



# CHINA'S DISCOURSE ON STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS: INSIGHTS INTO PRC EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA

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## **ABSTRACT**

While tracing back to the second half of the 2000s, Chinese research on strategic communications has experienced a notable uptick over the last few years. Recent studies on China's own practice of strategic communications, and, more importantly, Xi Jinping's call to build 'a strategic communications system with distinctive Chinese characteristics' in May 2021, suggest that current Chinese views on the subject are worthy of analysis. This article examines 15 years of scholarship on the subject in Mandarin against the backdrop of institutional developments concerning 'propaganda work' in the Chinese Party-State under the Xi administration. It shows how the Chinese discourse on strategic

communications has evolved from an assessment of US doctrines and practices to a discussion of the effectiveness of the country's 'external propaganda'. Contrary to previous attempts to adapt to a perceived Western-dominated 'discourse system', Beijing is now seeking to affirm its own values and interests on the global stage.

## INTRODUCTION

On 31 May 2021, during the thirtieth group study session of the 19<sup>th</sup> Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Party's General Secretary and President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Xi Jinping stated:

it is necessary to strengthen top-level design and basic research, build a strategic communications system [zhanlüe chuanbo tixi] with distinctive Chinese characteristics, and make tremendous efforts to improve international communication influence, the attractive power of Chinese culture and China's image, China's discourse persuasiveness, and international public opinion guidance.<sup>1</sup>

Notably, this was the first time Xi referred to 'strategic communications' [zhanlüe chuanbo] in a public speech. Recent literature on Chinese strategic communications has focused on Beijing's efforts to craft and project narratives in the geopolitical arena, exemplified by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific, and in cross-Strait relations with Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> These studies have built on a holistic understanding of strategic communications that emerged in Western scholarship in the past decade that can be defined as 'the use of words, actions, images,

1 'Xi Jinping zai Zhong-Gong Zhongyang Zhengzhi Ju di sanshi ci jiti xuexi shi qiangdiao jiaqiang he gajin guoji chuanbo gongzuo zhanshi zhenshi liti quanmian de Zhongguo' [Xi Jinping Stressed the Importance of Strengthening and Improving International Communication Work to Show an Authentic, Multidimensional and Panoramic View of China During the Thirtieth Group Study Session of the CCP's Politburo], *Xinhua*, 1 June 2021.

2 Naoko Eto, 'Japan-China Strategic Communications under the Belt and Road Initiative: The Case of "Third Country Business Cooperation"', *Asian Perspective* Volume 45, No 3 (2021): 533-558; Aurelio Insisa, 'No Consensus across the Strait: Chinese and Taiwanese Strategic Communications in a Contested Regional Order', *Asian Perspective* Volume 45, No 3 (2021): 503-531.

or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behavior in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives’,<sup>3</sup> and as ‘[a] holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment’.<sup>4</sup> Further insights on Beijing’s practice of strategic communications can be drawn indirectly from literature focusing on the activities of Chinese bureaucratic actors tasked with ‘propaganda work’ [xuanchuan gongzuo] and ‘united front work’ [tongzhan gongzuo] targeted at foreign audiences;<sup>5</sup> and also from studies assessing Beijing’s attempts to achieve strategic objectives through concerted leverage across information, economic, and security domains.<sup>6</sup>

Yet Xi’s recent statement highlights one key gap in the research. The existing scholarship does not provide a granular inquiry of the meaning of strategic communications in relation to other modes of political communication devised by the Chinese Party-State to influence foreign audiences.<sup>7</sup> To cover this gap, my research focuses on mainstream academic literature on strategic communications published on the Chinese Mainland from 2006 to the summer of 2021. The explanatory power of this body of work is somewhat limited, mainly because of the traditional reticence of Chinese scholars to discuss publicly the mechanics of Party-State propaganda,<sup>8</sup> and the long-established practice of articulating sensitive debates within the circuit of ‘internal-circulation

3 James P. Farwell, *Power and Persuasion: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2012), pp. xviii–xix.

4 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, *Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology* (Riga: NATO StratCom CoE, 2019), p. 46.

5 See: Kingsley Edney, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda: International Power and Domestic Cohesion* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); Anne-Marie Brady, *Magic Weapons: China’s Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping* (Wilson Center, 2017).

6 See: Giulio Pugliese and Aurelio Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics: Might, Money and Minds* (Culemborg: Palgrave, 2017); J. Michael Cole, *The Hard Edge of Sharp Power: Understanding China’s Influence Operations Abroad* (Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 2018); Ross Babbage, Thomas G. Mahnken, and Gillian Evans, *Winning Without Fighting: Chinese and Russian Political Warfare Campaigns and How the West Can Prevail, Volume I* (CSBA, 2019); Michael J. Mazarr et al., *Understanding Influence in the Strategic Competition with China* (RAND, 2021).

7 I use the term ‘Party-State’ in this article to describe China as a Leninist political system in which ‘the Party exercises a monopoly of the state and military power to an extent unimaginable in democracies or most authoritarian states’. See: Steve Tsang, ‘Party-State Realism: A Framework for Understanding China’s Approach to Foreign Policy’, *Journal of Contemporary China* Volume 29, No 122 (2019): 305. In the context of this article, the term also hints at the overlapping party and state identities of Chinese bureaucratic actors involved with propaganda work.

8 Anne-Marie Brady, ‘How “China” Frames “Taiwan”’, in *Taiwan’s Impact on China: Why Soft Power Matters More than Economic or Political Inputs*, ed. Steve Tsang (Palgrave, 2017, ebook edition), p. 24.

only' [neibu] publications unavailable to the public.<sup>9</sup> Despite these constraints, Chinese scholars advocating the adoption of a strategic communications mindset among domestic bureaucratic actors, stress its advantages vis-à-vis other modes of political communication. This type of 'constructive' criticism determined the selection of relevant sources within the literature. In turn, less emphasis is placed on more divulgatory scholarship on strategic communications that is primarily concerned with the exposition of Western, and more specifically American, concepts and practices.

Given these premises, the article is structured in the following way. The first section provides an overview of the concept of 'communication' within the broader context of China's evolving conceptualisation and articulation of its 'external propaganda' [duiwai xuanchuan] aimed at foreign audiences. This section does not aim to present an account of institutional development within the time frame of this article (late 1980s to mid-2000s). Rather, it seeks to outline the intellectual background and the benchmarks necessary to undertake a critical engagement with Chinese scholarship on strategic communications, especially regarding terminology. The second and third sections, which constitute the bulk of this study, review Chinese domestic literature on strategic communications with the goal of mapping the reception and adaptation of the concept within the PRC. The second section covers the years from 2006 to 2013, while the third covers the period from 2013 to 2021. The article continues with a fourth section, in which I investigate patterns of correlation between the articulation of the Chinese academic debate on strategic communications since 2013 on the one hand, and the bureaucratic restructuring of Party-State actors tasked with external propaganda under the Xi Jinping administration on the other. Given the opacity of Chinese institutions, this section relies on a diverse body of works consisting of 'China-watching' reports and secondary literature. Finally, in the conclusion I sum up the findings of this study and outline remaining issues and areas of investigation.

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel C. Lynch, *China's Futures: PRC Elites Debate Economics, Politics, and Foreign Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. xi-xii.

## CHINA'S EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA AND 'EXTERNAL/INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION', 1980s-2000s

Since at least the end of the First World War, the term 'propaganda', translated in Mandarin as 'xuanchuan', has been popularly understood in Western societies through a moralist outlook. It is associated with a mode of political communication featuring one-way information flows, widespread use of falsehoods and distortions, and malicious intent.<sup>10</sup> Western attitudes toward propaganda stand in stark contrast with China. The Chinese Party-State never disavowed the Leninist heritage of its own propaganda institutions, which trace their origins to the period prior to the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and the political legitimacy of 'propaganda work'.<sup>11</sup> Any attempt to scan the landscape of China's influence activities must start with acknowledging the continuing centrality of this Leninist paradigm. More broadly, the Party-State's ability to adapt to new communication theories, information technologies, and organisational approaches to maintain its hold on political power since the era of reform and opening-up began in 1978,<sup>12</sup> suggests that Chinese propaganda cannot be reduced to popular Western perceptions of the phenomenon. Rather, as Edney notes, propaganda should be primarily understood as 'a collection of practices through which the Party-State exercises power in relation to the public articulation of discourses.'<sup>13</sup>

This relational understanding of propaganda highlights the differences between 'domestic propaganda' and 'external propaganda'. The former can be understood as the exercise of power practices in the tightly controlled discourse of the PRC. The latter as the exercise of a separate

10 On popular understandings of propaganda in Western societies, see Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo, 'Introduction: Thirteen Propositions about Propaganda', in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, eds. Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1-16. On the moralist framing of propaganda see: John H. Brown, 'Two Ways of Looking at Propaganda', *CPD Blog*, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 29 June 2006.

