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CULTURAL GOVERNANCE IN  
CONTEMPORARY CHINA:  
“RE-ORIENTING” PARTY PROPAGANDA

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# Cultural Governance in Contemporary China: “Re-Orienting” Party Propaganda

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Shortly after the startling collapse of Communist regimes across Eastern Europe in 1989, the field of contemporary China studies was swept by a “democratization” paradigm that looked for imminent regime transition in the People’s Republic of China [PRC] as well.<sup>1</sup> Scholars pointed to the growth of NGOs and other signs of bottom-up activism in post-Tiananmen China as evidence of a rising civil society poised to challenge the Chinese Communist Party’s [CCP] monopoly on power.<sup>2</sup> A quarter of a century later, however, sobered by the failure of the PRC to undergo significant political reform despite sustained economic progress, the China field is today more inclined toward an “authoritarian resilience” paradigm that presumes the indefinite survival of the Communist party-state system.<sup>3</sup> This analytical shift, while at some risk of underplaying the very serious problems which plague the Chinese system and render all political predictions perilous, nevertheless serves the salutary purpose of focusing attention on the actual mechanisms of state rule that have sustained the polity to date.

In reassessing the staying power of the Chinese state, analysts have emphasized such critical indicators as the system’s ability to recruit, monitor, and hold accountable government officials; to grow and guide the economy via flexible policy levers; to invest in valued public goods; to enlist the active support of entrepreneurs and other key social groups; and to keep the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, He, *The Democratization of China*; and Gilley, *China’s Democratic Future*.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism*; and Reilly, *Strong Society Smart State*.

lid on popular protest through a clever combination of coercion, censorship, cooptation, and conciliation.<sup>4</sup> There is however a more elusive, yet no less critical, element of state capacity: the facility of the Party-state to make a case for its “right to rule” in terms that resonate both at home and abroad. For this task, the PRC leans heavily upon *cultural governance*, or the deployment of symbolic resources as an instrument of political authority. It does so, moreover, in a manner that underscores the distinctively “Chinese” character of the political system. A state whose ideology and institutions were imported almost wholesale from the Soviet Union is represented in party propaganda as part and parcel of a glorious “Chinese tradition.” Over the years, the Chinese Communist Party has continually “re-Oriented” its message so as to come across as culturally congruent with its principal target audience. The process bespeaks a dynamic and diversified propaganda operation that is as attentive to popular emotions as to party ideology.

### ***Cultural Governance***

Cultural governance figures in the legitimization and perpetuation of any enduring state system.<sup>5</sup> When practiced by critics of the system (whether from inside or outside the state apparatus), cultural governance may serve to question – or even to resist – state power.<sup>6</sup> Controlling and channeling symbolic political expression so that it strengthens rather than challenges government legitimacy is therefore a concern for all states, but perhaps especially so for those which lack robust and respected electoral and legal institutions capable of conferring procedural legitimacy on state leaders.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of firmly established democratic institutions, leaders may find historical and cultural assertions to be of indispensable value in staking their claim to a “right to rule.”

It has sometimes been suggested that reliance on cultural modes of governance was particularly pronounced in “traditional” polities where the lines between secular and religious power were indistinct and overlapping.<sup>8</sup> Clifford Geertz’s analysis of nineteenth-century Bali, for example, depicted a “theatre state” ruled by rituals and symbols rather than by force.<sup>9</sup> Imperial China, which administered a far-flung empire with a remarkably small cadre of

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<sup>4</sup> Lily L. Tsai, *Accountability Without Democracy*; Kellee S. Tsai, *Capitalism Without Democracy*; Naughton and Yang (eds.), *Holding China Together*; Heilmann and Perry (eds.), *Mao’s Invisible Hand*; Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*.

<sup>5</sup> Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*; Shapiro, *Methods and Nations*.

<sup>6</sup> Callahan, *Cultural Governance and Resistance in Pacific Asia*.

<sup>7</sup> Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*.

<sup>8</sup> Pye and Verba (eds.), *Political Culture and Political Development*.

<sup>9</sup> Geertz, *Negara*.

bureaucratic officials, is often cited as another archetypal case of effective cultural governance. There the shared literary and moral universe of intellectuals and officials, imparted through a classical Confucian education, institutionalized in government-sponsored examinations, and observed in family, community and state rituals, helped to uphold and invigorate a dynastic order for centuries.<sup>10</sup>

By demarcating the boundaries of the realm (天下) along cultural rather than territorial lines, Confucian political theory assigned great weight to the proper performance of symbolic rituals as a means of producing and promoting obedience and allegiance. In Joseph Levenson's influential formulation, Chinese "culturalism" (which he contrasted to modern "nationalism") underpinned a powerful identity that elevated Confucian mandarins and their subjects above the unwashed "barbarians" outside the Sinic world.<sup>11</sup> The impact of these cultural claims was felt externally as well as internally. Vivienne Shue observes that "if not by conquest, then by cultural splendor and the projection of a confident superiority itself, the empire could manage to command the respect of those powers on its periphery and beyond."<sup>12</sup>

The Revolution of 1911 dealt a deathblow to the imperial political system and its cultural foundations. Twentieth-century revolutionaries and statesmen, chafing under the humiliation of Western imperialism, sought to save China by importing foreign ideologies of nationalism and Communism to supplant the seemingly exhausted Confucian culturalism. "China's cultural superiority," Shue notes, "became harder and harder simply to assume, and her national glory came to be measured not in its radiant splendor, but in painful comparisons with other rising empires and competitor states."<sup>13</sup> Modern political parties and regimes, whose power emanated from "the barrel of a gun" – as Mao Zedong put it baldly – rather than from the Mandate of Heaven, introduced a new pattern of secular rule directed by militaristic cadres in place of moralistic literati. The magnitude of the rupture was underscored by Levenson when he warned against the fallacy of interpreting Chinese Communism as simply warmed-over "Confucianism with another name and another skin but the same perennial spirit. Canonical texts and canonical texts, bureaucratic intellectual elite and bureaucratic intellectual elite – nothing has changed,

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<sup>10</sup> Fairbank, *China*; Zito, *Of Body and Brush*; Thornton, *Disciplining the State*.

<sup>11</sup> Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*.

<sup>12</sup> Shue, "Legitimacy Crisis in China?" 49.

<sup>13</sup> Shue, 49.

allegedly – except, possibly, everything.”<sup>14</sup> Levenson’s focus on the wrenching shift from culturalism to nationalism highlighted the profound transformation of modern China, which occurred through the succession of revolutions that toppled the imperial order and installed first a republican and then a communist political system. In contrast to imperial dynasties, these revolutionary regimes would struggle to repair and reassert Chinese pride in a “modern” world order of competing nation-states.

Despite such monumental ideological and institutional changes, however, the contemporary Chinese state also leans heavily on cultural governance. While far from “traditional” in its espoused secularism and embrace of a “scientific development outlook,” the PRC continues to devote considerable attention and energy to the exercise of symbolic power as a means to affirm its right to rule. It does so, moreover, in ways which creatively blend “culturalist” and “nationalist” claims. The Beijing Olympics, intended as a kind of “coming out party” for a rising China, provided a graphic illustration of the PRC’s professed identity as the rightful inheritor and steward of a five-thousand-year-old civilization.<sup>15</sup> From the eye-catching logo based on the ancient art of seal calligraphy to the breathtaking opening ceremony directed by cinematographer Zhang Yimou, the 2008 Olympic Games offered a spectacular display of the Communist Party’s declaration to be perpetuating and perfecting a seamless cultural tradition. Beijing’s effort to project Chinese soft power globally through the establishment of hundreds of government-sponsored “Confucius Institutes” around the world is further evidence of this impulse.<sup>16</sup>

China’s rulers today are quite explicit in the high value they put on cultural governance. They are almost equally explicit in their instrumental use of cultural governance for nationalistic ends. In his address to the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, the retiring General-Secretary of the CCP, Hu Jintao, declared that “culture is the life blood of the nation.” Hu emphasized that “the strength and international competitiveness of Chinese culture is an important indicator of China’s power and prosperity and the revival of the Chinese nation.” Hu Jintao called for promoting “traditional” Chinese culture and made

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<sup>14</sup> Levenson, *Confucian China*, Book I: 162.

