

Assessing the Features of Propaganda and Thought Work in Post-Trust China

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Abstract

This article endeavours to evaluate the attributes of propaganda and thought work in contemporary China. Previous studies have highlighted resemblances to Mao-era leadership, particularly in terms of ideological guidance. However, this article contends that while the propaganda strategies employed in contemporary China exhibit similar characteristics to those of the Mao era, the changes in the receivers of the party's propaganda and thought work would not lead to similar ideological consequences seen in the late Mao era. Through an in-depth examination of the features of propaganda and thought work, and interviews with numerous individuals in China, this article demonstrates that despite the post-trust political environment potentially reducing the Party's capability for socio-political mobilisation, the detrimental consequences would be simultaneously mitigated by people's long-term post-trust sentiment and indifferent attitude. This article contributes to the understanding of ideology in contemporary China.

Keywords: *Propaganda and thought work in China, the Mao era, indifference, Post-trust, Ideology.*

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1. Introduction

1.1 *Research Background*

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Mao Zedong implemented an extremely coercive propaganda strategy in order to fully control and manipulate ideology in China. Under Mao's leadership, the propaganda and thought work in China was conducted through various means, including massive political study campaigns, struggle sessions (*Pi Dou*), and the practice of "speaking bitterness" (*Su Ku*). These long-lasting propaganda campaigns were characterised by absoluteness and sharp transitions. Any alternative views other than the mainstream voice faced serious punishment from the government, and the official voice was highly dynamic, constantly undergoing abrupt transformations. Thus, Mao's propaganda strategy eventually triggered indifference among the people toward the Party's political rhetoric. For instance, people in Yan'an, the hallowed place of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), showed no interest in politics and ignored the latest party directives. Instead, they revitalised local traditions that had been "beaten down" (*Da Dao*) by the CCP (Dikötter, 2023a: 297-298). Moreover, Mao's coercive propaganda strategy even led to massive democratic movements in the late 1970s. The most notable events were the April 5th Incident and the Democracy Wall in 1979.

Therefore, it was clear to Deng Xiaoping, the *de facto* supreme leader of the PRC after Mao's death, that continuing Mao's propaganda strategy would be detrimental to the political stability of the CCP, as it had already provoked widespread resistance among the people. Thus, Deng to a considerable degree loosened the ideological control among the Chinese populace. Toward the Democracy Wall, Deng said, "What is the harm of a little opposition?" (Vogel, 2011: 254). He highly praised it: "The Democracy Wall is very good... 99 per cent of the Wall is good... Let the masses speak out their grievance... Posters are protected by the constitution... This is a kind of democracy" (Shao, 2015: 87). While there were anti-bourgeois liberalisation movements primarily led by members of the conservative faction within the CCP, one could argue that the Chinese people enjoyed an unprecedented level of freedom during the 1980s. Although such a degree of freedom was no longer tolerated after the chaos in the late 1980s, the CCP still allowed certain non-subversive speeches to a certain extent, as long as they were not perceived as threats to the Communist regime.

However, the CCP did not alter its propaganda strategy until the regime assumed leadership in 2012. He gradually abandoned Deng's political legacy and tightened domestic ideological control. His policies have been broadly regarded as retrogressive or "backwardness" by many scholars and liberals, earning him the label "Mao Zedong of the 21st century" (Ding & Panda, 2022: 30). Regarding propaganda and thought work, the current regime's strategy also exhibits many features of Mao's, particularly "absoluteness" and "sharp transitions." State surveillance and political censorship were significantly intensified. More political study campaigns, similar to those in the Mao era, were officially revitalised as a mandatory daily task for every CCP member and college student (Liang *et al.*, 2021). It seems that the current regime's return to Mao's approach could once again lead to strong public resistance and potentially escalate into democratic movements. However, such resistance exists but has not escalated to the scale of the massive subversive movements seen during the late Mao era. Online implicit criticisms and expressions of cynicism are pervasive; however, no large-scale democratic movements have emerged.

1.2 Post-Trust

Post-trust, a term extensively debated by scholars, refers to a societal condition in which public trust does not "simply disappear altogether but is instead re-allocated" (Löfstedt, 2009: xv). Trust, as scholars have interpreted Giddens's notion, is "confidence in the operation of institutions that people cannot directly monitor and control" and serves as "the lifeblood of modernity" (Sanders & West, 2003: 11). It is absent in the most primal forms of human existence, where mistrust constitutes the normal state among individuals. Mistrust, a "general sense of the unreliability of a person or thing," constitutes the fundamental state of human beings, as "other people are, in some sense, unknowable *per se*" (Carey, 2017: 8-10). It is also mutually constitutive with trust, as the possibility of mistrust is necessary for trust to exist (Mühlfried, 2018: 11). Thus, the concept of post-trust does not signify a regression to mistrust but rather a decline in trust toward the once seemingly reliable authorities. In this context, the official channels traditionally responsible for transmitting knowledge have lost their perceived legitimacy and authority, leading to a reallocation of trust to alternative sources. The original authorities quickly become targets of mistrust, with people tending to disregard, ridicule, and even attack them, often perceiving

them as conspicuously out of touch or irrelevant.