11 On the role of propaganda in the construction of Marxist-Leninist regimes, see: Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). On CCP propaganda before and after 1949, see: Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Timothy Cheek, 'China's Directed Public Sphere: Historical Perspectives on Mao's Propaganda State', in *Redefining Propaganda in Modern China: The Mao Era and Its Legacies*, eds. James Farley and Matthew D. Johnson (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 36-53.

12 Anne-Marie Brady, 'Guiding Hand: The Role of the CCP Central Propaganda Department in the Current Era', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* Volume 3, N° 1 (2006): 58-77.

13 Edney, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda*, p. 8.

set of power practices within a contested discourse space that has been shaped by Western perceptions of what is to be considered legitimate or not. This predicament, namely the historical dominance of Western norms and standards in the collective understanding of legitimate modes of state communication, has posed a notable challenge to Beijing—especially as the country’s interactions with the outside world and its status in international politics have grown in tandem with its astonishing economic growth since the late twentieth century. Contrary to Western states, who—led by American example and the emergence and development of public diplomacy—have been relatively successful in distancing their own modes of state-driven political communication from popular perceptions of propaganda, Beijing has not been able to chart a similar ‘transition’ out of the Leninist propaganda model. Political culture, pattern dependency within domestic institutions, and, above all, the centrality of domestic propaganda practices in the CCP’s exercise of political power appear as insurmountable obstacles to this shift.<sup>14</sup> As a result, discourse on political communication targeted at foreign audiences, articulated across Party-State institutions and Mainland Sinophone academia, has grown increasingly complex, and at times downright confusing. This is because of a fundamental internal contradiction: maintaining a Leninist propaganda model while articulating new modes of political communication that should not be perceived by foreign audiences as ‘propaganda’.

The concept of ‘external communication’ [duiwai chuanbo], also described as ‘international communication’ [guoji chuanbo] in later sources, has played a central role in this endeavour.<sup>15</sup> The emergence of ‘communication’ as a concept both related to and contrasting with propaganda can be traced back to the second half of the 1980s, when the Party-State and the scholars in its orbit began to undertake a re-valuation

14 See: Nicholas J. Cull, ‘Roof for a House Divided: How U.S. Propaganda Evolved into Public Diplomacy’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, eds. Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 131–146.

15 ‘External communication’ and ‘international communication’ are, ultimately, interchangeable terms. The two adjectives generally convey slightly different nuances: ‘external communication’ focuses on the agency of Chinese actors, while ‘international communication’ focuses on the two-way dynamic between Chinese actors and international audiences. Other terms sometimes used by Chinese scholars, such as ‘media propaganda’ [meiti xuanchuan] and ‘media diplomacy’ [meiti waijiao] can be associated with external/international communication, even though they refer to a narrower media-centric dimension of this facet of external propaganda work.

of China's external propaganda activities.<sup>16</sup> Among the studies published in this period, a 1988 monograph authored by Duan Liancheng introduced a contraposition between propaganda and external communication to mainstream academic debate.<sup>17</sup> The former was considered a solipsistic, boastful, and damaging mode of political communication associated with the darkest pages of the Cultural Revolution but still present in the China of the 1980s. The latter was championed as a new alternative based on communication studies, objective reporting, the establishment of two-way flows of information, and the ability to adapt content and channels of communication to different recipients.<sup>18</sup> However, in doing so, Duan also injected a considerable degree of ambiguity into the use of the term 'propaganda' in Chinese discourse. The term was now used both in a disparaging fashion to indicate outdated and damaging modes of communication *and* in a neutral way to refer to the institutional set-up and set of practices tasked with influencing foreign audiences.

Throughout most of the 1990s, the nuances and ambiguities exemplified by Duan's study appeared in the minutiae of academic debate. In the aftermath of the international backlash following the June Fourth Incident, which Ohlberg has painstakingly reconstructed, concerns about the perception of China's state-driven political communication aimed at foreign audiences took the backseat. Emphasis lay on an overhaul of the external propaganda apparatus and of the strategic logic underpinning it. In the first half of the decade, the focus rested on restructuring existing institutions, with the rise of the Office for External Propaganda / State Council Information Office (SCIO) as the main engine of the propaganda apparatus. As well as on the establishment of new infrastructure for the dissemination of state-driven information abroad, with the creation and

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16 Mareike Ohlberg, *Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda* (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a *Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics* (PhD diss., Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, 2013), pp. 278-280.

17 On the introduction in Sinophone Mainland Chinese communication studies of the term 'chuanbo' as a Mandarin translation for 'communication' see: Jiang Fei, 'Ruhe zouchu Zhongguo guoji chuanbo de "shizilukou"' [How To Exit the Crossroads of Chinese International Communication], *Guoji chuanbo* [Global Communication] Volume 1, N° 1 (2016): 32-33.

18 Duan Liancheng, *Duiwai chuanbo xue chutan / How to Help Foreigners Know China (Han-Ying beibianben)* [A Preliminary Exploration of External Communications Studies (Chinese-English Bilingual Edition)] (Beijing: Zhongguo jianshe chubanshe, 1988). Duan was a former director of the Foreign Languages Publication and Distribution Office—a propaganda unit then under the Ministry of Culture.

reorganisation of state media and the introduction of new practices such as the institutionalisation of press conferences and the publication of white papers. Successively, against the backdrop of this renewed media and institutional infrastructure, the second half of the 1990s saw the formalisation of a new strategic outlook that interpreted information as one of the multiple domains of an international competition pitting China against hostile foreign forces—a domain in which external propaganda had the fundamental responsibility to create a ‘favourable international public opinion environment’ that would facilitate China’s rise.<sup>19</sup>

The issue of negative foreign perceptions of China’s external propaganda would only re-emerge by 1999, to then take centre stage in 2003 and 2004, when the Party-State implemented a comprehensive upgrade of external propaganda rooted in a starkly realist, zero-sum view of international politics as a multi-domain struggle for primacy. Against this backdrop, external propaganda was reconceptualised as a priority task aimed at sustaining and enhancing the PRC’s ‘comprehensive national power’ [zonghe guoli] against Western hostile forces. Now considered key in upholding China’s cultural and ideological security, external propaganda was elevated to the national security level. This conceptual shift, in turn, explains the major changes affecting the articulation of Chinese external propaganda throughout the mid-2000s: the implementation, through massive investments, of a ‘going out’ [zouchuqu] strategy for Chinese state-controlled media in 2004; the embrace of public diplomacy, with the creation of a public diplomacy unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also in 2004 and the launch of the Confucius Institute in 2005; as well as the official adoption of ‘soft power’ [ruan shili] as a conceptual tool to shape and scope this mode of political communication in 2007.<sup>20</sup>

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19 Ohlberg, *Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment*, pp. 297-334. 1997-1998 was a brief exception to this trend, as the CCP Central Propaganda Department decided to edit the official translation of ‘xuanchuan’ from ‘propaganda’ to ‘publicity’ in 1997, a decision that would eventually lead the Party organ to change the translation of its own English moniker to ‘Central Publicity Department’ the following year.

20 Ohlberg, *Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment*, pp. 334-445. For a state-of-the-art overview of soft power in China, see: Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu, eds., *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China’s Campaign for Hearts and Minds* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020).

In the aftermath of these profound transformations, the academic discourse on Chinese propaganda became increasingly fraught by the end of the decade. Here external propaganda is to be understood, paraphrasing Edney, as the set of diverse power practices held by the Party-State in the international information sphere and the institutions and information infrastructure supporting it. The aforementioned reforms of external propaganda shaped an academic consensus around the fact that China had now successfully ‘modernised’ its political communication and moved away from outdated modes of ‘one-way’ political communication associated with foreign audiences’ perceptions of ‘propaganda’. The nature of this shift, however, remained contested, mainly because of the difficulty in placing external communication within this intellectual construct. Starting with the reforms of state media tasked with external propaganda in the early 1990s, the concept of external communication mainly came to define those media-centric power practices concerned with the more immediate dimension of information dissemination: the selection of information, the translation of content from domestic propaganda and the creation of exclusive content for foreign audiences, the organisation and management of ad hoc state media deputed to the dissemination of information abroad, and the measurement of effectiveness across different foreign audiences.<sup>21</sup>

Whether or not this specific dimension of China’s external propaganda had to be considered as a subset of the new public diplomacy remained subject to debate. Some scholars retroactively figured a three-stage process in which China’s political communication targeted at foreign audiences had evolved from the unidirectional propaganda of the Maoist era to the two-way external communication that characterised the first decades of the reform and opening-up period, and finally to the emergence of a contemporary, all-round public diplomacy.<sup>22</sup> While from a Western perspective the inclusion of state-driven information

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21 See: Liu Na, *Zhongguo guangbo dianshi duimai chuanbo li yanjiu* [Research on the External Communication Power of Chinese Broadcasting and Television] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2017).

