

**Strategies for Propaganda: Behavioural Patterns of Public Opinion
Guidance in Universities by Chinese Communist Party in the Digital
Age**

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Strategies for Propaganda: Behavioural Patterns of Public Opinion Guidance in Universities by Chinese Communist Party in the Digital Age

Guidance on public opinions and political propaganda are the major weapons of the Chinese Communist Party. But how do the authoritarian governments engage in public opinion guidance when citizens often know that their governments are propagandizing and therefore resist or ignore? Based on long-term participant observation, this exploratory research employs the method of comparative cases analysis to reveal four behavioural patterns in public opinion guidance in universities. Analysis on comparative cases accords to two stages in the theory of agenda setting, which are the media agenda and the public agenda, using initiative in agenda setting and degree of ideology of issues as two dimensions. This research divides the guidance on public opinions in the digital context into four: the union-interpretation pattern, the dialogue-competitive persuasion pattern, the competition-diffusion pattern and discussion-balance pattern.

Keywords: propaganda; authoritarian resilience; public opinion; China;

Introduction

How do the authoritarian governments engage in public opinion guidance when citizens often know that their governments are propagandizing and therefore resist or ignore? In China, guidance on public opinions and political propaganda are the major weapons of the Chinese Communist Party¹. Before the digital age, CCP played a leading part in the ideological and political areas by tightly controlling the media resources, especially in

¹ David Shambaugh, 'China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy', *The China Journal* 57, (2007), pp. 25-58; Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and thought work in Contemporary China*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

universities². The Internet and new media are threatening the monopoly of power of discourse in China. Even under censorship, different groups of people and individuals are providing views on the digital platform and some of them are striking up a discordant tune with the official propaganda³. The old monopolistic patterns are lapsed just like state-owned enterprises in the marketization period, which forces party-owned media to change their behavioural patterns in the public opinion guidance into a more flexible and market-oriented way⁴.

The role of media in political change is one of the major focus of comparative politics. Recent scholars attached attention to the role of media in non-democracies to stabilize the authoritarian regime. “The authoritarian Resilience” has led to research on the nondemocratic authoritarian context and might replace the transition theory⁵. Indeed, scholars focusing on China admit the critical role of media in stabilization⁶. Existing literature pay extensive attention to China’s thought management and public opinion

² Xiaojun Yan, ‘Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in Post-Deng China’, *The China Quarterly* 218, (2014), pp. 493-513.

³ Yang Guobin, *The Power of the Internet in China*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

⁴ Anne-Marie Brady(Ed.), *China’s Thought Management*, (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁵ Andrew Nathan, ‘Authoritarian Resilience’, *Journal of Democracy* 14(1), (2003), pp.6-17

⁶ Anne-Marie Brady, ‘Mass Persuasion as a Means of Legitimation and China’s Popular Authoritarianism’, *American Behavioural Scientist* 53, (2009), pp.434-457; Anne-Marie Brady, ‘Regimenting the Public Mind: The Modernization of Propaganda in the PRC’, *International Journal* 57(4), (2012), pp. 563-578; Daniela Stockmann and Mary Gallagher, ‘Remote Control: How the Media Sustain Authoritarian Rule in China’, *Comparative Political Studies* 44, (2012), pp.436-467; Meixi Zhuang, Xiaoling Zhang and Stephen Morgan, ‘Citizen–Media Interaction in China’s Local Participatory Reform: a Contingent Participation Model’, *Journal of Contemporary China (Online)*, (2017), pp.1-17.

guidance⁷. Brady⁸ pointed out that Chinese Communist Party stressed the mass persuasion after 1989 within modern strategies used in democratic states. The party-state updated means of propaganda to build a popular authoritarianism. Stockmann⁹ asserts the importance of positive propaganda and relative uniformity of information resource because of censorship in achieving the political goal. However, most of them focus on the effect rather than process, which is inadequate for a comprehensive understanding on the public opinion guidance work in China.

When people know it is propaganda from party-own media, how should the media fulfil responsibility in opinion guidance? To reveal the logic of strategy choice of propaganda in China, based on long-term participant observation and detailed cases collection, this exploratory research employs the method of comparative cases study to reveal four behavioural patterns of public opinion guidance of CCP in the universities.

This research concentrated on the cases from Tsinghua University. As the top high school in China, Tsinghua is famous for ideological and political education and the school spirit *Red and Expert(You Hong You Zhuan)*¹⁰. In 2015, the Matrix of New Media is put forward by the Youth League Committee of Tsinghua. After months, the Matrix of New Media is written into the Brief Report of Tsinghua and presented to the Ministry of Education in China and commended by the department of Publicity in the

⁷ Lijun Tang and Helen Sampson, 'The interaction between mass media and the internet in non-democratic states: The case of China', *Media Culture & Society* 34(4), (2012), pp. 457-471; Chen, 2007

⁸ Brady, 'Mass Persuasion as a Means of Legitimation and China's Popular Authoritarianism'.

⁹ Stockmann, 'Remote Control: How the Media Sustain Authoritarian Rule in China'.

¹⁰ Joel Andreas, 'Institutionalized Rebellion: Governing Tsinghua University during the last years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution', *The China Journal* 55, (2006), pp.1-28.

Central Committee of China Communist Party¹¹. Since the leading role of Tsinghua, the transformation in Tsinghua would provide insight into the flexible reconstruction of public opinion patterns in China. Based on one-year participant observation in the major official new media platform in Tsinghua, the research selects four cases of academic issue, campus life, democratic election and patriotism education. Covering different areas and concentrating on sensible events on campus, these cases reflect the complexity in the public opinion guiding work.