The post-trust Chinese society does not imply complete mistrust in the CCP; rather, the key questions revolve around the extent of trust, as well as the shifts in what and whom the public chooses to entrust. The debate surrounding trust in contemporary China remains highly contentious. Some scholars argue that a form of “implicit political trust” exists extensively among the Chinese populace, wherein individuals tend to automatically and intuitively comply with the regime. This implicit trust is considered crucial to the regime’s stability (Huang *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, some scholars refute this notion, arguing that public dissatisfaction with the CCP, driven by its poor performance and corruption, undermines trust in the Party’s governance (Pei, 2008: 187, 198), which could potentially lead to political instability (Pei, 2008: 212).

In the early stages, there is no doubt that the CCP enjoyed ultimate credibility, with Chairman Mao wielding absolute charisma and commanding unwavering loyalty among the general populace. However, such public trust, or the so-called implicit political trust, was eroded through coercive ideological campaigns and relentless political movements initiated by Mao, leading to the emergence of a post-trust society in which individuals increasingly disregard and even ridicule the CCP’s discourse. The Chinese population has become significantly less influenced by the CCP’s political discourse, with their enthusiasm for politics declining markedly in the post-Mao era. This shift could arguably be seen as desirable for the CCP. As Jiwei Ci notes, Deng Xiaoping leveraged hedonism to counteract the nihilism that arose from Mao’s political failure to construct a socialist utopia (Ci, 1994: 7-8). Thus, China’s post-trust society is largely politically oriented, reflecting both a form of resistance to the CCP’s coercive propaganda and ideological campaigns originating in the Mao era, as well as a persistent indifference toward the Party’s political rhetoric—an attitude paradoxically desired by the CCP to maintain political stability. Therefore, analysing the similarities with the Mao-era strategies, particularly in terms of propaganda, necessitates a comprehensive examination of China’s post-trust society, where the CCP’s rhetoric has lost its former impact. Public trust in China should not be viewed solely as a reaction to the CCP’s past performance, nor should the corresponding public sentiment and socio-political (in)stability be regarded merely as products of its (non)existence, as suggested in the existing literature, but rather as a crucial factor requiring evaluation within

the post-trust analytical framework to better understand socio-political (in) stability in contemporary China.

1.3 Research Methods and Aims

This article aims to analyse the characteristics of propaganda and thought work, as well as their related consequences, in post-trust China under the current leadership. It will first offer a concise overview of the transformations in propaganda and thought work in China since 1949, emphasising the formation and deepening of a post-trust environment. Subsequently, it will evaluate the propaganda and thought work of this era through examinations of several cases and in-depth interviews with individuals living in China, with a particular focus on public reactions shaped by the accompanying social transformation.

Assessing public sentiment toward the CCP's propaganda and thought work is indeed challenging, given the diversity of Chinese society and the authoritarian nature of the CCP. No specific method can be deemed entirely objective or free from bias. I have conducted long-term observations and in-depth interviews with numerous individuals residing in Beijing, China. All of my interviewees are closely connected to the CCP; they are either currently/previiously employed by the Party and the Chinese government or are children of Party cadres. Although these social and political elites cannot represent the entirety of Chinese society, their perspectives provide valuable insights into the attitudes and sentiments within the CCP's inner circles. Given that these individuals are more likely to display alignment with the CCP's ideology due to their connections, it is reasonable to infer that the general public, who lack such direct ties to the CCP, may exhibit even greater levels of skepticism, indifference, or resistance toward the Party's propaganda and thought work in this post-trust era.

This article argues that although the current regime's propaganda strategy shares many similarities with Mao's, the CCP does not face the same challenges as it did under Mao or Deng, as China has long entered a post-trust era. Chinese people inherently do not trust state media controlled by the CCP. Therefore, the side effects of coerciveness are mitigated by people's long-term distrust and indifference. Although Mao's propaganda strategies share many similarities with current ones, their consequences and underlying sociopolitical logic differ fundamentally.

2. Mao's Propaganda Strategy: "Absoluteness" and "Sharp Transitions"

The propaganda and thought work during the Mao era were extremely coercive, and millions of Chinese people were severely purged due to the massive political campaigns. Although Mao's purges were primarily conducted by the masses mobilised by his political rhetoric, his propaganda strategy, characterised by the features of "absoluteness" and "sharp transitions," triggered ideological turbulence among the people, and therefore led to political instability in China. This part aims to elucidate Mao's propaganda strategy by analysing three cases: the anti-rightist movement, the Sino-Soviet Split, and the death of Lin Biao.