22 For an overview of the academic debate on communication, public diplomacy, and external propaganda in China, see: Falk Hartig, *Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of the Confucius Institute* (Abingdon and New York, 2015), pp. 68-70.

dissemination clashes with perceptions of what constitutes public diplomacy, these discourses reflected a tendency, noted by Bandurski, to present it as the evolution of China's external propaganda writ-large by the second term of the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao administration (2007-2012).<sup>23</sup> Other scholars, however, continued to regard external communication as a part of external propaganda, and as separate from the practices of public diplomacy focused on audience engagement. They either foregrounded the successful transition from one-way propaganda to two-way international communication, or considered 'communication' an ideal standard that was yet to be fully realised.<sup>24</sup> It was within this conceptual landscape, marked by the tension between the perceived need to uphold a Leninist paradigm of propaganda and widespread concerns for the reception and credibility of China's political communication, that Mainland Chinese scholars and Party-State institutions tasked with propaganda work began to investigate the emergence of strategic communications in the US from the late 2000s to the early 2010s.

### **CHINA DISCOVERS STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS, 2006-2013**

The concept of strategic communications first appeared in mainstream Chinese academia in an article authored by Shen Suru and published in July 2006 in the academic journal *International Communication* [Duiwai chuanbo]. The article discussed the evolution of the PRC's political communication targeted at foreign audiences from outdated propaganda models to soft-power focused public diplomacy. Shen defined strategic communications, in a somewhat cumbersome manner, as 'the promotion of a set of themes or the implementation of specific government policies through symbolic and communication activities'. She framed it as one of three levels of Chinese public diplomacy, alongside 'reporting' [baodao] and the establishment and management of close relations with elite

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23 David Bandurski, 'Public Diplomacy', in *The Decoding China Dictionary*, eds. Malin Oud and Katja Drinhausen (Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, 2021), pp. 46-49.

24 See: Xiaolin Zhang, 'From 'External Propaganda' to 'International Communication': China's Promotion of Soft Power in the Age of Information and Communication Technologies', in *China's Information and Communications Technology Revolution: Social Changes and State Responses*, eds. Xiaoling Zhang and Yongnian Zheng (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 103-120; Hartig, *Chinese Public Diplomacy*, pp. 68-70.

actors and epistemic communities in foreign countries (namely, ‘united front work’).<sup>25</sup> The article remained an isolated case in the Chinese academic landscape until 2008, when new studies began to appear following the publication of a series of official documents on strategic communications issued by US bureaucratic actors: the US Department of Defense’s (DoD) *Quadrennial Defense Review Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication* published in September 2006, the 2007 amendment of the DoD *Joint Publication 1-02* including for the first time a definition of strategic communications, and the US Department of State’s (DoS) 2007 *National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication*, the 2009 DoD *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept*, and the 2010 US *National Framework for Strategic Communication* by the Obama White House.<sup>26</sup>

It is possible to identify two main trends in this earliest period of Chinese scholarship on strategic communications. The first is, unsurprisingly, preoccupied with explaining the emergence of a US approach to strategic communications between the second George W. Bush administration and the first Obama administration. The first three academic monographs published on the subject in Mainland China between 2008 and 2014, can each be considered part of this trend. These studies focused on reconstructing how strategic communications emerged from communication science, on mapping the evolution of the bureaucratic and technological infrastructure that enabled the US to transition from WWII propaganda to Cold War-era public diplomacy to contemporary strategic communications, and on outlining the relation between strategic communications and other modes of US political communications. These include public diplomacy, public affairs, psychological operations, and ‘international broadcasting’ [guoji guangbo]—a term used to describe the US government’s influence over major international media. Moreover, with an eye on the War on Terror, these studies presented the pivot to strategic communications as a tool

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25 Shen Suru, ‘Kaizhan ‘ruan shil’ yu duiwai chuanbo de yanjiu’ [Developing Research on ‘Soft Power’ and ‘Strategic Communications’], *Duiwai chuanbo* [International Communication] No 7 (2006): 24-28.

26 For a review of the emergence of an official literature on strategic communications in the US, see: Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communications: Origins, Concepts and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), pp. 19-20.

to protract American dominance in the global information sphere, thus maintaining its hegemonic status in international politics.<sup>27</sup>

The second trend in early Chinese scholarship on strategic communications is an attempt to frame strategic communications in terms of public diplomacy, soft power, and ‘national image’.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Li Defang described strategic communications as an important aspect of Chinese public diplomacy, to be used in order to enhance a country’s soft power.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, Yu Zhaohui labelled it the centerpiece of an integrated public diplomacy practice that aims to create an effective national image to be disseminated on the global stage.<sup>30</sup> Even scholars such as Bi Yantao and Wang Jinling, who avoided reductionist definitions of strategic communications as some sort of strategic dimension of public diplomacy, tended to fall within this camp. The two authors offered a more comprehensive definition of strategic communications, defining it as a process by which governments or NGOs mobilise and coordinate resources to transmit information and influence designated targets to realise specific strategic interests. Yet some of the goals they outlined, such as image creation and identity construction,<sup>31</sup> do reveal the continuing dominance of these themes.

Integrating the debate on strategic communications in China in the wider discourse on public diplomacy, soft power, and national image, also allowed local scholars to use strategic communications as a conceptual tool to convey ‘constructive criticism’ of China’s external propaganda. Yu Zhaohui, for instance, ascribed Beijing’s perceived shortcomings

27 Yu Zhaohui, *Zhanlüe chuanbo guanli: Lengzhan hou Meiguo guoji xingxiang goujian yanjiu* [Strategic Communication: An In-Depth Study of US Image-Building in the Post-Cold War Era] (Beijing: Shishi chubanshe, 2008); Bi Yantao and Wang Jinling, *Zhanlüe chuanbo gangyao* [Essentials of Strategic Communications] (Beijing: Guojia xingzheng xueyuan chubanshe, 2011); Li Jian and Zhang Chengyuan, *Zhanlüe chuanbo: Meiguo shixian guojia anquan yu junshi zhanlüe de zhongyao shoudian* [Strategic Communications: An Important Means to Implement US National Security and Military Strategy] (Beijing: Hangkong gongye chubanshe, 2014).

28 On the relation between ‘national image’ and foreign policy behaviour in China, see: Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

29 Li Defang, ‘Gonggong waijiao yu Zhongguo ruanshili jianshe’ [Public Diplomacy and the Construction of China’s Soft Power], *Lilun xuesi* [Theory Study] No 2 (2008): 58-59.

30 Yu Zhaohui, ‘Zhenghe gonggong waijiao: Guojia xingxiang goujian de zhanlüe goutong xin shijiao’ [Integrated Public Diplomacy: A New Perspective on the Strategic Communications of the Construction of National Image], *Guoji guancha* [International Review] No 1 (2008): 21-28.

