

1. What areas accumulated and produced successful theoretical frameworks:

Since 1989, the study of Chinese politics has shifted from the transition paradigm to explaining China's authoritarian resilience. In examining the durability of the one-party state, scholars have underscored the importance of "input" institutions that invite societal feedback without undermining stability¹; the promotion mechanisms of local cadres that foster economic development²; the importance of informal institutions in providing public goods;³ the party's effective alliance with key societal groups, such as entrepreneurs⁴; as well as the feature of fragmented authoritarianism⁵ and the role "guerrilla style" adaptive governance,⁶ amongst other explanatory variables.

The role of thought work or information management in creating and diffusing a favorable image of the party-state to its citizens, has garnered relatively less scholarly attention within the larger scholarship on China's authoritarian resilience. Propaganda and cultural work, however, have consistently been highlighted as critical or as a top priority by the highest echelons of the party. The CCP appears as determined to avoid the mistakes of the Soviet Union, where the party's loss of attraction amongst its citizens has contributed to the collapse of the regime.

While earlier studies of China's propaganda system in the reform era argued for its decline due to technological advancements, the growth of commercial forces and administrative fragmentation,⁷ the cumulative scholarship over the past two decades, underscores the adaptive nature of China's propaganda apparatus, and the importance of the party's multifaceted thought work for the larger project of authoritarian resilience.

In her influential work, *Marketing Dictatorship*, Brady put forward a concept of "popular authoritarianism," arguing that the party's modernization of the propaganda system is at the heart of its survival of multiple crises since 1989.⁸ Along similar lines, Shambaugh's assessment of China's propaganda system argues that despite some atrophying, "the system remains effective in controlling most of the information that reaches the Chinese public and officialdom."⁹ In her analysis of the evolution of China's cultural governance, Perry suggests that the high levels of public support for the current system can in part be explained by the

¹ Andrew Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 6-17.

² Pierre F. Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism: The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era* (Yale University Press, 2008).

³ Lilly Tsai, *Accountability Without Democracy: Solidarity Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴ Bruce Dickson, *Red Capitalists in China: The Party, Private Entrepreneurs, and Prospects for Political Change*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁵ Andy Mertha, *China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change*, (Cornell University Press, 2010).

⁶ Elizabeth J. Perry and Sebastian Heilmann, *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, (Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).

⁷ Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media Politics, and 'Thought Work' in Reformed China* (Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁸ Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

⁹ David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy," *The China Journal* 47, (2007).

“successful re-Orienting of party propaganda to present the CCP as the acknowledged leader of a national revival...”¹⁰

This “re-Orienting” has been richly documented in empirical research on all facets of thought work, including surveillance, censorship and persuasion. Scholars of surveillance document the party’s shift to large-scale scientific polling and surveying, as a way of analyzing and responding public opinion.¹¹ Studies of censorship showcase its smart, selective nature,¹² as well as the evolution of regulations into more subtle informal and legal pronouncements.¹³ The studies of persuasion and cultural governance demonstrate the official use of media commercialization and Westernization in creating more attractive content for the public,¹⁴ the shifts towards entertainment¹⁵ and distraction¹⁶ in official messaging strategies, as well as the emergence of online public deliberation forums to promote responsive governance as part of the persuasion effort.¹⁷

Other than demonstrating these upgrades in information management strategies, scholars also underscore the party’s persisting reliance on experimentation and improvisation—a tradition that some link to the revolutionary governance of the Mao era.¹⁸ Rather than seeing the state as monolithic and deliberate in its persuasion work, rich empirical case studies of crisis communication, for instance, showcase the on-the-spot adaptations of the state, using a multitude of techniques and mechanisms outlined above.¹⁹ Overall, the collection of works on thought work in the reform era produced coherent theoretical frameworks linking the adaptive nature of the propaganda apparatus (and its practices) to the party’s resilience.

2. What areas are ripe for more knowledge accumulation: building connections between the latest and the past scholarship

The current research on public opinion management (primarily in the digital sphere) features some important new directions that could benefit from better linkages with the accumulated

¹⁰ Elizabeth J. Perry, “Cultural Governance in Contemporary China: ‘Re-Orienting Party Propaganda,’” *Harvard Yen-ching Institute Working Paper Series*, (2013): 26.

¹¹ Patricia M. Thornton, “Retrofitting the Steel Frame: From Mobilizing the Masses to Surveying the Public,” *Mao’s Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, (2011).

¹² Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326-343; Peter Lorentzen, “China’s Strategic Censorship,” *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 2 (2014): 402-414.

¹³ Maria Repnikova, *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

¹⁴ Daniella Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*, Cambridge University Press: 2012; Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

¹⁵ Ashley Esarey, Daniela Stockmann, and Jie Zhang, “Support for Propaganda: Chinese Perceptions of Public Service Advertising,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 103 (2017): 101–117.

¹⁶ Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument,” *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 484–501.

¹⁷ Jesper Schlæger and Min Jiang, “Official Microblogging and Social Management by Local Governments in China,” *China Information* 28, no. 2 (2014).

