debates since its first cycle in 2000 (Dobbins, 2014; Hopfenbeck et al., 2018).

We used PISA as a search term because it shows the international student assessment, education rankings, and more often it includes terms related to policy impact, reform initiatives, and, particularly, comparisons between countries, as PISA results often spark debates on educational policies and practices across nations (Dobbins, 2014; Tan, 2017).

Chinese language. The term encompasses various dialects and written forms of Chinese, including Mandarin, Traditional Chinese (Chen et al., 2013). Chinese language referring to Mandarin, which is the most widely spoken form, was our primary focus (M. Wang et al., 2005).

The search resulted in 202 articles, which were exported to an Excel file. We removed irrelevant articles that included the search terms but were not in the scope of the study, as well as duplicate articles, which left 153, as shown in Table 1. All the obtained articles were read and subjected to content analysis.

Data analysis. Content analysis and Excel software were used to determine the thematic content of articles. Researchers who can read and speak French fluently coded the articles and organised them based of their scope. The main idea of each article was translated and given to the other researchers to confirm the coding categories. During the analysis, we tried to interpret the statements through the lens of policy borrowing and lending to understand the philosophies and logic used by the authors of the articles Table 2.

We developed a three-part coding scheme. The first part covered general descriptive information on the articles, such as publication date, heading and sub-headings, and the cover pages of some outlets. The second part explored how Moroccan media perceives the China's educational system and the education exchange between the countries, including Chinese soft power through CIs, the BRI, higher education, and Chinese language. The third part examines how Moroccan media perceives China within a comparative framework, references to any other country besides China, and calls for policy borrowing Table 3.

Findings

The findings showed an increasing interest in the Chinese higher education system and the country's brand regarding international university ranking, international student mobility, and the power of Chinese language in the workplace. We developed an analysis

Media Outlets	Institut Confucius/ Confucius Institute	PISA	Enseignement en Chine/ Chinese Education	Langue Chinoise/ Chinese Language	La Route de Soie/Silk Road	Relevant hits	Relevance after Refining
L'Economiste/The Economist	18	10	56	24	10	118	95
Le Matin/The Morning	20	7	1	37	0	65	44
ALM/Today's Morocco	4	0	6	3	3	16	14
Total	42	17	63	64	13	199	153

Table 1 Results of the article search.

Terms used in the search query in French and their translation in English are presented.

Table 2 The coding scheme.

Newspaper	1st Step	2nd Step	3rd Step
Media Outlet	Meaningful set of data, initial codes	Identified concept, combined concept	Emerging themes based on concepts
Outlet Ref#	General descriptive information on the articles, such as publication date, heading and sub-headings and the cover pages of some outlets.	How Moroccan media perceives the China's educational system and the education exchange between the countries, including Chinese soft power through Confucius Institutes, the Belt and Road Initiative, higher education, and Chinese language.	How Moroccan media perceives China within a comparative framework, references to any other country besides China, and calls for policy borrowing.

Table 3 Macro and micro levels of policy borrowing.

Macro level (Push Factors)	Micro Level (Pull Factors)
- Morocco faces intense competition in global educational rankings and seeks ways to improve its standing. Moroccan universities are absent from prestigious global rankings and need financial support for educational reforms. - Morocco's adoption of Chinese educational practices allows it to receive international aid and educational expertise (Entman, 2003).	- The demand for Mandarin-speaking graduates is increasing in Morocco owing to the growing Chinese economic presence in the country. This shift is leading to the creation of specialised programmes in Mandarin and Chinese culture (The Economist, 2019). - The influx of students to China for higher education – particularly in prestigious universities such as Fudan and Jiaotong – is also a key driver of this trend (The Morning, 2017).

scheme of 'pull' and 'push' factors through the lens of policy borrowing and lending between countries.

Morocco is expressing interest in adopting CIs and CCs and receiving the associated annual funds. Forty-two articles were published on CIs. *The Morning* reported 20 more of these articles than *Today's Morocco* and *The Economist*. Considering the primary readership, the narratives written by authors of the three media outlets are interpreted as indicative of the macro and micro levels that have led Morocco to pull policies from China, while China pushes soft power by providing opportunities to learn from its expertise in education.

Emerged themes

China's human capital soft power. The official welcoming stance towards international cooperation has led to an increasing number of international meetings, conferences, and training courses through which state bureaucrats and other educational stakeholders become embedded in the 'global educational policyscape' (Carney, 2009). These international conferences on education are a powerful tool in establishing what can be conceived as best practices in international education development and might lead to a call for policy borrowing from reference countries attending international conferences on education (Arnove & Torres, 2007).

