

How China's Socialist Core Value Propaganda Portrays China as a Serious Society

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Abstract

This paper argues that the goal of China Communist Party's (CCP) "Socialist Core Value" propaganda is to help ingrain the image of a serious, organized and important China into the Chinese mind, and that the details of the CCP's message are less important than the general effect it has on the Chinese psyche. To achieve these ends, Socialist Core Value street propaganda incorporates traditional Chinese themes as opposed to aligning with mainstream popular culture. This essay is based on conclusions drawn from Frederick Crook's 2014-5 collection of "China Dream" photos. It will briefly review the content and purpose of the CCP's message, analyze the historical roots, examine artistic symbols and themes, offer a comparison of street propaganda to other methods of promoting the values, conduct a rough preliminary evaluation of the success of domestic China Dream publicity, and conclude with an evaluation of the significance of the propaganda.

Introduction

The China Dream is President Xi Jinping's vague answer to the question: What does it mean to be Chinese? (Link 25) In President Xi's calculation, the Dream symbolizes China's ambition to realize the full potential of the Chinese people. Announced as part of the 18th People's Congress in 2012, the term represents a selective version of how his predecessors envisioned progress, aiming to unite the Chinese people through this vision and strengthen CCP rule. The ideological core of the Dream is comprised of the Socialist Core Values, a set of 12

qualities that outline the people's relationship with the state. These values are: prosperity (富强), democracy (民主), civility (文明), harmony (和谐), freedom (自由), equality (平等), justice (公正), rule of law (法治), patriotism (爱国), dedication (敬业), integrity (诚信) and friendship (善友). The stated purposes of spreading these values are to advocate greater support for the CCP and increase the morality of the people (冷 2016).

Core Value Propaganda in Chinese Society

The dissemination of ideology is a central focus of CCP rule because as one dictator put it, “the production of souls is much more important than the production of tanks” since without legitimizing rule and guiding popular thought, it is difficult to pursue an agenda and influence behavior (Priestland, 194). The Central Propaganda Department (CPD), under the direction of the Propaganda Small Leading Group, views their role akin to “priests guiding their flock” (Brady 58), acting as a moral leader for the people, not solely as a political influencer. Thus, propaganda,¹ as defined as “the control of opinion by significant symbols, or to speak more accurately by stories, rumors, reports, pictures and other forms of social communication” (Lasswell 627), informs how the CCP maintains control and defines political agendas, moral values and social trends.

The role of the propaganda department in spreading these values is to make the “effect of these values as present as air” (Xi, 2014). Effective propaganda, after all, conceals itself as common sense and hides within the ‘values and accepted power symbols of the given society’, thus becoming as ubiquitous as air itself (O’Shaughnessy 2). Perhaps the most obvious method

¹ It is interesting to note that the word ‘propaganda’ does not exactly have the same negative connotation as it has in English. The Chinese word, 宣传 is understood to also mean the ‘spread of information.’

of propaganda is the prevalence of street posters on roads throughout China, but efforts to achieve this goal also include celebrity endorsements on television, advertisements on shopping websites, questions on the college entrance exam and required readings of books at school such as “100 examples of how to apply the Socialist Core Values.” There is consistency in the way that these values are depicted through official media, and the themes they choose to display them through. The uniform method of disseminating this propaganda combined with the prominence this campaign is taking in Chinese society today calls to attention the importance the CCP attributes to the promulgation of these values.