31 Bi Yantao and Wang Jinling, ‘Zhanlüe chuanbo chutan’ [A Preliminary Study on Strategic Communications], *Hainan Shijian Daxue xuebao (Shehui kexue ban)* [Journal of Hainan Normal University (Social Sciences)] Volume 24, No 5 (2011): 160-162.

in constructing an appealing national image abroad and in providing a ‘correct’ understanding of its policies to foreign audiences to the absence of strategic communications mechanisms.<sup>32</sup> Instead, Wang Yi and Pang Tong used strategic communications as a tool to criticise the effectiveness of what they define as one of the subsets of China’s public diplomacy: media diplomacy, or external communication. In their eyes this practice featured bureaucratic actors who put too much emphasis on ‘propaganda tasks’ [xuanchuan renwu] and neglected the ‘rules of journalism’ [xinwen guilü], thus affecting China’s persuasiveness and credibility on the international stage.<sup>33</sup>

During this first phase of domestic scholarship on strategic communications, the tendency to devise the concept as a tool to criticise, or more precisely, to suggest improvements for Chinese external propaganda, can also be seen among scholars discussing the propaganda work of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). As early as the summer of 2008, Fu Changyi used strategic communications as a conceptual tool to criticise traditional shortcomings of the PLA’s external propaganda work: literal translation of internal propaganda content into external propaganda, an inability to ‘zone’ [fenqu] propaganda and obtain a granular understanding of target audiences to produce tailored communication activities, as well as a tendency to respond slowly to crises, hampering the timely dissemination of accurate reports to foreign audiences. More importantly, against the backdrop of US developments, Fu argued that, in order to effectively meet the requirements of national strategy, PLA external propaganda work should be elevated to a strategic position and incorporated within the overall framework of China’s strategy to develop international communication.<sup>34</sup>

32 Yu Zhaohui, ‘9·11 hou Meiguo Zhong-Dong zhanlüe chuanbo guanli yanjiu’ [A Research on the US Management of Strategic Communications in the Middle East after 9/11], *Alabo shijie* [Arab World], 44.

33 Wang Yi and Pang Tong, ‘Qianxi wo guo meiti waixuan gongzuo de zhuanxing zhi lu’ [A Preliminary Analysis of the Avenues of Transformation for the External Propaganda Work of Our Country’s Media], *Wenhua yu chuanbo* [Culture & Communication] Volume 2, N° 5 (2013): 14-17.

34 Fu Changyi, ‘Mei jun zhanlüe chuanbo de tedian ji dui wo jun duiwai xuanchuan gongzuo de qishi’ [Characteristics of the US Armed Forces’ Strategic Communications and Lessons for the External Propaganda of Our Armed Forces], *Xi’an Zhengzhi Xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of the Xi’an Politics Institute of PLA] Volume 21, N° 4 (2008): 40-43.

Fu's views were echoed later in 2011 by Li Mingfu, who also portrayed strategic communications as a criterion to improve the effectiveness of PLA external propaganda work. Li was the first scholar to provide a concrete example of the PLA's ineffective external propaganda that could have benefited from a strategic communications approach: the 2001 Hainan Island spy plane incident involving the US.<sup>35</sup> Also in 2011, Wei Chao re-examined the nexus between PLA external propaganda and strategic communications, focusing more directly on Western media's perceived capacity to monopolise the global information environment through agenda setting and thus to project their 'China threat theory'. Wei suggested to bridge this gap by maximising 'source control' [xinyuan kongzhi] in the dissemination of the PLA's external communication to Western media, and by simultaneously enhancing engagement with the foreign public. In a rather puzzling move, Wei also argued in favour of donating 'propaganda materials' as a possible tool of strategic communications targeting the foreign public.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Wang Jianjun highlighted three proposals for PLA strategic communications: the 'optimisation' of the various organs tasked with the 'management of military information'; the simplification of censorship procedures to speed up information dissemination; and a deeper engagement with foreign media. These proposals were later echoed by Xiao, Liu, and Zhang's call for strengthening military-civilian cooperation, establishing a cross-agency information sharing platform, and strengthening oversight on intelligence acquisition, resource allocation, and staffing.<sup>37</sup> A further insight can be drawn from these studies: contrary to scholars focusing on China's international relations, scholars working in the orbit of the PLA were not particularly worried about defining the

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35 Li Mingfu, 'Mei jun xingxiang zhanlüe chuanbo de neihan tedian jiqi qishi' [The Essential Features of the US Armed Forces' Strategic Communications – and Insights on Them], *Guofang keji* [National Defense Science & Technology] Volume 268, N° 3 (2011): 85-88. On the international and domestic impact of the 2001 US spy plane incident see: Peter Hayes Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics and Diplomacy* (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 108-109.

36 Wei Chao, 'Zhongguo jundui de duiwai xuanchuan yu zhanlüe chuanbo' [The External Propaganda of China's Armed Forces and Strategic Communications], *Duiwai chuanbo* [International Communications], N° 8 (2011): 9-10.

37 Wang Jianjun, 'Linian zhuanbian: Wo jun guoji xingxiang jiangou de xianshi yaoqiu' [A Conceptual Shift: Pragmatic Requirements to the Construction of Our Armed Forces' International Image], *Junshi jizhe* [Military Correspondent] N° 2 (2012): 42-43; Xiao Liuwei, Liu Yan and Zhang Zongbo, 'Mei jun zhanlüe chuanbo fazhan tedian ji qishi' [Developing Features of the US Armed Forces' Strategic Communications and Their Implications], *Guofang keji* [National Defense Technology and Science] Volume 35, N° 4 (2014): 28-32.

Chinese Armed Forces information activities as ‘propaganda’. Bypassing ambiguities in distinguishing between external propaganda as a set of power practices, and external propaganda as a discrete mode of political communications supposedly superseded by either public diplomacy or international communications, these scholars tended to interpret strategic communications simply as a cipher for *better* propaganda work.

## STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN THE XI ERA, 2013-2021

A qualitative shift in Chinese scholarship on strategic communications emerged from 2014. Critiques of China’s external propaganda based on strategic communications, as well as proposals for adopting mechanisms and a mindset based on it, assumed a more sophisticated and concrete character. Four speeches delivered by the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in the second half of 2013 can be retroactively singled out as signaling a top-down shift in the direction of the country’s external propaganda. This shift, in turn, led to new developments in the research agenda on strategic communications.

The first was Xi’s announcement of what would eventually morph into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) during an official visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013.<sup>38</sup> The BRI is still an evolving project as it approaches its second decade. Despite enduring international backlash and obstacles, the BRI has become a tangible example of Beijing’s ambitions to expand its geo-economic footprint across and beyond Eurasia, and a key driver in promoting an alternative model of international governance to the Western paradigm.<sup>39</sup> The second was a speech given by Xi in October of the same year at the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference. For the first time the Chinese leader signaled a shift away from the Denghist credo ‘hide one’s capabilities and bide one’s time’ [taoguang yanghui], and the arrival of a new era for Chinese diplomacy in which Beijing

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38 ‘President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 7 September 2013.

39 Within the sizeable literature on the BRI, the most comprehensive analysis of its geo-strategic rationale is arguably: Nadège Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century: Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau Research, 2017). On influence projection in the context of the BRI, see: Nadège Rolland, ‘Mapping the Footprint of Belt and Road Influence Operations’, *Sinopsis*, 8 December 2019.

would ‘strive for achievements’ [fenfa youwei].<sup>40</sup> Finally, the third and fourth were two speeches that Xi delivered in August, for the annual National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference, and in December, during the twelfth group study session of the 18<sup>th</sup> Politburo of the CCP. These two speeches grounded the Party-State propaganda work in the new, emerging direction of China’s engagement with the outside world. At the August conference Xi asked to innovate ideas and methods in propaganda and ‘thought work’,<sup>41</sup> while later in December he called for permeating every aspect of the country’s external communication with contemporary Chinese values and expanding its platforms and vehicles.<sup>42</sup>

The first discernible pattern in assessing how directives asking for a more proactive external propaganda have filtered down into Chinese scholarship, concerns the conceptualisation of strategic communications. As seen in the previous section, with the exception of PLA environments, during the Hu-Wen administration Chinese scholars had primarily understood strategic communication as a dimension of public diplomacy. Since 2014, however, the main framework grounding strategic communications in the broader debate on external propaganda has become that of external communication. Several scholars have framed this shift as a course reversal in relations between China and the international public opinion environment. If in the past China had tried to fit within a ‘discourse system’ shaped by the West, now the Party-State had the opportunity, through strategic communications, to successfully project its own values onto the international public opinion

40 ‘Xi Jinping zai zhoubian waijiao gongzuo zuotan hui shang fabiao zhongyao jianghua’ [Xi Jinping Delivered an Important Speech at the Work Conference on Peripheral Diplomacy], *Xinhua*, 25 October 2013. For a detailed analysis of this speech, see: Michael D. Swaine, ‘Chinese Views and Commentaries on Periphery Diplomacy’, *China Leadership Monitor*, N° 44 (2013): 1-43. Further evidence that 2013 was a key year in the reconceptualisation of China’s foreign policy behavior and objectives can be found in: Bonnie S. Glaser and Alice Szalwinski, ‘Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics’, *China Brief* Volume 13, N° 16 (2013): 9-12.

