

# Valedictory: Analyzing the Chinese Leadership in an Era of Sex, Money, and Power

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This article, my last as *Monitor* general editor and contributor, offers perspectives on the methods of analyzing Chinese leadership politics today.<sup>1</sup>

## On Method

A long time ago, deep in remote spacetime, the China-watching universe was inhabited by wizened sages and their apprentices who applied the same analytical method to a small body of information from a single source open to all on the road to truth. That method rested on a set of premises and a logic that culture heroes in the even more remote past originally had derived to analyze the politics and foreign policy of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. As later extended and applied to affairs in the PRC, that analytical approach had its shortcomings. But it also scored signal successes in an era when no other method or significant body of information was available.

Then a lot of stuff happened. The United States established diplomatic relations with Beijing, opening up to a broad range of interactions, permitting access to previously denied sources, and providing new avenues of research in understanding current trends in Chinese politics and foreign policy. Meanwhile, the fount of the old wisdom--PRC media--evolved. They abandoned the staid, stupefying uniformities that made the old analytical ways feasible in favor of splashy advertising, racy stories, and sensationalist reporting. In this new era, the old ways were set aside and, with the passing eons, are now only dimly remembered by a few elderly sages. The result has been a degraded age of analytical disorder populated by all sorts of cow ghosts and snake spirits, an outcome that, surely, Confucius himself would have lamented as paralleling his own. Regrettably, in these days tender analysts have lost sight of the eternal Way of media analysis and so succumb to the irresistible charms of the sirens of uncertain insight, the Beijing rumor mill and the Hong Kong China-watching press.

This is surely an analytical tragedy. But, heeding the example of past worthies such as Han Yu and Ouyang Xiu, it is also one that a new movement to “restore the ancient ways” may repair. Despite the sweeping changes in PRC media, the premises that enabled the ancient logic of China-watching still hold. Therefore, the old analytical ways may still reward those who have the patience, diligence, and insight required to apply them. Thus again may the Way ascend into view and an age of enlightenment prevail.

## *Now and Then*

It should not surprise that Western students of contemporary Chinese affairs have doubts about the continuing utility of traditional media analysis methods. Today, students of contemporary Chinese leadership politics and foreign policy encounter a diversity of sources and avenues of analysis. Thanks to Beijing’s acceptance into the international

community in the early 1970s as the legitimate government of “China,” to the normalization of U.S.-China relations in 1979, and to the sweeping changes in Beijing’s approach to economic and other international interactions in the post-Mao period, Western analysts have gained routine access to many of the institutions that interact in the PRC political order. Access to Chinese academics, diplomats, think-tank researchers, mid- and sometimes high-level bureaucrats, and some leaders frequently provides direct insight into the perspectives of participants in China’s political processes that were not feasible, for Americans at least, in the first three decades of the PRC. The information that this access has provided is valued because it seems unencumbered by the screens of the secrecy and censorship that inform the PRC media and because the personal perspectives of the informants lend a realistic feel to the dynamics of Chinese politics that intuitively enhances its credibility.

Perhaps the most visible manifestation of this access has been the vastly expanded community of Western reporters in Beijing and elsewhere in China working for major wire services, newspapers, and television networks since the 1970s. Their reporting now provides a steady stream of information that attests to the energy with which they have exploited the enhanced access Beijing has permitted the international community. Perhaps the most dramatic index of this development may be the scant reporting on the April 1976 Tiananmen demonstrations and their suppression as compared to the voluminous, minute-by-minute reporting—with vivid television footage—of the April-June 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations and the massacre that followed. In the old days, during the Cultural Revolution, Western analysts had to rely on a few Japanese reporters going out late at night and wearing lighted coalminer helmets to read and copy Red Guard wall posters denouncing the latest leadership victims of Mao’s animus. Those days are long gone.

Meanwhile, the changes in China’s interactions with the world also provided access to local politics and broader Chinese society itself—areas of research interest largely denied to Americans until the 1970s except through émigré interviews in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Among academic specialists in particular, this new access spawned a major industry focused on understanding state-society interactions at local levels in both the urban wards and rural villages through direct study. As invaluable as these studies have been, they have come at the opportunity cost of declining interest in elite politics and an unwillingness to expend the tedious labors required to study it.

A second important channel of information has been the reporting on current affairs by the independent Hong Kong media. Hong Kong has long been an important China-watching venue—before the 1970s, it was the center for such work by Americans—and Hong Kong’s independent press was always a source of insight into the PRC’s politics. In the late 1970s, however, a new array of China-watching magazines emerged to supplement longstanding sources like the *South China Morning Post* and 明报 *Ming Bao*. Magazines such as 争鸣 (*Contending*), 七十年代 (*The Seventies*) (later 九十年代 *The Nineties*), 动向 (*Trend*), 广角镜 (*Wide Angle Mirror*), 镜报 (*The Mirror*), and others carried a steady stream “inside stories” of Beijing politics derived from the writers’ contacts in Beijing and elsewhere. The number of these publications has declined since Hong

Kong's reversion in 1997. Always tantalizing in their intimate detail, these publication's stories drew on the leaks, rumors, anecdotes, speculations, and sometimes fantasies and outright fabrications of the kind that circulate about leadership politics in all great power capitals.

