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Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China
Transformation and Modernization

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Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party's propaganda and thought work is responsible for all "ideology-related work," in which all sectors related to ideology are subject to the direct leadership or guidance of the Party. This vast and deeply penetrative propaganda apparatus must adapt to the evolving conditions of Chinese society. The state's propaganda and thought work has become increasingly important, as it is arguably the most effective tool for addressing the widespread alternative views in Chinese society, primarily through non-repressive, persuasive means. It became an urgent task for the Party to adjust its propaganda and thought work to accommodate a rapidly pluralizing society, where strong progressive public sentiment persisted following the tumultuous 1980s. Thus, in order to examine the durability of the regime in China, it is essential to trace the trajectory of its ideological control. This leads to the central concern of this thesis: how does the Party utilize its propaganda machinery to sustain political stability?

Existing literature shows that scholars have examined three major characteristics of China's propaganda and thought work: 1) the extensive and intense overwatch over the entire population, along with the selective adoption of Western democracy into its propaganda system that serves to maintain its rule; 2) consistent emphasis on the rejection of universal values and the promotion of the China model on different levels, officially through its propaganda machinery and academically by leftist scholars; 3) soft strategies used to persuade the general masses, including the strategic commercialization of media, a hedonistic emphasis on material prosperity, reliance on personnel with public credibility, and the ubiquitously embedded grand narrative of the Party.

Scholars have devoted substantial attention to the Chinese government's strategies for carrying out propaganda and thought work, and their contributions are valuable for understanding the relationship between state practices and political stability. However, the transformation of Chinese society, and of the Chinese people, whose responses play a vital role in shaping and adjusting the Party's propaganda strategies, has received comparatively less scholarly attention. The dominant scholarly focus on propaganda and thought work continues to center primarily on the Party's use of disinformation, information control, deception, and political rhetoric, rather than on how these strategies interact with a changing society. Thus, a logical paradox emerges: how can the Party maintain control over the Chinese people if, in many ways, they have moved beyond the Party's direct vision and control? If, as mainly suggested by the existing literature, the essential reasons for Chinese political stability rely mostly on a closed China maintained through various means, the fast-growing number of people going abroad would greatly undermine the regime's durability. However, this is not the case. Thus, the remaining unanswered question in the existing literature is: why does the Chinese government not fear the growing number of people going abroad? The barriers have been mitigated, and, more importantly, more people choose to receive education abroad, which indicates a tendency that more people may no longer be, as pointed out in multiple previous studies, deceived by the government. Therefore, mere reliance on the strategies noted by the existing literature cannot fully explain the resilience.

Regarding the promotion of the China model by the state's propaganda apparatus and leftist scholars, it has indeed gained wide acceptance among academics, particularly within postcolonial schools of thought and among certain leftist intellectuals. However, the thought emancipation is not reversible. Therefore, it is undeniable that, for the general public in China, the most fundamental understanding of what is right or wrong still largely depends on the so-

called universal values disseminated and internalized by the West, and the same logic applies to their political cognition. Hence, although a theoretical defense of the China model may find acceptance within academia, it nonetheless stands in tension with the preexisting cognitive framework of the general public. The Party's political stability, therefore, does not rest on abstract theoretical claims about rejecting Western democracy or promoting its own alternative model.

Furthermore, indeed, people increasingly rely on commercialized media to access what they perceive as genuine information. However, this does not suggest that the phenomenon will persist, nor does it imply that the current state of official media credibility is what the Party intends. Instead, due to growing public awareness of the commercialized media's ultimate pursuit of profit, its credibility is also declining. The influence of official media has nonetheless remained high, even during a period when Chinese society was filled with sarcasm toward the Party's official discourse. To this end, the current perception of untrustworthiness must be mitigated in the long run.

To more comprehensively and accurately analyze the Party's resilience, this thesis assesses propaganda and thought work across different eras in China through the lens of Foucault's theories of power, particularly the functioning of normalized power, in which surveillance is not merely repressive, but integrated into the everyday practices of self-discipline and ideological internalization. Of course, this does not mean that the coercive nature of the state's propaganda system is unimportant. Rather, the focus here lies on the societal response to the Party's propaganda and thought work, as well as how the Party reacts to such "societal evaluations" by continuously adjusting its propaganda strategies. This thesis aims to elucidate the dynamics and transformation of the production of docile bodies in Chinese society under a socially embedded panopticon sustained through the Party's propaganda and thought work, ultimately linking this process to the persistence of authoritarian political stability.

