



Commentary

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China Wants Face and We Are Left with the Cost

Anne-Marie Brady

Hollywood has not made a movie with a China-critical plot since 1997 (Brazier 2017).¹ Restricting negative portrayals is the price foreign companies must pay for access to the China market. And pay, it seems, they will. From movies to gaming, critical perspectives on China have become off limits in mass entertainment products. They are increasingly off limits in our universities and commercial publishing too.

Western companies and governments have salivated over the China market. But to access it, they have to adjust their products and activities to fit the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) censorship guidelines. And the outcome is that the public conversation on China, outside of China, has become more and more constrained. Any commentary that raises concerns about China's behaviour is routinely denounced as "anti-China" or part of a "China threat" (Xinhua News 2015), which are standard CCP epithets used to shut down debate. While many public commentators take pride in criticizing the words and deeds of US President Trump – with good reason – it is an open secret that many of our academics and politicians are now afraid to raise a critical perspective on China or Chinese president Xi Jinping.

Our open economies and open societies have allowed the CCP to have an undue influence on our public sphere. It will take recognition of this influence and a major strategic adjustment to correct this.

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Foreign Media and Universities

The Chinese government's efforts have been facilitated by our government's economic policies that offered up our strategic industries to the investor with the deepest pockets (AFP 2016). In addition, the neoliberal philosophy of education as a business (Denniss 2019) created shortfalls in our university funding that forced them to fill the deficit with international students (Magnier and Bases 2019).

The devastating impact of the Internet on the news media, publishing, and entertainment industry drew these sectors to court access and advertising in China, one of the most censored public spheres in the world. Indeed, Western academic and commercial publishing companies now openly admit they are working under CCP censorship guidelines, and not only for China-related books (Magnier and Bases 2019; Christian 2019b).

University academics are under pressure to portray the CCP in a positive light (Das 2019), not only because they might risk being denied a visa to China, but also because some university leaders pressure their staff to avoid criticizing China for fear it will have an impact on Chinese student enrolments (Varghese 2019). Foreign taxpayers subsidize China's self-declared propaganda organizations, the Confucius Institutes (Xinhua 2007), whose partnership agreement with foreign universities requires a 50-50 split in costs and requires the Confucius Institutes to obey Chinese law above domestic law (Peterson 2017).

Mainstream newspapers and wire services such as Reuters have content agreements with the CCP news agency Xinhua and are subsidized by Chinese corporations such as HSBC and Huawei (Christian 2019a). News media such as *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, and *The Guardian*, which consistently publish stories that do not always portray a positive view of the CCP, are blocked in China. This affects their bottom line as it denies them access to a major advertising market.

Foreign journalists and other opinion influencers are courted through free tours to China (Bridge, Fisher, and Ralph 2019). If they repeat the CCP's talking points, they'll be put on a "white list" (Stone Fish 2019). If they don't, they'll be blacklisted, which can be career-destroying for some. Politicians are offered donations in return for their support on China-related matters (McDermott 2017). Meanwhile the CCP has succeeded in pressuring the Chinese diaspora media into following the party line. With the exception of Falun Gong publications and a few dissident outlets, the diaspora Chinese-language media are a parallel universe, spouting only the pro-CCP message (Brady 2017).

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Propaganda as the CCP's Lifeblood

Propaganda is not a negative word in China. The CCP calls propaganda and thought management the "lifeblood of the Party" (Brady 2008). The CCP's project to dominate the global conversation on China issues has been going on for nearly 30 years, and initially, even CCP propaganda advisers were skeptical about the efficacy of its efforts. In 1991, the CCP set up the Office of Foreign Propaganda, also known by its other nameplate, the State Council Information Office, to lead the project to rebrand the country. China's international image had been

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severely tarnished after the government's violent suppression of the student protest movement in 1989. Having a negative international image affects the Chinese Communist government's ability to achieve its political and economic goals domestically and globally, and also has an impact on national pride.

