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China is seeking to remake its international image. The leaders of the country’s ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have tired of being portrayed in international media reports as dubious dictators, human rights violators, media censors, and the enemies of democracy. Beijing’s top propagandists have determined that the answer is to repackage the country’s global brand, as it were. China’s leaders are enhancing the PRC’s “communication capacity” (*chuanbo nengli*), with the goal of increasing the country’s “soft power,” or persuasive influence in foreign affairs. Central to achieving these objectives is the creation of global media organizations capable of disseminating propaganda designed to change international perceptions of contemporary China.

Propaganda and China’s National Image

Despite the negative connotation associated with the word “propaganda” in the United States, all modern governments utilize some form of political communication that is one-sided, occasionally polemical, and designed to influence the thoughts and actions of citizens. China’s use of propaganda is noteworthy because it is commonplace, reasonably effective, and generally accepted by the citizenry of the People’s Republic. Chinese citizens thus do not usually view negatively or cynically propaganda meant for internal or external consumption. Foreign propaganda (*duiwai xuanchuan*) represents the attempt to influence perspectives of China through cross-national and cross-cultural communication.

Numerous interrelated institutions are involved in the crafting of Chinese propaganda, in general, and foreign policy narratives, specifically. By far the most powerful decision-making body in the propaganda system overall is the Central Leading Group on Propaganda and Thought Work. This secretive body hides the extent to which it controls information in China to blunt criticism of its actions. Politburo Standing Committee member, Li Changchun, heads this group (according to one source), a position that would place him in control of all Chinese propaganda activities. Li concurrently serves as Chairman of the Guidance Committee on Building Spiritual Civilization Construction, a central-level organization involved in propaganda production for domestic audiences. Another key figure in the Chinese propaganda system is Liu Yunshan, who heads the Central Propaganda Department, the CCP organization in charge of the country’s

ideological, educational, cultural, artistic activities, including supervision and control of Chinese mass media.

Efforts to promote foreign propaganda, in particular, are managed by the CCP Central Committee Foreign Propaganda Office, headed by Wang Chen, who concurrently serves as the Deputy Director of the Central Propaganda Department and Director of the State Council Information Office. Day-to-day supervision of foreign propaganda is handled by the State Council Information Office, which pays attention to media coverage of salient issues in foreign affairs and interacts with foreign journalists in China.

As Anne-Marie Brady noted in her April 30, 2009 testimony before this commission, “the CCP has a longstanding policy of utilizing foreigners in its foreign propaganda work, this is called ‘using foreign strength to promote China’ (*liyong waili wei wo xuanchuan*).” Some Chinese scholars of foreign propaganda advocate favorable communication with foreign journalists and foreigners visiting China as the *most* effective means of improving the People’s Republic’s international image.¹

In the aftermath of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2002-2003, China’s central government responded to criticism that it mishandled information about SARS by creating a “spokesperson system” (*fayanrenzhidu*) to train bureaucrats in public relations. Ostensibly designed to increase information transparency, the spokesperson system required ministries and provincial and municipal governments to employ spokesmen who could handle media inquiries as well as control the outward flow of politically sensitive information. A supplementary initiative to establish a spokesperson system for CCP party committees at the level of ministries and provincial and municipal governments is well underway, with the objectives of providing authoritative information about the party’s position on breaking stories, dealing with sensitive issues, and improving the image of the party. Across China, many provincial and municipal governments also have Foreign Propaganda Leading Small Groups (*duiwai xuanchuan lingdao xiaozu*) that are charged with supervising foreign propaganda within their administrative districts.

In order to coordinate the efforts of diverse actors and standardize political messages, national foreign propaganda meetings are regularly held, featuring speeches by the major players in the propaganda system. The most recent such meeting was hosted in early January 2011 by the CCP Central Committee Foreign Propaganda Office.² In his address at the January meeting, Director Wang Chen emphasized the need for those engaged in foreign propaganda to “more openly face the world, take advantage of strategic opportunities, promote the scientific development of foreign propaganda... boost the nation’s cultural soft power, struggle for an objective and friendly environment for international public opinion, demonstrate China’s prosperous economic development,

¹ See, for example, Zhang Kun, *Guojia xingxiang chuanbo* (Communicating National Image), (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2005), p. 311.

