

The US Inspires Dreams and China Gets Things Done: Gauging Global South Attachments to Major Powers with Evidence from Nigeria

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How do citizens in the Global South form attachments to major powers competing for influence in their communities? Existing research focuses primarily on elite-level strategic motives or on the local impact of particular interventions. We argue, instead, that major powers that engage in development initiatives in the Global South form distinct reputations over time and that subsequent interventions activate those reputational assets, with some spillover into other dimensions of appeal. Drawing on an original, three-arm survey experiment conducted in Lagos, Nigeria, we examine perceptions of China and the US across four dimensions: their development model, partnership quality, operational effectiveness, and cultural appeal. At baseline, the results underscore distinct reputational pillars: China's reputation for operational effectiveness and the US's enduring cultural appeal. Upon treatment, the funder's nationality alone moves preferences toward the sponsoring power, but the effects differ in scope. US-funded projects draw on a broad, abstract reservoir of cultural goodwill that lifts perceptions of the US on every dimension. Chinese-funded projects confirm citizens' belief that China delivers and, notably, also raise interest in China's cultural appeal. These findings suggest that the nationality of a funder is legible to citizens, that soft power is multidimensional, and that major powers take distinct paths to influence.

Keywords: soft power, foreign aid, foreign direct investment, China, United States, Nigeria, survey experiment

Introduction

The contest between China and the United States for influence in the Global South has generated a rich literature, much of it focused on elite bargaining, strategic aid allocation, and the structural features of foreign-funded projects (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Blair et al. 2022; Dreher et al. 2022). Yet, two questions at the foundation of this competition remain relatively underexplored:

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The survey data, project images, and replication code supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and will be deposited in a public repository upon publication.

what reputational identities do China and the United States hold among ordinary citizens in low-income countries, and how does exposure to the development projects those major powers fund shift the ways they are perceived?

Soft power ultimately operates at the level of public opinion (Nye 1990). Thus, if a country's economic engagement overseas is to translate into broader influence, it must move the preferences of local citizens in ways that both outlast short-term approval of a single project and also exert upward pressure on political elites. Citizens who come to see China's model of development as best suited to their own country's needs, for example, or who recognize in the US an enduring partner of support, are more likely to adopt stances vis-à-vis their own political leadership that reflect those views of foreign powers (Kertzer 2022; McCauley et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2022). The stakes of soft power reputations continue to rise as major powers like China and the US alter their conventional foreign assistance strategies.

In this article, we argue that major powers like China and the US occupy distinct reputational niches in the Global South, niches that have emerged over long periods of engagement and that each new episode of local exposure activates (Fombrun and Shanley 1990). China, we suggest, has built a reputation as the power with superior operational effectiveness: it gets things done, often working at scale and on compressed timelines, if also imposing costs to environmental or labor standards (Brautigam 2009; Fioratta 2019; Mohan 2013; Nyiawung et al. 2024). The United States, by contrast, carries a cultural appeal rooted in decades of cultural exports, educational exchange, and normative influence that complement its conventional, public health- and governance-focused development efforts (Bartels et al. 2009; Nye 2004; Pew Research Center 2026). Additionally, we argue that new projects do not simply reinforce the dimension on which a power is already strong. Rather, they activate the power's existing reputational asset, and the breadth with which that asset spills over into other dimensions of appeal depends on the nature of the asset. A cultural reservoir such as the US has constructed over time is abstract, broad, and low in boundaries, so its activation lifts perceptions of the US across numerous dimensions, including those on which the US is comparatively weak. China's reputation for operational effectiveness operates on a more concrete dimension, and it also reminds community members of the potential costs of rapid development, so its spillover is more limited in scope: demonstrated competence carries over into cultural interest in the country, we find, but not into the more normatively demanding judgments about whether China represents the right model or partner.

To test these claims, we rely on an original, three-arm survey experiment conducted in Lagos, Nigeria. The design establishes a baseline via a control group and exposes two treatment groups to portfolios of randomly assigned development projects funded, respectively, by either China or the US. Because the pool of project types is identical across the two treatment arms and only the funding-country label varies, the design isolates the effect of the funder's nationality from the characteristics of the projects themselves. A battery of questions on major powers in their community then allows us to estimate the perceptions that local community members hold of China and the US, and how those preferences shift with exposure to Chinese- or US-funded projects.

Three findings stand out. First, at baseline, respondents modestly favor China as offering the better development model, being a better-quality partner, and providing stronger operational effectiveness, while strongly preferring the United States in terms of cultural influence. Second, exposure to a portfolio of development projects from a major power moves preferences in favor of the sponsoring country, even though the projects themselves are held constant and only the

funder's nationality varies. The effects differ in scope but generally suggest an activation of diverse dimensions of appeal. Third, these average patterns mask important heterogeneity among individuals in the sample. Chinese projects are considerably more persuasive among younger respondents in terms of operational effectiveness and the best model for development. Education levels, meanwhile, exert divergent effects on the partnership dimension: upon exposure to Chinese projects, less-educated respondents view China more favorably as a development partner, while respondents with higher levels of education view the US as the better partner after exposure to US-funded projects.

The paper contributes to the literature in five important respects. First, and most importantly, it shows that the nationality of a project's funder is legible to ordinary citizens and is sufficient, on its own, to move their preferences. Because our design holds the pool of project types constant and randomizes only the funding-country label, the shifts we document cannot be attributed to project size, sector, or quality. This finding stands in contrast to recent work concluding that project characteristics, rather than the funder's country of origin, drive citizen reactions to foreign-funded projects (Bulman et al. 2025; Ferree et al. 2026), and it implies that major powers carry portable reputational assets into every community in which they operate. Second, the paper adds experimental evidence, grounded in a pre-treatment baseline, to a growing literature on the soft power reputations of China and the United States in the Global South. Third, it makes a theoretical distinction between different avenues to soft power, suggesting that major powers accumulate distinct reputational assets, such as operational effectiveness and cultural appeal, and that the nature of an asset governs how broadly its activation spills over into other dimensions of appeal. In this sense, we build on and extend Nye's (1990, 2004) multidimensional account of soft power, and similarly on the critique that studies too frequently treat soft power as a single scale (Blanchard and Lu 2012). Fourth, by showing that US project exposure moves preferences on every dimension we measure, while the improvements to China's reputation following local development efforts are more limited in scope, the study identifies an underappreciated opportunity for US reputational gains in low-income countries, even amid the apparent recent erosion of the US position relative to China.

Finally, this study speaks to a question that straightforward comparisons of reactions to Chinese and US development projects cannot answer on their own: whether major powers have enduring areas of comparative reputational strength that each new project activates. A growing literature treats project-level features, such as size, sector, and environmental or labor-related costs, as key drivers shaping citizen approval of foreign-funded projects (Bulman et al. 2025; Ferree et al. 2026). That work offers important insights regarding the local-level political implications of Chinese and US economic engagement, but it is less well equipped to address potentially longstanding and portable reputational advantages that may color opportunities for soft power to begin with when major powers operate in a community in the Global South.

Existing Literature

Scholarship on the political consequences of foreign aid and investment has expanded rapidly in recent years, with increasing attention to how those consequences register with ordinary citizens rather than elites alone. Studies have established that economic engagement from foreign powers can move public opinion toward donor countries (Goldsmith et al. 2014), shift citizens' assessments of their own governments (Blair and Roessler 2021; Dietrich et al. 2018), and affect

incumbents' electoral prospects (Briggs 2019; Wang et al. 2022), at least in the short term (see Wang et al. 2022). A related body of research documents citizens' perceptions of Chinese and US development engagement specifically, generally finding that those powers produce complex and at times ambivalent local reactions (Blair et al. 2022; McCauley et al. 2022; Rhee et al. 2025).

Within this literature, the identity of the funding country is often associated with distinct drivers of citizen perceptions. Chinese aid is often associated with speed and scale, for example (Brautigam 2009; Mohan 2013), while US aid is often linked to capacity building, democratic norms, and conditionality (Moss et al. 2006; Schraeder et al. 1998). These associations are typically studied indirectly, by examining projects already funded by one power or another, rather than by measuring baseline preferences prior to exposure and then estimating how exposure to development projects from one or the other of those powers alters preferences.

Studies present US and other Western engagement in Africa as channeled largely through official development assistance governed by OECD-DAC norms and marked by a preference for grants over loans; a concentration in health, education, humanitarian relief, and governance; and delivery through implementing partners, non-governmental organizations, and multilateral agencies that frequently bypass recipient governments (Dietrich 2013; Moss et al. 2006; Schraeder et al. 1998). In Nigeria, public health programming, including HIV/AIDS treatment and maternal and child health, alongside democracy and governance support, dominates US assistance (Brooks et al. 2023; U.S. Foreign Assistance 2024). These projects typically include policy conditions, procurement rules, and environmental and social safeguards that may lengthen timelines, and their outputs, such as trained health workers, functioning clinics, or reformed procedures, are less physically visible and less easily attributed to a single funder than, for example, a new highway or port. US private investment, meanwhile, tends to concentrate in extractive sectors such as oil and gas (Mordor Intelligence 2024), where local benefits are often contested.

