

China's External Propaganda Work: Missions, Messengers, Mediums

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In order to achieve the Chinese Communist Party's goal of improving its image abroad, President Xi Jinping has overseen the intensification of the external propaganda blitz begun in 2007 by former top leader Hu Jintao. This emphasis on the role of external propaganda work in achieving CCP objectives was further reflected in bureaucratic changes announced this year intended to improve the CCP's ability to influence international public opinion. Thus, China's international activities in the information space and media domain have become a key element in China's global posture.

Since coming to power, President Xi Jinping has overseen the intensification of the external propaganda blitz begun in 2007 by former top leader Hu Jintao. As Xi told the November 2014 Foreign Affairs Work Conference in Beijing: “We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world.”⁶² This is the task of CCP propagandists. Thus, on February 19, 2016 Xi paid an important visit to the headquarters of the *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and CCTV, where he stressed the importance of external propaganda work.⁶³

This increasing emphasis on the role of external propaganda work in achieving CCP objectives was further reflected in bureaucratic changes announced this year intended to improve the CCP's ability to influence international public opinion. China Central Television, China Radio International, and China National Radio were all merged under a single entity entitled Voice of China (mirroring the United States' Voice of America), a state-entity under the management of the CCP's Central Propaganda Department.⁶⁴

Since then, Xi Jinping has continued to emphasize the importance of external propaganda work. At the August 2018 National Meeting on Ideology and Propaganda, Xi stated: “To present good

⁶² Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech at Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, November 29, 2014. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1215680.shtml.

⁶³ Xinhua, “Xi Completes Media Tour, Stresses Party Leadership,” February 19, 2016. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-02/20/c_135114528.htm.

⁶⁴ Chris Buckley, “China Gives Communist Party More Control Over Policy and Media,” New York Times, March 21, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/world/asia/china-communist-party-xi-jinping.html>

images, we should improve our international communication capability, tell China's stories well, disseminate China's voice, show an authentic and comprehensive China to the world, and raise the country's soft power and the influence of Chinese culture.”⁶⁵

The Chinese Communist Party has long distinguished between “external propaganda” (对外宣传) and “internal propaganda” (对内宣传).⁶⁶ The latter has always been aimed at audiences inside China, while the former has targeted foreigners abroad. Indeed, the CCP recognized early on the importance of trying to shape the views of foreigners potentially sympathetic to their cause. In the Yan'an base area, CCP propagandists cultivated and subjected left-leaning journalists—such as Agnes Smedley, Edgar Snow, Theodore White, Annalee Jacoby, John Hersey, and Anna Louise Strong—to the CCP narratives on a variety of subjects.

After coming to power in 1949, the new regime established a number of mechanisms to target foreign audiences around the world.⁶⁷ For most of the 1950s-1970s these activities were mainly carried out by the CCP International Liaison Department and media units affiliated with Xinhua News Agency, and they were primarily targeted at socialist and developing countries.

Beginning in the late-1970s, commensurate with China's general opening to the West and to Asia, its cultural diplomacy, party-to-party diplomacy, and media activities began to broaden internationally. Then, after 2012, China's external “image activities” began to ramp up and go global.⁶⁸ This coincided with the popularization of Joseph Nye's concept of “soft power” (软实力) within the CCP, which Chinese leader Hu Jintao referred to in his 17th CCP Congress speech that year. Since then, the world has witnessed a dramatic increase of attention, resources, and explosion of activities associated with the Chinese government's desire to affect and control international views of China.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ “At National Meeting on Propaganda and Ideological Work, Xi Jinping Stresses That it is Necessary to Raise the Banner High, Win the Support of the People, Cultivate New personnel, Invigorate Culture, Present a Good Image, and Urges to Better Accomplish the Mission and task of Propaganda and Ideological Work Under the New Situation,” Xinhua Domestic Service, August 22, 2018.

⁶⁶ In the last decade Chinese authorities have officially been translating *xuanchuan* as “publicity,” so as to give it a less sinister connotation to foreigners. But “propaganda” remains the accurate translation for *xuanchuan*.

⁶⁷ See Herbert Passin, *China's Cultural Diplomacy* (London: School of Oriental & African Studies/The China Quarterly, 1962); Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

⁶⁸ See David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 6.

⁶⁹ See David Shambaugh, “China Soft Power Push,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2015), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/china-s-soft-power-push>; Mingjiang Li and Gang Chen, *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011); Kingsley

Thus “external propaganda work” has long been an important foreign policy instrument for the Chinese Communist Party and People’s Republic of China. It is not necessarily a new phenomenon, but it has become a real priority of China’s party-state.

