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Information Control and Communist Party Legitimacy in China

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2023

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

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Authors declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: __Paul Gardner_________

Signature: _

Abstract

Control of information is key to the survival of authoritarian regimes. Censorship and propaganda play a particularly important role in maintaining and enhancing regime legitimacy. The Chinese Communist Party has developed a large and sophisticated information control operation in its efforts to manufacture the consent of Chinese citizens, but censorship and propaganda are much more selective and sophisticated than they were under Chairman Mao. This thesis analyses what content the CCP controlled during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency (2013-2018), how it controlled this information and particularly the way that censorship and propaganda were used together, and what types of legitimacy these information control efforts focused on. It involves a content analysis of censorship instructions sent to media organisations, and social media posts by People's Daily, the Party's main propaganda mouthpiece, together with additional qualitative analysis of the content of these instructions and posts. While King et al (2013) argued that censorship was focused on content involving collective action, this thesis shows that the CCP uses censorship and propaganda to target a much wider range of political content. It proposes a new typology of the censorship and propaganda system and argues that it is important to consider how the CCP uses a mix of censorship and propaganda to get an accurate picture of what information is controlled. This thesis then uses the information about the political content the CCP controls and the way they use censorship and propaganda to control that information to improve our understanding of how the CCP sought to enhance its legitimacy. It shows that information control targeted at the public focused on ideology based on nationalism and moral values, while manipulating and limiting discussion of challenging performance issues and the Party itself. This creates an anaesthetised information environment which encourages people to feel patriotic and positive, but where politics is as unpolitical as possible.

Key words

Censorship, propaganda, legitimacy, Chinese Communist Party

Contents

Acknowledgement 2
Authors declaration 3
Abstract 4
List of tables 7
List of figures 8
List of images 9
Chapter One: Introduction 11
Chapter Two: Literature review 21
2.1 Introduction 21
2.2 How does the CCP use censorship and propaganda to control information? 21
2.3 What information is controlled? 35
2.4 What types of legitimacy are most important to the CCP? 42
2.5 Research questions and limitations in existing research 51
Chapter Three: Methodology 57
3.1 Introduction 57
3.2 Censorship instructions 58
3.3 People's Daily posts on Weibo 62
3.4 Analysis 64
3.5 Limitations 75
3.6 Conclusion 77
Chapter Four: CCP censorship 78
4.1 Introduction 78
4.2 What content is censored? 80
4.3 Censorship of performance issues 84
4.4 Censorship of ideological issues 90
4.5 Censorship of institutional issues 97
4.6 Censorship of content related to the Party 100
4.7 Conclusion 105
Chapter Five: CCP propaganda 109
5.1 Introduction 109
5.2 Content included in the People's Daily political posts 111
5.3 Ideological legitimacy 112
5.4 Performance legitimacy 123

5.5 Institutional / legal-rational legitimacy ... 127
5.6 Charismatic legitimacy and the Party ... 131
5.7 Promoting positive energy ... 134
5.8 Conclusion ... 138
Chapter Six: Analysis of the link between censorship and propaganda ... 143
6.1 Introduction ... 143
6.2 Elimination or minimisation? ... 145
6.3: How does the Party seek to refocus people's attention? ... 162
6.4: China's integrated information control system ... 174
Chapter Seven: Conclusion ... 190
Appendix: Coding manuals ... 199
Coding manual – Censorship instructions ... 199
Coding manual – People's Daily Weibo posts ... 204
References ... 209

List of tables

Table 1: Changes in the number of leaked propaganda instructions 61

Table 2: Changes in the number of People's Daily political posts on Weibo......................64

Table 3: Main variables coded for censorship instructions...65

Table 4: Main variables coded for People's Daily Weibo posts...66

Table 5: Variables used to identify full or partial censorship 72

Table 6: Categories selected for analysis of People's Daily posts......................................74

Table 7: Content of censorship instructions - categories and legitimacy types 81

Table 8: Content of People's Daily political posts – categories and legitimacy types 112

Table 9: Leaked censorship instructions 2013-2018 categorised by type of censorship ...146

Table 10: Strategies used in the People's Daily posts related to the sample of censored topics 163

Table 11: Typology of China's integrated information control system............................174

Table 12: How information control varied according to the type of legitimacy...............182

List of figures

Figure 1: Proportion of nationalism posts among People's Daily political posts on Weibo (2013-2018) 115
Figure 2: Main topics within Weibo posts on nationalism (2013-2018) 116
Figure 3: Changes in topics mentioned in People's Daily Weibo posts on nationalism (2013-2018) 119
Figure 4: Proportion of culture and tradition posts among People Daily's political posts on Weibo Posts, 2013-15 compared with 2016-18 121
Figure 5: Proportion of disasters and environment posts among People Daily's political posts on Weibo (2013-2018) 124
Figure 6: Proportion of corruption posts among People Daily's political posts on Weibo (2013-2018) 128
Figure 7: Proportion of other CCP posts about corruption and other negative issues among People Daily's political posts on Weibo (2013-2018) 129
Figure 8: Proportion of rule of law posts among People's Daily posts on Weibo (2013-2018) 130
Figure 9: Proportion of positive posts mentioning Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang and other CCP among People's Daily posts on Weibo (2013-2018) 132
Figure 10: Categories where there are significant reductions or increases in the proportion of People's Daily posts on Weibo between 2013-15 and 2016-18 136
Figure 11: Leaked censorship instructions by instruction type and topic (2013-18) 151
Figure 12: Censorship instructions by instruction type, changes over the period 2013-18 160
Figure 13: People Daily's approach to covering health and education, the environment and disasters in Weibo posts 170
Figure 14: People Daily's approach to covering health and education, the environment and disasters in Weibo posts, 2013-14 compared to 2015-18 173
Figure 15: Illustration of the information control decision making process 180

List of images

Image 1: Censorship directive leaked on Weibo and translation..60
Image 2: A patriotic flash mob in a post on 20/10/2016...116
Image 3: Image from a post on 1/12/2014 117
Image 4: Image from video celebrating the Chinese military in a post on 04/11/2017 119
Image 5: Image from patriotic rabbit video in a post on 03/12/2017 120
Image 6: Image from a video entitled China's Red Dreams in a post on 22/10/2017 132
Image 7: Xi visiting descendants of a Red Army martyr in Jiangxi in a post on 02/02/2016 133
Image 8: Cancer patient who saved a boy who fell in water from post on 19/01/2017.....137

Chapter One: Introduction

The stereotypical view of censorship and propaganda in authoritarian regimes is largely influenced by simplistic understandings about China under Mao and the Soviet Union under Stalin. Authoritarian states are expected to carry out heavy handed censorship, removing any information they do not like, and therefore keeping their populations completely in ignorance of any problems at home and what they assume is the better life available 'in the West'. Meanwhile, propaganda is expected to be omnipresent, simplistic and very often false. In reality, information control in most modern authoritarian regimes is much more selective and sophisticated. This is particularly true in China. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains a large scale system for controlling information using censorship and propaganda (Creemers, 2016; Brady, 2006, 2008; Shambaugh, 2007). However, propaganda in China is generally much less simplistic and intrusive than it was when the country was led by Mao Zedong during the period from the start of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to Mao's death in 1976. At the same time, Chinese citizens have access to a much greater range of information and more scope to comment on problems in the country than they did then. The Chinese internet has been described as 'a cacophony of voices' (Sullivan, 2014, 26). There is a considerable amount of censorship, but it is much more selective than in the Mao era. The CCP has to make decisions about what information it needs to control; what it should prioritise in its propaganda and what to censor and when, and what it can allow people to freely access without undermining their hold on power. Information control techniques have also had to evolve in response to the changes brought by the growth of the internet. In particular, the Party has moved from relying mainly on censorship to a more proactive approach involving an attempt to mould public opinion online (Svensson, 2014; Yang, 2014; Sparks et al, 2016) using both censorship and propaganda to try to 'shape the discursive parameters' of the internet (Schneider, 2016, 2677).

My interest in the CCP's use of censorship and propaganda started while doing a Masters in Chinese Studies in 2013. I had previously worked as a political journalist at the BBC, as a special adviser at the UK Treasury and then as a public relations consultant on projects that aimed to raise awareness and improve engagement in issues ranging from flooding and health care to nuclear waste disposal. This has made me a strong believer in the importance of free speech, freedom of information and in the watchdog role of the media in maintaining and developing democracy. There are efforts to shape public opinion, with some manipulation of information and constraints on freedom of information and free speech in

all political systems. However, information control is typically considerably greater in authoritarian regimes. As I read more of the literature on censorship and propaganda in China, I became increasingly interested in the role that information control plays in the CCP's resilience. I also believe that a better understanding of the way the CCP uses censorship and propaganda is not only important to an understanding of the constraints to democratisation in authoritarian countries like China. There are risks to other countries from the use of these tactics to manufacture consent in authoritarian societies for extreme or aggressive policies. There are also risks posed to democracies by how censorship and propaganda tactics may be used abroad by authoritarian regimes. And a better understanding of information control in China is also important to assessing the implications of decisions democratic governments may take to limit free speech, freedom of information and media freedom. However, this research is situated in the discipline of China Studies and my focus is on the information control system in China and its link to the regime's legitimation strategy.

This thesis therefore aims to gain a better understanding of the CCP's use of information control; what content information control focuses on and how it uses a combination of censorship and propaganda to manipulate information in the traditional news media and online. It also looks at what the Party is seeking to achieve by its use of information control. As King et al note in relation to censorship in China, the CCP's propaganda operation 'exposes an extraordinarily rich source of information' about the Party's 'interests, intentions, and goals' (2013, 1). This thesis examines the content that the CCP focuses on in its censorship and propaganda, and the methods it uses to control that content, to describe and understand how this sophisticated system of information control works and to identify how the CCP uses censorship and propaganda to maintain and enhance its legitimacy.

Legitimacy is important for authoritarian regimes, as well as democracies, to ensure their long-term survival (von Soest and Grauvogel, 2015). People can be coerced into accepting authoritarian rule but this 'often entails the high costs of surveillance, resistance, and low efficiency' (Zhao, 2009, 416). Ideally, a state or ruling Party needs its citizens to positively evaluate it, so that it can 'rely less on coercion and monitoring' (Stockmann, 2013, 24). The CCP certainly attaches a great deal of importance to its legitimacy (Zeng, 2014). It no longer seeks to win 'blind devotion' from its citizens, as it did under Mao, but it does believe it needs to win and retain hearts and minds to stay in power (Shambaugh, 2007, 58; Perry, 2013; Brady, 2008). Legitimacy does not depend simply on what a government or a political party does to satisfy its citizens but also on their perceptions of these actions (Zeng, 2016,

11). As Bondes and Heep suggest, in the absence of elections to legitimate their rule, 'official framing plays an even more vital role in the reproduction of legitimacy' for authoritarian states (2013, 318). The CCP therefore attaches great importance to being able 'to construct and influence the subjective values and meanings' against which it is judged by Chinese citizens (Holbig and Gilley, 2010, 396). Consequently, effective control over information plays a vital role in helping the CCP to maintain and enhance their legitimacy (Hung and Dingle, 2014, 378-9). But what information does it seeks to control, how does it do this, what types of legitimacy does it focus on and how has this changed over time?

The CCP has placed a high priority on censorship and propaganda since it was created in the 1920s. However, the approach has changed along with leaders, the needs of the CCP, ongoing events, as well as technological developments. The CCP started to develop its information control techniques during the Chinese civil war in the 1930s and 1940s, and propaganda played an important part in their victory in 1949 against the Kuomintang led government (Taylor, 2009; Chassin 1965; Shambaugh, 2007). Once they had won the civil war, propaganda became a key mechanism in the CCP's efforts to maintain their control over the country. Chairman Mao stressed that the success of his project rested on the Party's ability to 'manufacture public opinion' (Thornton, 2011). In this period (1949-1976), propaganda was intensively used by the Party to produce mass consent (Yang and Tang, 2018, 6), with the CCP seeking to overwhelm its citizens 'with official information and interpretations of reality' (Lynch, 1999, 3; Shambaugh, 2007).

Since Mao's death in 1976, the Chinese media and citizens have had more freedom to discuss political issues than they had during the first three decades of CCP rule. Propaganda and censorship started to be relaxed in the early 1980s as a reaction to the excesses of the Mao years (Brady, 2008). There was a recognition that 'hard propaganda' can damage 'regime legitimacy and aggravate the government's long-term prospects' (Huang, 2018, 1038). Therefore, propaganda has become more sophisticated and appealing (Xin, 2018). This was helped by the marketisation of the media, with the subsequent expansion of semi-independent media which had to act commercially in order to survive and thrive. As Stockman discussed, the marketised media have presented news in a much more attractive and interesting way than state media had previously done and branded themselves as 'trustworthy representatives of ordinary citizens', giving greater credibility to the propaganda messages which they still had to include in their output (2013, 4).

Greater freedom of expression in the decades after Mao's death was partly due to some liberalisation by the CCP, but also affected by changes in the media environment. The CCP recognised that there were some benefits in giving people more, if limited, freedom to discuss issues that were considered to be sensitive, in particular to give them the ability to act as watchdogs to help tackle corruption (Lorentzen, 2014; Shirk, 2011; Tong & Sparks, 2009). The CCP also realised that censorship could sometimes be harmful, a point that was highlighted when censorship during the SARS epidemic in 2002/3 meant that rumours dominated the information that was available, causing people to panic (Shirk, 2011). However, marketised media sometimes pushed the boundaries set by the Party even further, playing 'edge ball', in order to attract readers and audiences (Stockmann, 2013, 164; Zhao 2008; Xu, 2014, 2; Zhang 2011). In particular, the growth of the internet from the late 1990s gave Chinese citizens much freer access to information than ever before and considerably more opportunities to express their opinions (Luo, 2014; Lewis, 2013; Yang, 2009). The CCP initially struggled 'to keep a tight lid on information flow' (Zheng, 2010) and the internet started to play a role in organising collective action, sometimes forcing the Party to respond to public opinion (Tai, 2006; Esarey and Qiang, 2011; Yang, 2009). For example, in 2007, local authorities in the city of Xiamen decided to move the site of a planned PX chemical factory after 20,000 people took part in protests organised on the internet and by text, following warnings about the health risks published in a blog (Yang, 2009; Huang & Yip, 2012). As discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, these developments meant that from the late 1990s to around 2008-12, Chinese citizens and journalists had greater freedom of expression than ever before.