Chinese engagement represents a starkly different profile. Chinese state financing to Africa consists mostly of loans and export credits rather than grants; is concentrated in transport, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure; and is often implemented by Chinese state-owned contractors on compressed timelines, without policy conditions and with comparatively thin environmental and labor safeguards (Brautigam 2009, 2011; Dreher et al. 2018, 2022). The results are large, visible, and easily attributed to China, from stadiums and railways to ports (Lindlacher and Pirich 2025; Strange 2023), even as they draw criticism for harmful labor practices, indebtedness, and environmental costs (Mohan 2013; Nyiawung et al. 2024).

A body of work that builds on China's donor profile asks whether Chinese economic engagement buys the kind of political goodwill its architects intend. Isaksson and Kotsadam (2018) find that proximity to Chinese-funded projects is associated with higher local corruption, an outcome that runs counter to stories of monotonic Chinese soft power accumulation. Knutsen and Kotsadam (2020) show that the political returns to foreign aid, including Chinese aid, often accrue disproportionately to incumbents, while Blair and Roessler (2021) demonstrate that Chinese aid does little to build support for the Chinese state, even as US aid strengthens both support for the United States and commitment to democratic norms, a pattern broadly consistent with the asymmetry we document in project exposure below. Taken together, this literature suggests that the political payoff to major powers' economic engagement in low-income contexts is neither automatic nor symmetric across donors.

China's global rise, and its political-economic competition with the US, has long been described in soft power terms. Nye (1990, 2004) defines soft power as the capacity to shape others'

preferences through attraction rather than coercion, identifying culture, political values, and foreign policy as its principal sources. That formulation is explicitly multidimensional, even if applied work does not always treat it as such (Blanchard and Lu 2012). Applying the concept to China's engagement in Africa, Wang et al. (2022) find that news of upcoming Chinese projects provides an initial boost in favorability but that over time local communities sour on Chinese involvement. Others find that citizens distinguish sharply between appreciating a Chinese project and endorsing China as a model (Eichenauer et al. 2021; Hanusch 2012). Ferree et al. (2026) find that in Malawi, project attributes shape approval of the specific project and beliefs about local benefits but have little effect on broader perceptions of China's role on the continent. Bulman et al. (2025) similarly find that project characteristics, more than the investing firm's country of origin, drive public support for Chinese investment across several countries, though labor and environmental violations at the project level can reduce support regardless of source. Read together, these studies raise the possibility that the funder's nationality is not, in itself, a consequential signal to citizens after accounting for project features.

Regarding China's operational effectiveness as a driver of soft power, studies of Chinese-financed natural resource and infrastructure projects often note that they are frequently delivered under compressed timelines relative to Western-financed alternatives, a pattern attributed to streamlined decision-making within Chinese state-owned enterprises and to the absence of the conditions that often accompany Western financing (Dreher et al. 2022; Ping et al. 2022). Whether that reputation is apparent to ordinary citizens, and whether it moves their broader judgments about China as a partner and a model, are questions we seek to answer in this study.

Research less explicitly considers the soft power position of the US as it engages economically in Africa. Some research documents the US's longstanding cultural reach globally, rooted in media, education, consumer culture, and democratic norms, and its association with favorable public opinion (Nye 2004; Pew Research Center 2026; Watanabe and McConnell 2008). Studies of US foreign policy in Africa tend to emphasize institutional capacity building, public health investment, and conditions-based aid as the primary instruments of engagement (Brooks et al. 2023). Few studies, however, directly measure the cultural appeal of the United States in an African context or set it against China's own reputational advantages.

We build on these literatures in an effort to bring together local political preferences, the longstanding reputations of major powers, and the shifts in those reputations that may occur with each new engagement. By drawing particular attention to the distinct reputational dimensions on which China and the United States compete, we hope to bring renewed attention to the multidimensional nature of soft power in the Global South.

Theory

We argue, first, that citizens in low-income settings form preferences about foreign powers through two analytically distinct channels. The first is direct exposure to development projects: their size, usefulness, environmental cost, supply of jobs, and the extent to which they meet pressing local needs. The second is an accumulated stock of cultural and normative associations that citizens hold regarding foreign powers independent of any single project, shaped often by media, education, travel, and broader global narratives. Our central claim is that these two channels have produced distinct reputational profiles for China and the United States in places like Nigeria, and that project exposure activates those profiles in ways that spill over unevenly

across the dimensions on which citizens evaluate major foreign powers.

China's reputational profile is rooted in perceptions of operational effectiveness. China's emergence as a leading donor and financier of development projects in Africa has come with a reputation for speed and delivery (see China Africa Research Initiative 2025). Chinese state-owned enterprises and private firms tend to execute projects on compressed timelines (Brautigam 2009; Hanauer and Morris 2014), and the visibility of large Chinese-built infrastructure, including railways, stadiums, ports, and highways, is widely noted by scholars and practitioners alike (Lindlacher and Pirich 2025; Strange 2023). The absence of policy conditions on Chinese finance, though often criticized in Western circles, reinforces a sense among ordinary citizens that China moves without the institutional friction that often slows Western-funded projects (Brautigam 2011; Knutsen and Kotsadam 2020; Wang et al. 2026). Together these features produce a durable cognitive heuristic for residents of the Global South: China is the power that gets things done.

The United States' profile operates through a different mechanism, which we argue is built on a cultural appeal that is largely independent of its development record in any particular country. In Nigeria as elsewhere, the US is associated with aspirational goods: higher education, technological innovation, and a cultural canon of music, film, sport, and freedom that circulates globally and is absorbed into local contexts (Bartels et al. 2009; Nye 2004; Pew Research Center 2026). We suggest that this appeal is sustained without continuous project engagement; instead, it is reproduced through diaspora networks, media consumption, and the circulation of American cultural products. A resident of Lagos, Nigeria may hold a strongly positive association with the United States without ever having encountered a US-funded project directly.

If soft power operated according to a single underlying metric, we might expect project exposure to move all dimensions of country preference by similar amounts, irrespective of the major power that sponsors the project. Yet, Nye's original formulation of soft power already distinguishes among culture, political values, and foreign policy as separate sources of attraction, and subsequent scholars have pointed out that studies applying Nye's logic too often collapse this multidimensional concept into a single favorability score (Blanchard and Lu 2012). We build on that critique by arguing that major powers accumulate distinct types of reputational assets, that each new local engagement activates the asset a power already holds, and that the breadth with which an activated asset spills over into other dimensions of appeal depends on the nature of the asset. An asset built on operational credibility is concrete. It should be expected to move judgments that are themselves about capacity and delivery, and to carry over to adjacent judgments that are plausibly informed by competence, such as curiosity about the country that produced the engineering feat, but to apply less readily to judgments that require a broader normative endorsement, such as whether a country represents the right model for one's own society. An asset built on cultural aspiration, conversely, is abstract, broad, and low in boundaries. Because admiring a country's culture, values, and way of life plausibly colors judgments about its suitability as a partner, a model, and a project implementer all at once, its activation may inspire favorable changes across dimensions, including those on which the power is comparatively weak.

This logic generates a specific expectation for how project exposure should operate. For China, a local project confirms for community members an existing claim about capacity: citizens who observe a Chinese-funded railway or port update their beliefs about China's ability to get things done, and demonstrated competence of this kind can also generate a taste for visiting a country whose engineering feats they have just witnessed. What the project does not do on its own is make the case that China is the right model for their own country's development path or the

right partner for its future. Those judgments draw instead on broader normative considerations beyond demonstrated competence. For the US, a project activates among community members a reservoir of aspirational regard that is not narrowly tied to demonstrated capacity in the first place. Therefore, when a new project triggers cultural affinity for the US, that reservoir has fewer boundaries and should lift judgments about the US as a model, a partner, an implementer, and a destination together.

To reinforce this point, we do not expect that any single project would generate cultural value for a foreign power from a baseline of zero. A well-executed project can, however, function as evidence of a major power's competence and modernity, and competence is itself attractive. For China in particular, whose cultural presence in much of the Global South is comparatively recent and less saturating than that of the US, a demonstration of engineering capability may generate a kind of curiosity or admiration that spills over into interest in the country itself. We therefore expect the spillover from China's operational effectiveness to reach the cultural dimension, a possibility that the literature's focus on infrastructure and effectiveness has tended to overlook. That spillover should nonetheless be more limited in scope than the spillover generated by a preexisting stock of cultural associations.

Importantly, the argument implies that each new project most profoundly activates the reputational asset a major power already holds, and that reshaping perceptions along other dimensions of affinity requires either a larger and more sustained volume of exposure or independent investment in the kind of cultural and normative outreach that has sustained the US position over decades. This is consistent with the observation that China's own public diplomacy efforts increasingly extend beyond infrastructure into media, education, and cultural exchange (Sautman and Yan 2009) – an acknowledgment, in effect, that operational effectiveness alone may not be sufficient to build the kind of diffuse appeal the United States has built over time in the Global South.

These arguments lead to three observable implications that we test below. First, at baseline, respondents should favor China in terms of operational effectiveness while favoring the US on the cultural dimension. Second, exposure to Chinese-funded projects should move the effectiveness dimension most reliably, because it most directly confirms China's existing reputational claim; it may also raise interest in visiting China, since demonstrated competence can spill over into cultural curiosity; and it should be least likely to move the normatively demanding model and partner dimensions. Exposure to US-funded projects, by contrast, should enhance not just US cultural appeal but the broader dimensions of US soft power, including the developmental dimensions on which the US trails at baseline, because the US's cultural reservoir is not confined to a project-specific domain. Third, because these processes rest on citizens' prior stocks of information and experience, the marginal change associated with each power's new projects should vary across subgroups defined by age and education, as those demographic attributes tend to shape prior information about China and the US.