Messaging

Over the years the themes of external propaganda have varied substantially—in parallel with the dramatic fluctuations in domestic political campaigns (运动) and related slogans (口号), shifts in ideology (意识形态), meta propaganda narratives (提法), and substantive elements in China’s diplomacy (外交). The shifts in propaganda lines (宣传路线) throughout PRC history have thus been dizzying and anything but consistent.

Inside China, the regime has subjected its citizens to decades of indoctrination and political study (政治学系) in attempts to publicize its policies and priorities. Chinese examinations—including the rigorous university entrance exam (高考) or civil service exam (公务员考试)—similarly require test takers to memorize stock answers to stock questions (all of which can be known in advance from the exam preparation manuals).

The PRC is also a state that places a lot of stock in declarative policies. Words matter a lot to the CCP and PRC. When they make a declaratory policy statement, they expect others to take note. They also expect others to memorize, internalize, and parrot back verbatim the specific propaganda narrative, slogan, or policy. In Chinese this is the very political act of political allegiance—or as the CCP puts it: to “unify thought” (统一思想).

The Chinese communist government puts strong stock in slogans both domestically and externally. Slogans are usually Chinese character compounds of 4, 8, 16, 28, or 32 characters in length, and are often used as propaganda devices. Slogans and state-set narratives have long been intrinsic to Chinese communist political culture. They are meant to simultaneously motivate the intended recipient audience and, at the same, summarize the content of a specific policy. Slogans are not only supposed to convey policy and indoctrinate recipients, but the main purpose is to force uniformity of thought and articulated language. Therefore, the appropriate response within the Chinese political system when hearing a slogan is to parrot it back (repeat it) *word for word* (verbatim)—so as to reflect the fact that the recipient has internalized it and accepts it.

Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu (eds.), *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China’s Campaign for hearts and Minds* (London: Routledge, 2018).

In Chinese this is known as the act of *biaotai* (表态), “declaring where one stands.”⁷⁰ Thus, to *biaotai* to a *kouhao* (slogan) is a ritualistic, rhetorical, and significant political act—the essence of loyalty to the regime. In essence, it is a prime example of what the late Sinologist Lucian Pye referred to as an act of “feigned compliance.”⁷¹ To *biaotai* does not mean that one actually believes or complies with a given *kouhao* or government policy—it is an expression of compliance through verbal conformity. It is a political ritual of pretension.

The Messengers: The External Propaganda Bureaucracy

The bureaucratic nexus of this Orwellian operation has long centered on five main institutional actors: the CCP Propaganda Department, CCP International Liaison Department, Xinhua News Agency, the State Council Information Office, and the Political Work Department of the People’s Liberation Army. To be sure, other ministries are involved—such as the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, China Radio International (formerly Radio Beijing), China Central Television (中央电视台), the Foreign Languages Press (外文局), State Council Foreign Experts Bureau (专家局), CCP Central Committee Bureau of Translation & Compilation (中央编译局), and other organs. But these bodies are more the implementers of external propaganda, whereas the former group are the formulators.

For the first three decades of the PRC these organs conducted their external propaganda work as a subset of their domestic propaganda work. But beginning in the early 1980s, the CCP Propaganda Department began to organizationally distinguish between internal and external propaganda and set up a separate bureaucratic apparatus to promote the latter. On April 8, 1980 the CCP Politburo established a separate External Propaganda Leading Group (对外宣传小组), or EPLG, to oversee the increasingly sprawling apparatus under the *joint* sponsorship of the CCP Central Committee and State Council. Prior to this time external propaganda was the joint responsibility of the Foreign Affairs Leading Group (中央外事领导小组), which was established in 1958, and the Propaganda & Education Leading Group (中央宣教领导小组).

The latter was temporarily abolished in February 1988 (when its duties, functions, and staff of 33 were absorbed by the CCP Propaganda Department), but it was restored two years later in March 1990.⁷² The EPLG’s composition has varied over time, but in 1990 it had eleven members.⁷³ It

⁷⁰ Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, *A Chinese-English Dictionary* (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1985), p. 41.

⁷¹ This is a central argument in Lucian Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China’s Political Cultures* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies of the University of Michigan, 1988).

⁷² The documents abolishing and restoring the EPLG are available in General Office of the Central Propaganda Department (ed.), *Dangde Xuanchuan Gongzuo Wenjian Xuanbian, 1988-1992* [Selected Documents on the Party’s Propaganda Work] (Beijing: Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao chubanshe, 1993, *neibu faxing*), pp. 1704, 1904, 1936.

has always been chaired by the Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of ideology and propaganda work. Currently that is Wang Huning. Previously it was Liu Yunshan, and before him Li Changchun. In addition, as with other leading groups, the composition of the EPLG is comprised of the ministerial level officials from leading agencies in this policy system (系统).

