

# The potential of museums and cultural heritage centres in facilitating the Sino-Malawi diplomacy

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## Abstract

This paper explores the potential of museums and cultural heritage centers in facilitating Sino- Malawi diplomacy. Studies elsewhere have shown that heritage plays an important role in diplomacy between nations. Desktop survey, interviews, exhibition analysis and archival research were used to collect data to determine the potential of museums and cultural heritage centers in diplomacy. The paper engaged with cultural diplomacy as its theoretical and analytical framework. This paper notes that lack of a centralized national museum in the Malawi's capital city, Lilongwe, and the lack of initiatives to engage community museums and local cultural heritage centers hinder efforts at cultural exchange which is crucial for promoting cultural diplomacy between China and Malawi. The paper argues that proper and adequate engagement with a national museum and cultural heritage centers have a potential to reinforce good relations between China and Malawi through cultural exchange framed as cultural diplomacy.

## Keywords

Malawi,  
China,  
Diplomacy,  
Cultural Diplomacy,  
Cultural Heritage,  
Museums,  
Cultural Heritage Centers

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## Introduction

This paper aims to argue for the recognition of museums and cultural heritage centers in Malawi as important sites and forums that can significantly contribute towards facilitation of the emerging diplomacy between China and Malawi. In cultural and heritage studies, two important concepts have been propounded to understand how countries use their past and culture to forge and

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cement international relations. While the concept of heritage diplomacy has been useful in analysing how nations promote their diplomatic ties based on shared heritage, we would like to engage with cultural diplomacy as our conceptual and analytic framework to understand how museums and cultural heritage centers play a role in cementing diplomatic relations between nations that have no shared heritage. In doing so, we briefly sketch the function that museums played and continue to play in forming and fostering transnational relations and identities. While we acknowledge a debate in museology in framing museums as temples or forums, centralized or decentralized, our endeavor is to embrace these binaries as essential approaches that can be engaged in the discourse of cultural diplomacy between China and Malawi in Malawi and China. Building from this position we advance an argument that a lack of a centralized national museum of Malawi in the capital city, Lilongwe and the lack of initiatives to engage community museums and local cultural heritage centers constitute a hindrance to efforts of enhancing and expediting cultural exchange which is crucial for promoting cultural diplomacy between the two nations.

A combination of historical modes of inquiry was applied during research for this article. Oral interviews were conducted with key persons involved with the work of the Malawi-China relationship via culture and heritage, particularly Department of Museums and Monuments of Malawi. The primary sources from Department of Museums and Monuments for example minutes and reports were explored. The advantage of these primary sources along with the interviews were that they shed more light on the policies and politics of the department in regards to interests of the two countries in forging their bilateral relationship. An analysis of secondary sources that included books and articles about the history of relations between China and Africa in general and Malawi in particular was also done. This provided an empirical context of the historical perspective of the article. Another important methodology was curatorial analysis of exhibitions particularly in the museums and cultural heritage centers in Malawi which revealed lack of cultural exchanges between the two countries as an opportunity to reinforce their relationship while advancing their respective strategic interests.

However, the limitations in our methodological approach are that with limited time we could not reach out to the Chinese Embassy or any representative from the Chinese community to provide a nuanced discussion for this paper. We were also unable to analyse the museums and cultural centers in China to assess the extent of cultural exchanges with Malawi in China. Nonetheless, we feel that the discussion presented in this article provokes debates on how culture and heritage can be instrumentalised to facilitate diplomacy between Malawi and China.

### **Contemporary Chinese involvement in Africa and Malawi**

Chinese involvement in Africa is now receiving growing public and academic interest. The article acknowledges the fact that other scholars have extensively written on Malawi and China relations and it was noted that there is a dearth of scholarly engagement vis-à-vis the cultural exchanges and cultural sharing between the two countries especially as technologies and platforms for enhancing and reinforcing diplomatic ties. Most scholars have focused on the aspects of trade, commerce and development programmes between Malawi and China. For example, McNamara (2017) explored non-elite Malawians' understanding of the Chinese government's relationship with the Malawi government in relation to development. He argued that Malawians perceive Chinese development as mode of exploitation. He further contended that for the Malawians the presence of Chinese goods in Malawi is not an indicator of development but rather of underdevelopment (McNamara, 2017:1).

