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**Guiding Hand:  
The Role of the CCP Central Propaganda Department in the Current Era**

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**Abstract**

The Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a central, guiding, role over the whole of Chinese society in the current era. The Central Propaganda Department oversees the Propaganda and Education System (*xuanjiao xitong*) which monitors, instructs and censors all of China's newspapers and magazines, film, television and radio broadcasting, the Internet, the publishing industry, and all aspects of cultural and information production from the highest to the lowest levels of society. In this paper I outline the structure and role of the Central Propaganda Department and the system of thought control it oversees. I consider some recent innovations in the system in the last fifteen years; which combine with traditional methods for a more strengthened approach to control. I examine ongoing preoccupations in the thought work of China's propaganda high priests. And finally, I argue that contrary to assumptions made by earlier researchers, the Central Propaganda Department and China's propaganda system have experienced a rebirth, not a decline, in the period since 1989.

**Introduction**

The Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a central, guiding role over the whole of Chinese society in the current era. The Central Propaganda Department oversees the Propaganda and Education System (*xuanjiao xitong*) which consists of three connected parts: the state-run culture, education, sport, science and technology, health, and media sectors in China; all mass organisations in China ranging from trade unions, artists' associations to neighbourhood committees; and the network of propaganda cadres and offices installed in party branches at all levels of organisations in both the state bureaucracy, as well as Chinese and foreign-run private enterprises with CCP branches (Brady 2005a). China's cultural economy alone (which includes education, culture, entertainment, art, radio, film, television) is now the third

fastest growing sector of the economy.<sup>1</sup> Through its officers in place at every level of the bureaucracy who oversee the successful implementation of current ideology in China, the propaganda system touches on virtually every aspect of life in the PRC.

The role of the propaganda system in the current era in China is akin to that of the church in medieval Europe. According to one mid-ranking propaganda official, 'Propaganda work is spiritual work', and China's propagandists are like priests guiding their flock. Harold Lasswell, one of the leading scholars on the role of propaganda in politics who in recent years has become as influential in Chinese propaganda work as he is in Western mass communication studies, similarly described propaganda as within the sphere of guiding minds, calling it 'the control of opinion by significant symbols, or to speak more accurately by stories, rumours, reports, pictures and other forms of social communication' (Lasswell 1927). In China in the current period, even more so than in the past, the CCP places enormous emphasis on this task. Indeed, following the crackdown of the student democracy movement in China in 1989 the newly-formed government under Jiang Zemin set a new line on propaganda work, a line which has been followed to the present day: 'seize with both hands, both hands must be strong', (*liang shou zhuo, liang shou dou yao ying*), meaning that the Party would focus its energy (and base its legitimacy) on both economic growth *and* a renewed emphasis on propaganda and political thought work.

Propaganda and thought work in China since the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989 has been much underestimated and downplayed by many Western researchers (Bi 2001; Bishop 1989; Fan 2001; Gao 2002; Hachigian 2002; Harwit and Clark 2001; Hemelryk Donald, Keane and Hong 2000; Jirik 2003; Kalathil and Boas 2001; Latham 2000; Lee 1990, 2000; Li 2001; 2002; Lieberthal 1995; Liu 1996; Lynch 1999; Mengin 2004; Wang 2002; Zhao 1998). Yet since 1989, as I have detailed in a number of earlier papers (Brady, 2002; 2005a; 2005b), with the strong encouragement of senior leaders Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, propaganda work has become the very life blood of the party, the main means for guaranteeing the party's ongoing legitimacy and hold on power. Many scholars have argued that either technology or commercialisation, or the two combined, would overcome the grip of the Central Propaganda Department over China's public sphere, as well as, eventually, the CCP's hold on political power. Yet I do not see any contradiction between a market economy as practised in China and the continuance of the one-party state. Indeed there is clearly a comfortable and functioning relationship between monopoly politics and monopoly markets in the PRC today. The commercialisation of the cultural economy in China has been a deliberate process engineered by the CCP as part of China's economic reform, and as with other economic reforms it has been accompanied by corresponding restraints aimed at maintaining CCP control through a range of means. And unlike the other remaining socialist states Cuba, North Korea, Laos and Vietnam, which

have sought to limit the impact of the Internet on their societies, the government in China has embraced the new technology, regarding it as an extremely effective tool for propaganda work in the modern age.

This article utilises previously unexplored classified sources, particularly the journal *Neibu tongxun* (Internal Report), to present a brief overview of the propaganda system in the 1990s and 2000s. I do not have the space to detail every aspect of the system, but I will concentrate on recent innovations and preoccupations within that system.

