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Beyond Persuasion: Propaganda as Signaling in
Chinese Public-Schools

By

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Abstract

What powers do propaganda have beyond persuasion, and what legislative infrastructure has been implemented in modern China to develop this power? This paper is an analysis of the systematic implementation of cultural symbolism through the theoretical lens of propaganda as signaling to investigate how patriotic education is systematically instituted in public primary, secondary, and high schools to target “troublesome” groups such as student protestors after Tiananmen Square following the pro-democracy student movement in 1989, Uyghur groups in Xinjiang following the 2009 conflict with Uyghur ethnic minorities, and students involved in the ongoing protests in Hong Kong since the handover from the United Kingdom in 1997. While there is a concerted effort on the part of the CCP to utilize symbolism to foster and develop a sense of a Chinese national identity or *Zhōngguó shēnfèn* (中國身份),¹ this implementation of propaganda also has the effect of repressing those who hold differences of opinion by signaling the party’s strength, and quelling public signals of those who would mobilize opposition. Though often dismissed as irrelevant by scholars in the post-Ideological world, a growing body of scholarship argues that propaganda can be powerful even when it is not persuasive. To understand this power, this paper will implement the theoretical model of propaganda as signaling investigating the manner in which state crafted symbolism is manipulated in public-schools to propagate symbols to students. This paper will further investigate how students are then themselves turned into cultural symbols in China. Given the limitations of the context in which this work is constructed, this paper is not an empirical analysis of the ramifications of

¹ Fen Lin and Sixian Lin, “Why Framing National Identity Fails: A Case Study of the Anti-Moral and National Education Movement in Hong Kong,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3032869>.

propaganda as signaling in schools, but an analysis of the political infrastructure that has been developed within China to construct nationalism, and repress rebelliousness in schools.

Introduction

The school day starts bright and early with a familiar buzz of excitement. Students get dropped off in front of campus, passing by friends, and greeting hello to their teachers. Young boys and girls race around the playground momentarily, discussing their weekends and the assignments they may or not have completed. While this scene may be familiar to many around the globe, the scene that follows is known best by students of China.

On this Monday morning, children assemble in neat rows with their red scarfs blowing in the wind. With their uniforms neat and tidy, the marching begins. In a choreographed manner, and in time with the chanting of slogans, a group of students march down the path, as the Chinese flag is raised above the school of Heung To Middle School in Hong Kong.

This particular scene is new to Hong Kong, but familiar to many students across mainland China. For decades, students on the mainland have engaged in a similar ritual as the start to public-school weeks. But, after the legislation that mandated flag raising ceremonies in Hong Kong, these rituals have become more and more familiar.² As the students line up along the green trees to raise the red flag, reporters snap photographs that will soon be broadcast, along with other propaganda, across a series of state-run media platforms throughout China, and

² Rhoda Kwan, "All Hong Kong Schools Must Display Chinese National Flag, Hold Weekly Flag-Raising Ceremonies from next Year," Hong Kong Free Press HKFP, October 12, 2021, <https://hongkongfp.com/2021/10/12/all-hong-kong-schools-must-display-chinese-national-flag-hold-weekly-flag-raising-ceremonies-from-next-year/>.

translated to be disseminated across the planet.³ For generations, students have been a very familiar component of spreading the party's propaganda.⁴

At this flag raising ceremony, there are two groups of students present: the older students who allegedly came voluntarily to the function, and the younger students for whom attendance was mandatory. Several of the older students who voluntarily came praised the ceremony. Their remarks were quoted in a *China Daily* news article titled, "Students: Flag-raising Ceremony Helps Foster National Identity."⁵ In this article, the older students applaud the wave of education reforms in Hong Kong for their efforts to increase national identity in the city.

One student was quoted as saying, "Teachers talked about national identity in class, but I think it's not enough. We need such events, out of the classroom, to experience and feel it."⁶ The article goes on to say that one student,

Louie Ho-shun, leader of the school's flag-raising team, said that the ceremony could consolidate student's sense of national identity as it offers a good chance for them to grasp a better understanding of the nation and its symbols – the flag and the national anthem.⁷

Despite the praise from the students who attended voluntarily, none of the students who were forced to attend were quoted in the article. Though these students were not given an opportunity to have their thoughts spread with the same enthusiasm as those who attended

³ Shih-Wen Sue Chen and Sin Wen Lau, "From Nation Builders to Global Connectors: Children and China's Bri Propaganda," *Continuum* 35, no. 1 (October 5, 2020): pp. 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2020.1827368>.

⁴ Stephanie Donald, "Children as Political Messengers: Art, Childhood, and Continuity," in *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution*, edited by H. Evans and S. Donald, (London: Rowman and Littlefield) 79–100.

⁵ 江巍, "Students: Flag-Raising Ceremony Helps Foster National Identity," *China Daily* <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202010/04/WS5f79abb2a31024ad0ba7d2a7.html>.

⁶ 江巍, *China Daily*

⁷ 江巍, *China Daily*

voluntarily, they were still forced to attend, and their images were still circulated throughout the reach of the propaganda system.

These students at the school had another story. Just six months earlier, some of the younger children from this same school, Heung To Middle School in Hong Kong, were singing a different tune. On June 12, the *South China Morning Post* published an article titled, “Hong Kong protests: Students at Heung To Middle School hold demonstration to support music teacher allegedly let go for political beliefs.”⁸ Young students from the school had formed “human chains”⁹ and “chanted slogans against censorship”¹⁰ in protest of their music teacher, Novem Lee Kwan-pui, allegedly being let go over her “patriotic” stance.

The teacher, Novem Lee Kwan-pui was cited for allowing her students to sing the song, *Glory to Hong Kong*. In a report, Mr. Lee did not indicate that he was fired over the patriotism or political stances. He said, “The school has the right to be patriotic, but it shouldn’t censor teachers’ freedom.” At the scene of the protest where the children gathered, “a squad of uniformed police officers...announced through loud speakers that the protest was violating social distancing laws.” The students attending the protest wished to remain anonymous, and their faces were blurred out from images published online.¹¹

There is a problem with the modern analysis of Chinese education. For decades, international scholars have been concerned with the degree to which curriculum and textbooks

⁸ Tsui-kai Wong, “Hong Kong Protests: Students at Heung To Middle School Hold Demonstration to Support Music Teacher Allegedly Let Go for Political Beliefs,” *South China Morning Post*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/yp/discover/news/hong-kong/article/3088845/hong-kong-protests-students-heung-middle-school-hold>.

⁹ Tsui-kai Wong, *South China Morning Post*.

¹⁰ Tsui-kai Wong, *South China Morning Post*.

¹¹ This was not the only occurrence of students being forced to censor their symbolic protest. A student was reprimanded for bearing a flag that said, “Free Hong Kong, Revolution Now.” <https://www.scmp.com/yp/discover/news/hong-kong/article/3101567/heung-middle-school-defends-suspending-student>

have spread propaganda through classrooms. This approach is not incorrect, however, it misses the larger picture of how nationalism is spread in the Chinese education system, and the greater powers that system has. This paper hopes to expand the traditional understanding of propaganda by conducting a semiotic analysis of signals that are constructed from the central authorities of China, the effects that propaganda signals have beyond traditionally understood persuasion, and how students are crafted into propaganda signals. The Chinese state implements national imagery in education settings for three purposes: the cultivation of national identity, the repression of signals which protest the cultivation of national identity to groups such as mainland Han students after the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy student movement of 1989, Xinjiang Uyghurs after the 2009 protests, and Hong Kong students since the handover in 1997 in primary, secondary, and high schools and the construction of students as a cultural symbol for mass dissemination.

Propaganda

Propaganda is frequently analyzed as an Orwellian caricature of “brainwashing”¹² such as the craft of central theorists like Joseph Goebbels, displayed through mediums such as posters and films seen through the Stalin era. This traditional understanding of propaganda has been studied for generations. Many traditional scholars have conceptualized propaganda along its capability to persuade, as Dr. Haifeng Huang explains in his piece “Propaganda, Presumed Influence, and Collective Protest.”¹³ Scholars such as Dr. Jason Stanley of Yale have argued that

¹² Haifeng Huang, “Propaganda as Signaling,” *Comparative Politics* 47, no. 4 (2015): 419–37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43664158>.

¹³ Haifeng Huang and Nicholas Cruz, “Propaganda, Presumed Influence, and Collective Protest,” *Political Behavior*, February 8, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09683-0>. See Also Arturas Rozenas and Denis Stukal, “How Autocrats Manipulate Economic News: Evidence from Russia’s State-Controlled Television,” *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 3 (July 2019): 982–96, <https://doi.org/10.1086/703208>; Leonid Peisakhin and Arturas Rozenas, “Electoral Effects of Biased Media: Russian Television in Ukraine,” *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 3 (2018): 535–50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12355>; Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, “A Theory of Informational Autocracy,” *Journal of Public Economics* 186 (June 1, 2020): 104158,

propaganda is effective when it is used as a vehicle to mobilize people who are already pre-disposed to believe in a particular ideology.¹⁴ However, while there is merit to this analysis, this perspective on the efficacy of propaganda misses out on broader implications of the additional signals that propaganda produces beyond persuasion. For a long time, propaganda in China was analyzed through the perspective of persuasion, but more recently, scholars are beginning to analyze how propaganda can be powerful beyond persuasion.¹⁵

This article focuses on the arena of propaganda in public education of China, by introducing the theoretical tool of “propaganda as signaling,” and providing an empirical overview of concrete policies have been implemented which force students to both engage in propaganda and serve as propaganda signals. A great body of propaganda analysis has revolved around understanding propaganda in public-schools through the lens of how persuasive it was, and how successful it has been in attaining a particular goal, usually the acceptance of an ideology. To do so, many scholars analyzed the dissemination of narratives, often articulated through cultural symbols that carry deep historical significance. These cultural symbols construct a shared identity, which contribute to a crafted historical narrative which the powers that be wish to disseminate. For years, scholars have criticized how the transmission of politically charged and propagandistic textbooks in China has manipulated representations of history and the world in the effort to generate nationalism.¹⁶ Academic engagement over textbooks producing nationalism in China was complexified in recent years by scholars such as Licheng Qian, Bin Xu

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104158>; Maja Adena et al., “Radio and the Rise of The Nazis in Prewar Germany,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 130, no. 4 (November 1, 2015): 1885–1939, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjv030>.

¹⁴ Stanley, Jason. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015.

¹⁵ Haifeng Huang and Nicholas Cruz, “Propaganda, Presumed Influence, and Collective Protest,” *Political Behavior*, February 8, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09683-0>.

¹⁶ Davide Cantoni et al., “Curriculum and Ideology,” *Journal of Political Economy*, March 9, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1086/690951>.

& Dingding Chen. In the piece “Does History Education Promote Nationalism in China? A ‘Limited Effect’ Explanation,”¹⁷ these authors challenged the prevailing beliefs about the power of textbooks in classrooms to shape student’s perspectives on history, and by extension, the nationalistic fervor intended by propagator. The authors based their argument off of an empirical analysis which argued that unlike the traditional argument over the persuasive capabilities of Chinese textbooks, that there was only a ‘limited effect’ of persuasive capabilities. And while the concerns raised in this and other similar pieces are valid, they are still limited by the same traditional framework which narrowly analyzes whether or not propaganda in textbooks works to persuade students towards nationalism in China. To their credit, Licheng Qian, Bin Xu & Dingding Chen make a credible argument when they say that propaganda in modern Chinese classrooms is not as persuasive as previously thought. However, propagators still benefit from the production and dissemination of propaganda regardless of its persuasive capabilities, and there is a wealth of propaganda analysis which scholars may apply to the field of propaganda in Chinese public-schools.