On January 25, 1991 the Central Committee and State Council jointly decided to merge the State Council's Information Office (国务院新闻办公室) together with the EPLG.⁷⁴ This phenomenon is described in Chinese as “one organ, two signs” (一个机构两块牌子), but in fact, the SCIO is the administrative staff office to the EPLG. The EPLG sets external propaganda policy, and the SCIO implements it. The new director of the SCIO is Xu Lin, who previously served as head of China's Cyberspace Administration.⁷⁵ The SCIO is the “front” organ that the world—and particularly the foreign press corps in Beijing—see, but it is in fact one operational side of the EPLG and external propaganda work. Among other responsibilities, it is responsible for coordinating the compilation and publication of all government White Papers.

Propaganda towards Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao is not viewed within the purview of “external propaganda,” and is accordingly overseen jointly by the CCP United Front Department, the Taiwan Affairs Office and the Hong Kong & Macao Affairs Office of the State Council. Propaganda aimed at foreigners resident in China and short-term visitors such as tourists and businessmen are also priorities for the SCIO, which is also responsible for managing the flow of information and media flowing into China from abroad.

As a result of the sweeping reorganization of the State Council at the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2018, it appears that the EPLG has been reabsorbed back within the Central Propaganda Department—thus no longer enjoying its semi-autonomous status—but this is not entirely clear.

⁷³ Central Committee Document No. 265 [1990], *Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Zhongyang Duiwai Xuanchuan Xiaozu Zucheng Renyuan Zhuzhi de Tongzhi* [Notice Regarding the Membership of the Central External Propaganda Leading Group] in General Office of the Propaganda Department, *Dang de Xuanchuan Gongzuo Wenjian Xuanbian* [Selected Documents on Party Propaganda Work] (Beijing: Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao chubanshe, 1993), p. 1919.

⁷⁴ Wang Jingsong, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Zhengfu yu Zhengzhi* [PRC Government & Politics] (Beijing: Zhongyang Dangxiao chubanshe, 1995), p. 401.

⁷⁵ Nectar Gan, “China Names Former Internet Tsar Xu Lin as New External Propaganda Chief,” *South China Morning Post*, August 21, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2160623/china-names-former-internet-tsar-xu-lin-new>

Missions & Mediums

The Chinese government is of the view that Western media possess a monopoly (垄断) on international information concerning China, and that these media have an ingrained bias against China. The primary overarching mission of external propaganda work is, therefore, to break the monopoly (大垄断), acquire China's own "discourse power" (话语权), engage in "discourse war" (话语战争) with Western media, and "tell China's story well" (将中国故事好).⁷⁶

Derivatively, external propaganda work is thus oriented towards four principal missions: (1) publicizing Chinese government policies and perspectives; (2) promoting Chinese culture abroad; (3) countering what is perceived to be hostile foreign propaganda (such as the so-called "China threat theory") and negative images of China; and (4) propagating China's foreign policy on international questions. Each of these functions involves considerable efforts, resources, technology, and personnel. It is an increasingly important effort and component of China's foreign policy.

External propaganda covers a variety of mediums. It includes the international broadcasting of China Radio International, CCTV broadcasting to Taiwan of Cross-Strait Voice (海峡之声), China Global Television (CGTN), publications such as *People's Daily* foreign edition (海外版), *China Today*, *Beijing Review*, *People's China*, *China Pictorial*, *China Daily*, *Liaowang* weekly edition, and various publications of the Foreign Languages Press. The March 2018 NPC reorganization also folded a number of these organs (notably CRI and CGTN) into a newly created "Voice of China" (中国之声). As with the EPLG, it is still too early to tell exactly what this reorganization means in practical terms—but it is all commensurate with a recentralization of propaganda work under the CCP Propaganda Department.

Xinhua News Agency also plays a central role in external propaganda work. Xinhua is China's official state news service and a Central Committee organ. From its inception, Xinhua has always had a dual role: to report news and to disseminate Party and state propaganda. This has been true both domestically and internationally. Altogether Xinhua now has approximately 3000 journalists, of which 400 are posted in 117 bureaus abroad, with plans to expand to 180 bureaus by 2020. In addition to opening new bureaus Xinhua is strengthening the staffs of existing ones (particularly in the Northern American, European, and Asian markets) and diversifying its product line beyond traditional news reporting to substantially beef-up its web presence, video and audio streaming, and multimedia. Xinhua's external service mainly publishes descriptive news reports and seeks to develop a large client base based on marketing a cheaper product than the big Western wire services. In 2010 Xinhua had 80,000 paying institutional subscribers—which produces a strong revenue stream. Xinhua is especially targeting the developing world

⁷⁶ This is a phrase originally used by Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

where Western media have less presence and there is no real domestic competition for international news.