At the same time that these changes were taking place, a large number of Chinese scholars were arguing that the CCP was facing a legitimacy crisis (Gilley and Holbig, 2009; Zeng, 2016). A number of Western based scholars also argued that the Party's ability to govern had been eroded since the start of the post-Mao reform era (Pei, 1998; Liu and Chen, 2012; Su, Zhao and He, 2013; Shambaugh, 2016). Many of the China based scholars argued that boosting information control was one of the most important strategies to maintain and enhance the CCP's legitimacy (Zeng, 2014). From around 2008-12, and particularly after Xi Jinping became president at the end of 2012, the propaganda authorities have indeed significantly tightened their control on information, through censorship and propaganda. Xi Jinping quickly signalled that he would take a tougher approach to propaganda and censorship when censors rewrote an editorial in one of the more independent Chinese papers, Southern Weekly, within days of him becoming president. The censors removed an article

which had called for political reform, replacing it with a tribute to the CCP (Xu, 2015). The tighter grip on the media was further underlined by a visit Xi made to key media organisations in February 2016 declaring that: “All Party media have the surname Party” and demanding the media be loyal to the government, the state and the Communist Party (International Federation of Journalists, 2016, 11). At the same time the CCP accelerated its efforts to gain control of the internet. For example, new laws on rumourmongering in 2013 meant netizens could be given jail sentences of up to three years if their ‘false’ posts are viewed by more than 5,000 internet users or reposted more than 500 times (Ng, 2015). A Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs was established in 2014, with Xi as its chairman (Bandurski, 2015). The Party’s efforts to control the internet in the years that followed were relentless. Freedom House found that during 2016 and 2017 the Cyberspace Administration of China had published announcements about online regulations on average every two days (China Media Bulletin, 2018, 5). And rather than relying solely on censorship, the Party has increasingly sought to guide public opinion by stepping up its online propaganda, for example, getting government departments to establish an internet presence (Sullivan, 2014), strengthening the Party media’s online presence (Han, 2015; Yang and Tang, 2018; Xin, 2018; Guo, 2018; Lu and Pan, 2021; Xu and He, 2022) and making use of ‘internet commentators’ or ‘astroturfers’, who act on behalf of the Party but present themselves as ordinary citizens (King et al, 2017; Han, 2018). Nevertheless, even since Xi Jinping became president, the information environment in China has still been more porous than it was under Mao (Roberts, 2018). The Party still takes a selective and sophisticated approach, combining censorship and propaganda. But what content has the Party under Xi Jinping sought to control and how does it use the mix of censorship and propaganda to achieve that control? And what does this reveal about the Party’s intentions, and in particular what types of legitimacy does information control focus on?

This thesis focuses on the first six years of Xi Jinping’s presidency (2013-2018) and seeks to answer the following research questions. Firstly, what types of political information do the Chinese authorities seek to control in the traditional news media and online using censorship and propaganda? Secondly, how do the Chinese authorities use a combination of censorship and propaganda to control this information? Finally, what types of legitimacy does the CCP focus on in its use of information control?

Chapter 2 of this thesis looks at the literature on information control and legitimacy in China. This shows that there is disagreement in the existing studies about what type of content the

CCP has focused on controlling using censorship and propaganda. There are also gaps in the literature about the way the CCP uses censorship and propaganda to control this information, and in particular, about how the Party uses the mix of censorship and propaganda tools at its disposal to manipulate the information that is seen by Chinese citizens. A weakness of the existing literature on information control is that it is generally too narrowly focused; very often examining just one type of censorship or propaganda, looking at just one communication channel, using data covering a relatively short period of time, and/or focusing on one particular event or issue. Most of the research was also conducted prior to Xi Jinping becoming president.

The literature on legitimacy also shows that there is disagreement about the emphasis that the CCP places on different types of legitimacy. Many authors focus on the importance of performance legitimacy or delivering the goods for Chinese citizens, particularly economic growth (e.g., Hung and Dingle, 2014; Zhao, 2009). However, many others emphasise ideological legitimation (e.g., Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018; Zeng, 2016), where ideology involves a set of ideas that seek to justify a regime's right to rule and define what is in the common interest (Freeden, 1998). Some authors have also suggested that institutional legitimacy has become increasingly important for the CCP, including an emphasis on the rule of law and greater participation. Given the role that information control plays in manufacturing the CCP's legitimacy, analysing the content of censorship and propaganda and the way that content is controlled, should provide a valuable insight into the types of legitimacy that the Party focuses on, as well as the extent to which there is a focus on the CCP itself.

Chapter 3 discusses the research design of the thesis. This research involves a content analysis of leaked censorship instructions issued by propaganda bodies in China and social media posts by the People's Daily newspaper, together with a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the content of these instructions and posts. The leaked censorship instructions have been collected by an organisation called China Digital Times (http://chinadigitaltimes.net). They are not the full body of instructions issued by propaganda bodies in China, but they provide a valuable insight into the information that the CCP considered sufficiently sensitive to censor and the ways that they sought to censor that information. The People's Daily newspaper is the main propaganda mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, and it helps to set the agenda and determine the tone of the rest of the media (Stockmann, 2013). By 2014, 80 percent of internet users in China reported

they got their news online (China Internet Network Information Center 2014 in Li and Sparks, 2018) and the CCP sees state media as playing a key role in its online propaganda efforts. The content analysed for this research therefore consists of People's Daily posts on Sina Weibo, a social media platform which was set up as a Twitter clone, which was an important source of news during this period. The data for this research covers the period from 1 January 2013 (when Xi Jinping became president) until 31 December 2018, the first six years of Xi's presidency.

Chapter 4 is the first of the empirical chapters and focuses on the analysis of censorship. Firstly, it seeks to establish what political content the CCP aims to censor. Some scholars have argued that censorship is in fact quite narrowly focused. In particular, one influential study argued that censorship online in the period just before Xi Jinping became president was almost exclusively focused on content involving collective action, and that otherwise the CCP allows 'the full range of expression of negative and positive comments about the state, its policies, and its leaders' (King et al, 2013, 14). In contrast, this thesis establishes that a wide range of political content was censored in the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency. This included content related to ideological, performance and institutional legitimacy, as well as content related to the Party and its leaders. There was a lot of censorship of performance issues and ideological threats, but the censors also targeted content that might undermine the Party's claims to institutional legitimacy and information which threatened the Party's reputation. Not all sensitive content was censored, but the Party was clearly alert to potential threats from all directions. Some issues were ones that people would be aware of from their personal experience, but the CCP still had opportunities to shape perceptions of those problems, for example by minimising information from experts about the consequences of those problems and strong criticisms about the role of the Party/state. Far from allowing people to freely express their views on most political issues, the CCP manipulated a significant range of information in an effort to prevent their legitimacy being eroded.

Chapter 5 then focuses on the analysis of propaganda, specifically posts by the People's Daily newspaper on Weibo. Again, it finds that a wide range of different political topics featured in the CCP's propaganda. The analysis in this chapter also shows that the biggest focus of the Party's propaganda was on ideological and performance legitimation. The results show that the public facing propaganda relating to ideology during the first six years of Xi's presidency was largely a mix of nationalism and moral values. This is consistent with

Zeng's argument that the CCP targets 'informal ideology' on the general public, which he describes as 'those popular ideations that are broadly concerned with the justification of the party's rule' (2016, 17). This is in contrast to the Party's 'formal ideology' which is promoted to Party members, and in which there is still a significant focus on communism (Zeng, 2016, 17).

The analysis in this chapter also shows that the nature of performance legitimation changed over this period. After 2015 serious problems were less likely to be mentioned in the People's Daily posts, even if the Party was taking action to address them. At the same time, there was more of a focus on diverting people's attention towards more positive issues or to problems that were caused by individuals or businesses, rather than ones that the Party could be held responsible for. There was much less focus in the People's Daily posts on institutional legitimacy, particularly after 2015. And there was little evidence of an attempt to promote a form of charismatic legitimacy in propaganda aimed at the public. Indeed, the Party as a whole is generally kept in the background in the People's Daily's Weibo posts. There was a bigger emphasis on content that would make people feel more positive and fewer references to problems over the period covered by this research.

Chapter 6 looks at the different types of censorship and propaganda and how these are used together. It also considers how this helps to further improve our understanding about the CCP's legitimation strategy. I propose a new typology of the information control system, with two main types of censorship – elimination and minimisation censorship, and two types of propaganda – extensive and limited propaganda – to try to protect and enhance the CCP's legitimacy. Elimination censorship involves complete bans on certain sensitive information, and minimisation censorship involves efforts to reduce the amount of sensitive content that people see while still allowing some coverage and discussion of the topic. Extensive propaganda involves promoting information very strongly and extensively, with mainly optimistic and celebratory content. On the other hand, limited propaganda is generally linked to sensitive topics and is more cautious. This limited propaganda mainly involved three main approaches: promoting Party/state policies and achievements, providing basic factual details, and distracting attention away from the central Party/state by focussing on the responsibility of individuals, companies and regional government.

I also provide a reasonable hypothesis about the information control decision making process for sensitive content. The CCP used minimisation censorship and/or limited propaganda to

manipulate information about sensitive topics that they did not simply try to eliminate. A number of factors influenced these decisions. For example, the authorities were more likely to manipulate, rather than eliminate, sensitive information when it was possible to show the Party in control of a widely perceived problem. If a lot of people have direct experience of a particular problem, or a lot of potentially harmful content has already been communicated online, the propaganda authorities appear to also judge that it is better to try to counteract that information with official narratives communicated via the media, while doing what they can to minimise the spread of the most negative content online.

However, analysis of the censorship instructions suggests that after 2013 there was a shift towards simply eliminating more content that was regarded as sensitive, rather than trying to manipulate that information to create a narrative more favourable to the CCP. It suggests the Party under Xi Jinping became less confident that it could maintain sufficient control by manipulating the information about some stories, and therefore sought to eliminate as much of that information as possible.

The analysis of the content that was controlled using censorship and propaganda, and the way that information was controlled, helps to improve our understanding of the CCP's legitimation strategy under Xi Jinping. The analysis shows that there was a strong focus on ideological legitimacy during Xi's first six years as president, as indicated by the fact that the CCP applied its hardest forms of censorship and propaganda to content that was central to the Party's efforts to justify its right to rule and to define what was in the common interest. The CCP usually eliminated critical content that it defined as ideological 'perils' in an internal party paper known as Document 9, such as discussion about Western Values and criticism of the Party's history (ChinaFile, 2013). At the same time, the Party extensively promoted its own ideology, a mix of nationalism and moral values.

The CCP's approach to performance legitimacy was more often about maintaining its legitimacy in the face of negative information that might damage the Party's reputation. A large proportion of the censorship instructions about performance issues involved eliminating content. However, in other cases, the CCP sought to minimise the most negative content and/or the amount of information that was accessible. At the same time, People's Daily often provided limited propaganda which sought to further manipulate the resulting narrative about these issues. And the CCP also typically used these limited propaganda

approaches to discuss some of the most sensitive performance issues, even if they were not subject to censorship instructions.

It is also striking that while there was a lot of censorship of information involving the CCP and its top leaders, there was not a significant amount of propaganda that specifically mentioned the Party, or even Xi Jinping himself. This suggests that in this period, the CCP under Xi Jinping did not want ordinary citizens (as opposed to Party members and officials) to think about the Party too much, relying on ideology and positivity to enhance its legitimacy.

Finally, Chapter 7 summarises the main arguments of this thesis. I show that the CCP used both censorship and propaganda to control a wide range of political content related to the state, its policies and its leaders, rather than narrowly focusing on preventing collective action. This thesis also shows the limitations of research on information control which has only a narrow focus on one type of censorship or propaganda. There is a need to look at different types of both censorship and propaganda, and at how censorship and propaganda interact with each other. Regarding legitimacy, this thesis also establishes that the Party used a mix of censorship and propaganda approaches to focus Chinese citizens on ideology based on nationalism and moral values, while manipulating and limiting discussion of challenging performance issues and the Party itself. This created an anaesthetised information environment which encouraged people to feel patriotic and positive, but where politics was as unpolitical as possible.

Chapter Two: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

There is a large body of literature about information control (censorship and propaganda) and about legitimacy in China. This literature reveals important insights into how the Chinese Communist Party seeks to control information and the importance of legitimacy to the Party's continued rule. However, this chapter argues that there are significant gaps in our understanding of what political content the CCP seeks to control using censorship and propaganda; how the Chinese authorities use censorship and propaganda to control political information in traditional / legacy media (newspapers, television and radio) and online; and what the information that is controlled, and the way it is controlled, reveals about the types of legitimacy the Party focuses on in its efforts to remain in power. Firstly, different studies have resulted in conflicting conclusions about the content the CCP seeks to control. Secondly, previous research has tended to focus either on censorship or propaganda, rather than looking at how the two parts of the propaganda system interact. Part of the reason for this is the limitations in the research methods that have been adopted, which are discussed later in this chapter. Thirdly, although some of the literature on information control refers to legitimacy there has been very little attempt to look at what the content that is controlled and how it is controlled reveals about the CCP's legitimation strategy.

This chapter is structured as follows. Section 2.2 looks at what we know from the literature about how the CCP uses censorship and propaganda. Section 2.3 examines the evidence about what information is controlled. Section 2.4 then looks at what the literature shows about which sources of legitimacy the CCP focuses on in order to sustain its rule. Finally, section 2.5 sets out the research questions for this thesis and discusses the limitations in previous research on these topics.

