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Popularizing party journalism in China in the age of social media: The case of Xinhua News Agency

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Abstract
The phenomenon of the "popularization" of journalism has become widespread in the process of media marketization, globalization and digitalization. This phenomenon has been studied mostly in the Anglo-American context. This article instead draws attention to China, where the tendency toward popularizing (party) journalism is also occurring but taking a rather different form. It focuses on the case of Xinhua News Agency—the pioneer as well as the most representative case of traditional party journalism in the country. The article considers to what extent Xinhua's online media content concerning the ruling party since 1949—the Communist Party of China—has been popularized both in terms of content and style. The changes to online media content made by Xinhua are indicative of the extent to which it is possible to combine the status of a state-owned central news organization with a new journalistic orientation that seeks to make the messages from and about the party more appealing to technology-savvy and entertainment-driven audiences in the new media environment in mainland China.

Keywords
Chinese journalism, journalism transformations, party journalism, popular journalism, Xinhua News Agency

Introduction

On 21 June 2017, a story issued by the Xinhua News Agency hit the headlines online in mainland China. What made Xinhua suddenly "popular" was a short news item about Saudi Arabia released by the agency that day via WeChat, the Chinese equivalent to WhatsApp. Within 10 minutes of releasing the story online, it had been read, reposted and commented on over 100,000 times.[1] The

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whole news item, including its title "刚刚，沙特王储被废了," which literally means in English "Just now, Saudi's crown prince has been fired," consisted of only 38 Chinese characters. What captured its readers' attention was not just the story itself, but also what appeared to many Xinhua's "excessive use of labour" in editing such a short story. Three editors in total were involved in the production and the release of the news story, sharing its authorship. While some readers in their comments half-jokingly criticized Xinhua for being "capricious" (任性), others praised the news agency for being "meticulous" (严谨). To some WeChat users' surprise, they not only received immediate replies from Xinhua's editors on their comments, but also found the editors' responses "unusual." For example, in responding to one reader's comment questioning the use of three editors to complete this nine-word-only title, one editor replied, "王朝负责刚刚，关开亮负责被废，陈子夏负责沙特王储，有意见？？？." His reply literally means: "Wang Chao (an editor's name) is responsible for "just now," Guan Kailiang for "has been fired"; Chen Zixia for "Saudi's crown prince." Do you have any [different] opinion [on our division of work]?" This half-joking reply, which is very different from the traditional "Xinhua style" (新华体), perceived mostly as formal top-down propaganda (Lv & Chen, 2015), served to stimulate the discussion of Xinhua's story online. As such, the interactions between Xinhua editors and audiences had turned this short piece of international news into a type of "popular text" identified by John Fiske in his famous study of Western popular culture and mass media, conducted about three decades ago (Fiske, 1989a, p. 117). Consequently, the "popular text" produced by Xinhua, together with the response of its online audience, boosted the popularity of its WeChat public account in mainland China.[2]

Although the success of the news story was largely accidental, the case itself exemplifies how China's traditional central news organizations like Xinhua are eager to use popular social media platforms such as WeChat to promote their news services to the world's largest online population. This is particularly true when Chinese Internet users are increasingly turning to sources other than Xinhua and similar state-owned media outlets, for news and information. This is worrying not only for Xinhua and other central media organizations, but also for the Communist Party of China (CPC)—the country's ruling party since 1949 (Xin, 2017; Zhao, 2013). It is worth noting that the CPC's revolutionary ideology used to be rather effective in motivating journalists and cultural workers to make their symbolic work well-liked by the masses when the party was based in Yan'an and other rural areas which it controlled in the 1940s (Liu, 1997; Xin, 2012; Zhao, 1998). Nowadays, however, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the party-controlled media, such as Xinhua, to gain the same degree of popularity, either online or offline, that they once enjoyed (Xin, 2017; Zhao, 2013). In circumstances such as those described above, Xinhua was able to succeed in attracting a sizable audience online, though not necessarily for the reasons that the news agency had originally contemplated. However, as noted by some online readers in their comments on Xinhua's story, this case, though eye-catching, cannot be seen as a typical example of Xinhua's party journalism practices as it did not concern the CPC. Departing from this particular case, this article explores to what extent Xinhua has managed to popularized its core party journalism content, especially in terms of handling topics concerning the party and its policies. In comparison with international news reporting, Xinhua's handling of the coverage of the party in general should, at least in theory, be more representative of China's party journalism practice.

This issue is also closely linked with a broader debate around the transformations undergone by Chinese journalism since the early 1980s: to what extent is popular journalism compatible with traditional party journalism in China? Some scholars suggest that market-oriented popular journalism aiming to meet audience needs is inevitably in tension with party-oriented official journalism's propaganda function (Goldman, 1994; Hsiao & Yang, 1990; Lee, 2000). However, research on the

transformations of the Chinese press since the 1980s, including a more recent study focusing specifically on *China Youth Daily*, illustrates that traditional party organs have tried to combine both roles, and their news portfolios are now leaning toward the more popular end of China's journalism in order to be able to survive (Lee, He, & Huang, 2006; Li, 1998; Wang, Sparks, & Huang, 2017; Zhao, 1998, 2008).

