

SILENT CONTROL: THE IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION IN XI'S ERA AND
THE POLITICAL EXPRESSION FROM GRASSROOTS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores ideological reconstruction under Xi Jinping and grass-root reactions towards it in contemporary China. It begins with a top-down analysis of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a Leninist vanguard that pragmatically adapts Marxism with Chinese characteristics to sustain institutional authority. “Ideological work” goes back to central to governance under “Xi”. It marked by the revival of Mao-era slogans and street banners embedded into daily life as an omnipresent semiotic apparatus that reinforces political legitimacy.

The second half investigates grassroots reactions to this saturation. It argues that ordinary actors construct a parallel micro-structure of resistance operating within the gaps of power. Rather than straight violent confrontation, they engage in mimetic subversion, reappropriating official banners while infusing them with divergent meanings. Through analyzing these practices, the study demonstrates that the CCP’s discursive hegemony is more porous and less monolithic than it appears.

DEDICATION

To all those who encouraged and supported me during my years of study, and to those who stood by me and helped me complete my academic journey after the accident that tested my strength. To God, who never departed from me.

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INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

To explore the development of street banners and political propaganda in China, it is essential to trace the development from the Mao era to the present leadership under Xi Jinping. By looking into the past, this historical overview provides a crucial context for understanding the ideological transition and persistent ideologies within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and their far-reaching consequences for the existing political terrain, as well as continuities within the CCP and their implications for the current political landscape.

The Chinese people's daily life was dominated by street banners during the Mao period from October 1, 1949, to September 9, 1976. These banners were more than just decorative pieces in the public space; they were effective political propaganda weapons that used strong, ideologically charged language to communicate the decisions made by Party officials and future policies. Phrases like "the helmsman" and "Chairman Mao is the sun" were emblematic of the cult of personality that surrounded Mao Zedong.¹ The state's ideological apparatus, firmly under the control of the Party and its top leaders, utilized these banners to shape public opinion and reinforce the Party's dominance over the masses.

However, there was a notable change in the application of political propaganda during post-Mao era, which was characterized by the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang

¹ For example, a 1967 April propaganda poster portrayed "Chairman Mao is the red sun in the hearts of the people of the world." "Mao zhuxi shi shijie renmin xin zhong de hong taiyang," Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe (上海人民美术出版社), 1967, Chinese posters.net, accessed November 30, 2025, <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e39-877>.

Zemin, and Hu Jintao. This period, characterized by a focus on economic reform and opening up, witnessed a decline in the intensity of nationwide ideological construction. The leadership's emphasis shifted towards modernization and economic development, rather than political propagandas, leading to a relative decrease in the reliance on street banners as a medium for political messaging.

With Xi Jinping's ascent to power on November 15, 2012, he emphasized the importance of ideology propaganda again. Outdoor banners and posters which date back to Mao's time became important propaganda tools once again. Xi Jinping asserted that ideological work should be focused as a central task and is extremely important work for the Party.² This resurgence is not merely a return to old practices but indicated a deliberate ideological succession of Mao Zedong's methods. The banners under Xi Jinping's leadership permeate almost all public spaces in China, signaling a reinforcement of his position as the supreme leader of the Party, nation, and military. The similarities in the use of leader portraits, adoption of Chinese folk art, and even the wording of banners between the Mao and Xi eras are striking and reveal a deep-rooted continuity in the CCP's approach to ideological propagation.

This historical and comparative analysis of street banners from the Mao era to the Xi Jinping era is invaluable for understanding the relationship between Xi Jinping and Mao Zedong. It sheds light on Xi's governing goals and future direction in leading the nation. By examining the evolution of these banners, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the ideological underpinnings of the CCP and its impact on shaping public opinion and the socio-political fabric of contemporary China. The resurgence of

² Xi Jinping, "Ideological Work Is Extremely Important Work for the Party," *Chinese Law & Government* 48, no. 6 (2016):452-55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094609.2016.1241108>.

these banners under Xi Jinping's leadership is a testament to the enduring power of visual propaganda in political communication and its role in reinforcing the ideological narratives of the ruling party.

This thesis takes a comprehensive approach that incorporates historical, political, and sociological perspectives. Through this lens, the thesis aims to explore how political messaging and ideological control have evolved over time, shedding light on the historical continuity and change in the use of political propaganda through street banners in China. The comparison between the Mao era and the Xi Jinping era is particularly noteworthy, as it reflects the shifts in the political landscape and governance strategies of the CCP. By analyzing the symbolism, language, and imagery used in these banners, we could gain valuable insight into the techniques of political communication and propaganda employed by the CCP. These elements are essential in understanding how ideological dissemination and public persuasion are achieved through the use of such tools and give an example in the broader studies of totalitarian ideologies.

Furthermore, the research investigates the sociopolitical implications of these propaganda strategies, considering how the resurgence of Mao-era propaganda techniques under Xi Jinping impacts Chinese society. This includes examining public perception, political discourse, and the political expression of dissidents, therefore offering insights into the broader sociopolitical dynamics under the CCP's governance.

Through the case studies on various political expressions in China in recent years, this thesis seeks to illustrate how the ideological propaganda of Xi Jinping's regime is not

effective as its intended social impact based on a series of social movements and artistic expressions.

Research Gaps and Questions

The academic examination of the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda system began after World War II, influenced by the social sciences and area studies that emerged in research universities during that time³. During this period, Mao Zedong's leadership was heavily influenced by Russian communism, which led to the CCP adopting several propaganda techniques from the Soviet Union and integrating Leninist ideological principles.

According to Lifton (1969), Lindbeck and Pye (1971), these foundational studies revealed how the CCP's propaganda strategies were rooted in the Soviet model⁴. Under Mao's leadership, the CCP effectively utilized these Soviet-inspired tools and Leninist ideologies to create its narrative and consolidate its power. This period was a significant phase in the development of the CCP's approach to information dissemination and public persuasion, laying the groundwork for its future propaganda strategies.

Understanding the interplay between Soviet propaganda methods and Leninist ideas in shaping the CCP's early propaganda tactics is crucial to comprehend the party's methods of controlling and influencing public opinion. The initial research in this area has paved the way for more comprehensive studies that explore the evolution and impact of the CCP's propaganda system on Chinese society and politics.

As the fifth generation of leadership in the Party, scholars have also debated the extent to which Xi Jinping has inherited Mao Zedong's ideological legacy. Lee (2018) in his

³ Bruce Cumings, "Boundary Displacement: The State, the Foundations, and Area Studies during and after the Cold War," in *Learning Places*, (New York: Duke University Press, 2020), 173-204.

⁴ Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China* (New York: Norton, 1969); John M. H. Lindbeck and Lucian W. Pye, *China: Management of a Revolutionary Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971), 3–33.

article “Can Xi Jinping Be the Next Mao Zedong? Using the Big-Five Model to Study Political Leadership”, discusses whether Xi Jinping has emulated various aspects of Mao Zedong, viewing him as a political idol⁵. This perspective suggests that Xi's political maneuvers may be seen as an attempt to align himself with Mao's legacy, possibly to leverage Mao's enduring influence within China for his own political legitimacy and authority.

Furthermore, other scholars such as Kerry Brown (2017) have examined that since Xi Jinping is a member of the “red second generation”, who is different from his previous colleague Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, he attempts to shape his image as a powerful leader. He points out that Xi Jinping is trying to establish himself as “the most powerful leader modern China has seen since Mao Zedong”⁶. This viewpoint indicates that Xi's leadership style and political strategies might be driven by an ambition to attain a level of authority and influence comparable to Mao, which would mark a significant shift -- from collective leadership to one man dictatorship, in the dynamics of China's political leadership since the post-Mao era.

These academic discussions highlight the complexities of Xi Jinping's leadership within the CCP, examining how his familial background, political lineage, and personal ambitions influence and intertwine to shape his approach to governance and ideological propagation. They also underscore the importance of understanding Xi's leadership in the context of China's historical and political legacy, particularly in relation to Mao Zedong's enduring influence on the Party and the country.

⁵ Tony C. Lee, "Can Xi Jinping Be the Next Mao Zedong? Using the Big Five Model to Study Political Leadership," *Chinese Journal of Political Science* 23, no. 4 (2018): 473–97, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-018-9540-0>.

⁶ Kerry Brown, “The Powers of Xi Jinping,” *Asian Affairs* 48, no. 1 (2017): 17–26.

As the first-generation leader of the CCP, Mao Zedong consistently emphasized the importance of ideological work within the Party. He propagated his political and ideological concepts through techniques that were accessible and acceptable to the people, such as organizing mobilisation campaigns, creating ideology study groups and setting up ideological monitors, propagating banners on the walls or with propaganda teams (xuanchuan dadui), propagating model operas, folk art, and films with ideological elements. These methods were instrumental in spreading Mao's ideological messages to a wide audience.⁷

Many scholars have studied the ideological propaganda of Mao's era, focusing particularly on slogans and printed materials, which is proved in the work of Farley and Johnson⁸. The Cultural Revolution, a period of intense ideological fervor, has been the subject of much research, with scholars such as Powell and Wong examining the street slogans of the era⁹. These studies have provided valuable insights into the nature and impact of Mao's propaganda techniques and their role in shaping public consciousness and political discourse in China.

However, because of the extremely strict censorship and information control in China and cultural and language barriers, there has been a notable gap in scholarly research when it comes to examines the ideology construction conveyed by banners that re-emerged during Xi Jinping's tenure and evaluates the effectiveness through grassroots reactions. The resurgence of street banners under Xi Jinping provides a unique

⁷ David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy," *The China Journal*, no. 57 (January 2007): 26–27, <https://doi.org/10.1086/tcj.57.20066240>.

⁸ James Farley and Matthew D. Johnson, eds., *Redefining Propaganda in Modern China: The Mao Era and Its Legacies* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021).

⁹ Patricia Powell and Joseph Wong, "Propaganda Posters from the Chinese Cultural Revolution," *The Historian* 59, no. 4 (1997): 776–92.

opportunity to explore the continuities and divergences in the CCP's approach to ideological propaganda across eras. Such a comparative study would not only shed light on the evolution of the Party's propaganda strategies but also provide a deeper understanding of how Xi Jinping's leadership is navigating the legacy of Mao's ideological strategy and influence.

After the Cultural Revolution, China gradually began to place its focus on the development of its commodity economy from Deng Xiaoping's era onwards, and the importance of ideological construction was quietly overshadowed, with banners and political propaganda posters on the streets being replaced by a plethora of advertisements. But in the Xi Jinping era, the mass of advertisements on the streets were suddenly replaced by portraits of Xi Jinping. Although some scholars have studied Xi Jinping's newly initiated ideological propaganda, they have focused more on political ideological propaganda in various modes and have not elaborated on the revival of street banners, a prevalent means of political propaganda in the Maoist era, nor have they further elaborated on the similarities and differences between Xi Jinping's propaganda means and those of the Maoist era¹⁰. Observing the street banners and banner propaganda of the Xi Jinping era, it is not difficult to discover that the political propaganda of the Xi Jinping era is laced with the influence brought by the commodity economy. His personal portrait and slogans convey his thoughts were repeatedly posted on walls and bus stop advertisement signs like commodities, and some banners were accompanied by artistic elements such as paintings, paper cuttings, and traditional folk culture, which made the banners look not monotonous but full of life. In this thesis, we hope to focus on the ideological propaganda via street banners during Xi Jinping's time

¹⁰ Suisheng Zhao, "The Ideological Campaign in Xi's China: Rebuilding Regime Legitimacy," *Asian Survey* 56, no. 6 (2016): 1168–1193.

and use them as the object of study to re-examine the challenges of regime and the crisis of governance that Xi Jinping is facing in the new era.

The research questions can be narrowed down as follows:

What ideological values are conveyed through street banners in the era of Xi Jinping, what effects are these banners intended to impart upon the mass people? Do banners effectively achieve their ideological function? How have grassroots received, interpreted, and respond to these mobilizations in their art and social practices?

Theoretical Framework

This thesis uses an interdisciplinary set of theoretical frameworks to interpret how ideological instruction is constructed from top to down and how reaction and resistance from grassroots is practiced in contemporary China. It focuses on how state propaganda functions as a spectacle of power and how ordinary citizens respond through subtle, symbolic, and decentralized political expression. To better understand this political dynamic in China special circumstances, this thesis adopts four core perspectives from different fields, which is James C. Scott's infrapolitics (Scott 1985; 1990), Guy Debord's spectacle of Society (Debord 1967), Gilles Deleuze's control societies and its ideas on micro-resistance (Deleuze 1992), and the last but not least -- anarchist political thought on everyday autonomy and prefigurative resistance (Fians 2022, Gerber 2025). All together the theories draw a comprehensive conceptual understanding.

James C. Scott: Infrapolitics, Hidden Transcripts, and the Art of Not Being Governed

James C. Scott has made foundational contributions to the study of resistance, particularly through his concepts of "infrapolitics" and "hidden transcripts." Infrapolitics is a word created by Scott, which refers to the subtle, everyday forms of resistance practiced by subordinate groups that avoid open confrontation with authority. These acts are often disguised or encoded to avoid punishment, yet they carry deep political meaning. This term is introduced in Scott's two books, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*¹¹.

¹¹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

In “Weapons of the Weak”, James Scott introduces the concept of infrapolitics. It is defined as a political expression manifested through subtle and quotidian forms of resistance. The concept is from Scott’s two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 1978 to 1980 in a rice-farming village in Kedah, Malaysia, a place is called “Sedaka”. He employs this concept to analyze the everyday forms of resistance practiced by impoverished peasants against the hegemonic authority of landlord and local elite.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott examines how subordinate groups express dissent through gossip, folklore, humor, and symbolic acts that undermine the legitimacy of the ruling order. These "hidden transcripts" remain backstage, in contrast to the "public transcript" of outward compliance.

This thesis reinterprets Scott’s notion of state evasion not as physical withdrawal, but as symbolic and cultural refusal in authoritarian China. In this context, the state’s ideological apparatus seeks to saturate public and private life through banners, media control, education, and cultural programming. Yet individuals often respond not by organizing collective protest, but by refusing to participate fully in the ideological performance. This can take the form of ironic mimicry of propaganda, aesthetic subversion of official symbols, coded speech in digital spaces, or the cultivation of lifestyles that reject the values promoted by the state.

Much like the Zomia highlanders' rejection of written language to avoid administrative capture, some Chinese citizens deliberately choose forms of expression that are difficult to categorize, decode, or regulate. In Chapter 3 for example,

protestors in White Paper protest hold papers in blank to express their dissatisfaction to the government, since the blank represents everything. Also in the Halloween Parade, people dress up as different characters to mock the social problems. In Chapter 4, artists use art works to show their attitudes towards the government and its ideological construction. In each case, the goal is not to overthrow the regime, but to render one's beliefs, values, and intentions opaque to the ideological surveillance of the state. This opacity functions as a mode of noncompliance and autonomy.

Importantly, Scott's work underscores that resistance does not need to be recognized as such by the state or by scholars to be meaningful. Its power lies in its invisibility and untraceability. In applying Scott's insights to contemporary China, this thesis moves beyond traditional protest paradigms and recognizes the nuanced and fragmented ways in which political resistance can be enacted through everyday practices, aesthetic choices, and individual or subtle protests. These practices do not constitute an organized movement, but they amount to a dispersed yet persistent form of ideological noncompliance—an art of not being governed within the symbolic domain.

Guy Debord: The Society of the Spectacle

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord conceptualizes modern political life as dominated by representations, images, and orchestrated illusions.¹² The spectacle refers to the state's performative projection of power. Its use of media, slogans, visual aesthetics, and rituals to manufacture consent and suppress alternative narratives. The spectacle is both concentrated and diffuse. In Xi Jinping's China, this spectacle is

¹² Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2024).

obvious at every corner in the society, not merely propaganda—it is a full sensory environment designed to propagate the Party’s ideological vision total and serve to legitimize its power. Debord’s diffuse spectacle also constitutes an all-encompassing network surrounding citizens’ lives in China. It is a comprehensive surveillance apparatus that infiltrates every aspect of citizens’ daily life constantly.

Debord’s theory enables a reading of official red banners, televised rituals, ideological slogans, and online campaigns as part of an all-encompassing theater of unity and harmony. At the same time, it also helps us understand how grassroots subversive actions, such as memes, ironic slogans, or symbolic performances, can puncture and deface the spectacle by refusing to play along with its visual grammar.

Gilles Deleuze: Control Societies and Micro-Resistance

This thesis adopts idea from Deleuze’s concept of control societies, which is from his short essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control”.¹³ In this essay, it explains how modern power no longer completely relies on institutions of discipline but instead operates through continuous, decentralized monitoring and modulation. In China, this is manifest in digital surveillance, social credit systems, algorithmic censorship, and biometric tracking. Specifically, the daily decentralized control is operated through street banners according to Chinese context. The state governs not only through building up the fear or ideology but through predictive control and coded infrastructures that pre-emptively shape citizen behavior.

Deleuze’s idea on “line of flights” also provides theoretical support for understanding

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 3–7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778828>.

the micro-resistance: everyday gestures, digressions, and escape routes that he calls “lines of flight.”¹⁴ These are not organized rebellions but creative acts of evasion including rhetorical play, shifting subjectivities, and performative refusal that resist being fully captured by systems of control. All these resistances could be seen in China.

Anarchist Political Thought: Everyday Autonomy and Prefigurative Resistance

Anarchist theory, as articulated by thinkers like David Graeber, Colin Ward, and even implicitly by James Scott, offers a unifying perspective: that power is not only to be resisted from within institutions, but lived against through alternative modes of being. Unlike Marxist theories of counter-hegemony, anarchism emphasizes the importance of voluntary cooperation, decentralization, mutual aid, and lived refusal of authoritarianism, which has similarity with Scott’s infrapolitics and Deleuze’s micro-resistance idea. All of them shifts their focus from macro-level to micro and daily perspectives. As Fians observes, prefigurative politics differs from revolutions in that it is oriented not towards macro-level changes, but toward subtle, and incremental change from micro level.¹⁵ It is opposed to fight against the injustice and oppression, instead, it encourages to build up a parallel society with the existing one, to “form the structure of the new society within the shell of the old”.¹⁶

In the Chinese context, where citizens often lack institutional outlets for political expression, and it is lack of freedom of speech considering the highly intense

¹⁴ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Guilherme Moreira Fians, "Prefigurative Politics," in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Felix Stein (2022), <http://doi.org/10.29164/22prefigpolitics>.

¹⁶ Quoted in Alix Gerber, “Building a New World in the Shell of the Old: Co-Designing Post-Capitalist Visions,” *Societies* 15, no. 10 (2025): 283, <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15100283>.

ideological control, resistance takes prefigurative and lifestyle-based forms, avoiding political confronting, or engaging in subversive aesthetics through performance and satire. These are not merely coping mechanisms—they are anarchist gestures that reclaim autonomy and refuse state-imposed narratives of success, nationalism, and productivity.

Interdisciplinary Scope and Research Limitation

This thesis is situated at the intersection of several academic disciplines, reflecting its interdisciplinary approach to analyzing ideological control and grassroots resistance in contemporary China. Primarily grounded in cultural studies and political science, it engages with theories of authoritarianism, propaganda, and political expression under repressive regimes. At the same time, it draws extensively from sociology, particularly in examining everyday resistance, symbolic interaction, and the dynamics of power within daily life. The study also considers perspectives from media studies, using frameworks such as Guy Debord's theory of spectacle to analyze how the Chinese state constructs ideological imagery and how citizens subvert these through satire, memes, and language art. The inclusion of art and performance studies is central to understanding how bodies, gestures, and aesthetics become mediums of political expression, especially in the case studies involving performance artists. The thesis also adopts conceptual insights from anarchist political theory, which provides a lens to interpret decentralized, anti-authoritarian, and non-institutional forms of resistance that non-violently fight against hierarchy and state-imposed meaning. Finally, certain philosophical concepts from post-structural and critical theory, particularly those of Gilles Deleuze, are also used to understand the resistance as affective, fragmented, and often pre-verbal.

Together, these disciplines provide a nuanced understanding of why state ideology is at the core status in totalitarian regime and how state ideology is performed and how individuals interpret and resist it through both overt and covert means.

While this interdisciplinary approach enriches the analysis, it also imposes limitations: the research does not offer a comprehensive treatment of each discipline's methodological traditions, nor does it claim universal applicability beyond the specific sociopolitical context of Xi-era China. Instead, it seeks to illuminate a comprehensive understanding on how citizens living under ideological pressure express political subjectivity through symbolic, everyday, and aesthetic forms of resistance.

Methodological Approach and Data Sources

The methodological approach of this thesis has been carefully developed to offer a thorough and in-depth analysis of the ideological narratives that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been promoting under the direction of Xi Jinping. Discourse analysis and textual analysis are two main approaches in this thesis, which are complemented by semiotic analysis to offer a multi-dimensional understanding of the subject matter.

The study employs textual interpretation with semiotic analysis to scrutinize the banners, which are significant mediums of public discourse in Xi Jinping's China. These two methodological approaches are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the messages conveyed by these banners. With a focus on the banners' comprehensive messages and linguistic elements, textual analysis enables a thorough analysis of the language, and textual content. On the other hand, semiotic analysis explores the banners' symbolic elements. It entails analyzing the placement and context of the banners in relation to the public domain in addition to interpreting the visual components, symbols, and images. The study attempts to reveal the complex meanings and ideological ramifications concealed within these banners by examining both text and symbolism.

Discourse analysis is an essential component of this research, enabling an exploration of the broader public discourse surrounding the CCP's ideological narratives. This approach is instrumental in identifying and examining both narratives that align with and those that challenge the official ideology. Discourse analysis is employed to understand how language and communication practices are used to construct and

convey meanings, identities, and power relations. It facilitates an examination of the ways in which the CCP's narratives are articulated, received, and contested within the public domain. This analysis is particularly valuable in revealing the nuances of public opinion, the dynamics of ideological reception, and the forms of resistance manifested by the populace.

The data for this study primarily consists of banners and posters, with a focus on materials that are publicly accessible, most of which were collected from online image archives.¹⁷ The thesis utilizes a diverse range of sources, including photographs, illustrations, and content from publicly accessible websites and media outlets. These sources are carefully chosen and analyzed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the visual and textual representations of the CCP's ideology. The study also considers the socio-political context in which these banners are situated, providing a deeper insight into their significance and impact.

By integrating textual and semiotic analysis with the typical cases chosen, the thesis offers a nuanced and comprehensive examination of the CCP's ideological narratives. This methodological approach allows for a multi-layered exploration of the complex interplay between state propaganda, public perception, and the socio-political context. It provides a framework for understanding not only the explicit messages of the CCP's narratives but also their implicit meanings, symbolic representations, and the broader implications for Chinese society.

¹⁷ Most of the images in this thesis are from Chinapropaganda.com, online archival collection of Chinese propaganda posters and banners, accessed December 5, 2025, [www. Chinapropaganda.com](http://www.Chinapropaganda.com).

Research Purpose

This thesis focuses finding out the loop of Chinese Communist Party's ideological construction under Xi Jinping from the reaction through grassroots. It is based on a scholarly investigation into the ideological narratives that are advocated by the CCP under Xi Jinping's leadership, with an emphasis on street banners as a main medium of public discourse. The study critically assesses the paradoxes and challenges embedded within the CCP's ideological framework, pointing out that these inherent contradictions are ineffectual in addressing the current societal issues and in maintaining the stability of the regime as intended. A key focus on the analysis of Xi's ideology is placed on the "Core Socialist Values" and the "Chinese Dream" with the thesis arguing that their abstract nature diminishes their effectiveness in resonating with the general Chinese people.

With a strict methodological approach and empirical studies, this study combines theoretical discussion with empirical observation, relying on the author's life experience and in-depth knowledge of the sociopolitical context in China. The thesis offers a thorough examination of the text and images on the banners, considering the complex themes they aim to address as well as the historical and sociopolitical background of their creation. The paper also critically analyzes these ideological tools' shortcomings, emphasizing how inadequate they are to meet the societal issues they claim to be addressing.