<sup>15</sup> Brownell, *Beijing’s Games*; Hubbert, “Spectacular Productions,” 119-142; Hubbert, “Of Menace and Mimicry,” 408-437.

<sup>16</sup> In the U.S. alone, over 80 Confucius Institutes with enrollments of nearly 160,000 students were founded in the space of a mere eight years. *International Herald Leader* (June 5, 2012). On soft power in general, see Nye, *Soft Power*.

multiple references to the “great revival of the Chinese nation” (中华民族伟大复兴), a phrase repeated by incoming CCP General-Secretary Xi Jinping in his own remarks to the Party Congress. Standing in front of a monumental painting of the Great Wall, Xi proudly referenced China’s 5,000 year old civilization, proclaiming that “the great revival of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream of the Chinese nation in modern history.”<sup>17</sup> Immediately after the Congress, Xi led his newly elected fellow members of the Politburo Standing Committee on a well-publicized visit to the National Museum of China to view an exhibition entitled *The Road to Revival* which featured the heroic role of the Communist Party in spearheading China’s nationalist struggles. Opening with China’s humiliation in the Opium Wars, the exhibit sounded a triumphal note with its declaration that “today the Chinese nation towers majestically in the Orient; the brilliant prospect of the great revival is already unfolding before us. The dream and quest of China’s sons and daughters can definitely be realized!”<sup>18</sup> Employing a brand of extravagant rhetoric once reserved for praise of Chairman Mao, the CCP was re-Orienting its propaganda to showcase the glories of the ancient civilization that it claims to be representing and reviving.

That this line of cultural-cum-nationalist propaganda enjoys considerable currency in the contemporary PRC had been demonstrated two years earlier when the Chinese Communist Party celebrated its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a blockbuster movie entitled *Beginning of the Great Revival*. Featuring a star-studded cast of Chinese and Overseas Chinese actors, the film conflated the birth of the Communist Party with the great revival of the Chinese nation and portrayed the young Mao Zedong as a central figure in that national renaissance. *Beginning of the Great Revival* was the top-selling Chinese movie in the PRC in 2011, outranking even *Harry Potter* and *Spiderman* in ticket sales.<sup>19</sup> A *New York Times* review described the movie as “a proud statement by an ascendant society.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***Cultural Nationalism***

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<sup>17</sup> “New Party Leadership Gains Limelight,” *Xinhua* (November 15, 2012); “Xi Jinping Pledges ‘Great Renewal of Chinese Nation’,” *Global Times* (November 30, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> <http://fuxing.chnmuseum.cn/intro.php> Accessed April 18, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Only *Kungfu Panda 2* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* did better at PRC box offices that year. “中国内地电影票房历史排行” [Historic rankings of China’s domestic movie ticket sales], *Mtime*, <http://group.mtime.com/12781/discussion/253526/> Accessed March 10, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Andy Webster, “Chinese History, Straight from the Source,” *New York Times* (June 24, 2011).

The current prominence of cultural nationalism in PRC governance is often interpreted as a recent development, traceable to the suppression of the Tiananmen Uprising of 1989. Yingjie Guo writes, “The surge of cultural nationalism in post-Tiananmen China can be explained in terms of . . . the increasing importance given to state nationalism by a party-state which is eager to shore up its own position as the ruling party. Having shifted away from its traditional Marxist-Maoist basis of legitimization, the CCP is compelled to reposition itself . . .”<sup>21</sup> Faced with the discrediting of Marxism-Leninism in the post-Cold War era, so the argument goes, the Chinese state cast about for a new framework of legitimization, settling upon a formula intended to derive strength from popular pride in the glories of Chinese civilization (as well as the gains of the Communist revolution). The shift, it is emphasized, was driven by external as well as internal pressures. Zhao Suisheng explains, “The Western sanctions after the 1989 crackdown were interpreted in official propaganda as anti-China . . . The Communist regime repositioned itself as the representative of China’s national interest and the defender of Chinese national pride.”<sup>22</sup> The state-sponsored Patriotic Education Campaign, launched with much fanfare in the 1990s, sought to inoculate the younger generation against the temptations of “bourgeois liberalism” by a dual focus on the cultural splendors of the Chinese past and the heroic sacrifices of the CCP in rebuilding the Chinese nation. Zhao continues, “By appealing to the students’ sense of patriotism rather than trying to convert them to Marxism, the Communist regime hoped to reassert its moral authority.”<sup>23</sup>

There is definite merit in this argument, as long as it does not obscure the importance of cultural governance with nationalist objectives as an instrument of mobilization and rule (played in different keys and at different decibel levels) throughout the ninety-plus-year history of Chinese Communism. As Mao proclaimed during the war with Japan:

Our national history goes back several thousand years and has its own characteristics and innumerable treasures . . . We should sum up our history from Confucius to Sun Yat-sen and take over this valuable legacy . . . [W]e can put Marxism into practice only when it is integrated with the specific characteristics of our country and acquires a definite national form . . . Foreign stereotypes must be abolished, there must be less singing of empty, abstract tunes,

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<sup>21</sup> Yingjie Guo, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China*, p. 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Zhao, p. 219.

and dogmatism must be laid to rest; they must be replaced by the fresh, lively Chinese style and spirit which the common people of China love.<sup>24</sup>

The contemporary emphasis on cultural nationalism, rather than a sharp break with an earlier reliance on Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought as the ideological foundation of Chinese Communism, marks yet another turn in a tortuous legitimization project that has frequently (if fitfully) drawn upon a wide range of resonant symbols from the Chinese past and present – elite and folk culture alike – to buttress the standing of the CCP. Today’s Patriotic Education Campaign is a recent expression of an impulse with deep roots in the experience of the Chinese Communist Party.

Most of the early Communist leaders, Mao Zedong included, were educated intellectuals who brought to their mobilizing efforts substantial cultural capital and creativity. Central to their revolutionary process was the role of what I have elsewhere called *cultural positioning* – or the strategic utilization of a diverse array of symbolic resources (from Mandarin gowns and literary aphorisms to popular religion and secret-society conventions) for purposes of political persuasion. The supple methods of Mao and his fellow teachers-cum-revolutionaries not only enabled the transplantation of Marxist-Leninist ideas and institutions onto Chinese soil; they further ensured that the Chinese revolutionary variant would grow into something quite different from its Russian prototype. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, party and government agencies – led by the Department of Propaganda and the Ministry of Culture – spearheaded concerted efforts to utilize cultural resources on behalf of powerful political patrons. In the process, cultural positioning was superseded by *cultural patronage*, as local and central officials leveraged party and state resources to capitalize on cultural claims for purposes somewhat different from those that had animated popular mobilization in earlier decades. In the revolutionary years, cultural positioning had enabled the communication of foreign concepts through familiar conduits in order to attract a mass following; after 1949, cultural patronage – conveyed through state-controlled media – was directed toward burnishing the image of the Communist Party and its top leaders by presenting them as national heroes.<sup>25</sup>

Mao Zedong drew the connection between the victory of his revolution and the revival of the Chinese nation in his famous remarks at the first session of the Chinese People’s Political

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<sup>24</sup> Mao, “The Role of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War”, p. 155-56.

<sup>25</sup> Perry, *Anyuan*.

Consultative Conference in September 1949, ten days before the official founding of the PRC, when he declared dramatically that the Chinese people had at last “stood up”:

...our work will go down in the history of mankind, demonstrating that the Chinese people, comprising one quarter of humanity, have now stood up. The Chinese have always been a great, courageous and industrious nation; it is only in modern times that they have fallen behind . . . . For over a century our forefathers never stopped waging unyielding struggles against domestic and foreign oppressors, including the Revolution of 1911 led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, our great forerunner in the Chinese revolution. Our forefathers enjoined us to carry out their unfulfilled will. And we have acted accordingly . . . . From now on our nation will . . . . work courageously and industriously to foster its own civilization . . . . Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation. We have stood up.<sup>26</sup>

As Mao recognized, the project of cultural nationalism would require serious and sustained work.

