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ENGINEERS OF THE HUMAN SOUL: CHINA'S PROPAGANDA WORK SYSTEM

The background of the middle section features a grayscale cityscape with a network of nodes and lines overlaid, suggesting a global or digital theme. The CIRA logo is centered in blue, with the full name below it.

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REPORT DATA

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations used in this report are summarized in the table below:

Abbreviation	Definition
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPD	Central Committee's Central Propaganda Department
CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China
PRC	People's Republic of China
LSG	Leading Small Group
CFAC	Central Foreign Affairs Commission
SCIO	State Council Information Office
CCAC	Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission
CFAC	China Film Administration
CMG	China Media Group
MIIT	Ministry of Industry and Information Technology
CMC	Central Military Commission
NRTA	National Radio and Television Administration

1.0 Introduction

Since the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) founding in 1921, the propaganda work system has been one of its chief instruments for influencing and controlling the People's Republic of China's (PRC) information space.* As a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party, propaganda work is inherent to the functioning of the CCP. Consequently, it dedicates enormous amounts of effort and resources to the development and operation of a propaganda apparatus capable of penetrating and dominating practically every element of China's information environment, from news and entertainment productions to education and online activity.

Today, the CCP maintains a far-reaching and highly regimented infrastructure encompassing a range of Party and state organs dedicated to carrying out propaganda work. This system is directed by the Party Central Committee, which formulates policy and guidance transmitted down to Party branch committees at lower levels. At the national level, the main body responsible for carrying out these directives is the Central Committee's Central Propaganda Department (CPD / 中共中央宣传部, or simply 中宣部), which serves as the executive arm tasked with managing implementation of the Party's propaganda directives.† Crucially, the bulk of the CPD's propaganda work is not performed unilaterally. Rather, it mainly serves as an overarching coordinative authority for a wide range of state and non-state institutions, trying to ensure that all entities involved in the production, dissemination, or removal of information act in accordance with guidance handed down from central leadership.

This monograph is divided into five sections which collectively demonstrate how the CCP wields its propaganda apparatus to shape the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of China's population. The first section briefly reviews the history of propaganda work within the PRC, demonstrating how the lessons of the past shape the modern Party's approach to propaganda work. The second section outlines the current structure of the propaganda system, including profiles of key actors and stakeholders ranging from the Central Committee down to the local level. The third section details the main responsibilities of those actors and stakeholders, with the goal of demonstrating how they act collectively to undertake propaganda work. The fourth section demonstrates how those missions are put into practice in the real world, using three recent instances as illustrative examples. Finally, the last section provides an assessment of trends in the Party's approach to propaganda, analyzing their impact on the future form, function, and efficacy of the propaganda work system.

2.0 History and Emergence of the Propaganda Work System

From the CCP's founding until the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the propaganda work system served as a transformative instrument, aiding the Party as it sought to fundamentally break down and re-structure Chinese society. The CPD itself was formally founded on 5 May 1924, and

* The term *xuanchuan* (宣传) can be translated alternatively as "propaganda" or "publicity." Since the 1990's, the Party's official English translations have defaulted to using "publicity" to describe their work, arguably with the intention of avoiding the negative connotation that the term "propaganda" carries in the West. However, for the purposes of this paper, we have made the decision to translate *xuanchuan* as "propaganda," as that term most accurately reflects nature of the work undertaken by the Party.

† For the purposes of this paper, "CPD" will refer to the propaganda department and all of its subordinate bodies.

maintained a comparatively circumscribed portfolio for the first 25 years of its existence. Propaganda work during this period mainly revolved around decentralized grassroots mobilization efforts undertaken by local Party branches, which sought to generate support for initiatives such as land reform and popular mobilization against adversaries such as the KMT and the Japanese. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the propaganda work system underwent a major reorganization and expansion, as local propaganda apparatuses were folded into a more centralized bureaucracy under the administrative authority of the CPD. This period also transformed the CPD's mission set, as it moved from directly undertaking propaganda work itself towards a more supervisory role directing the information output of media organs and government ministries. Propaganda work during this period was principally focused on enabling whole-of-society mass mobilization campaigns such as the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Great Leap Forward. During the tumultuous Cultural Revolution, Mao sought more direct control of propaganda, completely disbanding the CPD in 1966 and folding its functions into the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group (中央文革小组) which directed a more *ad hoc* propaganda regime.

As China began its period of reform and opening up in the late 1970s, the purpose of the propaganda work system shifted from societal transformation towards maintaining domestic stability and safeguarding the leading role of the Party in political affairs. Starting in 1977, the Party underwent a process of re-bureaucratizing propaganda work, including the reconstitution of the CPD with a renewed charter and an expanded set of responsibilities which re-established its oversight authorities over all media, cultural, and news production entities within China. The Party also began to alter its approach to propaganda work during this period, moving away from mass mobilization campaigns towards more diffuse methods borrowing many techniques for mass communication from Western-style marketing and advertising.

The Party's decision to take a more indirect approach to propaganda during the 1980s was deemed to be a necessary component of reform, but this new approach also carried with it a number of drawbacks which limited the Party's ability to directly exert social control. During this period the slackening of the Party's control over information flows, coupled with the PRC's move towards economic liberalization, led to the emergence and proliferation of independent media outlets as well as a nascent civil society. This contradiction came to a head in 1989 with the Tiananmen Protests. In the midst of this unparalleled challenge to the Party's authority, the CPD was hamstrung by a lack of consensus in how to handle the protests, and vacillated between taking a hardline or a conciliatory stance. Subsequent Party leaders have come to view the CPD's ineffectualness during the 1989 protests as a cautionary tale illustrating the dangers of a loose approach to information management, and successive generations of leadership have sought to remediate this weakness by keeping the CPD under tighter control from the Party Center, to ensure that Party messaging remains unified and consistent regardless of the circumstances.

The post-Tiananmen period was marked by a significant expansion in the scope of CCP's propaganda work system, as the Party re-asserted control over China's information environment. In order to rectify the mistake of being "hard on the economy, soft on politics" the Party established new organs and initiatives such as the Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization (中央精神文明建设指导委员会) and the National Program for Patriotic Education (爱国主义教育), tasked with ensuring that the Party's message more fully penetrated Chinese society. This period also saw the Party attempt to strengthen the CPD as its flagship mechanism for managing China's information environment, endowing the department with increased authority and resources commensurate with its mandate of overseeing China's broader information environment. Despite these efforts, however, the propaganda work system in the

1990s and 2000s still suffered from a degree of institutional malaise, struggling to manage the increasingly fractured nature of China's media landscape, as well as the challenges posted by new communications technologies such as the internet.

2.1 PROPAGANDA WORK IN THE ERA OF XI JINPING

Since Xi Jinping's ascension to power in 2012, the Party has only increased its efforts to re-assert its role at the center of civic life in China by strengthening the propaganda work system as a whole and the CPD in particular. While many of the most recognizable aspects of the Party's information-shaping measures (such as state-led media campaigns and online censorship) pre-date Xi, there was a noticeable re-focus on propaganda work following 2012's 18th National Party Congress. As a result, in the decade since, the Party Center has tightened its control over the bureaucratic apparatus which undertakes propaganda work, while also ensuring that it has the funding and authority necessary to fulfill its designated role.

Xi's directives for the content on and direction of propaganda work were outlined in a 2013 speech to the National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference (全国宣传思想工作会议).[‡] In this appearance Xi called for an increased focus on ideological work under the aegis of the "Two Consolidations" (两个巩固) and instructed the Party to "wage a war to win over public opinion."[§] This exhortation to re-center Marxism at the core of public life was the natural outgrowth of the internal "Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere" (also known as "Document 9") circulated by the CCP General Office in early 2013. Document 9 laid out a list of dangerous ideas imported from the West such as "universal values" and "historic nihilism" to be on guard against. In addition to these theoretical formulations, Xi called for practical alterations to be made to the propaganda work system, such as re-asserting Party leadership within the field of education and streamlining government oversight of internet content within China.

The priorities laid out by Xi's 2013 address were borne out by subsequent propaganda work initiatives throughout the rest of the decade. For example, in keeping with Xi's earlier guidance, educational institutions underwent a major initiative to center Party-approved teaching and to purge dissenting academics. The same year also saw the creation of a reformed bureaucratic apparatus to manage the internet centered around the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC, 国家互联网信息办公室), which has moved to implement more stringent and effective online censorship.^{**} Non-Party press outlets also saw their operations curtailed, resulting a marked increase in the number of news stories and content productions censored during this period.

As the CCP marked its centennial in 2021, it made clear that it intends to build upon efforts to modernize and expand its propaganda work system. The nature and scope of these reforms were

[‡] The National Propaganda Work Conference has been held once every five years since at least 2003. The Conference usually takes place shortly after the conclusion of the CCP National Party Congress, and is intended to bring together all relevant actors within the propaganda work system in order to set priorities for propaganda work in accordance with the goals of the Congress.

