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Research Article

GIGA | Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

Journal of Current Chinese Affairs
00(0) 1–23
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DOI: 10.1177/1868102620981963
journals.sagepub.com/home/cca

Romanticising the Past: Core Socialist Values and the China Dream as Legitimisation Strategy

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Abstract

This article examines “core socialist values” as a part of the China Dream discourse, in the context of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s search for alternative sources of legitimacy. Using the “visualising our values” poster collection and the “China Dream Child” campaign as case studies, this article argues that such narratives form a crucial part of the CCP’s continuing legitimisation strategy, where the party emphasises its role in providing moral authority and guidance for the general public. In order to lay such claims, the narratives focus on romanticising and homogenising both the imperial and the socialist past, while projecting a strong sense of optimism for the future, based on similar hopes of continuity and homogeneity.

Manuscript received 27 August 2019; accepted 27 November 2020

Keywords

China, propaganda, core socialist values, legitimacy

Introduction

China’s propaganda system is one of the most successful and pervasive in the world. A key rationale behind the developing trajectory of Chinese propaganda after 1949 has been to establish and maintain the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s legitimacy.

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Mao Zedong's various political movements and slogans were to establish and retain the CCP's status as the revolutionary party, and it was the inability of the party to transition from a revolutionary party to a party in power that led to the legitimacy crisis of 1989 (Brady, 2012). Afterwards, the CCP renewed its emphasis on "thought work" (思想工作, *sixiang gongzuo*) using Western methodologies and new technologies. Contrary to those who argue that market reform and capitalist forces have undermined the CCP's propaganda efforts (Lynch, 1999; Zhao, 1998), the party's ability to broadcast its political message en masse has remained strong. From 2002 onwards, the CCP's status as party in power has been written into the Constitution, signalling the top leader's awareness that the party's legitimacy now partly depended on public support.

From 2013 onwards, China's propaganda machines embraced President Xi Jinping's "China Dream" (中国梦, *zhongguo meng*) as a new buzzword and overarching paradigm. Since then, scholarly work has proliferated on what the China Dream means, what it entails, and its implications for China's domestic development and international relations. Most articles, thus far, have focused on the policy outcomes of the China Dream, what it means for China's soft power overseas, and what exactly it is that the CCP hopes to achieve in terms of its national development (Callahan, 2015; Feng, 2015; Li, 2015a). Less attention, however, is paid to the propaganda campaigns that are disseminated at the ground level and that permeate Chinese citizens' everyday life. Attention to such widespread and thematic campaigns is important because the China Dream discourse evokes not only the imagined perfect nation but also the good life, a "composite ideology" that encompasses dreams of national revival with individual fulfilment and happiness (Callahan, 2017). Regardless of the factuality in these narratives, they represent a nation's imagined future as prescribed by the ruling class and illustrate the perfect society and citizenry (i.e. one that is most conducive to regime sustainability) as imagined by the CCP leadership.

This article thus examines "core socialist values" (社会主义核心价值观, *shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhiguan*; hereafter "CSVs"), one of the most fundamental and pervasive propaganda campaigns within the China Dream discourse. An overview on Chinese propaganda and recent changes is given, followed by a closer look at the "visualising our values" poster collection, which shows how CSVs is popularised at the ground level, which differs from its official maxims. Then the article will present a case study of the "China Dream Child" (中国梦娃, *zhongguo mengwa*) campaign, analysing the key values presented in turn. By using these two case studies, this article shows that everyday CSVs campaigns selectively promote so-called traditional values that do not appear in the official twelve maxims but nevertheless contribute to the overall legitimisation strategy. The actual campaign on the ground thus offers a unique insight into how the CCP both romanticises and homogenises the imperial and socialist past, in order to construct a moral narrative around the CSVs discourse, allowing the party to emphasise its role in providing moral authority and guidance for the general public.

Background: Chinese Propaganda and the Continuing Search for Legitimacy

The CCP is acutely aware of the challenge of renewing legitimacy, publicly declaring in 2004 that "[t]he party's governing status is not congenital, nor is it something settled once and for all" (CCP Central Committee, 2004). In recent years, the scholarly consensus is that the main sources of regime legitimacy in contemporary China are a mixture of performance legitimacy – based on economic growth and sociopolitical stability – and nationalism (Pan, 2008; Zhu, 2011). However, performance-based legitimacy can both be subjective and fleeting. How socio-economic stability translates to legitimacy is largely dependent on how the regime frames its performance narrative (Holbig and Gilley, 2010). Economic uncertainty almost always results in political challenges: the legitimacy crisis of 1989 prompted the CCP to renew its propaganda efforts, turning to nationalism and patriotism as the cornerstone of its legitimising strategy. As China's economy grew rapidly, however, a separate set of challenges arose: an economically mature society often demands a greater degree of political participation and liberalism (Lipset, 1959). Nationalism, too, is a double-edged sword; left unchecked, it can result in violence, as the country witnessed in the 2012 anti-Japanese riots, as well as foster trenchant criticisms against those in the ruling party who are seen as corrupt and betraying the national interest (Holbig and Gilley, 2010). The quest for the renewal of legitimacy while maintaining stable economic growth and political control thus poses a more complex challenge still. Indeed, in the last decade, Chinese academia and leadership have been concerned about the threat of socio-economic inequality, corruption, and incapability of bureaucratic systems to regime legitimacy, and, as a result, many have proposed, along with improving social justice and governance, the use of propaganda and ideological guidance to create more participatory citizens as a legitimisation strategy (Zhang, 2014). While legitimisation strategies are usually discussed in the context of discourse analysis, often for political speeches, the underlying process for legitimisation nevertheless relies on the argumentation and justification of social practices, usually through invoking public emotions about a hypothetical future, in order to gain political approval (Reyes, 2011). In the absence of revolutionary and charismatic leadership, the Chinese state has to appeal to a grander narrative in order to secure its long-term legitimacy: a moral claim to Chinese culture, civilisation, and traditions.