Analysis on comparative cases accords to two stages in the theory of agenda setting, which are the media agenda and the public agenda, using initiative in agenda setting and ideological degree of the issues as two dimensions. This research divides the guidance on public opinions by the party in the digital context into four: the union-interpretation pattern, the dialogue-competitive persuasion pattern, the competition-diffusion pattern and discussion-balance pattern. These four patterns would contribute to understanding the ideology-shaping strategies and various logics of public opinion guidance in the universities in the digital age.

This research contributes to the existing literatures in these two aspects. Firstly, it explored behavioural patterns of CCP in public opinion guidance based on detailed microscopic observation of the exemplary innovation. Secondly, it asserted the dimensions of topics that influence the behaviour and revealed the diverse logics of the behaviour.

¹¹ The Publicity Department in the Central Committee of China Communist Party appreciated the ‘thought work’ in Tsinghua University, See the comment article from Guangming Daily, Tsinghua university strictly implements the ideological work responsibility system (20 January 2017), available at: http://dangjian.com/djw2016sy/djw2016gddj/201701/t20170120_4020178.shtml (accessed 5 September 2017).

New Media and Public Guidance Behavioural Patterns

The public opinion guidance work in China is a major work for propaganda institutions¹². The guidance of public opinion is not a relatively new idea for the Chinese Communist Party. In 1987, the concept was introduced in the government report, asserting that the government need to provide the correct guidance to public opinion¹³. After Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, the guidance of public opinion became one of the major concern especially in the universities¹⁴. In 1992, the guidance of public opinion was endorsed in a policy document and espoused as the focus of the propaganda work since 1994¹⁵. In 2016 the news and public opinion work conference of the party, president Xi maintained that public opinion guidance is a great task for governance and stability and the Internet is the priority among priorities¹⁶.

The aim of opinion guidance, is to shape the thinking and behaviour of the audiences at whom they are aimed, the Chinese citizenry¹⁷. Existing literatures consider the Chinese Communist Party as a monolithic and conceptualize the news media as

¹² Brady(ed.), *China's Thought Management*.

¹³ Alex Chan, 'Guiding Public Opinion through Social Agenda-Setting: China's media policy since the 1990s', *Journal of Contemporary China* 16(53), (2007), pp. 547-559.

¹⁴ Yan, 'Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in Post-Deng China'.

¹⁵ Chan, 'Guiding Public Opinion through Social Agenda-Setting: China's media policy since the 1990s'.

¹⁶ For more details about Xi's view upon news and media, *People Daily Overseas* (25 February 2016), available at: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0225/c64387-28147896.html> (accessed 1 March 2016)

¹⁷ Doug Young, *The Party Line: How the Media Dictates Public Opinion in Modern China*, (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

singular rather than plural¹⁸. However, this monolithic view based on the ignorance of the competition between different sectors and the rise of private or individual new media in China.

In China, the thought politics in colleges and universities is one of the major ideology tasks for Chinese Communist Party. New media, such as WeChat Official Account Platform, turned into the one of the main field for ideological propaganda especially for university students. WeChat is now the most popular instant message software and social media system in China. The WeChat Official Account Platform(*Weixin Gongzhonghao*) is a platform in WeChat. The users are able to subscribe the account, which means the users will receive articles publish by the account. The users could read the articles from the *Subscription* or from the *Moment(Pengyouquan)*, where people could share articles within WeChat. The registration for WeChat official Account is open to every individuals, companies and public sectors.

The Matrix of New Media, raised by Communist Youth League Committee in Tsinghua University and emulated in other organizations¹⁹, is a group of official media in the form of WeChat Official Accounts, managed by the Party and League based on

¹⁸ Young, *The Party Line: How the Media Dictates Public Opinion in Modern China*; Chan, 'Guiding Public Opinion through Social Agenda-Setting: China's media policy since the 1990s'.

¹⁹ For Matrix of New Media, more and more universities and provinces have emulated the form from Tsinghua, such as Tongji University and Fujian Province. See Tongji News, the Establishment of Matrix of New Media Union (3 July, 2015), available at: <http://news.tongji.edu.cn/classid-6-newsid-47848-t-show.html> (accessed 1 March 2016); Fujian Daily, Typhoon Soudelo Reports from the Matrix (10 August 2015), available at: <http://news.dahe.cn/2015/08-10/105429712.html> (accessed 1 March 2016).

the student work institutions²⁰. The publicity channels on WeChat covering most students and teachers in the campus were integrated and controlled by the Party and League. Among the media, on the one hand, they are competing for the same target audience. Therefore they have to create attractive content for more subscription. On the other hand, they all commit to the management from the department of publicity in the Party Committee and League Committee. The balance between them is subtle and flexible. Different from the monopoly in vociferation in the former age, the digital age enhances the openness and lowers the cost in running a new media. In the context of Tsinghua, there are many individual media in the campus as well as relatively independent media Qingxin Times, which are out of control by the Party and League.

Degree of Ideology

The ideology still plays an indispensable role in the quest to legitimize authoritarian rule in contemporary²¹. Based on Beetham's theoretical model, three functions the ideology serve in China include the provision of normative justifications for the rightful source of political authority; the definition of the proper ends and standards of regime performance; and the mobilization of consent of subordinates, or at least of relevant elites²².

In the process of politics, the propaganda machine is the great tool for State ideology regime²³. The mainstream for supporting communism and criticizing

²⁰ Yan, 'Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in Post-Deng China'.