2.2 How does the CCP use censorship and propaganda to control information?

Censorship

Censorship is the suppression of opposing views (Taylor, 1998; Cole, 1998). It can involve a range of different processes 'by which restrictions are imposed on the collection, display and dissemination, and exchange of information, opinions, ideas, and imaginative expression' (Jones, 2001, 2). There is no single form of censorship, it 'can include deletions, rewritings

and insertions within a text' (O'Leary, 2016, 8). Censorship also means manipulating the information people are allowed to receive, including creating official messages that are thrust upon the population (Caso, 2008, ix), as well as telling media organisations to ensure certain news content is not displayed prominently or requiring internet companies to make sure some content is difficult to find online (Tai, 2014). Freshwater describes censorship as a continuum from threats of brutality or imprisonment through to self-censorship (2009, 11). Censorship is also not simply about top-down repression, for example cultural and social pressures can also lead to the 'suppression of expression' both in democracies and authoritarian regimes (O'Leary, 2016, 19-20). However, this thesis focuses on top-down censorship by the state. State censorship has been part of human society since ancient times; the word derives from the Roman censors who were originally charged with taking the census but who gradually acquired the power to regulate public morals (Caso, 2008, 3-4). Censorship increased in Europe after the French revolution because there were concerns among elites about the masses and the influence of the growing press sector on them (Goldstein, 2000, 3). Although freedom of expression is regarded as central to democracy, wars have typically seen significant censorship in democratic countries, justified on security grounds. For example, the Espionage Act of 1917 made it a crime to criticise President Wilson's conduct of the war (Taylor, 1998, 101). Even in peacetime, there have been ongoing debates about the extent to which the democratic right to free expression needs to be balanced with other rights, such as the rights to privacy, respect and civility (O'Leary, 2016, 5). However, in the last century, the suppression of information by authoritarian states has typically been on a considerably greater scale than in democratic countries. Censorship and repression were 'practiced on a massive and nearly complete scale during the Soviet period' (Caso, 2008, 85). And after the CCP came to power in China in 1949, the state under Mao exercised the tightest control of information possible, with fear of the consequences of stepping over the line leading 'to an environment of extreme self-censorship' (Roberts, 2018, 95). Censorship became more relaxed in the years after Mao's death in 1976 but China still has one of the most restrictive media and internet environments in the world.

Self-censorship still plays a key role in the CCP's efforts to control information in both traditional media and online (including social media platforms). The more that the CCP can encourage people to self-censor, the less need there is for more costly and intrusive control methods. Meetings, verbal and written instructions, and training ensure media owners, journalists and internet companies know what is expected of them (Edney, 2014; Stockmann, 2013; Zhang, 2011; Brady, 2009a). Most of the income that journalists earn is based on the

number of words they publish, so there is an incentive to avoid spending a lot of time on a story that may be censored (Li and Sparks, 2018). Articles in the official media, such as Xinhua and People's Daily, as well as in government documents, help to establish frames for the way sensitive issues should be discussed both by journalists and netizens (Brady, 2009b; Stockmann, 2013, Edney, 2014). The pressure to self-censor is backed up by the threat of coercion. Link (2002) described the CCP's efforts to encourage self-censorship as being like 'the anaconda in the chandelier', most of the time it does not move but everyone knows it is there and everyone gets used to making the adjustments needed to ensure it does not strike. Getting 'on the wrong side' of the propaganda authorities can be fatal for media organisations, who are dependent on the state for their ability to operate, while being 'flagged up to the authorities as a potential troublemaker' can affect the careers of individual journalists or netizens (Edney, 2014, 52; Zhang, 2011; Shirk, 2011). For example, in 2009-10 Fanfou, China's first microblogging platform, was closed down after users posted information about riots in Xinjiang (Beach, 2013). More recently, citizen bloggers such as Zhang Zhan have been jailed for writing about what was happening in Wuhan at the start of the Coronavirus pandemic (Guardian, 2020).

The CCP cannot completely rely on self-censorship. Since the 1970's marketisation of the media has meant that the number of media outlets has increased significantly and most of these channels and publications are no longer under the direct control of the propaganda authorities (Stockmann, 2013). Internet companies that emerged after the 1990s are technically private businesses. However, the Chinese authorities issue instructions to media and internet companies about the treatment of specific issues they decide are politically sensitive. Writing about the period before Xi Jinping became president, Tong and Sparks said media organisations received a 'daily flood' of instructions from the propaganda authorities (Tong & Sparks, 2009, 342). A senior manager at one of China's largest internet portals also told Qiang (2011) he received instructions from propaganda officials 'at least three times a day'. The number of written directives increased in the 2000s because of the problem of communicating verbally 'with a multiplying number of websites and media outlets' (China Digital Times, 2010). In 2014 censorship logs were leaked from the social media site Sina Weibo. In total there 8,427 logs disseminating 'management decisions about how or when to implement government directives' covering the period from 2011 to 2014 (Gallagher and Miller, 2021, 11). The propaganda authorities seek to anticipate sensitive events but as news has 'to appear in a timely manner', many of these instructions are 'issued after specific events have occurred' (Stockmann, 2013, 36-7).

The pressure on the traditional media to censor information has increased since Xi Jinping became President at the end of 2012. Chinese investigative journalism, which was developing during the 1990s and early 2000s (Bandurski, 2015b), has been subjected to a tighter political environment and a crackdown on critical voices (Lam, 2015; Li and Sparks, 2018). At the beginning of 2013 the censors rewrote an editorial calling for political reform in Southern Weekly, a publication which had established a reputation for being relatively independent, replacing it with a tribute to the CCP (Xu, 2015). That same year the Party tightened up the training of journalists with much more attention on 'the current Party policies and Xi Jinping's perspective on media' (Li and Sparks, 2018, 421). In 2014 journalists were banned from putting work related information onto their personal social media accounts, a method some reporters had used to get around the censorship of stories they had written (Sparks et al, 2016). Xi Jinping visited key media organisations in February 2016 declaring that: "All Party media have the surname Party" and demanding the media be loyal to the government, the state and the Communist Party (International Federation of Journalists, 2016, 11). Several months after Xi Jinping toured media organisations in 2016 demanding that Chinese journalists must be loyal to the Party, the senior editorial staff at the liberal and reformist magazine, Yanhuang Chunqiu, were replaced and the business magazine, Caixin, was disciplined, with other news sites forbidden from carrying their reports for two months, for 'repeatedly violating news and propaganda discipline' (Zhao, 2016, 1182). Research by Sun Yatsen University in China showed that the number of investigative journalists fell by 58% between 2011 and 2017 (China Media Bulletin, 2018, 6).

The potential impact of the internet on the CCP's grip on power has been a particular cause of anxiety for the Party from the early 2000s. Measures designed to control online communications were introduced even when the number of people with access to the internet was still very low. Several incidents shortly before Xi Jinping became president accelerated these efforts. In particular, in 2011 there was a massive online response to a train crash at Wenzhou, with social media users criticising official explanations of the incident, and the Arab Spring that year was seen as having been, at least in part, facilitated by the internet (Creemers, 2016; Bondes and Schucher, 2014). However, there has been a much greater sense of urgency in the CCP's online censorship efforts since Xi Jinping became president at the end of 2012. A secret Central Committee communiqué circulated among senior officials in 2013 identified the internet as one of seven potential ideological risks, describing

it as a channel for 'mistaken thinking trends' to enter mainstream discourse (Creemers, 2016, 7). The Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs was established in 2014, with Xi as its chairman (Bandurski, 2015). In 2015, China's military newspaper, the People's Liberation Army Daily, described the internet as 'the primary battlefield for ideological struggle', warning that China must 'resolutely protect ideological and political security on the invisible battleground of cyberspace' (The Diplomat, 2015). The paper said 'hostile forces' were using the internet to 'maliciously attack our Party, smear the founding leaders of new China, slander our heroic figures, [and] raise up the mistaken viewpoint of historical nihilism. Their fundamental purpose is to use "universal values" to confuse us, "constitutional democracy" to harass us, "color revolutions" to overthrow us, negative public opinion to overturn us' (.ibid). Consequently, under Xi Jinping the CCP has sought to increase its control over the internet (Li and Sparks, 2018, 417; Creemers, 2016).

During the period covered by this thesis (2013-18) the CCP introduced a range of changes to gain greater control of online communications. For example, since 2013, new laws on rumourmongering mean netizens can be given jail sentences of up to three years if their 'false' posts are viewed by 5,000 internet users or reposted more than 500 times (Ng, 2015). Jiang argues that 'the state's demonisation of 'rumour' produces a chilling effect on the public's ability to know, to question, and to act' (2016, 43). The authorities have also taken harsher action against netizens for posts that the Party deems are against its interests. For example, in 2017 Wang Jiangfeng was sentenced to two years in prison for using satirical names for the Chinese president in private online chats with friends (PEN America, 2018, 26). The Party particularly focuses on repressing or co-opting netizens with large numbers of followers on social media, the so-called Big Vs (Gallagher & Miller, 2018; Creemers, 2016). Xi Jinping said the Party needed to 'strengthen education and guidance of online opinion leaders [like the Big Vs], we must encourage the good ones and restrain the bad ones, we cannot let things slide' (Creemers, 2016, 8). There has also been increasing pressure on internet companies to control the content on their sites. In 2015, the new Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) reminded internet companies that failure to comply with instructions would lead to 'fines, temporary suspensions or outright closure' (Wall Street Journal, April 2015). For example, in 2018 the CAC shut down leading news aggregation app Jinri Toutiao for 24-hours for failing to adequately monitor its platforms for obscene and false content, which led to the company hiring 2,000 more "content reviewers" to boost its monitoring ability (PEN, 2018, 30). Neihan Duanzi, 'a seemingly harmless social media portal for videos, memes and jokes' similar to Reddit was closed down altogether (Gallagher

and Miller, 2021, 1). Freedom House noted that during 2016 and 2017 the CAC had published announcements about online regulations on average every two days (China Media Bulletin, 2018, 5). As Schneider points out, although there has been a 'strong research focus on contentious politics' in China, particularly in relation to the challenges that the internet poses for the CCP, there is also a lot of evidence that the Party is 'successfully adapting to the challenges of governing a complex and dynamic network society in the 21st century' (2016, 2665).

Controlling sensitive content online largely relies on technology. China's internet is connected with the rest of the world through 'a few major backbone Chinese networks', creating a relatively 'controlled information environment' (Tai, 2006, 102-3) in which access to certain foreign websites can be 'banned' (King et al, 2013). During significant periods of unrest in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, the authorities have even cut off access to the internet in these areas altogether (Sullivan, 2014). For the most part, however, online censorship within China is left to individual internet companies. There have been a large number of studies looking at the censorship of online content. Studies have found that about 13-16% of social media posts are deleted by internet companies (King et al, 2013, 6; Bamman and O'Connor, 2012). Censorship not only targets the text of posts but also content such as images and videos, indeed Liu and Zhao found that 'multimedia posts are more frequently deleted than plain text posts' (2021, 26). Social media accounts can also be closed altogether (Gallagher and Miller, 2021). For example, in September 2016 the Cyberspace Administration of China announced that 11,459 public Weibo accounts had been shut down, in many cases on 'suspicion of disseminating rumours' (International Federation of Journalists, 2016, 47). However, technology is also used to limit access to information, rather than simply eliminating it, for example since 2002 technology has been used to prevent people searching for text that contains banned words or phrases (Zheng, 2008; Sullivan, 2014). The advantage of blocking key words is that it significantly limits the potential for information to spread but the censorship is less obvious to netizens because they are not prevented from posting the content (Ng, 2013). Studies show that content posted by netizens can be identified and either deleted or blocked very quickly (King et al, 2013).

The CCP therefore has a large scale and sophisticated censorship operation. However, censorship does not simply involve deleting or banning content, it can also involve techniques designed to minimise the impact of information, for example, by making sure that it is reported according to the Party's narrative or ensuring that it is difficult for people

to find critical content online (Tai, 2014; Roberts, 2018). It means that when looking at censorship it is important to take account of all the information that the CCP seeks to control, not just what they are trying to eliminate.

Censorship is much more selective than it was under Mao, even after the tightening of information control under Xi Jinping. Since the 1970s the CCP has recognised that excessive censorship was not consistent with 'building trust and confidence between the ruler and the ruled' (Zhang, 2011, 24). Allowing more access to information can lead to higher levels of public trust, as well as informing the Party about public concerns (Zhang, 2011; Sullivan, 2014; Repnikova, 2017). A number of scholars have shown that the CCP has, to some extent, allowed the media and netizens to act as watchdogs to tackle corruption among lower-level officials (Shirk, 2011; Tong & Sparks, 2009; Lorentzen, 2014). As well as recognising that there were some benefits in giving people a greater sense of freedom from state control, the CCP realised that censorship could sometimes be harmful. For example, Shadmehr & Bernhardt (2012) point out that if people do not hear any news when problems arise, they may assume the worst. The limits of banning information in China were exposed when the media were initially prevented from covering the outbreak of SARS in 2002/3 (Zhang, 2007). Lack of information in the SARS case caused panic and anger and people looked to other sources in search of the facts (Shirk, 2011). This helped the CCP to recognise that there is an argument for a certain amount of openness to satisfy the 'increasing demands by the public for timely and accurate information' (Zhang, 2011, 5). The challenge for the propaganda authorities is therefore to give citizens access to a certain amount of information while 'protecting the Party from its possible negative effects' (Stockmann, 2013, 7).

Media liberalisation in the 1990s and 2000s was not entirely the result of a deliberate strategy. It was, at least in part, an unintended consequence of the process of marketisation of the media that started in the 1980s, which presented new challenges for the propaganda authorities (Stockmann, 2013). In the Mao era nearly all the main communication channels were under state control, so that the Party could exercise direct control over information (Zhang, 2011). Since marketisation of the media started, there has been a significant increase in the number of media outlets and most are now financially independent of the government (Zheng, 2010; Stockmann, 2013). The number of media outlets made it harder to exercise the kind of detailed control that was possible in the past (Zheng, 2010). The need to attract advertising revenue also meant commercial news media were under pressure to push the limits of censorship as far as possible in order to cover stories that interested their readers,

including social issues and stories which might be politically sensitive (Yang & Calhoun, 2007; Tong & Sparks, 2009; Zhao 2008; Stockmann, 2013). Some parts of the media would go as far as possible in covering contentious stories, without offending the CCP, a practice known as 'playing the line ball' (Xu, 2014, 2). As noted above, during this period there was a growth of investigative journalism (Bandurski, 2015b). This was most evident in semi-independent publications such as Southern Weekly but Party media, in particular China Central TV, also launched significant investigations, for example exposing corruption and other wrongdoing (Tong and Sparks, 2009). This gave people access to a much wider range of information than in the past. However, as discussed above, control of the media has significantly tightened under Xi Jinping.