In 1956, Khrushchev delivered his famous speech titled "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences", known as the "Secret Speech", at the 20th Party Congress. This speech soon sparked an ideological crisis across the Eastern Bloc, as people began to question the legitimacy and sanctified image of these socialist leaders. Mao was also frequently compared to Stalin by the people, with questions like "Why does the XX Congress struggle with the cult of the individual while in the Chinese People's Republic, comrade Mao-Tse-Tung is glorified as 'Good Emperor Mao'?" being posed by some liberals (Kemp-Welch, 1996). Mao soon initiated the "Hundred Flowers Campaign," explicitly stating that the CCP should allow alternative views, or even the "right ones", to be expressed without intervention. He highly encouraged Chinese intellectuals to speak out about their dissent (Wu *et al.*, 2013: 574-575). In response to Mao's call, the propaganda machine began to emphasise and promote the idea that Chinese people enjoyed freedom in "literary and artistic work and scientific research" (Lu, 1956). Soon after, a widespread explosion of discontent prevailed throughout China. Many famous intellectuals publicly and explicitly voiced their doubts and alternative views regarding the CCP. For example, Zhang Bojun and Luo Longji expressed certain systematic faults of the CCP's leadership (Kiely, 1993). However, an abrupt transformation occurred in the following year. After hearing the massive dissents from the masses, Mao decided to launch a crackdown on those who spoke out, characterising the Hundred Flowers Campaign as "luring the snake away from its hole" (*Yin She Chu Dong*) (Shen, 2011: 25-40). Soon, China's propaganda machine suddenly shifted to a completely antithetical way, strongly criticising the so-called "rightists" and labeling them as "cow demons and snake spirits" (*Niu Gui She Shen*)

(*People's Daily*, July 1, 1957). This large-scale crackdown, known as the “Anti-Rightist Campaign”, was rigidly implemented by the local cadres, who strictly adhered to Mao’s prescribed ratio of rightists in each working unit. Or, it could be said that Mao’s quota had to be absolutely met by all local cadres. Consequently, there were many “accidental dissidents” who were randomly chosen by those cadres in order to fulfill Mao’s “great guidance” (Dikötter, 2023b: 301-303). Those rightists were sent to military farms to “labour under supervision” or undergo “labour reform”, while ultra-rightists were sent to re-education camps (Wang, 2017: 6-7).

The case of the Sino-Soviet Split also illustrates the sharp transitions in ideological construction. After the establishment of the PRC, “leaning to one side” became one of Mao’s most fundamental policies, where China joined the Eastern Bloc and formed a formal alliance with the Soviet Union. Even though there were strong anti-Soviet sentiments in China, particularly in Manchuria due to Russia’s past invasions and interventions (He, 2010: 28-46), the CCP coercively repressed these sentiments through its propaganda and thought work. Lu Dingyi, the head of the Publicity Department, stated that the propaganda machine in China should “consistently showcase the lifestyles and achievements” of the USSR (Chi, 1987: 56-57). The *People's Daily* massively promoted Stalin and elevated his status above Mao’s by cheering “Long Live Stalin” before “Long Live Chairman Mao” (*People's Daily*, December 26, 1949). The CCP also organised mandatory pro-Soviet and anti-American rallies. People who did not join these rallies were severely punished by the state, either through fines or by being accused of belonging to “a secret society” (Dikötter, 2023b: 153-155). Individuals who expressed any alternative views on the Soviet Union faced coercive official purges. For instance, one engineer was labeled as a “rightist” and exiled to Manchuria solely because he said that “Not all of the Soviet experts were good people” (Shen, 2015: 3). However, after the dramatic Sino-Soviet Split in the 1960s, the pro-Soviet propaganda and ideological efforts were abruptly and completely replaced by the exact opposite: anti-Soviet propaganda. The most notable articles used by the CCP to criticise the Soviet leaders and the USSR were the so-called “Nine Comments on the CPSU” published by the *People's Daily*. The anti-Soviet propaganda and thought work also exhibited the characteristic of absoluteness, wherein non-anti-Soviet opinions were strictly prohibited. For instance, another engineer was also “beaten down” for his “counter-revolutionary speeches,” merely because he stated that

“There were good people among the Soviet experts” (Shen, 2015: 3).

The death of Lin Biao was the most shocking case for Chinese people, causing ideological turbulence and suspicion toward the Cultural Revolution. Due to the persecution of Mao’s previously designated successor, Liu Shaoqi, during the Cultural Revolution, Lin rose to second place in the CCP, ranking only below Mao. Mao explicitly designated Lin as his successor, a decision that was enshrined in the Party’s constitution in 1969 (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006: 291). Thus, China’s propaganda and thought work profoundly promoted Lin’s image, and to a considerable extent, cultivated a cult of personality around him. A mandatory revolutionary ritual, “morning request, evening report” (*Zao Qing Shi, Wan Hui Bao*) was practiced by all Chinese people every day. During the practice, individuals were required to hold the “Little Red Book”, stand upright, face Mao’s portrait, bow, and cheer “Long live Chairman Mao, Vice Chairman Lin, may you always be healthy” (Jian et al., 2006: 194). Lin’s image was massively propagated by the propaganda machine as “Chairman Mao’s close comrade-in-arms” (*Qin Mi Zhan You*) (*People’s Daily*, May 21, 1968). However, following Lin’s death, attributed to his unsuccessful attempt to flee to the Soviet Union, the propaganda and thought work sharply turned extremely anti-Lin. Mao amended the party constitution by removing contents related to Lin and formed an investigation group to draft a formal resolution on the “crimes of the Lin Biao anti-party clique” (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006: 360-361). Shortly thereafter, massive anti-Lin campaigns were launched in China, and the most famous one was the “Criticise Lin, Criticise Confucius Campaign” initiated in 1974. Thus, Lin’s sanctified and glorified image abruptly plummeted, transitioning from being reversed as the “Number Two Deity” to being vilified as the “Number One Demon” (Qiu, 2013).