For 30 years the picture of an anonymous man holding his plastic shopping bags and facing down a row of tanks in Beijing has come to symbolize international perceptions of China. After the end of the Cold War, the image was widely understood as a symbol of the individual facing down party-state oppression.

China's propaganda specialists worked hard to shift global perceptions of China away from such imagery. The government's failed bid to host the 2000 Olympics was part of these efforts. Its successful bid to host the 2008 Olympics was an indication that it was achieving a measure of success. The main focus of CCP rebranding in the 1990s and early 2000s was to distract foreign attention from the party-state and its abuses by re-directing focus onto China's economic development and talking up the China market.

“Making the foreign serve China”

The CCP already had an established foreign propaganda set-up, which included an English-language newspaper, a whole raft of foreign-language magazines, publishing houses, and a radio and television station devoted to foreign audiences. These were expanded after 1991, with television a particular focus. CCP media organizations worked hard to partner with foreign media, offering free or subsidized content and paying for excerpts of *China Daily* to appear in leading international papers such as the *Washington Post* (Fitzgerald 2016). CCP propaganda manuals refer to this as “borrowing a boat to go out on the ocean,” using foreign media organizations to promote the CCP line.

CCP propagandists understand the value of getting Beijing's viewpoint across in the international media without intermediaries. One strategy has been to cultivate positive relationships with foreigners who are seen as politically friendly to China, as part of a longstanding policy of getting “foreign friends” to promote CCP talking points. Mao Zedong called this “making the foreign serve China” (Brady 2003). The most valued CCP foreign friends are prominent individuals who bring commercial and political advantages to China (Brady 2016a). Public agreement on China's political positions is not required. CCP leaders host foreign VIPs (Fitzgerald 2018), journalists, and academics to do “thought work” on them to create an “international army of friendly propagandists” for China (for more on this, see Brady 2008).

The politicizing of “friendship” was invented by the Soviets and it was a tool of their foreign policy too. But the CCP perfected it and made it their own. The economic focus to China's post-1991 rebranding strategy was helpful in attracting a new generation of foreign friends such as former French President Jacques Chirac (China 2013) and former Australian Prime Ministers Paul Keating and Kevin Rudd (Poprzeczny 2008; Floating.red 2019).

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Chinese propaganda specialists believe that foreigners who study Chinese will be more sympathetic to the CCP perspective (Brady 2003). In 2004, the first Confucius Institute was set up in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. As of 2018, China had 525 Confucius Institutes and 1113 Confucius Classrooms (China Daily 2018), with more than nine million students enrolled in classes. Promoting a CCP-defined version of Chinese culture and language internationally serves to marginalize groups such as Uighurs, Tibetans, democracy activists, Falun Gong followers, Taiwan, and other regions, all of which, from the CCP's perspective, have the potential to present a counter-narrative and threaten the CCP's monopoly on power.

Yet despite all these strenuous efforts, polling by Gallup and Pew showed that China continued to have very low international approval ratings throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Brady 2016b). An exception to this was China's economic propaganda effort, which succeeded in building a relentlessly positive picture of the China market - even when statistics told a different story.

In 2009, the CCP government responded to these low international approval ratings with the "big foreign propaganda" initiative (Brady 2016b), devoting US\$45 million to an expansion of Xinhua News Service and China Radio International and setting up a new international television network, CGTN.

However, this figure did not reflect the true scale of China's "big propaganda." The CCP imposes a three percent "propaganda industry tax" on all profit-making enterprises in the Chinese public sphere to fund the costs of expanding and upgrading the propaganda system. Each Chinese province has a budget for foreign propaganda, which is coordinated with national-level efforts. Each party member is also required to promote the CCP line. More than 70 percent of the CEOs of Chinese major companies are CCP members, and 100 percent of the CEOs of ICT companies such as Huawei and Alibaba are CCP members (Zhang 2018). Increasingly in the 2000s, as Chinese companies "went global," the CCP would draw on Chinese companies to expand CCP global messaging and rebranding.