²¹ Heike Holbig, 'Ideology after the end of ideology. China and the quest for autocratic legitimation', *Democratization* 20(1), (2013), pp. 61-81.

²² Holbig, 'Ideology after the end of ideology. China and the quest for autocratic legitimation'.

²³ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, (London: Verso, 1991).

capitalism have persisted for decades before the reform and opening-up policy²⁴. Recent years after 1989, the decline of communist ideology and rise of nationalism became evident in China especially in the patriotic education²⁵. The opinion guidance in universities aims at patriotic education and shaping political ideology. The combination of nationalism and patriotism seeks for its goal the kind of loyalty and support for the nation and party²⁶.

As for public opinion guidance, when the issues relate closely to the ideology of patriotism or nationalism, which also means the issue concerning about the public support, political force will self-strengthen to deal with that more cautiously. The goal is to balance between the effect, “into the ear, into the brain, into the mind(*Ru Er, Ru Nao, Ru Xin*)”, and the uniformity²⁷. However, the tension between China’s youth values and official ideology persist²⁸. The persistent tension forces the media to seek for ways to relief the tension for a better propaganda effect, which influences the strategy choice when dealing with various issues.

As the ideology concentrates on patriotism rather than communism, the degree of ideology most relate to the degree of involvement of political agent. In the research, the degree of ideology will be measured with two criterions, the official agents such as nation/governments or universities involve or the topic is about political issues.

²⁴ Brady, ‘Mass Persuasion as a Means of Legitimation and China’s Popular Authoritarianism’.

²⁵ Suisheng Zhao, ‘A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31(3), (1998), pp. 287-302.

²⁶ Tang, *Populist Authoritarianism*, (New York: Oxford Press, 2016)

²⁷ Brady, ‘Mass Persuasion as a Means of Legitimation and China’s Popular Authoritarianism’; Brady, *China’s Thought Management*.

²⁸ Yan, ‘Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in Post-Deng China’.

Initiative in agenda setting

Agenda setting theory raised by McCombs and Shaw²⁹ helps to reveal that the party state has begun to shift the focus of its propaganda work from ‘what people think’ to ‘what people think about’³⁰. The initiative in agenda setting refers to the active position in choosing the issues. China government could put forward some issue to set the agenda for public opinion effectively³¹.

Apart from passive censorship, scholars have notice the positive propaganda in China³². In particular, it has developed a new interest in attention management, including how to use the state-controlled media to draw people’s attention to one issue and divert their attention from another³³. The degree of initiative in agenda setting will influence the strategy choice. When the Party tries to set an agenda, the initiative relates to the resource invested. In the contrary, when unexpected issues raised by other media out of the control from the Party, the Party will judge the necessity to responded and how to avoid enlarging the negative influence.

The need in propaganda motives the Party and League have a discriminatory consideration about various issues and adopt different degree of initiative. When

²⁹ Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, ‘The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media’, *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 36(2), (1972), pp. 176-187

³⁰ Chan, ‘Guiding Public Opinion through Social Agenda-Setting: China's media policy since the 1990s’.

³¹ Yunjuan Luo, ‘The Internet and Agenda Setting in China: The Influence of Online Public Opinion On Media Coverage and Government Policy’, *International Journal of Communication* 8, (2014), pp. 1289-1312.

³² Brady, ‘Mass Persuasion as a Means of Legitimation and China’s Popular Authoritarianism’; Brady, *China’s Thought Management*; Stockmann, ‘Remote Control: How the Media Sustain Authoritarian Rule in China’.

³³ Chan, ‘Guiding Public Opinion through Social Agenda-Setting: China's media policy since the 1990s’.

measure the degree in initiative, the research employ two criterions, the some groups and people are organized for the publicity in advance or they cooperate with each other in the publicity process.

Classification of Behavioural Patterns

Based on the two dimensions, the degree of ideology and initiative in agenda setting, all the issues could be divided into four types. Upon every type of issues, the party-owned media will employ different behavioural patterns. The dimensions in Table1 refer to the issues' degree of ideology and initiative in agenda setting. The variables are continuous. As they square crossed, the four quadrants reflect four kinds of issues as well as behavioural strategies.

Table1 Classification of Behaviour Patterns

Patterns		Initiative in agenda setting	
		High	Low
Degree of Ideology	High	Union-interpretation pattern	Dialogue-competitive persuasion pattern
	Low	Competition-diffusion pattern	Discussion-balance pattern

Source: Conducted by the author

The union-interpretation pattern

Media Agenda: because of both the high degree of ideology and initiative in agent setting, the Party and League will fulfil their responsibility in shaping political attitude. The high degree of ideology leads to the remarkable consensus and high organizational degree of publicity. The Party and League will command the media to unite or establish

a working group, making working plans or systematic schedules, and publish similar information to avoid internal dispute.

Public Agenda: for the high ideology, when in publicity, the Party and League will provide interpretation to reveal the significance of the issue using similar discourse but subtly different forms based on the characteristics of the account, to convey detailed information and lead the public. During the process, the standpoints of the media are tightly in accordance to the party.

The competition-diffusion pattern

Media Agenda: in terms of the issues with low degree of ideology but high initiative in agenda setting, the topics are more familiar to the public. The risk of evoking contentions is limited. Therefore, when offering to set the agenda, the Party and League will set up a temporary group and require the group to foster the publicity. Due to the less ideological limitation, the media can use vivid forms and content to publish the same topic. Because the audience for them are overlapped, the competition among them arise and encourage to create more popular content adjusting to the audience.

