

Cultivating and Communicating Nationalism: Marketing China's Foreign Policy to its citizens in the 20th Chinese Communist Party National Congress
Centre for Democratic Politics, University of Leeds, 1 November 2022

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Abstract

This data memo examines the coverage of Chinese paramount leader Xi Jinping's speech at the opening of the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party on Chinese social media. It finds that elements of the speech concerning Taiwan and military and foreign policy were focused on in official reporting, which constituted the entirety of coverage of the congress online during the period examined. In addition to media outlets publishing identical extracts from Xi's speech, the police, public safety and judicial state organs also posted these identical quotes, contributing to a homogenous picture of coverage on social media that acts as part of a wider narrative to create a picture of massive support and unity behind the announced ideas. This messaging presents two delicate, discursive balancing acts concerning what constitutes an internal issue and what constitutes external interference, and around how aggressive language and military preparations can be made consistent with ideas of a peaceful, benevolent country. There were notable elements of messaging that seemed aimed not just to convince a domestic Chinese audience about the justness of reunification with Taiwan but also the need for individual citizens to strengthen their preparedness for war. Given the history of nationalistic mobilisation in China, these elements of not just discursive, ideological justification to citizens of military action but also, even subtle, calls for individual citizen action is something that should be keenly watched by those seeking to understand the scope of the CCP's future policy vis-à-vis Taiwan.

The 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party

The National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party is the most important event in the Chinese political calendar. Held every five years, the National Congress is an event of political theatre at which top-level leadership changes are announced and major policy directions are outlined in speeches. Chinese paramount leader Xi Jinping opened the 20th National Congress on Sunday 16 October 2022 with a speech intended to outline the achievements of the last five years and set the tone for the next five.

This speech was notable for its strong language on Taiwan that was seen as a "warning" (Davidson and Graham-Harrison 2022). Questions over whether

this language indicated an elevation in the risk of invasion or military action by the CCP against the island in the near future were widely discussed in the media (Davidson 2022; Graham-Harrison et al. 2022; Pan 2022; Sui 2022).

However, this reporting has been based almost exclusively on Xi Jinping's speech and expert commentary on that speech. Although the speech has given reporters and analysts indications of the publicised direction of Xi Jinping's historic third term, it is only one single text. Much more can be learned about China's intended messages about its foreign policy plans by the nature and content of Chinese state propaganda efforts on domestic social media around the speech.

China's cybernationalism and Taiwan

As an un-elected political party holding power for more than 70 years, the CCP must seek alternative avenues to cultivate legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese public. The idea that the CCP unified China after the instability of the Republican Period (1912-1949) is a major pillar upon which it bases its legitimacy to govern (Brown 2015, p.60).

This statement provides an indication of why Taiwan, among China's many territorial disputes holds such weight for the CCP. The CCP fought a civil war (1927-1937, 1945-1949) against China's Republican Government led by the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT). The CCP beat the KMT to take power in mainland China in the Communist Revolution of 1949. After this defeat, the KMT retreated to Taiwan where they remain a major force in Taiwanese politics. The island of Taiwan, just 180 km from mainland China across the Taiwan Strait, represents territory where the Communist Revolution remains incomplete.

Cultivating nationalism among the Chinese population on issues such as Taiwan and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has formed a major pillar of the CCP's continued efforts to bolster its legitimacy (Strecker Downs and Saunders 1998). Since the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square, the CCP has engaged in a widespread policy of Patriotic Education through the Central Propaganda Department; this effort aims to cultivate a powerful nationalism in the Chinese people and shift their focus from domestic to foreign problems (Callahan 2010).

Not only is traditional and social media used to distribute nationalistic propaganda, but online spaces have also become a major space in which Chinese citizens consume, respond to, negotiate and organise around nationalism (Schneider 2018). For instance, after the election of Taiwanese President

Tsai Ing-wen in 2016, members of a mainland Chinese messaging board organised to "jump" the Great Firewall and post numerous pro-mainland messages on Tsai's Facebook page (Monaco 2017).

Although the sensitivity of the 20th Party Congress means that we would be unlikely to see individual user response to the CCP's nationalistic messaging, past events have demonstrated the crucial importance of online channels for disseminating the state's patriotic educational messaging. An analysis of state online propaganda around Xi Jinping's 20th Party Congress speech would add much to our understanding of the messages contained in that speech because it would illuminate not only the text of that speech (as has been covered in international media) but also how domestic Chinese media were instructed to communicate that to Chinese citizens.

