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CHINA REAL TIME REPORT

The Foreigner Advising Beijing on Propaganda

Boutique agency China-i helps the Chinese government with publicity campaigns

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Sameh El-Shahat with his sister Samah. PHOTO: SAMEH EL-SHAHAT

BEIJING—When China’s top propaganda and media operatives gather in Beijing, an erstwhile Egyptian often stands out from the crowd of suits, thanks to his towering frame and voluminous afro.

In his telling, though, Sameh El-Shahat says he and the Chinese bureaucrats and

businessmen who seek his counsel on public relations are all in the same boat: rowing against a tide of Western cynicism toward China.

His boutique agency, China-i Ltd., provides media training and risk-management advice to government agencies, as well as state-owned and private enterprises. The State Council Information Office—the government’s publicity arm—has invited him to address seminars and conferences. State media often seek his views on China’s international branding.

“We don’t sit on the fence,” says the 47-year-old, born in Cairo and educated in Britain. “We’re on China’s side.”

Mr. El-Shahat has become an unusual example of foreign influence in Chinese propaganda officialdom, which in recent years has tried to tap Western expertise and techniques to improve the Communist Party’s image at home and burnish China’s standing abroad.

A former investment banker at UBS AG and furniture designer, Mr. El-Shahat first

ventured to China in 2007. Though he had little media experience, he said he sensed that officials needed to learn how to better communicate with foreign audiences.

His arrival coincided with a push by propaganda officials to improve global perceptions about China ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

“The government wanted to bring in foreign talent to train up locals in publicity work and improve their grasp of international markets,” said Qiao Mu, a media scholar at Beijing Foreign Studies University, which hired Mr. El-Shahat from 2008 to 2010 to provide communications training to government officials and state-industry executives.

Mr. El-Shahat, now a British national, is sympathetic to the official view that China is confronting unfair spin. “In the world in which we live today, facts are not enough,” he said. “It’s about the presentation. It’s about perception.”

That insight comes from personal experience, according to Mr. El-Shahat, whose parents were high-ranking journalists in Egyptian state media under President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The family fled in 1971, when Mr. Nasser’s successor, Anwar Sadat, purged a number of state media officials. The El-Shahats spent a decade in Libya before moving to the U.K.

The transition from socialist regimes to the capitalist West taught Mr. El-Shahat about the power of propaganda. “Suddenly, the guys who were supposed to be your friends are now the enemy,” he said of his experience. “Every dominant culture has to create its baddies, and the Chinese were presented as the baddies” by the West.

The company, with 19 staff, operates from offices in Beijing and London. His sister Samah, an economist and former journalist, joined the firm full-time in 2012 from Al Jazeera, where she was a television presenter.

Last year, a secretive party-run studio tapped China-i to produce short films showcasing China’s ties with the U.S. and Britain, according to people with knowledge of the matter. The films were credited to Studio on Fuxing Road and were released ahead of President Xi Jinping’s state visits to those respective countries.

A recent corporate client is China’s state-owned Wanbao Mining Ltd., which sought out China-i in early 2013, after a copper-mine project in Myanmar stalled amid fierce protests. On China-i’s advice, according to Ms. El-Shahat, Wanbao has gone on a social-spending spree, setting up schools and clinics in communities near the mine while offering compensation to displaced villagers. China-i documented the effort in a film titled “Myanmar Wanbao: A New Dawn.”

The effectiveness of China-i’s methods is hard to assess. Its films were praised by viewers for their high production values; each video received hundreds of thousands

views. But they drew mostly skeptical coverage from Western media. Just last week, fresh protests broke out at Wanbao's Myanmar mine against the company's efforts to restart full operations.

Mr. El-Shahat said he is focused on the long term. "It's a constant, iterative process of trying and improving and learning," he said.

—Chun Han Wong. Follow him on Twitter @ByChunHan.

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