Scholars such as Hannah Arendt have argued for generations that the ambition of propaganda is not just the transmission of a narrative, but the organization of a society.¹⁸ Regardless of the content, propaganda signals to an audience that the propagator has the resources and means to distribute propaganda, and force people to comply with the content of the propaganda. This display of power has the additional power of stifling signals which run counter to the state’s ideals, thus decreasing the ability for protesting forces to organize publicly. This is

¹⁷ Licheng Qian, Bin Xu, and Dingding Chen, “Does History Education Promote Nationalism in China? A ‘Limited Effect’ Explanation,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 104 (March 4, 2017): 199–212, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2016.1223103>.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

the theory of “propaganda as signaling,” which this paper will apply to the propaganda distributed through cultural symbols in contemporary China.

The theoretical roots of “Propaganda as signaling” in its modern form were first articulated by Vaclav Havel through his now famous parable about the “greengrocer” where he argued that propaganda does not have to be fully believed to be influential.¹⁹ Havel’s allegory of the greengrocer argued that propaganda continues to serve as a symbol of state power over the individual involved. In this autocratic system, people falsify their preferences for the sake of survival, even if they might privately believe that their best interests would arise within a revolution. Unfortunately, because people are falsifying their preferences, people cannot signal to others that they would join a revolution. Havel argued that if people were to live more “truthfully,” then autocracies such as the Soviet Union would crumble.²⁰ Theorists have looked to the cascade of liberalism throughout Eastern Europe at the fall of the Soviet Union as supplemented in part by more and more signals of people calling for liberalism.²¹ But this concept was not exclusive to the twentieth century.

Havel’s concept was formalized in academia by Dr. Lisa Wedeen in her research on Syria.²² She studied how cultural representations were forced upon the Syrian people under Assad, and the great extent to which the state forced the people to absorb and repeat the representation of propaganda. However outlandish the content of the propaganda was, the symbols were publicly displayed to the people, and replicated by the people. These symbols

¹⁹ Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless* (SAGE Publications Inc, 1979) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418766625>.

²⁰ Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless* (SAGE Publications Inc, 1979), 72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418766625>.

²¹ Timur Kuran, “The East European Revolution of 1989: Is It Surprising That We Were Surprised?” *The American Economic Review* 81, no. 2 (1991): 121–25, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2006838>.

²² Lisa Wedeen, “1. Believing in Spectacles,” in *1. Believing in Spectacles* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226345536-004>.

displayed propagandistic images of folk heroes, and sayings claiming that Assad was their “pharmacist.” But more so than the content, it was through process of displaying and publicly affirming these cultural symbols that the people received the clear signals: that the government could exert such power as to force people to display content that they are not persuaded to believe with seeming authenticity, and secondly, that signals of dissent would not be tolerated. This analysis became known as “propaganda as signaling,” and has begun to arise in more and more propaganda scholarship.

“Propaganda as signaling” was introduced to scholarship on China through Dr. Haifeng Huang in 2015. Dr. Huang brought Dr. Wedeen’s understanding of propaganda as signaling directly to China. Dr. Huang’s argument in *Propaganda as Signaling*²³ is that while there may still remain propaganda that attempts to influence an audience through persuasion, the way in which it is disseminated, and the frequency through which messages and signals are propagated carries a signal of its own. Huang complemented this theoretical model with an empirical analysis of the trends of propaganda reception in China, and found that it did increase the degree to which university students felt that they had to outwardly behave obedient to the state, but the propaganda did not have as great an effect on their beliefs regarding any particular state policy. Huang argues that many students act as if they are vigorously pro-nationalism, while falsifying their preferences to act in compliance with the autocratic system. By studying the environment in which students are introduced and integrated into the system of cultural symbols, how the state strategically implements patriotic education at times of internal strife, and how students are then re-conceptualized as symbols themselves, academics can better understand the manipulation of cultural symbols in China, and not limit the understanding of propaganda to outdated modes of

²³ Haifeng Huang, “Propaganda as Signaling,” *Comparative Politics* 47, no. 4 (2015): 419–37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43664158>.

thought. An analysis of propaganda in this manner needs to analyze the different platforms in society where propaganda is used to quell dissent, and the manipulation of signaling for the effort of presenting a homogenous, cohesive group. For such an analysis to succeed, it would not need to make a causal argument that propaganda has successfully stifled dissent or produced homogeneity, but rather explore the efforts that propagators have introduced to produce such a state. This would involve an analysis of each of the aspects of political culture where the state pays conscious attention to the development of signals it produces. This study is an introduction to a semiotic analysis of propaganda that is acted out in Chinese public education up to high school, implementing the theoretic lens of propaganda as signaling.

To better understand propaganda as signaling, and how it should be applied to the analysis of propaganda in modern Chinese public-schools, a clear definition and example is necessary. Propaganda as signaling is the instance in which a government manipulates the visibility of negative signs of dissatisfaction towards the state, and construct positive signals to replace them as a means of maintaining regime stability. The kinds of signals that concern propaganda as signaling involve the public expression of information that is relevant to the strength of different groups. The strength of a group is often signaled through the perceived strength of its support. These signals can be presented through propaganda content, but also speeches by authority figures, or the publicity which surrounds passing legislation, and enforcing said legislation, as well as individuals visibly affirming their support for a group. These actions, when publicized to a populous, signal the propagator's power. This process is complemented by the elimination of signals which might show the state's weakness. When individuals create signals such as protesting, or other forms of criticism towards a state, can indicate to other individuals a shared sentiment of dissatisfaction, and the potential for mobilizing dissent towards

political action. Autocracies that force citizens to falsify their beliefs in public and vocalize outlandish forms of support for the state limit the ability for critical speech exist in the public sphere, preventing people from mobilizing revolt.²⁴ By isolating the visibility of signals of dissent, potential revolutionaries are less likely to correctly analyze the degree to which others in their vicinity were inclined to revolt. In Chinese education today, the state strategically replaces signals of dissent such as student protests in areas of political turmoil with signals of support, such as students ritualistically acting out support for the state, or authority figures in the CCP passing legislation on cultural practices or textbook reform in schools. There are examples of this manipulation of public signals throughout different arenas of public space, for instance in the digital sphere. Dr. Roberts has published on how Chinese propagandists will “drown out” negative critiques of the state with “positive energy” by mobilizing an army of internet commentators known as the “Wu Mao.”²⁵ While the Wu Mao is an arm of China’s propaganda mechanism, a similar process of presenting an image of overwhelming consensus is occurring in public Chinese schools, where students are forced to physically act out signals of appreciation towards the state. These positive signals are then amplified through state run media, projecting an image of solidarity in students across China.

Analysts who study propaganda as signaling in public-schools should direct their attention towards the public, ritualistic, mandated display of support for the state in areas of public education. This analysis should be especially focused on areas where critiques are largely discouraged. Additionally, scholars should recognize how these signals of support are then

²⁴ Lisa Wedeen, “1. Believing in Spectacles,” in *1. Believing in Spectacles* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226345536-004>.

²⁵ Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion inside China’s Great Firewall* / (Princeton University Press, 2018).

amplified as a means of creating the illusion of unified support for the state, which would inhibit potential protestors from revolting. In the case of public-schools in China, students are often forced to engage in ritualistic expressions of support for the state, such as the flag raising ceremony presented in the introduction. These students are simultaneously challenged or silenced when vocalizing their dissatisfaction with the state. And the positive representations of these students signaling a support for the state through ritual are then amplified through state media outlets across the country. Even though citizens may recognize the inherent propagandistic element of these media outlets, the bombastic and amplified nature of these propaganda campaigns limit the access to actionable information available to protestors, signals the state's strength, and serves as propaganda as signaling to prevent revolt. As shall be explored later, this can create an environment of "presumed influence," which does not even have to be persuasive to individuals for the propaganda to be powerful. Instead of for persuasion, these signals should be studied as tactical repression of dissent in schools, turning the audience of students itself into propaganda.

While the theoretical lens of propaganda as signaling can be applied throughout many facets of public life, I am choosing to analyze propaganda as signaling in an education setting because it is a location where state-sanctioned cultural symbols are standardized and disseminated, and it is an environment where signals can be shrewdly controlled. This is not an empirical study of the ramifications of propaganda as signaling on primary and secondary students in China, but rather an introductory analysis of the government action that has implemented policies which have acted to create an environment of propaganda as signaling within these areas. This paper serves as an introduction, which may be complemented with deeper empirical analysis in the future.

In the “post-ideology” era, some scholars have come to assume that persuasion has fallen to the wayside of political ambitions, and as a result, propaganda studies have received less attention.²⁶ Scholars such as Dr. Lynch have argued that as post-Maoist China began to develop a market economy, the strength of the propaganda department shrunk in size.²⁷ This analysis was in line with other late twentieth century scholars such as Francis Fukuyama predicted the decline of ideologically driven autocracies, and the emergence of a “post-ideological” world.²⁸ Many scholars at this time believed that states would be less driven by ideology, and by extension, propaganda would decline in power. Semiotic analysis of propaganda based off cultural symbols fell in importance among academic circles, as it was seen as “nonscientific and academically peripheral.”²⁹ But, as it has gone unstudied, its effects have still been felt. Though this argument may have had some merit at the time of the collapse of the soviet union, the implementation of propaganda, and ideologically driven propaganda, in large parts of China has been a constant throughout the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries.³⁰ While doubts over the efficacy of the traditional, doctrinal Marxist-Leninist Communism began to wane during the post-Mao era, the rhetoric of Communism is still pervasive in China, as well as the cultivation of nationalism in the school systems.³¹

²⁶ Carlos Pessoa, “On Hegemony, Post-Ideology and Subalternity,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 22, no. 4 (2003): 484–90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27733608>.

²⁷ Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics, and ‘Thought Work’ in Reformed China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

²⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Simon and Schuster, 1992).

²⁹ J. Michael Sproule, “Propaganda Studies in American Social Science: The Rise and Fall of the Critical Paradigm,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 73 no. 1 (1987): 70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638709383794>.

³⁰ William A. Callahan, “History, Identity, and Security: Producing and Consuming Nationalism in China,” *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 179–208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672710600671087>.

³¹ Suisheng Zhao, “A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 1998): 287–302, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0967-067X\(98\)00009-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0967-067X(98)00009-9).

Propaganda comes in all mediums and platforms, ranging from material objects, to rhetoric, and even to unwilling participants. Government agencies such as the Ministry of Propaganda work to disseminate this content broadly throughout China in physical and digital forms. The most visible symbolic propaganda in Chinese education is the ritualistic representation of cultural symbols with national meaning. The act of imposing ritualistic presentation of patriotic, national symbols, and militantly rejecting imagery that does not comply with them is not a new development in China.³² The scene in the introduction of a flag raising ceremony is common to most students of public-school in China, and has been the case for over half a century. While the meanings of cultural symbols in many situations throughout China evolve over time and have a life of their own, the meanings of the symbols in this particular moment have been consciously orchestrated through a construction by the CCP as a means of garnering political capital. Such scenes, replicated nationally in public-schools across China, take meaningful cultural symbols and curate them in a particular fashion to produce a powerful political signal. This paper will explore the symbolic meaning of these rituals to understand what nationalistic sentiments they evoke, but also the signaling power that the implementation of such propaganda has. As previously explored, propaganda as signaling does not dismiss the notion of propaganda as persuasive, but rather complements it with an exploration into what other powers it has. The ramifications of this study are an analysis of propaganda's resonating power with people who believe in the nationalism of China, and the impact of the implementation of propaganda on those who do not. To do this, scholars must expand their understanding of nationalism in Chinese public-schools beyond persuasion, and focus on issues such as

³² It should be noted that this claim does not exempt other nations from their propagandistic imbuing of national pride into education. But, as this paper will argue, the case is unique in China for the repressive, autocratic nature of Chinese propaganda in primary, secondary, and high schools.

propaganda as signaling, the ramifications of perceived influence, and how unpersuaded students are turned into propaganda symbols.