Dataset

In order to investigate Chinese propaganda messaging to its citizens around the opening of the 20th Party Congress, this data memo focuses on messaging on Sina Weibo.

Sina Weibo is the largest open social media platform in China with more than 250 million active daily users. Although Weixin has more monthly active users than Weibo, its messaging functionality is much more closed, meaning it is used less as a place for distribution of news information. Analysis of a leak of fabricated Chinese propaganda posts found that 53% of these posts were to government websites and 47% to commercial websites; of the posts to commercial websites, more than half were made to Sina Weibo, demonstrating the importance of Sina Weibo as a space for the distribution of Chinese state propaganda messaging (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017).

This research focuses on Sina Weibo discourse on Saturday 15th October, Sunday

16th October and Monday 17th October – the day before the opening of the CCP Congress, the day of the opening of the Congress and the day after the opening of the Congress – in order to capture pre- and post-discussion of Xi's speech at the opening of the National Congress.

Custom Python scripts were created that scraped the Weibo hot topics list (equivalent to Twitter's trending topics) every 15 minutes during the study period, from 00:00 on Saturday 15th through 23:45 on Monday 17th (Chinese time). Between 37 and 49 hot topics were returned per successful query, with an average of 44.1 hot topics per successful query. Out of the 288 total queries (96 per day), there were four instances (1%) in which the script failed to scrape any hot topics due to network and connectivity issues.

Every 15 minutes, after the hot topics on Weibo were scraped, the top posts in each of those hot topics were scraped. Due to the large volume of data collected in a short time, it was not always possible to collect data in all hot topics. The script started with the most popular of the approximately 40 hot topics and continued for 15 minutes until the next query was initiated. Out of 13,018 hot topics collected across the three days at each 15-minute interval, post data was collected in 11,821 of these topics (90.8%). On average, 13.4 posts were collected in each hot topic at each 15-minute interval.

Weibo's Hot Topics focus on the Congress and on the Taiwan/foreign policy elements of Xi's speech

Across the three days, data was collected in 496 unique topics. The most prevalent hot topics overwhelming focused on the 20th Party Congress and on the Taiwan/Foreign Policy Elements of Xi's Speech (Figure 1).

Among the ten most prevalent trending topics on Weibo during the three-day

period, nine concerned the CCP Congress. Of these, four were relatively generic reporting of the congress, one addressed China's COVID policy, one reported Xi's statement's on China's future and three were quotes from Xi's speech concerning Taiwan and nationalistic foreign policy propaganda.

Figure 1: Top 10 Hot Topics on Weibo, 15-17th October

1. 20th Party Congress Report (二十大报告)
2. Solving the Taiwan issue is the Chinese people's business (解决台湾问题是中国人自己的事)
3. Golden Sentences from the 20th Party Congress Report (二十大报告金句)
4. Welcome 20th Party Congress (你好二十大)
5. China will never seek hegemony and never engage in expansion (中国永远不称霸永远不搞扩张)
6. The CCP's central task from this point forward (从现在起中国共产党的中心任务)
7. Alipay has supported transfers to WeChat QQ friends (支付宝已支持给微信 QQ 好友转账)
8. The 20th National Congress Spokespersons Responds Concerning Epidemic Prevention and Control (二十大发言人回应疫情防控)
9. We must comprehensively strengthen training and preparations for war (我们要全面加强练兵备战)
10. Agenda of the 20th Party Congress (二十大议程)

In order to understand, how the political theatre of the 20th Party Congress was being reported to Chinese citizens in online state propaganda, the posts collected in all 10 of these trending topics were examined. However, this data memo

largely focuses on the posts in the three hot topics related to Taiwan, the military and foreign policy:

- Solving the Taiwan issue is the Chinese people's business (in which 99 posts were collected);
- China will never seek hegemony and never engage in expansion (in which 68 posts were collected);
- and We must comprehensively strengthen training and preparations for war (in which 39 posts were collected).

Official, top-down communication

Across all trends, communication is official and top-down. Although in other foreign policy trends collected from Weibo in the proceeding weeks, commentary from the accounts of online opinion leaders and individual users was widely captured, posts within 20th Party Congress trends came only from news organisations or official state accounts.

Within these posts, no retweeting was present (which is again uncommon). However, there was an extreme lack of diversity/extreme homogeneity in messaging. It appeared more as if all accounts were posting the same supplied, endorsed posts.