Mao’s repressive propaganda and thought work, marked by its absoluteness and sharp transitions, ultimately led to profound indifference, sarcastic views, and even resistance within Chinese society. For instance, by the late Mao era, people were no longer motivated by the Party’s political discourses. Instead, prohibited “counter-revolutionary” literature quietly began to spread among the Chinese populace (Dikötter, 2023a: 315). Such ideological turbulence, caused by the abrupt shift and rigid implementation of the highly fluid propaganda and thought work, as MacFarquhar argues, resulted in the discrediting of Mao’s Cultural Revolution (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006: 336). However, this discrediting extended beyond the

political movement launched by Mao, affecting the entire CCP's political rhetoric. This coercive propaganda strategy resulted in Chinese people no longer trusting the CCP's discourse, which eventually led to political instability for the party. The April 5 Incident and the Democracy Wall in 1979 were prominent examples of resistance from the Chinese populace.

3. Anti-Models and Lessons: The Post-1980s Propaganda and Thought Work

Recognising and experiencing the political instability caused by Mao's propaganda strategy, Deng Xiaoping, the *de facto* paramount leader of China, understood that reform was necessary to maintain the CCP's leadership. In the late 1970s, Deng largely allowed free expression and dissent among the Chinese people. As a result, Chinese society began to rapidly democratise, with the voices of many liberals and reformers becoming prevalent.

Deng also explicitly stated that political reform was essential to "adapt to the situation" and that the CCP should expand "socialist democracy." Soon after, the *People's Daily* published a series of articles promoting political reform, with the first article titled "Political Issues Can Be Discussed" (Wu, 1997: 20-21). Therefore, following Deng's directive, a formal political reform study group known as the "Central Study Group" was established, led by Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang. The core members of this group were all high-ranking politburo members (Wu, 1997: 22-23).

The reform of propaganda and thought work was a key part of Deng's political reform, and of course, a core mission of this group. Since the anti-CCP and anti-Deng big-character posters were posted on the Democracy Wall in late 1979, the CCP realised that allowing such free speech would also lead to another form of political instability (Vogel, 2011: 254-256). Thus, the entire 1980s can be seen as a trial for the CCP to find a proper approach to its propaganda and thought work, which could be argued as a process akin to Deng's "crossing the river by feeling the stones" strategy. In the interview with me, a person who was closely related to the Office of the Central Seminar Group on Political Reform formed by Bao Tong and Zhao Ziyang during the 1980s stated that the decade was characterised by a pattern where odd-numbered years saw liberalisation, while even-numbered years saw a tightening of restrictions. China's ideology was in chaos, with massive democratisation movements launched by the people. However, the CCP's attitude was ambiguous and even polarised between

liberals and conservatives. For instance, regarding the 1986 Chinese student demonstrations, which were caused by loosened ideological control, Hu Qili, the first secretary of the CCP secretariat, emphasised that the CCP needed to be cautious about “publicising propaganda” (*Gong Kai Xuan Chuan*), and only advised that radical proposals that could not be achieved in the short-term should be slowed down (Wu, 1997: 216-217). It could be said that liberal ideas prevailed in China during the 1980s, which ultimately led to the chaos in the final years of the 1980s.

The chaos in the late 1980s served as another significant domestic lesson for the CCP. After the suppression of the demonstration, Deng stated, “The developments in this decade are good, but the biggest mistake is in education. Political thought work was not emphasised, and the development of education is lacking” (Deng, edited by *the Party Literature Research Centre of the CCP Central Committee*, 1991: 491). The CCP realised that to a large extent, allowing free speech was indeed detrimental to its durability, as permitted anti-CCP speeches could eventually develop into subversive movements. Moreover, the democratisation of the Soviet satellite states and the collapse of the USSR served as an international lesson for the CCP. Gorbachev’s *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* triggered large-scale ideological turbulence in the USSR, and his propaganda strategy, characterised by “transparency” to a large extent, was seen by the CCP as an anti-model (Brady, 2010: 175-177). Therefore, the CCP needed to find a balance between Mao’s extremely coercive strategy and the “failed trials” in the 1980s.