A focus on patriotic mobilization, drawing upon historical and revolutionary resources, marked Mao’s China from the establishment of the PRC through the Cultural Revolution. With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Chinese citizens were encouraged to sign “patriotic pledges” [爱国公约] guaranteeing their commitment to the nationalist cause. That period also saw the beginning of a series of impressive “Patriotic Health Campaigns” which framed mass public health and sanitation programs as “patriotic” actions to restore the Chinese nation to good health in order to combat American imperialism.<sup>27</sup> In the Cultural Revolution, Chinese nationalism was reframed in opposition to Soviet revisionism. Mao Zedong was now revered as a leader who had not only rescued the Chinese nation from the threat of Western imperialism and Japanese militarism; he was also touted as the global guru of revolutionary ideology. Henceforth political correctness would be decided not in Moscow but in Beijing.

In the early post-Mao era, when “reform and opening” encouraged criticisms of Mao Zedong and his radical policies, CCP leaders fiercely debated how to deal with the Maoist legacy.<sup>28</sup> Deng Xiaoping’s decision to stem the rising tide of de-Maoification by affirming commitment to “socialism with Chinese characteristics” was critical in facilitating a formidable blend of “traditional” and “revolutionary” sources of cultural authority to serve a nationalist end.

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<sup>26</sup> Mao, “The Chinese People Have Stood Up!” (September 21, 1949).

<sup>27</sup> Rawnsley, “The Great Movement to Resist America and Assist Korea,” 303ff. The anti-SARS campaign of 2003 was also presented as a “patriotic health campaign,” but absent the anti-Americanism of earlier days.

<sup>28</sup> Baum, *Burying Mao*.

Although the practice of cultural nationalism gained further attention and momentum after the suppression of the Tiananmen Uprising, it was already a pillar of CCP propaganda prior to June Fourth of 1989.

Internal-circulation publications of the Central Propaganda Department make clear that the project of re-Orienting its message in order to make the Communist system appear more “Chinese” is not a new development. In 1983-84, for example, the Propaganda Department issued a series of directives that called for strengthening both “patriotic education” in Chinese history and “education in the revolutionary tradition.”<sup>29</sup> On April 19, 1989, only a few days after the Tiananmen protests had begun and almost two months before the suppression of June Fourth, the Propaganda Department communicated a new policy on the hanging of portraits in Tiananmen Square that revealed the central leadership’s commitment to the indigenization of their revolutionary tradition. Whereas past practice had called for the portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin to be hung alongside Mao’s portrait on the two major national holidays of May 1 and October 1, the new policy mandated that henceforth no foreign Communist luminaries would be displayed on these occasions. On May 1 (International Labor Day), Mao’s portrait would hang in solitary splendor atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace. On October 1 (National Day), Mao would be joined by Sun Yat-sen. The circular from the Propaganda Department explained that most countries display portraits of their national heroes on national holidays and that it was therefore entirely appropriate that Sun Yat-sen, as forefather of China’s modern revolution, should hang alongside Chairman Mao, who had led the Communist Party and the Chinese people in a revolution that overthrew the “three big mountains” (imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism) and established the People’s Republic of China.<sup>30</sup>

The project of indigenizing the PRC’s claim to legitimacy was thus well underway prior to June Fourth, but the CCP’s official verdict on the Tiananmen Uprising reinforced the trend. In the immediate aftermath of the crackdown, top party leaders charged that the student protest movement had been a product of the neglect of propaganda and “thought work” on the part of the now disgraced former General-Secretary of the CCP, Zhao Ziyang. Thanks to Zhao’s lax attitude, it was alleged, proponents of wholesale Westernization had succeeded in debasing China’s traditional culture and revolutionary tradition, thereby allowing “Western bourgeois”

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<sup>29</sup> Central Propaganda Department (ed.), “运用革命文物加强传统教育,” p. 73. Internal circulation publication.

<sup>30</sup> Central Propaganda Department (ed.), “中央宣传部关于节日期间天安门广场悬挂伟人像的情况通知,” p. 1867. Internal circulation publication.

notions of democracy, freedom, and human rights to gain hold among the young.<sup>31</sup> To rid the nation of such pernicious ideas, the Propaganda Department (assisted by the iron fist of Public Security) spearheaded a massive censorship sweep in which 38 publishing houses were closed down, more than 700 periodicals were discontinued, and some 32 million books and magazines were confiscated.<sup>32</sup>

Censorship was seen as a necessary first step in the reassertion of party control over the ideological arena, but of greater significance in the long run would be a proactive effort to re-Orient the terms of public discourse. Quoting Chairman Mao's warning that "if the East wind does not prevail over the West wind, then the West wind will prevail over the East wind," the new General-Secretary of the CCP, Jiang Zemin, called for an acceleration of ideological work intended to showcase China's "dazzling material and spiritual civilization."<sup>33</sup> In response, a central party directive of July 1989 enjoined propaganda departments and social science academies across the country to undertake systematic research into Chinese history, culture, society and economy to serve as the foundation for a propaganda program that would demonstrate the Chinese people's "creativity, fighting capacity, and commitment to national unification."<sup>34</sup>

The PRC's concern for cultural governance has grown steadily in recent years. Although the budget of the Propaganda Department is not publicly accessible, the official figures for government spending on "cultural undertakings" (文化事业) give a rough idea of the general trend. In the years immediately following the Tiananmen Uprising, such spending increased by over 200 million yuan per year (from 1,357,000,000 RMB in 1989 to 1,946,000,000 RMB in 1992). With the launching of the Patriotic Education Campaign, spending on cultural initiatives took another major leap (from 2,237,000,000 RMB in 1993 to 3,425,000,000 in 1994). It has continued to climb ever since. In 2010, the official figure stood at 52,952,000,000 RMB – a fifty fold increase in twenty years.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Jiang, July 20, 1989, "在全国宣传部长会议上的讲话," p. 916-918. Internal circulation publication. Central Propaganda Department (ed.), "运用革命文物加强传统教育: 72-74.

<sup>32</sup> Wang, January 16, 1991, "坚持正确方针, 把工作做深做细做实,": 964.

<sup>33</sup> Jiang, July 20, 1989 "在全国宣传部长会议上的讲话," p. 915.

<sup>34</sup> "Party Central notice concerning strengthening of propaganda, thought work" (中共中央关于加强宣传, 思想工作的通知), July 28, 1989, p. 938-949.

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Culture Financial Planning Department (ed.), 文化事业统计年鉴; Editorial Committee of the Chinese Financial Yearbook (ed.), 中国财政年鉴.

Internal bulletins from the Propaganda Department stressed that the CCP was to be depicted as the chief custodian of Chinese civilization, credited with perpetuating an allegedly uninterrupted party tradition of protecting ancient cultural relics as national treasures. It was asserted that even under the duress of war, the party had ordered the military to go to great lengths to safeguard China's cultural heritage. In order to preserve priceless artifacts such as those contained in the Forbidden City, for example, the CCP had supposedly taken every possible measure to ensure the peaceful liberation of the city of Beijing. In the forty years thereafter, the importance of cultural preservation had been reflected in the establishment of a special agency and the promulgation of a steady stream of central laws, policies, and directives for this purpose.<sup>36</sup> The Propaganda Department emphasized that schools, family and society all bore responsibility for instructing the younger generation in the protection and promotion of cultural relics, which was seen as beneficial for cultivating allegiance to one's local native place as well as fostering patriotism.<sup>37</sup> National holidays, anniversaries of important historical events (including those causing national humiliation), and major athletic competitions were singled out as excellent opportunities for disseminating propaganda capable of stirring strongly patriotic feelings. The collective participation and mass enthusiasm exhibited on such occasions, it was suggested, would permit a deep and abiding educational impact.<sup>38</sup> These bulletins made no mention of the destructive episodes in CCP history when party leaders had actively encouraged vicious attacks on elements of Chinese tradition: the Red Terror of the 1920s, the Destroy the Four Olds of the 1960s, and the Criticize Lin Biao Criticize Confucius Campaign of the 1970s, for example.<sup>39</sup> Rather, the re-Orientation of the Propaganda Department called for the recognition, protection and preservation of revolutionary and pre-revolutionary relics alike, as though they were all an integral part of a unitary and uninterrupted glorious "Chinese tradition."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Central Propaganda Department (ed.), "中央宣传部, 文化部, 国家文物局关于印发‘人人爱护祖国文物宣传提纲’的通知," p. 1875.

<sup>37</sup> Central Propaganda Department (ed.), "中央宣传部, 文化部, 国家文物局关于印发‘人人爱护祖国文物宣传提纲’的通知," p. 1876.

<sup>38</sup> Wang, January 16, 1991 "坚持正确方针, 把工作做深做细做实," p. 964-965.