Research Design

Study Site

The study was conducted in Lagos, Nigeria, a site that is well suited to this study for two reasons. First, Nigeria has substantial exposure to development activity from both the US and China. The

US is Nigeria's principal bilateral official development partner (U.S. Foreign Assistance 2024), and US firms maintain a prominent presence in Nigeria's oil and gas sector in particular (Mordor Intelligence 2024). China, a comparatively recent entrant in foreign direct investment (FDI) and development finance, has expanded its footprint substantially since the 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (Chiyemura et al. 2023; Huang 2016), with high-profile projects in Lagos including the light rail system operating since December 2022 (Xinhua News Agency 2024) and the Lekki Deep Sea Port, widely described as transformative for the Nigerian economy (Sanni 2023).

Second, the US-China dynamic in Nigeria mirrors broader patterns across African states, where the US retains longstanding influence even as China has rapidly expanded its economic footprint (McCauley et al. 2022). Nigeria thus offers a compelling case for studying the comparative reputational dynamics of these two powers. In addition, Lagos receives a substantial share of both countries' investment and aid in the country (Lagos Global 2024), so citizens in this study location have ample exposure to both major powers' economic engagement activities. Afrobarometer data show that Nigerians hold favorable views of both powers, though for different reasons (Selormey and Sanny 2021), which makes the decomposition of preferences along our theoretical dimensions both feasible and informative.

Experimental Design

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three arms. Those in the control arm ($n = 291$) answered a set of outcome questions comparing their preference between China and the US absent any exposure to projects; their responses thus provide a baseline measure of attitudes regarding China and the US that both addresses aspects of our claims and serves as a point of comparison for the treatment group results. Respondents in the two treatment arms first viewed a portfolio of three real development projects, each funded exclusively by either China ($n = 280$) or the US ($n = 290$), and only then answered the same outcome questions. The funding power associated with each portfolio of projects was randomly assigned, and the two treatment arms differed in no characteristic other than the funding country label. Because assignment was fully randomized, the three arms are balanced on observable demographic characteristics, which we confirm in Appendix A. Appendix B describes all variables and their measurement, and Appendix C reports descriptive statistics for the full sample, which includes 861 respondents.

We measured respondents' preferences between China and the US across four dimensions:

- → Which country is perceived as the best model for Nigeria's future development.
- → Which country is considered the best partner for Nigeria's development.
- → Which country is viewed as the most effective in getting things done.
- → Which country respondents would most like to visit in the future.

The first two dimensions capture development-focused reputational assessments: whether the foreign power is a credible model and partner in the development domain. The third operationalizes the dimension of operational effectiveness, which we view as the perceived capacity to implement projects and deliver results.

The fourth serves as our proxy for cultural appeal. We use the desire to visit a country because it captures not merely a narrow cultural curiosity but a broader affective attraction to the country as a whole. Nye (2004) counts the pull of a country as a place people wish to visit, study, and experience among the core resources of soft power, and research on country image treats visit

A **power dam** project funded by companies from **China**

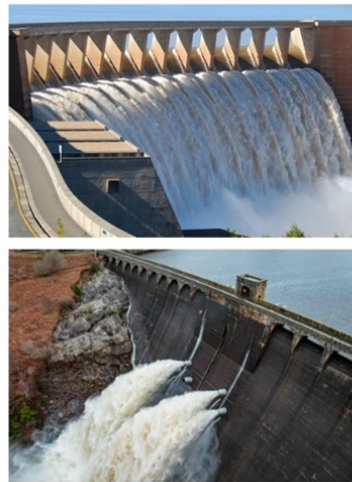


Figure 1: Example of an assigned project

Note: Top image: Adobe Stock (dpreezg, Photo ID 596730023).
Bottom image: iStock (Stock87, Photo ID 1443512996, 2022).

intention as a behavioral expression of the affective component of country image, reflecting how much people feel drawn to a country as opposed to their cognitive beliefs about its capabilities (Nadeau et al. 2008; Roth and Diamantopoulos 2009). In the Nigerian context, the wish to visit the US or China also carries an aspirational element: it identifies the country that respondents associate with opportunity and a desirable way of life. The measure therefore distinguishes the affective and aspirational pull of a power from evaluations of its capacity and from judgments about its suitability as a developmental model or partner, which is the distinction our theory requires.

The projects that respondents viewed span a diverse set of sectors: railways, maternal health programs, telecommunications infrastructure, roads, hospitals, coal power plants, digital government training, mining, oil refining, stadiums, power dams, and beverage manufacturing.¹ Each project was presented as an image accompanied only by a brief label describing what the image showed and identifying its funder; Figure 1 provides an example. This image-based approach allows us to cleanly randomize the funding-country label across an otherwise identical pool of project types. The three types of projects to which each respondent was exposed were themselves randomized. Because the funder label was randomized across the same pool of twelve project types, any gap in outcomes across Chinese- and US-labeled projects represents the effect of the funder label net of project type, which is balanced across arms and further absorbed by project-type fixed effects in a robustness check reported in Appendix D. The design thus offers a direct test of whether the funder's nationality is a legible signal: if respondents did not register or act on the funder label, the two treatment arms would be indistinguishable from one another.

We collected the data in summer 2024 using a sampling protocol stratified by gender to help ensure demographic balance across the three arms. Age, education, occupation, and food

¹ We relied on pre-treatment focus groups to propose the sectors and to confirm via example the plausibility of such projects from both China and the US. Sectoral priorities are a clear feature of Chinese and US assistance; the experiment thus requires plausible variation in the funding source.

expenditure are similarly balanced across arms (see Appendix A). Enumerators administered the survey face to face using tablets, with project images shown on-screen in the order determined by the randomization protocol; we find no evidence that the ordering of displayed projects affects the outcomes reported below (Appendix E). Respondents were drawn from across Lagos's administrative subdivisions using a multi-stage clustered sampling procedure. Enumerators were trained to present projects with no additional details or embellishment, reading a standard script that named only the project type and its funding country.

The resulting sample skews neither markedly young nor old, and it reflects the occupational diversity of a large West African metropolis, including respondents engaged in trade, transport, the informal sector, and salaried employment. Because Lagos is cosmopolitan even by Nigerian standards, the respondents are, if anything, more likely than the average Nigerian to have encountered both Chinese and US development activity directly, which strengthens our confidence that the baseline preferences we document are not simply artifacts of unfamiliarity with one power or the other. See Appendix C for descriptive statistics.

Empirical Strategy

The empirical strategy includes two components. The first documents baseline preferences using control-group responses, which, by virtue of having been collected absent any project exposure, offer an uncontaminated estimate of prior country attachments in our sample. The second component estimates the effect of project exposure on the four dimensions of reputation. Each of the four dependent variables is binary, coded 1 for a stated preference for China and 0 for a stated preference for the United States. Our baseline estimating equation is

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{country}_i + \lambda \cdot X_i + \epsilon_i$$

where Y_i is the outcome of interest for respondent i , and country_i is a categorical indicator distinguishing the control arm from the China-exposure arm and the US-exposure arm. The vector X_i includes individual-level covariates: age, gender, education, religion, occupation, food expenditure, food security, and prior awareness of Chinese and US investment and aid activity in Nigeria (described in Appendix B). We estimate the model using linear probability regression, which allows us to read the coefficients directly as percentage-point shifts in the probability of preferring China over the United States. The coefficient on the China-exposure arm captures how Chinese project exposure shifts preferences about China relative to the unexposed baseline, while the coefficient on the US-exposure arm captures how US project exposure shifts preferences equivalently regarding the US.

Findings

Baseline Preferences

Table 1 reports the distribution of baseline preferences among control-group respondents who did not view any development projects as priming treatments. The pattern is consistent with our theoretical expectations, showing a sharp distinction in perceptions of China and the US.

On the three development-related items, respondents modestly but consistently favor China. A slight majority, 52.2 percent, view China as the better model for Nigeria's development, compared

with 47.8 percent who favor the United States. The partnership item shows a somewhat larger baseline advantage for China, 56.9 percent to 43.1 percent. As anticipated, on operational effectiveness, respondents again favor China as the major power they perceive as most likely to get things done, preferring China at a rate of 53.0 percent to 47.0 percent for the US.

The cultural outcome, by contrast, produces a notably different result: 69.1 percent of respondents prefer to visit the US, as opposed to 30.9 percent who prefer China. This finding supports our claim that the US occupies a distinct reputational niche in Nigeria rooted in cultural appeal rather than development effectiveness. Citizens appear to distinguish their assessments of the two powers as development actors from their attachments to those powers as cultural beacons.

Table 1. Baseline preferences for China and the US

Question	China (%)	US (%)
Best Model for Development	52.2	47.8
Best Partner for Development	56.9	43.1
Most Able to Get Things Done	53.0	47.0
Visit	30.9	69.1

Notes: Percentages represent the share of control-group respondents ($n = 291$) selecting each country on each dimension before any project exposure.