Sinologists have long since acknowledged and problematised the idea of China being a "civilisation-state," using the concept to explain the longevity of the unitary Chinese state (Dynon, 2014; Pye, 1990). Critically, as set out by Tu (1991), a civilisation-state exercises both political power and moral influence, where the political leadership assumes ideological and moral authority and exemplifies the civilisational norms for the general public. While "tradition" was denounced during the Mao era for its connotation with the imperial oppressive past, the idea of traditional culture and civilisation entered leadership discourses again in Deng Xiaoping's era, when a distinction was made between material and spiritual civilisation (物质文明, *wuzhi wenming* vs. 精神文明, *jingshen wenming*; Deng, 1984). Under Jiang Zemin, "traditional values" began to be included in modern thought work, and "spiritual civilisation" became the cornerstone of the CCP propaganda as a form of depoliticised cultural nationalist rhetoric (Dynon,

2014). From 2001 onwards, key Confucian concepts have been included in the movement for the "construction of moral education for Chinese citizens" (Brady, 2012). There is also a subtle shift in cultural topography as shown by the increased official presence and subsidies for Confucianism-related events as well as the incorporation of traditional Chinese holidays as national holidays (Cheung, 2012). This policy direction has reached new heights under the China Dream and CSVs campaign; attempts are even made to demonstrate the compatibility of these values with the mythical culture of the Yan Emperor, suggesting and further legitimising the Chineseness of this discourse (Mi, 2016). This change in policy is less a change in philosophical belief than a return to patterns of social control in which Confucianism, along with ideas such as Mohism and Legalism, was dominant in Chinese society (Bakken, 2000). Moreover, it is also the result of the CCP's anxiety to establish modern China's political identity – in other words, to establish socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Ever since the CCP's relationship with the Soviet Union became tense in the 1960s over questions of international communist leadership, the party has been adamant in finding its own revolutionary path to forge socialism with Chinese characteristics. During the Mao era, this meant that the party discourse was dominated by Marxist–Leninist–Maoist revolutionary rhetoric, which not only separated Communist China ideologically from the West but also put a tense distance between that and the "Soviet big brother." Since the reform era, however, the CCP has gradually moved away from such revolutionary discourses and, after a few fits and starts, looked to "traditional Chinese values" as a replacement paradigm that underlines socialism with "Chinese characteristics." The CCP has now sought to distance itself ideologically from the West by arguing that the China Dream, based on cultural heritage, is different from the American Dream, or the American liberal hegemony.

Indeed, the CCP has been wary of so-called Western influence since its founding. Despite the gradual introduction of capitalist elements and market economy since the 1980s, the CCP has rejected "peaceful evolution" and the idea of Western modernity. Instead, the CCP has always pursued an alternate modernity, a "socialist modernity," "socialism with Chinese characteristics," a "China model," or different variations thereof. In this vision, capitalism presupposed socialism: henceforth, China was not capitalist, but rather in the primary stages of socialism. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, this propaganda strategy has been expanded and given renewed emphasis under the so-called CSVs, as a part of the grander China Dream discourse. Some of these values have been given detailed consideration in previous research (Feng, 2015), and it has since been argued that the CSVs campaign is a shift in propaganda focus with an overarching attempt to emphasise the sociopolitical superstructure over the economic base, in order to build civic consensus (Gow, 2017). Indeed, unlike their predecessors in the state–socialist era, these campaigns do not attempt to mobilise viewers into action at all, and instead focus on creating an "idealised, harmonious and caring past" (Landsberger, 2019), in order to allow the party to lay claim as the legitimate inheritor and upholder of the so-called Chinese civilisation.

Methods

This article uses the "visualising our values" poster collection and the "China Dream Child" animated advertisement (ad) as the two selected case studies for understanding how CSVs is being disseminated on the ground, and the kind of grand narratives the campaign seeks to propagate. All 388 posters in the "visualising our values" collection, starting from 2014, were downloaded from the official depository for all propaganda materials in the CSVs campaign, run by the Ministry of Propaganda (Wenming, 2014). The "China Dream Child" televised ad, one of the most widely broadcasted propaganda commercials in China, was published by China Central Television (CCTV) in 2015 and is available to view online at YouTube (2015). Both campaigns are still active in China as of 2020. Supplemental propaganda materials, such as essays and editorials, constituting as "thought work pieces" (思想工作论述, *sixiang gongzuo lunshu*), published in state and local CCP outlets covering the key themes in CSVs and the China Dream Child ads were collected systematically using keywords in their internal search engines, and used to illustrate how key messages in these campaigns are explained and legitimised in mainstream media. These two campaigns were specifically selected because they are the main campaign drives behind CSVs, and they cover the two types of media most commonly found in propaganda: posters and video advertisements. The former has lined Chinese streets and billboards from 2013 to present, across public spaces in both urban and rural China, while the latter appears frequently across all CCTV platforms in varying lengths – from short few-second bursts to minute-long segments; it fills up the breaks between all kinds of CCTV programmes. Their audience reach is far and wide: citizens are now ubiquitously exposed to these materials across Chinese public spaces (Zhao, 2019).

