

Anne-Marie Brady (Ed.), **China's Thought Management**, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011, 224 pp., \$125.00 (hardcover).

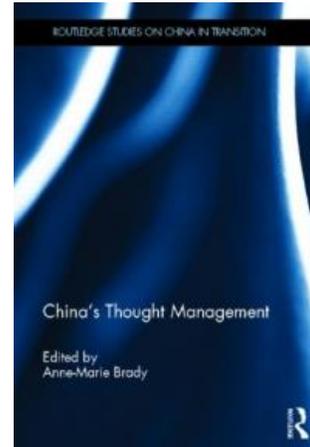
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Reviewing an edited volume is different from reviewing a monograph. In a monograph, one looks for a carefully reasoned and well-supported argument around one specific topic. An edited volume can be an opportunity to develop an academic discussion, bringing together different views of a central theme or to analyze a central claim from different topical angles and cases. In this volume, Anne-Marie Brady has opted for the latter approach and pulls of the task with aplomb.

In **China's Thought Management**, Brady has brought together contributions from Chinese and foreign academic authors that investigate new themes and new approaches in Chinese propaganda. The starting point for this investigation is the observation that, more than 20 years after the crisis of 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, China's single-party system has not only survived but has also overseen China's trajectory toward becoming the second-leading economy in the world. In Brady's view, this success is to no small extent due to the adaptive and intelligent approach that the leadership has taken toward reshaping its propaganda system to become more "market-friendly, scientific, high-tech and politics-lite" (p. 1).

The first part of the two-part volume addresses new themes in propaganda. Its first chapter, written by Brady herself, focuses on the propaganda efforts surrounding the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics, which she claims to have been a "campaign of mass distraction" (p. 11) whose aim was to use the Olympics as a symbol for China's found-again international prestige and progress in development and to rebrand China as a modern, cultured nation at home and abroad. The narrative revolved around slogans on harmony and inclusiveness, brought to the world through carefully stage-managed press strategies. Also, it allowed for the creation of a large volunteer organization that would become a model for subsequent political campaigns. Lastly, it spurred the redevelopment of Beijing, to "civilize" the capital (p. 24). This campaign came to its climax with the extravagant opening and closing ceremonies, which were designed to convey a message meticulously crafted at the highest levels of the propaganda department to billions of viewers.

The second chapter, by Brady and He Yong, deals with economic propaganda. While the economic reform program was controversial among the leadership during the 1980s, the post-1992 focus on the economy drove a shift in economic propaganda. A new governing structure was established to build popular support for the new reform program. Papers and news programs now contain significant amounts of economic stories that emphasize positive news and regularly portray international crises as a



justification for the Chinese approach. At the same time, a number of no-go zones remain, particularly in relation to state-owned enterprise and banking reform, as well as to unemployment. This system was tested through the milk powder scandal of 2008, which was partly exacerbated due to instructions on the reporting of public health issues during the run-up to the Olympics and which illustrated the risks "inherent in the overlapping relationships between Party, State, market and criminal interests" (p. 52).

Subsequently, Brady tackles the question of State Confucianism, Chineseness and tradition in CCP propaganda in the third chapter. Rescued from the vilification during the Cultural Revolution, Confucius and traditional Chinese values have been embraced by the Party in order to generate social compliance, as an addition to Socialist theory. However, this use is selective: It builds on terms such as civilization, filial piety, virtue, the prosperous society, ritual, honesty, and trust, as well as on the figureheads of Confucius and the Yellow Emperor. These serve as foundational concepts on the basis of which messages are created throughout the political system. This pragmatic and selective use of traditional concepts reflects the ongoing value crisis, and provides a ground for alternative views of modernity, as well as for "soft power" efforts, particularly in relation to Taiwan and overseas Chinese.