An original contribution of this thesis is that it provides an exploration of current grassroots responses, including protests that contains banners and artistic expressions with banners as medium made by artists and the ordinary people. These responses are

interpreted as forming a counter-narrative to the official state ideology, underscoring the public's critical and often satirical engagement with state propaganda.

In its conclusion, this thesis makes a contribution to the field of ideological studies by providing new insights into the effectiveness of ideological propagation within authoritarian regimes, particularly in the context of the modern CCP. The nuanced public reception of the CCP's ideological messages, evidenced by the spontaneous emergence of alternative narratives, questions the viability and the effectiveness of Xi Jinping's ideological agenda and indicates potential ongoing instability within the regime's narrative dominance.

This research not only offers a comprehensive critique of the CCP's prevailing ideological strategy but also paves the way for further examination of the intricate relationship between state power and public perception in the domain of ideology. Recognizing the limitations inherent in conducting fieldwork within China, the thesis suggests that its findings represent an initial step in a more extensive scholarly exploration. It underscores the necessity for ongoing scholarly contributions in this area, particularly in understanding the evolving dynamics of the CCP's ideological endeavors.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized with an extensive exploration of the ideological landscape under Xi Jinping's leadership in China. The introduction chapter sets the stage by providing a detailed overview of the research background, delving into the complexities of the current ideological framework. This chapter introduces the primary objectives of the study, which are centered on unraveling the paradoxical nature of Xi Jinping's ideological constructs. This chapter also illustrates the methodologies it is adopted in the thesis. The chapter critically examines how these diverse elements coalesce within the CCP's ideological narrative, setting the context for the subsequent analysis. Furthermore, this chapter identifies gaps in existing research, highlighting the unique contribution of this study to the understanding of contemporary Chinese political discourse. The chapter also details the methodologies employed in the study, including a blend of discourse analysis, textual interpretation, and semiotic analysis. These methodologies are crucial for a comprehensive examination of both the overt and covert messages in public propaganda, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the ideological narratives propagated by the CCP.

Chapter 2 gives a specific literature review on how Xi Jinping's ideological construction is developed, why he emphasizes ideology as the core strategy for national security and development, and how he strengthens his personal status and power in the Party through ideology reconstruction. It starts with a brief introduction on the history of the ideology trajectory of Xi's political thoughts, which is based on Marxism-Leninism. Then it traces back its ideological legacy from Mao Era. It also compares Xi's difference and divergence from Mao's Thoughts traditional Marxism-Leninism idea and how does he shape and strengthen his personal cult with a new ideological

narrative. And demonstrates how the one-party state construct and keep its ideological hegemony under the current circumstances in China.

Chapter 3 provides a different landscape from Chapter 2. It shifts the focus from the top-down to evaluate the reaction from the grassroots. Through four examples of various forms of everyday resistance and actions, it evaluates the counter-narratives of ordinary Chinese citizens to resist the official ideology. With the theoretical framework from James Scott's "weapons of the weak", it analyzes four typical incident: which is the Beijing Sitong Bridge protest as an individual public dissent action, the White Paper protests and the related art practices as a silent resistance, the 2023 Shanghai Halloween parade as transforming the lifestyle into a daily resistance, and the collective political expression of the public mourning for Chinese former Premier Li Keiqiang. All these actions and political expressions happened in recent years show solid evidence of the real attitude from the public.

Chapter 4 illustrates that living in the totalitarian regime, under the circumstances of severe surveillance and limited freedom of speech, the artistic expression is also a non-violent and subversive way to resist the official propaganda. This chapter provides two typical art practices that the author personally anticipated and experienced. It is crucial in understanding the public's reception of and reaction to the CCP's ideological narratives. It explores how various forms of artistic expression and social movements have emerged as powerful tools of resistance against the state's propaganda under China's special societal circumstance. The chapter analyzes how these art practices contain social functions and provide alternative narratives and perspectives, challenging the official discourse and offering a glimpse into the diverse opinions and

sentiments within Chinese society.

The last chapter concludes the findings from the previous chapters, providing an overview and comparative analysis. It evaluates the effectiveness of the Xi government's attempts to stabilize its regime and legitimacy through ideological propaganda when facing the new era challenges. The chapter discusses the potential long-term problems that may arise from the current ideological approach, contributing to the broader discourse on the efficacy of ideological propaganda in authoritarian regimes.

This chapter not only summarizes the key findings of the study but also discusses the broader implications of these findings for the field of political science and Chinese studies. It highlights the complex interplay between state-driven narratives and public reception, underscoring the dynamic nature of ideology in contemporary China. The chapter also opens up potential fields for further research and discussion, suggesting areas where future studies could build upon the findings of this thesis.

Chapter 2: Xi Jinping's Ideological Constructs and Public Discourse in China

“Ideological work is about forging the character of a country and the soul of a nation. We must ensure that the Party firmly exercises leadership over this work and that the responsibility system for it is fully implemented. We will cement and expand the mainstream thoughts and ideas that inspire hard work in the new era.”¹⁸

Xi Jinping has been regarded as one of the most formidable leaders in China since Mao Zedong. Over his decade as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CCP), he has systematically consolidated one-party power, pursued assertive national governance strategies, prioritized ideological propagation, and established a decisive stance in both domestic and international policies.¹⁹ This consolidation has further entrenched Xi's central role within the Party, setting the stage for critical analysis of the mechanisms underlying his authority and their broader implications.

In 2016, at the CCP's 18th Central Committee's 6th Plenary Session, Xi Jinping was affirmed as having assumed the central role within the Party. This was further solidified in 2017 at the 19th National Congress of the CCP, where "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" was formally written into the Party's constitution, marking a significant ideological endorsement.²⁰ These political milestones set the stage for further changes in China's leadership structure.

Following this, in March 2018, an important moment occurred when the National

¹⁸ “Full text of the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” International Department, Central Committee of C.P.C, August 2, 2023, <https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english2023/tjzl/cpcji/20thPartyCongrressReport/>.

¹⁹ Verna Yu and Emma Graham-Harrison, “Xi Jinping: From ‘Counter-Revolutionary’ to Absolute Power,” *The Guardian*, October 22, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/22/xi-jinping-from-counter-revolutionary-to-absolute-power>.

²⁰ “中国共产党第十八届中央委员会第六次全体会议公报,” The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, October 27, 2016, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-10/27/content_5125093.htm; “Resolution of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on the Revised Constitution of the Communist Party of China,” Xinhua, October 24, 2017, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/top_news/2017/10/24/content_281475919837140.htm.

People's Congress of China passed a contentious constitutional amendment. This amendment removed the term limits for the President and Vice President, a move that sparked widespread discussion and was seen as potentially allowing Xi Jinping to extend his leadership indefinitely, beyond the traditional two-term limit for leaders.²¹ This development prompted renewed debate within China about the future of political leadership and its broader implications.

Xi Jinping's leadership signals a significant shift in China's politics, strengthening the CCP's control and altering governance and ideology. The amendment sparked debate, marking a move from Deng Xiaoping's collective leadership to one-man rule, reminiscent of Mao Zedong's era.²² From theoretical construction and propaganda discourse to the actual exercise of power at the highest leadership levels, Xi Jinping's status within the CCP has been repeatedly elevated. Many Chinese political specialists believe that his actual power now parallels that of Mao Zedong. Furthermore, Xi's initiatives in establishing personal authority and strengthening control in all respects have led observers to draw comparisons with Mao.²³ Understanding these parallels is essential to analyzing Xi Jinping's broader ideological and political strategies.

In early 2013, Xi Jinping proposed the principle of "Two Un-denials". He stated, "The historical period before reform and opening up must be correctly evaluated, the historical period after reform and opening up cannot be used to deny the historical period before reform and opening up, neither can the period before reform and opening up be used to deny the historical period after reform and opening up."²⁴ The

²¹ Chris Buckley and Steven Lee Myers, "China's Legislature Blesses Xi's Indefinite Rule. It Was 2,958 to 2," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/11/world/asia/china-xi-constitution-term-limits.html>.

²² Richard McGregor, "Echoes of Mao as Xi Jinping ends term limits," *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, February 26, 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/echoes-mao-xi-jinping-ends-term-limits>.

²³ Alfredo Toro Hardy, "Is Xi Jinping the World's Number One Autocrat?," *Fair Observer*, August 30, 2025, <https://www.fairobserver.com/politics/is-xi-jinping-the-worlds-number-one-autocrat/>.

²⁴ Xi Jinping, "Correctly Deal with Both Historical Periods Before and After Reform and Opening Up," China Copyright and Media, December 26, 2013, <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/12/26/correctly->

leader before the Reform and Opening-up was Mao Zedong, and after that period, it was Deng Xiaoping. In this context, Xi Jinping's emphasis was on not negating the first thirty years of China, which were under Mao's leadership. Xi's intention appears to be to revisit the paths not fully explored in the first thirty years, building on the material conditions established in the subsequent thirty years under the Reform and Opening-up. This period led to the development of capitalism and markets, such as mixed public-private enterprises and people's communes. The direction remains unchanged, but the means, forms, and technological conditions have evolved. This effort to bridge different historical periods presents inherent challenges, particularly as China advances into new social and economic contexts.

However, what Xi Jinping may not fully recognize is that, having experienced the Reform and Opening-up and the market economy, the Chinese people now have a different mindset from that of the Mao era. As a result, a reversion to the approaches of Mao's time is likely to encounter significant resistance. This resistance stems from the profound changes in societal attitudes, economic structures, and individual aspirations that have occurred since the end of the Mao era.²⁵ Consequently, Xi's attempt to blend the ideologies and practices of both eras presents a complex challenge, as it involves navigating the delicate balance between historical reverence and contemporary realities. Ultimately, this aspect of Xi's leadership highlights the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity in China's political and ideological landscape.

[deal-with-both-historical-periods-before-and-after-reform-and-opening-up/](#).

²⁵ On China's economic reform, see Barry J. Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Adaptation and Growth*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018); on China's social stability and inequality, see Martin King Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); for the experiences of ordinary Chinese people fighting for their rights, see Philip P. Pan, *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009) and Merle Goldman, *From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Xi Jinping, like Mao Zedong, strongly emphasizes ideology and expects universal acceptance of his stance, discouraging independent thought or dissent. Policies decided by Xi are expected to be obeyed without question. Unlike Mao, who mobilized the masses and party members against each other, Xi uses a top-down, state-driven approach to enforce compliance²⁶. This method relies on strict policy enforcement and controls dissent, resulting in uniformity and order. This comparison sets the stage for examining historical precedents in governance style.

For historical comparison, Mao Zedong's era was characterized by chaos and terror, as evident in the Cultural Revolution, where social mobilization and Party members frequently clashed. This mobilization led to widespread disorder and fear²⁷. In contrast, Xi adopts a different mechanism for enforcing ideology. Xi's approach, while maintaining strict control, does not rely on the same level of societal upheaval and internal conflict that characterized Mao's rule. Instead, Xi's regime focuses on maintaining stability and unity through authoritative governance and the suppression of dissent²⁸. This difference in approach reflects a shift in the CCP's strategies for maintaining control and promoting its ideology. Under Xi, the emphasis is on order and uniformity, whereas Mao's era was marked by mobilization and conflict as tools for enforcing ideology.

As a socialist country, China distinguishes itself from Western countries, particularly in values and social structure. The CCP's unique political lexicon forms a value system that directly contrasts with Western ideologies, emphasizing collective over individual interests. Authoritarian states, such as China, prioritize propaganda,

²⁶ Minxin Pei, "Rewriting the Rules of the Chinese Party-State: Xi's Progress in Reinvigorating the CCP," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 60 (Summer 2019); Minxin Pei, "Xi Jinping's Political Agenda and Leadership: What do we know from his decade in power," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 73 (Fall 2022): 7.

²⁷ Andrew G. Walder, *China Under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 250–58.

²⁸ Yu and Graham-Harrison, "Xi Jinping."

whereas Western systems tend to promote open debate and pluralism. For example, the fascist regime in Hitler's era had a dedicated propaganda department, as did the Soviet Union. The influence of Mao's era also shaped ideological movements abroad, such as the May 68 Movement in France.²⁹

The construction of a comprehensive theory under a proletarian dictatorship is evident. George Orwell's novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four" portrays the Ministry of Truth, emphasizing the crucial role of the propaganda department in shaping collective thought. In contrast, the West cherishes freedom and individual thought. Authoritarian regimes like China, the former Soviet Union, and fascist states emphasize ideology and propaganda. The essence of propaganda, as shown in Orwell's novel, is spreading falsehoods, as exemplified by the Ministry of Truth.

In these authoritarian contexts, the power of propaganda is emphasized as a tool for shaping and controlling public opinion. Unlike in Western societies, where there is a diversity of thought and freedom of expression, authoritarian regimes focus on creating a unified ideological narrative. This approach to governance and societal control highlights the stark differences in how societies are structured and governed based on their political ideologies and systems. The role of propaganda in these systems is not just about disseminating information but also about constructing a reality that aligns with the state's objectives and suppresses dissenting views.³⁰

To understand Xi Jinping Thought, Mao Zedong Thought, and Deng Xiaoping Theory, and how they differ from the former Soviet Union, it's essential to recognize that each has its own unique discourse system. Xi Jinping, like his predecessors, has adopted the socialist tradition of propagating ideology through slogans and banners,

²⁹ Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 294.

³⁰ Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 31–32.

which, in some ways, are akin to Western commercial advertising. These slogans have permeated every aspect of daily life and the collective psyche. The difference in Xi Jinping's era, as compared to Mao's, lies in his adaptation of Western advertising methods, a change brought about by reform and opening-up. He employs advertising techniques to promote his ideological agenda, recognizing that advertising is a powerful tool for disseminating ideas and shaping consumer behavior and perceptions.

Advertising, omnipresent and persuasive, compels attention and, over time, shapes people's beliefs and values. Just as product advertisements embed themselves in people's minds through imagery, political slogans in China have a similar effect. For example, the widespread promotion of Coca-Cola in Mexico by the United States, using the product to establish cultural dominance, is a classic case.³¹ Mexico's extensive use of the US dollar and the integration of Coca-Cola into everyday life demonstrate the power of nonviolent, noncoercive cultural influence. American pop artist Andy Warhol commented on this phenomenon, noting how Coca-Cola symbolizes a unique aspect of American life: everyone, regardless of social status, consumes the same product. Drawing on these parallels helps to illuminate the methods by which ideology and culture become deeply ingrained within societies.³²

In China, political language functions similarly to Coca-Cola's advertising. Xi Jinping's slogans, such as the Chinese Dream, the Core Socialist Values, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation, are all part of his self-definition through street banners. These slogans outline the path and means of

³¹ Bruce Hobson, "Coca-Cola Capitalism," Mexico Solidarity Project, April 24, 2025, <https://mexicosolidarity.com/coca-cola-capitalism/>.

³² Andy Warhol, "Excerpt from The Philosophy of Andy Warhol," Core 100, Columbia University, November 20, 2019, <https://core100.columbia.edu/article/excerpt-philosophy-andy-warhol>.

China's rejuvenation as defined by Xi.

Thus, political slogans in China, much like commercial advertisements in the West, have become an inescapable part of everyday life. They define the narrative and direction of the nation, shaping public perception and understanding of the government's goals and policies. Xi Jinping's use of this form of propaganda exemplifies the integration of traditional socialist methods with modern advertising techniques, thereby creating a powerful tool for ideological dissemination in contemporary China.

What is Xi Jinping Thought? How is it created? What is the relationship between Xi's Thought and traditional ideology? What is the difference between Xi Jinping and other leaders? Xi Jinping Thought represents a significant ideological shift within the contemporary Chinese political landscape, marking a departure from the approaches of the previous three generations of leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao. This ideology emerged as a strategic response to both domestic and international challenges, reflecting Xi's recognition of the need to reinforce the CCP's control and legitimacy.

The genesis of Xi Jinping Thought stems from the perceived need to maintain the Communist Party's centralized power structure and fulfill Xi's personal ambitions and vision for China. It intertwines traditional socialist values with a renewed emphasis on nationalism and Marxism, repackaging these ideologies with a focus on state nationalism, which differs from the principles of Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism-Leninism.³³ This approach aims to strengthen the ideological narrative of the Party, contrasting with the era of Deng Xiaoping, where the emphasis was more on

³³ For a detailed analysis, see Kevin Rudd, *On Xi Jinping: How Xi's Marxist Nationalism Is Shaping China and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

economic reforms and opening up to the global market, and with less focus on political ideology.

Under Deng, political ideology was less emphasized in favor of economic development, as evidenced by the prevalence of commercial advertising over political propaganda. During the eras of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, China saw closer relations with the West, with ideological propaganda aligning more with Western economic models. However, Xi Jinping's tenure has seen a shift back towards a more traditional socialist narrative, reinforcing the notion that China is a communist country and that the West is fundamentally different, thus distancing China from Western ideologies.³⁴

Xi Jinping's approach to governance and ideological propagation is distinct from other authoritarian models. Unlike Kim Jong-un's familial rule in North Korea, the centralized governance of Russia during the post-Soviet era, or Vladimir Putin's personal style of governance, Xi's most notable characteristic is his use of patriotism and Marxist ideology to articulate and implement state nationalism. This strategy aims to shape public thought, maintain control over the national narrative, and reinforce both the Party's and his personal control while adapting to contemporary challenges.

Xi Jinping Thought is not just about maintaining the status quo but also serves as a tool for Xi to present his own vision for China's future, both domestically and on the international stage. The emphasis on ideological control and the shaping of public consciousness under Xi Jinping Thought reflects a significant shift in China's approach to governance and its relationship with the rest of the world. It represents a strategic blend of traditional socialist ideology and modern governance tactics, aiming to reinforce one-man Party control while adapting to contemporary challenges.

³⁴ "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation," ChinaFile, November 8, 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

In this chapter, a specific analysis of banners from the Xi Jinping era is conducted, and the methods of ideological propaganda employed by Xi Jinping and Mao Zedong are compared. This analysis will examine the differences in how each leader established the authority of their respective regimes. It will also examine how Xi Jinping Thought diverges from Marxism and Leninism, and how Xi Jinping has developed his own ideological framework through these differences.

2.1 Xi Jinping's Inheritance of Maoist Ideological Tools: A Political Legacy from the Mao Era

A well-known definition of propaganda is provided by Harold Lasswell, an American political scientist and communications theorist, who characterized it as “the methods and approaches used to influence and control public opinion”: “The control of opinion by significant symbols... by stories, rumors, reports, pictures, and other forms of social communication. Propaganda is concerned with the management of opinions and attitudes by the direct manipulation of social suggestion rather than by altering other conditions of the environment or in the organism.”³⁵

China is renowned for being a society governed by slogans and reliant on political ideological propaganda to stabilize its regime. This is a common characteristic of Communist Party governments, not just unique to China. However, since Xi Jinping's rise to power, his use of banners in governance has surpassed his predecessors, only with the exception of Mao Zedong. Xi has introduced a multitude of political "Newspeaks" into China's political life, which have become an integral part of the Party's political culture and have had a profound impact.

These "Newspeaks" can generally be categorized into two types. The first type is associated with specific stages of national development goals and tasks, such as the

³⁵ Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique In World War I* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971).

Chinese Dream, Targeted Poverty Reduction, Supply-Side Structural Reform, The Belt and Road Initiative, A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind, and the Chinese Path to Modernization. These terms are considered progressive and in keeping with the times.

The second type is aimed at highlighting and maintaining the rule of the Communist Party, as well as consolidating Xi Jinping's personal cult. Examples include: Two Upholds, Four Consciousness, Four-sphere Confidence, Remain Committed to Our Mission and Keep the Mission Firmly in Mind, The Party Leads Everything, firmly uphold the authority and centralized, Unified Leadership of the Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the Core, Great Struggle, Political Rules, Political Construction, Fundamental Compliance, Key Minorities, and so on. These terms reveal the distinctive characteristics of Xi's personal leadership style and his ambition to maintain himself at the center of the Party, a trait previously seen only under Mao Zedong.

Xi Jinping's introduction of these new terms reflects a strategic effort to shape and direct the political discourse in China, reinforcing the CCP's ideological control and his own leadership position. The impact of these terms on Chinese society and politics is significant, as they not only guide policy and governance but also influence the public's perception and understanding of the Party's direction and objectives.

In his novel "1984," George Orwell fictionalized a totalitarian state, Oceania, ruled by "Big Brother" and the "English Socialist Party" (Ingsoc). One of the key methods of control in Oceania was "Newspeak," a language designed to limit freedom of thought and control the populace. The Party's slogan, "Who controls language controls thought, and who controls thought controls everything," encapsulates the essence of this control. Newspeak, as the official language of Oceania, was specifically invented

to manipulate and restrict public thought, filtering out any language that conflicted with the Party's political needs.

In a parallel situation, the concept of "Newspeak" frequently appears in Party documents, reports, speeches by leaders, international communications, media propaganda, cadre training, student classrooms, and in the speeches and papers of experts and scholars. These terms have become the "Newspeak" and ideology of the Party in the new era. They form the core content of Xi Jinping Thought and represent the "political culture" that the CCP exports externally.

This comparison underscores the impact of language in shaping and influencing public discourse and thought. Just as Orwell's Newspeak was designed to limit the range of thought, Xi's political "Newspeak" serves to guide and define the acceptable parameters of political discourse in China. These terms not only reflect the current ideological stance of the CCP but also play a crucial role in reinforcing Xi Jinping's authority and the Party's ideological narrative. The widespread use of these terms across various platforms and institutions underscores their significance in the CCP's strategy of ideological control and dissemination.

Xi Jinping's political "Newspeak," particularly those in the latter category, can be characterized as revolutionary language or grand revolutionary terms, as they fundamentally represent the linguistic manifestation of a revolutionary party's political culture. These terms, familiar to many, include phrases like "People's Leader," "Helmsman Commander," "Struggle in Public Opinion," "Self-Revolution," "Red Culture," "Political Appearance," "Political Security," "Politician-Run Newspapers," "Historical Nihilism," "Hostile Foreign Forces," "The Heart of Selflessness Never Dies," and "I Shall Eliminate Myself."

While some of these revolutionary terms have persisted since the Mao era — and in this sense, are not exactly "new" — under Xi Jinping, their meanings have been reinvigorated. Xi has effectively resurrected these terms, infusing them with renewed significance and aligning them with the contemporary ideological and political objectives of his administration.

This revitalization of revolutionary language under Xi Jinping is not merely a continuation of past practices but represents a strategic effort to reinforce the CCP's ideological narrative and assert the authority of his leadership. By reactivating these terms, Xi is tapping into a historical and cultural lexicon that resonates with the Party's revolutionary heritage while adapting them to serve the current political agenda.

The use of these terms, steeped in the Party's revolutionary history, serves multiple purposes. It connects Xi's leadership with the legacy of Mao Zedong, lending a sense of historical continuity and legitimacy to his rule. At the same time, it reinforces the Party's revolutionary identity and its commitment to its foundational principles. This approach also serves to consolidate Xi's power within the Party and among the populace, as these terms evoke a sense of collective identity and shared purpose rooted in the Party's revolutionary past.

A revolutionary party, tasked with overthrowing an old world, emphasizes a distinct political direction and strong agitation in its revolutionary culture and language, appealing to people's inner emotions. This revolutionary culture and language reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution, becoming grandiose revolutionary terms; however, in the process, they lost their original liveliness and emotional resonance, becoming dry, uninteresting, and hollow. Examples from the Cultural Revolution include popular phrases like "Never forget class struggle," "Proletarian dictatorship,"

"Continue the revolution," "Great criticism," "Stinking Old Ninth,"³⁶ and "Black Five Categories."³⁷ As historian Elizabeth J. Perry has noted, the political language of the Cultural Revolution was characterized by being formulaic, stereotypical, standardized, and vulgar.³⁸ The strong political tone overshadowed the individual emotions of the language users, leading to an increasingly pale connotation that weakened its expressive function and diminished its vitality. The loss of personalized language expression also led to the prevalence of empty, clichéd, and grandiose rhetoric.

