

Play the Game of Encirclement in the Going out Age: The Mediation of Africa by China in the 21st century

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Play the Game of Encirclement in the Going out Age: The Mediation of Africa by China in the 21st century

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Abstract

This article sets out to explore the presence of Chinese media in Africa, which is to be understood as a process of mediation and interpretation. Many believed that the Chinese media expansion is part and parcel of China's public diplomacy in Africa, which implies the attempt to use culture and information to spread a country's influence, and to counter what it views as unfair treatment in the global media. This goes hand-in-hand with increased Chinese investments and economic engagement in Africa.

The paper shall first present a brief history of Chinese media's engagement in Africa against the backdrop of China's debate on media competitiveness and not the least, the 'Media Going Out Project' since the late 1990s. It then tackles on how news and meaning production are organized and negotiated between Beijing and the newsrooms of CCTV, Xinhua and China Radio International in Africa, drawing on data collected on a field study in Nairobi in 2014. Committed to the task of "reporting Africa to the world", the newly arrived Chinese media engage themselves in establishing an alternative perspective that on one hand appropriates the approved formulas of mainstream Western media and on the other hand discredits the perceived hegemonic Western media discourse. Mediating Africa thus becomes a process of meaning reconstruction, in which the Chinese media seek to reinforce the role of nation-state and to redefine the course of development in Africa. In doing so, the Chinese media houses adopt a vigorously localizing strategy, relying heavily on local staff and sources from African governmental institutions.

What about the reception of Chinese media? Although there is yet to find any concrete evidences such as audience surveys, the paper suggests some tentative measurements by summarizing observations and interviews undertaken in Uganda, Kenya and Mozambique with local journalists and media professionals. It can be said that the audience's experience of Chinese media is that of continuing engaging and disengaging, as the existence of the media itself signify a constant interplay between reality and representation. The paper argues in general that China's engagement in Africa is characteristic of encirclement thinking, where forming boundaries that encircle the bigger share of the board is the ultimate goal. This approach is found in Chinese media houses in Africa, as if their mission were to building more walls against other walls rather than dismantling them. The paper shall explore how a dilemma is wrought in the mediation process in which meaning, power and interest are negotiated between the center and the periphery, the state and the organizational, the local and the global, the political and the economical, while the challenges for Chinese media in Africa remain fundamental.

Text

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 Public diplomacy. Coined at the Fletcher School at Tufts University in 1965 by the then Dean Edmund A. Gullion, "public diplomacy" deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as between diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the processes of inter-cultural communications. "Central to public diplomacy is the transnational flow of information and ideas."¹ As a form of diplomacy, public diplomacy has been increasingly programed by the government and oriented around national interests. Since 1999, the United State has annexed a position Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, in charge of international education and cultural exchanges, public affair and international information exchange projects, followed by the establishment of British Public Diplomacy Strategy Board in 2002, and the upgrading of the Chinese Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affair to the Public Diplomacy Office in 2010.

Using culture and information to spread a country's influence is at the core of public diplomacy, be it of liberal democracies and authoritarian states. Steven Herman asserts in his study of the role of the Voice of America in the 21st Century Public Diplomacy, that It can be argued that what many government-funded broadcasters, be they of democracies or repressive regimes, sometimes typically engage in could be termed "white propaganda," akin to "information communications" to build credibility with the audience which could have utility for wider national objectives over the long term². The Chinese answer to public diplomacy, as given by Zhao Qizheng, the former Director of News Office at the State Council and the proponent of a Chinese Public Diplomacy, is international exchanges and activities that will improve a country's international status and influence, and to promote a country's image. Such activities shall be targeted on winning the minds and hearts³. Zhao Qizheng refines the characteristics of what can be called as Chinese public diplomacy. First and foremost is that such public diplomacy is conspicuously directed by the government. Non-governmental actors are participants who may even play the major role in the scene, but nevertheless under the direction of government. Zhao argues that the Chinese style has been more transparent than what can be observed in some foreign countries' public diplomacy campaigns where the government drove the show but acted more discretely, and ready to augment what happened on the front stage. In Chinese public diplomacy operations, non-governmental actors shall always align themselves with the governmental guidance. They may tell a Chinese story with Chinese flavor, in a tune different from that of the government. The story originated from the government can be austere and succinct, while the non-government actors present a more individual and vivid narrative, easier to grasp for foreign audience. The two narratives are complementary⁴.