Finally, PRC media themselves changed.<sup>2</sup> Since the beginning of the Deng era, China has witnessed an explosion in the kind, number, and diversity of media sources available for analysis. In step with the Deng leadership's reorientation of industry toward production of consumer goods, mass production made televisions a new medium available to most urban and many rural audiences. Meanwhile, television programming kept pace with the new audience. In 1985, PRC television stations broadcast 65,954 hours of news programs; by 1990 this number had doubled, to 135,532 hours; and by 1995, news programming was nearly six times the 1985 figure, at 353,368 hours. By 2015, total television news programming totaled a staggering 2,520,624 hours.<sup>3</sup> Radio broadcasting—long a major medium in the PRC--also expanded dramatically in the reform era.

But the most daunting development for media analysts in the reform period has been the explosion in print media. The sheer number of publications available in China has overwhelmed bibliographic control and the capacity of individual analysts to review in tracking trends in PRC foreign policy and leadership politics, as the following table suggests:

**Table 1: Newspaper, Magazine, and Book Publishing, 1952-2015**

Year	Newspaper Titles	Magazine Titles	Book Titles
1952	296	354	13,692
1957	364	634	18,660
1962	273	483	8,305
1965	343	790	12,352
1970	42	21	4,880
1975	180	476	13,716
1980	188	2,191	21,621
1985	698	4,705	45,602
1990	773	5,751	80,224
1995	1,049	7,583	101,381
2000	2,007	8,725	143,376
2005	1,931	9,468	224,473
2010	1,939	9,884	328,387
2015	1,906	10,014	475,768

Source: 中国统计年鉴 1996 (China Statistical Yearbook 1996, Table 18-67, 693; and 中国统计年鉴 2016 (China Statistical Yearbook 2016), Table 23-2.

These crude numbers detailing the explosion of print media mask the diversity of publications that have become available to Western analysts. In part, these numbers reflect the fact that in the 1980s, as state subsidies for publishing houses declined,

publishers increasingly had to produce books, magazines, and tabloid newspapers that were commercially viable in a mass market. Much of the content of many of these new publications has been sensationalistic and intended primarily to sell. Such publications have been of debatable analytical value, even when the topics were not just about sex, celebrity, and violence and were intrinsically political. The prime example here is 环球时报 and its English-language edition *Global Times*, which is owned by the publishers of the foremost party newspaper *People's Daily*.

Nevertheless, some fraction of the volume of publications that has become available is of analytical value. Virtually every topic of conceivable interest to students of Chinese politics and policy now has specialist periodicals devoted to it. This diversity includes publications on previously sensitive topics like foreign affairs and military issues. Since the early 1980s, previously restricted specialist publications dealing with various aspects of international affairs—journals such as 美国研究 (*American Studies*) and 台湾研究 (*Taiwan Studies*)--and new publications such as 中国外交 (*Chinese Diplomacy*) became openly available. In military affairs, the Academy of Military Science's premier journal 中国军事科学 (*Chinese Military Science*) became available for home delivery to Western students of the PLA. In the 1990s, PRC media began routinely to carry opinion pieces by the growing community of foreign policy and national security specialists in China that frequently offered competing and clashing perspectives on various international issues, raising fundamental questions among Western analysts about what political authority to attach to them in Beijing's policy process.

These traditional media sources were completed since the mid-1990s by the explosive growth of China's Internet. The proliferation of websites hosted by news agencies such as Xinhua and publishers of official print media has given immediate access to streams of information and commentary far surpassing anything that was easily accessible by traditional means. Also, the steady growth in websites sponsored by party and state institutions at all levels has incrementally aided access to sources previously inaccessible. These official sources have been complemented by an ocean of websites representing think tanks and academic journals, as well as sites hosting tolerated political commentary, wikis, chat rooms, and blogs, that present observers of contemporary Chinese affairs with a previously unimaginable tangle of avenues of information. And since the mid-2000s, the advent of social media has provided access to torrent of comment and sentiment from society itself.

### *An Embarrassment of Sources*

The proliferation of sources for analyzing PRC politics and foreign policy has brought obvious rewards, but it has also entailed costs. Nowadays, confronted with the sheer volume of information available from direct access to China's political players, from the community of Western academics and correspondents in China, from the independent Hong Kong press, and from PRC media and the internet, no individual analyst can hope to establish control over the entire field and generalize as was possible to do in an earlier era. Increasingly, students of Chinese affairs specialize in narrow areas and seek to establish familiarity with those sources most directly relevant to their interests. As a

consequence, the China-watching community suffers from a contemporary variety of what Chairman Mao might have described as “mountaintopism” (山头主义): analysts have command over their parochial base area of interest but lose track of the overall picture. In many respects, analysts today seem to talk past each other because they specialize in narrower fields and draw on bodies of evidence with which those working in other areas are not familiar.