Public Agenda: as required, the media will have to publish articles in the same time interval. However, for pursuing more page views, the media will seek for forms and content welcomed by the public most. In result, the public will receive condense information of the very topic with different content, which attract attention and enhance the influence of the issues.

The dialogue-competitive persuasion pattern

Media Agenda: for issues with high degree of ideology but low initiative in agenda setting, the Party and League will straightforward response to the dissent opinion, which

develop a dialogue between the official media and the dissent opinion. The dialogue will be specific and focus on the issue raised by the opponents in order to avoid extra contentions and limit the influence.

Public Agenda: focusing on the same issues, the public opinion will diverge and reshape because of the new opinion from the official media. The debate between different opinion is rational and impersonal. The official media use more persuasive narratives and win more public support wildly through the dialogue with someone dissent specifically.

The discussion-balance pattern

Media Agenda: for issues with low degree of ideology and low initiative in agenda setting, the entry level for discussion is easy therefore usually numerous participants join in the discussion. With respect to the extensive range of discussion, the Party and League will treat it more cautiously if not passively and avoid offending specific schools or department.

Public Agenda: the complexity also limits the possibility to shape the opinion into an integral unity. If the official media join in the discussion too rigorously, they might trigger new conflict. Therefore, the Party and League tend to avoid involving too much with official status. Yet, because the contentions need being mitigated, the official media will join in the discussion with a more flexible way to convey different opinion with ambiguous authority, hoping to settle disputes to a more balance situation.

Selection of Cases

The research selects cases from Tsinghua University to reveal the behavioural patterns. It is admitted that the status of top schools in China helps to intensify the extension of

public opinion and controversy. However, Tsinghua is still one of the best cases to reveal the logic of opinion guidance in China. On the one hand, as one of the top universities in China, Tsinghua put forward the concept of New Media Matrix, which is typical in most universities now in China. On the other hand, with the reputation of Red and Expert, the thought politics work in Tsinghua is always preeminent among the university, which clearly exemplify the strategies of the Party and League in opinion guidance in China³⁴.

To reveal the logic and strategical choice of the Party and League in public opinion guidance among students, the research focus on cases related directly to the groups of students rather than official news about Tsinghua such as academic achievement or leader's visit. Therefore, most of the participants in the cases are students or teachers, both of who lack strong force or power to censor the dissent views.

The four cases this research select are Grading System Reform, 12•9 Choral Competition, Sport Promotion Policy and Student Union Election. The influential degree of article in WeChat are measured by the page views and the ratio of number of "Like" over page views.

³⁴ Guangming Daily, 'Tsinghua university strictly implements the ideological work responsibility system'

Table2 Selection of Cases

Patterns		Initiative in agenda setting	
		High	Low
Degree of Ideology	High	Union-interpretation pattern Case: Grading System Reform	Dialogue-competitive persuasion pattern Case: 12•9 Choral Competition
	Low	Competition-diffusion pattern Case: Sport Promotion Policy	Discussion-balance pattern Case: Student Union Election

Source: Conducted by the author

Cases and Analysis

Publicity for the Reformation of Grading System in 2015

The Suggestions Upon Deepening Comprehensive Education and Teaching Reform in Tsinghua University, put forward by Tsinghua University on Oct. 16th 2014, asserted that for students' further development, it was necessary to strengthen and improvise a student-oriented and efficiency-central evaluation and supervision system for education quality³⁵. On May 15th in 2015, *The Reform Scheme for Building an Academic Evaluation System for Promoting Students' All-round Development*³⁶ pointed out the

³⁵ See more details about the reform scheme, Tsinghua News, *The Suggestions Upon Deepening Comprehensive Education and Teaching Reform in Tsinghua University* (17 October 2014), available at: http://news.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/news/4205/2014/20141017142602293970435/20141017142602293970435_.html (accessed 1 March 2016).

³⁶ See more details about the grading system reform, Tsinghua News, *For Building an Academic Evaluation System for Promoting Students' All-round Development*(15 May 2015),

disadvantages of current hundred-mark system for GPA calculation and put forward a new version of regulation for students' grade recording in Tsinghua University, suggesting replacing the current hundred-mark system with a new ABCD degree level system.

The grading system, related to the students' interest closely is the main evaluation system for their academic performance. However, the information for system reforming was close before releasing by the authoritative sectors. The public opinion leading work caught vital attention for the fact that unintended controversy³⁷ raised among students about another reform in regulation of class-dropping³⁸ due to the lack of advanced publicity. With respect to the negative influence caused by class-dropping reform, the Academic Affairs Office set up the publicity group for education reform, including different offices in the Party and League³⁹, such as the Policy Research Office and the Publicity Department of Party Committee, both of the Publicity Departments in the Communist Youth League and Communist Youth League of Graduate Students and Qingxin Times, which is a student newspaper office in the School of Journalism and Communication. As a significant step of education reform, the publicity for the grading reform is not only for the sake of notification but also ideological propaganda for reform spirit and public support. The group made a comprehensive scheme for the grading system reform, purposing to avoid dispute and query to the reform by advanced

available at:

<http://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/news/mobile/4204/2015/20150519142730504945827/20150519142730504945827.htm> (accessed 1 March 2016)

³⁷ The question raised in Zhihu, a Social Q&A Website in Chines, How to consider the decision for not charging for mid-term dropping out in Tsinghua University?, available at:

<https://www.zhihu.com/question/28798347> (accessed March 2016)

³⁸ from the announcement in Web Learning for Tsinghua

³⁹ According to the participant observation.

publicity encouraging students to comprehend the reasonability of level system and the significance of the reform.

