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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# "Propaganda State 2.0" in China

Rongbin Han

Department of International Affairs, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA
Email: hanr@uga.edu

**Abstract**

By observing China's domestic media landscape and state policies during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper proposes the concept of "propaganda state 2.0" as a framework for exploring autocratic state propaganda from a holistic perspective. It contends that state propaganda in China remains an agitprop apparatus deeply embedded in the totality of the authoritarian regime, which it both serves and is served by. This system performs both conventional persuasion and indoctrination functions, as well as fulfilling the now underestimated mission of agitation, which can enhance the credibility of propaganda messages. This framework emphasizes the legacies of China's past "propaganda state" and effectively explains how the party-state transformed the pandemic into opportunities to win popular support, and how this resulted in a debacle. Theoretically, the article highlights how state propaganda in contemporary China can shape, if not dictate, state policy, while serving as a more organic framework that bridges the "hard" and "soft" propaganda literatures.

**摘要**

通过观察新冠疫情期间中国国内媒体领域及相关政策, 本文提出"宣传国家 2.0" 作为一个概念框架, 从整体的角度来探讨中国的国家宣传。它认为, 中国的宣传系统依然是一种深深嵌入整体中的宣传鼓动机器, 因此不仅服务于政权, 也为政权所服务, 并且它既能执行传统的劝导和宣传功能, 也遂行如今被低估的动员使命, 而后者能够被用于增强宣传信息的可信度。这个概念框架强调了中国过去"宣传国家" 的遗产, 并很好地解释了国家是如何将疫情转变为赢得公众支持的机会, 但最终又导致了其疫情政策的失败。从理论上讲, 本文强调当代中国的国家宣传如何在某种程度上能够塑造(若非主导)国家政策。同时, 作为理论框架, "宣传国家 2.0" 也可以更有机地桥接既有的 "硬宣传" 与 "软宣传" 相关文献。

**Keywords:** agitprop; agitation; China; mass persuasion; propaganda state 2.0

**关键词:** 宣传鼓动; 鼓动; 中国; 大众说服; 宣传国家2.0

Owing to fundamental transformations in the media environment, the Chinese state today faces a propaganda crisis, as its messages, distributed through state-run media, are becoming less credible, less attractive and less persuasive in the eyes of citizens. Existing studies suggest that the state is aware of this crisis and has implemented measures in response. However, scholars present different, if not conflicting, arguments about the motives and effectiveness of the state propaganda in contemporary China. These viewpoints can be roughly divided into two camps, namely "hard propaganda" versus "soft propaganda." Proponents of the "hard propaganda" viewpoint suggest that the state may not care about citizens' trust at all; they contend instead that rather than aiming at indoctrination and persuasion, propaganda functions effectively to signal the state's power and thus deter citizens from

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mobilizing.[1] In contrast, those of the "soft propaganda" camp argue that the state still intends to indoctrinate and persuade and has embraced many innovative tactics to better package propaganda messages so as to increase their appeal and credibility.

The debate is inspiring but not quite conclusive. If the state intends to signal its strength rather than persuade, why has it adopted innovative and softer propaganda tactics? Conversely, if the state is focusing on persuasion, why has hard propaganda persisted, if not prevailed? Moreover, while many empirical studies demonstrate the ineffectiveness of state propaganda, with some even arguing that any connection to the government is an instant turn-off,[2] why can state propaganda sometimes appear effective, and why do Chinese citizens still demonstrate high levels of trust in the media and the regime?[3]

To engage with the discussion and address these puzzles, this article approaches state propaganda in China from a holistic perspective, situating it within the totality of authoritarian governance. Highlighting its "propaganda state" legacies, I contend that China's state propaganda should be viewed as an agitprop apparatus which is deeply embedded in the authoritarian system that it simultaneously serves and is served by. It performs conventional persuasion and indoctrination functions, while also undertaking the now underestimated mission of agitation, which can help to enhance the validity and credibility of its propaganda messages. This "propaganda state 2.0" framework contributes to the literature empirically and theoretically. Empirically, it explains how the Chinese state transformed crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic into opportunities to garner popular support and why zero-COVID ultimately ended up as a propaganda and governance fiasco. Theoretically, the article highlights the mobilization tradition of state propaganda in China, revealing how it can shape, if not dictate, state policy in the contemporary era. It also engages with the debate on hard versus soft propaganda, providing a more wholesome and perhaps more organic understanding of authoritarian propaganda in the Chinese context.