It was the growth of the internet from the 2000s, however, that has had the biggest and most long-lasting impact on information control (Esarey and Qiang, 2011; Yang, 2009). The internet significantly increased the amount of information available to Chinese citizens and their ability to share views (Lewis, 2013; Luo, 2014; Yang, 2009). Chinese netizens have also used a variety of techniques, including slang, alternative characters, egao (spoofs), satire and euphemisms to try to bypass censorship (Yang, 2009; Diamond, 2010; Edney, 2014; Qiang, 2011, 2014). Particularly in the first decade of the 2000s, when the internet was only just starting to be understood, technology significantly limited the ability of the propaganda authorities 'to keep a tight lid on information flow' (Zheng, 2010, 161; see also Tai, 2014; Qiang, 2011). The relatively greater degree of freedom online allowed material to appear, at least briefly, in blogs, chats, and instant messaging, that could not be found in the traditional media (Li and Sparks, 2018; Qiang 2011; Tong and Sparks 2009; Yang 2009).

A number of authors at this time believed that by giving people access to a much wider range of information, the internet had the potential to undermine authoritarian regimes like those in China. Diamond argued that the internet can function as a 'liberation technology', enabling citizens not only to mobilise protests but also 'to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions… scrutinise government… and expand the horizons of freedom' (2010, 70). Some China scholars have suggested that as ordinary people have been able to discuss a wide range of political issues online, the country has seen the 'the emergence of a citizen's discourse space' that is 'expanding citizen's unofficial democracy' (Yang, 2009, 2, 212–217). Liu argued that 'the mobile phone-mediated counter-public sphere could possibly influence the trajectory of China's future political socioeconomic development' (2013, 1016). Tang and Huhe also found that the growing use of the internet had given netizens in

China some control over news facts and news frames, and they believed this 'alternative framing', could 'strongly affect popular support for an authoritarian regime' (2014, 560). In an analysis of content posted on the popular online forum Tianya between 2008 and 2010, Lei and Zhou found that 'lawyers, disputants, and NGOs attempted to mobilise public opinion through their connection with outspoken newspapers' and that this provided the public with alternative views and information about controversial issues, including connections with problems not mentioned in the official discourse (2015, 588). Some internet scholars question the idea that the internet has had a significant political impact either in democracies or authoritarian countries (Harlow, 2014; Wolfsfeld et al, 2013). However, as Neuman et al argue, even if the internet has not yet led to dramatic political changes, the changes brought about by the internet 'are numerous, subtle, conditional' and, importantly, 'still evolving' (2011, 18). The efforts that the CCP has been making to increase their control over the internet suggest they are concerned that this may be true.

Despite the further tightening since Xi Jinping became president, information control is still much looser than it was under Mao. In particular this is because the leadership of the CCP still appears to believe that heavy-handed censorship is incompatible with their ongoing desire to create 'trust and confidence' between the Party and Chinese citizens (Zhang, 2011, 24). Some degree of online freedom also has other benefits for the Party. For example, social media can act as 'a de facto polling system', providing feedback the CCP can use to identify potential threats but also to adapt policy (Gallagher & Miller, 2018; Sullivan, 2014, 31) which helps to solve the "dictator's dilemma" of not having a true sense of how people feel about a repressive regime (Wintrobe, 1998). The widescale protests against Covid lockdowns in late 2022 were just one example of this, leading to a significant easing of the restrictions. Allowing people to vent their frustrations on social media may also act as a safety valve for discontent (Creemers, 2015). Some authors have also argued that popular expressions of nationalism online can help Chinese leaders to put additional pressure on other countries by suggesting they are constrained by public opinion (Weiss, 2013). Therefore, although censorship has been tightened under Xi Jining, it remains selective. This means that the CCP still has the challenge of deciding what content it needs to remove or limit to remain in power.

Propaganda

Censorship is only one element of the CCP's information control strategy. The other main mechanism is also important: propaganda. The word propaganda stems from an organisation established by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 in response to the Reformation, to 'propagate' the true faith worldwide (Auerbach and Castronovo, 2013, 1). Several authors define propaganda as publicly disseminated information that aims to influence beliefs, to get people to support a particular policy, or to take certain actions (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013; Walton, 1997). Jowett & O'Donnell argue that it is 'a deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour' (2019, 5). Plano and Greenberg also emphasise that it involves the 'careful selection and manipulation of data' and Lasswell argues that it involves 'a deliberately one-sided statement to a mass audience' (Cole, 1998, 620). Bartlett further emphasised the manipulative aspect of propaganda, suggesting that it involves an attempt to get people to adopt certain opinions and behaviour 'without themselves making any definite search for reasons' (Bartlett, 1954, 464). Political propaganda, as opposed to public relations, must also be accompanied by the exclusion of opposing messages (Cole, 1998, 100). This means that the propagandist must also be capable of suppressing opposing views so that propaganda can 'monopolise public discourse' (Cole, 1998, 100). Academic interest in propaganda grew as a result of the 'massive and constant' use of propaganda during World War One, particularly by the United States and the United Kingdom (Cole, 1998, 608; Jansen, 2013). In the US, the Committee on Public Information (CPI), set up by the Wilson administration to mobilise public support for the war, presented the conflict 'sanitised, with heroic allies fending off a brutal aggressor' (Jansen, 2013, 307). Film was used for the first time as a propaganda tool, changing from 'an instrument for the amusement of the masses into an instrument for the manipulation of the masses' (Haste, 1995, 130). In Britain this included the use of mobile cinema vans which toured the country showing patriotic films and 'atrocity propaganda' in which many of the stories were fabricated (Cole, 1998, 873). As discussed earlier in this chapter, propaganda in both cases was reinforced by censorship. After the war a number of authors, such as Walter Lippmann, criticised the role that propaganda had played in 'the manufacture of consent' (Auerbach and Castronovo, 2013, 11). Nevertheless, subsequent conflicts have to varying extents enabled governments in democracies to control public discourse enough to deploy propaganda. However, it is authoritarian regimes that have been able to use propaganda to greatest effect in an attempt to manipulate their citizens because they have much greater ability to suppress opposing views. The Nazis believed that propaganda had played a significant role in the

German defeat in World War One and created the powerful Department of Propaganda and Popular Enlightenment led by Joseph Goebbels (Cole, 1998, 609). After the Russian revolution in 1917 Soviet rulers also 'erected an immense network of propaganda', mobilising every form of communication, which 'reached into every aspect of Russian life' (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019, 210).

The Chinese Communist Party, advised and supported by the Soviets, also adopted a powerful propaganda structure influenced by the system in the Soviet Union. Under Mao propaganda represented 'the quintessential Leninist "transmission belt" for indoctrination and mass mobilization' (Shambaugh, 2007, 26). The Party sought to overwhelm Chinese citizens with upbeat propaganda about itself (Lynch, 1999). In addition to its domination of the media, the CCP developed 'a nationwide system of loudspeakers that reached into every neighbourhood and village' and 'propaganda teams' indoctrinated specific segments of the population (ibid., 27). However, after Mao's death there was a recognition that although crude and heavy-handed 'hard propaganda' can deter dissent and help maintain regime stability in the short term, 'it can also decrease regime legitimacy and aggravate the government's long-term prospects' (Huang, 2018, 1038). Therefore, propaganda in the post-Mao era became increasingly sophisticated.

Part of the changes to the Party's propaganda has involved making use of marketing and public relations tactics adopted from the West (Brady, 2012; Stockmann, 2013). The modern public relations industry in the West drew lessons from the use of propaganda during the first world War (Jansen, 2013). An early proponent, Edward Bernays, who had worked for the Committee on Public Information, suggested that the US President appoint a Secretary of Public Relations 'to keep the citizens of this country in touch with governmental activities and the reasons which promote them' (Martinelli, 2020, 52) and the first press secretary was appointed a year later by President Hoover (Kumar, 2007, xxvi). In Britain, a Central Office of Information, responsible for government communication and marketing services, was established in the 1940s including 'a cadre of information officers' (Sanders, 2013, 85). Canel and Sanders (2012) define modern government communication as 'communication directed to key publics and pursuing both political and civic purposes' (Sanders, 2020, 166). Effective government communication is important in a democracy, which 'presumes an effective two-way flow of communication between governors and governed' (Tench and Yeomans, 2009, 83). It involves 'providing information, explaining and promoting policies, and engaging with citizens, media, civic groups, business organisations, and other states in

multichannel platforms' (Canel and Sanders, 2016, 450). In 2007, the State Council in China passed the Regulations for the Opening of Government News (Stockmann, 2013, 111). Before 2003, the Chinese government had only a handful of government officials who were responsible for engaging with the media but by 2011 'every department of all levels of the government had officials in charge of communicating with journalists' (Dong et al, 2013, 264). Many government bodies also started hiring independent marketing companies 'to get public feedback' (Dong et al, 2013, 270). The CCP pushed government bodies to put out information about stories they would previously have avoided, to try to set the agenda (Shirk, 2011; Lewis, 2013; Steinhardt, 2015). For example, after the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan the government quickly acknowledged the severity of the disaster, and the State Council gave daily press conferences (Stockmann, 2013). These developments give elements of the Chinese government's communications operations a similar feel to those in Western democracies. Some authors also view government communications in democracies as 'bolstering politicians' power at the expense of citizens' (Canel and Sanders, 2016, 454), with some seeing it as no more 'than ideological propaganda' (L'Etang, 2011, 115). Nevertheless, a key distinction between government communications in democracies and propaganda in authoritarian states is the information environment. The level of transparency and oversight is typically much greater in democracies than in authoritarian regimes. Most democracies have freedom of information laws, while opposition parties and the media are always keen to expose 'improper behaviour, incompetence, or a scandal', making it much more difficult for governments to control their communication with the public (Strömbäck and Kiousis, 2013, 4-5). In China, Western style public relations tactics have been used to update the Party's propaganda tactics in an information environment which is considerably more controlled than in democratic countries, with the Party having direct control over the traditional media and being able to use censorship to significantly limit the scope for people to access opposing views. For example, during the protests over plans for a chemical factory at Xiamen in 2007, when it became clear the authorities could not entirely prevent information reaching the public, they used 'a propaganda blitz' in an attempt to 'guide public sentiment' (Perry, 2013, 21-22).

The marketisation of the media has also played an important part in the process of updating the CCP's propaganda. Stockmann (2013) points out that rather than undermining the Party's ability to put propaganda in front of readers and audiences, marketisation led to news being better packaged and therefore more appealing and convincing propaganda messages. Media under the direct control of the Party have also made their content much more attractive in

response to the development of more commercialised media (Xin, 2018). The propagation of propaganda messages through traditional media remains fairly straightforward. The authorities can insist that certain content is run by news organisations however they are financed (Tai, 2014). When covering issues that matter to the CCP, coverage therefore does 'not divert much from the position of the government' (Stockmann, 2013, 88, 131).

Ensuring that propaganda reaches audiences online has been a bigger challenge for the CCP. The problem of trying to "guide online public opinion" was recognised by the CCP early in the development of the internet. The 2000 CCP plenum emphasised the need to build 'an internet propaganda team and forge the influence of positive opinion on the internet' (Yang, 2013, 287). In 2007 President Hu Jintao called for the Party to 'assert supremacy over online public opinion' and to 'study the art of online guidance' so that the Party could 'use' the internet (Economist, 2013). By December 2011, there were over 50,000 government accounts across the four major microblog platforms in China (Sullivan, 2014, 32).

However, Xi Jinping accelerated efforts to to occupy what he referred to as the 'public opinion battlefield', making online public opinion the top priority of the Party's propaganda efforts (Creemers, 2016). At the first meeting of the Leadership Group on Internet Security and Information in 2014, Xi declared that 'captivating online public opinion is a long-term task that requires bringing forth new ideas to improve online propaganda … stimulating the right energy, vigorously cultivating socialist values' (quoted in Repnikova and Fang, 2019). The Party has moved from largely relying on censorship to a more proactive stance involving an attempt to shape public opinion online (Svensson, 2014; Yang, 2014; Sparks et al, 2016). For example, in 2013 the State Council issued a reminder about the need to put out more information, in order 'to expose rumours' (Xinhua, 2013). The Party engages in a 'struggle for discursive hegemony' online, where the emphasis is on trying to determine what is discussed, rather than just focussing on 'the simplistic suppression of information' (Yang and Tang, 2018, 8; Schneider, 2016). A similar strategy has been pursued in other authoritarian regimes such as Russia, where scholars have identified efforts to manipulate 'information to convince the public that they are doing a good job' (Guriev and Treisman, 2015, 29) and at times to compete with online critics 'through effective counter information campaigns that overwhelm, discredit, or demoralize opponents' (Wolfsfeld et al, 2016, 287).

Party media such as People's Daily and Xinhua play a particularly important part in this online strategy. The Party has been seeking to try to ensure that these media account for a

much higher proportion of the news that is spread online. In 2014, Xi Jinping called for an acceleration of efforts to create 'new media groups that have strength, communication capacity, credibility and are influential' in order for the Party to be better placed to set the agenda online (South China Morning Post, 2014). This has included a push to popularise Party media online, for example by making their content more appealing and the use of clickbait to increase their visibility (Xu and He, 2022; Lu and Pan, 2021; Yang and Tang, 2018; Xin, 2018; Guo, 2018; Han, 2015). Indeed, Party media succeeded in increasing their presence on social media, overtaking or displacing commercial media (Cook, 2015).

The Party also uses "internet commentators" or "astroturfers" to help guide opinion, by posting content online as if they were ordinary netizens (Han, 2018; King et al, 2017; Edney, 2014). They are popularly known as the "50 cent Party" because of suggestions that they are paid 50 cents per comment. However, Miller found that they are often full-time workers with specific titles such as news spokesperson', 'internet commentator', 'public opinion analyst' etc. (2016, 9). The CCP also called on its members to occupy 'strategic positions' online, setting up their own social media accounts (Gierow et al, 2016). One study found that the 50-cent Party wrote approximately 448 million social media posts each year and that 'a large proportion of government web site comments, and about one of every 178 social media posts on commercial sites, are fabricated by the government' (King et al, 2017, 494-5). Miller found that between 14.5%-17.1% of all commentary on 19 popular news outlets came from government astroturfers (2016, 24).

Therefore, the Party is making considerable efforts to influence discourse on the internet as well as in the traditional media. Even before Xi Jinping became president, Mackinnon argued that China's 'networked authoritarianism' enables the CCP to remain in control at the same time that 'a wide range of conversations about the country's problems' takes place online (2011, 33). Similarly, Jiang talked about 'authoritarian deliberation' in which the Party plays a central role in shaping and defining the boundaries and limits of discourse (2010, 8). Some scholars argue that 'the rapid evolution of proactive government strategies' is successfully subverting social media in authoritarian states and turning it into 'a tool of regime stability' (Gunitsky, 2015, 42; Morozov, 2012). The CCP has been particularly successfully at revamping 'political communication for the digital age' (Schneider, 2016, 2677).