¹⁸ Elizabeth J. Perry, “Cultural Governance in Contemporary China: ‘Re-Orienting Party Propaganda,’” *Harvard Yen-ching Institute Working Paper Series*, (2013).

¹⁹ Maria Repnikova, “Information Management During Crisis Events: A Case Study of Beijing Floods of 2012,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 107 (2017): 711-725.

scholarship discussed in the previous section. These include the fusion of state and societal actors in thought work production, and public responses to state propaganda strategies. As for the former, a number of latest works on digital persuasion highlight its interactive features, whereby the state delegates much of the content production and diffusion to other actors. Studies on paid commentators or the 50-cent army,²⁰ the voluntary pro-party commentators,²¹ and cyber-nationalists²² all point to the importance of societal forces in fortifying and channeling pro-regime discourses. Studies of official Weibo also demonstrate how public interactions with these platforms are at the heart of constructing a responsive image of the party-state.²³

While the Internet has facilitated and expanded the webs of state-societal interactions in the realm of thought work creation, these interactions existed in the pre-Internet era. As Perry highlights in her essay on cultural governance, “both in Mao’s day and today, society plays a critical role in reinterpreting, iterating, and enforcing state policy.”²⁴ More work is needed in distilling the unique features pertaining to digital co-construction and dissemination of pro-regime content, and their implications for authoritarian resilience. The more rapid and expansive state-society interactions in the digital age, for instance, can be conducive to more sophisticated online propaganda, while putting more pressure on the state for “performing” responsiveness to public concerns, and updating its cultural symbols to the fast evolving digital culture. Integrating the interactive/collaborative nature of thought work creation into the analysis of other upgrades introduced in the first section is also timely. For instance, it is important to examine in more depth the role of commercial forces in propaganda production, the contrasts between Chinese and Western tools in e-governance and trolling practices, and the blurring lines between entertainment and politics in the construction of pro-regime messages.

The second important area that’s ripe for more knowledge accumulation is that of the bottom-up study of thought work implications, or public reactions to and interpretations of state propaganda efforts. The few recent studies showcase some mixed findings, with some works demonstrating public support for propaganda and others highlighting resistance towards these efforts. A study of public reactions to public service advertisements, for instance, found a high public support for the state’s involvement in advert production in contrast to the more negatively perceived role of companies.²⁵ Another study of the implications of state propaganda argued that it succeeded in signaling the state’s capacity at social control, thereby preempting dissent, as opposed to directly persuading audiences of specific state narratives.²⁶ Even if citizens ignore propaganda messages, this study suggests, they would still be impressed by the ability of the state to produce it, and fear transgressing the political status quo.

²⁰ Rongbin Han, “Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China’s ‘Fifty-Cent Army,’” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44, no. 2 (2015): 105-134; Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument,” *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017).

²¹ Rongbin Han, “Defending the Authoritarian Regime Online: China’s “Voluntary Fifty-Cent Army,” *The China Quarterly* 224, (2015): 1006-1025.

²² Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova, “Demystifying the ‘Little Pink’: The Creation and Evolution of a Gendered Label for Nationalistic Activists in China,” *New Media & Society*, (2017).

²³ Ashley Esarey, “Winning Hearts and Minds? Cadres as Microbloggers in China,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44, no. 2 (2015).

²⁴ Elizabeth J Perry, “Cultural Governance in Contemporary China: ‘Re-Orienting Party Propaganda,” *Harvard Yenching Institute Working Paper Series*, (2013): 22.

²⁵ Ashley Esarey, Daniela Stockmann and Jie Zhang, “Support for Propaganda: Chinese perceptions of public service advertising,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 103 (2016): 101-117.

²⁶ Haifeng Huang, “Propaganda as Signaling,” *Comparative Politics* 47, no. 4 (2015): 419-437.

Other works, however, underscore societal overt and covert resistance to state propaganda efforts. The analysis of contestation of official ideology within journalism education, for instance, showed that faculty and students actively reinterpret both official restrictions and media slogans, with some students even choosing to abandon journalism profession as an act of resistance.²⁷ Other studies illuminate creative forms of resistance of China's social media users through deployment of irony and other linguistic devices to push back against censorship and official propaganda efforts online,²⁸ as well as the role of news workers as critical public opinion leaders on the Internet²⁹ and within traditional news organizations.³⁰

More research is necessary in interrogating these dynamics of support for and neglect of official propaganda in China. Such research would strongly complement the past works on strategic adaptations of the propaganda apparatus by showing how these adaptations play out in public perceptions. Do the mixed reactions of support and contestation still fit the authoritarian resilience thesis considering that public criticisms don't amount to large-scale social movements? Or does apathy towards and mockery of official propaganda indicate the weaknesses of the party's thought work and invite us to think deeper about the actual effectiveness of these various adaptations that we have thus far linked primarily to authoritarian resilience? Methodologically, there is space for a better integration of top-down and bottom-up perspectives on propaganda work, whereby both the strategies of the state and societal reactions are carefully considered in the analyses. The empirical study of societal perceptions of propaganda, of course, is challenging, but a combination of focus groups, participant observations and interviews could help produce fresh hypotheses, which could in turn be potentially tested in surveys or larger experimental studies.