It is also worth noting at this point that, of course, the rise of popular journalism is not unique to China. In fact, it has arguably become a global phenomenon (Thussu, 2008). Its wider impact on society has been extensively debated in liberal democratic societies since at least the mid-1990s (Thussu, 2008). The studies carried out in the Chinese context have focused mainly on newspapers (Lee et al., 2006; Li, 1998; Wang et al., 2017; Zhao, 1998). Hence, this article draws on the relatively understudied case of Xinhua, the pioneer as well as a representative case of China's party journalism (Xin, 2012). The origin of Xinhua's party journalism can be traced back to the early 1930s. As one of the most influential news organizations in mainland China, Xinhua has ever since played a key role in setting the general tone for other media in covering politically sensitive issues concerning the country and the party (Xin, 2012). This makes Xinhua a highly relevant and suitable case for this study.

This paper consists of five main sections besides the introduction. The first two sections set up the theoretical framework within which this study is situated. The third section explains the method employed for collecting primary data. The fourth section presents the main research findings generated from a contextual analysis of two examples selected from Xinhua's recent online media productions. The final section draws some conclusions.

What makes journalism "popular" in the Western context?

Although China's party journalism does have a revolutionary legacy in relation to the rural masses and folk culture in the 1940s, the current tendency toward popularizing online media content and adopting styles borrowed from Western popular culture in order to cater for the needs of younger generations needs to be understood in a broader context (Liu, 1997; Xin, 2012; Zhao, 1998, 2008). The emergence of the latter phenomenon in today's China has surely been partly, if not entirely, driven by the country's unprecedented process of marketization, urbanization and integration into the global capitalist system since the early 1980s. While it is worth examining the phenomenon from a national and historical perspective, a theoretical comparison with the rise of popular journalism in other parts of the world is also necessary. The literature review section of the article thus starts by reviewing some ground-breaking studies carried out by Western scholars.

In the Western context, defined in a broad sense, the notion of popular in relation to culture and mass communications has been variously defined (Story, 2015). Raymond Williams (1983: 237), for instance, argues, based on a study of the history of British press, that the "popular" entails four different meanings: In an older sense, popular means "inferior kinds of work" and "work deliberately setting out to win favour"; in a more modern sense popular refers to work being "well-liked by many people" or to "culture actually made by the people for themselves." The main problem with the existing definitions of the popular, as John Storey (2015) suggests, lies not so much in the lack of theoretical agreement on the concept of "popular" itself, but mostly in the seemingly taken-for-granted quantitative approach to its operationalization. On the one hand, the "popular" of popular culture/journalism needs to be justified by including a quantitative dimension of the conceptualization. On the other, relying too much on a quantitative methodology offers little clarification about the nature of popular culture but instead generates meaningless figures (Storey,

2015). Bearing Story's methodological concern in mind, this study draws attention specifically to those pieces of research which are helpful for generating a more nuanced approach to understanding popular journalism in general and its contemporary practice in China in particular.

Historically, the term "popular" emerged in early discussions about European elites' concerns over the masses, who were also referred to as "ordinary people" or "craftsmen and peasants" (Burke, 2009, p. xiii). The popular was traditionally seen by the elites as "a generalized threat to order and civilization" (Sparks, 1992, p. 25). The "popular" was later put forward by the left in opposition to the term "the working class" (Sparks, 1992, p. 25). In both cases, it seems natural to argue that popular culture and journalism must necessarily contradict each other. Colin Sparks (1992) elaborates,

> In order to be "popular" at all, it [popular journalism] must have some contact with the lives of the masses in a society, but the popular is not, and never can be, a "socialist" term. At the very best, it may be a term which mobilizes a certain ill-defined discontent with the existing structure of society. At its worst, of course, it has been a term put to most barbarous usages. We would thus expect to find that while popular journalism would speak in an idiom recognizable by the masses as more or less related to their own, it would only speak of their concerns, joys and discontents within the limits set for it by the existing structures of society. (p. 28)

Here, the contradiction between popular culture and journalism is seen as an inevitable outcome of the objective social reality (Sparks, 1992). For Stuart Hall (1981, p. 238), such a contradiction is not class-based but exists between "the people" and "the power-bloc." Hall (1981) argues, "The people versus the power-bloc: this, rather than 'class-against-class', is the central line of contradiction around which the terrain of culture is polarized" (p. 238). For Hall, the power-bloc refers to an alliance of the dominating forces, including the media (Fiske, 1992; Hall, 1981). Although sections of the media might from time to time act as a check on or even criticize the government over certain issues, the media as a whole must still be seen as part of the power-bloc since disputes between the media and the rest of the power-bloc are usually confined to limited actions (Fiske, 1992). Moreover, the contradiction between the people and the power-bloc, as suggested by Hall, serves as an importance source of popular culture/media, which in turn neutralizes the conflict caused by the contradiction (Hall, 1981). According to Hall, both the left and the right should be able to articulate with the notion of the popular for their own political ends. Hall's view is based on his observation of British politics in the 1980s (Hall, 1981, 1988; Sparks, 1992).