The CCP therefore uses a mix of censorship and propaganda methods to achieve its aims. However, for the most part, previous research has either focused on censorship or

propaganda. There has been very little research on how the CCP use censorship and propaganda together to control the information available to Chinese citizens. This limits our ability to understand what is being controlled and what the CCP might be aiming to achieve by the decisions it makes about the political content that is the focus of censorship and propaganda.

2.3 What information is controlled?

Given the fact that information control is more selective than under Mao, and that it is possible for people to see and hear some critical content, it is important to understand how the CCP decides what information to control. Selective censorship and more subtle propaganda involve a difficult judgement about what information the Party needs to focus its efforts on. If the state does not exercise total control over information, it is the choice of what information to remove or add in that ultimately matters in ensuring regime stability. If the Party gets the control of information wrong, it could even turn out to be the 'catalyst for the breakdown' of the regime (Stockmann, 2013, 5).

In this section, I consider the evidence in the existing literature about what information is controlled using censorship and propaganda and how this contributes to regime stability. I first look at the research which suggests that censorship is largely focused on who is publishing the information, rather than what is being posted. I then examine evidence that censorship is narrowly focused on limiting collective action. I also look at research which suggests that a much wider range of content is controlled using both censorship and propaganda. As we will see, however, existing research is not clear about which types of content the Chinese authorities focus on or why they decide to control this information.

There is a body of research that suggests that propaganda officials are less concerned about the content of information posted online than about who is promoting it. Gallagher and Miller found that critical posts are more likely to be censored if they are posted by 'users who have the influence and the public following to cause real damage' (2018, 23). At the same time the Party sought to coopt netizens (known as Big Vs) with large numbers of followers to contribute towards their propaganda effort online (Gallagher & Miller, 2018, 22). This suggests that the Party is most concerned about the risk that their support is gradually eroded over time 'by elites and influential thought leaders', rather than by specific content (Gallagher & Miller, 2018, 21). Jiang and Kuang (2021) also found that the level of

censorship varied depending on who was communicating the information. Their research showed that there was much more censorship of rightists, who supported more democratic ideals, than leftists. However, most of the research that has looked at censorship suggests that the propaganda authorities are concerned about what information is being published or posted, as well as who is providing that information.

Other researchers have focused on the type of content that is censored. The most influential study of censorship over the last twenty years was a paper by King et al (which had been cited 2,600 times by 11 July 2023). The authors suggested that 'posts are censored if they are in a topic area with collective action potential' (2013, 33) and that otherwise Chinese citizens were free to make both negative and positive comments about 'the state, its policies, and its leaders' (2013, 14). Protests have been a factor in the collapse of a number of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union and in the Middle East during the Arab Spring (King et al, 2013). Therefore, it makes sense for authoritarian regimes to take action to prevent, or at least limit, collective action. The number of collective actions in China grew rapidly in the reform era and it is estimated that there were 180,000 in 2010 (Liu and Chen, 2012). Many of these protests were caused by disputes over land seizures and wage arrears but pollution, corruption and ethnic conflict have become increasingly important factors (Shambaugh, 2016, 62). Some China experts, such as Roderick MacFarquhar, have argued that at some point 'one of these 'sparks' will ignite a national prairie fire... All the elements for a really massive collapse are there' (Shambaugh, 2008, 25). This may exaggerate the level of risk, but it is clear that the Party is 'very nervous' about the large number of protests, and has become 'hypervigilant against uprisings', particularly since observing a series of Colour Revolutions in former Soviet republics and the Arab Spring (Shambaugh, 2016, 62).

Access to information can play a significant role in facilitating protests. For example, media coverage can create recognisable visual frames that influence how protest is conducted (Voltmer, 2013). The role of the internet in organising and mobilising protests is also a particular concern for the Chinese authorities (Yang, 2009, 2013). Several studies have shown that the internet has played an important part in organising protests in China (Yang, 2009, 2014; Huang and Yip, 2012; Yang and Calhoun, 2007), such as ones about the environment in Xiamen (Weber, 2011) and local democracy in Wukan (Tong and Zuo, 2014). Liu (2013) also shows that the spread of mobile phones further assisted the organisation of popular protests. There is agreement in the literature that the Chinese authorities therefore

go to great lengths to control information concerning possible collective action. A number of laws have been introduced to prevent information about protests being published online, for example, regulations published in November 2000 banned content 'inciting illegal assemblies, association, demonstrations, protests and gatherings that disturb social order' (Yang, 2009, 50). A study of censorship on Sina Weibo by Bamman et al (2012) showed that censorship was higher in areas with a greater risk of collective action. The authors found that up to 53% of all messages in Tibet, where there have been protests about Chinese rule, were deleted, compared with 12% in Beijing and 11% in Shanghai (2012). Stockmann also concluded that the 'key to understanding restrictions of media reporting' in an area such as labour issues is 'the term social stability, primarily associated with mass incidents and collective protest' (2013, 89).

Given the above, it is not surprising that the Chinese authorities censored a lot of content related to collective action. However, the fact that King et al (2013, 14) concluded that otherwise people could say what they liked about 'the state, its policies, and its leaders' is more controversial. Several other studies show that Chinese citizens were able to express a wide range of political views online, particularly in the first decade of the 2000s. Sullivan, for example, talked about there being 'a cacophony of voices' on the Chinese internet, with the CCP 'being constantly exposed, ridiculed, and criticised' (2014, 26). Yang's research also showed that 'the most unorthodox and subversive ideas' could be found online (2009, 2). However, focusing information control only on trying to prevent protests would appear to be very risky. Large scale protests often occur because the public becomes 'dissatisfied with, alienated from and agitated by the state through a long and gradual process of attitudinal makeover' (Tang and Huhe, 2014, 571). Similarly, Shirky argues that the internet produces 'change over years and decades, not weeks or months' (2011, 30). Tang and Huhe argued that the diffusion of information on the internet was eroding 'the public's support of the CCP regime by influencing its users' political views towards directions unfavourable for the party-state' (2014, 571). Therefore, it seems unlikely that the CCP would be content simply to censor information related to collective action and otherwise to allow Chinese citizens to say what they like about political issues.

Other authors have indeed found evidence that a wider range of other political content features in both censorship and propaganda. Some of this research suggests that information control is particularly focused on content that mentions the CCP. Vuori and Paltemaa (2015) found that words associated with the Party were 3.5 times more likely to be censored than

words related to Opposition (12.5%) or Mass Protests (10.5%) (2015, 409). Ng (2015) also showed that numerous social media posts relating to Party/state policies were censored. Sorace found that the CCP uses propaganda after crises, such as the Sichuan earthquake, to 'insistently remind China's citizens that their well-being is the result of the Party's benevolence' (2017, 41). Schneider and Hwang also looked at how the CCP's propaganda after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake sought to strengthen the CCP's political legitimacy by focussing on 'the leadership of the Party' and 'a revamped version of the Confucian idea of benevolent rule' (2014, 636). Esarey (2021) showed that there has been a greater media focus on Xi Jinping since he became president compared to his predecessors and to other members of the leadership. Other research finds that the CCP censors are mainly concerned to stop certain critical views spreading and to set out the limits of acceptable discourse (Gueorguiev & Malesky, 2019; Schneider (2018). Vuori and Paltemaa also found that words which involved 'potential rallying points for oppositional political awareness building' tend to be censored 'more continuously' than other types of content (2015, 419, 400).

A number of studies identify particular policy areas or topics that have been subject to significant levels of censorship. For example, Ng (2015) found there was an emphasis on social media posts about corruption. Cui (2017) identified evidence of censorship of an environmental film that went viral on the Chinese internet in 2014. Tai and Fu (2020) found that more than 25% of content that was censored on WeChat public accounts in 2018 was about the economy and Tai (2014) found that living standards were one of the topics that was most often censored by the CCP. So, it is clear that a wide range of content related to policies has been censored. However, some of the evidence about information relating to policies that is controlled appears to be contradictory. For example, Brady (2008) found evidence that media were instructed to run content demonising the United States, but Stockmann argued that the Chinese authorities generally intervene to prevent media attacks on the US (2013). Stockmann (2013) also found that traditional media could only report freely on foreign policy issues if these were unrelated to Chinese leaders. However, a study by Cairns and Carlson showed that online comments during the 2012 Senkaku / Diaoyu crisis, a highly sensitive issue for Chinese leaders, 'were not uniformly censored for the entire duration of the dispute' (2016, 25). Therefore, the literature does not provide a clear picture about what type of issues censorship focuses on. Moreover, these studies also generally cover short periods, so they may reflect issues that were particularly important at that point in time. For example, the research by Tai and Fu (2018) was carried out when

there was the threat of a trade war with the USA, which would have caused particular concerns about the economy.

There are similar disagreements about the content and purpose of propaganda. A number of studies suggest the aim of propaganda is to set the agenda, framing the discussion of sensitive political issues in a way that brings public opinion into line with the CCP and, in some cases, defending the Party/state against criticism (Sorace, 2017; Brady, 2017; Yang, 2016, 2014; Gunitsky, 2015; Edney, 2014; Stockmann, 2013). Miller and Gallagher also suggest that public opinion guidance using internet commentators is often 'about responding to "public opinion emergencies" through agenda-setting, and "dilution" of "negative sentiment"' (2016, 5). For example, after an explosion in Tianjin in 2015, which killed more than 170 people, they found that commentary by internet commentators sought to guide public opinion by talking about the bravery of firefighters and trust in government (Miller and Gallagher, 2016, 7). In some cases, internet commentators used more aggressive tactics to take on the critics and were 'caustically argumentative' (Miller and Gallagher, 2016). One factor that may affect whether the Party feels able to set the agenda is whether it has a solution to the problem (Brady, 2008; Stockmann; 2013). For example, coverage of labour laws was allowed in the news media after a National Labour Law was passed in 1994 and the Party therefore had something substantive to say about the issue (Stockman, 2013, 86). Zeng argues that 'the CCP's overwhelming capability of mobilization and powerful propaganda' has meant that it has been possible to transform crises, such the 2008 financial crisis, by manipulating people's perceptions of the problems, and 'thus maintain – or even strengthen – the CCP's rule' (2016, 12, 77). The CCP seeks to manipulate information about these sensitive issues so Chinese citizens accept, and if possible, support the Party's continued rule (MacKinnon, 2008; Stockmann, 2013).

Other studies suggest that rather than trying to set the agenda on sensitive topics, the CCP largely uses propaganda to distract people's attention from these issues. One way this is done is by trying to get people to focus on more positive information. King et al argue that internet commentators generally do not 'engage in debate or argument' but 'seem to avoid controversial issues entirely', focusing instead on 'cheerleading and positive discussions' (King et al, 2017, 485). Similarly, Brady has suggested that propaganda in China seeks to achieve 'the political mummification of the nation' by promoting 'positive' messages that will create 'optimistic and positive' citizens who are 'as disengaged from politics as possible' (2009a, 6). Yang and Tang also show how the CCP has made use of a 'positive energy'

discourse to encourage people to focus on being positive and to pressure them 'into avoiding critical or negative feelings about societal and political matters because such sentiments are stigmatised as "negative energy"' (2018, 20). Similarly, Yang suggests that the wenming (which can be translated as both "civilization" and "civility") discourse promoted by the CCP has been used 'to engender a civic online public that produces positive, not negative, emotional energies' (2017, 1958).

Distraction does not just involve positive discussions. Nationalism has been used by many regimes to distract people from domestic problems and Schneider (2018) found that Party interventions online often 'place politics within a simplistic, nationalist framework of understanding'. As Callahan points out, getting Chinese people to focus on foreigners "as an enemy, as an external Other", is a useful way for the CCP to distract Chinese citizens from any problems at home (2006, 186). Some other authors suggest that the CCP also seeks to divert attention away from central government towards problems involving individuals and regional government (Yang and Wang, 2021; Miao, 2020).

The CCP is not only concerned about what is being discussed but also about how much it is being discussed. Gallagher and Miller found that the Party was more likely to censor information 'when a large number of people online are talking about the same thing, what it calls "a public opinion emergency" (舆论危机)' (2018, 4). Several other authors have also found that content was censored after an escalation of public interest in an event (Lorentzen, 2014: Repnikova, 2017). Therefore, a sensitive issue which attracts only limited attention may not get censored but an issue, which might be considered less threatening to the CCP, will be censored just because of the large number of people who are discussing it online. The Party also seeks to anticipate when one of these public opinion emergencies might arise by adapting 'to China's rapidly changing political, societal, and economic circumstances' (Stockman, 2013, 81; see also Miller and Gallagher, 2016). Therefore, it is possible that there may be more control of critical information about an issue like pollution for a period when the authorities believe this poses a greater risk, perhaps because parts of the country are experiencing particularly high levels of pollution. The level of control may change quickly, depending on the level of perceived risk. For example, Elmer (2012) shows that during the Wukan Incident in 2012 Sina Weibo search filtering changed from day-to-day, depending on the political situation. Similarly, Vuori and Paltemaa found that with changing circumstances, words can get blocked and released in quick succession (2015, 406). Therefore, there may be little or no censorship of a sensitive topic during one time period,

but that same topic may be heavily censored in a later period. This again shows the problem that research which focuses on relatively short time periods may give a misleading impression of which issues are considered particularly sensitive.

Focussing on limiting the extent to which information about a story can spread enables the Party to fragment the public, keeping criticisms to specific complaints, localised gripes and small groups (Mackinnon, 2008; Yang, 2014; Roberts and Stewart, 2014; Creemers, 2016; Roberts, 2018). For example, the anti-rumour laws introduced in 2013 place restrictions on the number of times 'rumours' can be rebroadcast and so are one way the CCP attempts to ensure sensitive information does not get widespread attention (Creemers, 2016). Filtering political content fractures public discourse, reducing the possibility of citizens developing 'shared critical opinions' and therefore for 'oppositional political awareness' to build up (Vuori and Paltema, 2015, 413, 419). De Tocqueville, whose work has reportedly been popular among Chinese leaders, noted that: 'Patiently endured so long as it seemed beyond redress, a grievance comes to appear intolerable once the possibility of removing it crosses men's minds' (Pridham, 2000, 90). Studies show mass mobilisation is most likely to occur in authoritarian states 'when citizens are aware that anti-regime grievances have become widespread' (Reuters and Szakonyi, 2015, 49). Therefore, the Party may feel that it can allow critical opinions to be published 'as long as they are not easily and widely circulated and accessible' and, therefore, grievances remain localised and do not form into broad networks and movements (Ringen, 2016, 60). This shows that it is important to look at efforts to limit access to certain information, as well as complete bans on content.

