

THREAT  
ANALYSIS

CHINA

Recorded Future®

By Insikt Group®

February 3, 2022



# Elephants Must Learn to Street Dance: The Chinese Communist Party's Appeal to Youth in Overseas Propaganda



This report assesses the Chinese Communist Party's strategic thinking regarding influencing young people's perception of China globally. It draws on leadership speeches, authoritative documents, the actions of party-state media, and the writings of communication theorists in China related to international communications, especially those that discuss targeting young audiences outside of China. See Appendix A: Methodology for more information on methods and sources. This report will be of most interest to government and industry professionals seeking an understanding of the strategic concepts shaping China's contemporary propaganda and information influence activities. Information about the author, Devin Thorne, can be found at the end of this report.

## Executive Summary

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) propaganda and thought work apparatus is an “elephant”. It is weighed down by decades of tradition, party politics, and a complex bureaucracy that strives to coordinate domestic and international influence efforts among multiple leading bodies, work units, media outlets, and other entities.<sup>1</sup> Some aspects of this system are nearly as old as the CCP itself. Yet the propaganda apparatus must adapt, or, as a vice minister of propaganda has put it in recent years, “[learn to street dance](#)”. This system must become adept at modern modes of communication to cultivate a positive view of China and the party among global youth. Driving this ambition is the goal of establishing a long-term advantageous international environment for the party's mission of maintaining leadership over China and fulfilling a great rejuvenation of the nation.

<sup>1</sup> For many years since the 1980s, there was a bifurcated system for managing domestic and international propaganda. As Anne-Marie Brady has [detailed](#), domestic propaganda was principally managed by the CCP Central Committee Propaganda Department (中央宣传部), [founded](#) in May 1924. International propaganda was principally managed by the Central Committee's Office for External Propaganda (中央对外宣传办公室), better [known as](#) the State Council Information Office (国务院新闻办公室). Divisions of labor almost certainly continue to exist, but in 2014 the Office for External Propaganda was [absorbed](#) by the Central Propaganda Department. Numerous other institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cyberspace Administration of China, play various roles in domestic and international party-state propaganda work. For more information on recent reforms and a detailed overview of the CCP's propaganda apparatus, see this January 2021 [report](#) by Jichang Lulu, Filip Jirouš, and Rachel Lee as well as Mareike Svea Ohlberg's “[Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda \(Duwai Xuanchuan\) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics](#)”.

This report draws on CCP leadership speeches and authoritative texts — including the *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* publication collectively authored by the Central Propaganda Department Cadre Bureau<sup>2</sup> — as well as the writings of Chinese academics and analysts to assess the party-state's strategic thinking on how to influence young people around the world. It shows that the focus on youth stems from the top of the CCP hierarchy and entails orchestrating a vast array of national resources online and offline, new and traditional, to shape youth views as part of a “great external propaganda pattern” (大外宣格局) in development since 2004. Some of the tools that party authors and academics emphasize for youth-focused propaganda work are directly controlled by the CCP, whereas others, such as the entertainment industries, may be independent but act in ways that support the broad goals of party-state messaging. Some of these messages are overtly political, but many are rooted in building cultural allure.

The CCP's underlying youth strategy is not entirely new, and the party has hoped to increase China's cultural influence and “soft power” for over a decade.<sup>3</sup> However, party and academic discourse around these issues deserves a fresh examination given the surge in disinformation and influence efforts in recent years and the evolution of international propaganda strategy that is currently underway. This evolution is pushing the propaganda apparatus to become increasingly targeted and capable of influencing specific communities of people overseas, renewing attention to international youth. Ultimately, this research concludes that vigilance towards the party's efforts is warranted, but many obstacles will likely inhibit the CCP's goal of building rapport with international youth.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A: Methodology for more information on this publication.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas J. Cull, Testimony Before US-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on “China's Propaganda and Influence Operations, its Intelligence Activities that Target the United States and its Resulting Impacts on US National Security”, US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 30, 2009, 183, <https://www.usccf.gov/sites/default/files/transcripts/4.30.09HearingTranscript.pdf>.

## Key Judgments

- The CCP's focus on influencing global youth — broadly defined as anyone ages 35 and under — stems from the belief that young people are impressionable, will hold foundational opinions and ideologies well into the future, and can serve as a bedrock of support for the party and China once they mature into positions of influence.
- Interest in international youth is not a new aspect of propaganda work, but it is almost certainly receiving renewed attention as part of a wider effort by the propaganda apparatus to achieve “precise communication” (精准传播) and produce more targeted content.
- The underlying goal of China's external propaganda efforts, including through the influencing of youth, is to build a good external environment for safeguarding China's national sovereignty, security, and development interests, as well as to protect the CCP itself.
- Content identified by academics and propaganda officials as appealing to young people includes global challenges such as human rights and environmental protection, real discussion of issues in China beyond positive publicity, and modern and traditional Chinese culture.
- Suggested channels for influencing global youth include personal experiences, such as organized visits to China and participation in topical forums; entertainment media, such as animation, comics, games, novels, and movies; and the use of social media platforms, including through influencers and creating opportunities for young Chinese people and foreigners to create media broadly in line with CCP messaging.
- The wide variety of resources, tools, and methods advocated by party and non-party writers offers insight into the CCP's concept of a “great external propaganda pattern” — the coordination of all resources to project an image of China internationally that serves the strategic interests of the party-state.
- A significant concept within China's propaganda efforts is “polyphonous communication” (复调传播), which seeks to coordinate the voices of multiple communicators — major news outlets, new media companies, private media firms, and civil society — as in a choir, reflecting a fuller, more powerful vision of China beyond the single voice of official media alone. Turning overseas youth into such communicators is a theme in youth-targeted propaganda theory.
- The sources reviewed for this study demonstrate several weaknesses that will likely inhibit the implementation of the strategy, including a poor definition of “the youth”, limited description of this group's characteristics, poor differentiation in descriptions of youths in different countries, and very few evidence-based assessments of alleged successes in propaganda and international communication work.
- Still, there have been cases of success in the past year and a half in both the cultural and political spheres. The CCP is working to address some of its weaknesses, including through international audience surveys, procurement of targeted research projects, and party-state media talent reforms.

Table of Contents

**Executive Summary** ..... 1

**Key Judgments** ..... 2

**Grasp the Future** ..... 4

**Shape the Critical Period of Youth** ..... 4

**Keep What Works and Add What’s Needed** ..... 6

**Send the Right Message** ..... 7

**Who Are the Youth?** ..... 7

**Suitable for 35 and Under** ..... 8

**Use All the Right Media** ..... 10

**Personal Experiences** ..... 10

*People-to-People Exchange* ..... 10

*Topical Forums* ..... 11

**Books, Movies, and More** ..... 11

*Books and Comics* ..... 12

*Film and TV* ..... 12

*Animation* ..... 13

*Video Games* ..... 13

*Music* ..... 14

**Online and Social Media** ..... 14

*KOLs and Influencers* ..... 15

*Polyphonous Communication* ..... 15

*Interactivity and Responsiveness* ..... 16

**Unleash Youth Power** ..... 16

**Build Youth Talent Teams for International Communication** ..... 16

**Create Pathways for Domestic Enthusiasm to Go Abroad** ..... 17

**Outlook** ..... 20

**Appendix A: Methodology** ..... 21

## Grasp the Future

“Elephants also must learn to street dance” has [become something](#) of a [catchphrase](#) for 54-year-old Shen Haixiong (慎海雄). Shen, a [vice minister](#) of propaganda for the Chinese Communist Party and head of China Media Group (CMG), means that China’s media apparatus must evolve; news organizations must embrace digitization and use technology to form a new strategic pattern of communication as part of efforts to ensure they can effectively participate in the “first phalanx” (第一方阵) of the party’s — and specifically CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping’s — central leadership. The phrase is likely a reference to Lou Gerstner’s book *Who Says Elephants Can’t Dance?*, about American computer giant IBM’s transformation on the brink of collapse. But the invocation of “street dance” also speaks to another effort underway in China’s propaganda environment: cultivating support for the CCP among global youth.

## Shape the Critical Period of Youth

The CCP’s interest in youth starts at the top, and the logic of its strategy is plain: young people are impressionable, and when they become adults, they shape the world. If the youth support the party’s goals and China’s development now, there will be fewer obstacles to the CCP’s continued leadership and national rejuvenation in the future. The application of this logic begins at home but equally applies overseas. Speaking to college students at Peking University in 2014, Xi Jinping [explained](#),

*The orientation of youth values decides the future orientation of values for all of society, and, as youth exist in a period of values formation and establishment, it is very important to grasp the value cultivation of this period. This is just like buttoning buttons on a shirt. If the first button is wrong, the following buttons will all be wrong. The buttons of people’s lives should be buttoned well from the start.*

By 2018 (if not much earlier), Xi Jinping’s 2014 advice had become writ; Xi’s speech at the 2018 National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference — an event focused on domestic propaganda work — [instructed](#) party cadres to “grasp the critical period of youth values development and establishment, guide the youth in buttoning up the first button of life”. The goal of this work domestically, and of all Chinese propaganda work, is to “cultivate a new generation of man that takes responsibility for the great task of national rejuvenation” and “strengthen faith in Marxism... [and strengthen] confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture of Socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

Within China, provincial Communist Youth League (CYL) leaders have since [argued](#) for using short, quickly digestible cartoons, animations, and songs in new media to innovate within the youth-oriented “red education system” (红色教育教学体系). Virtual reality (VR) [experiences](#) are bringing the party’s history to life for young audiences, as well as making major political events like the annual Two Sessions more interesting — [parts](#) of the National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress have been [broadcast](#) in VR since 2017. Outside observers have [noted](#) a [shift](#) in propaganda outputs to digital shorts, quick explainers, youth-oriented films, and [rap music](#). “Patriotic education” [policies](#) and [other means](#) of carrying out youth-focused thought work have also proliferated under Xi Jinping’s leadership.