The degree and manner which the CCP fosters nationalism in Chinese education has received a great deal of international attention. Many scholars comment that though Communism is still present in propagandistic rhetoric, the driving force of ideology in China today has shifted from Marxism as the central pillar of the CCP's constructed national identity to nationalism.³³ Of course, this is not to assume that people are “brainwashed.” China is not a monolith, and belief systems across China are diverse. But, perhaps because of this diverse array of beliefs, the autocratic structure employs an arsenal of propaganda techniques.

When scholars approach the topic of nationalism in China, especially in Chinese classrooms, they often overlook symbolism and look directly to written texts that carry nationalistic messages. Dominant academic trends are quick to condemn the manner in which curriculum is twisted to for the purposes of spurring nationalism.³⁴ This is the error committed by scholars such as Licheng Qian, Bin Xu & Dingding Chen, who limit their understanding of the efficacy of Chinese public education to the degree to which it is successful in persuading students.

This investigation into the persuasive powers of curriculum to manipulate children's beliefs about reality is not born of erroneous assumptions, but is too narrow. The CCP itself has very publicly announced its intentions with political education. As the Patriotic Education

³³ Suisheng Zhao, “A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 1998): 287–302, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0967-067X\(98\)00009-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0967-067X(98)00009-9); Aleksandra Kubat, “Morality as Legitimacy under Xi Jinping: The Political Functionality of Traditional Culture for the Chinese Communist Party,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47, no. 3 (December 1, 2018): 47–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261804700303>.

³⁴ Robert Weatherley and Coirle Magee, “Using the Past to Legitimise the Present: The Portrayal of Good Governance in Chinese History Textbooks,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 41–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261804700102>.

campaign was being rolled out following the Tiananmen Square protests, the party was mostly in unison in its interests to develop a (中國身份) with a unified, patriotic core, through education.

The reforms were announced in 1991, and when they were implemented in 1994, the CPC Central committee released a statement titled, “Outline of Implementing Patriotic Education” where it argued that,

The objectives of conducting patriotic education campaign are to boost the nation’s spirit, enhance cohesion, foster national self esteem and pride, consolidate and develop a patriotic united front to the broadest extent possible, and direct and rally the masses’ patriotic passions to the great cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics.³⁵

This and other policies were rolled out throughout the 1990s, and served as the Party’s public declaration of their effort in identity construction implemented from the center in China.

This

legal rhetoric of “national identity” runs deep in such a program, and clearly displays the party’s attempt at developing a persuasive organ for producing a cohesive (中國身份).³⁶

And while there are extremes that the CCP goes to in an effort to instill ideological consensus within the youth in classrooms, such as classes specifically designed to provide political educations to students, limiting an investigation to analyzing school textbooks runs the risk of failing to fully understand the broader cultural phenomenon that students experience and live out in a public-school system,³⁷ and the political ramifications this could have. This narrow

³⁵ Zheng Wang, “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 790, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29734264>.

³⁶ Fen Lin and Sixian Lin, “Why Framing National Identity Fails: A Case Study of the Anti-Moral and National Education Movement in Hong Kong,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3032869>.

³⁷ See Fei Yan and Edward Vickers, “Portraying ‘Minorities’ in Chinese History Textbooks of the 1990s and 2000s: The Advance and Retreat of Ethnocultural Inclusivity,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 39, no. 2 (April 3, 2019): 190–208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2019.1621800>; Danping Wang, “Learning or Becoming: Ideology and National Identity in Textbooks for International Learners of Chinese,” ed. Kris Gritter, *Cogent Education* 3, no. 1

focus of either supporting or challenging the notion that nationalism is generated through textbooks, thereby failing to analyze the implementation of cultural propaganda in Chinese education, risks the potential of misunderstanding the development of Chinese students, their beliefs, and the way that they are integrated into society at large. For, as this paper will argue, Chinese public education does not only have the effect of promoting nationalistic sentiments, but also repressing non-nationalistic sentiments in an effort to prevent rebellion.

One of the ramifications of studies like Licheng Qian, Bin Xu & Dingding Chen's which fail to recognize the signaling of culture as a means to stifle non-nationalism is misunderstanding how cultural symbols are being converted into political tools for the CCP to attain objectives beyond the simply professed cultivation of a "national identity."³⁸

Despite the factionalized interests and differences in authority, the political education of China has encouraged a synthetic love of state, country, and the party, so for the purposes of this examination, the CCP and the Chinese state will be referred to interchangeably.³⁹ This is not to

(December 31, 2016): 1140361, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1140361>; Stevan Harrell and Bamo Ayi, "Combining Ethnic Heritage and National Unity: A Paradox of Nuosu (Yi) Language Textbooks in China," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 30, no. 2 (June 1, 1998): 62–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1998.10411045>; Isabella Jackson and Siyi Du, "The Impact of History Textbooks on Young Chinese People's Understanding of the Past: A Social Media Analysis," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, June 12, 2022, 18681026221105524, <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026221105525>; Min Zhou and Hanning Wang, "Anti-Japanese Sentiment among Chinese University Students: The Influence of Contemporary Nationalist Propaganda," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 46, no. 1 (April 1, 2017): 167–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261704600107>; Wang, Yuxiang, and JoAnn Phillion. "Whose Knowledge Is Valued: A Critical Study of Knowledge in Elementary School Textbooks in China." *Intercultural Education* 21, no. 6 (December 1, 2010): 567–80 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2010.533037>; Davide Cantoni et al., "Curriculum and Ideology," *Journal of Political Economy*, March 9, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1086/690951>.

³⁸ "Notice of the Central Propaganda Department, the National Education Commission, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage on the Full Use of Cultural Relics for Education on Patriotism and Revolutionary Traditions," Wanfang Data (Central Propaganda Department, National Education Commission, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Civil Affairs, Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China, State Administration of Cultural Heritage), <https://d-wanfangdata-com-cn.proxy.uchicago.edu/claw/Cg9MYXdOZXdTmJAYmJAYmJiSCmczMDAwMjI4MDMaCDhiNzE5dXJw>.

³⁹ There is precedent for this conscious conflation of state and Party in propaganda analysis of China: Brandon Zheng, "Centenary Propaganda and Nationalism with Xi Jinping Characteristics for a New Era," n.d., 5.

mitigate the tensions that arise when the center implements policies that the provinces disagree with, but it does examine the force that the Party can exert on students. Since the 1980s, Chinese education has been increasingly decentralized. Many have lauded Shanghai's public-school systems for their turn towards more liberal pedagogy.⁴⁰ However, this does not paint the whole picture. While more freedoms have been allotted to the individual provinces, scholars consider this decentralization a "centralized-decentralization"⁴¹ because the CCP still maintains immense control over certain components of the education system, and some processes, such as the ritualistic acting out of nationalism, are standard practice in mainland public education. Additionally, while provinces such as Shanghai have been granted freedoms, areas where there is internal political turmoil, such as Beijing immediately following the Tiananmen Square student movement, Xinjiang following the Uyghur protests of 2009, and Hong Kong since the handover, political education has been harshly implemented to suppress unrest.

This analysis of symbols in primary and secondary schools shall be built on an understanding of the trends in education policy, beginning with the Patriotic Education Campaign that was implemented in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests. To understand modern trends within Chinese education, it is necessary to analyze the precedents set by this powerful movement. Though it may seem like a relic of the past, the ramifications of this campaign have impacts on nationalism to this day. One of the explicit messages of the public education system is that loving the country requires loyalty to the party, "otherwise it is not loving or not loving enough."⁴² This is reflective of the reforms that were made in the 1990s to

⁴⁰ Guorui Fan, "Changes in Educational Institutions in China: 1978–2020," in *Handbook of Education Policy Studies: Values, Governance, Globalization, and Methodology, Volume 1*, ed. Guorui Fan and Thomas S. Popkewitz (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 111–29, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8347-2_6.

⁴¹ Tingting Qi, "Between Centralization and Decentralization: Changed Curriculum Governance in Chinese Education after 1986," n.d., 234.

⁴² Ying Xie, Yunping Tong, and Fenggang Yang, "Does Ideological Education in China Suppress Trust in Religion and Foster Trust in Government?," *Religions* 8, no. 5 (May 2017): 94, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8050094>.

education with the Patriotic Education Campaign. The Patriotic Education Campaign will be discussed, and how Chinese education continued to promote Marxist-Leninist philosophies, but also increasingly demanded nationalistic patriotism as a means of developing legitimacy within China. Dr. Suisheng Zhao of Stanford has argued that the Patriotic Education Campaign, born out of pragmatic interests by the CCP, was a resounding success, and that the effects of the campaign are felt into the twenty first century.⁴³ This cultivation of nationalism was fostered both through textbook reform, but also through the increase propagation of national symbols. This propagation of national symbols forced students to comply with nationalistic ritual, drowning out any voice of dissent. This drowning out disrupts the flow of accurate information and has an immediate political ramification.

As was clearly seen in the allusion produced in the introduction, students in Hong Kong recognized more than the persuasive elements of propaganda during the flag raising ceremony. Students who had earlier protested were forced to falsify their beliefs in public. That falsification of beliefs was then incorporated into the *China Daily* article, which was broadcasted online, which sent a manipulated signal presenting students showing their support to the state through ritualistically acting out cultural symbols, rather than the dissenting signals that students had attempted to present earlier. While students of cultural scenes are very aware that scenes are loaded with many different symbols, in Chinese public-schools these symbols are crafted. The same school where months earlier students protested the silencing of their teacher later forced students to comply with nationalistic ceremony by acting out nationalism. This in turn served as a signal to students that the state had the power to force them to subordinate their beliefs to the powers of the party, such as those students who had protested their teacher's dismissal earlier,

⁴³ Zhao, Suisheng. *A Nation-state by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004.

but then attended the flag raising event. Chinese state media then turned those students into symbols of good, obedient citizens, by publishing about the ritual in a CCP backed media outlet that was published across the country. This signaling of acting out nationalism in the education system fleshes out how modern propaganda works by complementing the traditional “persuasive” propaganda, which may have influenced the older students who volunteered to go to the ceremony. This power of propaganda as signaling in public-schools of China has not yet been given the academic scrutiny it deserves.

To best understand how this system of cultural symbolism both promotes national identity but also implicitly signals a repression of non-nationalism, Chinese public education must be analyzed on three levels. Firstly, from the traditional perspective that the CCP consciously constructs the education system to encourage students to act out nationalism by ritualistically engaging with cultural symbols endowed with meaning. Secondly, that these rituals not only promote nationalism, but also reject non-nationalism as a means of dampening negative signals. This will be analyzed both in the context of how education policy is implemented in China surrounding moments of internal struggle, such as Tiananmen Square, Xinjiang, and more recently in Hong Kong. Finally, this paper will argue that students in the education system are then themselves turned into symbols, when their actions are publicized through the mass propagation of their acting out nationalism and ritualistically engaging with cultural symbols.

