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.\(^2\)

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.\(^3\) In addition, Xi at various venues repeatedly articulated “China Dream” in relation to its distinct tasks, practical strategies, and work objectives,\(^4\) home and abroad, making it a nationwide patriotic education campaign.

Effectively, the Chinese authorities have aggressively launched a series of new nationwide propaganda campaigns that are under instructions of the Propaganda department at all levels since Xi took power. A nationwide barrage of propaganda posters as well as learning activities that went up starting December 2012 gives a clearer connotation of what the Chinese party and government organs, including states enterprises and universities authorities, are up to since then. The call for action to realize the cause of national rejuvenation and unity as well as prosperity has been on the top agenda of the new Xi-Li administration.


\(^3\) 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 “China 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).
Apart from the top-down “China Dream” propaganda campaign, we have also seen the rise of the Internet-mediated public opinions and debates from below that from time to time run against the official agenda. Ever since China launched its first global Internet connection in 1994, the Internet population has grown exponentially after two decades of development, with its current Internet population up to six hundred million. The innovative Internet application such as new social media Chinese microblogging (weibo, 微博) has already posed unprecedented and formidable challenges to China’s propaganda-like mediaspace as well as the propaganda regime itself. Coupled with the conservative and authoritarian Chinese regime, the increasingly unfettered cyberspace and blogosphere has highlighted the “networked socialism with Chinese characteristics” (有中国特色的网路社会主義) wherein Chinese citizens may have enjoyed relatively more freedom than they were before in communicating horizontally and disseminating alternative information and debating in a more swift, interactive and convenient way on the one hand. But still, there are political taboos and red lines in both cyberspace and physical life in constraining complete communications freedom and liberty on the other. One of the direct consequences is that it is becoming obvious and prominent to note the Chinese propaganda is confronting soaring “reactionary” opinions from the general public and the virtual world that they are undermining, challenging, or revising and replacing alternative “discourses” and “agenda-setting” which were traditionally considered as the monopolized power of the privileged propaganda machine.

Consequently, Xi Jinping has repeatedly remarked at several meetings to vow for greater initiative in the publicity and ideological work to ensure a correct political direction in the information era. He, for example, stressed at the “national conference on the publicity and ideological work” (全国宣传思想工作会议) in Beijing in August 2013 that the Party-State is now “facing unprecedented challenges and hardships, [and] we must persist in consolidating mainstream ideology and opinion.” In this vein, he identifies the Internet as the country’s “unruly” media and issues calls

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for the Party’s propaganda machine to build a strong army to seize the ground of new media. To be specific, instead of being passive, the propaganda government would however be more combative and take an initiative to wage a war to win over Chinese public opinion, which may be symbolized as “positive propaganda, public opinion struggle.” (zhengmian xuanhuan, yulun douzheng, 正面宣傳，輿論鬥爭) The former propaganda chief and Politburo standing committee member, Liu Yunshan, has hence urged strengthened efforts to continue to tackle the “China Dream campaign, a truly calculated initiative from the top. In his words, “The publicity of the ‘Chinese dream’ and socialism with Chinese characteristics should be conducted thoroughly so as to consolidate people’s confidence in China’s socialist path and system.”

Against this backdrop, incorporating the top-down patriotic education of “China Dream” campaign, this article raises the fundamental question on how and to what extent the Chinese propaganda system may be able to achieve its privileged discourse rights and set its Party-State agenda in the global information age. To further empirical discussions, special attention will also be paid to the constitutional debate with regard to the “China Dream” campaign. This article argues that the propaganda regime is increasingly and constantly confronted by the alternative discourses mediated in Chinese cyberspace, leaving an increased fierce conflict over the seizure of discourse rights between the Chinese propaganda government and the public intellectuals and Netizens. While both the Chinese Communist Party and the public intellectuals are seizing and expanding their commanding heights of discourse rights which is coined in this work as “sovereign discourse rights,” there will be far-reaching social and policy implications for China in the long term as information and ideological control is usually believed as one of the strong pillars for this Party-State.