External propaganda work also very much involves a range of “united front” exchange organizations, such as the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission (CCP United Front Department), Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (Foreign Ministry), China Association for International Understanding (CCP International Department), China Association for International Friendly Contact (PLA General Political Department), China Institute of International Strategic Studies (PLA General Staff Department Second Department), Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, and others. To a certain extent, external propaganda work also extends to the work of international affairs think tanks such as the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (Ministry of State Security), China Institute of International Studies (Foreign Ministry), and others.

External propaganda is by no means all about politics. In fact, Beijing places a high priority on promoting its own cultural traditions abroad; indeed, it is China’s 5000 years of civilizational heritage that may be its strongest soft power asset. The Seventeenth Central Committee of the CCP even devoted a whole plenary session in October 2011 to the issue of *culture*, with the final plenary communiqué declaring that it was a national goal to “build our country into a socialist cultural superpower,” claiming that “it is a pressing task to increase the state’s cultural soft power and enhance the international influence of Chinese culture.”⁷⁷ As such, China is assertively promoting its culture abroad through fine arts, performing arts, sports, music, film, literature, and architecture. In each of these areas China is beginning to make inroads abroad. Art exhibitions of China’s rich imperial past have always been popular around the world. China’s traditional heritage is often marketed abroad as part of a series of “Year of China” festivals staged in different countries. Many overseas exhibitions are mounted by the Ministry of Culture’s China Arts and Entertainment Group, a large state-owned enterprise. The State Council Information Office is also involved in staging exhibitions abroad.

China is also using what it calls “host diplomacy” (接待外交) and special events to good effect. A large number of governmental and non-governmental conferences take place in China every year. Some, such as the 2014 APEC meeting or the 2017 Belt & Road Forum, are real extravaganzas. China’s hosting of the 2016 G-20 summit was a similar showcase event. The 2010 Shanghai Expo and 2008 Olympics won international acclaim. The annual Boao Forum (China’s tropical version of the Davos World Economic Forum), China Development Forum, Beijing Forum, Tsinghua University World Peace Forum, Shanghai World Forum on China Studies, Global Think Tank Forum and other large-scale conclaves bring leading figures from around the world to China every year.

⁷⁷ Xinhua, “CPC Central Committee Plenum Ends with Cultural Development Guideline,” October 18, 2011. <http://english.cntv.cn/20111018/114732.shtml>.

In addition to these forums, China's government affiliated exchange organizations play a large role in efforts to influence foreign expert opinion. The CCP's International Department (and its front organ the China Center for Contemporary World Studies) convenes an annual "Party & the World" conference, but also brings a steady stream of foreign politicians to China for all-expenses-paid "study tours." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' affiliated Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs has long done the same. The Hong Kong based China-US Exchange Foundation is also actively promoting the voices of Chinese scholars through its website and Chinese government positions through monetary research grants given to American institutions.

In sum, external propaganda work encompasses a diverse set of institutions, activities, and mediums. It is only going to become more important in the future.

External Propaganda Work is an Increasing Priority

Clearly, the CCP and State Council have prioritized improving China's image abroad. Huge amounts of resources are being allocated to this purpose—nobody knows for sure how much, as the budgets of involved institutions are not made public and it depends on how one defines the parameters of external propaganda work. For example, are Confucius Institutes to be counted? Should *all* Ministry of Culture projects abroad be counted? Should *all* of Xinhua News Agency activities abroad be included? What about China's Ministry of Education—should scholarship support for foreign students studying in Chinese universities be counted? So, there are obvious methodological questions concerning the financing and activities related to China's external cultural exchanges. And how are we to distinguish between *legitimate* public diplomacy (公共外交) work and external propaganda work? *All* countries practice public diplomacy in attempts to publicize their cultures and government policies abroad. China is surely no different. So, what is the distinction between public diplomacy and propaganda?

These are all vexing questions to keep in mind when considering, and researching, China's external propaganda work and so-called "influence activities" abroad. But one thing is certain: China's international activities in the information space and media domain have increased significantly in recent years and have become a key element in China's global posture. They are not likely to decrease.

The real remaining question is, however, is all the effort actually *improving* China's image around the world? So far, the evidence (judging from public opinion surveys) is that China's global image remains *mixed* and there has been no appreciable *improvement* in China's "favorability" ratings. If anything, they have *declined* in several regions (Africa, Asia, Western Europe, Latin America, and North America). Thus, to date, those who administer China's external propaganda machinery and activities should not be too satisfied—although it is likely

that they are, as Chinese officials live in an “echo chamber” and tend to believe their own propaganda.

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