



Enter the Dragon: China's Media War in Africa

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"The whole secret lies in confusing the enemy so he can't fathom the real intent." - Sun Tzu
(Chinese war leader, strategist and philosopher)

On New Year's Eve 2016, President Xi Jinping of China sent a congratulatory message to the China Global Television Network (CGTN), which had rebranded and relaunched its former label, the China Central Television (CCTV).

"Tell China stories well, spread China stories as well, spread China's voice well, let the world know a three-dimension colourful China and showcase China's role as a builder of world peace," extolled the president while inaugurating the channel's newly enlarged and sophisticated production studios in Beijing.

CGTN, which is the biggest news network and production house in mainland China, sustained its operations by beaming and broadcasting news as CCTV, just like before, and therefore was not affected by the rebranding. It has continued to telecast news and make documentaries and news programmes tailored for local consumption that are sanctioned by the Central Committee of the Communist Party. CGTN is the equivalent of the state-run Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), but with the clout and financial muscle that makes KBC look like one of its many news production

departments.

But it is the CGTN's operations and manoeuvres geared to cast China as a global phenomenon in the 21st century and beyond that the Central Committee is really keen to see. It would like its wings to spread worldwide so as to, "showcase China's role as a builder of world peace", as President Jinping mildly put it more than two years ago. Delivered as a message to a world that is undergoing tumultuous political shocks, it was a statement that camouflaged China's real and serious global expansionist intentions as we enter the third decade of the 21st millennium.

That statement, as innocuous as it sounded, is a characteristic of Chinese foreign policy lingo that deliberately seeks to not frighten or scare its neighbours, such as India, Japan and South Korea, into alertness (military or otherwise), or to not arouse suspicious feelings (which might lead to heightened escalation of global drums of war) among fellow world economic powers, such as Germany, Japan, the United States and the militaristic Russia. Such a statement also serves to calm and reassure countries in Africa and Asia that China hopes to extract raw materials from.

It is a philosophical underpinning that was underscored by Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese post-modern reformist leader who ruled between 1978 and 1989, who famously stated in the early 1980s: "Observe development soberly, maintain your position, meet challenges calmly, hide your capacity and bide your time, remain free of ambition, never claim leadership."

Yet, beneath the carefully crafted and worded statements by the president and the senior Central Committee members that portray China as a humble and benevolent Big Brother - whose only agenda is world peace and harmonious co-existence - is a hidden, subtle, and ruthless ambition and pursuit of global power that China hopes to use to conquer the world and re-establish China as the dominant civilisation that it once was in the centuries gone by.

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CGTN is a consolidation of six carefully picked foreign-language operations. Apart from Chinese, the channel broadcasts in Arabic, English, French, Russian and Spanish. It is a convergence of print, radio, TV, and online (new media) publication. In 2009, the Chinese government had already set \$6.5 billion aside for CCTV's rebranding and expansion into CGTN. In November 2018, CGTN opened a state-of-the-art bureau in Chiswick, a wealthy London suburb. That bureau is supposed to cover the length and breadth of continental Europe.

The [One Belt, One Road \(OBOR\)](#) initiative is the combination of railway lines (belts) and (silk) roads that are supposed to link mainland China with the rest of the world, collapsing distances for a hungry China in need of raw materials for its economic quantum leap and eventually its world political power. It is China's latest massive agenda, which it hopes will catapult it to an economic power house that rivals every other world economic power within 25 years.

Italy, Portugal and Greece are among Europe's rancorous democracies that have bought into the idea of OBOR. China will be building a road and railway line into Italy and with that link, create trade routes and have access to continental Europe's goods as it taps into its engineering and technological advancement. The newly opened CGTN bureau in London, one of the biggest financial hubs in the world, will, among other things, capture and tell the story of the entry and success of

OBOR in Europe.

Nairobi and news out of Africa

However, it is the CGTN's Nairobi bureau that continues to elicit excitement and which is being closely watched (pun intended) by Western powers who once totally commanded and controlled the information flow entering and leaving the country and region. The bureau officially started broadcasting from Nairobi on January 11, 2012 as CCTV. On December 31, 2016, the bureau launched its CGTN operations and was made the biggest bureau in Africa, whose operations cover the entire continent, especially in regions that China has a keen interest in. Just around the same time, Xinhua, China's largest news agency, signed a pact with Nation Media Group (NMG), ostensibly to trade news, but really for Xinhua, to have access to tell its stories in the largest newspaper in the region.