A further complicating factor in determining what content the CCP focuses on is that information is also controlled 'more closely at some times than at others' (Yang, 2009, 63). China undergoes 'fairly regular cycles', for example, with control over information tightening around the time of key Party meetings, around sensitive dates such as the anniversary of the Tiananmen protests and when there is a leadership change (Brady, 2008; Stockmann, 2013). Meetings like the National People's Congress are important propaganda opportunities for the Party, so it makes sense to seek to ensure that the information environment, as much as possible, supports rather than contradicts the messages the CCP wants people to focus on. Similarly, the Party has an incentive to avoid people being reminded that the state turned its guns on its own citizens during the Tiananmen protests, so censorship tightens around the anniversary of the Tiananmen protests. This again means that there are risks in focussing research on relatively short time periods.

Most authors agree that the main objective of these information control efforts is 'to construct and influence the subjective values and meanings' against which it is judged by Chinese citizens (Holbig and Gilley, 2010, 396), using censorship and propaganda to manufacture its legitimacy (Zeng, 2016; Zhang, 2011; Brady, 2008). Indeed, since about 2008-11 the CCP has been increasing its control over the information that reaches its citizens as part of its efforts to maintain and build support for the Party's continued rule (Schneider, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Zeng, 2016; Bondes and Heep, 2013). This follows a period when many Chinese scholars believed that the CCP was facing a legitimacy crisis and argued that boosting propaganda was one of the most important strategies to maintain and enhance the Party's legitimacy (Gilley and Holbig, 2009; Zeng, 2014). The literature is generally less clear about what types of legitimacy censorship and propaganda is focused on. However, if legitimacy is a key goal of information control, the content that is controlled by the CCP should be able to tell us a lot about how the Party is seeking to maintain and enhance its legitimacy.

Therefore, there is disagreement and uncertainty about a number of issues. In particular, there is disagreement about what type of political content the Party is focused on controlling. For example, is the Party concerned about what people are discussing or simply about who is having the conversations? Is censorship almost entirely focused on stopping collective action or on a broader range of content? If a wider range of content is censored, does the CCP see it is a priority to control content about itself? Does the Party seek to set the agenda on sensitive issues, or does it put more of the emphasis on distracting people's attention from these issues? What does the information that is controlled reveal about the Party's legitimation strategy? And to what extent has the Party's priorities changed since Xi Jinping became president?

The next section focuses on the CCP's legitimation strategy. It looks at what the literature on legitimacy in China tells us about what content we might expect the Party to focus on in its use of censorship and propaganda to maintain and enhance its legitimacy.

2.4 What types of legitimacy are most important to the CCP?

Lipset (1981) and Linz (1988) define legitimacy as an acceptance that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate for that society, and therefore that decisions made by

those institutions should be accepted by the citizens. Legitimacy may involve 'active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population' (Gerschewski, 2013, 18). Authoritarian regimes need their citizens to positively evaluate them, so they can 'rely less on coercion and monitoring' (Stockmann, 2013, 24). The CCP therefore attaches a great deal of importance to its legitimacy (Zeng, 2016). The literature on legitimacy identifies a number of different types of legitimacy that may be important to regimes. This research focuses on four types of legitimacy that are often discussed in relation to China: performance, ideological, institutional and charismatic legitimacy.

Performance legitimacy concerns a regime's ability to deliver the goods. In particular, many authoritarian regimes have focused on economic performance (also known as eudaemonic legitimacy) to create a "social compact" with their citizens, justifying their rule by 'successful economic performance and effective provision of economic benefits to individuals' (Chen, 1997, 423; see also White, 1986). Many scholars have argued that the CCP's legitimacy since Mao has largely rested on its performance (Yang and Zhao, 2015; Zhao, 2009). Hung and Dingle suggested that particularly after Tiananmen, CCP legitimacy became 'virtually synonymous' with performance legitimacy (2014, 376). Zhao saw this as a return to the traditional concept of legitimacy in China, the Mandate of Heaven, which had a strong performance aspect (2009, 421-422). The Mandate of Heaven meant there was a belief that a dynasty would lose power if it failed to deliver certain basic goods to its citizens.

After Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping recognised that the Party's legitimacy had been significantly weakened by the failure to significantly improve people's living standards and he initiated reforms aimed at increasing the country's economic growth (Guo, 2003). Over the following few decades rapid economic growth led many authors to conclude that economic growth had become the foundation of the Party's performance legitimacy (Zhao, 2009; Saich, 2004; Chen, 1997). Even after a period of declining but still high growth rates under Xi Jinping, many commentators continue to argue that economic development remains the most important source of the CCP's legitimacy (Huang and Pang, 2018: Financial Times, June 2022). However, relying on economic legitimacy is risky for authoritarian regimes because any downturn or even a significant slowdown in growth could trigger a legitimacy crisis (Hung and Dingle, 2014; Shue, 2010). China's declining economic growth rates under Xi Jinping means that the CCP would therefore have good reason not to rely too much on economic legitimation.

A number of studies show that as the country has become more prosperous, other aspects of the Party/state's performance have also become important, including social inequality and environmental degradation (Bondes and Heep, 2013; Shambaugh, 2016). By the early 2000s the negative consequences of reform and opening up were having serious consequences for many citizens (Yang and Zhao, 2015). At the same time, the rapid growth of China's middle class had created expectations that went beyond simply meeting their material needs. Under President Hu Jintao the CCP recognised that the Party's performance legitimacy relied on more than just economic growth and launched a series of social reforms (Yang and Zhao, 2015). In his study of Chinese academic literature between 2007 and 2012, Zeng found that socioeconomic inequality was identified by nearly half of the authors (49%) as a significant threat to CCP legitimacy (Zeng, 2016, 103). Other social factors mentioned by these authors included environmental degradation (14%) and inadequate provision of public welfare (13%). Shue (2010) has also suggested that the CCP no longer derives its legitimacy from its 'technical capacity' to deliver economic growth but from its 'political capacity' to create a stable environment in which economic development can take place. The CCP's ability to deliver stability is also seen as being a key factor in the Party's performance legitimacy by other authors (for example Heberer and Schubert, 2006). Therefore, there is a strong focus on performance in much of the literature on legitimacy but there are unanswered questions about whether performance legitimacy has been the principal source of the CCP's legitimacy under Xi Jinping. And to the extent that performance legitimacy is important for the CCP, there are questions about the degree to which different aspects of their performance are important to securing the Party's legitimacy and how this may have changed under Xi Jinping.

Ideological legitimation has been a key focus of most communist regimes. Freeden (1998) defines ideology as 'idea complexes containing beliefs – encompassing consciously or unconsciously held values, understandings, interpretations, myths and preferences, which support or contest political arrangements and processes, as well as providing plans of action for public political institutions; and in doing so they act as devices for mobilizing mass political activity' (1998, 16). China under Mao was seen 'as a highly ideological society' (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018, 324). However, the reform and opening up of China's economy that was initiated by Deng Xiaoping meant that the communist ideology promoted by Mao became much less credible. Nevertheless, some authors argued that 'without ideology the Party would have no claim to legitimacy' (Moody, 1995, 172). A number of Chinese scholars writing in the 2000s also stressed the importance of ideology in the CCP's

efforts to build its legitimacy (Holbig and Gilley, 2010; Zeng, 2016). Nearly half (49%) of the articles by Chinese scholars in Zeng's research between 2007 and 2012 saw 'changing values' as a key threat to the CCP's legitimacy, including factors such as the weakening of communist ideology, increasing civic awareness and the promotion of Western political values (2016, 103). Ideology in China is still often seen as being synonymous with communism but, as Holbig (2013) argues, the CCP has taken a flexible approach to its ideology, constantly adapting Party theory in order to justify the CCP's continued rule. Zeng also says that the Party has seen ideology as 'crucial to regime legitimacy' investing 'a great deal of energy and human capital in modernizing its ideological basis' (2016, 15). Several authors also argue that the emphasis on the importance of ideological work has increased under Xi Jinping (Li and Sparks, 2018; Brown and Čerenkova, 2018; Zeng, 2016).

So what role, if any, does communism play in contemporary CCP ideology? It is generally agreed that communism as it would have been defined by Mao does not play a significant part in contemporary iterations of CCP ideology (Zhao, 2009; Christensen, 1996). The reality of the way the Chinese economy has operated since the 1980s is markedly different from anything that Mao or Marx would have envisaged. However, each leader since Mao has been expected to present any changes as building on the innovations of the previous leaders, including Mao, rather than overturning them. Successive Chinese leaders have therefore made efforts to upgrade 'communism with Chinese characteristics' by introducing new ideological concepts. Deng Xiaoping emphasised economic reconstruction, epitomised by his "southern tour" in 1992 to push for the market reform programme (Zeng, 2016, 46). Jiang Zemin's 'Three Represents' was intended to further China's economic modernisation and included the expansion of the Party's membership to include private entrepreneurs (Zeng, 2016, 117). Hu Jintao's 'Scientific Outlook of Development' involved an attempt to address some of the problems caused by rapid economic growth, particularly growing inequality (Zeng, 2016, 120). Each of these changes was presented as cumulative revisions to communist ideology.

A number of authors have looked at Xi Jinping's ideas such as the China Dream (Miao, 2020; Brown and Čerenkova, 2018; Peters, 2017). The importance of Xi's ideas in the CCP's evolving ideology was underlined by the decision to adopt amendments in 2018 which enshrined "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" into the Constitution (Xinhua, March 2018). This would suggest that these ideas have become an important element of the CCP's legitimation strategy.

Brown and Čerenkova argue that despite the extent to which the CCP's ideology has been adapted, 'this ideology and its keywords and language' still seek to marry 'the current leaders to those of the past' (2018, 325). In particular, Mao, as the Party's revolutionary leader, is still seen as vitally important to the CCP's legitimacy. Shortly after becoming leader, Xi Jinping said, 'if we completely negate comrade Mao Zedong, is our party tenable? Is our socialist system tenable? It is not tenable' (Zeng, 2016, 8). Von Soest and Grauvogel (2015) argue that 'foundational myths' play an important role in legitimising many non-democratic countries and the CCP does still protect its legacy as a communist and revolutionary party.

A number of authors argue that nationalism has long played an important role in building and maintaining the CCP's ideological legitimacy (Gilley and Holbig, 2009; Gries and Rosen, 2004; Christensen, 1996). As Freeden notes, emotion plays a vital role in ideology and linking nationalism to the ruling ideology can provide a valuable emotional connection between that ideology and the public (1998, 764). Nationalist pride was important to the CCP's claim to power in the 1930s and 1940s (Guo, 2003, 9, 10). The 'restoration of pride to the country following the century of humiliation', which included a series of unequal treaties forced on China by European powers and Japan, and the CCP's, generally exaggerated, role in resisting the Japanese in the second world war, were important in legitimising CCP rule under Mao (Downs and Saunders, 1998, 119). However, several authors show that there was a renewed emphasis on nationalism in the CCP's ideology after Tiananmen (Gries, 2005; Zhao, 1998; Christensen, 1996). The Party decided to make greater use of nationalism 'as an instrument for the glorification of the party, for the consolidation of the PRC's national identity, and for the justification of the political system of the CCP's one party rule' (Wang, 2008, 784). The focus of the CCP's patriotic education campaign after Tiananmen was again on China's 'century of humiliation'. The humiliation discourse has been powerful for the CCP because it continues to resonate with many Chinese people (Callahan, 2006). Japan in particular has become deeply engrained in 'the CCP's attempt to legitimate its rule' (Schneider, 2018). This emphasis on nationalism seems to be effective for the Party. Surveys in Beijing have found that people with strong nationalist feelings and a preference for stability tend to be more supportive of the CCP (Reilly, 2012, 38).

However, some authors argue that relying too much on nationalism carries risks for the CCP. Callahan suggests that by the mid-1990s nationalism had 'spread beyond official control' (2006, 187). Gries and Rosen also found that the Party's legitimacy by the early 2000s

depended ‘on meeting the expectations of nationalists’ (Gries and Rosen, 2004, 24). This is potentially dangerous for the CCP. Student led protests against the Treaty of Versailles on May 4th, 1919, were seen as the start of a nationalist movement against foreign humiliations, which undermined the then government and contributed to the eventual victory of the Chinese Communist Party. Some scholars have argued that the CCP fears it too could lose power if the public believes it is weak in dealing with other countries and allowing China to be humiliated again (Shirk, 2011). Therefore, there is a risk for the CCP that in certain circumstances nationalism could undermine, rather than enhance, its legitimacy. This means there is a question about the extent to which the CCP believes it can rely on nationalism as part of its legitimation strategy.

Moral and cultural values have been less widely discussed as a form of ideological legitimacy in China. However, a few authors argue that values have also played an important part in the CCP’s ideological legitimation strategy in recent years, and in particular since Xi Jinping became president (Brown and Čerenkova, 2018; Kubat, 2018; Gow, 2017). Part of the reason for this development has been a fear that many young Chinese citizens were adopting a Western moral value system. Gilley argues that value change can be a key source of legitimacy crisis for authoritarian regimes; ‘the regime continues chugging along one train line only to look back and discover that the passenger cars have been decoupled’ (2008, 272). One Chinese scholar, Chang Sumei, argued that ‘the diversification and differentiation of values’ in Chinese society had ‘increased the disorder of social values and have thus reduced party legitimacy’ (Zeng, 2014, 625). A number of Chinese scholars writing in the first decade of the 2000s suggested that the Party should do more to integrate Chinese moral and cultural values within the CCP’s ‘ideological structure’ (Zeng, 2014, 625). President Xi Jinping has placed a particularly strong emphasis on the importance of promoting moral values. The idea of ‘Socialist spiritual civilisation construction’ has featured in CCP discourse since the Mao era. However, as Brown and Čerenkova (2018) note, from 2012 onwards, Xi put ‘spiritual civilisation construction’ at the centre of core Socialist values. This concept represents an attempt to focus the country’s citizens on Chinese, as opposed to Western, values (Brown and Čerenkova, 2018, 337).

