



BOOSTING THE PARTY'S VOICE

China's quest for global ideological dominance

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Main findings and conclusions

- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Xi Jinping considers itself to be involved in an ideological confrontation with “the West,” which primarily refers to the United States, but also includes Europe. In this war, the CCP sees itself at a significant disadvantage.
- China's top leaders are fearful that a lack of a widely shared Chinese ideology at home could lead to cadre and elite defection, resulting in a collapse similar to the fate of the Soviet Union. The CCP views its ability to offer a coherent and appealing ideology as an essential strategy to secure the loyalty of cadres, the wider elite, and, ultimately, the entire Chinese population.
- Under Xi Jinping, the CCP's propaganda apparatus, most importantly the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) at home, and the State Council Information Office (SCIO) abroad, are working hard to create and promote a “Chinese ideology.” This includes creating new think tanks, promoting research to provide a theoretical foundation for China's political and economic system, expanding China's global media presence, and generally slicker propaganda using cartoons and video clips.
- An important part of the strategy is to discredit Western ideas and institutions, both in order to make China's alternative model seem more attractive and to pre-empt disloyalty, seeing that large parts of the elite send their children to be educated abroad.
- The most ambitious goal of the campaign is to turn the CCP into a global voice by disseminating its message via new channels of distribution such as credible global media players and social networks.
- In the medium to long term, the goal is to present China's party-led political and economic model as an alternative to Western systems so as to create an international echo chamber for the CCP's messages. As the “Western world” is plagued by crises such as Brexit in the EU, and growing racial violence in the US, China's counter-narratives may become increasingly attractive, both in the developing world and in Western countries themselves.
- In the absence of a major shift in the Chinese leadership, this increasingly sophisticated ideological offensive will expand and impact the academic and media landscape outside of China's borders. Western governments, businesses, and other organizations dealing with China should respond by defining red lines and jointly creating codes of conduct.

1. The CCP's ideological offensive against the West

In 2013, anonymous sources leaked a military documentary called *Silent Contest* (较量无声), which warned of Western “ideological infiltration” of China through international NGOs and other channels that turned unwitting Chinese academics or cadres against the Party. If the West were to succeed in its plan, *Silent Contest* implied, China would collapse just like the Soviet Union.¹ The documentary followed in the footsteps of the Party’s “Document No. 9”, which outlined seven “incorrect ideological positions”, which recipients and their subordinates were no longer allowed to support.²

Now, three years later, it has become clear that the hard line towards foreign organizations and ideas propagated in *Silent Contest* did not represent a fringe position in China’s ruling party. In 2015, the CCP launched a large-scale campaign to ensure ideological conformity at China’s universities. In early 2016, official media announced an all-year campaign targeted at the CCP’s 88 million members to make sure that they support the “correct” ideological messages and values. In April 2016, Chinese lawmakers passed a law governing the conduct of foreign NGOs in China, which is projected to restrict and prohibit the activities of a substantial number of foreign organizations presently operating in China.³

Almost four years into Xi Jinping’s tenure, it is clear that the CCP sees strict control over ideology – understood as a system of ideas and values – as one of the core pillars of its rule. It is becoming equally clear that the Party sees itself on the weaker end of an ideological confrontation with the West.⁴ Terms such as “ideological security” (意识形态安全), “ideological struggle” (意识形态斗争), and “ideological war” (意识形态战) are commonplace in policy documents and China’s flagship media. In response, the Party attempts to spread its own counter-ideology both domestically and globally. For the domestic side, most work is coordinated by the Central Leading Small Group for Propaganda and Thought Work, which

operates through the Central Propaganda Department (CPD). On the international front, there is the Central External Propaganda Work Leading Small Group, which operates through the State Council Information Office (SCIO) and works in close coordination with the CPD.⁵

At the core of the Chinese ideology is the notion of the “China Dream,” which stresses that a “meritocratic” one-party-system can effectively turn China, and potentially other countries, into a prosperous, highly developed nation. In order to further refine these core ideas, the CCP is presently sponsoring academic research to generate and spread a broad range of theories and ideas to counter Western concepts in virtually all areas of society and governance, including Chinese theories on “democracy”, economic governance, internet governance, or journalism standards. In so doing, the CCP draws on a wide range of sources, including selected Western ideas, traditional Chinese thought, and its own Marxist tradition.