<sup>39</sup> Some CCP leaders did, however, make an effort to protect certain cultural treasures from Red Guard rampages in the Cultural Revolution. See Ho, "To Protect and Preserve".

<sup>40</sup> Central Propaganda Department (ed.), "中央宣传部办公厅国家文物局关于印发‘革命文物宣传工作座谈会会议纪要’的通知," p. 1949-1951.

As part of the post-Tiananmen Patriotic Education Campaign, propaganda departments at all levels of the system were encouraged to identify familiar local sites to serve as “educational bases” where instruction in the history of China and the indispensable role of the Communist Party in unifying and modernizing the nation could be effectively conducted.<sup>41</sup> Such education, it was stressed, should encourage young people to nurture fervent feelings for the motherland capable of generating national pride and self-confidence.<sup>42</sup> “Patriotism,” the Propaganda Department explained, “is the powerful emotion . . . of deeply loving the motherland . . . The children of China, having been raised in the bosom of the motherland, should harbor profound sentiments toward the motherland akin to what they feel toward their own mother.”<sup>43</sup> The key to instilling these feelings was said to be a proper appreciation of China’s unique “national character” [国情].<sup>44</sup>

Reeducating Chinese youth so as to prevent another student uprising was a top priority in the aftermath of June Fourth, but party leaders also recognized a pressing need to counteract the hostility of the international community. At a July 1989 meeting of provincial propaganda directors from around the country, Premier Li Peng blamed reporting by American and Hong Kong journalists for having fanned the flames of insurgency prior to the imposition of martial law. Li went on to reveal that he had recently floated with Chinese diplomats posted overseas his suggestion that the Central Propaganda Department should produce a video sympathetic to the June Fourth crackdown and pay for it to be broadcast on television networks around the world. Having been rebuffed on grounds that his scheme would be unacceptable to the foreign media, Li Peng remarked sarcastically that although the Western media claimed to have a free press, it was obviously highly restricted and rigid! Li bemoaned China’s having lost a major opportunity in failing to seize the propaganda initiative while the Tiananmen protests were still underway, and he concluded that the PRC must redouble its international propaganda efforts in future.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Central Propaganda Department (ed.), 高举爱国主义旗帜, p. 152.

<sup>42</sup> Party Central notice concerning strengthening of propaganda, thought work (中共中央关于加强宣传, 思想工作的通知), July 28, 1989, p. 938-949.

<sup>43</sup> Central Propaganda Department (ed.), 高举爱国主义旗帜, p. 217.

<sup>44</sup> Party Central notice concerning strengthening of propaganda, thought work (中共中央关于加强宣传, 思想工作的通知), July 28, 1989, p. 945.

<sup>45</sup> Li, July 20, 1989, “在全国宣传部长会议上的讲话”, p. 926.

The dismantling of the Soviet Union in 1991 further convinced the central Chinese leadership of the need for an international propaganda initiative that would distinguish its own “national character” from that of its erstwhile Communist “Big Brother.” The Propaganda Department called for drawing a sharp contrast between China’s political stability and the existential crisis unfolding in the former USSR.<sup>46</sup> Post mortems on the Soviet collapse highlighted the issue of cultural governance, noting the significance of ethnic and cultural identity in sustaining or subverting a Communist system.<sup>47</sup> As one analyst put it, “The survival of the Soviet Union as a sovereign state was due to the eleven minorities who allied in support of the socialist system and Marxist ideology. It was precisely this cultural identity that constituted the national interest of the Soviet Union. As soon as this cultural identity was no longer recognized, the national unity of the USSR disintegrated. From this we can see that cultural identity [文化认同] is the precondition for national interest.”<sup>48</sup>

Overseas Chinese, especially those residing in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, were a major focus of international propaganda efforts aimed at solidifying national identity and interest. The selection of sites for patriotic education that would appeal to this critical constituency was particularly encouraged. For example, in 1994-95 Shaoxing’s Propaganda Department was praised for having identified and publicized (with the assistance of academic expertise) more than twenty sites in the city that could be associated with Yu the Great, a legendary ruler who is respected along with Yao and Shun as one of the three great sages of ancient China and to whom prayers were traditionally offered for purposes of flood prevention. Noting that overseas Chinese continued to pay homage to Yu, the Zhejiang government approved a recommendation by the Shaoxing Propaganda Department to promote the public worship of Yu the Great by refurbishing his tomb (which required demolishing nearly fifty homes) so that tourists and pilgrims could congregate there for collective observances. In connection with the city’s initiative, which it dubbed the “Number One Construction Project for Worshiping Yu,” donations were sought from both domestic and overseas organizations and individuals. The Shaoxing native-place association of Hong Kong explained its sizeable donation to the project by

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<sup>46</sup> Wang, January 16, 1991 “坚持正确方针，把工作做深做细做实,” p. 966.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, the internal-circulation video produced for party cadres by the Central Discipline Commission in 2006, 居安思危——苏联亡党的历史教训 [Thinking of danger in the midst of peace: Historical lessons from the collapse of the Soviet Union].

<sup>48</sup> Tao, “文化外交时代的来临,” p. 13.

noting that public worship of Yu “promotes our Chinese national spirit, perpetuates our excellent historical and cultural traditions . . . and strengthens national cohesion.” To publicize the initiative, the Shaoxing Propaganda Department convened several international academic conferences and sponsored the publication of a series of scholarly monographs on the subject of Yu the Great. It also fed favorable reports about the project to domestic and international newspapers, magazines, radio and television. At a ceremony to mark the first public commemoration of Yu at his refurbished tomb on April 20, 1995, more than a thousand representatives of the PRC’s people’s political consultative conference, central ministries, and provincial and city governments were reportedly joined by delegates from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and even a number of Western countries.<sup>49</sup>

As the Shaoxing case suggests, propaganda departments often enlist professional academic talent in the effort to uncover and exploit appropriate cultural resources. This is not a new practice; establishment intellectuals have long played a critical role in promoting the party-state’s agenda.<sup>50</sup> Grants from the Ministry of Education and other government agencies are frequently tied to projects that reflect propaganda priorities. Academies of social sciences at all levels and departments of social sciences and humanities in the major universities depend heavily upon such funding and routinely reshape research programs to align with the party’s changing priorities as announced by the Central Propaganda Department.<sup>51</sup> Today, for example, researchers across the country are busy trying to put some flesh on the barebones of Xi Jinping’s call for a “Chinese Dream.”<sup>52</sup> But this work is not left entirely to academics. Propaganda cadres themselves are also supposed to devote serious attention to investigation and study. According to an internal directive of the Central Propaganda Department, propaganda cadres at all levels are expected as a rule of thumb to spend 90% of their workday engaged in research and only 10% in formulating propaganda materials and policy recommendations.<sup>53</sup> The Propaganda Department by no means sees its primary mission as an academic one, however. It is much more concerned about the emotional and political than the cerebral or scholarly impact of its efforts.

### ***Emotion Work***

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<sup>49</sup> Central Propaganda Department (ed.), 高举爱国主义旗帜, p. 119-122.

<sup>50</sup> Hamrin and Cheek (eds.), *China’s Establishment Intellectuals*.

<sup>51</sup> Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*; Sleeboom-Faulkner, *The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, p. 19-22.

<sup>52</sup> Propaganda chief Liu Yunshan also ordered that the concept of the Chinese dream be written into school textbooks so that it “enters students’ brains.” “Chasing the Chinese Dream,” *The Economist* (May 4, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> Wang, January 16, 1991, “坚持正确方针, 把工作做深做细做实,” p. 978.