After learning from these lessons, Deng once again adjusted the CCP’s propaganda strategy. The CCP began to pay extra attention to subversive speeches that could potentially threaten the regime, resolutely suppressing them without the slightest mercy. Both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the supreme leaders of China, emphasised the necessity of the CCP’s close intervention in propaganda and thought work related to the “overall situation” and “political principles” (*People’s Daily*, 1999; *People’s Daily*, 2008). However, the CCP still allowed a certain degree of free speech and criticism as long as they were considered non-subversive. As Brady notes, the CCP conducted “the most undemocratic practices of modern Western societies” (Brady, 2009). Thus, a diversity of voices and plurality remained visible in Chinese society (Qin *et al.*, 2017).

This does not imply that the propaganda strategy of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, inherited from Deng’s political legacy, represented genuine

democracy. Under Jiang and Hu's leadership, the CCP ruthlessly suppressed political dissenters deemed subversive by the Party, showing no mercy. For instance, Falun Gong was labelled a "heretical teaching" (*Xie Jiao*) by the CCP and was extensively suppressed due to its nature—fostering intensified loyalty to a figure outside the CCP and promoting an alternative belief system distinct from communism—along with the massive, well-organised, and unexpected protest in 1999 (Ming, 2011: 16-17). Furthermore, during the Hu era, the CCP went so far as to suppress its own official newspaper. The CCP suspended *Bing Dian* (Freezing Point), a news journal of the *China Youth Daily*, the official newspaper of the Communist Youth League. *Freezing Point* was especially lauded by its readers for its in-depth reporting and critical analysis of social issues. However, such critical perspectives dissatisfied the regime and finally led to the journal's suspension for several weeks and the removal of its editor-in-chief, Li Datong, in 2006 (Li, 2006). Thus, although the propaganda and thought work in this era may appear to represent a rupture, it maintains a clear continuity with the CCP's post-1980s propaganda strategy.

4. Revitalisation of Mao's Strategy: The Current Regime's Approach

Since 2012, the CCP has gradually tightened restrictions on free expression. The current regime's propaganda strategy shares many features with Mao's. Ideological control through coercive propaganda and thought work has been revitalised, bringing characteristics of absoluteness and sharp transitions that are evident in today's China. That is, a re-ideologisation began to prevail over Deng's de-ideologisation. It could be argued that the current regime's approach represents an amplification of the CCP's intolerance toward alternative discourse under its non-genuine democratic political system, with the foundations for his emergence having been laid by the previous regimes of Jiang and Hu.

The current supreme leader is described by many scholars generally in a negative way, and David Shambaugh refers to him as a monarch in the modern era (Shambaugh, 2021). Before delving into his ideological control in detail, it is necessary to first examine the possible reasons behind his adherence to the Maoist style. His father was a communist guerrilla leader in the 1930s who later became one of the top leaders of the CCP. During the Cultural Revolution, his family, including himself, was severely

persecuted. However, unlike others who adopted a hedonistic lifestyle after the Cultural Revolution, he “chose to survive by becoming redder than red,” firmly believing that he, as part of the second generation of the CCP’s revolutionaries, “deserve(s) to rule China” (US Embassy Beijing, 2009). Thus, his past may provide insight into his return to the Maoist route of governance, and contemporary China under his leadership is described by Shambaugh as a form of “neo-totalitarianism” and “an unprecedented surveillance state” empowered by “the full power of technology” (Shambaugh, 2021). Both Pei Minxin and Wu Guoguang argue that the CCP’s propaganda strategy has shown continuity from Mao to the current leadership, with no significant changes in the concepts or organisational structure of its surveillance system. The key differences between them are, first, the enhanced precision of modern surveillance due to technological advancements (Pei, 2024: 178-179), and second, the current regime’s tendency to “deceive” the public through political rhetoric, reinforced by the state’s violent power (Wu, 2024: 193-196).

Indeed, as existing literature suggests, political studies reminiscent of those from the Mao era have been reintroduced under the leadership of the current regime. These political studies are highly digitalised, with the regime utilising mobile apps to intensify and monitor ideological control over Chinese people. “Study Xi, Strong Nation” (*Xue Xi Qiang Guo*) and “Youth Study Program” (*Qing Nian Da Xue Xi*) are the two main political study sessions. CCP members, students and government officials, are required to pass mandatory quizzes; failure to do so results in official criticism (Liang *et al.*, 2021). Giant posters displaying the Core Socialist Values, which consist of the twelve words proposed by the CCP, are posted everywhere in China. These socialist elements are considerably more intrusive in people’s daily lives than during the Reform and Opening-Up era, which, arguably, exhibits closer parallels with the Mao era.