This thesis adopts a qualitative and interpretive research approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It examines how the Party's propaganda and thought work constructs and reconstructs ideological legitimacy through language use, narrative framing, and related policies aimed at countering dissent. Primarily drawing on Gramscian hegemony theory and Foucauldian power theory, particularly the latter, this thesis approaches the Party's propaganda and thought work as strategic sites where authority is reaffirmed and docile bodies are produced in response to both internal and external ideological crises. By tracing the evolution of propaganda and thought work from the Mao era to the present, this study seeks to reveal how the Party has reconfigured its ideological control mechanisms in response to recurring challenges to its legitimacy, particularly those rooted in political cynicism and historical nihilism. The methodological aim is to construct a historically grounded, discourse-oriented explanation of how the modern Communist regime functions through ideological governance, and to elucidate how such discursive strategies contribute to the reproduction and stabilization of the social status quo in a transforming China.

The thesis analyzes both the political dynamics and the associated social consequences. Regarding the political dimension, it interprets the underlying meanings as well as the potential causes and consequences of political texts within their respective historical contexts, thereby illustrating how narratives are framed, reproduced, and internalized, or, conversely, stigmatized, satirized, and resisted. The analysis is primarily textual and draws on a wide range of sources, including Party directives, official speeches, state media coverage, and political campaigns. Each

chapter focuses on a distinct era or ideological shift, analyzing discourse not only in terms of what is said, but also how it is said, by whom, and under what sociopolitical conditions.

This thesis aims to explore the Party's pathway toward modernization through the normalization of its mechanisms of ideological control. It argues that, after reflecting on the lessons of the Maoist propaganda strategy, as well as the reform trials of the 1980s, which featured significant liberalization both domestically and internationally, the Party found a middle ground to create and foster social docility in Chinese society under this post-trust political environment, where it allowed a certain degree of plurality, diversity, and free speech, but within strict, non-negotiable boundaries. The Party would not punish non-subversive criticisms of the government or alternative views, dissent that may displease the regime but is unlikely to pose a significant threat, among the general populace. The Party uses official media to project distinct messages, with specific outlets designated for different audiences based on their viewpoints. The messages from official media are intended to reassure audiences by demonstrating the party's alignment with their views, thereby de-escalating any potential for subversive thought. However, in response to the small fraction of subversive speeches or actions, the Party would resolutely suppress them. Thus, the Party maintains ideological control over the population by using propaganda and thought work to guide people toward a "correct" understanding of issues. The choreographed democratic practices of the Party's propaganda apparatus effectively obscure its surveillance power structure, fostering a perception of freedom among the Chinese populace. The instances of punishment keep the boundaries visible yet ambiguous to the populace, thus preventing the widespread dissemination of subversive thoughts. Thus, social docility among the Chinese populace has been shaped and reinforced by the Party's propaganda strategy, thereby strengthening its governmentality.

Chapter 1

The Mao Era: Absoluteness, Sharp Transitions, and Political Instability

Existing literature has identified several crucial features of Mao's propaganda and thought work that contributed to consolidating the regime's resilience: integrated forms of dissemination designed to maximize reach among the population, highly repressive control over the populace, and the construction of model figures to embody and promote the Party's values. Even though public reception did not fully align with the Party's expectations, the underlying reasons were not inherently anti-establishment but rather stemmed from ignorance or deeply rooted traditional Chinese thinking. As for the factional conflicts that were theoretically grounded in the self-interpretation of Mao's quotations, such developments, in fact, reflected Mao's intention to mobilize the masses. In this sense, the social disorder incited by his propaganda strategy was not an unintended consequence but a calculated element of his political maneuvering, deliberately employed to consolidate and intensify his personal authority. Thus, as shown in the existing literature, Mao's "mass line" approach to the Party's propaganda and thought work was effective in indoctrinating the general populace with his socialist values and in sanctifying his own image to enhance the charismatic dimension of the Party's legitimacy.