## State Propaganda in China

The state propaganda of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has evolved in multiple ways. During the Maoist era, China featured a propaganda state in which the propaganda apparatus primarily served indoctrination and agitation roles. The state monopolized mass media to control citizens' thoughts, to shape public opinion and to mobilize the masses for its goals.[4] In the reform (and the post-reform Xi) era,[5] the Chinese media sphere has become increasingly contested owing to trends such as media commercialization and the expansion of digital media,[6] which have enabled more critical reporting and freer expression.[7] Consequently, it has become increasingly important for the state to suppress deviating information[8] while simultaneously enhancing its "mass persuasion" capabilities.[9]

However, the state faces two major challenges. First, how should it package and deliver its propaganda messages to ensure that they reach their intended audience in the drastically changed information environment? Second, how can it improve the credibility and persuasiveness of its propaganda? Fundamental transformations in China's media environment, such as the commercialization of the media sector and the expansion of digital media, have cultivated consumerist and

1 Huang 2015; 2018.
2 Tong and Lei 2013.
3 Xu, Jie 2013.
4 Brady 2008; Shambaugh 2007. Chinese state media are also "information-gathering institutions," as Martin Dimitrov (2022) nicely shows.
5 Minzner 2015.
6 Stockmann 2013; Brady 2008; Yang, Guobin 2009; Han, Rongbin 2018.
7 Bandurski and Hala 2010; Hassid 2015; Repnikova 2017b; Shirk 2011; Chan 2002.
8 Roberts 2018; King, Pan and Roberts 2013.
9 Brady 2008.

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often subaltern tastes for information, rendering outlandish old-fashioned propaganda less attractive. Why would the average citizen, who is exposed to entertainment, sports and hobbies, as well as more diverse political sources, read *People's Daily* reports or editorials filled with propaganda clichés? This explains why the state has reached out to citizens via social media, embraced softer, Western-style publicity methods and sought to envelop its ideological constructs in popular digital culture.[10]

State propaganda also faces an even greater challenge: a credibility crisis. While media commercialization and digitalization trends could benefit the regime in some ways,[11] they undermine the state's monopoly on information by providing Chinese citizens with more diverse and often critical sources. The expansion of digital technologies is particularly threatening, as "a state accustomed to having a monopoly on public speech" now has "to account for anomalies between its view of events and the public's."[12] Such discrepancies in perceptions between the state and citizens erode the credibility of state propaganda. Indeed, studies show that Chinese netizens are more politically opinionated, more critical of the party-state and more willing to engage in collective action than traditional media users.[13]

How has the state responded to this credibility crisis? Some argue that it is not an issue: the focus of propaganda today is not to persuade or indoctrinate but to prevent social instability. Therefore, while "crude and heavy-handed" hard propaganda often backfires, it effectively signals the state's power, deterring citizens from engaging in collective mobilization.[14] In this regard, the credibility of the messages themselves is no longer that important. This reasoning echoes studies that emphasize how much effort the Chinese state has put into stability maintenance online and offline.[15]

However, while the hard propaganda argument makes sense, it is difficult to believe that the state does not intend to persuade at all. Relying on coercion is costly and provides only short-term solutions, while persuasion, when done properly, can achieve longer-term, more effective and less costly control. Studies show that the state is still motivated to preserve its legitimacy[16] and has embraced innovative soft propaganda tactics,[17] such as hiding propaganda traces,[18] mobilizing symbolic resources for "cultural governance"[19] and instrumentalizing public compassion through "moral performance."[20] According to Clyde Yicheng Wang, the propaganda system strives to construct a "pseudo-environment" or "pseudo-reality."[21] These studies suggest that the state intends to make state propaganda more appealing.

This inconclusive debate poses two related puzzles. The first centres on the theoretical engagements between hard and soft propaganda, which disagree in terms of whether the Chinese state still cares about making propaganda more credible and persuasive. The second puzzle is the paradox of high levels of trust in the state media and the government, despite many studies showing that state propaganda, especially hard propaganda, is ineffective. The sections that follow attempt to address the puzzles by proposing a novel theoretical framework that understands contemporary Chinese state propaganda as an agitprop apparatus that performs both persuasion and agitation functions. This "propaganda state 2.0" framework, I argue, provides a more organic and wholesome view of

10 Lagerkvist 2008; Schlæger and Jiang 2014; Esarey 2015; Brady 2008; 2009; Repnikova 2017a.
11 Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Lorentzen 2014.
12 Shirky 2011, 36.
13 Lei 2011.
14 Huang 2015; 2018.
15 Wang, Yuhua, and Minzner 2015; King, Pan and Roberts 2013.
16 Lorentzen 2014.
17 Mattingly and Yao 2022.
18 Han, Rongbin 2015; King, Pan and Roberts 2017; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011.
19 Perry 2017.
20 Xu, Bin 2012; 2016.
21 Wang, Clyde Yicheng 2024.

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state propaganda motives, behaviour and effects, highlighting, among other things, how contemporary Chinese state propaganda may shape socio-economic and political realities, which in turn improve the credibility of propaganda messages.

## Conceptualizing "Propaganda State 2.0"

The framework of "propaganda state 2.0" revitalizes the "propaganda state" concept that characterized the Soviet Union and Maoist China to better understand state propaganda in China today. In a nutshell, the framework highlights that: (1) the propaganda system is integrated with authoritarian governance - it is impossible to study state propaganda without a holistic understanding of the Chinese political system, and vice versa;[22] (2) propaganda in China has an agitprop tradition, aiming at both indoctrinating and persuading citizens (conventionally perceived propaganda functions today) and agitation (to mobilize).[23] As Jean-Marie Domenach puts it, Leninist propaganda has two fundamental forms, namely "political revelations" and "slogans," with the former focusing on indoctrination and the latter on agitation by prescribing the correct revolutionary objectives and tactics.[24] Historians like Matthew Lenoe and David Priestland have also made distinctions between the "enlightenment" and "mobilization" functions of Soviet propaganda.[25] In fact, Peter Kenez has devised the concept of "propaganda state," which features reliance on indoctrination in forming the state and executing policy, with ideology occupying a central position.[26]