When it comes to the question of what constitutes popular journalism in a liberal democracy, the discussion often takes a different direction. Popular journalism is generally seen as a relative concept, "defined in contrast to what is seen as 'quality journalism'" (Sparks, 1992, pp. 38-39). In comparison with quality journalism, popular journalism tends to give more space to "human interest" stories than to stories about political and economic lives (Sparks, 1992). In general, popular journalism concentrates on the "immediate issues of daily life" over "those concerns traditionally ascribed to the 'public sphere'," thus its news structure is "massively and systematically 'depoliticised'" (Sparks, 1992, p. 39). In other words, the "political" is often replaced by the "personal." The popular conception of the personal," as Sparks clarifies, is usually used as "the explanatory framework within which the social order is presented as transparent" (Sparks, 1992, p. 40). Within the framework, the question "what happened" becomes irrelevant in a popular news story. Instead, it asks a rather different question: what happened to certain groups of people? (Sparks, 1992). In this way, the main subject of a popular news story has been ultimately personalized.

Hall (1981, p. 227) defines the approach to personalizing news subjects by creating documentary effects as "popular naturalism." For him, this approach might be persuasive from the audience's perspective but the subsequent consequences of using it are worrying. Hall (1981) elaborates,

> . . . within this field of "popular naturalism," the primacy of the visual element has contributed both to growth in our ability to document and visualize accurately, and to a persuasive or false presentation of ordinary people and "real" life. (p. 227)

According to Hall (1981), it is particularly problematic when popular naturalism and documentary effects are employed altogether "not as modes of communication with their own strengths and limitations but as ways of giving the communicators an easier passage into the mind of an audience" (p. 228).

In contrast to Hall's concerns with the negative effects of popular journalism, some scholars are more positive about the encroaching of popular culture into the field of journalism. John Fiske is one of the leading figures in this camp. Fiske (1989a, p. 21) argues that popular culture is "potentially, and often actually, progressive (though not radical)" as well as "essentially optimistic." He suggests that popular culture involves an "active process of generating and circulating meaning and pleasures within a social system," which is a subjective process in nature (Fiske, 1989a, p. 23). Fiske (1989a, p. 142) also argues that "popular culture" should be conceptualized as "a productive process." During this process, the people or "popular readers" tend to conduct "selective and spasmodic" readings (Fiske, 1989a, p. 143). They select certain texts only and turn them into popular texts, which can be sensational, obvious, excessive and/or clichéd (Fiske, 1989a, p. 117). To make a text popular, it "must have points of relevance to a variety of readers in a variety of social contexts" (Fiske, 1989a, p. 141). The best approach to analyzing popular texts, Fiske (1989a) suggests, is "to investigate what traditional critics ignore or denigrate in popular texts" (p. 106).

In comparison with Hall and Sparks's views, Fiske's (1989a, 1989b) approach to popular journalism places emphasis on readers' engagement with the process of manufacturing popular cultural products, such as soap opera and popular news. In order to make news popular, Fiske (1992) suggests that news should borrow from soap operas. This means that rather than promoting "a final truth," popular news should "provoke discussion (like soap opera) or disagreement (like sportcasting) (Fiske, 1989b, p. 195). In addition, popular news in general and TV news in particular "must meet the key criteria of popular taste, those of relevance and pleasurable productivity" (Fiske, 1989b, p. 185).

In terms of relevance, it is mostly "a matter of content, as the experiences of the viewer's life are matched to those represented in the text" (Fiske, 1989b, p. 186). There are different levels of cultural relevance in operation, which can be roughly divided into the macro, the middle and the micro levels. Of the three, the micro level of relevance, which makes connection between the text and the readers' everyday lives, is the most important one for motivating people to watch TV news or read a newspaper story (Fiske, 1989b). In some respects, Fiske's notion of "popular relevance" is similar to Hall's concept of "popular naturalism," though Fiske considers the relationship between popular culture and journalism in a much more positive light than Hall.

As for the issue of "popular productivity," Fiske does not define it directly (Fiske, 1989b, p. 185). He argues that if relevance "can be sought through context," productivity of popular culture is "more a matter of form" (Fiske, 1989b, p. 190). In order to enhance the relevance of news

content as well as to make the form of news pleasurable to watch, oralization of news is essential. In other words, popular news should be essentially oral and easy to bring up in everyday conversations. As Fiske (1989b) points out, the "more formally open and internally interrogatory television is, the more it will be talked about" (p. 192).