In order to persuade people to accept values ‘formed and developed on our own soil’, the CCP has reversed its previous hostility to traditional values, particularly Confucianism. As Holbig notes, Confucianism has become ‘actively reinvented by the party in recent years as part of the process of ideological adaptation’ (2013, 76; Wu, 2014). Where symbols of

traditional ideas were destroyed by Mao's supporters during the Cultural Revolution, the CCP now calls the past a 'rich source of morality' (Johnson, 2019) and seeks to meld these traditional values into its Core Socialist Values. For example, in 2018, Wang Huning, a member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, said the leadership of the CCP over cultural-ethical progress should be strengthened and called for efforts to promote China's fine traditional culture and for ethical education among teenagers to further cultivate core socialist values (China Plus, 2018). Where Mao sought to eradicate Confucius and Confucianism, Xi Jinping has even written a book on 'How to read Confucius'. Gow suggests that this 'strategic intertwining' of Confucian values with the CCP's own discourse increases the likelihood that CCP's rhetoric 'will find traction with Chinese people and, over time, become constitutive of common sense in contemporary China' (2017, 111). Similarly, Huang (2013, 49) believes the combination of Marxism and Confucianism 'will enrich the ruling ideology of the CCP and further enhance its legitimacy'. Kubat (2018, 78) goes further, suggesting the narrative around traditional values 'can be construed as an attempt to reframe the relationship between the Party and society', in which the CCP acts as 'a moral vanguard… safeguarding of China's distinctive values and model of socio-political organisation'. Feng (2016) has also shown that after 2012, the messages conveyed by the annual Spring Festival gala shifted from indoctrination about communism 'to moral civic education'.

The importance of moral values was reinforced by the decisions to introduce a set of 12 Core Socialist Values at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 (Kubat, 2018, 71). They are prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony at the national level; freedom, equality, justice, and rule of law as societal values, and patriotism, dedication, integrity, and geniality as citizens (Gow, 2017, 99; Brown and Čerenkova, 2018). These values incorporate traditional ideas such as the love of social order and stability, the acceptance of hierarchy and devotion to the family and the state, which conveniently help to legitimate authoritarian rule, while resonating with 'traditional cultural values that are still rooted very deeply' in Chinese society (Holbig and Gilley, 2010). In 2013, the CCP Central Committee issued the first government directive on Core Socialist Values, requiring them to be integrated at all levels of government (Lin, 2019). At a meeting of propaganda officials and state media executives in August 2018, Xi Jinping was quoted as saying that in the 'new era', the Party needed to 'strengthen propaganda and ideology work to tightly unify the ideals and faith, the values and ideas and *the morals and ethics* of all our people to make greater contributions to the cause of the party and the country' (South China Morning Post, 2018).

The literature therefore suggests that in recent decades CCP ideology has drawn on a number of sources, including communism, nationalism and traditional moral and cultural values. Holbig argues that ‘the (re)production of party ideology remains a highly fluid framing process’ with the mix of elements that are included being constantly changed (2013, 64). The CCP also distinguishes between ‘formal ideology’ which is mainly aimed at CCP members, and ‘informal ideology’ which is used to justify authoritarian rule to the wider population (Zeng, 2016, 18). This means that the exact mix will be different for the two groups. Therefore, there is a question both about how much the CCP under Xi Jinping has focused on ideological legitimation, and to what extent it has emphasised the different elements of its ideology in the decisions it makes about censorship and propaganda targeted at the general public.

The literature also shows that the CCP seeks to frame alternative ideologies and political systems in negative terms and to limit the scope for these competing narratives to gain traction (Zeng, 2016; Hung and Dingle, 2014). Zeng argues that this approach to ideology often makes use of a stability discourse, linking ‘liberal democracy with national chaos’ while stressing the importance of the CCP to maintaining stability in China (2016, 124). For example, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Arab Spring have both been used as examples of the dangers of the collapse of authoritarian rule and democratization (Zeng, 2016, 126). Therefore, propaganda that aims to reinforce the CCP’s ideological legitimacy can be expected to include content that delegitimises alternative political systems and ideologies, as well as promoting the CCP’s own ideology.

Although most of the literature on legitimacy in China focusses on performance and ideological legitimacy, some authors argue that the institutional legitimacy has also become more important over the last few decades. Institutional legitimacy involves the institutionalisation of governmental procedures and the years after Mao’s death did see the increasing institutionalisation of the regime (Gilley and Holbig 2009; Nathan, 2003). This included increased bureaucratic efficiency, the empowerment of people’s congresses, the development of the rule of law, more inner-party democracy and more opportunities for public participation (Holbig and Gilley, 2010; Guo, 2003). To some extent these reflect the concept of legal-rational legitimation ‘as understood by Weber or Huntington’ (Holbig and Gilley, 2010, 23-24). Chin (2018) has argued that the rule of law, which she describes as ‘a solid ground for legal-rational legitimacy’, is used as ‘a core rationale in the Party’s

legitimation efforts'. Schubert has also argued that 'legal reforms have probably done the most to generate legitimacy for the current regime' (2008, 196). More recently, Zhang (2023) has argued that the CCP thinks 'legality can be a major source of political legitimacy'. The Party has also made use of the concept of "democracy" as part of its 'strategy of institutionalisation' (Holbig and Gilley, 2010, 23-24). This has included greater opportunities for public participation, sometimes described as 'socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics' (Tong and Zuo, 2014, 68).

Some scholars are critical of the suggestion that that 'at any point in China's long history of authoritarianism has rational-legal legitimacy prevailed' (Perry, 2018). And to the extent that the Party has ever been committed to trying to secure a form of institutional or legal-rational legitimacy, this has been further called into question under Xi Jinping's leadership. For example, in 2015 there was a clamp down on rights lawyers (Guardian, July 2015) and in 2018 the decision was made to end presidential term limits, which was seen as being one of the key institutional changes made by Deng Xiaoping in order to prevent a return to one man rule (BBC, 2018). Therefore, there is a question about whether the CCP under Xi Jinping believes that institutional legitimacy has a role in sustaining one party rule in China.

Although there is a debate about the extent to which the CCP has sought to promote a form of institutional legitimacy, there has never been any question that the Party itself is the ultimate source of power in China. The CCP can seek to legitimise its rule through a mix of performance, ideological and institutional legitimacy but a number of authors argue that the Party's moral performance is also an important aspect of how people evaluate it (Zhao, 2009; Tong, 2011; Zeng, 2016). In the Confucian scheme 'the ruler was to be a role model for moral behaviour' and if he was considered to have lost his virtue, 'then he also lost the mandate to rule' (Tong, 2011, 146). Bondes and Heep emphasise the importance of controlling information to influence 'the people's core beliefs' about the virtues of CCP leaders to strengthen regime legitimacy (2013, 318). One of the biggest threats to public perceptions of the CCP's moral performance has been corruption (Zeng, 2016) and Xi Jinping put a strong focus on tackling this problem during the first few years of his presidency. Therefore, the CCP can be expected to put itself at the forefront of its propaganda efforts and to use censorship to protect its reputation.

Weber also refers to charismatic authority as an important source of legitimacy, stemming from the leadership of an individual, and it is a method still used by many non-democratic

countries to legitimise their regimes (von Soest and Grauvogel, 2015). During the Mao years charismatic legitimacy played an important role in legitimising one party rule (Perry, 2018). However, after Mao's death the CCP moved away from an emphasis on individual leaders as a reaction to the chaos of the cultural revolution. There was more focus on collective leadership as part of the wider effort to promote institutional legitimacy discussed above. However, some journalists and scholars identify signs of a revival of charismatic legitimacy under Xi Jinping (Yin and Flew, 2018; New York Times, 2015; Washington Post, 2014). Indeed, Susan Shirk is emphatic that the 'Xi personality cult is gathering steam' (2018, 23, 27) and Esarey concluded that his research was evidence of 'the near deification of Xi Jinping in China's official media' (2021, 900).

Therefore, there are questions about what types of legitimacy the CCP focuses on in its efforts to stay in power and how this has changed under Xi Jinping. Given the role that information control plays in manufacturing the CCP's legitimacy, analysing the content of censorship and propaganda and the way that content is controlled should provide a valuable insight into the types of legitimacy that the Party focuses on, as well as the extent to which there is a focus on the CCP itself.

2.5 Research questions and limitations in existing research

This review of the literature shows that there is a disagreement in the existing studies about what type of content the CCP have controlled using censorship and propaganda, partly because most research has focused on specific events and short time periods. Secondly, there are also gaps in the literature about the way the CCP uses censorship and propaganda to control information, and in particular, about how the Party uses the mix of censorship and propaganda tools at its disposal to manipulate the information that is seen by Chinese citizens. And thirdly there is disagreement about the focus of the CCP's legitimation strategy. This thesis argues that a better understanding of the first two problems will help to answer the third issue about the CCP's legitimation strategy. Therefore, this research aims to gain an improved understanding of censorship, propaganda and legitimacy in China from the start of Xi's presidency on 1 January 2013 to the end of 2018 by answering the following research questions:

(a) What types of political information do the Chinese authorities seek to control in the traditional news media and online using censorship and propaganda?

(b) How do the Chinese authorities use a combination of censorship and propaganda to control this information?
(c) What types of legitimacy does the CCP focus on in its use of information control?

This thesis answers these questions by addressing a number of limitations in the existing research: In particular, most previous research has been too narrowly focused; very often examining just one type of censorship or propaganda, looking at just one communication channel, using data covering a relatively short period of time, and/or focusing on one particular event or issue. In addition, most of this research does not examine how information control seeks to shape legitimacy and most of it was conducted prior to Xi Jinping becoming president. The following paragraphs go into more detail about these limitations.

Most studies of censorship online have looked at what information does or does not get posted or published, particularly on social media (King et al, 2013, 2016; Bamman et al, 2012; Ng, 2013, 2015; Vuori and Paltemaa, 2015). Focussing just on the elimination of content can give the impression that censorship is more limited than it is. The fact that criticisms about a particular issue can be found online does not mean that some, or even most of the criticisms related to that issue have not been censored. This is because, as discussed above, censors sometimes seek to minimise the amount of negative information people can see about a particular topic, rather than just eliminating that information altogether. For example, the amount of criticism might have been reduced, so that it appears the critics are just a small number of isolated voices. Alternatively, the authorities may not have prevented the information being posted but they may have got internet companies to make it more difficult for the information to be found. King et al (2013) may not have found evidence of content about CCP leaders being blocked from longer blogs because the authorities felt they were already controlling this type of information by getting internet companies to block people searching for words related to senior CCP leaders, as Ng (2013) and Vuori and Paltemaa (2015) find in their studies. The news media may not be completely banned from running a particular story but the propaganda authorities may insist that the they only cover it using information from official sources, so that only a partial view of the topic is reported. Equally, the fact that only a small proportion of online content on, for example, pollution has been deleted, does not mean the authorities have not censored the content they were particularly concerned about, or that they have not manipulated the information that is available on that particular topic, e.g. by using public opinion guidance. In addition, censorship by internet companies may not fully reflect the CCP's aims. This is because

media and internet companies do not always implement censorship instructions in exactly the way the authorities had intended (Cairns, 2017). For example, internet companies may not fully implement instructions because to do so could put users off, and therefore undermine their business (Miller, 2018). On the other hand, if internet companies feel they are not sure what content might lead to sanctions from the censors, they may feel the need to over censor, to avoid the risk of being penalised e.g., by having their services temporarily or permanently suspended.

One way to overcome these limitations is to focus on what the Party says it is seeking to control, rather than the outcomes (i.e. what is present/absent in media content). A number of studies have taken this route. Brady (2006) looked at bi-monthly propaganda bulletins prior to 2003, while Tai (2014) did a quantitative study of leaked propaganda instructions up to 2013. Stockman (2013) interviewed a number of propaganda officials as part of her study and Creemers (2016) analysed published Party/state documents to study institutional and regulatory changes. However, there has not been an in-depth study since Xi Jinping became president focused on analysing censorship instructions issued by the Chinese authorities.

Most existing research on information control in China has also focused *either* on censorship (Vuori and Paltemaa, 2015; Ng, 2015; King et al, 2013; Bamman et al, 2012) or propaganda (Xu and Sun, 2021; Miao, 2020; Sorace, 2017; King et al, 2017). The weakness of this approach is that the Chinese authorities maintain a complex system of controls and therefore it is difficult to reach conclusions about what is being controlled and for what purposes without looking at the system as a whole. In some cases the Party may feel that it can achieve its objectives largely by using propaganda to set the agenda, and therefore avoiding the need for heavy handed censorship. The fact that a large amount of critical content is still available, therefore, does not mean that the information people see has not been manipulated to a significant extent. Looking at censorship and propaganda together would overcome this problem.

Most of the existing research has tended to either analyse traditional media (Esarey, 2005; Stockmann, 2013) or the internet (King et al, 2013; Bamman et al, 2012; Esarey and Qiang, 2011; Roberts, 2014; Roberts and Stewart, 2014; Yang, 2014; Roberts, 2015). The weakness of this approach is that the two are increasingly interlinked. The internet had become a key source of information for Chinese citizens by 2013. And by the end of June 2018 over 800 million people (out of a population of 1.3 billion) had access to the internet (Xinhua, August

2018). Lorentzen (2014) argues that a key reason for increasing controls on Chinese news media from the early 2000s was to try to retain the overall balance of information that is available to the public as more information became available via social media. Traditional news is also a key source of political news on social media. In their study on the control of online infornation in Russia, Reuter and Szakonyi found that the ability of activists to 'politicise social networks depends on the availability of 'inputs' such as media coverage, 'that can be fed into online social networks' (2015, 30). The propaganda authorities in China believe getting newspapers to set 'the agenda' online is an important tool in controlling information on the internet (Hassid, 2012, 223). At the same time, the authorities have been reducing the ability of more independent news sources to publish content that varies from the official line on sensitive issues (International Federation of Journalists, 2016). Traditional media, therefore, play an important part in the Party's efforts to guide public opinion online. But existing studies have generally not reflected this. Analysing censorship instructions can show how information is censored both in the traditional media and online. At the same time, analysing how traditional media presents information on the internet would help to show how the Party seeks to shape the agenda online.