In addition to the proliferation of sources available to Western analysts, changes in Chinese political discourse have seemed to challenge the usefulness of traditional media analysis methods. With the reformulation of the CCP’s “general task” at the watershed Third Plenum in December 1978 from “waging class struggle” to promoting China’s economic modernization, the ideologically charged jargon of the Mao years gave way to a language that sounds pragmatic, apolitical, and more like our own. As new technocratic generations of Chinese leaders have taken the helm, leadership speeches and reports sounded more and more like they could have been drafted by experts at the RAND Corporation than by party hacks.

It is also fair to say that Chinese politics has gradually become more transparent through the Deng years down to the present. The leadership of party General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao advertised transparency in decision-making explicitly as part of their effort to improve “intra-party democracy” and increase public confidence in the regime. While seeming to shut down the Hu era’s experiments in inner-party democracy, Xi Jinping has nevertheless affirmed transparency in party and state affairs, and the party under his leadership has adopted new regulations stipulating enhanced publicity to meetings and other events. Increased openness about the regime’s politics, of course, goes back to the beginning of the Deng era, when PRC media began to carry more detailed accounts of major party and state meetings than had been the case in the later Mao years.

In ancient times, the situation was just the reverse. Down to the 1970s, because of the lack of U.S.-China diplomatic relations, most American students of contemporary Chinese affairs could not legally travel to the PRC and interact with participants in China’s political order at any level. Apart from occasional accounts by “old friends of China” like Edgar Snow, few Westerners gained access to China’s leaders. Efforts to interview émigrés in Hong Kong more frequently shed useful light on local conditions than they provide insight into the workings of the leadership in Beijing.

Because of the poverty of alternative sources, PRC media were by far the most important source of insight into leadership politics and foreign policy. The number and diversity of PRC media were sufficiently small that the American government’s Foreign Broadcast Information Service and the UK’s BBC could manage to translate virtually everything relevant to contemporary political analysis. As poorly illuminated as the big picture may have been at various times, therefore, it was nevertheless feasible for most analysts to be generalists. In contrast to the entrenched “mountaintopism” of analysis today, most analysts in ancient times could read and establish intimate control over all of the available data. In contrast to the multiplicity of methods employed today, they all applied the same

traditional methods of media analysis, even if they disagreed among themselves over how to interpret the data.

Given this evolution over the past 40 years, it is not surprising that the techniques of media analysis that once were the stock in trade of China-watchers have withered and that doubts have emerged about whether the traditional methods of media analysis still apply. In an era when media have proliferated, when media treat formerly sensitive topics with a degree of openness unthinkable in earlier periods, when diverse voices are more clearly audible, and when party control over media has seemed to wither, it may seem reasonable to ask whether the old rules still apply.

## The Way of the Ancients

The methods of media analysis that were long the mainstay of China-watchers are a variant of methods developed to exploit Nazi German propaganda during World War II and to analyze politics and foreign policy in the former Soviet Union. Essentially kremlinology with Chinese characteristics, “propaganda analysis” of PRC media has been called “Pekingology,” a name that never quite established itself.<sup>4</sup> Although its practitioners sometimes emphasized its Chinese characteristics by comparing it to the reading of oracle bones in ancient China and to “reading tea leaves” in modern times, analysis of PRC media nevertheless shared the basic premises with its predecessors.<sup>5</sup> As classically summarized by Alexander George, these premises entail:

- The use of the media by the regime elite as an instrument of policy;
- Coordination of media reporting and commentary to reflect regime policy goals and intentions; and
- Centralized control and review of all media and their content by the regime.

These premises, George posited, warrant the conclusion that, in regimes having controlled media, media decision-making is subordinate to political decision-making.<sup>6</sup>

From that conclusion comes a logic and method of media analysis. If the content of the media reflects the political purposes of the regime, then one may reason backwards by examining the content of the media and infer the political purposes of the regime. Close examination of how information is presented and what lines of editorial commentary are offered in regime-controlled media makes possible valid inferences about the regime’s policy purposes and strategies.

For all of the Mao period and well into the Deng Xiaoping reform era, these premises and the logic and methods they recommended held up well. They were intrinsic in the place of China’s media in the broader structure of political communications that served the political decision-making process. To appreciate this, it is useful to examine the role and characteristics of the public media alongside the other elements of the political communications universe in China.

Historically, down through the Deng years, there were two basic components of China's system of political communications, each of which served different roles in the political process.<sup>7</sup> One component was the public (公开) media--enormous array of broadcast, electronic, and print sources that conveyed information and commentary for mass consumption domestically and internationally. These media included:

- Radio Beijing, which in the 1980s broadcast domestically in two parallel channels and internationally in 38 foreign languages and five Chinese dialects, and the national network of provincial and municipal radio stations, which routinely channeled news programs fed from Radio Beijing.
- The Xinhua News Agency, which transmitted news reports and commentary for publication in newspapers and other print publications in Chinese and several foreign languages, including English, Japanese, Russian, and French, and its associated news services for Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities—the Zhongguo Xinwenshe and the Zhongguo Tongxunshe.
- CCTV, the national television network, together with the provincial and municipal television stations that expanded rapidly in the 1980s; and
- Print media, including the newspapers, magazines, and books whose proliferation in the Deng era is reflected above in Table 1.