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Other CGTN bureaus in Africa exist - in Johannesburg, Lagos, and Cairo. The other major bureau outside of Beijing and Nairobi is the Washington DC bureau. The Washington bureau gives the Chinese an opportunity to show the Americans that they can also operate on their soil. However, in terms of strategic significance, geopolitical importance and long-term plans, the Nairobi bureau far outflanks the Washington bureau.

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The re-organisation of the state-controlled CGTN in Nairobi did not go unnoticed by the Western media based in the city. At just about the same time, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), another state-run media conglomerate, was also expanding and moving its Nairobi operations from the central business district offices at Norfolk Towers to the quiet suburb of Riverside Drive. Its first move was to raid CGTN's experienced staff - editors, reporters and mainly producers - and to hike their salaries and remunerations as an incentive to luring them from the heavily-funded Chinese media house, where money was the least of its problems. In its expanded offices, the BBC Nairobi bureau, which has been reporting on Kenya and the East African region for the last five decades or so, employed 300 journalists (four-fifths of whom were locals) to boost its image and presence.

“Our most important investment,” opined the Director of BBC News, Francesca Unsworth, “will be training the next generation of African reporters and producers to world class standards.”

This dramatic shift in the BBC's policy does not surprise Gray Phombeah, who was the BBC's Nairobi bureau chief from 2006 till 2008. When he became bureau chief, the BBC's Nairobi office was tiny, comprising only around ten people. By the time he left in October 2008, it had expanded to more than 30 staff members, the majority of whom were Kenyan journalists. “It was during this time that the BBC broadcast for the first time the Swahili programme, Amka na BBC, from outside its

London headquarters," he says.

However, Phombeah is aware that "Africanising" the BBC bureau in Nairobi does not necessarily mean that Kenyan or African stories will be told from an African perspective and without bias. "We have to remember that the BBC World Service is Britain's soft power, and so who controls and manages its bureaus abroad is part and parcel of that. The fact that the BBC has recognised the importance of having African journalists telling the continent's stories is a good thing, but we must also accept the fact that only those stories that are palatable or acceptable to the British ruling class and Foreign Office mandarins get told."

Clearly CGTN's serious rebranding and infusion of more money by the state for its expansion and penetration into the African continent merited the BBC's re-evaluation of its operations in Africa - whether by default or design. The BBC also "relaunched" in November 2018 to position itself as the premier global broadcaster that takes the African continent seriously.

Two decades ago, in 1998, the BBC World Service had already opened its office in Nairobi. "The BBC began by moving its operations from Johannesburg to Nairobi," said a senior BBC editor, who is not authorised to comment on the BBC's Africa media plans. "Several things mitigated the shift: labour issues - the trade unions in South Africa are very powerful and strong - the worrying issue of escalating xenophobia and the fact that Johannesburg oftentimes is far removed (geographically and its heartbeat) from the continental issues that are central to the rest of the African countries."

Africa is as important to the BBC as it is to CGTN. The BBC, in a project it is calling World 2020, in which its strategic expansion plans in Africa from its Nairobi headquarters are expected to have reached their zenith, is also expanding into Asia, building networks and partnering with local radio and TV stations to create as big a BBC audience as it possibly can.

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"Today, the United Kingdom's best known and strongest foreign policy brand is the BBC," said the BBC senior editor. "With the Brexit imbroglio, the UK must look outwards and reach out to countries that it has had past relations with." (Many of these countries, it goes without saying, are former colonies.)

The Propaganda Department

CGTN currently employs 150 local journalists who work as camera personnel, studio technicians, editors and producers, but the managerial and editorial decisions remain solely in the hands of the expatriate Chinese staff.

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CGTN is not in the business of making profits, but countering what it considers to be the Western media's distortion of the Chinese presence on the continent, said the former CGTN editor. "The major agenda for CGTN in Africa is propaganda, that is propagating China's interests in Africa, through its own voice and medium." To this extent, said the editor, "the Communist Party's

Propaganda Department heavily channels inexhaustible funds to CGTN as part of its global information warfare.”

But a senior assistant director of news at CGTN, a Kenyan, refutes the assertion that CGTN is an out-and-out self-censorship propaganda channel. “True the Managing Editor is Chinese, but his substantive editors are international staff, and they are anybody else but Chinese. CGTN only controls news that touch on Chinese interests and its foreign policy, its Asian neighbourhood, and major state conferences, like the just concluded One Belt, One Road International Forum that took place in Beijing last month...every other news is fair game.”