These baseline results are consistent with China's growing reputation as an effective development actor in Africa, built largely on the visibility of infrastructure investment and finance offered with fewer policy conditions (Brautigam 2011; China Africa Research Initiative 2025). They are also consistent with the depth of American cultural influence in Nigeria, rooted in longstanding diaspora ties, US-educated professionals, and the reach of American media (Bartels et al. 2009; Nye 2004). The size of the cultural gap, nearly 40 percentage points in the US's favor, reflects an affective attachment that, our theory suggests, can be activated by US economic engagement in ways that generate gains across dimensions beyond the cultural one.

Treatment Effects: How Project Exposure Shifts Country Preferences

Figure 2 presents the estimated effect of each power's projects on the probability of preferring China, with 95 percent confidence intervals, in separate panels for exposure to Chinese projects and exposure to US projects. Two results stand out.

First, exposure to US projects moves every dimension toward the United States. Across all four outcomes, viewing US-funded projects reduces the probability of preferring China by a statistically significant 10 to 12 percentage points ($p < 0.02$ in each case). Given the compositional nature of the outcome questions that forces a choice between China and the US, the reduction in preferences for China indicates that exposure to US engagement improves how citizens rate the US on each measure – as a model,² a partner, an effective implementer, and a destination.

² We note that the results run counter to recent studies suggesting that exposure to investment projects from either China or the US reduces support for that country's model of development (Wang et al. 2026). One potential difference is the exposure mechanism: in this study, we rely on image-based treatments that conjure broader attitudes about the investing power but that may obscure some of the real-world costs that accompany actual projects in one's community.

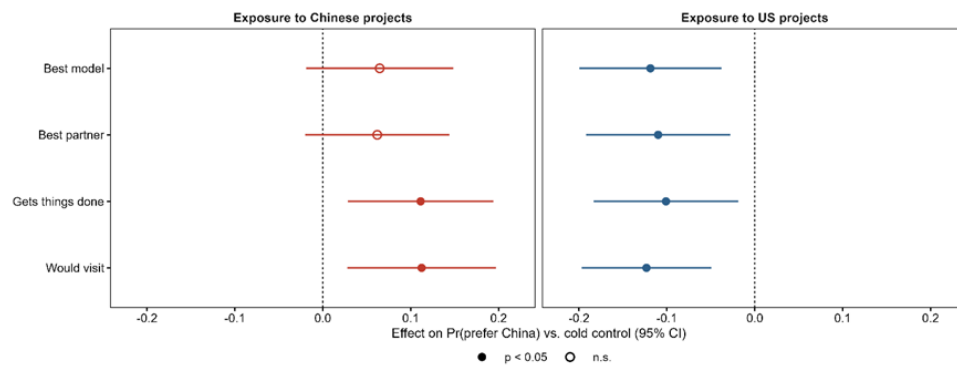


Figure 2: Effect of project exposure on preferring China over the US

Notes: Effect of exposure to Chinese projects (left) and US projects (right) on the probability of preferring China over the United States, by dimension. Markers denote coefficient estimates with 95% confidence intervals from linear probability models with demographic controls; HC1 robust standard errors.

Chinese project exposure affects respondents' preferences along a more limited set of dimensions, but the dimensions it does move are telling. As anticipated, seeing Chinese-funded projects significantly raises the share of respondents stating that China is the power that gets things done (+11.1 percentage points, $p < 0.01$). Interestingly, it also makes respondents more likely to want to visit China (+11.2 percentage points, $p < 0.01$), an effect equal in size to the effectiveness effect and located on precisely the dimension where China is weakest at baseline. Exposure to Chinese development projects does not, however, statistically improve the two development measures: the coefficients on best model (+6.5 points, $p = 0.13$) and best partner (+6.2 points, $p = 0.14$) are positive but not statistically distinguishable from zero. Chinese projects, in other words, buy operational credibility and convert some of it into cultural interest, but they do not measurably improve China's standing as a development model or partner.

This pattern is consistent with the account developed above, in which projects activate pre-existing reputational assets whose spillover varies with the nature of the asset. Two features deserve emphasis. First, the effects of exposure are not confined to the dimension on which each power is already strong. US project exposure draws on a broad, abstract reservoir of attachment that improves views of the US along each dimension we measure, including the model and partner dimensions on which the US trails at baseline. Chinese project exposure confirms what citizens already believe about China's capacity to deliver, and that demonstrated competence spills over into the affective dimension: having seen China's ability to get things done, respondents become measurably more interested in visiting China. This result shows that the cultural dimension of soft power can be moved by project exposure, even for a power whose cultural presence in the region is comparatively thin. Second, the spillover from China's operational asset stops short of the more normatively demanding judgments about whether China represents the right model or the right partner for Nigeria's future, whereas the spillover from the US cultural asset reaches those judgments.

To be clear, China's baseline advantage on the developmental items neither dissipates nor grows much with exposure. Exposure to Chinese projects confirms what citizens already believed about China's competence and adds to their interest in the country, while doing comparatively little to build the broader case for China as a model or partner. US projects, meanwhile, convert an abstract cultural asset into concrete gains in other ways, including on the two developmental items where the US lags behind China at baseline. Finally, because the two treatment arms viewed

the same pool of project types and differed only in the funder label, the fact that each arm diverges from the control group, and that the two arms diverge from one another, establishes that the nationality of a funder is indeed a legible signal to which citizens respond, independent of project characteristics.

Heterogeneity by Age and Education

To probe how the two powers persuade different segments of the Nigerian public, we interact each treatment arm with respondents' age (18–39 versus 40 and above) and education (completed secondary school or less versus any post-secondary schooling; see Appendix B for details on these splits).

The outcome of interest here is the treatment-by-moderator interaction: how much the effect of treatment exposure on the probability of preferring China differs between subgroups (younger minus older respondents; less- minus more-educated respondents). The results are shown in Figures 3a and 3b. Full model estimates with predicted probabilities appear in Appendix F. Because interaction coefficients alone can be difficult to interpret, Table 2 translates them into the effect of project exposure within each subgroup.

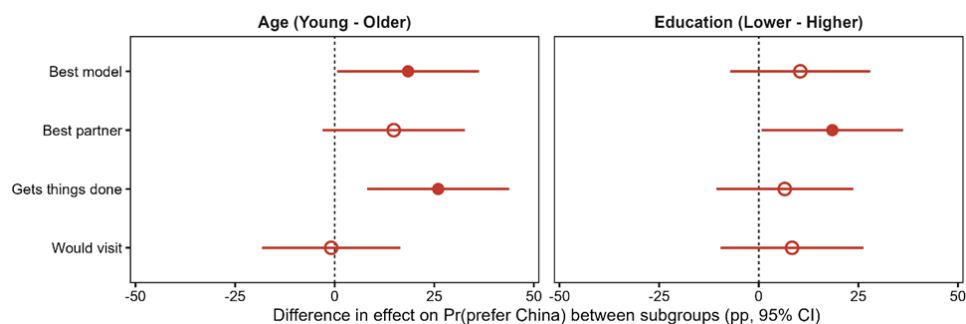


Figure 3a: Interaction effects, exposure to Chinese projects

Notes: Markers are the treatment-by-moderator interaction—the difference in the project's effect on the probability of preferring China between subgroups (younger minus older for Age; lower- minus higher-educated for Education)—from one linear probability model per outcome with demographic controls ($n = 861$); bars are 95% confidence intervals (HC1). Filled markers (interval excluding zero) denote a difference statistically distinguishable from zero.

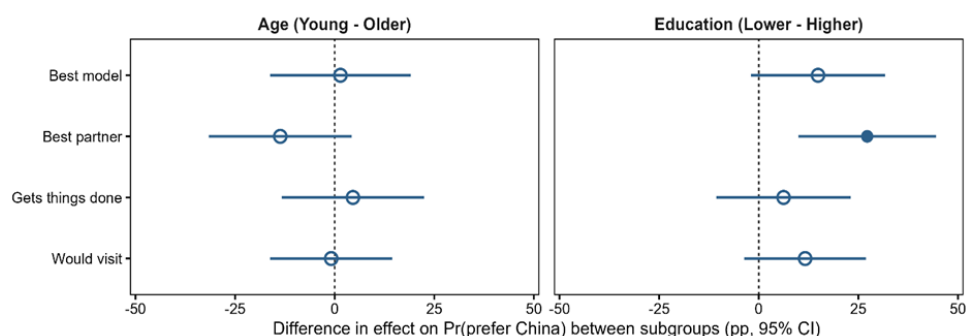


Figure 3b: Interaction effects, exposure to US projects

Note: Interaction effects, exposure to US projects. As in Figure 3a, for exposure to US projects ($n = 861$). Because US exposure lowers the probability of preferring China, a positive difference means the US effect is weaker (less negative) in the second subgroup.

Four interactions are statistically distinguishable from zero. Exposure to Chinese projects moves younger respondents considerably more than older respondents on best model (+18.4 percentage points, $p = 0.04$) and on getting things done (+26.0 percentage points, $p = 0.004$). As Table 2 shows, among respondents under 40, Chinese exposure raises the probability of naming China as the best model by 12.0 points and as the power that gets things done by 18.8 points, whereas among older respondents the corresponding effects are small and negative. Exposure to Chinese projects also moves less-educated respondents more than more-educated respondents on best partner (+18.5 percentage points, $p = 0.04$): a 17.9-point gain among the less educated against a null effect among the more educated. Exposure to US projects, meanwhile, has a statistically stronger effect among higher-educated as opposed to lower-educated respondents in terms of whom they view as the best partner for Nigeria (+27.2 percentage points, $p = 0.002$). Because US exposure lowers the probability of preferring China, this positive interaction means that the US's pull on the partnership item concentrates among more-educated respondents. Among them, US exposure reduces the probability of naming China as the best partner by 21.2 points, whereas among less-educated respondents the effect is a statistically null +6.0 points. No other interaction can be distinguished from zero.