[§] The "Two Consolidations" is a policy formulation which calls for consolidating Marxism as the basis for ideology construction, and uniting the entirety of the Party and country along shared ideological lines.

^{**} The commission was established as the Leading Small Group for Cybersecurity and Informatization (中央网络安全和信息化领导小组) in 2013, before being converted into its current Commission status in 2018.

outlined by Xi Jinping in a landmark address delivered at the 2018 National Propaganda Work Conference. In this speech, Xi affirmed that the overall direction that the propaganda work system had taken since the 18th National Party Congress was fundamentally sound, and that steps should be taken to continue to expand upon these efforts. Much of the theoretical core of the speech drew upon pre-existing formulations, with Xi once again emphasizing the importance of undertaking political work under the auspices of the “two consolidations” (两个巩固) and the “Four Consciousnesses” (四个意识), as well as appealing to cadres to continue combatting the “Four Winds” (四风) of formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism, and extravagance within the Party. †† The address also featured an expanded set of guidelines meant to improve the overall efficacy of the propaganda work system. For instance, Xi called for further expanding the authorities and capabilities of all Party organs involved in public opinion management, and implored propaganda cadres at all levels to incorporate new techniques and technologies when undertaking their work.

3.0 Organizational Structure

Propaganda work in the PRC is carried out under the auspices of the propaganda *xitong* (系统) or system, of which the CPD forms the leading element.‡‡ Broadly speaking, Chinese propaganda institutions can be categorized into five types, each of which serves their own distinct role in undertaking propaganda work, from formulation of policy to enactment of strategy. The functions of these jurisdictions are outlined as follows:

Table 1: Institutions Involved in CCP Propaganda Dissemination

Institution Type	Role and Composition
Leading Institutions (领导机构)	Comprised of Party committees, which are organized hierarchically from the Central Committee down to the grassroots level. Each committee maintains its own propaganda work sub-group, which is responsible for carrying out Party leadership directives within its jurisdiction.
Functional Institutions (职能机构)	Comprised of central, provincial, and local-level Party propaganda departments (宣传部), state entities involved in ideological and cultural work, and other state department-level (厅级) and bureau-level (局级) organs. These collectively serve as the executive instruments for carrying out policies developed by the propaganda sub-groups of their corresponding and higher-level party committees.
Service Institutions (事业机构)	Comprised of state-owned entities responsible for the production and dissemination of content. These include newspapers, broadcast, television, publishing, cultural, arts, and educational materials enterprises.
Research Institutions (研究机构)	Comprised of internal organs within central-, provincial-, and local-level propaganda departments which study matters pertaining to public opinion. This category also includes academic organizations responsible relevant social science research, as well as policy research offices, intelligence research institutes, and information centers.

†† In party nomenclature, the “Four Consciousnesses” refers to “consciousnesses of ideology, overall concepts, the [Party] core, and the [Party] line” (是指政治意识、大局意识、核心意识、看齐意识).

‡‡ In Party nomenclature, the term “xitong” refers to a network Party, government, and affiliated institutions which work collectively to achieve in particular task—in this case, managing China’s information environment.

Mass Institutions (群团组织)	Comprised of mass organizations (群众组织), which collectively shape society and culture within the PRC. These include civil and economic entities such as labor unions, the Communist Youth League (中国共产主义青年团), and the All-China Women's Federation (中华全国妇女联合会) as well as cultural groups such as the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (中国文学艺术界联合会) and China Writers Association (中国作家协会).
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3.1 CENTRAL-LEVEL PROPAGANDA ORGANIZATIONS

At the top level, China's propaganda work system is directed by the Party Central Committee, which is led by Xi Jinping in his capacity as the Party's General Secretary. The Central Committee in turn delegates formulation of propaganda policy to a number of subordinate institutions which are led by high-ranking Party officials. Chief among these is the Central Propaganda and Ideological Work Leading Small Group, which has direct responsibility for overseeing the CPD. However, there are a number of other high-level groups which also undertake tasks related to propaganda work. These include the Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization, the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, and the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission. The functional responsibilities of these groups overlap considerably. However, the precise means by which they coordinate policy is unclear. The basic structure of this system is outlined in Fig. 1.

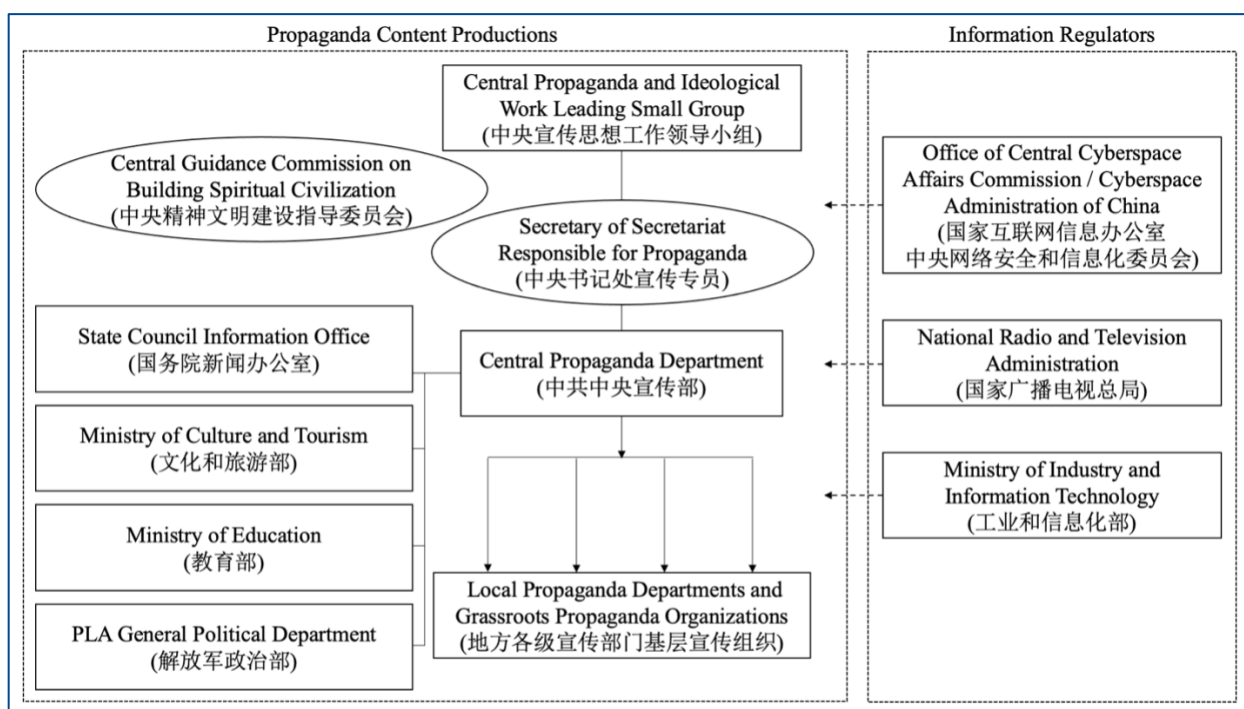


Figure 1: Chinese Central-Level Propaganda Organization Structure

Ultimate authority for formulating and implementing policies relating to propaganda work is vested in the Central Propaganda and Ideological Work Leading Small Group (中央宣传思想工作

领导小组), hereafter referred to as the Propaganda LSG. §§ The Propaganda LSG has final authority over all party-state propaganda organs, determining major issues (重大事项), and acting as the coordinator, or “mouth” (口) for organs involved in propaganda work. Its responsibilities include: “analyzing the dynamics of ideology, and studying professional propaganda methods, policies, and other strategic issues, coordinating ideological work between departments tasked with overseeing propaganda, theory, culture, news, and publishing, and providing opinions and suggestions on the organizational matters relating to propaganda and theory.”

The Propaganda LSG is chaired by a member of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC / 政治局常委会), who is responsible for propaganda and ideological work. As of 2023, the Propaganda LSG head is Wang Huning (王沪宁), who is ranked fifth in PBSC and is also the first-ranked secretary of the CCP Central Secretariat (中央书记处). Since the head of CPD is usually the Secretariat member responsible for propaganda, this arrangement allows him to “personify the institutional linkage from the Propaganda LSG to CPD.” *** Currently, both Wang Huning and the head of CPD, Li Shulei (李书磊), are secretaries of the Party’s Central Secretariat. This arrangement serves as the main connection point between Party leadership and the propaganda *xitong*, with Wang serving as the senior liaison to the PBSC and Li overseeing linkages further down the propaganda work system hierarchy.

The work of the Propaganda LSG organizationally overlaps with the Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization (中央精神文明建设指导委员会), hereafter referred to as the Building Spiritual Civilization Commission. The Building Spiritual Civilization Commission is an LSG-equivalent organization tasked with “building an ethical and upstanding culture among the youth through schools and media.” It is usually led by the head of the Propaganda LSG, and accordingly is currently chaired by Wang Huning. Organizationally, the Building Spiritual Civilization Commission office is managed by the CPD. However, the exact delineation of areas of authority between the two organizations is not made clear in publicly available official documentation.

