



# Propaganda as a Lens for Assessing Xi Jinping's Leadership

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## ABSTRACT



This article examines Xi Jinping's utilization of state propaganda since his rise as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012. Through a comparison of reportage on Xi and other national leaders and the consideration of case studies from the Mao and Xi periods, it argues that Xi has made more extensive use of propaganda in the People's Daily than any leader since the founding of the People's Republic, with the possible exception of Mao Zedong. By evaluating a 'Xi Jinping effect' in propaganda, this article suggests Xi has leant heavily on media power to project authority over the Party and beyond. Xi Jinping's ascent has also coincided with reduced emphasis on other leaders, providing evidence for the weakening of collective leadership in China.

## Introduction

Xi Jinping's rise to prominence as a paramount leader in 2012 has been accompanied by a vast upwelling of supportive propaganda in Chinese news outlets. Media accounts on Xi's views have emphasized his guidance of the anti-corruption campaign, visionary role in conceptualizing a 'China Dream,' status as the architect of the grand 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, and hero in the 'People's War' against Covid-19. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members compete to memorize Xi Jinping trivia on the phone app *Xuexi qiangguo* ('Study Xi, Strong Country'), while public challenges to Xi's authority are rare and speedily repressed. Xi Jinping, as portrayed by Chinese media, is a champion fighting the nation's ills, who casts such a large shadow that there is little limelight for competitors. In what ways does the state's use of media power reveal Xi's leadership style and strategies for bolstering his authority within the CCP and with the public, more generally? Does the constant refrain of 'Xi love' in state propaganda suggest a break from the past in terms of its quantity and enthusiasm, amounting to a 'Xi Jinping effect' in propaganda?

Xi Jinping took the reins of power as paramount leader at a time of a crisis for CCP legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> High-flying politicians such as the Chongqing party boss Bo Xilai, security chief Zhou Yongkang, Ministry of Railways head Liu Zhijun, and head of the CCP's General Office Ling Jihua had been tainted by corruption scandals. Popular discontent with pollution in major urban centers was rising. The digital media revolution, including the rapid proliferation of microblogs, had empowered public intellectuals, threatened the ruling party's control of information, and raised the specter of Arab Spring-style movements. Less than 3 years into Xi's tenure as China's top leader, longtime China watchers, such as David Shambaugh, saw his government teetering on the verge of collapse.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop, Xi Jinping launched a far-reaching campaign for 'national rejuvenation,' an

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<sup>1</sup>Nimrod Baranovitch, 'Strong Leader for a Time of Crisis: Xi Jinping's Strongman Politics as a Collective Response to Regime Weakness', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 30 (128), 2021, pp. 1–17.

<sup>2</sup>David Shambaugh, 'The Coming Chinese Crack Up', *The Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2015.

effort that drew heavily on the power and reach of state media to sell new policies and popularize Xi's socialist ideology.

In 2013, Xi Jinping began calling for a greater emphasis on control of political messaging at home and abroad. In an August 2013 speech at the 'National Propaganda and Thought Work' conference, he characterized economic development as a central endeavor but ideology as 'extremely important work.' Propaganda and thought work, he argued, was essential to shore up the leading role of Marxist ideology. He called for an emphasis on 'positive propaganda,' 'telling China's story well,' and delving into online spaces to 'fight for public opinion.' Since ancient times, Xi asserted in a 2016 speech, a firm grasp on public opinion has been essential to gaining power and to the longevity of any political authority.<sup>3</sup> Xi lauded Mao Zedong as a model propagandist, quoting Mao's adage that the Communist Party must hold 'a propaganda flyer in the left hand and bullets in the right hand to defeat enemies.'<sup>4</sup> A command of 'journalism and public opinion,' Xi claimed, is a 'great party tradition' and a 'magic weapon.' Media run by the party and the government must be 'surnamed party' (必须姓党).<sup>5</sup>

More than any leader since Mao, Xi Jinping has placed a heavy emphasis on the need to revitalize socialist ideology. Though done in numerous ways (e.g. through the education system or ideological training sessions for journalists and cadres), under Xi state media and Internet sites have been treated as essential for popularizing ideology and signaling its importance to large audiences. Winning compliance from state-owned media that, in some cases, gained a reputation for critical journalism prior to Xi's rise,<sup>6</sup> required the reassertion of party leadership over such elite media as the *Southern Weekend*, and tightening the screws of censorship.<sup>7</sup>

Xi visited central media outlets, including the *People's Daily*, the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, Xinhua News, and China Central Television, gave speeches on propaganda, ideology, and public opinion, and sidelined once powerful propagandists, including Politburo member and Propaganda Department Director Liu Qibao as well as Politburo Standing Committee Member, President of the Central Party School, and former Propaganda Department Director Liu Yunshan. The son of China's propaganda head in the early 1950s, Xi Zhongxun, Xi Jinping and his supporters sought to achieve political dominance through a combination of persuasion and hardball tactics that have been likened to that of 'one of those swordsmen in a popular martial arts movie, daring multiple opponents to take him on, and then slaying them in a series of bloody showdowns.'<sup>8</sup> With the benefit of the palpable sense of fear among officials created by the anti-corruption campaign, Xi took the commanding heights in the propaganda system and used its powers to signal the strength of his political authority, centralize media messaging, and highlight the leading role of party organizations.<sup>9</sup>

## A 'Xi Effect' in Propaganda

To identify the magnitude of the 'Xi Jinping effect' in propaganda, this article compares reportage in the CCP Central Committee's flagship newspaper the *People's Daily* (人民日报) on Xi to that of other contemporary political figures as well as prior paramount leaders. Seldom for sale in shops or street

<sup>3</sup>Xi Jinping, 'Speech at the Party's Journalism and Public Opinion Meeting', 19 February 2016, pp. 417. In 'A Selection of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Speeches and Essays', Literature Research Office of the CCP Central Committee ed., (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2016).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Zeng Xiangming, 'How to Grasp "Party Media Must be Surnamed Party" Three Key Points,' Chinese Communist Party Journalism Network, March 9, 2016. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0309/c40531-28185505.html>.