This phenomenon has experienced a resurgence in contemporary times. The Cultural Revolution pushed revolutionary language to its historical peak, resulting in extreme hatred among the populace towards this mode of expression. Following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent ideological thaw, what once seemed like elevated and sacred political language became the subject of relentless satire by novelists and artists. For instance, the novels of Wang Shuo and Wang Xiaobo are replete with such descriptions.³⁹ Particularly noteworthy are the sitcoms "Stories of the Editorial Department" and "I Love My Family." The dialogues in these shows are steeped in irony towards revolutionary language. When the characters in these dramas deliver these revolutionary phrases with utmost seriousness, the inherent absurdity of

³⁶ During the Cultural Revolution, class enemies were defined using the concept of the "Black Nine Categories," which included landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, rightists, traitors, spies, capitalist roaders, and intellectuals. Because intellectuals were listed as the ninth category, they were popularly referred to as "Stinking Old Ninth."

³⁷ During the Cultural Revolution, the term "Black Five Categories" often referred to the children of individuals belonging to these five categories: landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists. In the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, influenced by the concept of "bloodline theory," children of the Black Five or even Black Seven Categories faced discrimination in various aspects of life, such as joining the Communist Youth League or the Communist Party, job assignments after graduation, employment opportunities, military enlistment, career advancement, and even in matters of love and marriage.

³⁸ Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun, "Revolutionary Rudeness: The Language of Red Guards and Rebel Workers in China's Cultural Revolution," *Indiana East Asian Working Paper Series on Language and Politics in Modern China*, no. 2 (July 1993): 1–31.

³⁹ 洪子诚, 《中国当代文学史》(北京: 北京大学出版社, 2010), 441; 罗岗 and 许纪霖, eds., 《启蒙的自我瓦解》(吉林: 吉林出版集团, 2007), 77; Wang Xiaobo, *Golden Age*, trans. Yan Yan (London: Penguin Books, 2023).

the language is immediately shown, eliciting strong resonance from the audience. This dramatic effect serves to dissolve the significance of this political language, making these sitcoms classics in Chinese situational comedy that remain unsurpassed to this day.

By today's standards, both the novels of the two Wangs and these sitcoms represent a significant affront to the political regime due to their blatant mockery of political language. However, at the time, audiences did not take this mockery seriously, and even censorship institutions treated it as a commonplace occurrence. This reflects a relative leniency in the political culture of that era, indicating a period when political discourse was subject to less stringent control, allowing for a greater degree of artistic freedom and expression. This aspect of the era provides a stark contrast to the current political climate, where such expressions might be viewed with much more severity.

However, this relative leniency and openness dissipated when Xi Jinping seized power. Xi's tightening grip on politics was not immediate but gradually intensified. His approach was tentative at the beginning, but as he solidified his position as the core leader, the subtlety gave way to overt control. One key aspect of establishing his authoritarian rule involved reinvigorating and reintroducing the CCP's revolutionary culture and language into the Party's political life. While revolutionary culture and language have always been a part of the CCP and have never gone away, they had receded somewhat into the background during most of the Reform and Opening-up period, as China sought to align more closely with the West.

Xi, however, is deeply influenced by the revolutionary ideological and linguistic education of the Cultural Revolution period during his youth. This background made him adept at employing this revolutionary language, doing so effortlessly and without any sense of incongruity and discomfort. With minor adaptations to fit the new era, he

was able to present these old concepts in a fresh and innovative way. For instance, Xi is known for always quoting Mao's poetry in his speeches. He once said, "Storming an iron-wall pass,' today is 'the right path in the world is the vicissitudes of life,' tomorrow will be 'the time will come when the wind breaks the waves.'"⁴⁰ These are classic examples of old Chinese revolutionary terms. Under Mao, these lines carried with a sense of revolutionary romanticism and optimism. However, when Xi uses them, they seem to lose their original spirit and come across as somewhat pretentious and obscure.

This shift under Xi Jinping represents a significant transformation in China's political and cultural landscape. The renewed emphasis on revolutionary language and culture signifies a return to more traditional and rigid forms of ideological control, reflecting Xi's approach to one-man governance and his vision for China's future. This change also highlights the dilemma between China's recent past, characterized by a more open and reform-oriented period, and the current era of tightened political control and ideological rigidity.

The new challenge for Xi Jinping is how to repackage and propagate this political "Newspeak," which has been pivotal in revitalizing seemingly lifeless revolutionary phrases and embedding them deeply into the hearts and everyday lives of people, subtly changing their thought patterns. Although street banners have not been a unique propaganda tool for China, both Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping have utilized them to their fullest potential during their presidencies.

Even though each leader has had their unique propaganda methods, Xi Jinping has still drawn from some of the public banner propaganda techniques of Mao's era.

⁴⁰ "Xi Jinping, Achieving Rejuvenation Is the Dream of the Chinese People," USC U.S.-China Institute, November 29, 2012, <https://china.usc.edu/node/21227>.

During Mao's time, especially during the Cultural Revolution, streets were covered with banners, which became an integral part of people's everyday life.

Since Xi Jinping came to power, he has inherited Mao's use of public spaces as natural platforms for these banners, spreading his "Newspeak" across every corner of Chinese cities and villages. This approach ensures that every citizen, whether walking on the streets or going about their daily life, is enveloped by these political banners, making them a pervasive presence.

Moreover, these banners often cleverly incorporate elements of folk culture. Xi Jinping, understanding the mindset of the masses, emphasizes the development of folk culture that resonates with the people. In propagating this culture, he has borrowed extensively from folk culture, such as paper-cutting and the *Meng Wa* ("Dream Child"), a girl with a traditional Chinese winter coat who represents a doll to bring good luck, making the ideological propaganda more palatable under the guise of traditional cultural decorations.



Figure 1 The Core Socialist Values, January 2023, Shanghai.⁴¹



Figure 2 Meng Wa (Dream Child) in a “Chinese Dream” advertisement, December 2019.⁴²

⁴¹ <https://www.chinapropaganda.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2-copy.jpeg>

⁴² https://www.sohu.com/a/360031212_120060547

Xi's approach represents a sophisticated fusion of traditional propaganda methods and modern communication strategies. He has effectively made these messages more accessible and acceptable by infusing ideological messages with cultural elements familiar and appealing to the masses, as this strategy not only ensures the widespread dissemination of the Party's ideology but also facilitates its deeper integration into the social fabric and cultural consciousness of the Chinese people. This method has proven effective, making the propaganda well-known among the people, to the extent that even a three-year-old can memorize the words.

However, to ensure that revolutionary language and grand revolutionary terms become a prevalent part of China's political culture under new political realities, a protective mechanism must be established. Any act, whether intentional or unintentional, that dares to mock or challenge these revolutionary terms is subject to suppression under this mechanism. Such suppression is intended to instill a sense of sanctity and inviolability around these grand revolutionary terms. This is the obvious reason behind the increasing number of politically sensitive words defined by the authorities in recent years.

If someone touches upon these sensitive words, the consequences can range from receiving a formal reprimand to facing legal prosecution, even years of prison.⁴³ Such measures are indicative of the government's efforts to maintain control over the political narrative and to ensure that the revolutionary language and terms align with the current political agenda. The sanctification of these terms and the strict control over their use and interpretation serve to reinforce the ideological hegemony of the ruling party. It also reflects the challenges faced by individuals and groups in

⁴³ "China Detains Jilin Activist For Wearing Anti-Xi Jinping T-Shirt," Radio Free Asia, November 2, 2016, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/activist-11022016120902.html>.

expressing dissent or alternative viewpoints in an environment where political discourse is heavily monitored and regulated.

This protective mechanism around revolutionary language and terms underscores the complex dynamics of power, control, and resistance in China's political landscape. It highlights the delicate balance the state seeks to maintain between promoting its ideological agenda and managing public perception and discourse. The increasing sensitivity around political language and the measures taken to enforce compliance reveal the underlying tensions and the evolving nature of political communication in China.

Xi Jinping's stringent approach to ideological control, which appears as a top-down, tightly woven system of educating and regulating the thoughts and actions of the masses, is evident in practices such as the widespread posting and promotion of street banners across various regions, in line with the directives of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission.⁴⁴ These measures seemingly create an atmosphere that is well-received by the public, suggesting that Xi Jinping's governance philosophy and ideas have deeply penetrated every aspect of public life.

However, as later mentioned in the third chapter, through a series of recent artistic and social practices and movements, it becomes apparent that the people's reception of Xi Jinping's ideological propaganda is not entirely uncritical or wholly accepting.

Having experienced three years of the pandemic, economic downturns, and various social events, the masses are gradually awakening and reflecting on the reality behind the glossy façade of this "newspeak."

This awakening is not an outright rejection but a nuanced response to the ideological

⁴⁴ Minxin Pei, "The CCP's Domestic Security Taskmaster: The Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 69 (Fall 2021).

narratives being propagated. People are increasingly questioning and contemplating the actual state of affairs behind the seemingly successful implementation of these ideological strategies. The artistic and social movements discussed in Chapter 3 serve as a window into this evolving public consciousness. They reveal a society that is subtly, yet significantly, shifting in its perception and response to the state's ideological messaging.

The contrast between the official narrative and the grassroots reality highlights a complex and dynamic landscape of ideological engagement in China. While the state continues to promote its narrative through various means, including the pervasive use of street banners, official films, and songs, the people's response is characterized by a growing sense of critical awareness and a strong desire for a more authentic understanding of their social and political climate. Therefore, this thesis aims to unravel the layers of this ideological landscape, examining both the state's efforts to embed its narrative in every corner of society and the subtle yet significant ways in which the public responds to and at times resists these efforts. The aim is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the current state of ideological control in China and the emerging undercurrents of public sentiment and expression.

2.2 Divergence and Conflict: Xi's Contrasting Ideological Strategies from Communism

Many scholars, both domestic and international, believe that Xi Jinping is the leader most similar to Mao Zedong, particularly in his reemphasis on the core role of socialist ideological construction within the Party. However, this thesis finds that the context of Xi's era differs significantly from that of Mao.

These two leaders are situated in different eras and contexts. On a social level, unlike North Korea, which has remained largely isolated and closed off from the outside world,

China introduced capitalism and a market economy following the Reform and Opening-up period and opened up to the global economy. Unlike North Korea, China has opened its doors to the world, seeking to integrate into the global economic community and join international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). This active economic openness has also led to a more open mindset among the Chinese people. People's perception of leadership has evolved since the Mao era. During Mao's time, it was common for ordinary families to display portraits of Mao Zedong, reflecting absolute adoration and reverence. However, in Xi Jinping's era, it is rare for ordinary families to hang portraits of Xi Jinping in their homes. The focus of leadership has shifted to the families themselves.

This change marks a substantial shift in the way Chinese citizens perceive their leaders and interact with political ideology. Exposure to global influences and diversification of economic and social experiences have contributed to a more nuanced and varied understanding of leadership and governance among the Chinese people.

In terms of leadership, Xi Jinping's apparent adoration of personal power has led him to establish numerous economic groups, appointing himself as the head of these groups. This move has effectively diminished the power of the Premier and other members of the Politburo Standing Committee.⁴⁵ Objectively, the older generation of Communist Party leaders has either passed away or aged, lacking the capacity to counterbalance or limit Xi Jinping's autocratic power. This situation has facilitated China's transition from a collective leadership system to more one-man rule. This is also why, despite Xi Jinping not having successfully led the people to victory in wars, he is still able to

⁴⁵ Christopher K. Johnson, Scott Kennedy, and Mingda Qiu, "Xi's Signature Governance Innovation: The Rise of Leading Small Groups," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 17, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/xis-signature-governance-innovation-rise-leading-small-groups>; Yu Zeyuan, "How Xi Jinping Consolidated Power over the Past Decade," ThinkChina, October 10, 2022, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/how-xi-jinping-consolidated-power-over-past-decade>.

consolidate power within the Party.

However, at the same time, when Xi Jinping took power, the Communist Party was already almost a century old, a stark contrast to the Party's state during Mao Zedong's early chairmanship. The Party had just achieved victory in World War II and the Chinese Civil War during Mao's era, establishing the People's Republic of China in which its newly "liberated" population became essentially "a people of the party, by the party and for the party" as a party of the people, by the people. Mao, as the leader who guided the people to these victories, naturally held immense prestige within the Party and the country.

Xi Jinping faces a different set of challenges in establishing his personal authority and maintaining the CCP's stability as the ruling party. Unlike Mao, who had clear victories and a revolutionary legacy to bolster his status, Xi must navigate a more complex and mature political landscape. He needs to consider how to build his personal prestige and ensure the CCP's continued one-party rule in a context where the Party's historical victories are more distant and its role in a rapidly changing global environment is under scrutiny. These considerations are crucial for understanding Xi Jinping's approach to governance and his efforts to consolidate power within China's current political framework, as well as his ideological differences with Mao Zedong: "Once the father seizes power, the son must take over. This is called passing it down from generation to generation."⁴⁶

To gather more support within the Party and society, Xi Jinping needs to establish his authority. On the one hand, he learns from Mao Zedong, emphasizing his status as a legitimate successor from the "Red Second Generation." However, considering the

⁴⁶ 北大附中《红旗》战斗小组,“自来红们站起来了!”, November 26, 1966, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/reference-books/minjian-1966-1976/04.htm>.

changes of the times and his personal needs, Xi also makes corresponding adjustments to Mao's ideological constructions. These adjustments often diverge from the socialism of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, as well as many of Mao's concepts, leading to contradictions.

These contradictions highlight the challenges Xi faces in successfully implementing his ideological propaganda. They suggest that his approach may not only be unfeasible but also likely to encounter opposing viewpoints from the public. The tension between adhering to traditional Marxist-Leninist and Maoist principles and adapting these ideologies to fit contemporary needs and Xi's personal vision is a central dilemma of his leadership. This conflict highlights the complexities of maintaining ideological consistency while also responding to contemporary political, economic, and social realities. The public's reception of these ideological shifts is crucial in determining the success of Xi's leadership and the future trajectory of central control within the Communist Party of China.

In the exploration of Xi Jinping's ideological trajectory, a diverse range of scholarly works reveals Xi Jinping's differences, divergence from, and conflict with traditional communist doctrines and Mao's ideology. The study "Xi Jinping's Ideology: A Hybrid between Marxism and Nationalism" examines how Xi Jinping has uniquely blended traditional Marxist-Leninist principles with a potent sense of Chinese nationalism, forging an ideological framework distinct from classical communism.⁴⁷ This idea is further explored in "'Marxism' as Tradition in CCP Discourse", which highlights the evolving interpretation and application of Marxist principles under Xi Jinping's leadership, signifying a critical shift in the Party's ideological stance.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Elpeni Fitrah, "Xi Jinping's Ideology: A Hybrid between Marxism and Nationalism," *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations* 8, no. 2 (2022): 226–52.

⁴⁸ Giorgio Strafella, "'Marxism' as Tradition in CCP Discourse," *Asiatische Studien - Études Asiatiques* 69, no. 1

The paper "Debating China as Ideology: Marxism, Materialism, and Own Way" sheds light on the ideological shifts and contradictions that have emerged under Xi's rule, focusing on the intersections and conflicts between Marxism, materialism, and Xi Jinping's unique approach.⁴⁹ Moreover, "The World According to Xi Jinping: What China's Ideologue in Chief Really Believes" offers an in-depth examination of Xi Jinping's personal beliefs and ideological convictions, providing a comprehensive understanding of his vision for China and its contrast with traditional communist ideologies.⁵⁰ In addition, "The Political Thought of Xi Jinping" delves into the nuances of Xi Jinping's political thought, highlighting its divergence from traditional communist thought, particularly in its emphasis on Chinese characteristics and nationalism."⁵¹

The research conducted by Shan, Gu and Chen, titled "Layering Ideologies from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping: Tracing Ideological Changes of the Communist Party of China Using Text Analysis" uses text analysis to trace the ideological changes within the Communist Party of China, highlighting the layers of ideological evolution and the distinct shift towards Xi Jinping's personalized ideology.⁵² Not only is Xi Jinping's ideology distinct from Maoism, but it also diverges from the ideas of Marx and Engels. "Xi Jinping on Marx and Engels" examines Xi Jinping's interpretation and application of Marx and Engels' theories, providing insights into how Xi Jinping aligns with and diverges from these foundational communist thinkers in his ideological approach.⁵³ These papers collectively offer a comprehensive view of the ideological divergence and

(2015): 235–53, <https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2015-0001>.

⁴⁹ Bartosz Kowalski and Dominik Mierzejewski, "Debating China as Ideology: Marxism, Materialism, and Own Way," in *China's Selective Identities* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 97–156, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0164-3_3.

⁵⁰ Rudd, *On Xi Jinping*.

⁵¹ Steve Yui-Sang Tsang and Shun Yan Olivia Cheung, eds., *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024).

⁵² Wei Shan, Yongxin Gu, and Juan Chen, "Layering Ideologies from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping: Tracing Ideological Changes of the Communist Party of China Using Text Analysis," *China* 21, no. 2 (2023): 26–50, <https://doi.org/10.1353/chn.2023.a898340>.

⁵³ Roland Boer, "Xi Jinping on Marx and Engels," in *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 273–307.

conflicts in Xi Jinping's approach compared to traditional communism, underscoring the complexities and contradictions inherent in adapting Marxist-Leninist principles to contemporary Chinese society and politics under Xi Jinping's leadership.

Furthermore, In "Two faces of ideology: Double-edged functions of ideology in the reform discourse under Xi Jinping", the dual nature of ideology in Xi Jinping's reform discourse is analyzed, showcasing how Xi Jinping's ideological strategies serve both as a tool for reform and as a means to consolidate power, often leading to conflicting outcomes. This would be analyzed through the reactions of the public in Chapter Three.⁵⁴

Cultural Revivalism and Traditionalism

An important document was passed on August 8, 1966, on the Eleventh Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the CCP during the opening phase of the Cultural Revolution, and it deserves special attention. This document, especially its first line, emphasized the political significance of dismantling the "Four Olds": old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. It stated that "Although the bourgeoisie has been overthrown, they are still trying to use the old ideas, culture, customs, and habits of the exploiting classes to corrupt the masses, capture their hearts, and achieve their goal of restoration. The proletariat, on the contrary, must meet head-on every challenge of the bourgeoisie in the realm of ideology and use its new ideas, culture, customs, and habits to transform the entire spiritual outlook of society." This content was widely publicized, with the mouthpiece "People's Daily" publishing the "Sixteen Points" in full on August 9, and the "Liberation Army Daily" echoing similar content in its editorial on August 12, emphasizing the need to completely eradicate all old thoughts, culture, customs,

⁵⁴ Yayoi Kato, "Two Faces of Ideology: Double-Edged Functions of Ideology in the Reform Discourse Under Xi Jinping," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 49, no. 2 (2020): 137–61.

and habits of the exploiting classes.⁵⁵

However, Xi Jinping differs from Mao Zedong's stance on abandoning the "Four Olds." On June 1 and 2, 2023, Xi Jinping's visit to the National Library of China and the Chinese Academy of History, followed by his participation in a symposium on cultural heritage and development, signaled his continued emphasis on cultural and ideological matters. The importance of this event is proved by the attendance of prominent figures in the party, such as Cai Qi, who is the Director of the General Office of the CCP, the Minister of the Central Propaganda Department, the Vice Chairman of the National People's Congress, a State Councilor in charge of culture and education, and the Foreign Minister. Additionally, members of the Central Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideological Work, heads of relevant central and state organs, leaders of various units within the central propaganda and cultural system, and representatives of experts and scholars were present.⁵⁶ This level of representation at the symposium demonstrates the central status of cultural and ideological work in Xi Jinping's government.

During this symposium on cultural heritage and development, Xi Jinping emphasized two main themes: (1) Chinese civilization has five prominent characteristics, namely its remarkable continuity, innovation, unity, inclusiveness, and peaceful nature; (2) the "two combines," which involve integrating the basic principles of Marxism with China's specific realities and excellent traditional culture.⁵⁷

This approach marks a significant departure from Mao Zedong's stance during the Cultural Revolution, which advocated for the destruction of the "Four Olds" and the overthrow of traditional Chinese culture. Mao's confidence in the legitimacy of Marxist

⁵⁵ Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); 卜伟华, 《「砸烂旧世界」》, 196–99.

⁵⁶ Xi Jinping, "Speech at the Meeting on Cultural Inheritance and Development," *Qiushi*, November 14, 2023, https://en.qstheory.cn/2023-11/14/c_937963.htm.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

theory of class struggle was evident. However, as the legitimacy of Marxism increasingly comes under scrutiny, Xi Jinping has shifted towards a revival of traditional culture, proposing "cultural confidence" and expanding the original "three confidences" to "four." His remarks at the symposium signify a further move to reorient the CCP's ideology from Marxism towards traditional Chinese culture, transforming the Party into one that is rooted in and upholds Chinese traditional values. However, this does not imply that Xi is abandoning Marxism. He continues to uphold Marxism as the Party's ideological foundation, reinforcing its legitimacy. What Xi is undertaking now is the introduction of an additional source of legitimacy for the CCP, namely the excellent traditional Chinese culture, positioning his own thoughts as a product of the "combination" of these two ideologies.

Additionally, alongside bolstering the ideological promotion of traditional culture domestically, Xi Jinping has established Confucius Institutes worldwide⁵⁸. Confucius, a representative figure of traditional Confucian thought in China, plays a significant role in Xi's extensive promotion, hinting at a revival of traditional Chinese thought and culture. Notably, he advocates for Confucian culture, which promotes a hierarchical society and emphasizes a monarch-subject relationship akin to that of father and son, reflecting strict social stratification. This aligns closely with Xi Jinping's paternalistic and authoritarian governance philosophy. Since his rise to power, Xi has strengthened and consolidated his authority by diminishing the power of other leadership positions and asserting his "core" status, with others expected to revere him and not dissent. Influenced by street propaganda, Xi believes in the rationality and correctness of his policies, convinced that China's current achievements would not have been attainable

⁵⁸ Pratik Jakhar, "Confucius Institutes: The growth of China's controversial cultural branch," BBC News, September 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49511231>.

without his leadership. Whether it's anti-corruption campaigns or the zero-COVID policy, China's extensive external propaganda continually affirms the correctness of Xi's leadership.

In many street propaganda banners, we can observe the use of traditional folk culture elements, such as paper-cutting, as the background for the banners. For instance, in the illustration related to the "24-Character Core Values" banner, there is an image of an infant dressed in traditional Chinese attire, positioned centrally in the frame, surrounded by traditional Chinese toys. This incorporation of cultural imagery serves to connect the contemporary political message with deeply rooted cultural and historical elements, thereby resonating more profoundly with the public.



The Promotion of Nationalism and Patriotism

Mao Zedong emphasized the unity of the global proletariat and the notion that the working class has no nation, diverging significantly from Xi Jinping's emphasis on nationalism. Mao focused more on internationalism and the spirit of Marx, supporting global revolution.⁶⁰ In contrast, Xi Jinping emphasizes patriotism, closely aligning it with his ideological narrative. However, after three years of the pandemic, Xi Jinping's ideology faces a significant crisis of trust.

The pandemic period has exposed vulnerabilities in the narrative of infallibility and

⁵⁹ <https://www.chinapropaganda.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/7-copy.jpeg>

⁶⁰ Lovell, *Maoism*; Michael Latham, "The Cold War in the Third World, 1963–1975," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 258–80.

absolute authority that Xi's regime has sought to project. The stringent measures and their social and economic repercussions have led to public discontent and skepticism towards the government's handling of the crisis. This shift in public sentiment challenges the core of Xi's ideological stance, which heavily relies on the narrative of a strong, capable leadership steering the nation towards prosperity and global prominence.⁶¹

In the 24-character core values of China, "patriotism" is placed foremost at the individual level. The "Wolf Warrior" spirit, a product of heightened patriotism, reflects this emphasis. The push for cultural revival is underpinned by the logic that, as a Chinese person, one must love one's country and understand its history. This narrative suggests that without such love, China could fall prey to Western capitalist powers. Advocating for national interests is tied to the belief that the country's prosperity is inextricably linked to the Party's leadership. And who leads the Party? Its leader. Thus, loving the country equates to loving the Party, and loving the Party equates to loving its leader, Xi Jinping. Loyalty must be absolute.