However, this constructed and tightly censored, society-wide consciousness of Mao's socialist ideals, shaped through a uniformly orchestrated media apparatus encompassing all forms, was a double-edged sword in his effort to maintain the regime's durability. On the one hand, mobilizing the general masses through a propaganda strategy designed for maximum reach was indeed vital to securing public support for the regime. On the other hand, what would happen if the newly disseminated messages contradicted earlier ones, partially, or even entirely? If this were the case, the integrated system of propaganda and thought work would experience an abrupt shift, potentially fueling growing skepticism among the general populace regarding the regime's credibility. Secondly, regarding the constructed models, what would be the consequences if the highly glorified figures that everyone was expected to emulate turned out to be discredited or rejected by the people? Mao's charisma relied heavily on the promotion of such model figures, his absolute loyalists, and thus, the downfall of these prominently celebrated exemplars would inevitably undermine the charismatic authority that had been so carefully cultivated around Mao. Hence, once such situations occurred, the entire propaganda apparatus would shift in the opposite direction, deploying repressive mechanisms to "correct" the very public ideology that had ironically been shaped through the same coercive means.

These theoretically foreseeable drawbacks of Mao's propaganda and thought work became evident in practice through various events during the Mao era. This chapter examines the following cases: the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the influence of Soviet propaganda and thought work among the Chinese people, and the death of Lin Biao, in order to elucidate the defining features of Mao's propaganda strategy and its associated detrimental consequences. It focuses on the messages propagated by the central state and the coercive methods employed to indoctrinate them, as well as the social responses to these state-driven actions.

The examination of the three cases regarding the Party's propaganda and thought work during the Mao era reveals two defining characteristics: absoluteness and sharp transitions. The Party's extensive and intensive campaigns sought to construct an epistemological absolutism through collective perception management, while simultaneously suppressing dissent with coercive force. This resulted in a rigid ideological environment that demanded total conformity.

However, the abrupt transitions that punctuated the era, such as the sudden shift from the “Hundred Flowers Campaign” to the “Anti-Rightist Campaign,” the dramatic reorientation of the Party’s stance toward the Soviet Union, and the rapid reversal of Lin Biao’s public image, gradually eroded the credibility of the Party’s messaging. The April 5 Tiananmen Incident in 1976 marked a visible public rupture in trust, and the Democracy Wall movement that followed Mao’s death made explicit the people’s growing desire for freedom and democratic participation. These abrupt ideological shifts, combined with their often inflexible implementation, destabilized the political landscape and undermined public trust in the Party’s consistency and moral authority. As a consequence, the Party faced mounting challenges in sustaining its legitimacy, as a growing segment of the populace became increasingly skeptical of official narratives. China thus entered what might be termed a post-trust era, marked by a widespread tendency to preemptively regard official communications as untrustworthy.

This propaganda strategy, rooted in fluid and highly charged political struggles framed by ambiguous terms such as “revolutionary” and “counterrevolutionary,” was originally deployed by Mao to unify “the people” and consolidate the regime’s durability. However, as noted in previous studies, these terms gradually slipped beyond Mao’s control, as public antagonisms and political interpretations became increasingly rooted in individualized readings of Mao’s words. From a Foucauldian perspective, the absoluteness embedded in Mao’s propaganda and thought work inherently revealed its repressive logic, which inevitably produced side effects such as public indifference, the emergence of alternative discourses, and even overt resistance. The highly intrusive politicization and ideologization of everyday life heightened public awareness of the Party’s coercive ideological indoctrination, a system that could be swiftly reversed in an entirely opposite direction through nothing more than a single shift in Mao’s own discourse. Thus, ironically, this unintended discretion, deviating from Mao’s original expectations, eventually turned against both Mao and the Party.

Such ideological turbulence, induced by the propaganda and thought work of the Mao era, proved politically devastating for the Party. Its repercussions became even more acute under Deng Xiaoping. By the late Mao era, the public had grown increasingly sarcastic toward the Party’s discourses. The efficacy of the Party’s once-powerful “the great banner of Mao Zedong Thought” had been significantly undermined. Thus, the later movements of thought emancipation and democratization in China were not abrupt departures from the Maoist era triggered solely by external influences, but rather continuations rooted in the ideological transformations that had already begun during that period. The intensified engagement with the outside world beginning in the late 1970s amplified a preexisting public sentiment in Chinese society, where people had become “indocile.” In this post-trust society, it became increasingly difficult for the new Party leadership to sustain the Party’s authority, particularly in the absence of a charismatic leader capable of maintaining ideological credibility. As a response, the Party was compelled to reform its propaganda and thought work in order to mitigate the powerful traits of a post-trust society, one that had emerged largely as a result of the political failures inherent in Mao’s propaganda strategy.