<sup>6</sup>Maria Repnikova, *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power Under Authoritarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup>Suisheng Zhao, 'The Ideological Campaign in Xi's China: Rebuilding Regime Legitimacy', *Asian Survey* 56(6), (2016), p. 1177.

<sup>8</sup>Richard McGregor, *Xi Jinping: The Backlash* (Sydney: Penguin, 2019), p. 28–29.

<sup>9</sup>Kyle Jaros and Jennifer Pan, 'China's Newsmakers: Official Media Coverage and Political Shifts in the Xi Jinping Era,' *China Quarterly* 233 (2018), pp. 111–136.

stalls, the *People's Daily* is primarily oriented toward party members and government employees, but its content is widely available online and at times mandated for circulation by state media.<sup>10</sup> Though *People's Daily* readers do not necessarily monitor its content for the latest political news or information per se, they seek indications of which politicians' interests guide the party-state and tune into signals relaying core leaders' preferences. As China watcher Alice Miller once observed, 'The fact that the information may not be true . . . is beside the point; the fact that it is conveyed by media subject to regime control and so reflects political decisions is what makes it analytically relevant.'<sup>11</sup> This article tracks trends in media content, with the aim of utilizing the extent to which leaders receive mention (or are not mentioned), as a means of arriving at tentative inferences about changes in Chinese political leadership over time.<sup>12</sup>

## Research Methods

Utilizing the 'full text' search function of the CNKI database, and restricting returns to the *People's Daily* from the year 2000 to 2018, this article tracks the frequency with which articles in *People's Daily* mention Chinese leaders by name, including such paramount leaders as Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and every Politburo Standing Committee member from the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress to the 19<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress. Findings are discussed below.

Due to limitations in the date range of the CNKI database, it was not possible to use the same method to compare media coverage of Xi Jinping with China's powerful founding leader, Mao Zedong, during the decades in which Mao held power. To compare propaganda related to these two leaders, an approach is employed that examines *People's Daily* headlines for 1 month in six different case studies. The cases are selected with the aim of shedding light on how Xi and Mao, along with other national figures, have been portrayed during mass mobilization and domestic and international crises.

## Media Coverage of Chinese Leaders

It is not by coincidence that prominent political figures appear in *People's Daily* reports. The decision to mention (or not to mention) key figures reflects deliberations by editors and their higher ups in the propaganda system that may express, indirectly, power relations and the political interests of the paramount leader and other figures overseeing the country's media. The *People's Daily* is well-known to convey the views of the CCP Central Committee and is the authoritative publication of record, as it were, for party members and officials working at all levels of government.<sup>13</sup> Media professionals in China know that the *People's Daily's* content is carefully vetted at the central level and circulate it widely, especially for articles on politically sensitive topics.

The influence of the *People's Daily* among officials stems in part from its long history as the voice of the country's top leaders as well as its record for mobilizing the masses. From 1950 to 1957, Mao Zedong personally reviewed 46 editorials in the *People's Daily*, with Premier Zhou Enlai considering another 153 before publication.<sup>14</sup> According to communication scholar Yuezhi Zhao, during the

<sup>10</sup>Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), pp. 14–33; Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 52.

<sup>11</sup>Alice Miller, 'Valedictory: Analyzing the Chinese Leadership in an Era of Sex, Money, and Power', *China Leadership Monitor* 57 (August 29, 2018), p. 16.

<sup>12</sup>Another study with similar objectives examined trends in provincial-level media content early in the Xi Jinping era. See Kyle Jaros and Jennifer Pan, 'China's Newsmakers: Official Media Coverage and Political Shifts in the Xi Jinping Era.'

<sup>13</sup>Guoguang Wu, 'Command Communication: The Politics of Editorial Formulation in the *People's Daily*', *The China Quarterly*, 137 (1994), pp. 194–211.

<sup>14</sup>Ji Fengyuan, *Linguistic Engineering: Language and Politics in Mao's China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 59; Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1992).

Cultural Revolution ‘a single editorial could shape a whole mass movement.’<sup>15</sup> Mao expressed his support for red guard activism in 1966 in *People’s Daily* reports,<sup>16</sup> and the *People’s Daily* published a 1968 directive from Mao lauding the merits of sending cadres to the countryside for re-education through hard labour and self-criticism. Eventually, over one million people were incarcerated.<sup>17</sup> In the post-Mao period, a *People’s Daily* article influenced by Deng Xiaoping helped to provide the official account of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, describing student demonstrations as part of a scheme to ‘negate the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system.’<sup>18</sup> Though media commercialization and the availability of publications closer to popular tastes reduced the *People’s Daily’s* circulation in the post-Mao period, the paper has retained import for government officials, with articles often co-published with the national Xinhua wire service.<sup>19</sup> For example, articles published by the *People’s Daily* helped herald Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign in early 2013.<sup>20</sup> During the Covid-19 pandemic, a *People’s Daily* article showcased Xi Jinping’s leadership of a 25 January 2020 Politburo Standing Committee meeting that announced a new leadership small group would take charge of the outbreak and unify government strategies for combatting the novel coronavirus.<sup>21</sup>

*People’s Daily* reporting on leaders is ‘propaganda’ (宣传) in the sense that it is typically one-sided and intended to leave readers with the impression of how a leader should be perceived. Media coverage of top leaders is also overwhelmingly positive, unless a rare decision has been made by the party center to push out a leader for alleged wrongdoing. Yet regardless of whether *People’s Daily* reports give a leader ‘props’ or throw him under the bus, coverage is rarely impartial or objective in the sense that a debate transpires related to a leader’s conduct, as is frequently the case for leaders in democracies. Put differently, there is little space in *People’s Daily* articles for critical reflection or independent evaluation of leaders, although readers do make nuanced inferences about power relations based on what is written or what goes unmentioned.