The importance of gauging and guiding public emotions, both domestic and international, is emphasized repeatedly in Propaganda Department teaching materials. The overriding goal is to make people *feel* sympathetic to the party’s agenda. Central to this goal is a concern for “public sentiment” [舆情] – an umbrella concept that refers to the cumulative emotional and cognitive impact on ordinary people (Chinese and foreigners alike) of party and government policies. It is the responsibility of propaganda cadres to assess and interpret public sentiment so that policies can be fine-tuned in response.<sup>54</sup> Under the principle that “internal and external are different” [内外有别], the Department recommends discrimination in choosing appropriate symbols to appeal to different audiences. When the target audience for party propaganda is international rather than domestic, Chairman Mao and the revolutionary origins of the PRC usually go unmentioned in favor of concentrating on the splendors of the “Chinese cultural tradition.” Within this “tradition,” moreover, international propaganda may be further differentiated according to the particular country toward which it is directed. A recent handbook on propaganda work notes that propaganda aimed at the United States should emphasize the contributions of individual heroes in Chinese history because Americans admire individuals; propaganda targeting Japan should emphasize China’s beautiful natural scenery and colorful folk customs because these appeal to Japanese sensibilities; propaganda directed at Europe should highlight China’s love for the environment and its inherent pacifism in order to satisfy the Green and anti-war sympathies of Europeans, and so on.<sup>55</sup>

Central Propaganda Department directives often begin with a familiar quote from Chairman Mao: “Without investigation, no one has a right to speak.” The main purpose of investigation, today as in the past, is to understand the attitudes and outlook of the intended audience so as to formulate effective tactics and strategies to advance Communist Party priorities. The Propaganda Department still points to Mao Zedong’s 1927 *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*, which extolled revolutionary violence in the Chinese countryside, as setting the standard for gauging public emotions in accordance with “mass line” principles. Cadres are urged to approach their work as an art form as well as a science; propaganda should appeal as strongly to people’s feelings as to their reason. At the same time, propaganda work

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<sup>54</sup> Fan (ed.), 最新党的宣传工作, p. 182-183.

<sup>55</sup> Fan (ed.), 最新党的宣传工作, p. 163-164.

must be continuously upgraded and updated to suit the ever-evolving inclinations and sentiments of a variety of contemporary audiences.<sup>56</sup>

As the reference to Mao's *Hunan Report* indicates, serious attention to mass emotions is nothing new for the Chinese Communist Party. Since its revolutionary days, the CCP systematized "emotion work" as part of a conscious strategy of psychological engineering. Through such techniques as "speaking bitterness," "denunciation," "criticism-self criticism," "rectification" and "thought reform," the Chinese Communists heightened emotional commitment among cadres as well as ordinary recruits to their cause. In the 1930s and 1940s, dedication born of this "emotion-raising" [提高情绪] was a key ingredient in Communist campaigns against Japanese soldiers and Chinese landlords alike. After 1949, patterns of emotion work developed during the wartime years lived on in a series of highly-charged mass campaigns that stretched from Land Reform and the Suppression of Counter-Revolutionaries through the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.<sup>57</sup>

Mao Zedong himself was keenly attuned to the importance of emotions in mass mobilization, and devoted significant attention in his writings to a discussion of the role of human feelings in revolutionary transformation.<sup>58</sup> But Mao was not alone among the Chinese Communist revolutionaries in this recognition. As early as the Anyuan workers' club of 1922-25, CCP propaganda cadres made a conscious and concerted effort to enlist mass emotions to serve the revolutionary cause. Cultural activities such as drama and cinema were seen as effective mobilizing vehicles precisely because of their ability to tug at people's heartstrings.<sup>59</sup> The process of cultural governance with an eye toward its emotional effect was further systematized after the establishment of the Jiangxi Soviet in the early 1930s. A CCP propagandist recalled of the make-shift theatrical performances staged in Ruijin to generate support for the Red Army:

When the audience watched the comic scenes they laughed loudly; when they watched tragic scenes they lowered their heads and wept or angrily denounced the landlords. Thus we knew that the drama had deeply stirred the audience, achieving propaganda results. How happy we were then!<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Pragmatics of propaganda work* (宣传工作实务), p. 59-67.

<sup>57</sup> Perry, "Moving the Masses," 111-128; Perry, "From Mass Campaigns to Managed Campaigns", p. 30-61.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Mao, "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Art and Literature".

<sup>59</sup> Perry, *Anyuan*: chapters 2-3.

<sup>60</sup> Pan, "忆红一军团宣传队", p. 146.

American journalist Edgar Snow, who interviewed Communist leaders after their epic Long March, highlighted the emotional and ideological role of theater in the Communists' mobilization drive: "There was no more powerful weapon of propaganda in the Communist movement than the Reds' dramatic troupes, and none more subtly manipulated . . . When the Reds occupied new areas, it was the Red Theater that calmed the fears of the people, gave them rudimentary ideas of the Red program, and dispensed great quantities of revolutionary thoughts, to win the people's confidence."<sup>61</sup> Once moved by such theatrical performances, peasant recruits were encouraged to articulate their own accusations against their former oppressors. As a propaganda worker in the Northeast noted, "We felt that speaking bitterness was extremely effective in stimulating class hatreds and heightening feelings of vengeance . . . The purpose of war became clear, and the emotions of the troops were raised."<sup>62</sup>

### ***Modernization and Improvisation***

The tradition of revolutionary "emotion work," modernized to take advantage of advances in communications technology, lives on in post-Mao China. A telling example was the suppression campaign that party leaders launched against Falun Gong in the summer of 1999. Television and radio broadcasts flooded the air waves with testimonials by bereaved relatives of Falun Gong victims who railed against the "evil cult" that had led their loved ones astray. Sobbing denunciations of Master Li Hongzhi blamed Falun Gong's supreme leader for the tragedies of insanity, suicide, starvation and even murder that had befallen parents, children, or spouse. Although national television and radio had supplanted the community theater as the favored venue for carefully orchestrated emotional performances, the Propaganda Department's methods bore more than a passing resemblance to previous mass campaign tactics.<sup>63</sup>

Less than a decade after the anti-Falun Gong campaign, the Propaganda Department embarked on another technological upgrade, this time graduating from radio and television to internet and cell phone as more effective means of reaching a population that relies increasingly on these new modes of communication. Impressive as such modernization efforts are, they constitute but the latest chapter in a long history of cultural governance designed to resonate emotionally with its target audience so as to win popular acceptance for the party's political agenda.

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<sup>61</sup> Snow, *Red Star Over China*, p. 123-124.

<sup>62</sup> Mo, "解放战争时期辽东军区的政治工作," p. 194.

<sup>63</sup> Perry, "Reinventing the Wheel?"

To note such continuities in governance practices is certainly not to suggest that nothing has changed in recent years. In sharp contrast to Mao's day, when propaganda was intended to move the masses to revolutionary action, today the point is to detect and dampen any sparks of protest in order to stabilize party rule. Yet the importance of engineering popular emotions in service to party concerns remains a central focus. In a recent teaching manual compiled by the Central Propaganda Department, for example, Hebei Province is commended for having established an effective “public sentiment office” [舆情办] in response to the infamous tainted milk scandal that beset that province in 2008. With an estimated 300,000 victims of adulterated milk, including six infants who died of kidney failure, the incident triggered impassioned protests by distraught parents seeking redress on behalf of their afflicted children. The public sentiment office, led by ten cadres from the Hebei Propaganda Department, initially focused on internet communications as a guide to popular feelings. It harvested and analyzed tens of thousands of web postings by Hebei netizens, on the basis of which the office issued instructions to internet control agencies [网管部门] on how best to manage digital portals, chat rooms and bulletin boards so as to defuse public outrage. The sentiment office also proactively manufactured internet discussions in order to seize control of the public discourse. Once the office had dealt with the internet threat, it undertook a more familiar form of investigation and mobilization. A ten-person survey research team, assisted by 70 investigators, visited every town and neighborhood in Shijiazhuang (where the milk powder scandal had originated) over a one-month period in order to ascertain and assess the feelings of various social groups in the affected area. The public sentiment office provided daily updates on its survey findings in a special bulletin for provincial cadres entitled *Daily Trends in Public Sentiment*, and compiled executive summaries with proposals for new government policies – e.g., low-interest loans to dairy farmers for the purchase of high-quality fertilizer – based on the findings. This coordinated effort by the provincial propaganda department to comprehend, channel and control public sentiment was credited with forestalling mass protest in response to the deadly breach of food safety.<sup>64</sup>

The Chinese Communists do not simply replicate the techniques of Confucian culturalism, nor do they merely apply a thin veneer of modern nationalism to an otherwise traditional formula. Rather, cultural governance under the PRC bespeaks an inventiveness born

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<sup>64</sup> National Academy for Propaganda Cadres (ed.), *宣传思想文化工作: 案例选编*, p. 279-289.