Chapter 2

The 1980s: Ideological Reform by Feeling the Stones

Regarding Deng's reform in the Party's propaganda aspect, previous studies have highlighted that a degree of freedom was granted to intellectuals, many of whom had been extensively purged during the Mao era. Indeed, if Deng's changes in the Party's propaganda and thought work were to be compared with those in what are often called democratic countries, China in the 1980s had a highly limited space for freedom. However, such horizontal comparisons fail to comprehensively capture the situation in 1980s China. From a vertical perspective, compared to the Maoist era, Deng's ideological relaxation was both bold and deliberate. Deng's relaxation aligned with the preexisting public cynicism in this post-trust society (see Chapter 1), and this cynicism was significantly amplified by his loosening of ideological control. Thus, although previous studies have accurately identified the characteristics of Deng's reform in the Party's propaganda and thought work, they remain overly retrospective, largely shaped by hindsight knowledge of the tragedies that unfolded in the late 1980s. In other words, such interpretations are informed by both the eventual outcomes and a democracy-centered perspective, which fail to account for the rapid escalation of public demands for democratization and the contingent, unstable pathway that led to those outcomes. Thus, in examining Deng's propaganda reform in 1980s China, a more grounded assessment is needed, one that focuses on the political dynamics that, while considered limited in retrospect, carried significant transformative potential at the time and ultimately contributed to a broader eruption of democratic demands among the general populace.

This chapter seeks to analyze Deng's reform of the Party's propaganda and thought work within the specific sociopolitical context of 1980s China, focusing in particular on his response to the persistent public indifference and social resistance rooted in the failures of the Mao era. It examines the Party's political transformation in the ideological realm, including Deng's assessment of Mao's propaganda strategy, the rise of liberal-minded figures within the Party, and the recurring pattern of the loosening-tightening cycle of ideological control. It also examines the societal transformations that emerged in response to the Party's political shifts, including the public reassessment of the Maoist era, the rise of critical *scar literature*, and a wave of progressivism grounded in a broader emancipation of thought. Finally, this chapter analyzes the Party's own reassessment of ideological reform and highlights the paradox it faced during this transitional period.

This chapter argues that after Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping recognized the shortcomings of the Maoist approach to propaganda and thought work, particularly its coercive nature, which he saw as inherently detrimental to the Party's long-term durability. Throughout the 1980s, Deng maintained a clear and consistent stance on reforming this system, as reflected in his active promotion of liberal-minded cadres. Contrary to the arguments of some scholars in retrospective analyses, liberalization remained the predominant mainstream ideology within the Party throughout the decade. It was a remarkably bold attempt within the sociopolitical context of the time. The Party's political signal calling for liberalization lifted a lid that had already been under immense pressure from public sentiment accumulated during the late Mao era. Hence, although Deng's reforms were highly limited, and repeatedly set back, especially when compared to developments in Western countries or even the Soviet satellite states during the 1980s, the resulting liberalization in China nonetheless became increasingly "unlimited." Thus, the Party's

propaganda and thought work throughout the 1980s, largely driven by the dominant liberal cadres within the CCP, played a significant role in shaping “China’s own microclimate.”

Deng’s reform of the Party’s propaganda and thought work could arguably be seen as an ideological counterpart to “crossing the river by feeling the stones.” However, unlike economic reforms, this approach could not remain limited in scope or confined to specific regions; instead, it had to be implemented nationwide, facing the inevitable risk of unleashing excessive progressivism among the general public. Furthermore, the consequences of this ideological liberalization proved largely irreversible, even in the face of harsh political measures. The enduring influence of scar literature remains visible today. Thus, an excessively liberal trajectory ultimately proved incompatible with China.