Building on these studies, "propaganda state 2.0" puts propaganda back within the totality, reminding us of the agitprop tradition of the Chinese regime. This totality, while not mounting to totalitarianism (yet),[27] suggests that propaganda is an indispensable component of the regime. Although it is fragmented in many senses,[28] it still exhibits the holistic attributes of a Leninist party-state.[29] Indeed, while the regime and its media system have been transformed in the reform era, they both continue to bear their communist legacies (which have been somewhat revived under Xi).[30] In particular, state propaganda remains a highly centralized system under the Party, serving both indoctrination/persuasion and agitation purposes. This continuity is seen in how the Maoist "mass campaign" has been retained and reconfigured to fit the "managed campaigns" of the reform era.[31]

Of course, "propaganda state 2.0" differs from the Soviet or Maoist style of "propaganda state" in nuanced yet important ways. First, while the "propaganda state" was intrinsically defined by the all-encompassing ideology of communism[32] and aimed to convert people's belief systems ("making the New Soviet Man"[33] or "acculturating the masses"[34]) and mobilize them to join state campaigns, contemporary propaganda is largely devoid of this ideological motive, following more of a "performative state" logic. This is because communism, as an ideology, has lost its appeal among the public – and even within the Party – and the state's physical and ideational control over its citizens

22 Brady 2008.
23 This depiction is useful but necessarily oversimplified. For instance, Chua (2023) finds that the Mao-era press was also used in political and ideological struggles.
24 Domenach 1951.
25 Lenoe 2009; Priestland 2007.
26 Kenez 2009. Also see Brandenberger 2012; Cheek 2016.
27 Kenez 2009.
28 Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Mertha 2009.
29 Farley and Johnson 2020.
30 See Cheek 2021.
31 Perry 2011.
32 Kenez 2009, 10.
33 Lenoe 2009.
34 Hoffman 2018.

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has significantly weakened. Therefore, state propaganda now emphasizes persuasion over indoctrination,[35] and its persuasion efforts focus more on performance than on ideological appeal,[36] as it has largely given up on ideological legitimacy and relies instead on performance legitimacy. These changes require state propaganda to align more closely with the reality perceived by citizens, which I will elaborate on further below.

Second, state propaganda remains an agitprop machine, but the nature of its agitation has altered due to the absence of the all-encompassing communist ideology, as discussed above, and changed state–society relations. In particular, while Chinese citizens are still subject to state mobilization, Maoist "mass campaigns" have been replaced by "managed campaigns," whose frequency, scale and degree of mobilization are not comparable.[37] This has made Chinese citizens more spectators of state performance rather than targets of agitation, although that does not mean they are completely immune from it. Moreover, recent studies show that propaganda now serves internal mobilization purposes, with the upper levels trying to enhance bureaucratic control by allowing critical reporting,[38] and local officials using media to signal their competence and loyalty.[39] Overall, this renders the bureaucratic system a target of propaganda agitation.

Third, by emphasizing how deeply embedded propaganda is within the authoritarian regime, the concept of "propaganda state 2.0" also underlines how propaganda itself can benefit from the totality of the regime. Given that the state prioritizes remaining in power over ideologically preaching to and mobilizing citizens, propaganda needs to be more persuasive and credible. For that purpose, unlike agitation under Mao – which typically involved mobilizing propaganda to achieve ideological or policy goals – the state now mobilizes itself for the purpose of persuasion, often by emphasizing its performance. This implies that propaganda can, to some extent, influence the state's policy agenda and policy choices.

In sum, "propaganda state 2.0" can be understood as a modern variant of the "propaganda state," as it remains embedded in the totality of the regime and retains its agitprop traditions. However, unlike the "propaganda state" built on the communist ideology, which drove both indoctrination and agitation, "propaganda state 2.0" follows a performance legitimacy logic and therefore functions differently in important ways. First, rather than indoctrinating citizens ideologically, it aims to persuade citizens by following a practical and non-ideological logic of "seeing is believing" with the state's governance performance. Second, given this performance legitimacy logic, agitation is now more targeted at state agents (goading them to achieve performance goals) than at citizens, who have become more spectators of state performance. It is in this context that I discuss state propaganda in today's China.

As discussed above, a major reason behind today's state propaganda credibility crisis is that propaganda is often divorced from citizens' perception of reality (hereafter "reality" for the sake of parsimony). What options does the state have? It may choose to ignore reality and tell its citizens to "reject the evidence of your eyes and ears" and align their beliefs with propaganda.[40] However, this approach did not even work under the Soviet propaganda state, which failed to mobilize society along communist lines.[41] Given the fading appeal of communism and the fact that citizens have alternative information sources, this kind of hard propaganda (which ignores "reality") may help to preserve stability by signalling the state's strength, but it is even less effective in persuasion today.

35 Brady 2009.

36 Dickson et al. 2016; Holbig and Gilley 2010; Yang, Hongxing, and Zhao 2015. This is not to dismiss the importance of ideology. Rather, it highlights that China today is ideationally more pluralized and overall less ideological.