of decades of revolutionary experimentation. In a co-edited volume with Sebastian Heilmann, *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in Contemporary China*, we propose that the revolutionary past of the CCP continues to exert a significant influence on contemporary politics and policies. The achievements of the post-Mao economic reforms, we suggest, are due not only to Adam Smith's invisible hand of market forces, but also to Mao's invisible hand of “guerrilla policy-making”: a pragmatic, trial and error method of handling crisis and uncertainty that originated in the Communist base areas during the war with Japan. Thanks to its unusual revolutionary origins, the Chinese Communist political system allows for more diverse and flexible input and response than would be predicted from its formal political structures, which remain for the most part standard Leninist institutions.<sup>65</sup>

The CCP operates according to classic Soviet principles of so-called “democratic centralism,” and exercises control over the bureaucracy through standard Soviet Nomenklatura procedures (with the Organization Department assigning party and government officials to their posts). Anyone familiar with the political institutions of the former USSR or the Communist countries of Eastern Europe would have little difficulty grasping an organization chart of the PRC.<sup>66</sup> But despite this institutional similarity, the operations of the Chinese system are nonetheless distinctive in ways that reflect China’s unusual revolutionary history and that have bequeathed a surprisingly adaptive and responsive approach to policy. In reaction to massive tax riots that erupted across the Chinese countryside in the 1990s, for instance, the government in 2005 took the extraordinary step of abolishing the agricultural tax. In response to widespread internet complaints about abusive treatment of migrant workers at the hands of the police, China substantially revised its vagrancy laws to make it more difficult for public security to arrest and impound rural migrants in the cities. Such instances by no means imply that the Chinese political system is democratic, but they do suggest that there is more policy responsiveness and flexibility than one would expect on the basis of China’s Communist institutions *per se*.<sup>67</sup>

China’s propaganda czar Liu Yunshan, one of the new standing committee members of the Politburo elected at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, gave an instructive account of this adaptive policy style in an important speech entitled “Being Good at Summing up Experience is Our

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<sup>65</sup> Heilmann and Perry, “Embracing Uncertainty: Guerrilla Policy Style and Adaptive Governance in China,” p. 1-29.

<sup>66</sup> To be sure, there are some differences. The top policy-making group of the CCP, the Standing Committee of the Politburo, was not part of the CPSU’s institutional make-up. Nevertheless, for the most part the institutions of the PRC are directly parallel to those of the former Soviet Union and other Communist systems.

<sup>67</sup> Perry, “The Illiberal Challenge of Authoritarian China,” 3-15.

Party's Excellent Tradition." Liu opened his speech with a quote from Chairman Mao: "We depend for a living on summing up experience." He proceeded to explain that "propaganda, thought and cultural work" today, as in the revolutionary past, must operate as a pragmatic response to crisis and uncertainty. Mao's emphasis on learning from experience was invoked as the inspiration for today's "hard fought battle after battle." Liu cited the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, and the international financial crisis as examples of recent battles during the course of which the Propaganda Department learned to adapt to new challenges with the aid of new tools – cellular technology, the internet, and new social media in particular.<sup>68</sup>

Liu Yunshan's speech was reprinted as the preface to a series of case studies which were published as teaching materials for trainees at the National Academy for Propaganda Cadres in Beijing. The case studies, based on recent incidents, were chosen to illustrate "breakthroughs" [突破] that occurred in propaganda work – some due to planned experiments and others to improvisations "in the midst of battle" – in conjunction with the incidents. According to Liu, the period in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics saw a major shift in propaganda work, from a reactive toward a more proactive approach, as cadres turned to the aggressive use of cutting-edge communications technology to gain the upper hand in dealing with potentially unsettling issues. In Guangdong, for example, in 2009 the provincial propaganda department partnered with the local branch of China Mobile, the largest cell phone and internet provider in the province, to develop an attractive and interactive webpage complete with video games and animated cartoons intended to convey in easily digestible form the official line on a range of sensitive international and domestic questions. Within a few months, the website was being visited regularly by more than half a million netizens.<sup>69</sup> Another case singled out for praise and emulation by the Propaganda Department was that of the Jincheng Coal Group in Shanxi Province. An old state-owned enterprise burdened by a large number of disgruntled employees when it embarked on privatization, Jincheng's propaganda department contracted with IT specialists at Shanghai's Jiaotong University to construct a multi-tiered digital network aimed at accessing and assessing the mentality [思想动态] of all 60,000 members of its workforce. Workers were encouraged to share their concerns and complaints through emails and blogs. As the Jincheng party secretary

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<sup>68</sup> Liu, "善于总结经验是我们党非常好的传统," p. 1-7.

<sup>69</sup> National Academy for Propaganda Cadres (ed.), 宣传思想文化工作: 案例选编, p. 47-53.

instructed his propaganda cadres, “In this network, information about employees’ thoughts are ‘letters’ that circulate freely in the network. You are the postmen responsible for handling the mail.” The more than 10,000 messages received from Jincheng workers provided a treasure trove of information that the enterprise leadership credited with permitting a smooth privatization process, free from the vociferous demonstrations and sit-ins that plagued the privatization of many other state-owned enterprises.<sup>70</sup>

In the above cases potential protests were apparently averted thanks to the preemptive use of high-tech communications, but in other instances propaganda methods were honed in the actual process of managing collective protests. On June 1, 2007, thousands of residents of the city of Xiamen in Fujian Province took to the streets for what they euphemistically called a “stroll,” intended to register opposition to the construction of a PX chemical factory in the area. To gauge the level of dissatisfaction, Xiamen authorities conducted an online poll that revealed widespread and deep discontent. As a result, provincial officials agreed to relocate the plant to a desolate piece of land on Gulei Peninsula in Zhangzhou municipality, a safe distance from Xiamen. When journalists and bloggers encouraged Zhangzhou residents to emulate the Xiamen “strollers,” the municipal propaganda department engaged experts from the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Xiamen University to attest to the appropriateness of the new site in internet postings and other media. The propaganda department also came up with a catchy and widely publicized slogan intended to foster collective pride in Zhangzhou’s acceptance of the chemical plant: “Maritime development begins with Zhangzhou; Loving Zhangzhou begins with us!” The Zhangzhou propaganda cadres realized the need to dispense with their usual practice of responding to protest by censoring the media, in favor of a new approach that actively enlisted the participation of the media (state and private alike) in a propaganda blitz intended to “guide public sentiment” along lines congruent with state policy. Hundreds of radio and television broadcasts publicized the remarks of leading officials and academic authorities in support of the factory relocation; newspapers and other periodicals were instructed to print favorable stories; prime-time news reports were preempted to announce new developments and work plans for the PX project; countless cellular and computer messages transmitted a stern public security warning against illegal mass disturbances. The city of Zhangzhou employed a group of over 120 distinguished “experts” drawn from propaganda, media, and academia to serve as internet

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*: 57-61.

monitors and commentators [网络阅评员] to respond to netizen complaints with blogs and microblogs that defended the government's position. More than five hundred college student volunteers were dispatched to surrounding villages to educate rural dwellers in the official line through "heart-to-heart" chats with individual families. On the basis of these household visits, influential villagers were selected to participate in state-sponsored visits to Nanjing and other cities where PX factories were already operating without incident so that they could spread the good word to skeptical neighbors. In short, a range of mobilizing techniques – some drawn from decades-old mass campaigns and others from recent technological advances – was deployed in service to the cause.<sup>71</sup>

As the Zhangzhou case indicates, cultural governance is not simply a matter of the state imposing its will on an otherwise inert and unininvolved society. Members of Fujian society – journalists, professors, students, and villagers – took an active part in constructing and communicating a message that apparently in the end made sense to local constituencies. As is true in many domains of grassroots Chinese governance, both in Mao's day and today, society plays a critical role in interpreting, iterating, and enforcing state policy.