This article begins with a brief review of the literature on the transitions of Chinese propaganda system, dating back from Lenin to the post-Mao era. It then turns to propose the notion of “sovereign discourse rights” as an analytical concept to explore the dynamics between the propaganda regime and the Chinese general public, mostly the public intellectuals and the Big Vs in this work, in current constitutional

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7 See note #5.
8 There will be more discussions about the notion of “sovereign discourse rights” in the ensuing section.
debate with regard to the “China Dream” campaign. The exploration of this constitutional debate will help serve as an empirical evidence to answer on how and to what extent the Chinese propaganda regime may achieve to (re)gain its commanding height in strengthening its discourse rights when increasingly confronted by opinion leaders as well as elites on the one hand, and in setting its top-down agendas in this global information age on the other.

**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.\(^9\) Since the 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.\(^10\)

Mao Zedong himself is actually a propagandist. During Mao’s reign, 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*

\(^9\) 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.

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.\textsuperscript{11}

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China’s central propaganda Department adjusted to new political situations and expanded its roles to carry out economic and sociopolitical tasks assigned by the Party-State. However, during what is officially termed as the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” propaganda system was seized by and served for only Mao and his close associates. Over this chaotic period, “a \textit{de facto} national propaganda department operated, under the control of the Cultural Revolution Leading Small Group, which has usurped the powers of the CCP Central Committee.”\textsuperscript{12} Propaganda worked for Mao and his closest allies had eventually turned into a personal tool for him to advance the world revolutionary movement on the one hand, and to get engaged in fierce power struggle on the other hand.

Entering into the post-Mao era, the propaganda machine was then tasked with the publicity and promotion of economic restructuring that was from a command economy into a more socialist market economy, with a vague media line on continuously upholding the “Four Cardinal Principles” (四項基本原則).\textsuperscript{13} In the mid-1990s, with the rise of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), the Chinese government intended to harness the potential of ICTs to stimulate economic growth and to promote national competitiveness in a global economy, while simultaneously constraining the ICT’s capability to foster what the authorities deem undesired sociopolitical liberation and democratic transition.\textsuperscript{14} Given that the Party-State recently called for a “comprehensive deepening of reforms” (全面深化改革) at the Third Plenary Session of 18th CCP Central Committee,\textsuperscript{15} we have


\textsuperscript{15} See the full text of the Communiqué of the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the
nonetheless continued to witness the Chinese media and mass communication sectors, both of which are essentially administered and regulated by the CCP’s Central Propaganda Department (中共中央宣傳部), swing for the spectrum between more autonomy in management and political obedience, that are largely depending upon the volatility of China’s current political climate. More specifically, the Chinese propaganda is and should be subsumed within the Party-State, and it ought to both strengthen “positive propaganda” and engage in “public opinion struggle” (zhengmian xuanchuan, yulun douzheng; 正面宣傳，輿論鬥爭) by all possible means.

While Chinese President Xi Jinping vows to deepen its economic reforms and opening-up in all respects at the key Third Plenum meeting, the Chinese media sector has undoubtedly been increasingly affected by the interplay of the forces of globalization and digital revolution. In fact, prior to the introduction of the ICTs in the early 1990s, mass media in the propaganda-oriented Party-State virtually had a direct, immediate and powerful effect on its Chinese audiences. This is usually described as the “hypodermic needle effect,” in that media messages are injected straight into a passive audience which is normally influenced by the message very shortly. Simply put, the media’s message is like a bullet that fires from the “media gun” into the viewer’s “head.” This has resulted in the general overlook of public’s right to know (知情權), right to participate (參與權), right to freedom of speech (表達權), and the right to serve as watch of government policies (監督權). However, this article holds that the conventional propaganda apparatus is not as effective as it used to be. This is primarily the case when the propaganda regime vigorously promotes the patriotic campaign of “China Dream,” a recurring theme throughout the incumbent Xi-Li


Administration from November 2012 onwards. While the Party-State preserves in requesting its media outlets to undertake the role of guiding and shaping public opinion and to strengthen government-sponsored propaganda agendas, the media’s credibility and government authorities have nevertheless been frequently challenged and undermined, with the Chinese opinion leaders and intellectuals as well as the general public going online and engaging in alternative discourses and policy deliberation on this “China Dream” campaign. In the face of increased technological modernization, social pluralization, and economic globalization, the Chinese propaganda regime is yet giving in; rather, it seeks to restore its propaganda power and efficacy by asserting and enhancing what is called “sovereign discourse rights” in this work, so as to help stabilize its social and political situations and, more importantly, to work for fundamental interests of the Party-State in the information age.