Parameters

This paper will focus its semiotic analysis on public education between primary school, and high school. It should not be confused with a polemical condemnation of nationalism. Many nations imbue national pride into their public ceremony. Democratic nations such as the United States do regularly express national pride through rituals held in schools. However, because the

Chinese state implements policies which manipulate information through a much more centralized manner, and represses signals that it does not support with nearly surgical precision, the Chinese case is more complex. The autocratic propaganda structure in China is more centrally crafted,⁴⁴⁴⁵⁴⁶ and signals of opposition to national identity are challenged by the state, or blocked out entirely. Though many like Dr. Lynch have argued that the strength of the modern propaganda system in China has changed and shrunk since the Mao era⁴⁷, authors such as Dr. Shambaugh have argued that “the CCP propaganda apparatus has been revitalized in recent years and remains fully capable of controlling the content of information that reaches the public *when it decides to do so*.”⁴⁸ Therefore, researchers of propaganda in China must be specific in their analyses, and define the particular arenas of propaganda that they wish to study. That is why this paper is explicit in its parameters, seeking to understand the manipulation of public signals within early education of public-schools in China, studying the enforcement of preference falsification and then presentation of students in media. Though this paper’s orientation is not a critique of textbooks that have political orientations, this paper is also not an exoneration of oppressive misrepresentations of history and culture as a means of establishing political legitimacy in democratic nations. Though there have been a great many policies introduced in the last decade which infringe upon the freedoms of international schools in China as a means of

⁴⁴ Zhao, Suisheng. *A Nation-state by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004.

⁴⁵ David Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy,” *The China Journal*, no. 57 (2007): 25–58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20066240>.

⁴⁶ Anne-Marie Brady, *Guiding Hand: The Role of the CCP Central Propaganda Department in the Current Era* (Brill, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004302488_027.

⁴⁷ Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics, and ‘Thought Work’ in Reformed China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ David Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy,” *The China Journal*, no. 57 (2007): 25–58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20066240>.

promoting patriotic reforms,⁴⁹ these cases will remain outside the parameters of the immediate study. These reforms should be studied on their own accord. Furthermore, this paper does not purport to ascribe political education as the primary force of repressive reforms in China. Censorship reforms and mass incarceration are serious problems that exert the force of the state. However, this paper further analyzes the often understudied signaling that goes on in a key institution for cultural transmission. Additionally, given the limited resources available to this investigation, the primary archive material for this argument will be policies that have been produced by the CCP, and could be accompanied in the future with empirical data from specific regions of China. This paper fully recognizes the disconnect between legal rhetoric and the tangible manifestation of state plans in China, however, this serves as an introduction to further study.

Cultural Symbolic Meaning

Because propaganda that manipulates signals builds upon pre-existing cultural symbols, and works to convert the pageantry of flag raising ceremonies, this paper will study how the Young Pioneers, and mandatory military education use them to create nationalistic fervor, or at least compliance. The CCP explicitly states that their ambition is to utilize such symbols as a means of developing “national identity”⁵⁰ or *Zhōngguó shēnfèn* (中國身份). This national identity

⁴⁹ He Huifeng and Jane Cai, “China’s Middle Class Families Fret as President Xi Jinping ‘Tightens Grip’ on International Schools,” South China Morning Post, December 5, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3158333/chinas-middle-class-families-fret-president-xi-jinping>.

⁵⁰ “Notice of the Central Propaganda Department, the National Education Commission, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage on the Full Use of Cultural Relics for Education on Patriotism and Revolutionary Traditions,” Wanfang Data (Central Propaganda Department, National Education Commission, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Civil Affairs, Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China, State Administration of Cultural Heritage), <https://d-wanfangdata-com-cn.proxy.uchicago.edu/claw/Cg9MYXdOZXdTmJAYmJAYmJIScmczMDAwMjI4MDMaCDhiNzE5dXJw>.

both explicitly and implicitly carries the assumption that national identity affirms both the nation, and the party. In primary school, three key systems of cultural dissemination are powerful means of having children act out the nationalism of the party. These three rituals are the ritual of the flag raising ceremony, the “Young Pioneers” program (中国少年先锋队), and as they grow older, mandatory military education (军训). These are three major programs where Chinese students participate in some of the most visible displays of acting out nationalism in public. For decades, the legal rhetoric that surrounds the implementation of these activities has been oriented towards developing nationalism through symbols of the Chinese proletariat, guided by the CCP. Understanding the structures of disseminating nationalism are foundational before scholars can understand how schools also serve as signals of quelling non-nationalistic sentiments. Once scholars understand how these systems operate, they may probe into the additional signals that are produced in conjunction with pro-nationalism sentiments for students, and then how students are themselves used to send signals.

Flag raising ceremonies are enacted every Monday morning in public-schools, and involve the students performing a choreographed ceremony. Students dissolve amongst the masses, reflecting the staunchly collectivist political ideology taught. The students raise the Chinese flag while singing the national anthem, which alludes back to the collective national trauma experienced during the “Century of Humiliation.”

An analysis of the flag raising ceremony was best conducted by Dr. Suisheng Zhao in his seminal work *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*. He described the ritual in depth:

The first point was “a heroic spirit of fearing no death and sacrificing our personal interests for the interest of the motherland and the people.” The second was “a spirit of unity, with people working

with one heart and one mind.” The third was “a sense of anxiety from thinking of danger in times of safety.” These points were exactly what the communist state wanted to pass on to the Chinese people.⁵¹

Here, Zhao is expertly synthesizing the cultural symbolism that is consciously packaged within the ritual, and the emotional response it is intended to invoke. By spreading this ritual and making it mandatory, the CCP hopes that these feelings are elicited. But there are other powers that the ritual can have.

This collective ritual is widespread amongst public-schools across China. As was alluded to in the introduction, flag raising ceremonies have significant cultural value in China, and are often propagated through mass media platforms. Though many students bring different perspectives to the event, the ritual is static and constant. Unlike democratic nations, students in China face severe consequences if they attempt to abstain from participating in flag raising ceremonies. In 1990, in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests, the PRC passed the National Flag Law. This law laid out several mandates for the purposes of, “promoting the spirit of patriotism.”⁵² This piece of legislation mandated weekly flag raising ceremonies in both primary schools and secondary schools. This event is a manner in which students act out nationalism, and engage with cultural symbols, such as the flag of China, which is endowed with deep symbolic meaning. While this has the potential to foster genuinely positive attitudes towards the Chinese government, their history, and the direction that the country is going, this weekly ceremony is also a weekly reminder of state power which students must participate in, or face consequences. And while the punishment may deter students, it is the larger signal that the state controls what

⁵¹ Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 241.

⁵² “Laws of the People's Republic of China,” AsianLII (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1990), <http://www.asianlii.org/cn/legis/cen/laws/nfl133/>.

the punishment is that is more important. Another symbol that is engaged with in this ritual is the red scarf that students wear, which symbolizes their participation in the Young Pioneers program.

The Young Pioneers are integrated into the public education system in China, and from a young age, children are given their mandatory uniform to wear when attending school. The Young Pioneers are part of the Communist Youth League. Their uniform is adorned with very visible historic symbolism. The main component of the Young Pioneers uniform is the red scarf (红领巾). This bold outfit is dripping with historical symbolism, as it is figuratively dipped in the blood of martyrs, and is representative of the corner of the red Communist flag.⁵³ Students continue to live out this nationalism and remembrance of martyrs as they grow older.

When students get older, mainland public-school students are forced to join military training education programs. For several weeks several times throughout their high school and undergraduate education, high school students adorn themselves in replica Red Army uniforms, and perform drills in public. This exercise is a combination of going through physical trials, as well as undergoing education on Maoism and other CCP ideologies. While this and the Young Pioneers program can be understood as inspiring nationalism, there is more and more scholarship and empirical data emerging showing that the efficacy of promoting nationalism in these systems can be low, or even counter-productive to promoting nationalistic beliefs.

Martyrdom is a particularly popular motif in the symbolism of CCP propaganda, as it harkens back to the collective trauma that China experienced during the 19th century.⁵⁴ This

⁵³ “0043 - The Red Scarf Is a Corner of the Red Flag.” University of Pennsylvania School of Arts & Sciences. Center for the Study of Contemporary China. <https://cscs.sas.upenn.edu/resources/poster/0043>.

⁵⁴ Zheng Wang, “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 783–806, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29734264>.

collective trauma is known as the “Century of Humiliation.” Dr. Zhang Wang argues in his article “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China” that the Century of Humiliation narrative plays a vital role in the cultivation of modern nationalism in China.⁵⁵ This historical legacy of bloodshed has remained an integral component of the CCP’s ideology and is propagated throughout mass culture.

The particular meanings, and corresponding values, that have been tied to these symbols are inextricably intertwined with the ideology of the CCP, and often reflect either a Marxist-Leninist, or a nationalistic sentiment. These meanings have evolved over the tenure of the CCP, and have been consciously altered to reflect the interests of the government. This was clearly seen through the change of education policy that emerged after the Tiananmen square protests and how these symbols were understood.

Education trends in Post-Tiananmen China

The modern manipulation of how historic symbols are presented in public-schools in China for political gain was clearly seen following the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests. In that time of great internal distress, the Ministry of Education began to heavily emphasize the victim narrative of the Century of Humiliation through the Patriotic Education Campaign, departing from the more prevalent “victor” narrative that had dominated the sentiments of Chinese education. This shift in policy further elaborates on the points made by

⁵⁵ Though peripheral to this analysis, and more primary to studies on the politicization of history in curriculum reform, it is important to briefly review the modern narrative of the Century of Humiliation that the CCP promotes to completely understand the symbolism mobilized in modern propaganda, that is used to control signals. For an overview of the “Century of Humiliation” narrative both in its content and its implementation, see Zheng Wang, “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 790, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29734264>.

Suisheng Zhao in his book, *A Nation-State by Construction* where he argues that nationalistic ideology and its representation through propaganda was a conscious political effort that has been successful for the CCP in the twenty first century.⁵⁶ For decades, scholars have argued that the CCP has helped to guide the Ministry of Education's reforms to mobilize the "Century of Humiliation" as a national trauma, in an effort to develop a cohesive "national identity." In that way, the Ministry of Education has included patriotism as a guiding principle for China's educational reform. In a study of China's patriotic education reforms of the mid 1990s Dr. Yin Xie and Dr. Yang argued that, "The content of patriotic education, stipulated in 1994, is featured with two themes: Chinese tradition and history, and territorial integrity."⁵⁷ As already seen, this was followed with concrete policies and support from the CCP to target the teaching of history in classrooms for the purposes of developing a national identity that was founded on a collective trauma of historical wrongs that affected China.⁵⁸ This goal of constructing an historical narrative for the purposes of political capital was explicitly enforced. As is stated in the "Teaching Guideline for History Education" published by the Ministry of Education in 2002,

Chinese modern history is a history of humiliation that China had been gradually degenerated into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society; at the same time, it is also a history that Chinese people strived for national independence and social progress, persisted in their struggle of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, and was also the history of the success of New-Democratic Revolution under the leadership of the CCP.⁵⁹

This meaning construction saw the invigoration of narrativized history as endowed with cultural "victim" meaning, which became materially represented in the symbols propagated

⁵⁶ Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 241.