Propaganda under Xi Jinping

"Buying a boat to go out on the ocean"

Xi Jinping's August 2013 speech at the National Meeting on Propaganda and Thought Work signalled a new strengthening of CCP foreign propaganda efforts. Xi told his audience, "China needs to strengthen media coverage...and use innovative outreach methods...to tell a good Chinese story and promote China's views internationally" (Xinhua 2013).

After Xi's talk, the CCP further increased subsidies for foreign propaganda activities. It also launched a bold new approach, colloquially referred to as "buying a boat to go out on the ocean" (Guangming 2014). CCP foreign propaganda would now to be conducted as a business activity. Under this policy, Chinese companies were encouraged to make strategic mergers and acquisitions of Western media and culture enterprises in order to take control of global China narratives.

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The CCP's "buying a boat" policy made major inroads into Hollywood production, casting, and film distribution, as well as the news media and popular culture (Kokas 2017; Linder 2018). Since 2012, most of the movie cinemas in the US, Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand are owned by Dalian Wanda (Szalai 2016; Frater 2015; Economist 2017; Kot 2018). Alibaba's Jack Ma bought Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post*, formerly the most authoritative English-language paper reporting on China. In 2018, it followed Chinese state media in republishing forced confessions of some of China's high-profile political prisoners (China Digital Times 2018). Huawei has become a major advertiser and sponsor of newspapers, universities, and foreign sports teams (Christian 2019a; White 2019). HSBC became the *Telegraph's* largest advertiser (Osborne 2015), which reputedly led to a shift in the editorial line to more pro-CCP coverage.

Under Xi Jinping, China opened up its market to foreign academic publishing and increased the numbers of Hollywood films that were able to legally be shown in China from 10 a year in the 1990s, to 20 a year in 2012. By 2017, 44 per year could be shown. The price was accepting CCP censorship.

The price to access the China market

Despite joining the WTO in 1997, China's news, entertainment, publishing, and culture market has long been closed off to foreign businesses. Allowing foreign media and culture companies access to the China market has had an impact on their products in other markets too. If a production company makes a television show, advertisement, or film that portrays China in an unfavourable way (Kan 2019) – even if it will only be shown outside China – it will affect access for products they hope to sell in the China market (Koetse 2019).

In academic publishing, this has resulted in publishers culling their journal and book offerings to remove content critical of China in materials they make available to the China market (Lew 2019). This is having a chilling effect on academic publishing on China in some journals. Most photographic books are now printed in China for cost-saving reasons, but any books that break Chinese censorship guidelines cannot be printed in China (Coughlan 2019). This is the case even if those books are not destined for the China market.

Think tanks and new media

Another significant development in the Xi era was the project to establish between 50 and 100 think tanks in China by 2020, and partner them with global think tanks (Xinhua News 2015). CCP propagandists recognize that think tanks have an important role to play in shaping government policies and influencing public opinion and are thus a perfect match for promoting the Xi government's assertive foreign policy line (Xinhua 2015).

Think tank relationships are a useful means to collect information on the intentions of other nations. Funding international think tank networks such as the Silk Road Think Tank Network (eSilks)² helps mute critical voices, and cultivate foreign political elites. In the Xi era, China adopted the practice of many other foreign governments in offering generous strings-attached research funding in order to influence the boundaries of analysis and debates in foreign academia (Green 2019).

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The CCP government is also increasingly using new media for covert influence campaigns and to strengthen global censorship on China-related issues. The CCP long ago banned Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and Google from China. But all the CCP foreign propaganda organizations such as the Office of Foreign Propaganda and Xinhua are now active globally on these banned foreign social media platforms. China's intelligence agency has been using LinkedIn to recruit assets among foreign diplomats and politicians.³ Twitter is increasingly being used by the CCP for social media disinformation campaigns against the Hong Kong protestors, to rebut international condemnation of the Chinese government's detention of more than a million Uighurs, and to shape the global narrative on the Covid-19 epidemic (AFP 2019).

