The “China Dream” in the PRC’s Propaganda Regime in the Digital Era: Case Study of the Constitutional Debate during 2012-2013

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Abstract
At such a time a new “fifth-generation” leadership, led by Xi Jinping, was installed at the Chinese Communist Party’s 18th National Congress in November 2012. The “China Dream,” put forth by the General Secretary Xi Jinping when he visited the exhibition “The Road to Revival” at China’s National Museum in Beijing in late November 2012, has ever since become his governing ideology by which his generation will achieve what is officially proclaimed as “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.” In the wake of Xi’s further elaborations on “China Dream” in a keynote speech at the National People’s Congress in March 2013, forcibly propagating the “China Dream” as a leading patriotic education campaign has apparently been the core duty of the propaganda regime at all level. The official slogan—China Dream—has, however, confronted by alternative discourses both mediated in Chinese cyberspace and physical space, leaving an increased fierce conflict over the seizure of discourse rights between the Chinese propaganda government and the governed, epitomized as Netizens and elites in this work. Both the Chinese Communist Party and the public intellectuals are seizing and expanding their respective discourse power which is coined as “sovereign discourse rights” in this work. Applying the notion of “sovereign discourse rights” into the study of “China Dream” campaign, with a special reference to the controversial constitutional debate, we find it helpful to comprehend conceptually and analytically the transitions as well as dynamics between the Chinese propaganda regime and the new empowered Chinese blogosphere in this global information age. This will in turn bear far-reaching social and policy implications for China in the long run as this bottom-up force may facilitate and reinforce a favorable social basis of the twin effects: the dynamic civic-oriented agenda and enhanced discourse rights. Both of them will serve as a precondition for a dynamic Chinese civil society, which in turn are the core foundation and a necessary ingredient of any future political transitions in Communist China.

Keywords: propaganda, Internet, China Dream, sovereign discourse rights, agenda-setting

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IN 1793 a British envoy, Lord Macartney, arrived at the court of the Chinese emperor, hoping to open an embassy. He brought with him a selection of gifts from his newly industrializing nation. The Qianlong emperor, whose country then accounted for about a third of global GDP, swatted him away: “Your sincere humility and obedience can clearly be seen,” he wrote to King George III, but we do not have “the slightest need for your country’s manufactures”. The British returned in the 1830s with gunboats to force trade open, and China’s attempts at reform ended in collapse, humiliation and, eventually, Maoism. 

Introduction

China convened its 18th Party Congress in November 2012, designed to usher in the fifth generation of leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) who will govern in the decade ahead onto the 2020s. Unlike Hu Jintao’s (胡錦濤) predecessor Jiang Zemin (江澤民) who remained head of the Central Military Commission for two years after he stepped down at the 16th Party Congress in 2002, Hu handed over both the Party General Secretary and Chairman of the Central Military Commission positions to Xi Jinping, marking a full power transition in CCP history. The way Hu Jintao stages a “luo tui” (裸退, literally translated as naked retreat, or full retirement) has conferred upon full mandate throughout his ruling in his era in a decade.

Soon after Xi Jinping took office, he and his six newly appointed Politburo standing committee members, including Li Keqiang (李克強), Zhang Dejiang (張德江), Yu Zhengsheng (俞正聲), Liu Yunshan (劉雲山), Wang Qishan (王岐山), and Zhang Gaoli (張高麗), made a public debut in late November 2012 on a visit to the “Road to Revival” (復興之路) exhibit at the National Museum in Beijing. On this occasion, Xi delivered a speech, pledging for the revival of China into a strong and wealthy nation. As such, the exhibition is very patriotic that recalls a century of Chinese modern humiliating history that dates back to the Opium War in 1840. In what is called the “China Dream,” (中國夢) the nation, according to Xi, has gone through on the road to revival, and he considers:

…achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest Chinese dream in modern times. Because the dream carries a long-cherished wish of generations of Chinese people, it reflects the interests of the Chinese people as a whole, and it’s a common expectation of the Chinese nation. History tells us that

the personal future and destiny of each one of us are closely connected with the future of this country. The people can live well only when our country and nation develop well. This glorious dream requires tireless efforts of generations of Chinese people.  

