

D.1 China in Africa: Essays

The “My China Story Competition” Campaign in Uganda: Molding the Global China Narrative One Human Interaction at a Time

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As is perhaps at last better known to the great elite liberal democratic vanguard communities² and their administrative partners in the regulatory and security organs³ (though not yet understood by their media outlets in the press and social media),⁴ China, through its Party propaganda and foreign ministries has begun much more robustly to project and control the narrative of its own image, and the explanation of its own system, to its partners abroad.⁵ The framework for this projection is the Belt & Road Initiative. BRI, as is also now better appreciated (perhaps) has as one of its key elements a cultural, political and people-to-people component that is meant to create deeper and stronger alignments between China and its partners.

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² Given the structures of social and political organization within liberal democratic orders one cannot call these societal vanguards mere political parties, as those are the fronts beside which more durable guiding organizations which manifest only within the political sector. See, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Inclusive Vanguardism: The Alternative Futures of the Knowledge Economy* (OECD), Transcript of a video of a discussion at the OECD, Paris, on May 5, 2017 available [https://www.oecd.org/naec/Inclusive%20Vanguardism_R%20Unger.pdf].

³ Cf., Mike Lofgren, *The Deep State* (NY: Penguin, 2016).

⁴ Cf., Tuen A. van Dijk, *Discourse and Power* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁵ See, e.g., David Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy,” in *Critical Readings on the Communist Party of China* 713-751 (Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard (ed) Brill, 2016); Kingley Edney, “Soft Power and the Chinese Propaganda System,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 21(79):899-914 (2012).

That this is critical work is undeniable--the control, and controlled projection, of a well curated national image and of its political-economic model principles in ways that are better aligned to the cultures and expectations of receiving societies is an essential and fundamental task in (1) challenging and then supplanting the Western liberal democratic model as the baseline against which to measure the welfare and happiness of a political community, and (2) providing the principles guiding the means by which that welfare may be advanced by the state and its related organs. Fundamental to this project is the construction of an easy to understand image and principles system, and then to embed and naturalize its matter-of-factness within the masses of a target community. The more the common people come to understand and embrace a way of understanding a dominant power and its political-economic-social system, the more likely it is that stronger bonds will be created--to the greater glory of that exporting state.⁶

U.S. public administrators understand this at some level.⁷ To date, however, their efforts have been hampered both by a lack of commitment to such a project and as well because of the debilitating effects of the continuing and quite aggressive warfare among elements of the liberal democratic vanguard communities over the exact context of the "American story."⁸ That factional fighting has produced an inward turning that makes effective projection of a unified vision of the liberal democratic and markets based order now much more difficult and also easier to target for the weaknesses their own elites are constructing.⁹ At the same time, liberal democratic efforts are only partially public projects; it is also to some extent privatized.¹⁰

⁶ This appeared to be understood at the time of the creation of the post 1945 global order under the vanguard leadership of the United States. See, e.g., Max Beloff, "The Projection of America Abroad," *American Quarterly* 1(1):23-29 (1949); Connie Gentry, "Projections of America: Introducing the American Way of Life Abroad," *The National WWII Museum* (11 August 2021); available [<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/projections-of-america-propaganda>].

⁷ Discussed generally, Robert Albrow, "The disjunction of image and word in US and Chinese soft power projection," *International Journal of Cultural Power* 21(4):382-399 (2015).

⁸ See, e.g., Timothy Sandeur, "The 1619 Project: An Autopsy," *Cato Institute* (27 October 2020), available [<https://www.cato.org/commentary/1619-project-autopsy#>].

⁹ This was a trajectory that might perhaps have reached its emotive apogee in the contests over the 2020 Presidential election and its aftermath, both enveloped within the United States in a sort of apocalyptic discourse quite conscious of its effect on projections of U.S. images abroad. See, e.g., Sarah Yerkes and Thomas Hill, "To champion US values abroad, start with North Africa," *The Hill* (15 February 2021) available [<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/538530-to-champion-us-values-abroad-start-with-north-africa>] ("At home, the Biden administration must prioritize repairing America's democracy. The erosion of democratic norms and the challenge to democratic institutions have caused many around the world to lose faith in American support.")