It could be argued that Deng’s reform of the Party’s propaganda and thought work was a failure even in securing the Party’s resilience. While it successfully addressed the excesses of the Maoist approach, the pendulum swung too far in the opposite direction, toward excessive liberalization. The unintended consequence was a growing public skepticism not only toward the Maoist past but also toward the very foundations of Chinese history and civilization. It could be argued that what I term “Neo-Occidentalism” was widely prevalent among Chinese intellectuals. While Occidentalism originally refers to the demonization and stereotyping of the West by the Eastern world, this tendency underwent a dramatic reversal: the West came to be seen as the binary opposite of China, more advanced, more rational, and the only viable path for human development. The Chinese people began to perceive their own traditions through the lens of what Edward Said termed “Orientalism”: viewing traditional Chinese elements as backward, feudal, and uncivilized in contrast to an idealized image of the West. The 1980s marked the period when, in Foucauldian terms, China’s original ideological wall began to dissolve, as the Maoist disciplinary apparatus was widely disregarded. Although the Party attempted to construct a new wall, it failed to find a viable pathway: the public’s increasing engagement with Western ideas significantly undermined the efficacy of Maoist-style setbacks and instead fueled a stronger push for modernization, more precisely, a total Westernization within the sociopolitical context of the 1980s, in which the mounting public demand for sweeping sociopolitical change posed an escalating challenge to the Party.

Chapter 3

The Collapse of the Soviet Union: An International Lesson

As the existing literature has pointed out, Gorbachev's reform contributed significantly to the CCP's perception of a "failure model" in propaganda and thought work, one that resembled the Party's own reform trajectory during the 1980s but ultimately led to disastrous consequences. Gorbachev's experience further convinced the CCP that economic reform alone, without firm ideological control, would not bring about prosperity under Communist rule. Perhaps ironically, this lesson reinforced the perceived necessity of re-politicizing the Party's propaganda and thought work to "counterattack" deviations from the fundamental tenets of communist ideology, even though the Party's primary goal throughout the 1980s had been depoliticization. Thus, an ideological paradox emerged for the CCP, one that previous studies have not thoroughly examined. As noted in Chapter 2, it can be argued that a new form of politicization of everyday life took shape throughout the 1980s, in which many Chinese individuals increasingly adopted Orientalist perspectives to interpret Chinese traditions and what I call "Neo-Occidentalist frameworks" to view the West, perceiving Westernization, particularly democratization, as a universal path to China's modernization. Ironically, this embedded Western-favored politicization was itself a byproduct of Deng Xiaoping's effort to depoliticize the Maoist past and was further reinforced. Indeed, Gorbachev's reform served as a warning to the CCP that a return to orthodox Marxist politicization was necessary to counteract the new forms of politicization that had emerged as unintended consequences of the Party's own depoliticization during the tumultuous 1980s. Yet, one may ask: would this Maoist-style reversal prove effective? The core conflict thus became a confrontation between two distinct forms of politicization: one emerging from the general public, and the other imposed by the Party. This tension unfolded in a political atmosphere where China continued to pursue greater openness to the world, an environment in which the Chinese people were increasingly engaging with global discourses and values. Hence, a mere return to orthodox Marxist-Leninist principles would not have served the CCP's interests. Instead, a reassessment of what Gorbachev's reform signified for the modification of China's propaganda and thought work within the sociopolitical context of the time is necessary to understand the formation of the CCP's propaganda and thought work from the 1990s onwards.

This chapter aims to explore the implications of Gorbachev's reform for China's propaganda and thought work, which served as an international lesson that complemented the CCP's own domestic experience in the 1980s. It briefly examines the reform policies of perestroika and glasnost in the realm of ideological control in the Soviet Union, along with the consequences these policies produced in Soviet society. It then focuses on how the changes in the Soviet Union were interpreted by Chinese society, both by Party cadres and the general public, from the early stages of reform to the Soviet Union's eventual collapse.

This chapter argues that Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost significantly contributed to the Soviet Union's eventual dissolution. The collapse served as a stark warning to the CCP that excessive political liberalization in the Gorbachev style would be dangerously destabilizing. This lesson constituted the second pole that the CCP must consciously avoid in shaping its propaganda and thought work. Moreover, the final years of the CPSU demonstrated the irreversibility of such ideological liberalization. Hence, the CCP deemed it necessary to recalibrate its propaganda and thought work by drawing lessons from both the "Maoist pole" and the "1980s pole," in order to safeguard long-term durability.