According to the reading statistics of the articles (appendix I), the publicity group released 13 articles in 7 WeChat official accounts during the period from May 11th to 19th, focusing on the necessity, details, orientation and influence of the reform. The total page views are more than 70,000⁴⁰. Apart from the authoritative sectors, some of the individual media voice opinions in their personal WeChat official accounts as well as some state-owned mainstream media. Generally speaking, the effect of publicity is positive and efficient.

With respect to the releasing centralization and page views, before the information release on May 15th, 4 articles are released and viewed for more than 10 thousand times; 5 articles on 15th were read more than 50 thousand times; 6 articles after 15th were viewed for 7 thousand times. In terms of the articles questioning the reform, they caused little controversy compared with the degree of attention in the earlier period of publicity, with only one article viewed more than 2 thousand times from Qingxin Times on May 26th.

Controversy in 12•9 Choral Competition

12•9 Choral Competition, annually held by Committee of Communism Youth League in Tsinghua University, is one of the political educational collective activities. With respect to competition among the schools and departments, students are asked to spend more effort and time in singing training, which evoked negative emotion among the students. Publicity work from departments and schools were evaluated as part of the comprehensive performance. Party committees and Youth League of the schools and

⁴⁰ The data cut off on December 21th, 2015 and will be showed in the appendix.

departments conduct a great deal of publicity work. For instance, Committee of Communism Youth League of Department of Electronical Engineer promulgated 20 articles during one and a half months before the final competition (appendix II). However, the page views of these articles are limited, most of which were less than 300.

On December 4th, Qingxin Time published comments titled *12·9: Memory for Forgetting* on 12·9 Choral Competition in the WeChat Platform, criticizing that the competitions had degenerated into forms. Introduced by the author Chen, after being published, he received no critical interference from the authority. Being criticized by the comment article, the 12·9 Spirit was always unscrambled by the party and the Youth League with features of sole information source, highly abstract and ideological. The next day, the Communist Youth League of Graduate Students promulgated responding article *12·9: Yes! Memory for Forgetting*, which responded the former comment directly using similar title and evoked publicity for 12·9 competition. After that, Chen published an article in his personal WeChat Platform to tell the story about why he wrote this comment and restated his opinion. Other personal WeChat Account joint in the discussion then. As Chen said⁴¹, in order to avoid negative influence on comprehensive performance evaluation for his own school, students might not forward this article on their own WeChat.

With respect to the ratio of number of Likes to the page views for these two articles from Qingxin Times and CYL of Graduate Students, the comments are much more influential than all the other publicity articles. Comparatively speaking, the responding article from CYL is more influential than the former one according to the reading statistics.

⁴¹ According to the interview, 10 December 2015.

Publicity for Sport Promoting Policy

To revive the sporting tradition, freshman since 2015 were required to do daily physical exercises with the one app on the mobile phone recording. The record would be used to evaluate students' performance in physical education class. However, because the new regulation was unclear, the using rate of the app was not more than 50%, which called for the need to popularize this new policy.

On Nov 6th 2015, the Freeman Sport Working Group, which mostly consisted of teachers working in the Communist Youth League of Committee in Tsinghua University, organized a conference including people from different organization, such as Student Union of the university, publicity department in the League of the university, Qingxin Times, the publicity departments of committee in the CYL from three largest schools in the university. This conference was aimed to promote the publicity work of the new physical education reform.⁴²

Because of the multiple platform and unspecific requirement of publicity, the agents showed their capacity to present the common specific topic with vivid content, such as comments, exclusive interview or picture work. The sport tradition relates little to the political ideology and the policy had been open online.

The publicity agents, for pursuing a better number of page views, had to compete with each other by playing their strengths. After the conference, the committee of CYL in schools and departments conduct their instruction about the policy based on taste of their students. The Committee of CYL in the university used more detailed stories to show the sport tradition in Tsinghua. According to the reading statistics in appendix III, the effect of this publicity action is positive and effective to promote the

⁴² According to the participant observation.

new policy. Most of the articles have been read for thousands times and some of them even got more than 70 thousand views.

Controversy in Student Union Election in M School

June 2014, the student union in M School held an annual election. The election in M, different from many schools and departments in Tsinghua, is always more competitive teamwork with high-sounding publicity, which attracts much attention in the campus. Qingxin Times also promulgated a comment titled *Memoir on Election in M: Success of Failure of Democracy*, discussing about how the election worked in M and its outcome.

One of the Candidates Y ran her personal WeChat Platform for some time before the election, which was influential somehow. After the failure of election, on June 2nd, Y released an articles *The Election of M in Tsinghua I Experienced* with previewed edition, which could only been seen in her personal WeChat Moment within a smaller range, telling the story how unfair the experience she had was during the election campaign. The previewed article leaked unexpectedly and Y deleted it as soon as she found. Nevertheless, soon after that, she promulgated that in her WeChat Platform, which caused a bigger scale of discussion. The page views increased to nearly 100,000 before it was deleted again. There appeared other discussions on other social network systems like Zhihu and Douban, where more and more private information leaked and social influence emerged.

With more and more direct elections of student unions held in the department-level, the intrigues and inside stories mentioned in the article stocked fierce controversy. More platforms involved in the discussion, including personal WeChat Platform and CYL of M School, which led to another round of discussion not about Y but the democratic election of student union in campus. Articles from other individual platforms talked about his personal experience to show students could share a more

harmonious relationship in the election and activities. Qingxin Times promulgated the previous comment article to join in the discussion. According to the reading statistics in appendix IV, most of the comment articles has little effect to settle the dispute but to enlarge it.