37 Perry 2011, 31.

38 Chen 2020; Repnikova 2017b.

39 Yu 2023; Zeng 2023.

40 Orwell 2009[1949].

41 Brandenberger 2012.

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The state may choose to align propaganda faithfully with reality and be responsive to the public.[42] This, however, entails relinquishing informational and ideological control, making it less than ideal. A more viable option is to embrace soft propaganda by packaging and delivering propaganda messages more skilfully to make them *appear* to better reflect reality. Such tactics are often deceptive in nature. For example, the "fifty-cent army" hides its connection to the government;[43] ideotainment disguises state ideological constructs with popular culture;[44] and remote control disperses propaganda messages through marketized media.[45]

The "propaganda state 2.0" framework prescribes a third option – shaping reality to validate propaganda. Rather than ignoring reality or making propaganda *appear* in congruence with reality, the state may, through concrete policy activities, transform reality to fit its propaganda agenda, rendering the latter more credible. Note that although I suggest that it can be strategized to make propaganda more effective, the conceptual framework is more than a propaganda strategy.

Admittedly, the discussion here is overly simplified. For instance, reality and perceptions of reality are different and both can be influenced by many factors, including propaganda. Given the limited space, I cannot discuss the nuanced differences between the two in detail, but the basic rationale is straightforward. Borrowing Walter Lippmann's metaphor of media being a flashlight in a dark attic,[46] if the attic is such a mess that even a good flashlight (state propaganda) cannot beautify it (creating a "pseudo-environment" or "pseudo-reality"), the state can tidy it up, making it look good with any flashlight.[47]

Evidently, the reasoning assumes that the state has the intention and capacity to shape "reality," which is the case in contemporary China. As discussed above, propaganda in China traditionally has the agitation function that ultimately aims to change the physical world. When the regime shifts to performance legitimacy, showcasing its achievements is essential. In President Xi Jinping's 习近平 words, the Party needs to "manifest the power of faith through actions."[48] Therefore, state propaganda today often highlights "real actions" (*shigan* 实干), "real effects" (*shixiao* 实效) and "living up to one's promises" (*shuodao zuodao* 说道做到) to "gain the trust of the people" (*quxin yumin* 取信于民).[49] Evidently, when the state delivers, propaganda gains credibility. This "performative" logic, among other complicated implications, suggests that the state has an impetus to direct public attention to where it can deliver.[50] This logic, given the totality and agitprop legacies of state propaganda, may even turn "propaganda state 2.0" into a legitimation strategy: the state may make a promise (through state media), fulfil it (through agitation), and then claim performance credit and propaganda credibility. The process can be soft and skilful, or blunt and crude; in either case, the state can persuade because "actions speak louder than words."

## The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Case Study

The interaction between state policies and propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a heuristic case of "propaganda state 2.0." The government's initial mishandling of the virus invited widespread criticism, putting its propaganda in a disadvantaged position. But the state managed

42 Jin 2023.
43 Han, Rongbin 2015.
44 Lagerkvist 2008.
45 Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Repnikova 2017b.
46 Williams and Carpini Delli 2011, 47.
47 Wang, Clyde Yicheng 2024. Note that while both are about creating a "pseudo-reality" in a sense, "propaganda state 2.0" highlights the change of reality through agitation, while Wang emphasizes more the altering of the "perception of reality" through indoctrination and persuasion.
48 Er 2016.
49 *The People's Daily* ran a whole page on 2 January 2024 under the headline, "Promote development through concrete actions to win the people's trust."
50 Ding 2022.

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to quickly reposition itself in the propaganda war, reportedly winning over the citizens just a few months into the pandemic.[51] This clearly was not the result of a dramatic improvement in propaganda skills, or the "rally-round-the-flag effect" of nationalism.[52] Rather, it was because the state showed the public its ability to handle the crisis and get things done, substantiating its core propaganda claims that it represents the best interests of the people. In other words, the state reshaped reality, thus exemplifying "propaganda state 2.0." The "totality" reasoning explains why the state set such a rigid and highly symbolic goal of "zero COVID" and was willing to pay the huge social and economic costs to achieve it. It also prevented the state from adapting promptly enough to a changed reality, as citizens grew weary of restrictions and the rest of the world gradually opened up, ultimately leading to a propaganda and policy fiasco.

### *Making the promise: the Party representing people's interests*

State propaganda has long depicted the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a vanguard force, with its members serving as exemplars for its citizens. "Serving the people" (*wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务) is not merely a slogan from the Maoist era but the central theme of today's official propaganda. After all, one of President Jiang Zemin's 江泽民 "three represents" was that the CCP must represent the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people. Additionally, President Xi has been reiterating the Party's original aspiration (*chuxin* 初心) and mission (*shiming* 使命).