## Evidence for a ‘Xi Effect’

To what extent has Xi Jinping’s rise been associated with media coverage beyond the norm for an ascendant paramount leader? When media coverage of Xi is compared to that of Hu Jintao, the CCP General Secretary from 2002 to 2012, we see that the *People’s Daily* mentioned Xi more than twice as much as Hu Jintao in the first full year following the selection of both men to the position of CCP General Secretary. In 2003, ‘Hu Jintao’ appeared in 294 articles (see [Figure 1](#)), whereas the *People’s Daily* mentioned ‘Xi Jinping’ 734 times in 2013 ([Figure 2](#)). The vast difference in coverage of the leaders continued in subsequent years. For example, in the first year following the commencement of the leaders’ second five-year term as general secretary, ‘Hu Jintao’ was mentioned in 568 articles in 2008 and ‘Xi Jinping’ 1366 times in 2018.<sup>22</sup> The magnitude of difference in the coverage received by Xi received signals his far greater prominence and provides evidence a ‘Xi Jinping effect’ in the field of propaganda. Additionally, it serves as an indication of his more ambitious political agenda about which the *People’s Daily* may have had more to report: Xi, at times simultaneously, pursued a wide range of initiatives, including his signature anti-corruption, military restructuring, enhancement of propaganda work and

<sup>15</sup>Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup>Andrew G. Walder, *China Under Mao: A Revolution Derailed*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 214.

<sup>17</sup>Ji Fengyuan, *Linguistic Engineering: Language and Politics in Mao’s China*, pp. 226–227.

<sup>18</sup>Louisa Lim, *The People’s Republic of Amnesia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 94.

<sup>19</sup>Jonathan Hassid, *China’s Unruly Journalists: How Committed Professionals are Changing the People’s Republic* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 134.

<sup>20</sup>Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), pp. 399–400.

<sup>21</sup>‘Members of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee’s Politburo Standing Committee Hold Meeting to Study Efforts to Fight Novel Coronavirus Infections, CCP Central Committee General Secretary Xi Jinping Serves as Moderator’. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-02/12/c\\_1125565831.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-02/12/c_1125565831.htm); see also Dali Yang, ‘The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Estrangement of US-China Relations,’ *Asian Perspective* 45(1), pp. 7–31.

<sup>22</sup>The activities of both leaders received more coverage later in their tenure, relative to the year following their political ascent, suggesting that the influence of the General Secretary over *People’s Daily* propaganda increased over time.

## 16th Party Congress (2002-2007)

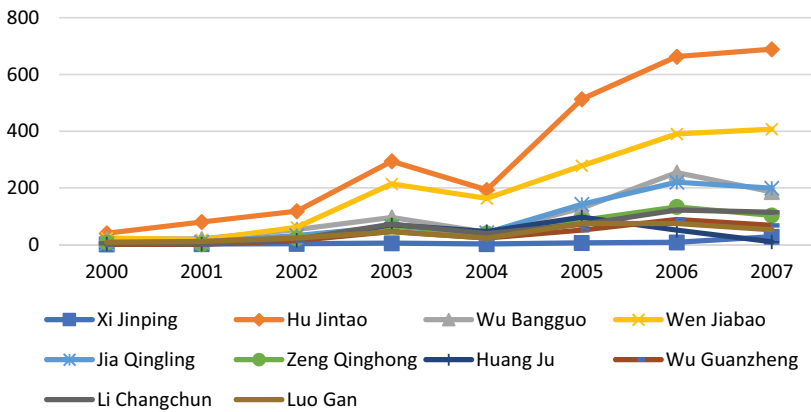


Figure 1. Mention of Politburo Standing Committee Members after the 16th Party Congress