The news outlets view soft power in the form of human capital as a vital tool that has led Morocco to be responsive to CIs, CCs, and local training. This explains the rationale behind borrowing some educational policies implicitly by integrating Chinese studies as a field at Hassan II University, in parallel with Chinese Beijing International Studies University. This cooperation provides credibility to CIs and could encourage other universities to welcome them.

Many students quoted in *The Economist* and *Today's Morocco* mention the benefit of learning Chinese for research and academic reasons. Thus, most people express interest in learning Chinese for these reasons rather than for diplomatic or economical purposes. This explains the rising number of CIs to cope with the demand among local students for Chinese language studies. Moroccans with Chinese language skills are welcomed profiles in the Moroccan labour market.

Learning Chinese language is becoming for Moroccan students owing to the increasing number of Confucius Institutes in the country.

(Today's Morocco, 2018)

Chinese language is a rare language in the new labour market, which is focusing more on foreign languages.

(*The Economist*, 2019)

Mandarin is being taught in primary school after cooperation between the BMCE Bank Foundation and Confucius Institutes.

(*Today's Morocco*, 2017)

E-learning for Chinese language is being provided through videoconference for students who live in rural areas.

(*The Economist*, 2019)

Aiming to diversify its teaching models and the languages offered, Ibn Zohr university has started offering Chinese language courses in collaboration with Confucius Institutes.…

(*The Economist*, 2019)

The impressive Chinese educational model and the ranking of its universities are quoted by the media as a rationale that reflects international student mobility in China as destination country for Moroccan undergraduates.

China is increasingly attracting Moroccan bachelor's students, who have chosen China as a study destination. The country's economic development is impressive, and it contains more than 2,000 schools dedicated to teaching, among which we distinguish two world-renowned universities, Fudan University and Jiaotong University.

(*The Morning*, 2017)

Having access to Chinese language gives young Moroccans an agentive strategy and capital to reposition themselves in the local labour market, which is also the case for Cameroonian, Ethiopian, and Ugandan Mandarin speakers (Mulvey, 2020; Tugendhat &

Alemu, 2016; Wheeler, 2014b). Thus, they are targeted by local companies that deal with Chinese firms. Promoting the Chinese language shows the effectiveness of the policy to make it become a future world language (J. Li et al., 2020; Riva, 2017). CIs are considered a form of state-sponsored cultural diplomacy that is being piloted in universities (Pan, 2013, p. 23), which is a joint effort to continue branding the country in the African region.

CIs have a crucial role in marketing young people for employment and solving the issue of local unemployment by training fresh graduates in ICT skills as well as offering courses in primary schools and e-lectures for those living in rural areas. These efforts are interpreted as part of China's 'Going-Out' strategy (Hu & Ji, 2012), which is well studied by the Chinese government to target the investments needed to contribute to the quality of the local Moroccan educational system. Fulfilling the host country's needs will make the country more responsive to borrowing Chinese educational policies to guarantee its success.

Training young people to master ICT skills by sending future Moroccan engineers for training via Huawei Academy is another aspect of the soft power of human capital. The Huawei ICT Academy stands as a pivotal element in China's soft-power strategy in Morocco, emphasising educational collaboration, technology transfer, and the enhancement of digital skills. Huawei's expansive footprint in Morocco, initiated through global ventures, is significantly advancing the nation's ICT sector while simultaneously strengthening bilateral relations between China and Morocco. By bolstering technological innovations and educational opportunities, the academy enhances Morocco's capacity to become a regional leader in digital competencies.

Huawei, recognised globally as a leader in the ICT sector, commenced its operations in Morocco back in 2002, establishing collaborative partnerships with both local telecommunications providers and government agencies. The Huawei ICT Academy was officially inaugurated in 2019, signalling the company's robust commitment to Morocco's digital transformation and the development of its technology workforce (Huawei, 2024). The establishment of the academy provided a structured approach to strengthening the digital skillset among Moroccan professionals, aligning with national goals to cultivate a competitive technology landscape in North Africa.

As part of a larger global ICT Academy initiative, the Moroccan branch offers comprehensive training programmes that encompass essential technological domains such as 5 G, cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and the Internet of Things (IoT). Such offerings are crucial for Morocco's ambition to emerge as a key digital innovation hub in the region (Hannahxiahan, 2023). By equipping local talent with the latest skills, the Huawei ICT Academy plays an instrumental role in facilitating Morocco's progression towards a knowledge-based economy.