The Party and League in the university level did not lead the public opinion at the beginning of the discussion. Because the event was related to specific student and school, and the article was promulgated on her personal platform rather than an official platform. Thus, the influence was complicated so the authoritative platforms said nothing at the very beginning. Then Yang, one of the former presidents of student union of M, proactively submitted a piece of article to Publicity Department of CYL, telling his own election stories, which was the first comment from the authority upon this event. Yang also promulgated this article in his personal platform and the total views were more than 20,000.

The next day, Y's friend deleted the article and gave an illustration. The question in Zhihu was also closed. The comment article from Yang showed vital effects to settle controversies by join in the discussion.

Comparatively Cases Analysis

Focusing on the cases above, we conduct a comparative analysis with two dimensions, the degree of ideology and initiative in agenda setting, which is showed in table3 below. As discussed above, the degree of ideology will be measured with two criterions, the official agents such as nation/governments or universities involve or the topic is about political issues. The initiative in agenda setting is measured with another two criterions, the some groups and people are organized for the publicity in advance or they cooperate with each other in the publicity process. If one of the criterions is met, we claim that the issue show the high feature, vice versa.

Table3 Comparative Analysis

Case	Degree of Ideology		Initiative in Agenda Setting	
	Political agents involved	✓	Organization	✓
Grading System Reform	Political agents involved	✓	Organization	✓
	Political Issues	✓	Cooperation	✓
12•9 Choral Competition	Political agents involved	✓	Organization	
	Political Issues	✓	Cooperation	
Sport Promotion Policy	Political agents involved		Organization	✓
	Political Issues		Cooperation	
Student Union Election	Political agents involved		Organization	
	Political Issues		Cooperation	

Source: Conducted by the author

The four cases of public opinion events in Tsinghua University reveal various strategies of the New Media Matrix, which are listed below:

- In the case of publicity for grading system reform, the Party and League organize the people and proposals to settle the working schedule in advance. On the day for proclaiming, the media use the similar content and employ various forms to interpret the reform announcement.
- In the case of 12•9 choral competition, the dissent opinion raised by Qingxin Times was responded quickly by the party-owned media with exactly the same title, which turn the crisis into chances for publicity.
- In the case of sports promotion policy publicity, the Party and League organized people for the same topic. The media played their strengths to attract their audience with attractive stories.

- In the case of student union election, the League joined in the discussion with a very flexible way telling the stories of the former president rather than contraposing to the candidate individually.

Based on the two-step agendas, the media agenda and public agenda, the different strategies the Party and League employed are listed:

Table4 Comparative Analysis: Two-Stage Strategy

Cases	Goal	Media Agenda	Public Agenda
Grading System Reform	To reveal the significance of reform and strengthen the support to the university	The Party and League convene people and organize a temporary publicity group and make the schedule.	The media interpreted the concrete scheme and the significance of the reform
12•9 Choral Competition	To propagandize the spirit of 12•9 and patriotism	The dissent opinion raised and the formation for patriotic education was questioned.	Aiming at the specific article, the media stroke back and disseminate the patriotism spirits.
Sport Promotion Policy	To disseminate the policy and encourage sporting	The Party and League convene people for publicity and interpret the scheme.	The media employ various content based on a common theme based on their strengths

			to compete with each other.
Student Union Election	To defuse the controversy	The individual published an article to express discontent and cause the controversy.	The media joined the intense discussion with a flexible stories.

Source: Conducted by the author

In the highly ideological issues with high initiative in agenda setting, the Party and League tend to in advance organize people, design the publicity plan and unify the understanding of the issues. The media, as required, use similar content and discourse to lead the opinion. For issues with lower initiative in agenda setting but high degree of ideology, the media will compete with each other and disseminate the issue using abundant content. For the issues with low initiative in agenda setting, the influence is out of control of the Party and League.

If it is highly ideological, to earn more public support, the Party and League will employ more specific and pointed method and content to develop a dialogue between the official media and the dissent. If lowly ideological, both for limiting the negative influence and defusing the controversy, the Party and League will only join the discussion to balance the opinion field.

Conclusion

How does the propaganda system work exactly when the people know they are propagandizing? How will the authoritarian state get adjusted to the change in the

digital age for its stability? Existing literature focusing on authoritarian politics and propaganda in China does not present an exact answer to these questions. The modernization of propaganda and its flexible adjust to the digital media in China has attracted much attention from scholars, who focused mostly on some micro policies or principles in state-level⁴³. However, the subtle mechanism could help to reveal the political logic in propaganda strategies choice, which contributes to a more comprehensive understanding about authoritarian resilience.

Based on the long-term participant observation and comparative cases analysis, the research intends to summarize the various behavioural patterns of the Party and League's public opinion guidance. The academic contribution include two aspects. Firstly, it explored different strategy choices when the Party and League face with different kinds of issues based on detailed participant observation. Secondly, it asserted the classification standard for issues and revealed the internal logic of the guidance strategy choice.