### **The Structure and Role of the Propaganda System**

The CCP has historically divided propaganda work into two categories: internal (*duinei*) and external (*duimai*), meaning that which is directed towards Chinese people and that which is directed towards foreigners and the outside world; as well as four types: political, economic, cultural and social propaganda. The Central Propaganda Department oversees internal propaganda, while its brother organisation the Office of Foreign Propaganda oversees matters relating to external propaganda. The two bureaucracies are very closely linked and coordinated.

The Central Propaganda Department is supervised by the Propaganda Leading Small Group, made up of the most senior officials of leading Party and State institutions in the propaganda sphere. The Office of Foreign Propaganda is supervised by the Foreign Propaganda Leading Small Group, similarly consisting of a handful of senior CCP leaders, some of whom are members of both groups. The senior leader currently responsible for the propaganda and ideological sphere is Politburo Standing Committee member Li Changchun. The head of the Central Propaganda Department is Liu Yunshan, while the head of the Foreign Propaganda Office is Cai Wu, simultaneously also head of the State Council Information Office.

The Central Propaganda Department is a highly secret organisation; its street address and main phone numbers are classified and it is only indirectly represented online. Neither it, nor the propaganda system appears in published diagrams of the Chinese bureaucratic system, whether in Chinese or other languages.

<b>Central Propaganda Department</b>	
Department of Television and Radio	Department of News
Department of Publishing	Department of Arts and Culture
Department of Propaganda and Education	National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science
Department of Human Resources	China Dominant-journalism Development Centre
Department of Theory	Policy and Regulations Research Office
Department of Public Opinion	

The Office of Foreign Propaganda is similarly secret but has a more public front under its other name, the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China.

<b>Office of Foreign Propaganda/ State Council Information Office</b>
First Office: Liaison with Foreign Media and Public diplomacy activities
Second Office: Managing China's international news, researching international public opinion
Third Office: Publishing, Film, and Cultural Exchanges
Fourth Office: Foreign Propaganda Planning and Research
Fifth Office: Internet Propaganda policies, regulations, activities
Sixth Office: Manages Foreign Journalists' Activities in China
Seventh Office: Promotes China's Human Rights Activities
Personnel office
Secretariat: Coordinates policy between central and local level; admin work

The rapidly expanding nature of China's media and cultural sphere in the last fifteen years has necessitated a need for an expansion in the numbers of propaganda personnel. Due to the highly-sensitive, political, and theory-related nature of the work, new staff are required to have at least a Masters degree, and in some cases the requirement is for a PhD. Depending on the section they are assigned to, in recent years graduates have been sought with a disciplinary background in mass communication, political science, international relations, Chinese language, information sciences, and less often Party history/Marxist-Leninism Thought.<sup>2</sup> Naturally all staff in the propaganda system are required to be party members as well. Existing staff are also constantly being retrained to meet the new demands of the information era. Reflecting the near inseparable bond between Party/State in China, many provincial and local level leaders are in charge of propaganda work (a Party matter) within their area in addition to their government titles (State-oriented activities).

A further means which the Central Propaganda Department has utilised to cope with the expansion of its work in the current era is the creation of 'news reviewer groups' (*xinwen yueping xiaozu*). Since 1996 the Central Propaganda Department and its provincial branches have employed the talents of retired party members who formerly held positions in the propaganda, media, cultural or publishing sphere to be responsible for surveying the content of all new materials which fall within the propaganda sector. Each cadre is assigned to take charge of a particular television station, newspaper or other information source. The news reviewer groups make regular reports to the Central Propaganda Department on overall media trends and make recommendations on whether brickbats or bouquets are required. This is an inspired use of the talents of elderly ideological workers who could potentially be a source of criticism for the party and its current right wing deviation in economic policy, as well as being an economical means to cope with the ever increasing demand for censors.

### **The Powers of the Central Propaganda Department**

The Central Propaganda Department is the only dead spot in China that does not operate by rules and regulations; it is a dark empire in which the rays of law do not shine. (Jiao 2004)

In April 2004 a controversial article by Beijing academic Jiao Guobiao circulated inside and outside China questioning the influence of the Central Propaganda Department over Chinese society, and decrying its actions as unlawful. However, according to the terms of the current Chinese political system, which assigns the CCP and its organs to the leading role in all matters in China, the Central Propaganda Department and the Office for Foreign Propaganda are well within their powers to act as they do. Under the limited political reforms of the post-Mao

era there has been an effort to separate the activities of the Party and the State, at least on paper. Hence the Central Propaganda Department is meant to have only a guiding, not implementing, role in the task of policing and censoring the public sphere in China. The Central Propaganda Department's 'guidance' on various topics is issued in the form of written or verbal instructions. The actual task of implementing the policy advice given by the Central Propaganda Department is undertaken by State-run organisations such as the State Bureau of Publishing, the Public Security Bureau, the Ministry of Culture, Party and non-Party newspapers, television stations and so on.