While the Propaganda LSG and its subordinate CPD are principally tasked with undertaking domestic propaganda efforts, it also has a hand in formulating external propaganda in cooperation with another LSG-equivalent organ, the Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC / 中央外事工作委员会), which is headed by Xi Jinping and oversees matters related to foreign affairs. While the CPD is the decision-making unit (决策单位) responsible for formulating policies and determining the strategic direction of China’s propaganda work, it also has a subordinate arm, the State Council Information Office (SCIO / 国务院新闻办公室) which consults with CFAC on propaganda issues related to foreign affairs.

§§ Leading Small Groups (领导小组), or LSGs serve as a key coordination mechanism used by the Central Committee. They are directly subordinate to the Party Secretariat, and are generally formed when the Party needs to formulate policy that is to be carried out concurrently by multiple components of China’s party-state bureaucracy.

*** Generally, the CCP Central Secretariat is the communication bridge between Leading Small Groups and Commissions and Central Committee departments.

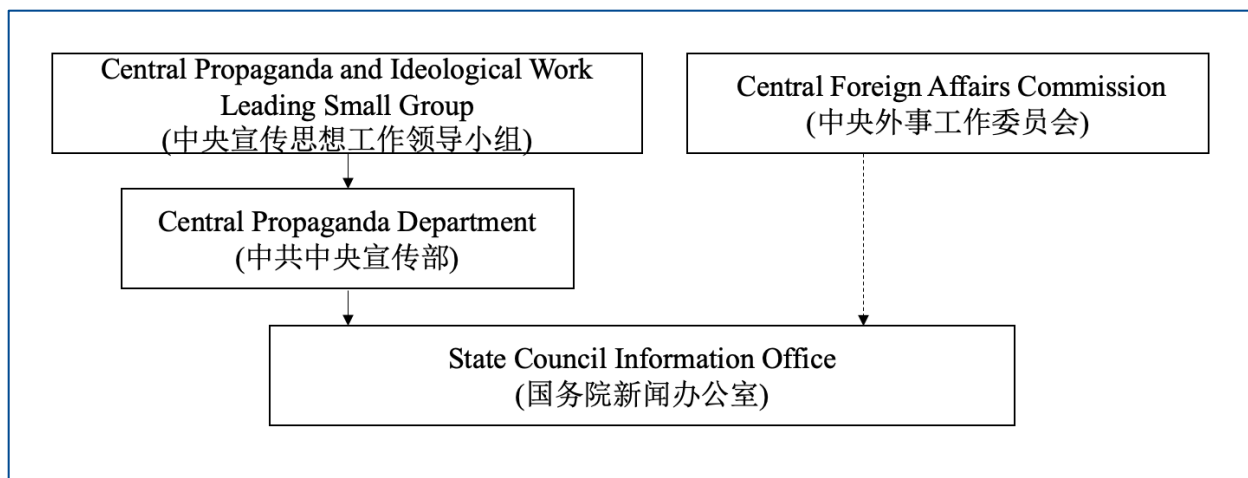


Figure 2: CCP Domestic and Foreign Propaganda Organizations

In order to manage China's online environment, the Propaganda LSG also coordinates closely with the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (CCAC / 中央网络安全和信息化委员会), first established in 2014 as a LSG but subsequently upgraded to a commission in 2018. CCAC's importance is indicated by the fact that Xi Jinping himself chairs the commission, as opposed to the Propaganda LSG which is chaired by a member of PBSC. CCAC's main goal is to coordinate major issues on cybersecurity, information infrastructure, and Internet-related issues. Its administrative office is hosted by the CAC which is tasked with implementing Internet-related policies and regulating Internet use and online censorship. The head of CAC generally serves concurrently as Deputy Director of the CPD, indicating the close institutional ties between the two organs.

3.2 CENTRAL PROPAGANDA DEPARTMENT

The Central Propaganda Department is the CCP's comprehensive functional department (综合职能部门) in charge of propaganda and ideology work directly under the CCP Central Committee. While post-1977 incarnation of the CPD was initially conceived of as a lean organization with eight primary bureaus, its structure has gradually expanded over the decades in order to oversee an ever-increasing proportion of China's information environment. The current known and active offices directly under CPD are listed in Fig. 3. ^{†††}

^{†††} These bureaus and offices were identified through recruitment announcements posted on CPD's official portal *Guojia Wenmingwang* (中国文明网) between 2018 and 2021.

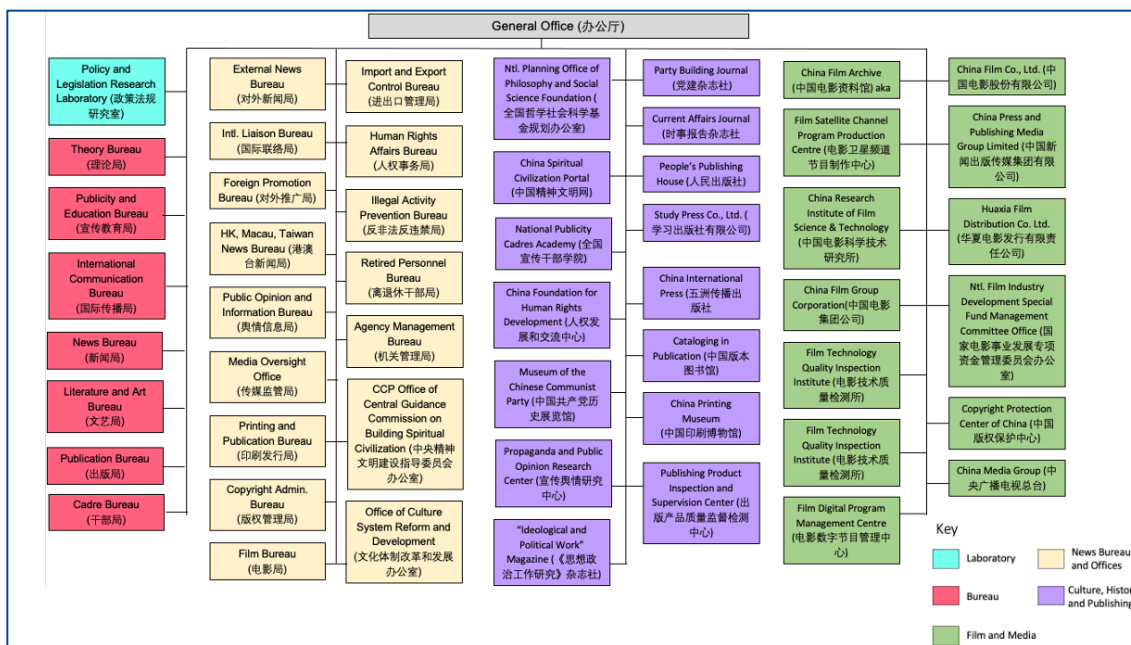


Figure 3: CPD Subordinate and Affiliate Organizations

In carrying out its function as the arbiter of China’s information environment, the CPD coordinates and directs the activities of a broad range of actors across the party, state, and society. The CPD and its subordinate components and counterparts are tasked with overseeing a myriad number of institutions that exist outside of the party-state hierarchy, such as those in the media, academia, and the (nominally) private sphere. Hence, while the CPD and its subordinate branches do directly perform key propaganda functions, the bulk of their work revolves around “guiding” (指导) and “coordinating” (协调) institutions which are not formally subordinate to the Propaganda Department structure. Under this formulation, the Propaganda Department system can be likened to an orchestra conductor, charged with ensuring that the various players under its supervision act in accordance with directives given from the Party Center.

Under Xi, the Party has taken steps to subordinate all elements of China’s media ecosystem under the leadership of the CPD, as evidenced by the expansion of the department’s jurisdictional purview to include film and press output. From 2013 to 2018, the China Film Administration (CFA / 国家电影局), was part of the then-State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (国家新闻出版广电总局) which was under the authority of the State Council. In 2018, the CCP Central Committee moved the CFA under the CPD, in order to consolidate political oversight of the production, distribution, and release of films in China. The Central Committee has also consolidated several state-owned media organizations, including the China Central Television (中央电视台), China National Radio (中央人民广播电台), and China Radio International (中国国际广播电台), into China Media Group (CMG / 中央广播电视总台), also known as Voice of China, which is managed by the CPD. These organizational changes effectively consolidated within the propaganda work system responsibility for oversight of film production, news reporting, and publishing.