The propaganda and thought work have become significantly more coercive, with much less tolerance for non-subversive speeches and domestic cynicism. Many individuals expressing alternative or sarcastic views would face severe punishment, and these cases of punishment would be propagated by the official media to the Chinese populace for educational purposes. For instance, during the China-India skirmishes in 2020, four Chinese soldiers were killed in action and one was wounded. Soon, these soldiers were promoted as national heroes by the propaganda machine. However,

there were dissenting voices among the Chinese populace. Qiu Ziming, an internet celebrity followed by more than 2.5 million people, was sent to jail for “defaming martyrs” (*Global Times*, 2021). This sentence was widely propagated by domestic propaganda, and Qiu was arguably “beaten down” under public criticism, reminiscent of the Mao era. As another example, in relation to the recent anti-American films centred on the Korean War, Luo Changping, an influential journalist, offered objective yet alternative views on the fate of the company that froze to death during the Battle of Chosin Reservoir—a narrative particularly emphasised in these propaganda campaigns. The company was labeled as the “ice sculpture company” (*Bing Diao Lian*) by the propaganda machine, whereas Luo characterised it as a “silly company” (*Sha Diao Lian*) in his post, where he also raised doubts about the legitimacy of the Korean War. No doubt, Luo was also imprisoned, and his sentence was also widely publicised by the propaganda machine (*Global Times*, 2022). Thus, such coerciveness and intolerance in the current propaganda strategy exhibit a similar feature of absoluteness as seen during the Mao era.

The propaganda and thought work under the current regime also exhibit the feature of sharp transitions. The most recent sharp transition is evident in the pandemic. In the initial stage of the pandemic outbreak in late 2019, Dr. Li Wenliang, a medical doctor in Wuhan, warned about the existence of a new type of coronavirus in a WeChat group. However, Dr. Li and seven other individuals were soon detained by the police department in Wuhan for “spreading rumors” (Green, 2020). They were forced to confess to their “crimes,” and the detention of these doctors was widely reported by the domestic propaganda apparatus. However, one month later, the Chinese government officially admitted the existence of the coronavirus pointed out by Dr. Li, and an unprecedented lockdown was launched in Wuhan. On February 7th, 2020, Dr. Li died from COVID-19. His death triggered public anger, and Dr. Li was publicly regarded as the “whistleblower” of the pandemic. The propaganda machine soon shifted to a completely antithetical approach. While deleting massive sarcastic online posts and articles promoting Dr. Li and criticising the Chinese government, the *People’s Daily* published the results of the reinvestigation of Dr. Li’s case. This report cleared Dr. Li’s grievances and announced that the Wuhan police department needed to be “corrected under supervision” and that the charges against Dr. Li would be repealed (*People’s Daily*, March 20th, 2020). Such

sharp transitions led to widespread sarcastic views, reflected in the discontent of many individuals toward the grand award ceremony for the medical personnel who contributed significantly to the fight against COVID-19 in September 2020, during which the public appealed that Dr. Li's name should not be absent (*BBC*, 2020).

Another case reflecting the sharp transitions was the medical anti-corruption campaign. After 2012, the CCP launched a series of anti-corruption campaigns. Many corrupt high-ranking government officials and party cadres were arrested, and their crimes and punishments were extensively reported by the state media. Pei Minxin argues that the anti-corruption campaign is a tool to bolster his "political capital" and suggests that the campaign may have negative consequences for the CCP, as it could weaken political cohesiveness (Pei, 2016: 265). However, the anti-corruption campaign was not merely a short-term initiative targeting the so-called "other factions," but a sustained movement affecting all aspects of Chinese society. The targets are not confined to the politicians but include all individuals with access to social resources. In other words, the campaign targets not only political corruption but also common social practices in China that have been widely criticised by the populace. The medical anti-corruption campaign initiated in 2023 was one of this type. During the pandemic that started in 2020, medical personnel were extensively promoted by domestic propaganda, and numerous spectacular performances were initiated to enhance their image. It could be argued that medical personnel were elevated to an unprecedented social status by the political authorities in these years. However, right after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, a large-scale medical anti-corruption campaign was launched, and many medical personnel were arrested for accepting bribes. This campaign was extensively reported by the propaganda apparatus, and the *People's Daily* referred to the corrupt individuals as representing "unhealthy trends" (*People's Daily*, May 12th, 2023).

Thus, as we can conclude from these cases, the current propaganda strategy indeed exhibits many features similar to Mao's. Although the degree of absoluteness and the abruptness of sharp transitions were not as extreme as in the Mao era, it could be argued that the relatively loosened propaganda strategy in the post-1980s era is gradually being discarded by the current regime. Instead, the former disadvantageous strategy seems to be revitalised.

5. Chinese People in the Post-Trust Era

Indeed, the current leadership is often regarded as another Mao by academia and many China watchers, and his policies, particularly ideological control, appear to be similar to Mao's. However, while previous studies—primarily conducted by political scientists—have extensively examined his resemblance to the Maoist route, the social transformation of the recipients of the CCP's propaganda in this post-trust era has not been sufficiently addressed, despite being crucial to the Party's capacity for socio-political mobilisation. Thus, although the current leadership's propaganda strategy features absoluteness and sharp transitions, it is unlikely that the current regime will face the same ideological turbulence as Mao and Deng did. This is because China has been entering a post-trust era for many decades, triggered by Mao's propaganda strategy and further reinforced by Deng's de-ideologisation during the Reform and Opening-Up era. Chinese people commonly hold sarcastic views toward official voices from the government, perceiving official channels as untrustworthy and therefore largely unreliable. As a result, it is much more difficult for the current regime to mobilise the masses due to people's indifference and alternative interpretations. However, this public attitude also weakens the detrimental effects of increasingly coercive propaganda strategies.