¹ The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, "What is Public Diplomacy", <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Murrow/Diplomacy>

² Steven Herman, "The role of The Voice of America in 21st century public diplomacy", Master thesis, Mountain State University, 2012: p25

³ Li Fanjie, "Beijing Olympic Games and Public Diplomacy: Interpretation and Insights", Public Diplomacy Quarterly, Summer, 02, available at http://www.qstheory.cn/gj/gjrd/201403/t20140323_332934.htm

⁴ China.com, "Interview with Zhao Qizheng," November 2, 2011, http://fangtan.china.com.cn/2011-11/02/content_23785946.htm

The state-owned media's outreach in Africa may well illustrate the role of media in China's public diplomacy in Africa. The purpose of this global media outreach, is mainly 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 the world. It needs to be pointed out that the media global outreach strategy did not just happen. Zhao Qizheng suggests that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s use of public diplomacy dated back to the days of Yan'an, when Chairman Mao explained, via the mouth and pen of Edward Snow, the very existence and composition of the CCP to the world and won such sympathy that had rewritten the history of China⁵. Xinhua News Agency's radio, established in 1940 in Yan'an, began English broadcasting in 1944. China International Radio started English program in 1947. In the 1990s, the era of Chinese media came into being. In 1991, China Yellow River TV station was established, broadcasting Chinese-teaching programs in North America via SCOLA, an American education satellite network. A year later CCTV's international channel CCTV-4 was aired.

The media going out began to gain momentum after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The year 2009 saw the Chinese government claimed to invest \$7 billion in a “大外宣” (Da Wai Xuan, i.e. Grand Overseas Propaganda, or GOP) project. In January 2009 *South Morning Post*, an English newspaper in Hong Kong first disclosed the story, which was republished in short time by *The Global Times*, a tabloid newspaper owned by *the People's daily*, and was spread by Xinhua.net, the official website of Xinhua News Agency, and made cover story on *The Phoenix Weekly*, among other Chinese press, before the Central Publicity Department (CPD) silenced the debate over the matter⁶. What triggered the GOP project is likely the humiliation Chinese government experienced during the disturbed Olympics torch relay. China was abhorred by the reaction of Western people and especially the way in which Western media carried the story, totally biased and bullying from the perspective of the Chinese government. Since 1990s, China has strived to adapt itself to the global system. In the meantime, International criticism against the human right issues in China was on the wane as China's developmental achievements and profound social changes stole the protests' thunder. It was not until the torch replay China has realized that it is on the losing end of an ideological battle against the so-called Western communication hegemony.

After the Beijing Olympics several major media including Xinhua, China Daily, CCTV and CRI teamed up in investigating the feasibility of a GOP project. Reports were filed and a new specialized foundation was established. “We have never seen that much of money”, a senior Xinhua journalist commented. The state-owned media have unprecedented change to apply fund for overseas expansion. Establishing new branches was perceived the most effective way, in addition to reaching out via digital media and new media. “Setting up the overseas office is a state-funded operation and hence sustainable. In the worst scenario it would not work the offices can be closed down and the staff can be transferred.”⁷

The GOP project is reportedly aimed to regain China's voice in the international arena, especially in Africa, an increasingly sought-after continent by international public diplomacy broadcasters. China's intensive economic engagements in Africa since 2006 were met not only by warm welcome. Barry Sautman and Yan Hairong point out that an international

⁵ China.com, “Interview with Zhao Qizheng, “

⁶ He Qinglian, "Unveil the mysterious "Grand Overseas Propaganda" Project", Watch Chinese magazine, issue no.50, November 19 2009, <http://www.watchinese.com/article/2009/1737>

⁷ Interview with Xinhua journalist, June, 2014

discourse filed of China-in-Africa has emerged, particularly in Western countries with dense links to Africa: the US, UK and France. They argue that “while China's presence in Africa should be critically examined, interest in it in the West is skewed by elite perceptions of China as a rival for resources and influence in Africa and as a rising power, with the tone of the discourse far more negative than that accorded the Western presence in Africa”⁸. Hence China gave certain priority to the state media’s outreach in Africa. For instance, China Radio International’s first overseas FM studio (CRI91.9FM) was launched in Nairobi, followed by the other 20 FM studios worldwide⁹.

