



**DEPUTY MINISTER IN THE PRESIDENCY FOR WOMEN, YOUTH
AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

MESSAGE OF SUPPORT

BY

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AT THE

CHINA – SOUTH AFRICA STUDENT EXCHANGE NIGHT

“THE FUTURE WE SHARE”

ON

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[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

Thank you Programme Director,
His Excellency Ambassador Wu Peng, Ambassador of the People's
Republic of China to the Republic of South Africa,
Comrade Nomvula Mokonyane, First Deputy Secretary-General of the
African National Congress,
Leadership of the China-South Africa Youth Federation,
Distinguished guests,
Young people of South Africa and China,
Comrades and friends,

Good evening.

As I was reflecting on this gathering, and particularly on the significance of it taking place on Youth Day, I found myself thinking about how we often speak about relations between countries and how easily we reduce something profoundly human into the language of economics, diplomacy, and geopolitics.

We speak about trade volumes, investment flows, strategic partnerships, and bilateral agreements, all of which matter because they shape the conditions under which societies grow and develop. Yet beneath every agreement signed by governments and beneath every partnership announced by leaders are ordinary people whose lives are ultimately affected by those decisions. It is their aspirations, their fears, their creativity and their labour that determine whether relationships between nations become meaningful or merely symbolic.

Evenings like tonight are important because they remind us that the strongest relationships between countries are not built in government buildings or through diplomatic agreements alone. They are built when people encounter one another, when they learn from one another, when they discover common aspirations despite different histories and circumstances, and when they begin to understand that their futures may be far more connected than they previously imagined.

Perhaps that is the question I would like us to reflect on this evening: ***what is it that truly connects societies?***

If somebody were to ask us what the most important infrastructure of development is, many of us would naturally think of roads, railways, ports, power stations and digital networks. We would not be wrong. The history of development across the world teaches us that infrastructure matters because it allows people, goods and ideas to move.

Yet the wiser I become and the more communities I engage, the more convinced I am that the most important infrastructure any society can build is not physical infrastructure at all. It is human infrastructure. It is the invisible architecture of trust, solidarity, understanding and shared purpose that allows people who may never have met one another before to work together toward common goals.

Roads can connect cities. Fibre-optic cables can connect computers. Airports can connect continents. But only human relationships can connect societies. When those relationships are strong, they are capable of surviving political changes, economic uncertainty and even generational transitions because they are rooted in something deeper

than convenience. They are rooted in a recognition of our shared humanity.

I think this is particularly important for us to reflect on this evening as we gather on a day that occupies a sacred place in South Africa's democratic story.

Fifty years ago, young South Africans took to the streets of Soweto and many other parts of our country because they believed that the future they were being offered was not worthy of their humanity. The young people of 1976 were not ministers. They were not diplomats. They were not people occupying positions of formal authority. They were young people who possessed something far more powerful than authority. They possessed conviction. They possessed courage. They possessed an unshakeable belief that the future could be different from the present.

When we commemorate Youth Day, we often remember the events themselves, but perhaps we do not spend enough time reflecting on the lesson that those young people left behind for future generations. Their struggle was never simply about education policy. It was fundamentally about dignity. It was about insisting that young people have the right to participate in shaping the societies in which they live. It was about recognising that development without dignity is incomplete and that progress which excludes people cannot truly be called progress.

That lesson remains relevant today because the challenges confronting young people in the twenty-first century may look different, but they are no less significant. Across the world, young people are navigating economic uncertainty, technological disruption, climate instability and

widening inequality. Many are asking whether the opportunities available to previous generations will be available to them. Many are wondering whether technological advancement will create new opportunities or deepen existing exclusions. Many are asking whether growth and development will translate into better lives for ordinary people or whether prosperity will continue to accumulate in the hands of a few.

What is remarkable, however, is that these concerns are not uniquely South African and they are not uniquely Chinese. They are increasingly shared concerns across the globe.

A young entrepreneur in Johannesburg who is trying to build a business in a competitive economy is grappling with many of the same questions as a young entrepreneur in Beijing. A young woman seeking equal opportunity in South Africa is connected through her aspirations to millions of young women across the world who are pursuing the same objective. A young person with a disability confronting barriers to participation understands something that transcends geography, namely that inclusion cannot be treated as an afterthought if societies are serious about justice.

This is why I believe that the future of people-to-people cooperation must move beyond the idea of exchange alone. Exchange remains important because it creates opportunities for learning and cultural understanding. But the future before us demands something more ambitious than simply visiting one another's countries or learning about one another's histories. The future of people-to-people cooperation requires us to think about how young people can become co-creators of solutions to the challenges confronting humanity.

The future of South Africa-China cooperation cannot simply be measured by how many delegations travel between our countries. It must increasingly be measured by the extent to which young people are building together, innovating together, researching together and creating together. The greatest tribute we can pay to the idea of friendship between nations is not merely to celebrate that friendship, but to use it as a platform for solving real problems and improving real lives.