Alongside the public media for mass consumption was a parallel realm of political communications, the “internal” (内部) publishing system. Although the internal publications system was difficult to chart authoritatively from the outside, sufficient numbers of examples have been collected by individual scholars and deposited in libraries to allow tentative generalization. The internal publishing system encompassed an enormous array of publications that includes periodical newspapers and journals and books. Some of these publications had huge circulations. For example, *Reference News* (参考消息), the four-page daily tabloid compilation of straight translations of foreign news reports on topics of general political and foreign affairs interest, had a circulation that in the 1970s larger than that of the CCP's public mouthpiece, *People's Daily*. The internal publishing system also produces a huge array of unit periodicals that carried specialist articles analyzing policy topics and political issues, such as the Central Party School's journal 理论动态 (Theoretical Trends), as well as books of collected leadership speeches, documentary compilations, political memoirs, specialist studies, and translations of foreign works.

The parallel realms of internal and public of political communication appeared to be of comparable scale and variety. But they contrasted in two fundamental ways--with respect to dissemination and content. First, dissemination of the internal media was restricted to authorized channels, while dissemination of the public media was unrestricted, accessible to anyone. The degree of control over dissemination of internal publications probably varied considerably, and some easily found their way outside

authorized channels. But all carry some form of advisory warning against public circulation, and they were distributed under work unit controls or in authorized repositories, such as segregated sections of Xinhua bookstores requiring appropriate credentials to enter. No such restrictions—by definition—constrained access to public media.

Second, judging by available examples, the content of internal publications is relatively open and uncensored, while the content of the public media is controlled and subject to censorship. The degree of control and level of scrutiny of the content of the public media varies widely, depending on the particular medium and the significance of the topic. Some commentary and reporting receive only limited editorial scrutiny and depended on self-censorship on the part of the item's author. But other statements and editorial comment routinely receive very high-level scrutiny by the political leadership itself, including by the paramount leader.

No authoritative Chinese explanation for the existence of these two parallel realms of political communication has been offered. However, the contrasting controls over dissemination and content in the internal and public media suggest an answer in the distinctive roles each played in the political process. The internal media are restricted in dissemination, not content, and the diversity of opinion disseminated in these media is far broader because it is not public. The speeches, articles, and translations that are published there are disseminated not because they reflect the authoritative positions of the editors of the particular medium, its sponsoring institution, or of the party leadership, but because they are intended to facilitate the political decision-making process by providing information and competing perspectives that inform deliberation of policy alternatives.

In contrast, the public media are controlled with respect to content, not dissemination, and so the diversity of viewpoint there is far less diverse and explicit because the content of these media are public. The content of the public media does reflect in some degree the authoritative position of the medium and, ultimately, the regime leadership. The purpose of the public media is not to facilitate policy deliberation on the way to informing a new political decision, but to enunciate the party's "line," to explain the regime position once a policy decision has been made and to enlist and mobilize public acquiescence, if not support behind it.

It is this ever-present element of control that accounts, among other things, for the amazing (and often stupefying) consistency of the public media. To cite a trivial but nevertheless instructive example, after Premier Zhou Enlai enunciated them at the Third NPC in December 1964 and again at the Fourth NPC in January 1975, the "four modernizations"—the call to create in China a "modern agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense"—were always recited in precisely the same order. Never were they cited in the public media in a different order or in a haphazard manner ("modernize industry, national defense, and whatever the other two are," etc.). Never until February 1981, that is, when PRC media suddenly altered the order, placing industry first and agriculture second. Thereafter, reference to the "four modernizations" has always listed "a modern industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national



defense” as the regime’s goal. No authoritative explanation emerged to explain this change, leaving us to speculate about the reason, but the consistency of the new formulation underscores that it was purposeful.

From a process perspective, the internal media served the input side of the political decision-making process, while the public media served the output side. From the perspective of Leninist democratic centralism, the internal media served the “democratic” side of the policy process—where anyone with appropriate standing and expertise may offer their individual perspective. The public media served the “centralism” side of the concept, by which everyone is obliged to adhere to the leadership’s decision once it was made, whether they agreed with it personally or not. In simplest formulation, the internal media provided the news and views necessary to making an informed decision, while the public media provided the “line” on any given issue.

From this broad structural perspective of the place of the public media in China’s political process, it is apparent that the general premises of propaganda analysis laid out by George and others working on other regimes held true in the PRC case. Because the PRC’s public media served as instruments of CCP policy, their content served the agenda of the regime. By rigorously scrutinizing the content of the media, one could infer the regime’s goals and strategies. By this logic, all aspects of the output of PRC public media—their format, themes, and emphases, placement and priority—reflected deliberate editorial decisions informed by the CCP leadership’s priorities.