Historical roots of the Core Socialist Values

The purpose of Core Value propaganda is to “leave behind a sedimentation of common sense (Gow 92),” not to deliver out of touch jargon. Although the rhetoric behind the Chinese Dream and Socialist Core Values often seems longwinded, the Core Values distill the diction into twelve words that have historical roots familiar to the population. This thinking among Party members and leadership was made evident in a study published on the *People’s Daily* website in 2013: at that time, citizens thought the most important element a government should advocate for was equality (46.8%), democracy (43.2%), fairness (39.7%), prosperity (39.2%), and harmony (37.0%)—all Socialist Core Values (“Socialist Core Values are Widely Accepted” 2014). The study concludes that their public awareness mechanisms for the China Dream must be effective since these values are what the China Dream advocates. In this author’s opinion, however, since 2013 was the beginning of the China Dream campaign, these findings simply show that the people’s mindsets and opinions at that time--regarding what a good country is--was already in harmony with what the CCP has conveyed for many years. As such, Xi Jinping crystallized, but

did not create, the Socialist Core Values. They are the product of several generations of work, adjusted to what the current leadership believes the needs of the people are today. They build upon the ideological foundations of Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin's "Three Step Development Strategy" and Hu's "Harmonious Society." Thus, the Core Values are simply a restatement of previously conveyed ideas, emphasizing what the CCP believes should be highlighted in this era.

Confucian Influence

In fact, these characteristics of a good country have roots that extend back to Confucius thought. Thus, the Socialist Core Values are not new, rather, they are a handpicked selection of ancient teachings that the CCP finds applicable to the people today. After all, the concept of "modern nationalism"² did not even emerge until the 19th century. Traditional Chinese texts cover such a wide breadth of information that the Core Values simply select--not summarize--teachings from Confucian classics; the "basket" of teachings is so large it is possible to pick and choose which values to use (Dotson 2). As Chairman Xi explains, "to have a united people and country we must know who we are, where we come from and where we are going. If we analyze all of this *correctly*, we will have a sure direction for future goals (Xi 2014). The sheer volume of propaganda that displays this selective narrative helps a Chinese population, that is not necessarily interested in politics, absorb the CCP's version of history. As such, the CCP presents the image of a strong, powerful and rooted China through their campaign.

The Core Values clearly reflect a Confucius influence in several ways. First, the connection to Confucius teachings is reflected in the structure of the values. The Values are

² As defined as "the individual's loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests." <https://www.britannica.com/topic/nationalism>



The values on the right are national values, the middle are societal values and the left are personal values (Crook 2015).

categorized into improvements on a personal, societal, and national scale (also known as the “Three Advocates”). This echoes the Confucian principle that one must first put his personal life in order. Only then can he put his family, the country and the world in order (修身齐家治国平天下).

Second, the Core Values feature the six Confucian virtues: wisdom, benevolence, faith, righteousness, loyalty and harmony, and the six virtuous actions: filial piety, friendship, kindness charity, honest and respect (Gow 100). While it is certainly quite possible, ordinary citizens

are not acquainted with Confucian theory and would not make this

immediate association, these virtues appeal to ‘common sense’ thinking

as to what constitutes a positive relationship. Perhaps the propaganda helps individuals make the connection between these virtues by coupling the values with traditional images to invoke a feeling that these virtues are associated with China’s past, which includes Confucius.

Furthermore, the values balance the forces of nationalism and harmony. While the CCP is clearly encouraging the rise of ‘love of country’ through its media campaigns and promoting the love of country as the most fundamental and lasting value (金 2016), it also promotes “peaceful development” with other nations as well as increased globalization. Xi Jinping frequently advocates taking the “middle road” (中庸道路), “different but united” development (和而不同) and other Confucius injunctions to remain united despite differences. This type of rhetoric helps prevent extreme nationalism, while simultaneously promoting the degree of nationalism the government wishes the people to have.

Spirit of Lei Feng

In a move that harkens back to the Maoist era, the Socialist Core Values aim to instill the spirit of Lei Feng into the Chinese people (王 2017). The CCP has utilized the image of Lei Feng as an altruistic individual who is the ‘golden standard’ of ethical behavior. In 2011, the 17th CCP Central Committee promoted the permanent implementation of the “learn from Lei Feng” campaign, even declaring March 5th “Learn from Lei Feng” day (China).