1.1 IDEOLOGY AS A MATTER OF PARTY SURVIVAL

“Ideological subversion” is viewed as a real and present danger, not an academic or abstract problem for the CCP. The CCP judges that ideological subversion played a major role in the fall of the Soviet Union (SU), leading to quasi over-night defection of cadres and collapse of the Party structure. As one of the most eminent threats the CCP has identified the discrepancy between its own “voice” (话语权) and that of the West. The CCP sees itself as lacking “voice”, or the ability to shape global discourses and norms. As long as the CCP is unable to dominate (主导) ideological debates and the interpretation of events of crucial interest to the CCP, it remains at risk of sharing the SU’s fate.

The Party sees numerous recent examples of such attempted subversion in its vicinity. The Sunflower Movement in Taiwan and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong have both been interpreted as Western plots to destabilize China.⁶

1.2 FINDING A GLOBAL VOICE TO ENSURE SURVIVAL AT HOME

The ways in which the Party tries to neutralize the threat of ideological infiltration have changed substantially in recent years. In the past, the main focus was on trying to keep hostile ideas out of China by blocking flows of information. More recently the CCP has realized that its censorship measures only provide it with limited protection against unwanted ideas. The new goal is to create an international echo chamber for the CCP. This way, ideas such as that the Chinese political and economic system are the best for China will reach China’s citizens not only through domestic but also international media and platforms. Moreover, ideas and concepts that discredit the Chinese system could be confronted at the international level before they even reach China.

Though the CCP wants to be able to continue to censor content in China for the time being, it does not want to rely primarily on censorship for its survival in the long run. The goal is to relocate the battleground of the confrontation in order to give the CCP some breathing space while simultaneously boosting its standing abroad. Instead of having to deal with an influx of ideas from other countries into China, the Party wants to fundamentally change the conversation at the global level so as to defend China’s interests abroad and reinforce the ideological consensus at home.

2. Constructing a Chinese ideology and discrediting Western ideas at home

The principal concern for the CCP in the ideological confrontation remains its home turf: Its aim is to ensure that Western ideas cannot destabilize China from within, by inspiring Chinese people to demand more political participation or call for other substantial political reforms.

The CCP views certain segments of the Chinese population as vital to ideological success. At the top of the list are party members, in particular cadres, opinion leaders, and people in positions of influence or authority. By controlling what these groups can say, the CCP hopes to protect itself against elite defection.

At the same time, winning over people in key positions of authority or influence, such as teachers, professors, and journalists, is seen as another good way to target particularly the urban, educated elite. Party committees at all levels, including at universities, are currently instituting a so-called responsibility system for ideological work.⁷ This system defines who is to be held responsible in case of an ideological mistake and what the punishment should be.

Although the principal focus is on developing a Chinese counter-ideology, launching attacks on Western ideas and systems of governance also plays an important role in the CCP's strategy. The Party first saw an opening to systematically attack Western political and economic systems in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 and the "Occupy Wall Street" movement that followed suit.

Discrediting Western values and systems of government is seen as vital because large parts of the elite send their children to be educated abroad. This means that from the CCP's point of view, the next generation of leaders is at risk of being "won over" by the West, necessitating a systematic discrediting.

The take-away from *How Leaders Are Made*

Obama raises money to fund his presidential campaign, showing that Western democracies represent the interests of corporate sponsors rather than their citizens. By contrast, Xi Jinping receives valuable training and insight into the different conditions in China while rising through the ranks, which will enable him to govern the country competently.



Source: Screenshot

The CCP has started using modern means of communication and more subtle channels to discredit Western systems of government.⁸ A video called *How Leaders are Made*, produced by the private sector with CCP backing, does this quite skillfully by comparing the roads to becoming the country's top leader in the US, the UK, and in China. While the Chinese system is presented as a meritocracy in which leaders are trained and tested over decades, the presentation of US elections focuses mainly on the need to raise money to become president.⁹

2.1 HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES AS KEY BATTLEGROUND

The CCP fears that its ideology and value system lack legitimacy and attractiveness. This means that at present, a large part of resources is focused on reinventing a set of ideas and values that can be used to buttress the current system. The

CCP refers to this as "building a discourse system with Chinese characteristics" (建设有中国特色的话语体系).¹⁰ Here, understanding the term ideology as a "system of ideas and values" is important because this is precisely what the CCP seeks to create.

Consequently, the humanities and social sciences, coordinated at the top by the National Planning Commission for the Humanities and Social Sciences under the CPD, play central roles in the construction of a Chinese ideology and "discourse system". According to the Thirteenth Five-Year-Plan, China plans to establish between 50 and 100 "high-end think tanks" devoted to innovation in the humanities and social sciences that will buttress China's political and economic system.¹¹ In May 2016, Xi Jinping himself highlighted the need to speed up the "construction" of "humanities and social sciences with Chinese characteristics."¹² The CCP wants to challenge and offer alternatives to concepts, theories and indicators that were developed in the West and, according to the CCP, do not apply to

China. Over the course of the next five years, China wants to systematically build and expand a Chinese theory of political economy.¹³ For example, researchers are trying to find alternatives to the GINI coefficient¹⁴ to help burnish China's governance and economic credentials.