As noted in the literature by MacFarquhar, Schoenhals and Dikötter, which has been discussed above, Chinese people's reactions to Mao's propaganda and thought work included ignoring the Party's directives and revitalising the so-called counter-revolutionary practices that had been suppressed for many years in the late Mao era. Thus, it could be argued that the beginning of the post-trust era for socialist China started at this point, as people in the early stage of the PRC would proactively buy the People's Daily even if they were poor (*Ren Min Ri Bao Bao Shi Bian Ji Zu*, 1988: 75-78). The discrediting of the CCP's political rhetoric resulted not only in a rethinking of the past from a retrospective perspective in the 1980s but also in a long-lasting distrust in the future. Such long-lasting distrust has been reinforced by Deng's slogan of "emancipating the mind" (*Jie Fang Si Xiang*), and the Chinese people are equipped with inherent "critical thinking" towards official voices. Due to relatively loosened surveillance, questioning the government's policies and raising alternative views on mainstream voices has become prevalent among Chinese people.

I conducted interviews with numerous individuals living in Beijing who are closely tied to the CCP, arguably the “reddest” personnel in Chinese society due to their family backgrounds. Most of them informed me that they never proactively watch the news through official channels. Many of them expressed sarcastic views about official newspapers and *Xin Wen Lian Bo* produced by China Central Television, quoting an extremely popular saying: “People in *Xin Wen Lian Bo* are way too happy (*Xing Fu*).” Many of my interviewees were college students pursuing bachelor’s or master’s degrees at Chinese universities, and none of them expressed interest in political study campaigns such as “Study Xi, Strong Nation” and “Youth Study Program” launched by the current leadership. For the mandatory daily study tasks, T (pseudonym), the son of a high-ranking military officer, shared that all of his classmates, including himself, simply put their phones aside while the study videos played. S (pseudonym), a current civil servant in China, shared that during her college years, if students and Party members (many college students joined the CCP for practical reasons) were required to pass a test, they would simply search the internet for the correct answers rather than answering on their own. In some cases, passing the tests is not required; participants simply select random options to complete the task. T mentioned that many Party cadres he knows even asked their family members to complete the quizzes on their behalf rather than doing them themselves. This phenomenon was corroborated by several of my other interviewees. R (pseudonym), the son of a law professor at a prestigious university who holds a county-level executive rank, shared that he was frequently tasked with answering the quizzes on behalf of his parents, as they were unfamiliar with using the internet to search for answers. Furthermore, Y (pseudonym), the son of a mid-ranking government official, informed me that there are applications available online that automatically answer the quizzes. These applications are primarily used by individuals who need to complete these daily tasks.

Regarding the pervasive promotion of the cult of personality, many of the official messages have become a “joke” (*Geng*) among the Chinese people, sometimes in a highly explicit manner. For instance, Li Hongzhong, the Party Secretary of Tianjin at the time, made a famous statement: “Loyalty that is not absolute is absolutely disloyal,” to demonstrate his “absolute loyalty” to the supreme leader (Li, 2016). This blatant flattery quickly became a joke among the populace, with online discussions of

Li Hongzhong's words often expressing highly negative sentiments. Furthermore, in the early years of this era, some overt propaganda was employed to build and consolidate his charisma. One of the most notable examples was a song titled "*Xi Dada Loves Peng Mama*", where "*Xi Dada*" (Uncle Xi) referred to Xi himself, and "*Peng Mama*" (Mother Peng) referred to his wife, Peng Liyuan (Yin & Flew, 2018). Retrospectively, such propaganda songs bear a resemblance to the so-called "red songs" of the Mao era, such as "*Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman*" and "*The East is Red*". However, due to the social transformation among the recipients, the positive influence of such propaganda cannot compare to that of the Mao era. The dissemination of songs praising the current supreme leader was relatively limited, and people often adopted indifferent and negative attitudes toward such overt promotion. Among intellectuals, such promotion has become a target of ridicule. X (pseudonym), an international student in the US and the son of a high-ranking government official, stated that the song was too "explicit" and made people feel embarrassed, adding that the CCP should have anticipated this obvious consequence. Perhaps, as X observed, all discussions about this song had ceased by 2014 according to my observation.

In addition to indifferent attitudes and widespread sarcasm towards official voices, I also noted that many of my interviewees, especially the younger generations, expressed scorn for both the CCP's propaganda and thought work, as well as for those people who believed in these political discourses. Indeed, there have been enduring verbal battles and debates between "Public Intellectuals" (*Gong Zhi*, typically referring to liberals in Chinese society) and the so-called "Little Pinks" (*Xiao Fen Hong*, typically referring to nationalists or supporters of the CCP), and public sentiment towards the CCP has remained highly fragmented. However, in my interview, most of the interviewees, including both "Public Intellectuals" and "Little Pinks," indicated that they do not regard the CCP's official messages as reliable sources. For instance, H (pseudonym), the son of a medical doctor with a mid-level executive rank, described himself as "absolutely pink" but not naive. Regarding the CCP's propaganda, he remarked, "Of course, they are fake, but that is common in all countries," adding, "Those who believe it are truly stupid." These people often ridicule those who still watch the news on TV, typically their grandparents and occasionally their parents. Even the most moderate interviewees informed me that they occasionally place

limited trust in certain pieces of information on foreign affairs broadcast by the CCP's propaganda, primarily because they have never been abroad. However, they indicated that they would never trust information regarding domestic affairs propagated by the propaganda apparatus.

