

China in the Classroom of an African Cadre School

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Since its inauguration in early 2022, the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School regularly brings together the ruling parties of six African countries of Southern Africa in a small town next to the Tanzanian metropole of Dar es Salaam. Supported by the Chinese Communist Party's International Department (CCP-ID), the institution remains a “black box” – its inner workings, until now, hidden from view. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Tanzania, this policy brief examines how the school is administered, who shapes its curriculum, and what political purposes it serves. The analysis shows that although the school is formally owned and administered by African parties the CCP-ID holds a significant programmatic role in the institution, which functions as an exclusive forum for the region's ruling parties. It therefore represents an important vehicle through which Chinese party officials can share the CCP's strategic messages with a wide political audience, reaching the most influential political elites of the entire region of Southern Africa.

Political party schools – commonly referred to as ideological cadre schools – are a widespread phenomenon in political contexts shaped by a socialist tradition. They serve a dual function: transmitting specific political messages to young party members while simultaneously reinforcing their ideological foundations and their personal commitment to the political party. As such, political party schools are key instruments of political reproduction and party cohesion. Nowhere is this more visible than in the People's Republic of China, where the CCP has established a dense network of ideological cadre schools that constitutes an important backbone for its authoritarian one-party state.¹

The Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School (MJNLS) in Tanzania represents a unique variation of such a socialist party school model. Rather than serving a single party, it functions as a regional political platform, bringing together the ruling parties of six Southern African states that identify as “sister parties”: South Africa's ANC (African National Congress), Mozambique's FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique), Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front), Angola's MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola), Tanzania's CCM (Chama Cha Mapinduzi), and Namibia's SWAPO party. Collectively, these parties form a political alliance that calls itself the “Former Liberation Movements of Southern Africa”. What unites this group is a shared trajectory of

¹ David Shambaugh, “Training China's Political Elite: The Party School System,” *The China Quarterly* 196 (December 2008): 827–44; Frank N. Pieke, *The Good Communist: Elite Training and State Building in Today's China* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

uninterrupted rule since national independence, as well as a socialist political heritage, to which the members of the parties commonly refer. Although independence was achieved at different moments in history, all six parties have remained in political power ever since. This includes the example of Tanzania's CCM, which, under Julius Nyerere and its predecessor organization TANU, led the country to independence in the early 1960s, and the ANC and SWAPO, both of which emerged from the struggle against apartheid to become the governing parties of their respective countries. Yet, despite this common historical background, the six parties operate in substantially different political environments, ranging from electoral autocracies (such as Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania) to electoral democracies (Namibia and South Africa).² By regularly convening this diverse but ideologically linked group, the MJNLS has emerged as an exclusive forum for some of the region's most entrenched ruling parties.

Against this backdrop, the presence of the CCP's International Department (CCP-ID) at the MJNLS is particularly striking. Not only did China provide a USD 40 million grant for the construction of the school's infrastructure (conference rooms, classrooms, fully equipped dormitories, and a sports facility³), Chinese involvement encompasses a substantive programmatic role within the institution.⁴ The CCP-ID's engagement with the MJNLS therefore raises questions about the nature, scope, and strategic logic of Chinese party activity across the African continent.

This policy brief sheds light on this discussion. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Tanzania, it examines the inner dynamics and organizational structures of the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School.⁵ It pays particular attention to the programmatic role of the Chinese Communist Party in shaping an institution that serves as an exclusive forum for a select group of ruling parties across Southern Africa.

The African Cadre School's Purposes

The Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania serves three purposes. First, it functions as a platform for regional connection and exchange for the ruling political parties of Southern Africa. It not only fosters an institutional cooperation between the already existing African cadre schools such as the ANC's party school (OR Tambo School of Leadership), or ZANU-PF's Herbert Chitepo School of Ideology.⁶ The school has also become a site of regular personal exchange among the future political party cadres of the region. Workshops, training programmes, and joint activities aim to foster the personal bonds between the young members of the six "sister parties". Whenever the young party members come together at ceremonial events and collective celebrations, they wave the flags of their countries and jointly sing their national anthems. These joint activities carry high symbolic and emotional value, aiming to strengthen regional solidarity and foster mutual understanding among the political parties' younger members.

² See Marina Nord et al., *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the Democratic Era?* (V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, 2026).

³ Paul Nantulya, *China's First Political School in Africa*. Spotlight (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 7 November 2023).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ A short note on the methodology. During a five-week field research stay in Tanzania in 2023, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with participants and administrators of the MJNLS. Moreover, the author visited the school's site in Kibaha. In addition, qualitative data were acquired through document analysis as well as the documentation of the school's website and social media presence in the timeframe between 2022 to 2025.