Xi Jinping's stance on Taiwan is also seen in this light. In authoritarian regimes, leaders often establish their prestige through military achievements and territorial expansion. Deng Xiaoping initiated the Sino-Vietnamese War shortly after coming to power; Jiang Zemin is associated with Hong Kong's return to China, and Hu Jintao is associated with Macau's return. Similarly, Xi Jinping seeks a significant achievement – the unification of Taiwan with the mainland. This act is portrayed as a patriotic endeavor, a manifestation of loyalty to the Party, and by extension, to Xi as the great leader. The narrative suggests that reclaiming Taiwan is not just a strategic move but also a means

⁶¹ Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 3–6.

to bolster Xi's prestige and validate his leadership.⁶²



Figure 4 “Patriotism is a part of faith.” Taken by an anonymous contributor on January 11, 2023, at the Muslim Hero Tomb in Guangzhou city’s Yuexiu district.⁶³

The photograph of the banner, taken on a Muslim building in Guangzhou, bears the message “Patriotism is a part of faith.” In the Chinese context, this banner implies that even for those who seek faith, their primary allegiance should not be to a religion, but to the state led by the CCP.

In another image, a street banner in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province, located at the northeastern extremity of China, explicitly instructs people to harbor love and allegiance towards the CCP. The banner's message educates people that, even though they are in the far north of China, their hearts should remain loyal to the CCP, which is centralized in Beijing. It urges the study of the contents released during the Party's 20th

⁶² Andrew Scobell, “Half-Hearted Coercive Diplomacy: China’s 1979 Attack on Vietnam,” in *China’s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 119–43; Richard C. Bush, “What Xi Jinping said about Taiwan at the 19th Party Congress,” Brookings Institution, October 19, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-xi-jinping-said-about-taiwan-at-the-19th-party-congress/>; Kyle Amonson and Dane Egli, “The Ambitious Dragon: Beijing’s Calculus for Invading Taiwan by 2030,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 3 (March–April 2023): 37–53.

⁶³ <https://www.chinapropaganda.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/22-copy.jpg>

National Congress and calls for unity under the Party's charter to strive for a China led by the CCP. This emphasizes the absolute loyalty of every individual to the Party and the expectation that they contribute to the CCP's cause.



Figure 5 "Living in the North, but with a heart yearning for the Party Central Committee." Taken in Harbin, Heilongjiang province in July 2023 by an anonymous contributor.⁶⁴

2.3 The Core Socialist Values as Pillars of Xi Jinping's Ideological Edifice

The "Twenty-Four Character Core Values" stands as the central representation of Xi Jinping's ideological framework. Although these twenty-four words are conceptually vague and lack clear definitions or operational guidelines, Xi Jinping has his own focal points within this framework, primarily centered on the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Patriotism is a key concept here, upon which he seeks to build "Xi Jinping Thought." This ideology is propagated and reinforced through a plethora of street slogans.

⁶⁴ <https://www.chinapropaganda.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/1-copy.jpg>

In contrast to Western democratic nations, where commercial advertising dominates public spaces, socialist countries like China replace this commercial presence with extensive political propaganda. In China, the streets are not inundated with commercial messages but rather with political slogans that serve to embed the government's ideology into the daily lives of its citizens. This approach reflects a fundamental difference in how public spaces are utilized for messaging and the kind of narratives that are prioritized in different political systems.

Based on Louis Althusser's understanding of the essence of ideology, it becomes clear that ideology serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it ensures the subjugation of individuals, aligning their beliefs and behaviors with the dominant norms and values. On the other hand, it perpetuates and reinforces the entire society, thereby regenerating the existing social structures and power dynamics.⁶⁵

In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Louis Althusser argues that ideology is internalized through means such as education, rendering individuals subjects with opinions and the capacity to act. However, the true subject is the ideology itself, because it always dominates people's concepts. Ideology constructs individuals into subjects, which is a mirror structure. This type of mirror replication is constituted by ideology, ensuring the functional role of ideology.⁶⁶

Xi Jinping's "Core Values" are essentially ideological tools constructed by the CCP to guide public thought and perception, aligning them with the Party's objectives and strategies. This alignment is crucial for ensuring the CCP's continued dominance and maintaining a specific power structure and set of interests. The values emphasized, such as patriotism and the rule of law, are not universal concepts but are tailored to fit the

⁶⁵ Ben Brewster and Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

social and cultural context under CCP leadership in China. The aim is to create an environment where the majority of the populace voluntarily accepts and adheres to the Party's leadership and policy direction.

Within this ideological framework, a series of values is labeled as "core," resulting in a passive mode of thinking. This approach discourages independent thought and questioning among the general populace, reducing their inclination to explore alternative values or perspectives. It also effectively marginalizes and silences dissenting voices, further strengthening the government's control over social thought and public discourse. This strategy of ideological shaping not only consolidates the CCP's power but also limits the scope of public debate and critical thinking within Chinese society.

Understanding Xi Jinping's core ideological propaganda provides insights into his power, will, and vision for an ideal China. Within the framework of the "Twenty-Four Character Core Values," Xi cannot disseminate all his political speeches or expect everyone to read lengthy discourses. Instead, he opts for catchy, familiar phrases that resonate with the public and are aesthetically pleasing (often using a red background, a color deeply associated with Chinese culture and the Communist Party). These twenty-four words concisely convey his core principles and attitude towards power.

The Communist Party itself is rooted in a tradition of red, symbolizing its legitimacy and commitment to the ideals of socialism. The unshakeable nature of the Party's red politics is a key element of its identity. Utilizing the unique pictographic nature of Chinese characters, these words are combined with imagery and pervasively propagated across all social spaces. This approach not only reinforces the Party's messages but also embeds them into the daily lives of the people, ensuring a constant presence and reminder of the Party's guiding principles and Xi Jinping's vision for the

nation.

The propaganda surrounding the "Twenty-Four Character Core Values" extends beyond China's borders through what is often referred to as "external propaganda" or "public diplomacy." This effort aims to shape the Western world's perception of China as a strong socialist democracy. By promoting the values of "prosperity," "democracy," "civility," and "harmony" outlined in the Core Values, and aligning them with the government's actions during the pandemic, such as the "zero-COVID policy," China presents a carefully curated image. Official reports of low death rates during the pandemic, coupled with narratives of rapid urban development, convenient railway transportation, and steady economic growth, create an impression of a thriving nation.⁶⁷

This portrayal suggests to some in the Western audience that the development path of the CCP is more beneficial for societal progress. It fosters the illusion that socialism is conducive to national prosperity and success. Consequently, this narrative also lays the groundwork for affirming Xi Jinping's leadership as the correct path for China. It's a strategic effort to position the CCP's approach as not only successful within China but also as a good model for other countries to consider. This aspect of China's external propaganda plays a crucial role in shaping international perceptions of the country's political and economic systems.

⁶⁷ Alison Hsiao and Olivia Yang, "China's Great Propaganda Campaign During the COVID-19 Pandemic," Taiwan Foundation for Democracy; Nadège Rolland, "China's Pandemic Power Play," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 28–42.



Figure 6 A poster reminding citizens to be patriotic — one of China's 12 "core socialist values." Taken by an anonymous contributor in Tongliao, Inner Mongolia on December 23, 2020.⁶⁸

This photograph, taken on December 23, 2020, in Tongliao, Inner Mongolia, according to the description on the China Propaganda website, features a striking red banner in the middle of the picture. The design of the banner is simple, featuring no picture on the side and only basic elaborations surrounding the text for decoration. The most prominent feature of this banner is the red word "爱国" (patriotism).

According to Louis Althusser's interpretation of ideology, it serves as a form of re-education for the masses. The intention behind the prominent display of the word "patriotism" on this large street banner is to convey to everyone that patriotism is the correct sentiment for all. In this context, patriotism is equated with love for the government and the Party. However, "patriotism" does not necessarily equate to love for the state managing the country. Patriotism is about loving the people of the country.

⁶⁸ <https://www.chinapropaganda.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2-copy.jpg>

Because China is under a one-party system, the CCP is synonymous with the governing body and, in a sense, represents the "people" of the nation. However, the state, as a political entity, cannot be equated with the "nation" itself, nor can it represent every individual within the country.

This explanation is crucial in understanding the use of the term "patriotism" in Chinese propaganda. While the CCP seeks to associate the concept of patriotism with support for its governance, the concept of patriotism inherently extends beyond the confines of any single political entity. It encompasses a broader love and loyalty to the nation and its people, transcending the boundaries of government and party politics.

In the "Twenty-Four Character Core Values," terms like "freedom," "democracy," and "equality" are paradoxically listed as sensitive words by internet censorship authorities. Despite the Chinese government's external propaganda claiming China to be a democracy under Communist Party leadership, numerous incidents of social injustice, the Xinjiang concentration camps, and the disregard for the freedom and public good under the "Zero Policy" during COVID have been subjects of international criticism and concern.

This contradiction between the proclaimed values and the reality of their implementation highlights a significant gap in the Chinese government's ideological narrative. While the government promotes values such as democracy and freedom, the practical application and public perception of these values often diverge from the official rhetoric. This discrepancy raises questions about the authenticity and effectiveness of the government's ideological campaign, particularly in terms of aligning public sentiment with the stated core values. The true public reaction to this mainstream propaganda is illustrated through real cases in Chapter Three.

2.4 The Cult of Personality in Xi Jinping's Ideological Narrative

It is first necessary to examine the definition of personal cult before further examining the propaganda in street banners that shapes the cult of personality of Xi Jinping himself. Personal cult is an ideology, so we can start by looking for the root of the problem from this perspective. Until now, the CCP has not believed that the emergence of a personal cult is a fault originating from the communist theoretical system. The CCP's Constitution and Party Charter explicitly state that Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought are the guiding ideologies of China and the CCP.⁶⁹ However, this theoretical system itself is full of contradictions regarding the issue of personal cult, and the occurrence of this kind of personal worship is rooted in this. Marx and Engels never held power, so they did not have much authoritative discourse on this issue, which mainly occurs after the Communist Party comes to power.

However, Engels' discourse on the worship of revolutionary authority was actually the start of a personal cult tradition in communist society, as it involved the worship of violence and power.⁷⁰ Lenin was the first Communist Party leader to hold power for several years. He made a famous statement about the relationship between leaders, the party, classes, and the masses during his lifetime, which led to Engels' original general worship of revolution and a shift in power towards the worship of individual leaders.⁷¹ Lenin proposed the ruling model of "one-party dictatorship plus leader's dictatorship," which is now evident in Xi Jinping's leadership. Of course, the "leader" in Lenin's writings still refers to a group of people (members of the Politburo), but

⁶⁹ "Full text of resolution on amendment to CPC Constitution," Xinhua, October 24, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/24/c_136702726.htm.

⁷⁰ Friedrich Engels, "On Authority," in *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 3 (People's Publishing House, 1995), 224-27.

⁷¹ Vladimir Lenin, "Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder," in *Lenin's Selected Works*, vol. 4 (People's Publishing House, 1995), 197.

Mao Zedong explicitly interpreted the relationship among this group of people: "A class must worship the class leader; it's essential".⁷² Therefore, under the ideology of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, there is often a natural tendency towards one-man rule and the cult of personality of "a leader."

After having undergone thousands of years of imperial rule, Chinese society was constructed on the concept of "divine right" of emperors, where legitimacy and lifelong governance were guaranteed through hereditary succession.⁷³ However, leaders like Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping do not have this hereditary assurance from blood. Ironically, the Marxism-Leninism they adhere to, at least in rhetoric and institutional structure, opposes monarchical succession and lifelong rule.

Consequently, dictators like Mao and Xi, who desire lifelong governance, have had to resort to cultivating personal cults to bypass systemic intermediaries, thereby establishing direct loyalty between the leader and the masses. Mao Zedong, with his charismatic appeal, built the Cultural Revolution and successfully allied directly with the masses, calling for a rebellion against the bureaucratic system.⁷⁴ In contrast, Xi Jinping lacks Mao's charismatic personality and appears less confident in lifelong governance, making it more necessary for him to construct various myths surrounding his personal image to support his continued rule. In this context, the personal cults of dictators serve as protective charms for their aspirations of lifelong governance.

⁷² Mao Zedong, "Speech at the Chengdu Conference" (March 10, 1958), in Song Yongyi, ed., *The Database of China's Cultural Revolution* (online ed.), Center for the Study of China, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2022.

⁷³ 林毓生, 《中國意識的危機: 五四時期激烈的反傳統主義》(臺北: 聯經出版公司, 2020), 29–35. Lin, Yü-sheng. *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Anti-traditionalism in the May Fourth Era*. Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2020, pp. 29–35.

⁷⁴ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 205.



Figure 7 A portrait of Mao Zedong is hanging on the wall of a farmer's home.⁷⁵

Unlike their imperial predecessors, Mao and Xi have had to navigate a political landscape that officially opposes traditional forms of monarchical rule, using personal cults and myth-making as strategic adaptations to these constraints. This approach highlights the complex interplay between historical legacies, ideological principles, and contemporary political ambitions in China's governance.

We will provide examples and explore how Xi Jinping has utilized street banners to cultivate personal worship, illustrating this phenomenon through specific examples of banners that follow. These examples will help elucidate the underlying meanings and intentions behind these banners.

Street banners in China, particularly under the leadership of Xi Jinping, have become a significant tool for disseminating political messages and shaping public perception. These banners often carry meanings that not only promote state policies and

⁷⁵ <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/tp/hd2011/2011/11-02/72471.shtml>

ideologies but also serve to elevate Xi Jinping's personal stature and authority within the political landscape. By analyzing specific slogans used in these banners, we can gain insights into the strategies employed to build a cult of personality around Xi Jinping. These banners are carefully crafted to resonate with the public, embedding Xi's vision and leadership style into the collective consciousness of Chinese society.

For instance, banners that emphasize national rejuvenation, the Chinese Dream, or the Belt and Road Initiative are not just policy statements but also subtle endorsements of Xi Jinping's leadership. They link national aspirations and achievements directly to Xi's dream and goals, thereby reinforcing his status as an indispensable leader.

Xi Jinping has employed modern printing techniques in creating propaganda through street banners, resulting in a proliferation of banners in public spaces. This visual maximization creates an omnipresent and somewhat oppressive atmosphere, compelling people to take notice and internalize the banners as a normal part of their environment. The banners, catchy and easy to memorize, gradually influence the mindset of every citizen. This shaping of public consciousness represents the ideological system Xi Jinping seeks to establish, simplifying the ideology centered around himself or a small collective into a single concept: the Chinese Dream.

The Chinese Dream, as conceptualized by Xi Jinping, is in fact his personal vision, setting a standard that defines what the Chinese Dream should be. It is presented as "mine" – Xi Jinping's vision of the Chinese Dream, which is also projected as the dream of every Chinese citizen. This constructs a form of authoritarianism characterized by Xi Jinping's leadership, where the concept of Xi Jinping Thought emerges through such linguistic construction. This is something that Mao Zedong lacked in his propaganda.

Xi Jinping's approach to using street banners goes beyond mere propaganda; it's a strategic effort to embed his personal vision into the national psyche. By defining the Chinese Dream in his political terms, Xi Jinping not only affirms his authority but also seeks to unite the nation's aspirations with his leadership. This method of ideological propagation, unique to Xi Jinping's rule, distinguishes it from previous leadership styles in China and highlights the progressive nature of political communication, as well as the strengthening of control in the country under Xi Jinping's leadership.

Xi Jinping's background is rooted in the Red Guards. The Red Guards are known for their extreme worship of Mao Zedong and his era (especially during the Cultural Revolution), who equated the cult of individuals with the following to the entire party and the nation. Xi Jinping grew up under the profound influence of Mao's ideology, which has shaped his perspectives and policy-making as a leader. China is a centralized state, and as such, it places a special emphasis on collective will and collectivism. Xi is influenced by this idea, and his early experience as a Red Guard also shapes his affinity for a cult of heroic figures, a cult of violence, and an acceptance of violence as a political tool, as well as a preference for the color red, which symbolizes revolution and the tradition of communism. He also mentions loyalty to the Party, the unity, and the top leader.

The disturbing result of ideological propaganda is strikingly evident in the modern era, where young people wear Red Guard uniforms and reenact scenes from the Cultural Revolution.⁷⁶ This reflects the profound impact of ideological influence on the contemporary youth mindset. Xi Jinping's aspiration to return to the Mao era,

⁷⁶ Anne Yi, "Outcry as Chinese students recreate Red Guard persecution for yearbook photos," *South China Morning Post*, June 20, 2014, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1537089/outcry-chinese-students-recreate-red-guard-persecution-yearbook-photos>.

when the individual would be fully dominated by the Party, the people, and the military, positions him as the core leader. His words carry absolute command, achieving a level of individual control over the state and the thoughts of its citizens that only Mao had previously obtained. However, Xi's approaches differ significantly from those of Mao.

For example, Mao embraced a form of worldism, but Xi places a stronger emphasis on his central role in the party and leadership. He seeks to attain the nationwide status that Mao once held. Notably, Mao initially did not prioritize patriotism and did not emphasize the Chinese Dream or the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. He focused more on global communism and a vision of a world revolution that included the liberation of all humanity, encompassing Asia, Africa, and Latin America.⁷⁷

Xi Jinping, in contrast, emphasizes nationalistic themes like the Chinese Dream and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. His focus is more inward and centered on China's rise under his leadership, unlike Mao's broader global perspective. This shift highlights a significant transformation in the ideological narrative of Chinese leadership, from Mao's emphasis on global communism to Xi's focus on national rejuvenation (which is a tactic to maintain the Party's central control) and the consolidation of his personal power within the Party and the country.⁷⁸

Xi wants to show the world the way forward, and China is winning the race by fighting and competing with the West. The banner's significance as a materially visible sound is defined by what its presence means, where and how it spreads, and what kind of claim it makes in each era. The significance is to reveal what it means for the banner to exist in a totalitarian state, how it works, and what it does to

⁷⁷ Lovell, *Maoism*; Latham, "The Cold War in the Third World," 258–80.

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

complement Xi Jinping's own centralization of power, all of which must be analyzed in this section through specific banners, and to lay the groundwork for the next chapter's analysis of the revolt of Xi Jinping's personal centralization of power through the social movements and practices that against him. Through this analysis, we aim to reveal the intricate ways in which political messaging is used to shape public opinion and maintain the authority of the leadership. One of the most obvious signs of Xi Jinping's personal cult is that his name appears most frequently in public media among the five top Chinese leaders.⁷⁹

Xi Jinping's status as "the core"

In 2016, at the 18th Central Committee's 6th Plenary Session of the Communist Party of China, the term "core" resurfaced as a political concept to consolidate Xi Jinping's position. This term had been dormant for over a decade. The following year, at the 19th National Congress, Xi Jinping was confirmed once again as the "core" by the amendment to the CPC Constitution, in which the Party must "firmly uphold the authority and centralized, unified leadership of the Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core".⁸⁰ The term "core" was first used in 1989, following the Tiananmen Square crackdown, when Deng Xiaoping appointed Jiang Zemin as the top leader of the CCP and directly conferred upon him the title of "core." In contrast, Hu Jintao, who became General Secretary in 2002, was never referred to as the "core".⁸¹ During his tenure, the CCP's political decision-making increasingly shifted towards collective leadership by the Politburo Standing Committee, known as "Nine

⁷⁹ David Bandurski, "Has Xi Jinping Gotten His Crown?," China Media Project, March 19, 2017, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2017/03/19/xi-jinping-gotten-crown/>; David Bandurski, "The man who controls the headlines," China Media Project, December 4, 2015, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2015/12/04/the-man-in-the-headlines/>.

⁸⁰ "Full text of resolution on amendment to CPC Constitution."

⁸¹ Joseph Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen: From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 169.

Dragons managing the water" in a Chinese proverb. The official narrative was adjusted to "the Party Central Committee with Comrade Hu Jintao as General Secretary."⁸²

However, when Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, he quickly departed from this model of collective leadership. Instead, he established multiple leadership groups within the Party and positioned himself as their leader. These small groups gradually gained control over decision-making power in areas such as the economy and initiated a widespread anti-corruption campaign, which resulted in the downfall of hundreds of high-ranking officials at the vice-ministerial level and above. Although this campaign was widely popular among the public, some scholars and observers have raised concerns about its use as a tool for eliminating political rivals for Xi's personal use. Senior officials and state media (mouthpieces) also emphasized the need to uphold the authority of the Party Central Committee and warned against "improper discussion of the Central Committee" within the Party.⁸³

According to data from the People's Daily's image and text database, the frequency of the terms "Xi Jinping" and "core" in the People's Daily has increased significantly from 2012 to 2020.⁸⁴ The establishment of Xi Jinping's "core position" indirectly confirms China's shift from collective leadership back to a more one-man leadership system. This shift, solidified through rhetoric, is moving towards a trend of a personal cult of Xi Jinping.

The picture below illustrates the frequency of "Xi Jinping" and "the core" appearing

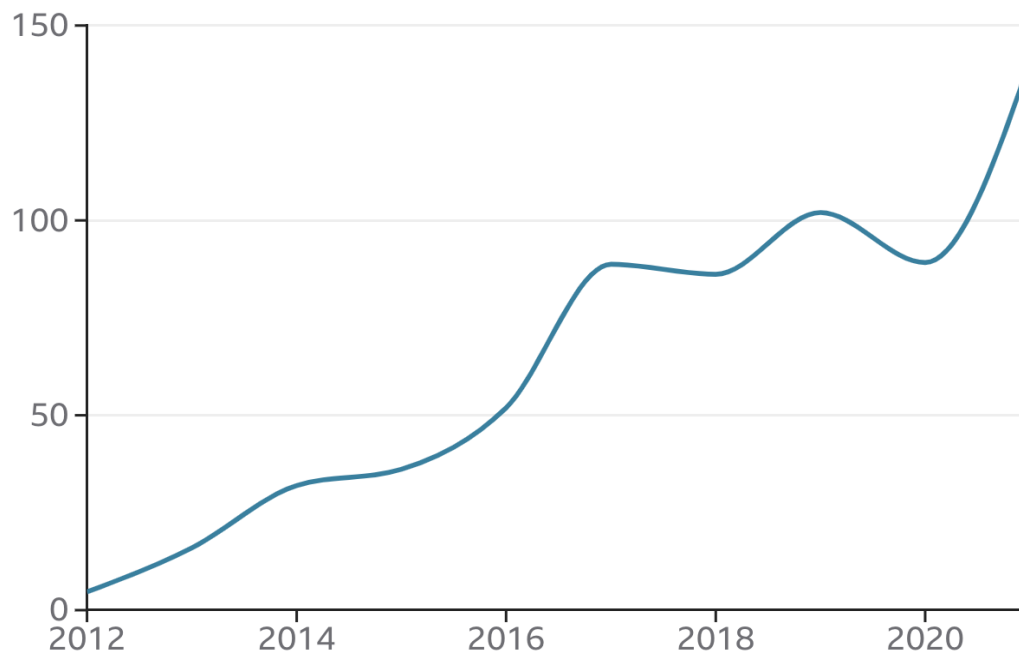
⁸² "Leadership Core (领导核心)," China Open Source Observatory, accessed September 5, 2025, <https://chinaopensourceobservatory.org/glossary/leadership-core>.

⁸³ Minxin Pei, "From Purge to Control: A Recent Pivot in Xi Jinping's Anti-Corruption Crackdown," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 83 (Spring 2025).

⁸⁴ "中共二十大：党报热词揭示“习时代”的中国变化," BBC News 中文, October 12, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-63211713>; Alex Colville, "Summer Break, Power Intact," China Media Project, August 29, 2025, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2025/08/29/summer-break-power-intact/>.

in People's Daily (the largest and most authoritative mouthpiece of the CCP) during the past decades, between 2012, when Xi Jinping first came to power, and 2022.

過去十年「習近平」和「核心」在《人民日報》出現頻率 縱軸為每年每千篇文章出現比率



備註：包括同時提及「習近平」與「核心」的文章

來源：《人民日報》圖文數據庫

B B C

Figure 8 Note: Vertical axis shows the frequency of the two keywords “Xi Jinping” and “core” occurrence per 1,000 articles per year, BBC.⁸⁵

On the street, banners featuring these two keywords have also appeared, along with the following. For example, in the following picture, which was shot in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province. The banner displays the contents as follows: “Let us rally more closely around the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core and strive to win a new victory by comprehensively building a great modern socialist country.”