Figure 1: Scenes from the Long March portrayed in VR (Source: [Beijing Binghe World Technology Co., Ltd.](#))

Internationally, the CCP's interest in youth is often less plainly stated, but still visible, and serves the overarching goal of "building a good external environment for safeguarding China's national sovereignty, security, and development interests".<sup>4</sup> Xi Jinping's 2018 speech, for instance, did not directly connect the instruction to "grasp the critical period of youth values development" with overseas propaganda, also known as "international communication" (国际宣传)<sup>5</sup> or "external propaganda" (对外宣传). The abbreviated public version of Central Committee Propaganda Department (CCPD) Minister Huang Kunming's (黄坤明) speech at the 2018 National External Propaganda Work and Advancement Conference (全国外宣工作推进会) does not mention young audiences either. However, authoritative historical CCP decisions, other contemporary leadership statements, and the actions of party-state media indicate that this is part of the CCP's calculus, such as when Xi said in 2017 that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization "must promote heart-to-heart connections between the people of each country, especially [among] the youth, so that the cause of good-neighborliness, friendship, and cooperation will remain vigorous forever". Nor is interest in youth confined to the civilian sphere, as found during a 2019 review of the Chinese military's strategic thinking on social media for influence operations.

China's media apparatus has moved to apply new methods to youth communication and create external-facing outputs that borrow from youth culture. For example, Shen Haixiong indicated in June 2021 that CMG will "actively explore new methods of external communication, including the Influencer Studio (网红工作室), and [create] a 'mobile app cluster in multiple languages' and a 'cluster of overseas social media platform accounts,' thereby steadily raising our influence among young people and mainstream people". In March 2021, China Global Television Network (CGTN) — which falls under CMG — published a rap music video to its YouTube channel proclaiming that Chinese people "do it right, but haters gonna hate". Since April 2020, Xinhua News Agency has similarly published rap battle videos, political memes referencing Japanese trading card games, and animated productions on foreign social media platforms that deride the United States' handling of COVID-19 while lauding China's efforts.

4 "Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work" [第十章 对外宣传工作], in Communist Party of China Central Propaganda Department Cadre Bureau [中共中央宣传部干部局], *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* [新时代宣传思想工作], (Study Publishing House [学习出版社], 2021), 227.

5 Technically, as some Chinese scholars argue, there is a difference between "international communication" and "propaganda". However, many sources reviewed for this study, including the most authoritative sources, appear to use the terms interchangeably.



Figure 2: Mock trading cards published by Xinhua on foreign social media that refute US narratives about China's role in the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic (Source: [Sina](#))

In academic and theoretical circles, there is growing attention to domestic and foreign youth in relation to international communication efforts. **Figure 3** shows steadily increasing interest in this area of study since about 2010 based on title, abstract, and keyword searches in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Overall numbers per year remain low, but since 2017 there has been a marked increase in the number of both professional articles and master's and doctoral theses. While this specialization in the field of international communication is still in its early stages, it is likely to continue growing. The sample of abstracts in **Figure 3** is not a comprehensive reflection of this field of study in China and it does not include all relevant literature that is publicly available. For more information on the data, see **Appendix A: Methodology**.

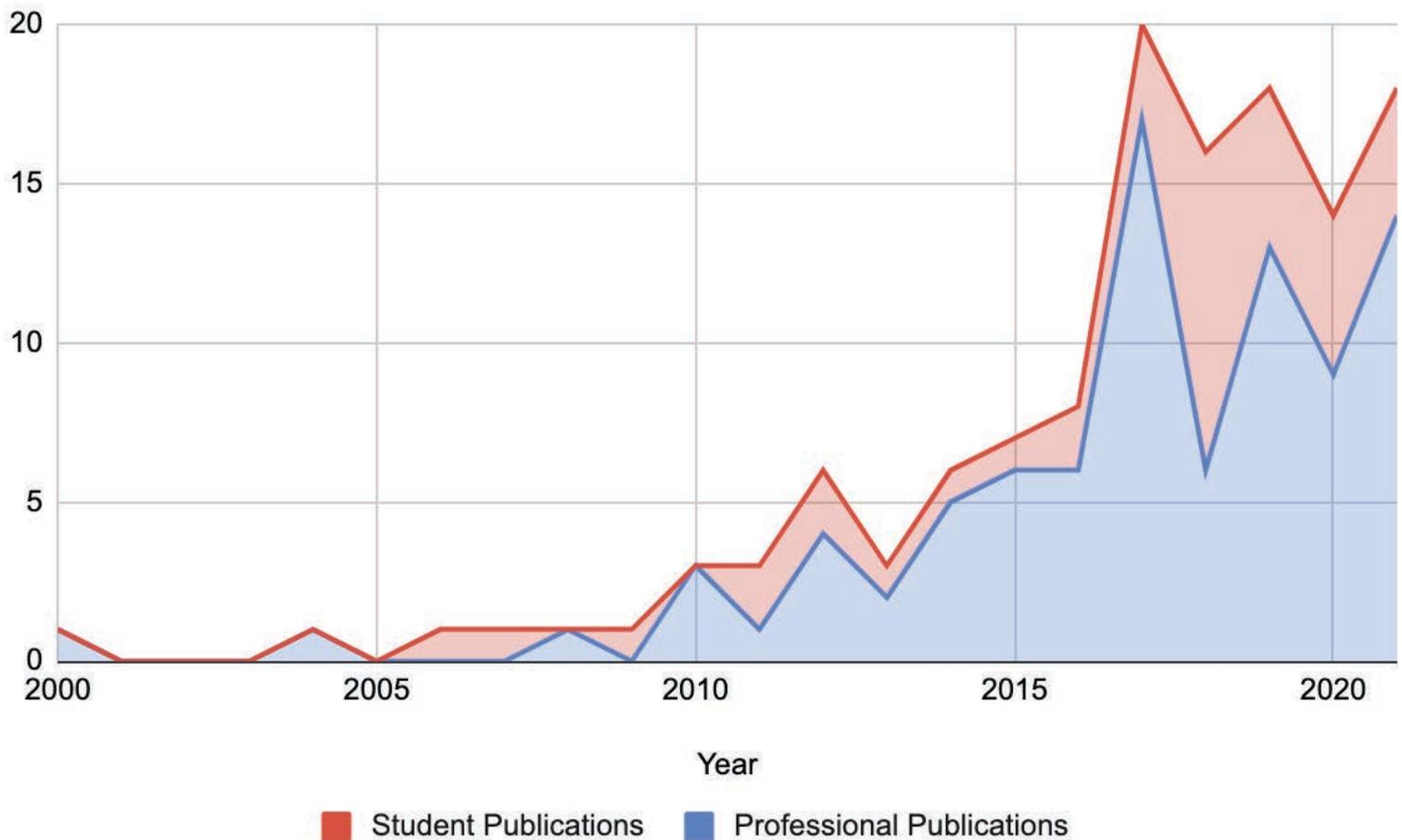


Figure 3: Number of articles per year that discuss domestic and international youth as part of international communication or external propaganda work, based on titles, abstracts, and keywords (Source: CNKI; compiled by Recorded Future)

### Keep What Works and Add What's Needed

Xi Jinping's and the CCP's focus on youth is a renewal of strategy rather than an entirely new approach. The CCP has long attached great importance to the role that young people play in society. In fact, the CCP-led CYL was [founded](#) in May 1922, less than a year after the CCP itself and even [before](#) the formation of the CCPD. The student-led pro-democracy movement of 1989 caused Deng Xiaoping to opine afterward that the CCP's "gravest failure has been in [political] education. We did not provide enough education to young people, including students".<sup>6</sup> This "failure" was followed by a major overhaul of CCP thought work.<sup>7</sup> As the party's propaganda apparatus was just starting to move [online](#) around 2004, the Central Committee [called](#) for authorities to both "attach great importance to the influence of the internet and other new media on public discussion" as well as to "incorporate socialist ideology and morality into all aspects of youth growth in a vivid and concrete manner".

6 Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*, (Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 45.

7 *Marketing Dictatorship*, 70-87.

The CCP and Chinese government have likewise shown interest in international students since at least the 1980s, promoting Chinese language learning as an activity of "major strategic importance for increasing China's international influence" that helps "cultivate more people friendly to China". Interest in foreign youth was demonstrated in the 2000s through, for example, the [activities](#) of the Shanghai People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (上海市人民对外友好协会). These activities [included](#) programs to facilitate in-person visits to China such as the Shanghai International Youth Interactive Friendship Camp. The first batch of Confucius Institutes was also [established](#) at universities in South Korea and the US as part of cultural communication efforts in 2004. During this same period, research by a provincial CYL Central Committee member advocated for using people-to-people contact by and among youth as a tool for international communication and improving China's influence.<sup>8</sup>

8 Shuai Li [袁丽], "Humble Opinions and Innovative Thinking on Youth External Propaganda Work in the New Era" [新时期青年外宣工作创新思维刍议], *Journal of China Youth University for Political Sciences* [中国青年政治学院学报], 3(2005), 23-28.

The CCP's renewed attention to youth audiences overseas comes as part of a wider effort by the propaganda apparatus to become more targeted and overhaul traditional propaganda, which has been [criticized](#) domestically as “routine, stylized ... copied, stiff, [and] empty preaching, [that makes] people keep their distance”. A major part of this reform is a movement to “precise communication” (精准传播). This is a foundational principle (基本原则) of external propaganda work today according to , an authoritative December 2020<sup>9</sup> publication collectively authored by the CCPD Cadre Bureau.<sup>10</sup> In May 2021, Xi Jinping [voiced](#) (not for the first time) that the CCP's international communication must “use precise communication methods that stick close to different regions, different countries, and different audiences, promote the globalized expression, regionalized expression, and audience differentiation-alized expression of China's story and China's voice, [and] improve the affinity and efficacy of international communication”. Although not made explicit by Xi or *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era*, “foreign youth” is one [type](#) of [audience](#) being [considered](#) under this concept.