Core Socialist Values in Rhetoric and Dissemination: The "Visualising Our Values" Poster Collection

The idea of "CSVs," or core value system of socialism," was first in the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CCP Central Committee in 2006. The overarching themes and ideas were a clear continuation from the previous state-building projects and propaganda ventures: the title of the document references Hu's Harmonious Society concept, and the ideas contained in the CSVs framework are built upon The Programme for Improving Civic Morality (issued in 2001), which advocated "patriotism and observance of the law; courtesy and honesty; solidarity and friendship; diligence, frugality and self-improvement; and devotion and contribution [to society]" (Ping et al., 2004). The 18th Party Congress in 2012 then reiterated the importance of building CSVs, and defined it as:

> [T]he soul of the Chinese nation which will serve as the guide for building socialism with Chinese characteristics. We should carry out a thorough study of and education in these values and use them to guide social trends of thought and forge public consensus. (Hu, 2012)

Table 1. Core Socialist Values.

Level	Values	
National level	Prosperity	富强, *fuqiang*
	Democracy	民主, *minzhu*
	Civility	文明, *wenming*
	Harmony	和谐, *hexie*
Society level	Freedom	自由, *ziyou*
	Equality	平等, *pingdeng*
	Justice	公正, *gongzheng*
	Rule of Law	法治, *fazhi*
Personal level	Patriotism	爱国, *aiguo*
	Dedication	敬业, *jingye*
	Integrity	诚信, *chengxin*
	Friendliness	友善, *youshan*

According to the party journal *Qiushi*, the focal point of this task is twofold: first, it has to promote socialism with Chinese characteristics, and second, it has to be implemented through effective means of Western-style propaganda. The so-called socialist values, being superior to that of their Capitalist counterparts, should be "built upon the successes of human civilisation, including those introduced by capitalism," so that it might showcase the openness and advancement of socialist Chinese civilisation (*Qiushi Editorial*, 2012). In order to do that, "Western, especially American"-style propaganda should be employed. The CSVs project, therefore, is an attempt to modernise and popularise propaganda in an era where standardised, politicised, and detached-from-life slogans have fallen out of popularity. In implementation, it should not be "anything new"; instead, it should utilise existing terminology and slogans with which the public is already familiar. It should offer flexibility in interpretation and presentation, while maintaining some levels of standardisation (*Qiushi Editorial*, 2012). The end result is the twelve maxims (twenty-four characters) that have been seen all over on Chinese streets since 2013 (Table 1).

Heralded as the "common denominator for the values of socialism," these twelve values are interlinked and laid out on three different dimensions: state, society, and personal (*Qiushi Editorial*, 2012). At the top, prosperity, democracy, civility and harmony are "national objectives," and are seen as taking leading roles in all other values. The middle level presents freedom, equality, justice and the rule of law, which is "a vivid expression of a good society," the "basic feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics," and a "long term goal and practice of the CCP." At the personal level, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendliness are seen as the "moral guideline of all people, a fundamental code of ethics used to evaluate the moral standards of citizens." Together,

this presents a neat framework in which morally commendable citizens live in a good society with rights and freedoms guaranteed by the hard work of the CCP, which would lead to the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" as a national objective (*Qiushi Editorial*, 2012).

On 22 May 2013, the Research Centre for Theories of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (RCTSCC) under the Ministry of Education published a detailed piece in the *People's Daily*, outlining each of the twelve CSVs and their definitions. The RCTSCC is directly under the supervision of the Ministry of Propaganda and the Ministry of Education Party Group. It is primarily responsible for the dissemination of party values in higher education and serves "to promote Sinicised Marxism through the popularisation of theories" (Wu, 2013). In this particular article, which is widely quoted as the most authoritative interpretation of CSVs, many key concepts are redefined and reinterpreted. These definitions are then incorporated into official propaganda websites and party study materials, and often serve as a starting point for further propaganda work at the local level.

It is easy to dismiss these concepts as lip service if we only consider it in the context of conventional or Western usage. There is, however, an underlying consistency to the narrative, which helps the CCP to juxtapose and reconcile otherwise contradictory concepts, so that they can be integrated into the grander discourse of the China Dream, and socialism with Chinese characteristics. For instance, a distinction is made between "normative values" such as prosperity, civility, and justice, and "aspirational values" such as democracy and harmony, with the former indicating values that are pre-existing "natural states" under socialism, while the latter represents values that are not a given but have to be attained through hard work. Some of the CSVs terms have specific interpretations different to the conventional definitions: democracy, for example, is defined as "people's democracy" or "consultative democracy," as opposed to Western-style democracy, which was proclaimed a dead end for China by Hu Jintao in 2004 (Cabestan, 2004). Freedom is specified as free will, the freedom to live and the freedom of development, but not freedom of movement, assembly, or association (Wu, 2013), as these are discretionary to party policy and not guaranteed, even in rhetoric. The concept of harmony, which is most often associated with internet censorship in China, is in fact suggested as a response to the increasing socio-economic inequality resulting from market transition that emphasised "cooperation across all strata of society" in order to achieve the "mutual goal" of a prosperous society, defined as "the achievement of equal access to social services and rights such as healthcare, education, employment, elderly care and housing" (Wu, 2013).

Not only are most of the values given party-ordained definitions, but some of these definitions are deliberately vague, in order to create wide-reaching, all-encompassing, and ambiguous catch-all terms that allow the CCP to legitimise certain social behaviours while denouncing others. Civility, for example, is constructed as a "summary of national, scientific and popular socialism," a symbol for "progressive society," which is "outward looking, future-oriented and modernising," and should serve as an "important pillar for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Wu, 2013). By far, the most widely utilised

concept in propaganda, this ambiguous interpretation allows the CCP to deploy the concept of civility as a soft form of social control using a variety of ideas sourced from Confucianism to the May Fourth movement, past and present (Brady, 2012). Similarly, personal-level maxims such as integrity and friendliness are given broad definitions like "the integral foundation of all social relationships" (Wu, 2013), drawing upon so-called traditional values and emphasising the role of the party-state in revitalising such values. In doing so, individual and social behaviours are subsumed in the wider discourse of national rejuvenation and growth, as it paints the image of everyone working towards the same goal.