The policy implementation process for the foreign propaganda system is slightly different from that of the Central Propaganda Department in that guiding and implementing are conducted by the same body, but with two different name plates, one secret, and one non-secret. The Office of Foreign Propaganda /State Council Information Office both researches and develops China's foreign publicity activities as well as monitoring, policing and censoring all activities within China which fit within the foreign propaganda ambit, including the activities of foreign journalists, monitoring foreign social science research on China, and controlling the Internet.

Many of the powers of the Central Propaganda Department are expressed indirectly. In addition to its 'guiding' role in propaganda and ideological work the Central Propaganda Department and its provincial branches have the power to authorise the hiring and firing of senior managers in the media and other propaganda related sectors. Through this system they are also able to have indirect influence on those who are hired and fired at a lower level. Those who reach the position of senior editor are 'encouraged' to become party members, thus putting them under two disciplinary systems, both that of the State and the CCP. Any political mistake will be borne by the senior editors, which tends to make them extremely conservative in their editorial decisions. A further means by which the Central Propaganda Department exercises its powers is its representation on the various professional associations which govern the activities of the various sectors of the cultural economy such as the Journalists Association, the Publishers Association, the Internet Association and so on. Propaganda Department cadres make up at least half of the representatives on such bodies.

Sometimes more direct forms of control are utilised, such as oral instructions via meetings or phone calls to editors. Reflecting the central role of television in post-1989 propaganda work, the Central Propaganda Department actually has a direct telephone line with a special red telephone which dials in to the senior editorial chambers of China Central Television (CCTV) in Beijing. In the Mao years newspapers had a more dominant role. Television now reaches a much wider public than newspapers ever could. Only the literate can read newspapers and

China still has a major problem with illiteracy. Television is an effective means of transmitting ideas through symbols and associations. Almost everyone owns a television in China today and coverage now reaches into even the most remote parts of China.

Another important means of reinforcing the web of control are through the regular meetings propaganda department officials hold with editors and journalists to directly inform them of current propaganda policy. These are called 'update meetings' (*tongqihui*). In addition to these meetings, since 2003 the Central Propaganda Department has arranged an intensive series of political study classes for journalists and editors.<sup>3</sup> Media personnel have to pay 300 Renminbi (about US \$30) to attend,<sup>4</sup> so it is both a lucrative way for the propaganda system to make money for itself and a direct means of doing thought work on China's media workers. Similarly, under the principle of 'user pays', media personnel now have to pay for the regular bulletin the Central Propaganda Department issues on what can and cannot be printed in the media.<sup>5</sup> Through this channel journalists are informed which topics must not be openly reported and the correct words to use to discuss politically sensitive topics.

Since 1997 all profit-making organisations within the propaganda sector have had to pay a tax of 3% to the propaganda department as an administration fee - paying for the cost of their supervision. This is in addition to existing taxes paid and affects businesses ranging from indoor bowling, karaoke bars, golf courses (all part of the broadly defined entertainment sector), to bookshops, cinemas, art galleries (cultural sphere), television and radio stations (the media), and film, DVD and CD-ROM producers (multi-media).

An important channel for guiding and policing media-related propaganda activities in China that has evolved since 1989 is the classified journal *Neibu tongxun* (Internal Report), published by the News Bureau of the Central Propaganda Department. In the following section, based on my critical analysis of *Neibu tongxun* from 1990-2003 and supplemented by other relevant material, I will outline the broad themes of propaganda work in the years 1989-present.

### **Innovations**

#### *Monopoly Politics and Monopoly Markets: Synergy not Conflict*

The powers of the Central Propaganda Department and Office of Foreign Propaganda are not simply political or legal. In fact, in the current era, probably their most effective means of force is the power to allocate lucrative contracts to suitably obedient State and commercial organisations, or take them away if they do not comply. The financial backing of the popular tabloid *Jinghua Ribao* (Capital Daily) which is licensed by *People's Daily*, is a case in point. The paper's financial

backers and main recipients of its profits are a number of State-owned enterprises (SOEs). This is technically illegal but tolerated, because of whom the paper is registered to and their close connections with the Central Propaganda Department.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, *China Daily* is permitted to translate and sell on to other Chinese papers foreign language stories from the Internet, although legally only Xinhua News Service should be doing this.<sup>7</sup> This is because demand is so great for such stories and *China Daily's* connections with the Office of Foreign Propaganda are good enough to allow it to make money from this activity.

Similarly, in 1999 there was intense competition for the right to be one of the Internet sites in China to be allowed to display news content: 250 websites applied, only 136 were accepted.<sup>8</sup> News sites attract more viewers and hence more advertisers than most other sites. The Office of Foreign Propaganda controls the licensing of all websites in China. Naturally it approves those that steer away from controversial content and closes down those which break the boundaries.