Table 2. Effect of project exposure on the probability of preferring China, by subgroup (percentage points)

Outcome	Exposure to Chinese projects				Exposure to US projects			
	Younger	Older	Lower ed.	Higher ed.	Younger	Older	Lower ed.	Higher ed.
Best Model	+12.0	-6.4	+12.1	+1.7	-11.3	-12.7	-3.1	-18.0
Best Partner	+10.8	-4.0	+17.9	-0.6	-15.3	-1.6	+6.0	-21.2
Gets Things Done	+18.8	-7.2	+14.8	+8.3	-8.7	-13.3	-6.4	-12.6
Would Visit	+10.5	+11.4	+15.7	+7.3	-12.4	-11.5	-5.8	-17.4

Notes: Entries are the estimated effect of project exposure within each subgroup, expressed in percentage points, computed from the full interaction models in Appendix F (Tables F1 and F3) as the sum of the treatment coefficient and the relevant treatment-by-moderator interaction; entries for the reference groups (Older, Higher ed.) are the treatment coefficients themselves. Bold entries mark the subgroup pairs whose difference is statistically distinguishable from zero ($p < 0.05$). Younger = 18-39; Lower ed. = completed secondary school or less. Tables F2 and F4 give the corresponding predicted probabilities.

Two patterns emerge from this analysis. First, it appears that China's persuasive advantage is generational: Chinese projects move younger respondents on the model and competence dimensions substantially more than they move older respondents, consistent with younger Nigerians holding less settled prior views of China that are more easily updated by direct exposure to a Chinese-funded project. On the partnership item specifically, education produces a kind of crossover effect: US-funded projects pull more-educated respondents toward the US as the better partner, while Chinese-funded projects pull less-educated respondents toward China, suggesting that the two powers' partnership appeals resonate with different segments of Nigerian society. Read alongside Table 2, these results also indicate that China's null average effects on the developmental items conceal real movement within particular segments: Chinese projects do improve China's standing as a model among the young and as a partner among the less educated, even though those gains wash out in the full sample. These results, perhaps related to differential exposure to each country's messaging or differential stakes in the kinds of partnership that each power offers, merit further study.

Robustness Tests

The results survive a battery of standard checks. First, we re-estimate each model as a logit, given the binary nature of the outcome measures. Doing so returns odds ratios that are directionally and substantively consistent with the linear probability estimates: US exposure significantly lowers the odds of preferring China (and thus raises the odds of preferring the US) on all four dimensions, while Chinese exposure significantly raises the odds of preferring China only for getting things done and for visiting the country (Appendix G).

Second, we conduct covariate balance tests to confirm that randomization succeeded in equalizing observable characteristics across the three arms (Appendix A). These tests reveal nothing that would suggest imbalance in the subsamples.

Third, because random assignment makes covariate adjustment unnecessary for identification, we re-estimate the treatment effects without any controls. The unadjusted estimates are substantively identical to those reported above — indeed, the effects of US project exposure grow slightly — confirming that the results are not an artifact of covariate adjustment (Appendix H).

Finally, we address the fact that the binary outcome measures exclude respondents who answered “None” or named a third country. Project exposure does not affect the probability of choosing between China and the US in the first place (all $p \geq 0.16$), and recoding each outcome as a choice of China versus any other response — a coding that requires no exclusions — reproduces the pattern of results exactly (Appendix I).

Discussion

The contrast between the breadth of the US effect and the more limited scope of the Chinese effect carries implications beyond the specific coefficients reported above. At the individual level, the asymmetry suggests that Nigerian citizens hold distinct views of each major power’s strengths and reputation, rooted in pragmatic effectiveness in the case of China and more aspirational, cultural attachments for the US, and that a new project activates those sentiments rather than creating them. This finding counters descriptions of soft power as a single underlying construct and supports the view that scholarship should attend more closely to the specific mechanisms through which countries acquire and exercise influence (Blanchard and Lu 2012; Nye 2004).

The results also carry a more basic implication for the literature on foreign-funded projects. Recent studies conclude that project characteristics matter more than the funder’s country of origin for citizen support (Bulman et al. 2025) and that project attributes do little to move broader perceptions of China (Ferree et al. 2026). Our results do not contradict the claim that project characteristics matter, which our design does not test. They do establish, however, that the funder’s nationality is legible on its own: with the pool of project types held constant, a change in the funding-country label alone moves preferences by roughly 10 to 12 percentage points, and it does so in different ways for the two powers. Reputations, in other words, travel with the funder into each new community. A practical corollary is that the visibility of the funder, through branding, signage, and public attribution, represents an important soft power instrument, whose value depends on the reputational asset the funder brings with it.

At the policy level, the findings offer different lessons for each country. For China, the results suggest that large, visible, and efficiently delivered infrastructure remains a primary vehicle for reputational gains, consistent with existing work on Belt and Road engagement (Lindlacher and

Pirich 2025; Strange 2023), and that such projects also generate a measure of curiosity about and attraction to China itself. A challenge for China is that, while its reputation for effectiveness spills over into interest in the country, it does not yet convert into the kind of broad-based endorsement that would shift attitudes about its standing as a development model or partner. Projects associated with environmental harm or labor exploitation may ultimately erode the effectiveness reputation that is China's chief asset, particularly if citizens perceive a widening gap between promised and delivered benefits (Mohan 2013; Wang et al. 2022).

For the US, the findings suggest that development engagement represents an opportunity to convert latent cultural appeal into concrete gains across development domains. If each US project that a Nigerian citizen encounters generates gains across dimensions by virtue of the longstanding appeal that the US represents, this implies that expanding US development engagement in Nigeria and similar contexts could produce disproportionate soft power returns relative to an equivalent Chinese investment, particularly on the developmental dimensions where China currently holds an advantage.

The findings also highlight a vulnerability: over time, the positive associations that derive from a strong cultural appeal can also dissipate if astute citizens feel the net outcomes from US economic engagement in their communities reflect poorly on the US reputation. Research suggests that environmental harm imposes a larger reputational penalty on US-funded projects than on Chinese-funded projects, an indication that citizens hold the United States to a higher standard precisely because they expect more of it (Rhee and Haunschild 2006; Wang et al. 2026). The US's cultural appeal is thus both its comparative advantage and a point of exposure.

The heterogeneity results add a further layer. That Chinese projects move younger respondents more than older ones suggests that China's reputational gains may compound over time as younger cohorts, whose views are less settled, become a larger share of the electorate.

An important caveat concerns the source of the asymmetry we document. We have attributed it to the different nature of the reputational assets the two powers hold, culture versus capacity. Alternatively, the asymmetry may simply reflect China's position as a relative latecomer. China's reputational reservoir in Nigeria is shallower than that of the US, its engagement is concentrated in visible infrastructure, and citizens have had less time to form settled views of it, so a project may move only those judgments for which the evidence is immediate. On this account, the pattern we observe would be a newcomer effect rather than a China-specific one, and a power that entered Nigeria recently with a different kind of asset might display a similarly limited spillover. We flag this as a priority for future research.

Conclusion

This study examined how citizens in a competitive soft power environment, where both China and the US engage extensively in development finance, form and update their attachments to the two major powers. Using a three-arm survey experiment with an uncontaminated baseline and priming treatments for the US and China, we provide evidence of the distinct reputational profiles that China and the United States enjoy in this setting, and of how project exposure moves those profiles.

Our findings support a logic of multidimensional soft power, and they extend the theoretical distinction between operational effectiveness and cultural appeal in an important way: projects activate pre-existing reputational assets, and the breadth of the resulting spillover depends

on the nature of the asset. China holds a modest baseline advantage on development-related dimensions of preference, being viewed as the somewhat better model, partner, and implementer, while the United States holds a clear advantage on the cultural dimension. Project exposure shifts preferences toward the sponsoring country, but not uniformly: exposure to US-funded projects moves respondents in a pro-US direction on all four dimensions, while exposure to Chinese-funded projects enhances pro-China views in terms of operational effectiveness and, notably, the desire to visit China, but not in terms of China's standing as a model or partner. An abstract cultural reservoir thus diffuses across all dimensions, whereas a concrete reputation for competence spills over into cultural interest but not into normative endorsement. We also show that Chinese projects are especially persuasive among younger respondents, and that the two powers appeal to different educational strata.

These findings have several implications, both theoretical and practical. For the literature on soft power and public diplomacy, they provide experimental evidence that soft power operates through distinct mechanisms, and that countries accumulate influence through different channels depending on their reputational profile. This point is consistent with Nye's original multidimensional formulation and with subsequent calls to take that multidimensionality seriously in applied research (Blanchard and Lu 2012). With respect to the literature on foreign aid and public opinion, the results establish that the identity of the funding country is legible to ordinary citizens and functions not only as a project feature but also as a prior that shapes how a major power's economic engagement in local communities is processed and how far its effects travel. Finally, for the broader literature on US-China competition in Africa, this study suggests that China is effectively challenging the US through its reputation as a dynamic and effective implementer of large-scale development projects. Yet, the US also has advantages that owe to its longstanding cultural reservoir, which provides real opportunities for enhanced influence and soft power to the extent that US economic engagement can avoid some of the community-level pitfalls that sometimes discourage local residents.