China's diplomats are also taking to Twitter and other social media platforms with their own individual accounts and are adopting an increasingly strident tone, reflecting the harsh international messaging of the Xi government. The Chinese government is promoting the global uptake of Wechat (China Digital Times 2019), a China-based app which combines the features of Twitter, Facebook, and electronic payment services – and must follow CCP censorship guidelines. Wechat now has one billion users worldwide, more than Facebook Messenger (Cannane and Hui 2019). Most of the growth in new users is coming from the US, Southeast Asia, and Europe. In 2019, Tencent Corp, the owner of Wechat, made a US\$150 million investment in Reddit, raising fears about censorship (BBC 2019).

The CCP's hardening propaganda message

Under Xi, China's foreign propaganda messaging has reached a level of stridency not seen since the Cultural Revolution. The initial message of the Xi era was to promote the Belt and Road Initiative, a China-centred strategic and economic grouping, and to “tell a good story for China” emphasizing the positive framing of China and promoting a politics-lite version of Chinese society, which underlines China as a modern society steeped in an officially sanctioned image of Chinese “tradition.” But since 2019, with an ongoing “trade war” with the US, the CCP foreign propaganda message has hardened.

China's domestic politics has gone back to levels of oppression not seen since the Mao years. And the government is ultra-sensitive to criticism. People have, for example, been detained for liking tweets in support of the protests in Hong Kong (WeiQuanWang 2019). China's foreign policy has also turned to a level of antagonism last seen in 1967 (Barnouin and Yu 2011), when the People's Republic of China arrested foreign journalists and teachers on false spying charges and Chinese diplomats fought with police at the London embassy. Xi's crackdown on dissent and a selective anti-corruption campaign, plus stricter controls on the education and cultural sector, news media, NGOs, civil society, students, intellectuals, and government officials, has forced Chinese people who interact with foreigners and the outside world to follow CCP discipline and “sing with one voice” too.

A poll by Pew in 2019 on US perceptions of China found that 60 percent of Americans now have an unfavourable view of China (Silver, Devlin, and Huang 2019), the highest percentage since the Pew Research Center began asking this question 15 years ago. Despite China investing billions to rebrand, it appears further away from its goal of creating a positive international image for China – at least in many Western democracies – than it ever has been. But the more recent goal, of shaping the global China narrative, has had much better results.

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Conclusion

Our open, democratic societies need to develop a resilience strategy to deal with the CCP's inroads into the public sphere. Some of the problems can be dealt with by better legislation. But many others have occurred from the uncertain financial model of our media and culture sectors and the chronic underfunding of our universities.

The CCP wants “face,” but our societies increasingly have to bear the costs of this. Thomas Jefferson once said, “The price of democracy is eternal vigilance.” Oscar Wilde also famously quipped, “People today know the price of everything, but the value of nothing.” So what value do we put on the freedom of ideas and information? And what price are we willing to pay to maintain these freedoms, the bedrock of our societies?

About the Author



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Endnotes

- 1 The last ever China-critical movies made by a Hollywood company were *Kundun*, *Red Corner*, and *Seven Years in Tibet*. Actors *Richard Gere* and *Brad Pitt*, who featured in those films, were banned from *China*.
- 2 <http://www.esilks.org/about/members>
- 3 Following the approach used with traditional media, Chinese corporations are investing in foreign social media platforms such as Reddit and seeking partnerships with encrypted communication specialists such as Proton.