Fiske (1989b) also tries to differentiate popular news from all kinds of propaganda. He warns that serving "the socio-political interests of any set of social forces" will risk "failing to meet the two criteria of the popular—relevance and productivity" (Fiske, 1989b, p. 197). However, Fiske does not offer practical solutions to prevent popular news production from becoming vulnerable to external hegemonic influences of the "power bloc."

Fiske's view on popular culture and journalism has also been extended to studies of politics, entertainment and citizenship in liberal democratic societies (see van Zoonen, 2005). Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) among others has discussed the tendency for politicians to act as celebrities, sometimes referred to as "popularizing politicians." Yet, van Zoonen's (2005) work on the popularization of politics is outside the scope of this study, which is concerned with the popularization of China's online party journalism. Some of the key conceptual and analytical categories of popular journalism proposed by Hall, Fiske and Sparks will be employed for analyzing Xinhua's online journalistic output. The following three aspects are particularly relevant to this study: Fiske's relevance or Sparks's personalization of news, Fiske's popular productivity, and the oralization realized by using less formal/oral expressions. Before applying these criteria to the case of Xinhua, the following section will briefly discuss the relevance of the notion of popular journalism in the Chinese context.

The relevance of popular journalism in the Chinese context

Popular journalism in the Western sense emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s in mainland China as a result of media marketization (Zhao, 1998). The divide between quality and popular journalism in mainland China has never been as a clear cut as it is, for example, in the United Kingdom or Germany (Wang et al., 2017). A distinction can be made between China's traditional party journalism/party-oriented media and market-oriented media (Xin, 2006; Zhao, 1998). However, such a dichotomy has been questioned recently since, the argument goes, it no longer accurately reflects the greater variety of Chinese news media outlets brought about by media marketization, globalization and digitalization over the past decades (Wang et al., 2017). Thus, a more nuanced classification seems necessary.

Strictly speaking, as the only ruling party, the CPC currently owns all news media in mainland China, though the vast majority of them are no longer fully funded by the party-state's subsidies (Zhao, 2008). In this sense, the type of journalism that China's news media as a whole practises on a daily basis remains formally "party journalism." All China's news media outlets, both party-oriented and market-oriented, have to follow the party's ideological directions, no matter what formats and styles they adopt. Meanwhile, the political, economic and social costs for not obeying the "Party line" remain high (Zhao, 1998, 2008). However, this does not mean that there are no differences in content and style among China's news media outlets. In fact, there has been a diversification of news media outlets across all media platforms since the early 1980s, especially since 1992, as an outcome of the ongoing media transformations in China (Xin, 2012; Zhao, 1998, 2008). A less formal type of party journalism, focussing on human-interest stories as well as various forms of entertainment has emerged in the Chinese press, on television, in radio as well as online. This "popularized" genre of Chinese journalism has been

described as either "popular journalism with Chinese characteristics" (Li, 1998, p. 307) or "popular official media" (Wang et al., 2017, p. 1). According to Wang, Sparks and Huang, "popular official media," namely central state media such as *China Youth Daily*, tend to present "the party and business elite in a human light and thus constitutes a renewal of the repertoire of hegemonic devices at the party's disposal" (Wang et al., 2017, p. 1). Fundamentally, however, the "popularized" genre of Chinese journalism is still a type of party journalism. Or more accurately, it is a popularized version of party journalism.

Along with other party-owned news organizations, Xinhua historically aimed to simultaneously serve the party and "the people," even though the notion of "the people" in the Chinese context has constantly changed (Xin, 2006, 2012). Treating "the people" as news consumers is a recent development in Chinese media marketization (Xin, 2006). For Xinhua, a traditional news agency, it was difficult to reach readers directly, especially in the pre-Internet age, as the majority of the state news agency's news subscribers/clients were media outlets and institutions (Xin, 2012). In the new digital environment, individual users are able to access Xinhua's news directly online, mostly via mobile devices. In theory, this has created a new opportunity for Xinhua to serve "the people." In this context, Xinhua has in recent years expanded its online news and information services, which can now be accessed via Xinhuanet.com along with various mobile news apps (Song, 2013). In addition, in late 2012, Xinhua set up a new division producing and marketing online-only media content (Song, 2013). It aims to target over 730 million Internet users in the country, the vast majority of whom are under 39 and often go online via smart phones (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2017). Xinhua's online output tends to be more market-oriented, especially in comparison with Xinhua's traditional wire news (Lv & Chen, 2015). The introduction of a direct-to-people online news service is part of Xinhua's efforts to adapt to the rapidly changing news environment in China where the Internet and social media platforms play an increasingly important role in audiences' media consumption. For a leading central news organization like Xinhua, the effort to make news coverage more popular online is not only a response to business and journalistic incentives but also a political task, in the context of China's hegemonic battle for winning "hearts and minds," both at home and abroad (Xin, 2017; Zhao, 2013). In particular, the CPC is concerned that it may lose the attention of younger generations in the new digital environment unless messages *about* the party and *from* the party are delivered in styles that are more appealing to them (Xin, 2017). There is thus a sense of urgency and necessity behind the adoption of more popular styles and forms by outlets practicing China's traditional party journalism. In this sense, the modification of China's party journalism toward popularization should be seen as "progressive" or evolutionary rather than as a "radical" change, similar to the ways in which Fiske (1989a, pp. 160-161) has described the nature of popular culture.