Areas for future research:

Other than a more in-depth study of public perceptions of propaganda, future scholarship should engage with comparative and global dimensions of China's thought work. As for the former, the analysis of propaganda strategies and practices is ripe for comparative work, including historic, sub-national, authoritarian, and democratic comparisons. First, as already alluded to in the previous section, the interrogation of new digital strategies of official persuasion could benefit from comparisons to the Mao era, as well as to the pre-Internet era more broadly.

Second, while the existing studies tend to focus on national-level investigations of the propaganda apparatus, a significant variation exists in how officials practice thought work at the local level that is yet to be systematically examined. Frictions between different levels of the state as well as across different locales will be instructive in teaching us more about the possible cracks in the official propaganda enterprise in the long-term.

Third, analytical comparisons in information management between China and other authoritarian states would be insightful for underscoring the possible uniqueness as well as generalizability of the China case when it comes to the relationship between propaganda

²⁷ Maria Repnikova, "Thought Work Contested: Ideology and Journalism Education in China," *China Quarterly* 230, (2017): 399-419.

²⁸ Siu-yau Lee, "Surviving Online Censorship in China: Three Satirical Tactics and Their Impact," *China Quarterly* 228, (2016): 1061-1080; Guobin Yang and Min Jiang, "The Networked Practice of Online Political Satire in China: Between Ritual and Resistance," *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 215-231.

²⁹ Joyce Y. M. Nip and King-wa Fu, "Challenging Official Propaganda? Public Opinion Leaders on Sina Weibo," *China Quarterly* 225, (2016): 122-144.

³⁰ Maria Repnikova, *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

work and authoritarian durability. China-Russia comparisons, for instance, demonstrated that the Chinese state relies more heavily on preemptive signaling and public opinion surveillance in controlling media narratives than its Russian counterpart that opts for more post-factum censorship and coercion.³¹ Similar comparative studies on specific facets of information management are both methodologically feasible and theoretically enriching.

Fourth, fruitful comparisons could be made between China's persuasion and information control strategies and those used by democratic governments. For instance, parallel to the notion of the party-state's delegation of co-production of positive content to netizens, scholars of democratic contexts demonstrate how politicians guide online political participation to mobilize support for their campaigns.³² Echoing the idea of responsive governance via official Weibo channels, studies of Western contexts point to the "co-production" of governance between citizens and the state in the social media era.³³ Engaging in cross-regime comparisons could help further illuminate the extent of "Westernization" of China's propaganda work, as well as some possible convergences in democratic and authoritarian systems when it comes to public opinion management.

Other than comparative research, it is timely to investigate the global facets of China's thought work or how the Chinese party-state attempts to export its media and cultural products outside its national borders. Some studies already point to the expansion of China's external propaganda through investments in the global reach of China's official media enterprises.³⁴ The research, however, thus far remains limited when it comes to production strategies (and processes) of global-oriented thought work; the perceptions of these efforts by targeted recipients; and the linkages between the global and domestic realms of party's legitimation practices.

As for content production, our understanding of it is relatively scarce in contrast to the richly documented analysis of domestic propaganda work. In particular, it would be important to examine whether the use of commercial and Western tools, as well as the reliance on improvisation, is evident in the external propaganda production as much as it is in the domestic one. The public opinion response to China's global persuasion effort is another area for investigation. Thus far, some analyses suggest that this work is failing with Western audiences,³⁵ but the reactions are more complex in the global South, namely in Africa, that call for more exploration. Finally, the driving incentives behind the global image work are pertinent to examine. How much of this costly effort is oriented towards domestic audiences, or projecting to Chinese public the impressive global reach of the one-party state, and how much of it is genuinely aimed at boosting global attraction of the China model? Better grasping these incentives will inform us not only about the evolution of China's propaganda apparatus but also about a possible reorientation of the party's approach towards legitimacy building.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Rachel K. Gibson, "Party change, social media and the rise of 'citizen-initiated campaigning'," *Party Politics* 21, no. 2 (2015); Christian Vaccari, "From echo chamber to persuasive device? Rethinking the Role of the Internet in Campaigns," *New Media & Society* 15, (2009): 109-127.

³³ Dennis Linders, "From e-government to we-government: Defining a typology for citizen co-production in the age of social media," *Government Information Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2012): 446-454.

³⁴ Wen-Hsuan Tsai, "Enabling China's Voice to Be Heard by the World: Ideas and Operations of the Chinese Communist Party's External Propaganda System," *Problems of Post-Communism* 64, no. 3-4 (2017): 203-213.

³⁵ Yuezhi Zhao, "China's quest for 'Soft power': Imperatives, impediments, and irreconcilable tensions?" *Global Media Worlds and China* 20, no. 4 (2013).

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