Xi Jinping was later confirmed by the National People’s Congress (NPC) in March 2013 as the new state president and chairman of the State Central Military Commission, making him the Communist Party chief, head of state and commander-in-chief. Following his first talk on “China Dream” in late November 2012 with respect to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, Xi vowed to arduously press ahead with “China Dream” at the closing meeting of the first plenary session of the 12th NPC in March 2013. Different from his previous vague but grand vision of realizing the “China Dream,” this time he elaborated on this notion systematically and comprehensively in greater detail. In addition, Xi at various venues repeatedly articulated “China Dream” in relation to its distinct tasks, practical strategies, and work objectives, home and abroad, making it a nationwide patriotic education campaign.

Chinese Communist Party Propaganda in Transition

Essentially the Party’s propaganda department occupies a key part in Chinese Communist Party’s governing structure; it is mainly in charge of overall ideology-related thought work. The reason why ideology and thought work matters much for Communist Party is that they are per se the fundamental basis building up for the rationale of its very existence, activities, and moral ground. Since the

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3 This speech delivered at the closing meeting of the first plenary session of the 12th NPC in March 2013 is deemed as the second time Xi Jinping interprets the “Chinese Dream.” Xi repeated the words “Chinese Dream” nine times in this speech. See “Spotlight: Xi Jinping talks about ‘Chinese Dream nine times,” (Text: Xi Jinping jiuti Zhongguomeng) Xinhua News Agency [on-line], (17 March 2013), http://news.xinhuanet.com/2013lh/2013-03/17/c_115054547.htm (accessed 16 March 2014).

4 According to official information, Xi Jinping has talked about “China Dream” fifteen times for the purpose of advancing the cause of patriotism and national unity. See “General Secretary Xi Jinping delivers fifteen systematical speeches to elaborate on the ‘Chinese Dream’,” (Xi Jinping zong shuji shiwupian jianghua xitong chanshi Zhongguomeng) People’s Daily Online [on-line], (June 19, 2013), http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0619/c40531-21891787.html (accessed 16 March 2014).

5 Hua Gao (高華), Hongtaiyang shi zenyang shengqi de: Yanan zhengfeng yundong de lailong qumai (How the red sun is rising: the sequence of The Yan’an Rectification Movement; 紅太陽是怎樣升起的－延安整風運動的來龍去脈) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001), p. 301.
inception of the Chinese Communist Party, Marxism, and later Marxism-Leninism, has been the guiding ideology for all its actions. In accordance with Lenin’s dictation on what the Communist Party needs and ought to serve as the vanguard of the proletariat, the CCP has from the 1920s principally maintained and practiced what Lenin has prescribed: the party-run and government-operated newspapers ought to work for “a solid ideological unity” and to supply “complete and timely information” for a mighty political force.  

Mao Zedong himself is actually a propagandist. During Mao’s rein, he had extensively incorporated every possible means to enhance propaganda techniques and to strengthen thought work. Mao in particular laid out his plan for the role of art and literature in Chinese society in his notable talk at Yan’an Forum (延安文藝座談會), in which he highly credits the “pen” as the key to the success of Chinese people’s liberation:

> In our struggle for the liberation of the Chinese people there are various fronts, among which there are the fronts of the pen and of the gun, the cultural and the military fronts. To defeat the enemy we must rely primarily on the army with guns. But this army alone is not enough; we must also have a cultural army, which is absolutely indispensable for uniting our own ranks and defeating the enemy.

Networked Sovereign Discourse Rights

This paper proposes the idea of “sovereign discourse rights” to explain and reflect upon China’s propaganda in the digital era, with special reference to its most recent nationwide patriotic campaign—China Dream. The notion of “sovereign discourse rights” involves two interrelated strands: discourse rights and sovereignty. To speak with the notion of “discourse rights,” it actually refers to its basic construct of “discourse.” It was firstly rooted and developed in the field of linguistics but was later expanded to a more widely usage with a broad indication in humanity and social sciences, such as communication, literature, cultural studies, sociology and politics. A discourse can be defined as a “system of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and

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the worlds of which they speak.”