As the discussion below will show, the CCP is not trying to throw out its entire playbook; it will keep what is seen as successful (in-person engagement) and add what is necessary for a new age (such as new media strategies).

## Send the Right Message

Achieving precise communication among global youth audiences requires a clear understanding of who that audience is and what their preferences are. Neither is well-defined among the writings reviewed for this report. This is a gap in current efforts, though Chinese state media organizations are working to closely understand international audiences through multi-country surveys. For example, CMG issued a tender for a global international communication efficacy survey in June 2021 to understand the reach and effects of their worldwide television, broadcast, website, and social media presence. The tender asked bidders to survey no fewer than 500 people ages 18 and older in a selection of 52 countries<sup>11</sup> using local languages. Global Times 4-D Market Survey (Beijing) Co. Ltd. (环球四维市场调查(北京)有限公司) won the contract.<sup>12</sup> As it stands, “youth” likely refers to anyone under the age of 35.

<sup>9</sup> The copy reviewed for this research was printed in March 2021.

<sup>10</sup> “Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work”, 228.

<sup>11</sup> These are Albania, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Belarus, Bulgaria, Poland, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Russia, France, Belgium, Philippines, South Korea, Nigeria, Cambodia, Czech Republic, Croatia, Laos, Romania, Malaysia, Mongolia, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Portugal, Brazil, Afghanistan, Japan, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, India, Thailand, Turkey, Cyprus, Pakistan, Ukraine, Spain, Argentina, Mexico, Israel, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Indonesia, United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and Vietnam.

<sup>12</sup> Source documents held by Recorded Future.

Thinking on types of effective content and messaging for young people is likewise not sufficiently refined to the point where it is significantly different from broader discussions of propaganda messaging.

## Who Are the Youth?

There is no unified definition of “the youth”, whether in reference to domestic or foreign young people, presented across sources reviewed for this report, and most sources do not attempt to prescribe an age range for this period of life or describe the target audience in detail. The most consistent description is that the youth are those people [fluent](#) in online communication; Xi Jinping's comments on international communication via new media and the internet [repeatedly stressed](#) that young people primarily get their information from online channels like social media rather than traditional sources. The “overseas” youth described in sources reviewed for this study includes people of Chinese ethnicity outside of China as well as those of other ethnicities; both are targets for external propaganda.

Anyone age 35 and under is plausibly a member of the youth from a targeting perspective. This judgment is based, in part, on the “youth” respondents in surveys organized by the Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies (ACCWS; 当代中国与世界研究院), a think tank [subordinate](#) to the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration (CFLPA) of the CCP [Central Committee](#),<sup>13</sup> to understand China's international image. ACCWS's 2020 “China and the World in the Eyes of International Youth” survey [focused](#) on 18-to-35 year olds from 21 countries, ultimately collecting over 4,000 responses. A 2019 survey sponsored by ACCWS likewise [used](#) 18-to-35 year olds as the youngest grouping of participants, whose more (relative to older respondents) positive perception of China prompted a communications professor to [comment](#) that the survey reflected “my country's focus on overseas youth groups”. Other research sometimes [discusses](#) “youth” with [reference](#) to people born as early as the [80s](#) as part of the “[Millennial](#)” cohort.

<sup>13</sup> Specifically, CFLPA was under the [management](#) of the Central Committee's Office for External Propaganda (对外宣传办公室) and its predecessor starting in 1991. Since the Central Propaganda Department [absorbed](#) the Office for External Propaganda in 2014, CFLPA now very likely falls under Central Propaganda Department management as well. In Chinese, CFLPA is 中国外文出版发行事业局. CFLPA is also known as China International Publishing Group (CIPG; 中国国际出版集团).

On the younger end of the spectrum, Generation Z (Gen Z), people born between approximately 1997 and 2012, is a point of reference for both [foreign](#) audiences of CCP messaging as well as international communication youth talent [training](#) within [China](#). The most explicit [description](#) of Gen Z in relation to international communication efforts among the sources reviewed for this report is found in an article by Peng Zhengang, a deputy head of Nanjing's CCP Committee's Propaganda Department and director of the Nanjing's Guiding Cultural and Ethical Progress Commission Office (南京市委宣传部副部长; 市文明办主任<sup>14</sup>). Likely writing in a personal capacity, Peng asserts the following:

- Gen Z migrates across social media platforms, seeking new experiences, and they are accustomed to communication that is characterized by fragmented time and fragmented pieces of information; this requires constant innovation and presence on new and old platforms.
- Gen Z communication is characterized by “decentralization” and “everyone having a microphone”, which necessitates that communicators approach Gen Z from a position of equality, with an attitude of sincerity, and language with “local flavor” (本土“地气”).
- Gen Z follows opinion leaders (such as influencers), who they hope genuinely and sincerely care about their (Gen Z's) interests; they are willing to give money to influencers and “idols”.
- Gen Z pays attention to solving urgent global issues like environmental protection, social justice, and sex equality; they believe in shouldering personal responsibility to make the world better.
- Gen Z is motivated by entertainment, with animations, comics, cartoons, and video games being a universal interest that has penetrated, along with emojis, their discourse environment.
- Gen Z is passionate and open about their interests, but also very subjective and not easily swayed once their beliefs are set.

<sup>14</sup> Wenming ban (文明办) is an abbreviation of jingshen wenming jianshe zhidao weiyuanhui bangongshi (精神文明建设指导委员会办公室), which is officially [translated](#) as the General Office of the Commission for Guiding Cultural and Ethical Progress. A literal translation would be closer to the General Office of the Commission for Spiritual Civilization Construction Guidance, variations of which sometimes appear in English-language research.

More research is needed to confirm whether these points reflect mainstream understandings of Gen Z preferences among China's communication theorists.<sup>15</sup> However, many are reflected within writings sampled for this report. Some of them are found in other descriptions of the “youth” more broadly, such as the importance of “[2D Culture](#)” (“二次元”文化) among people born in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Strictly speaking, “2D culture” is a reference to [ACGN](#) (animation, comics, games, and novels) subculture, but the texts reviewed for this study also often apply the term to youth social media culture in general. Emphasis on the fragmentation of information and interactive forms of communication on social media are often [found](#) in international communications research as well. Other points are quite prevalent in discussions of external propaganda, whether in relation to social media or other channels, and whether in relation to youth or foreign audiences generally. For example, *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* stresses using “local flavor” in communicating with foreign audiences, while some academic studies call for [using](#) the expressions of youth.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is worth keeping Peng's summary in mind as content selection and tactics are explored in the following sections.

### Suitable for 35 and Under

“Content is king” (内容为王) is a watchword of the CCPs modern [international](#) (as well as [domestic](#)) propaganda work. Discussing precise communication in external propaganda, *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* instructs cadres to “persist in ‘content is king’, strengthen supply-side reform of information content, make news products have greater appeal ... create quality content products that are special, fresh, and stick to the [language, traditions, habits, and needs, of] localities”.<sup>17</sup> The purpose is to provide content that foreigners will want to consume and serves the following goals (among others):<sup>18</sup>

- Building a good external environment for safeguarding China's national sovereignty, security, and development interests
- Communicating that China respects the choices of all countries and will not export China's model, but also will not import other countries' models
- Helping others understand why the CCP is capable, why Marxism is implemented, and why Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is good
- Promoting China's contributions to a new type of international relations as well as global peace and development

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix A: Methodology for a definition of this term.

<sup>16</sup> “Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work”, 229.

<sup>17</sup> “Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work”, 228-229.

<sup>18</sup> “Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work”.

- Addressing and managing misconceptions about China's economic rise, emphasizing that this great achievement is the result of the efforts of all Chinese people as well as the leadership of the CCP and China's socialist system
- Promoting China's great achievements without overhyping them as well as being honest about ongoing struggles and the fact that China continues to be a developing country

Regarding specific themes for youth-focused propaganda, there is generally not significant deviation from overall messaging. Some researchers [emphasize](#) moving away from a single focus on positively covering China's successes to discussing global challenges. Nanjing propaganda official Peng [argues](#) that because Gen Z is passionate about social and environmental issues, the CCP should "penetrate shared discourse with sincere exchange and equal dialogue on topics such as civilizational conflict and peace, people's health and human rights, science and technology innovation and sustainable development, environmental protection, anti-racism, multi-polarity and globalization, [and] culture and education". However, this is not unique to [discussions](#) of youth propaganda: *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* instructs cadres to "fully demonstrate the world influence of China's affairs, [and share China's view on] developments related to humankind, world peace, and international stability" as well as "...maintenance of international equality and justice".<sup>19</sup>

Selectively discussing problems within China is another theme to which some theorists attach importance; an article on external propaganda work focused on Russian youth published in 2021 in *International Communications* (对外传播), a periodical [overseen](#) by institutions subordinate to the CCP Central Committee and published by ACCWS, addresses domestic issues specifically. It [asserts](#) that state media should move away from its focus on positive publicity to proactively discuss domestic issues like corruption, pollution, and doctor-patient conflicts with the goal of seizing the initiative for shaping the narrative around such problems. Former Vice Minister of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fu Ying (傅莹) likewise [advocates](#), outside of the youth context, that the most compelling narratives show "how [a country] overcomes challenges, solves [its] own problems, practices big country responsibility, [and] contributes to world stability and development". It is not clear how far official messaging will go on domestic issues, but "being honest about ongoing struggles" is a point made in authoritative writing as cited in the list above.