41 ‘Xi Jinping zai quan guo xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo huiyi shang qiangdiao xionghuai daju bawo dashi zhuyuan dashi nuli ba xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo zuo de geng hao’ [Xi Jinping Stressed the Importance of Keeping the Larger Picture in Mind, Grasping General Trends, Looking Towards Great Matters, Doing Propaganda and Thought Work Even Better at the National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference], *Gongchandangyuan wang* [Website of the Members of the CCP], 21 August 2013.

42 ‘Xi Jinping zai Zhong-Gong Zhongyang Zhengzhi ju di shi’er ci jiti xuexi shi qiangdiao jianshe shehuizhuyi wenhua qianguo zhuoli, tigao guojia wenhua ruan shili’ [Xi Jinping Stressed the Importance of Building a Socialist Culture to Strengthen the Country and of Putting Further Efforts into Improving National Cultural Soft Power During the Twelfth Group Study Session of the CCP’s Politburo], *Gongchandangyuan wang* [Website of the Members of the CCP], 31 December 2013.

environment. Shi Anbin and Wang Xi, for instance, advocated a shift toward strategic communications and away from what they perceived as external propaganda driven by *Realpolitik* calculations. For them strategic communications offers a powerful and appealing alternative, based on the symbiosis of traditional and socialist moral values encapsulated in the ‘Chinese Dream’.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, Wang Weijia argued that China’s attempt to embed its external communication within a Western-dominated global media market since the 1990s to ‘tell the China story well’ [jianghao Zhongguo gushi], had only resulted in a situation where ‘nobody listens to’ and ‘nobody believes in’ [shuo le mei ren ting, ting le mei ren xin] China. However, as the balance of power in international politics changes, Beijing is on the threshold of acquiring capacities that will allow it to achieve ‘cultural autonomy’ and escape from its subaltern position in the global public opinion environment. Moreover, Wang argued, because of this shift in the international balance of power, an official strategic communications organ is bound to emerge as a consequence of the centripetal bureaucratic process in the Party-State that will proceed in lockstep with the expansion of the country’s capabilities. According to Wang, in a future where boundaries between national security, social governance, and propaganda management will eventually blur, strategic communications mechanisms responding directly to the central leadership will emerge from the seamless integration of ‘economic work, diplomatic work, and national security work’ [jingji gongzuo, waijiao gongzuo, guojia anquan gongzuo].<sup>44</sup>

More broadly, Wang Weijia’s article is an example of how strategic communications has become a topic that allows scholars to insert themselves into wider conversations on the future direction of China’s external propaganda, at a time when the Party-State leadership has

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43 Shi Anbin and Wang Xi, ‘Cong ‘xianshi zhengzhi’ dao ‘guannian zhengzhi’: Lun guojia zhanlüe chuanbo de daoyi ganzhao li’ [From *Realpolitik* to *Noopolitik*: On the Moral Appeal of National Strategic Communications], *Xuanshu qianyan* [Frontiers] No 12 (2014): 16-25.

44 Wang Weijia, ‘Zhongguo duiwai chuanbo huayu tixi mianlin de shishi yu tiaozhan’ [The Current Scenario and Challenges Facing China’s External Communication Discourse System], *Guojia Xingzheng Xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Chinese Academy of Governance] No 3 (2017): 10-14.

reaffirmed a hands-on approach. This predicament explains the proliferation of definitions of ‘national strategic communications’ [guojia zhanlüe chuanbo] that emphasise the centrality of state actors and international communication in recent years. Wang Fang, for instance, has defined strategic communications as a ‘communication behaviour’ and a ‘strategic viewpoint’ that is state-centric and guided by national interest, that aims at seeking support within the international community and at winning over the ‘right to speak’ [huayu zhudong quan], that is based on rules and systematic planning, that is articulated through mass media and other channels of communication, and that is targeted at both specific countries and at the international community.<sup>45</sup> Jiang Fei has portrayed it, instead, as an evolution of international communication from an original model of cross-cultural communication in which the main actors were NGOs and individuals, to a new type of communication guided by political and military interest-groups.<sup>46</sup> Finally, Zhu Yubo labelled it an ‘institutionalized and systematized propaganda activity led by the state to serve a nation’s strategic interests and goals.’<sup>47</sup> From this perspective, even Zhao Qizheng’s questionable claim that Mao Zedong’s 1938 work *On Protracted War* represents an *avant-la-lettre* case of strategic communications that proves how Chinese statesmen have long mastered this art, could be interpreted as an attempt to enhance the appeal and the legitimacy of the concept.<sup>48</sup>

A second, more intriguing pattern in recent Chinese scholarship concerns the proliferation of suggestions and proposals to enable ‘national strategic communications’ within the Chinese Party-State. One facet of this scholarship is concerned with the managerial dimension of state media—a trend that further proves how, since the beginning of the

45 Wang Fang, ‘Guojia zhanlüe chuanbo kuangjia yu huayu tixi goujian yanjiu’ [A Research on the Construction of a National Strategic Communications Framework and Discourse System], *Guangxi shehui kexue* [Social Sciences in Guangxi], 262 (2017): 143-147. On the Chinese concept of ‘right to speak’, a term also translatable as ‘discourse power’, see: Kejin Zhao, ‘China’s Rise and Its Discursive Power Strategy’, *Chinese Political Science Review* Volume 1, N° 3 (2016): 539-564.

46 Jiang, ‘Ruhe zouchu Zhongguo guoji chuanbo de “shizilukou”’.

47 Zhu Yubo, ‘Fanyi de zhanlüe chuanbo guan - Yi “Zhongguo guanjian ci” xiangmu wei li’ [A Strategic Communications View of Translation Through the “Chinese Keywords” Project Case Study], *Dangdai waiyu yanjiu* [Contemporary Foreign Languages Studies] N° 2 (2020): 111-118.

48 Zhao Qizheng, ‘Tisheng dui ‘zhanlüe chuanbo’ de renshi he shijian’ [Promoting the Knowledge and the Practice of Strategic Communications], *Gonggong waijiao jikan* [Public Diplomacy Quarterly] N° 3 (2015): 1-5.

Xi era, strategic communications has been more closely identified with external communication rather than public diplomacy. Scholars calling for this type of managerial reform, however, have only provided vague suggestions for the improvement of external propaganda in state media—perhaps because it is a sensitive topic in open-access mainstream scholarship. Cheng Manli and Zhao Liangying focused on the absence of coordination among propaganda units, on the continuing presence of ineffective self-reported evaluations to measure effect, and on the lack of scientific methods to measure outcomes, while arguing in favour of the establishment of flat management, centralised allocation of resources, merging of units with overlapping responsibilities, and the creation of a joint workforce.<sup>49</sup> The overall picture suggests that in this context strategic communications can be understood as a conceptual platform to call for the enactment of ‘better’ propaganda, similar to the earlier literature that emerged in PLA environments in the second half of the 2000s. It should not be surprising, then, that these studies have resorted to the same type of stark contraposition between one-way propaganda and two-way communication that traces back to Duan Liancheng’s work in the late 1980s. Zhao Liangying and Xu Xiaolin, for instance, have lamented that China’s ‘international communication has been managed as if it was propaganda’.<sup>50</sup>

More importantly, beyond this narrow managerial dimension, Chinese scholars have made more concrete proposals for the establishment of new institutional mechanisms for strategic communications within the Party-State. Zhao Qizheng has suggested the creation of an ad hoc institution that would include organs tasked with ‘government diplomacy’, public diplomacy, national security, external propaganda,

49 Cheng Manli, ‘Guoji chuanbo nengli jianshe de xietongxing fenxin’ [A Collaborative Analysis of International Communication Capacity Building], *Dianshi yanjiu* [TV Research] Volume 295 (2014): 16-17; Wang Mei, ‘Cong zhanlüe cengmian wei wo guo guoji chuanbo jianyan xiance: Zhuanfang Beijing Daxue Guojia Zhanlüe Chuanbo Yanjiuyuan yuanchang Cheng Manli’ [Suggestions for Our Country’s International Communication from a Strategic Level: An Interview with the Director of the National Strategic Communications Institute of Peking University, Cheng Manli], *Duiwai chuanbo* [International Communications] No 3 (2015): 30-31; Zhao Liangying, ‘Meiguo de guojia zhanlüe chuanbo tixi jiqi qishi’ [The US Strategic Communications System and the Insights That Can Be Drawn From It], *Xueshu baijia* [Academic Debate] No 10 (2015): 11-13.