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- One of the top five think tanks in Canada and No. 1 in Ottawa according to the University of Pennsylvania.
- Cited by five present and former Canadian Prime Ministers, as well as by David Cameron, the British Prime Minister.
- First book, *The Canadian Century: Moving out of America's Shadow*, won the Sir Antony Fisher International Memorial Award in 2011.
- *Hill Times* says Brian Lee Crowley is one of the 100 most influential people in Ottawa.
- The *Wall Street Journal*, the *Economist*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post* and many other leading national and international publications have quoted the Institute's work.



"The study by Brian Lee Crowley and Ken Coates is a 'home run'. The analysis by Douglas Bland will make many uncomfortable but it is a wake up call that must be read."

FORMER CANADIAN PRIME MINISTER PAUL MARTIN ON
MLI'S PROJECT ON ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND THE NATURAL
RESOURCE ECONOMY.

Ideas Change the World

Independent and non-partisan, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute is increasingly recognized as the thought leader on national issues in Canada, prodding governments, opinion leaders and the general public to accept nothing but the very best public policy solutions for the challenges Canada faces.



About the Macdonald-Laurier Institute

What Do We Do?

When you change how people think, you change what they want and how they act. That is why thought leadership is essential in every field. At MLI, we strip away the complexity that makes policy issues unintelligible and present them in a way that leads to action, to better quality policy decisions, to more effective government, and to a more focused pursuit of the national interest of all Canadians. MLI is the only non-partisan, independent national public policy think tank based in Ottawa that focuses on the full range of issues that fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

What Is in a Name?

The Macdonald-Laurier Institute exists not merely to burnish the splendid legacy of two towering figures in Canadian history – Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir Wilfrid Laurier – but to renew that legacy. A Tory and a Grit, an English speaker and a French speaker – these two men represent the very best of Canada’s fine political tradition. As prime minister, each championed the values that led to Canada assuming her place as one of the world’s leading democracies. We will continue to vigorously uphold these values, the cornerstones of our nation.



Working for a Better Canada

Good policy doesn’t just happen; it requires good ideas, hard work, and being in the right place at the right time. In other words, it requires MLI. We pride ourselves on independence, and accept no funding from the government for our research. If you value our work and if you believe in the possibility of a better Canada, consider making a tax-deductible donation. The Macdonald-Laurier Institute is a registered charity.

Our Issues

The Institute undertakes an impressive program of thought leadership on public policy. Some of the issues we have tackled recently include:

- Aboriginal people and the management of our natural resources;
- Making Canada’s justice system more fair and efficient;
- Defending Canada’s innovators and creators;
- Controlling government debt at all levels;
- Advancing Canada’s interests abroad;
- Ottawa’s regulation of foreign investment; and
- How to fix Canadian health care.



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What people are saying about the Macdonald- Laurier Institute

In five short years, the institute has established itself as a steady source of high-quality research and thoughtful policy analysis here in our nation's capital. Inspired by Canada's deep-rooted intellectual tradition of ordered liberty – as exemplified by Macdonald and Laurier – the institute is making unique contributions to federal public policy and discourse. Please accept my best wishes for a memorable anniversary celebration and continued success.

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE STEPHEN HARPER

The Macdonald-Laurier Institute is an important source of fact and opinion for so many, including me. Everything they tackle is accomplished in great depth and furthers the public policy debate in Canada. Happy Anniversary, this is but the beginning.

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE PAUL MARTIN

In its mere five years of existence, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, under the erudite Brian Lee Crowley's vibrant leadership, has, through its various publications and public events, forged a reputation for brilliance and originality in areas of vital concern to Canadians: from all aspects of the economy to health care reform, aboriginal affairs, justice, and national security.

BARBARA KAY, NATIONAL POST COLUMNIST

Intelligent and informed debate contributes to a stronger, healthier and more competitive Canadian society. In five short years the Macdonald-Laurier Institute has emerged as a significant and respected voice in the shaping of public policy. On a wide range of issues important to our country's future, Brian Lee Crowley and his team are making a difference.

JOHN MANLEY, CEO COUNCIL