⁸⁵ “中共二十大：党报热词揭示“习时代”的中国变化。” “The 20th CCP National Congress: Party-run newspapers’ buzzwords reveal the transformations of China in the ‘Xi era’.”

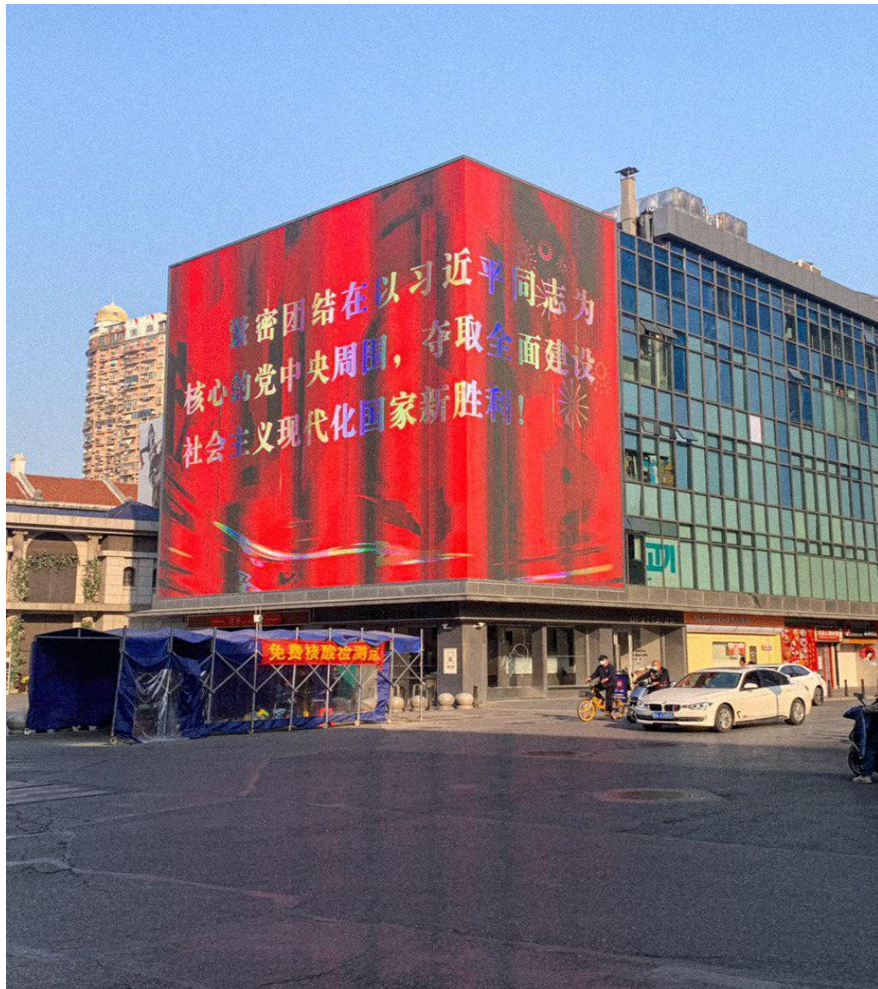


Figure 9 Source.⁸⁶

In the picture, the original wall turns out to be a large LED billboard that occupies almost the entire building. It still uses the red color as its background, signifying the red tradition and the legitimacy of the CCP. Additionally, it signifies the authority of Xi Jinping's core status within the Party. The large scale of the billboard demonstrates the party's undeniable authority, indicating that every public space, whether private or commercial, is primarily reserved for official use. Otherwise, it would be seen as a sign of noncooperation with the government.

Similar content of banners could also be seen in a picture taken in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province. The banner is hung under the bridge on a highway. It is said, "Let us rally more closely around the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its

⁸⁶ <https://www.chinapropaganda.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/16-copy.jpg>

core”. The banner also features a red background to lend legitimacy to the content’s authority. A somewhat ironic aspect is that it is used as a directional sign for roads under the actual direction of the highway, but it is not actually a guiding sign. It implies that following Xi Jinping as the core is essential, portraying him as a guide who leads the people in the right direction without question.



Figure 10 Source.⁸⁷

Chinese Dream

Another typical banner to illustrate Xi Jinping’s personal cult is the “Chinese Dream”. Here is an example of a street banner with “Chinese dream” taken in a Jino ethnic minority village near Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, in July 2021.

⁸⁷ <https://www.chinapropaganda.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/11-copy.jpg>



Figure 11 Always follow the Party, jointly build the Chinese dream." Taken by an anonymous contributor in a Jino ethnic minority village near Xishuangbanna, Yunnan in July 2021.⁸⁸

The slogan "永远跟党走" (Forever follow the Party) prominently emphasizes that everyone should follow the CCP as the guiding force, reflecting the Party's longstanding narrative of its ideological correctness. The underlying message of this phrase also indicates to the masses the necessity of absolute loyalty to the Party. However, considering the Party as a collective entity comprising different individuals, the call for unwavering loyalty essentially translates to absolute loyalty to the leader of this collective – in this case, Xi Jinping.

This banner subtly conveys that following Xi Jinping's leadership is synonymous with pursuing the "Chinese Dream." It positions Xi as the embodiment of the Party's will and direction, suggesting that his guidance is integral to the realization of national aspirations. This intertwining of individual leadership with collective ideology is a strategic move to consolidate power and reinforce the narrative that the Party's, and by extension Xi's, leadership is essential for China's progress and success.

⁸⁸ <https://www.chinapropaganda.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/5-copy-4.jpeg>

In the banners, the concept of the "Chinese Dream" is somewhat ambiguous and lacks a clear definition. This contrasts with the "American Dream," which is broadly understood as an open and diverse aspiration for everyone, not attached to a particular political party. The American Dream brings the idea of personal achievement and success, accessible to anyone, including immigrants who come to the United States with their own dreams and motivations.

On the contrary, Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" is intertwined with themes of nationalism and patriotism, and it comes with specific conditions and expectations given by the Party. The dream, as envisioned by Xi, is not just a personal aspiration but a collective goal shaped by the values and objectives of the CCP. It is a prescribed vision of prosperity and national rejuvenation that aligns with the Party's agenda. Furthermore, the "Chinese Dream" is presented within a context where there are significant restrictions on foreigners living in China, reflecting a more insular and controlled interpretation of national aspirations. This approach suggests that the "Chinese Dream" is not just about individual or collective success but is also about fulfilling a specific vision of China's future as determined by its current leadership. In this way, the "Chinese Dream" becomes synonymous with Xi Jinping's vision for China, rather than a broad, inclusive concept that accommodates diverse individual aspirations.

Both the banners that contain "以习近平为核心" (surround Xi Jinping as the core) and "中国梦" (Chinese Dream) ultimately serve the purpose of cultivating personal worship of Xi Jinping. Political cults of personality are essentially a form of power worship.⁸⁹ Given that the object of worship seeks to "consolidate and strengthen" its

⁸⁹ Brian Hart, "Creating the Cult of Xi Jinping: The Chinese Dream as a Leader Symbol," *Cornell International Affairs Review* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2016).

rule through all means, the aim is not merely to achieve short-term legitimacy but to pursue long-term, even lifelong, legitimacy and the possibility of governance.

This pursuit of a cult of personality around Xi Jinping is a strategic move to entrench his power and authority within the Chinese political system. It goes beyond traditional political leadership and enters the realm of personal devotion, where the leader's vision, decisions, and even personal attributes are elevated to an almost unassailable status. This strategy is not just about maintaining current power, but also about ensuring its continuity and long-term, unquestioned acceptance. The use of banners and propaganda in this context serves as a tool to deeply embed these notions in the public consciousness, thereby securing Xi Jinping's position not just as a political leader but as an almost irreplaceable figure in contemporary Chinese politics.

The transition from factionalism to outright suppression of dissent is a notable trend in the history of communist movements globally. Personal cults have been a key political tool for communist leaders engaged in power struggles. The Soviet Union's history offers an example. Following Lenin's death, Trotsky was highly esteemed within the party. Stalin, to counter Trotsky, initiated an extensive "Lenin cult" and portrayed himself as Lenin's closest comrade and disciple. After overthrowing Trotsky, Stalin openly promoted the "Stalin cult" and used it to eliminate party opposition, such as Bukharin and Zinoviev, ultimately securing absolute power and deifying himself as the nation's greatest leader and genius.⁹⁰

Mao Zedong has similar approaches. To purge leaders like Liu Shaoqi, who had differing views during the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent famine, Mao encouraged and directed figures like Lin Biao to promote his cult of personality from

⁹⁰ Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin, Vol. 2: Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017).

the military to the broader society. As Mao's cult gained momentum, he launched the Cultural Revolution.⁹¹

Xi Jinping has followed in the footsteps of these previous experiences. He rose to power with the support of Hu Jintao's "Youth League faction" and used an anti-corruption campaign to eliminate his potential Party enemies and strengthen his own cult of personality. After consolidating power at the 20th Party Congress, he quickly purged Hu Jintao and all representatives of the "Youth League faction."⁹²

Additionally, Xi has often postured aggressively towards Taiwan, signaling a willingness to use military force, partly as a means to enhance his own stature and accomplishments.⁹³

This pattern of using cults of personality as a political strategy not only consolidates power but also eliminates internal opposition, often leading to an unchallenged and absolute form of governance. In the case of Xi Jinping, this approach has been instrumental in establishing his dominance within the Chinese political landscape. Historical patterns and the cultivation of personal cults, as evident in Xi Jinping's street banners, reveal that such cults often serve as tools for dictators to deceive and manipulate the populace for their own ambitions. Mao Zedong aspired to be a "Great Leader" in comparison with the Soviet Union in the international communist movement, while Xi Jinping aims to be the "People's Leader" who overturns the global order of freedom. Their cultivation of personal cults was a strategy to deceive and exploit the people in order to fulfill their personal ambitions. Mao's Cultural Revolution brought a nationwide catastrophe to China, causing millions of innocent

⁹¹ 余汝信,《风暴历程——文革中的人民解放军(上)》(Hong Kong: New Century Press, 2021), 44–53.

⁹² "Hu Jintao escorted out of party congress," Reuters, October 22, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/former-chinese-president-hu-jintao-escorted-out-party-congress-2022-10-22/>.

⁹³ Bush, "What Xi Jinping said about Taiwan"; Amonson and Egli, "The Ambitious Dragon."

deaths, near economic collapse, and almost dragging the country into nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Xi Jinping, having already implemented a comprehensive lockdown of Chinese society under the guise of pandemic control, raises concerns about whether he will further utilize various political movements or even stimulate war to manufacture and solidify his personal ambitions. This pattern of behavior warrants vigilance from the international community. The use of personal cults in this context is not just about maintaining power; it's about expanding it in ways that can have profound and potentially devastating impacts both domestically and globally. The lessons of history underscore the importance of scrutinizing such developments and understanding the underlying motivations and potential consequences of these actions.

Chapter 3: Weapons of the Weak: The Counter-Narrative to Official Ideology from Grassroots

After the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, as a result of the Chinese government's global propaganda efforts and stringent domestic surveillance, the world seldom saw or heard about mass protests in China. The only significant and sustained protest in recent years occurred in Hong Kong, from 2019 to 2020. This widespread demonstration, characterized by substantial public participation, gradually faded from public attention due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹⁴ However, after three years of pandemic quarantine, several protests unexpectedly erupted in mainland China, sounding discordant notes against the CCP's dominant narrative.

On October 13, 2022, the Beijing Sitong Bridge protest—a solitary act—sparked public motivation for open expression. The subsequent Urumqi Fire in November, a tragedy attributed to Xi Jinping's strict 'zero-COVID' policy, left at least ten people dead and nine injured, according to official statistics. However, the government deliberately suppressed relevant reporting rather than admitting any policy shortcomings. This tragedy became the impetus for nationwide public mourning for the innocent lives lost, as well as protests against the zero-COVID policy and a broader backlash against Xi Jinping's administration.⁹⁵ The episode marked a turning point in public reaction to state policies by highlighting the human cost of strict enforcement and serving as a poignant symbol of resistance against government control and censorship.

This chapter focuses on the voices of resistance from specific individuals and

⁹⁴ For Chinese literature on the 2019 Hong Kong protests, see 馬嶽, 《反抗的共同體: 二〇一九香港反送中運動》(臺北: 左岸文化, 2020); for more comprehensive analyses in English, see Ho-fung Hung, *City on the Edge: Hong Kong under Chinese Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); and Ching Kwan Lee, *Forever Hong Kong: A Global City's Decolonization Struggle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025).

⁹⁵ Patricia M. Thornton, "The A4 Movement: Mapping its Background and Impact," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 75 (Spring 2023).

grassroots groups, using these cases to analyze the failure of Xi Jinping's ideological construction to resonate with ordinary people. Each section of the resistant voice builds upon the banners derived from the "Twenty-Four Character Core Values" discussed in Chapter Two. By examining the genuine reactions of the masses to these ideological constructs, which intended to create an ideal social blueprint. The chapter aims to demonstrate the hollowness and hypocrisy of these banners in the Xi Jinping era, thereby substantiating the failure of ideological construction.

Considering that ideological construction has always been a primary means for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to maintain its legitimacy and authority, and it is a key method for Xi Jinping to stabilize his personal rule, the grassroots cases evaluated in this chapter point to a crackdown of stability in Xi Jinping's governance. These social practices reveal a disconnect between the propagated ideals and the lived realities of the people, challenging the effectiveness of the CCP's ideological narrative under Xi Jinping's leadership. This phenomenon not only questions the authenticity of the ideological constructs but also suggests potential instability in Xi Jinping's rule, as grassroots responses fail to provide positive affirmation of the official narrative.

3.1 Beijing Sitong Bridge Protest

On 13 October 2022, the digital space was abuzz with images and videos of protest banners hung over Beijing's Sitong Bridge. The banners were emblazoned with bold declarations, one of which proclaimed: 'We want food, not PCR tests. We want freedom, not lockdowns. We want respect, not lies. We want reform, not a Cultural Revolution. We want a vote, not a leader. We want to be citizens, not slaves.' Another banner vehemently called for a boycott of schools, strikes, and the removal of Xi Jinping.⁹⁶ This act of defiance coincided with a critical juncture in Chinese politics,

⁹⁶ Helen Davidson, "'We All Saw It': Anti-Xi Jinping Protest Electrifies Chinese Internet," *The Guardian*, October

occurring just days before the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was scheduled to commence in Beijing on 16 October.⁹⁷



Figure 12 The large banner on Beijing Sitong Bridge. Source comes from the Internet.⁹⁸



Figure 13 A smoke rose up from the banners at Beijing Sitong Bridge, and many people gathered and took pictures. Source comes from the Internet.⁹⁹

14, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/14/we-all-saw-it-anti-xi-jinping-protest-electrifies-chinese-internet>.

⁹⁷ “20th CPC National Congress to be held from Oct 16 to 22: spokesperson,” October 15, 2022, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202210/15/content_WS634a8405c6d0a757729e137c.html.

⁹⁸ “Protester arrested after humiliating Xi Jinping in epic stunt ahead of Communist Party Congress,” October 15, 2022, <https://www.news.com.au/world/asia/protester-arrested-after-humiliating-xi-jinping-in-epic-stunt-ahead-of-communist-party-congress/news-story/18cabb51c23cd0e86de47d3bd7992e5d>.

⁹⁹ “Is the Communist Party's Old Guard Tiring of Xi's Iron Grip on China?,” Radio France Internationale, October 17, 2022, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20221017-is-the-communist-party-s-old-guard-tiring-of-xi-s-iron->

Although brief and initiated by a single individual, the Sitong Bridge protest stands out as the first overt act of public dissent against the Chinese government and its top leader since the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement.¹⁰⁰ In China, where open expression can be dangerous and official polls rarely reflect genuine sentiment due to strict censorship, individual acts like this reveal significant cracks in the state-enforced silence. These moments of dissent, though fleeting, signify emerging discontent and can inspire broader responses, demonstrating that authentic voices can still surface despite extensive control.

The emergence of even a solitary dissenting voice, even without broader mass engagement, effectively shatters the Chinese government's projected image of representing 1.4 billion citizens. Underlying this is the reality that each visible act of opposition, no matter how minor or seemingly inconsequential to the political power structure under Xi Jinping's administration, in fact shakes the ideological foundations of the Chinese government. If the Chinese state fails to convincingly assert that it embodies 'the entire people' and their collective will, it may inevitably be likened to regimes such as Russia and Iran—states reliant primarily on overt coercion for governance, suppressing discourse, and consequently unable to cloak themselves in the legitimacy once derived from the ideal of 'rule by the people.'

The developments following the Sitong Bridge Protest serve as a testament to the fragility of the ideological edifice constructed by Xi Jinping. The spontaneous expressions from various segments of society indicate that not all individuals are fully subsumed under the state's ideological narrative, with a discerning few identifying the

[grip-on-china-xi-jinping](#).

¹⁰⁰ Yvette Tan, "China protest: Mystery Beijing demonstrator sparks online hunt and tributes," BBC News, October 14, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-63252559>; "Xi's Grip May Have Tightened, but He Still Has China's Long History of Democratic Protest to Contend With," Human Rights Watch, October 26, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/26/xis-grip-may-have-tightened-he-still-has-chinas-long-history-democratic-protest>.

core issues at hand. While this incident did not evolve into a national protest movement comparable to the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, the continued occurrence of sporadic “public sentiment incidents”—even those not directly confronting the political authorities, like the Sitong Bridge protest—nonetheless represents a significant breach in the mythologized narrative of a unified people’s will.

The following sections of this chapter examine incidents such as the Halloween parade, notable for youth participation despite not directly opposing political authorities. The discussion also covers the White Paper Movement, which generated nationwide responses, and explores how the art community reflected on these events through performance. These examples indicate growing signs of ideological fracture within Xi Jinping’s administration, as some citizens are beginning to think critically and act accordingly.

3.2 Silent Resistance: White Paper Protest and Related Art Practice

White Paper Protest

In late November 2022, the spontaneous White Paper Revolution, sweeping across the nation, effectively terminated the Chinese government's pandemic management and 'dynamic zero-COVID' policy—a strategy that had persisted for three years.¹⁰¹ This uprising unfolded just a month after Xi Jinping secured his third consecutive term at the 20th National Congress, serving as a silent yet profound critique of his policies and a wholesale rejection of the newly established post-Congress regime. In the face of an ever-centralizing government under Xi Jinping, the White Paper Movement emerged as a grassroots rebellion against authoritarian governance, resonating with the bravery showcased in the Sitong Bridge protest and expressing opposition to Xi's

¹⁰¹ Thornton, “The A4 Movement.”

personal autocratic rule.¹⁰² Although the protest was brief and lacked a unified, systematic framework, its occurrence is crucial in re-evaluating and challenging the illusion of a harmonious society—a notion that has been a cornerstone of Xi's ideological narrative.

On 24 November 2022, during the enforcement of China's 'zero-COVID' policy, a high-rise condominium in Urumqi, Xinjiang, caught fire. Due to the 'zero-COVID' restrictions, firefighters and fire engines were unable to enter the building and carry out their duties. They could only attempt to extinguish the fire from a distance using water hoses. Ultimately, at least ten people died and nine others were injured.

Eyewitness accounts suggest that the rigorous lockdown and pandemic containment measures significantly impeded the firefighters' efforts. The very next day, Urumqi—a provincial capital in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, notorious for its stringent security and stability measures—witnessed a city-wide protest.¹⁰³

The rigorous pandemic control strategy, known officially as the 'resolute zero-COVID policy without wavering,' is a cornerstone of Xi Jinping and the Party Central Committee's approach to handling the pandemic. This policy continued unabated even when the Omicron variant, known for its rapid spread but milder symptoms, led many countries to relax restrictions. In contrast, China intensified its measures.

Local authorities rigorously enforced this top-down directive, resulting in widespread lockdowns—from Xi'an, Zhengzhou, and Shanghai to entire provinces in the Northeast—causing economic downturns and extensive suppression of citizens.¹⁰⁴

Notably, the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was held last

¹⁰² “Matters | 为什么白纸抗议是“三个运动”？理解封控抗议潮的革命性和局限性,” China Digital Times, January 13, 2023, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/691936.html>.

¹⁰³ Thornton, “The A4 Movement,” 8–10.

¹⁰⁴ “China expands lockdowns as COVID-19 cases hit a daily record,” NPR, November 24, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/24/1139147636/china-expands-lockdowns-as-covid-19-cases-hit-daily-record>.

year. Xi Jinping, seeking to secure his third term unopposed by abolishing term limits, implemented a policy that served both as pandemic management and as a means to suppress political dissent. This 'zero-COVID policy' was transformed into a form of political control, vividly illustrating Xi Jinping's increasingly tight grip over Chinese society and marking it as a pathological political maneuver.¹⁰⁵

The unexpected fire in Urumqi, Xinjiang, ignited a surge of outrage among the Chinese masses. In the midst of mourning, people's anger swiftly turned against the 'zero-COVID' policy, igniting protests that rippled throughout the country. From Urumqi to Shanghai, and from Beijing to Nanjing, an unprecedented wave of national protests erupted across dozens of cities, a phenomenon not seen since the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.¹⁰⁶

During the era of the zero-COVID policy, the cost of speaking out became perilously high, with even slight criticism of the policy risking police detention for questioning. This environment led to the emergence of the 'White Paper Protest,' predominantly led by youth. Protesters positioned themselves at street corners, crossroads, and campuses, holding up blank sheets of paper in silent protest.¹⁰⁷ This minimalist yet profoundly eloquent form of dissent represented a potent political expression—saying everything without uttering a word.

The White Paper Revolution is inspired by a Soviet-era joke. In this tale, a dissenter distributing flyers in Red Square was apprehended by the authorities, only to reveal that the flyers were mere blank sheets. When the dissenter contested the arrest, the police retorted, “Do you think I'm unaware of what you intend to convey?”¹⁰⁸ This

¹⁰⁵ Joy Dong, “A Chinese city may have used a Covid app to block protesters, drawing an outcry.,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/16/business/china-code-protesters.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Thornton, “The A4 Movement,” 2.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Mike Gallagher, “Chairman Gallagher's Opening Remarks at 'The White Paper Pro-Democracy Movement One Year Later' Hearing,” speech, House Select Committee on the CCP, Washington, DC, November 29, 2023,

story resonates profoundly with the spirit of China's 2022 White Paper Movement, symbolizing the power of unspoken dissent and the underlying messages conveyed through silence.

On the night of 26 November, the people of Shanghai, informed and ideologically aligned, chose to gather on Urumqi Middle Road—a street sharing its name with the city of Urumqi in Xinjiang. As the night deepened, the crowd grew, and their initially silent mourning gave way to vocal protest. In unison, they shouted slogans and voiced their political demands. The chants that echoed through Urumqi Middle Road that night drew attention not only across China but also globally.¹⁰⁹ Such a collective demand for the Communist Party and its top leader to step down—“Down with the Communist Party! Down with Xi Jinping!”—was unprecedented since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The banners they held also reflected the sentiments expressed during the Sitong Bridge incident in Beijing.¹¹⁰

<https://selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/media/remarkstranscripts/chairman-gallaghers-opening-remarks-white-paper-pro-democracy-movement>.

¹⁰⁹ “China's 'White Paper' movement one year on: six protesters share their stories,” Amnesty International, November 23, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2023/11/chinas-white-paper-movement-one-year-on-six-protesters-share-their-stories/>.

¹¹⁰ Helen Davidson, “Anti-lockdown protests spread across China amid growing anger at zero-Covid strategy,” *The Guardian*, November 27, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/27/anti-lockdown-protests-spread-across-china-amid-growing-anger-at-zero-covid-strategy>.