The research design

In order to address the above research aims, a qualitative contextual analysis of Xinhua's online media content was employed as the main method of data analysis. Fiske's (1989a, p. 108) approach to reading popular texts emphasizes "contextuality," which derives from "the unique relations of this particular linguistic use to this particular contextual moment." The contextual reading is useful in handling the "transient and impermanent" type of subtle changes made to the media content and presentation (Fiske, 1989a, p. 108).

For this contextual analysis, two well-known examples of Xinhua's online media output were chosen. The first case is a video clip, known as "新华社神曲" (translated literally into English as

"Xinhua's 'Divine Tune'"). The second case is a short film called *The Red Temperament* (or 红色气质). They cover two of the most popular topics of party-oriented journalism: the Divine Tune case concerns the party's policy, specifically the top party leader Xi Jinping's "Four comprehensives" policy; the "The Red Temperament" short film is about the revolutionary history of the CPC. Each example is analyzed by reference to the criteria of popular journalism discussed earlier, namely: (1) the criterion of relevance/personalization of news, (2) the criterion of popular productivity, and (3) the criterion of oralization. In addition, the use of compact formats, as exemplified by Xinhua's short piece about Saudi Arabia, for online circulation via social media will be used as a supplementary criterion for assessing Xinhua's online output.

In order to understand the main considerations behind Xinhua's production of the two media items, the producers' notes were also analyzed. Partial notes were published in Xinhua's internal journal *Journalism Practice Weekly*. Additional information was accessed through publicly available interviews with the Xinhua journalists involved in the production of the two pieces. The producers' notes provide contextual information about how the original ideas about the two pieces were pitched, developed and realized.

Since this study is exploratory in nature, any findings generated from it are only indicative of the current trend of the Chinese journalism in general and Xinhua's online media content in particular. While it cannot make any generalizations, its research findings are likely to apply broadly to other central news media organizations that are representative of traditional party journalism, such as the *People's Daily*, China Central Television, *China Daily, Guangmin Daily* and China Radio International. In ways, which are similar to Xinhua, these organizations have all begun to popularize their online party journalism content via popular social media platforms (Liu & Wang, 2017). Future research could fruitfully compare the popularization strategies of these organizations in order to identify similarities as well as differences.

A contextual analysis of Xinhua's online media content

"Four comprehensives"[3]

This 3-minute video recites Xi Jinping's political slogans, first proclaimed in a speech given during an official visit to Jiangsu province in December 2014 (Guo, 2014). The slogans are derived from Xi's famous political philosophy—the so-called "Four comprehensives" (or "Si Ge Qan Mian" 四个全面 in Mandarin). The "Four comprehensives" refer to Xi's calls on all party members to

> Comprehensively build a moderately prosperous society (全面建成小康社会); Comprehensively deepen reform (全面深化改革); Comprehensively govern the nation according to law (全面依法治国); Comprehensively strictly govern the Party (全面从严治党).

This video aims to promote Xi's "Four comprehensives" among the younger generation of Chinese audiences online. It seeks to do so by adopting a new strategy, described by a senior editor sarcastically but effectively as "洗脑＋卖萌." This means literally a strategy combining the techniques of "brainwashing" (洗脑) and "deliberately acting cute" (卖萌) (Qian & Li, 2016). The strategy has arguably worked effectively in recent years in the realms of advertising, public relations and political communication in China (Qian & Li, 2016).

The choice of a suitable format for the video was a paramount consideration for Xinhua's editorial team (Qian & Li, 2016). They believed that a more popular format would make a difference in

attracting younger viewers when it came to covering a traditional "party journalism" topic like Xi's policy. An animated cartoon immediately became their favorite choice: animation is considered one of the most popular formats of Chinese journalism in the age of social media, especially among younger viewers (Qian & Li, 2016). There are well-known examples of animated cartoons designed to promote the government's policies, most notably a cartoon on China's 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development (Qian & Li, 2016). They provided a model for Xinhua's editorial team behind the "Four comprehensives" video. The next important issue for Xinhua producers to tackle was how to give the topic a personal angle in order to make it more relevant to younger audiences' everyday lives. Personalization is an important component in the wider strategy to popularize party journalism in China.