The methods derived from these premises and traditionally employed to analyze PRC media are similar to those used to analyze the controlled media of the Nazi German, Soviet, and other communist bloc regimes and adapted to suit Chinese characteristics. They involve:

- Rigorous examination of official statements and authoritative editorial commentary to identify the Chinese leadership’s prevailing consensus—its “line--on any given issue of analytical interest;
- Comprehensive comparison of leadership speeches, official statements, and commentary conveyed in PRC public media to search for variations and deviations from the prevailing line that indicate changes in policy emphasis, signal forthcoming shifts in the line, or possibly reflect political disagreement with the line;
- Attention to the formal aspects of presentation in PRC media—the level of official statement or editorial vehicle, the prominence, and other choices in presentation—to assess the authority of a particular item; and
- Comparison of the versions of leadership speeches, documents, and commentary from other media reported in PRC media with their originals, whether foreign and domestic, wherever possible to infer the priorities reflected in what was reported versus what was not.

Properly performed, this kind of political analysis has always required several things. In particular, it demands:

- *Comprehensiveness and precision*: Being as precise as possible about all aspects of what is said and how and where it is conveyed in the public media goes a long way toward narrowing the range of valid inferences that may be drawn about the political purposes that drove the editorial decisions that went into it.
- *Large files and long memories*: Judging the importance of a new statement or commentary and recognizing the politically meaningful elements that it may contain require thorough familiarity with the prevailing party line on the topic and the prevailing media practices and routines.
- *Interpretive judgment and experience*: The validity of analytical inferences rests on familiarity with the broader political context in which the public media operate and on sensitivity to the evolution of the jargon of political discourse and to the alternative meanings of key concepts over time and in different circumstances. Propaganda analysis is foremost an exercise in hermeneutics, akin to the humanistic methods of evaluating documentary evidence by historians and appreciating texts in literary criticism; it is not a mechanical exercise driven by “scientific” nomothetic ambitions.

Propaganda analysis of Chinese media in the past was always labor intensive and frequently tedious. It had serious limitations in its capacity to penetrate the workings of a secretive leadership and its agenda. But it also scored major successes in an era when other means of analysis were not possible. It detected the tensions and controversies in the early 1950s that later blossomed into the Sino-Soviet split, and it unraveled the clashes of ideological principle and national interest that irretrievably fractured the international communist movement and that brought Moscow and Beijing to the point of war. It enabled Western analysts to follow the twists and turns of the Cultural Revolution, and it allowed them to read the intricate signaling that presaged the Sino-U.S. rapprochement in the watershed 1968-1972 period. It tracked the politics of Deng Xiaoping’s transformation of the CCP’s ideological commitments and his capture of the party’s agenda at the December 1978 Third Plenum, and it made it possible to follow the oscillations between reform and retrenchment in the 1980s and 1990s.

### *Is It Still Possible?*

Is propaganda analysis of leadership politics still feasible in an era that has seen major changes in PRC media? Do the premises of the traditional approach still hold? And do the old methods still apply? Some of the new aspects of the present political communications environment do not invalidate the traditional approach. The advent of social media, for example, offers useful insight into the changing moods and tensions in Chinese society, among other things. But their relevance to leadership analysis is limited

at best. The “internal” (内部) realm of publications has seen much of its previously restricted content move into the public arena. *Reference News*, for example, is now an openly available publication with its own website. But the role of the system in disseminating leader speeches, documents and alternative viewpoints in ongoing policy debates within a channel of restricted access persists.

But in other respects, at first glance at least, the evolution of PRC media over the past two decades might invite skepticism regarding these questions. Three major trends in PRC media during the reform era raise questions about the continuing validity of the premises of traditional propaganda analysis today.

One trend is commercialization of print media, which has introduced a degree of pluralism and selective autonomy that was not present earlier.<sup>8</sup> Party decisions in the 1980s to cut state subsidies to publishing houses meant that they had to begin producing newspapers, magazines, and books that are commercially viable. Increasingly, Chinese publishers have had to produce products that sell by catering to the tastes and interests of mass readerships, not products that reflect the political agenda of the party leadership.

The consequence of media commercialization has been the emergence of books and periodicals of staggering variety, focus, and format intended to appeal to readers in Chinese society. It has also meant that publishers and editors make decisions about what to publish no longer solely according to political criteria sent down by the party Propaganda Department or the party leadership itself, but increasingly according to market signals about what sells and what does not. In those choices, there is an evident realm of autonomy that in most cases the political leadership tolerates.

The older print media that were the focus of traditional propaganda analysis continue to exist in the midst of this new wave of commercialization. The ongoing media reform that began in 2003 and renewed under Xi Jinping is reducing their number, altering their dissemination through mandatory subscription, and consolidating their operations through merger. But newspapers and periodicals produced under the aegis of the institutions of the political order continue publication relatively unaffected by the emergence of an ocean of publications produced for market.