Poster reads: “Cultivate the Lei Feng spirit...carry out the China Dream” (传承...)

Throughout the years, propagandists have used the image of Lei Feng to communicate their message: in the 1970s he was the embodiment of having strong (and correct) allegiances to Mao Zedong, in the 1990s he was a hard worker, and in the modern era he represents “social morality and honesty” (CPC 2012). By reusing iconic figures the public is already familiar with, the values become easier to understand. It contributes to the image China is attempting to portray because Lei Feng has become closely associated with morality and loyalty to the party--the embodiment of the ideal attitude people should have towards the party.³

Propaganda Art Portrays China as a Distinctive, Serious Society

The purpose of utilizing traditional art forms is threefold: to emphasize that China is an ancient and mature civilization, as a vehicle to clarify the meaning of the messages, and to convey a

³ The (arguably) overemphasis of Lei Feng has also led to commercial mockery throughout the years. For instance, Lei Feng condoms were produced in 2006. Presumably because of the Lei Feng connection, the government intervened and production was stopped shortly thereafter.

uniquely Chinese image in contrast to Western influences. This is primarily accomplished through traditional artistic mediums, symbols, and themes.

Art Forms

The Core Value propaganda utilizes classical art forms which are used to emphasize that Chinese tradition is distinctive. Based on the collection of propaganda examined for this essay (Crook 2017), classical art forms featured on Core Value propaganda are restricted to paper cuts, wood block prints and Huishan



Example of a China Dream papercut. Also note the red stamp at the lower right hand corner noting this is official China Dream propaganda (Crook 2015).

style clay figurines. These traditions are deeply rooted in Chinese tradition. Paper cuts, for instance, date back over a thousand years, and many of the classical designs still in use were known in the twelfth century (Butcher 5). These art forms are instantly recognizable as uniquely Chinese forms that are usually used to convey messages of peace and prosperity in the workforce.

Symbolism

The propaganda features positive “heuristic or cognitive short cuts” which “express, embroider, simplify or resurrect myths” (O’Shaughnessy 6). The symbols the CCP chooses to feature on the propaganda conditions people to associate Chinese society with continued progress and seriousness. An example which embodies simple symbols would be this poster featuring a man and woman walking on a road lined with budding trees and several purple birds,

balancing apples in a basket, against a red and yellow background and full sun. This contributes to the CCP message for China in several ways. Birds placed in a Northeast direction are a symbol of good luck in fengshui. Apples are a homophone for peace: the “ping” sound in 苹果 (ping guo) sounds like the “ping” sound in 和平 (he ping). Red and purple are colors which indicate good luck, and yellow is known as a



Propaganda illustrating peace and prosperity (Crook 2015).

stabilizing color. This could be taken to mean that good luck comes through peace which stabilizes, or that prosperity and good luck are in China today. While this only focuses on the symbolism behind color and the main objects in the image, one could also examine details of the character’s clothing and their actions. This image conveys the Chinese Dream as a lucky omen for the Chinese people: one that will bring peace and prosperity.

There are also symbols of longevity, reliability and peace found within the propaganda, perhaps suggesting “long life” for the CCP. Commonly found symbols include peonies which represent nobility and endurance. Other symbols include butterflies which symbolize long life, along with cocks which are not to be killed lest bad luck comes upon the killer during the tomb sweeping festival (Williams 103). By using such symbols, the propagandists may be implying that the future of the CCP is bright and auspicious because each of these symbols have positive associations and bad luck could come upon any who disturb the existing order.