Figure 14 Decemeber 27th, 2022. People in Shanghai hold White papers in their hands. Picture is from RFI. ¹¹¹

Though the White Paper Movement swiftly receded from public view, its profound impact lingered. Firstly, it laid bare the folly of the three-year 'dynamic zero-COVID' policy. Secondly, it mounted a direct challenge to Xi Jinping's authority, especially after his ascent to unprecedented power at the 20th National Congress and his adherence to unilateral policymaking. Thirdly, the fervent overnight protests in Shanghai underscored the city's status as a victim of this policy. Li Qiang, Shanghai's top official, rigidly followed Xi Jinping's mandates, leading to some of the most draconian measures seen in any city. The deployment of tens or even hundreds of thousands of health workers, dubbed 'Big Whites,' who enforced strict quarantines, became a stigmatized symbol of the city.¹¹²

On the evening of November 27th, hundreds of youths in Beijing gathered by the Liangma River for a candlelight vigil to honor the victims of the Urumqi fire. The

¹¹¹ “一年整 那场埋葬动态清零的白纸革命,” Radio France Internationale, November 26, 2023, <https://www.rfi.fr/cn/%E4%B8%93%E6%A0%8F%E6%A3%80%E7%B4%A2%E8%A6%81%E9%97%BB%E5%88%86%E6%9E%90/20231126-%E4%B8%80%E5%B9%B4%E6%95%B4-%E9%82%A3%E5%9C%BA%E5%9F%8B%E8%91%AC%E5%8A%A8%E6%80%81%E6%B8%85%E9%9B%B6%E7%9A%84%E7%99%BD%E7%BA%B8%E9%9D%A9%E5%91%BD>.

¹¹² “Shanghai's neighborhood committees act as 'white guards' during lockdown,” Radio Free Asia, May 29, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/shanghai-whiteguards-05292022070418.html>.

crowd, growing to over a thousand, recited in unison the slogans that had adorned the banners at Beijing's Sitong Bridge: "We want food, not nucleic acid (for COVID) tests; freedom, not lockdowns; dignity, not lies; reform, not cultural revolution; votes, not a leader; to be citizens, not slaves."¹¹³ Between November 26 and 28, a wave of protests, totaling at least 43 instances, erupted across at least 22 cities in China.¹¹⁴

Merely ten days following the Sitong Bridge incident in October, the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China came to a close, with Xi Jinping securing another term as China's President, thus breaking the conventional two-term limit for the Chinese presidency. Subsequently, in November, amidst the enduring 'zero-COVID' policy, a wave of protests erupted in Guangzhou's Haizhu District, and violent unrest unfolded at the Foxconn factory in Zhengzhou due to the stringent implementation of the policy.¹¹⁵

The Sitong Bridge Incident in Beijing had a profound impact on similar civilian protests nationwide. Phrases like 'We want freedom, not nucleic acid tests' began to surface in public restrooms nationwide, an anonymous yet powerful echo of the Sitong Bridge demonstrators' bravery. This spirit of defiance also stirred the youth, with comparable slogans appearing at Sichuan University. Although it cannot be definitively stated that the Sitong Bridge Incident catalyzed the White Paper Movement, the valor of those at Sitong Bridge undoubtedly inspired many involved in the White Paper Movement, prompting widespread individual actions in solidarity with their banners.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Li Yuan, "China's Protest Prophet," *The New York Times*, December 7, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/briefing/china-protest-peng-lifa.html>.

¹¹⁴ "China protests escalate as authorities warn of 'crackdown'," Deutsche Welle, November 29, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/china-protests-escalate-as-authorities-warn-of-crackdown/a-63936542>.

¹¹⁵ Amy Chang Chien, Chang Che, John Liu and Paul Mozur, "In a Challenge to Beijing, Unrest Over Covid Lockdowns Spreads," *The New York Times*, last updated November 28, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/24/world/asia/china-unrest-covid-lockdowns.html>.

¹¹⁶ Thornton, "The A4 Movement," 5.

In his recent analysis, Wu Qiang characterizes the principal actors in the “White Paper Revolution” as the “New Dispossessed Class”. This concept, examined through the lens of class structure transformation, posits a theoretical hypothesis regarding the disappearance and evolution of class. It suggests a silent revolution unfolding against another backdrop of “impossibility”. This hypothesis traces its roots to the late 1990s, when China's state-owned enterprise reforms ostensibly eliminated the entire working class in a class-based context. With China's entry into globalization, a substantial New Dispossessed Class emerged, profoundly shaping the global trend towards such class formation. Post-2011, as the Chinese government intensively clamped down on civil society and steered towards heightened authoritarianism, this class, which had long remained in a state of “unfinished proletarianization”, accelerated its self-realization. It became cognizant of the duplicity in nationwide ideological indoctrination and, during the final phase of the three-year-long COVID-19 pandemic, unveiled its political potency.¹¹⁷

In his analysis, Wu Qiang identifies the workers' unrest at the Zhengzhou Foxconn factory as the initial spark of the 'White Paper Revolution,' adding a crucial worker-class element to the movement. However, when considering the roles of nearly dispossessed proletarian groups and the protesting urban youths in Beijing and Shanghai, who resemble urban intellectual proletarians, the essence of the White Paper Revolution is shaped by these pivotal revolutionary actors. Theoretically, given their shared proletarian status, these two socially marginalized groups are presumed to represent a larger, more homogeneous entity, like a burgeoning and rapidly expanding New Dispossessed Class. Therefore, the White Paper Revolution marks the debut of this new class on China's political stage, demonstrating their societal presence and

¹¹⁷ 吴强, “中国的白纸革命和新流民阶级的崛起——一个现场观察的视角,” 当代中国研究通讯 34, 8–16.

political influence.¹¹⁸

From the perspective of changing class structures, this new class hypothesis suggests a theory about the disappearance and evolution of classes, a revolution quietly transpiring against a backdrop of 'impossibility.' It posits that the post-1990s reforms of state-owned enterprises in China may have effectively eliminated the entire working class, contributing to the formation of a significant New Dispossessed Class within the context of globalization. This class's evolution was further accelerated by the Chinese authorities' comprehensive suppression of civil society and move towards authoritarianism after 2011. Long in a state of 'incomplete proletarianization,' this class rapidly became self-aware and showcased its political force in the last phase of the three-year COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹⁹

The phenomenon of 'dispossession,' while deeply rooted in China's unique situation, embodies several universal traits of the global New Dispossessed Class: 1) a specific production relationship grounded in unstable employment; 2) a distinct distribution relationship due to the absence of social insurance and assistance; and 3) a unique state-citizen relationship marked by a paucity of civil rights.¹²⁰

At the time, both the Sitong Bridge incident and the White Paper Movement held significant representativeness, as the dissatisfaction caused by the zero-COVID policy was a collective experience that resonated with many. Although none of these emerging movements evolved into systemic, enduring acts of resistance, given the Chinese government's severe control over all societal strata, every instance of individual dissent merits attention and introspection.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 13–16.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 13.

Related Art Practice

Within China's dispossessed class, expressions of dissent extend beyond ordinary citizens demonstrating on the streets. Chinese artists, too, have voiced their grievances through performance art, highlighting the discrepancy between government rhetoric and reality.

In 2023, the Chinese artist Deng Zhen undertook a performance art project in the vast grasslands of Inner Mongolia. He meticulously arranged innumerable white papers to compose an immense white canvas sprawling across the grassland. This artistic arrangement simultaneously commemorated the White Paper Revolution and symbolized Deng Zhen's silent protest against the Chinese government.¹²¹

The artist community in China has always been marked by its dynamism and poses an unpredictable element for the government. This is largely due to the fact that many artists, particularly those not tethered to galleries and museums, have a strong capacity for independent thought. They engage with the public through their artistic actions, using art to reveal the true purposes of prevailing ideologies, rather than relying on conventional protest methods. Unlike traditional protests, which primarily focus on voicing dissent through slogans and street demonstrations without much interaction with the wider public, performance art inherently encourages interaction. This interactivity fosters connections with local people, making performance art more accessible and engaging. As people experience the beauty of art, they are simultaneously opened up to its critiques of social issues, aiding in the discovery of societal problems and encouraging more proactive reflection on the societal status quo.

¹²¹ Deng Zhen, WeChat message by author, November 12, 2023.

Deng Zhen's series of performance art refrained from articulating any specific viewpoints or attitudes. Instead, he transformed a desolate grassland into a vast canvas of whiteness using blank sheets, accompanied by the imagery of a dove in flight. The blank sheets resonate with the continuation of the White Paper Movement among ordinary Chinese citizens, questioning the full realization of Xi Jinping's '24-Character Core Values.' The dove, symbolizing peace and freedom, embodies the desire for freedom and serves as an emblem of joy and tranquility. The use of white paper in this context captures the longing of ordinary Chinese people for a return to normalcy on their own land, following three years of stringent pandemic restrictions, and their aspiration for a life of genuine freedom and equality.

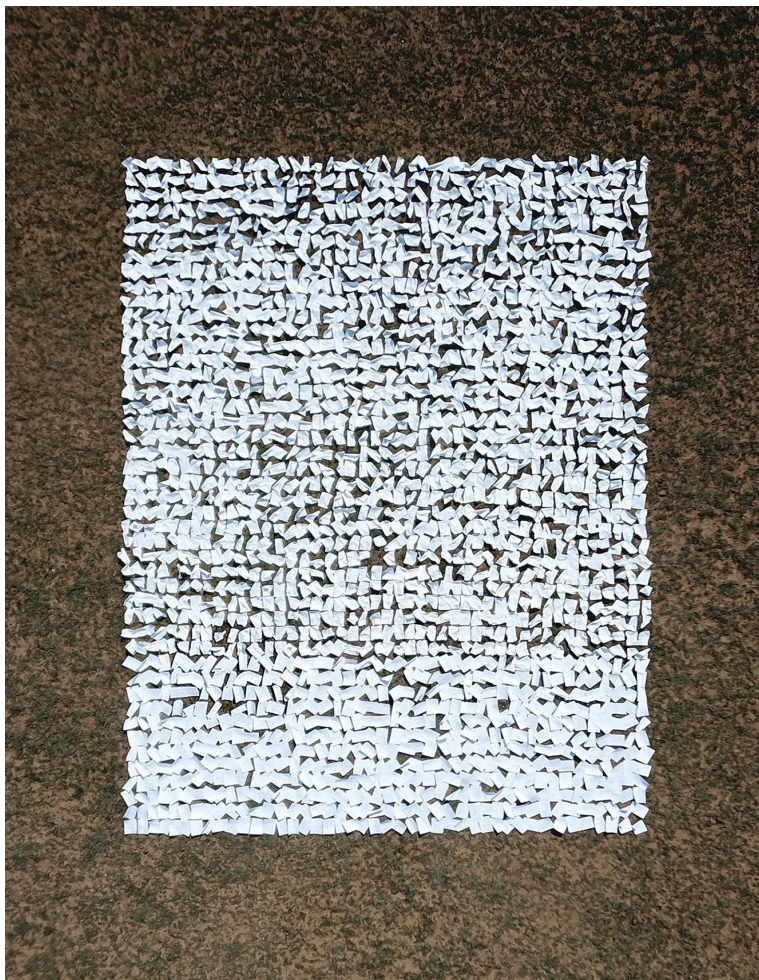


Figure 15 Deng Zhen Work 1. White Paper. Picture is provided by the artist.

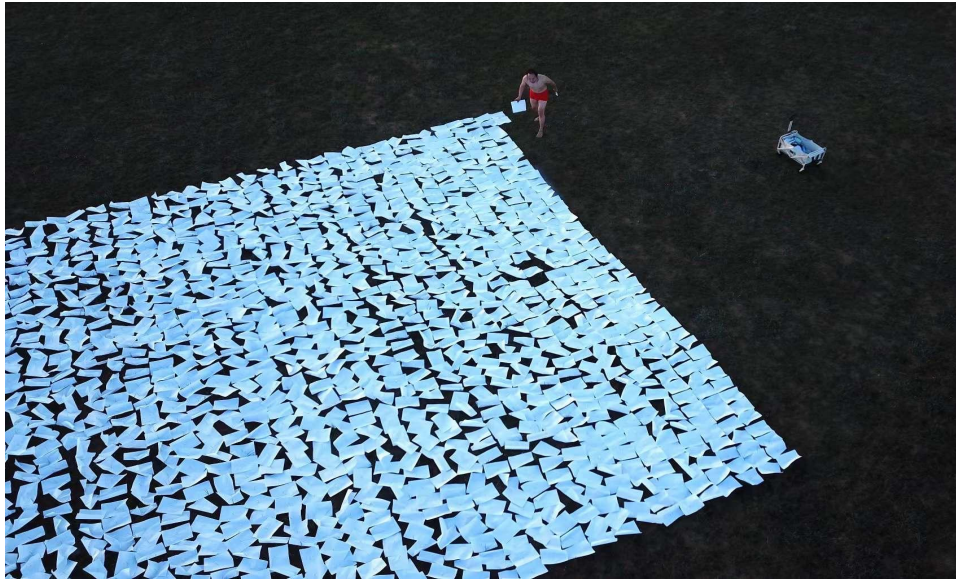


Figure 16 Deng Zhen was conducting his performance art on White Paper. Picture is provided by the artist.



Figure 17 White Paper artwork on the grassland in Inner Mongolia. Picture is provided by the artist.



Figure 18 Mongolia. Picture is provided by the artist.

3.3 2023 Shanghai Halloween Parade – Transforming Lifestyle into An Art of Resistance

In the realm of postmodern political studies, scholars observe that under capitalism, the continual intervention of governments and capital has led to the politicization of all aspects of social life and individual existence.

For instance, in "Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics," the authors discuss how postmodern political studies reveal this trend towards politicization in every facet of personal and social life.¹²² This is echoed in "Postmodern Politics and the Battle for the Future," where the author delves into the complexities of politicization in the postmodern era.¹²³ Additionally, Gavin Kendall further explores how individuals, whether focusing on their personal lives or engaging in social interactions and behaviors, increasingly find these aspects imbued with political significance.¹²⁴ These works collectively underscore the pervasive influence of political dynamics in shaping

¹²² Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman, eds., *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹²³ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "Postmodern Politics and the Battle for the Future," *New Political Science* 20, no. 3 (1998): 283–99, doi:10.1080/07393149808429830.

¹²⁴ Gavin Kendall and M. Michael, "Politicizing the Politics of Postmodern Social Psychology," *Theory & Psychology* 7, no. 1 (1997): 7–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354397071002>.

individual and collective experiences in the contemporary world, particularly under the influence of capitalist structures.

This trend is evident in how individuals, whether attending to their private lives or engaging in social interactions, increasingly perceive these areas as being imbued with political significance. In China, this politicization is more intense due to the unique political structure and the pervasive influence of the Chinese Communist Party in everyday life. The state's role in shaping public opinion, controlling media narratives, and influencing individual behaviors and beliefs is more direct and apparent.¹²⁵ As a result, individuals in China navigate a complex landscape where their personal choices, expressions, and even identities are often seen as extensions of broader political narratives.

This environment creates a space where personal expressions and performances, such as those witnessed in the Shanghai Halloween parade, become acts of political significance. The youth, through their creative expressions and satirical performances, are not merely participating in a cultural event; they are engaging in a form of political discourse. Their actions reflect a broader desire to reclaim personal space from the overarching political narrative, asserting their individuality and perspectives in a context where such expressions are inherently political.

The politicization of social life in China presents both challenges and opportunities for personal expression, particularly among the youth. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, individuals must navigate a landscape where asserting personal beliefs has overt political significance. The state's revival of Mao-era propaganda and control over narratives intensifies these dynamics.¹²⁶ In this context, events like the Shanghai

¹²⁵ Chenggang Xu, *Institutional Genes: Origins of China's Institutions and Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 630–38.

¹²⁶ Suisheng Zhao, "Xi Jinping's Maoist Revival," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (2016): 83–97,

Halloween Parade serve as stages where modern, creative forms of expression offer the youth a platform for political commentary and dissent, thereby subverting traditional state propaganda.

The authentic reactions of the masses serve as an effective counter to the actions of those in power. While the majority of Shanghai's Halloween celebrations remained traditional parades focused on festivity, some young people used the occasion as a platform for performance art. In a country that has experienced three years of pandemic control, economic downturn, and ongoing social protests, these young people utilized the parade to express themselves. By portraying historical figures or representing social events through humorous political metaphors, they subtly critiqued the current social situation in China.

These parade participants, in an event that lasted just one day, relied on performance to express their dissatisfaction with the authorities and the government. Their approach highlights the evolving nature of protest and expression in contemporary China, where traditional and festive occasions are transformed into opportunities for subtle political commentary and rebellion under heightened oppression. This phenomenon reflects the political awareness among the youth and the creative strategies they employ to express their views within the constraints of the existing social and political framework.

The Chinese government has consistently emphasized strong nationalism, which often translates into extreme xenophobia. Simultaneously, it promotes a patriarchal system centered around Xi Jinping. Not a single woman has been elected to the Politburo Standing Committee in the hundred-year history of the CCP¹²⁷. Additionally, in public

<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0051>.

¹²⁷ “China’s Communist Party Congress For His 3rd Term, Xi Jinping Surrounds Himself With Loyalists,” *The New York Times*, last updated October 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/10/22/world/china-xi-jinping-congress>.

media, Xi Jinping is often referred to as "Xi Dada," a term that phonetically resembles "dad" in Chinese, which further reinforces this patriarchal image.¹²⁸

This high concentration of power in Xi Jinping, coupled with the objective of perpetuating the CCP's ruling status, has led to a series of oppressive political practices. Such practices are likely, at some point, to stimulate "discordant voices" among the masses. This phenomenon reflects the tension between the state's efforts to maintain control and the underlying societal currents that may not always align with the official narrative. Additional problems, such as the underrepresentation of women at the highest levels of the Party and the emphasis on strong, centralized leadership under Xi Jinping, suggest broader cultural and political issues within China. These issues, while aimed at consolidating power and ensuring stability, also have the potential to generate resistance and dissent among certain segments of society.

When confronting the issue of patriarchy in China, some participants in the Halloween event creatively used their costumes to make a bold statement. One woman dressed as a phallus, satirizing the "phallocentrism" prevalent in contemporary Chinese society and culture. Another individual assumed the persona of Cheng Dieyi (a female character portrayed by Leslie Cheung), specifically the character Yu Ji from the film "Farewell My Concubine."¹²⁹ Through this portrayal, which blurred gender boundaries, they challenged prevailing societal gender norms.

¹²⁸ Tom Phillips, "'Big Daddy Xi' No More: Chinese President's Nickname Nixed from Social Media," *The Guardian*, May 3, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/03/big-daddy-xi-no-more-chinese-presidents-nickname-nixed>.

¹²⁹ "上海万圣节," China Digital Times, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/%E4%B8%8A%E6%B5%B7%E4%B8%87%E5%9C%A3%E8%8A%82>.



Figure 19 The participant who acted as Cheng Dieyi in Shanghai Halloween parade. ¹³⁰

Another young person dressed up as Lu Xun, a renowned Chinese writer, holding a sign that read, "Studying medicine won't save the Chinese people," a famous quotation and reference to Lu Xun's famous decision to abandon his medical studies in favor of writing.¹³¹ This costume served as a symbolic critique of the current state of affairs in China.

¹³⁰ “【CDT 网语】““万梗节”的狂欢，“中国梦”的粉碎”，China Digital Times, December 4, 2023, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/702903.html>.

¹³¹ “手紙 | 上海狂欢：当“万圣节”成为“万梗节”，”China Digital Times, November 1, 2023, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/701685.html>.

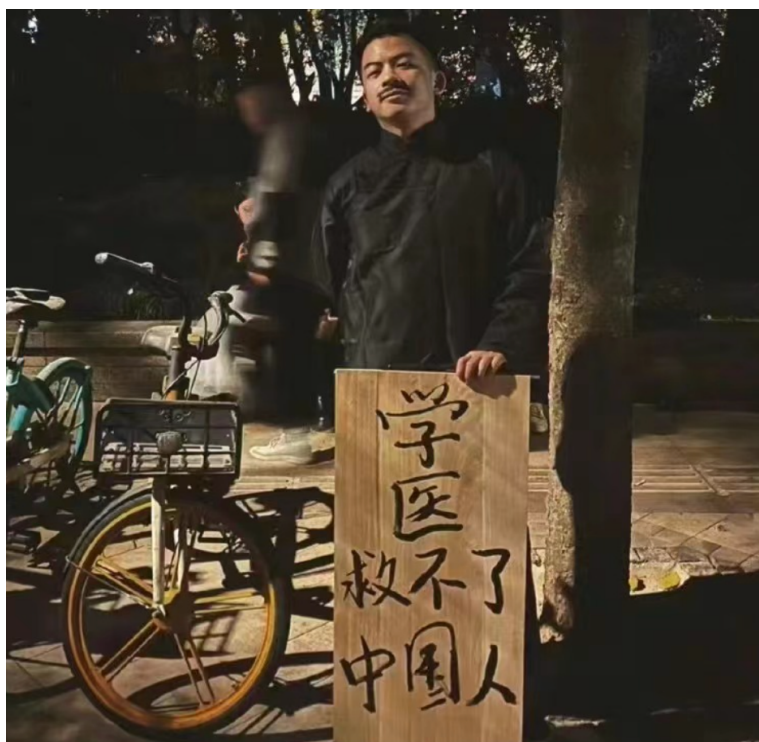


Figure 20 Participant who dressed up as Lu Xun with the slogan written "Studying medicine won't save the Chinese people".¹³²

Additionally, some participants dressed as Winnie the Pooh and an emperor, subtly mocking Xi Jinping's authoritarian image. The use of Winnie the Pooh, in particular, has become an indirect way to reference Xi Jinping, as evidenced by internet memes comparing the two—a phenomenon the Chinese government has often censored.¹³³

Another striking portrayal captured attention and elicited knowing smiles from onlookers. A young man had his face made up to appear bruised and exhausted, with sunken cheeks, as if he had been working tirelessly for days without sleep. On his body, a sign read "乙方" (Party B), a symbolic representation that resonated deeply with the crowd.¹³⁴

This young man's portrayal was a poignant commentary on the infamous "996" work culture prevalent among Chinese youth, in which employees work from 9 am to 9 pm,

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ “上海万圣节”; Stephen McDonnell, “Why China censors banned Winnie the Pooh,” BBC News, July 17, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-40627855>.

¹³⁴ “上海万圣节.”

six days a week.¹³⁵ The term "乙方" (Party B, or the employee) further emphasized the subordinate position of employees who often repeatedly modify their work according to the demands of "甲方" (Party A, or the employer), sometimes to the point of physical and mental exhaustion. This representation highlighted the often futile nature of this dynamic: despite all the effort, Party A might still revert to its original plan, leaving Party B powerless and drained.

This young man's costume and performance at the parade illustrate the broader argument: seemingly personal or cultural acts in contemporary China can serve as forms of resistance and political commentary. By leveraging a public, festive occasion, young people make visible the power dynamics and grievances that might otherwise remain obscured, using creativity to assert their perspectives in a politicized society.

The creativity of the young people in the Shanghai Halloween parade was evident in their representations of various topical issues. These elements, once trending online, found new life in the parade, showcasing the participants' awareness and engagement with current events. These examples also illustrate that the Core Socialist Value of "Prosperity" under Xi Jinping's leadership has not been achieved.

One of the most resonant and symbolic representations was the participants dressed as 'Big white' (medical social workers in COVID protective suits), holding oversized cotton swabs. They occasionally posed as if they were about to conduct a nucleic acid test on passersby. This portrayal was a direct reference to the experiences of Shanghai residents during last year's strict pandemic control measures, evoking collective memories and emotions related to that challenging period.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Li Yuan, "China's Grueling Formula for Success: 9-9-6," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/long-days-a-staple-at-chinese-tech-firms-1487787775>.

¹³⁶ "China's 'White Guards' gain reputation for brutal enforcement of Shanghai lockdown," Radio Free Asia, May 29, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/shanghai-whiteguards-05292022070418.html>; "Anger Erupts at



Figure 21 A participant acted as the “Big White”, the medical workers who helped to test COVID.¹³⁷

Additionally, a particularly brave young woman dressed in black and covered in white A4 papers made a profound statement.¹³⁸ Her attire was a tribute to the 'Blank Paper Movement' that erupted towards the end of the previous year. This movement, characterized by the use of blank sheets of paper as a symbol of protest, became a powerful tool for expression in a constrained environment. Her costume not only paid homage to this movement but also highlighted the innovative ways in which the youth are finding to voice their opinions and concerns.