⁶ Social media data, 2025.

Secondly, the school aims to give a new socialist image to the participating African parties. By referring to prominent authors of the early concepts of “African socialism”, such as Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere, Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, and Guinea-Bissau’s Amílcar Cabral, the school’s research agenda explicitly states its ambitions in “re-ideologizing the political space” of the respective parties.⁷ To this end, the school’s curriculum

“explores the evolution and adaptation of Pan-Africanism, socialist thought, and ideology in governance. At its core is the imperative for ideological renewal to revitalize the Liberation Movements, strengthen their mass appeal, and develop a transformative leadership pipeline, particularly among youth and women. It aims to reinforce party-building strategies and promote ideological clarity and resilience within the Six Sister Parties.”⁸

This statement of strengthening the political parties’ “resilience” by referring to its socialist heritage is telling as it openly reveals the school’s purpose as a strategic instrument to strengthen its participants’ political power and legitimacy at home.

This ambition connects directly to the school’s third purpose, which addresses an existential political challenge. All six participating parties are confronting what might be described as a slow political decline.⁹ Having long derived their legitimacy from their founding role as liberation movements, they now find that historical narrative increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of growing public disillusionment and electoral pressure. In response, historical memory has become a central resource for legitimizing continued incumbency.¹⁰ The MJNLS has taken up this challenge directly, embedding the history of the liberation struggle at the heart of its curriculum. Tanzania – a country dotted with sites that once hosted exiled liberation movements – provides a natural setting for this endeavour. Regular visits to these historical locations form a prominent feature of the school’s programme, designed to renew the liberation narrative in the hearts and minds of the next generation of party cadres.

African Political Parties’ Structural Ownership of the Cadre School

The conceptualization of the school was, from the outset, an African initiative. It was the party members themselves who first approached the CCP, having identified several internal gaps – among them a lack of ideological coherence, insufficient regional connectivity, and a weakening of historical awareness among younger cadres. The partnership with Beijing was therefore actively sought, not imposed.¹¹

This African ownership is reflected in the school’s governance structures. The curriculum is developed primarily by the participating parties, guided by a board of trustees that meets regularly to assess needs and determine content.¹² Day-to-day administration is likewise handled by the member parties, with Tanzania’s CCM playing a particularly central role.¹³ The selection of participants remains an internal matter for each party, and workshop fees – amounting to approximately USD 700 per participant – are covered by the parties

⁷ Mwalimu Nyerere Leadership School, *Research Agenda 2025-2035* (MJNLS, March 2025).

⁸ Ibid., vii.

⁹ David Soler-Crespo, *The Slow Death of Liberation Movements in Southern Africa* (Navarra Center for International Development, 2019).

¹⁰ Henning Melber, “Authoritarian Populism under Former Liberation Movements in Southern Africa,” *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos*, no. 24 (2024): 69–91.

¹¹ Expert interview, Tanzania 2023.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

themselves.¹⁴ Taken together, these arrangements make clear that, at a structural level, the school is genuinely owned and operated by its African members.

This is not a passive or ceremonial ownership: the parties shape the agenda, manage the institution, and bear its costs. Any assessment of external influence, including that of the CCP-ID, must therefore be understood against this baseline of a substantive African agency.

However, despite the African political parties' structural ownership of the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School, the CCP-ID plays a substantial role in shaping what is taught, what is said and what is discussed in the school's classrooms.

The Institutional and Programmatic Role of the CCP-ID in the School

The CCP's International Department (CCP-ID) occupies a significant position within China's broader foreign policy apparatus.¹⁵ The MJNLS is no exception to this pattern. The CCP-ID's structural and institutional involvement is most clearly reflected in its financial support for the construction of the school's facilities. China provided a USD 40 million funding for the project, which was implemented by the Chinese state-owned China Railway Construction Engineering Group.¹⁶ The institutional dimension of the CCP-ID's involvement has recently been deepened further. In cooperation with the Chinese Renmin University, the school now offers Master's and PhD programmes for young political party members, elevating it from a training facility to an institution with recognized academic standing.¹⁷

Representatives of the CCP-ID regularly provide input to the school's courses and workshops, which are designed as forums for exchanging governance experiences.¹⁸ Through this format, the CCP-ID has secured privileged access to a platform where it can actively promote distinctly Chinese approaches to governance.