The CPD’s role in carrying out policy related to internet governance and censorship is demonstrated by its maintenance of a Public Opinion and Information Bureau (舆情信息局). Public opinion monitoring has long been a key tool of Party governance, dating back to the establishment of neighborhood residents’ committees (居民委员会) during the Mao era. However, the past two

decades have seen stepped up efforts to more thoroughly bureaucratize and "informatize" (信息化) public opinion monitoring work. In 2004, the Party created the Public Opinion and Information Bureau, which serves as a subordinate body to CPD. The Bureau oversees three component organs: the Internet Public Opinion Division (网络舆情处), Public Opinion Division (社会舆情处), and Public Opinion Analysis Division (舆情分析处). Together, these organs collect, compile, analyze, and report public opinions throughout China. The Bureau also oversees corresponding public opinion and information organs at provincial, municipal, and county levels. At the same time, all Party organs and the majority of central government organizations such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Security, State Council Information Office, elements the "politics and law *xitong*" (政法系统), and scientific and research institution also established their own internal public opinion and information divisions, offices, center, and "direct reporting stations" (直报点) and "public opinion direct reporting officers" (舆情直报员). Together, they constitute a nation-wide network to surveilling and reporting on public opinion at the grassroots level in a system that ultimately reports to the CPD.

Lastly, in addition to its unilateral mandates, the CPD collaborates with other government ministries in order to undertake its mission. For example, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT / 工业和信息化部) - effectively China's defense industrial ministry - works closely with the CPD to regulate the Internet industry and conduct online surveillance and censorship.^{###} Other ministerial departments which contribute to facets of China's information space such as academia (e.g. the Ministry of Education (教育部), and culture (e.g. the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (文化和旅游部)) also take direction from the propaganda work system. The People's Liberation Army has its own propaganda system as well, that exists parallel to the CPD system but which is under the purview of the Central Military Commission's Political Work Department (CMC / 中央军委政治工作部).

3.3 PROVINCIAL-LEVEL PROPAGANDA ORGANIZATIONS

Propaganda departments at the provincial and sub-provincial levels function as scaled-down versions of the CPD. All units at these levels maintain a set of core offices which handle key tasks such as administrative guidance, theory work, and media oversight, as well as oversight of subordinate propaganda departments within their area of territorial or organizational responsibility. Offices at this level usually maintain a staff of between 200-500 personnel, with annual budgets ranging from 10-50 million RMB. However, for departments overseeing particularly large population centers, the size and scope of the departments can range significantly larger. For example, the Shanghai Municipal Propaganda Department boasts a budget of more than 3.2 billion RMB, and maintains a comparatively expansive portfolio of external cultural institutions that it is responsible for funding (See: Fig. 4).^{\$\$\$}

^{###} This includes, for example, the implementation and maintenance of the Great Firewall.

^{\$\$\$} In order to map out the form and functions of the propaganda work system at the sub-provincial level, the authors surveyed over two dozen budgetary documents published by provincial and municipal propaganda departments. A full list of these reference documents is available upon request.

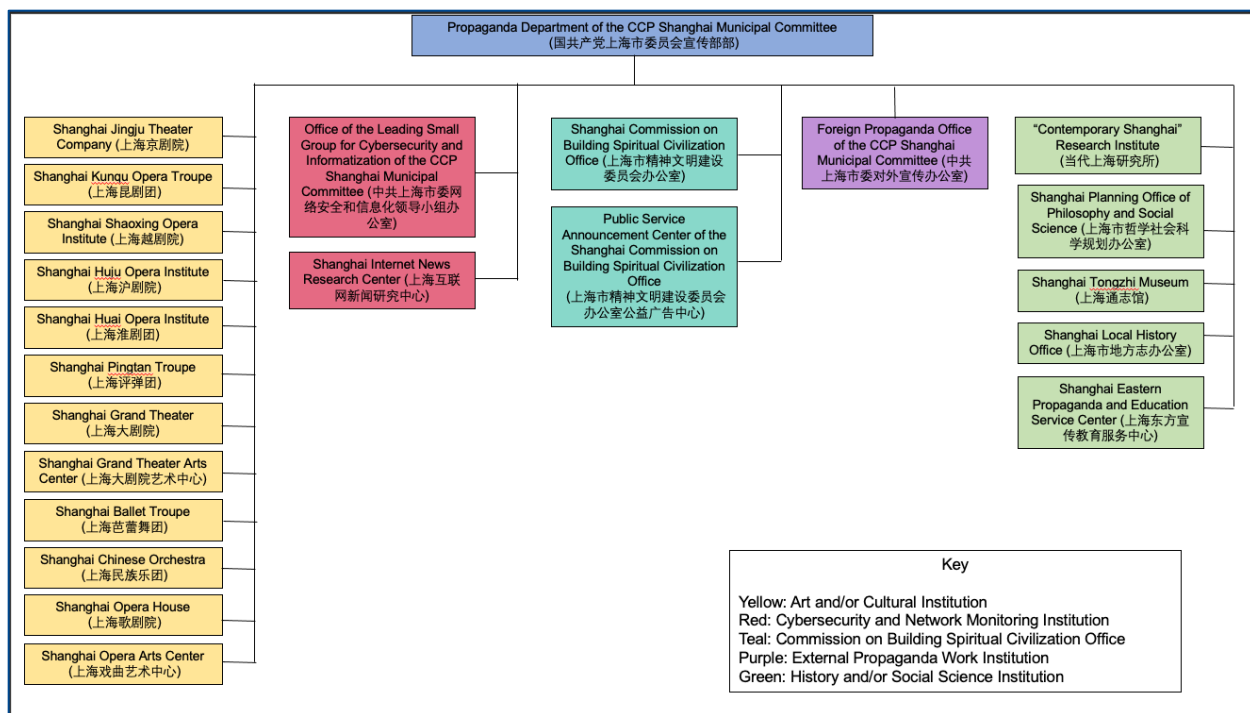


Figure 4: External Institutions Managed by the Shanghai Provincial Propaganda Department

Fig. 5 depicts the organizational structure of the Shaanxi Provincial Propaganda Office, which is more typical of departments at its level.

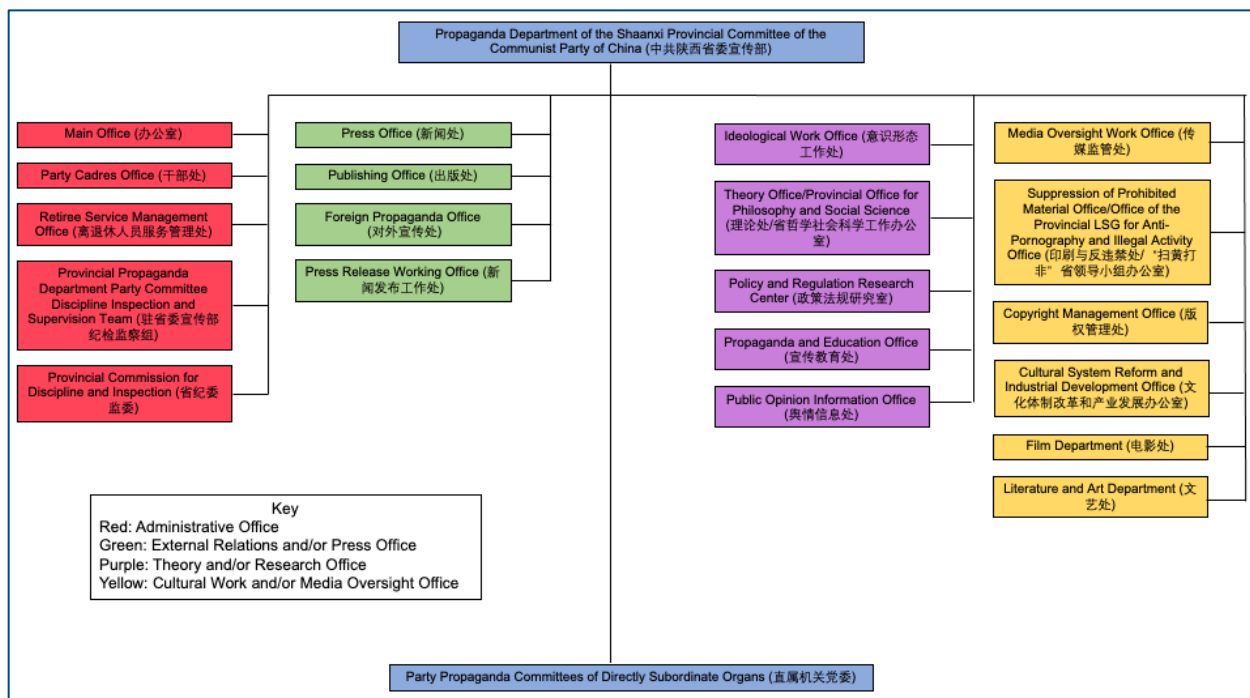


Figure 5: Structure of the Shaanxi Provincial Propaganda Department

In addition to their core organs, provincial-level propaganda departments oversee and fund ancillary institutions related to propaganda work, similar to the national-level CPD. To use the same example of Shaanxi Province, its propaganda department is funds a number of external institutions such as the provincial Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization Office and professional associations such as the Shaanxi Provincial Journalists Association (see: Fig. 7.).