Thindwa (2014) showed how Chinese Foreign Development and Investment to Malawi grew from US\$0.96m in 2006 to US\$11.25m in 2009 and inter-country trade reached US\$300m in 2011. However, she argued that the terms of this trade drastically favour China, with Malawi providing raw commodities and China returning manufactured goods. Other scholars have followed this pattern of researching on trade and development matters between Malawi and China (Chirombo, 2017). While this paper continues this debate on relations between Malawi and China it takes a diversion from the development and trade paradigm by bringing in the cultural exchange perspective as a technology to reinforce diplomatic

ties between the two countries. The paper weaves through seven thematic sections before it concludes.

### **Pre-colonial relations between China, Southern Africa, and Malawi**

Diplomatic relations between societies were prevalent in the past in Africa even before the onset of colonial and post-colonial governments. In fact, trade was one means of securing such relations. Such trade routes, for example the Trans-Sahara trade route in West Africa and the maritime trade in the Swahili coast of East Africa, facilitated opportunities for forging relations and sometimes proxy diplomatic relations between the trading centers and their hinterlands. As Chirikure (2014:2) notes, “from the mid-first millennium AD onwards, southern Africa gradually became enchainned to the Indian Ocean rim region, initiating over 1500 years of commodities and values exchange, which linked and transformed not just coastal regions but also their conjoined hinterlands in contrasting ways.” He further noted that “Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean worlds had varying resource gradients which naturally stimulated conditions for trade and exchange relationships” (Chirikure, 2014: 2). Professional and scientific archaeological research has confirmed that indeed Southern Africa was for centuries entangled in Indian Ocean-based trade with Asian countries including China. Chinese material culture was carried to Africa through trade and aided in the thriving of some powerful pre-colonial polities. For instance, archaeological research by Prinsloo et al (2005) discovered Chinese porcelain at some of the sites of Mapungubwe, an industrial polity in pre-colonial Southern Africa. Their study concluded that the manufacturing time of this Chinese porcelain may have been the Yuan or early Ming dynasty. Other similar archaeological studies have revealed that Chinese porcelain from Ming dynasty has a fairly wide distribution in such important archaeological sites of former glorious African kingdoms, for example, at Great Zimbabwe, Khami, Danangombe and other sites in southern Zambezia (Chirikure, 2014). All these archaeological findings underscore the fact that the Chinese and Southern Africans were involved in some form of intercultural exchange way before colonial

and post-colonial systems of rule and their relationship or interaction is anchored in deep history.



Figure 1; Blue-on-white Ming dynasty porcelain from Great Zimbabwe (Photo: Shadreck Chirikure, 2014, p.11).

In Malawi, scientific archaeological excavations have also revealed the interface between Chinese culture and the Maravi Kingdom, a precursor of contemporary Malawi, in a pre-colonial context (Juwayeyi, 2020). The archaeological excavations in 1988 by Yusuf Juwayeyi at Mankhamba site which was the headquarters of the Maravi Kingdom of the Chewa people found 31 preserved fragments of imported Chinese porcelain. According to Juwayeyi (2020), Bennet Bronson, Curator Emeritus of Asian Anthropology and Ethnology at the Field Museum, Chicago, identified the discovered ceramics at Mankhamba as Chinese porcelain. According to Juwayeyi these Chinese porcelain originated from China particularly in the provinces of Jiangxi and Fujian where they were produced between AD 1570-1600 during the Ming dynasty (Juwayeyi, 2020). What this cultural contact through these discoveries at Mankhamba tells us is that from very early on the history of Malawi and China has all been about trade and interconnections either directly or through intermediaries. Therefore, the relations and interactions between

the people of Malawi and Chinese people are not recent and did not begin with diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1964 by President Hastings Kamuzu Banda or with Republic of China in 2008 by President Bingu Wa Mutharika. Rather, the relations between the Chinese and Malawians have long roots in the pre-colonial context; what is new is the direction, scale and scope that has evolved overtime.



Figure 2: Chinese porcelain discovered at Mankhamba in Dedza ( Photo: Yusuf Juwayeyi 2020, p.123.)

### Cultural Diplomacy Theory

The theoretical framework guiding this paper is cultural diplomacy. Villanueva (2018), states that there is no general consensus on the definition of Cultural Diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy means different things to different people. Many countries see cultural diplomacy as “promotion of national culture overseas” (Berridge and James, 2001). Others view it as soft power (Nye, 2008). Milton Cummings defines cultural diplomacy as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to

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foster mutual understanding” (Lenczowski, 2009:74). Cummings’s definition thus includes cultural relations and intercultural exchanges.