The result has been the creation of a dualistic public media realm divided between a persisting population of institutional newspapers and periodicals and a huge population of commercial materials. Many publishing houses, in fact, produce both types of publications. The question for propaganda analysts is what political significance may be attached to media products produced for sale in mass markets?

A second trend has been the professionalization of Chinese journalists, editors, and writers. This development followed naturally from the post-revolutionary transformation of the CCP’s foremost task from “waging class struggle”—which politicized expertise—to China’s modernization—which professionalized expertise. Comparable trends of professionalization have been visible in other categories of labor requiring authoritative specialized knowledge, including Chinese scientists, lawyers, educators, and officers in

the PLA. Paralleling developments in these other professions, Chinese media in the reform era have increasingly employed journalists and editors who have been trained in journalism departments in universities or social science academies, who have formed or revived professional journalist associations, who have produced professional journals, and who operate within hierarchies of professional status.

Accompanying all professions is a professional ethos, a set of ideals that prescribe standards of professional behavior that members of the profession are expected to embrace in principle if not always in practice. It is the ethos of journalism that potentially challenges the instrumental role the media have previously been expected to play in politics, and so also potentially challenges the foundational premises of propaganda analysis. Specifically, if the primary responsibility of professional journalists is to tell the story straight, without political bias or ideological prejudice, then how can they perform at the same time the political role expected of them as instruments of leadership policy?

This tension between professional ethos and political role has been visible throughout the reform period in professional journals like *新闻战线* (News Front). On their part, party leaders—from Hu Yaobang to Xi Jinping—have consistently underscored the necessity for media to remain “mouthpieces” of the party, but they have also sent mixed messages encouraging publishers, editors, and journalists to produce materials that appeal to Chinese consumers. For propaganda analysis, the challenge presented by the steady advance of professionalism in Chinese media may seem to pose a serious challenge. How is it possible to tell when journalists are writing according to their professional ideals from when they are writing in service to the political leadership?

A third trend visible in PRC public media, especially in the 1990s, has been the emergence of competing perspectives on and alternative approaches to important policy sectors. Debate over policy and politics has always been visible in PRC media, even during episodes such as the Cultural Revolution when totalitarian control appeared at its highpoint. Now, however, debate over alternative approaches and policies is explicit.

This trend is particularly striking with respect to foreign affairs, a policy area that previously had been tightly controlled to present a façade of unanimity to domestic and foreign observers. Since the mid-1990s, alternative analyses of international events and trends by specialists in foreign affairs in the research institutions and university centers have become commonplace in PRC media. Some of these analyses explicitly rebut the published perspectives of other experts and offer specific policy recommendations that Beijing pursues.

In part, this development is a consequence of the spectacular proliferation of think-tank and research institutions in Beijing, Shanghai, and other centers since the 1980s, paralleling a comparable trend in the USSR during the Khrushchev era and after. The PRC’s increasingly technocratic leaders value specialist expertise in decision-making, and so Chinese academic and think-tank experts advance their careers by pitching their ideas and knowledge to the leadership in a manner not altogether alien to the methods of

Western academics, Washington public research institutions, and various bandits inside the Beltway and beyond. Among other things, they write position papers, opinion pieces, and books that they hope will attract the attention of the political leadership. In addition, some publications addressing foreign policy issues are not products of research specialists and, judging from their sensationalist tenor and emotionally charged approach, appear to have been published because they sell.

For purposes of propaganda analysis of leadership politics, this trend may also present a challenge. What political significance should be attached to specialist writings on policy topics? Are they published because they reflect the party line on the issue or some significant perspective within the political leadership? Or are they more akin to the articles published in journals like *Foreign Affairs* or op-ed pieces in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in the United States—they were published because they reflect the perspectives on the issue of the day of experts in China’s research community and do not necessarily carry any political importance until some member of the political leadership takes them up? And, finally, what political significance should be attached to publications whose appearance seems to reflect commercial rather than political purposes? What political significance should be attached to books like Song Qiang’s et al. *中国可以说“不”* (A China That Can Say “No”), Qiao Liang’s and Wang Xiangsui’s *超限战* (Unrestricted Warfare), Wang Shan’s *第三隻眼睛看中国* (Seeing China Through a Third Eye), or Liu Mingfu’s *中国梦* *China’s Dream*, to name a few examples?

As challenging as these questions may seem, they do not ultimately suggest that the traditional premises and logic of propaganda analysis no longer hold. First, the validity of propaganda analysis’ methods has never depended on static media practices. Propaganda analysis has always had to accommodate change in Chinese and other countries’ media. In the PRC, new media have come and gone over the decades since 1949, frequently in step with the changing purposes and political agenda of China’s leadership. Varieties of editorial commentary have changed over time. In its authoritative commentary, *People’s Daily* has always published editorials (社论), but “commentator articles” (本报评论员) attained frequent usage only in the 1970s; “editorial department articles” were once the most authoritative vehicles of authoritative comment, reserved for extremely sensitive issues of fundamental importance to the international communist movement, but they have been dropped almost entirely since the November 1, 1977 article was published on Mao’s “three worlds” theory. Media reporting practices have evolved, sometimes suddenly. Changes in China’s media require vigilance on the part of the analyst and careful scrutiny to trace them accurately so that they may be taken into account, but they do not automatically invalidate the premises of analysis.