50 Zhao Liangying and Xu Xiaolin, ‘Jiji goujian Zhongguo guojia zhanlüe chuanbo tixi’ [Actively Building a Chinese National Strategic Communications System], *Xueshu baijia* [Academic Debate] No 9 (2016): 10-14.

and foreign aid.<sup>51</sup> Shi Anbin and Wang Xi have advocated the launch of interministerial meetings to plan the country's strategic communications on major foreign policy issues and initiatives, and the establishment of a strategic communications mechanism within the Central National Security Commission formed in November 2013.<sup>52</sup> The most comprehensive proposal, however, has been advanced by Zhao Liangying in his 2017 monograph. Zhao's proposal opens with a scathing assessment of the bureaucratic infrastructure of the Party-State international communication, described as a sprawling ensemble of units unable to coordinate effectively amongst each other. This, according to Zhao, means that the country's communication capabilities are unable to keep pace with the country's rising status in global politics. To solve this impasse, he advocates the creation of a strategic communications system within the Party-State bureaucratic machine, that would adapt US mechanisms to the Chinese political system.<sup>53</sup>

Here it is necessary to consider the layered meaning of the term 'system' in the Party-State bureaucracy, which translates to two different terms in Mandarin: 'xitong' and 'tixi'. As Engstrom explains, a 'xitong'-system is 'a discrete system that carries out specific functions'. Conversely a 'tixi'-system is 'a large integrated system that comprises multiple types of *xitong*-systems ... and carries out numerous and varied functions. Specifically, a *tixi*-system denotes either a system of systems or a system's system'. To further complicate these definitions, 'no distinct or objective conceptual boundary can be drawn between most systems (*xitong*) and what constitutes a system of systems (*tixi*); this is a matter of perspective.'<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting how, from this bureaucratic perspective, external propaganda can be seen as a 'tixi'-system that is articulated across two 'xitong'-systems, namely 'foreign affairs' and 'propaganda'.<sup>55</sup>

51 Zhao Q., 'Tisheng dui "zhanlüe chuanbo" de renshi he shijian'.

52 Shi and Wang, 'Cong "xianshi zhengzhi" dao "guannian zhengzhi"'.  
53 Zhao Liangying, *Meiguo guojia zhanlüe chuanbo tixi yanjiu* [A Research on the US National Strategic Communications System] (Wuhan: Wuhan Daxue chubanshe, 2017).

54 Jeffrey Engstrom, *System-Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare: How the People's Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare* (RAND, 2018), pp. 2-3.

55 Ohlberg, *Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment*, p. 150.

Thus, Zhao argues that China must establish a new strategic communications ‘tixi’-system capable of harnessing the external communication capacities of multiple Party-State organs. At the helm of this ‘tixi’-system there would be a ‘national strategic communications leading small group’ [guojia zhanlüe chuanbo lingdao xiaozu] (LSG) guided by the Party-State leadership and responsible for the overall design, coordination, promotion, and implementation of China’s strategic communications.<sup>56</sup> The LSG would include the heads of a variety of Party-State organs: propaganda, diplomacy, national defence, national security, commerce, culture, tourism, folk religions, united front, Macao, Hong Kong and Taiwan affairs, but also major companies and media organisations. A ‘national strategic communications centre’ would then be established under the supervision of the LSG, headed by a figure with a specific profile: versed in both Chinese and Western cultures, and possessing a profound knowledge of communication strategies, national strategy, and the ‘diplomatic arts’. Dedicated offices answering directly to the centre would then be established in all relevant departments, creating the key nexus for the articulation of strategic communications.<sup>57</sup> As a ‘tixi’-system, strategic communications would rely on four ‘xitong’-systems, reflecting the diverse responsibilities of the Party-State organs involved: public diplomacy, online public opinion, media propaganda, and national defence communication.<sup>58</sup>

A third pattern that has emerged in the scholarship concerns the application of strategic communications. Bi Yantao and Yin Juanjuan have discussed the use of strategic communications on social media as a tool for Chinese border governance against extremists.<sup>59</sup> Bi Yantao, this time together with Lin Xinyan, has presented strategic communications

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56 LSGs are ‘coordinating bodies that address important policy areas that involve several different (and occasionally competing) parts of the bureaucracy’. Since the beginning of the Xi administration, the number and scope of LSGs has expanded dramatically, becoming key vehicles in the centralisation of power conducted by the Chinese leader. See: Christopher K. Johnson and Scott Kennedy, ‘Xi’s Signature Governance Innovation: The Rise of Leading Small Groups’, *CJIS*, 17 October 2017.

57 Zhao L., *Meiguo guojia zhanlüe chuanbo tixi yanjiu*, pp. 259-260.

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 263-274.

59 Bi Yantao and Yin Juanjuan, ‘Xin meiti, zhanlüe chuanbo yu bianjiang zhili’ [New Media, Strategic Communications, and Frontier Governance], *Yichun Xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Yichun College] Volume 36, N° 5 (2014): 64-67.

as a tool to soften the backlash experienced by the BRI.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, He Hui has suggested a concerted strategic communications approach to respond to the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration over the South China Sea that ruled in favour of the Philippines and which Beijing has not recognised. Once again, it is difficult to consider strategic communications in these studies as little more than a cipher for a more effective but fundamentally traditional form of propaganda. Bi and Lin reduce strategic communications, in the context of the BRI, to achieving a more granular understanding of target audiences and focusing on contrasting Western readings of the geopolitical significance of the project.<sup>61</sup> Instead, He Hui's understanding foregrounds timely responses and the integration of different channels of communications such as news, advertising, public relations, peer-to-peer personal communication, book distribution, movies and TV promotions, and other communication methods and forms, to convey China's policies and positions on territorial disputes such as the one concerning the South China Sea.<sup>62</sup>

Other studies, however, show a more sophisticated understanding of the challenges and opportunities that come with embracing the strategic communications paradigm. An article published in 2017 by Kou Liyan provides a concrete picture of strategic communications as an inherently dynamic process that exists at the juncture between long-term strategic objectives and the need to adapt a state's communication to an everchanging international scenario. Kou uses the rise to power of President Trump and his administration's 'America First' foreign policy as a case study. Against this backdrop, Kou uses strategic communications as a tool to criticise the Chinese tendency to rely on macro-level and abstract concepts in its political communication. Although, the solution the author proposes to counter backlashes against China and the BRI—to provide relatable stories that emphasise the contraposition between a supposedly inspirational 'Oriental collective struggle' against a 'Western

60 Bi Yantao and Lin Xinyan, 'Zhanlüe chuanbo shijiao xia de "Yidai-yilu"' [The Belt and Road Initiative from a Strategic Communications Perspective], *Gonggong waijiao jikan* [Public Diplomacy Quarterly], N° 1 (2016): 73-79.

61 Bi and Lin, 'Zhanlüe chuanbo shijiao xia de "Yidai-yilu"'.

62 He Hui, 'Jiaqiāng Nánhái zhūquān guishū Zhōngguó de zhānlüè chūānbō' [Strengthening Strategic Communications over China's Sovereignty on the South China Sea], *Duōwú jīshuān* [International Communication] N° 11 (2016): 26-27.

individual struggle’—fall under those same trappings.<sup>63</sup> Another example of a scholarly piece showing an acute understanding of key traits of the Western strategic communications paradigm is a recent article by Xu Meng on the COVID-19 pandemic. As in the case of Kou’s article, Xu emphasises the saliency of strategic communications in situations where a long-term strategic objective, such as the construction of a national image appropriate to China’s economic and political status, is forced to adapt to the challenges posed by an unexpected crisis, such as the pandemic. Between the lines of domestic political correctness, Xu highlights a distinctly Chinese type of strategic communications, one that is built upon the coordination of domestic propaganda and external propaganda for a single, paramount, strategic objective: domestic regime stability.<sup>64</sup>

It is worth concluding this overview of Chinese scholarship in the Xi era with an outlier case: the Research Institute of National Strategic Communications of Peking University, a think tank launched in November 2014.<sup>65</sup> A few months after its creation, a short essay authored by the Director of the Institute, Professor Cheng Manli, and previously published in the *Guangming Daily* (one of the major state newspapers) was posted on the SCIO website. The essay provided a concise outline of the emergence of strategic communications in the US, defining it as a process that is more goal-oriented, more ‘offensive’, and better at integrating resources than public diplomacy. Cheng presented a three-stage agenda that, through the integration of communication activities of state media, public diplomacy actors, national security, and military intelligence organs, would eventually integrate into a ‘national strategic communications’ organ tasked with influencing both domestic and

63 Kou Liyan, ‘Zai “wei-douzheng” zhong kaizhan zhanlue chuanbo: Telangpu ru zhu baigong dui Zhongguo zhanlue chuanbo de yingxiang ji yingdui’ [Developing Strategic Communications in the ‘Micro-Blogging Confrontation’: The Impact of Trump’s Arrival in the White House on China’s Strategic Communications and Its Response], *Duiwai chuanbo* [International Communication] N° 2 (2017): 18-20.