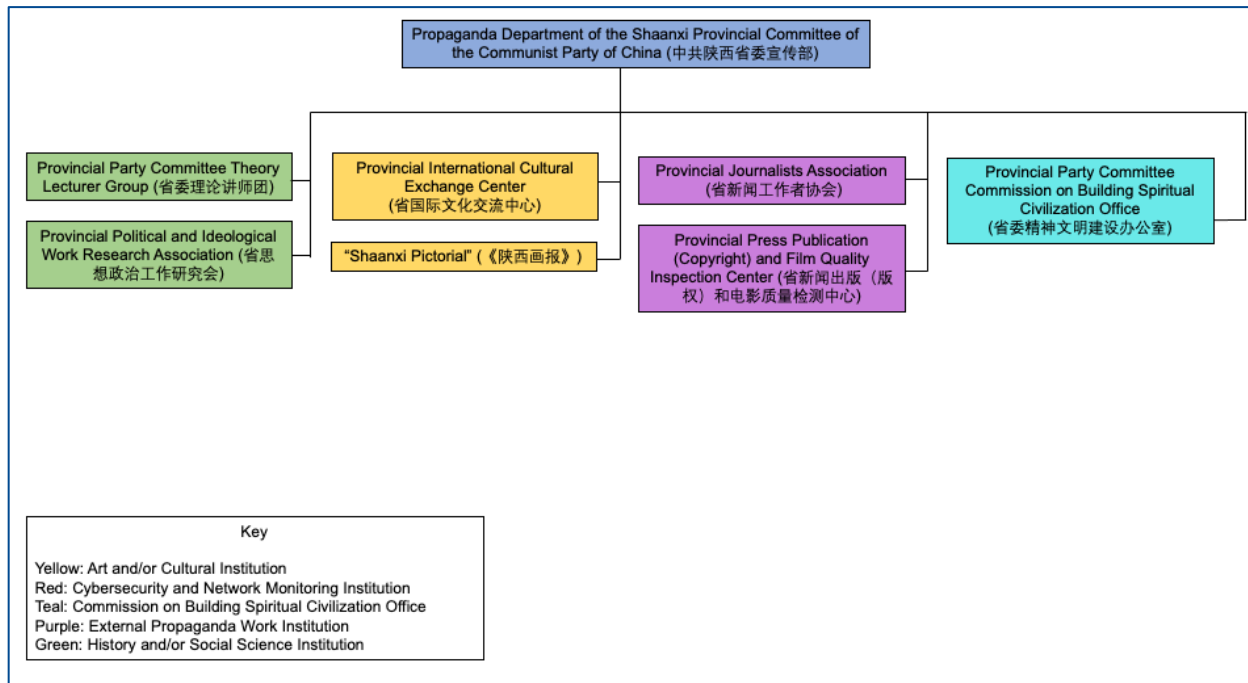


Figure 6: External Institutions Managed by the Shaanxi Provincial Propaganda Department

3.4 LOCAL-LEVEL PROPAGANDA ORGANIZATIONS

Propaganda organs at the sub-provincial level generally oversee specific geographical entities, such as counties (县) and urban districts (市辖区). As with the provincial and ministerial levels, local-level organs are organized around an administrative core dedicated to performing key functions. Propaganda organs at the sub-provincial level typically maintain a staff of 10-50 personnel, with annual budgets ranging from 10 to 50 million RMB. In some cases, organs at this level provide funding to external organizations such as cultural institutions and periodicals, although this is less common than at higher levels, owing to the limited size and budgets of sub-provincial organs. An example of typical county-level organizational structure can be found in Fig. 8. Notably, at the sub provincial level there appears to be a much higher degree of variation in how organs organize themselves, with many components being either dual-hatted or assigned unique functions as necessary. For example, Baihe County in Shaanxi maintains its own Internet Information Unit (网信股) to manage online content, whereas in Long County, Shaanxi, those functions are undertaken through the Propaganda News and Publishing Group (新闻宣传和出版组). This combining of organizational responsibilities indicates that propaganda organs at the local level operate within comparatively limited personnel and funding limits, and must stretch and tailor their organizational resources in order to accomplish the broad list of tasks mandated by the Party Center.

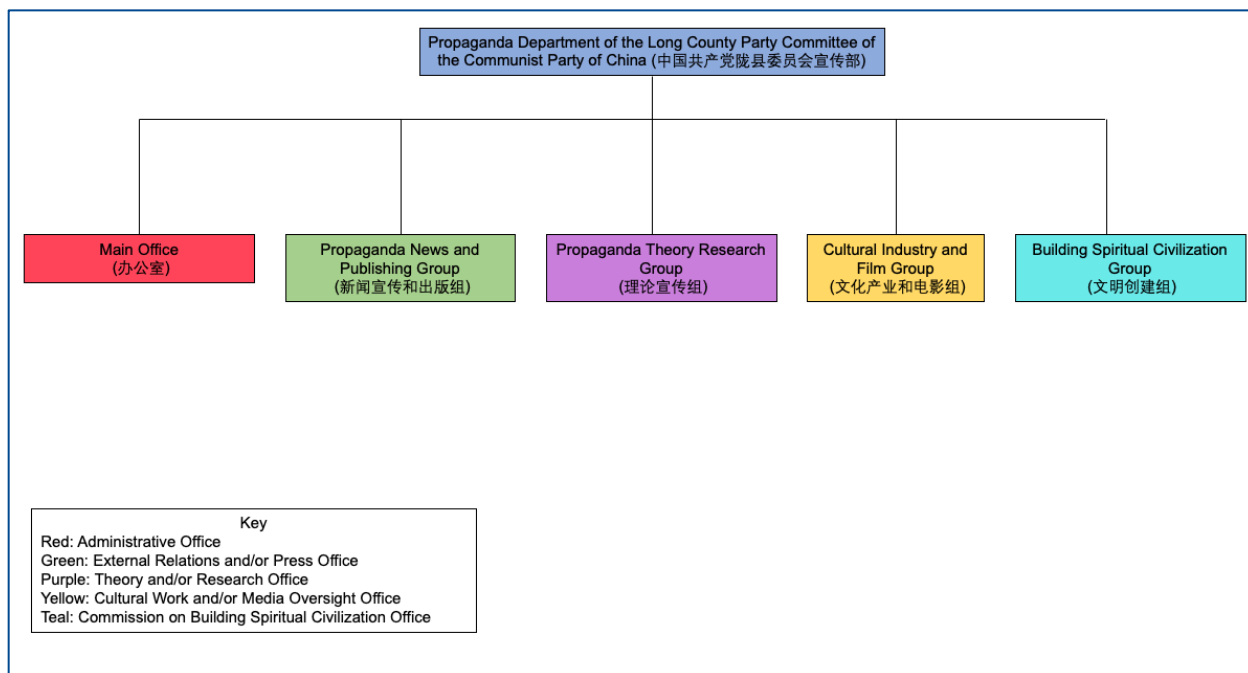


Figure 8: Organization of the Internal Bureaus of the Long County Propaganda Department

Propaganda organs at the local level also appear to be the main conduit for managing and overseeing propaganda work done at the grassroots level within their areas of jurisdiction. According to existing Party guidance, institutions which must maintain propaganda cells include but are not limited to village and/or community-level administrative organs, state-owned and state-controlled enterprises, higher education institutions, enterprises with state-owned equity, and “non-public economic organizations” (i.e., corporations).

4.0 Codifying Party Propaganda - CCP Rules on Propaganda Work

Under Xi Jinping, the CCP has undertaken a major effort to codify its approach to propaganda work, with the goal of providing concrete guidance to departments at all levels. This undertaking began in 2013 with the issuance of the *Central Committee’s First Five-Year Plan for the Formulation of Intra-Party Laws and Regulations* (中央党内法规制定工作第一个五年规划), which sought to create a more formalized set of by-laws governing intra-Party relations. The *Plan* identified the propaganda work system as being one of the main areas which was to be subject to this process of formalization.

The process of creating a formal set of guidelines for propaganda work culminated in 2019 with the release of the *CCP Regulations for Propaganda Work* (中国共产党宣传工作条例). The *Regulations* were first-ever set of Party by-laws to provide unified guidance for undertaking propaganda work and were produced with the intention of “consolidating the ideological guiding position of Marxism, and the common ideological foundation upon which the whole Party and all the people of the country unitedly fight.” (巩固马克思主义在意识形态领域的指导地位, 巩固全党全国人民团结奋斗的共同思想基础). The CCP characterizes the *2019 Rules* as a set of “backbone”

(主干性的) 和 “fundamental” (基础性的) regulations designed to unify propaganda work across all echelons of the Party hierarchy.