How the state media portrayed Xi during the COVID-19 pandemic is very telling. Initially, Xi was criticized by many for not even mentioning the pandemic in his Chinese New Year's Speech on 24 January 2020, even though the epicentre, Wuhan, had already announced a lockdown. Moreover, he did not visit Wuhan until 10 March. But then during a meeting with WHO director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, on 28 January, Xi explicitly stated: "I have been personally dictating and deploying [pandemic control]." This was a risky statement for Xi to make, as it meant he would have to personally assume full responsibility. Was that an accident? Probably not because it was frequently reiterated in state media. According to an article published on 6 February on the CCP news site:

> Since the outbreak of this epidemic … General Secretary Xi Jinping has personally deployed and directed [the battle against the virus], held many meetings, listened to reports and issued important instructions, requiring Party committees, governments and relevant departments at all levels to formulate careful plans and organize all parties to strengthen the prevention and control over the epidemic.[53]

Why was Xi's personal commitment highlighted so much? It is unclear whether this was due to Xi himself or if the propaganda system was trying to please him. But by allowing state media to emphasize his commitment, Xi put his own reputation at risk, especially given that, at that time, there was no clear indication that the epidemic would be brought under control soon and failure to do so could have cost him dearly. This approach seems somewhat irrational from a conventional perspective, as he did not need to make such a gesture.[54] It would have been safer to have the-then premier, Li Keqiang 李克强, who was also head of the Central Leadership Group for Epidemic Response, take the lead. Xi could have taken credit once the virus was contained, thereby avoiding all potential blame. Xi's move was also unusual because it violated the Party's collective leadership principle. Thus, it invited criticism and was probably why the Xinhua News Agency had to clarify that the fight against the virus was under the "unified leadership and unified command" of the central leadership group.[55]

51 Wu et al. 2021.
52 Zhang, Chenchen 2020; Yang, Xiangfeng 2021.
53 Xinshidai xuexi gongzuoshi 2020. Author's translation.
54 This is not to argue that Xi is perfectly rational. But it is safe to argue that (1) he does not act randomly and (2) he cares about his reputation.
55 Bai 2020.

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But Xi's move at this early stage of the pandemic becomes more understandable from the "propaganda state 2.0" perspective. While it was a propaganda move, it should be understood as more than just an attempt to persuade the public; it was also an act of agitation, signalling to citizens and the entire party-state that Xi and the Party would conduct an all-out mobilization to fight the pandemic. In retrospect, this turned out to be a success (albeit a temporary one) in that China achieved its declared goal of bringing the pandemic under control. What China accomplished, compared with what happened elsewhere in the world, especially in developed liberal democracies such as the United States, earned the Party and Xi considerable credit. It not only validated the Party's self-proclaimed role as a government truly for the people but also demonstrated its capacity to live up to its words.

### *Mobilizing reality*

If state propaganda regarding Xi's full commitment was seen as a promise, it would not have been effective or could even have backfired if the state failed to deliver, as the initial mishandling of the virus illustrated. In this context, the state had to showcase its will and capacity to contain the virus. So, what did the state do? It focused on mobilization, using propaganda to agitate, with the state itself often being the target of its efforts.

First, the Party summoned its members to fight on the frontlines of the pandemic. The slogan, "Party members charge first" (*dangyuan xianshang* 党员先上), was frequently reiterated in state media. Zhang Wenhong 张文宏, the director of the Center of Infectious Diseases at Huashan Hospital and a leading expert at the Shanghai Medical Treatment Experts Group of COVID-19, gained prominence for popularizing the catch phrase.[56] For the Party, CCP members and cadres taking the lead in the battle against the virus served as a living testimony to how it fulfils its promises to the people. This point was laid out explicitly in an article on the CCP's official "Forget not our original aspirations and hold tightly to our mission" education website:

> In major emergencies concerning the safety of the people, Party members and cadres "charging to the front" demonstrates a kind of strength … The more critical the situation is, the more Party members and cadres shall rush forward and devote themselves; the more critical the moment is, the more Party members and cadres must be at the forefront and guard the most dangerous place. With a firm belief and "hard-core" actions, [one shall] faithfully implement "the epidemic is the order, and prevention and control is the responsibility" … [One shall] actively assume functional responsibility and earnestly take the "battlefield" of epidemic prevention and control as the "test ground" for fulfilling the original aspirations, turning in satisfactory answers to the people with real, serious and concrete actions.[57]

The emphasis on "real, serious and concrete actions" confirms the "propaganda state 2.0" logic, highlighting the need to mobilize reality to render the propaganda effective.

Second, the Party disciplined corrupt and incompetent officials and publicized their punishments. Hundreds of cadres from the street level to the provincial level, including the Party secretaries of Hubei province and Wuhan municipality, were dismissed or even criminally charged for failing to prevent the spread of the virus. While punishing local officials served multiple purposes, including using them as scapegoats,[58] it was an effective act of agitation to spur cadres to contain the virus at all costs (to shape reality) while also demonstrating how much the Party cared about the people (propaganda narratives serving persuasion purposes). The effort to achieve a desirable governance outcome – by preventing and controlling the virus in this case – validated state propaganda regarding the commitment of the Party and Xi to represent, serve and protect the people.