These representations in the parade were more than just costumes; they were powerful statements on social and political issues. The participants used the platform of the Halloween parade to creatively express their perspectives on the events that have shaped their lives and society. Their actions reflected a deep engagement with the world

Xi's 'Big White' Army of Lockdown Enforcers,” Bloomberg, April 26, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-26/anger-erupts-at-xi-s-big-white-army-of-lockdown-enforcers>.

¹³⁷ “上海万圣节新态耐人寻味的变装,” Deutsche Welle, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/zh/%E4%B8%8A%E6%B5%B7%E4%B8%87%E5%9C%A3%E8%8A%82%E6%96%B0%E6%80%81%E8%80%90%E4%BA%BA%E5%AF%BB%E5%91%B3%E7%9A%84%E5%8F%98%E8%A3%85/g-67275892>.

¹³⁸ “上海万圣节.”

around them and a desire to participate in the broader social and political discourse.

The 2023 Shanghai Halloween Parade serves as an instructive example for re-evaluating the role of Chinese youth in challenging official narratives. The youth of China—a generation born into a world of global connectivity and digital information—have shown a growing tendency to question and challenge the one-dimensional ideological narratives promoted by the state. Their participation in events like the Shanghai Halloween Parade demonstrates a shift in attitudes, wherein traditional celebrations become platforms for political expression and satire. This shift is indicative of a broader generational change in the perception and reception of state propaganda.¹³⁹

The 2023 Shanghai Halloween Parade, in its essence, was not merely a festive celebration but a microcosm of political expression. The Halloween parade by young people in China presents a stark contrast to its counterpart in Toronto across the Pacific. While both parades celebrate this Western festival, the nature and underlying messages of these events differ significantly.

In China, the Halloween parade transformed into a grand satirical performance. Many young people dressed up as historical figures or enacted scenes from recent news events, infusing the parade with layers of political and social commentary. This approach turned the event into a platform for expressing critiques and opinions about various aspects of contemporary society.

In contrast, the Halloween parade in Toronto primarily retained its traditional essence of pure entertainment. It was more about celebrating the festival in its conventional sense, focusing on fun and enjoyment rather than conveying deeper, symbolic messages.

¹³⁹ Zifeng Chen and Clyde Yicheng Wang, “The Discipline of Happiness: The Foucauldian Use of the ‘Positive Energy’ Discourse in China’s Ideological Works,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 48, no. 2 (2019): 201–25, doi:10.1177/1868102619899409.

The Toronto parade, while festive and lively, lacked the same depth of meaning or served as a medium for social or political commentary as seen in Shanghai.

The Shanghai Halloween parade symbolizes a growing awakening among the young generation in China. It represents a shift from adherence to a singular value system propagated by the Chinese Communist Party toward a more reflective and critical stance. The use of humor and satire in their responses to social issues indicates newfound boldness and a desire for more open expression. This change signifies a crucial development in China's socio-political landscape, as young people increasingly seek to voice their opinions and engage in societal discourse in creative and impactful ways.

The youth, through their costumes and performances, subtly critiqued various social and political issues, transforming the event into a stage for political satire and commentary. This act of resistance highlights the evolving nature of political expression in contemporary China, where traditional forms of celebration are reimagined as avenues for political discourse.¹⁴⁰

The continuous interventions by the government and capital under capitalism have led to the politicization of all aspects of social life, a trend that is particularly pronounced in China. The Shanghai Halloween Parade exemplifies how even seemingly apolitical spaces can become arenas for political expression and resistance.¹⁴¹ It stands as a significant example within the larger narrative of public reaction to ideological constructs in Xi Jinping's patriarchal China. It showcases how the younger generation is actively redefining the boundaries of political expression, challenging traditional

¹⁴⁰ "Authorities in Shanghai Crack Down on Halloween Celebrations," VOA News, November 1, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/authorities-in-shanghai-crack-down-on-halloween-celebrations/7843440.html>.

¹⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

political subjectivities, and reshaping their political identity in response to dominant ideological narratives.

In the context of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of "Faciality," the concept can be applied to understand the political subjectification in capitalist states, particularly in relation to the construction of a "model citizen." According to Deleuze, the political subjects produced by capitalist states are subjugated under fundamental principles or authoritative norms, aligning with the image of the sovereign state. This process manufactures citizens who ideally embody the operational needs of capitalism. These political subjects share a common pursuit of power, value, and order, striving for universally significant political aspirations such as freedom, democracy, equality, legal justice, and human rights.¹⁴²

Within this framework, the state apparatus leverages the inherent differences among individuals, transforming them through the 'faciality machine' into a unified political identity. This unification process effectively homogenizes the intrinsic diversity of individuals, aligning them with a state-centric hierarchical order. The faciality machine, therefore, plays a crucial role in molding diverse individuals into a collective majority, reshaping their internal multiplicity to conform to the state's vision of an ideal citizen. This transformation underscores the state's capacity to craft a unified, dominant narrative that subsumes individual identities and aligns them with its own ideological and operational objectives.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Year Zero: Faciality," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 167–91.

¹⁴³ Ibid.



Figure 22 A Halloween participant stands at the street banner of “twenty-four words of Core Socialist Value”.¹⁴⁴

In the unique political landscape of China, which diverges from the typical capitalist framework, the insights of Gilles Deleuze offer a compelling lens for understanding the state's interaction with its citizens. Deleuze's theories suggest that state machinery, regardless of a country's political system, operates on a principle of homogenization and de-differentiation. This process involves assimilating individuals into predefined roles, shaping them into 'ideal' citizens that fit within the state's narrative.¹⁴⁵ However, the events witnessed during the Shanghai Halloween parade present a striking counterpoint to this model.

The youth participating in the Shanghai Halloween event, through their acts of role-playing and imitation, effectively challenged and dismantled the standard norms and expectations of political appearance and behavior. Their actions were not mere

¹⁴⁴ “从“上海白纸”到“上海万圣”，那些在创伤后继续走上街头的年轻人，” WOMEN 我们, November 26, 2023, <https://women4china.substack.com/p/9be>

¹⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, “Year Zero: Faciality,” 167–91.

expressions of dissent; they were a reclamation of individual identity in a landscape often dominated by a singular, state-driven narrative. By mimicking various societal forms and issues, these young individuals crafted a mosaic of diverse identities, breaking away from the monolithic image often projected by state propaganda.

This act of defiance aligns with what Deleuze describes as the behavior of 'political nomads.' These are individuals who, rather than conforming to the rigid structures and roles imposed by the state, choose to redefine and rediscover their identities.¹⁴⁶ The experiences of these youths, particularly under the stringent conditions imposed during three years of pandemic control, have led to a profound re-evaluation of their social status, roles, and the discrepancies between government propaganda and their lived realities.

The depth and insightfulness of the performances at the parade were a testament to the fact that the younger generation in China is not entirely engulfed by material comforts or swayed entirely by political rhetoric. Instead, they have shown a capacity for deep reflection on societal issues. Their actions during the parade were not just a form of entertainment or protest; they were a powerful statement about the desire for a more nuanced and multifaceted identity, one that transcends the confines of what is typically portrayed by the state.

This phenomenon signifies a significant shift in China's socio-political fabric. The younger generation, through creative and symbolic acts of resistance, is actively engaging in a dialogue about their role in society, challenging the status quo, and reshaping the narrative around citizenship and individuality. This shift is indicative of a broader global trend where individuals, especially the youth, are increasingly seeking

¹⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "1227: Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 351–423.

to assert their unique identities and perspectives in the face of homogenizing state or global narratives.

The 2023 Shanghai Halloween Parade, in the broader context of public reactions to ideological constructs, can be seen as a dramatic culmination and sublimation of a series of political expressions that began with the mourning for the Urumqi fire. This mourning initially manifested on Urumqi Middle Road in Shanghai and eventually evolved into the nationwide White Paper's protests. These events marked a significant shift in public sentiment and expression.¹⁴⁷

The Halloween Parade in Shanghai represented a transformative moment where political propaganda was reinterpreted and repackaged into satirical performances. Participants creatively turned social issues into theatrical displays, effectively using humor and performance to demystify and critique political narratives. This transformation of political discourse into satire was a key feature of the parade, distinguishing it from more conventional forms of political protest.

The Halloween event was not just a parade but a spontaneous act of participatory performance art by the masses. This form of artistic expression allowed for a unique demystification of political language. By reinterpreting political discourse through art, the original meanings of these political messages were unveiled, making their underlying intentions and logic more apparent to a broader audience.

This artistic reinterpretation of political discourse during the parade played a crucial role in awakening a sense of self-identity among the participants and observers. By engaging in dramatized street participation, people not only expressed their dissent but also called for a deeper awareness of their individual and collective identities. This

¹⁴⁷ Thornton, "The A4 Movement," 8–10.

awakening was a significant outcome of the parade, highlighting the power of artistic expression in political discourse.

The 2023 Shanghai Halloween Parade, in this context, stands as a pivotal moment in the narrative of public reaction to ideological constructs in contemporary China. It showcased how a simple cultural event could be transformed into a platform for political and social expression. This transformation signifies a new era of public engagement and discourse, where art and performance become powerful tools for political expression and identity awakening.

The spontaneous Halloween parade in Shanghai represents a significant moment in the context of Xi Jinping's efforts to construct an ideological wall through various street slogans and propaganda. This event symbolizes a breach in the ideological barrier that the Chinese leadership, under Xi Jinping, has endeavored to build and maintain.

The street slogans and propaganda under Xi Jinping have been part of a broader strategy to reinforce the Communist Party's narrative and control over public opinion. These efforts aim to shape and direct the collective consciousness towards a unified ideological perspective that aligns with the party's values and objectives. However, the Halloween parade in Shanghai indicates a shift in public sentiment and a challenge to this controlled narrative.

The parade's spontaneous nature and the creative expressions of the participants reflect a growing desire for freedom of expression and a departure from the singular ideological path laid out by the state. The use of costumes, performances, and satire to comment on social and political issues demonstrates a break from the conventional acceptance of state-driven narratives. It signifies a crack in the ideological wall, where the public, particularly the youth, are finding ways to articulate their perspectives and

critiques outside the boundaries set by the state.

This development is crucial for understanding the evolving dynamics between the state and the masses in China. It highlights a growing undercurrent of dissent and a desire for more open and diverse forms of expression. The Halloween parade in Shanghai, therefore, is not just a cultural event, but a symbol of a subtle yet significant shift in China's socio-political landscape. It also serves as a carnival for public political expression against Xi Jinping's China and its political propaganda.

3.4 Examination of Why People Mourn Former Premier Li Keqiang

On 27 October 2023, the sudden passing of China's former Premier Li Keqiang from a heart attack served as a catalyst for widespread public mourning, raising critical questions regarding political symbolism and collective memory in China.¹⁴⁸ The extent and nature of the tributes suggest that Li's role, though marginalized during Xi Jinping's consolidation of central authority, resonated with deeper societal expectations of governance. Given the historical precedent since the 1980s, when Premiers typically led economic management, Li's constrained position marks a significant departure.¹⁴⁹ This period thus invites examination as a turning point, in which Li arguably became the most restricted Premier in the People's Republic's history, providing insight into the centralization of power and its social repercussions.¹⁵⁰

On the international stage, Li Keqiang was renowned for the eponymous 'Keqiang Index' he proposed.¹⁵¹ Yet, regrettably, Li, an economist by training, was never afforded the chance to fulfill his aspirations of steering economic progress through his

¹⁴⁸ Li Yuan, "Chinese Mourn the Death of a Premier, and the Loss of Economic Hope," *The New York Times*, October 27, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/27/business/li-keqiang-mourning-online.html>.

¹⁴⁹ Asei Ito, Jean C. Lim, and Hong Zhang, "Remembering Li Keqiang: Policy Divergence in Zhongnanhai and Its Economic Consequences," *The China Quarterly* 262 (2025): 352–70, doi:10.1017/S0305741025000165.

¹⁵⁰ Li, "Chinese Mourn the Death of a Premier."

¹⁵¹ "Keqiang, Ker-ching!" *The Economist*, December 9, 2010, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2010/12/09/keqiang-ker-ching>.

academic and professional expertise. A substantial factor behind this was the governance of pivotal institutions such as the central bank by the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission, presided over by Xi Jinping and operated by his close associates.¹⁵² Effectively, Li Keqiang, despite his perennial presence at the decision-making table, lacked any real influence on economic discourse.

The societal tributes to Li Keqiang's death arose largely from organic, civilian-led gestures of commemoration. Li may well be regarded as the last torchbearer of market economy ideology within the Communist Party of China, championing market principles, advocating alignment with global civilization, and aspiring for China's integration into the broader avenues of globalization. In the nascent stages of his leadership, he was characterized by an enthusiastic drive to enact transformative reforms, proposing an economic agenda predicated on market fortification, regulatory relaxation, supply enhancement, and innovation.¹⁵³ He called for dismantling market entry barriers, revamping governmental functions, reinforcing the market's foundational role, stimulating the vitality of market entities, minimizing governmental micro-management, redistributing domestic wealth, and propelling reforms across various sectors. His tenure bequeathed a litany of enduring maxims, such as advocating simplicity and restraint in the exercise of authority, entrusting responsibilities to the market and society where feasible, preferring transparency over secrecy, and espousing fiscal prudence for the government to enhance public welfare, all encapsulated by the metaphor of China's great rivers, which, he asserted, could not be compelled to reverse their course.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² "How China's Policy Making Machine Works," Bloomberg, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/china-policy-guide/>.

¹⁵³ Yao Yang, "Likonomics and China's new economic strategy," East Asia Forum, July 8, 2013, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2013/07/08/likonomics-and-chinas-new-economic-strategy/>.

¹⁵⁴ Katsuji Nakazawa, "Analysis: In cryptic lingo, Premier Li says rivers only flow forward," *Nikkei Asia*, March 14, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-picks/China-up-close/Analysis-In-cryptic-lingo-Premier-li-says-rivers->

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, 'Keqiang Economics,' a comprehensive blueprint for market economy restructuring, propelled China's economic growth consistently at 6%.¹⁵⁵ Reflecting on the past decade, had Li Keqiang's reformative vision been fully realized, it is conceivable that China would have transitioned into a truly market-driven economy, as opposed to the semi-market system that exists today. This shift could have potentially elevated the Chinese economy to a more advanced tier, markedly improving the standard of living for its citizens. Furthermore, the burgeoning phenomenon of 'Runxue'—the inclination to emigrate in response to the country's stringent political and economic landscape—might not have gained as much traction had the reforms steered the nation towards a more prosperous and politically stable path.¹⁵⁶

In an interview with domestic and international journalists on 28 May 2020, Li Keqiang highlighted a stark reality by stating that approximately 600 million Chinese citizens subsist on a monthly income of around 1,000 yuan.¹⁵⁷ This statement resonated deeply, portraying the Premier as a leader attuned to the plights of ordinary citizens and aware that a vast segment of the population remains untouched by the fruits of economic reforms. This acknowledgment of widespread economic precarity starkly contrasts with Xi Jinping's principal ideological mantra of the '24-Character Core Values,' which prioritizes 'prosperity' at the national level. Moreover, Xi's proclamation in 2021, on the centenary of the Communist Party of China, asserting the achievement of a comprehensive moderately prosperous society, appears at odds with the realities presented by Li.¹⁵⁸ The grim portrait of six hundred million people living at the margins,

[only-flow-forward.](#)

¹⁵⁵ Chen Weihua and Cheng Li, "An assessment of Premier Li Keqiang's government work report," Brookings Institution, March 6, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/an-assessment-of-premier-li-keqiangs-government-work-report/>.

¹⁵⁶ Zongyuan Zoe Liu, "Runology: How to Run Away from China," Council on Foreign Relations, November 22, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/runology-how-run-away-china>.

¹⁵⁷ "Premier stresses jobs, livelihoods at news conference," May 29, 2020, https://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/202005/29/content_WS5ed12604c6d0b3f0e94990b1.html.

¹⁵⁸ "Xi declares China a moderately prosperous society in all respects," July 1, 2021,

coupled with the incomplete reach of compulsory education and the resultant limitations on future opportunities for many due to financial constraints, underscores a disconnect between high-level political rhetoric and the lived experiences of a significant portion of the populace.

The reality of China's fiscal situation, as articulated by Li Keqiang, stands in sharp contrast to the ideological narrative propagated by Xi Jinping. Foremost among the '24-Character Core Values' is the principle of 'wealth and power.' On the Communist Party of China's centennial in 2021, Xi Jinping proclaimed the nation's attainment of a comprehensive moderately prosperous society.¹⁵⁹ This concept of 'moderate prosperity' envisions a life beyond basic subsistence, reaching a state of relative affluence. Yet, Li Keqiang highlighted that such prosperity and moderate well-being remain elusive for many in China, with a significant portion of the population still grappling with poverty and concerns over basic needs. This reality is vividly depicted at the outset of this chapter through Yan Yinhong's portrayal of a shepherd in Inner Mongolia, whose entire livelihood is encapsulated in his dispersed flock of sheep.¹⁶⁰

http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202107/01/content_WS60ddd47ec6d0df57f98dc472.html.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Author's personal observation, "Hot Snow" Performance Art Season 7, 2020.



Figure 23 An illustration of two of China's 12 core socialist values: prosperous and strong. Taken in Dali, home to many ethnic Bai people in Yunnan province, on July 11, 2019.¹⁶¹

Li Keqiang, once the second-highest-ranking official in the Communist Party of China and noted for his image as the 'people's Premier,' left a significant imprint on the populace. His sudden death triggered a wave of commemoration across China, particularly poignant among those who had witnessed his years of being overshadowed by Xi Jinping. In a spontaneous outpouring of grief, numerous people converged on his former residences and workplaces, laying flowers to express their sorrow at his death.¹⁶² Despite no official grounds to prohibit such expressions of grief, Beijing authorities effectively censored almost all online discussions pertaining to Li Keqiang, an approach

¹⁶¹ <https://www.chinapropaganda.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/27-copy.jpeg>.

¹⁶² Stephen McDonnell, "Li Keqiang: Official nerves show as BBC hears praise for dead Chinese leader," BBC News, November 2, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-67294136>.

akin to silencing political dissent.¹⁶³ The central government's unease over the public mourning stemmed from a keen awareness: this collective grief was not merely about Li Keqiang, but also served as a conduit for broader political discontent, primarily directed at Xi Jinping and his decade-long authoritarian rule. This situation prompted fears of potential unrest, reminiscent of the historical April Fifth Movement in 1976, with authorities wary of any catalyst that might provoke public upheaval.¹⁶⁴

The shift in public sentiment is palpable. Xi Jinping, despite his vocal emphasis on prioritizing the people's welfare and presenting the Communist Party of China as the people's unequivocal representative, has paradoxically found himself at odds with the populace. In his rhetoric, Xi frequently asserts the importance of being on the historically correct side. Yet, the organic 'Flower Revolution' memorializing Li Keqiang and the Halloween parade organized by Shanghai's youth starkly signal to Xi that his ideological constructs are no longer effective in shaping public opinion, indicating that he is not on the historically righteous path. Xi's aspiration to exert total control is juxtaposed with his growing realization of its erosion, and the impending threats that come with it. This apprehension forms the crux of his concern regarding the public mourning for Li Keqiang.

¹⁶³ Jeffrey Knockel, Chris Dehghanpoor, and Masashi Crete-Nishihata, "Chinese Censorship Following the Death of Li Keqiang," The Citizen Lab, November 2, 2023, <https://citizenlab.ca/2023/11/chinese-censorship-following-the-death-of-li-keqiang/>.

¹⁶⁴ MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 422–30.

Chapter 4 Transforming Life into An Art of Prefigurative Resistance

4.1 Introduction of Yan Yinhong's Art Practice

Many Chinese artists create their art based on the special social circumstances in China. Some of them wisely use official languages and ideology as the art material to help them safely express their art ideas.

In the 2020 'Hot Snow' Performance Art Season 7, held in Inner Mongolia, Artist Yan Yinhong presented two compelling pieces. The first unfolded during a bus journey across the Inner Mongolian prairie, where Yan was seen alongside a shepherd. In a symbolic gesture, they stood together, each holding a banner. The shepherd, with a banner in each hand, was flanked by Yan and Tomasz Szrama, a Polish artist who assisted with the banners. The banner in the shepherd's left hand declared, "By 2020, no one will be left behind in building a moderately prosperous society," while the one in his right proclaimed, "Are you ready for the Chinese Dream in 2020?" Yan herself wore a banner around her neck, also themed around the "Chinese Dream." These banners are all widely seen official slogans on the streets.¹⁶⁵

The scene was striking: the shepherd, positioned at the center with the banners, appeared content despite the chaos around him. His sheep, the most valuable asset for livelihood, had scattered and separated from him, yet he seemed unconcerned. This performance art piece by Yan Yinhong captured a poignant moment, juxtaposing the lofty ideals of the banners with the shepherd's indifferent attitude toward his wandering sheep. It was a powerful commentary on the disparity between political slogans and the harsh realities faced by those living on the margins of society's promises.

Yan conceived this idea because the white cloth and the red slogans echoed each other

¹⁶⁵ Author's personal observation, during "Hot Snow" Performance Art Season 7, Inner Mongolia, 2020.

in striking contrast. The banners she used in the performance were genuine street banners that she had collected from the streets.

In this performance, the elderly shepherd epitomized the image of labor, starkly disconnected from the concept of a 'moderately prosperous society.' His presence alongside the banners created a poignant irony, highlighting the gap between political slogans and the lived experiences of ordinary people. The banner about the Chinese Dream that Yan Yinhong wore was a salvaged half-piece she found in a trash bin, symbolizing the fragmented reality of this dream for many. She also sourced used banners and had some replicated at a print shop, further emphasizing the contrast between propaganda and reality.¹⁶⁶

The shepherd's situation in 2020 was a testament to the ongoing struggles faced by many in China, contradicting the narrative of “common prosperity and commonwealth.” The reality for ordinary people, as represented by the shepherd, was far from the realization of a comfortable life, let alone the Chinese Dream as envisioned by Xi Jinping. In this context, the ideological construct crafted by Xi Jinping collapsed, unable to withstand the stark contrast presented by the realities of people like the shepherd. This performance art piece by Yan Yinhong was not merely an artistic expression but a powerful critique of the disconnect between lofty political rhetoric and the actual conditions of everyday life in China.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.



Figure 24 Yan Yinghong (right), Tomasz Szrama(left) and the old shepherd (middle), 2020.



Figure 25 The old Shepherd held the banners, 2020.

4.2 Background of Yan Yinhong's collective art project

Yan Yinhong's journey as an artist, as discussed in this thesis, is unique not only for her bold use of art to challenge propaganda but also for her resilience in the face of

China's patriarchal society. Her story is emblematic of the broader struggles faced by female artists in a cultural landscape dominated by male artists. Yan's experience sheds light on the difficulties that women in the Chinese art world often encounter, from gaining recognition to competing on an uneven playing field. She herself has remarked on the need to adopt distinctive strategies to draw attention and have her voice heard amidst a chorus of male artists.

This challenge is further complicated by issues of plagiarism, which pose a significant hurdle for female artists striving for visibility and recognition in their field. In the sphere of political pop art, for instance, the scarcity of female representation is striking. The contributions of women are frequently overshadowed, and their works appropriated without credit, effectively muffling their artistic voices. Yan Yinhong's story, therefore, is not merely about individual perseverance but also reflects a systemic issue within the art community, where gender imbalances and the struggle for recognition and respect continue to shape the experiences of female artists in China.¹⁶⁷

Yan Yinhong distinguishes herself not only through her artistic courage but also through her unique artistic expression. Described as both an innate and 'eccentric' artist, Yan possesses a sharp sensibility for capturing the theatricality and absurdity inherent in everyday life, along with a keen eye for identifying paradoxes within political power. Her approach to expressing ideas is direct yet not aggressive. Yan maintains that her interest lies not in politics per se, but in transcending her own experiences to critically re-examine social and gender issues.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Oliva Rosenman, "Artist's Take on Sexual Abuse Turns Ugly", *China Digital Times*, August 8, 2013, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/08/artists-take-on-sexual-abuse-turns-ugly/>

¹⁶⁸ Yan Yinhong, quoted in Niamh Cunningham, "Existence—What The Artists Say", Niamh Cunningham Personal Blog. May 29, 2018. https://niamhcunningham.com/existence-what-the-artists-say/?utm_source

In her performances, Yan uses her body as a primary medium of expression and interaction with society and various audiences. This use of the body extends beyond mere performance art; it is also evident in her ink paintings, where she explores the interplay between the body and art. For Yan, the body transcends its basic life-sustaining functions, natural desires, and even its own emotions. Art critics have interpreted Yan's work through Chinese traditional philosophical notions of naturalness, purity and freedom, reflecting the Taoist spirit of 'Xiaoyao' (total freedom). This approach reflects a profound philosophical understanding of art as a medium for free expression and a tool for engaging with and reflecting upon the world. Yan's work, therefore, is not just a form of artistic expression but a statement on the human condition and the complexities of societal and gender dynamics.