## 17th Party Congress (2007-2012)

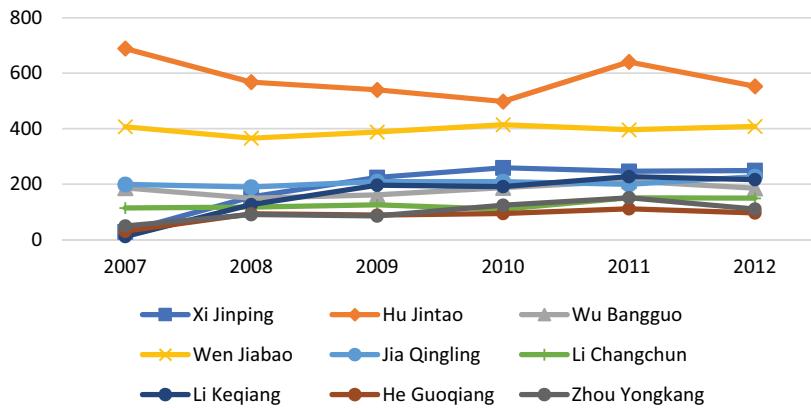


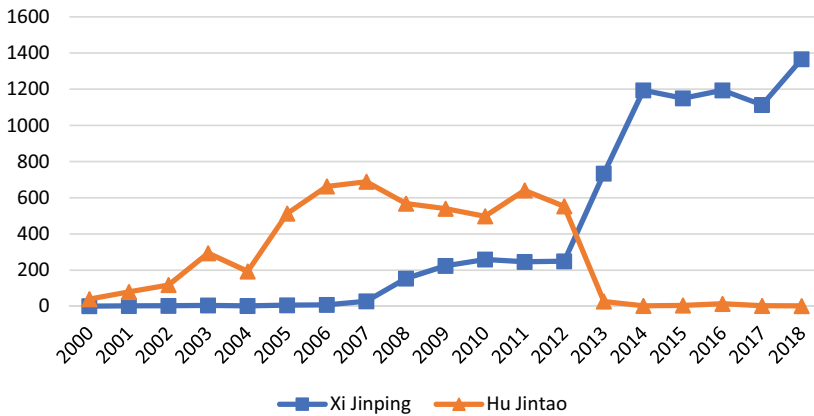
Figure 2. Mention of Politburo Standing Committee Members after the 17th Party Congress

information control through the establishment of the Cyber Administration of China, poverty reduction, sustainable development, strengthening the CCP's role in Chinese firms, and infrastructure construction via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Utilizing propaganda as a window on Xi's leadership, it's possible to determine whether a 'Xi effect' coincided with the deemphasis of the activities other national leaders present or past, indicating a possible departure from the Dengist priority of collective leadership at the top of the CCP. Here again there is unambiguous evidence that Xi's rise has coincided with the diminution of the status of other members of the Politburo Standing Committee, as illustrated by Figure 3 in which Xi rises and Hu disappears.

It is a curious feature of Chinese politics that leaders slated for positions of national prominence may only have fame of a localized sort and be something of an unknown commodity, as it were, to many citizens. However, once leaders are selected to the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo Standing Committee, the country's most prominent leadership body, there is a noticeable spike in the frequency with which they appear in media reports. Leaders' rise to prominence can thus seem to come 'out of

## Xi vs. Hu



**Figure 3.** People's Daily Reports on Hu Jintao vs. Xi Jinping

nowhere.' For example, former Politburo Standing Committee Members, Huang Ju and Li Changchun appeared in the *People's Daily* only 5 and 8 times, respectively, in the two years prior to their ascent in the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress; yet Huang and Li were mentioned 70 and 46 times, respectively, following their ascension to the Politburo Standing Committee. After a top leader's term of service is over, he (nearly all national leaders are men) also typically performs an impressive disappearing act. After appearing in 512 *People's Daily* reports in the 5 years that He Guoqiang served on the Politburo Standing Committee from 2007 to 2012, he received zero mention in news reports in 2013 and in only three reports subsequently as of mid-2019. Xi Jinping similarly rose from relative obscurity after long service as a local party leader, though with connections to the military at local and national levels. Yet in less than a decade as CCP General Secretary, Xi become a household name (indeed his posters adorn many households in Xinjiang)<sup>23</sup> and serves as the personification of government in state media. Xi Jinping has made certain that if, his record as a politician was little known prior to his ascent, his activities as paramount leader would be known to all.

Going further, when *People's Daily* coverage of Xi is compared to iconic leaders in the past, including Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and pre-Hu Jintao paramount leader Jiang Zemin, two trends emerge: First, coverage of Xi far surpasses that of past leaders Mao and Deng, who collectively appeared in *People's Daily* articles 60 times in 2018, whereas Xi was mentioned almost 23 times more, or 1366 times. Second, *People's Daily* mention of other leaders, including Premier Li Keqiang, decreases over time. While far from dismissing the salience of past leaders and of course their ideological contributions—more commonly emphasized in propaganda from the early years of Xi's rule—the 'Xi effect' in state propaganda creates the impression the Xi Jinping is the very personification of political power. See [Figure 4](#).

Due to a date-range limitation on the CNKI database available to this author, it isn't possible to directly compare media coverage of Xi to Jiang Zemin, paramount leader from 1992 to 2002, using the same method employed above. Still, one further observation is instructive: In Jiang's final year as PRC President, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and CCP General Secretary (2002), his name appeared 562 times in *People's Daily* reports. This is 172 times fewer mentions (roughly 25% less) than was the case for Xi Jinping in his first full year as CCP General Secretary.

<sup>23</sup>Musapir, 'War on fear: loyalty for life in the surveillance state of Xinjiang under Xi Jinping'. In Ashley Esarey and Rongbin Han, eds., *The Xi Jinping Era: Assessing Political Leadership in Contemporary China*, in preparation.