The post-2008 era means less competitions and more opportunities for Chinese media seeking for localization in Africa. For starters, beaten by financial crises in the United States and Europe, major 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 2003¹⁰. BBC closed five language services, including Portuguese broadcasting for Africa in 2011.¹¹

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

In terms of audience base, Africa is a less intimidating for the Chinese state-led media practioners, who found themselves in a more comfortable place than their colleagues working in North America and Europe, where competition is harsher and hostility towards Chinese media more pronounced¹². 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 organizations are going to make substantial contributions to China’s image building in Africa. As Wu Yu-hsan classified Chinese media engagement in Africa into five categories: Official exchange, Technical support, Training, Media presence and Content service¹³. Since 2009, the presence of Chinese media is getting more weight, with CCTV’s Africa office and studio founded in Nairobi in 2010 and China Daily’s Africa Weekly launched in 2012, and CRI now broadcasting shortwave program to the

⁸ Barry Sautman and Yan Hairong, "Trade, Investment, Power and the China-in-Africa Discourse," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 52-3-09, December 28, 2009. 交易、投資、権力および「アフリカにおける中国」

⁹ Interview with staff of CRI, Africa Bureau, 11. February, 2014, Nairobi, Kenya.

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ 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>

¹² Interview with staff in Xinhua News Agency, Africa Bureau, 10. February, 2014, Nairobi, Kenya.

¹³ Yu-Shan Wu, “The Rise of China’s State-Led Media Dynasty in Africa”, South Africa Institute of International Affairs, 2012

whole continent and FM program to 24 African countries¹⁴. Xinhua news agency has offices in every country of the continent. The expansion culminated by CCTV's purchase of a substantial share of Independent News and Media, one of the most powerful media groups in South Africa in 2013. The deal enabled CCTV and the China-Africa Development Fund, both controlled by Beijing, held 20% of the South African newspaper chain – a stake that will allow them to materially influence the company¹⁵.

It should be noted that this round of GOP have marginated, if not excluded, those Chinese periodicals previously dedicated to public diplomacy, or overseas propaganda under the administration of Chinese International Publishing Group (CIPG). CIPG, as still being widely called Chinese Foreign language bureau, used to be the most prestigious public diplomacy organ until the 1990s. It was founded in 1949 under the name of International News Bureau of News Directorate of the Chinese People's Government. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs administrated the organ between 1970 and 1972, before the bureau was taken over by the CCP's Foreign Relations Department and then transferred to the newly reorganized Ministry of Culture in 1982. The bureau gained a status of independent public institution (shi ye dan wei 事业单位) in 1991. With its seven publishing houses, five periodicals¹⁶ and 12 overseas branches, its own research institute and a distribution network worldwide, the well-fledged public diplomacy organ curiously have not played a more significant role in this round of media going out as it should. Since 1990s, China has undergone a reconfiguration of party-state's role in the market economy and media were no longer subsidized 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), one of the many CIGP periodicals for example, the magazine with English and French versions was founded in 1988 and had been the only Chinese magazine distributed in Africa. In 2001, *China and Africa* stopped making 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 struggled to re-establish its readership from scratch again.

On the one hand, it signaled that this round of media outreach might have slanted to broadcasting media. On the other hand, the new legion under the GOP project is constituted predominantly by mainstream media producing for both domestic and international markets: CCTV, *China Daily* and China Radio International and Xinhua. Many evidences show that in applying for fund the media have to show their own initiatives and motivation, with their correct understanding of the policy instructions issued by the state is a requirement. 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*, and *Chinese National Geography* while the rest six are from provincial cities. In order to attain the promised financial support from the state, media organizations nationwide have to be

¹⁴ Interview with staff of CRI, Africa Bureau, 11. February, 2014,

¹⁵ Geoffrey York, "Why China is making a big play to control Africa's media", Sep. 11 2013, *The Globe and Mail*, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/media-agenda-china-buys-newsrooms-influence-in-africa/article14269323/>