To assess the attitudes of older generations, I also interviewed several senior individuals in their 80s and 90s. Some of them had been labelled as "counter-revolutionary" and "rightist" during the Mao era. D (pseudonym), a senior citizen in his 80s at the time of the interview, was a former hospital president during the Mao era who was "beaten down" as a "rightist" in 1957 but rehabilitated in 1978, regaining his position as hospital president. He explained that the only reason he and his old colleagues often watch TV is that they do not know how to use the Internet, and in some cases, are not even aware of its existence. Even though they often watch TV, they typically neither believe nor care about the propaganda, largely due to their collective memories of the Mao era. C (pseudonym), another medical doctor who was also "beaten down" in 1957 and labeled a "rightist" for 22 years, remarked, "I didn't even believe what Mao said! How could I believe what the later ones say?!"

Thus, Chinese people are typically indifferent toward the political discourses of the CCP in this post-trust era; instead, they care about their income and lifestyles. This is primarily due to the transformation of people's values brought about by Deng's Reform and Opening-Up, in which economic development has been seen as the key priority for China. Borrowing Ci Jiwei's notion, it could be argued that Deng successfully introduced a profound ideology of Hedonism into Chinese society (Ci, 1994: 7). This led to a transformation among Chinese people, valuing personal interests much more significantly, while socialist values were inherently abandoned. Therefore, even though a political regression is visible in China, with many elements of the Mao era being revitalised, there is nonetheless strong social resistance, mostly indirect, invisible and inherent from the masses. This social resistance has been formed due to Mao's coercive approach to propaganda and thought work, reinforced by the relatively loosened ideological control in the post-1980s era, and it now poses a new obstacle for the CCP's propaganda and thought work—a general decline in trust in the Party's authority.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the characteristics of the propaganda and thought work employed by the current regime, as well as the social transformation of the recipients of the CCP's political discourse. Additionally, it has analysed the evolution of the CCP's propaganda strategy and the underlying reasons for these changes. The findings suggest that the propaganda strategy of the current regime, which abandons the optimisations developed in the post-1980s era, displays features of absoluteness and abrupt transitions reminiscent of the Mao era.

However, contrary to the notions presented in the existing literature—primarily by political scientists—I argue that China is unlikely to face similar political crises again due to its consistent approach to state ideological control. All of my interviewees residing in Beijing, the political centre of China, expressed indifferent and often sarcastic views toward the CCP's official messages. Although their identities are somewhat unique, as they are closely connected to the CCP—a group typically regarded as the most “politically correct” within the Chinese socio-political context—they reflect a profound and genuine mistrust of the CCP. This mistrust is likely even more severe among the general public. For decades, the country has been in a post-trust era, characterised by the general public's indifference toward the Party's discourses. As a result, although the CCP has significantly diminished its capacity for social mobilisation, the negative impacts of the coercive approach to state ideological control have been substantially mitigated.

There have been several instances reflecting public dissent toward coercive ideological control, including the White Paper Revolution in late 2022, Halloween protests in Shanghai in 2023, and the Flowers Revolution in late 2023 following Li Keqiang's death. However, the emergence of such anti-establishment protests was not a result of ideological turbulence stemming from the absoluteness and sharp transitions in propaganda and thought work. Instead, they represented pure acts of resistance by the Chinese populace against political repression and heightened surveillance in the post-trust era.

The CCP has also recognised the long-standing distrust among the Chinese populace, as its authority and legitimacy are continuously questioned, and in some cases, openly challenged. This realisation is perhaps best exemplified by the drama, *In the Name of the People*, which received

significant funding from the Supreme People's Procuratorate. In one notable scene, a retired procurator laments to the Party secretary, "During the old days (the Mao era), people believed that the people's government would not do bad things to them. However, now people believe that the people's government will not do anything good for them." This propaganda drama, designed to promote the anti-corruption campaign, directly reflects the CCP's acknowledgment of and attempts to address the widespread social indifference toward its authority.

While the drama illustrates the Party's awareness of the pervasive post-trust public sentiment, it also highlights the profound transformation occurring within the CCP's propaganda strategy. Though certain features may appear reminiscent of its socialist past, the underlying logic and potential consequences differ significantly. This underscores the necessity of reassessing the CCP's propaganda and thought work to gain a comprehensive understanding of its current approach. Such an analysis requires a refreshed framework that considers the mutual awareness and complexities of the post-trust era.

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