2.2 COMPLETING THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK TO SHUT OUT COMPETITION

Ultimately, arming Chinese citizens with a system of ideas and values is meant to serve as the most effective shield to protect them against being won over by supposedly harmful Western ideas and demanding things such as a free press or national elections. In the meantime, the CCP also uses new laws and regulations to keep unwanted foreign institutions and concepts as far away from the majority of Chinese as possible. The law on foreign NGOs, which limits the space of international groups working in areas such as civic participation or judicial advice, is a good example.

The advantage of building a comprehensive legal framework – as compared to previous, more arbitrary and less transparent censorship regulations – is twofold: first, it means there will be more consistency, and, second, it allows the CCP to censor openly by referencing its own laws, which in turn is meant to boost confidence in the Chinese system. In this regard, China roughly follows the example of Singapore's system of "confident authoritarianism".

This does not mean that the CCP wants to shut out all things foreign. On the contrary, the Party still depends on cooperation with other countries. However, it hopes to engage with the world on tightly controlled terms that allow the Party to shut out any concept and any organization that contradicts its political system. On the one hand, this allows it to protect itself from unwanted ideas and advocacy groups. On the other hand, it also shields Chinese companies and institutions from foreign competition while allowing them to grow into competitive players.

Selected propaganda clips produced since 2013



Video clip	Date & Event	Produced by
How leaders are made	2013; test video	Road to Revival Studios
Who is Xi Dada?	September 2015; Xi's US visit	People's Daily
The Shisanwu	October 2015; adoption of the 13th Five-year-plan	Road to Revival Studios, BBDO
Explaining the Chinese economy through Kung Fu (CN)	April 2016	Road to Revival Studios

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There are two main problems that could derail the CCP's undertaking of promoting a Chinese ideology. First, systematically constructing an ideology or a system of values in a top-down fashion always runs the risk of being rejected by people. Second, the more the CCP tightens its ideological controls to enforce its own artificial consensus, the more it risks a societal backlash by a weary population. However, as the West is shaken by systemic crises, the Chinese alternatives the CCP seeks to sell potentially become more attractive. All in all, the current mix of measures to promote a Chinese ideology has the potential to succeed, particularly if the CCP can create financial and social incentives for staying within the bounds of the official ideology without antagonizing large portions of the Chinese population through excessively repressive measures.

3. Building a market for Chinese ideas abroad

In distributing its ideology and concepts internationally, the CCP pursues a multi-pronged public diplomacy strategy that uses a large number of different channels and that distinguishes between different target audiences. Its three main goals are building international coalitions in support of Chinese concepts, sponsoring research, and expanding China's global media presence. Each of these helps the CCP to mitigate what it considers the influence of Western ideology and interests in third countries. In the long run, the CCP's global strategy is intended to weaken the West's "ideological hegemony," including in Western societies.

3.1 CREATING ALLIANCES FOR CHINESE IDEAS AND VALUES IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

The CCP knows that many aspects of its ideology and worldview are difficult to sell in the West, but hopes that it can win

over developing countries more easily. China tries to make inroads in these countries by offering seminars for government officials and journalists. In these programs, the Chinese organizers stress that the imposition of Western values and norms as well as the West's dominance of global conversations is not only a problem for China, but for all developing nations.

As part of the One-Belt-One-Road initiative, China has set up countless new formats for joint conferences and co-operations on topics it considers of ideological importance. For instance, China has sponsored the "Silk Road Economic Belt Media Cooperation Forum". At the 2015 meeting, Liu Yunshan, the Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of propaganda and ideology, asked participating media to create "positive energy" for the OBOR initiative. Another important test case for using international forums to spread new "ideas made in China" is the concept of "Internet sovereignty". After Chinese government representatives had discussed the concept in numerous fora in recent years, Xi Jinping formally presented the idea that each nation needs to be able to control cyberspace within its own borders at the World Internet Summit held in Wuzhen in November 2015.

3.2 TRYING TO WIN OVER INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARS

In order to win over foreign academics and to spread its ideas among the next generation of leaders abroad, the CCP has provided large amounts of funding and opportunities for cooperation. Convincing foreign academics of the Chinese system means the CCP gains important spokespeople abroad who are more likely to be seen as neutral and therefore enjoy much higher credibility than the Party itself.