The degree of ideology and initiative in agenda setting shape the behaviour of the Party and League. On the one hand, the aim of the publicity from the Party and League in universities is patriotism education. When the issues relate to ideological topics, the necessity for opinion guidance raises, which contributes to the preorganization and uniformity. When dissent opinion published by other media, the Party and League have to keep the uniformity therefore the targeted article would be employed to respond the opinion and earn public support. For issues with less strict requirement, the publicity work is organized but not unified. Even faced with

⁴³ Brady, 'Mass Persuasion as a Means of Legitimation and China's Popular Authoritarianism'; Brady, China's Thought Management; Stockmann, 'Remote Control: How the Media Sustain Authoritarian Rule in China'; Chan, 'Guiding Public Opinion through Social Agenda-Setting: China's media policy since the 1990s'.

unexpected opinion event, the media could flexibly join the discussion without using much official discourse. The media could enlarge the number of their audience by attractive content when the unifying requirement concede.

On the other hand, the media is not always monolithic. The relationship between the branches of the Party and League in the publicity work is both competitive and cooperative. Whenever they deal with publicity issues, they would exploit their creative freedom to pursue high attention. So the more they are required to be unified, they have less space for creativity and cooperate into an integer; however, when the requirement gets loose, they would compete with each other for more page views. When dealing with the unexpected events, the media have to take their status into account, which means a subtle balance between being an official media and a student media.

The features of the issues will adjust the balance between these two dimensions, which shapes the strategies choices into four patterns, the union-interpretation pattern, the dialogue-competitive, persuasion pattern, the competition-diffusion pattern and discussion-balance pattern. However, the limited of the research is evident. The cases are limited in one university and more empirical study are needed to assure the conclusion.

Further studies could re-exam the model in the mainstream media in China or other non-democratic states. The deep and long-term observation will help to reveal the internal logic but the external credibility of this model should be examined by more empirical materials.

In conclusion, the digital age broke the monopoly in power of voice in the authoritarian states, which would drive the propaganda system to change its strategies. When people know the party-owed media are always propagandizing, the state will adjust its strategies to improve the effect according to the features of issues. This

flexible adjustment and modernization of propaganda work in authoritarian states are revealed by the cases we scrutinize in this research. The logic for political stability in the authoritarian states is consistent, which is reflected in the strategy choice and the balance between uniformity and vivaciousness. With sufficient power to control and organize the media, the propaganda power still stays overwhelming than the individual dissent views. However, whether the propaganda will be effective or not depends only partially on the capability and partially on the method they employ. Cases of adjustment in China's universities' propaganda work reveal the possibility and reality that transformation happens in the authoritarian states, which will contribute to explain its resilience theoretically.

APPENDIX

Appendix I Statistics Data of Publicity for Grading System Reform (The data cut off on December 21th, 2015)

Time	Account	Affiliation	Title	Content	Views	Likes
2015.05.11	Tsinghua Studio	Communist Youth League for Graduate students in Tsinghua University	Real Reform in GPA How to talk about GPD elegantly in the future?	To quote the announcement and justify the necessity and importance.	3515	16
2015.05.12	Xenias	Student Union	Reform for GPA The teachers say: GPA needs to be changed	To justify the necessity and rationality.	3893	18
2015.05.13	Tsinghua Studio	Communist Youth League for Graduate students in Tsinghua University	Two Guesses about the reform for GPA	To justify the necessity and tendency.	3093	12
2015.05.14	Xiaowuyeyua	Communist Youth	Focus from Wuye After relief	To justify the necessity and the	2831	22

	n	League in Tsinghua University	for GPA, will there be Xueba or Xueza?	positive consequence from degree system.		
2015.05.15	Xiaowuyeyuan	Communist Youth League in Tsinghua University	Uncover secrets One picture to detailed study the reform	Use a picture to show the reform scheme and significance.	4659	16
2015.05.15	Graduate Education in Tsinghua	Graduate School in Tsinghua University	The grading reform starts from 2015	To explain the reform scheme.	812	1
2015.05.15	Tsinghua Studio	Communist Youth League for Graduate students in Tsinghua University	Ten Words to Understand the GPA reform	To explain the reform scheme.	7907	19
2015.05.15	Voice for Class Reform in Tsinghua	Consulting Council for Undergraduate Classes in Tsinghua	It Comes! The GPA Reform!	To explain the reform scheme and ask for advice.	21122	54

		University				
2015.05.15	Qingxin Times	Qingxin Times	Education Reform in Tsinghua: No Hundred-Mark System, Weak GPA, how to be a student in Tsinghua?	To explain the reform scheme.	4818	28
2015.05.15	Tsinghua Graduate Online	Graduate Student Union Tsinghua	Heard about the GPA reform, the four brothers in one dormitory decide to restart their university	To explain the reform and its influence.	17934	112
2015.05.16	Tsinghua Studio	Communist Youth League for Graduate students in Tsinghua University	Only from hundred-mark to degree system?	To evaluate the reform positively and appeal to more reform innovation.	1912	5
2015.05.19	Tsinghua Studio	Communist Youth League for Graduate	Strategy How to be a good student in Tsinghua?	To reveal the significance and evaluate the reform positively.	1694	5

		students in Tsinghua University				
2015.05.19	Tsinghua Studio	Communist Youth League for Graduate students in Tsinghua University	Give more space for GPA reform	To quote the speech from the vice president to address the significance.	210	2
2015.05.22	Tsinghua Studio	Communist Youth League for Graduate students in Tsinghua University	Post-GPA Reform Focus on the innovators in Tsinghua	To review the evaluation system in Tsinghua's history.	800	2
2015.05.26	Qingxin Times	Qingxin Times	【Vol.178 Leading Article】 First Question to the Degree System: the form is changing, how about the nature?	To criticize the reform change little on the utilitarianism.	2132	22
2015.06.01	Qingxin	Qingxin Times	【Vol.179·Leading Article】	To criticize the publicity work,	903	12