⁵⁷ Ying Xie, Yunping Tong, and Fenggang Yang, "Does Ideological Education in China Suppress Trust in Religion and Foster Trust in Government?," *Religions* 8, no. 5 (May 2017): 94, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8050094>.

⁵⁸ Zheng Wang, "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 790, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29734264>.

⁵⁹ Zheng Wang, "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 792, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29734264>.

throughout the education system. The mandates of the Patriotic Education Campaign were implemented in part to cultivate a shared sense of national identity in China, but the implementation of the campaign has further ramifications.

This centrally mandated perception was cemented through policies which mandated that public-schools utilize cultural symbols to promote the ideological agenda of the CCP. The implementation of culture in Chinese politics in its modern form began to emerge under Hu Jintao's administration. The report of the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China made clear the CCP's intentions of utilizing culture for political gains. Hu Jintao argued that China must enhance culture, "to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests."⁶⁰ As professor Dai Yanjun of the Central Party School noted that such emphasis indicated that the party was interested in utilizing culture in promoting "social development."⁶¹ This rhetoric of utilizing culture as a tool for political capital was continued through the implementation of policy. In a joint declaration from the Central Propaganda Department, National Education Commission, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Civil Affairs, Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China, and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage titled, "The Full use of Cultural Relics for Education on Patriotism and Revolutionary Traditions,"⁶² the party declared openly that history would be used to, "cultivate new socialist people with ideals, morality, culture, and discipline." This policy was implemented and reflected

⁶⁰ Celene, "Cultural Soft Power," *Chinadaily.Com.Cn*, https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/2007-10/18/content_6187064.htm.

⁶¹ Celene, "Cultural Soft Power," *Chinadaily.Com.Cn*,

⁶² "Notice of the Central Propaganda Department, the National Education Commission, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage on the Full Use of Cultural Relics for Education on Patriotism and Revolutionary Traditions," Wanfang Data (Central Propaganda Department, National Education Commission, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Civil Affairs, Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China, State Administration of Cultural Heritage), <https://d-wanfangdata-com-cn.proxy.uchicago.edu/claw/Cg9MYXdOZXdTmJyMjAyMjISCmczMDAwMjI4MDMaCDhiNzE5dXJw>.

in the political use of cultural relics such as in flag raising ceremonies, the Young Pioneer's red scarfs, and mandatory military education. The conscious construction of the representation of national trauma for the purposes of fostering political unity is in itself an intentional act of propaganda, and has received a great deal of international attention.⁶³ The Young Pioneers embody this collective trauma in their red scarves, and they are popularized across China through mass communications.

These forms of propaganda, when understood through the lens of propaganda as signaling, transmit more than simply the content of the CCP's centrally sanctioned ideology. They signal the strength of the CCP to the students involved, indicating its commitment to these beliefs, and the strength and resources to force students to comply. This signal, rather than the one that is dependent on values and meanings of cultural symbols, can be received regardless of ideological belief system.

It is important to note that in most cultural scenes,⁶⁴ there are countless numbers of cultural meanings being displayed simultaneously. And each of these meanings are expressed through a type of signal. However, the purpose of this paper is to analyze how the CCP directly attempts to exert control over the expression of such signals, constructing a particular narrative through the manipulation of symbols in an education setting, then projecting that message through mass communication.

For years, the CCP has implemented greater and greater legislation with the intention of protecting the symbols that it validates. For instance, legislation has been passed to legally

⁶³ Zheng Wang, "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 792, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29734264>.

⁶⁴ Daniel Silver and Terry Nichols Clark, *Scenescapes How Qualities of Place Shape Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

enforce the protection of martyrs,⁶⁵ the orthodox method of ritually raising flags,⁶⁶ forcing individuals to present their symbols like the red scarf in an appropriate fashion, and forcing students to attend patriotic education bases.⁶⁷ In the case of the protection of martyrs, the CCP is adamant about protecting the legacy of martyrs, and those who disrespect martyrs can be sentenced to prison time, and publicly serve as a warning to others. Luo Changping, a journalist in China, was sentenced to prison time for criticizing the soldiers in an historical epic film in China. His sentencing was publicized on state run media such as *China Daily* and CGTN.⁶⁸ While this legislation cannot reveal to an outside audience the degree to which these cultural symbols resonate with individuals, these policies do reveal the extent to which the maintenance of public perception plays a vital role in the governing style of the CCP. Additionally, scholars who understand these laws through the perspective of “propaganda as signaling” can see how ardently the CCP fights to maintain a positive representation of cultural symbols, while suppressing signals that would tarnish or speak against them.

By pairing the conscious intent of the CCP to develop *Zhōngguó shēnfèn* in Chinese schools through the implementation of policies that force students to enact cultural rituals, paired with a theoretical understanding of propaganda as signaling, scholars can see several key patterns emerge. Firstly, the timing of implementation becomes important. During periods of relative peace in areas of the country where people are less prone to express dissent, the degree to which

⁶⁵ Staff, “China Makes First Use of Law Banning Defamation of National Heroes,” Reuters (Reuters, May 22, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-martyr-lawsuit/china-makes-first-use-of-law-banning-defamation-of-national-heroes-idUSKCN11N0J0>.

⁶⁶ “Laws of the People's Republic of China,” AsianLII (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1990), <http://www.asianlii.org/cn/legis/cen/laws/nfl133/>.

⁶⁷ Amy Qin, “In China's Crackdown on Muslims, Children Have Not Been Spared,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, December 28, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/28/world/asia/china-xinjiang-children-boarding-schools.html>.

⁶⁸ William Zheng, “Ex-Journalist Detained over Comments about Chinese Soldiers in War Movie,” *South China Morning Post*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3151730/former-journalist-detained-over-comments-about-chinese-soldiers-war>.

patriotic education is enforced is loosened. Additionally, the severity with which negative signals in these three areas are repressed suggests that, while there may be truth to the claim that the CCP is attempting to instill these students with a sense of national identity, the CCP is also combating affronts to a cohesive Chinese national identity with education reform.⁶⁹ Again, whereas states like the United States may impose the declaration of cultural symbols to a limited degree, such as the utterance of the pledge of allegiance, the right to freedom of expression of individuals is heavily enforced, so students legally have the right to refuse such activities. Students have the legal right to visibly protest the pledge of allegiance.⁷⁰ This is an instance where there is a difference between the promotion of cultural rituals as a means of generating national support for a state, and repressing the dissent from such support. In China, the ability for students to visibly dissent is far more repressed, particularly students that are involved in groups that have received attention for dissent in the past.

Tiananmen, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Beyond

The CCP made concerted efforts to control the signals that were received publicly in China following the Tiananmen Square student protests, in part by tactically mobilizing cultural symbols projected through students. The Young Pioneers were mobilized and their symbolic representation mass communicated following the Tiananmen Square protests. Following the crackdown on the pro-democracy movement, 10,000 Young Pioneers were organized in Tiananmen Square to hold a ritual, affirming their commitment to the party.⁷¹ A major component of this ceremony was an affirmation that their red scarves served as a commitment to

⁶⁹ Chuyu Liu and Xiao Ma, "Popular Threats and Nationalistic Propaganda: Political Logic of China's Patriotic Campaign," *Security Studies* 27, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 633–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1483632>.

⁷⁰ "West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette, 319 U.S. 624 (1943)," Justia Law, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/319/624/>.

⁷¹ <http://www.tsquare.tv/media/youngpioneers.html>

“love socialism, and the mother country.”⁷² This ritual was broadcast, and cleanly edited footage still remains. In contrast, it is more difficult to find evidence of the students who had earlier protested for democracy at Tiananmen Square in China, as traces of the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy student movement and its crackdown have been expunged from the internet to the best of the CCP’s ability. Though video footage of the militant crackdown of protesters is not readily available online through censorship, the organization of the Young Pioneers sent a message of party strength to the students involved, and the people who witnessed the footage across the country. At a time when students projected a visible image of dissatisfaction with the state, the Young Pioneers were brought in as a propagandistic signal that the Party had the power to have students affirm their connection to the party, standing in the very place where days earlier students from across the country had called for freedom. This mandatory public display silenced students of all ages who may have felt sentiments that ran contrary to the party line, and confined non-nationalistic beliefs to a private sphere of belief. Just as the greengrocer depicted by Vaclav Havel was forced to present the sign “Workers of the world, unite!” so too do students from mainland China have to express their support for leaders, and especially during times of strife. And while this is enough to call for deep inspection, the situation has layered complexity when analyzed in pockets of China when patriotic education is mandated on students who are not of Han origin.⁷³

The battle for cultural representation is not limited to regions of Han Chinese citizens. In Xinjiang, people have called out that their culture is being suppressed, and that the education

⁷² Terril Jones, “Eight Condemned, Thousands of Children Attend Service at Tiananmen,” AP NEWS, June 17, 1989, <https://apnews.com/article/6ccbfd99ea17a2310874d61de7c9cf>.

⁷³ Nimrod Baranovitch, “Others No More: The Changing Representation of Non-Han Peoples in Chinese History Textbooks, 1951-2003,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 1 (2010): 85–122, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20721772>.

system is forcing Sinicization upon their youth, where traditional Uyghur culture is being replaced with Han centric cultural lessons. And while there has been phenomenal scholarship that investigates the manner in which discourse in Chinese textbooks has slowly adopted rhetoric intent on integrating ethnic minorities into the conceptualization of Chinese *Zhōngguó shēnfèn*,⁷⁴ this examination does not take the time to examine the signals produced in the larger educational context in which these texts are read.

The international community has long recognized how the “Re-education camps” have incarcerated over one million Uyghur people in China. Despite the great degree of international attention, the CCP has staunchly provided as little transparency to the situation as possible. What has received less attention are the fates of the children of inmates in these camps. Nearly half a million Uyghur children have been separated from their parents and been enrolled in state-run boarding schools.⁷⁵ There, they are given patriotic education, and many are inducted into the Young Pioneers. Since the 2009 protests of Xinjiang, a series of education reforms were implemented in the province which have signaled the power of state control to the inhabitants of these boarding schools. Children are indoctrinated with patriotic messages, and dissent is not accepted. It has been reported that a component of this Sinicization is that traditional languages in these boarding schools are replaced with Mandarin, and students are forced to participate in military education.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Baranovitch, “Others No More: The Changing Representation of Non-Han Peoples in Chinese History Textbooks, 1951-2003,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 1 (2010): 85–122

⁷⁵ Amy Qin, “In China’s Crackdown on Muslims, Children Have Not Been Spared,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/28/world/asia/china-xinjiang-children-boarding-schools.html>.

⁷⁶ 江真, “美国CECC听证会：中共试图通过消灭语言，抹去少数民族身份,” 美国之音, <https://www.voachinese.com/a/growing-constraints-on-language-and-culture-shows-ccp-s-intent-to-wipe-out-minorities-ethnic-identities-20220405/6516717.html>.