From a practical standpoint, the stakes of this competition are considerable. As China and the US continue to seek relative influence across the Global South, our results suggest that the two powers may increasingly diverge not just in the approaches they take to generate influence, but perhaps also in the partner countries with which they seek to engage to greater or lesser extents. If US cultural influence wanes in some regions of the Global South as a function of persistent political headwinds, for example, US policymakers may find it difficult to recover influence in those areas. Conversely, if environmental and labor costs associated with Chinese project implementation undermine China's reputation for operational effectiveness, democratic leaders in the Global South may grow wary of continued Chinese engagement, which could portend a relative shift in Chinese economic engagement toward less democratic states in the Global South.

This study opens several avenues for future research. First, the study was confined to Lagos, a major urban center with high exposure to both US and Chinese engagement. Subsequent studies might examine preferences elsewhere in Nigeria and in other low-income contexts. Second, as noted above, the design cannot separate the type of reputational asset a power holds from its tenure in a country. Whether the limited spillover we observe for China reflects the nature of its asset or its status as a newcomer is a question that comparisons across powers with different tenures, or repeated measurement as China's engagement matures, could resolve. Third, the design we used in this study measures short-term preference shifts following priming treatments that highlight Chinese or US economic engagement locally. Longitudinal designs would be needed

to assess whether these shifts persist or accumulate. Fourth, the four-item battery of outcomes we use captures theoretically relevant dimensions but clearly does not exhaust the ways in which citizens evaluate foreign powers. Future work might examine additional dimensions, such as perceived honesty in partnerships or financing conditionality, that may further distinguish the two powers' profiles. Finally, future research might also explore the political consequences of the patterns documented here. If citizens who admire the US culturally are also more likely to support democratic institutions or elite alignment with US foreign policy, the downstream implications for governance would be notable. Research on whether China's reputation for getting things done extends to support for different development policies would likewise advance understanding of how the US-China soft power competition shapes political outcomes in Africa and beyond.

More generally, the results suggest that scholars must apply caution in treating soft power as one consistent stock that rises or falls as a unitary quantity. The respective soft power advantages of China and the US rest on different foundations, one built through perceived dynamism in implementation, the other through decades of cultural and normative diffusion. Scholars studying great power competition in the Global South would do well to measure local-level preferences along multiple dimensions rather than collapsing favorability into a single index, since doing so risks masking the asymmetries that matter most for understanding how and where each power's influence is likely to rise.

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Online Appendix

The US Inspires Dreams and China Gets Things Done: Gauging Global South Attachments to Major Powers with Evidence from Nigeria

Contents

- Appendix A. Covariate Balance Across Experimental Arms
- Appendix B. Variables and Measurement
- Appendix C. Descriptive Statistics
- Appendix D. Project-Type Composition and Fixed Effects
- Appendix E. Project Display-Order Effects
- Appendix F. Full Interaction Models and Predicted Probabilities (Heterogeneity by Age and Education)
- Appendix G. Logit Robustness
- Appendix H. Sensitivity to Covariate Adjustment
- Appendix I. Selection into the Binary Outcome

Appendix A. Covariate Balance Across Experimental Arms

Table A1 reports the distribution of respondent characteristics across the three experimental arms (Control, $n = 291$; China exposure, $n = 280$; US exposure, $n = 290$). For each characteristic, we report column percentages by arm and the p -value from a Pearson chi-square test of independence between the characteristic and arm assignment (p -values simulated with 100,000 draws to accommodate sparse cells).

No test rejects balance at the 5 percent level. The smallest p -value, for education ($p = 0.06$), is unsurprising given nine simultaneous tests, and all models reported in the paper control for the full set of respondent characteristics in any case.

Table A1. Covariate balance across arms (column %)

Variable	Category	Control	China	US	χ^2 p
Gender	Female	44.0	51.4	49.0	0.19
	Male	56.0	48.6	51.0	
Age	18–29	34.7	35.0	33.1	0.99
	30–39	35.7	33.9	35.5	
	40–49	19.9	23.2	22.4	
	50–59	7.6	6.1	7.2	
	60 and above	2.1	1.8	1.7	
	No formal education	1.7	1.4	0.7	0.06
Education	Some primary school	1.0	1.4	0.3	
	Primary school completed	3.8	3.2	3.8	
	Some secondary school	2.4	5.7	4.8	
	Secondary school completed	22.7	19.3	24.5	
	Some college degree (ND/HND, NCE)	5.2	9.3	4.1	
	College degree (ND/HND, NCE)	14.1	15.4	19.3	
	Some university	6.2	8.6	10.3	
	University degree (BSc)	33.0	30.7	25.5	
	Postgraduate (MSc and above)	9.6	5.0	6.2	
	No response	0.3	0.0	0.3	
Religion	Atheist	1.7	0.4	0.7	0.32
	Christian	41.6	47.9	45.9	
	Islam	52.6	50.4	51.4	
	Other	1.4	0.7	0.7	
Occupation	Traditionalist	2.7	0.7	1.4	0.46
	Civil servant	6.5	6.8	7.2	
	Construction	1.4	2.5	3.8	
	Farming	1.7	1.4	2.8	
	Management	4.5	5.4	3.1	
	No response	0.0	1.8	0.7	
	Office and admin	9.3	5.4	6.2	
	Other (please specify)	3.4	2.1	1.7	
	Production and labor	2.7	1.8	3.4	
	Professional	9.6	7.1	8.6	
	Retired	1.7	0.7	1.4	
	Sales, trader and business	22.3	25.0	26.2	
	Service	5.5	8.9	4.8	
	Student	17.9	15.7	15.2	
	Transportation	8.2	8.9	9.7	
	Unemployed/looking	5.2	6.4	5.2	

Table A1 continued

Variable	Category	Control	China	US	χ^2 <i>p</i>
Daily food expenditure	Below N2,000	15.5	15.7	16.2	1.00
	N2,000 – N5,000	44.3	46.8	44.1	
	N5,000 – N10,000	32.0	30.0	32.1	
	N10,000 – N20,000	5.5	4.6	5.5	
	N20,000 and above	2.4	2.5	2.1	
	No response	0.3	0.4	0.0	
Food insecurity (past year)	Never	38.8	44.3	38.6	0.24
	Just once or twice	31.6	30.7	32.4	
	Several times	19.9	15.0	19.3	
	Many times	8.6	6.1	7.9	
	Always	0.7	2.9	1.7	
	No response	0.3	1.1	0.0	
Aware of US aid/investment	Yes	62.5	57.1	65.2	0.34
	Do not know	35.4	39.6	32.1	
	No response	2.1	3.2	2.8	
Aware of Chinese investment/aid	Yes	64.6	65.4	70.0	0.62
	Do not know	30.2	30.4	26.6	
	No response	5.2	4.3	3.4	

Notes: $n = 861$. Column percentages within each arm. “No response” denotes item nonresponse. The final column reports the simulated Pearson chi-square p -value for the full cross-tabulation of the covariate with the three arms.

Appendix B. Variables and Measurement

Outcome measures. The four head-to-head outcome questions were asked of every respondent exactly once — before project exposure in the control arm and after project exposure in the two treatment arms. Exact wording:

Table B1. Outcome questions

Dimension	Question wording	Coding
Best Model	“In your opinion, which country, if any, would be the best model for the future development of Nigeria?”	1 = China, 0 = USA
Best Partner	“Which country, if any, would be the best partner for the development of Nigeria in the future?”	1 = China, 0 = USA
Gets Things Done	“Which country, if any, do you believe is the most effective at getting things done?”	1 = China, 0 = USA
Would Visit	“Which country would you be more interested in visiting in the future if possible?”	1 = China, 0 = USA

Notes: Respondents could also answer “None” or name another country (“Other”); those responses fall outside the binary China-US comparison and are excluded from the estimation samples, which is why the number of observations varies slightly across outcomes (see Table G1).

Individual-level covariates. All models control for the following respondent characteristics, measured pre-treatment: prior awareness of US and of Chinese investment or development assistance, gender, age, education, religion, food security, daily food expenditure (our income proxy), and occupation. The two prior-awareness items were worded: “To your knowledge, do the following countries provide investment or development assistance to Nigeria’s government?” asked separately for the USA and China, with response options “Yes” and “Do not know.” Remaining covariates come from standard demographic items; their categories appear in Tables A1 and C1.

Moderators. The heterogeneity analysis in the “Heterogeneity by Age and Education” section of the paper dichotomizes two pre-treatment characteristics. Both are recorded in ordered brackets (see Tables A1 and C1), so cutpoints must fall on bracket boundaries; we selected the boundary with the clearest substantive interpretation that also leaves adequately sized subgroups on each side.

Age contrasts younger respondents (18–39; 69.3 percent of the sample) with older respondents (40 and above; 30.7 percent). The boundary at age 40 separates respondents who came of age amid Nigeria’s rapid expansion of mobile telephony and internet access, and whose information about foreign powers has therefore been acquired largely through routine access to online media on mobile devices, from respondents whose impressions of the major powers formed in a sparser information environment.

