

Do leftist social struggles in China play the same role as they have in Western Europe and the United States? That is, if we understand that whatever progressive policies and measures actually do exist in Europe and the US are the consequence of sustained struggles from below, then what is the relation between leftist social struggle and politics in China? Are these social struggles cumulative or just contingently additive? Ruckus doesn't have a clear answer to any of this, even while he does seem to assume that leftist social struggles play a role similar in China as they do in Euro-America, a premise about which I am considerably less convinced than he is. But pointing out the lack of a clear answer is not necessarily a fatal critique. For, just by raising such questions at this point, Ruckus has given us a map with enough places marked out for others to start their inquiries, should they so wish. The importance of taking on the systems in China and globally that produce stunning privatized wealth along with abject poverty, environmental degradation, patriarchal repression, international antagonisms and militarisms, as well as highly exploitative social relations, cannot be overstated. Ruckus should be congratulated for insisting on staging the conversation.

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

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Dongshu Liu

City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong  
Email: [dongshu.liu@cityu.edu.hk](mailto:dongshu.liu@cityu.edu.hk)

How has China's propaganda strategy evolved in the digital era when social media and internet technology challenge the state's monopoly on information? In his new book titled *The Making of a Neo-Propaganda State*, Titus Chen has provided a comprehensive review of the evolution of China's propaganda machine and a strong argument of how it embraced the digital era to enhance the party-state's ideological work: they utilize marketized channels to conduct propaganda works in a large and efficient manner.

Scholars have reviewed the marketization of China's media sector as a challenge to the state's ideological and propaganda works. Chen's book, however, notes that state propaganda machines can utilize the market system to enhance their authoritarian system and ideological control. Chapter two of the book correctly identifies the Chinese regime's challenge in the digital media era. The state media lost both control and influence in the early days of social media in China when user-generated content provided alternative information sources and narratives. However, the Xi Jinping regime quickly adapted to such challenges and adopted dramatic reforms to reshape the entire propaganda strategy of the party-state. Calling it the "Grand strategy for taming social media," chapters three and four demonstrate that China's state media is tasked with developing marketized operations to increase its presence on social media and produce content that fits popular consumption patterns. The creation of new regulatory agencies, together with censorship strategies, also motivates private social media companies, such as Tencent, to cooperate with the state in

promoting appropriate ideological and propaganda content. As a result, the official narratives have successfully dominated the public discourse and “crowded out” dissident opinions.

Nevertheless, can state propaganda create content that is attractive? Using large-scale text analysis, Chen explores the pattern of Chinese propaganda on social media, again identifying the market logic in creating propaganda that emphasizes affective narratives, emotion-soaked content and “soft content.” This kind of market-oriented, mass-appeal approach guarantees that state propaganda not only floods out dissident views but also produces content that can be popular. Such content can be very powerful in manipulating public discourse. An excellent example is demonstrated in chapter seven, in which Chen demonstrates how the reformed state propaganda organ reshaped public opinion in Mainland China during the 2019 Hong Kong protest by misrepresentation, misinformation and framing strategies.

The core of Chen’s book is the role of market logic in reforming China’s propaganda strategy on social media. The commercialization of China’s media outlets has been regarded as a factor that weakens state control over public discourse, and social media has also been seen as a challenge to authoritarian rule. The combination of both, however, creates a new institution that enhances China’s authoritarian party-state. China utilizes market logic to reshape state media and motivate (and control) non-state media to produce more effective propaganda. Social media channels ensure that propaganda can spread quickly and cover the population broadly. Market systems and the internet may be a challenge to state control and a channel for disseminating dissident views, but they can also become a convenient venue for spreading regime-approved messages.

The rise of China’s neo-propaganda state, the term Chen uses in his book to describe the new propaganda system in the Xi era, comes together with increasing nationalism among the Chinese public. Does the newly reformed propaganda machine play any role in the rise of nationalism? Conventional belief tends to view propaganda as a top-down process in that regime-controlled media outlets produce corresponding narratives to affect the public. With much more effective propaganda on social media, it is easier for the Chinese regime to spread nationalist messages that affect public opinion. However, the neo-propaganda system that follows the logic of social media and its market orientation means that messages may be reshaped by the tastes and expectations of its audience. Market logic should dictate that the propaganda system produces more nationalist content to cater to its audience. Strong nationalist sentiment among the public may force market-oriented propaganda outlets on social media to take a more nationalist position in their narratives to maintain their attractiveness to the public, and such positions may cultivate stronger nationalist sentiment in the public. Propaganda, therefore, becomes a two-way cycle that pushes nationalist sentiments to the extreme.

Market-oriented propaganda also means that the regime relies on commercial actors to perform a significant portion of the ideological work. The online presence relies on the cooperation of social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat. The censorship of dissenting views is also primarily done by platform companies. Will such state reliance empower platform companies, and how do those companies utilize this reliance to negotiate with the government? China has been outsourcing important government functions to online platforms, and internet giants such as Tencent and Alibaba have become increasingly crucial for China’s social functioning and control. The neo-propaganda state Chen identifies in this book is perhaps one example of such a trend. The question, however, is whether those platform companies will generate substantial bargaining power when negotiating with the government. Is China’s crackdown on tech industries in the past few years indicative of the regime’s effort to push back? If the Chinese regime continues to use market logic for its propaganda and many other functions, non-state market actors are inevitable. The negotiation between the state and the non-state actors should, therefore, be an important area of research that deserves more scholarly attention.