For instance, within the China will never seek hegemony and never engage in expansion topic, 50 of the 68 collected posts (74%) were the exact same lengthy quote from Xi's speech, referenced to CCTV. This was posted as an original post (rather than a retweet) by a wide variety of news organisation from CCTV, The China Daily and The Global Times to smaller news outlets and state voices such as the Yunnan Police, Guangdong Public Security Bureau and the Ningxia News Network.

Although it is not surprising that communications about the event are

extremely controlled, it is worth remembering the experience a user engaging with this hot topic would have. Clicking on or searching for the topic on the platform, they would be met with a wall of messages, treated by the platform as original and different (since they were not retweets), that were nevertheless all exactly the same. Psychological research on misinformation has shown that repeated information seems more true (Foster et al. 2012) and therefore the extremely repetitive nature of reporting on the main points of Xi's speech in Chinese traditional and social media is likely to increase audience belief in its factuality and validity.

Also, of note are the types of voices speaking within these trends. Unsurprisingly, most of the voices are media organisations and the rest are state organs, but what is interesting is which state organs are participating. The state accounts posting are almost invariably either police and public security or judicial organs.

It might have been hypothesised that this is because these trends focused on foreign policy issues which are more aligned with the police and the judiciary. However, within the trend the 20th National Congress Spokespersons Responds Concerning Epidemic Prevention and Control there were no posts by public health organs or hospitals but there were posts from judicial voices – the Guangzhou Huangpu Court, the Weifang City Hanting Notary Public Office, the Prosecutors Office of Chengcheng County, Weinan City, Shaanxi Province and the Public Security Bureau of Yibin City, Sichuan Province. The fact that the state voices posting within these trends are predominantly from public security and judiciary accounts suggests to the audience, firstly, that these messages are backed by the strongest possible enforcement mechanisms and, secondly, that the full military, policing and judicial apparatus is behind these messages.

On the flip side, as discussed in greater length in Goron and Bolsover (2019), state organs at all levels in China are instructed to be active online but also risk penalties from anything they post; this means that the safest thing an account can do to fulfil its online activity quota is to post (or repost) information already posted by a higher branch of the state structure. However, in keeping with the incentive structure system outlined in Goron and Bolsover (2019), this results in the repetition of official lines by a multitude of state outlets in a way that floods online spaces with these official perspectives, crowds out any potential discussion or criticism, and acts to increase the perceived truthfulness of that information through repetition.

Creating an impression of widespread support of the CCP's position on Taiwan

In keeping with the structural repetition of Xi's words by a cacophony of official media and state voices noted above, the text of messages about Xi's messages concerning Taiwan foregrounded the idea of widespread support and fervour for these messages. In the reporting on the topic Solving the Taiwan issue is the Chinese people's business, four of the 68 posts prefaced the standard quotation from the speech with the hashtag "the audience of the 20th Party Congress erupted with a very long applause" and a fifth offered a slight rewording of this framing sentence saying: "long applause broke out among the audience of the 20th Party Congress."

Not only is the Party Congress an act of political pageantry that foregrounds ideas of huge support for the announced policies, with images of thousands of visually-similar delegates unanimously voting and applauding, but an apparent unanimity is also conveyed in the volume of identical reporting from media and state organs about the Congress proceedings.

It is also notable that a number of lower level government organs such as the account of the Zigong Public Security Bureau, the Huzhou Public Security Traffic Police and the account of Ping'an Lu County posted a very similarity worded message that called Xi's phrase that the Taiwan issue was the Chinese people's business inspiring.

The word inspiring was also used frequently in reference to Xi's quote that China will never seek hegemony and never engage in expansion with outlets including the Department of Justice of Sichuan Province, the Prosecutor's Office of Huanglong County, Yan'an City, Shaanxi Province and Bureau of Justice of Longnan City, Gansu Province all posting that people should study and learn from these inspiring words.

In addition to the effects of repetition already discussed, abundant research has demonstrated a bandwagon effect whereby individuals adopt beliefs or behaviours because they believe others have done so (Nadeau, Cloutier, and Guay 1993). Therefore, the aforementioned repetition combined with messages of support and admiration and reports of support would also serve to increase the uptake of these views among their audience.