On a more individual level, a central focus of Confucian teachings is that people should know what their place is in society and act according to the social constraints of that role. Thus, the images portrayed also define the role of the citizen as a submissive and moral individual. This is shown through images that demonstrate filial piety, including images of willow and

bamboo. A scene in one propaganda clip features students and a teacher under a willow tree (Youtube 2015). In traditional culture, willow trees represent humility, perhaps indicating that citizens should adopt an attitude of humility to their leaders (Williams 85). Bamboo is another prominent theme in posters extolling the virtues of filial piety. This iconic Chinese plant is one



Students and a teacher under a willow tree (Youtube 2017)

of the 24 classical examples of submitting to your elders: the story is told of a sick mother who longed for bamboo shoot soup in the winter. Her son wept so copiously on her account in a bamboo plantation that his tears softened the hard, wintry ground. As a reward for his pious affection, the tender bamboo shoots burst forth. This story demonstrates how filial piety is not only a great virtue, but that it is rewarded by nature, or a greater power. By drawing upon this story, perhaps the CCP is conveying that subservience to the party will result in rewards in life. Thus, bamboo is not only a uniquely Chinese plant but also suggests positive results from filial piety, if only subconsciously (Zhao 1985).

One could argue these symbols are used because they are typically prominently featured in Chinese art for aesthetic reasons or are stylistic choices. For instance, the choice of purple birds in the abovementioned apple example could simply be a designer's choice to form a contrast to the red and yellow background. However, symbols that do not portray the CCP's core message are clearly excluded—icons that represent fertility and money such as pomegranates and coins, for instance, are not found. Thus, the simplicity of the propaganda designs and the selective images indicate that they were chosen for their symbolic meaning, not only for their aesthetic qualities.

Unifying Factor

By utilizing common Chinese art forms, the propaganda department promotes unification because these styles are nationally recognized as being uniquely Chinese. For instance, the company that created the clay figurines for the campaign became an “intangible cultural heritage of China” in 2006. While the company is based in Tianjin, the iconic “China Dream doll” has a silhouette that resembles a good luck charm (da a fu). This charm is used by Chinese people both on the mainland and overseas and is produced using Huishan pottery techniques (China). Relating the China Dream to this ubiquitous symbol of good luck implies that the Core Values are also a symbol of unity and positivity.⁴ As such, with fifty-six minority groups and a population that represents diverse interests and goals, the use of these recognizable artistic mediums indicates that China is united despite these differences.



The China Dream doll in a poster advocating for morals (Crook 2014).

Rural themes also serve as a unifying factor because they target those with agricultural connections and highlight values that are often attributed to the hardworking lifestyle of farmers. These themes have been used for several decades in Chinese propaganda. Traditionally, this may have been

because a large majority of the Chinese population lived in the countryside, and these themes would have been highly relatable. As urbanization has swept over the country, however, featuring rural themes in city propaganda invokes feelings of longing for family still living in the countryside or the idea of a more simplistic lifestyle. This could also be an appeal to the older

⁴ It is interesting to note the China Dream doll was not designed specifically for this campaign—it was found by a propaganda official who found it on a display cabinet. The official said it reminded him of “longing and hope” (Johnson 2015).

generation—online advertisements are able to target the younger population—but street propaganda is the most accessible form of mass media to those not accustomed to frequent internet access. Rural themes could also be a reference to Premier Xi’s time as a youth spent in the countryside (上山下乡) where, according to his autobiography, he learned valuable lessons about hard work, serving others, and effective leadership (Xi 2012). In fact, Premier Xi has called on artists to avoid being “slaves” to the market. The media regulator also recently called upon artists to “form a correct view of art” by spending time in the countryside (The art...2014). This romanticized portrayal of life in the countryside alongside the values often attributed to farmers helps to serve as a unifying factor because urban life is a theme that Chinese families have a relationship with and all Chinese are called upon to develop the types of virtues that a rural lifestyle supposedly supports.