The most boring time to work for CGTN, said the director of news, is the month of March. “It’s the political season in China. That’s when the executive committee of the Communist Party meets and deliberates on issues. It also the time Parliament does the same, as it passes legislative laws deemed appropriate for the country. On these matters, nobody is better placed to handle them than the Chinese staff themselves. You easily could lose your job for ‘misreporting’ these events.” Misreporting here meaning reporting impartially and being critical, if need be.

CGTN may not be as thorough as the BBC, but by and large it is building its content for its Africa coverage, said the director of news. “China has a 100-year-long term plan for Africa and a fully-fledged news coverage of Africa is part of the plan. When CCTV started in 2012, it used to have only 30 minutes of African news. Soon, it was broadcasting the one-hour lunchtime Africa Live. Africa Live soon had two editions - the lunchtime one between 1 pm and 2 pm and the 8pm one. Now, they even have Global Business Africa, a one-hour programme dedicated to African business news daily between 9pm and 10pm.”

Other programmes include the weekend shows, Face of Africa and Talk Africa. Face of Africa, a documentary, is shown on Sundays for 30 minutes, while Talk Africa is televised on Saturdays, between 8.30pm and 9pm. Talk Africa touched on various African issues, be they economic, political or social. There is also 30 minutes of African sports reporting on Saturdays. CGTN’s goal in Africa is to eventually sell China’s brand image to every corner of the continent, said the director of news.

In this current world of media explosion and Internet influence, if you can control the information warfare globally, you have half won the battle against your adversaries, said CGTN’s former editor, who added that China has taken this dictum extremely seriously. China believes that it is only by controlling and telling its narratives through its own kaleidoscopic lenses that it will achieve its own goal and pursuit of ultimate power and influence in the world.

But more than telling its own narratives and controlling what kind of news comes from its channels, the Chinese also realised that the Western media in Africa does not report positively about the continent. “They understood there is a gap they can plug in, even as they plot on how to maximize and rationalise their presence on the vast continent,” said the CGTN news director.

“In Africa, CGTN is competing with the Americans especially, whose media presence in the continent has been waning. The Cable News Network (CNN) and the Voice of America (VOA) are the only American news media outlets that report anything on Africa and when they do, it’s not all positive. Even then, CNN has one single correspondent dedicated to the whole of Africa.” The director of news said many American journalists consider being posted to Africa as a downgrade - in their minds Africa is still this backward, backwaters continent.

In the information warfare in Africa between America and China, “America has unfortunately been losing the (propaganda) war,” said the CGTN producer. “Today, when CNN wants to report on Africa, it relies on just one leanly-staffed bureau based in South Africa, and if it needs support, it

flies in one of its various correspondents, who jet in in the morning and by evening have jetted out.”

For example, when David McKenzie, the CNN reporter stationed in Johannesburg, or Nina Elbagir, the Sudan-born CNN foreign correspondent, report on Africa, it is usually about a tragedy and generally bad news. “The only time CNN reports big time on Africa is when a calamity has taken place...CNN’s model on reporting Africa has remained the same since the days of Jeff Koinange - who was also the sole reporter from Cape to Cairo, Dar es Salaam to Dakar, Luanda to Lagos. Hence, with the exception of BBC, the Western media doesn’t have a major presence in Africa,” said the director of news.

Natural resources diplomacy

The decision by China to pick Nairobi as its continental operational base was a well- calibrated move and a “diplomatic coup” to bolster its grip on the country’s and the continent’s strategic extractive resource materials. China, through CGTN, views itself as a friend of Africa and enabler of its developmental progress and peacekeeping force, hence, its “favourable” reporting on its working relations with some of the countries it is directly dealing with.

The producer observed that “CGTN will not do ‘human rights stories’...the kind of stories that Al Jazeera, BBC and other international media organisations are wont to doing in Africa because the Communist Party has a clearly spelt out non-interference [foreign] policy that states that China will not seek to influence any country’s domestic politics.”

“China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in July 2017 - People’s Liberation Army (and) Navy (PLAN) - from there it coordinates its peace keeping missions in Africa,” said the CGTN producer. “Nairobi is close enough to be reporting (positively) on the Chinese force working in trouble spots such as Mali and South Sudan, helping to stabilise those countries (peacefully) without China necessarily interfering with their domestic affairs.” According to the Council on Foreign Relations, an American think-tank, China in 2017 contributed about 2,500 troops and military experts to six United Nations peacekeeping missions in Africa.