In a simpler term, discourses are embedded in human communications and this is how we human being differs from the animal. Any economic, social and political changes are to be inevitably bound up with changing discourses which essentially reflect newer sets of value orientations, attitudes, and identities.

In the process of boosting re-adjustment and re-mobilization of the Chinese Party-controlled media, the propaganda regime has repeatedly vowed to “firmly grasping the initiative in public opinion work,” and “capturing the initiative in the online public opinion struggle.” Meanwhile, Xi Jinping gravely requests his propaganda and ideology departments to bear full responsibility to protect well the territory, and to be responsible for defending the territory, and to do everything they can to defend the territory, (守土有責、守土負責、守土盡責), so as to realize the “China Dream” of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. This top-down request is in consistent with the notion—“sovereign discourse rights” in this work.

Case Study: Sovereign Discourse Rights in “China Dream”
—The Constitutional Debate

Soon after his high-profile visit to the national museum’s “Road to Revival” exhibit on 29 November 2012, Xi Jinping openly marked the 30th anniversary of China’s 1982 Constitution on 4 December 2012 by asserting:

No organization or individual has the privilege to overstep the Constitution and the law; and any violation of the Constitution and the law must be investigated...We must establish mechanisms to restrain and supervise power. Power must be made responsible and must be supervised... We must ensure that the power bestowed by the people is...
constantly used for the interests of the people.  

Xi’s affirmative message in promoting the faithful implementation of China’s Constitution has coupled with what is widely touted as his “new” Southern Tour (新南巡) on a nostalgic note of Deng Xiaoping’s “Southern Tour” in 1992. Xi visited several southern cities, including China’s special economic zone of Shenzhen during 7-11 December 2012. Xi’s low-key tour of southern China has not only portrayed himself as a man of the people, but has also earned him a positive public image of being anti-corruption and reformed-minded. More importantly, his politically calculated southern tour seems to suggest that he as a new Communist Party leader would continue to push ahead with more comprehensive economic reforms as his predecessor Deng, popularly dubbed as the “general designer of Chinese reform and opening-up to the outside world.”

Both Xi’s assurance to defend the 1982 Chinese Constitution and his unbending determination to deepen economic reforms had been warmly welcomed by many Chinese citizens. Expectations had thereby run high for Xi Jinping to advance political reform during his first term. In the wake of Xi’s encouraging remarks on constitution and the assured gestures in his “new” Southern Tour, some outspoken and liberal-minded scholars, intellectuals, Internet users, had been fevered to discuss and debate over constitution and “constitutional governance” (xian zheng, 憲政) in connection with the ongoing “China Dream” campaign. The Southern Weekend (Nanfang Zhoumo, Southern Weekly, 南方周末), one of China’s most liberal and outspoken newspapers, intended to publish its “New Year’s Greeting” (新年賀詞) in early January 2013, with the title—Chinese Dream, Constitutional Dream (中國夢，憲政夢). However, it was censored directly by the propaganda officials of Guangdong Province without any acknowledgement of the Weekly’s editors. In their proposed “Greetings,” they advocate:

Today, we absolutely do not only dream about material wealth, we also hope for spiritual plenty; we absolutely not only dream that the country can become strong and wealthy, we hope even more that its citizens can find self-respect. A new people and a new country is saving the nation from extinction and enlightening it. No one can do without others, no one can overpower others. Constitutional governance is the basis for all beautiful dreams.\(^\text{14}\)

Parallel to the Southern Weekend, the Yanhuang Chunqiu (炎黄春秋), another liberal and outspoken political journal, had similarly published a bold yet significant “New Year Message” (新年献词) with the heading—“The Constitution is a Consensus for Political Reform”—in its January edition in 2013. Inside this “Message,” the Yanhuang Chunqiu calls for:

> As the Constitution provides the consensus for political reform, we must all spring into action, turning our voided Constitution into real political and legal systems — and that means we must change all current systems, statutes and policies that violate the Constitution, so that [laws and systems] accord with the Constitution.\(^\text{15}\)

The “New Year Messages” both from the Southern Weekend and Yanhuang Chunqiu were actually a pro-civilian agenda given that their media ownership affiliation is either with the Communist Party of the Guangdong (广东) Province or with a close tie to the CCP. Yet, the “New Year Message” from the Southern Weekend had nonetheless revised and furthered the official discourses from initially “Constitution” (宪法) to “Constitutional Governance” (宪政), in the sense that “Constitutional Governance” is not merely having and showcasing the “Constitution.” What is more important is that the underlying political values, ideas, attitudes, and the patterns of democratic practices that attach to the Constitution. Consequently, the Southern Weekend linked the concept of “constitutional governance” with the ongoing “China’ Dream” campaign. The defiant action by Southern Weekend for its 2013 “New Year’s Message” was truly aggressive in that it has indeed revised the official


discourses, attempted to compete with the propaganda regime to seize the commanding heights, and profoundly challenged the Party’s monopolistic agenda-setting power. In other words, *Southern Weekend* was deemed by the CCP to contend with the propaganda machine to occupy the discourse power and seize the “sovereign discourse rights.” Situated in the current political climate, the original “New Year’s Message” was relentlessly censored by the propaganda department of Guangdong Province a day before it could be released. Instead, the editorial team of *Southern Weekend* was forced to add a “politically correct” commentary that glorifies the CCP with its annual New Year editorial. In parallel, *Yanhuang Chunqiu* was likewise instructed to close down their website on 4 January 2013 for the reason that this journal failed to renew its registration information before it could publish any messages.

Both the 2013 New Year edition of *Yanhuang Chunqiu* and the *Southern Weekend* incident indicate that there has been a surging expectation among reform-minded Chinese intellectuals and Netizens that they tend to regard the official “Chinese Dream” as the desirable “Constitutional Dream.” To them, to realize the “Chinese/Constitutional Dream” would imply to carry out political reform. In fact, there exists essential different perceptions between the propaganda government and the Chinese general public, in particular those intellectuals, on the nature, role, and meaning of constitution/constitutional governance. And these diverse perceptions have driven some Chinese intellectuals and liberal media outlets, such as the *Southern Weekend* and *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, to ponder on what exactly is the “Chinese Dream,” and how the Dream should and could be realized. In one aspect, this is essentially symbolized as a seizure of the “sovereign discourse rights” between the propaganda government and the governed for both of them have their own presumptions, interpretations, and agendas of the “China Dream.”

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16 See note #39 for the newly imposed piece of the New Year editorial. Besides, for the internal chatter among Chinese journalists concerning *Southern Weekend* incident, please see Teng Chang (滕昶), “Nanfang zhouver xinwen zhiye lunli weiyuanhui shengming: youren yi xingzheng zhiling cubao niuqu shishi,” (Statement of the *Southern Weekend* news ethics committee: someone is violently distorting the truth through administrative directives, 南方周末新聞職業倫理委員會聲明：有人以行政指令粗暴扭曲事實) *IBTimes Chinese* [on-line], (6 January 2013), http://www.ibtimes.com.cn/articles/18996/20130106/southern-weekly.htm (accessed 16 March 2014).

Conclusion

Since Xi Jinping put forward the slogan of “China Dream” in late November 2012, it has been a focal point of study for both policy makers and academics at home and abroad. It has become a governing ideology for the fifth generation of leadership of the Chinese Communist Party by which his generation endeavors to achieve what is usually referred as the “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” in the decade ahead. Amid this context, the propaganda machine has spun in full motion to conduct vigorous propaganda to mobilize workers and personnel mostly from the public institutions as well as students from schools at all levels to participate in this patriotic “China Dream” movement. While the “China Dream” campaign has been continuously proceeding, do Chinese share the identical dream as the propaganda has aggressively advanced? Alternatively, do Chinese simply sleep in the same bed, yet, they are having different dreams?