A universal characteristic of the museum, however, is its capacity to be an arena of cultural expression. Cultural diplomacy has been viewed in political realm as an avenue aimed at politically indoctrinating foreign communities about the cultural superiority of a given nation. For liberalists the idea of cultural supremacy is retained, but toned down with notions of exchanges, cooperation, scholarships and the teaching of foreign languages. This research is, therefore, guided by Villanueva’s (2018: 683) definition of cultural diplomacy as an activity that allows both practitioners and academics to think in terms of inclusion, otherness and the building of political communities, whose values are above national sovereignty, by means of a privileged vehicle that is culture in its most comprehensive perspective. Museums, through their ability to transcend boundaries, can thus create relationships between people from different backgrounds and opposing beliefs. It is argued that cultural diplomacy and cultural relations are our best hope of transforming prejudices, mistrust and hatred into curiosity, tolerance and understanding. These arguments are defended through the role of the Department of Museums and Monuments of Malawi in fostering cultural relations between countries.

### **Museums and Cultural Diplomacy**

As hinted above, for centuries, museums and related institutions have been well known for representing culture. It is no wonder that in a globalized world museums have become connected to international relations. Museums contribute to soft power through persuasion rather than coercing through elements of “hard” power such as use of military (Hoogwaerts, 2012). Muscat (2020) posits that as agents of culture, museums have the potential to broker into international soft power working alongside and in partnership with institutions and governments to influence change. By their nature, museums can be useful agents of change and address most formidable global challenges. Museums have played central roles in forming and fostering cultural identities, cultural governance, creation of civil citizens, nation building, democracy, wealth creation, climate change

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and transnational relations and identities, among others. This demonstrates that museums possess soft power resources in abundance. Muscat, (2020) states that museums use methods of public diplomacy which carry messages easily understood by the public. He goes on to state that museums curate objects and offer interpretation but the visitors choose what to read and listen to, thus experiencing the museum on their own. However, narratives in museums are dictated by objects and the way they are exhibited. Museums emerge as excellent agents of soft power that is a subtle peddler of influence promoting an agenda of its own planning.

### **The Museum Landscape in Malawi**

Lusaka (2019 and 2023 a) provided a scope and history of museums in Malawi. He noted that although new museums have been established in Malawi, the museum landscape is still not expansive. The Museum of Malawi<sup>1</sup> was established in 1957 under the colonial government following the passing of the Museum Ordinance No.201 in Zomba. The Museum of Malawi comprises five museums of which two are regional. The branches that make up The Museum of Malawi include Top Mandala Museum, which was opened to the public in 1960, to act as a depository for artefacts in Blantyre. Chichiri Museum in Blantyre, which was opened in 1966, is the largest in terms of its size and collections. Opened in 1972, Lake Malawi Museum in Mangochi displays the heritage of the lake shore region. Mzuzu Museum in northern Malawi is a regional museum as it interprets and exhibits the heritage of that region. Mtengatenga Postal Hut Museum situated at Namaka in Chiradzulu was opened in 1991 and is the smallest government museum. The Mtengatenga Museum focuses on the history of postal services in Malawi (Lusaka, 2019 and 2023 a). We should also point out that there are privately-owned museums in Malawi. These include Chamare Museum under Catholic Mission at Mua in Dedza, Stone House Museum under Livingstonia Mission at Khondowe in Rumphu, Transport Museum owned by the Society of Malawi in Limbe, and

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1 At the moment the main signage of Museum of Malawi on the wall of Chichiri Museum has no 'S' (Museum of Malawi). There is still debate to include an 'S' in order to reflect its expansion and inclusion of other museum branches under it. However in most official documents Museums of Malawi is mostly used. The Authors have opted to use Museum of Malawi to refer to the entire collection of museums under it.