FUNCTIONS OF PARTY COMMITTEES

The *2019 Rules* solidify the leadership positions of both the CPD and Party committees within the propaganda work system, imbuing them with “tremendous responsibility and authority” (极大的责任和权威). This designation of Party organs as the core of propaganda work is intended to “firmly maintain the authority of the Party Central Committee under a centralized and unified leadership” (坚决维护党中央权威和集中统一领导). In order to achieve this goal, it lays out a series of seven core functions for undertaking propaganda work which are to be universally followed by Party committees at all levels, ranging from central government ministries down to grassroots organizations. These responsibilities are as follows:

1. Fully implement Central Party and superior Party committees' orders and decisions on propaganda tasks; guide; supervise, and inspect subordinate party organs on propaganda work
2. Regularly review important work and crucial matters on propaganda work and report to Central Party and superior Party committees on ongoing propaganda work.
3. Study important policies on formulating propaganda work and produce and disseminate intra-party regulations and regulatory documents in accordance with its authority on propaganda work
4. Firmly master ideological work leadership and carry out the functions of the ideological work responsibility system.
5. Lead and organize the construction of socialist spiritual civilization and culture.
6. Lead propaganda organs at all levels to do well on propaganda work, by appointing qualified leadership and strengthening training of propaganda cadres.
7. Lead and supervise the People's Congresses, state organs, political consultative conferences, courts, procuratorates, mass organizations, private enterprises in relation to their respective propaganda work responsibilities.

These responsibilities extend to all Party organizations and explicitly require all Party organs to maintain components tasked with overseeing propaganda work. One of the emphases of the *2019 Rules* is the clarification and reinforcement of propaganda work at the grassroots level, specifically laying out the institutional requirements for propaganda work for private enterprises, rural areas (农村), state organs, schools, research institutions, urban sub-district and neighborhood organizations, and social organizations. In particular:

- Township and urban sub-district (乡镇街道) level Party organs must appoint a member of the Party committee or Party working committee (党工委) to be responsible for propaganda work.
- Village or community level Party organs should have designated propaganda personnel (宣传员)
- State-owned and state-controlled enterprises' Party committees/branches must establish propaganda work organs (机关).
- Party committees at higher education institutions (高校) must operate propaganda departments.
- Party organs of enterprises with state-owned equity, non-public economic organizations (非公有制经济组织), and social organization must designate propaganda personnel on a case-by-case basis.

- Grassroots Party organs (基层党组织) at all levels must set up propaganda components on a case-by-case basis, or designate specific personnel for propaganda work.

Interestingly, the *2019 Rules* specifically mandate Party committees and state organs at all levels should increase their expenditures on cultural infrastructure such as public libraries, museums, radio and television broadcasting, and township-, village-, and even street-level “integrated cultural stations in order to “provide quality cultural products and services.” However, it is currently unclear if this directive has been accompanied by an overall increase in funding for local departments, or if it is merely an unfunded mandate.

CPD DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The *2019 Rules* codify the Party’s existing *de jure* policy of having Party branch committees be responsible for undertaking propaganda work within their areas of oversight. Accordingly, functional department (职能部门) are tasked with carrying out propaganda policies developed by their corresponding Party committees. The *2019 Rules* details 16 responsibilities and functions for all propaganda departments in China:

1. Fully implement Central Party and superior Party committees’ orders and decisions on propaganda tasks; draft important policies and development plans for propaganda work.
2. Lead, organize, and coordinate the implementation and daily supervision of ideology work with visitorial inspections for special items.
3. Guide and collaborate the theoretical study relating to propaganda work.
4. Lead the analysis, criticism, and guidance of social opinions; lead and coordinate news agencies and news publications.
5. Manage news publications and film industry; lead and guide radio and television broadcasting; and organize and guide “anti-pornography and illegality” work.
6. Lead and guide the construction of socialist core values, construction of ideology and moral, and ideological and political work; promote the creation of mass spiritual civilization.
7. Lead and guide the creation and production of spiritual and civilization products; collaborate on relevant work related to Chinese traditional heritage; guide and coordinate the construction of mass culture.
8. Guide and coordinate the cultural system reform and the development of cultural and tourism industries; guide and coordinate the management and supervision of state-owned cultural assets.
9. Guide the propaganda and management content on the Internet in a macro-level and coordinate the construction and management of the new media.
10. Lead and carry out foreign propaganda work, guide foreign cultural exchange and cooperation work, collaborate the promotion of Chinese culture “go global” work, and coordinate human rights propaganda work.
11. Coordinate the promotion rule-of-law construction in propaganda matters.
12. Lead and guide public opinion information work.
13. Take responsibility for content creation and unity of voice in propaganda work.
14. Take responsibility for the management of leadership, cadres, and talent within select jurisdictions.
15. Guide subordinate Party committees on propaganda work.
16. Complete other tasks assigned by the Party committee at the same level and by superior Party committees.

2019 RULES IMPLEMENTATION FROM THE TOP DOWN

Official documents published by provincial- and local-level propaganda departments provide a great deal of additional insight into how the tenets of the *2019 Rules* are put into practice in the real world. The following section draws upon yearly budgetary statements and clerical documents published by provincial and local propaganda departments to provide a snapshot of how they have implemented the guidance laid out by the *2019 Rules* in fulfilling their mission of guiding and coordinating actors within the PRC's civil society.

From a Party governance perspective, propaganda departments at all levels are charged with overseeing the ideological work responsibility system (意识形态工作责任制) within their geographic jurisdiction. Functionally this entails managing content produced by news media (新闻媒体) and network media (网络媒体), middle and primary school courses (中小学等课程讲解), various performing arts venues (各类演艺场所), exhibition halls (展览馆), etc. It also entails the suppression of ideological heterodoxy amongst Party members, participation in illicit online activity, and ideology which “negate the leadership of the Chinese Communist party or attack the system of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” (否定中国共产党的领导、攻击中国特色社会主义注意制度).” Cadres tasked with overseeing these aforementioned functions are evaluated on an annual basis. Additionally, Party committees are tasked with regularly reporting to superior Party committees (for example, one county-level department would issue a report on ideological work to the next-highest Party committee once every six months).

Information gleaned from local budget documents makes clear that propaganda departments at all levels take a very active role in fulfilling their mandate of overseeing the press, media outlets, and publishing institutions in their jurisdiction. This includes overseeing the administrative work of press and publishing houses, supervising and managing the content and quality of publications, overseeing the issuance of copyrights, managing the import and export of publications, etc. Additionally, this work entails preventing and suppressing the publication of illegal material such as pornography. Departments are responsible issuing reporter cards (新闻记者证), which function as an official form of identification for journalists.^{****} Departments are also tasked with acting as the main coordinating body within their respective jurisdiction's cultural system (文化体制) in producing cultural products and programs which promote Chinese cultural heritage as well as “national, ethnic, and cultural identity” (增强国家认同、民族认同、文化认同). Departments are tasked with ensuring that approved cultural material is distributed across media providers such as newspapers, books, periodicals, radio stations, television stations, internet sites, etc. They are also tasked with coordinating and overseeing content released by public cultural institutions such as libraries, cultural centers, museums, art galleries, and other cultural institutions.

Propaganda departments at all levels also serve as the Party's first line of defense in identifying and deflecting social discontent. Departments are tasked with “tracking, understanding, studying, and mastering the dynamics of public opinion.” Concurrently they are tasked with collecting, analyzing, and judging the importance of public opinion data at home and abroad. It also appears that they participate in the development and research of new technologies in the field of online

^{****} Note that the cards themselves are printed and issued by the General Administration for Press and Publications (新闻出版总署统).

propaganda, especially those which might assist in recognizing developing trends in public opinion and developing system-wide responses to it. Moreover, departments are tasked with monitoring public opinion and organizing emergency news work and public information distribution in times of crisis specifically. The organizational form that this takes varies from instance to instance, but usually propaganda organs will feature some sort of analysis cell such as an Internet Information Unit (网信股) which is tasked with monitoring data intakes for evidence of societal discontent. Once these trends are identified, they can be flagged for remediation by other relevant departments such as CAC, or the security services, depending on their severity.

5.0 The Propaganda System in Action

Recent events indicate that the reforms made to the CPD in the past decade have not been undertaken as a mere bureaucratic expedient, but rather serve the Party's overarching goal of reasserting itself at the center of social and political life in China. As the previous section demonstrates, the CPD's mission set includes both "positive" functions such as those which improve the public image of the Party and foster adherence to its ideological tenets, as well as "negative" functions such as informational gatekeeping and censorship efforts. This section will demonstrate these duties are not intended as distinct and separate mission sets, but are rather integral with each other. The propaganda work system's "positive" functions serve as a mechanism for operational preparation of China's informational environment, conditioning society to accept the Party's ideological framing of issues and Party leadership during moments of crisis. At the same time, the system's "negative" functions strengthen the CCP's efforts to shape the attitudes and behaviors of the public, by ensuring that the only messaging widely disseminated in the information space is that which has the approval of the Party and serves its purposes.

The following section is comprised of three vignettes which together demonstrate how the propaganda work system carries out its positive and negative functions to achieve the overall effect of shaping China's information space. The first example covers recent efforts by the Party to achieve social-level effects by curbing and removing undesirable online content. The second demonstrates the CPD's efforts to harness the internet as a means of disseminating the Party's messaging. The final example examines the propaganda system's role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating its capacity to control China's information space in crisis periods.