Chinese traditional culture and lifestyle topics are also themes that feature prominently in writing on external propaganda related to youth audiences. Most appeals for cultural communication are ambiguous, though examples in theory and practice include sharing glimpses of life in [rural villages](#) and [pastoral](#) scenes, [tea culture](#), [martial arts](#), and (of course) [pandas](#). China's modernity and scientific advancement, which are also focus areas of propaganda programs discussed below, are also arguably elements of Chinese culture. *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* contains numerous references to culture, and instructs cadres to "attach importance to exhibiting well China's image, focus on exhibiting the profound heritage of Chinese history [and] the unified ethnic diversity (民族多元一体) and multi-cultural harmony of a civilized big country" as part of efforts to establish the country's national image.<sup>20</sup>

Importantly, while most youth-oriented cultural propaganda is often likely not political in nature, the CCP's conception of cultural communication involves more than just history, social traditions, and showing off China's "beautiful mountains and rivers".<sup>21</sup> It also includes distinctly political topics; in discussing cultural "going out", *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* highlights films such as "China: Time of Xi" (习近平治国方略), which is in line with the goal of demonstrating why the CCP is capable.<sup>22</sup> Thus China's political positions, even though relatively less frequently discussed with regard to youth audiences, are not off-limits. For example, ACCWS announced research funding for projects solicited by CFLPA in April 2021. Among the winning projects is "Research on the Dissemination and Influence of the Concepts of China's Core Policies in the New Era Among the Overseas Youth Group (新时代中国核心理念在海外青年群体中的传播力影响力研究)".<sup>23</sup>

Although precise communication and audience differentiation is the strategic approach defined by the CCP, the writings reviewed for this study do not generally reflect in-depth, granular considerations of who the youth are or what will appeal to them. Except for a handful of papers by academics (such as those related to young people in Russia and ASEAN), there is also very little discussion of how to differentiate between young people in different parts of the world. Instead, authors generally treat this as a monolithic block. While that might be accurate to some extent (all young people like to be entertained), this likely represents a weakness in the current state of propaganda and international communications research.

<sup>20</sup> "Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work", 232.

<sup>21</sup> "Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work", 232.

<sup>22</sup> "Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work", 243.

<sup>23</sup> Source documents held by Recorded Future.

<sup>19</sup> "Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work", 231, 232.

## Use All the Right Media

Former General Secretary Hu Jintao elevated external propaganda work as major national priority in 2004, kicking off [efforts](#) to [build](#) a “great external propaganda pattern” (大外宣格局).<sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> Conceptually, this remains a cornerstone of the CCP’s international communication. In discussing this “pattern”, *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* stresses the intricate coordination of all of the party and all of society, highlighting the importance of “taking hold of the comprehensive national power formed since the reform and opening [and] turning it into powerful strength for external propaganda work, forming a three-dimensionalized communication system ... [and situation that] acts in unison, hand-in-hand”. The publication urges that the party “must integrate resources from every aspect, mobilize forces from every aspect, give full play to the roles of various domestic entities, push propaganda departments, the media, practical work departments, and every battlefield to tell China’s story well”.<sup>26</sup> In other words: use every tool available.<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 4** shows 3 broad modes of engagement discussed in the sample of youth-focused propaganda abstracts collected for this study: experiential propaganda, in which young people attain firsthand experience of China or interact with Chinese people; entertainment-based propaganda, in which the CCP’s message and preferred image of Chinese culture are baked into the products of popular culture; and propaganda spread through emerging media (such as social media). Importantly, these are not always distinct avenues of communication, and, as the conceptual model prescribes, some propaganda efforts are designed to exploit multiple channels at once.

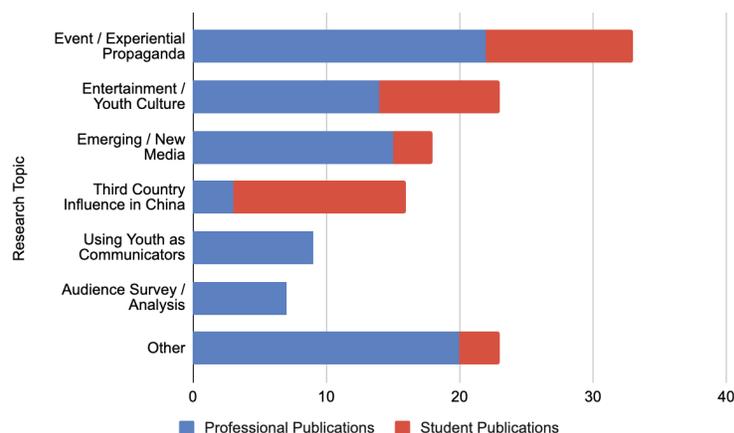


Figure 4: Number of articles that discuss domestic and international youth as part of international communication or external propaganda work categorized by topic (Source: China National Knowledge Infrastructure; compiled by Recorded Future, see Appendix A: Methodology for more information)

## Personal Experiences

In May 2021, Xi Jinping [urged](#) the CCP to “deepen the use of all kinds and forms of cultural exchange activities and the use of many channels to promote people-to-people bonds between China and all countries” and use “important international conferences and forums ... and other platforms and channels” to disseminate China’s voice on important topics. Both forms of experiential propaganda — people-to-people exchanges and participation in topical forums — frequently appear in writings on youth-focused propaganda as well as in practice.

## People-to-People Exchange

The fundamental assumption made by the CCP regarding the first mode of engagement is that exposure creates opportunities to establish understanding and strengthens bilateral relations between states.<sup>28</sup> In the CCP’s case, the key is properly [organizing](#) visits by foreigners to China to win their support. This applies equally to adult and youth audiences, and some party academics [apply](#) this logic to in-person experiences as well as other forms of international communication. The quintessential examples repeatedly looked to in party history are the visits of foreign journalists such as Edgar Snow and Aurel Stein to the CCP’s revolutionary base in Yan’an and the subsequent positive coverage of the revolution that these interactions yielded internationally.

24 “Great external propaganda” (大外宣) has also been translated as “grand external propaganda”, “great foreign propaganda”, “great overseas propaganda”, or other combinations of the words “grand”, “great”, or “large” and “external”, “foreign”, or “overseas” propaganda.

25 Mareike Svea Ohlberg, “Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment: External Propaganda (Duwai Xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics” (Doctoral Thesis), (University of Heidelberg, March 6, 2013), 9, available at: [https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/17289/1/Ohlberg\\_External-Propaganda.pdf](https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/17289/1/Ohlberg_External-Propaganda.pdf).

26 “Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work”, 248.

27 For more discussion of the “great external propaganda pattern” and the systems that the CCP seeks to coordinate as part of it, see Chapter 8 of “Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment”, available at: [https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/17289/1/Ohlberg\\_External-Propaganda.pdf](https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/17289/1/Ohlberg_External-Propaganda.pdf).

28 For example, see then-Vice Minister of Education Hao Ping’s article, “Still Waters Run Deep”, in [this](#) 100,000 Strong Foundation Signature Report.

Different types of people-to-people programming involving youth have varying degrees of management, ranging from foreign student enrollment in universities, which is relatively relaxed, to short-term travel programs that are tightly controlled by departments involved in external propaganda work. In the latter category, for example, young people (likely in their mid-20s to early 30s<sup>29</sup>) from 8 countries [visited](#) Guizhou province in April 2021 through a program organized by ACCWS and the Center for China and Globalization (CCG; 全球化智库); participants were taken to sites such as the Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical (Radio) Telescope (FAST) to learn about opportunities for scientific exchange with China, the National Big Data Comprehensive Experimental Zone to learn about the digital economy and poverty alleviation efforts, and a tea farm to experience Chinese tea culture. Critically, the program also took participants to the site of the Zunyi Conference. This conference was a major point of transition in the party's history, [establishing](#) Mao Zedong's authority over the Red Army and Central Committee. Fittingly, participants in the April 2021 program were treated to discussions of trends in international relations and the CCP's achievements over the past 100 years.

Programs for younger ages are much the same. The 2021 [iteration](#) of the Shanghai International Youth Interactive Friendship Camp, originally founded in 2005, arranged “age-appropriate interactive activities” related to Chinese culture (martial arts, traditional Chinese medicine, and dance), science (artificial intelligence), and other topics. The participants also [visited](#) a revolutionary site, Yan'an, to “follow the deep friendship of more than half a century ago between foreign friends and the Communist Party of China”.

### Topical Forums

Regarding the second mode of engagement, the goal is to shape foreigners' views on specific subjects so they align with the CCP's perception. One article in International Communications on how to achieve discourse construction in Europe [recommends](#), for instance, organizing China-Europe youth forums and short-term student exchange programs under global governance themes such as Community of Shared Future for Mankind, “strengthening China and European youth's rational judgment [and] ability to digest information, [all of which] holds great importance for resisting all manner of ‘backward’ thinking in China and Europe in the post-pandemic era”. Nanjing propaganda official Peng likewise [asserts](#) that the CCP should use existing international youth-focused platforms and those of China's own creation to express China's voice and build a favorable image of China.

29 Based on video footage of participants accessible at [http://www.ccg\[.\]org.cn/archives/64300](http://www.ccg[.]org.cn/archives/64300).



Figure 5: Ambassador to the US Qin Gang demonstrates knowledge of youth culture by referencing Marvel comic book hero Iron Man and villain Thanos while addressing the “Gen Z’ Sino-United States (US) Exchange Dialogue” in October 2021 (Source: [YouTube](#))

As in the ACCWS and CCG program in Guizhou, some events combine both people-to-people cultural exchange with topical forums. In October 2021, the China Public Diplomacy Association (中国公共外交协会) [sponsored](#) a “Gen Z’ Sino-American Exchange Dialogue” (“Z世代”中美青少年交流对话会). The goal of the event was to facilitate “dialogue between the Gen Z youth of [China and the US], exchange culture, enhance friendship, [and] let the connectivity of Chinese and American youths escort the healthy and stable development of China-U.S. relations”. It lasted for 2 hours and included a cultural [talent show](#) portion as well as discussion among 12 youths (presumably 6 from China and 6 from the US) around the following [themes](#): Sino-US Emerging Industries from Gen Z's Perspective; Sino-US Gen Z Sports Culture Exchange; Sino-US Gen Z Internet Preferences; and Sino-US Development and Changes from Gen Z's Perspective.