**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 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.

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A postmodernist Michel Foucault has in this sense inspired on how we come to term with discourse in modern human society. Foucault coins the phrase of power/knowledge to suggest that power and knowledge are mutually constituted and are so inextricably interrelated that they are in principle inseparable.\(^\text{21}\) For Foucault, “negotiations or struggles within society are not essentially about the possession of power, but rather the contested term of the deployment of power.”\(^\text{22}\) It is in this sense that power is present in formation of any knowledge and calculation. Actually, “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”\(^\text{23}\) Thereby, truth is inextricably articulated to power and thereby, power is always present and can both produce and constrain the truth.\(^\text{24}\) In this work, discourses are simply beyond the forms and contents that language may convey. Rather, it is a power relation that the privileged usually seek to monopolize and create rules of exclusion. This is phrased in this article as “sovereign discourse rights” in which it highlights multi-players competing to pursue and seize greater discourse rights via their disproportionate, asymmetrical power dynamics.

In the Chinese Party-State, media-politics nexus is vividly symbolized in an unwavering basic principle of Party control over the media (dang guan mei ti, 党管媒体) through a complex combination of Party monitoring of news content, legal restrictions and punishments on journalists and editors, and financial incentives for self-censorship.\(^\text{25}\) Underlying this Party-State media logic is that Party’s voices and opinions are much more heard and represented in mass media in comparison with its civilian and/or commercial counterparts. The general Chinese public is thus either excluded from much of the discourse on public policies and current events or being limited to a marginalized sphere of discourses. It is not until the new media, the Internet and its affiliated weibo in particular, that it challenges and undermines the


Party-State ultimate dominance over the discourse rights. Both the Party-State and the opinion leaders from the intelligentsia and cyberspace are fiercely contending and competing against each other in seizing the commanding heights of discourse rights in this digital era, leaving the old and conventional order of discourse system unstable and re-adjusted as well as re-mobilized.

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,”26 and “capturing the initiative in the online public opinion struggle”27. 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,28 (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.

In essence, networked sovereign discourse rights can be defined as a “virtual” presence of traditional sovereignty in cyberspace wherein it has a supreme, exclusive and interpretive power of discourses. In the virtual space, multiple actors, including the state and non-governmental organizations as well as individuals are contending and running against each other for maximizing their online sovereign discourse rights in the hope that they may better promote and strengthen their agendas. In the Chinese context, the discourse rights were traditionally dominated by the propaganda machine of the Party-State. Nevertheless, the networked “sovereign discourse rights” in China are now arguably under ever-increasing competition from its incipient civil society, including the more “unruly” yet dynamic and “reactionary” Internet users. Thus far, it has been an information-intensified battlefield in which the propaganda department (the Party-State) and the Chinese general public (the emerging civil society) to vie

with each other for greater networked “sovereign discourse rights” in this digital era. In so doing, they may better mobilize themselves to rally their followers and supporters in pushing their preferred (policy) agenda forcibly ahead. In the case of “China Dream” campaign under study, this article demonstrates how and to what extent the “sovereign discourse rights” are fiercely contested between the Chinese propaganda regime and the emerging civil society, with a special reference to the constitutional debate.