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Hence, “China’s entry into Africa - with its value-neutral ‘natural resources diplomacy’ - has outflanked the West and forced a donor retreat from democracy,” recently wrote Wachira Maina, a constitutional lawyer.

To shut its (Western media) critics, CGTN has ostensibly been reporting good news coming out of Africa, such as innovation and technological advancement in relation to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and business concerns all over Africa, said the CGTN producer. “CGTN content is heavily slanted towards their investments in Africa - mainly in infrastructure and telecommunications, light industries (solar panels and green energy), mobile telephony assembly, mobile gadgets customised for Africa, and heavy commercial vehicle assembly in South Africa.”

China’s First Auto Works (FAW), the long distance truck engines and body works, opened its first plant in Johannesburg and CGTN never ceases to report about how China is partnering with Africa to build and develop its future production plants. Until Huawei, a Chinese telecommunication company, entered the African market in 1998, Africa’s telecommunication industry was controlled and

dominated by Western multinational corporations, such as Ericsson, Motorola and Nokia. A dozen years later, the stiff market competition triggered by Huawei and other Chinese private companies have altered the terrain completely. The cost of telecommunications equipment and rates have gone down drastically.

Five months after CGTN was inaugurated in Beijing, in May 2017, Kenya launched a \$3.2 billion standard gauge railway line funded by China, linking the capital Nairobi to the port of Mombasa, arguably making it the biggest infrastructure project in Kenya since independence in 1963. Popularly known as the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), the railway line is part of the OBOR project. That railway line is supposed to run all the way to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), passing through Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda. It is also supposed to divert to South Sudan and Ethiopia.

The East-West media war

“Under the One Belt, One Road initiative, China is investing nearly \$900 billion in what it thinks of as a trunk silk-road. One trunk is an overland network of rail, road and power grids that link China’s industrial heartland to the vast oil, natural gas and mineral resources of Central Asia and on the market of Eastern and Western Europe,” observed Wachira. “The second trunk is a maritime silk road with two branches – an Indian Ocean link to sub-Saharan Africa and a Red Sea link to North Africa and Europe where ‘maritime road and overland belt’ converge.”

China, an emerging global power, and Britain, a retreating and politically troubled former colonial power, will channel their “media wars” from their bases in Nairobi. It will be a battle between a new Eastern power that hopes to gain a foothold in the continent’s unexplored extractive sector and a nostalgic Western power keen not to lose its control over African and Asian Commonwealth countries. Either way, both have decided to use the media as soft power to endear themselves to the continent.

In *China in Africa: Power, Media Perceptions and a Pan-Developing Identity*, Shubi Li and Helge Ronning argue that China’s media presence in Africa has increased in the last couple of years. “The country’s major media representative, Xinhua News Agency, added five more branches in 2011.”

The authors point out that 150 journalists and 400 local staff in Nairobi dispatch 1,800 pieces of news in English every month. “Radio has been an indispensable means of transmitting soft power, especially in a continent where half of the countries have a 30 percent illiteracy rate,” says the book’s authors. “In February 2006, China Radio International (CRI) launched its first overseas FM radio station in Nairobi with a schedule of daily programmes for 19 hours in English, Kiswahili and Chinese, covering China’s economic, social and cultural development.”

But China’s penetration of the Africa media scene has not been without criticism: “China has a record of jamming transmissions that it finds unpalatable,” said an editorial in the *Zimbabwe Independent*, which is quoted in the book. The editorial said that China also passes this technology to its (African) friends. Said the editorial: “China’s strict control of media and the Internet is not helping when it attempts to offer media aid in Africa.”

On the other hand, observe Li and Ronning in their book, “Chinese media following instructions from the Central Propaganda Department has been educating the public about the importance of building up soft power internationally and exporting the Chinese development model.”

China’s growing global dominance in the last quarter of a century has grown significantly. Indeed, the recently concluded One Belt, One Road International Cooperation Forum in Beijing further cemented Chinese dominance as a fast-rising global superpower. The country’s media presence in

Africa is its latest strategy for global supremacy.

However, unlike that of other superpowers, the Chinese model of world domination is more subtle, as observed by the great Chinese war leader, strategist and philosopher, Sun Tzu, who said, "The whole secret lies in confusing the enemy so he can't fathom the real intent."

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