¹⁶ CIPG has seven publishing houses (Foreign Languages Press, New World Press, Morning Glory Publishers, Sinolingua, China Pictorial Publishing House, Dolphin Books, New Star Publishers) and five periodicals (Beijing Review, China Today, China Pictorial, People's China, China Report) published in a number of language editions. The organization annually publishes over 2,000 book titles, 21 printed periodicals, as well as 25 cyber journals in 20 languages. China International Book Trading Corporation, a CIPG subsidiary, distributes all these books and periodicals to over 100 countries and regions., as on the CIPG's website-(http://www.cipg.com.cn/about_cipg/overview/)

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

The confusing discrepancies between the Chinese media houses in Africa and what have been conventionally understood as public diplomacy media need to be elucidated. The Chinese media in Africa would not describe themselves as mere public diplomacy organs¹⁷. The tasks as they understand have more ramifications. They shall:

- Contribute to China's public diplomacy and promote China's image and values;
- Bring the news about Africa to Chinese audience;
- Compete with international mainstream media.

Contribute to China's public diplomacy

First of all, as inscribed in their ownership and power structure, the Chinese media houses share a sense of obligation to promote China's interest in Africa. CRI, who found the first Chinese overseas station in Nairobi in 2006, has played the most significant role in promoting Chinese culture and values. CRI's Chinese-teaching program, "Broadcasting Confucius Classroom (Guangbo kong zi ke tang)" gained such popularity among local audience that the classroom in air was developed into classrooms in brick-and-mortar in Tunisia, Tanzania and Kenya. In Nairobi, CRI's African station's local partners include one public boarding school (HHHS), one private international school (BIS) and one private Chinese training school (CICCK) in establishing three bases for Chinese teaching and qualification exams (HSK). The HHHS and CICCK bases have 5 Chinese teachers sent by Hanban, teaching 300 enrolled students, including 100 new students enrolled in 2013, 30% higher than the enrollment rate of 2012. Established in 2014, the BIS classroom shall offer Chinese course for children from first grade to high school seniors in the international school.

Introducing Chinese television and cinema into Africa seemed to be another highlight of CRI's achievement in promoting Chinese public diplomacy. During its long-term service in Africa, CRI have fostered a talent pool of radio journalists who can work with English, French, Portuguese, Swahili, Hausa and Arabic. The incomparable linguistic advantages greatly facilitated CRI's ascending to a central position in culture and media exchange programs between China and Africa. After CRI's film and television translation center translated the first Chinese television drama into Kiswahili and broadcasted in Tanzania and Kenya in 2011, the TV drama's French version was aired in Senegal in 2013. The popularity of this TV drama became a favorite anecdote for Chinese and African politicians when they talked about mutual understanding and cultural commonalities between China and Africa. Up to now, CRI have translated 1300 episodes of Chinese TV drama, cinema, animation and documentaries¹⁸.

Bring the news about Africa to Chinese audience

Unlike the U.S. government's broadcasting arm being restricted by a so-called anti-propaganda law preventing them from delivering programming to American audiences, journalists from Xinhua, CRI and CCTV Africa made it clear that many of their stories are sent back to China and consumed by domestic audience¹⁹.

¹⁷ Interview with staff of CRI, Xinhua, China Daily and CCTV in Nairobi. February, 2014.

¹⁸ Ren Qian, Speech in The 2nd Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation, June 16, 2014, Beijing, <http://english.cntv.cn/2014/06/16/ARTI1402899560543888.shtml>

¹⁹ ibid

Xinhua foreign correspondents write in both Chinese and foreign languages, on stories they regard would be intriguing for the people back home. CCTV Africa made plenty of documentaries about nature, wild life, among other tourist attractions in Africa, and stories about China-Africa issues are always within their focus. In the case of CRI, much of the agenda in news selection and production is set by the head office in Beijing where editors work in shifts around the clock. Whenever there is breaking news, the head office would ring up the local team for action. On less urgent or important issues, the local team can make their own decisions. *China Daily Africa* sets out to strengthen the China-Africa tie and to deliver African stories to their English readership in China.