There are also a variety of posters that display iconic Chinese architecture and skylines which demonstrate the progress that China has made. Notably, this type of propaganda lacks the official ‘China Dream’ stamp and is produced on a municipal level instead of a national scale. While this distinction could raise the question of whether the goals of propaganda on the municipal level are the same as the nationwide posters—displaying images of a city has several implications. Looking towards the past at images of ancient wonders from Chinese history, such as the pagoda towers in the image above, invokes a sense of heritage pride. Looking towards the future, images of the modern city show the progress that China has made in the last 30 years or so and implies that China will continue to develop. By

Poster produced by the Taiyuan City featuring pagodas and the Core Values (Crook 2014).

providing more localized examples of what progress in China has been accomplished, it helps relate the Dream and Values to individual lives.

Using uniquely Chinese images and artistic techniques is a way to present China as an independent and developed entity and thus combat potentially Western interpretations of the Core Values. Ideologically, China has always viewed Western defined principles of freedom, democracy and equality with suspicion. As the *People's Daily* reports, the West feigns concern for China's human rights and freedom issues, seeking to mold China to its own values. Furthermore, China has its own value system which are the enemy to Western values, and just because the West technologically developed first, it does not mean their ideas (or their definitions of concepts supposedly originally introduced by Confucius) are superior (Wang 2012). Undoubtedly, the Core Values translated into English include the seemingly Western concepts of 'democracy' and 'equality.' In Chinese thinking, however, this is based upon Mencius's maxim that 'the people are the most important element in a nation; the spirits of the land and grain are the next; the sovereign is the lightest' (Mencius). However, so-called "democracy" is defined differently in China. This point is made by using artistic techniques that harken back to the days of Chinese superiority in the world order, reminding the people that once they were the most powerful and that the China Dream will help them become so again.

Other Methods of Promoting the Core Values

To fully penetrate the thinking of Chinese people and convey the intended image of China, propaganda must come from every angle and in every form. While this paper focuses on Core Value street propaganda, this section roughly outlines other forms of soft power currently in use to highlight how the purpose of the Core Value propaganda is to completely influence the

Chinese mind. While the topics of these promotions vary, nationalism is always at the core of their message—thus circling back to the Core Values.

In comparison to the traditional Socialist Core Value propaganda, the propaganda discussed below is decidedly higher tech, often more lighthearted in nature, and more direct in its message. It also does not necessarily come as the direct product of the CPD. One example of this is China’s recent film “Wolf Warrior II” (战狼 2). The central message of China’s highest grossing film is: “Anyone who offends/attacks/invades⁵ China will be killed no matter what it takes” (犯我中华者，虽远必诛)—a tagline decidedly in line with the national level Core Values of “prosperous and strong” (富强) and nationalism “爱国” (Times 2017). While the movie was not the direct product of the Propaganda department and was even advised by American filmmakers (“the co-directors...” 2017), it was undoubtedly approved by the CPD and its action scenes reach a section of the population that perhaps would be less inclined to pay attention to high art displayed on street posters.

As a generalization, the most pointed messages are featured in cartoons and short videos. For instance, the CCP is cracking down on foreign spy activity within the country. Warnings to the public regarding these issues are found in cute cartoon strips featuring gullible or unsuspecting youth who fall in love with foreigners who ultimately abuse the relationship (AP 2016). Another short video shows what children should do if they catch someone stealing secrets for foreign spies (Zhou 2017). There is also a plethora of other propaganda such as smartphone apps that allow users to have ‘clapping’ competitions for Xi Jinping (Zhong 2017). The use of these mediums show that factors that display Core Values are not limited to street propaganda

⁵ There seems to be some dispute as to what the exact translation is, but the purpose of the translation is to show that this is a highly China-centric message.

but influence all types of modern mediums and entertainment. This prevalence of these ideas in modern culture increases the possibility that people will absorb these messages.