The official policy documents aiming to define and interpret the CSVs framework are dry and notoriously abstract. In order to widely disseminate these ideas and raise public awareness, they had to be popularised. One of the key propaganda efforts to disseminate CSVs is the poster collection of "visualising our values," now widely seen on Chinese streets since 2013. Available centrally online for provincial and local use, this propaganda campaign collection has 388 posters in total (Wenming, 2014). Some of the key messages are repeated several times, using different illustrative forms. After extracting all the keywords from these posters, Figure 1 shows the key themes outlined in them and their frequency of appearance.

All twelve CSVs appear in the margins of each poster, and a total of eleven posters are devoted to the artistic rendering of these values verbatim. A total of sixty-eight posters, 17.5 per cent of the total collection, depicts individual case stories of outstanding members of the CCP, taking on the role of individual moral exemplars. The rest typically has a thematic focus or highlights one or few specific value sets.

We can see that not all values are given equal representation in the poster dissemination, which suggests the state is prioritising certain values over others. Out of the twelve maxims shown in Table 1, only six are directly referenced in the posters (compare Figure 1): prosperity, civility, and harmony as national-level values, and patriotism, friendliness, and integrity as personal-level values. All of the four societal level values – freedom, equality, justice, and rule of law – are absent from the poster collection along with the value of democracy and dedication. As mentioned before, these missing six values under the CSV framework have very specific interpretations and definitions, all of which fall under the strict guideline of the party-state. As individuals are not expected to interpret or contribute towards these values, but instead are considered the beneficiaries in a society where these values will be allowed to prosper, values such as democracy and rule of law are not popularised in the poster collection. Out of the six core values portrayed, patriotic themes are by far the most heavily featured, which is unsurprising given how nationalism is an integral part of the CCP's legitimacy and governing strategy (Gries, 2004; Zhao, 1998). Patriotic posters often contain messages reminding the public of the CCP's role in China's national rejuvenation and emphasise the importance of individuals submitting themselves to the collective task of achieving the China Dream (Figure 2).

What is more notable is that a significant proportion of the posters features thematic messages that are not part of the official CSV framework but instead utilise ideas that are

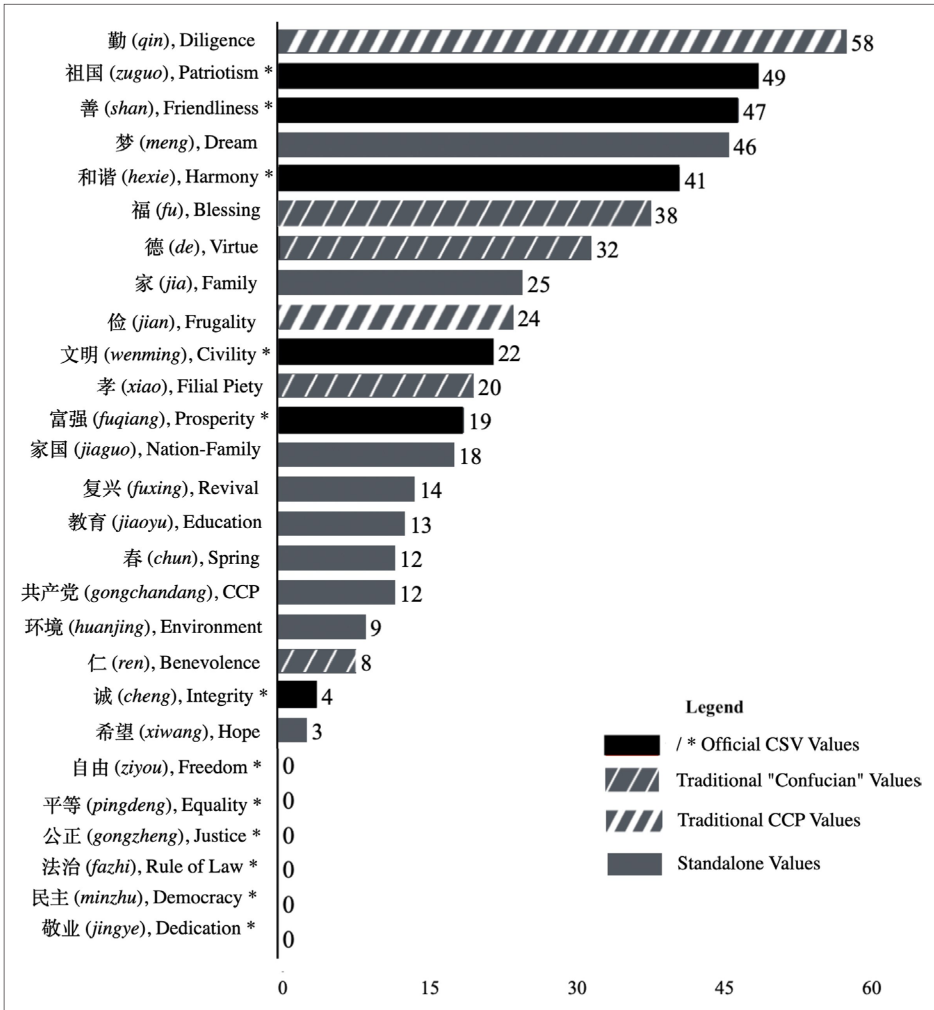

Figure 1. Occurrence of Keyword Values in the "Visualising Our Values" Poster Collection.
Note: Occurrence of values in the posters do not add up to 388 since posters can portray more than one value at the time. CCP: Chinese Communist Party; CSV: core socialist values.