¹⁰ See, e.g., Athanasios Moulakis, "What the U.S. Government Can't Do Abroad, Colleges Can," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (3 July 2011); available [<https://www.chronicle.com/article/what-the-u-s-government-cant-do-abroad-colleges-can/>].

The Chinese vanguard is not so hampered. And so it is with great interest that one can observe the ways in which its propaganda and foreign ministries coordinate efforts, under the guidance of the vanguard and its developing approach to a construction of the narrative of China and its system, within BRI partner states. One of the more visible projects coordinated with the upcoming celebrations of the centenary of the Communist Party of China is the "My China Story" campaign available through the Chinese People's Daily operation.¹¹

But much more interesting is the targeting of this campaign within China's Belt & Road African partner states. In April 2021, for example, the Chinese embassy in Uganda announced its sponsorship, along with New Vision,¹² of an Ugandan "My China Story Competition." The announcement was distributed through Uganda's newspapers.¹³ The theme of the 2021 competition was to help celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China: "The Centenary Journey of the Communist Party of China and its inspiration and inspirations and implications to the Social-Economic-Transformation of Uganda."¹⁴ Participants were encouraged to share "stories on the Communist Party of China with articles, video clips and/or photos."¹⁵ Prizes included mobile phone and a trip to China.¹⁶

Ten winners of the competition were announced in June 2021, out of a total of 135 entrants. The ceremony was held at Vision Group head offices in Kampala.¹⁷

Vision Group's content manager for news and current affairs, Felix Osike, said the essay contest was highly competitive, with over 300 entries received by the judges. "This is an eye-opener for you to learn a lot about China. For those who get the

¹¹ "My China Story: A Place Like No Other," China Daily.com A copy of the announcement may be found at [https://lcbackerblog.blogspot.com/2021/04/chinas-new-vision-campaign-taking.html]. The website invites readers to share their stories but notes that though China Daily receives "interesting stories and opinions almost every day" only stories that meet China Daily's "editorial standards" will be used. Successful contributors receive a quite modest honorarium of "200 yuan (\$30). Ibid.

¹² New Vision is an important news source in Uganda and the East Africa region. See its website [https://www.newvision.co.ug/].

¹³ A copy of the announcement may be found at [https://lcbackerblog.blogspot.com/2021/04/chinas-new-vision-campaign-taking.html].

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. ("Essays must be clear, in good English, not exceeding 1000 words. Video clips must be no longer than 3 minutes. Photos must be larger than 3 MB and in JPEG format").

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jackt Achan, "2021 My China essay winners get prizes: "The essays provide me with good food for thought and surely help me a lot as I embark on my duties here. I feel we are good comrades, brothers and sisters and good partners." New Vision)19 August 2021) available [https://www.newvision.co.ug/articledetails/112370/2021-my-china-essay-winners-get-prizes].

opportunity to travel to China, you can come up with ideas that you can use to improve yourself," he stated.¹⁸

And, indeed, this was a point emphasized to other effect by the Chinese ambassador to Uganda. It "China's new Ambassador to Uganda, Zhang Lizhong, said the "My China Story" essays provided thought-provoking ideas and a good hint on some areas to focus on, as he embarks on his tour of duty. Lizhong said for Ugandans to understand China should start by understanding the CPC party. "Without the CPC, there would be no new China," he said."¹⁹ The winners received certificates and a "high end smartphone made in China."²⁰

The Ugandan Chinese Embassy-New Vision news media sponsored "My China Story Competition" was one piece of a global campaign coordinated with Chinese national²¹ and global²² (here) efforts to develop and reframe the way in which people--the masses--come to understand and engage with a China that is more immediate, friendlier, and better aligned with the values and aspirations of those who share their stories.