64 Xu Meng, ‘Zhongda tufa shijian zhong guojia xingxiang de zhanlue chuanbo: Jiyu zhong guo kangji xinguan feiyun yiqing de sikao’ [National Strategic Communications during Major Emergencies: Insights From China’s Thinking on Fighting the New Coronavirus Epidemic], *Shijiazhuang Xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Shijiazhuang University] Volume 32, N° 2 (2021): 102-109.

65 ‘Beijing Daxue jiang chengli Guojia Zhanlue Chuanbo Yanjiuyuan’ [Peking University Will Establish the Research Institute of National Strategic Communications], *Renmin wang* [Website of the People’s Daily], 19 November 2014.

foreign audiences through ‘manipulation or management’.<sup>66</sup> Also in 2015, the Research Institute began to run the ‘China House’ project in the Pakistani cities of Karachi and Islamabad. Explaining the task of the project, Cheng described the China Houses as ‘long-term mechanisms for the “localisation” of popular diplomacy’ that had the mission of enhancing contacts with Pakistani media and think tanks. Quite candidly, Cheng explained that the people-to-people contacts driven by an NGO such as the Institute could avoid ‘the strong flavor of propaganda’ [qianglie de xuanchuan secai] that comes with official diplomacy, and could help Beijing reach a deeper level than government institutions in establishing those ‘people-to-people bonds’ critical to the success of the BRI in Pakistan—one of the geostrategic junctions of the project.<sup>67</sup> The publication on the website of the SCIO, and especially the China House project in Pakistan, suggest that Cheng Manli and her Research Institute, at least for a short period of time, enjoyed a degree of interaction and even coordination with Chinese Party-State actors, setting them apart from other Chinese scholars and the other centres on strategic communications that appeared in the PRC throughout the 2010s.<sup>68</sup> Yet, as of late 2021, the Research Institute does not have a dedicated webpage on the website of Peking University, and no recent reports or studies associated with the institute are accessible to the public. Similarly, no trace of the ‘China House’ project appears online, suggesting the project was rapidly folded after its launch. At the moment the Research Institute seems to be simply a ‘nameplate’ for Professor Cheng Manli. It remains to be seen whether it will be relaunched after Xi’s call for establishing a strategic communications system.

66 Cheng Manli, ‘Guojia guoji chuanbo nengli jianshe xuyao yongyou zhanlue shiye’ [The Construction of National International-Communication Capacities Requires the Possession of a Strategic Vision], State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 21 July 2015.

67 Cheng Manli, ‘Tansuo minjian wajiao xin moshi: Beida Guojia Zhanlue Chuanbo Yanjiuyuan zai Bajisitan de shijian’ [Exploring a New Model of Popular Diplomacy: The Activity of the Peking University’s National Strategic Communications Institute in Pakistan], *Guoji chuanbo* [Global Communication] No 1 (2016): 82-86.

68 At least nine strategic communications research institutions within Mainland Chinese universities were established between 2010 and 2017. See: Yang Qifei and Chen Hong, ‘Zhongguo zhanlue chuanbo yanjiu kuangjia yu huayu tixi goujian’ [The Research Framework and Discourse System Construction of China’s Strategic Communications], *Xueshu shalong* [Academic Salon] No 2 (2019): 206.

## STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA IN THE XI ERA

Scholars scrutinising the Chinese Party-State have highlighted how the gradual emergence of a ‘total national security concept’ [zongti guojia anquan guan] during the first term of the Xi administration (2013-2018) has driven a comprehensive, centripetal process of bureaucratic restructuring affecting virtually all the actors involved in the production of what could broadly be defined as external propaganda.<sup>69</sup> Because of the blurring of boundaries between the internal and external dimensions of national security, the separation between internal and external propaganda has lost salience in the face of a new paradigm prioritising centralisation, coordination, and proactiveness, leading to a wave of bureaucratic restructurings.

The first and arguably most significant restructuring, though never directly acknowledged by state media, was the absorption of the leading organ tasked with external propaganda, the CCP Office for External Propaganda (better known by what became its ‘governmental nameplate’ SCIO), within the CCP Central Propaganda Department (CPD) in 2014.<sup>70</sup> A similar pattern can be seen in the PLA reforms enacted in 2016, in which the General Political Department, the organ which had been responsible for PLA external propaganda, was incorporated into the newly established Political Work Department of the CCP Central Military Commission (CMC).<sup>71</sup> The establishment of the Central United Front Work Small Leading Group in 2015 and comprehensive restructuring of tasks and bureaucratic organisation of the CCP United Front Work Department that followed, can also be considered steps in this process. Especially if we consider ‘united front work’ targeted at overseas Chinese communities, foreign businesses, and political elites as one of the facets

69 Matthew D. Johnson, ‘Safeguarding Socialism: The Origins, Evolution and Expansion of China’s Total Security Paradigm’, *Sinopsis*, 16 June 2020.

70 Jichang Lulu, Filip Jirouš and Rachel Lee, ‘Xi’s Centralisation of External Propaganda SCIO and the Central Propaganda Department’, *Sinopsis*, 25 January 2021, p. 8.

71 On post-2016 reforms: Joel Wuthnow and Philip C. Saunders, ‘Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA’, in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, eds. Philip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019), pp. 1-42.

of external propaganda, here understood in its broader meaning as the exercise of power through practices of discourse-control in a contested international environment.<sup>72</sup> The process of comprehensive bureaucratic restructuring continued in the following years as the CPD, by assuming the unified supervision over ‘news and publishing work’ [xinwen chuban gongzuo] in 2018,<sup>73</sup> became the supervising organ of the Central Radio and Television Network, a new unit that absorbed state media tasked with external propaganda<sup>74</sup>: China Global Television Network, China National Radio, and China Radio International.

The political and organisational concerns motivating these developments can all be associated with a strategic communications paradigm. This notwithstanding, the opacity of both the Chinese political system and, by virtue of the parallel ‘neibu’ [internal circulation only] circuit of publication, the relationship between the academic community and the Party-State, prevents any meaningful attempt to unearth a causal nexus between research on strategic communications and the bureaucratic restructurings enforced between 2014 and 2018. While it is safe to assume that the PLA and the Ministry of National Defense had been closely monitoring the development of US strategic communications doctrine since the mid-2000s,<sup>75</sup> there is not enough evidence to identify an institutional embrace of strategic communications throughout the 2010s. In light of this, I argue that the causal link should be reversed. Growing interest in strategic communications in Chinese academia in recent years should be understood as a *reflection* of the Xi administration’s concerns for increasing bureaucratic centralisation, coordination, and proactiveness of the Chinese external propaganda machine. Concerns

72 Alex Joske, ‘The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group: Institutionalising United Front Work’, *Sinopsis*, 23 July 2019.

73 ‘Zhong-Gong Zhongyang yinfa “shenhua dang he guojia jigou gaige fang’an”’ [The CCP Central Committee Issued the ‘Program for the Deepening Reform of Party and Government Organs’], *Xinhua*, 21 March 2018.

74 Here to be understood in the immediate, media-centric dimension of external communication. David Bandurki, ‘When Reforms Means Tighter Control’, *China Media Project*, 22 March 2018.

75 Tangential evidence of the Party-State’s knowledge of strategic communications is given by a Chinese scholar’s account of their participation in an ‘advanced training course’ [gaoji peixunban] in ‘international strategic communications’ [guoji zhanlue chuanbo] organised by the Foreign Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defense in March 2010. See: Jin Chuan, ‘Zai ying wai renwu zhong zhanxian Zhongguo jundui xingxiang: Canjia guoji zhanlue chuanbo gaoji peixunban de sikao yu tihui’ [Showing the Image of China’s Army When Welcoming Foreign Visiting Deployments: Reflections on Participating in an Advanced Training Course in International Strategic Communications], *Duowai chuanbo* [International Communications] N° 8 (2010): 21-22.

which had been made explicit in the speeches delivered by Xi in the second half of 2013, examined in the previous section. The best evidence supporting this argument is the shift in the conceptualisation of strategic communications that occurred between the Hu-Wen era and the Xi era. While the earliest scholarship on strategic communications attempted to provide an indigenous framework centered on public diplomacy, by the mid-2010s strategic communications was framed in terms of external communication, reflecting the Party-State leadership's change of priorities. Further patterns that can be identified in this body of work, namely growing attention given to the bureaucratic organisation of strategic communications and the application of related practices to face crises and challenges in China's foreign policy, strengthen this claim.

