

# From spectacle to myth: Public diplomacy and Chinese media in Africa

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Before I start, a disclaimer needs to be made: this is but a proposition based on our previous research and results of our two weeks of fieldwork in Kampala and Nairobi. The data is yet to be contextualized.

Two weeks in Kampala and Nairobi, I was struck by the gap between what has been hyped about Chinese media in Africa and the substance of it.

Since 2009, the so-called rise of Chinese media in Africa has made stories and headlines from BBC to CNN, from the *Economist* to the *New York Times*. Many believed that the expansion is part and parcel of China's public diplomacy in Africa. Let us first return to the concept of Chinese Public diplomacy: that is, to use culture and information to spread a country's influence, to counter what it views as unfair treatment in the global media, and goes hand-in-hand with increased Chinese investments and economic engagement in Africa.

However, I need to point out that the media going out strategy did not just happen. It has existed for more than 20 years. As early as in 1991, China Yellow River TV station was established, broadcasting Chinese-teaching programmes in North America via SCOLA, an American education satellite network. A year later CCTV-4, the Chinese English Channel was launched.

However, it was only after 2008, the time has ripened. Due to financial crises in the U.S.A and in Europe, many international media had to downscale their coverage in Africa. A report from *American Journalism Review* finds that the number of full time foreign correspondents has declined steeply since 2003<sup>1</sup>. In 2011, BBC closed five language services, including Portuguese broadcasting for Africa.<sup>2</sup>

By 2009, China has had the latecomer's advantage in deploying its media as instruments of public diplomacy, as there have been plenty mature models: Voice of America, France 24, and Deutsche Welle or German Wave. All of them

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<sup>1</sup> Priya Kumar, 2011 *American Journalism Review*, "Foreign Correspondents: Who Covers What", , <http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=4997>; see also Justin D. Martin (2012) "Loneliness at the Foreign 'Bureau' News organizations exaggerate the size of their overseas newsrooms" at *Columbia Journalism Review*, April 23 2012 [http://www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/loneliness\\_at\\_the\\_foreign\\_bureau.php?page=all#sthash.j3BLoxJG.dpuf](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/loneliness_at_the_foreign_bureau.php?page=all#sthash.j3BLoxJG.dpuf)

<sup>2</sup> Voice of America, "BBC to Shut Down 5 Language Services" January 24, 2011 , at <http://www.voanews.com/content/bbc-to-shut-down-5-language-services-114608894/170455.html>

can provide valuable and various experiences and lessons in content production, distribution/transmission and marketing strategies.

For Chinese media, Africa is a less challenging place than North America and Europe, where competition is harsher and hostility towards Chinese media more pronounced. In addition, between China and many African countries there is a mutual understanding based on shared memories of the revolutionary past and the present status as developing countries. This makes effective communication and affinity more likely to happen.

Therefore, the media coverage of the rise of Chinese media in Africa had almost unanimously agreed that the Chinese media organisations are going to make substantial contributions to China's image building in Africa.

Now CCTV Africa has been broadcasting from Nairobi for two years, and *China Daily Africa Weekly* has also been around for more than one year. Are they causing any impact for African people's perception of China?

Before answering the question, I want to argue that it may be a mistake to regard the Chinese media outlets in Africa as pure instruments of public diplomacy, because there are visible discrepancies between the positioning of these media and what have been conventionally understood as public diplomacy tools.

For starter, the Chinese media in Africa are not fully funded by the state or government agencies, as other international public broadcasters do. Since 1990s, China has undergone a reconfiguration of party-state's role in the market economy and media were no longer subsidised by the state treasury in general. Media have maintained the role of the mouthpiece of the Party-state and under quite thorough and stern control from the CCP, but they have to earn their revenue in the market, from subscribers and advertisers. In the meantime, press and publications designated to *wai xuan* or foreign propaganda, were severely affected by financial cuts. Taking *China and Africa* (zhong guo he fei zhou) for example. The magazine was founded in 1988 and published in English and French. It was the only Chinese magazine targeting the African continent. In 2001, *China and Africa* stopped making the print edition, in spite of that the magazine had a stable readership in several major African cities. By 2009, the magazine was resumed but it has had to re-establish its readership from scratch again. It is worth noting that the new legion of the Chinese media going out, are not those media initially designated for foreign propaganda. What we have here in Africa are CCTV, *China Daily*, China Radio International, all mainstream and influential media in China, earning huge profits from their strong market presence and political capitals. Much evidence show that the plan for Chinese media going out has had to combine policy incentives promised by the state with initiatives from the media. In 2011 GAPP (General Administration of Press and Publishing) of China announced 48 leading Working Unit in "Going Out" of the year. 9 out of the 48 leading Units are newspapers and magazines. Three are based in Beijing: *China Daily*, *Chinese News Week*, *Chinese National Geography* while the rest six are from provincial cities. In order to attain the promised financial support from the state, media organisations nationwide have to be

proactive: identifying possible partners, leading the negotiation process and investing some of their own money when they see fit.

