

Book Review

The Making of a Neo-Propaganda State: China's Social Media under Xi Jinping.

Chen, Titus. Leiden: Brill. 2022. 226 pp. 978-90-04-51937-4. E-book.

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Propaganda is of paramount importance in the governance of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Its power, quantity, and variety have enticed generations of researchers. But the propaganda itself has not always been their object of study. Instead, the focus has been on analysing the policies, tools, and systems around propaganda—a trend seen in the major works of recent decades (Lynch, 1999; Brady, 2008 and 2012). However, overlooking content means that we cannot understand exactly how propaganda promotes its intended messages. Titus C. Chen's timely and welcome book, *The Making of a Neo-Propaganda State: China's Social Media under Xi Jinping*, is an attempt to do just that.

This study opens with the following question, implicitly addressing the People's Republic of China (PRC): "Why do some authoritarian governments retain popular support without directly enforcing their policy preferences on citizens?" (p. 1) Chen proceeds to answer the question over six chapters. The first three use official statements and documents to describe how reform-era developments turned the PRC into a "post-propaganda state" (p. 19); how the Xi administration has regained control; and how official media have adapted to this new control. The other three chapters comprise case studies of these latter two developments. In the case studies, Chen uses text data from WeChat posts of both official and pro-regime media to analyse homogeneity in content and sen-

timent, propaganda as diplomatic signalling, and disinformation used against Hong Kong democracy movements.

In answering his question, Chen demonstrates something oft claimed, but rarely proven: that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Xi attaches great importance to propaganda, not only in wielding such "control measures" (p. 29) as censorship, but also in creating and distributing masses of content. Chen argues that it is the active propagation of pro-regime content that can lead to "bestowal of popular consent to authoritarian rule" (ibid). He shows that propagandists in the contemporary PRC have adapted by becoming "marketized", by matching "editorial policies, narrative styles, and marketing strategies as closely as possible with the taste and preferences of [their] target audiences" (p. 23), without necessarily becoming "commercialized"—that is, they remain under the direct or indirect control of the CCP. The case studies lead Chen to conclude that the CCP pursues a "market-driven, audience-friendly, and emotion-laden discursive strategy", with "framing techniques of enticement and acculturation rather than intimidation and indoctrination" (p. 180), amounting to what Chen calls "soft content" (p. 6).

This short book punches above its weight, simultaneously fitting in with the extant literature and widening the field. Chen gives due recognition to important prior research—for example, the works of Daniel C. Lynch, Anne-Marie Brady, Zhao

Yuezhi, Daniela Stockmann, Florian Schneider, and the team of Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts—and, in the early chapters, shows that he too can provide an accomplished description of the CCP propaganda system. However, the book’s greatest asset is the case studies of the later chapters. Here, Chen delivers quantitative analyses of varying complexity (the more complex including sentiment analyses, topic modelling, and tone analyses), while using clear prose and well-deployed graphs to appeal to a wide range of readers. Thus, with both accessibility and rigour, *The Making of a Neo-Propaganda State* forges new paths in the study of CCP propaganda.

The book’s weaknesses are few and consist mostly of surprising oversights. Minor examples include when the case studies stop short of addressing obviously relevant matters. For example, in the chapter on online thought work as diplomatic signalling, foreign-language propaganda on PRC-external social media is not included in the analysis. However, a more striking and serious problem is that Chen gives no room for reflection on some important concepts. The term “neo-propaganda state” is left completely unexplained, and there is almost no theoretical discussion of the concept of “propaganda”. Given the word’s connotations, and its complicated relationship with its Chinese counterpart, *xuanchuan*, 宣传 this is a remarkable omission. Space could easily have been found for such discussions, which would have raised the quality of the book even further.

However, these weaknesses hardly spoil the significant achievements of *The Making of a Neo-Propaganda State*. Chen’s book is a must-read for anybody interested in propaganda in the contemporary PRC. It is a pioneering work, and a contender to become a classic.

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