### Books, Movies, and More

*Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* notes that “external publishing (of books) is a powerful tool for external propaganda... [and] telling China's story well”, and that “film and television works... are the ‘frontline troops’ of Chinese culture's going out” (文化走出去), specifically in this order.<sup>30</sup> Other types of media are scarcely mentioned in this authoritative text, and no

30 “Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work”, 241, 242.

mentions connect any medium with youth specifically. However, the youth-focused writings of communication theorists and other materials indicate that all forms of media are being considered as means for achieving influence overseas.

In addition to books, film, and TV, researchers note that external propaganda efforts must move to what the youth [enjoy](#), namely “2D culture”, which is causing youth to [move away](#) from mainstream media channels and communication patterns. As the [secretary](#) of the Communist Party Committee of Communication University of China [wrote](#) in June 2021: “future international communication talents will be the builders and communicators of ‘2D culture’; their behavioral manner, cognitive manner, emotional manner, and thinking manner will decide the orientation of cross-cultural communication, and even [determine] the success or failure of the mission to construct a Community of Shared Future for Mankind”.

### Books and Comics

As the quote above from *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* suggests, the party attaches importance to the role of books and successful translation of printed materials in external propaganda work. With regard to youth specifically, the trend is toward digital and newer types of materials that cater to young people’s interests. For example, a CFLPA-subordinate educational publishing house [hosted](#) a seminar in July 2021 on its “Documenting Real China Overseas Youth Converged Media Communication Project” (纪实中国海外青少年融媒体传播工程). The project seeks to create friendly feelings toward China among international youths from Gen Z (defined in this source as born between 1995 and 2009) through printed and digital books, audiobooks (有声读物), and other materials.

Comic books are another focus area. In 2015 and 2018, CFLPA entities launched a mobile [application](#) and social media [account](#) for sharing Chinese comics with audiences in Japan. In 2020, a [researcher](#) on that CFLPA initiative published an [article](#) in International Communications describing comic books as a cost-effective, flexible method of disseminating grand concepts like the “Chinese Dream” across countries and nationalities in attractive packaging. Among other points for developing China’s comic industry, that researcher suggests that rather than always focusing on China and Chinese characters, outputs could incorporate stories about foreigners in their own countries, thereby becoming more appealing, “as long as the core transmitted [message] is Chinese values”.

### Film and TV

The single-most frequently referenced international communication effort across all writings and abstracts reviewed for this report is the “[Looking China](#) · Foreign Youth Film Project” (看中国·外国青年影像计划), a program that brings young foreigners to China to collaboratively produce 10-minute, documentary-style films. Focus on this program within the sample is likely due to its age, having [begun](#) in 2010 or 2011, as well as its combination of longstanding experiential propaganda practices with ideas on how to create content not produced by the CCP while still being in line with party goals. Writing on the role of film and TV in international communication in 2019, an associate professor at the Beijing Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era Research Center gave several [examples](#) of film and TV programs serving external propaganda goals, 3 of which (including Looking China) involve foreigners participating in the show or production. Such interactive programs, according to the associate professor, both create experiential propaganda opportunities for influencing the youths involved and yield content that can be transmitted externally from the youths’ point of view. As will be discussed further below, reference to the latter strategy is [common](#) (see **Polyphonus Communication**), and local government departments have similarly organized filming of foreigners in China to make homemade-style documentaries or “video logs” (VLOGs).<sup>31</sup>

Focus on Looking China also reflects [interest](#) in [documentary](#) film and TV in general, not just as it relates to youth propaganda. As a researcher from Renmin University’s Research Center for Humanistic Beijing (人文北京研究中心) [describes](#), documentaries “shoulder the important missions of cross-cultural communication, creating national cultural soft power, and building a national brand” and give international audiences “an image of a three-dimensional ... real, developing” China while downplaying political elements.

<sup>31</sup> For example, see this 2019 [recognition](#) of “Friends in Xiamen” (厦门“老友记”) as an “exceptional case” of overseas communication. An episode is available on YouTube [here](#).

News coverage reprinted in People's Daily of a 2020 international communication conference sponsored by the National Radio and Television Administration's Development Research Center (国家广播电视总局发展研究中心) and the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio and Television (北京广播电视台) highlights another type of TV content aimed at youth audiences: pure entertainment. This news report [describes](#) state-run Mango TV (芒果) as "leaning younger" and achieving "good international communication effects" with shows like Viva La Romance (妻子的浪漫旅行) — a comedic reality-style travel show — and Chinese Restaurant (中餐厅) — a reality show in which celebrities run a restaurant. Other reports [assert](#) that some of its activities in China are making strides to "lead youth trend culture". The station found [success](#) attracting viewers at home and abroad by, in part, [localizing](#) its content on platforms like YouTube. Chinese streaming website and show producer Youku also saw international success in 2021 with the period martial arts drama Word of Honor (山河令), which was [translated](#) into English, Spanish, Thai, Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Arabic and [added](#) to streaming giant Netflix. It also [garnered](#) millions of views on YouTube.

### Animation

A repeated topic of study among researchers, especially among masters and doctoral students, examining international communication is the success of Japanese [animation](#) and [manga](#) (comics; discussed above). One government-funded study argues that cartoons can be a significant factor in shaping young people that should be used to transmit a positive national image of China and modern Chinese values. The article cites Disney's major contributions to US "soft power" through its entertainment that integrates American values, but notes that China's cartoons lack clear values dissemination as well as emotional resonance and coherent storytelling. The latter 2 ingredients, along with appropriate music and sound design, will be necessary for success.<sup>32</sup> Others [point](#) to more overtly political cartoons that have become popular among young people in China as examples of what could be shared internationally, such as Year Hare Affair (那年那兔那些事儿), an animated series that recounts events from Chinese history.

32 Zhao Xiaobo [赵小波], "Thoughts on Animation Works and Values Transmission Under the Background of International Communication" [关于国际传播背景下动画作品价值观输出的思考], *Television in China* [中国电视], 2(2018), 94-97.



Figure 6: Digital painting of characters from Year Hare Affair (Source: [Sohu](#))

Despite potential weaknesses in the industry, some CCP-led organizations already seek to use animation for overseas propaganda work. For example, the Henan Provincial Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (河南省归国华侨联合会) issued a tender in September 2021 for the production of a cartoon series in support of its "2021-2022 'Affection for China — Native Home Henan' Overseas Ethnic Chinese Youth Central Plains Culture Online [and] Roots Seeking Experiential Activity Production Procurement Project" (2021-2022年度“亲情中华·老家河南”海外华裔青少年中原文化线上寻根体验活动制作采购项目 招标公告). According to the tender, the goal of this project is to promote passion for Chinese language studies and Chinese culture among young people of Chinese heritage living outside of China. The winner of the contract will be asked to produce a 20-episode, short-form cartoon series to "improve the ideological and emotional identification of overseas Chinese youths with their ancestral (home) country and ancestral (root) place" for 70,000 RMB (about \$10,800).<sup>33</sup>

### Video Games

Discussion of video games among the writings reviewed for this study is relatively rare. An International Communications article on precise communication in ASEAN member states [includes](#) "animation and cartoon games" (动漫游戏) as one of several areas for generating influence among the young audiences. The author further highlights using the China-ASEAN Expo Anime Game Exhibition (which has been [organized](#) annually since 2015) to make "young groups capable of understanding China's cultural development thread and China's success from a more comprehensive perspective". Nanjing propaganda official Peng makes passing [reference](#) to mobile games, among other

33 Source documents held by Recorded Future.

media, being infused with Chinese culture and values. It is also clear from other sources that video games are an area of interest. Namely, a procurement tender issued in September 2021 shows that CFLPA and Renmin University are soliciting “research on digital culture and international internet communication such as anime and games” (动漫、游戏等数字文化国际互联网传播研究).<sup>34</sup>

Notably, China’s entertainment industry had unexpected success in the video game arena in 2020 to 2021; the mobile game Genshin Impact (原神) [generated](#) \$2 billion in worldwide revenue, with the China market accounting for less than 30% of that total. An unofficial list of top 10 international communication achievements over this period cited Genshin Impact in [asserting](#) that in the past year Chinese games “began crafting characters and stories and designing activities with Chinese traditional culture as the spiritual core, making foreign youth groups have more and more precise understanding of China”.

## Music

Similar to video games, detailed discussions of music are not very common in the writings reviewed for this report despite [official calls](#) for music to “go out” and tell China’s story. Music mainly appears in passing references, such as another brief [mention](#) by Nanjing propaganda official Peng. Others [highlight](#) alleged musical international communications successes, such as 2016’s “Red Hip Hop” (红色嘻哈) song “[This is China](#)”, as part of writing on how the creativity of China’s youth can be turned into a force for external propaganda work (see **Unleash Youth Power** below for more discussion of this point). Among abstracts collected from CNKI, only 2 focus on music. One of these argues that music “has a special role in overcoming language and cultural barriers ... promotes ‘amity between the peoples of different countries’ (国之交民相亲), [and] deepens cultural understanding”.<sup>35</sup> However, based on interviews with 62 people from Southeast Asia, the authors find that people listening to Chinese popular (pop) music (流行音乐) mostly do so because they are already interested in learning Mandarin.

<sup>34</sup> Source documents held by Recorded Future.

<sup>35</sup> Yang Entai [杨恩泰] and Tang Xingqin [唐兴琴], “The Current Situation and Prospect of Circulation of Chinese Pop Music: A Case Study of the Empirical Researchers in South-East Asia” [中国流行音乐对外传播现状与展望——以东南亚地区实证研究为例], *Explorations in Music [音乐探索]*, 1(2020), 58-65.

