Chinese State Media Tweeting

Between Centralized Propaganda And Competition

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Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPD, also CCPPD	Central Propaganda Department, also Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department
SCIO	State Council Information Office
EPLG	External Propaganda Leading Group

1. Introduction

China has been heavily investing in external propaganda. In the wake of the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2009, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rolled out a six billion US-Dollar[1] "going-out" program to expand its English-language media presence (Hu and Ji 2012, 33). As part of this campaign, from 2011 onward state media launched English-language accounts on Twitter.

Since then, the approach Chinese state media take in external propaganda has changed. State media have increasingly integrated concepts of public diplomacy (Tsai 2017, 203). In 2018 Vivien Marsh finds that "China's international media offering [nowadays] is vastly more sophisticated than that in 2009" (Marsh 2018: 143). Still, Chinese state media find themselves in a field of tension between centralized propaganda and competition.

On the one hand, external propaganda is coordinated by the Central Propaganda Department (CPD). Chief editors of state media receive instructions on a daily basis, which include topics that should be reported and the wording to be used. The primary goal of external propaganda under current president Xi Jinping is to "tell a good China story" (Bradly 2015, 55) and to establish a "single, unified national image" (Hu and Ji 2012, 34).

On the other hand, state media are competing with each other on a foreign market. They have to adapt to readers habits, appear trustworthy and offer value in terms of newsworthiness. On Twitter about ten Chinese state media are competing with each other for the attention of the audiences abroad.

In this paper I want to analyze how centralization is exhibited in external propaganda today. I pose the question: **How does centralized propaganda play out on the three large Chinese state media Twitter accounts?**

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1   The estimates of the cost of the campaign vary. Bradly states the total higher at 7,2 US Dollar (Bradly 2015, 54)

Twitter is an opportune example to study external propaganda, because Twitter is blocked in mainland China. Thus, the accounts of Chinese state media on the social media platform are targeting oversees Chinese and foreigners only.

Empirical research on Chinese external propaganda has mostly focused on overall trends across all state media. To answer my question I draw upon these studies. I adapt three hypotheses regarding frequent topics in Tweets among Chinese state media introduced by Nip/Sun, and test whether they hold true for all three state media outlets.

I focus on Tweets from October 1st 2019. It is both the Chinese national holiday and a peak in violence at the ongoing anti-extradition-law protests in Hong Kong. It therefore provides the possibility to compare the state media Tweets regarding two major events.

The paper is composed of four parts. The first part is a review of literature on China's external propaganda. In the second part I introduce my data set and the method I use. The third part consists of the main findings. At the end stands a conclusion.

2. Chinese state media on Twitter

In this chapter I provide an overview on Chinese state media on Twitter. First off I present a brief overview of the large state media outlets and the relations between them. Second is a review of empirical studies on state medias news agenda, which is the starting point for my own research.

Chinese state media are not financially dependent on the state. On the contrary, beginning with the 1990s Chinese state media are required to be economically profitable and receive little subsidies (Roberts 2018, 201).

What is more is that state media are not so much controlled by the state, but rather by a department of the Chinese Communist Party: The Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department (CCPPD). David Bandurski, a long-term researcher on Chinese politics, says that the State Council

Information Office (SCIO) and the CCPPD are "one office, with two signs on the door" (Hilton 2019).

The influence of the CCPPD on state media is considered to be strong. The department holds daily meetings and supplies state media with instructions on what to report, what not to report and what terminology to use. Publishers, chief editors and other key officials of Peoples Daily, CCTV and Xinhua News Agency are appointed by the CCPPD, chief editors are required to be cadres of the CCPPD (Song and Chang 2017, 1070).

This did not change with global expansion of Chinese media. On the contrary, when state media expanded globally the External Propaganda Leading Group (EPLG) was established to oversee the foreign-language editions of Peoples Daily, Xinhua and other state media outlets (Shambaugh 2007, 48). Thus, "centralized coordination has remained the main model of operation" (Nip and Sun 2018, 99).

The most influential state media are the "big three media outlets in China" (Song and Chang 2017, 1070). Those are:

Peoples Daily, @PDChina

Xinhua News Agency, @XHNews

CGTN, @CGTNOfficial

All three have verified Twitter-accounts and are associated with further regional or special interest accounts as well as Facebook, Youtube and Instagram accounts.

CGTN is the official national broadcaster, formerly known as CCTV. In 2017, it was merged with China National Radio and China Radio International into a new flagship broadcaster and re-branded as CGTN (Nip and Sun 2018, 100).