Compete with international mainstream media

It is quite clear that the Chinese media operate in Africa on a competitive base. As far as to our knowledge, CRI's Africa bureau is among the first Chinese media houses to conduct audience research in Africa. In 2013, Du Shunfang from CRI's Africa bureau finalized an audience inquiry in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, using the methods of questionnaire survey and interview to acquire information about CRI's program and their competitions in the East Africa region. The informants were selected from a rather wide spectrum of professions, ranging from civil servant, firm employees, school teachers, media practitioners, students, businessmen, laborers, farmers, artists and performers to taxi drivers. The investigation shows that radio remained the most reliable, popular and populous communication platform. Another research demonstrates that 89% of Kenyan adults listen to radio for news and information in fixed time on daily basis. Information transmitted over radio is regarded as trustworthy. CRI's research finds out that many Kenyan spend many hours on listening Radio, up to six hours in remote rural area. Radio is the most accessible source of information in Tanzania and Uganda because of lack of electricity and financial means. The research concludes that among all international Radio broadcasters in East Africa, BBC is the most obvious favorite, for its immediacy, relevancy and accuracy, as demonstrated by its prime time news program *Dira Ya Dunia*. Advices suggested in the report are: 1) increase "Chinese learning" airtime; 2) increase airtime of Kiswahili program and broaden coverage in Tanzania; 3) catch up with BBC and deploy correspondent in every country covered by CRI waves, introduce more interactive programs such as interviews and call-in, and attune to local culture. 4) Establish listeners' clubs and more reward program to enthusiastic listeners; 5) As a new entrant in the market, many informant did not even aware of the existence of CRI and RFI but admitted they listen to BBC and VOA regularly. Hence self-promotion and visibility in public places is vital for CRI's branding in the three countries ²⁰.

CCTV Africa entered the market even later, but as television news plays a more visible role in African political and social life, and CCTV Africa was broadcasted via major national TV networks across Africa, it is difficult not to register the existence of the channel even people may yet to be a fan. Most informants in our field study compare CCTV Africa with BBC and Al Jazeera. A Kenya TV journalist suggests that BBC and Al Jazeera are superior because they "are always the fastest. Whenever something happened, which one is the first channel I turn to? Of course BBC! Al Jazeera is catching up too. They are getting fresher and more accurate than they did". ²¹ On the other hand, informants did give credit to CCTV Africa for it provides a meaningful addition to the market.

²⁰ Du Shunfang, An Overview of Media Presence in the East African three countries and the communication effect of CRI. 2013

²¹ Interview with a Kenyan TV journalist, 12. Feb. 2014

CCTV Africa aspired to be in the same league as BBC and Al Jazeera. It positions itself as a global broadcaster from Africa, taking a position "to tell a different story of Africa to the world", instead of "to tell a different story of China to Africa". CCTV Africa's news anchor Beatrice Marshall accentuated in her interview that she decided to join CCTV Africa because she shares the CCTV's ambition to show the world a real and under-reported side of Africa: the developments in nation-building, the success stories, the promising future. As an African, she is confident that CCTV is providing an African perspective of Africa, with a "very deep pocket"²².

CCTV's investments in infrastructure and equipment appropriately match its ambition. With four live-broadcast studios in Nairobi, Cairo, Lagos and Johannesburg and a staff of 70 employees, it has already outrun its international competitors in the region. Its French program was launched in 2014 and the current daily one-hour program consisting of Africa Live, Talk Africa and Faces of Africa editions will be expanded into a full channel within 5 years.

Organizationally, the Chinese media show a clear tendency in localization. Among the 70 employees of CCTV Africa's Nairobi office, 60 are from Kenya, with the rest 10 people from other countries, China included. The editorial team, manned predominantly by Kenyan staff, drafts a bulletin on what they are about to report and it usually receives minor adjustments from Beijing. Beatrice stressed the fact that she never experienced any censorship from Beijing, however the director of the office, Mr. Pang Xinhua is sent from Beijing, who is responsible for signing off all programs²³. Other accounts from the same team, on the contrast, suggest that a certain degree of control and manipulation over the content does exist.