² This is my translation of the Office’s Chinese title; in the official English translation, this organization has the innocuous title of International Communication Office of the Central Committee.

[promote] democratic progress and open civilization, and produce a peaceful, harmonious, and positive national image.”

Wang also hailed the 11th Five Year Plan (from 2006-2010) as a period when the world developed a much greater understanding of China, the PRC gained new influence, and the country demonstrated its new status as a responsible great power. The effectiveness of foreign propaganda, Wang asserted, has greatly improved due to factors including the expansion of the spokesperson system, a huge increase in the number of reports written for foreign audiences, and improvements in internet management. He observed that, while foreign propaganda does face challenges, it also faces a great opportunity for further development.³

Dissemination of Foreign Propaganda

For the Chinese central government, the establishment of global media that can rival the appeal of Western media, such as the Associated Press, CNN, or BBC, has become a national aspiration pursued with nearly the same fervor as the construction of an aircraft carrier or the development of China’s space program. New policies designed to expand the reach of Chinese media to larger foreign audiences stem from the belief that the CCP’s capability to influence international perspectives regarding China is weak and that investment in mass media for disseminating foreign propaganda will create more a favorable impression of China.

In recent years, the People’s Republic has budgeted more than six billion dollars (45 billion yuan) to increase the overseas reach of state media and expand the operations of Xinhua News Agency, which serves as the mouthpiece of the Chinese central government domestically and the eyes and ears of the Chinese state abroad. A September 2010 study written by Douglas Farah and Andy Mosher suggests that Xinhua News Service operates 117 overseas bureaus and provides news in eight languages, including English, French, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, Japanese as well as traditional Chinese. According to Farah and Mosher, “Xinhua has plans to expand to more than 200 bureaus worldwide, which would make it the largest news agency in the world.”⁴ In July of 2010, Xinhua launched CNC World, a 24-hour television news station that broadcasts in Chinese and English.

Other efforts to boost China’s communication capacity include the expansion of foreign language programming by China Central Television (CCTV) and China Radio International. CCTV broadcasts to foreign audiences in English, French, Spanish, Arabic,

³ Xinhua wang, Quanguo duiwai xuanchuan gongzuo huiyi zhaokai tuidong waixuan gongzuo fazhan National Foreign Propaganda Work Meeting Held to Promote Foreign Propaganda Development), January 6, 2011 accessed on March 8, 2011 at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-01-06/180921772084.shtml>.

⁴ Douglas Farah and Andy Mosher, “Winds from the East: How the People’s Republic of China Seeks to Influence the Media in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia: A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance,” September 8, 2010, p. 10.

and Russian; the Internet-based television station, CNTV (*zhongguo wangluo dianshitai*) provides programming in ten foreign languages, including Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, Kazak, and Korean. China Radio International currently broadcasts in 38 different languages and on multiple frequencies in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America.

The rapid expansion of the above media platforms has necessitated the training of a vast new cohort of personnel with foreign language skills. In a speech delivered on December 17, 2010, Politburo Standing Committee member and top propaganda tsar, Li Changchun, urged students at the Communication University of China to “promote the country’s developmental achievements, expand the battle for international public opinion, protect national security and ideological security, and create first-class international media.”⁵

According to an article published in the January 25, 2011 edition of *Guangming Daily*, the Central Propaganda Department and the Education Ministry have been collaborating with “test” (*shidian*) universities, such as Tsinghua University, People’s University of China, Communication University of China, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and Fudan University. Beginning in 2009, efforts were made to recruit students to masters degree programs, with the objective of training a new cohort of more 300 journalists to work in international communication for major central-level news media. The instruction of these journalists involves collaboration by the government, media, and universities and involves practical experience and foreign language training.⁶ If these efforts to train China’s next generation of foreign journalists are considered to be effective, it is not unreasonable to assume they will commence in other parts of the country.