broadly categorised and portrayed as "traditional values," including benevolence, virtue, filial piety, blessing, and family (usually referred to as Confucian traditions in supplementary propaganda materials), and diligence and frugality (described as CCP traditions in supplementary propaganda materials). Apart from patriotism, these are the most frequently mentioned values in the poster collection, which suggests these are the prioritised messages that the campaign wants to advocate to its audience. Together, they illustrate how citizens should behave under the guiding framework of CSV, and, more

Figure 2. Core Socialist Values (CSVs) Posters with the Slogans (a) "The Beauty of Our Native Land is Due to the Redness of Our Party Flag" and (b) "Many Horses Galloping [Towards] the China Dream."
Source: Wenming (2014).

importantly, they help to define the relationship between citizens' personal behaviour and the national objective. In doing so, the campaign employs a mixture of ideas from Confucian classics to socialist revolutionary exemplars, while maintaining a progressive outlook that heralds the CCP as both the liberator of China and the leader of the Chinese Dream. This is best illustrated by the concurrent "China Dream Child" campaign being deployed alongside the posters.

The China Dream Child Campaign

The China Dream Child is one of the most popular and widespread advertisement collections in the CSVs campaign. China Dream Child, a clay figurine girl, is the central feature of this short animated film commissioned by the Ministry of Propaganda aiming to popularise CSVs. The film animated seven thematic values (family-nation, diligence, filial piety, friendliness, frugality, integrity, and harmony), presented as seven easy-to-rhyme maxims, which were further disseminated in the form of posters, slogans, and billboards (Figure 3).

Of the seven values popularised by the China Dream Child campaign, only three are direct adaptations of official CSVs maxims: friendliness, integrity, and harmony, though the value of "family-nation" alludes to patriotic themes. The others, like those found in the "visualising our values" poster collection, represent "traditional values" from both Confucian and revolutionary heritage, and the two are often deployed side by side. The China Dream Child collection is an excellent example of how CSVs campaigns are

Figure 3. A China Dream Child Poster.
Note: The seven central maxims are: nation is family (国是家, *guoshijia*), diligence as foundation (勤为本, *qinweiben*), filial piety first (孝当先, *xiaodangxian*), friendliness as soul (善作魂, *shanzuohun*), frugality as virtue (俭养德, *jianyangde*), integrity as self-conduct (诚立身, *chenglishen*), and harmony is precious (和为贵, *heweigui*).
Source: Wenming (2014).

actually conducted on the ground: values such as democracy and rule of law are overlooked, while "traditional" values branded as personal virtues such as filial piety and frugality are celebrated. Further propaganda literature, often written by Chinese scholars and cadres, were published in newspapers, magazines and websites, focusing on each proclaimed value, offering official definitions and interpretations of the maxims, and advocating moral reasoning as to why these values should be desired. This section will analyse these seven values thematically along with the accompanying propaganda literature on these values to illustrate how the central feature of the on-the-ground CSVs propaganda campaign is that they present a homogenised and romanticised idea of China's past, and seek to establish a hegemonic discourse of how to build China's future.

Symbolism of the Family-Nation

The first maxim to the China Dream Child film employs the notion of a "family-nation," with the accompanying animation depicting a bird nest containing many eggs in a large tree with the slogan "a nation is made of many families, there can be no family without a nation" (国是千万家, 有国才有家, *guoshi qianwanjia, youguo caiyoujia*). The implication is that if the nation (tree) falls, families (bird nest) and individuals (eggs) would also fall and shatter. The posters deployed alongside the ad depict a closed iron gate, with the underlying message that if the gate to a nation is

breached, the gates of each family will not be safe either. In other propaganda uses, the phrase "nation as family" is used synonymously with "family-nation sentiment" (家国情怀, *jiaguo qinghuai*), which the official interpretation calls a "unique Chinese value" and traces it back to the Confucian *Book of Rites* and to *Mencius* (*China Youth Daily*, 2014). There is also a special emphasis on how the communist revolution modernised this traditional virtue: in a widely reposted piece, the *China Youth Daily* argued that even though the idea of treating nation as your family existed long ago:

> In imperial times the nation belonged to the emperor, and was in no way a concern of the people. Even though there were tales of emperors enjoying life as commoners, these were nothing but window-dressing for oppressive regimes […] It is only after the establishment of the PRC [People's Republic of China] that people became the masters of their own country and could enjoy peace both in their families and their country. (*China Youth Daily*, 2014)

The act of modernising traditional values are what Bakken (2000) calls "repetition with a difference" – where memories of the past are utilised to control the modern. What is particularly of note here is that the CSVs framework describes the Communist liberation not only as a political and historical event but also a triumph for the personal and moral development of all Chinese citizens; it is only when the people are no longer oppressed and constrained by the imperial rule can they fully realise the "traditional" and the "virtuous" values accumulated by China's thousands of years of history. Consequently, the CCP now depicts itself as the inheritor and promoter of the purified "essence of traditional culture," which is crucial for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Furthermore, the key ingredient to the notion of "family-nation" lies in its ability to transcend ethnic and geographical differences when evoking themes of nationalism, which can be utilised in events of political significance such as the Hong Kong handover to bolster the legitimacy of the CCP (Pan et al., 2001). In doing so, the idea of family-nation places a heavy emphasis on the individual as the foundation of social stability and national prosperity. The *CCP News* website editorial notes that CSVs recall the Confucian ideals of self-betterment (修身治平, *xiushen zhiping*) – the idea that an individual must first self-cultivate before he or she can manage his or her family, govern a country, and finally unify and bring peace to the world (Hua, 2014). The idea of self-betterment is further expanded to correspond with the call to have more "positive energy" in people's lives, to focus positively on self-help rather than passively blaming others for the shortcomings of society. The *People's Daily* editor, Lu (2012), gave a famous motivational speech at Peking University's graduation ceremony in 2012:

> No matter how China is, please remember: China is where you stand. The way you are represents how China is. What kind of person you are, makes China the kind of country it is. If you turn towards the light, China will not be dark.