**Understanding “China Dream” Through “Sovereign Discourse Rights”**

Xi Jinping firstly proposed his version of “China Dream” when he spoke at the National Museum “Road to Revival” (復興之路) exhibition at Beijing on November 29, 2012, soon after he took over as the Chinese Communist Party chief. His vision for the achievement of great renewal or rejuvenation of Chinese nation reflects a long-cherished national aspiration for a “China Dream” about making the country wealthier (fu, 富) and stronger (qiang, 强) from the aggressions and humiliations it suffered in the past centuries. However, Xi’s proposal of “China Dream” is by its nature not a fresh formula in realizing the so-called “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Rather, it is at its root the succession of preceding political causes and glorious missions undertaken by Xi’s predecessors—Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao—in which both of them had in China’s 15th (1997) and 16th (2002) Party Congresses vowed for the new “Three-Step Development Strategy” and “Building a Well-off Society in an All-Round Way”. respectively, to achieve a “prosperous, strong, democratic and culturally advanced

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30 According to the new three-step development strategy, there are three development phases: Step One: Continuing to maintain the rapid, healthy and sustained growth of the national economy. Per capita GDP will be doubled on the basis of 2000, and the life of the Chinese people becomes more comfortable. In particular, all rural areas in the country will enter a well-off society. Step Two: By 2020, the rural population lives a prosperous life with the development of industrialization and urbanization, while the urban population gets even richer. Step Three: From 2020 to 2050, per capita GDP will largely reach US$4,000. China will then become a richer, more democratic and modernized socialist country.
socialist country.”  

Xi Jinping decidedly sums up what his predecessors have previously pledged in the political reports and related development strategies and he then puts forth his slogan of “China Dream” to posture the new era under his reign.  

At a later time, Xi delicately incorporated his edition of “China Dream” into his speech delivered at the closing meeting of the First Plenary Session of 12th NPC in March 2013. He vowed anew to press ahead with the “China Dream” along the path of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” highlighting:

To achieve a comprehensively well-off society, to build a prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized, and harmonious modern socialist country and to attain the Chinese dream of the great renaissance of the Chinese nation is to achieve prosperity, revitalize the nation, and bring about the happiness of the people...  

Stressing the slogan “China Dream” is not a dream for the nation alone, Xi accentuates in the same speech that it is, after all, the dream of the people from all sections of society. Xi in his rhetoric brings “China Dream” into the life of every Chinese by stating Chinese nation shares the common destiny, and therefore, he urges “1.3 billion Chinese people should bear in mind the mission, unite as one, and gather into invincible force with the wisdom and power.”  

In addition to these two remarkable speeches, Xi has also reiterated “China Dream” at several occasions, home and abroad, since he took the reins from November 2012, to vigorously promote his slogan and strive to achieve the dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.  

In particular, when Xi Jinping arrived in


34 See above.  

35 See, for example, “Xishou hezu, gongtong fazhan: zai jinzhuan guojia lingdaoren diwuci huiwu shi de zhuzhi jianghua,” (Work hand in hand for common development: keynote speech by Xi Jinping at the fifth BRICS leaders meeting) People’s Daily Online [on-line], (28 March 2013),
Indian Wells, California, to meet with U.S. President Obama on 6 June 2013, his adopted catchphrase “China Dream,” was once more articulated at summit, in which he elaborates,

By the Chinese dream, we seek to have economic prosperity, national renewal and people’s well-being. The Chinese dream is about cooperation, development, peace and win-win, and it is connected to the American Dream and the beautiful dreams people in other countries may have.\(^\text{36}\)

Xi Jinping has enthusiastically adopted the famous term of “American Dream” in his remarks in the summit. It is primarily because that, on the one hand, Xi may win broader support from its American and Western counterparts when he utilizes the nuanced external propaganda (\textit{wai xuan}, 外宣) techniques to emphatically point out “Chinese Dream” as fully consistent with the dreams of other countries and their own peoples, and on the other hand, this sort of \textit{wai xuan} may in turn be skillfully shifted by his propaganda apparatus on to an internal propaganda (\textit{nei xuan}, 内宣) tactics that it could ultimately help bolster the CCP’s legitimacy while promoting the “China Dream” campaign. Amid this political climate, the propaganda machine has spun in full motion to reinforce its \textit{nei xuan} agenda in conducting a new wave of vigorous propaganda to mobilize citizens and personnel as well as students from public institutions and schools for this patriotic “China Dream” movement. Not only is the mainstream media obliged to facilitate this new thought work movement, but also this patriotic education enters into the classroom, and enters the Chinese students’ brains.\(^\text{37}\)