## Online and Social Media

The CCP [views](#) the internet as “the main front for public opinion propaganda [and] the frontline of public opinion struggle”. The party’s ability to disseminate its message through popular online and social media channels is, accordingly, a core concern of propaganda theory. *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* recognizes this imperative and instructs cadres to do the following:<sup>36</sup>

*Combine international concerns and the [topics] that overseas netizens pay attention to, use the carriers and methods that overseas netizens enjoy (喜闻乐见)... [and] vigorously promote Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era ... [as well as] the story of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s governance.*

*Give full play to the unique and important role of the internet in cultural communication; produce and disseminate original short videos, use network livestreaming, ‘moving news’ (动新闻), and other new communication forms; fully exhibit the essence, contemporary values, and world significance of Chinese culture; [and] unceasingly raise the international influence of Chinese culture.*

*Strengthen internet external propaganda front construction ... [and] actively support the efforts of external propaganda media on overseas social media, [to] expand [its] influence, [and] become an indispensable source of information for foreign audiences.*

Although this authoritative text does not link these instructions to youth audiences specifically, the same notions permeate other writing on youth-oriented communication strategies. The reason is easily understood: users of social media websites like YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok [skew young](#), especially on newer platforms. Most popular [foreign](#) social media [sites](#) are mentioned in the [texts](#) by party officials and other communication theorists that were reviewed for this study. Theorists also emphasize the role that China’s platforms are playing in building audiences overseas, [pointing](#) to alleged increases in the number of young people from ASEAN member states using Weibo, WeChat, Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), Tencent Video, and iQiyi to say that the party should “borrow” these platforms to improve “daily” communication with foreign youth.

<sup>36</sup> “Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work”, 245, 246.

## KOLs and Influencers

As mentioned previously, state media conglomerate CMG is [seeking](#) to create (or has created) an “Influencer Studio” as part of a strategy to “steadily [raise its] influence among young people and mainstream people”. Scholars at Tsinghua University have [written](#) in International Communications that establishing “key opinion leaders” (KOL; 关键意见领袖) is important for following the trend of diminished trust in mainstream media overseas as well as for overcoming the “cancel culture” (取消文化) that has seen some American platforms label Chinese media as being affiliated with the government. They argue that a “KOL matrix” should be established, suggesting the participants would speak to different segments of a target population. A procurement tender issued in September 2021 shows that CFLPA and Renmin University are soliciting research on both aspects of this issue (differentiated targeting and role of KOLs); project topics include “Research and Intelligent Profile Modeling for International Communication of Youth Groups on the Mobile Internet” (移动互联网下青年群体国际传播智能画像模型与研究) and “Big Data Evaluation Models for the Influence of International Social Media Opinion Leaders” (国际社交媒体意见领袖影响力大数据评估模型).<sup>37</sup> Importantly, parts of an influencer-based strategy are already [visible](#) in influence operations directed at Taiwan.

Not all discussion of KOLs and influencers focuses on politics. The most common reference to a specific [success](#) story in cultural communication is Li Ziqi (李子柒), who amassed 16.4 million [followers](#) on YouTube and is lauded for “making Chinese-style pastoral life, cuisine culture, and educational concepts flow into the hearts of foreign audiences”. In an article republished by People’s Daily, a professor [argued](#) as early as 2019 that China’s cultural communication “needs more Li Ziqi”-type content. Her content, the author asserts, is not superficial as some critics say, hinting at internal debates about how best to achieve cultural influence through entertainment. Instead, Li Ziqi offers a simple and easily understood image of China that provides a starting point for people who want to learn more — similar to how America’s food culture is represented by McDonald’s, according to the author. In this way, it overcomes the “cultural discount” phenomenon that afflicts more complex forms of cultural communication.

Other writings discuss something similar to a KOL in an offline context. Nanjing propaganda official Peng [argues](#), for example, that the party should “cultivate and guide influential young Chinese leaders as China endorsers (中国代言), like a Chinese [Malala Yousafzai] or [Greta Thunberg], [to] effectively disseminate core socialist values”.

<sup>37</sup> Source documents held by Recorded Future.

## Polyphonous Communication

Similar to the idea of cultivating influencers, whose connection (if one exists) to the party-state may not be obvious, another common concept in new media propaganda thinking is polyphonous communication (复调传播). This is the [concept](#) that multiple communicators — major news outlets, new media companies, private media firms, and civil society, for instance — can be joined together like voices in a choir, reflecting a fuller, more powerful vision of China beyond the single voice of official media alone. Importantly, participating voices should not be self-governing or simply repetitive (不是各自为政, 更不是重复传播). In theory, these would be authentic speakers that engage with international audiences. The scholars from Tsinghua University [connect](#) this concept with KOLs and the goal of targeting specific audiences (such as youth) through “customized communication” and “breaking ideological discourse traps”. That is, with more, and more agile, communicators, China should be able to achieve precise communication and influence target audiences more effectively.

Polyphonous communication is not limited to youth-targeted propaganda, nor is it entirely new,<sup>38</sup> but presents itself quite commonly in writings on social media strategy. Moreover, there is a notable emphasis on developing overseas young people of Chinese and other ethnicities alike into communicators of the party-state’s message so they can influence other young people. The “Looking China” program discussed above is an example of how polyphonous communication can be achieved. Party academics and propaganda officials [advocate](#) “support [for] foreign youths in [experiencing China in person], and using their familiar platforms to influence their friends circle after returning [home]”. Nanjing propaganda official Peng [recommends](#) using “global competitions, invitations, co-production, and other methods to attract ‘Gen Z’ to participate in video production and dissemination”. Writing in a personal capacity, Xu Hejian, a deputy department head of the Beijing CCP Committee Propaganda Department and director of the city’s Information Office, [highlights](#) a program used to “borrow [foreigners] mouths to speak”: the “100 Reasons to Love Beijing” Short Video and Essay Competition (“爱上北京的100个理由”主题短视频征集和征文大赛), in which more than 1000 youths from 100 countries have reportedly participated.

An additional element of researchers’ thinking on polyphonous communication, creating channels through which China’s patriotic youth can speak internationally, is discussed in **Unleash Youth Power**.

<sup>38</sup> “Creating a Favorable International Public Opinion Environment”, 453.

## Interactivity and Responsiveness

Another element of strategic thinking with regard to online and social media is its interactivity and the potential for “[exchanges](#)” (交流) to occur, particularly among Chinese and foreign youth. The International Communications article on international communication efforts among young Russian audiences [argues](#) that the party-state “ought to further innovate and expand media dissemination methods ... use the interactive function of self-media (自媒体) [and] make communicators and Russian audiences form interactive communication”. The analysis cited above on ASEAN likewise suggests the expansion of Chinese social media and entertainment platforms globally creates opportunities for foreign youths to [engage](#) with young people in China. These suggestions likely reflect digital versions of longstanding theories that through contact with Chinese people, foreigners will come to view China (and by extension the party) positively. Such suggestions also represent the digitization of in-person, experiential propaganda models.

An [author](#) affiliated with a research center subordinate to the CFLPA [assessed](#) in 2020 that interactive dialogue is a more effective choice for achieving precise communication across different audiences of various countries and cultures. The current mode of international communication loses credibility among foreign audiences because of its clear propagandistic content and “single-trace ideological spectrum” (意识形态光谱单一等痕迹). Interactivity, which entails dialogue and responsiveness, can disseminate the CCP’s message further with greater flexibility. Other academics have made similar arguments, [asserting](#) that there is a difference between “international communication” and “external propaganda” and that “China ‘talks too much and listens too little’ (说的太多, 而听的太少)”.

It is clear from this review of international communication channels that China’s communication theorists see external propaganda as an endeavor that cuts across affiliations (party, non-party, and government) and industries (publishing, entertainment, and technology). Although most sources reviewed for this study do not refer to the “great external propaganda pattern”, that is, in essence, likely what is being described from the CCP’s perspective — the coordination of all resources to project an image of China internationally that serves the strategic interests of the party-state. However, while the mechanisms of how the desired external propaganda pattern is brought into action are beyond the scope of this study, it would be inaccurate to assume that every output, especially those in the cultural and entertainment spheres, is an explicit piece of propaganda created at the behest of the CCP.

## Unleash Youth Power

Party-state media’s current attempts to turn youth culture into political and current affairs propaganda are derided by [foreign](#) — and sometimes [domestic](#) — observers as ineffective “cringe”.<sup>39</sup> One likely reason is that the bureaucratic and highly-politicized nature of China’s official media outlets leaves decision making in the hands of older managers, stifling youth-driven innovation; as one former foreign employee of the nationalistic Global Times tabloid [describes](#), the bureaucracy often causes young journalists in China who may be capable of creating content that foreigners would find interesting to “either learn to resign themselves to the increasingly stiff limits of state media or quit”.

However, the party-state is striving to become more adept at new forms of communication by training young media talent and elevating their voices in the system, which theoretically will help the CCP reach young audiences internationally. The communication theory research community also has a suggestion for increasing the creativity and impact of international communication: enable Chinese youth to speak externally and shape China’s discourse system, under the right guidance of course.

## Build Youth Talent Teams for International Communication

The idea that youthful employees should be empowered to shape external propaganda is reflected in multiple authoritative documents and leadership speeches. In September 2020, the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and State Council [issued](#) “Opinions on Accelerating the Promotion of Deep Media Convergence Development”, asserted that media organizations should “place more exceptional middle-aged and young talents who are familiar with new media in key positions, amply release the vitality of [this] talent”. “Media convergence” (媒体融合)<sup>40</sup> is a theoretical concept that has been adopted as [national strategy](#) to [ensure](#) the party retains control of, and its message is uniformly found across, all communication channels, traditional (for example, newspapers and TV) and new or emergent (such as online and social media).

<sup>39</sup> That is, something that makes one feel extremely awkward and embarrassed for the creator.

<sup>40</sup> Alternatively translated as “media fusion”.

*Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* instructs cadres to “attach great importance to youth talent” as part of efforts to “strengthen external propaganda work team construction”.<sup>41</sup> Although the text makes clear that political considerations will remain paramount and other factors such as international experience are important, these instructions point to efforts within the media apparatus to give young professionals greater opportunities to guide propaganda work. Writing on efforts to establish a “new model of international-class mainstream media” (国际一流新型主流媒体), Shen Haixiong also made this [argument](#) in December 2021. Shen asserted that media organizations should “strengthen the training of youth talent”.



Figure 7: Vice Minister of the CCPD and Head of China Media Group Shen Haixiong (center) speaks at the first CYL-CMG Representative Assembly in September 2021 (Source: CCTV)

More specifics as to the goal of strengthening youth talent were made clearer in September 2021 at the first Communist Youth League-CMG Representative Assembly. Shen Haixiong [asserted](#) that the youth themselves ought to take responsibility for efforts to field new technologies in media work, connecting this with his theory that “elephants also must learn to street dance”. He argued that “leading cadres at all levels must start paying attention to the youth and caring about the youth, proactively give youth tasks ... and encourage them to reform and innovate, dare to try ... and support those in charge”. Thus, the party is seeking to empower youthful employees to apply their knowledge of new media, and by extension youth communication, to news and propaganda work at home and abroad within certain political confines.

41 “Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work”, 249.

## Create Pathways for Domestic Enthusiasm to Go Abroad

Harnessing the power of Chinese youth for external propaganda is not confined to bureaucratic reforms. *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* also instructs CCP cadres to “push ... youth [and other groups] to widely engage in dialogue and exchange, increasing understanding, deepening friendship” as part of the “great external propaganda pattern”.<sup>42</sup> The text specifies that the goal here is for communicators to use their “nongovernmental identity” (民间身份) and “nongovernmental methods” (民间方式),<sup>43</sup> obscuring the propagandistic nature of the contact.<sup>44</sup> This very likely relates to the concept of polyphonous communication in both online and offline environments that bring together people from China and other countries. Several prominent voices in Chinese diplomacy and international communications argued in 2021 for creating channels for more Chinese people to speak about their views internationally, albeit not with a specific focus on youth audiences:

- Former Vice Minister of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fu Ying [argued](#) that in striving “to create a credible, admirable, and respectable image of China”, the party should “take people as the medium [of communication]” (以人为媒) and allow “more Chinese people to tell their lively stories ... [to] achieve a multiplier effect”. Fu provides an example in which a Chinese nurse wearing a CCP pin is able to speak with a foreign politician, asserting that the nurse was able to show this politician what kind of people make up the party.
- Fudan University Professor and guest [speaker](#) at a May 2021 Central Committee Political Bureau (Politburo) study session on international communication Zhang Weiwei (张维为) goes further, [arguing](#) that internet restrictions should be loosened to allow more ordinary Chinese people the chance to express themselves to the outside world. Zhang’s thinking is that through greater contact with generally non-political representations of China, foreign audiences will realize that “Western” media’s depiction of the country are full of “rumors” and “smears”.

42 “Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work”, 249.

43 Alternatively, people-to-people identity and methods.

44 “Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work”, 249.

The CCP will not take the risk of broadly opening China’s internet, but Fu and Zhang’s remarks reflect a current of thought within the wider community of communication theorists in relation to using domestic youth as communicators for the party-state (see the discussion above about **Interactivity and Responsiveness**). For example, research published in 2018 in *International Communications* [asserts](#) that Chinese Millennials can be turned into a force of “unprecedented ‘cultural confidence’” for international communication through stronger “‘top-level design’ and effective guidance”. The authors specifically link this idea to the concept of polyphonous dissemination discussed above. Others similarly [argue](#) that the views of young Chinese internet users, content creators, and overseas Chinese people and students, as well as foreigners in China, should all be guided to participate in international communication.

A separate article presented in *International Communications* [describes](#) China’s young generation as an “emerging public opinion force”. The author, a doctoral advisor at the School of Journalism and Communication at Peking University, believes that online organic expressions of domestic patriotism (examples are seen in **Figure 8** below) born from young Chinese people and youth culture should be turned outwards. Although such expressions will require support in finding the right “political vocabulary”, they represent a new form of communication that can move past “fangirling” about China to commenting on real issues (such as race, war, and human rights) internationally, thereby giving voice to a “systematic values concept that transcends nationality”.

The patriotism of China’s youth will probably be viewed negatively by “Western” media, the author of this second article acknowledges, but the focus should be on influencing China’s “friends” elsewhere in the world. Indeed, one of the young patriotic artists highlighted in the article created an image of an Australian soldier killing an Afghan child that stirred [international ire](#) in November 2020 after a Chinese government spokesperson posted it on American social media. Other researchers who [argue](#) domestic and overseas Chinese youth should be “inspired” to contribute to international communication work also assert that “excess nationalism” should be avoided.

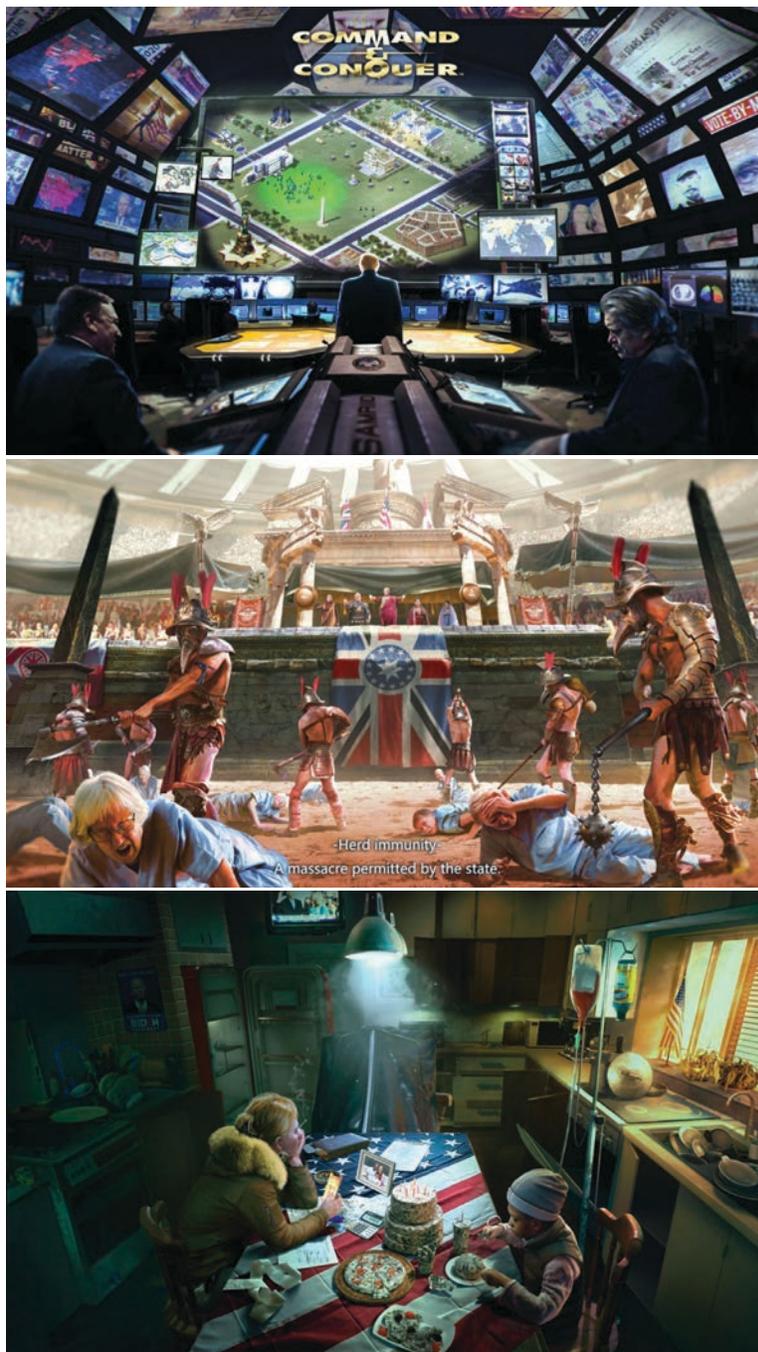


Figure 8: Digital paintings by a patriotic artist from China not only affirm the CCP’s national narratives, but also satirize America’s treatment of its own population and alleged hypocrisy (Source: @Wuhe Qilin (乌合麒麟) on Weibo)

Both party figures and the broader pool of communication theorists recognize that young Chinese people are assets for improving international communication. Not only do they better understand modern modes of communication and new media better than old bosses, they can help cultivate accurate (from the CCP's perspective) impressions of China in foreign minds through interactions with foreigners. The most official CCP sources focus on creating (likely stage-managed) opportunities for people to share their experiences regarding life in China while putting distance between the party and its message, making it more palatable, as well as integrating the voices with the existing media apparatus. The broader community of communication theorists advocate something looser, though still with appropriate guidance: capture, promote, and create channels for the creativity and enthusiasm of China's young people to go abroad. Theorists argue that domestic expressions of youthful patriotism — such as rap songs and cartoons — have succeeded in stimulating audiences at home, and hope they can do the same overseas. The question facing the party if they choose to more systematically open such channels is how to channel this energy in a way that amplifies the “right” Chinese voices with the right content to connect with foreign audiences while adhering to the CCP's political line.