This speech was picked up by mainstream media and widely disseminated in support of the family-nation campaign. Subsequently, there were many spin-offs of "positive

Figure 4. Screenshot from the China Dream Child Ad Collection, with the Slogan "Filial Piety First."
Source: YouTube (2015).

thinking" phrases that emphasised how individuals should change their attitude and take responsibility for themselves when faced with external crises. When Chengdu was hit by heavy smog in December 2016, a screenshot of a WeChat log went viral on the internet, in which a local high school issued a ban on masks for their students, with the comment that "as long as you have sunshine in your hearts, smog will eventually dissipate" (Hu and Shi, 2016). The authenticity of the comment was contested and the authority's attempts to verify the claim fell flat after the headlines passed, but it shows the impact of these motivational campaigns and how these ideas reframe public and political issues into a personal one.

Renewed Emphasis on Filial Piety as Form of Social Control

Another maxim in the China Dream Child rhyme that receives significant airtime is the emphasis that "filial piety should come first." Although filial piety is not officially a part of the twelve CSVs maxims, it features heavily in on-the-ground deployment of propaganda under the CSVs umbrella campaign. Usually, this is done through depictions of relatable images such as domestic scenes and folklore: in the China Dream Child video, filial piety is accompanied by images of a man washing his father's feet, when his son also joins and offers a towel to his back. The video urges with the message that "filial piety should be passed down in generations" (Figure 4). The use of these "traditional"

and "age-old" motifs emphasise the idea that filial piety is not new, but rather a virtue that should be reawakened among the Chinese public.

The CCP's recent attempt to promote filial piety in national political discourse can be seen as having several end goals. First, values that encourage duty and submission such as filial piety are conducive to sociopolitical stability. Filial piety is seen as "an individual's contribution towards building a harmonious society, and is the cornerstone upon which every other virtue can be built" (Wang, 2014). These so-called traditional virtues act as a panacea to China's growth pains of reform and modernisation, and, without them, China would encounter a moral crisis: "as social structure and economic life diversifies," writes one thought work piece,

> many of the [19]80's and [19]90's generations have been accustomed to the "little emperor" or "little princess" lifestyle, and have become selfish, fragile and ungrateful […] it is only by learning filial piety that they will learn to respect and appreciate life, and will not harm themselves or others. (Li, 2015b)

Similar drastic consequences of individual moral decay as a result of a lack of filial piety that lead to social unrest is a common theme among such thought work pieces. As Callahan (2017) notes, such moral crises are an umbrella discourse introduced by the ruling party in response to society's socioeconomic and political crises.

Second, respectful children and a tightly knit family are seen as answers to China's ageing society. One author admits that although the state is beginning to roll out basic pension cover to rural areas, at CNY 55 per month per person, it is far from sufficient; hence, elderly care in rural areas still need to rely on the old method of "raising children to provide for old age," whereby filial piety subordinates the younger generation to the older as a way to guarantee the former material support in old age. Without filial children, the article warns, the suicide rate among the elderly will increase, families will crumble, and social harmony will be threatened as a result (Li, 2015b). In 2013, the revised Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly included a new section stipulating that those who live apart from their parents should visit or greet the elderly regularly, although punishment for failing to do so was not specified (Zhang, 2017). Thus, reviving filial piety is also an attempt to ameliorate the lack of complete state welfare for the elderly in the post-market transition era.

The re-emergence of filial piety as a part of national political discourse is a post-reform phenomenon. Under state socialism, the ideological discourse and radical socio-economic restructuring called for the reshaping of family units to larger socialist collectives, albeit the drive was ultimately unsuccessful (Whyte, 2005). During the reform era, the CCP became more pragmatic about the importance of family relationships in terms of the support for the elderly: Article 45 of the 1982 Constitution stated that the elderly have "the right to material assistance from and be supported by their sons in their old age" as well as the "right to material assistance from the state and society" (People's Republic of China Constitution, 1982). The terminology used by the State Council and Ministry of Civil Affairs at the time, however, still avoided keywords such

as filial piety, and instead used phrases such as "fostering the fine tradition of mutual assistance among relatives, friends and neighbours," which is more in line with the collectivist tendencies of the 1960s–1970s (Chow, 1991). Since the early twenty-first century, the re-emergence of filial piety in public discourse is seen as a part of China's search for modernity and soft power (Zhang, 2013), and contrast is often explicitly drawn between the kind of filial piety that is the "drivel of imperial, feudal times," and the right kind that is the "essence of traditional Chinese culture," which is argued to be fully compatible with CSVs (Wang, 2014).

Third, as the CCP is the head of China's paternalistic state, the emphasis on filial piety is used to further strengthen its legitimacy claims, as the relationship between the parent and the children can be emulated by the relationship between the ruler and the people (Wang, 1980). Again, this ties in with the idea of family-nation, in which "a family is the smallest country and a country is made up of thousands of families" (Zhang, 2014). Patriotism is therefore described as filial loyalty to the state. Duan (2015) wrote that:

> from a [society's] developmental point of view, being loyal to your country and your place of work, so that your parents and your superiors do not have to worry about your performance in work, is also a type of filial piety […] loyalty and patriotism is filial piety at its most transcendent.