William Murray Museum at Nkhoma in Lilongwe administered by Nkhoma Synod. The Cultural and Museum Center Karonga stands out because it is under public-private partnership between Malawi Government and the community of Karonga. (Lusaka, 2019 and 2023a). Currently, some projects are underway by some institutions to establish their own museums. For example, in Zomba there are two museum projects. The Malawi Institute of Education (M.I.E) has finished mounting exhibits for the Education Museum at Domasi and was waiting for its inaugural opening by the time this article was being written. The Malawi Defense Force is also in the process of research geared towards the establishment of a Military Museum at Cobbe Barracks. This is the current museum landscape in Malawi:



Figure 3: The Front side of the building of Museum of Malawi in Blantyre. Take note that this museum is also known as Chichiri Museum. Photo by Department of Museums and Monuments.

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## **Cultural Diplomacy at Museum of Malawi**

The Museum of Malawi is mandated to collect, research, conserve, and exhibit and interpret Malawi's natural and cultural heritage for education, entertainment, identity and posterity. Most of its cultural activities are informed by ideals encapsulated in the mandate. However, there are instances in which the Museum of Malawi has been engaged in what is framed as cultural diplomacy through its exhibition practices. Four examples are therefore outstanding in this regard.

On 20 May 1989 the Museum of Malawi celebrated the first ever repatriation of its cultural objects from Whatcom Museum in USA. The repatriated cultural objects were labeled as the 'The Cox Collection' as they were an assemblage of cultural objects collected by the Cox brothers who were planters in the Shire highlands in Thyolo District during the colonial period. The process of repatriating these cultural objects initiated the politics of diplomacy between Malawi and USA that worked to further cement and promote the relations between the two countries. During a special ceremony for the reception of these artifacts in Malawi, both the American ambassador and his Malawian counterpart emphasized in their statements the symbolism of cooperation and mutual understanding that the repatriated objects represented. The two countries pledged continued support and working together in various areas for the benefit of the people of Malawi and USA (Mtotha, 2017). The Cox Collection was later on 6 July 1989 exhibited at Chichiri Museum as part of Malawi's Silver Jubilee Independence celebrations. At this function, the artifacts were presented as gift from the American people to Malawi. The return of Cox Collection showed how cultural objects or cultural exchange and exhibition in museums can be a vehicle for cementing and promoting diplomacy between two countries.

In 1989, at the invitation of the Board of Trustees of the David Livingstone Memorial Centre in Blantyre, Kamuzu Banda supported the Museum of Malawi to participate at Livingstone Memorial Centre in Scotland. The Museum of Malawi mounted an exhibition with Banda's name and that of Livingstone as a

title for visitors to compare current developments in Africa with what existed during David Livingstone's life. Lusaka (2023b) argued that the exhibition became one of the sites upon which the memory of David Livingstone was invoked as a shared heritage to facilitate international co-operation between Scotland and Malawi. For Malawi, the exhibition became a stage to attract Scottish tourists and investors to come to Malawi. For Scotland, the exhibition was a platform to insert Scotland in the international stage as a global player with influence on countries far beyond its borders (Lusaka, 2019 and 2023b). Again, in 2013, Museum of Malawi joined Scotland in celebrating the bicentenary of the birth of David Livingstone. Museum of Malawi opened a special exhibition titled David Livingstone the Man. The exhibition showed the history of Livingstone in Africa and Malawi. According to the Chief Curator at the Museum of Malawi, the objective of the exhibition was among other things to promote the understanding of the basis of the relationship and cooperation between Malawi and Scotland among the Malawian youths (Interview with Chief Curator of Chichiri Museum, 2018). The presence of Scottish dignitaries during the opening of this exhibition underscored how significant the exhibition was in acting as a vehicle of cultural exchange to enhance diplomacy and cooperation between the two countries.

The last example of cultural diplomacy at the Museum of Malawi is when on 6 August 1991 the Japanese embassy donated the atomic-bombed stone from Hiroshima to Chichiri Museum as part of its message of world peace. This was part of the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima during the Second World War. This Hiroshima stone has become part of the permanent exhibition in the gallery of Chichiri Museum in Blantyre. In essence what this exhibition does is to mobilize sympathy for Japan as the victim of the war. Thus, the Hiroshima stone absolves Japan of its war injustices and presents Japan as a champion of world peace to humanity and therefore a country worth associating with as a partner. We can see therefore, how through the Hiroshima stone as a cultural object exhibited in a museum the Japanese are sanitizing their image at the international stage to advance their diplomatic interests.