Most prominently, Confucius Institutes provide funds for universities abroad, including for individual chairs. Renowned foreign universities have set up campuses in China, partially owned by Chinese partners.¹⁵ This does not mean that these universities' scholarship is necessarily

Selected acquisitions and cooperation projects in the news and entertainment industry



News Media	Entertainment Industry
2010: <i>The Washington Post</i> and <i>The International Herald Tribune</i> begin publishing <i>ChinaWatch</i> , a paid supplement edited by <i>China Daily</i>	2014: Imax cooperates with China Media Capital 华人文化产业投资基金 to establish China Film Fund
2015: <i>The Telegraph</i> begins publishing <i>ChinaWatch</i>	2015: China Media Capital and Warner Bros. cooperate to found Flagship Entertainment (旗舰影业)
2016: Alibaba acquires <i>South China Morning Post</i>	2016: Wanda announces its purchase of Legendary Entertainment (\$ 3.5 billion)
2016: Six Australian media outlets sign cooperation agreement with Chinese Party-state media; <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> , <i>The Age</i> , and <i>The Australian Financial Review</i> begin publishing <i>ChinaWatch</i>	2016: Visual China Group acquires Corbis Images
2016: Chinese and Russian media sign cooperation deal at Far Eastern Media Summit in Vladivostok	2016: Tang Media Partners buys IM Global

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influenced by Chinese interests, but with financial dependencies in place, it becomes easier for the Chinese side to try to exert pressure. Finally, there are endowments to universities. The most prominent case was a donation made to Cambridge University in 2014 for a chair of "Chinese Development Studies" which could be linked back to the daughter of former Chinese premier Wen Jiabao.¹⁶ However, this is only the tip of the iceberg: countless universities and think tanks across the EU rely heavily on Chinese money.

3.3 EXPANDING CHANNELS FOR GLOBAL PROPAGANDA

In order to create a market for its point of view and influence global public opinion, China is pursuing three main strategies to expand its global media presence.¹⁷ The first is building up its own official flagship media such as Xinhua News Agency and CCTV, including on Western social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. For example, CCTV has over 25 million likes on Facebook, second only to the BBC. The CCP has also started promoting less formal media that are potentially more easily accepted by Western audiences. One example is *Sixth Tone*, an English-language website belonging to the Shanghai-based *Oriental Morning Post*. Whereas Xinhua is clearly

known as being an official news agency, an ordinary reader of *Sixth Tone* would not be able to guess that the website is affiliated with official institutions in China.

Second, the CCP has started involving private companies in its global quest to buy up foreign media companies. The most prominent example was the acquisition of the *South China Morning Post* by Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba.¹⁸ In addition, multiple Chinese investments and take-overs in Hollywood and the entertainment industry are seen as important vehicles to spread Chinese values indirectly and more subtly than through mass media.¹⁹ Of course, Chinese private companies have their own agenda when investing abroad, but from the CCP's perspective they are an important asset in the Party's quest to amplify China's voice.

Third, the CCP seeks to sign cooperation agreements with foreign media. The most recent example is an agreement between China's flagship media and six Australian media companies.²⁰ From the CCP's perspective, this strategy has the advantage of being subtler than buying up foreign media while still allowing the CCP to distribute its points of view. This is sometimes done through inserts in major foreign newspapers or by attempting to shape the foreign media's coverage in return for funds or promises of access to the Chinese market.

The CCP's global efforts and its chances of success should not be underestimated. On the surface, the Party faces an uphill battle, much more so than at home where it has a range of instruments to shut out competing ideas and institutions. In particular, trying to sell Marxism and Communist ideas in a post-Cold War world remains a daunting task. The potential attractiveness of its one-party-system both in China and abroad remains heavily reliant on the Party's ability to deliver economic results. Even with individual concepts and ideas, the Party is running into difficulties. For instance, it has encountered problems in trying to convince other nations to accept its concept of "Internet sovereignty."²¹

However, it is important to understand that the CCP is well aware of the obstacles and has adjusted its strategy to focus on long-term rather than short-term results. Instead of

expecting immediate success, the Party is willing to intensify its efforts slowly and incrementally, giving other countries time to adjust instead of trying to change the conversation too suddenly. If the CCP manages to continue this gradual approach and does not try to impose thought controls abroad too quickly by trying to restrict what foreign media or academics that it funds can say, it has a good chance of succeeding in becoming a very strong global voice within the next decade.