By setting up economic monopolies the CCP's propaganda system both enriches its favoured clients and keeps them loyal to it in the hope of gaining more favours, as well, in some cases, as enriching its own personnel, through kick-backs. Under the current system, the commercialising public sphere is well-rewarded by staying within the limits set by the Central Propaganda Department. First, cultural industries are allowed to continue to operate in a controlled market while gaining new sources of income such as increased advertising and external investment. Second, they are encouraged to focus on popular, consumer-oriented topics which were forbidden or restricted in the Mao and Deng era but have been actively encouraged in the time of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. In the last fifteen years the media in China has undergone a revolution in the content it provides to consumers. Though Chinese media organisations are still required to give prominent coverage to two types of political news: 1) high profile events such as party conferences, and the activities of China's leaders, 2) ongoing information promoting the government's policies and ideological line, the media is now free to fill up the rest of its space with less overtly political material much more attractive to public audiences. The focus on consumer culture is both extremely lucrative and as popular with mainstream audiences as it is all around the world. In contrast, there are very few rewards and many risks in breaking the boundaries imposed by the CCP's thought police.

*More Lapdogs than Watchdogs: Investigative Journalism in China since 1989*

In recent years many commentators have written enthusiastically about developments in the media in China which have permitted the creation of a limited watchdog role for journalists. Some see this as an indication of an evolving civil society, with the media taking its place as a Fourth Estate, rather than as a bugle (*haojiao*), or mouthpiece (*houshe*), as CCP leaders have traditionally described it.



The Central Propaganda Department has expressly forbidden the use of the terms 'Fourth Estate' or the 'theory of the Media as a Tool of the Public' (*meiti gongqi lun*) to describe the media in China.<sup>9</sup> Yet at the same time since the early 1990s the CCP has encouraged the development of a limited watchdog role for the media. Rather than a Fourth Estate (in Chinese *di si ge quanli*, or sometimes *disi dengji*), with implications of the media having powers independent of the government to critique government policy and issues, propaganda theorists prefer the term the Fourth Governmental Branch (*di si ge bumen*). This means that the media is connected to the Party/State system of policing and controlling society, not apart from it (Hu 2001).

Investigative, exposé-style journalism is not new to the PRC. During the Mao and Deng era journalistic exposés of corruption and abuses of power were an effective tool in leadership power struggles. In the current period such exposés often have a similar role – the furore over the arrest for corruption of former Beijing mayor Chen Xitong being a notable example. Exposés help the central government deal with abuses of power at the local level which it does not condone, but is frequently powerless to control. They also are good PR, making it look as if the central government is seriously concerned about dealing with the problem of corruption. However the amount of coverage journalists are allowed to give to such topics is severely restricted and only on authorised targets.

Journalists involved in such activities are well aware that their powers of investigation are limited. They can only target low level officials and solvable problems. They must not critique the system itself or expose the corruption or power abuses of senior officials (unless formally instructed to). Hence under the current political system, the investigative journalism activities of papers such as *Southern Weekend*, *Beijing Youth Daily* or the television programmes *Focuspoint* or *Oriental Horizon* are more in the realm of lapdogs of the Party/State than they are watchdogs for civil society.

In a speech in 2003 Liu Yunshan, the current head of the Central Propaganda Department, stated that 'one of the primary tasks of journalists is to make the people loyal to the party.'<sup>10</sup> From the point of view of the Central Propaganda Department (and in line with Marxist-Leninist thinking on propaganda), the role of Chinese journalists and the media is still that of mouthpiece of the CCP. This message is constantly emphasised in Chinese journalism textbooks. And, in accordance with that thinking, the Chinese media is still hyper-managed by the Central Propaganda Department.

Nonetheless a small number of Chinese journalists continue to challenge the mouthpiece/lapdog role, 'playing line balls' (*cha bianqiu*) by pushing the boundaries of what is politically acceptable to publish. Investigative journalism attracts

readers/viewers and in a commercialised cultural economy all newspapers and television stations are competing for advertising dollars and subscriptions/audiences to pay for the cost of production and maintain well-qualified staff. The costs of breaking the rules can be high: demotion, fines, physical and verbal harassment, journalists and editors being fired and put under arrest, whole newspapers have even been closed down. In contrast, the rewards for breaking the rules are relatively slight – mostly moral, certainly not financial.

Hence under the current political system the majority of Chinese media organisations accept the constraints imposed by the propaganda system. Apart from the pro-CCP information the media is required to publish, the content of the Chinese visual and print media is increasingly similar to that found in most other countries in the world, with a focus on mass consumerism and entertainment. Some commentators have described this as an indication that the cultural economy is breaking away from the constraints of the propaganda system. On the contrary, encouraging Chinese people to make money and spend it in large quantities has been one of the key propaganda messages coming from the central government in the post-1989 period.