Huawei implements its strategy in Morocco through public–private partnerships, creating a framework for sustainable developments in the ICT sector. While the initiative is not entirely government-funded, Huawei substantially invests in scholarships, internships, and research projects, which illustrates its dedication to nurturing local talent (Huawei, 2024). The Huawei Academy serves as an integral component of Huawei's ICT Talent Ecosystem—a global initiative designed to develop a workforce adept in navigating the digital economy.

The Academy provides a diverse range of opportunities for education and professional advancement, including

a. ICT Training and Certification Programmes
b. ICT Competitions and Innovation Challenges
c. Internships and Research Opportunities
d. Career Development and Job Placement

These efforts underscore the Academy's role as a vital contributor to China's soft power in Morocco, merging education, technology transfer, and diplomatic relations. By providing high-quality ICT training and fostering a skilled workforce, Huawei significantly contributes to Morocco's technological and economic development. As part of the broader BRI, Huawei's educational endeavours promote long-term collaboration between China and Morocco, reinforcing Huawei's position as a global ICT leader while enhancing cultural and economic ties.

Furthermore, the Academy promotes itself as a knowledge provider through various avenues, including training seminars, visits to high-tech firms, and certified courses in fields such as big data, cloud computing and cybersecurity. This multifaceted approach not only enriches educational prospects in Morocco but also strengthens China's cultural and economic influence within the region (El-Kadi, 2024).

Contextually, China sends yearly trainers to teach Moroccan young graduates about the necessary ICT skills to be able to integrate into the technological labour market. As a result, Morocco has adopted certificates in ICT skills alongside bachelor's and master's degrees for future recruits.

> To decrease the gap in skills of Moroccan students and future ICT engineers, Moroccan Universities have referred to Confucian culture while focusing on a student-centred approach and the variation of learning styles to include all kinds of students through inclusive learning.

(*The Economist*, 2018)

Targeting local human capital is a vital part of China's higher education propaganda to increase its soft power. In 2019, a report published in *The Morning* discussed the digital soft power of the Chinese Huawei Academy and its tremendous role in improving local graduates' ICT skills, which are necessary to gain credibility to enter the labour market (The Mourning, 2019). The article highlights the increasing propaganda via the outlets to market China as a country.

> This program aims to improve the employability of the students; they will be trained on the necessary skills that will enable them to handle ICT projects and be delivered a Huawei certificate at the end of the training.… local teachers who will oversee delivery of the ICT training will be pretrained by Huawei tutors.

University ranking. To cope with international standards regarding quality of education and universities' reputations to attract international students, institutions are purposefully called to cooperate with highly ranked universities to strengthen their own status in the local context. Therefore, progressive educational ideas, policies, and practices are borrowed from abroad to improve the quality of the educational system and deal with internal issues through proven best practices in education.

According to *The Economist*, the Moroccan business school ESCA is developing partnerships with a Chinese business school. This is a form of borrowing reputation and credibility by indicating local ownership and ensuring relevance of the school in its national context. Universities with a less-developed higher education system seek relationships with other institutions that they view as more prestigious to increase their chances of a higher global ranking. These relationships are undoubtedly 'accelerators' of higher education reform and have succeeded in changing discourses around knowledge, society, and the economy (Magalhães & Amaral, 2009). Furthermore, such connections reframe the relationship of higher education within and between states. Global university rankings are thus seen as a core component of
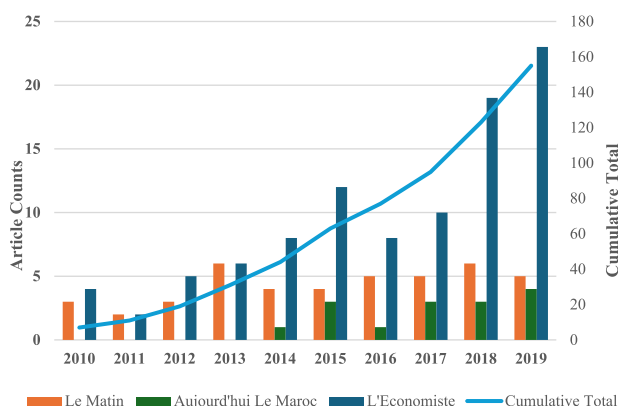
Fig. 3 The growth of the search strings reporting on China from an educational perspective in 2010–2019.

Fig. 4 Frequency of mentions of reference countries over time.

the transformation of educational discourses (Hazelkorn, 2018; Lo, 2013).