In Uganda, this was not the first "My China Story" Campaign. In 2020, for example, New Vision sponsored one the theme of which was "Building a Community with a Shared Future for Uganda and China."²³ Facebook's #MyChinaStory²⁴ provides a glimpse of the project in various

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jacky Achan, "'My China Story'" Essay competition winners announced: A total of 135 essays were submitted in the competition that started on April 14, 2021 and concluded on June 15, 2021" New Vision (30 June 2021); available <https://www.newvision.co.ug/articledetails/107462/my-china-story-essay-competition-winners-anno>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ China Media Project, The CCP's 2021 Propaganda Blueprint (13 April 2021) available [https://chinamediaproject.org/2021/04/13/the-ccps-2021-propaganda-blueprint/] ("People's Daily reports prominently on its front page today that the Central Office of the Chinese Communist Party has released a notice providing guidance for propaganda and education in the run-up to the 100th anniversary of the CCP. The notice, which outlines general "arrangements and outlays" (安排部署) for the carrying out of a comprehensive national propaganda campaign through the July anniversary and to the end of the year, specifies the guiding theme: "Forever Following the Party" (永远跟党走).").

²² Amber Wang, "Beijing asks challenged Wolf Warriors to find wisdom in China's past," South China Morning Post (11 April 2021) available [https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3128974/beijing-asks-challenged-wolf-warriors-find-wisdom-chinas-past] (According to the website of the Chinese foreign ministry, diplomats last month started studying Communist Party history in a national campaign overseen by President Xi Jinping for cadres to find "wisdom" from the party's past, as it celebrates its 100th anniversary").

²³ The New Vision, "My China Story Competition 2020 is now Open," Facebook Post available [https://www.facebook.com/thenewvision/posts/10158500201669078] (5 May 2020).

²⁴ Facebook, #MyChinaStory, available [https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/mychinastory] people were posting about

states. It has partnered with the Chinese Embassy in Uganda from time to time. For example, in connection with the Mt China competitions, it has provided its readers with a free copy of My China Magazine to coincide with the opening of the Forum on China Africa Co-operation (FOCAC) in Dakar in November 2021.²⁵

The national campaigns included an effort to include foreigners and their stories of positive life in China--and thus the national "My China Stories" campaign hosted online by China's People's Daily.²⁶ The campaign hosted abroad followed a similar format. Thus the example of the Ugandan competition. The object was quite straightforward: These are stories that make China accessible and that create a baseline of believability against which stories that paint China in a harsher might will be judged by the masses--that is by the masses who vote in liberal democratic orders. In this sense Chinese vanguards have both discovered and have begun to understand the way that mass perception politics can significantly (if indirectly) affect the political choices of those who depend on the popular vote to govern.

But more than that, it suggests a long term and potentially quite significant operation to supplant the old liberal democratic normative baseline for understanding and judging reality with a Chinese socialist one. That baseline places at the apex prosperity and stability principles. It values rule of law in the service of those principles and the objectives of collective improvement in quality of life measured by economic, social, and cultural factors. It places civil and political rights as the methods, which when appropriately managed, may contribute to the collective project of prosperity and stability, but which must be aligned with the responsibilities of the leadership of the nation--however that leadership is constituted. It is not clear whether or how the West can respond to this quite distinct vision when, in the process of their own factional wars, they appear to be aligning along the same lines.²⁷



participation in Uganda, Bangladesh, South Sudan, the United States, Kazakhstan, and South Africa, among other places.

²⁵ "Vision Group to give free copies of My China Magazine," New Vision (27 November 2021) available [https://www.newvision.co.ug/articledetails/120898/vision-group-to-give-free-copies-of-my-china].

²⁶ China Daily, "My China Story: A Place Like No Other" (April 2021, available [https://lcbackerblog.blogspot.com/2021/04/chinas-new-vision-campaign-taking.html]).

²⁷ See Cuban Constitution, April 10, 2019. Available https://www.gacetaoficial.gob.cu/es/constitucion-de-la-republica-de-cuba-proclamada-el-10-de-abril-de-2019.

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