Unlike the Mao era when frugality and egalitarianism were promoted, under Deng, and even more so under the rule of Jiang and now Hu, the central government has a high tolerance for social inequity in China in the short-term period, in the belief that in the long run the standard of living for all will improve. CCP leaders in the current era want China to become 'rich and strong' (*fuqiang*). They want Chinese consumers to spend their savings to help to stimulate the economy, they want to motivate them through consumerism to earn more and produce more, thereby creating more jobs to soak up the massive numbers of unemployed. In the post-89 period Chinese economic propaganda targeted at Chinese consumers has created a 'Chinese dream' similar to the 'American dream', promoting the myth that anybody can become wealthy if they try hard enough.

*China's E-government: The Internet and Propaganda Work*

The Chinese government has embraced the Internet as an efficient and effective tool for propaganda work. Propaganda theorists take a positive but combative attitude to the role of the Internet in modern society, describing it as a 'new battle front for public opinion'.<sup>11</sup> The Fifth Office of the Office of Foreign Propaganda /State Council Information Office is in charge of policy-making and has issued a long list of regulations on the Internet in China.<sup>12</sup> China is alleged to be the most regulated country in the world for Internet usage. Moreover it is estimated that at least 30, 000 online censors are employed full-time by the Ministry of Public Security to monitor the Internet. Personal emails, China-based websites and China's Internet cafes are all closely monitored by means of a combination of software and human censors. The censors utilise the latest in firewall and Internet

surveillance software to block access to sites outside China deemed unsuitable for Chinese netizens to view, remove offensive content from both Chinese based and international sites, filter all Chinese email messages for sensitive content and police China's Internet bars where the majority of Internet users log on.

In addition to these forces a number of efficient and relatively inexpensive means have also been introduced to deal with the task of monitoring and censoring the Internet. In 2004 a website was set up to encourage Chinese citizens to report any illegal Internet content on Chinese sites.<sup>13</sup> All editor/managers of Chinese Internet sites are now required by law to police content, 'guide' discussion in Internet forums, report back to propaganda officials at the relevant levels on general trends within the discussions, and remove any politically sensitive content found on their sites. Failure to do so will result in the closure of the Internet site they manage along with the possibility of being arrested if they are found to have deliberately placed sensitive material on their website.

Internet/BBS managers on government-based sites are also encouraged to construct 'thought education websites' which will attract Chinese Internet users, especially students. The goal is rather than attempt to control other sites, to create pro-government sites. Through these sites managers can guide BBS discussions and attempt to unite public opinion on given topics.<sup>14</sup> The *People's Daily* online forum *Qiang guo luntan* (Strong Country Forum) is one of the most successful examples of this policy. The forum was founded in 1999, to direct online public opinion in the wake of the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the war in Kosovo. The forum has become a highly effective means to monitor and manage popular views on Chinese foreign policy as well as acting as an alternative outlet to express government views to the international community. In accordance with *People's Daily's* leading role in the propaganda and ideological sphere, though the forum makes no profit, a major investment in its maintenance and upkeep has been made. At any one time the forum is run with at least six online censors and a manager to monitor, censor and guide discussions online.

All websites in China must be registered with the national bureau, net.china.cn. Registered sites must keep to the boundaries of their permitted area of interest or risk censure. News organisations in China are forbidden from taking material directly off the Internet and publishing it in China.<sup>15</sup> In 2003 a controversy arose over the Beijing based paper *Beijing Xinbao* which published a story from a 'reactionary overseas Chinese language site' on 'the seven evils of China'. The paper was closed down and the editors fired as a result.<sup>16</sup> Previously the story had been blocked and wiped by China's Internet police, despite it appearing on an overseas site.<sup>17</sup>

### **Guidelines for Thoughtworkers**

One of the main tasks of the journal *Neibu tongxun* is to provide guidelines for media personnel of current themes they should focus on or avoid. In the following section I have summarised some of the main points of these themes, which have remained remarkably consistent in the period under consideration.

#### *Think Positive*

'Focus on positive propaganda' has been a phrase repeated like a mantra by successive leaders in propaganda work since 1989. This is in line with Deng Xiaoping's dictum 'stress stability above all else' adopted in the same period. The goal of the emphasis on positive propaganda - positive accounts of the triumphs of Chinese-style socialism - has been to help Chinese citizens regain confidence in the political system after the crisis of 1989.