### Paramount Leaders

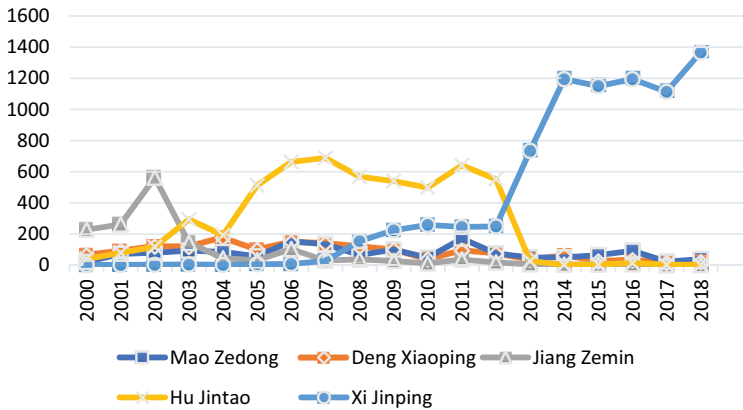


Figure 4. People's Daily Reports on Paramount Leaders

### Xi Rises while Others Fall: reports Members of the Politburo Standing Committee

It is clear that in Xi Jinping's 'new era,' the *People's Daily* has had comparatively less bandwidth for reporting on other national leaders. This can be seen in the 'flattening' of trend lines for media reports on members of the Politburo Standing Committee after the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Congresses (see Figure 5 and 6), as compared to the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, with the noticeable exception of *People's Daily* coverage of Premier Li Keqiang. Li appeared in 60% as many reports as Xi in the five years following the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress but in roughly one-third as many in 2018, the year after the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. By comparison, Premier Wen Jiabao was mentioned 75% as frequently as President Hu Jintao during the decade in which they both served on the Politburo Standing Committee. See Figure 5. These results provide some support for the view that Xi's rise coincides with reduced authority for other leaders and weakened collective leadership, more generally.<sup>24</sup>

### 18th Party Congress (2012-2017)

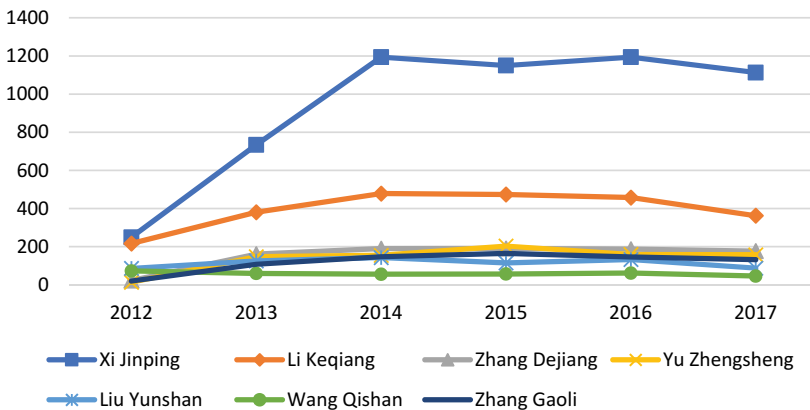


Figure 5. Mention of Politburo Standing Committee Members after the 18th Party Congress

<sup>24</sup>Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

## 19th Party Congress (2017-2018)

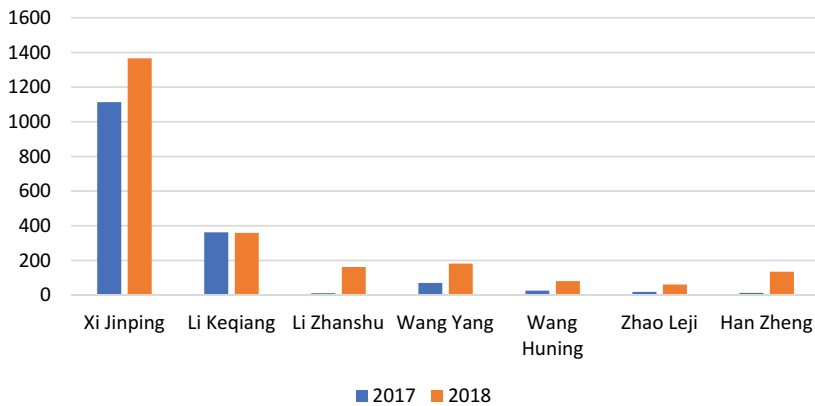


Figure 6. Mention of Politburo Standing Committee Members after the 19th Party Congress

### Xi Vs. Mao in Propaganda

Perhaps the most directly relevant comparison with Xi Jinping is the authority wielded by Mao Zedong over propaganda. Known as ‘Chairman Mao’ (*Mao zhuxi*), Mao’s image was ubiquitous in China of his day, a talisman to some, and even a source of political protection to others, amidst the many ‘direct action’ campaigns that Mao unleashed on his country. Due to data limitations, a different form of content analysis is utilized to examine *People’s Daily’s* reportage on Mao and his ‘thought’ (*sixiang*) during the decades in which Mao served as China’s most powerful leader. Rather than utilizing key word searches, six case studies have selected from the Mao and Xi periods—three cases per leader—to examine the extent to which the country’s top leader appeared in front page headlines (*biaoti*) and subheadings (*fubiaoti*) of the CCP’s flagship newspaper for 30 days following the onset of 1) an international crisis, 2) a campaign to rectify problems within the political system, and 3) a national mass mobilization to achieve larger societal objectives. The rationale for this case selection is that mention of a leader in *People’s Daily* headlines when the political stakes are high will help to generate inferences about intersections between propaganda and leadership.

The three case studies selected for the Mao period include: 1) *People’s Daily* coverage for the month following the October 1950 decision by the CCP Central Committee to send troops to fight in the Korean War; 2) the first month following Mao Zedong’s April 1956 announcement to an enlarged Politburo meeting of the principles guiding the ‘One Hundred Flowers’ Campaign (百花运动) in which Mao sought to shake up a bureaucracy that had grown resistant to radical action; 3) and coverage after CCP Central Committee’s May 1966 release of a document outlining Mao’s thoughts on the ‘Cultural Revolution,’ a decade-long movement in which Mao sought to replace his successors (first Liu Shaoqi and then Lin Biao), advance his agenda for socialist transformation, and tame a bureaucracy more resistant to Mao’s authority after the tragic Great Leap Forward.