For this purpose, Xinhua's cartoon portrays two main characters: an unidentified young female figure in a red dress and an anonymous adult male figure wearing a pair of black framed glasses. Both characters are given clear gender and social roles: the girl is curious about Xi's policy but not shy in spite of her ignorance; the man, who seems more knowledgeable, offers to help her and patiently explains in vernacular what the "Four comprehensives" stand for. The video also employs one of the common "brainwashing" strategies in advertising—the repetitive use of key words taken from Xi's policy directly in the lyrics of a rap song (Qian & Li, 2016). The interactions between the two main characters are depicted as them "having fun together" in spite of their differences in gender, age, education and social background. This can be seen as a reversal of the way in which Xinhua used to send out the formal top-down messages from and about the party.

The video is intentionally constructed to attract younger viewers. It opens with the male figure singing a rap song, turning the short phrase "Four comprehensives" into a counting rhyme in rap music. This makes the female character curious about what he is singing. Her question is not answered directly. When the man responds, "have you heard of the 'Four comprehensives?'" the girl hesitantly replies, "[are they] about the Chinese dream or something like that?" In this way, the opening scene manages to create an informal tone for the video, carefully avoiding sounding like the male figure is talking on behalf of the party and forcing his audience to listen to him. This approach is also quite different from Xinhua's traditional party journalism, which is often perceived as dull preaching delivered by Xinhua on behalf of the party (Lv & Chen, 2015). The opening scene is also an implicit recognition that young people know little about the "Four comprehensives" and might find it difficult to relate them to Xi's "Chinese dream." To ensure that the video resonated with younger audiences, Xinhua's production team included the target audience's peers, young producers born in the 1980s and 1990s (Li, 2016a). Their comments and suggestions were taken seriously in the planning and production of the video (Li, 2016a). This "referring down" effort was often highlighted by Xinhua's producers in their reflections on the reasons for the success of the video.

Arguably, the source of the video's "popular productivity" mainly derives from letting the two cartoon characters "deliberately act cute" in speech and action, which might look a bit excessive and unnatural to a non-Chinese audience. In China, however, "deliberately acting cute" has become not only socially acceptable in recent years, but also highly regarded in public and media discourses and does not carry negative connotations. As a news strategy, the "deliberately acting cute" method works particularly well in circumstances in which the news topic is serious, mostly concerning politics. In this sense, the "卖萌" method intends to create an effect similar to the "personalisation of news" brought about by the tabloid format of journalism in the Anglo-American context.

In order to be able to act cute, both cartoon characters in the video are singing and dancing together to rap music, only briefly toward the end of the video joining a crowd to sing

Beethoven's Ode to Joy together. The combined use of rap and classical music in the video results in a certain degree of contradiction, which, according to Fiske's reading, is also a typical feature of popular culture (Fiske, 1989b). Yet, the main objective of the cartoon is, of course, not to provoke its audiences or make them feel uncomfortable about Xi's policy. Rather, the cartoon aims to promote Xi's policy as well as inform young people about it despite its elements of popular culture.

However, the use of the fictional cartoon characters somehow fails to generate the type of popular productivity created in a documentary, for example. The kind of popular productivity produced by documentaries, according to Hall (1981, p. 227), is closer to "popular naturalism" than fictional content. Documentaries tend to be more effective in shaping and reshaping audiences' perception of social reality. Conversely, this implies that the choice of animated cartoons, while succeeding in appealing to young audiences, was not as effective as the choice of a non-fictional format of popular journalism in generating an effect of trustworthiness in the target audience. For Xinhua's producers, however, the trade-off between the two formats and their differential impact on a target audience's perceptions were not a major concern. They were more concerned with finding a way of creating a message that could appeal to younger audiences in order to win their support for Xi's policy.

In such circumstances, oralizing the text in order to make it more accessible for its younger audiences was equally crucial for the purpose of personalization. In explaining what "Comprehensively building a moderately prosperous society" means in the Chinese context, the rap song in the video first proposes a conceptual connection between the "moderately prosperous society" and everybody's dream. Since the concept of dream remains vague, the video then makes a more relatable connection between the "moderately prosperous society" and people's everyday lives. Vernacular expressions instead of the written text of traditional Xinhua style are used to illustrate what daily life for ordinary people should look like in a "moderately prosperous society." Life in a "moderately prosperous society" is described in the video as: "We will not feel stressed [by the money issue] as we have [enough] money in our hands." The use of We is intended to denote an inclusive society. Meanwhile, the cartoon subtly divides "Us" from an unspecified "Them," implying that building a "moderately prosperous society" remains a *national* project in China. In addition, the video envisages that in a "moderately prosperous society" environmental concerns, especially the worrisome air pollution, will be resolved eventually. Environmental problems, corruption and other social problems are framed not as an open criticism of the government but as urgent issues that the country is tackling under Xi's leadership and that will eventually be solved. As such, the video has inherited from traditional party journalism the "positive/constructive" approach to reporting social problems plaguing contemporary Chinese society.