Secondly, the Chinese media in Africa positioned themselves not merely as public diplomacy organs dedicated solely to promoting China's image and values. They aim for a more ambitious goal, competing with international mainstream media. CCTV Africa, for example, aspire to be in the same league as BBC and Al Jazeera. The position is "to tell a different story of Africa to the world", instead of "to tell a different story of China to Africa".

Organizational wise there is a clear reliance on local staff. CCTV Africa employs 70 persons in Nairobi, and 60 of them are from Kenya, with the rest 10 people from other countries, China included. The editorial team, manned predominately by Kenyan staff, drafts a bulletin on what they are about to report and it usually receives minor adjustments from Beijing.

Xinhua News Agency relies on correspondents from local press and freelancing journalists to get breaking news. In certain Lusophone countries the dependence on local staff can be very comprehensive. CRI in Nairobi, 5 out of their 7 staff are Kenyan. The Chinese staff in the Nairobi bureau is there mainly to coordinate the communication between Beijing and local employees.

A rather superficial observation from my fieldwork infers that there might exist a differentiation of roles and functions among the Chinese media bureaus in Africa. CCTV Africa positions itself as a global broadcaster from Africa. It invested heavily in infrastructure: 4 live-broadcast studio in Nairobi, Cairo, Lagos and Johannesburg, the launch of French programme in 2014 and the expansion into a full channel within 5 years. Xinhua is the news agency selling its professionalism and neutrality, and often good connections with African leaders and governmental organisations. *China Daily Africa* sets out to strengthen the China-Africa tie and to report Africa to the English readership in China. CRI seems to be the medium that currently shoulders more workload in promoting Chinese culture and values, with its Chinese-teaching programs and translation of Chinese TV series and film productions into Kiswahili. They are doing it on a more moderate budget than CCTV.

China is promulgating an alternative image of Africa instead of self-promotion, doesn't this sound good? Unfortunately the approach is causing confusions for the African audience, who finds it difficult to make sense of Chinese media in Africa.

First of all, the Chinese media in Africa are preoccupied with casting positive light upon Africa; a natural choice in content production would be focusing on economic growth and achievement in developments. They do cover political stories but usually would not pursuit the drama and conflicts that are sought after by African audiences.

The lack of reportage on China from the Chinese media in Africa disappoints its audience, as our fieldwork found out. Very few African countries can send its

journalists or correspondents to China. When Chinese commodities and Chinese workers and businessmen make their inroads into Africa, it is only natural that African people want know about this remote country that is having an impact in their society. The journalists I interviewed expressed their eagerness to learn more about China. The topics they mentioned, among other things, range from agriculture and the development in rural areas to everyday life, gender issues, culture, sports and music in China. The audiences are not getting these contents from CCTV Africa. Even though CCTV 4 send programmes on China, these programmes are not tailored for the needs of African audiences. The expectations from the audience have not been met so far.

Even though people are aware of the existence of Chinese media in Africa, the audiences seldom see or hear any Chinese faces and voices from these media. A Ugandan journalist told me that he has never met a Chinese journalist in Kampala. Of course, there is but one Chinese journalist from Xinhua News Agency working in Kampala. A Kenyan TV journalist told me that, "When I see a BBC journalist at a function, I'll come to him and say: hi Gabriel, I am your fan, nice to meet you! I wish I could say the same to a Chinese journalist, to know about your culture and your work here. Unfortunately most CCTV staff here seems to be Kenyans, whom I knew already very well. There's nothing new for me."

Influences take time. However my take is based on the current strategy and more importantly, the mind-set behind the Chinese approach, the integration would not just naturally happen.

Henry Kissinger, the American Secretary of State under President Nixon and a politician who has been dealing with China for more than half a century, uses a metaphor "Weiqi", or Go in Japanese, to describe the Chinese way of strategic thinking. A direct translation of Weiqi is "the game of encirclement". Unlike chess, which is organised around a clash of forces and aiming for a decisive battle and total victory, Weiqi aims for relative gain of long-range encirclement. It starts from an empty board, and only ends when the board is filled by partially interlocking areas of black and white stones symbolizing opposing strengths. In this game you win by forming boundaries that encircle the bigger share of the board.

Even before I read Kissinger's *On China*,<sup>3</sup> when I begun to study China's engagement in Africa, I was struck by the approach characteristic of the encirclement thinking. You spot a place of strategic importance, and then you put your stones in the area, working out the way so they could form a self-sufficient community that is impossible to be penetrated from outside, possibly after several rounds of skirmishes and confrontations. The need to communicate with local communities is being kept at minimum. Communication is often avoided because it is feared that unnecessary communication might attract attention that can disturb the building of the self-sufficient system.

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<sup>3</sup> Kissinger, Henry (2012), *On China*, Penguin Books:

This practice of power politics is not without merit, especially from a utilitarian point of view. The side effect of this quiet encirclement has caused problem for the Chinese companies, especially in labour-intensive industries. The presence of a large community of foreign people, without adequate and effective communication, could trigger the wildest imaginations and the most impossible theories. In the field of media and communication, where spectacles and myths are generated every day, the mind set of encirclement that cares more about marking territory than creating substantial exchange of cultures and ideas, is likely to be counterproductive. It produces more indifferent or sceptical bystanders other than engaged audiences, let alone inspired followers.