PEOPLE'S DAILY is the largest national daily newspaper in mainland China (Hu and Ji 2012, 33). It is also considered to be the "most authoritative organ of the CCP" (Song and Chang 2017, 1070).

For a period of time in the 1960s the newspaper had a leading role to coordinate news (Roberts 2018, 200).

XINHUA NEWS AGENCY is the national news agency. It is considered to be at the "front line" sending the message back to other news outlets (Hilton 2019). After the Tiananmen-massacre in 1989 the CCP instructed newspapers to follow the lead of Xinhua News Agency on China-related events (Roberts 2018, 103). Since 1990 Xinhua developed into a global news agency and now functions as the "central platform for promoting [the CCP's] global narrative" (Cheng, Golan, and Kiousis 2016, 745). Among Chinese media it "enjoys the highest status as the only official news media authorized to selectively transmit foreign media content into the country" (Hong 2011, 382).

On Twitter there are at least ten accounts of official Chinese state media outlets (Nip and Sun 2018, 100). Remarkably there are no *commercial* Chinese news media on Twitter (Nip and Sun 2018, 100).

Joyce Nip and Chao Sun conducted one of the most extensive studies on the Chinese news agenda on Twitter (2018). Nip/Sun collected data from Twitter over the course of one year and determined the most frequent topics in Tweets of the three large Chinese state media outlets. They find that Chinese state media carry mostly, about 60%, China-related content.

China-related Tweets then focus on the country's "top leaders and achievements" (Nip and Sun 2018, 98). The Chinese president, Xi Jinping, is the most prominent theme and the hashtag "#XiJinping" is the most frequent single word in the data set (Nip and Sun 2018, 106). The second most prominent theme is the premier, Li Keqiang. Nip/Sun classify this focus on activities of top leaders to be consistent with the news agenda of traditional national media in China (Nip and Sun 2018, 106).

The top three most prominent themes in Chinese state media Tweets related to China according to Nip/Sun are:

(1) the country's top leaders, i.e. Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang.

(2) the cities of Beijing, Hong Kong and Shanghai and

(3) Chinese festivities.

Further prominent themes according to Nip/Sun are the "Belt and Road Initiative", the National Party Congress and natural sceneries as well as cultural heritage (Nip and Sun 2018, 106).

Nip/Sun find Twitter to be representative of external propaganda on other platforms, they conclude that "Chinas state media on Twitter are repeating the same themes as published on other platforms in their external communication" (Nip and Sun 2018, 107).

However, Nip/Sun do not make mention of the fact that the data show significant differences between state media outlets. For instance Xinhua News Agency is much more active in publishing Tweets than CCTV, but CCTV carries proportionately more China-related content (Nip and Sun 2018, 105).

In a similar study, Yunya Song and Tsan-Kuo Chang analyzed the news agenda of the large three state media on Sina Weibo, over the course of one week. They find that while there are disassociation strategies of state media online in respect to self-presentation and interaction, the content of state media online is still related to the print version. Song/Chang conclude that the "offline logic of Communist Party journalism appears to have been carried over to the new medium" (Song and Chang 2017, 1064).

Regarding differences between the state media outlets, their data show significant differences in percentage of posts linking back to parent newspaper: "Of the Peoples Daily posts 37.3 percent refer to the parent newspaper (including its affiliates) compared with 73.6 percent for Xinhua and 66.0 percent for CCTV" (Song and Chang 2017, 1071).

3. Analysis of Tweets by Chinese state media

In this chapter I present the method I use. Purpose of this paper is to analyze the level of centralization in Chinese external propaganda. I take a deductive approach, that is, in this chapter I formulate three hypotheses on frequent topics of Tweets, which I then test for Peoples Daily, Xinhua News Agency and CGTN, to see if there are any differences. At the end of this chapter I introduce the tool I used to collect the Tweets.

3.1 Hypotheses

Past studies on Chinese state media have determined frequent topics in external propaganda. In order to evaluate the level of centralization in external propaganda I draw upon those findings and test whether those frequent topics occur on all three accounts. I adapt the findings of Nip/Su to the events relevant in my data set.

According to Nip/Sun frequent topics in Tweets of Chinese state media are (1) the country's top leaders, i.e. Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, (2) the cities of Beijing, Hong Kong and Shanghai (3) Chinese festivities.

Since my data set is constructed around October 1st 2019, which is both the Chinese national holiday and a peak in violence at the ongoing anti-extradition-law protests in Hong Kong, I expect these two events to be among the most frequent topics.