## Outlook

From leadership speeches, authoritative texts, the actions of media organizations, and writings of communication theorists, it is clear that the CCP is seeking to cultivate support for the party's mission, policies, and China's development among global youth. Whether the CCP can succeed in achieving this goal is a complex question. There are many challenges that must be overcome in moving from strategic theories (the topic of this report) to tactical implementation (which involves wrangling intra-party bureaucracy as well as external industry) and finally influencing the real world. In the latter phases, many obstacles are outside of the CCP's influence, such as the countermeasures of other countries and foreign social media companies (such as [bans](#) on China-based social media platforms and the [labeling](#) of state affiliations). Yet even the implementation of theory at home is a struggle due to intra-party bureaucratic interests and challenges coordinating external industry with varying motives. Many of the approaches described above have been part of propaganda efforts for years, if not decades, yet continue to be widely discussed as areas for improvement.

Several major challenges to the CCP's plans are found within the party-state's media bureaucracy itself. Regardless of target audience, former foreign party-state media employees and others argue that the need to preserve political credibility domestically very likely [shapes](#) international communication outputs and [interpretation](#) of their success to the detriment of strategic goals. Media talent is also said to be [poorly](#) equipped and funded to create internationally appealing content and [not designed](#) to attract viewers in the way that media from countries such as the US and United Kingdom are. In fact, the majority of writings reviewed for this report made no serious attempt to prove that alleged external propaganda successes were actually achieving the desired effects overseas. Xinhua sometimes [highlights](#) the engagement its YouTube videos get, but overall this trend probably points to limited means among academics and analysts to meaningfully assess effects. Other aspects of China's governance, such as heavy [regulations](#) on the video game industry, will also likely negatively affect young target audiences regardless of improvements in media outputs.

Some Chinese scholars also [lament](#) the trend of using nationalistic, domestic-style propaganda narratives and tactics for external propaganda (外宣内宣化). "Theoretical frameworks based in radical nationalism ... cause us to be deeply trapped in Western-led topical frameworks and discourse systems, [moving China] from 'passive response' to 'dancing with the wind'", [asserts](#) an essay in International Communications, which is not in line with the CCP's goal of guiding public opinion. Ironically, the authors of this critique channel former US First Lady Michelle Obama

to say that "If they go low, we must go high". Yet a softening of approach is highly unlikely; as *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* instructs party cadres "dare to flash the sword (敢于亮剑) ... counterattack all kinds of anti-China arguments, [and] forcefully safeguard [China's] national image".<sup>45</sup>

However, while it is easy to dismiss many of the CCP's recent external propaganda and China's international communication outputs as crude, heavy-handed, poorly implemented, and even "cringe", there have been some successes. Many are found in the non-political arenas of culture and entertainment, such as with Genshin Impact and Word of Honor.<sup>46</sup> Other TV shows with more overt political messages have also reportedly had enough [success](#) on global platforms like YouTube that international versions are being developed. Even in the field of news and politics, state media has also scored some goals, such as when American rap musician Cardi B [lauded](#) China's handling of COVID-19 on an Instagram livestream after she watched a documentary produced by CGTN. There are also existing forms of official, English-language media that tell more engaging stories than the major party-state outlets, such as Sixtthone.

More important is that the CCP is seeking solutions for at least some of the challenges it faces, including the lack of adequate new media talent in the newsroom. Instructions to elevate the responsibilities of young journalists and those with more international experience will probably yield some improvements in the type and quality of outputs aimed at overseas youth of Chinese heritage and other ethnicities over time. Suggestions from the wider body of communication theorists to support young Chinese people in engaging with international counterparts and strive for ostensibly non-party-state polyphonous communication online will likely be implemented and achieve footholds in some communities. The CCP will almost certainly double up on perceived successes like Hollywood does for hit movies, strive to establish a presence on every platform to which youth groups are attracted, and continue carrying out experiential forms of propaganda online and offline. However, "radical nationalism" will most likely continue to inhibit these efforts for the foreseeable future, as will lingering bureaucratic and industry roadblocks and political rigidity. Thus vigilance is warranted, but paranoia about the potency of the CCP's international political and cultural communications efforts is not.

<sup>45</sup> "Chapter 10: External Propaganda Work", 227.

<sup>46</sup> Assessing whether either of these entertainment products were specifically created with party-state goals in mind is beyond the scope of this research. However, the CCP almost certainly views any successful cultural output as contributing to external propaganda goals whether or not the party had a direct hand in a given output's creation.

## Appendix A: Methodology

This research draws from leadership speeches, authoritative documents, the actions of party-state media, and the writings of communication theorists in China related to international communications, especially those that discuss targeting young audiences outside of China. “Communication theorists” refers broadly to all of those that likely contribute, however indirectly, to debates around the formulation of the CCP’s propaganda efforts. It includes CCP figures in positions of influence; journalists and practitioners within China’s media and propaganda apparatus, including local-level propaganda department officials; and academics and analysts that produce research related to propaganda and communication theory, whether demonstrably affiliated with the party or otherwise. Where authoritative documents are not available or lack specifics, the writings of this group can provide unauthoritative but useful insight into established, evolving, and emerging concepts.

A 3-step process was used to create a sample of relevant sources that discuss, in whole or in part, youth as it relates to external propaganda and international communication:

- First, targeted searches were conducted on the People’s Daily and Qiushi (QS Theory) websites using keywords related to young people, youth culture, international communication, and external propaganda. This yielded authoritative statements of policy, authoritative and semi-authoritative statements by CCP leaders and media personnel, non-authoritative but highly relevant theoretical commentaries promoted in these party publications, and news coverage related to specific propaganda initiatives. The time range for these searches was 2018 to the present.
- Second, similar searches were conducted on issues of the International Communications (对外传播) periodical using China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and other sources to collect relevant analyses by a wider pool of communication theorists. International Communications was [established](#) in 1994 and is guided (指导) by the CCP Central Committee’s Office for External Propaganda (中央对外宣传办公室)<sup>47</sup>; managed (主管) by the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration (CFLPA; 中国外文出版发行事业局), a [Central Committee](#) work unit (事业单位) under the Central Committee

Propaganda Department;<sup>48</sup> and sponsored (主办) and published by the Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies (ACCWS; 当代中国与世界研究院), a think tank [subordinate](#) to the CFLPA. Although writings in International Communications are not authoritative (i.e., they do not reflect policy), they are likely a reliable method of observing ideas and debates related to external propaganda that could inform the perceptions and practices of party members. The time range for these searches was 2018 to the present.

- Third, additional research was done to find materials that elaborated or provided examples of concepts discovered through the results of the 2 steps above. These tertiary searches led to the collection of texts from other sources, which were evaluated for relevance and value on a case-by-case basis, and were not confined to a specific time period to understand the historical context of the concepts. Additionally, publicly accessible procurement record databases were searched during this step for evidence of CCP and party-state organizations seeking to implement youth-targeted propaganda projects.

The sample of leadership speeches, authoritative documents, the actions of party-state media, and the writings of communication theorists was supplemented by an assessment of the book *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* (新时代宣传思想工作). This work was collectively authored by the Cadre Bureau (干部局) of the CCP Central Committee Propaganda Department (CCPD). It was published by the CCPD-subordinate Study Publishing House (学习出版社) in December 2020 and is labeled “cadre training teaching material” (干部培训教材). Given these characteristics, *Propaganda and Thought Work in the New Era* is very likely an authoritative statement on how the CCP has determined to pursue ideological and propaganda work. Chapter 10 deals specifically with external propaganda aimed at overseas audiences. The copy of the book reviewed for this report was published in March 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Various translated as the Central Office of Foreign Propaganda and International Communication Office, this body operates publicly as the State Council Information Office (国务院新闻办公室).

<sup>48</sup> Starting in 1991, CFLPA was [managed](#) by the Central Committee’s Office for External Propaganda (对外宣传办公室) and its predecessor. The Office for External Propaganda was [absorbed](#) by the Central Propaganda Department in 2014. Thus, CFLPA now very likely falls under Central Propaganda Department management. CFLPA is also known as China International Publishing Group (CIPG; 中国国际出版集团).

To understand whether interest in targeting young audiences, as demonstrated in the sample described above, was reflective of a larger trend, CNKI was searched for all journal articles, periodical articles, theses, and other materials that include terms related to young people, international communication, and external propaganda in the title, abstract, or keywords. This yielded 329 texts. Irrelevant articles (based on abstracts) and most news items that did not contain commentary were removed. Masters and doctoral theses were separated from professional writing. The final database of abstracts consisted of 90 non-student articles and 39 student theses. There was no time boundary for this search. Some of the professional articles collected here were added to the sample of sources.

Neither the sample of leadership speeches, authoritative documents, the actions of party-state media, and the writings of communication theorists nor the database of abstracts is comprehensive of all relevant materials related to the CCP's international communication strategy as regards youth. In particular, there is much more research that could be done into strategic and tactical thinking in relation to each of the specific propaganda channels (experiential, social media, movies, video games, etc.) identified in this study.

## About the Author

Devin Thorne

*Threat Intelligence Analyst, Insikt Group®*

Devin Thorne is part of Recorded Future's Global Issues Team. His research strives to explain China's security strategies through primary-language sources, with emphasis on propaganda work, maritime security, and military-civil fusion. He holds a bachelors from the University of Alabama at Birmingham and a masters from the Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and American Studies. He speaks Mandarin.

## About Insikt Group®

Recorded Future's Insikt Group, the company's threat research division, comprises analysts and security researchers with deep government, law enforcement, military, and intelligence agency experience. Their mission is to produce intelligence that reduces risk for clients, enables tangible outcomes, and prevents business disruption.

## About Recorded Future®

Recorded Future is the world's largest provider of intelligence for enterprise security. By combining persistent and pervasive automated data collection and analytics with human analysis, Recorded Future delivers intelligence that is timely, accurate, and actionable. In a world of ever-increasing chaos and uncertainty, Recorded Future empowers organizations with the visibility they need to identify and detect threats faster; take proactive action to disrupt adversaries; and protect their people, systems, and assets, so business can be conducted with confidence. Recorded Future is trusted by more than 1,000 businesses and government organizations around the world.

Learn more at [recordedfuture.com](https://recordedfuture.com) and follow us on Twitter at @RecordedFuture.