Finally, the emphasis on filial piety as a traditional Chinese value is juxtaposed against the CCP's wariness of Western universal values and Western cultural hegemony. The Ministry of Civil Affairs warned as early as in 1987 that "the situation in which the better the social security develops, the weaker the family role becomes as in the West must be avoided" (Chow, 1991). Filial piety continues to be heralded as a "defining feature of the Chinese nation," a value that "sets us apart from western cultures" (Wang, 2014). Not only does this claim promote national identity but it also implies that the Western (liberal democratic) development trajectory will inevitably lead to social crisis; thus, China must forge its own path by seeking answers from its "long and glorious history."

From Interpersonal to Sociopolitical: Harmony and Friendliness

The two maxims on friendliness and harmony often appear together on TV, in posters, and the accompanying materials. In the China Dream Child ad, the motif for harmony is a traditional Chinese painting of lotus and fish, depicting harmonious co-existence, whereas the accompanying CSVs poster uses ecological harmony as a motif for sociopolitical harmony (Figure 5).

The vagueness of these messages compared to the others shows the extent to which harmony is used as a catch-all umbrella term in the overall narrative. Harmony has been a main propaganda focus for the CCP since the introduction of "harmonious society" as a political concept by the Third Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee in 2004. The CCP leadership have since sought to redefine and reinterpret the concept as a melange of ideas drawn from thinkers such as Confucius, Mencius, Mozi, and even Taiping rebel leaders, ignoring the tension presented in these arguments (Delury, 2008).

Figure 5. Screenshots from the China Dream Child Ad Collection, with the Slogans (a) "Harmony is Precious" and (b) "Spring Rain Comes to Earth, All Things Grow Depending on Harmony."
Source: Wenming (2014).

In more recent years, CCP usage of harmony has expanded ever more and is now an underpinning feature of CCP's development goal. According to the official interpretation, harmony is divided into three levels: social harmony (social stability), harmony among humans and the environment (sustainability), and harmony among countries (peace; Guo, 2014a).

While the visual representation of harmony is vaguely focused on general well-being and harmonious interpersonal relationships, the supplementary propaganda essays emphasise more on its sociopolitical function. According to a *People's Daily* editorial, for instance, harmony is "the natural and defining characteristic for Chinese socialism […] all other forms of socio-political organisation are fundamentally incapable of generating harmonious societies" (Liu, 2014). The continued emphasis on harmony appears to be both a rhetorical and policy response to mounting socio-economic inequalities in post-reform Chinese society. Indeed, the concept of harmony was initially suggested as a response to the increasing socio-economic inequality resulting from market transition, which emphasised "cooperation across all strata of society" in order to achieve the "mutual goal" of a prosperous society. Henceforth, harmony is perhaps the most striking example of hegemonic discourse, as it can mean different things to different sections of the population and under different contexts. Using the harmony discourse, individuals are encouraged by the state to seek non-conflicting ways of resolving disputes among themselves and against the authorities; internet and media censorship is legitimised as a necessary way to maintain social stability; environmental concerns such as air pollution and food safety are subsumed; and even China's rise on the international stage can be placed in the framework to support its peaceful intentions (Guo, 2014b).

In order to achieve such harmony and social stability, emphasis is placed on the need for friendliness (友善, *youshan*) in Chinese society, again by referencing the value's traditional roots. An article published on Beijing Propaganda Office's website directly equates friendship with benevolence (仁, *ren*), again tracing the philosophical roots of these terms back to Confucian classics (Guo, 2014a). As with the concepts above, once the validity, Chineseness, and moral desirability of the value are established, attempts are made to modernise and contextualise it so that it becomes relevant in today's society. The China Dream Child ad shows friendliness in the most conventional sense, by depicting a policeman helping a farmer with a broken-down vehicle, but the supplemental materials again put a theoretical spin on the phrase and argue for a more comprehensive, catch-all definition of the value, which can be applied to personal and political contexts. For instance, one report advocated that modern-day friendliness has four dimensions: from civil friendliness (公民友善, *gongmin youshan*) and behaviours such as helping others in day-to-day environments, to friendliness in society (社会友善, *shehui youshan*) which can act as a social adhesive, as "being friends often means working towards the same goal […] and the common goal of all Chinese people is the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Guo, 2014a: 11). The author then elevates the concept and argues that friendliness among countries (国际友善, *guoji youshan*) is necessary for maintaining international peace, and environmental friendliness (生态友善, *shengtai youshan*) promotes sustainability (Guo, 2014a: 33). Thus, the value of friendliness is also promoted as a hegemonic discourse. It is seen as a panacea to the ill effects of market reform and the transition of *Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft* (community to society) as it eases the struggles between post-reform haves and have-nots, helps to ensure social stability (Li and Wang, 2015), saves the environment, and promotes collective identity and a sense of communal belonging (Huang, 2015).

Reclaiming Individual Virtues: Diligence, Frugality and Integrity

The use of moral exemplars has long been a notable feature of Chinese moral and public education (Bakken, 2000; Reed, 1995). The CSV campaign not only stresses ideational values that individuals should strive for, but they also repackage these values as "socialist traditional," referring back to the CCP's revolutionary and Maoist era. The remaining three values in the China Dream Child film are treated as the underlying foundations of a socialist moral exemplar: diligence, frugality, and integrity. The ad again employs traditional Chinese art styles to illustrate these values such as paper-cutting and traditional paintings. In the accompanying posters, these values are given almost hallowed properties; it is argued that those who follow the virtues of diligence and frugality will reap blessings, longevity, and happiness as rewards (Figure 6).