My hypotheses are:

> I: In accordance with Nip/Sun I expect Xi Jinping to be the most prominent theme and "#XiJinping" to be the most frequent hashtag. Xi consolidated his power in 2018, when term limits for his presidency were lifted. Thus, there is reason to expect Xi Jinping to be as prominent of a theme in 2019 as he was in 2017.

II: I expect Hong Kong and the hashtag "#Hongkong" to be a large theme on October 1st. On October 1st 2019 a police officer, for the first time since the beginning of the five-month long pro-democracy protest, shot a protester with a live bullet. This peak in police violence was widely discussed on social media and the video of the shooting was circulated online.

III: In accordance with Nip/Sun I expect the National Day on October 1st and hashtags related to it, to be a large theme on that day. Among all Chinese festivities the celebration of the founding of the Peoples Republic of China is one of the most important.

3.2 Collection of Tweets

Cut-off date for my data set is November 7th 2019. The data set includes the past 3200 Tweets for each of the three accounts –@PDChina, @XHNews, @CGTNOfficial– from that day. Since Tweet volume per day varies between the accounts I analyze a fixed amount of Tweets per account, to avoid distortion. Although the time frame of the analysis varies slightly between account, Tweets of October 1st, the national holiday, are included in the analysis of all three accounts.

I use hashtags as indicator for frequent topics instead of analyzing full text of Tweets. Hashtags are used to accentuate a single word and to participate in a wider debate. It is in the interest of state media to use hashtags, to push their news agenda, develop recognizable formats and control the narrative on certain events or a public figures.

To collect Tweets I use the tool Accountanalysis developed by Luca Hammer and Max Karadeniz (2017). In terms of structural data the tool provides information on Tweet-volume, daily rhythm and used interface. It also enables me to gather used hashtags as well as information on retweeted and quoted users. Those functions work both ways, either by selecting a date and then showing used hashtags or by selecting a hashtag and then showing dates of use. The tool also allows me to retrieve full, which is useful for understanding the context of a certain hashtag.

4. Findings in Tweets by Chinese state media

The Twitter accounts of Chinese state media are highly professionalized and most probably well financed. This can be seen in their daily output: All three accounts post Tweets 24h a day, many of which are high-quality videos and photographs. The fact that they are tweeting around the clock supports the claim that external propaganda is aiming at a global audience, as opposed to primarily targeting North America.

While all three are very active accounts, there is a remarkable divide in Tweets per day between Peoples Daily and the other two. Xinhua News Agency and CGTN add up to a total of 108 and 118 Tweets respectively on Ocotber 1st 2019, while Peoples Dailys output on that day is substantially lower at a total of 38 Tweets.

What is more is that all three use different interfaces to publish their Tweets. Peoples Daily mostly uses TweetDeck and seldom the Twitter Web App. On the contrary CGTN regularly uses four different interfaces, all of which are official Twitter applications: TweetDeck, the Twitter Web App, Twitter Media Studio and Periscope. Still, Xinhua News Agency takes a different path altogether. Xinhua News Agency mostly uses a self-developed interface called "China Xinhua News". This supports the proposition that each state media outlet has a separate newsroom with varying number of staff and internal directives on which interface to use. Xinhua News Agency and CGTN appear to spend more resources on their English-language Twitter accounts, than Peoples Daily.

4.1 Xinhua avoids the hashtag "#XiJinping" (Hypothesis I)

In accordance with hypothesis I the hashtag "#XiJinping" is one of the most frequent hashtags for both Peoples Daily and CGTN. However, Xinhua News Agency displays a strong irregularity: It hardly ever uses the hashtag "#XiJinping". Among 3200 Tweets the hashtag "#XiJinping" appears only once. The related hashtag "#XiFocus" is also used once. Although Xinhua News Agency

reports on Xi Jinping, their Tweets do not highlight his name. This is a sharp contrast to CGTN and Peoples Daily.