In the same vein, another article has highlighted recent cooperation with the China Europe International Business School owing to its high global ranking. ESCA is attempting to pursue a strategy of becoming more visible internationally and gaining more legitimacy, and these two schools have signed a convention that aligns with their objectives. The goal of this cooperation is to increase entrepreneurship and leadership among women in Africa by offering them training in Shanghai.

Lessons learned from the Chinese educational system. Analysing reference countries and learning policies is important to better understand the factors and interests (e.g. economic, educational, and political) that drive soft-power discourses and that have led to the construction of borrowing and lending policies in Morocco. Figure 4 shows the number of education systems that Moroccan media referred to from 2010 to 2019 and the three most referenced educational systems. The number of reference countries increased from 11 in 2010–2014 to 95 in 2015–2019. This change in the scope and intensity of referencing seems to support Schriewer, Martinez Valle (2004) arguments that emergent global education policy has opened up a new space for policy transfer for national and international education systems.

Interestingly, calls for policy borrowing from other educational systems over time—particularly from the Chinese educational system—have consistently and exponentially increased. In 2015, one article called for learning from China regarding language of instruction and adapting it to teaching the mother tongue locally. Another article in 2014 called for learning and borrowing from the Chinese higher education system. The report suggested learning from China's successful educational reforms to solve Moroccan educational issues related to coordination between stakeholders and departments Fig. 3.

In 2017, a similar report from *Today's Morocco* explained rationales behind adapting the Chinese model at the economical level. In the same year, another article called for learning from China regarding its solid educational system: 'For a long time, the country has had a university system in full expansion, and in the scope of various reforms, the state is attempting to make the university system an excellent one worldwide and provide all the resources to achieve this' (*Today's Morocco*, 2017) Fig. 4.

In 2018, a local debate arose concerning the use of French language for teaching in higher education due to colonial roots in Morocco (Alalou, 2018). The three outlets reported on language of instruction and examples of other countries that have excellent educational systems while using their mother tongues as the
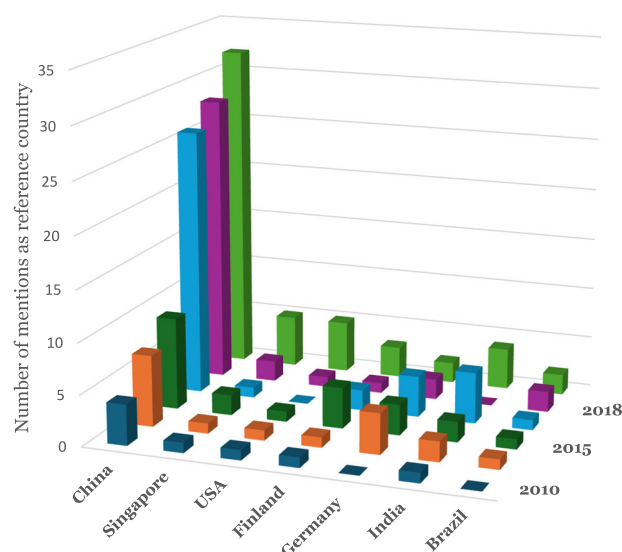
official language of instruction, including China. To decrease the gap in skills of Moroccan students and future engineers in ICT, Moroccan universities have also referred to Confucianism to overcome local educational issues, as demonstrated in the following quotes:

> *Help local universities and schools to create new disciplines in ICT, gain pedagogical materials, and cultivate and target talented people to diversify chains of ICT through the program as 'seeds' for the future.*

(*The Morning*, 2017)

> *During the 'Forum of Education' and aligning with the convention signed between the University Mohammed V Agdal and Donghua(东华) University in Shanghai, the Moroccan university is aiming to reinforce scientific research, student educational exchange, and exchange between teachers and researchers.*

(*The Economist*, 2019)

Discussion

The way the media frames the cooperation between CIs and Moroccan universities is a highly relevant indicator of the institutes' legitimacy in Morocco. Framing affects how people understand and evaluate an issue (Reese, 2001). According to Entman (2003), when news media frame an issue, they 'select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the items described' (Entman, 1993, p. 52). By selecting and highlighting certain features, media can frame narratives and exert substantial power over how certain events are perceived by the public (Coleman et al., 2008).

Morocco appears to be an active borrower from the Chinese educational system through different scenarios. The data collected from the three outlets suggest that the number of CIs in Morocco increased from two institutes in 2014 to four institutes in the whole country, in parallel with the increased influence of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation in higher education.