The lesson drawn from Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost was not merely a return to Maoist-style ideological control through the re-politicization of everyday life. It is true that, beginning in mid-1989, the conservative faction within the CCP gained the upper hand, and the country appeared to be led by hardline cadres, who strictly adhered to leftist principles. However, the CCP also recognized the potentially even graver consequences of such conservatism, consequences starkly illustrated by the final years of the Soviet Union. As many scholars have noted, Gorbachev, unlike Deng, prioritized political reform and regarded it as foundational to all other reforms. This emphasis ultimately gave rise to widespread political cynicism and historical nihilism, culminating in a "bottom-up revolution," in which the general populace began to politicize their everyday hardships and frustrations as critiques of the Soviet system. Thus, although Gorbachev's prioritization of political reform and his permissiveness toward pluralism were widely regarded as the actions of "an idiot," directly leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the sequence of political and economic reforms, as well as the degree of tolerated pluralism, ultimately mattered little. In fact, contrary to the views held by many scholars, the attitudes of Deng and Gorbachev toward political liberalization were, to a large extent, similar.

Given the sociopolitical context, one could argue that in both countries, the original ideological wall vanished along a similar trajectory, the only difference being that Gorbachev permanently lost the opportunity to reconstruct it. In terms of rebuilding the wall, of course, the temporary Maoist reversal adopted by the CCP could not succeed, as they created a paradox, not only in the economic realm, given the Party's continued pursuit of economic prosperity, but more importantly in the ideological domain. A return to Maoist-style politicization would be ineffective in producing, in the Foucauldian sense, "docile bodies," since the operational mechanisms of the state's propaganda apparatus had already been laid bare to the public and thus had become intolerable.

Indeed, Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost provided the CCP with an anti-model in modifying its propaganda and thought work. However, the lesson was not so much a cautionary tale as a mirrored experience, one that, in many respects, had already taken shape within Chinese society during the 1980s. The CCP needed to avoid a confrontational mode of politicization, having witnessed the corrosive impact of pervasive cynicism and historical nihilism in the Soviet Union—sentiments that were likewise present in Chinese society. This did not mean that the CCP deemed politicization unnecessary; rather, it recognized the need for a form of politicization marked by depoliticizing characteristics: one that could effectively reconstruct the ideological wall by resonating with the cognitive orientation of the Chinese populace. Thus, the emphasis on both upholding the Four Cardinal Principles and adapting Marxism-Leninism to "new situations" by successive Party leaders served to maximize the effectiveness of the new Party-favored politicization, while simultaneously signaling the Party's inclusiveness toward a diversity of voices in the public sphere, especially as the Soviet Union, and its prolonged Stalinist era, came to be viewed not only by its own populace but, more importantly, by the Chinese public as running counter to the grand tide of the 1980s.

Chapter 4

Manufactured Freedom through Propaganda and Thought Work: The Creation of Docility after Emancipation

Previous studies have identified several important features of the CCP's propaganda and thought work in the post-1980s era. First, the Party shifted from Maoist-style repression to a softer approach, allowing a certain degree of public criticism. This new strategy aimed to persuade rather than coerce, by guiding people to stay on the "correct track" and emphasizing the Party's ongoing supportive stance toward the people. Second, the Party relies heavily on censorship, and the general population in China is subject to pervasive surveillance. Punishments may be applied depending on the content, context, and the identity of the speaker. Top-down state censorship has gradually evolved into a form of self-censorship, in which individuals voluntarily remain silent to avoid potential repercussions. Third, the Party has utilized increasingly advanced technologies to deliver ideological indoctrination in immersive ways that make the message more convincing. Such immersive and penetrative propaganda strategies allow the Party's messages to be more effectively delivered, thereby facilitating its efforts to reject Western values and promote its own ideological narratives, including those aligned with leftist theories of democracy.

However, as discussed in the Thesis Introduction, important questions remain unanswered, and the models or analytical approaches proposed by previous studies for understanding the CCP's propaganda are still subject to critique and refinement.