For the Xi period, the three cases include: 1) the US-China Trade War, or more specifically, *People’s Daily’s* coverage in the summer of 2018 after US imposed 25 percent tariffs on a large basket of Chinese exports; 2) coverage following an anti-corruption speech by Xi Jinping in January 2014 at the national meeting of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection; and 3) the month following Xi’s announcement of China’s ‘People’s War’ against Covid-19 in February 2020. For both leaders, this approach compares the frequency with which each figure was mentioned in a crisis in foreign affairs, a national rectification campaign, and a major domestic mobilization.



## Results of the Case Comparison

A comparison of *People's Daily's* reporting on Mao and Xi during the two foreign crises shows large differences in the role that propaganda had in substantiating their position as top leader. In the month after China decided to send troops to fight in the Korean War, Mao received less mention than the untimely demise of Ren Bishi, a Politburo member, diplomat, and former Long Marcher. See [Figures 7 and 10](#). Further, a large number of other national figures appeared in the headlines, although less frequently than Mao. In descending order, they included: Premier Zhou Enlai, the writer Lu Xun, and several leaders with stature as CCP stalwarts and military commanders, such as Liu Shaoqi and Zhu De. In *People's Daily* headlines during the U.S.-China Trade War, by comparison, Xi soars above his contemporary leaders, appearing four times more frequently than Premier Li Keqiang and over six times more than his main enforcer in the anti-corruption campaign, Wang Qishan. Further, only five national leaders received any mention in headlines, a much narrower group of individuals than was the case as China entered the Korean War.

When we compare the two national rectification campaigns, similar trends appear. Premier Zhou Enlai, and not Mao, received the most coverage during the first month of the Hundred Flowers Campaign and a number of other figures featured prominently, including Chen Yi, Song Qingling (the widow of Sun Yat-sen), Guo Moruo, Zhu De, Nie Rongzhen, and Liu Shaoqi. See [Figures 8 and 11](#). Whereas during Xi's anti-corruption campaign, Xi towers above other figures, followed by Li Keqiang, Wang Qishan, Wang Yang, and Li Zhanshu. No other national leaders appeared in the headlines.

A comparison of Mao and Xi during times of national mobilization shows the greatest similarity. See [Figures 9 and 12](#). At the outset of the Cultural Revolution, Mao receives nearly six times the coverage of Zhou Enlai and over twice as much as all other national figures combined. Clearly, the Cultural Revolution—a formative time for Xi, based on official accounts—was a movement designed to help Mao and his supporters aggregate and utilize the power of the *People's Daily* to lead the country in a radically different and ultimately highly destructive direction. What about Xi during his 'People's War,' an expression also used by warring rebel factions during the Cultural Revolution?<sup>25</sup> Xi Jinping was mentioned eight times more than Li Keqiang and four times more frequently than all five other central leaders who appeared in the headlines. Scholar of Chinese high politics, Cheng Li wrote that Mao was 'viewed as a godlike figure, especially during the Cultural Revolution,' but Covid-era Xi Jinping had the *People's Daily* trumpeting his 'main melody' louder than Mao ever did, at least based on this limited test.<sup>26</sup>

## Discussion

The principal findings of this study are as follows. First, there is clear 'Xi effect' in terms of the extent to which China's paramount leader has been the subject of adulation in the CCP's flagship publication; his use of propaganda has been outsized, by comparison to prior leaders, and it has grown over time. Second, his rise has coincided with a deemphasis on other historical figures, including such revolutionary heroes as Mao and Deng. Third, Xi's potential rivals don't get much love. The coverage allocated even to Premier Li Keqiang is a lot less than was the case for Hu Jintao's Premier Wen Jiabao; the frequency with which Li has appeared in reports has even fallen off since the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. Taken together, these findings support the view that, if we interpret the frequency of mention in the CCP's mouthpiece publication as an imperfect proxy for influence within the Central Committee, these trends bespeak a steady decline in the position of other CCP leaders relative to Xi and could serve to corroborate the idea that Xi's rise has led to the demise of collective leadership. This assertion merits qualification, as the analysis of media content gives but a partial view of Chinese politics. As the Mao adages goes: "As communists, we gain control with the power of the gun and maintain control with

<sup>25</sup>Guobin Yang, *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 40.

<sup>26</sup>Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective*, p. 15.

# FREQUENCY OF MENTION

**Korean War**  
October 8 to November 7, 1950



Figure 7. Reports on Leaders after Chinese Decision to enter the Korean War (抗美援朝战争)