	Times		Second Questions to the GPA Reform: Why it is so hard for democratic participation?	survey and democratic participation.		
2015.05.11	Qiaoyan	Individuals	For a peaceful desk in Tsinghua: the class and the grading reform	To Justify the necessity for reform	1961	29
2015.05.15	Chenxiweiguang	Individuals	Grading Reform in Tsinghua: Pro or Con (Comments from the Moment)	To present diverse views from the students	222	4
2015.05.15	Ailianshuo	Individuals	Let you know why the grading reform benefit most common students	To analyze and evaluate and the new system	207	3
2015.05.15	People Daily Politics & Culture	People Daily	Hundred-Mark System was replaced by ABCD in Tsinghua to Evaluate students' capacity	To reveal the significance and evaluate the reform positively.	5151	28
2015.05.16	Beijing Daily	Beijing Daily	A+ or 100? Freshmen in	To reveal the significance and	197	2

			Tsinghua say goodbye to hundred-mark system	evaluate the reform positively.		
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Source: Collected by the author from WeChat Official Account Platform

Appendix II Articles on 12·9 Choral Competition (only part of the articles from EE is included, the data cut off on December 21th, 2015)

Time	Account	Affiliation	Title	Content	Views	Likes
2014.11.02	Wuxianzhisheng	CYL in Department of Electronic Engineer	Red Songs for Praise	To introduce one of their activities about 129	133	2
2014.11.03	Wuxianzhisheng	CYL in Department of Electronic Engineer	129 On Spot: the voice from the students	To introduce the training and the feeling	217	1
2014.11.06	Wuxianzhisheng	CYL in Department of Electronic Engineer	Memorize 129 and strengthen our army: the Theme Class Meeting for Wu41	To introduce the meeting held by the students and share their feeling.	123	4
2014.12.04	Qingxin Times	Qingxin Times	<i>12·9: Memory for</i>	To criticize the significance is	1846	31

			<i>Forgetting</i>	constructed simply.		
2014.12.04	Tsinghua Studio	Communist Youth League for Graduate students in Tsinghua University	<i>12·9: Yes! Memory for Forgetting</i>	To justify the significance and necessity.	2424	30
2014.12.04	Neighbor	Individual	Logic Questions for the two articles on 129	To question the logic inside of the two articles	Deleted	Deleted
2014.12.09	Emergency Room for Mr.Chen	Individual	It is 129 today but no one memorize	To tell the experience that he wrote the critical article	134	1
2014.12.09	Qiaoyan	Individual	It is 129 today but no one memorize	To criticize the competitions had degenerated into only forms.	844	9

Source: Collected by the author from WeChat Official Account Platform

Appendix III Publicity for Sport Policy (The data cut off on December 21th, 2015)

Time	Account	Affiliation	Title	Content	Views	Likes
2015.11.07	SEM Sport in Tsinghua	Student Union in SEM	This is your running!	To introduce the sport policy.	558	6
2015.11.10	Publicity Center in School of Art	CYL in School of Art	Have you run today?	To introduce the sport policy.	420	4
2015.11.11	Student Union in School of Art	Student Union in School of Art	PE subject is coming!	To introduce the sport policy.	253	1
2015.11.18	Wuxianzhishe ng	CYL in Department of Electronical Engineer	You Deserve This! The PE Subject!	To introduce the sport policy.	255	1
2015.11.19	Xiaowuyeyuan	Communist Youth League in Tsinghua University	Three Thousand Meters in Tsinghua: a story for one century.	To introduce the sport tradition and spirit.	36556	107
2015.12.15	Xiaowuyeyuan	Communist Youth	Running! The Blue West-	To introduce the rebuild of the	76090	248

	n	League in Tsinghua University	Playground! The Best Track of Tsinghua in history	playground and encourage student to exercise.		
2015.12.15	Wuziban	Working Group for Freshman	Sunny Running for Freshman	To introduce the Sport Policy	2563	29

Source: Collected by the author from WeChat Official Account Platform

Appendix IV Articles on the Controversy in Student Union Election in M School (The data cut off on December 21th, 2015)

Time	Account	Affiliation	Title	Content	Views	Likes
2015.06.02	Shanfeng	Candidate	The Election of M in Tsinghua I Experienced	To tell the experience in election and show dissatisfaction about the election.	Deleted	Deleted
2015.06.03	Yinlun	Individual	The Election I experienced, is not this case	To criticize the candidate hurt classmates' feeling for the election, which distort the meaning for student union.	8229	129

2015.06.03	Qingxin Times	Qingxin Times	Memoir on Election in M: Success of Failure of Democracy	To introduce the election in M in 2013 and discuss about the democracy in campus.	5214	36
2015.06.03	Communication Center in M School	Student Union in M School	The announcement for the election	To illustrate the process but little about the controversial article.	3069	12
2015.06.03	Communication Center in M School	Student Union in Y School	The announcement for the election regulation in M School	To illustrate the regulation about the election.	306	3
2015.06.03	Xiaowuyeyuan	Communist Youth League in Tsinghua University	Voice from the Senior: I have experience 5-year election in M School	The former president talked about his experience and gave advice.	7041	92
2015.06.03	Fufuchanshi	Former President in M	I have experience 5-year election in M	The former president talked about his experience and gave advice.	13989	310

			School			
2015.06.04	Shanfeng	Candidate	About the Article Yesterday	The friend of the candidate deleted the article and illustrate some situation simply.	2664	64

Source: Collected by the author from WeChat Official Account Platform