A case in point is the changes that commercialization has brought to PRC media since the 1980s. It is important to take note of what has changed and what has not.

Commercialization has had great impact in print media, creating a universe of commercially-inspired publications that have been produced for mass markets and institutional publications that have been largely untouched by commercial incentives and that continue to perform their traditional roles in the political process. Meanwhile, news reporting and commentary via broadcast media has been virtually untouched by the

commercial trends that are in evidence in their other programming. Chinese television newscasters may these days wear smart Western suits and trendy colored shirts and silk ties, but the content of their reporting still closely conforms to the agenda of the political elite.

Even publications produced because they sell must take political strictures into account. Editors and writers appear to receive little or no direct political intervention from the party's Propaganda Department in their work, but they nevertheless must constantly weigh what will sell against what will get their publications banned and get them into political trouble. As a result, they play what is sometimes referred to as "playing edge ball" (打边球)—referring to the attempt in ping pong to hit the ball so that it hits the very edge of the table, counting as in but also impossible for one's opponent to return, seeking to publish works that will entice readers but not attract the notice of the political authorities. Numerous occasions when sensationalistic books have been banned and gossipy evening tabloid newspapers have been suspended point to instances in which publishers and editors misjudged the shifting boundaries of regime toleration.

The conclusion to be drawn is that the regime has relaxed control over some aspects of the media for economic reasons, but it retains control over those that remain important as instruments of policy and politics. Even where the regime has withdrawn routinized control, it retains the capacity to intervene when its political agenda is violated.

Similarly, the rise of professionalism in Chinese journalism does not necessarily jeopardize or invalidate the premises of propaganda analysis. Their professional ethos may lead journalists to balk at the instrumental role they are expected to play on behalf of the political elite, and instances of this are easily discerned in the insistence with which the political leadership asserts that role. But, as is the case in all professions—in China and elsewhere, journalists also depend on the political authorities to defend their status and authorize their professional credentials. This provides incentives for collaboration and accommodation with political authority, balancing the tensions professional ideals may inspire.<sup>9</sup>

With respect to both the media pluralism that commercialization has introduced and the impact of professionalized journalism, it is noteworthy that trends in China have not proceeded as far as they did in the former USSR in the *glasnost*' era. Under Mikhail Gorbachev, the relaxation of media controls and abolition of censorship, the rise of independent media, and the enshrining of media protections in the 1990 press law facilitated the creation of a spectacularly diverse media in the Soviet Union that contributed to the complex political dynamics of that period.

But even with that dramatic media revolution, the fundamental tenets of analysis still applied. As a brilliant and highly authoritative Foreign Broadcast Information Service analysis report pointed out in April 1991, the media policies introduced under the banner of *glasnost*' did not alter the instrumental role of particular media essential to the political elite even while relaxing controls to permit expression by new forces in the Soviet political arena. "Soviet media," the report concluded, "continue to supply the essential

elements that have long been the grist for media analysis—a record of authoritative statements, revealing patterns of emphasis and targeting, esoteric communication that requires “decoding” or interpretation, and deliberate slanting of new reports. With some adjustments to fit the new situation, the traditional techniques of media analysis can still be used to draw inferences from these elements.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Is It Worth The Trouble?*

If, after appropriate adjustment and tactical modification, the traditional methods still apply to China’s changing media, is propaganda analysis still worth doing? Are the painstaking precision, huge files and long memories, and interpretive judgment and experience required to do it well justified by the value of the analytical conclusions they make possible regarding leadership politics in China? Is it worth all the trouble, especially when alternative avenues of information have become available? Both the strengths that these analytical methods offer and the weaknesses inherent in many of the alternative sources suggest that it is.

Among alternative sources for analyzing leadership politics, for example, the Hong Kong China-watching journals<sup>11</sup> offer tantalizing accounts that have commonly fed into Western analysis of leadership trends in the PRC. However, as fascinating as these accounts are, and without impugning the energy and professionalism of the journalists who produce them, their track record in explaining leadership politics—their main topic of interest—has not been good. Articles recounting the same episode in leadership politics often differ starkly in storyline and basic facts, including some that are demonstrably false. These accounts may in fact convey some kernel of accurate information, but it is usually impossible to separate it from the fantasy, speculation, rumors, and fabrications also conveyed among these sources.