Though there are a few firsthand accounts from students who have been held in these facilities, not enough empirical data has yet been provided to make informed assessments of the conditions within these schools. However, there is public legislation which reflects the objectives of the CCP in the education of these children. In December of 2009, the “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on Ethnic Unity Education” was enacted. This document specified the ambitions of the education reforms, specifically citing “ethnic unity” under a consolidated “China.” The text itself laid out the manner in which this objective would be accomplished, explicitly making two things clear: the CCP would encourage cultural education, and punish signals that would challenge ethnic unity. Article 19 of the document specifically states,

The Communist Youth League should attach great importance to ethnic unity among young people, and organize and implement various ethnic unity education activities that combine education and entertainment with the characteristics of young people.⁷⁷

Additionally, article 13 states that,

The competent cultural administrative department shall strengthen the supervision and management of the cultural market, make full use of such carriers as literary and artistic creation performances, exhibitions of cultural relics in museums, exhibitions and performances of intangible cultural heritage, mass cultural activities, sharing of cultural information resources and book reading, etc. Cultural activities with the theme of national unity education.

Policies like these that govern cultural depictions in Xinjiang have an immediate impact on Uyghur students and their families. When outside media such as the New York Times reach out to Uyghur children who know about the repression of traditional Muslim culture, they report

⁷⁷ “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on Ethnic Unity Education (Chinese Text),” Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on Ethnic Unity Education (Chinese Text) | Congressional-Executive Commission on China, December 29, 2009, <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region-regulation-on-ethnic-unity-education>.

that public expressions of the Quran have been correlated with the separation of children from their parents.⁷⁸

When analyzing these clauses through the perspective of propaganda as signaling, scholars can see that the promotion of cultural symbols through the Communist Youth League, which is the organization that houses the Young Patriots, as well as taking away Uyghur language courses, Uyghur students are to be instilled with signals in an effort to cultivate positive attitudes towards China. But, this cultivation, while it may be persuasive or not, has an additional ramification beyond the promotion of nationalism. This education also comes with a rejection of signals of dissent, thereby producing an additional ramification of cultural politics, that being the inability for negative signals to be projected, limiting the information available to those who privately hold different views. Article 9 of the same document states that, “No unit or individual may disseminate remarks that are not conducive to ethnic unity, may not collect, provide, produce, publish or disseminate information that is not conducive to ethnic unity, and may not carry out acts that undermine ethnic unity or incite ethnic division.” The terminology of what is considered undermining ethnic unity is vague, and gives the schools the legal parameters to challenge those who may wish to articulate their Uyghur values. This combination of traditional propaganda dissemination through cultural symbols, mixed with the repression of signals makes it difficult for voices of concern to be heard. But, the students in Xinjiang are not simply censored. Some of their signals have been cultivated to such a degree that they may be spread throughout the mass media of China.

⁷⁸ Chris Buckley, Paul Mozur, and Austin Ramzy, “How China Turned a City Into a Prison,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/04/world/asia/xinjiang-china-surveillance-prison.html>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/04/world/asia/xinjiang-china-surveillance-prison.html>.

A delegation of Young Pioneers from Xinjiang that contained Uyghur students was represented in the 2010 International Children's Day summit in Beijing. These students were, of course, adorned with the Red Scarf.⁷⁹ Scholars would also be well suited to interpret this program through the lens of propaganda as signaling. The students engaged in the program are given a clear demonstration of the state's ability to inject itself into the student's lives, and then their representation is constructed so that the rest of China sees the youth through state constructed symbolism that integrates modern Uyghur students with other public-school students through Young Pioneer imagery. While it still may be argued that some of these students are persuaded, the signal of state power is functionally ever-present in this education system. This is a clear reflection of how the state implements patriotic education as a means of quelling non-nationalism. But while the access to information on Xinjiang patriotic education facilities is fairly limited, the battle over patriotic education has captured the attention of the international community.

The fight over patriotic education in lower levels of Hong Kong public-schools has been fought even before the turnover. Throughout the colonial era, the British colonial government made explicit attempts to de-politicize both the content of textbooks, and the culture of education. Schools made conscious efforts not to promote Britain by refraining from waving the British flag.

Legislation shows that the mainland was preparing to institute patriotic education reforms in Hong Kong to develop a national identity even before the handover. The island of Hong Kong has significant symbolic resonance with the mainland, as its territory was ceded to the "western"

⁷⁹ Li Xiao, "'We Represent Xinjiang' - China.Org.Cn," http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-06/04/content_20190207.htm.

colonialists as a part of the “Century of Humiliation” and the “Unfair Treaties” that occurred in the fallout of the opium wars. The CCP Was determined to signal to the world its territorial cohesion and strength, and was set to do so through political action such as curriculum reform, and slowly implementing more and more patriotic education reforms.

Since the turnover, mainland China has utilized the entirety of its legislative and cultural capabilities to impose patriotic education on the students of Hong Kong. In 2002, the HKSAR proposed amending the *Basic Law* of Hong Kong to introduce the *National Security (Legislative Provisions) Bill*.⁸⁰ This proposed legislation was met with harsh criticism, and up to 10,000 students from 200 secondary schools went out to protest on September 2 of the same year.⁸¹ These protests helped to ward off powers of Beijing temporarily. Though many have fought for the promises of the “One Country, Two Systems,” many consider education policies to have intruded on the freedoms allotted to Hong Kong. After the handover, many reservations about de-politicizing the public education of Hong Kong were abandoned, and in their place a series of curriculum reforms imposed political lessons into classrooms. These were met with backlash, but gradual reforms have given way to more and more education policies restricting the freedoms of Hong Kong educators, and the implementation of nationalistic textbooks.⁸² But, as with the mainland, this change in curriculums and textbooks was paired with cultural signifiers. The CCP encouraged Young Pioneers from the mainland to make frequent trips to Hong Kong. Students attend a ceremony at Peking University, adorned in their red scarfs, to expand their “international

⁸⁰ Wai-Chung Ho, “The Influence of Politics in Hong Kong’s Education System 23 Years after Its Handover from the United Kingdom to China,” *The International Education Journal* 19, no. 2 (2020): 41.

⁸¹ It was significant that the protestors chose this day to symbolize their dissatisfaction, as this day holds a great deal of symbolic meaning. September 2 is the anniversary of the day that Japan surrendered to China in the second Sino-Japanese war, making these protests even more significant.

⁸² Cong Lin and Liz Jackson, “Politics in History Education in Hong Kong: Towards Critical Political Education,” *Educational Studies in Japan* 13, no. 0 (2019): 39–54, <https://doi.org/10.7571/esjkyoiku.13.39>.

horizon” but also serve as a spectacle of mainland engagement with Hong Kong.⁸³ This mobilization of the youth as a means of displaying solidarity and cohesion was a spectacle of patriotic imagery. Alongside this symbolism, the signaling of party strength was very visible, and these Young Pioneer students were converted into signals that were transmitted throughout China.

In 2012, the pro-Beijing camp of the Hong Kong leadership attempted to institute an even harsher series of patriotic education reforms in Hong Kong. The proposed change coincided with the divisive 2012 election in Hong Kong. However, the citizens of Hong Kong were adamant that this was an infringement on the “one country, two systems” agreement, and after waves of protest, Leung Chun-ying⁸⁴ conceded to the protestors and the legislation was temporarily dropped. This victory for the protestors of Hong Kong was a brief moment of success, but soon after the mainland would return with even stronger convictions to renovate the Hong Kong education system, following the election of Xi Jinping.

Xi Jinping has made ideological unity a main pillar of his platform, and targeted groups that do not share his vision of the ideological landscape of China. Since the early days of his tenure as chairman of the CCP, he has stressed how ideological cohesion is not only pageantry, but a necessary condition for the strength of China, as reflected in legal literature such as document no. 9.⁸⁵ This leaked document has infamously reflected the degrees to which the state will go to defend ideological consistency in China, and rebuff foreign patterns of thought. Xi has referred to the failed Communist regimes in Russia, by allegedly saying that their wavering

⁸³ Jerome Doyon, “Rejuvenating Communism: The Communist Youth League as a Political Promotion Channel in Post-Mao China” (Columbia University, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7916/D85B07TP>.

⁸⁴ “Hong Kong Students and Residents Reject National-Education Classes, 2012 | Global Nonviolent Action Database,” <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/hong-kong-students-and-residents-reject-national-education-classes-2012>.

⁸⁵ “Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation,” ChinaFile, November 8, 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

connection to their ideals played a role in their downfall⁸⁶. He has consolidated power in the media and renovated the propaganda systems in China so that public representations of reality serve the party.⁸⁷ This emphasis on ideological consistency may inspire belief in the state, but it also projects a signal of power in each facet of the country where ideological power is wielded. And this signal is strongly projected throughout the public-school system of Hong Kong.

The first series of reforms was brought on in 2017, when Xi passed legislation that would reform the curriculum of education in Hong Kong.⁸⁸ In 2018, high school graduates from Hong Kong seeking out prestigious education on the mainland lost their exemption from mandatory military education.⁸⁹ In 2020, through the National Security Laws, a wave of legislation mandated patriotism (as the party sees fit) in the leadership of Hong Kong government, and suppresses any misrepresentations of history with extreme measures.⁹⁰ In 2020, it became mandatory for school students in Hong Kong to begin the school week with a Flag raising ceremony. While it is understandable to take the CCP at their word that such reforms are intended to instill a sense of national identity, by looking at these trends through the lens of propaganda as signaling, and the weaponization of cultural symbols as a means of developing intimidation politics within the classrooms of Hong Kong, it becomes clear that the CCP's work

⁸⁶ Rogier J. E. H. Creemers and Susan Trevaskes, eds., *Law and the Party in China: Ideology and Organisation* (S.I.: CAMBRIDGE UNIV PRESS, 2020), 86.

⁸⁷ Tom Phillips, "'Love the Party, Protect the Party': How Xi Jinping Is Bringing China's Media to Heel," *The Guardian*, February 28, 2016, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/28/absolute-loyalty-how-xi-jinping-is-bringing-chinas-media-to-heel>.

⁸⁸ "Full Text: Youth of China in the New Era," Xinhua, April 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220421/ad0c7490f6db42f2bd6539794f3ca1af/c.html>.

⁸⁹ Phila Siu and Su Xinqi, "Students to Face Compulsory Military Training at Top Mainland University," *South China Morning Post*, August 19, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2160401/hong-kong-and-macau-students-will-face-compulsory-military>.

⁹⁰ Rachel Wong, "Second Hong Kong Teacher Sacked, This Time for Opium War Blunder as Lawmaker Says Punishment Too Harsh," *Hong Kong Free Press HKFP*, November 13, 2020, <https://hongkongfp.com/2020/11/13/second-hong-kong-teacher-sacked-this-time-for-opium-war-blunder-as-lawmaker-says-punishment-too-harsh/>.

to silence the signals of non-compliance, whether intentional or otherwise, broadcasts the strength of the CCP in Hong Kong.

Though the CCP did not have explicit legal control over Hong Kong's education system at the time of the handover, the pro-Beijing representatives passed legislation that worked to reform the education system and its signals to support the party, and instill a sense of national identity. Though these efforts were widely challenged by the people of Hong Kong, it has become harder and harder to do so under the tenure of Xi Jinping. His projects to develop policies which push for ideological consistency may in fact persuade some people of the ideology of the CCP, but it also forces those who do not comply to act in public as if they believe in it. Looking at this action through the lens of propaganda as signaling, scholars see how this makes the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong more challenging for protestors, as the platforms for vocalizing dissatisfaction are silenced, making communication of dissent more challenging.