In this vein, it is also notable that Xi's quoted words on Taiwan framed China's activities as aimed at the "interference of external forces and the very few 'Taiwan independence' separatists' not the 'vast majority of Taiwan.'" By painting the issue as external, China's actions towards Taiwan's democratically elected government and its supporters are legitimised. Further, by claiming that there are only a few individuals in Taiwan who support independence and, by implication, that the majority support reunification, Xi's position is bolstered both in terms of legitimising reunification as something the Taiwanese people want and in terms of,

again, creating a full bandwagon of characters supporting Xi's words.

This is important to note that Xi's statements on the desires of the Taiwanese people are not supported by available data. Polls by the national election study centre in Taiwan for the past 17 years have consistently found only a small minority of individuals supporting reunification. In 2021, only 1.2% supported immediate reunification and 5.6% gradual movements towards reunification. In contrast, 27.5% supported indefinitely maintaining the status quo, 28.2% supported the status quo with a decision at a later date and 25.8% supported gradual movement towards impendence (Election Study Center 2022).

Given this, there is an interesting circularity in Xi's headline statement that solving the Taiwan issue¹ is the Chinese people's own business. If Taiwan is part of the motherland, they are therefore Chinese and part of the Chinese people who should decide the political future of the island. However, only a tiny minority of the Chinese people living in Taiwan support even eventual reunification. Therefore, the misinformation that the majority of Taiwanese are compatriots and that support for independence is derived from external forces has to be maintained. This constructs a delicately balanced message that seeks to exclude other countries from supporting Taiwan by arguing that this is interference in China's own affairs and that it is up to the Chinese people alone to solve, but which also must ignore and explain away the documented wishes of the Taiwanese on the matter.

Supporting this messaging, a number of mainland Chinese media outlets associated with either Hong Kong or Taiwan posted in

this hot topic further information that suggested Taiwanese support for CCP politics towards Taiwan. The Hong Kong Dagong Weinhui Media Group, which publishes a number of newspapers in Hong Kong, and Voice of the Strait, a PLA owned radio station aimed at Taiwan, both posted the same message saying that relevant political parties, groups and people in Taiwan expressed their congratulations in various forms upon the occasion of the convening of the 20th Party Congress and added: Solving the Taiwan issue is the Chinese people's own business.

Phoenix Television, a Hong Kong and Shenzhen station, posted similar sentiments adding the specific that the 1992 Consensus (which is credited as having established a platform for semi-official cross-strait relations) opposed Taiwanese independence. It is notable that these statements are coming from CCP-supporting Hong Kong and Taiwanese media groups (and not for other sources), as it plays into ideas of support of the Taiwanese people and Taiwanese political establishment for unification both among mainland Chinese citizens and those Taiwanese and Hong Kong citizens consuming these CCP-aligned media sources.

Another delicate balancing act: maintain peace by preparing for war

Throughout the messaging on Taiwan, the military and foreign policy, Xi constructs another delicate balance between ideas of a commitment to peace but a preparation for war. In the main quotation in the hot topic solving the Taiwan issue is the Chinese people's business, Xi says that China will "never promise to give up on the use of force and reserves the option of taking all

¹ The use of the phrase Taiwan issue is, of course, another piece of discursive power since it implies that there is a problem that needs solving, which favours the CCP's argument over Taiwanese public

opinion in which more than 50% want to continue the status quo either indefinitely or with a decision at a later date.

necessary measures." He promises that "complete reunification of the motherland will surely be achieved" and says the "historical wheels of national reunification and national rejuvenation are moving forward and the complete reunification of the motherland must be realised and can be realised." It is this combination of clear statement that military force is not off the table and clear commitment to reunification that has led to media reporting that questions whether China will take military action against Taiwan during Xi's third term.

It is, however, notable the extent to which the hallmarks of Xi's speech communicated to Chinese citizens on social media via official propaganda channels focus on constructing this delicate balance with the chosen hashtags/quotes: China will never seek hegemony and never engage in expansion, and we must comprehensively strengthen training and preparations for war.

The second most widely disseminated phrase from Xi's speech after solving the Taiwan issue is the Chinese people's business was China will never seek hegemony and never engage in expansion. This is another delicate act of legitimisation, seemingly designed to counter the opposing arguments to China's planned reunification.

This constructs the idea that not only would military force to reunify China not be an act of aggressive expansion but also that China would never engage in expansion. This phrasing has a secondary implication of attempting to undermine those voices who might call CCP forceful reunification of Taiwan an act of aggression as this is something China would never do. Thus, even to accuse the CCP of planning or considering an aggressive act of territorial expansion would be an affront to China.