China’s attempt to influence the views of foreigners goes well beyond the production of news reports and other media programming that lacks the criticism and suspicion of the PRC that is common fare in Western reports about Chinese politics. Beijing has sought to create new cultural ties around the world through the construction of 322 Confucius Institutes in 96 countries as of late 2010. These institutes provide Chinese language classes and promote knowledge of Chinese culture. Moreover, the PRC’s hosting of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai attracted a great deal of largely positive international media coverage.

Foreign Policy Narratives

Vice Premier Li Keqiang, a potential successor to Wen Jiabao as the PRC’s future premier, has asserted that China has a long history of peaceful development, despite a clear historical record of civil war, domestic upheavals during the Mao Period, and clashes with the US, India, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam in the 20th century. Li suggested in an opinion piece published in the *Financial Times* that China’s long-term goal is to provide a comfortable life and moderate prosperity to its citizens. Li expressed

⁵ Qiushi, “Wei jiaqiang guoji chuanbo nengli tigong jianshi rencai zhicheng,” (To Increase International Communication Capacity Provide Substantial Support for Talent), February 16, 2011.

⁶ *Guangming ribao*, “Tishen guoji chuanboli rencai peiyang yao jiaqiang,” (Improving International Communication Capacity: The Fostering of Talent Must be Strengthened). January 25, 2011. Accessed on March 7, 2010 at http://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2011-01/25/nw.D110000gmr_20110125_1-16.htm

hope for peaceful relations with neighboring states and emphasized China's commitment to green technologies and constructive role in global economic government; he asserted that China's "development will not be possible without the world – and world development needs China. We are committed to work even more closely with other countries to create a bright future for all." ⁷ A perusal of dispatches from Chinese overseas diplomatic missions on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website posted since January of this year indicates similar utopian and pacific messages have been echoed by Chinese diplomats in places as distant as Botswana and the Netherlands as well as by Chinese establishment scholars publishing academic essays in the United States. ⁸

While this foreign policy narrative speaks of China's peaceful aspirations and economic accomplishments, it obscures the darker, potentially assertive side of Chinese nationalism that has created tension with Japan concerning the Senkaku Islands, with the US and South Korea over military exercises, and with the Philippines and Vietnam over Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. Beijing's preferred narrative fails to explain the country's motivations for growing investment on military capability, in the absence of a major threat to China's national security.

Chinese officials have also projected a different image overseas than they have when speaking to domestic audiences. President Hu Jintao's mention of the need for China to improve human rights during his visit to the United States in January, for example, was largely excised from media reports by Chinese domestic media. The merits of democratic government abroad are de-emphasized by Chinese journalists and efforts to promote democracy within China by 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo and others have been censored and suppressed by the state. As a result of information control within the PRC, the activities of domestic democracy activists remain largely unknown. It is no coincidence that the words "Egypt" and "Jasmine" have become words that are banned in Chinese Cyberspace after pro-democracy revolutions in the Middle East captured international media attention. Meanwhile, Chinese officials at all levels of government praise the strides their country has made toward openness and inner-party democracy.

The objective of CCP leaders is to utilize propaganda to retain high levels of popular support domestically and to improve the regime's international influence. When propaganda messages are disconnected from actions that speak otherwise or challenged by rival perspectives, the effectiveness of propaganda falters and sows doubt among both foreigners and Chinese alike. Only the future will reveal whether Beijing's grandiose efforts to develop the capacity to burnish its image as a peaceful, responsible, trading nation represent the genuine aspiration to promote global economic prosperity, or mask a design to lull potential adversaries into complacency. The United States must hope for the former while preparing for the latter. When attempting to appraise the PRC's real

⁷ Li Kiqiang, "The World Should not Fear a Growing China," *Financial Times*, January 9, 2011.

⁸ For the latter, consider the position argued by Wang Jisi in "China's Search for Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, Issue 2, March/April 2011, pp. 68-79.

intentions, this commission would do well to remember an oft used Chinese expression “tingqiyān guānqixiāng,” “listen to what is said and watch what is done.” China’s considerable efforts to develop international communication capacity are impressive, but they are unlikely to translate into real communication power or even strengthen soft power, unless the messages in Chinese foreign propaganda ring true.