In each of these situations, state run media publicizes the visage of students, whether they be conducting military operations, saluting the flag, or adorned in the red scarf, to people across China for the purposes of propagating an image of students embracing the cultural symbols which constitute the constructed identity which the CCP wishes citizens to adopt. However, this does not necessarily mean that people act like sponges and are readily persuaded by such propaganda. By applying the theoretical tools used by Dr. Haifeng Huang in his piece, "Propaganda, Presumed Influence, and Collective Protest," scholars can see that propaganda does not have to be persuasive to isolate individuals in an autocratic society, because it can produce the effect of seeming persuasive to other people.⁹¹ Dr. Huang introduces the concept of

⁹¹ Haifeng Huang and Nicholas Cruz, "Propaganda, Presumed Influence, and Collective Protest," *Political Behavior*, February 8, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09683-0>

“implied persuasion,” which argues that persuasion is not necessary for propaganda to work to alter the behavior of an audience, but simply the implied assumption that others were persuaded by the content. In this way, propaganda such as videos of school children ritualistically acting out ceremonious expressions of acceptance of the CCP, adorned in cultural garb, can remain unpersuasive but still work to manipulate the signals that are transmissible within the public sphere, helping to facilitate propaganda as signaling.

One further consideration is the timing in which patriotic education is implemented. While the Patriotic Education Campaign was staunchly adhered to in the 1990s after the Tiananmen Square protests, by the mid-2000’s tensions had cooled, and provinces such as Shanghai were given greater leeway to implement more liberal reforms. This further reflects that patriotic education is a tool for the party to implement in regions that it perceives to be at risk of harboring greater levels of rebelliousness.

But the issue of the CCP’s conscious moderation of signals transcends just the classroom, and has ramifications into other spheres. The expansion of access to the internet has shaped many facets of public life in China, however, access to sensitive information, and signals, is still largely controlled by state run censors who patrol acceptable forms of rhetoric. The “Great Firewall” of the Chinese internet has received considerable attention as of late, as have additional forms of censorship such as key word censorship, and the implementation of “flooding out” by the Wu Mao, or 50 cent army.⁹² These studies prove that the CCP has cultivated a powerful systematic approach to limiting the information that citizens are able to publicly vocalize, and the information that they can receive. By blocking out the signals of dissent which may question the legitimacy of the CCP, the party can replace these with its own signals, specifically the

⁹² Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion inside China’s Great Firewall* / (Princeton University Press, 2018).

representation of cultural symbols to create the illusion of uniformity. These symbols often come in the form of the students who display cultural symbols. Even if citizens on the internet recognize that there is censorship and propaganda, it can be difficult to determine the degree to which others share their believe. This form of censorship allows for discourse on line, but guides it in a manner that the CCP deems fit. By starting with a firm grasp on propaganda as signaling as seen in the classrooms, scholars can bring this perspective into other facets of life for Chinese citizens, such as the internet, expanding the potential for scholarly inquiry.

Conclusion

It is important to understand China's propaganda tools both because of the ramifications that propaganda as signaling has on the domestic front, but also Chinese propaganda's global impact. As China continues to expand its economic and "hard power" global influence, more and more academics have begun to analyze the means by which China has attempted to develop "soft power." By introducing propaganda as signaling to the academic discussion of soft power in China, academics can see that they must reconsider the necessary preconditions for a nation to develop international influence, and how China is using preference falsification to develop a stronger platform on the world's stage.

Throughout the twenty first century, China has sought to re-write its image on the international stage, generating soft power as a part of the "peaceful rise" of China⁹³. While China has undoubtedly amassed powerful international economic influence, Chinese scholars and policy makers alike fear that their soft power has been lacking, and many have made concerted

⁹³ Hongying Wang and Yeh-Chung Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power and Its Policy Implications: A Comparative Study of China and Taiwan," *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 56 (August 2008): 425–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560802000191>.

efforts to develop it. Yu Guoming, a famous communication scholar from Renmin University, argues that “the strength of our voice does not match our position in the world. That affects the extent to which China is accepted by the world. If our voice does not match our role, however strong we are, we remain a crippled giant.⁹⁴” This sentiment reflects how China has sought to utilize an assortment of techniques to develop stronger ties to the rest of the world, through soft power. But the sentiment is not held by academics alone.

The CCP has articulated the form of this modern, conscious desire to cultivate soft power through its very public platform. Although the implementation of culture has been a tool within CCP propaganda for decades, this modern effort for its use internationally was articulated the same report of the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China where Hu Jintao began to mobilize culture for the development of political capital. Hu Jintao made it clear that this tactic of cultural politics had global implications. In fact, he called for the development of soft power by name as one of the goals of cultural politics. And in the years since, China has continued to focus on developing soft power on the international stage, leading into the Xi era.

In many ways, the Chinese ambitions for soft power emulate the traditional versions imagined by Joseph Nye. In his article, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, Nye argues that

The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)⁹⁵.

Nye’s traditional understanding of soft power relies on the notion that the domestic populous holds some sort of acceptance towards the culture, political values, and foreign policies

⁹⁴ Guo, Z. & Lye, L. F. (2011). China’s Television “Going Out” and the Dynamics of Media Competition within China. Singapore: East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore. Cited in Zhao, Y. (2013). China’s Quest for “Soft Power”: Imperatives, Impediments and Irreconcilable Tensions? *Javnost – The Public*, 20(4), 17–29

⁹⁵ Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 94–109, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996>.

which constitute the political ambitions of their own state. However, as shall be explored, the concept of propaganda as signaling will complicate that relationship, by only demanding that such a sentiment is signaled internationally, a signal which can be constructed.

The conception of soft power in China, while never monolithic in academic circles, draws heavily from Nye's depiction⁹⁶. However, as Dr. Maria Repnikova, a researcher of Chinese politics, has shown, there are differences in the Chinese context. She has argued in her book *Chinese Soft Power*,

In contrast to clear distinctions made between hard and soft power in Nye's works, Chinese writings advocate for fluid boundaries between hard and soft power, treating them as symbiotic and mutually empowering. Whereas Nye put forward three key sources of soft power – culture, values, and foreign policy – Chinese interpretations tend to place an emphasis on the cultural dimension, and yet culture encompasses an ambiguous category that combines traditional culture with ideology, history, morality, and even economic governance.⁹⁷

Whereas some may scrutinize Nye's harsh distinctions between hard and soft power which may have been more applicable to the United States at the turn of the twenty first century, the core terms are still useful for establishing a vocabulary of analyzing foreign relations, as they recognize how powerful a nation's image is internationally. This vocabulary can then be applied for understanding the way China pairs harder economic reforms with softer publicity efforts, mixing soft power with hard power. And the emphasis on culture which Dr. Repnikova has articulated is very visible in Chinese foreign propaganda. Once scholars can apply the broad

⁹⁶ It is recognized that Nye draws a distinction between the idea of propaganda in his work and greater trends in soft power. His understanding of propaganda is often presented with a dismissive tone, in part due to how he perceives it to be simplistic and culturally specific. I use the term here because it is central to the Chinese ambitions of soft power, and has become a far more sophisticated force in Chinese discourse.

⁹⁷ Maria Repnikova, *Chinese Soft Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://www-cambridge-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/core/elements/chinese-soft-power/4E9C9E445C5F8A9F81F5AAEEAD2DF21D>.

terms that Nye introduced to Chinese soft power and hard power, scholars can understand the environment in which Chinese soft power develops.

Chinese academics and policy makers have seen two major preconditions as necessary for the cultivation of soft power internationally. Firstly, the domestic citizen populous must visibly support the state and its domestic policies. Secondly, that foreign nations must observe that support. The way the Chinese state intends on presenting the support of its people is through ‘cultural soft power,’⁹⁸ where China exhibits its cultural identity on an international scale. This goal of creating an image of a domestic Chinese populous that supports the government, then projecting that image to foreign nations through cultivated signals has been the ambition of cultural soft power under the Xi administration.

The Xi administration has made it perfectly clear what direction it intends to go when implementing soft power. In 2019, the Party History and Literature Research Institute of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China compiled an anthology of Xi Jinping’s speeches, “in order to help the majority of cadres and the masses learn, understand and master Comrade Xi Jinping’s important statements on Socialist cultural construction,⁹⁹” and the implementation of Soft Power abroad. Amongst these speeches, Xi articulates his stance on how to develop soft power through specific techniques, utilizing China’s culture. Xi’s soft power tactic can be summarized by his repeated slogan “telling Chinese stories well” (讲好中国故事). This slogan, appearing frequently throughout his speeches, is a reflection of his belief that narratives crafting of a projection of Chinese culture will help to foster international relations that compliment Chinese hard power. Whereas the singular broad Chinese story which Xi

⁹⁸ Kingsley Edney, “Building National Cohesion and Domestic Legitimacy: A Regime Security Approach to Soft Power in China,” *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (November 2015): 261, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12096>.

⁹⁹ Xi Jinping, *Summary of Xi Jinping’s Discussion on Socialist Cultural Construction* (Beijing, 2017).

expresses is a generalization of his administration's platforms such as the "China Dream" or Belt and Road Initiative¹⁰⁰, telling individual stories is a more targeted request to state media agencies and propagandists whose coverage of individual Chinese stories are then projected internationally¹⁰¹. These stories contain in them signals which Xi is intent on manipulating into positive representations of the state of China today.

Xi has been vocal with this goal of telling Chinese stories well. In October of 2014, Xi gave remarks where he stated that,

It is necessary to mobilize all parties to do ideological and public opinion work together, strengthen overall planning and coordination, integrate various resources, promote the integrated development of internal and external propaganda, play symphony and chorus, tell Chinese stories more and more wonderful, and make China's voice louder.¹⁰²

And in a speech delivered by Xi in February of 2016 at the Symposium on the Work of Party's News and Public Opinion, Xi stated:

We should make good use of the news, make good use of high-end think tank communication channels, make good use of major events and important festivals and event platforms, make good use of traditional Chinese festivals, make good use of overseas cultural positions, and make good use of various cultural forms, so that Chinese stories can become a topic of attention of international public opinion, and let China's voice win the understanding and recognition of the international community.¹⁰³

These two passages elaborate the intense call for a cultivation of soft power, but also several of the thoughts that the leadership has on soft power's use of culture. These passages reflect how the CCP values soft power, sees soft power as tied to internal propaganda, and sees

¹⁰⁰ Kerry Brown, "Chinese Storytelling in the Xi Jinping Era," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 16, no. 2–3 (November 23, 2020): 323–33, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-BJA10054>.

¹⁰¹ Reuters Staff, "China's Xi Urges State Media to Boost Global Influence," *Reuters*, February 19, 2016, sec. Media and Telecoms, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-media-idUSKCN0VS1IF>.

¹⁰² Xi Jinping, *Summary of Xi Jinping's Discussion on Socialist Cultural Construction* (Beijing, 2017).

¹⁰³ Xi Jinping, *Summary of Xi Jinping's Discussion on Socialist Cultural Construction* (Beijing, 2017).

how culture will be the driving force for external propaganda. In the first speech, Xi mentions how it is necessary to “promote the integrated development of internal and external propaganda.” This line reflects the interconnected nature of foreign soft power presentation, and domestic propaganda that is prevalent in the CCP. This is consistent with the work of Dr. Repnikova, when she argues that Chinese soft power is not as differentiated between domestic and foreign implementation, and how it is driven by Chinese cultural propagation. As she states, “Whereas the Western understanding of soft power tends to prioritize external audiences, Chinese motivations for soft power are rooted as much domestically as internationally. In particular, soft power is associated with political stability and societal cohesion.”¹⁰⁴

Now that it is clear how important soft power is to China’s global ambitions, scholars can explore the specific tactics implemented to develop soft power through the presentation of culture. To understand these modern tactics, scholars must employ the theoretical tool of propaganda as signaling.