Another incident that the Propaganda Department credited with generating new approaches to collective protest was the notorious Weng'an riot, which erupted in Guizhou Province in June of 2008 after a middle-school girl drowned under suspicious circumstances that her family believed involved police culpability. Crowds broke through public security cordons and set fire to government buildings and police vehicles. Although the rampage was triggered by the girl's death, it reflected widespread anger toward the Weng'an authorities, who for some years had employed heavy-handed tactics to forcibly relocate residents to make way for lucrative local government development projects. News of the riot went viral on Chinese social media, and by the time the Guizhou provincial authorities intervened the situation was already dire. The Guizhou Propaganda Department reported the circumstances to the News Office [新闻办] of the State Council, which gave its permission to censor both public and commercial press and internet to eliminate stories deemed harmful to the restoration of order. But provincial authorities soon realized that, with the information having already been so widely disseminated, censorship alone would prove inadequate. Rather than simply silence the discussion, therefore, they decided actively to "shape public sentiment" by commissioning and publishing information intended to

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<sup>71</sup> National Academy for Propaganda Cadres (ed.), 宣传思想文化工作: 案例选编, p. 126-135.

mobilize citizen support for the provincial response to the crisis (which included three contrite public apologies by the provincial governor to the people of Weng'an for the poor performance of their local county authorities). For a time, one-third of the *Guizhou Daily*, the official newspaper for the province, was dedicated to government-sponsored reporting on the Weng'an incident. The provincial propaganda department also recruited dozens of “internet critics” to compose and post hundreds of lively essays intended to change the tone of electronic discussions. Once it had carefully prepared the ground, the provincial propaganda department proceeded to invite reporters from all the major national print and digital media outlets to visit Weng'an to conduct pre-arranged interviews with the victim's parents, relatives, eye-witnesses, and local residents. Within the space of two weeks, nearly 150 reporters from more than 30 media outlets had travelled to Weng'an at the invitation of the provincial propaganda department. Most were reportedly satisfied with the provincial account, which pinned the blame for the incident entirely on the county government. The practice of deflecting criticism from higher to lower levels of government is of course another familiar Chinese governance pattern. In this case, according to the analysis of the Central Propaganda Department, the concerted public relations effort on the part of the Guizhou Propaganda Department was so successful that it even elicited praise from America's *Time Magazine* for the unusually transparent coverage of events!<sup>72</sup>

To recap, the Chinese propaganda system does not function as a Leninist echo chamber in which central policies simply reverberate down the ranks. Rather, there is considerable latitude for experimentation and innovation on the part of local government officials, whose initiatives may subsequently receive central endorsement.

### ***Symbolic Resources***

Propaganda departments at all levels make liberal use of both revolutionary and pre-revolutionary symbols to construct and project a persuasive message. The particular issues and instruments vary from once incident to another, but underpinning these diverse efforts is a consistent aim to foster a powerful collective identity that will contribute to the legitimacy and stability of the Communist party-state. Prior to the precipitous demise of Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai, the Central Propaganda Department gave high marks to his “singing Red” campaign to revive the Maoist revolutionary spirit, citing surveys which indicated that 97.25% of

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<sup>72</sup> National Academy for Propaganda Cadres (ed.), *宣传思想文化工作: 案例选编*, p. 150-157. In fact, the story in *Time Magazine*, “China Protests: A New Approach?” (July 4, 2008) was a good deal more muted in its praise than the Propaganda Department's synopsis suggested.

the city's residents had participated in the campaign with 96.51% of the participants reporting a high degree of satisfaction with the initiative. As one netizen responded to an online survey conducted by the Propaganda Department during the campaign, "In today's Chongqing, if you can't sing a few red songs . . . then you're OUT! [the word 'OUT' was written in English]" Improbably, the Propaganda Department credited the campaign with having restored popular faith in Marxism among the younger generation of Chongqing, noting that by the end of 2010 nearly 80% of those surveyed responded that they believed in Marxism, an increase of more than 10% over the previous year.<sup>73</sup> An examination of the lyrics of the 36 approved "red songs" featured in the campaign reveals, however, that the songs make little if any mention of Marxism. Instead, the dominant themes are patriotism, national unification, and the splendors of Chinese tradition. The top song on the list, entitled *Toward Revival* [走向复兴], includes the lyrics "We are the heroic sons and daughters of China, whose ancient civilization sparkles anew. To revive the Chinese nation is our ideal. . . . China towers majestically in the Orient; march onward, onward toward revival."<sup>74</sup>

A continuing commitment to honoring the legacy of Mao Zedong's revolution as an integral part of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" has not diminished the party-state's interest in claiming much older foundations of legitimacy. In response to a "national learning craze" [国学热] focused on the Confucian classics, which swept the country in the 1990s, the symbol of Confucius was deemed especially useful as a vehicle for cultural governance, both externally and internally.<sup>75</sup> In 2004, a government-sponsored program for a global network of Confucius institutes was launched in Beijing. Eight years later, more than 350 Confucius institutes and 500 Confucius classrooms had been established in more than 100 countries around the world.<sup>76</sup>

Evidently encouraged by this trend, the Propaganda Department took the unusual step in January 2011 of installing without prior announcement a large bronze statue of Confucius in the center of Tiananmen Square, directly in front of the National Museum (formerly the Museum of Revolutionary History) and just to the side of Mao's mausoleum. The move generated an

<sup>73</sup> National Academy for Propaganda Cadres (ed.), *宣传思想文化工作: 案例选编*, p. 237-245.

<sup>74</sup> <http://baike.baidu.com/view/2861610.htm> Accessed May 8, 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Within China, the popularization of the Confucian classics among today's college-age generation has been a notable trend. Tellingly, Yu Dan's accessibly written *Notes on Reading the Analects* was an instant bestseller which sold three million copies in four months in 2006-2007. Xiaolin Guo, *Repackaging Confucius*, p. 41.

<sup>76</sup> Zhou and Mo, "How 21<sup>st</sup>-Century China Sees Public Diplomacy as a Path to Soft Power," 19.

outpouring of online criticism from Chinese netizens, however, who drew attention to the unseemliness of situating the ancient sage amidst all the monuments to the revolution, and the statue was then removed (unannounced and overnight) three months later, just as suddenly and surreptitiously as it had been installed. Whether the removal was a response to the public outcry, or whether it pointed to a resurgence of neo-Maoist sympathies among the political elite (at a time when Bo Xilai's Singing Red campaign was still in full swing), was unclear. But that the reversal was evidence of a botched attempt at cultural patronage was obvious to all.

Efforts at cultural governance – even by as seasoned a practitioner as the Central Propaganda Department – may be ill-considered and unsuccessful. Another example of a failed initiative was the effort to resuscitate that quintessential exemplar of the Maoist spirit, Lei Feng, through a series of melodramatic movies released in the spring of 2013. The films proved to be a box office disaster, much to the chagrin of responsible officials in the Central Propaganda Department and Ministry of Culture.<sup>77</sup> Party propaganda does not always strike a chord with its intended audience. Even worse, from the Party's perspective, officially approved symbols and slogans can be hijacked for alternative purposes. The state's own rhetoric may backfire when, for example, cynics assign unauthorized meanings to the Three Represents or laid-off workers march behind portraits of Chairman Mao. Cultural governance, in other words, is a *variable* – the effects of which will fluctuate depending not only upon the symbols themselves, but also upon the venue, format, timing, audience, and so forth. Indeed, it is precisely the Propaganda Department's recognition that not all of its projects resonate with the public which explains its close attention to such matters as attitudinal investigation, technological innovation, and emotional impact.

### **Conclusion**

The current effort to commingle revolutionary and pre-revolutionary symbolic resources as though there were no inherent contradiction between Confucian “culturalism” and modern “nationalism” is but the latest twist in a complicated and circuitous process aimed at justifying the Communist Party’s right to rule. From the earliest days of the CCP right down to the present, cultural governance with a strongly nationalistic flavor has been regarded as critical to the party’s mission. The imaginative application of cultural appeals to augment the Communist Party’s moral and political authority by presenting itself as the savior of the nation has played a

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<sup>77</sup> Dan Levin, “In China, Cinematic Flops Suggest Fading of an Icon,” *New York Times* (March 11, 2013).

crucial – albeit ever changing – role from the very inception of the Party. Xi Jinping’s recent allusions to a “Chinese Dream” of a strong party and nation, fits comfortably within this familiar frame of reference.