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***Museums and Sino –Malawi Cultural Diplomacy***

Presently the Chinese Government has not engaged with the Museum of Malawi or any other museum to promote the Chinese image, ideas, beliefs, and visions at the international level to the Malawian audience through museum exhibitions in what can also be referred to as museum diplomacy. Through engagement with museums in Malawi using exhibitions on various themes, China can sell its own image to the Malawian audience and boost its international standing in the Malawian imagination and counter some misconceptions of China among some Malawians. For example, in his study mentioned earlier, Thomas McNamara discussed the non-elite Malawians' understanding of the Chinese government in relation to development. He argued that Malawians do not conceptualize the Chinese as bringing development. Rather, they perceive the government of China as exploiting the government of Malawi. Malawians also perceive Chinese goods as indicators of Malawi's underdevelopment. This conceptualization is influenced by the western focused development narrative, which frames development as a gift (McNamara, 2017). This shows lack of cultural understanding of Chinese approaches to development among local Malawians in general and therefore reinforces the need for museums and cultural centers to facilitate the understanding of Chinese philosophy and ideals with regard to development approaches. As already indicated in this article, the power of museums and related institutions in educating and inculcating certain views of the world to the public, and promoting ideals of the state at local and international levels, should not be underestimated. Chinese people's perceptions about the people of Malawi are not yet established. However, recent infrastructural developments by the Chinese government, for example the National Parliament and the Bingu National Stadium in Lilongwe, show how the Chinese government regards Malawi as a reliable and potential partner. However, we are still of the view that Malawi should find ways of selling its culture to Chinese people in China so that this cultural diplomacy is not one-way traffic and does not become cultural imperialism from China to Malawi.

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While there has not been any cultural diplomacy via the museums, some cultural diplomacy has been happening. However, this has been occurring at highest levels of government, with no impact among the local publics. For instance, in 2010, the Minister of Culture and officials from the Ministry visited China. The nature of the visit was more political than technical. As a result, there were no discussions with Chinese technocrats. It was the first visit to China by the Malawian Minister responsible for culture (Interview Deputy Director for Education at Department of Museums and Monuments, 2022). As a result of this visit, there was a gift of laptops to the Department of Culture in Malawi. In 2014, the Chinese government invited the Department of Culture to a conference. The Malawian officials who attended the conference gave a presentation entitled “Presentation of Cultural Heritage Protection in Malawi”. Some of the key issues presented were the “need for cooperation with China on tangible and intangible heritage cooperation,” “Participation in festivals arranged by the two countries,” “Exchange visits of staff between the two countries from the cultural sector,” and “Deliberate initiatives to assist in cultural infrastructure development. e.g. museums and cultural centers.” It is sad to note that since 2014 to date nothing material has emerged in as far as cultural exchanges are concerned as requested during that conference (Interview with Principal Historian at Department of Museums and Monuments, 2022).

We are of the view that the key issues that were presented at the conference can provide a window of opportunity for China and Malawi to reinforce their diplomatic ties through the power of culture. At a time when Malawi is struggling to find resources to establish state of the art cultural infrastructures such as a modern national museum and cultural center in the capital city Lilongwe it is an advantage for China to capitalize on the strength of cultural diplomacy that can emanate from such assistance. We acknowledge the fact that in the past the Museum of Malawi in its present format ably engaged in cultural diplomacy with foreign nations such as the USA, Britain and Japan as pointed out in this article. Why then does Malawi need a new and separate national museum in the capital city Lilongwe to facilitate Sino-Malawi relations?

In response to this, we reiterate Lusaka's argument for the national museum in Lilongwe. Lusaka contended that national museums are iconographies of power and their location in the capital city where power resides only functions to facilitate state functions of power and consolidation of national identity (<https://mwntation.com/a-capital-without-a-museum/>). We feel that just as diplomatic missions are mostly centered in the capital cities, the presence of a national museum in the national capital with the symbolic power of brokering cultural identity will be better placed in brokering cultural diplomacy. It is sad to note that since the declaration of Lilongwe as capital city in 1975 there is no national museum today let alone any structure that resembles it.

## Conclusion

We conclude by asserting that museums and cultural heritage centers in Malawi, if properly engaged, have the potential to reinforce the diplomatic ties between Malawi and China that have deep roots from pre-colonial times. The cultural exchanges through cultural diplomacy have the potential to enhance the image of China in Malawi and that of Malawi in China and in the long run inducing multiple effects of promoting the interests of each country, especially the development agendas.

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