"Other CCTV Africa journalists say they were told to provide positive news on China, to omit negative words such as "regime," and to ignore countries such as Swaziland that have diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Chinese demand for ivory could not be mentioned in stories about Africa's poaching crisis, one journalist said. Another recalled how human-rights questions had to be avoided in an interview with an authoritarian African leader. "I knew it would be cut out of my story, so I self-censored," he said. "²⁴

Under a similar principle of localization, Xinhua News Agency and CRI rely 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.

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, due to the following factors:

- Confusing Positioning

Our research finds out that the lack of contents about China from the Chinese media disappoints the African audience. Upon the arrival of Chinese media African audience look

²² Interview with Beatrice Marshall, 13. Feb. 2014

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Geoffrey York, "Why China is making a big play to control Africa's media",

forward to know more about China from the Chinese media. Their curiosity towards China was stimulated by how Chinese commodities, workers and businessmen have been making inroads in Africa since 2000. It is only natural that African people expect to gain information about this remote country that is having significant impacts in their society; on the other hand very few media from African countries could afford sending journalists to China, therefore the media coverage on China-related themes from African side goes seldom beyond labor conflicts and general debates and opinion pieces. China remained remote and incomprehensible for most African people, and even media professionals cannot claim they have better knowledge about China than average people, as all the Ugandan, Kenyan and Mozambique journalists we interviewed expressed their eagerness to learn more about China. It was disappointing that the existing demand was not met by the content strategy of CCTV Africa. Like a Uganda journalist complained, "They have some program about China, but still, in the mind of Ugandan, now I am speaking from the perspective from someone who is interacting with lots of Ugandan, we do not have a clear idea of China."²⁵ There are program about China in CCTV 4, nevertheless these programs were not tailor-made for African audiences.

How can Chinese media meet the expectation of African audience? Several African journalists gave specific suggestions on desirable themes:

- Agriculture and the development in rural areas
- Governance, administration in urban area
- Gender issues, the status of feminist movement
- Music, dance,
- Sports, especially about African footballer playing in Chinese leagues
- Everyday life of ordinary people

Instrumentalism / Insufficient understanding of local media environment

The Chinese media in Africa are preoccupied with casting positive light upon Africa but ironically the positioning appeared to be less than appetizing for African audience. In general the Chinese media's coverage about Africa can be described as "a formula of upbeat business and cultural stories and a deferential pro-government tone, while ignoring human-rights issues and the backlash against China's own growing power."²⁶

African television viewers look for political drama and conflict in television news, which were provided as a staple in Kenyan television news. One informant joked that "When people in Rwanda are bored they just switch on TV and said: «let's watch Kenya News and get some

²⁵ Interview with S, 04.Feb 2014 Kampala, Uganda.

²⁶ Geoffrey York, "Why China is making a big play to control Africa's media",

drama!”²⁷. Being accustomed to a media environment of lively debate, outspoken criticism and sensational controversies, many informants from east African countries confessed that the CCTV Africa news program is bland and timid to their taste. A Uganda journalist said;

“China is not interested in looking the things that affected people. They show you the infrastructure program in Ethiopia, coming in Uganda. But this lack of human right issue, for example is unsatisfying. China would never condemn the government of Uganda if they do something bad. As long as the business relationship is fine everything is OK. They do human interest stories but on a rather superficial level. They do not if it will annoy Ugandan government. ”²⁸

According to the interviews with the Chinese media, although there might not be any explicit instruction from Beijing to regard political conflict as taboo, the local staff can be very cautious to get involved in local political controversies. As a African journalist working for a Chinese media house clarifies: “Reporting conflict: In every story there are more than one side. We do not want to pick one side to simplify it.”²⁹

Low level of interaction with local people

Even though people are aware of the Chinese media presence 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 mindset 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 organized 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.

The strategic thinking behind the game of encirclement may perfectly explain the reluctance many Chinese companies have in interacting with local people in Africa: You spot a place of strategic importance, and then you put your stones in the area, working out the way so they

²⁷ Interview with a Kenya civil service. 09 Feb. 2014 , Nairobi, Kenya.

²⁸ Quote from interview with S, Kampala, Uganda.