While the Party-State has extensively promulgated the significance of realizing the “China Dream” of the great rejuvenation and economic prosperity through collective strength and mass mobilization, the majority of people in a more outspoken and dynamic Chinese society are wary of this new round of ideology campaign, contending alternative version of their respective Chinese dream both on- and off-line. The Chinese intellectuals and public opinion leaders, particularly those Internet-based “public intellectuals” (公知) and the “Big Vs” (大 V)—verified accounts in China’s popular social media Weibo (微博), have played a leading role in emancipating public discourses on the official “China Dream” concept embodied in ongoing propaganda work, mobilization, education and campaign.

As such, these public intellectuals and the Big Vs are playing a key part in liberating Chinese public discourses through their alternative agenda-setting and networked social/political mobilization, in the sense that neither the general public would necessarily share the same dream with their Party-State counterpart, nor would they be organized and mobilized to help collectively realize the official “China Dream” as they were requested in the past. Rather, they are now competing against the propaganda regime to seize the commanding heights for the networked “sovereign discourse rights” in the threefold interplay of dynamic action, both in physical world and cyberspace: First, they have disenchanted the official discourse of “China Dream,” enlightening the public with their civilian discourses, and re-enlightening the public when they are confronted by the official seizure of their re-gained discourse rights. The interplayed actions and affection of the general public may be formulated as “disenchancing” (祛魅)—“enlightening” (啟蒙)—“re-enlightening” (再啟蒙). Second, they have subverted and de-constructed the official agenda of “China Dream,” and instead, regain the discourse rights to set alternative civilian agenda. This dynamics of interaction between the Party-State and the general public may also be formulated as “subverting” (顛覆)—“de-constructing” (解構)—“re-constructing.” (再建構) Third, they have also de-mobilized the official “China Dream” campaign by either discouraging the mass or de-moralizing their participation and engagement in any official activities. As a result, the Chinese public may instead be mobilized by those
public intellectuals and the Big Vs to stay on-line and become an “onlookers”\(^{38}\) (wei-guan, 围观) rather than acting as a motivated participant of the “China Dream” in real-life activities. Once these onlookers follow online opinion leaders as long and much as they can, they may be inclined to accept their agendas and be further mobilized to rally around their doctrines/movements. The interplayed actions may be formulated as “mobilizing” (動員)—“de-mobilizing” (去動員)—“re-mobilizing.” (再動員) Incorporating the threefold interplay of action, the case of China’s constitutional debate will exhibit how the Party-State is defending against the general public in seizing and restoring its commanding heights, symbolized as the “sovereign discourse rights” in the “China Dream” campaign.

**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:

\[\textit{No organization or individual has the privilege to overstep the Constitution and the law, and any violation of the Constitution and the law must be investigated…We must establish mechanisms to restrain and supervise power. Power must be made responsible and must be supervised… We must ensure that the power bestowed by the people is constantly used for the interests of the people.}^{39}\]

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

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\(^{38}\) “Wei-guan” literally meaning “surround and stare” is a phrase commonly used in Chinese forums and Weibo when someone or an Internet user does something very eye-catching, it may result in others watching and observing. It also connotes the willingness for those onlookers to get participated in things they have closely followed.

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._


Parallel to the *Southern Weekend*, the *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (炎黃春秋), another liberal and outspoken political journal, had similarly published a bold yet significant “New Year Message” (新年獻詞) 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.42

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 (廣東) 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” (憲法) to “Constitutional Governance” (憲政), 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

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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.”