A limited number of negative news stories may be reported, but not too many, as over-reporting of such stories risks giving 'the wrong impression about China'.<sup>18</sup>

#### *No Bad News during Holiday Periods / Sensitive Dates*

The guidelines encouraging a focus on positive reporting are particularly strict during holiday periods such as the lead up to the Chinese New Year and sensitive political dates such as the month in between 4 May (anniversary of the influential 1919 May 4th Movement) and June 4 (anniversary of the crackdown in 1989). This was why early reports of the mysterious new disease Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which appeared in Guangdong in November 2002, were suppressed until April 2003. During the period from November 2002, when the 16th Party Congress was held that established Hu Jintao as the new leader of the CCP, to mid-February when the National People's Congress met and elected Hu as State President, editors had been strictly instructed to report only positive stories in order to maintain political stability during the leadership transition.<sup>19</sup>

When the signal was finally given in April 2003 that SARS could be discussed in the Chinese media, the propaganda system went into full swing, advising the population on how to avoid the disease and the means which the government was employing to bring the situation under control. Editors were instructed to 'guide public opinion' (meaning focus on positive stories) on the topic.<sup>20</sup> They were told to pay attention to SARS-related stories of interest to international public opinion as well as the concerns of people in China. Great effort was put into targeted foreign propaganda on the topic of SARS, to eradicate the impact of negative reporting on this topic by the foreign media. SARS was described as a 'highly political, policy-related and sensitive' matter and all reports were required to follow the central line.<sup>21</sup> Editors were instructed to strictly control coverage of SARS online, as well as in local papers and magazines, which are frequently sites of deviant news coverage in China. The May issues of *Neibu tongxun* (2003/9 and 10) were totally devoted to the topic of SARS and the management of information on the topic.

The SARS crisis was a striking indication of the need for reform in China's propaganda sector, but to date it has only resulted in small, but not systemic change. After the policy on reporting SARS was reversed a number of senior and middle level officials in the propaganda and health sector were demoted. Due to the massive international censure China faced in the wake of SARS, China now reports somewhat more openly on the outbreak of infectious diseases and other health problems than in the past. The 2005 outbreak of swine fever in Sichuan was a case in point, as were nationwide cases of avian flu in 2005 and new outbreaks of SARS in 2004. Yet as before, reporting on many critical topics is still strictly controlled for political reasons.

*Don't Mention Problems that Can't Be Easily Solved*

Though the causes of SARS can be addressed, and reported on, the origins of why the outbreak became a worldwide epidemic are a taboo topic. This is a symptom of the limits of press freedom in the post-1989 period; while journalists can report on more topics than ever before, they are not free to debate systemic problems or discuss problems that can not be easily solved. The Central Propaganda Department strictly instructs editors to control or suppress any stories which might cause instability in China.<sup>22</sup> Below I have collated some of the 'unsolvable' issues journalists are forbidden to report on in China.

One such problem is the growing income gap between the minority wealthy middle and upper classes in China and the majority struggling masses. Rather than reducing, as promised, this has become wider in recent years. This is an issue of great symbolic importance in China, as it negates the fantasy of the Chinese get-rich dream, that all can prosper under the policies of reform and opening up.<sup>23</sup> A related issue is the political influence of the wealthy classes in China; this is also a sensitive topic which must not to be reported on.<sup>24</sup> Journalists are also warned off reporting on the capital outflow from China and the stability of Chinese banks, except in classified internal publications.<sup>25</sup> Journalists may only report on import tax fraud cases which the State Council Leading Small Group investigating this topic approves for publicity.<sup>26</sup> They are forbidden from publishing figures on China's existing grain stores or the amount of subsidies paid to farmers. This is a State secret.<sup>27</sup> Discussion of party corruption has long been a sensitive topic, as early as 1991 editors were warned not to give too much coverage to such stories as this 'creates a negative impression.'<sup>28</sup> Inflation and price rises are also sensitive topics and the media is told to follow the central authorities' line on this –meaning that they should publish the *People's Daily* line on this topic. On any such sensitive matters the *People's Daily* sets the line which all other papers are to follow.

*Talk Up the Economy*

Many economic topics are politically sensitive because the Chinese government has based much of its legitimacy after 1989 on its economic performance. Yet on the whole, it is much safer for journalists to cover economic affairs than it is political matters. Chinese editors' followed this mantra after 1989: 'Political topics are sensitive, economic topics are relaxed' (*zhengzhi jin, jingji song*). Throughout the 1990s positive propaganda about the growing Chinese economy was a dominant theme in the news media. Even when there were economic troubles *Neibu tongxun* instructed editors to report from a positive angle. In 1997-1998, when there were massive nationwide lay-offs as a result of the closing down of unprofitable State-owned Enterprises (SOEs), editors were instructed to report on the successful 'reform' of the SOEs and the 'successful' redeployment of laid-off staff. In response, in this period CCTV created a series of public advertisements depicting the positive stories of various laid-off workers and their new lives since becoming unemployed.