Education contrasts lower-educated respondents (completed secondary school or less; 32.3 percent) with higher-educated respondents (any post-secondary schooling, from college/ND/HND/NCE training upward; 67.5 percent). This is the completed-secondary versus post-secondary credential boundary, the standard divide in the Nigerian schooling system and the education split conventionally used in survey research on African public opinion. The two respondents who declined to report education are excluded from the education models.

Each interaction model includes the full set of individual-level controls except the moderator’s own parent variable. Full estimates with predicted probabilities appear in Appendix F.

Appendix C. Descriptive Statistics

Table C1 reports the distribution of respondent characteristics in the full sample ($n = 861$).

Table C1. Descriptive statistics, full sample

Variable	Category	N	Percent
Gender	Female	414	48.1
	Male	447	51.9
Age	18–29	295	34.3
	30–39	302	35.1
	40–49	188	21.8
	50–59	60	7.0
	60 and above	16	1.9
Education	No formal education	11	1.3
	Some primary school	8	0.9
	Primary school completed	31	3.6
	Some secondary school	37	4.3
	Secondary school completed	191	22.2
	Some college degree (ND/HND, NCE)	53	6.2
	College degree (ND/HND, NCE)	140	16.3
	Some university	72	8.4
	University degree (BSc)	256	29.7
	Postgraduate (MSc and above)	60	7.0
	No response	2	0.2
Religion	Atheist	8	0.9
	Christian	388	45.1
	Islam	443	51.5
	Other	8	0.9
Occupation	Traditionalist	14	1.6
	Civil servant	59	6.9
	Construction	22	2.6
	Farming	17	2.0
	Management	37	4.3
	No response	7	0.8
	Office and admin	60	7.0
	Other (please specify)	21	2.4
	Production and labor	23	2.7
	Professional	73	8.5
	Retired	11	1.3
	Sales, trader and business	211	24.5
	Service	55	6.4
	Student	140	16.3
	Transportation	77	8.9
	Unemployed/looking	48	5.6
Daily food expenditure	Below N2,000	136	15.8
	N2,000 – N5,000	388	45.1
	N5,000 – N10,000	270	31.4
	N10,000 – N20,000	45	5.2
	N20,000 and above	20	2.3
	No response	2	0.2

Table C1 continued

Variable	Category	N	Percent
Food insecurity (past year)	Never	349	40.5
	Just once or twice	272	31.6
	Several times	156	18.1
	Many times	65	7.5
	Always	15	1.7
	No response	4	0.5
Aware of US investment/aid	Yes	531	61.7
	Do not know	307	35.7
	No response	23	2.7
Aware of Chinese investment/aid	Yes	574	66.7
	Do not know	250	29.0
	No response	37	4.3

Appendix D. Project-Type Composition and Fixed Effects

The funder label was randomized across the same pool of twelve project types, so the portfolios viewed in the China and US arms should contain the same mix of project types. Table D1 confirms this: a Pearson chi-square test cannot reject equal composition ($p = 0.74$).

Table D1. Project-type composition of viewed portfolios, by treatment arm

Project type	China arm	US arm
Dam	67	83
Digital	70	69
Factory	69	76
Hospital	61	64
Maternal	75	73
Mining	73	69
Oil	68	69
Power plant	74	75
Railway	81	61
Road	70	74
Stadium	60	80
Telecom	72	77

Pearson χ^2 test of equal composition: $\chi^2 = 7.7$, $df = 11$, $p = 0.74$.

Notes: Counts of project types across the three-project portfolios viewed in each treatment arm (each treated respondent contributes three projects; China arm $n = 280$ respondents, US arm $n = 290$).

As a further check, Table D2 re-estimates the treatment-effect models, adding indicator variables for the project types in each respondent's assigned portfolio ("project-type fixed effects"; eleven indicators, railway as the reference category). The estimates are essentially unchanged: all four US-exposure effects remain significant, as do the Chinese-exposure effects on Gets Things Done and Would Visit.

Table D2. Treatment effects with project-type fixed effects (LPM, HC1)

Outcome	Saw China projects		Saw US projects	
	Baseline	+type FE	Baseline	+type FE
Best Model	+0.065 (0.043)	+0.058 (0.043)	−0.119** (0.041)	−0.122** (0.041)
Best Partner	+0.062 (0.042)	+0.049 (0.042)	−0.110** (0.042)	−0.112** (0.042)
Gets Things Done	+0.111** (0.042)	+0.106* (0.043)	−0.101* (0.042)	−0.101* (0.042)
Would Visit	+0.112** (0.043)	+0.111* (0.043)	−0.123** (0.038)	−0.122** (0.038)

Notes: Coefficients with HC1 robust standard errors in parentheses; $n = 861$. "Baseline" columns reproduce the specification in the paper; "+type FE" columns add the portfolio-composition indicators. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Appendix E. Project Display-Order Effects

The three projects each respondent viewed were displayed in an order determined by the survey software's randomization. If primacy or recency mattered, the identity of the first-shown (or last-shown) project could shape responses. To test this, we re-estimate the treatment-effect models among treated respondents ($n = 570$), adding indicator variables for the project type shown first (respectively, last), and report the joint Wald test (HC1 robust) that those eleven indicators are jointly zero.

Table E1. Joint tests of display-order effects (treated respondents)

Outcome	First-shown project			Last-shown project		
	Wald χ^2	df	p	Wald χ^2	df	p
Best Model	10.7	11	0.468	10.9	11	0.452
Best Partner	13.9	11	0.237	11.3	11	0.415
Gets Things Done	19.9	11	0.047	9.0	11	0.619
Would Visit	12.4	11	0.337	13.1	11	0.285

Notes: Each cell block reports a Wald chi-square test (HC1 robust) that the eleven first-shown (last-shown) project-type indicators are jointly zero in a linear probability model that also includes the treatment-arm indicator and the full set of individual-level controls.

Seven of the eight joint tests are clearly insignificant. The single exception — first-shown project type for the Gets Things Done outcome ($p = 0.047$, uncorrected) — is what one would expect by chance among eight tests of eleven restrictions each (the Bonferroni-adjusted p -value is 0.38), and no comparable pattern appears for the last-shown project or any other outcome. Appendix D further shows that the treatment effects are essentially unchanged when the full portfolio composition is controlled directly.

Appendix F. Full Interaction Models and Predicted Probabilities (Heterogeneity by Age and Education)

This appendix expands on Table 2 from the main text along two dimensions. Tables F1 and F3 give the *marginal-effect* view for the age-moderator and education-moderator specifications, respectively: each column is a linear probability model for one outcome, with the two treatment arms interacted with the binary moderator defined in Appendix B and the full set of individual-level covariates included (except the moderator's own parent variable). For each treatment arm we report three quantities: the arm effect within the reference subgroup (the arm-dummy coefficient); the arm effect within the non-reference subgroup (the arm-dummy coefficient plus the arm $\times$ moderator interaction, with the appropriate HC1 delta-method standard error); and the between-subgroup interaction contrast (the raw arm $\times$ moderator coefficient plotted in Figures 3a and 3b). Tables F2 and F4 give the corresponding *predicted-probability* view: the predicted probability of preferring China at each treatment $\times$ subgroup cell, with 95% confidence intervals from the same fitted models.

Table F1. Treatment $\times$ age interaction models (LPM, HC1)

Coefficient	Best Model	Best Partner	Gets Things Done	Would Visit
Chinese-project exposure				
Effect within Older (reference)	−0.064 (0.074)	−0.040 (0.075)	−0.072 (0.076)	+0.114 (0.072)
Effect within Younger	+0.120* (0.052)	+0.108* (0.051)	+0.187*** (0.050)	+0.105* (0.053)
Interaction (Younger – Older)	+0.184* (0.091)	+0.148 (0.091)	+0.260** (0.091)	−0.009 (0.089)
US-project exposure				
Effect within Older (reference)	−0.127 (0.073)	−0.016 (0.076)	−0.133 (0.075)	−0.115 (0.061)
Effect within Younger	−0.113* (0.051)	−0.152** (0.050)	−0.087 (0.051)	−0.124** (0.048)
Interaction (Younger – Older)	+0.014 (0.090)	−0.137 (0.092)	+0.046 (0.091)	−0.009 (0.078)
Moderator (in control arm)				
Younger vs. Older	+0.027 (0.067)	+0.039 (0.068)	+0.025 (0.068)	+0.100 (0.064)
Model information				
N	804	805	813	757
R ²	0.150	0.161	0.154	0.126

Notes: Cells report coefficient estimates with HC1 robust standard errors in parentheses. Reference categories: control arm and Older (40+). “Effect within Older” is the arm-dummy coefficient; “Effect within Younger” is the arm-dummy coefficient plus the arm $\times$ Younger interaction (equivalently, the average marginal effect of arm exposure within Younger computed via the delta method); “Interaction (Younger – Older)” is the raw arm $\times$ Younger coefficient, i.e., the between-subgroup differential effect plotted in Figure 3a. All models include the full set of individual-level covariates (prior awareness of Chinese and US investment/aid, gender, education, religion, food security, daily food expenditure, occupation); age enters only through the binary moderator. Covariate coefficients are suppressed from the display for readability. *N*s vary by outcome because respondents who answered “None” or named a third country are excluded from the binary comparison. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, two-tailed.