In addition, although these accounts do not cite their sources, many appear to be derived from the reporters’ contacts among friends, relatives, and acquaintances among low- to mid-level officials. If that is the case, it is reasonable to ponder what people at these levels (and even officials much higher) actually know about the activities of the top leadership, much less their political machinations. Anecdotally, my own learned bias has been to presume that those among my own contacts who say that they know what’s going on in Zhongnanhai actually don’t, while those whose decline to talk about what they know likely do. Similarly, my own experience working in the U.S. government for 18 years and residing in Washington for more than 30 suggests to me that all sorts of rumors and speculations about American political leaders circulate among broader Washington officialdom, but very few have even the remotest inkling of what goes on in the Oval Office.

Finally, many accounts of leadership politics in the Hong Kong media employ a framework to explain Chinese leadership politics that does not seem to accord with present political realities. Many accounts narrate and explain events in terms of a factional struggle approach that more closely resembles politics in the late Mao era rather than the style of leadership politics that seems to prevail in Beijing today.

By contrast, media analysis offers the strength that the information that it bases its analysis on is unquestionably authentic. The information conveyed in PRC media may not be true, but there is no doubt about the provenance of the information and so its authenticity. The fact that the information may not be true, in fact, is beside the point; the fact that it is conveyed by media subject to regime control and so reflects political decisions is what makes it analytically relevant.

The media therefore offer an avenue of analysis of enduring value. Political communication is a variety of deliberate political behavior. All political behavior says something about the actors that engage in it. Given the difficulties attached to other sources, methodical analysis of media behavior may therefore provide better insight into the intentions and purposes of the secretive CCP leadership whose purposes the media reflect.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The first section of this essay updates and extends a conference paper written for the Center of Naval Analysis and presented on 29 June 2004. I am grateful to fellow Ming historian (yay!), CNA China Studies Director and US Army Col. (retired) David Finkelstein for his assent to my re-purposing it here.

<sup>2</sup> I am not a crank who believes that UFO-borne aliens populated the Earth in an earlier age. I do not believe that the Illuminati are guiding American foreign policy through the Council on Foreign Relations. Nor do I believe that tiny numbers painted on road signs along American interstate highways are encoded instructions directing blue-helmeted Chinese soldiers under United Nations guise to strategic locations from which they may take over the United States. I do not believe that Jesus will soon return riding on a cloud to snatch Bible-believing airline pilots out of their cockpits and God-fearing drivers of automobiles from behind the wheel up into the air with him at the sound of a trumpet. I reject the contention that crystals and pyramids have curative powers well understood by the ancient Mayans but no longer by reason-besotted early 21<sup>st</sup> century slaves of the Enlightenment. And I find ridiculous that the animal and bird figures etched into Peru's Nazca plain were intended to guide ancient aliens to landing sites for their inter-stellar craft. I am a crank, nevertheless, in insisting that the word "media" is a plural noun whose singular is "medium" and that "media" consequently requires plural verbs, possessive adjectives, and pronouns.

<sup>3</sup> PRC State Statistical Bureau, *中国统计年鉴 1996 (China Statistical Yearbook)* (Beijing: China Statistical Publishing House, 1996), table 18-75, p.697; and *中国统计年鉴 2016*, Table 23-2. Table 23-15, accessed at <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2016/indexeh.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> The term "propaganda analysis" is used in this discussion because it most clearly connotes the premises on which this method of analysis operates. It is preferred to the more widely used term "content analysis," which has been hijacked to describe the social science activity of assessing the content of media quantitatively—counting the number of times Lin Biao is mentioned on the front page of *People's Daily*, for example—to prove what is obvious.

<sup>5</sup> The classic formulation of the foundations of analysis of state-controlled media is Alexander L. George, *Propaganda Analysis—A Study of Inferences Made from Nazi Propaganda in World War II* (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson and Company, 1959). George's book offered a general framework for political analysis of propaganda in countries in which media are state-controlled and assessed the validity of wartime analysis of Nazi German propaganda performed by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (then under the Federal Communications Commission) analysts, including George himself, by comparing its conclusions after the war with German propaganda goals as recorded in Joseph Goebbels' diary and other captured German records.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-26.



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<sup>7</sup> This discussion ignores a third component of China's political communications universe, the confidential documents system. That system plays significant roles in the political process, but they may be set aside for the purposes of discussing propaganda analysis here.

<sup>8</sup> This trend is very usefully and comprehensively assessed in Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1998). Professor Zhao draws the compelling political conclusion that commercialization of PRC media does not necessarily portend political democratization and that an alternative framework beyond the traditional totalitarian command and liberal models of press autonomy is needed. She does not, however, address the issue of how trends of media commercialization affect media analysis for political purposes.

<sup>9</sup> On the political dynamic between professionalism and politics, see Eliot Freidson, *Professionalism: The Third Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 127-141.

<sup>10</sup> "Media Analysis in the Era of *Glasnost*, Foreign Broadcast Information Service *Analysis Report*, FB AR 91-10005, April 5, 1991, i.

<sup>11</sup> Excepted here are the two Hong Kong newspapers 大公報 (Ta Kung Pao) and 文匯報 (Wenhui Pao) and their respective websites, which are both PRC-owned. Their content has always been subject to the same political controls as other PRC media, though they sometimes convey information not seen in their mainland counterparts.