With the establishment of the Research Center on Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, an institute that was officially launched in May 2026 and which is now an integral part of the African cadre school's institutional structure, the CCP-ID has secured a further communication channel to young African cadres.¹⁹ As stated on the CCP-ID's website,

"the Thought [Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era] clearly and powerfully answers the questions of our times, offering valuable reference for African countries in exploring a modernization path suited to their national conditions. The establishment of the Research Center will create a new platform for Africa-China ideological exchanges and experience sharing of party governance and state administration."²⁰

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See, for example, Christine Hackenesch and Julia Bader, "Pragmatic, Strategic and Wide-Reaching: The CCP's Party Diplomacy in Africa," *Megatrends Afrika*, Megatrends Policy Brief no. 29 (October 2024): 11.

¹⁶ David H. Shinn, "The Communist Party of China Reaches Out to Africa," *E-International Relations*, 1 April 2026, 2.

¹⁷ "CCM Stresses Full Utilisation of Nyerere School," *Tanzania Insight*, 5 March 2026; "Renmin University, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School Sign Cooperation Agreement," *China Daily*, 9 October 2024; "CPC, FRELIMO Sees MJNLS as Key Player in Rebirth of Liberation Movements," *Daily News*, 30 March 2026; "RUC launches 2025 Overseas Elite Program on Governance", *Renmin University of China News*, 11 November 2025.

¹⁸ Expert interview, Tanzania 2023.

¹⁹ "Liu Haixing Attends the Unveiling Ceremony for the Research Center on Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era at the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School", International Department, Central Committee of CPC. 22 May 2026.

²⁰ Ibid.

This, again, underscores the CCP-ID's intent to convey clearly defined political and ideological messages through the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School, while framing it as a contribution to a neutral, academic discourse.

One channel through which the CCP-ID transmits its messages is the provision of books, journals, and magazines, which are prominently displayed in the institution's library. Since its establishment, the facility has received more than 200 books and publications, covering issues such as China's economic policies and strategies on poverty reduction and the Chinese development path.²¹

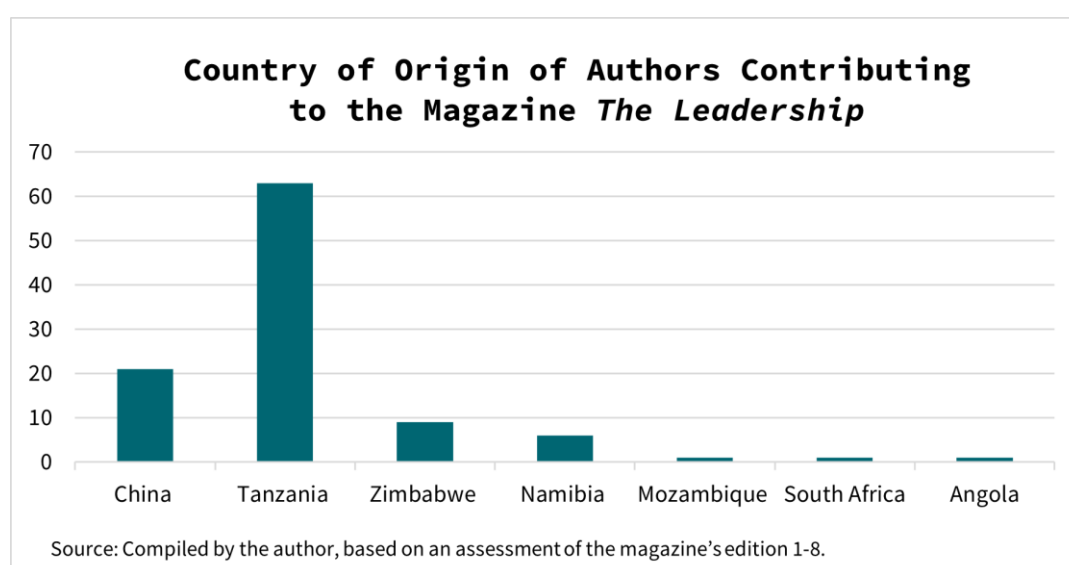
Another channel is the magazine *The Leadership*, jointly developed by the African cadre school and the CCP-ID. According to the school's website, the magazine is

“dedicated to fostering the exchange of governance experiences between China and African nations. Its mission is to promote mutual understanding and collaboration, advancing leadership excellence across both regions.”²²

While the editors do not elaborate further on what such an exchange of experience entails in practice, the explicit reference to governance experience already signals the political dimension that underlies the school's course offerings.