As part of the quoted statement in this hot topic, Xi says that "China firmly pursues and independent foreign policy of peace,

always decides its own position and policy according to the merits of the matter itself, safeguarding the basic norms of international relations, safeguarding international fairness and justice and firmly opposing all forms of hegemonic and power politics... (including) interference in other countries internal affairs and double standards." This is important messaging as it sets up a new (and competing) set of international norms of international relations/fairness and justice.

This language is powerful as it, on the one hand, linguistically ascribes China as 100% committed to the norms of international relations they are often accused of contravening in their foreign policy but, on the other, subtly constructs a different set of international norms to those espoused by Western countries around the principles that China foregrounds, including non-interference in what the country deems its own internal affairs. It is important to note here that there are existing strong international norms that see appropriateness in so-called intervention in the internal affairs of other countries, for instance, to protect against the repression and genocide of minorities or a forceful deposition of a democratically elected government.

Within the hot topic we must comprehensively strengthen military training and preparations, 32 of the 39 posts (82%) quoted exactly the same section of Xi's speech saying that China must comprehensively strengthen military training and preparations. Within this quote, Xi mentioned that China needed to improve the PLA's ability to win, build a strong strategic deterrent force system and develop the people's war strategies and tactics. This final point is interesting because it expands military preparedness not only within the military but also throughout the population. Given that 1) the Chinese education system contains mandatory military training and that 2) past

evidence has shown significant segments of the Chinese population self-mobilising and self-organising behind state nationalistic messaging, continued discourse in this vein might result in more grassroots organisation behind the goals of state-disseminated nationalistic propaganda messaging.

An interesting addendum in this hot topic came in three (identical) posts from the Wenxian Justice Bureau, Longnan City, Gansu Province; the Political and Legal Committee of the Chengdu Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China; and the Tianjin Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League. These posts noted it was 58 years ago to the day that Premier Zhou Enlai announced the success of China's first atomic bomb explosion.

These three posts again foregrounded ideas of overwhelming support for these movements saying: "Everyone can cheer, but don't let the floor collapse." Both posts also reinforced ideas of citizen mobilisation behind military efforts saying "Chinese, straighten your back!" before adding the hashtag quotation: we must comprehensively strengthen military training and preparations. In this construction, it becomes not just a national but also a personal responsibility to strengthen training and preparations for war.

Although these statements have come from a single (albeit very important) speech, observers of Chinese foreign policy should be cognisant of any increase in formal messaging from the state during Xi's third term about the need for citizen preparations for war. The risk of military action against Taiwan can be read not just from formal statements from Xi and other high-ranking politicians and diplomats widely reported in international media, but perhaps more importantly in the messaging that the CCP chooses to disseminate to its population

regarding the justification of and the need for preparation for potential military action.

Conclusions

As expected, the highly visible and highly controlled political pageantry of the CCP's 20th National Congress was reflected in Chinese social media coverage. During the opening of the Congress, nine of the top ten hot topics on Weibo (as well 13 of the top 25) concerned the Congress. Within these topics the main substantive focus was on Taiwan and foreign/military policy.

The structure of state communications through official propaganda channels acted to reinforce on multiple levels ideas of support and unanimity behind Xi's announced policies. Within these topics, the only voices came from official media organisations and from state organs, overwhelmingly police, public safety and judiciary. Although none of these organisations posted via retweeting, they all posted one of a small number of basically identical messages, likely contributing to powerful repetition and bandwagon effects among the domestic Chinese audience of these posts.

The language in these posts strikes delicate balances in their communications to Chinese citizens around what constitutes an internal issue and what constitutes external interference, and around how aggressive language and military preparations can be made consistent with ideas of a peaceful, benevolent country. Although both balances are delicate, tenuous and much more complicated than the discourse belies, with the CCP holding such firm control of the media narrative in reporting on the 20th Party Congress they cannot be domestically unpacked.

An interesting element of the messaging was that it sought not just to convince the domestic Chinese audience of the rightness and justification of any potential military

action, but also hinted at a need or civic duty for civilians to strengthen their military preparedness. In a context in which there is compulsory (albeit limited) military training within the formal education system and in which there has been a history of individuals self-organising behind state-promoted nationalistic discourse, the extent of communications to the Chinese people that aims not just to theoretically convince but to inspire or glorify action should be keenly watched.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the support of Google's Cloud Computing Research Credits Grant scheme that provides access to Google computational infrastructure for data collection, storage and analysis.

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