Soon after the official clampdown on the “New Year Message” of *Southern Weekend*, Guo Shiyou (郭世佑), a respectable historian scholar, firstly argued on 25 January 2013, holding,

> Constitutional governance is the method to govern the country at lower cost, and it is the face of a country and its citizens... Different countries admittedly have different histories, cultures and national circumstances, and different constitutional governance models and democratic standards must be adopted. Nevertheless, safeguarding human rights and restraining public power are implacable basic principles in any constitutional

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After Guo’s work on the reflection of China’s long-standing mistakes in understanding “constitutional governance,” there indeed saw a surge of public debates on the constitution and constitutional dream. Yet, the propaganda machine and those pro-government scholars did not at first actively respond to the mounting public discussions during that period of time in the early 2013. It was until in the early March 2013 when the so-called “liang hui” (兩會, NPC—The National People’s Congress, and CPPCC—National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference) was held, the new official agenda on “China Dream” and “Constitutional Dream” was clearly set for future propaganda work. Xi Jinping again pushed ahead the “China Dream” and further elaborated it in a more lengthy and systematic way at the closing meeting of the first session of the 12th NPC congress on 17 March 2013. Henceforth, a series of Party and government organ papers have lavishly covered nationwide campaign activities and released numerous editorials and commentaries with respect to the “China Dream” campaign.

As soon as the official agenda on advancing the “China Dream” became clear and focused, the propaganda machine has on the one hand spun in full motion to do the thought work, and on the other hand to organize party members, workers and students to conduct series of patriotic education movement. Notably, on 18 March 2013, for example, Renmin Ribao published an editorial to activate “a new journey of dreams of achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” followed by nine consecutive “commentator’s articles” (評論員文章) from 19 March 2013 onwards. Renmin Ribao’s commentator series centers upon the theme of “unanimously built together the Chinese Dream.” (同心共築中國夢)


theory periodical—published a commentary, claiming “China Dream” has been the most “loudest voice” (最強音) in Chinese society by now.48 Renmin Ribao and many other Party-run or government-operated mass media outlets have similarly establish their respective feature websites for promoting the “China Dream,” with thorough and extensive pages of covering campaign activities, the Party and government leaders’ speeches, propagandists’ remarks, as well as remarks made by those pro-government scholars. Some of the party officials and scholars have been selectively invited to chat online with Internet users over the “China Dream” campaign. A great deal of books on the “China Dream” has been published to join the orchestrated propaganda efforts in publicizing this patriotic movement as extensively as possible.

Again, while the Party-State has well geared up to advance renewed wave of the propaganda work after the liang hui, it is, nonetheless, confronted by diverse public discourses on how “China Dream” could be realized. Admittedly there are people and Netizens in support for government’s agenda. Some of their online posts are sent through the verified weibo accounts of government organizations. Yet, what is more significant is that there exists intensified confrontation in both physical life and the Chinese cyberspace between different views and agenda-setting on “China Dream.” Take a Sina weibo user “datie weibao” (打鐵微寶) for example. He comments, “As soon as I hear ‘Chinese Dream,” I am speechless. Improve the social security net

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before talking about dreams.” Another writer named “maomao yusi” (毛毛语丝) says, “My Chinese dream is to have a blue sky and clean water, and I can rest assured to eat meat and drink milk. My children can live and grow in a fair and happy environment.”

Moreover, there are heated debates over “China Dream” among scholars and the public intellectuals. Among others, He Weifang (贺卫方), renowned scholar from Peking University, bluntly criticizes the official discourse of “China Dream,” quoting, “This ‘Dream’ has overstressed on the great renaissance of the Chinese nation, on the national revival, and on the economic development and its affiliated economic indicators. Where is the Dream’s value-system? What exactly is our objective for social development? It is not clear in this ‘Dream’ whatsoever.”

Zhang Lifan (章立凡), historian and the assignee of the Charter 08 (零八宪章), holds that “The new deal in every ten years is always in the surname of the leaders… It is more important to completely live up to the promises clearly stated in the constitution. It is the key to China’s long-term stability and prosperity.” Ren Zhiqiang (任志强), one of the Big Vs in Chinese weibo, talks that, “The task of economic structuring is to tackle the housing problems. It is simply a dream if they are not well solved.”