Third, the state attempted to shape citizens' perceived reality more directly by conditioning their experiences during the pandemic. The public's experience (and assessment) of state propaganda

56 Zhang, Wenhong 2021.
57 Sun and Dang 2020. Author's translation.
58 Gainous et al. 2023, Ch. 8.

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depended on whether the virus was effectively contained, as reflected in the daily counts of positive cases and deaths, as well as the lockdown measures. This was the state's priority, especially in the early stages of the pandemic when panic was widespread and the virus variants were more deadly. It is fair to argue that until the end of 2021, the state was successful in this regard. Despite sporadic outbursts, some of which led to lockdowns in urban centres like Xi'an and Shanghai, China largely remained COVID-free. Citizens, although inconvenienced, complied with strict restrictions and even praised the government for its actions. State propaganda certainly lauded the government's efforts and the effectiveness of its zero-COVID policy – until it became unsustainable due to the huge socio-economic costs it entailed, the gradual wearing down of citizens and state agents, and the global relaxation of restrictions.

Those subject to more stringent restrictions, such as lockdown, expected the state to guarantee their livelihoods. However, this expectation was not met, at least initially, during major lockdowns – there were complaints from residents in Wuhan, Xi'an and Shanghai about the local governments' incompetence in providing subsistence aid. The state reportedly responded to such complaints and made improvements. Despite this, state propaganda in this regard was not as successful as that about pandemic control due to its misalignment with reality, although it worked to some extent. Coverage highlighting how the state listened to and addressed the complaints helped to contain the damage; however, the extreme hardships experienced by citizens caused widespread dissatisfaction, ultimately leading to the abrupt lifting of the zero-COVID policy.

In addition, the state staged participatory "public spectacles" to shape citizens' experiences. In official rhetoric, China is a big family where people are ready to support each other when needed; the regime not only represents the people's best interests but also has the "institutional strength" (*zhidu youshi* 制度优势) to "concentrate resources and capabilities for major undertakings" (*jizhong liliang ban dashi* 集中力量办大事).[59] During the COVID-19 pandemic, the state mobilized impressive public spectacles that were televised and digitally transmitted to create the shared participatory experiences that validate such propaganda promises. For instance, the state mobilized nationwide campaigns targeting both citizens and state agents to support the epicentres of outbreaks such as Wuhan in early 2020, Xi'an from late 2021 to early 2022, and Shanghai in early 2022. These campaigns, which shaped reality by containing the virus, were widely covered in both state and social media, reinforcing the propaganda narratives. In fact, *People's Daily Online* assembled a collection of 154 reports dated between 25 January and 9 May 2020 from various state media outlets with the theme of "the whole nation supporting one locality in need" (*yifang younan, bafang zhiyuan* 一方有难, 八方支援).[60] The coverage of these spectacles evidently bolstered the "institutional strength" propaganda.

Such spectacles, which included the rapid construction of the Huoshenshan 火神山 and Leishenshan 雷神山 hospitals in Wuhan, were widely covered and even live streamed by state media.[61] These public spectacles served as demonstrations of how the state effectively fulfilled its promises by delivering results. The fact that tens of millions were watching in real time showed that people across China were focusing on Wuhan, symbolizing the unity (and totality) of the nation. Similarly, while much less sensational than the live "cloud supervision" (*yun jiangong* 云监工) of hospital construction sites, state media frequently reported on vaccine development, vaccination progress, foreign countries approving Chinese vaccines and China providing the world with medical assistance. An analysis of all 470 *People's Daily* reports from 1 January 2021 to 25 March 2022 that

59 Hong 2020; Xiao 2020.

60 See http://society.people.com.cn/GB/369130/431577/431959/index1.html.

61 Han, Chenglin, et al. 2020; "Gongtong jianzheng Zhongguo sudu! 4000 wan 'yun jiangong' wei jianshezhe dianzan" (Witnessing China speed together! 40 million "cloud supervisors" give builders thumbs up). *CCTV*, 29 January 2020, http://news.cctv.com/2020/01/29/ARTIqshUluOnaGCosUAxbzvg200129.shtml. Accessed 28 October 2024.

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mention COVID-19 in their headlines reveals that those focusing on vaccines and vaccination, especially vaccine diplomacy, constituted the absolute majority.[62] The state expended substantial efforts and mobilized huge resources to shape the reality behind this propaganda campaign.

Overall, the operation of the propaganda machine during COVID reveals both its persuasion and agitation functions. Despite many problems, the Chinese state maintained its credibility for an extended time, validating its claims that the Party acts as a vanguard force serving the people at all costs and demonstrating its institutional strength.[63] The effectiveness of propaganda was not due to a sudden improvement in skill; in fact, much of it was blunt, clumsy and old-fashioned hard propaganda, as evidenced by many of the state media reports mentioned above. While such an approach might appear ridiculous to citizens elsewhere, it was, however, persuasive to many Chinese citizens because, as one foreigner observer noted, "there is a coherence between what is done and what is said."[64]

### *When "propaganda state 2.0" fails*

The shaping of reality to reinforce the propaganda worked. But that does not mean the state did a perfect job and all citizens were equally convinced, or that "agitation" is without cost and will always work. As discussed above, "propaganda state 2.0" is more of a conceptual framework to contextualize state propaganda within the totality of the contemporary Chinese regime. While the regime may mobilize reality to better align with its propaganda, there are associated costs – it is entirely conceivable that propaganda could be pulled down by unfavourable policies or poor policy performance. Moreover, propaganda can sometimes condition a policy agenda that is both costly and ineffective, leading to socio-economic or political disasters which, because of the totality of propaganda, can often indicate systemic failure.