Table F2. Predicted probability of preferring China, age-moderator models

Outcome	Control arm		Chinese-project arm		US-project arm	
	Older	Younger	Older	Younger	Older	Younger
Best Model	0.470	0.545	0.422	0.642	0.330	0.403
	[0.371, 0.569]	[0.474, 0.615]	[0.325, 0.518]	[0.570, 0.714]	[0.232, 0.427]	[0.336, 0.471]
Best Partner	0.512	0.594	0.524	0.667	0.483	0.419
	[0.410, 0.614]	[0.527, 0.661]	[0.428, 0.620]	[0.596, 0.738]	[0.380, 0.585]	[0.353, 0.486]
Gets Things Done	0.476	0.553	0.429	0.706	0.356	0.441
	[0.370, 0.581]	[0.485, 0.621]	[0.331, 0.527]	[0.639, 0.774]	[0.259, 0.454]	[0.372, 0.510]
Would Visit	0.211	0.346	0.342	0.438	0.093	0.202
	[0.121, 0.302]	[0.277, 0.415]	[0.245, 0.438]	[0.362, 0.514]	[0.025, 0.162]	[0.143, 0.261]

Notes: Cells report the average predicted probability of preferring China over the United States and the 95% confidence interval in brackets, computed with the R function `avg_predictions()` from the `marginalEffects` package, from the models estimated in Table F1 with HC1 robust standard errors. Predictions average over the empirical distribution of covariates within each treatment arm $\times$ subgroup cell.

Table F3. Treatment $\times$ education interaction models (LPM, HC1)

Coefficient	Best Model	Best Partner	Gets Things Done	Would Visit
Chinese-project exposure				
Effect within Higher (reference)	+0.017 (0.052)	−0.006 (0.050)	+0.083 (0.051)	+0.073 (0.052)
Effect within Lower	+0.121 (0.073)	+0.178* (0.076)	+0.149* (0.072)	+0.157* (0.076)
Interaction (Lower − Higher)	+0.104 (0.090)	+0.185* (0.091)	+0.065 (0.088)	+0.084 (0.091)
US-project exposure				
Effect within Higher (reference)	−0.180*** (0.051)	−0.212*** (0.050)	−0.126* (0.052)	−0.174*** (0.046)
Effect within Lower	−0.031 (0.069)	+0.060 (0.072)	−0.064 (0.069)	−0.058 (0.062)
Interaction (Lower − Higher)	+0.149 (0.086)	+0.272** (0.088)	+0.062 (0.086)	+0.116 (0.078)
Moderator (in control arm)				
Lower vs. Higher	−0.172** (0.064)	−0.212*** (0.064)	−0.086 (0.064)	−0.102 (0.064)
Model information				
N	802	803	811	755
R ²	0.146	0.142	0.150	0.131

Notes: Cells report coefficient estimates with HC1 robust standard errors in parentheses. Reference categories: control arm and Higher education (any post-secondary). “Effect within Higher” is the arm-dummy coefficient; “Effect within Lower” is the arm-dummy coefficient plus the arm $\times$ Lower interaction (equivalently, the average marginal effect of arm exposure within Lower computed via the delta method); “Interaction (Lower − Higher)” is the arm $\times$ Lower coefficient, i.e., the between-subgroup differential effect plotted in Figure 3b. All models include the full set of individual-level covariates listed above; education enters only through the binary moderator. Covariate coefficients are suppressed from the display for readability. Two respondents with missing education are excluded. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, two-tailed.

Table F4. Predicted probability of preferring China, education-moderator models

Outcome	Control arm		Chinese-project arm		US-project arm	
	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower
Best Model	0.584	0.373	0.611	0.481	0.410	0.326
	[0.516, 0.653]	[0.280, 0.467]	[0.538, 0.685]	[0.381, 0.582]	[0.340, 0.480]	[0.233, 0.420]
Best Partner	0.634	0.427	0.644	0.568	0.433	0.457
	[0.567, 0.700]	[0.328, 0.525]	[0.574, 0.714]	[0.462, 0.674]	[0.362, 0.504]	[0.361, 0.554]
Gets Things Done	0.565	0.447	0.650	0.543	0.441	0.366
	[0.496, 0.634]	[0.351, 0.543]	[0.582, 0.718]	[0.443, 0.643]	[0.370, 0.513]	[0.272, 0.459]
Would Visit	0.333	0.250	0.418	0.385	0.176	0.159
	[0.266, 0.401]	[0.156, 0.344]	[0.344, 0.491]	[0.280, 0.490]	[0.118, 0.235]	[0.087, 0.231]

Notes: Cells report the average predicted probability of preferring China over the United States and the 95% confidence interval in brackets, computed with the R function `avg_predictions()` from the `marginalEffects` package, from the models estimated in Table F3 with HC1 robust standard errors. Predictions average over the empirical distribution of covariates within each treatment arm $\times$ subgroup cell.

Appendix G. Logit Robustness

Because the four outcomes are binary, we re-estimate the main treatment-effect models as logistic regressions with the same covariates. Table G1 reports odds ratios (an odds ratio above 1 indicates a shift toward preferring China; below 1, toward the US). The pattern matches the linear probability estimates in the paper: US exposure significantly lowers the odds of preferring China on all four dimensions, while Chinese exposure significantly raises them only for Gets Things Done and Would Visit.

Table G1. Treatment effects, logit odds ratios

Outcome	Saw China projects OR (95% CI)	Saw US projects OR (95% CI)	N
Best Model	1.368 (0.932, 2.010)	0.577** (0.396, 0.840)	804
Best Partner	1.357 (0.921, 1.999)	0.603** (0.414, 0.877)	805
Gets Things Done	1.700** (1.158, 2.497)	0.629* (0.433, 0.913)	813
Would Visit	1.761** (1.172, 2.647)	0.467** (0.296, 0.738)	757

Notes: Odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals; reference category is the control arm. All models include the full set of individual-level controls. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Appendix H. Sensitivity to Covariate Adjustment

Because treatment was randomized, covariate adjustment is not required for identification. Table H1 therefore compares the treatment effects estimated with no controls — raw differences relative to the control arm — against the fully adjusted estimates reported in the paper. The substantive pattern is identical in both specifications: exposure to US projects significantly shifts all four dimensions toward the United States (the unadjusted effects are, if anything, somewhat larger), while exposure to Chinese projects significantly improves China's standing only on Gets Things Done and Would Visit, with the Best Model and Best Partner coefficients positive but insignificant throughout.

Table H1. Treatment effects with and without covariate adjustment (LPM, HC1)

Outcome	Saw China projects		Saw US projects		N
	No controls	With controls	No controls	With controls	
Best Model	+0.048 (0.043)	+0.065 (0.043)	−0.142*** (0.042)	−0.119** (0.041)	804
Best Partner	+0.051 (0.043)	+0.062 (0.042)	−0.130** (0.042)	−0.110** (0.042)	805
Gets Things Done	+0.086* (0.042)	+0.111** (0.042)	−0.117** (0.042)	−0.101* (0.042)	813
Would Visit	+0.099* (0.043)	+0.112** (0.043)	−0.139*** (0.037)	−0.123** (0.038)	757

Notes: Coefficients with HC1 robust standard errors in parentheses. "With controls" columns reproduce the specification in the paper (prior awareness, gender, age, education, religion, food security, food expenditure, occupation). * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Appendix I. Selection into the Binary Outcome

The four outcomes code a stated preference for China (1) against the United States (0); respondents who answered “None” or named a third country fall outside the binary comparison and are excluded from the estimation samples. Because that response is given after treatment, we verify that the exclusion does not itself depend on treatment assignment.

Two checks confirm that it does not. First, Table I1 regresses an indicator for giving a China/US answer on the treatment arms. Neither arm shifts the probability of choosing one of the two powers on any outcome: the coefficients range from -2.7 to $+0.6$ percentage points and none approaches statistical significance (all $p \geq 0.16$). Second, Table I2 re-estimates the treatment-effect models with the outcome recoded as choosing China versus giving *any* other response (the United States, “None,” or a third country), a coding that requires no exclusion. The pattern reported in the paper reproduces exactly: US exposure significantly shifts all four dimensions, while Chinese exposure significantly improves China’s standing only on Gets Things Done and Would Visit.

Table I1. Treatment and the probability of giving a China/US answer (LPM, HC1)

Outcome	Control-arm share	Saw China projects	Saw US projects	N
Best Model	0.942	−0.027 (0.022)	+0.003 (0.019)	861
Best Partner	0.942	−0.020 (0.021)	−0.000 (0.020)	861
Gets Things Done	0.959	−0.027 (0.019)	−0.017 (0.018)	861
Would Visit	0.880	+0.006 (0.027)	−0.007 (0.027)	861

Notes: Dependent variable = 1 if the respondent chose China or the US on the listed outcome, 0 if they answered “None,” named another country, or gave no response; $n = 861$. Coefficients with HC1 robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table I2. Treatment effects, outcome recoded as China vs. any other response (LPM, HC1)

Outcome	Saw China projects	Saw US projects	N
Best Model	+0.062 (0.042)	−0.107** (0.040)	849
Best Partner	+0.062 (0.041)	−0.103* (0.041)	849
Gets Things Done	+0.106* (0.042)	−0.101* (0.041)	847
Would Visit	+0.109** (0.040)	−0.109** (0.034)	849

Notes: Dependent variable = 1 if the respondent chose China, 0 for any other response (US, “None,” or another country); item nonresponse excluded. Models include the full set of individual-level controls. Coefficients with HC1 robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.