In the "Burn of Snow" performance art series in 2020, Yan Yinhong's artistic talent shone brightly through two artworks. Her sensitive incorporation of red elements and street banners into these pieces masterfully highlighted the disconnect between the idealized world depicted in political propaganda and the actual experiences of everyday life.¹⁶⁹

Yan's use of the color red, a hue deeply ingrained in Chinese political and cultural identity, especially in the context of communism, added a profound depth to her critique. By weaving in street banners, typically used for state propaganda, she created a striking contrast between the official narratives and the realities faced by ordinary citizens. This contrast not only examines the gap between propaganda and reality but also serves as a subtle yet powerful critique of the political system.

Her artworks serve as examples of how ordinary people respond to and challenge top-

¹⁶⁹ Author's personal observation, "Hot Snow" Performance Art Season 7, 2020.

down narratives. Yan's work transcends mere visual artistry, becoming a form of social commentary that gives authentic voice to perspectives often overlooked in political discourse. Yan Yinhong engages in a broader conversation through her creative expression about the role of art in society, the importance of individual viewpoints, and the dynamic, subtle relationship between those in power and those they govern. Her contributions to the art world are not only visually striking but also deeply meaningful in their exploration of societal and political themes, often evoking a sense of black humor.



Figure 26 Yan Yinhong and her work. Picture from the artist.

Yan Yinhong's family background, deeply rooted in China's societal and political

climate, significantly influences her artistic direction. Born into a family of artists and intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, her father, Yan Zhengxue, was a prominent art leader in Beijing's Yuanmingyuan Artist Village. Yan Yinhong was admitted to the China Central Academy of Fine Arts with the highest score, demonstrating both academic and artistic excellence. She became the only female student in the Department of Traditional Chinese Painting.

However, being the only female in a male-dominated environment was challenging rather than celebratory. Yan faced sexual harassment and unequal treatment, forcing her to learn self-protection and assert her presence and artistic voice. Additionally, her father's unjust imprisonment and the subsequent police surveillance of her family compelled her to consider strategies for interacting with an all-male police force from a young age. These experiences, intertwined with her female identity, are reflected in her artwork.¹⁷⁰

Yan Yinhong's "red memories" of the Cultural Revolution and her acute awareness of contemporary artistic elements in Xi Jinping's era have inspired her to create art pieces with distinct red themes. These works not only showcase her unique artistic style but also embody her personal journey and the broader sociopolitical context of her life in China.

The creation of the street banner artworks was closely related to Yan Yinhong's personal experiences and her interactions with the government. Before 2019, she made a great effort to establish a studio in Huantie Art Ville, near the 798 Art Zone. In 2019, she needed to decide whether to continue renting the space. By June, she sensed that the buildings would be demolished. Banners were posted throughout the

¹⁷⁰ Cunningham, "Existence – What the Artists Say".

ville, revealing government intentions such as “demolishing illegal constructions” and directives about public behavior. When she inquired whether the area would be demolished, those involved concealed the issue and simply encouraged her to renew her rental contract.¹⁷¹

She struggled greatly and visited the area daily to observe it, relying on her own intuition to judge whether demolition was imminent. The approaching contract renewal placed her under extreme conflict and pressure. She felt she was going crazy, sensing that the manager was hiding something from her, while the banners clearly indicated impending danger. Yet, this contradicted the narrative being presented to her. The red banners struck her as shocking, infusing a sense of magical realism into the situation and heightening her anxiety. Even the day before the demolition and their forced eviction, she asked the manager, the police, security guards, and others involved, yet they all denied any knowledge. The red banners left a lasting impression, intensifying her sense of magical realism and nervous tension.¹⁷²

After this experience and after moving and resettling, she reflected on how these red banners seemed to be connected to her. This is a phenomenon particular to China. The banners promoting “the Chinese Dream” were ubiquitous in 2020, a phenomenon unique to China. After half a year, she returned to the demolished site to collect the banners. She also photographed the banners that remained among the ruins.¹⁷³

As a participant in Season Seven of the 'Burn of Snow' Performance Art Festival and many other performance art festivals in both China and Canada, the author of this thesis has direct knowledge of performance art, which differs from traditional art forms. As a contemporary art medium, performance art is characterized not by a

¹⁷¹ Author’s personal interview with Yan Yinhong, December 2020.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

finished work, but by the complete process from the conception of the creative idea to the end of the performance act. This art form frequently fuses various materials and disciplines, extending beyond the materials employed to occasionally incorporate audience-artist interactions as fundamental aspects of the artistic process.

A notable example is Ai Weiwei's art project at the 2007 Documenta art festival in Kassel, Germany. His project was more than just a tower made of 1,001 Qing Dynasty wooden chairs. The artwork encompassed the entire journey, beginning with the selection of 1,001 volunteers from diverse backgrounds across China, bringing them to Germany, and documenting their everyday encounters with local people on the streets.¹⁷⁴ The performance included the construction of the wooden chair tower, which ultimately collapsed due to high winds. Ai Weiwei remarked in an interview, "Art is unpredictable, and that's why it is beautiful."¹⁷⁵ This performance art included every facet of the trip, including its consequences and the documentary that filmed these events. This approach, focusing on process and interaction, reflects the dynamic and multifaceted nature of performance art, where the experience and engagement are as significant as the physical artwork itself.

Yan Yinhong's performance art can be perceived as both a spontaneous event and a form of micro-resistance through action. This immediate, present-moment art can be captured through photography or writing, preserving and extending its significance. This section of the thesis aims to reevaluate two of Yan Yinhong's performance art pieces through written analysis, both of which engage with Xi Jinping's official slogans. Through descriptive language, the enduring significance of these ephemeral

¹⁷⁴ For Ai Weiwei's Fairytale project, see "Ai Weiwei: 1001 Chairs, 2007," documenta 12, Universes in Universe, accessed September 3, 2025, <https://universes.art/en/documenta/2007/aue-pavilion/ai-weiwei-chairs>; and "Fairytale," Slought Foundation, accessed September 3, 2025, https://slought.org/resources/fairytale_project.

¹⁷⁵ Ai Weiwei, "Fairytale," YouTube video, 2:33:16, Dec 18, 2012, <https://youtu.be/B1cYkK0cVEA>.

artistic practices is conveyed.

4.3 Significance and Implications of Yan Yinhong's Performance

Written language has always been a crucial medium for humans to record the history of civilization. Civilizations are often examined through the lens of their written documents. While artwork can be documented through images, written language remains an indispensable tool for chronicling and transmitting the history of art. It enables a deeper exploration and understanding of the context, details, and implications of artistic works, providing a narrative that complements the visual documentation. In the case of Yan Yinhong's art, writing serves not only as a record but also as a means to explain the layers of meaning and the sociopolitical commentary embedded in her performances.



Figure 27 People participated in 'Burn of Snow' Performance Art Festival, the local officials and police were watching Yan Yinhong's performance around her temporary tent, 2020.

Another of Yan Yinhong's performance art pieces was staged on the Xilamuren grassland. How does Inner Mongolia relate to red banners? She found an important point of connection: the blue Hada. The color breaks the monotony of the red banners and alters their meaning, as Hadas also symbolizes people's prayers and wishes for beauty. Similarly, the red banners can be seen as a form of aspiration for a better society.

She prepared a frame to support the banners and Hadas, carefully considering which materials would be the lightest. She bought fifty bed nets and removed the steel

frames from inside. She also purchased over 1,000 blue Hadas. She was somewhat nervous, as she did not know what would happen on the road or in what environment the performance might take place. When she arrived at the Xilamuren grassland, the provider of the performance space told her, “You have performed with the red banners already; do not use them again. Don’t take out the red ones—just use the blue ones. The blue is just as good.” She felt frustrated because her work would be meaningless if she only hung Hadas like the locals, simply repeating their religious activities. Later, with the curator’s explanation and negotiation, they finally reached an agreement. During the day, she was quite nervous because local officials arrived, so she played hide-and-seek with them while preparing the installation—sometimes explaining, sometimes coaxing. The curator Xu Xu intentionally shouted, “How positive! What positive energy! Do you see? This is a piece full of positive energy! Positive energy!” The shouting was both amusing and absurd. Yan tried to delay displaying the red elements as much as possible, fearing they would be seen by local officials and police too early. On the last day, before dawn, she got up to hang the red banners.¹⁷⁶

On the last day, under her tent adorned with red banners and Hadas, she performed her art. She turned on Tibetan religious music and began the performance. Then, local officials and special police arrived, her work was torn down, and the photographer was arrested—all of which seemed to be the inevitable conclusion of the event. The dismantling of her work paralleled the demolition of her studio; these two events were intimately connected.¹⁷⁷

The confrontation resulting from Yan Yinhong’s second performance art piece

¹⁷⁶ Author’s personal observation, “Hot Snow” Performance Art Season 7, 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Yan Yinhong’s work series with red elements could be dated back during the political pop period. Many of her following works also contain red memories.

illustrates a crackdown on people's beliefs in the face of propaganda. Her beautiful tent, constructed with blue Hadas (which symbolize best wishes in Tibetan culture) and red banners with positive messages, was dismantled by the local government. This could be seen as a metaphor: the attractive scenes presented by officials are so fragile and artificial that they cannot protect people and will eventually collapse.



Figure 28 Yan Yinhong conducted performance art in the temporary tent, 2020.

4.4 Wu Shanzhuan and His Sarcastic Art to Red Banners

A notable early example of artists using art practice to demonstrate the impact of street banners on daily life is Wu Shanzhuan's Red Humor Series, which began in 1986. This series, comprising four parts—"Red Characters: Big-Character Posters"

(1986), "Red Seals" (1987), "Windy Red Flags" (1987), and "Big Business" (1989)—represents an early form of political pop art in China.

In his installation and performance piece "Red Characters: Big-Character Posters" (1986), Wu collected slogans from street posters prevalent during the Cultural Revolution. These slogans are emblematic of the era, characterized by their distinct revolutionary fervor and ideological zeal. Phrases such as “To struggle with selfishness and to criticize revisionism” and “Exercise for strength in the class struggle” are a true reflection of the political and social climate of the time.

Wu's work is significant in the way it captures and repurposes the language of street banners from the Mao period, transforming them into a form of artistic expression. By doing so, he not only preserves a piece of historical memory but also invites reflection on the impact and influence of these street banners on Chinese society. His art serves as a commentary on the pervasiveness of typical Chinese political language in everyday life and its role in shaping public consciousness.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Geremie R. Barmé, “History Writ Large: Big-Character Posters, Red Logorrhoea and the Art of Words,” *PORTAL: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 9, no. 3 (November 2012): 2, <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/article/view/2645/3352>.



Figure 29 Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor series, Red Characters: Big-Character Posters* (1986)

Artist Wu Shanzhuan once said that he was fortunate to find large slogan banners from the Cultural Revolution to use as materials. Through his artistic transformation, the violence of the words on the banners is deconstructed. The red element from the revolution becomes an inspiration for the artist. Even today, the current strict political and social environment can be seen as fertile ground for art. Social problems and issues continue to inspire perceptive artists. It cannot be concluded that the Cultural Revolution was beneficial for the development of modern and contemporary Chinese art. Without the Cultural Revolution, modern art would still have emerged at an appropriate time; however, in more turbulent periods, there are more possibilities for creation. A difficult environment also helps artworks become more powerful and imbued with greater tension. In today's context, art for art's sake is no longer suitable; contemporary art is not merely for pure aesthetic pursuit, but rather a platform and medium for individual expression, inquiry into society, and exploration of the intrinsic spiritual world.

Wu wrote in an article, “We should no longer pay attention to the question of what is art by concentrating on the art objects; instead, we should investigate the social structure and art environment where artworks are located.”¹⁷⁹ This shift in focus to social issues is not unique to Wu Shanzhuan. Born and raised in an authoritarian regime, many perceptive artists have found society to be their inspiration and have turned their attention to reality. Their personal experiences, marked by the times, are reflected in their creations. Therefore, these modern and contemporary artworks serve as kaleidoscopes for social observation and as a distinctive way to record history.

¹⁷⁹ Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 227.

Conclusion: The Disillusion of Ideological Construct in Contemporary China

This thesis critically examines the ideological narratives propagated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) through street banners, an important medium of official public discourse in Xi Jinping's China. It shows the inherent paradoxes and challenges within the CCP's ideological constructs. By analyzing the grassroots' reactions, this thesis convincingly arguing that these contradictions do not effectively address the societal issues China currently has, nor fulfill their intended role of maintaining the Party's, especially Xi Jinping's leadership stability. The analysis underscores the hollowness of the "Core Socialist Values" and the "Chinese Dream", suggesting that without tangible substance, these values fail to resonate meaningfully with the populace, thereby the propaganda efforts is actually ineffective to the people.

The research methodology adeptly combines theoretical discourse with empirical examples, drawing from the author's extensive personal experiences and a deep understanding of the Chinese sociopolitical landscape. The thesis presents a nuanced interpretation of the banners' imagery and text, considering the context of their emergence and the complex issues they attempt to guide. It also brings to light the limitations of these ideological tools, which are unable to resolve the very problems they aim to address.

In this thesis, Chapter Two is structured in contrasting and echoing with Chapter Three and Four. Chapter Two begins by introducing the typical examples of street banners appeared in the Xi Jinping era, serving as an entry point to discuss the governance objectives of Xi Jinping's government. These objectives are divided into two main categories.

The first category concerns the stability of the CCP rule across the nation as it represents itself as a centennial Party. Within Xi Jinping's "Twenty-Four Character Core Values", there are statements in the national aspect addressing this goal. Additionally, Xi's emphasis on the revival and return to traditional culture represents an attempt to leverage the cultural heritage as a means of affirming the CCP's historical legitimacy, suggesting that history has chosen the Communist Party.

On the other hand, Xi Jinping's focus on shaping and reinforcing his core position within the Party and beyond is aimed at maintaining his core leadership status. His banners and statements regarding concepts reflect his ambitions for a more centralized and dictatorial position. This method of using banners as a propaganda machine indicates Xi's strategy to consolidate power and assert his authority. within the CCP and without, from the broader context of Chinese governance. The Chapter Two, therefore, not only explore the content and implications banners in Xi's Era but also analyze how they serve to reinforce his political Idea and leadership style.

In Chapter Three and Four, the discussion is enriched by a study of grassroots reactions, including unofficial banners and artistic expressions by figures such as Yan Yinhong, which serve as a counter-narrative to the official ideology. also, upon the passing of former Premier Li Keqiang, a considerable number of citizens engaged in spontaneous acts of remembrance, highlighting his efforts toward economic reform and his attentive concern for the well-being of the common people. This public sentiment subtly underscores a broader discontent with what is seen as President Xi Jinping's lack of populist outreach and a shortfall in decisive action. His action and the result are on the

contrary with what is said in his propaganda. These examples not only illustrate the public's critical engagement with and often satirical response to state propaganda but also highlight the difficulty of achieving ideological hegemony in contemporary China.

Compared to the founding leaders of the Communist Party, Xi Jinping represents a generation that inherited power, rather than one that forged it. Lacking the legendary narrative of the first-generation leaders who rose from humble beginnings to win the respects through numerous battles, Xi does not possess the same charisma or prestige earned through personal hardworking and achievements. This legendary aura naturally contributed to the cult of personality surrounding leaders like Stalin, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and Tito, who exuded a charismatic charm.

Xi Jinping, in contrast, relies on imitation and self-crafting. His emulation of Mao Zedong is an attempt to position and portrait himself as China's contemporary Mao, but he falls short when compared to Mao's revolutionary legacy. From a psychological perspective, "narcissism" sometimes stems from "inferiority", suggesting that the creation of one's own godlike image may originate from deep-seated fears and insecurities. This fear, that the failure to establish his prestige could lead to the loss of power, reflects a dictator's inherent insecurity, a pathological trait common to many autocrats.

Authoritarian leaders are often inherently suspicious; a trait exacerbated by the machinations and schemes they employed on their path to power. Projecting their own tactics onto others, they are constantly sensitive on guard against anyone who might use similar strategies to challenge their supreme authority. This sense of insecurity and the need to constantly reinforce their power base is a defining characteristic of authoritarian rule, as seen in Xi Jinping's leadership style.

When an authoritarian leader seeks to strengthen their power but lacks sufficient

confidence and cunning, their narrow-mindedness can transform suspicion into overthinking and action, leading to brutal political actions or other oppressive movements. For instance, the recent "zero-COVID" policy in China is not merely a public health measure against the pandemic, nor is it a government rule formulated with the health and well-being of the masses in mind. Instead, it represents Xi Jinping's pathological and patriarchal political way to tighten control over Chinese society.

Additionally, aging authoritarian leaders often undergo changes in their physical and psychological health, exacerbating their inherent tendencies toward overthinking and delusional thinking. They begin by imagining various unreal "enemies" and then use their unrestricted power to eliminate these perceived threats through extreme measures. This insecurity can lead to two outcomes.

Firstly, the CCP's propaganda machinery might work tirelessly against common sense to deify Xi, portraying him as a visionary, exceptionally talented, and a distinctive new world leader with remarkable leadership skills. The narrative would suggest that all sectors of the country should rally around Xi Jinping, showering the General Secretary with adulation, akin to stars orbiting a moon. This approach reflects a desperate attempt to booster Xi's image and legitimacy, compensating for his insecurities and fears of losing power.

If the first outcome of Xi Jinping's insecurity, characterized by farcical and comedic elements, seems relatively benign, the second potential outcome could be tragically consequential. While Xi's imitation of Mao Zedong might border on the absurd, a decision to establish his own personal legend could lead to a tragic shift, bringing misfortune to both China and the world. For instance, if Xi were to emulate Mao's belligerence by launching a military campaign to unify Taiwan, attempting to cast himself as a leader surpassing Mao in achieving national unification, it could result in a catastrophe akin to Putin's emulation of Peter the Great, bringing immense disaster to

the nation and the global community.

This scenario could also mirror the tragedy of Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte. After seizing power and dissolving the parliament, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte declared himself Emperor of France and, like his uncle, initiated foreign wars. His eventual capture by Prussian forces at the Battle of Sedan left him as a historical footnote, remembered more as an imitator than a great leader.

To think about China's significant role in international relations, regardless of the outcome, Xi Jinping's actions will inevitably impact the global community. His leadership style and decisions, whether they lead to what kind of results, will have far-reaching consequences, not just for China but for the international order as well.

Through a detailed analysis and comparison of street banners during Xi Jinping era, this thesis aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of Xi Jinping's governance style and personal ambitions. By analyzing the underlying reasons and explanations behind these banners, the thesis wants to uncover the motivations and implications of Xi's leadership methods.

Furthermore, by examining the latest individual or social movements within society, the thesis intends to provide real feedback on Xi's ideological propaganda. This analysis demonstrates the disconnect and contradictions between the ideological construction and the actual social realities, highlighting how ideology in the Xi era has not served as a protective talisman for his governance. Instead, it has exposed the void of propaganda, as evidenced by the public's resistance and silent mockery. These grassroots responses reflect the instability and crisis of Xi Jinping's leadership as the fifth-generation leader of China.

Contributions to the Related Field of Studies

The conclusion of this thesis is both a synthesis of its findings and a springboard for future research. It contributes to the field of ideological studies by offering a fresh perspective on the real efforts of ideological construction in authoritarian regimes. While acknowledging the constraints of the research, particularly the limited scope for fieldwork within China, the thesis posits that its insights are the beginning of a broader scholarly inquiry rather than an endpoint. The public's nuanced reception of the CCP's ideological messaging, as evidenced by the spontaneous creation of alternative narratives, challenges the feasibility of Xi Jinping's ideological project and suggests the potential for ongoing instability within the regime's narrative control. This thesis, therefore, not only provides a comprehensive critique of the current ideological strategy of the CCP but also opens up new avenues for examining the complex interplay between state power and public perception in the realm of ideology.

The study of ideology has long been a classic research topic, particularly aims to socialist countries like the former Soviet Union and Socialist China. However, the exploration of street banners with distinct Chinese characteristics, especially when contrasted with those from Mao Zedong's era, offers fresh insights into the unique features of banners from the Xi Jinping era. Given the contemporary nature of this content and its recent emergence, many previous scholars have not had the opportunity to include such analysis in their research. Therefore, the study of street banners during Xi Jinping's tenure represents a missing link in earlier research, providing a new dimension to the understanding of ideological shifts and propaganda strategies in modern China. This thesis aims to fill that gap, offering a timely and relevant analysis of the evolving nature of ideological expression in China's public spaces.

Street banners serve as direct carriers of ideology and are crucial for analyzing and realizing the policies and directions of socialist, centralized states. With Xi Jinping's

increasing growing global influence, understanding his ideology and how does it constructed, underlying reasons of why to create these contents, and its potential impacts, becomes increasingly important. These questions form the basis of a top-down governmental analysis.

Conversely, a bottom-up analysis, starting with the reaction from the masses, provides an effective assessment of whether Xi's ideological propaganda has achieved its intended results. This perspective is particularly valuable in evaluating the effectiveness of his ideological campaign. Such analysis not only demonstrates the shortcomings of Xi Jinping's ideological approach but also highlights its failure to achieve the desired outcomes that he has expected. By examining both the government's top-down implementation of ideology and the grassroots responses, this research offers a comprehensive proof that Xi's failure of his ideological construction with his approaches.

Reflections on Research Limitations and Prospects for Future Research

Researching and writing about a totalitarian regime presents its own set of challenges and risks. A significant barrier is the language; much of the relevant literature and research materials are in Chinese, limiting accessibility for international scholars. This language barrier also contributes to a scarcity of Chinese scholars or experts who write on these topics, as the scope for critical analysis within China is constrained. Most Chinese research tends to be policy-oriented and often hides away from directly addressing or critiquing the Party system. Furthermore, publications that openly criticize the Party are virtually non-existent in China. As a native Chinese speaker, the author uses the bilingual skills to fill these research gaps in the study of China's political system and seeks an environment that supports academic freedom for conducting and disseminating this research to the non-Chinese academic circles where it is unavailable to access the first-hand or Chinese materials.

However, it must be acknowledged a potential unconscious bias in this thesis, stemming from the author's upbringing within the Party system. This bias, whether positive or negative, is an important consideration and limitation in the formulation of this thesis. It is crucial to remain aware of these inherent biases and strive for objectivity and critical analysis throughout the research process.

As China continues to become increasingly important in the modern day world, its significance as a major economic and political entity and its strategic relationships with other countries are becoming so apparent that cannot be ignored. My goal is to provide fresh insights and a deeper understanding of China's political dynamics, which will add to the existing body of knowledge on global relationships and political studies.

Additionally, through all the analysis above, the thesis also aims to make reasonable

predictions about the future trajectory of Xi Jinping's rule. By understanding the current dynamics of his governance, including the public's reaction to his policies and the effectiveness of his ideological strategies, the thesis also provides insights into the potential challenges and predictions of the future potential actions of Xi Jinping's leadership in the coming years.

Furthermore, by situating China's overt and strategically articulated pursuit of great-power status, across the domain of tech dominance, geo-economics, military, new energy, and the supply chains—this study provides an interpretive framework for understanding its international behaviour. Analyzing the ideological foundations and propaganda mechanisms that structure China's domestic governance enables a more grounded assessment of its likely foreign-policy trajectories and long-term global ambitions. Accordingly, this thesis should be read not as an end, but as an initial analytical intervention that establishes the theoretical groundwork for subsequent empirical and conceptual inquiries into the evolving domestic and international policies of China.

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