²⁹ Interview with staff of CRI, Xinhua, China Daily and CCTV in Nairobi. February 2014.

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 has been 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.

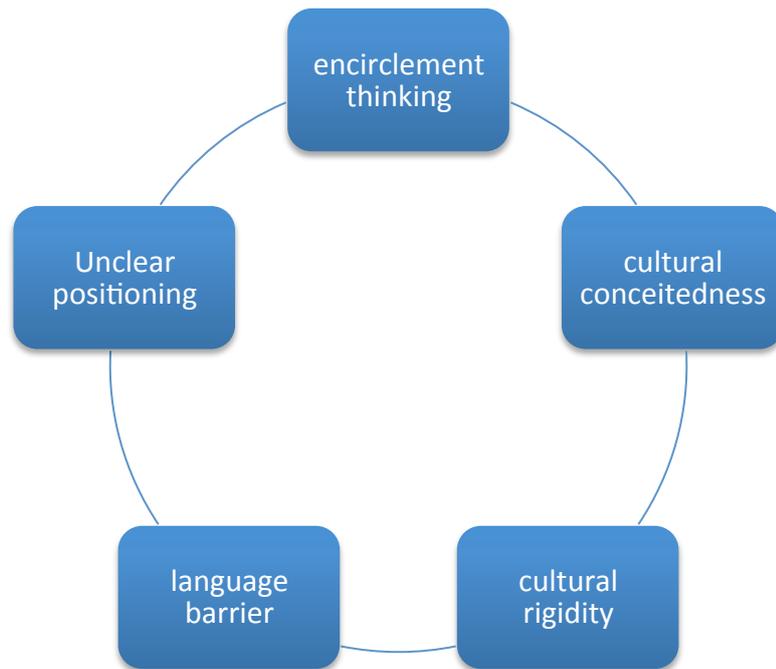
The manager of a Chinese farm in Mozambique told me that the reason he run the farm in a “military-style management ” (jun shi hua guan li 军事化管理) is he take the safety and welfare of his fellow workers and their family into consideration. The Militarized style boils down to one simple rule: no Chinese worker, with the exception of the manager, shall go out of the compound alone. One shall ask at least four companions if he must go out. The manager holds that going out alone is too risky for the Chinese workers who do not speak local language. They might be easy prey for prostitutes and criminals, or be caught in accident, quarrel or might catch tropical diseases.

Going out without a good reason is useless and dangerous. This utilitarian point of view can be widely observed in Chinese communities in Africa, be it of farm workers, businessmen, or journalists. Why the Chinese in Africa prefer to hang out with their fellow countrymen? Lack of language capacity might be the most obvious barricade. Many Chinese working in Kenya can speak English at work and several phrases of Kiswahili that can help them get around. However more in-depth communication and casual talks in social surrounding can be demanding and hence stressful for them when their language skill turned insufficient. The obstruction of language gets worse in French and Portuguese speaking countries.

When being asked why they are reluctant to hang out with their African colleagues after work, our informants often reasoned that their definition of relaxed social life could be very different from that of the Africans. While Chinese people enjoy a big meal and playing mahjong the Africans take pleasure in drinking, music and sports³⁰. However cultural rigidity and cultural conceitedness might be the real causes preventing Chinese people from blending with local people. It can be observed that many Chinese look down to African people. The Chinese show little interest in local culture and history, and seldom conceal their contempt for local people and describe them as “lazy, irresponsible and dishonest”, as compare the “Chinese characteristics” of superior work ethic and sense of responsibility. Most Chinese people staying in Africa are here for work. In the media houses as in other businesses, employees usually stay in a country for a shift of three-year, before being transferred to another country or continent. The mobility can impede the staff bonding with the country and the culture.

The encirclement thinking, plus the cultural conceitedness and narrow-mindedness may lead to that the Chinese people are contented to stay with their own circle, and prevented themselves from going out their comfort zone and exploring local cultures and people, and therefore minimalize their chances of language learning, and in return harm their capacity of social networking and interaction with local people.

³⁰ Interviews with Chinese in Kenya and Mozambique



This enclosure of mind has caused problem for the Chinese companies, especially in labor-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 skeptical bystanders other than engaged audiences, let alone inspired followers.