First, although the Party attempted mass persuasion through the deliberate allowance of criticism and the guidance of public opinion, its credibility had already been significantly undermined by its past. As demonstrated in the previous three chapters, China has entered a post-trust era since the late Mao period: a condition that was further entrenched during the 1980s. Thus, the Party's deliberate allowance of public criticism has become widely recognized and remains observable to ordinary citizens. In response, Chinese society has developed certain forms of satire targeting this mechanism of "permitted criticism." Consequently, mere tolerance of limited dissent is insufficient to keep the populace ideologically aligned. What is further required is a restoration of credibility in the Party's official media. Furthermore, the guidance of public opinion is not monolithic. Given the existing sociopolitical pluralism in Chinese society, the Party must tailor its guidance to different segments of the population. Otherwise, it risks provoking greater resistance instead of fostering a perception of support. Therefore, more attention should be paid to how the Party responds differently to diverse groups within society.

Secondly, the blocking of information flows has become increasingly ineffective in preventing people from accessing censored information. It can be argued that information control is becoming increasingly insignificant to the Party's ideological control, as the general public continues to devise countless ways to circumvent it. Self-censorship, though pervasive, is itself a product of fear-based state repression, and paradoxically, its expansion may further stimulate the development of subtle, grassroots strategies to resist the Party's control. What is more, China's expanding interaction with Western countries is inherently incongruent with, and even paradoxical to, its information control. Therefore, this analytical framework is somewhat problematic, as it overlooks the Party's sustained stability despite a growing segment of the Chinese population who are no longer fully subject to the Party's control. Instead of merely relying on information control, what the Party ultimately seeks to cultivate is docile bodies in the Foucauldian sense.

Third, the state's use of modern technologies to more effectively disseminate its messages has indeed encouraged the general public to proactively engage in the Party's propaganda and thought work. However, this does not necessarily imply a full-scale politicization of entertainment in everyday life. A politicization resembling that of the Maoist era is easily perceived by the public and thus risks provoking widespread sarcasm. Therefore, in evaluating the effectiveness of this form of soft propaganda, it is essential to examine how Chinese society is decoupled, or at the very least, appears to be decoupled, from politics.

Borrowing from the analytical frameworks of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci, this chapter examines the key characteristics of the Chinese Communist Party's post-1980s propaganda strategy, with particular attention to how the Party seeks to enhance the effectiveness of its propaganda and thought work as a means of cultivating social discipline among the general populace. The analysis begins with an examination of the Party's retrospective assessment of the tumultuous 1980s, and the overarching directives issued by Party leaders concerning propaganda and thought work. It then compares the discourse of various central-level official media outlets on identical topics, uncovering significant divergences in their narratives and thereby suggesting the presence of a model of "artificial democracy" within the Party's propaganda system. The third section turns to the analysis of a depoliticized Chinese society, examining everyday political expressions and popular discourse that reflect the Party's strategic flexibility in propaganda and thought work. The final part assesses cases of punishments carried out by the Party, which facilitate and reinforce the perception of the existence of the wall among the populace.

This chapter argues that the Party's propaganda and thought work in the post-1980s era, shaped by lessons learned from the two extremes of the Maoist model and the liberalizing 1980s, is a middle ground between the two. It can largely be understood within the framework of "grasping the large and letting the small go." On issues deemed "big" or fundamental, the Party has consistently maintained absolute control, regarding them as vital to its "overall interests," though the methods of control have varied. The periodic political education campaigns launched in this period were not a reversion to Maoist practices. Rather, they were comparatively much less socially intrusive and coercive, and increasingly incorporated elements of traditional Chinese values that enjoyed broader societal acceptance. Regarding the "small issues," the Party's propaganda and thought work operates more subtly and imperceptibly, shaping public perception through the construction of a "choreographed democracy" and the use of "Party-oriented echo chambers." Official media outlets have been strategically differentiated, each assigned with distinctive features to target specific audiences and address their "multilayered, multifaceted, and diversified spiritual and cultural needs." Within this framework, individuals are able to encounter supportive narratives from the Party's official voice, which serve to de-escalate potential confrontations by reinforcing the perception that "the Party stands with me." Moreover, the carefully orchestrated discursive disputes among official media outlets have created an illusion of democratic pluralism, appealing to the public's lingering aspiration for democracy shaped during the tumultuous 1980s. This illusion was further reinforced by the Party's designated main melody, depoliticization, which has prevailed in Chinese society. Under this framework, literary and artistic works with critical tones, as well as social criticism and even satire targeting Party leaders, have been largely tolerated, marking a complete departure from the coercive Mao era. To prevent subversion, the Party has punished those who either disseminated alternative ideologies or made "slightly incorrect" remarks while possessing the potential for mass mobilization. These punishments serve as warnings of the ideological walls that exist

within society, effectively deterring individuals from engaging in subversive behavior. In doing so, the Party seeks to avoid a repeat of the overt liberalism that emerged in the 1980s, a period it now regards as a cautionary lesson.