These days the CCP makes no apology for the denunciation and devastation that it unleashed on remnants of China’s so-called “feudal” culture at various junctures in its tumultuous history. In fact it makes no mention of these sorry episodes. At the sixth plenum of the seventeenth party congress in October 2011, a central party decision on deepening cultural reform unabashedly asserted that “the 5,000 years of our national cultural development has been a major spiritual force for the Chinese nation and a major contributor to the civilization of all humanity. From the day of its founding, the Chinese Communist Party has been the faithful heir and advocate of this outstanding traditional Chinese culture.”<sup>78</sup> A recent directive which prohibits teaching about the party’s historical mistakes (along with six other “speak-nots”) suggests that the CCP’s record of cultural destruction is unlikely to emerge as a topic of public debate in the near future.<sup>79</sup>

The Propaganda Department does not hold an unblemished record of success in pursuing its project of cultural nationalism, to be sure, but its cumulative achievement – especially when considered in light of the collapse of most other Communist systems – is quite remarkable nonetheless. The comparative resilience of the Chinese Communist party-state must be attributed to many factors, of course, but among them are the kindred feelings that many Chinese evidently harbor toward their political system. The party-state by most accounts enjoys a surprising degree of acceptability in the eyes of its own citizens.<sup>80</sup> As Andrew Nathan summarizes the findings of empirical research on post-Tiananmen Chinese political attitudes, “There is much evidence from both quantitative and qualitative studies to suggest that . . . . the regime as a whole continues to enjoy high levels of acceptance.”<sup>81</sup> One reason for this popular support, it would seem, has been a successful re-Orientation of party propaganda to present the CCP as the acknowledged leader of a national revival that lays claim not only to the legacy of modern revolution but also to much older symbols of cultural splendor and power.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Zhang, *推动社会主义文化大发展大繁荣*, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> “Chinese Government Bans Seven ‘Speak-Not’ Subjects,” *Global Voices Online* (May 16, 2013).

<sup>80</sup> Holbig and Gilley, “Reclaiming Legitimacy in China,” 395-422.

<sup>81</sup> Nathan, “Authoritarian Resilience,” 6-17.

<sup>82</sup> Writes Baogang Guo, “What we have learned from the history of the People’s Republic of China is that the CCP is quite capable of making necessary adjustments to the constantly changing political environment and, thus, they

The current brand of Chinese cultural nationalism is not without intrinsic limitations, of course. The idea of reviving the “Chinese nation” is surely more appealing to those who self-identify as Han Chinese (wherever they may reside) than, for example, to Uighurs or Tibetans living within the territorial borders of the PRC. Continuing unrest among the minority populations of Xinjiang and Tibet suggests that state-sponsored efforts to celebrate the “Chinese nation” are seen as unwelcome expressions of Han chauvinism by some citizens of the PRC who do not identify as Han. This is obviously worrisome to a Chinese leadership mindful that the collapse of the Soviet Union was propelled in part by the defection of non-Russian minorities. Nevertheless, the PRC’s accomplishments in fostering a sense of shared cultural identity and national unity among the Han – whose “dialects” of Chinese are linguistically as diverse as the various Romance languages – is no small achievement. The fact that over 90 percent of the population of the PRC identifies as Han Chinese (and, thanks to state-supported migrations, that even Tibet and Xinjiang are now heavily populated by Han) renders this feat of considerable political significance.

Even among the Han, however, cultural nationalism can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, nationalist sentiment encourages popular support for a strong Chinese state. On the other hand, any perceived signs of weakness or incompetence on the part of Chinese government officials are liable to generate criticisms of the regime by those same nationalistic citizens. The chance of a nationalist movement turning into an anti-government protest is therefore always a possibility. Take, for example, the massive demonstrations triggered by the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands conflict in September 2012. In addition to shouting anti-Japanese slogans, some protesters held up signs containing ironic statements that suggested oblique criticism of the PRC regime; e.g., “I’d rather feed corrupt officials than forfeit the Diaoyu Islands.” The prevalence among the crowds of portraits of Chairman Mao – widely regarded as the symbol of a stronger, less corrupt China – was another indication that the ostensibly patriotic protest carried an implicit reproach of the current party leadership.<sup>83</sup>

The Communist Party over which Xi Jinping now presides faces a host of extremely serious problems and challenges. And many of these difficulties stem directly from the basically

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[sic] can strengthen the CCP’s political legitimacy by reinventing itself.” Baogang Guo, “Political Legitimacy and China’s Transition,” 21-22.

<sup>83</sup> Ouyang Bin, “反日游行,毛主席于薄熙来” [Anti-Japanese demonstrations, Chairman Mao and Bo Xilai], *The New York Times* [Chinese Online Edition] (October 19, 2012).

unreformed Leninist political institutions that persist in contemporary China. Shortcomings inherent in these types of institutions, after all, have been proposed as a key explanation for the collapse of Communism across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.<sup>84</sup>

The Chinese leadership is well aware of the vulnerabilities of its Leninist institutions. Behind closed doors, Xi Jinping warns his fellow Communist Party leaders that unless they manage to combat corruption, the PRC will suffer the same fate as the former Soviet Union.<sup>85</sup> But publicly, Xi does not liken his regime to other Communist systems. Rather, he portrays the PRC as an essentially Chinese system, fully in keeping with China's own national character. His attack on official corruption, associated in Chinese political culture with extravagant banqueting, calls for the exercise of culinary restraint with the folksy slogan: "Four Dishes and One Soup."<sup>86</sup>

A public opinion poll conducted recently among residents in seven major Chinese cities suggests the degree to which China's Communist system has been successfully indigenized. When asked to name their twelve favorite countries, respondents failed to include any other Communist or formerly Communist country. China was the overwhelming favorite, followed at a considerable distance by the United States (with Japan ranked as number twelve).<sup>87</sup> When queried as to whether the collapse of the Soviet Union had been on balance more helpful or harmful to China, only 12% considered the Soviet collapse harmful to China's interests.<sup>88</sup> Asked whether China could resist Western pressure and continue to pursue a path of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," 67.4 % answered in the affirmative.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, 65.8% thought it likely that the rise of China would result in the consolidation of a political system "different from a Western democratic model" and based on China's "own national character."<sup>90</sup> A strong majority (69.1%) responded affirmatively to the question: "Influenced by domestic and international factors, contemporary young people have less knowledge of traditional Chinese culture. Do you have confidence in the continuation and flourishing of traditional Chinese culture?"<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Solnick, *Stealing the State*; Bunce, *Subversive Institutions*.

<sup>85</sup> Chris Buckley, "Vows of Change in China Belie Private Warning," *New York Times* (February 14, 2013).

<sup>86</sup> "Four Dishes and One Soup," *China Economic Review* (January 22, 2013).

<sup>87</sup> Global Sentiment Survey Center (ed.), *中国民意调查*, p. 27.

<sup>88</sup> Global Sentiment Survey Center (ed.), *中国民意调查*, p. 326.

<sup>89</sup> Global Sentiment Survey Center (ed.), *中国民意调查*, p. 174.

<sup>90</sup> Global Sentiment Survey Center (ed.), *中国民意调查*, p. 314.

<sup>91</sup> Global Sentiment Survey Center (ed.), *中国民意调查*, p. 176.

Skillful as the PRC's leadership has been in re-Orienting its propaganda to both suit and shape public sentiments, it has not managed to eliminate political dissatisfaction among the populace. These days many Chinese citizens (Han and non-Han alike) readily voice severe criticisms of their political system – from rampant corruption to ruthless coercion. But very seldom do they complain that the system is in any way *un-Chinese*.<sup>92</sup> Rather than attribute such problems to the shortcomings of an unreformed Soviet system, disgruntled citizens are apt to ascribe the faults of their polity to unjust tendencies rooted deep within the soil of Chinese culture – nepotism, bureaucratism, preference for rule by man over rule of law, feudal remnants. Those who feel aggrieved at the hands of unscrupulous officials rarely point the finger of blame at the Communist system itself. Instead, like their ancestors in bygone centuries, demonstrators often kneel behind banners emblazoned with the age-old cry of protest in imperial China: “Wronged” [冤枉]!<sup>93</sup> The implication is that “if the emperor only knew” of the offenses being committed by corrupt officials at the grassroots level, justice would be served and all would be well in the realm. Decades of inventive and intensive cultural positioning and patronage on the part of the CCP have paid off handsomely. A political system alien in its institutional and ideological origins has been made to feel indigenous. The foreign has been rendered familiar; a Russian recipe has been cooked so as to taste authentically Chinese.

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<sup>92</sup> Among the innumerable ironies of “Chinese” cultural governance is the fact that the country’s current territorial boundaries were established in the eighteenth century as part of the (non-Han) Manchu conquest. Perdue, *China’s March West*.

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, images from the Wukan protests of December 2011. [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-17821844](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-17821844)

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