Moreover, even for Peoples Daily and CGTN the hashtag "#XiJinping" is not the most frequent hashtag in the weeks before and after October 1st 2019. Among the last 3200 Tweets CGTN used the hashtag "#XiJinping" 79 times and Peopels Daily 104 times. In both cases the hashtag "#Hongkong" is the most frequent hashtag during these weeks of the pro-democracy protest. The hashtag "#XiJinping" ranks 7th on CGTN and second on Peoples Daily.
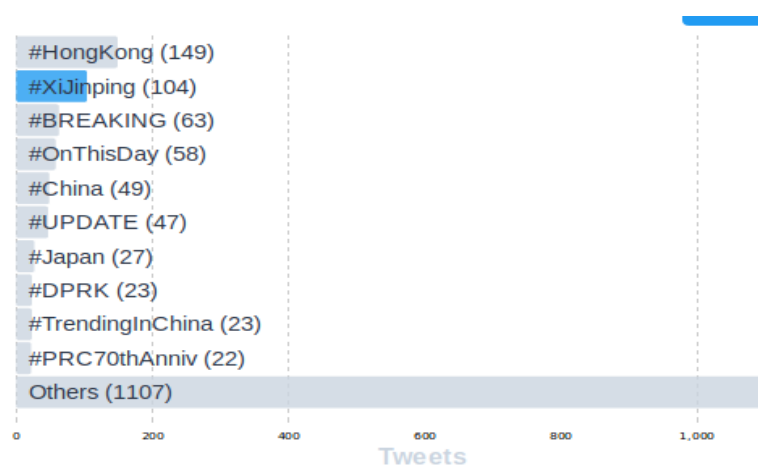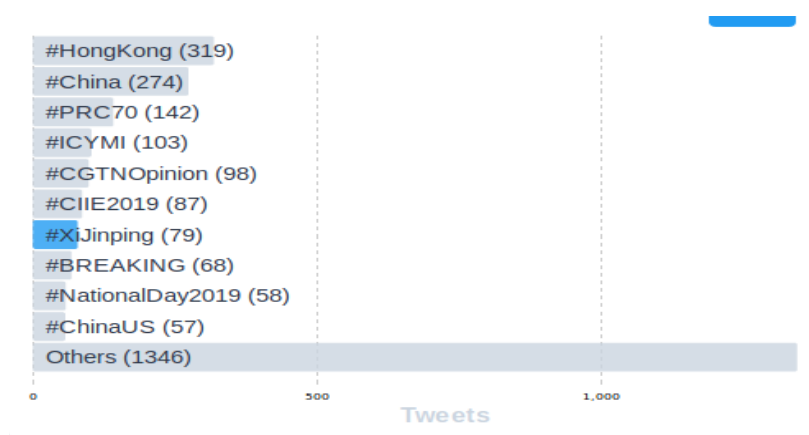
Most frequent hashtags in last 3200 Tweets by CGTN (upper) and Peoples daily (lower). Source: Accountanalysis (2017)

Premier Li Keqiang is not even among the top ten hashtags for any of the three accounts. Instead, Xinhua News Agency most frequently uses hashtags for their own recurrent formats. The top two hashtags are "#DailyChinaBriefing" and "#PhotoOfTheDay", followed by "#Breaking".

Altogether the data show that the hypothesis that the Chinese president and his premier are among the most frequent topics, does not apply to all accounts in the same way. While CTNV and Peoples Daily both regularly use the hashtag "#XiJinping", Xinhua News Agency rarely uses this hashtag. In doing so Peoples Daily and CGTN emphasize the presidents name and increase visibility for positive reports on his person, while Xinhua News Agency disguises its frequent reporting on the Chinese president.

4.2 Three separate hashtags for the national holiday (Hypothesis II)

In accordance with hypothesis II, all three state media outlets report on the National Holiday on October 1st and use hashtags to flag those Tweets. However, all three state media outlets use different hashtags, most of them a variation of the core element #PRC. In Tweets by Xinhua News Agency the most frequent hashtag related to the National Day is "#PRC70Years", on CGTN it is "#PRC70" and on Peoples Daily it is "#PRC70thAnniv".

Besides those frequently used variations of the core element #PRC, both Xinhua News Agency and CGTN also use further hashtags related to the National Day. Again none of those hashtags duplicated across accounts. While Xinhua News Agency uses the hashtags "#NewChina70Years" and "#NationalDay", CGTN uses the hastags "#NationalDay2019" and "#70YearsThriving".

CGTN is by far the most active account on this event, it uses the hashtag "#PRC70" 55 times and the hashtag "#NationalDay2019" a total of 39 times. Xinhua News Agency is less active, 14 of its Tweets contain the hashtag "#PRC70Years" and five contain the hashtag "#National Day". Peoples Daily is the least active on this event, which corresponds with its general output, it uses the hashtag "#PRC70thAnniv" six times.

The table shows the distribution of Tweets using a variation of the "PRC"-hashtag.

	CGTN	Xinhua News Agency	Peoples Daily	Total
#PRC70	70	/	/	70
#PRC70Years	/	14	/	14
#PRC70thAnniv	/	/	6	6
				90

Each hashtag related to the National Day then appears to be exclusively used by one state media outlet only. There is no cross-use between accounts. Thus, in a reverse search for one of the hashtags on Twitter the three state media outlet do not appear in the same feed. One of the basic functions of hashtags, to participate in an event or a wider debate, is therefore precluded. As a result, visibility and linkage between state media is not promoted, but obscured.