*Demonise the US*

Emphasising a hostile Other in order to unite the population has long been a tactic used by authoritarian governments both Communist and non-Communist. In China, since 1989, anti-US rhetoric has been a constant theme; a tendency strongly encouraged by the Central Propaganda Department through its publication *Neibu tongxun*. A 1991 article in the journal claimed that the US feared a strong China, that talk of freedom and human rights are aimed at keeping China weak, that US elections are not free, money buys votes and the press is also not free.<sup>29</sup> A 1992 article argued that Western countries' aim was to get rid of the CCP and turn China into a 'subsidiary' (*fushu*).<sup>30</sup> Articles in a similar vein appeared regularly in the journal from 1990-2003. Scepticism about the limits of freedom of the press in the West were mainstream in post-1989 writings on the media in China, the common view arguing that 'the US and other Western countries possess or control almost all the world's media and, [moreover] they mostly show the negative side of China to Western audiences.'<sup>31</sup>

*Don't Promote the Views of the Enemy*

The impact of the West on China since the policies of reform and opening up began is a topic of great concern to conservative forces within the Party leadership. Throughout the 1990s the Central Propaganda Department sounded frequent warnings on this topic. Editors were told to 'be very careful in selecting international news stories for publication in China-wide publications, don't unwittingly promote the incorrect viewpoints of the West...don't use our media to promote the views of the West.'<sup>32</sup> Editors were told to distinguish between materials aimed at wider audiences in China and those for official audiences, with the need to keep in mind the risk of 'sensitive materials causing chaos' among the general public.<sup>33</sup>

Television station editors were also advised to be extremely cautious about the sort of guests invited on Chinese programmes; what topics could be raised and questions asked.

*Use international News to Mould Public Opinion on Issues Relating to China*

Selective reporting on international news has proven to be a very effective means of moulding public opinion on issues relating to China. Hence throughout the 1990s the Chinese media gave detailed coverage of the problems of post-communist societies, while ignoring success stories. Such stories helped to mould public opinion on the likely outcome if China was to become a multi-party state. Similarly China reported factually, but without comment on the difficulties North Korea faced throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. This served as a caution to those on the left who were critical of China's market-oriented reforms.

During the lead up to the Iraq War the Chinese media was instructed by the Central Propaganda Department to bring the thinking of the Chinese people in line with that of the party centre,<sup>34</sup> which held the view of opposition to the US invasion. Coverage of the war was used as a means to attack the US government's position on human rights and other sensitive topics. Reporting on the war was strictly controlled, only officially designated Chinese journalists were permitted to travel to Iraq to report the war. Papers which sent journalists without official permission were punished.<sup>35</sup> The fact that some papers did send their own journalists demonstrates the tension between market pressures for papers to attract readers and the needs of political control.

*New Wine in Old Bottles: Recycling Propaganda*

Lastly, in a method familiar to advertisers in the Western world thought work in the current era has borrowed from the sounds and symbolism of past eras to guide the thinking of the current period. Revolutionary music and film are frequently used in current television programmes to draw a link between the goals and concerns of the present with those of the past and evoke feelings of nostalgia. In a year-long series beginning in April 2004, CCTV 1's top-rating current affairs program *Oriental Horizon* featured a series nostalgically revisiting famous propaganda films from the Mao era which promoted China's revolutionary past. The films were re-shot with a well-known journalist acting as interpreter of the films' importance and meaning, interspersed by sections from the original and interviews with the films' directors and actors. Such programmes aimed to evoke the positive idealistic feelings of the Mao era and rework them for the purposes of the current period. All throughout the 1990s propaganda figures from the Mao era have been resurrected to remind the Chinese people of the values of self-sacrifice and serving the Party. In the early 1990s Lei Feng, and Jiao Yulu reappeared, in the mid-1990s Kong Fansen was promoted, while in 2005, the 60th anniversary of the

end of the war against Japan, a host of CCP war heroes were dusted off, promoting a vision of the CCP single-handedly forcing the Japanese out of China.

### **Conclusion: the Rebirth of the Propaganda State**

To conclude, let us return to the thoughts of Harold Lasswell (Lasswell 1927) and examine his prediction of how modern societies should be controlled:

The bonds of personal loyalty and affection which bound a man to his chief have long since dissolved. Monarchy and class privilege have gone the way of all flesh, and the idolatry of the individual passes for the official religion of democracy. It is an atomised world, in which individual whims have wider play than ever before, and it requires more strenuous exertions to co-ordinate and unify than formerly. The new antidote to wilfulness is propaganda. If the mass will be free of chains of iron, it must accept its chains of silver. If it will not love, honour and obey, it must not expect to escape seduction.