Against the backdrop of surged dissenting discourses on “China Dream,” the Party-State has again responded them with an elaborate scheme of propaganda work, in the hope that it can seize back the control of agenda-setting power and discourse rights. In so doing, the propaganda department has proactively enlisted some of the

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51 “He Weifang: zhongguomeng jiazhiguan hezai?,” (賀衛方：「中國夢」價值觀何在？) Deutsche Welle Chinese [on-line], (26 March 2013), http://www.dw.de/%E8%B4%BA%E5%8D%AB%E6%96%B9%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E6%A2%A6%E4%BB%B7%E5%80%BC%E8%A7%82%E4%BD%95%E5%9C%A8/a-16698185 (accessed 16 March 2014).


Big Vs and several public intellectuals to work as members of the new online propaganda team. Obviously, they are tasked with strengthening official agenda and occupying government’s “sovereign discourse rights” in both Chinese cyberspace and physical space.

First, new propagandists start by writing articles to “educate” citizens by claiming there are many misconceptions about the constitution among people. For instance, Yang Xiaoping (楊曉青), a professor at the Faculty of Law, Renmin University, has written article to refute the suggestion of intermarriage of “China Dream” with “constitutional governance” (憲政) which are popularly shared by many liberal-minded scholars and public intellectuals. To Yang, opposite to Chinese system of “people’s democracy,” “constitutional governance” is *per se* an embodiment of western ideology.\(^5^4\) She contends that,

> ...the key systemic elements and concepts in constitutional governance only belong to capitalism and the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, and they do not belong to the Socialist people’s democratic system...[thereby] the people’s democratic system cannot be called “Socialist constitutional governance.”\(^5^5\)

The *Global Times*, a daily Chinese tabloid under the auspices of the *Renmin Ribao*, has published an editorial to note that “People who know about ‘constitutionalism’ are fully aware that it is the notion that will ultimately undermine and negate our Chinese patterns of political development... Advocating ‘constitutional governance’ is fundamentally opposed to our current constitutional design.”\(^5^6\) An important figure, Zheng Zhixue (鄭志學), publishes an article in *Dang Jian* (黨建), a magazine sponsored by the CCP’s propaganda department, in which he loudly denounces that “Advocating ‘constitutional governance’ is to abolish the CCP’s leadership in China and to subvert the socialist regime. Therefore, constitutionalism

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should never be China’s basic political concepts.”

Above all, one of the most notable propaganda works under the renewed official agenda is the controversial internal reference—Seven Speak-Nots (七不講), which is usually referred to as “Document No. 9” (中辦發 2013 九號文件). It is allegedly a directive entitled “Concerning the Current Situation of the Ideological Front” (關於當前意識形態領域情況的通報) distributed in May 2013 to (some) university professors and cadres of local party committees. Reportedly, the Document No. 9 bans discussion of seven topics deemed by the Party-State as dangerous Western influences, i.e., universal values, freedom of speech, civil society, civil rights, the historical errors of the Chinese Communist Party, crony capitalism, and judicial independence. In one sense, the Document No. 9 could be symbolized as political motives of the propaganda regime that it desires to seize the commanding heights and reframe its agenda lest the discourse rights swing to the public, in particular those dissident public intellectuals and Big Vs. In other words, the Document No. 9 aims to hold back the already heated public discourses and foster its reframed official agenda to publicize “China Dream.”

Second, the propaganda machine is also channeling public discourses into the official framework, in a way to convince ordinary people and promote official agenda. For example, Wang Weiguang (王偉光), Dean of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, explains to the public that, “China is now in an important strategic opportunity period. China is more confident and capable than it was before to realize the Chinese dream and its great mission.” Han Qingxiang (韓慶祥), another famous propagandist from the CCP’s Central Party school explains to the general public that “[we need] to dig out the real meaning of ‘China Dream’ and expound them to the outside world in respect to its underlying political wisdom and a new way of thinking. We also need to get to dispel people’s misunderstands and misconceptions though.

theoretical principle as soon as possible.”