As the Deputy Minister in the Presidency for Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, I also believe that we have a responsibility to ask difficult questions about who gets to participate in these opportunities. One of the lessons that experiencing the lived realities in our communities teaches us is that people experience development differently depending on their social location. It matters whether you live in a rural village or a major city. It matters whether you are a person with a disability. It matters whether you come from a wealthy family or a working-class household. It matters whether society recognises your identity and your humanity or treats you as though you are invisible.

Too often, international cooperation creates opportunities for those who are already connected while leaving behind those who stand furthest from opportunity. Yet if our commitment to human rights means anything, it must mean that the benefits of cooperation are deliberately extended to those who have historically been excluded. The measure of successful cooperation cannot simply be how many people participate. It must also be whether those who have traditionally been absent are finally present.

Our Constitution, which this year marks 30 years of existence, offers an important lesson in this regard. It teaches us that dignity belongs to all

people. It teaches us that equality cannot be selective. It teaches us that freedom becomes meaningful only when it is shared.

In many ways, these principles provide a powerful foundation for how we should think about international cooperation in the twenty-first century. If our partnerships are not advancing dignity, if they are not expanding equality and if they are not creating greater inclusion, then we must ask ourselves what purpose they ultimately serve.

It is particularly important that we hold firmly to these values at a moment when many parts of the world are witnessing the rise of organised anti-rights, anti-gender and anti-democratic movements. These movements may emerge in different forms and speak different languages depending on the country in which they operate, but they share a common objective: to roll back hard-won gains in human rights, to undermine the principles of equality and inclusion, and to convince societies that some people are less deserving of dignity, protection and opportunity than others.

What makes these movements especially significant is that they are not isolated phenomena. They are increasingly transnational. They organise across borders, share resources, coordinate messaging and exploit technology to spread fear, division and misinformation.

They often present themselves as defenders of culture, tradition, religion, or morality, when in reality they are advancing a politics of exclusion that seeks to narrow the civic space for women, young people, persons with disabilities, migrants, religious minorities, LGBTI persons and many others whose rights have historically been denied or contested. At their core, they represent not merely a challenge to specific rights, but a

challenge to the very idea that all human beings possess equal worth and equal dignity.

In confronting this challenge, we must recognise that legislation alone will not be enough, nor will policy frameworks, however important they may be. Our strongest defence against the politics of exclusion is often the simple but profound act of human connection. It becomes significantly more difficult to fear those whom we know, to dehumanise those whose stories we have heard, or to deny the humanity of people with whom we have built relationships.

This is why people-to-people cooperation is not a soft or secondary aspect of international relations. It is a democratic imperative. It is one of the most effective ways of building societies that are resilient against hatred, prejudice and division.

When young people from different countries learn together, create together and solve problems together, they begin to see one another not as stereotypes or abstractions, but as fellow human beings navigating many of the same hopes and challenges. They become less susceptible to narratives that seek to divide humanity into those who belong and those who do not. In this sense, every meaningful exchange, every partnership, every act of solidarity across borders becomes an investment not only in cooperation, but in democracy itself.

The future of human progress will not be secured by governments acting alone. It will be secured by people who refuse to allow fear to triumph over solidarity, exclusion to triumph over inclusion, or intolerance to triumph over our shared humanity. That is why the work of building human

connections across nations is also the work of defending the democratic and human rights gains that previous generations struggled so hard to achieve.

The world today often appears fragmented. We see conflict, polarisation and growing mistrust in many parts of the globe. Yet gatherings such as this remind us that another possibility exists. They remind us that relationships can still be built across cultures, languages and continents. They remind us that young people remain capable of imagining a future that is more cooperative than competitive, more inclusive than exclusive and more humane than divisive.

As South Africa commemorates 50 years since the Soweto Uprising and as we continue to build relations between South Africa and China, my hope is that we will place young people at the centre of this work, not merely as beneficiaries of development but as its architects. My hope is that we will build what I would like to call the ***human infrastructure of cooperation***, a foundation rooted not only in economic interests but in solidarity, dignity, equality and shared humanity.

Because ultimately the future we share will not be determined by what governments say about one another. It will be determined by what people choose to build together, whether we recognise our common humanity in one another and in our ability to ensure that we leave behind a world that is more just, more inclusive and more hopeful than the one we inherited.

Perhaps the greatest way we can honour the sacrifice and bravery of the generation of 1976 is by recognising that the fight for human dignity did not end in 1994. It continues wherever exclusion persists, wherever

inequality endures, wherever human rights are threatened, and wherever we fail to recognise our common humanity. The future we share will depend on whether we continue that struggle together.

As I prepare to take leave of the platform, I am reminded of the final words of Solomon Kalushi Mahlangu, who at the age of 22 faced the gallows with extraordinary courage and declared in his final moments, and I quote: ***"My blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom. Tell my people that I love them. They must continue the fight."***

The struggle to which Mahlangu referred was never only a struggle against apartheid. It was a struggle for human dignity, equality and justice. Our responsibility today is not to inherit freedom passively, but to deepen it, defend it and extend it to those who continue to stand at the margins of opportunity and power.

Together, we can build that future between our nations.

I thank you.