In order to reach younger viewers via social media platforms, the cartoon is kept as short as possible, being just over 3 minutes long (Li, 2016a). To cater to the taste of its younger audiences, the video ends by displaying some (positive) comments from its viewers, making them look like the live-streaming moving subtitles in the famous *danmaku* style of online games. These efforts illustrate how much Xinhua values the amplifying effects of social media sharing as it seeks to popularize its traditional party journalism output.

"The red temperament"[4]

This 9.5-minute film was produced in 2016 as part of the CPC's 95th anniversary. Similar to the cartoon, the short film also targets China's younger generations, particularly those who were born in the 1980s and 1990s. It was first released online, mostly via Xinhua's client terminal apps, and also offline, shown on outdoor big screens. Later, the film was made available on over 3000 websites and apps and attracted over 200 million viewers in total.[5]

Instead of using the cartoon's "brainwashing" and "deliberately acting cute" approach, the film adopts documentary storytelling techniques, aiming to be able to "走心," which literally implies "to take [audience's] heart away." The major concern of the editorial team was to draw younger viewers' attention to the film without making them feel as if they were the target of traditional party propaganda (Li, 2016b).

The style of the opening scene is an example of Hall's (1981, p. 227) "popular naturalism." The opening was clearly designed to demonstrate relevance, exemplified by the connection made between the main subject of the film and its target audience. There are obvious references to the link between the CPC's revolutionary past and a real person's life. The main character is Ms Qu Duyi (瞿独伊), who was born in the same year as the CPC. The film starts with Ms Qu singing "The Internationale" in Russian without musical accompaniment. Who is she? Why is she singing "The Internationale"? Why in Russian? Having prompted these questions, the voice over in the following sequence of the film offers some background information about Ms Qu's life in relation to the song as well as to the party's history. The former Editor-in-Chief of Xinhua's Moscow Bureau, Ms Qu was the only daughter of Mr Qu Qiubai (瞿秋白)—a famous leader of the CPC in the late 1920s. Once a photo of Mr Qu appears on the screen, more information about the heroic figure is provided, including about his death, as he was killed by the government led by the Kuomingdang (国民党) in 1937. The central narrative that the film endeavors to construct around Mr Qu's death via the voiceover is a portrait of a young father, walking slowly and with dignity toward the execution field while singing the Chinese version of "The Internationale" translated by himself. According to Ms Qu, who was 14 when her father died, she could barely make the connection between her father, looking like a frail intellectual in the photo, and a revolutionary party leader being brutally killed. Ms Qu's comments on her father are another reminder to the audience that the CPC's history is not just about the party itself and those heroic figures like Mr Qu Qiubai. It is equally relevant to Ms Qu, as an individual. In the same way, as the film subtly implies, the party's history could be relevant to every viewer of the film too. Underneath such a personalized but patriotic narration of the party's revolutionary past deployed throughout the film, the party's traditional ideological values, such as motivating party members to sacrifice their personal lives for the collective interest, represented by the CPC, can also be easily read.

The most obvious difference between this film and Xinhua's traditional party journalism is the way in which a hero like Mr Qu is portrayed. The documentary's strategy is to portray a hero as a common man instead of portraying a common man as a great hero, as in earlier films (Lu, 1997). This approach has also been applied to the narrative constructed around another well-known figure, Mr Jiao Yulu (焦裕禄). Alongside a brief introduction to Mr Jiao's dedication to his political career as a local CPC leader in the 1950s, *Red Temperament* deliberately directs the audience's attention to his less well-known hobby of playing the erhu, a traditional Chinese musical instrument. This is to illustrate that Mr Jiao was a common man too, who shared a common man's interest in music. This "common man-narrative" is, again, quite different from how Mr Jiao used to be portrayed by traditional party media as an idealized symbol of the most loyal party cadre in the

1960s (Lu, 1997). To complete Mr Jiao's common man portrait, the film also highlights his family's regret, possibly his own too, for missing the opportunity to take a family portrait (全家福) due to his very busy work schedule. Again, this serves the purpose of personalization via creating "documentary effects" or the effect of "popular naturalism," as identified by Hall (1981, p. 227).

In terms of style, the film is characterized by the extensive use of digital visual aids. Xinhua's archive photos were transformed into moving images and in this way contributed to the creation of "popular productivity." In one scene of the film Mr Jiao "joins" the rest of his family in a "virtual" photo, thus allowing the family to "realize" their dream of having a family portrait. Similar effects are deployed in other parts of the film. According to the General Producer (Li, 2016b), they were purposely employed to create powerful cinematic effects, visually appealing and emotionally touching. However, pursuing such a "surreal" visual effect unavoidably risks compromising the trustworthiness created by "popular naturalism" (Hall, 1981, p. 227). The latter is seen as arguably one of the most essential elements that make news and current affairs popular according to Hall (1981). Nevertheless, the adoption of special digital features does enhance the productivity of the film, as defined in Fiske's reading of popular culture/news (Fiske, 1989a, 1989b). In fact, the film's special effects became a popular subject of conversations between the film producers and the film's audiences after the film was released.