This theme is further elaborated by Valérie Niquet in Chapter 4, where she analyzes "Confu-talk" (p. 76), or the use of Confucian concepts in contemporary Chinese foreign policy. Niquet examines the emergence of such concepts as "harmony," and the importance of "Chinese characteristics" in China's international relationships. She sees the use of Confucian values and soft power in the light of the Chinese threat theory as aimed at building a benign political image to dispel the fears about its growth. She also looks at the Confucius Institute program and provides a case study of the variety of Confucius Institutes that have been established in France and how these interact with existing Asian studies centers. Nonetheless, she concludes, these efforts are mostly successful due to China's economic success and the extent of its financial investment.

In the last chapter of the first part, Ji Fengyuan provides a case study—the "maintain advancedness" campaign (p. 90)—to provide deeper insights of linguistic engineering in Hu Jintao's China. She offers a more epistemological analysis of the creation of official concepts and their spread downward into the hierarchy. This particular chapter was my favorite, because it provides a much-needed insight into the substantive and epistemological processes that underpin Party governance, as well as into the process of implementing discipline throughout the Party hierarchy. Ji also identifies this campaign as being of as much disciplinary importance as it was of ideological relevance, clarifying the interaction between individual officials and the official message.

The second part of *China's Thought Management*, on new methods of control, opens with an analysis of cultural structural reform by Nicolai Volland. He argues that the media sector has been transformed from a model based on direct control to one based on technocratic management, while ensuring that the cultural sector has become more marketized and efficient. This has also meant that the role of culture has been reimagined by seeking to turn the commercialization of the cultural sector into an opportunity to strengthen managerial control over media. Nonetheless, evidence of success in this regard remains mixed, as new structures continue to emerge that further complicate processes in the cultural sector and that may change the leverage that various players have vis-à-vis the Party State.

In Chapter 7, Brady and Wang Juntao provide insight into the structure of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) propaganda system. This system is part of the structure by which the Party Center controls the Army. Brady and Wang argue that the anatomy of this control is defined by dynamic relationships rather than by institutional structures. As such, the Party maintains a committee system throughout all military units, with political commissars holding important positions at all levels of hierarchy. The work of the propaganda system is broad: Recruitment and demobilization requires intensive propaganda work, which includes political education, as well as skills and insights necessary in military and postdemobilization civil life. Nonetheless, China's transformation has ushered in changes in this area as well, meaning that the PLA has needed to reorient content and upgrade its methods. Lastly, Wang and Brady analyze the different ways in which the Army's propaganda system aims to maintain good army-civil relationships.

Chapter 8 is dedicated to understanding the relationship between prostitution and propaganda in China. In this chapter, Elaine Jeffreys sketches the development of the legality of prostitution and its portrayal in propaganda campaigns. While prostitution was strongly banned during the early period of Communist rule, its resurgence in the postreform era led to numerous campaigns aimed at eradicating it. Nonetheless, there is increasing backlash against these campaigns and rising support for the legalization of prostitution. As such, propaganda efforts have partly shifted in certain localities, de-emphasizing the illegality of prostitution, while stressing the importance of preventing sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS.

In the last substantive chapter, James To provides an overview of thought management and of overseas Chinese. In his view, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been successful in gaining success to particular groups of overseas Chinese by stressing themes of Chinese unity and modernity. The PRC discourse has, to a large extent, also been able to displace rival voices, such as those of Taiwan, of Tibetan or Xinjiang movements, and of the Falun Gong. As a result, some overseas Chinese have been mobilized for "fifth-column activity" (p. 176). Conversely, the PRC sees overseas Chinese as a significant frontline in advancing China's soft power and its relationship with the rest of the world.

In Chapter 10, the editorial conclusion, Brady dubs the current conception of political and social control as "a velvet fist in an iron glove" (p. 182). The Mao-era methods of control, based on class struggle, violence, and coercion have been supplanted by concepts deemed necessary for a governing party rather than for a revolutionary party. These are based on increasing localized governance to provide better social care and service to those who need it. Also, the nature of the political message has shifted toward persuasion, rather than indoctrination, which is fostered by a better technological and media infrastructure. As such, Brady concludes, the Party has constructed a sense of belonging and ownership that is not based on formal participation in politics.