CRACKING DOWN ON FAN CULTURE: MANAGEMENT OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Under Xi, the CPD has more assertively exercised its regulatory authority to combat social attitudes and behaviors deemed to be undesirable by the Party, especially in highly visible areas of public life such as the entertainment sphere. August and September of 2021 witnessed a major push to reign in the cultural force and online influence of the entertainment industry, an effort coordinated primarily by the CPD and implemented via CAC and National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA / 国家广播电视总局). In early August, the CAC released a list of ten sweeping actions that should be taken by regulators at every level of government to address the "chaos" of fan clubs. These steps include asserting greater control of ranking algorithms, the banning of celebrity rankings, requirements for account registration within fan clubs, and other mechanisms to increase government oversight. This was followed by further regulations from NRTA aimed at regulating the pay and management of actors and industry employees as well as formalizing control of content. Together, these measures aimed at increasing content deemed 'moral' and reining in perceived negative influences such as the "effeminate man" (娘炮) trend.

In September of 2021, the CPD expanded its efforts, publicly issuing a summary of broader guidance titled *Launching Comprehensive Governance Work in the Entertainment*

Sphere Announcement (关于开展文娱领域综合治理工作的通知). This statement identified specific infractions committed by the entertainment industry, including tax evasion schemes and fake contracting (阴阳合同) and directly attacked the moral character of industry leaders. The announcement also called for greater Party control over cultural content production and improving political education for industry leaders, citing the importance of the entertainment industry in the “molding of future people” (塑造什么样的未来人). Tangible effects of this coordinated crackdown were quickly seen online, where large swathes of the fandom for the K-pop band BTS were banned on sites such as Weibo and fan groups for particularly popular actors were similarly taken down. These effects were also felt in other online communities. For instance, the video streaming platform iQiyi announced it was cancelling “idol competition” programming, citing their alleged “unhealthy” nature.

LET’S ALL LOVE XI: USE OF THE INTERNET AS A PROPAGANDA TOOL

A key development of the Xi era is the Party’s full-fledged adoption of the internet as a primary means of directly penetrating and influencing Chinese society, as opposed to its more tentative and less comprehensive use of internet means before. This changing approach to the role of the internet in propaganda work is demonstrated in the creation and promotion of the “Study the Great Nation” (学习强国) mobile app which, which was developed in partnership by the CPD and Alibaba. The app provides Party-approved content from a variety of national news and propaganda sources, primarily positive assessments of the party-state’s successes in the war on poverty, regulation efforts, and other governance initiatives.

Propaganda organs at all administrative levels have actively pushed individuals subject to their jurisdictions to download and use the Study the Great Nation app. It has also been promoted heavily by national outlets and through education and workplace party units. Some workers and students have reported requirements imposed by their employers or schools, to satisfy specific requirements for time spent on the app or scores on particular tests and quizzes within the app, with public shaming of those who do not meet the requirements. Prizes and public accolades are distributed to individuals or work units who score well nationally. The app is also an example of how national level efforts are repeated at lower levels of the Party hierarchy, with provinces and cities creating and promoting their own Study the Great Nation apps. Collectively these efforts point to an ongoing effort by the Party to develop new and innovative means to penetrate Chinese society down to the individual level. The impact of these efforts will be revisited in this paper’s concluding section.

COMBATTING ONLINE RUMORS: THE ROLE OF PROPAGANDA IN RESPONDING TO COVID

The CPD’s role in responding to the COVID-19 epidemic has highlighted its role as the CCP’s first line of defense in combatting potential challenges to Party authority. The greatest challenge of Xi’s tenure has undoubtedly been the COVID-19 global pandemic. The propaganda work system’s management of information related to COVID provides an instructive case for how the Party combines digital and analog methods of control to address modern crises. From the outset of the pandemic, technology has played a key role in the propaganda system’s efforts to control COVID-19 narratives at home and abroad. Censorship began as early as December 2019, the day after Wuhan doctors attempted to warn the public of the dangerous new disease. In January 2020, the CPD, CAC and SCIO issued a statement initiating and formalizing their work to “research and deploy pandemic-related propaganda and guidance (研究部署疫情宣传引导). In February CAC issued a stern, public warning to online media to “prevent the spread of online panic” (散布恐慌情绪等信息) and create a “good online environment” (良好网络环境) to win the battle against COVID. In a single week of January 2020, hundreds of individuals were fined or

jailed for “spreading rumors” (散布谣言) online, including in private messaging in WeChat. Directives were sent on a near-daily basis to online providers and news outlets about what was permissible to publish on the pandemic and what topics to censor or avoid completely.

At a more granular level, the CPD’s approach to pandemic information response was characterized by a carrot-and-stick approach—encouraging news outlets to report favorably on the Party’s pandemic response efforts while cracking down hard on those who deviated from officially sanctioned messaging. The CPD’s response to COVID came in the midst of a flurry of a domestic investigative reporting blitz that attempted to get pandemic news as well as evidence of government cover ups out to the Chinese people. In retaliation for these efforts, numerous local reporters were later arrested (with at least one was sentenced to 4 years in prison), while the CPD dispatched over 300 reporters to cover the pandemic in a politically acceptable manner. Starting in February 2020, the CPD led campaigns to recruit volunteers during lockdowns and by September was promoting the documentary *United War of the Pandemic* (《同心战“疫”》) which it had produced via China Media Group. In September 2021, the CPD began working with the Ministry of Public Education to ensure that “anti-pandemic” material would be covered in schools, likely a combination of sound medical guidance and a carefully constructed historical narrative. The efforts to influence domestic narratives on the government’s COVID response was both reactive and proactive.

Efforts to manage public opinion related to COVID did not end at China’s borders. The PRC has waged a public campaign to counter coverage depicting the party-state’s response in a negative light. It has consistently fought against any narrative claiming COVID-19 was the result of scientific research in Wuhan not just with public rhetoric and influence campaigns within international bodies, but also with more covert ‘astroturfing’ behavior on international public media sites.^{††††} Indeed, the Chinese officials and the propaganda system went on active offense in relation to the Wuhan lab leak issue, repeatedly making spurious counter claims that the virus might have actually been developed by the US military.

6.0 Flying into the Homes of the People: The Future of the Propaganda Work System

During his tenure, Xi Jinping has overseen an extensive expansion and reinvigoration of China’s propaganda work system. Xi’s vision for the role of the CPD and its affiliates is encapsulated in his statement that propaganda work should “fly in the homes of the people” (飞入寻常百姓家), incorporating propaganda work more deeply into all aspects – public and private – of national life. To accomplish this, propaganda work under Xi has been characterized by three mutually reinforcing trends: increasingly centralized direction of propaganda work under the supervision of the Party Center, expanding responsibilities for the Central Propaganda Department and its lower-level counterparts, and increasing reliance on online platforms. In the wake of the 20th Party Congress, it is clear that these dynamics will continue to define the PRC’s propaganda work system in the coming years.

^{††††} In contemporary political science parlance, the term “astroturfing” refers to the practice of manipulating public opinion outlets to give the false impression of broad-based grassroots support for a cause.

XI AT THE HELM

In the course of his leadership, Xi Jinping has stepped into a central role in directing the Party's propaganda work system. The crux of this effort is based upon incorporating Xi Jinping Thought alongside Marxism-Leninism-Maoism as a foundational theoretical framework used by the Party. Since the 18th National Party Congress, numerous statements have emphasized Xi's role as the core (核心) of the CCP in formulating the laws, standards, and methodologies governing propaganda work. This shift is reflected by the active affirmation of Xi Jinping Thought as a core element of propaganda work (as for all other forms of work in the party-state). For instance, in a 2019 interview the head of the CPD emphasized that it was "urgently necessary to adopt Xi Jinping's important ideas on propaganda and ideological work" as a precondition for the Department successfully executing its functions under modern conditions. This messaging has been mirrored in pronouncements by grassroots and local propaganda organs, which continually reference Xi Jinping Thought as a guiding principle in their annual work statements.

In addition to this focus on theoretical work, the Party has taken steps to further solidify Xi Jinping's *de facto* administrative authority over the propaganda work system. For instance, the timing of Xi's 2018 address at the National Propaganda Work Conference seems to have been deliberate, occurring just a few months after the issuance of the *Second Central Five Year Plan for Formulating Intra-Party Regulations* (中央党内法规制定工作第二个五年规划) as well as the formal incorporation of Xi Jinping Thought into the Party Constitution. Although not outright stated, this seems to imply Xi has taken a preeminent role in drafting and approving new regulations which will govern the Party's propaganda apparatus. At a more granular level, Xi presided over the Politburo meeting which commented on and approved the 2019 *Rules on Propaganda Work* discussed earlier, and has cemented his authority over the Propaganda Department's bureaucratic apparatus by nominating close allies to staff leadership positions within the CPD. Taken collectively, these measures indicate that in the future the CCP's propaganda work system, and by extension the information environment within the PRC, will fall firmly under the personal direction of Xi Jinping.