Effectiveness of the Core Value Propaganda

Perhaps it is impossible in this paper to evaluate the effectiveness of the propaganda. Rather, it is possible to examine general trends that could have been influenced by this campaign. There are several primary challenges to measuring the success of Core Value and China Dream propaganda. First, there are many factors that influence public opinion other than the narrow slice of propaganda examined in this essay. Second, it is hard to gather empirical evidence to evaluate an increase in qualities as defined by the CCP such as “friendliness” or “honesty,” and there seems to be a significant lack of objective studies on the increase of nationalism in China since the 2012 period. This statement in itself raises several questions such as: Does 爱国 translate into patriotism or nationalism? How do you measure nationalism and is this more important than examining a national identity? What does it mean to be nationalistic in China? Third, how does the CCP define ‘success’ in propaganda, how does that compare to a Western perspective, and is this distinction important? Is the call for a ‘moral’ society central to the CCP’s core purpose, and to what extent is nationalism with morality simply incorporated to dilute the political potency of the message? Lastly, the transient nature of political slogans through the years makes it difficult to measure how much people’s thinking is influenced by current propaganda in relation to previous slogans.

While this author could not find reliable sources to cite an increase of nationalism within China, there are numerous examples of when Chinese people fiercely defended the Chinese image in accordance with these principles in context of China’s relations with other countries.

These instances include backlash over the 2006 MIT “Visualizing Cultures” exhibition that featured Japanese art with imperialistic themes as well as a strong reaction to a speech by a Chinese student at the University of Maryland praising freedom of speech (Zhen 2014). More recently, there are strong nationalistic reactions regarding the Diaoyu island conflict and attitudes towards territorial disputes in the South China Sea. These outward manifestations of nationalistic tendencies points towards a strongly patriotic country, at least in relation to other nations.

From one perspective, the Core Values propaganda and its ideological predecessors are successful because they have had a strong but subtle effect on Chinese thinking. This was succinctly summarized by a middle aged, non-party mother:

“I think the China Dream means I own a house and car and have a good job. I don’t know what the Core Values are exactly, though. That sounds like something you would ask on an exam...I love my country though. China is starting to become strong and prosperous (*fuqiang*)” (Quan 2017).

While this is a single example, it illustrates how even someone who is politically passive has absorbed messages from the campaign without realizing it. Perhaps this is the hallmark of successful propaganda: one that molds thoughts in accordance with people’s conscience without the appearance of a political message. As Zhan Jiang from Beijing Foreign Studies University put it, “it is hard to see the political language and propaganda in [the Core Value posters]...it feels more like a campaign on morality and social conscience, which is easier for ordinary people to accept (Johnson 2015). Values such as filial piety and friendship may resonate more with the people because they do not feel like a political campaign. From this perspective, the campaign has been successful. Even if the population has not absorbed the message in its entirety, it has affected people’s perception of their country.

Conclusions: Why does examining this propaganda matter?

As future leaders redefine the identity of China and its future goals, the role of the individual citizen will also continue to evolve. Thus, analyzing China Dream propaganda offers a window into the goals of the CCP during President Xi's time in office (2012-). Regardless of how receptive the Chinese people are to street posters promoting the Core Values, examining propaganda is important because it demonstrates how the CCP wants China to be portrayed and who it wants its citizens to be. While there are a variety of technical analyses in the *People's Daily* about the meaning and application of the Core Values that we could examine, these do not necessarily reach or speak to ordinary citizens. The content and techniques of the large volume of street propaganda throughout rural and urban areas demonstrates what the CCP believes is the most important to portray. As people are exposed to this street propaganda many times throughout their daily routine, it would seem nearly impossible to ignore the message: China is a serious, organized and important country with patriotic citizens. As such, the CCP fully understands that the more exposure and attention something gets, the more it becomes a part of unconscious reality.

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- Yi ge min zu、一个国家，必须知道自己是谁，是从哪里来的，要到哪里去，想明白了、想对了，就要坚定不移朝着目标前进。“习近平：青年要自觉践行社会主义核心价值观--在北京大学师生座谈会上的讲话。”习近平：青年要自觉践行社会主义核心价值观--在北京大学师生座谈会上的讲话-新华网, 5 May 2014,
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