### The Hundred Flowers Campaign

Apr. 28, 1956—May 28, 1956

### FREQUENCY OF MENTION

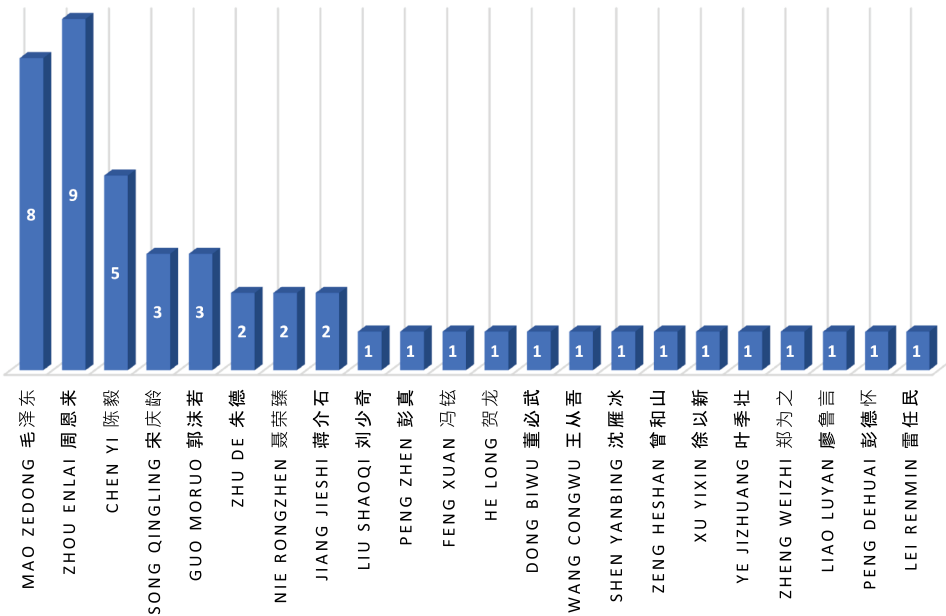


Figure 8. Reports on Leaders after Launch of Hundred Flowers Campaign

### Cultural Revolution

May 16, 1966—Jun. 15, 1966

### FREQUENCY OF MENTION

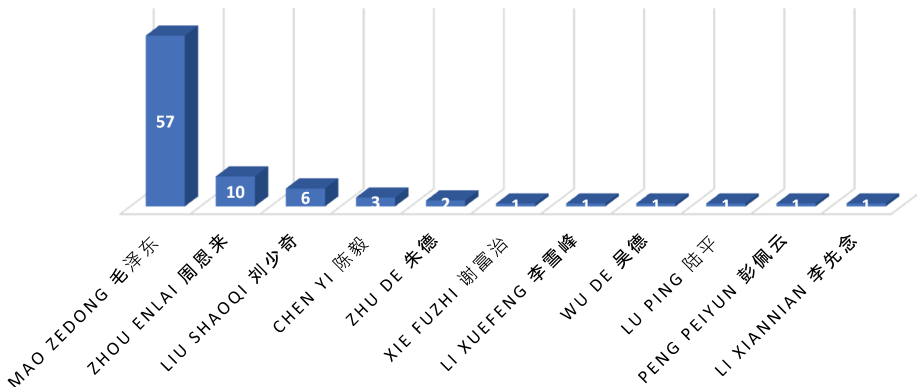
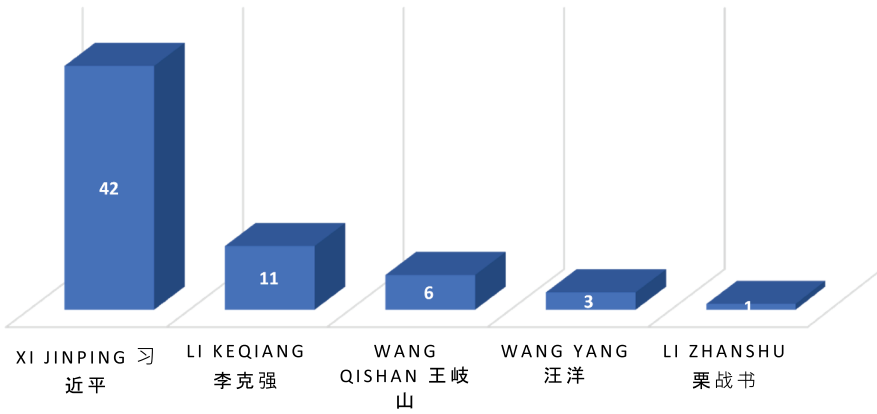


Figure 9. Reports on Leaders after Launch of Cultural Revolution

the power of the pen.” Xi’s dominance over propaganda would amount to little without other key sources of influence, e.g. authority over military affairs, as Jiang Qing and her ‘Gang of Four’ comrades discovered after Mao’s death. Moreover, at least one very powerful Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, did not rely extensively on the promotion of his personal authority via propaganda to achieve political objectives. This begs the question of whether Xi’s heavy reliance on propaganda conveys strength or weakness. Nimrod Baranovitch has argued in this journal that elite fears of regime weakness motivated