Since its official launch in January 2024, the magazine has published ten editions.²³ On the African side, contributions originate from individual party members, who explicitly state their party affiliation, and from representatives of public institutions that are currently, or have historically been, linked to the ruling parties. In particular, the Tanzanian CCM is prominently represented.

However, despite the magazine being framed as an African journal, there is a strikingly high number of articles written by the CCP-ID. Across the first eight editions, as shown by the author's analysis (see bar chart), the CPC has contributed 21 articles (about 20% of the total), covering a broad range of topics,²⁴ including the perceived advantages of Africa–China cooperation in the security sector under the Global Security Initiative, the historical foundations of Africa–China relations, and calls for reform of the global economic governance system, with China playing a leading role in this process.²⁵



²¹ “Tanzania opens Xi Jinping Thought Research Centre on socialism for new era”, *The Citizen*, 21 May 2026.

²² “The Leadership Magazine: Introduction”, MJNLS.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ At the time of writing, eight editions were available to the author. In total, 102 articles were counted in the magazine's editions under examination.

²⁵ “The Leadership Magazine: Introduction”, MJNLS.

The Chinese authors contributing to *The Leadership* are affiliated to public universities, but also to institutions with a clear political agenda, such as the Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Studies Centre, based in Beijing. This institute was inaugurated by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in 2020 and since then has been closely affiliated to the CCP.²⁶ It therefore represents an important part of the Chinese ruling parties' propaganda infrastructure. The presence of contributions from such institutions in a publication dedicated to addressing an African political audience reveals the strategic nature of *The Leadership* magazine for the CCP.

Some of the main messages conveyed by Chinese contributions to the magazine centre on the CCP's vision of a Sinocentric global order, often framing it as in explicit opposition to the West. Further contributions explore alternative conceptualizations of democracy and political order "with Chinese characteristics", which are presented as more "adaptable" to the African context than Western models of multiparty democracy.²⁷ Taken together, these contributions broadly correspond to what Gurol identifies as strategic messaging: the projection of a Chinese vision of the international order as being superior to Western ones.²⁸

In sum, the CCP-ID has made the African cadre school a distinctive vehicle for disseminating its narratives abroad, using party-to-party ties to position itself as a key actor in reshaping the global order.

Conclusions

The Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School constitutes a unique political forum. On the one hand, it provides a regional platform for the "Former Liberation Movements of Southern Africa" at a time when their political dominance and historical sources of legitimacy are increasingly put under pressure. Its core function is therefore not merely educational, but also strategic: it aims to enable ruling parties to exchange experiences, renew ideological narratives, reinforce their party-political cohesion, and ultimately contribute to strengthening the participating parties' political dominance at home. Thus, the school was initiated, and formally owned and administered, by the African parties themselves. This African ownership is also reflected in the contributions to its magazine *The Leadership*, with Tanzania's ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, occupying a particularly prominent position on the editorial board.

On the other hand, the school also functions as an important vehicle through which the CCP-ID disseminates its strategic narratives. Its presence in workshops, institutional partnerships, and written knowledge products enables the CCP to circulate political messages through party-to-party channels. As China is perceived by the African parties as a central ally, the CCP-ID was invited into the school as a key partner. This allows Beijing a privileged access to important networks in Southern Africa. Given the dominant-party character of the participating African parties, such access is not limited to the party structures alone, but extends into state institutions and personal networks. Consequently, given that the school explicitly targets present and future decision-makers from six different

²⁶ Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 30; "Study and Implement Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Conscientiously and Break New Ground in Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics", Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 20 July 2020; "Secretariat of the Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Studies Centre", China Institute of International Studies.

²⁷ "The Leadership Magazine: Introduction", MJNLS.

²⁸ Julia Gurol, "The Authoritarian Narrator: China's Power Projection and its Reception in the Gulf," *International Affairs* 99, no. 2 (2023): 687–705.

African countries, the CCP-ID's presence may influence future foreign-policy decisions in ways that are aligned with China's political positions.

Since the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School is a relatively new institution, its concrete impact – for example on African foreign and domestic policies – is not yet fully traceable. However, the school's development and the role of the CCP-ID therein deserve further close attention, especially in light of the school's ambitious aims, the regular workshops held within this forum, and China's prominent role within this institution.

The present case underscores the need to recentre party-to-party relations in analyses of Africa–China engagement. Political parties, party schools, and party-affiliated institutions serve as crucial channels of foreign influence and international political networking in China's foreign policy approach. Paying closer attention to these structures is essential to understanding how China gains access and influence beyond formal state-to-state diplomacy.

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