*China's Thought Management* is a welcome volume in a number of respects. First, it is quite timely and covers important subject matter. Straddling the boundary between political and communications studies, its focus on the content of political narratives provides a valuable addition to the corpus on Chinese politics that has focused strongly on the relationship between institutions and between Party, State and society. On the other hand, it fills an important gap in communications studies, which are

often overly focused on audience and social media angles. Overall, the volume addresses important questions in relation to the construction of a particular mode of discourse and a particular episteme, which goes beyond just political goals and methods, as it also determines, to a significant extent, the epistemological foundations for political and social debate in China. It seems to me that insufficient attention has, so far, been placed on understanding China's information order—the structures and processes by which socially and politically relevant knowledge is generated and circulated—and how this shapes the space for action of individuals and institutions at all levels. While Pieke (2009) and Brady (2009) herself have already significantly contributed to this topic, important questions remain in relation to the role of universities, Party schools, official media, research institutions, and think tanks in politics, and this volume broaches some ground in that respect.

Second, the strong presence of Chinese authors in this volume provides a highly data-driven, inside angle. At the recent China Internet Research Conference, it was noted that that foreign scholars too often see Chinese scholars as data, rather than as colleagues. Brady, however, takes their contributions seriously as a substantive addition to scholarship, which is to be commended. This approach is particularly valuable, as it has made this volume rich and dense in empirical content, providing substantial primary information on different aspects of the propaganda system itself, as well as on implementation of propaganda guidelines and shifting priorities in Chinese politics.

There is, however, no beauty that hath no strangeness to its proportion. First, Brady perhaps too easily accepts the efficacy of propaganda efforts, stating that "resistance is marginal and marginalized" (p. 200). Certainly, it is true that the Party's position seems solidly entrenched, much more so than had been anticipated by many observers. However, more attention could have been paid to the fact that resistance does not always mean wholesale drives toward regime change; it can also involve actors both inside and outside the system maintaining a great degree of autonomy to engage with the formal structures as they are imposed from the top down. For example, officials up and down the line often interpret central decrees in a way that agrees with their institutional or personal interests, while netizens have become quite adept at satirizing the official discourse (Meng, 2011). As a consequence, it cannot be simply assumed that the official propaganda message is absorbed by officials or citizens, but rather that it becomes a social meme where public acts of obedience are combined with strategic behavior.

Second, in her editorial introduction and conclusion, Brady frames this book as a response to those proposing the China collapse theory, arguing that "the regime has regained a high level approval rating from the majority of its citizens, both within China, as well as without" (p. 200). However, the "collapse theory that dominated scholarship and journalism outside China throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s" (p. 200) is perhaps too much of a straw man. Observers such as Heilmann and Perry (2011), Nathan (2003), Shambaugh (2008), and Tsang (2009) have developed strong lines of research around topics variously named authoritarian resilience, adaptive authoritarianism, or consultative Leninism. Brady does not refer to or engage with this particular body of literature.

Third, and I realize this is very much an anorak's comment, in her chapters, Brady cites official documents by referring to the official collectanea in which they are bundled without providing the title of

the individual document. This makes it rather difficult for scholars with similar interests to identify and find the relevant texts.

None of these concerns, however, invalidate the strong academic contribution that Brady and her co-authors have made with *China's Thought Management*. Rather, it should be recognized that a great deal of the topics touched upon in the volume remain under-researched and more work in this area remains necessary. Often, it is very difficult to design and execute the sort of research that would provide answers to these questions, either due to reasons of method or due to the limitations on research in this sensitive area in China. Brady has brought an empirically rich and well-balanced volume into academic discourse, which should be a powerful stimulation for further research of the many issues it brings up.

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