The forms of soft power discussed thus far are being integrated through 'academic diplomacy'. After implementing CIs and CCs, China has expanded its soft power through science, technology, engineering and mathematics, language training, and the high

demand for Moroccan Mandarin speakers and educational aids. These changes represent a stimulus that is amplifying Chinese academic diplomacy.

The prism of higher education is uniquely relevant for China's soft-power agenda (Luqiu & McCarthy, 2019). As universities remain an ideal place to direct soft power, using intangible power to attract people to the country is one of the aspects of Chinese higher education. However, some criticisms characterise the exchange in higher education between China and Africa, which is perceived as 'one-way' and as a coercive system. The 'one-way' model needs to be reconsidered and reflected on, and 'two-way' dialogue should be prioritised, in which China would not only offer educational opportunities to African students but would also benefit from Africa's rich history and cultural heritage. Developing relevant courses with contributions from African scholars would likely enable China to gain a deeper understanding of Africa, thereby strengthening the Sino–African relationship through mutual understanding. These issues highlight the current imbalance in mutual understanding between China and Africa. As stated by Aidarbek et al., 'That is why many ambitiously developing states (i.e., Brazil, Russia, India and China) are eager to adopt innovative economic models, pay special attention to the modernisation and internationalisation of their national education systems' (Amirbek & Ydyrys, 2014).

Morocco's increasing reliance on China's educational model reflects broader trends in global education policy, where nations —particularly in Africa and the Global South—are looking to China not only for economic cooperation but also for guidance in educational reform. The role of CIs, Mandarin language programmes and partnerships with Chinese universities is a key aspect of this soft-power strategy.

Media framing has played a critical role in the legitimacy of these educational exchanges, influencing public and policy perceptions. Morocco's efforts to improve its educational system through Chinese collaboration mirror global trends in educational globalisation, policy borrowing, and the expansion of soft power.

Conclusion and future directions

The Moroccan response to China-soft power was mainly through two actors, the CIs across the country and the talent training of Huawei Academy as a tool for penetrating the higher education system and labour market of the Kingdom of Morocco.

Media outlets have been successfully promoting China to become a reference in academic diplomacy and a study destination, citing one of the important reforms in the educational system through coordination between all departments and structures in countries such as China. In addition to CIs, departments of Chinese studies have begun to appear alongside academic language studies to provide a supporting theoretical curriculum in Morocco. The academic departments for China and Chinese studies have shown considerable progress, and studying Chinese has been found to provide an advantage in the business world. Media outlets have also highlighted the market demand for this skill, with those who master Chinese language being well positioned for finding a high-paying job.

This study sets the foundation for further research in the international arena regarding assessing the level of penetration of the above tools into foreign universities and institutes, shedding light on the Chinese efforts within the single case study of Morocco. These tools are expected to continue attracting the interest of the academic community in the North African region as long as China's global position continues to grow. The process of policy transfer is often driven by the need to compete in a globalised education system, as seen in Morocco's increasing references to the Chinese educational model (Schriewer, Martinez Valle (2004)). In other parts of the

world, countries such as Brazil, India, and Russia have also looked to innovative models from China to modernise and internationalise their higher education systems.

Establishing long-term relationships and adopting policies related to education and technology seems to be common between countries. Higher education, science, and technology training are being targeted by teachers and policymakers who occupy a strategic role in the host country. These figures are key to disseminating ideas and are considered vectors of soft power, building common interests and values to attract, persuade, and influence (Winkler & Nye, 2005).

Academic diplomacy can be characterised by three components: identification of educational issues, collaborative goal setting, and solving of the identified issues. Pan (2013) refers to this type of diplomacy through CIs as 'cultural diplomacy that is state-sponsored and university-piloted' and 'education diplomacy'. Educational promotion through diplomacy to foreign university campuses and student exchange has a positive impact on preparing youth to enter the global community and economy.

Data availability

Data generated or analyzed during this study are secondary data and are included in this published article.

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Author contributions

Zineb D: conceptualization and writing original draft. YR: supervision, review, and editing. SHAA and HMIZ: data curation, validation, interpretation, provided valuable insights into the theoretical framework resources, and proofreading. SM and Sufyan M: actively participated in the manuscript revising for scientific accuracy and ensuring clarity in the methodology section. All authors read and approved the final manuscript

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical statements

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

The study used secondary data from newspapers, and did not involve human participants. Therefore, the informed consent was not obtained or applicable.

Additional information

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