The abrupt ending of the zero-COVID policy is a case in point. While it proved effective for an extended time, the draconian restrictions imposed unbearable costs on both the state and citizens, especially those who had to endure strict lockdowns. Tragic incidents, such as critically ill patients failing to obtain vital medical assistance or people perishing in fires because of lockdown measures, led to widespread dissatisfaction and even protests. The "white paper" movement, triggered by a tragic fire in Urumqi in which at least ten people lost their lives because the residential lockdown prevented fire engines from arriving in time, reflected nationwide frustration and anger as the dire socio-economic conditions in 2022 contradicted state propaganda that claimed people were being cared for by the state. The movement is widely perceived as one of the most serious challenges to the regime, raising questions about its legitimacy to rule.[65]

The zero-COVID fiasco illustrates the "propaganda state 2.0" framework by revealing how intertwined state propaganda is with the totality of authoritarian governance. First, the hardships and tragedies were not directly caused by state propaganda but by inappropriate state policies and the regime's failure to adapt these policies to the evolving realities of pandemic control. Second, both propaganda messaging and agitation were responsible for the debacle, as they conditioned the regime's policy choices and made it difficult to adapt policy. By portraying the virus as extremely deadly (messaging), zero-COVID appeared to be the only policy option. Xi's personal commitment, conveyed through state media (messaging and agitation), enabled the total mobilization that initially succeeded in implementing zero-COVID, simultaneously sending a strong signal to state agents. This led to

62 Keywords used include "new corona" (*xinguan*), "new coronavirus" (*xinxing guanzhuang bingdu*), "epidemic" (*yiqing*), "fighting the epidemic" (*kangyi*) or "battling the epidemic" (*zhanyi*).

63 The state also attempted to impress the international community, as reflected in its medical and vaccine diplomacy efforts. For mixed propaganda agendas of the regime, see Wang, Clyde Yicheng 2023.

64 John 2022.

65 Buckley et al. 2022.

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"enthusiastic implementation" and overly entrenched the policy.[66] Local and public health officials could hardly explore alternative options or even an exit plan. In other words, state propaganda, leveraging both persuasion and agitation, deeply entrenched the "zero-COVID" policy, making it difficult to scale back. If the virus was so deadly and the Party so committed and successful in containing it (which was used to validate the superiority of the regime and its policy), any attempt to reverse course would appear unreasonable – until reality hit everyone hard enough to reconsider. Policy failures might be perceived as temporary setbacks, with the state remaining hopeful of aligning reality with its promises through further agitation, as in the case of the Wuhan lockdown.

The end of zero-COVID reveals the weaknesses of "propaganda state 2.0" by showing that while state propaganda can validate itself through agitation, such agitation can be very costly – zero-COVID reportedly exhausted local fiscal and human resources, among other things – and its effectiveness depends also on how the regime as a whole performs. Malfunctions in other components of the regime often indicate failures in shaping reality to its advantage, which directly impacts the propaganda system, conditioning both its tasks and effectiveness. This is not surprising, as local agents' motives often diverge from those of the central government, leading to opportunistic and deviating behaviour.[67] In particular, local officials often prioritize performative goals over actual governance improvements.[68] Moreover, reality changes fast and it can be difficult, if not impossible, for the state to keep up; when trying to shape reality, the state may head in the wrong direction, thereby widening rather than closing the gap between reality and propaganda.

### *"Propaganda state 2.0" beyond COVID*

Although this study focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic, the "propaganda state 2.0" framework can also be applied to other scenarios. For instance, when the party-state deals with natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and wildfires, the behaviour of state propaganda, as documented here (combining persuasion and agitation, and validating propaganda by shaping reality), is often readily observable. For instance, after the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, which claimed thousands of lives, the state not only controlled all information but also highlighted in its propaganda the attentiveness of the Party and top leadership. At the same time, it mobilized rapidly in response to the crisis, showcasing its strength and capacity to change reality, especially through rescue efforts, by punishing incompetent officials, leading memorial and reconstruction campaigns, and so forth.[69] During this process, state propaganda engaged in both agitation (for example, mobilizing nationwide rescue and support, disciplining local state agents, conducting massive reconstruction) and publicity/persuasion (highlighting agitation efforts and achievements to validate propaganda messages). However, similar to the COVID-19 debacle, these efforts were not always sufficient to defuse public dissatisfaction, especially among those who believed that the state bore some responsibility – for example, because of the linkages between corruption and poor quality school buildings.[70] This meant that it was essential for the regime to maintain control over and manipulate information.