Third, there is another innovative way of enhancing official agenda-setting power, which is through enlisting the public intellectuals and Big Vs in to the help for propaganda work. One striking instance is the “Internet celebrity social responsibility forum” (網路名人社會責任論壇) which was held in Beijing in the mid-August 2013. The forum agreed on the proposal of the “Seven Base Lines” (qitiao dixian, 七條底線)—the base line of laws and regulations (法律法規底線), the base line of the socialist system (社會主義制度底線), the base line of national interests (國家利益底線), the base line of citizens’ legal rights and interests (公民合法權益底線), the base line of public order (社會公共秩序底線), the moral base line (道德風尚底線), the base line of information accuracy (信息真實性底線). The “Seven Base Lines” require all Internet users, particularly those Big Vs (cyber celebrity) to consciously follow specified guidelines for what constitutes acceptable online conduct in order to help build a favorable and “healthy” online environment. In other words, the Big Vs are now politically requested to abide by the agreed “Seven Base Line” on the one hand, and to help the Communist regime advance their propaganda work on promoting the “Cyber China Dream” (網聚「中國夢」) on the other.

Admittedly, the Party-State has gradually learned to adapt to new informational environment in enlisting and co-opting all possible (social) groups and/or big names into their regime and work for their interests. At times, intimidating strategies are masterly applied to those who are opposing or defiant in order to teach them a lesson. This is usually referred to the Chinese proverb which goes “Kill the chicken

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63 See, for example, David Shambaugh, China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation (Berkeley, CAL. and London: University of California Press, 2008).
64 This argument can be evidenced in both China’s recent new measures to crack down on Net rumors and the “Xue Manzi (薛蠻子) incident.” See “‘Lianggao’ ‘guanyu banli liyong xinxin wangluo shishi feibang deng xiajian shiyong fala ruogan wenti de jieshi’ quanwen,” (「兩高」《關於辦理利用信息網絡實施誹謗等刑事案件適用法律若干問題的解釋》全文) People’s Daily Online [on-line], (9
to warn the monkey.” (殺雞儆猴) In one regard, the carrot and stick approach can be arguably dubbed as China’s “resilient authoritarian,” that is currently embodied in the propaganda and thought work aspects in the information age. The Party’s ambition seems unambiguous: the propaganda regime should and will remain in its master position to fully control the agenda-setting power, and it will in turn help the regime take a firm grip on the “sovereign discourse rights” in the digital era. Thus, it is evident that while the general public may discourse on “China Dream,” but it is likely that they are sleeping in the same bed, but dreaming different dreams.

**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?

It should be noted that this renewed wave of “China Dream” campaign is actually being undertaken in the information age wherein Chinese citizens have

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enjoyed more freedom than they were before in communicating horizontally and disseminating information and debating in a more swift, interactive and convenient way. Although China’s authoritarian regime readily embraces official propaganda as a positive and favorable force for mass persuasion, mobilization and sociopolitical control, nonetheless, Communist Party leaders increasingly find it hard, at least not as easy as it was before, to promote and enhance their agenda. Partly it is because that the new social media such as the Chinese weibo has already posed unprecedented and formidable challenges to China’s propaganda-like mediaspace. Arguably the Chinese propaganda machine is now confronting soaring “reactionary” opinions from the general public and the virtual world that they are truly being undermining, challenging, or revising and replacing by alternative discourses and agendas. It was virtually impossible because the agenda-setting power and discourse rights were traditionally considered as the absolute sovereign power of the privileged propaganda machine. In a word, the Party-State’s “sovereign discourse rights” are indeed under siege. In this regard, this article argues that the official version of “China Dream” is not entirely the dream Chinese people have extensively shared; they may have same beds and they usually have different dreams. It is primarily because the propaganda regime is increasingly confronted by alternative discourses within Chinese cyberspace and in the physical space, leaving an increased fierce conflict over the seizure of discourse rights between the propaganda government and opinion leaders and elites. While both the Chinese Communist Party and the public intellectuals are seizing and expanding their commanding heights of discourse rights, there will be far-reaching social and policy implications for China in the long term 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.