There still are, however, lingering questions regarding the timing of Xi's call for building a strategic communications 'uxi'-system with Chinese characteristics. What does this announcement mean for future conceptualisation and articulation of strategic communications? That is assuming that the term will not happen to be a *hapax legomenon* in the CCP vocabulary given the authoritative nature of the source. In short: why did Xi announce the construction of a strategic communications system in May 2021, and not earlier? After all, the shift in Beijing's posture in international politics and an open willingness to reshape global norms and values around domestic standards predates these developments, tracing back to the earliest years of the Xi administration.<sup>76</sup> My argument is that the two major events that have prompted a renewed sense of urgency for upgrading China's international communication capabilities, were indeed the core themes of his May 2021 speech.<sup>77</sup> The first is the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent scholarly pieces have emphasised China's efforts to counter international backlash, tout its extraordinary success in public health management, and, since the earliest stages of the pandemic, shape

76 Mareike Ohlberg, 'Boosting the Party's Voice: China's Quest for Global Ideological Dominance', *MERICCS China Monitor*, 21 July 2016.

77 'Xi Jinping zai Zhong-Gong Zhongyang Zhengzhi Ju di sanshi ci jiti xuexi shi qiangdiao jiaqiang he gaijin guoji chuanbo gongzuo zhanshi zhenshi liti quanmian de Zhongguo.'

public health paths out of the crisis at a global level.<sup>78</sup> As early as February 2020, Xi stressed the need to strengthen ‘integrated communication’ and control public opinion at home, while also seizing the initiative and effectively influencing international public opinion.<sup>79</sup> The second is the perception of an acceleration in the decline of the US in the aftermath of racial protests in the summer of 2020, the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic under the Trump administration, and the Capitol Riot on 6 January 2020.<sup>80</sup> In light of this, as of late 2021, we do not yet know what the construction of a Chinese strategic communications system will amount to. Will an institutional mechanism be established, possibly along the lines articulated by Zhao Liangying, that will supervise an upgrade of international communication as the key facet of the Party-State external propaganda? Or will it evolve into a ‘discourse’ instead – an officially-sanctioned conceptual platform in the domestic public space to articulate a continuing process of centralisation, coordination, and proactiveness in disseminating the ‘China story’ to the outside world.

## CONCLUSION

The study of strategic communications has been a niche topic in the Chinese academic landscape. Recent developments, however, suggest that the subject is worthy of attention. One reason is the increasing scholarly attention in Anglophone academia towards China’s practice of strategic communications, in lockstep with other regional actors in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>81</sup> A second reason is the announcement of the establishment of a ‘system of strategic communications with Chinese characteristics’ by the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in May 2021. In the absence of grey literature

78 Nadège Rolland, ‘China’s Pandemic Power Play’, *Journal of Democracy* 31, N° 3 (2020): 25-38; Suisheng Zhao, ‘Rhetoric and Reality of China’s Global Leadership in the Context of COVID-19: Implications for the US-Led World Order and Liberal Globalization’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2020; Lina Gong, ‘Humanitarian Diplomacy as an Instrument of China’s Image-Building’, *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 2021.

79 Xi Jinping, ‘Zai Zhongyang Zhengzhixu changwei hui huiyi yanjiu yingdui xinxing guanzhuang bingdu feiyan yiqing gongzuo shi de jianghua’ [Speech During a Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the CPC Addressing the Response to the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia Epidemic], *Qiushi* [Seek Theory], 15 February 2020.

80 On recent developments in Chinese perceptions of the US, see: Jude Blanchette and Seth G. Jones, ‘How Beijing’s Narrative of Strategic Decline Is Leading to Strategic Overconfidence’, *CSIS*, July 2021.

81 Chiyuki Aoi, ‘Japanese Strategic Communication: Its Significance as a Political Tool’, *Defence Strategic Communications* Volume 3 (2017): 71-102; James D.J. Brown, ‘Russian Strategic Communications toward Japan: A More Benign Model of Influence?’, *Asian Perspective* Volume 45, N° 3 (2021): 559-586.

or detailed official statements from which it is possible to discern the Chinese Party-State's conception of strategic communications, this study has mapped Mainland Sinophone scholarship on the subject, from the introduction of the concept in the domestic academic landscape in the second half of the 2000s to the period of Xi's announcement in 2021. It has then framed this scholarship in the context of the comprehensive institutional reforms pushed by the Xi administration since 2013.

The key finding of this study is the distinct articulation of strategic communications in China as a discourse on the effectiveness of the country's external propaganda. More precisely, this study has shown how strategic communications has been used as a conceptual tool to scope issues related to the perceived credibility deficit of a Leninist propaganda system competing in a global information environment. Mainland Sinophone scholarship on strategic communications has, as a result, been concerned with providing a new vocabulary and a new approach to discuss issues that have long preoccupied propaganda actors in China: the effectiveness of bureaucratic organisation, the adaptation to technological developments in the global information domain, the correct identification of target audiences and the appropriate localisation of propaganda activities, the relationship with domestic propaganda, and the measurement of outcomes.

In addition, by examining this body of work, this study has also shed light on the wider debate over the role of state-driven information dissemination—defined as 'external communication' or 'international communication' in Chinese official and academic parlance—within the wider set of practices defining external propaganda in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Throughout the second term of the Hu-Wen administration (2008-2013) this facet of external propaganda was generally subsumed in an attempt to present Party-State external propaganda mainly through the frame of public diplomacy. Following the rise to power of the Xi administration, however, the main frame of reference for external propaganda appears to have shifted toward external communication. This change in terminology may appear as evidence of a solipsistic, if not esoteric, debate to observers on the outside. But, in simpler terms,

it signals an inward shift in focus: from engagement with and adaptation to foreign audiences, to the challenges for Party-State bureaucratic actors to craft, organise, and disseminate information, coherent with domestic propaganda and the requirements of an ever-expanding national security agenda. More importantly, this shift is the result of a wider and more consequential change in posture under the Xi administration: Beijing moved away from an attempt to explain and justify China's positions and interests within a Western-dominated international 'discourse system' to launching a bid to reshape said system according to Chinese values and worldviews.

The scholarship examined in this study has closely followed this evolution. The early phase focused on the divulgence of US strategic communications doctrine that emerged during the George W. Bush and Obama administrations. But by the end of the Hu-Wen administration the scholarship pivoted to portraying strategic communications as a 'strategic' dimension of public diplomacy that could contribute to enhancing the country's soft power and construe a more effective 'national image'. In the aftermath of Xi's rise to power, however, scholars began to produce research on the bureaucratic and managerial dimension of external communication, putting the coordination of Party-State actors and media into the spotlight, and devising strategic communications-focused responses to international crises. This development leads to the second meaningful finding of this work. Proposals raised in the second half of the 2010s by Mainland Chinese scholars to update the Party-State external propaganda apparatus according to a strategic communications paradigm that privileges coordination and centralisation in fact *followed* actual institutional make-overs within the Party-State external propaganda apparatus that had previously occurred under the radar, tracing back to between 2014 and 2016.

These findings, in turn, open two paths for future research on China's strategic communications. The first regarding the relationship between Party-State bureaucratic actors involved with propaganda work and the academic community on the Mainland. As this study suggests, domestic scholarship on propaganda, similar to academic debates on

China's international relations, may provide a 'perceptual parameter' of the opinions and thoughts present in the leadership of the country's propaganda actors.<sup>82</sup> In light of the opacity of Chinese institutions tasked with propaganda work, examining domestic scholarship may remain, in the short to medium term, one of the few avenues available to track developments in this field. Future access to 'internal-circulation only' [neibu] publications may prove particularly useful from this perspective. A second path of research considers the establishment of a 'tixi'-system of strategic communications with Chinese characteristics. The key questions will be whether this system will result in the emergence of ad hoc strategic communications organs embedded in the Party-State's propaganda apparatus, as Mainland Chinese scholars have proposed, or whether it will evolve into a more nebulous organisational frame including pre-existing organs, as the use of the term 'tixi' [system of systems] by Xi himself appears to imply.

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<sup>82</sup> Huiyun Feng and Kai He, 'Why Do Chinese IR Scholars Matter?', in *Chinese Scholars and Foreign Policy Debating International Relations*, eds. Huiyun Feng, Kai He and Yan Xuetong (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 7.

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