Lasswell, echoing the thoughts of other thinkers of his time such as Edward Bernays and Walter Lippman, is arguing that in modern societies there is a need for more propaganda, not less, as one of the most fundamental means of social control. Lasswell's ideas have found a ready audience in China among propaganda specialists, trained to reject the notion of real freedom of speech or free media in the West as a deliberate lie. In China since the end of the Mao era, as with the Western world of the 1920s when Lasswell was writing, notwithstanding the hiatus of 1989, personal though not political freedoms have increased dramatically. In almost every way except a few key political freedoms – such as the right to choose the central government - the life of the average Chinese citizen is increasingly similar to that of people living in Western societies. Modern China is ruled by a government which now explicitly bases its legitimacy to rule on popular approval, rather than the moral right of revolutionary power (Brady 2005a). As Lasswell points out, under such conditions, the old means of social control, such as brute force or blind obedience to one ruler have become defunct. The means to control of such a society is persuasion.

As I have shown in this essay, contrary to the predictions of authors such as Lynch (1999) who foresaw the death of the propaganda state in China, since 1989 and throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, we have seen the re-birth of the Chinese propaganda state. As Lasswell's theories accurately predict, the methods and goals of this propaganda are different from those of the totalitarian past, aiming to convince and persuade, rather than demanding blind devotion as in the Mao years. This new approach to propaganda has made an important contribution to the renewed legitimacy of the CCP's grip on power since the watershed of 1989.



Since the events of June 4, 1989, the failure of force and the decline in 'idolatry' - faith in Maoism/Marxist/Leninism - has led the CCP to a conscious adoption of Western methods of social control and persuasion. Ever since China became a communist state in 1949, Western observers have speculated about when China would throw off communism and become a Western-style democracy. What my research indicates is that China has been consciously modelling itself on aspects of the West, especially in the post-1989 period, but not the aspects that Western liberal intellectuals like to boast of. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, as part of a planned programme of reform of the propaganda system, China has been adopting the methods of mass persuasion, mass communication theories, political communication, political and commercial PR, advertising theory and user pays, and incorporating them into the contemporary propaganda system. And as a consequence, rather than declining as some predicted, the activities and power of the Central Propaganda Department have actually increased in recent years and look set to continue that way.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Lingdao cankao* (Leadership Reference), 2004/9, pp. 15-18

<sup>2</sup> See for example the job ads for positions in the Central Propaganda Department and Office for Foreign Propaganda at:

<http://qual.netbig.com/official/news/2422/200011113/2002zydqigzkz.xls>  
(accessed 20 May 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Neibu tongxun (Internal Report) hereafter NBTX, 22/2003, p. 13. After Jiao Guobiao's article was published, senior journalism educators also had to participate in similar study classes in 2004 and 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with senior newspaper editor, May 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with senior newspaper editor, May 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Beijing-based spin doctor, December 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with *China Daily* manager, Beijing, December 2002.

<sup>8</sup> *Dui wai xuanchuan* (Foreign Propaganda), 2002/4, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> NBTX, 2003/13, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> NBTX, 2003/15, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> NBTX, 2001/22, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://net.china.cn/chinese/ic/408319.htm> (accessed 20 May 2004).

<sup>13</sup> The website is <http://net.china.cn/chinese/inndex.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Interview with propaganda theorist, Beijing, November 2002.

<sup>15</sup> NBTX, 2002/5, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> NBTX, 2003/12, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> NBTX, 2003/12, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> NBTX, 2003/4, pp. 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with senior editor, December 2002.

- <sup>20</sup> NBTX, 2003/7, p. 4.  
<sup>21</sup> NBTX, 2003/7, p. 5.  
<sup>22</sup> NBTX, 2003/5, p. 13.  
<sup>23</sup> NBTX, 2003/4, p. 13.  
<sup>24</sup> NBTX, 2003/7, p. 11-13.  
<sup>25</sup> NBTX, 2003/6, p. 17.  
<sup>26</sup> NBTX, 2001/3, p. 14.  
<sup>27</sup> NBTX, 1999/16, p. 5.  
<sup>28</sup> NBTX, 2/1991, p. 11.  
<sup>29</sup> NBTX, 4/1991, p. 3.  
<sup>30</sup> NBTX 1992/5, p. 4.  
<sup>31</sup> *Duivai xuanchuan cankao* (Foreign Propaganda Reference), 2004/4, p. 12.  
<sup>32</sup> NBTX, 2002/17, p. 12.  
<sup>33</sup> NBTX, 2003/3, p. 7.  
<sup>34</sup> NBTX, 2003/6, p. 1-2.  
<sup>35</sup> NBTX, 2003/7, p. 8.

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*Brady, Guiding Hand...*

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