The language used in the film's voice over is mostly plain and accessible. An "unpolished" voice from a senior journalist, instead of a well-trained TV presenter, was chosen for the voice over. In comparison with traditional party journalism practiced by Xinhua (see Xin, 2012), the general linguistic style of the film is less formal. However, it is much more formal than the cartoon. For example, the film cites a famous political slogan, "The Country is the People (江山就是人民), the People is the Country (人民就是江山)" from Mr Xi Zhongxun, who was a former leader of the CPC and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the father of Xi Jinping. Without offering further background information about the slogan, especially how it is related to Xi's "Four comprehensives" policy, the use of the slogan creates some ambiguity about the major theme of the film, in particular regarding the definition of "the people." In this sense, the film is closer to the traditional style of party journalism than the cartoon.

However, it can be seen that there is a delicate balance between being "too ideological" and being "not ideological" enough. As a result of this balancing act, certain editorial compromises had to be made, including revealing the main purpose of the film at the end of the movie rather than at the beginning (Li, 2016b). According to the youngest member of the production team, doing otherwise would have been perceived as being "too propagandistic" by his peers born in the 1990s (Li, 2016b). His suggestion convinced Xinhua's senior editors and thus was accepted in the editing of the film (Li, 2016b).

In general, the film portrays the party's history in a very positive light. Similar to other Chinese mainstream films, the "Red Temperament" equally promotes the "mainstream melody" (主旋律) — the revolutionary past of the party and its role in guiding the Chinese people through the "miserable past" toward today's prosperity. Apart from a brief phrase referring to the so-called "Great Cultural Revolution" (1966–1976) as "Ten Years of Great Disaster," the film refrains from saying anything negative about the Party's history. Instead, it depicts a wholly positive image of the party, in a personalized and visually impressive narrative style. In this respect, the personalization strategy was key to making the content of the film as relevant as possible to the target audience. In a way, which resembles the cartoon, the film also adopts the traditional "positive/constructive" approach to the reporting of problems encountered by the party throughout its history,

demonstrating more continuities than discontinuities with Xinhua's journalistic output in terms of covering issues concerning the party's past.

Finally, the film, like the cartoon, also adopts a compact format, aiming to tell the party's 95-year-history within 9.5 minutes, in order to make it more amenable to sharing via social media platforms (Li, 2016b).

Conclusion and discussion

The above analysis has shown that in order to appeal to a particular part of the audience—the younger generations of Chinese—both the cartoon on Xi's "Four Comprehensives" and the documentary film *The Red Temperament* have employed forms of contemporary popular culture suitable for online circulation via social and digital media platforms. In comparison with Xinhua's international news story on Saudi Arabia mentioned at the beginning of the article, these two examples are clearly different in terms of news strategies and the journalistic style they adopt.

Using the key criteria of popular journalism, namely personalization, popular productivity and oralization, these two cases show how Xinhua, the pioneer as well as the most representative case of China's traditional party journalism, is trying to popularize its online media output about the party in the new media environment. Meanwhile, Xinhua's efforts to popularize its online output have not changed the nature of the journalism that is practiced by Xinhua on a daily basis. It is worth noting that Xinhua's editorial modifications, such as taking younger journalists' opinions more seriously, have indeed created a valuable space for further editorial negotiations and new experiments. However, how big this space can become still largely depends on the party's guidelines.

It can also be seen that promoting the party's policies and ideologies via social and digital media has become part of Xinhua's routine practice. The goals informing Xinhua's online and social media practice are consistent with the state news agency's traditional role as a party organ. They are also in keeping with its ideological function, which, of course, predates the Internet and social media. The case of Xinhua shows that popular journalism is compatible with traditional party journalism in China and that the latter can be easily adapted to a more popular form of journalism, borrowing from the conventions and genres of (Western) popular culture, such as rap music (originating in the United States). In this sense, the journalism practiced by Xinhua is indicative of the extent to which it is possible to combine the status of traditional party organ with a new journalistic orientation that seeks to create messages from and about the party that can be appealing to younger Chinese audiences and that reach them through the online and social media channels to which they are increasingly turning. Further research should investigate how Chinese young people perceive this popularized type of online party journalism produced by Xinhua and other central news organizations.

Notes

1. Retrieved from: http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2017-06-21/doc-ifyhfnqa4553656.shtml
2. Retrieved from: https://www.pressreader.com/china/media/20,170,815/281,505,046,328,351
3. The video clip is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHUqJfvX56M
4. The film is available here: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-06-20/c_1119074520.htm
5. Retrieved from: http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2017-06-01/c_136330682_21.htm

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