It is likely that this is a coordinated campaign regarding the use of hashtags related to the National Day. This is supported by the fact that they are slight –but very specific– variations of the same core element as well as the simultaneous begin of Tweets containing these hashtags.

4.3 A single hashtag for violence in Hong Kong (Hypothesis III)

Hong Kong saw some of the most violent clashes between protesters and police on October 1st 2019. In the morning of the Chinese National Day one protester was shot with a live bullet by a police officer, leaving the protester severely injured. It was the first time during the four-month protest that police used a live bullet against protesters. This peak in police violence attracted international media attention.

In accordance with hypothesis III all three state media outlets tweeted about the events in Hong Kong on that day and all three used the same hashtag, "#Hongkong". Given that the hashtag is widely used in relations to the protests in Hong Kong, it appears that Chinese state media chose to

participate in the international debate over the events in Hong Kong on this occasion. CGTN is the most active account among the three in using the hashtag "#Hongkong" a total of nine times.

However not all state media used the hashtag "#Hongkong" to report on the protester who was shot by a police officer in the morning of October 1st. While CGTN and Peoples Daily did report on the event, offering the polices version of events, Xinhua News Agency did not mention the protester who was shot at all. Instead, Xinhua News Agency used the hashtag "#Hongkong" as well as related hashtags "#HKRiots" and "#HKRioters" to report on alleged violence by protesters on that day.

China Xinhua News	Tweet
@xhnews · 2019-10-01, 17:55	
In a new round of violence in #HongKong on Tuesday, #HKRioters sprayed corrosive liquid at police, injuring several… https://t.co/LHk7goBzUK	
	Show Full Tweet

China Xinhua News	Tweet
@xhnews · 2019-10-01, 15:31	
Rioters set fires and committed mass property damage in various parts of Hong Kong. #HKRiots https://t.co/lkMXT5Z2ig	
	Show Full Tweet

The state media's reporting on events in Hong Kong can be summoned under the term "flooding". Flooding is a propaganda strategy which promotes information that is either completely unrelated to a negative event to distract, or promoting an alternative version of an event to control the narrative (Roberts 2018, 193).

5. Conclusion

In this paper I analyzed how centralized propaganda plays out on the three major Chinese state media outlets on Twitter. I compared the use of hashtags in Tweets related to the National Day of the Peoples Republic of China, president Xi Jinping and events of police violence in Hong Kong on October 1st 2019. The data show that Tweets by Peoples Daily, CGTN and Xinhua News Agency are not the *same*, but appear to be *coordinated*.

All in all, the claim of Xi Jinping to a "unified voice" should not be taken literally (Hu and Ji 2012, 34). Chinese state media employ diverging styles and display distinguishable profiles in their external propaganda. In fact, linkages between them are barely visible on Twitter.

Evidence for coordinated action is particular strong in the data collected on the National Day of the Peoples Republic of China. Each state media outlet used a different hashtag on that day, to an extent where among 119 Tweets related to the holiday there is not a single cross-use of hashtags between accounts.

President Xi Jinping is the most prominent theme in Chinese media, both offline and online. In a year-long study scholars Nip and Sun showed that this holds true for English-language Twitter as well. The hashtag "#XiJinping" is the single most frequent word in Tweets by Chinese state media. My paper brings a new perspective: It shows that Xinhua News Agency is exempted from this pattern. Among 3200 Tweets, Xinhua News Agency used the hashtag "#XiJinping" only once.

The fact that Xinhua News Agency avoids the hashtag "#XiJinping" can be seen as disassociation strategy. While Xinhua News Agency regularly reports on Xi Jinping, they do so without using the hashtag. The reasons behind this remain unclear. It could be either the journalists working at Xinhua News Agency, who have an interest to compete with follow news agencies and appear independent of the Chinese state, or a directive by the Central Propaganda Department (CCPPD).

My data also provides some evidence for coordinated flooding. The Tweets related to the shooting of a protester in Hong Kong on October 1st 2019 show that all three state media outlets used the same hashtag "#Hongkong". Peoples Daily and CGTN both circulated the polices narrative to the event, while Xinhua News Agency used the hashtag to post content completely unrelated to the shooting of the protester. Thus, the data provides valuable insights into the many versions of what are 'alternative facts' in Chinese media.

In conclusion, it appears that coordinated action is taken to obscure the fact that propaganda on Peoples Daily, Xinhua News Agency and CGTN is centralized. Future research could start off by comparing Xinhua News Agencys approach in reporting on Xi Jinping to that of other Chinese state media.

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