4. How Western countries can react: confidence and coordination instead of "Cold War"

Given that ideological security is considered vital for the regime's survival by China's leaders, Western countries need to expect that the CCP will continue to spend massive resources on its ideological offensive for a long period of time. What we are currently witnessing, both in China and on a global level, is the outcome of years of planning, combined with the political momentum generated by the Xi administration.

Whether or not the CCP will actually succeed in becoming a global voice hinges on whether it will be able to gradually escalate its ideological influence without causing a major backlash either within Chinese society or abroad. Regardless, in the absence of a major power reshuffle, a political reorientation of the top leadership, a complete economic collapse or the fall of the CCP, the notion of an ideological confrontation will inform Chinese policy making for decades to come and will increasingly be felt in Western countries.

While Western countries will not be able to change the CCP's stance on ideology, they should formulate a response to mitigate the influence of China's policies, particularly on a global level.

A number of proposals have emerged in Europe and the United States on how to deal with aspects of China's rising in-

fluence in the West. These include demands for visa reciprocity for journalists,²² better regulations for foreign donations to universities and other public institutions,²³ and even task forces to counter Chinese "disinformation."²⁴ But if Western countries started limiting visas for Chinese journalists to retaliate against Chinese restrictions against Western reporters, they would implicitly accept such media controls as an established practice. Similarly, if Western countries introduced task forces to counter Chinese propaganda, this could also play to the CCP's effort to change the global rules of dialogue and legitimize the existence of government-funded, systematic information warfare. By contrast, proposals for a higher degree of transparency for university and think tank funding would neither single out China in particular nor contradict democratic ideals.

In addition, governments, businesses, societal organizations and all other actors dealing with China could consider drafting Codes of Conduct. This could include strategies for how universities, organizations, delegations, and businesses should respond if an individual member of their group is denied a visa to China. It could also include strategies to resist Chinese attempts to twist dialogue formats into new directions to accommodate authoritarian reinterpretations of key concepts by being ready to condition or cancel dialogues. If this is done in coordination with other countries or groups, it will be harder for China to play them against one another.

Most importantly, attempts to pacify China by adopting its official rhetoric, by making concessions, or by shunning groups and individuals the CCP dislikes will accomplish little to nothing. Instead, if Western countries define red lines and stick to them, it becomes much harder for the CCP to shape global opinions.

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- 2 | General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, *Notice on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere* (关于当前意识形态领域情况的通报), Document No. 9 (2013), April 22, 2013.
- 3 | *Law on the Management of Foreign Non-Governmental Organizations' Activities Within Mainland China*, adopted April 28, 2016, <http://chinalawtranslate.com/2016-foreign-ngo-law/?lang=en>, last accessed June 10, 2016.
- 4 | This Monitor uses the term "West" as a shorthand for North America and Europe. When the Chinese government speaks about "the West", it often primarily refers to the United States, with Europe as a "sidekick".
- 5 | In many ways, the current policies are an escalation and refinement of previous propaganda policies. For an in-depth analysis of the CCP's earlier propaganda institutions and policies, see Anne-Marie Brady's groundbreaking study *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).
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- 8 | In the past, one of the CCP's biggest hurdles to effective communication was its inflexibility and stilted language. See Hauke Gierow, Karsten Luc, and Kristin Shi-Kupfer, "Governance through information control: China's leadership struggles with credibility in social media," *China Monitor*, issue 26, January 26, 2016, http://www.merics.org/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/China-Monitor/China_Monitor_No_26_Social_Media_EN.pdf, last accessed June 16, 2016.
- 9 | "How to Make Leaders (How Leaders are made) - Viral Chinese propaganda video [English] 领导人是怎样炼成的", posted on Youtube October 17, 2013 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M734o_17H_A, last accessed June 10, 2016.
- 10 | Cf. Wang Mingsheng 王明生, "The construction of an academic discourse system for humanities and social sciences with Chinese characteristics is an important strategic task" 建设有中国特色的哲学社会科学学术话语体系是一项重要战略任务, *People's Daily Online*, February 9, 2015, <http://edu.people.com.cn/n/2015/0209/c367001-26533928.html>
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- 13 | "Thirteenth Five-year-guideline."
- 14 | See for example "At first session of 'China Discourse Summit Forum,' Director Zhang Weiwei speaks on 'How can China avoid the problem of being scolded' ("中国话语高端论坛" 首场开讲 张维为所长谈 "中国如何解决挨骂问题") , *World Forum on China Studies* website, November 28, 2014, <http://www.chinastudies.org.cn/c/943.htm>, last accessed July 7, 2016.
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