The accompanying propaganda essays for these values usually follow similar legitimising techniques. First, they establish that these values have traditional, often Confucian, roots, hence inherently Chinese. Diligence is traced back to the Confucian classic *Book of Documents* (Han, 2013), frugality is quoted back to the sayings of the Tang Chancellor Wei Zheng and the Song Confucian thinker Zhang Zai, and integrity is highlighted to be one of the "Five Constants" in Confucianism. Then, these pieces

Figure 6. Core Socialist Values (CSVs) Posters with the Slogans (a) "The Frugal are Blessed with Happiness and Longevity," Depicting a Family Taking Leftovers Home after Eating Out at a Restaurant and (b) "Happiness is in the Hands of the Diligent," Depicting a Painting of Harvest.
Source: Wenming (2014).

usually argue that these values have been consolidated and brought to the fore by moral exemplars from the revolutionary and socialist era. The value of frugality, for instance, highlights the CCP's modest beginnings. An article in *Study Times*, the chief newspaper of the Communist Party School, reminds the reader that "the CCP got into power because its frugal and diligent spirit won the masses," and warns that "to give that up would mean losing power and the mandate to rule" (Huang, 2012). This ties in neatly with Xi's anti-corruption campaign, which instituted austerity measures among cadres and is as much a party-building exercise as a propaganda campaign in itself (Yuen, 2014). As such, these propaganda pieces often propagate two sets of standards for CCP members and the public: diligence, for example, means "diligence in thinking, learning, asking questions and doing fieldwork at the local level" for cadres as members of a vanguard party, whereas for the public, these values represent desirable forms of behaviour that could bring karmic rewards (Han, 2013). On the posters that visually represent these maxims, officials are encouraged to be diligent in helping the people and remain incorruptible, individuals are encouraged to be diligent in self-betterment and patriotic acts, and, together, diligence is described as the only way to achieve the China Dream. Therefore,

individual values such as these are seen to unify the relationship between the cadre and the people, and society and the nation.

Individual-level values also attract most supplemental analyses from officials and party mouthpieces, as they are seen as instrumental in building the imagined utopia in the China Dream narrative. For instance, diligence is praised as the legitimate means of upward social mobility, a key characteristic of the middle class and one that the subordinate classes should aspire to follow. Some even went as far as to argue that "the diligence of the middle classes should give hope, and act as a good example, for the subordinate classes [...] to discourage them from having to resort to violence to satisfy their demands" (Yang and Wu, 2016). Although it is not in the official stance to pathologise the subordinate classes, such discriminatory language is common in everyday discourse (Miao, 2016). To position the middle class as moral exemplars for the subordinate class to follow effectively legitimises social stratification, as it downplays the role of institutional barriers to upward social mobility and shifts the attention away from the structural to the personal, effectively blaming the victim. Similarly, it is posited that personal integrity is the moral basis for social stability, the erosion of which is a major problem plaguing "transitional society" (Li, 2014). Thus, for these individual virtues, great emphasis is again placed on the responsibility of the individual to commit to virtuous behaviours, and to obey social rules and laws. The amalgamation of these "traditional" values would, according to the overall narrative framework, result in a rejuvenated China where morally upright, civilised citizens would be in a society shared with a remix of values from the Confucian and revolutionary past, guided by a strong party-state. The realisation of these values on the personal and societal levels is thus instrumental to achieving the state-led national-level goals of prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony. In doing so, the CCP effectively socialises the public into playing roles necessary for them to build an imagined utopia under the rubric of the "China Dream."

Conclusion

Propaganda campaigns such as the China Dream and CSVs can be integral to the state's legitimacy-building project. Conceptually, the CSVs discourse constitutes as a "moral narrative that expresses a nation's aspirations and anxieties in poly-vocal conversations about the good life, civilisation and progress" (Callahan, 2017; Madsen, 1995). Functionally, it is a renewed attempt at public moral education, aimed at encouraging self-cultivation and strengthening social stability and national unity. The posters and the animated ads examined in this article are ubiquitous in their reach, and together they offer insight into how the CCP attempts to employ traditional values in the service of contemporary propaganda campaigns. Unlike their state–socialist predecessors, these campaigns seek to socialise, rather than mobilise, their audience. This is a layered process: first, there is an overwhelming emphasis on so-called traditional Chinese values in the CSVs campaigns disseminated at the ground level, despite the fact that they do not form a part of the official twelve maxims. Instead of focusing on values with strict state-sanctioned definitions such as democracy and justice, the propaganda campaigns on the

ground highlight individual virtues such as filial piety, diligence, and patriotism, through the romanticisation and homogenisation of the past. The CCP lends legitimacy to these concepts not only by labelling them as part of the "thousand-year long Chinese tradition," but also by making a careful distinction between how the practice of these traditions was almost handicapped under imperial China and how the CCP remedied the problem by bringing China to modernity in 1949. Thus, so-called tradition and good moral values gain a renewed sense of purpose under the CCP's leadership, as they become representative values of the CCP in its role as a ruling party and the ultimate authority on public moral education, which in turn legitimises the CCP's rule. Finally, the CCP emphasises modern applications and adaptations for these traditional values, in order to appear as the moral authority with a forward-looking image. Two more thematic concerns emerge from this narrative. First, these ideas place a significant emphasis on the attitude, behaviour, and responsibility of the individual as the main recourse to socioeconomic and sociopolitical problems, so that it redirects attention away from structural and institutional reasons for these issues. Second, through the emphasis on the Chineseness of these concepts (both in terms of their traditional origins and the reference to socialist legacy), the CCP is able to narratively distance itself from the so-called Western universal values and juxtapose the China Dream in opposition to the so-called ideology of the West. By positioning itself as the inheritor of China's cultural heritage and reminding the public of its revolutionary successes against imperial and feudal oppressors, the CCP thus puts forward the argument that it is the only vessel capable of achieving the China Dream.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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