As alluded to earlier, the traditional means of understanding soft power was predicated in large part on perception of other nations. That perception being that the nation displaying soft power had persuaded its people that its own governing practices, whether they be cultural, political values, or foreign policies, were to be accepted. In the case of China, scholars such as Dr. Hongying Wang and Yeh-Chung Lu hold that,

Chinese analysts argue that only when a government enjoys the backing of the population can the country gain international status and influence. Popular support of the government, in turn, depends on the

¹⁰⁴ Maria Repnikova, *Chinese Soft Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://www-cambridge-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/core/elements/chinese-soft-power/4E9C9E445C5F8A9F81F5AAEEAD2DF21D>.

government's willingness and ability to satisfy the needs and demands of the people in terms of social justice and equality.¹⁰⁵

While this more traditional understanding may seem intuitive, the essential issue is not whether or not the state can “enjoy the backing of the population,” but rather whether the state can manipulate the signals of its people in such a way as to display support. Rather, it necessary to manipulate the signals which are broadcast internationally through state run media platforms to express support. By repressing the negative signals and replacing them with the illusion of an accepted national identity and culture, China can continue to develop soft power even when it is faced with groups that do not support the state, by manipulating the signals that are broadcast out to regions where it wishes to develop soft power. While the infrastructure of propaganda could still be visible to foreign nations, it would be unclear the extent to which individuals are falsifying their beliefs, allowing the cultivation of soft power. In other words, by implementing an understanding of propaganda as signaling, scholars can see that China's ability to develop soft power is shaped by the implementation of propaganda as signaling, which represses signals of dissatisfaction, and replaces them with the appearance of nationalistic support in the interest of displaying positive signals to foreign nations in the effort of cultivating soft power.

As an example, propaganda as signaling is useful when understanding how China develops soft power in Africa. Africa, along with other regions of Asia, is a prime target for Chinese soft power due to China's economic investment in the region, combining hard power with soft power. Unlike western nations such as the United States or United Kingdom where

¹⁰⁵ Hongying Wang and Yeh-Chung Lu, “The Conception of Soft Power and Its Policy Implications: A Comparative Study of China and Taiwan,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 56 (August 2008): 425–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560802000191>.

there is great skepticism towards China¹⁰⁶, China has been able to develop positive relationships with African nations, building off the hard power developments that China has made in the regions as a part of the Belt and Road Initiative. As Dr. Repnikova has argued, the development of telecommunications infrastructure in Africa has been paired with soft power efforts such as integrating African voice overs for Chinese state media. She argues that this pairing of hard and soft power has the ability to impact young people's perspectives in the region, shaping future African-Chinese relations in the future. Soft power in this sense is an attempt at shifting general perspectives on African-Chinese relations, to invest in a future where more concrete policies can be developed out of the positive relationship. The content of this propaganda expressed through Chinese state media in Africa to develop soft power downplays signals of turmoil and active protest within China, while promoting positive signals throughout its state-run media in Africa.

Chinese media outlets have done their best to minimize featuring Hong Kong protestors in their content in Africa. As an unnamed CGTN Africa insider has "privately expressed frustration over how little coverage the broadcaster has given to the Hong Kong protests", and instead promoting signals of Chinese citizens supporting the state¹⁰⁷. These signals are replaced with positive images of Chinese citizens affirming their support for China. A massive new wave of propaganda material which has been circulated by Chinese media outlets in Africa displays students and children from all walks of life embracing Chinese culture, through acting out ritualistic representations of support for the state, serving as a form of propaganda as signaling for the purposes of generating soft power. This practice of implementing children in foreign propaganda has evolved since the Mao era. But instead of children being utilized as symbols of

¹⁰⁶ Maria Repnikova, *Chinese Soft Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) pg. 28-30, <https://www-cambridge-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/core/elements/chinese-soft-power/4E9C9E445C5F8A9F81F5AAEEAD2DF21D>.

¹⁰⁷ Celine Sui, "China Wants State Media to Peddle Its 'Soft Power' in Africa, but Tech Platforms Are a Better Bet," Yahoo.com, October 29, 2019, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/china-wants-state-media-peddle-184631591.html>.

construction and building of individual nations, new scholarship suggests that children in BRI propaganda are being used as soft visages of peace, and bridges between two cultures.¹⁰⁸ The CCP has been producing traditional forms of propaganda that feature children¹⁰⁹, but also exporting footage of public-school students in China ritualistically acting out support for the state on state run media platforms. This use of children in propaganda as signaling is one sign of a shift, where the CCP is focusing on quelling dissent domestically in direct connection to its development of soft power abroad. The CCP is using these state-run media platforms to project the image of students ritualistically affirming their support to the state, despite the fact that many of these articles are of students from Hong Kong and Xinjiang and are falsifying their preferences, in order to present the image that China's youth are openly supportive of the state's actions. This decision to highlight the positive aspects of China and minimize dissent within China to foreign nations embodies the ethos of "telling Chinese stories well," and is using propaganda as signaling to develop soft power.

These decisions to promote positive signals of China have an impact on the information available to foreign nations. While nations may be aware of propaganda being used in China to control what information is projected internationally, nations would be uncertain of the degree to which Chinese citizens are sincerely supporting the state, and the degree to which citizens are falsifying their preferences. This ambiguity, combined with a constant influx of positive signals, has the potential to gradually shift the perspectives of citizens in foreign nations to view China favorably. Additionally, as China continues to expand its hard power ties through economic

¹⁰⁸ Shih-Wen Sue Chen and Sin Wen Lau, "From Nation Builders to Global Connectors: Children and China's BRI Propaganda," *Continuum* 35, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2020.1827368>.

¹⁰⁹ Manya Koetse, "China's Belt and Road Propaganda Machine Running at Full Speed: An Overview," accessed July 27, 2022, <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/chinas-belt-road-propaganda-machine-runs-full-speed-overview/>.

expansion, there is a greater likelihood that such soft power methods may become successful in other regions of the world. Dr. Repnikova points out that similar telecommunications infrastructure to that being developed in Africa is being developed globally, as 54 countries around the world have paired with Huawei to develop 5G networks. This, combined with the fact that there is evidence to suggest that these state-run media agencies are reforming their tactics to maximize the soft power capabilities,¹¹⁰ suggests that China has the potential to develop soft power globally when implementing propaganda as signaling. This soft power is not limited to a particular style of government such as autocracy or democracy, but rather the degree to which Chinese hard power becomes accepted and desired within a particular region, and the degree to which its ensuing soft power can create a greater acceptance of Chinese presence and influence. This soft power begins with a less targeted, general populous, but slowly begins to develop more concrete forms of influence.

However, the flow of soft power is not only an external force in the context of China, as the cultivation of soft power has ramifications for domestic citizens as well. As has already been discussed, the powers of Chinese soft power are not exclusively oriented externally, and in fact Chinese scholars and politicians believe that the cultivation of soft power abroad will develop greater cohesion domestically.¹¹¹ The argument presented by Dr. Kingsley Edney goes that as the domestic citizenry of China recognizes how the international community accepts the existing regime in China by accepting its soft power, the people will be persuaded of its legitimacy. However, again this understanding of the ramifications of soft power abroad still confines itself

¹¹⁰ Dani Madrid-Morales, "China's Digital Public Diplomacy towards Africa," in *China-Africa Relations*, 2017, 129–46, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315229096-8>.

¹¹¹ Kingsley Edney, "Building National Cohesion and Domestic Legitimacy: A Regime Security Approach to Soft Power in China," *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (November 2015): 259–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12096>; Daniel C. Lynch, "The End of China's Rise: Consequences for PRC Debates on Soft Power," in *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics* (Routledge, 2019).

to the limited understanding that a message needs to be persuasive for it to be effective. One possible alternative, which may still support the hypothesis that Chinese soft power has domestic political ramifications, may be better examined through the lens of propaganda as signaling.

Taking Hong Kong for an example, several foreign nations such as the United Kingdom¹¹² and United States¹¹³ have publicly displayed their support for the protestors of Hong Kong who speak out for their rights, and openly criticized China for their history of human rights violations. However, if China began to develop stronger ties in the to other foreign powers, or at least publicize that other nations would not support Hong Kong people's right to protest, then people in Hong Kong would not receive signals of potential support, thus making it more difficult to continue to mobilize dissent targeted at the CCP.

Propaganda as signaling has serious ramifications for scholars who wish to better understand China's domestic and foreign political ambitions. Students who are subjugated to propaganda as signaling are then themselves turned into propaganda pieces when they falsify their preferences, and publicly express their support through ritualistically embracing China's culture. This in turn develops soft power abroad, which then creates a process where the CCP uses that soft power to consolidate "cohesion" at home, but again not necessarily built on persuasion, but signaling of power. Scholars going forward should pair this theoretical and political analysis with empirical analyses on the development of preference falsification in public schools in China. Though the task may seem daunting, several scholars have blazed paths to creating empirical surveys which wade through preference falsification to extract information

¹¹² Reuters, "UK Criticises Hong Kong Arrests as Latest Attempt to Stifle Dissent," *Reuters*, September 8, 2021, sec. United Kingdom, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-criticises-hong-kong-arrests-latest-attempt-stifle-dissent-2021-09-08/>.

¹¹³ David Wainer, "China's Crackdown on Hong Kong Democracy Intensified, U.S. Says," *Bloomberg.Com*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-31/china-s-crackdown-on-hong-kong-democracy-intensified-u-s-says>.

from the Chinese populous. Dr. Haifeng Huang has developed a survey based on the presumed influence of propaganda on others¹¹⁴. This survey sought to quantify the degrees to which anonymous participants were allowed the privacy to express their sincere thoughts. The data of this experiment showed that respondents on the whole were not persuaded by the CCP's propaganda, but overwhelmingly believed that others in China were persuaded by such propaganda. This survey shows how the presumed influence of propaganda can lead people to falsify their beliefs in public, further restricting the vocalization of dissent. This survey model of anonymity, if modified to specifically study public school students in China, could help scholars quantify the degree of preference falsification in public schools in China.

The ramifications of propaganda as signaling in Chinese public-schools strike at the deepest conceptions of propaganda analysis, and are important when understanding autocratic rule and stability. Not only does the Chinese public education system promote nationalism, but it also can demand compliance from students who do not believe in the message of the CCP to falsify their preferences. Then, regardless of their beliefs, these students are turned into propaganda signals which further repress the ability for people to vocalize their dissatisfaction, and signal a constructed public version of reality where the citizens are unified behind the propagators. Some optimists may believe that differences of ideological beliefs are instilled through manipulative propaganda and can be resolved through the power of discourse and open dialogue. What this new theoretical model shows is that even students who are not "brainwashed" are still integrated into the propaganda system of China, which perpetuates the

¹¹⁴ Haifeng Huang and Nicholas Cruz, "Propaganda, Presumed Influence, and Collective Protest," *Political Behavior*, February 8, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09683-0>.

autocratic system of governance as it consolidates control over more and more students. Now more than ever, similar investigations into China's propaganda implementation are necessary.

My hope is that this piece can serve as a call for scholars to study the mobilization of cultural symbols in a political setting through the lens of propaganda as signaling. It is essential that this study is complemented by an empirical analysis of younger student's attitudes in public education towards the cultural symbols which they produce, and the degree to which allegiance to the CCP is falsified.

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