There are a number of plausible reasons as to why the Party has moved to center Xi within Party leadership in general, and within propaganda work in particular. A cynical reading of the situation would suggest that Xi's move to elevate himself to the CCP's core is merely an expedient designed to secure his seat in power and ward off potential intra-Party challengers. However, the possibility cannot be discounted that Xi and those who surround him in leadership are "true believers," who genuinely believe Xi Jinping Thought provides the best theoretical and practical basis for governing China going forward. It is clear from Xi's own writings that he expects China to encounter significant challenges between now and mid-century, and it is the gravity of these challenges that necessitates the imposition of a strong executive capable of imposing unity upon the Party. This would go a long way towards explaining why a Party which three decades stressed the importance of collective, consensus-based leadership has been so quickly subjected to Xi's personal rule. Were this to be the case, it would confirm the notion that the perceived necessity of acting as a unified Party free of factionalism trumps any existing misgivings caused by the specter of the Mao era. As a corollary, Xi's move to personally oversee the drafting of propaganda regulations is not merely a vanity project focused on securing his legacy, but is rather a key requirement to ensure that his guiding principles are "baked in" to future Party decision-making procedures, thereby ensuring that the CCP will adhere to his leadership vision even out to the edges of the system and will continue to do so after he inevitably exits the political stage.

STRENGTHENING THE GUIDING HAND

The Party is actively strengthening the propaganda work system's capacity to manage and direct wide-ranging elements of Chinese society. As discussed earlier in this monograph, Party guidelines issued since the 18th National Congress in 2012 have invigorated propaganda work with broader oversight responsibilities and an expanded role in directly shaping cultural and political discourse. The CPD leadership have made clear that these increased responsibilities will make the propaganda work system more capable of fulfilling its mandate of mobilizing the "whole of the Party" and "whole of society" to undertake its work. In practical terms, this will entail the CPD and its sub-national counterparts taking a more hands-on approach in regulating media platforms within the PRC, as well as assuming a more active role in coordinating with other party-state elements to shape the PRC's internal information environment.

Going forward, it appears certain that the propaganda work system will continue to assert ever-stronger Party control over publishing and media outlets. A recent instructional text published by the CPD's Theory Bureau stated that a key task for the Department would be the eradication of media and discourse spaces which do not operate under the Party's oversight, asserting that the Party will under no circumstances permit the existence of "special zones of journalism" or "public opinion enclaves." Viewed within this context, it is clear that the recent expansion of the propaganda work system's jurisdictional portfolio to include direct management of the press and film industries was done with the intention of enabling it to use its licensing and regulatory authorities as a means of eliminating media which do not fully adhere to Party content guidelines. Concurrently, the CPD has worked closely with its counterparts in CAC to implement the "two alls" (两个所有) policy. This policy mandates that the Party should have final control over "all services and platforms which have the capacity to mobilize public opinion" as well as all "news and information-related business." This move towards stricter oversight explains recent moves by CAC to freeze out foreign and non-approved outlets such as Caixin from publishing within China, and arguably portends a broader effort to close the PRC's media landscape.

In addition to expanding its role as an informational gatekeeper, the Propaganda Department is positioning itself to play a more dynamic part in shaping public opinion and political consciousness within China. This entails integrating new technologies with legacy mechanisms for managing public opinion in order to further enhance the Party's capacity to monitor and respond to shifts in public opinion. The future form of the Party's public opinion work system was outlined in the 2019 *Regulations for Propaganda Work*, which declared that the system should be comprised of a unified media environment which "integrates online and offline platforms as well as domestic and external propaganda work (构建网上网下一体、内宣外宣联动的主流舆论格局) and which "establishes content creation as the foundation [of public opinion work] supported by advanced technology" (建立以内容建设为根本先进技术为支撑). As part of realizing this vision, CPD leadership has pledged to deepen ties between its subordinate propaganda organs and other institutions which are traditionally involved in grassroots work. The fruits of these efforts can be observed in the day-to-day operations of provincial and sub-provincial propaganda departments outlined earlier in this section, which have seen tangible efforts to fund, oversee, and direct expanded operational portfolios in recent years.

In terms of capacity, the propaganda work system is expanding the surveillance capacity of its internal public opinion research bureaus, with an eye towards being able to monitor, analyze, and predict public opinion trends in near-real time. Taken collectively, the propaganda work system's efforts to expand its public opinion work analysis capabilities will provide it with powerful tools to shape public attitudes from the ground-up by enabling it to tailor its messaging to better cater to contemporary attitudes and tastes. Additionally, the example of the system's role in

responding to COVID demonstrates that its public opinion monitoring capabilities play a key role in controlling the prevailing narrative during crisis situations, as well as enabling it to promptly generate counter-messaging strategies to halt the online spread of potentially deleterious information. Lastly, intelligence on public sentiment gathered by the propaganda work system has enormous value for PRC's internal security and law enforcement organs by providing them with increasingly accurate, up-to-date, and targeted data on potential sources and accelerants of unrest and opposition to the regime. This is illustrated by the propaganda work system's efforts to more closely engage in joint work and information sharing with the Ministry of Public Security and its *xitong* through institutions such as provincial Anti-Misinformation and Fraud Centers (反虚假信息诈骗中心).

The reinvigoration of the CPD as the chief organ for overseeing the production of all news, scholarship, and cultural output in China is intended to enable the Party to thoroughly re-monopolize control over China's informational environment to a degree not seen since the pre-reform era. Emphasis on the importance of eliminating "public opinion enclaves" points to the desired end-state: a truly ironclad information environment, in which the only voices able to reach and inform public opinion are those operating as functional extensions of the Party. Accordingly, the CCP going forward will continue actively hindering and eliminating independent and foreign media outlets, while striving to ensure that domestic (and increasingly international) cultural and informational output reflects the Party's ideological outlook and practical needs. Concurrently, integrating at the institutional level the propaganda work system's public opinion monitoring capabilities with the enforcement mechanisms of China's security state points to still more aggressive monitoring and policing of online spaces especially and the public more generally.

GRASSROOTS GO MOBILE

In crafting its strategy for managing the propaganda system, the Party's leadership clearly regards the adoption of online and mobile platforms as central to future grassroots-level propaganda work. In many ways, embracing network platforms as a means of propaganda work marks the culmination of a methodological evolution underway since the conclusion of the 18th Party Congress. Since the internet first came to China in the 1990s, Party leadership has sought to strike a balance between harnessing it as an engine for economic growth while also being on guard to ensure that it did not become a vector for political destabilization. However, In the Xi era, however, the Party has fully recognized the transformative engagement potential offered by internet platforms such as social media and messaging apps, actively seeking to co-opt them into the propaganda work system. As a result, engaging the public online has become, in the words of one Party journal, "the most important task of propaganda and ideological work." Thus, while the Party acknowledges the challenges implicit in conducting effective messaging within China's fractious online landscape, it maintains that it can do so by innovating new systems for news and public opinion work."

In order to retrofit its propaganda work system for the 21st century, the Party has focused on building out a mobile application infrastructure that will enable it to more directly connect with China's citizenry. This "mobile first" (移动优先) strategy reflects a consensus view within the Party that mobile internet is the dominant mechanism for information dissemination within China, and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. As discussed earlier, the flagship platform promoted by the Party is the "Study the Great Nation App" which is designed to encourage the study of Xi Jinping Thought. However, there is also a large and growing ecosystem of more specialized apps such as "Party Member eHome", "Wisely Build the Party," and "Party Member's Little Backpack" which serve as functional tools for Party cadres and members. Additionally, city- and county-level propaganda departments have been tasked with promoting local governance

apps as part of the State Council's "Internet+Government Services" (互联网+政务服务) initiative. These platforms are maintained by local Party Committees, and provide users with a curated news feed, in addition to serving as a connection point for accessing various government services.

Adopting a "mobile-centric" approach offers several key advantages for China's propaganda work system. First, it enables local propaganda departments to connect more frequently and deeply with the general public, without necessitating a commensurate expenditure of resources. Promoting and tracking engagement with mobile propaganda applications provides local departments with a means of fulfilling the Party Center's mandate for increasing grassroots engagement, without necessitating the costly expenditures on staffing that such an effort would otherwise entail. Second, a mobile-based approach to propaganda dissemination has the advantage of cutting out bureaucratic middleman, ensuring that propaganda content consumed by the public comes straight from the Party Center without being muddled by having to pass through the interpretive gaze of local departments. Lastly, adopting the approach of "meeting the people where they are" through mobile applications will enable the Party to develop more compelling and engaging propaganda content. To wit, Party theoreticians have noted that the dynamic nature of online media will enable party organs to move beyond the outmoded "slogan-based, mechanical, and declarative" (口号式、机械式、表态式) methods of propaganda work in favor of a "deep engagement" approach more likely to resonate with the general public. Consequently, future grassroots propaganda work is likely to be more pedagogical in nature as part of an effort to render the often-dry tenets of Marxism-Leninism in terms which are more readily comprehensible to the general population. While the ultimate efficacy of this approach is still to be proven, Party academicians have confidence in its potential to foster increased ideological and institutional 'buy-in' from the Chinese populace, further cementing the Party's command over the civic and political life of China for the foreseeable future.