Chapter 5

Reframing the Main Melody: New Trends in Propaganda and Thought Work and the Consequences

Existing literature has examined the Party's propaganda and thought work in the recent decade from multiple perspectives. Scholars generally agree that it has revitalized key elements of ideological governance that were once unfavored. At the same time, the Party's propaganda efforts have become more persuasive and technologically sophisticated, particularly through its effective use of digital platforms to shape public opinion, in which these intensified methods have played a crucial role in reinforcing the regime's durability in a changing sociopolitical environment.

However, it is crucial for the Party to avoid returning to the unfavored trajectory. A drastic departure from the post-1980s model risks generating a similar wave of public disillusionment. Thus, a sociopolitical perspective is needed to examine how society has responded to recent changes in the ideological realm, in order to comprehensively assess the effectiveness of the transformation in China's propaganda and thought work. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the general populace in China has undergone a process of thought emancipation, and the influence of Westernization in the ideological realm appears irreversible.

This chapter aims to evaluate the validity of the conclusion drawn in Chapter 4, also the central argument of this thesis, by assessing the consequences resulting from the Party's departure from the post-1980s model.

This chapter suggests that the Party's propaganda and thought work has undergone a profound transformation over the past decade. All media outlets have been brought into highly unified alignment, shedding the "distinctive features" that had been deliberately and carefully cultivated over previous decades. Depoliticization is no longer the dominant tone in Chinese society, and people have grown markedly cautious in their speech. This led to some unintended consequences. They signaled that the Party may need to revert to the more flexible, depoliticized model of its propaganda and thought work developed in the post-1980s reform era.

Conclusion

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party has consistently sought effective means to maintain ideological control over the population, thereby ensuring political stability. In drawing a sharp distinction from "Old China," the creation of "socialist new men" in the "New China" has remained a central objective for the Party. This involves fundamentally "socializing" the vast majority of the population by encouraging the rejection of "feudal" and "bourgeois" values and embracing socialist values as the only "correct" ones. However, it is unquestionable that fundamentally eradicating the past is no easy task. More importantly, the challenges to socialist indoctrination, such as public indifference, resistance, and the persistence of alternative ideas rooted in both internal and external factors, have forced the Party to adapt its propaganda and thought work to shifting sociopolitical dynamics. In particular, the increasingly "modernized" population, whose values have become more difficult for the Party to control due to rising economic affluence, literacy, and access to education, posed significant ideological challenges. Thus, the evolution of the Party's propaganda and thought work is arguably a form of reactionary modernization, in which the Party has touched many "stones" while "crossing the river."

Drawing on the "stones" it had felt, the Party ultimately identified the post-1980s model as the most effective "modernized" form of ideological governance. This model selectively and strategically incorporates elements from both the Maoist approach and the liberal reforms of the 1980s, thereby formulating what I have termed the Party's strategy of politicization with depoliticizing characteristics. Hence, the Party's "most successful" model should not be seen as a complete departure from either the Maoist or the 1980s approach, but rather as an integration that incorporates both continuities and ruptures from each.

In the ideological realm, the Party's propaganda and thought work, though ultimately serving the Party's interests and remaining limited, nonetheless exhibits a number of democratic elements that are also present in Western democratic systems. The trajectory of sociopolitical dynamics from the Mao era to the present, as demonstrated in this thesis, illustrates the need to move beyond the traditional democracy-authoritarianism binary framework in analyzing China's ideological realm, as political stability in China fundamentally relies on a middle ground between the two. The Party's resilience would be severely undermined both by the absence of democratic elements and by an overly liberal orientation. Therefore, any shifts in the Party's propaganda and thought work should be analyzed through the lens of whether they approximate the post-1980s model, rather than a Western-style democracy, which may be an overly optimistic and impractical benchmark.