**United States-China Trade War**  
July 6 to August 5, 2018

**FREQUENCY OF MENTION**

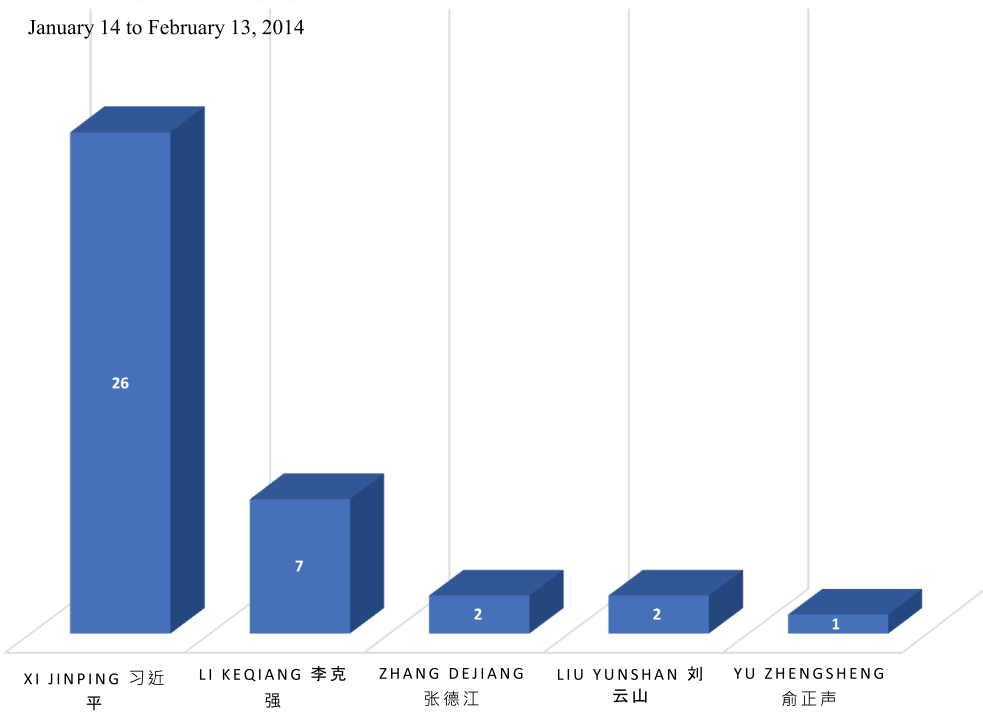


**Figure 10.** Reports on Chinese Leaders after Imposition of Tariffs on Chinese Goods in US-China Trade War

**Anti-Corruption Campaign**

January 14 to February 13, 2014

**FREQUENCY OF MENTION**



**Figure 11.** Reports on Leaders after Major Anti-Corruption Speech by Xi Jinping in 2014

support for Xi's brand of strongman politics<sup>27</sup>; Richard McGregor (2019) asserts that Xi pressed a 'panic button' after he came to power, as an explanation for the urgency with which Xi sought to reform the

<sup>27</sup>Nimrod Baranovitch, 'Strong Leader for a Time of Crisis: Xi Jinping's Strongman Politics as a Collective Response to Regime Weakness', pp. 1-17.

## People's War on Covid-19

Feb. 4, 2020—Mar. 5, 2020

## FREQUENCY OF MENTION

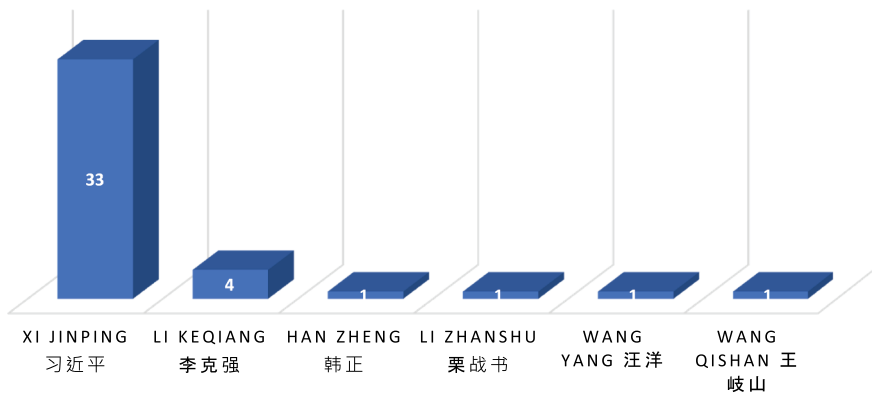


Figure 12. Reports on Leaders after Launch of People's War on Covid-19 in 2020

CCP to save the country. Both accounts suggest that Xi's hand, at least initially, may not have been strong. His steady bombardment of the public with propaganda over time, however, does seem to have aided the consolidation of his authority and even progress toward construction of a Stalinist 'cult of personality.'<sup>28</sup>

Some of these findings are likely to seem intuitive to China watchers who have tracked the steady rise of propaganda on Xi Jinping Thought, Xi's battles against corruption, Xi's folksy conversations with farmers, and meals in 'ordinary' Beijing restaurants, but the magnitude of Xi Jinping's use of propaganda is illuminating, when placed in comparative perspective. The six cases studies on propaganda under Xi and Mao suggest that Xi set the *People's Daily* to shouting his accolades to a greater extent than any of his predecessors, though it is difficult to make this point strongly without in-depth consideration of media operations and content in the Xi and Mao periods that is beyond the scope of this article. During the Cultural Revolution, there may have been a greater overall propaganda focus on Mao Zedong, when many citizens used Maoist expressions in their everyday lives.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, Mao's media 'interventions' (and those of his long-time backer Premier Zhou Enlai) were typically made behind the scenes; the nature of reporting and media operations at *People's Daily* have changed greatly in the decades since the Mao period.

At this point, it is difficult to extrapolate from Xi's influence over *People's Daily* coverage to his influence over public opinion via propaganda. Research published by Esarey, Stockmann, and Zhang on perceptions propaganda suggests that demographics differing by age, gender, and education process state messaging quite differently<sup>30</sup> and one early study on media effects by Chen and Shi showed a correlation between media coverage and *negative* attitudes toward government.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it is possible that the near deification of Xi Jinping in China's official media could backfire with highly educated citizens, who are more likely to deconstruct or even criticize state messaging. It is arguably the 'masses,' or the majority of citizens with an average education or below, whose support will help to keep the CCP in power. They are less likely to access information sources beyond the Great Firewall and more supportive of state guidance of

<sup>28</sup>Rose Luwei Luqiu, 'The Reappearance of the Cult of Personality in Asia', *East Asia* 33(4), (2016), pp. 289–307.

<sup>29</sup>Ji Fengyuan, *Linguistic Engineering: Language and Politics in Mao's China*, p. 102.

<sup>30</sup>Ashley Esarey, Daniela Stockmann, and Jie Zhang, 'Support for Propaganda: Chinese Perceptions of Public Service Advertising', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, (103), (2017), pp. 101–117.

<sup>31</sup>Xueyi Chen and Tianjian Shi, 'Media Effects on Political Confidence and Trust in the People's Republic of China in the Post-Tiananmen Period'. *East Asia* 19 (3), pp. 84–118.

public opinion. Their propaganda-driven view of Xi Jinping's authority within the party, the country, and beyond, contributes to Xi's influence and to that of the long-ruling party he commands.

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## **Notes on contributor**

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