Besides natural disasters, the framework can also be applied to cases such as "poverty alleviation." Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 promised common prosperity when he launched economic reform. Although his promise was reiterated under different administrations, it was deemed to have been unfulfilled, given China's growing economic inequality and social disparity, which hurt regime legitimacy and propaganda credibility. President Xi took on the task by making poverty alleviation his signature project. Alongside the promotion of state (and Xi's) narratives regarding the Party's commitment to common prosperity, policies were implemented, and resources invested, until the Party declared

66 Deng, O'Brien and Chen 2018.
67 Cai 2004; O'Brien and Li 1999.
68 Ding 2022.
69 Sorace 2014; 2016.
70 Xu, Bin 2017.

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victory over poverty in 2020. While the campaign was not without its flaws, and many question its actual effects,[71] the drastically improved reality – seen particularly in visible indicators such as infrastructure – enabled the state to claim both propaganda credibility and regime legitimacy.[72]

When the regime fails to align reality with its propaganda, "propaganda state 2.0" can backfire. A case in point here is Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022. State media escalated the rhetoric around potential repercussions of the visit to such an extent that it made war seem inevitable. The retired chief editor of the nationalist tabloid *Global Times*, Hu Xijin 胡锡进, even threatened on Twitter to shoot down Pelosi's flight. However, the visit went ahead without incident. The state failed to back its propaganda promise (maybe rightfully so, to avoid a devastating war), causing many nationalists to publicly express their disappointment.[73]

As outlined above, the concept of "propaganda state 2.0" is aimed at offering a better understanding of contemporary Chinese politics and propaganda. However, can it also explain the Maoist era, when the regime practised agitprop to transform China both ideologically and physically?[74] Take land reform as an example. The Party's confiscation of land from landlords and its redistribution of that land to peasants – a process that involved agitprop – can be understood from the "propaganda state 2.0" perspective, although one may argue otherwise. This may seem a bit confusing, particularly as I argued above that Maoist China featured a "propaganda state." The key difference lies in the extent to which "land reform" (that is, the distribution of land to peasants) was ideologically driven. If one believes it was ideologically driven, "propaganda state 2.0" does not apply. However, some may argue that while land reform was not devoid of ideological motivation, particularly in justifying the confiscation of land from landlords, it resembled the land-to-the-tiller promise made during earlier peasant uprisings. From this perspective, the state was fulfilling a practical, non-ideological promise to win popular support and legitimacy. This reasoning, which aligns with "propaganda state 2.0," is in line with the historical observation that China then was arguably in the "new democracy" period and had not yet been consumed by ideological fervour. However, when the Party took land back from the peasants for agricultural collectivization, the ideologically driven agitprop process clearly exemplified the "propaganda state." The state aimed to impose its will over citizens by changing their belief systems (justifying collectivization with communist ideology) to align with reality (state and collective land ownership). This ideological justification partially explains why although collectivization was met with less resistance than expected initially,[75] the system began to unravel when people became disillusioned with communist ideology.[76]

## Conclusion

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, China was faced with a propaganda crisis. Despite its initial mishandling of the situation, the state engaged in an agitprop campaign, turning the pandemic into a propaganda credit-earning opportunity by mobilizing reality to substantiate its propaganda claims. However, the totality of the campaign also made it difficult for the state to update its policy in a timely manner. The pandemic thus illustrates the conceptual framework of "propaganda state 2.0," which embeds state propaganda in the authoritarian regime as a whole and highlights its communist legacies. This framework indicates that propaganda serves both persuasion and agitation functions. As an indispensable component of the regime, the propaganda apparatus both serves and is served by the regime in its wholeness. It rarely functions in isolation, as state policies almost always carry propaganda implications and the regime can mobilize its resources for propaganda purposes.

71 Whyte 2024.
72 Zuo, Wang and Zeng 2021.
73 Li 2022.
74 See Perry 2011; Dillon 2015.
75 Liu 2006.
76 There are other causes of popular dissatisfaction in collectivization. See Zweig 1989.

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Again, "propaganda state 2.0" is not a state information strategy and does not aim to replace existing theories such as hard and soft propaganda. Rather, it is a lens through which we can better understand state propaganda and politics in China today. For instance, it provides an explanation as to why citizens may link propaganda to state power – evidently, in the Chinese context, state propaganda not only serves to influence public opinion but also has an agitation function. As far as soft propaganda is concerned, this framework highlights how the state can convert additional resources and capacity for propaganda purposes. Speaking more specifically to the debates on soft and hard propaganda regarding the persuasion function, "propaganda state 2.0" prescribes that the Chinese state cares about persuasion (thus it embraces soft propaganda tactics) and that hard propaganda under certain circumstances can be persuasive.

As a conceptual framework, "propaganda state 2.0" reveals not just how state propaganda may directly affect regime legitimacy and authoritarian governance but also how it is subject to the influence of other governance agendas and processes. In particular, it shows that overall governance success can improve propaganda credibility and make propaganda an easier job so that even hard propaganda can be effective, if not better, because the crude propaganda job can be an indicator that the regime cares more about "doing" than "talking." This confirms President Xi's words, "Empty talk leads the country astray and hard work helps rejuvenate the nation" (*kongtan wuguo, shigan xingbang* 空谈误国, 实干兴邦).[77]

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**Rongbin HAN** is professor of international affairs at the University of Georgia. He is the author or co-author of *Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience* (Columbia University Press, 2018), *Directed Digital Dissidence in Autocracies: How China Wins Online* (Oxford University Press, 2023) and *Make China Great Again: Online Alt-History Fiction and Popular Authoritarianism* (Columbia University Press, forthcoming). He also co-edited *The Xi Jinping Effect* (University of Washington Press, 2024).

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