Most of the studies that have considered what information is censored online also focus on just one communication channel. For example, King et al (2013) looked at deletions from longer blogs; Ng (2013) and Vuori and Paltemaa (2015) look at blocked words on Weibo; Ng (2015) also examines blocked words on WeChat. The problem with looking at only part of the system for controlling information is that the authorities may use different tactics for controlling different types of information. Looking at censorship instructions would give a more complete picture of what the CCP seeks to censor as these are sent to all media.

Much of the existing research on propaganda has also tended to focus on a single event or issue, very often looking at the aftermath of disasters. For example, Wang (2020) chose to look at the CCP's legitimisation strategies in China's official media by focussing on the 2018 vaccine scandal in China. More recently, Meadows et al (2022) looked at propaganda during the Coronavirus pandemic. Schneider and Hwang (2014) and Sorace (2017) looked at how the Party responded to the Sichuan earthquake. Xu and Sun (2021) looked at propaganda during smog crises since 2013. Schneider (2016) has also examined how the Party governs online political communication about Japan. Miao (2020) examined how the People's Daily responded to the top 20 public opinion incidents of 2016. In other cases, authors have focused their research on particular types of content. For example, Esarey (2021) analysed

media coverage in China to see how much focus there was on President Xi Jinping. Some authors have focused on particular propaganda campaigns such as the China Dream campaign launched under Xi Jinping (Miao, 2020). Brady (2009a) examined the use of the Beijing Olympics as a campaign of mass distraction. Feng (2016) looked at how the CCP promoted moral values through the Spring Festival Gala on CCTV. Wu (2014) looked at the promotion of Confucianism in People's Daily. These studies provide valuable analysis of how the control of information works in particular circumstances or in relation to particular issues. However, the results of the studies are not necessarily representative of what the Party is seeking to do to win people's hearts and minds on a day-to-day basis. Focusing on the state media's online content over a six-year period makes it possible to look more broadly at the CCP's approach to propaganda to try to identify the Party's overall objectives in the decisions it is making about information control in routine times.

Research on censorship has tended to focus on relatively short periods of time. This means that there is a risk that the results are skewed by specific events, so reproducing some of the issues highlighted above. As discussed earlier in this chapter, censorship can vary at different points in time, linked to specific events or anniversaries, or because of perceived public opinion emergencies. For example, the study by King et al (2013) was carried out over a 6-month period and Gueorguiev & Malesky (2019, 1545) argue that the results were distorted by the fact that this coincided with state-led consultation campaigns that were aimed at soliciting critical public input on policy proposals, which meant a lot of critical content was not censored over this period. In order to avoid the results being distorted by specific events, it is necessary to analyse data on censorship and propaganda over much longer periods of time.

Most research on censorship and propaganda does not consider how the information control system seeks to shape the CCP's legitimacy (Repnikova and Fang, 2019; King et al, 2017; Vuori and Paltemaa, 2015; Ng, 2015; King et al, 2013). Some of the existing studies of censorship or propaganda refer to legitimacy (Gallagher and Miller, 2021; Miao, 2020; Schneider and Hwang, 2014; Brady, 2008, 2009) but this is in very general terms. For example, Brady argues that the Party/state's legitimacy is 'carefully manufactured' by the way it controls the information reaching its citizens (2008, 190). Meadows et al (2022) did look at how propaganda is used to enhance the Party's legitimacy but focused on the Covid outbreak. However, it is widely accepted that effective control over information plays a vital role in helping the CCP to maintain and enhance their legitimacy (Holbig and Gilley, 2010;

Hung and Dingle, 2014). Analysing the content that is controlled by the CCP and the way that content is controlled would help to gain a better understanding what types of legitimacy the CCP focuses on in their decisions about censorship and propaganda.

Finally, most of the research on censorship and propaganda focuses on periods before Xi Jinping became president. It is generally accepted that after Mao's death there was some political liberalisation in China, including greater freedom of speech. However, most commentators agree that there has been a tightening of controls under Xi Jinping, including greater restrictions on what can be said in the media and online (Creemers, 2016; Yang, 2016; Repnikova, 2017). Therefore, this research analyses censorship and propaganda in the period from 2013, when Xi Jinping became president, up to the end of 2018, a year after Xi Jinping Thought was enshrined in the constitution and the decision to end Presidential term limits, which were significant points in Xi's presidency.

The way these limitations are addressed in the methodology used for this research are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

As the previous chapter shows, there is a substantial body of research about censorship and propaganda in China. However, there are significant gaps in our understanding of how information control works in China and how this contributes to the CCP's legitimation strategy. This thesis aims to gain an improved understanding of censorship and propaganda in China in the period after Xi Jinping became president at the start of 2013 until the end of 2018 by answering the following research questions. Firstly, what types of political information do the Chinese authorities seek to control in the traditional news media and online using censorship and propaganda? Secondly, how do the Chinese authorities use a combination of censorship and propaganda to control this information? Thirdly, what types of legitimacy does the CCP focus on in its use of information control?

This research involves content analysis together with more in-depth qualitative analysis of the content included in censorship instructions and propaganda. Regarding censorship, the analysis is based on leaked censorship instructions from propaganda bodies in China, which have been collected by an organisation called China Digital Times (http://chinadigitaltimes.net). The propaganda data are posts on Sina Weibo, one of China's main social media platforms, by the People's Daily newspaper, which is the main propaganda mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (Stockmann, 2013). The content of the censorship instructions and People's Daily posts are manually analysed separately, and then there is an analysis of the interaction between the two types of information control.

This chapter explains the methodology used in this thesis in detail. In sections 3.2 and 3.3 there are explanations of the data selected for this research: the leaked censorship instructions and People's Daily Weibo posts. In section 3.4 I explain the reasons for using content analysis to analyse this data, how the content analysis was carried out and how I carried out additional qualitative analysis of the content of the leaked censorship instructions and People's Daily posts. I also explain how I have sought to examine the interaction between the censorship instructions and People's Daily Weibo posts. Section 3.5 then discusses the limitations of this research and section 3.6 provides a summary of the methodology.

3.2 Censorship instructions

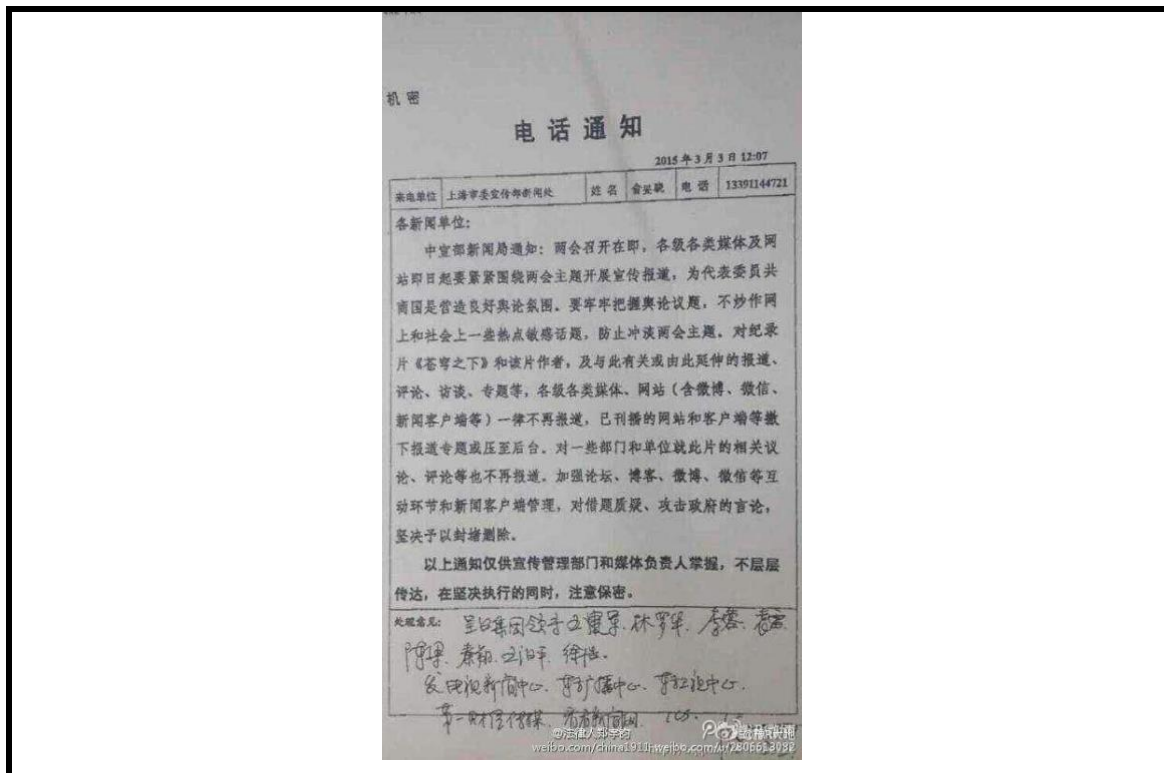
The analysis of censorship in this thesis focuses on censorship instructions issued by propaganda bodies in China. As explained in the literature, this makes it possible to identify content that is minimised as well as content that is eliminated. It also provides a broader picture of the content the CCP is seeking to censor because censorship instructions are used to tell media organisations to control news content, both offline and online, and to inform internet companies to control content created by individual netizens on social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat. However, unsurprisingly, researchers do not have open access to these censorship instructions. The data for this research comes from leaked censorship instructions, which have been collected by China Digital Times (http://chinadigitaltimes.net). Most of the instructions come from the two main propaganda bodies. The Central Propaganda Department (CPD) is the lead propaganda organisation and has direct responsibility for print and broadcast media (Shambaugh, 2007). The State Council Information Office (SCIO) had responsibility for the internet until this responsibility was transferred to the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) in 2014. This is the data I analyse to identify what types of political information the Chinese authorities sought to censor over the period from 2013 to 2018, and how the CCP sought to control that information.

As discussed in the literature review chapter, the Chinese authorities issue these instructions to media and internet companies about the treatment of specific issues they decide are politically sensitive (Brady, 2008; Tong & Sparks, 2009; Shirk, 2011). These instructions are usually secret (Tai, 2014). However, China Digital Times (CDT), a US based organisation, has been systematically collecting leaked instructions since 2011. These leaked instructions are used as the source of the data for this study. Using the CDT search function, I searched for all leaked instructions over the period from 2013-2018. The search returned 678 instructions.

China Digital Times is run by Xiao Qiang, an adjunct professor at the School of Information at the University of California at Berkeley. He is a highly respected academic who has himself published a number of widely cited academic articles on information control in China (e.g. Qiang, 2019; Esarey and Qiang, 2008). Link (2013) describes him as leading ‘the world in ferreting out and piecing together how Chinese Internet censorship works’. The instructions posted on the CDT website have either been leaked on Chinese social media or

are sent directly to CDT by people such as Chinese journalists (Link, 2013). Staff at China Digital Times ‘check the authenticity of every directive they receive against evidence of actual censorship’ (Tai, 2014, 192). In some cases, the wording of the instructions posted on CDT is altered to protect the source of the leak. However, the wording of the instructions posted on their website is also similar to occasional photocopies of censorship instructions posted on other sites e.g., an instruction posted on Weibo in March 2015 (Image 1). In addition, the reputation of the CDT site provides reasonable confidence that the meaning has not been changed. A number of scholars have used the leaked instructions posted on the China Digital Times website in high quality research on information control in China. Tai (2014) used all the leaked censorship instructions collected by CDT between March 2007 and April 2013 as the basis for her study of censorship in China. The article was published in the Journal of East Asian Studies and has been cited 139 times (at 1 December 2023). Roberts ‘combined leaked propaganda directives published online by the China Digital Times with detection of coordination in a large collection of government newspapers’ to identify newspaper propaganda in China for her book which has been cited 675 times (2018, 80). Other studies that have used some of the leaked instructions in their research include Gundogan (2023) in the Journal of Current Chinese Affairs; Han and Shao (2022) in the Political Research Quarterly; Kehoe (2020) in Media, Culture & Society; Khalil (2020) in a paper for the Lowy Institute; Lin and Zhang (2018) in China Review; Tang et al (2016) in Information, Communication and Society; and Crete-Nishihata et al (2016) on the University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab website. A number of studies have also used other content collected by China Digital Times, for example, Chen (2022) in Javnost - The Public; Vuori and Paltemaa (2025); Ng (2015) on the University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab website; and Shirk (2011) in her book ‘Changing media, changing China’ published by Oxford University Press.

Image 1: Censorship directive leaked on Weibo and translation



机密

电话通知

2015年3月3日 12:07

来电单位	上海市委宣传部新闻处	姓名	[illegible]	电话	13391144721

各新闻单位：

中宣部新闻局通知：两会召开在即，各级各类媒体及网站即日起要紧紧围绕两会主题开展宣传报道，为代表委员共商国是营造良好舆论氛围。要牢牢把握舆论议题，不炒作网上和社会上一些热点敏感话题，防止冲淡两会主题。对纪录片《苍穹之下》和该片作者，及与此有关或由此延伸的报道、评论、访谈、专题等，各级各类媒体、网站（含微博、微信、新闻客户端等）一律不再报道，已刊播的网站和客户端等撤下报道专题或压至后台。对一些部门和单位就此片的相关议论、评论等也不再报道。加强论坛、博客、微博、微信等互动环节和新闻客户端管理，对借题质疑、攻击政府的言论，坚决予以封堵删除。

以上通知仅供宣传管理部门和媒体负责人掌握，不层层传达，在坚决执行的同时，注意保密。

处理意见：[illegible]

Shanghai Propaganda Department Information Service: All news work units: The News Bureau of the Central Propaganda Department has put forth the following notice: The Two Sessions are about to begin. Media and websites at all levels must in the coming days tightly focus on major developments at the Two Sessions in order to create a favorable atmosphere of public opinion for the representatives' and committee members' discussions of national affairs. To prevent the dilution of Two Sessions topics, you must have a firm hold on public discussion and refrain from sensationalizing certain sensitive topics coming from the internet and society. Media and websites of all types and levels (including Weibo, WeChat, and news portals) must absolutely discontinue coverage of the documentary "Under the Dome" and its creator, as well as reports, commentaries, interviews, and special topics that concern or extend to this film and its creator. Websites and services that have already carried content must take down special features or clamp down on the backend. Discontinue reporting on discussions related to certain departments and work units concerned with this film. Strengthen management of forums, blogs, Weibo, WeChat, and other interactive platforms, and resolutely block and delete speech that uses this as an opportunity to cast doubt or attack the government.

Source: Image and translation from China Digital Times, March 2015, chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/03/minitrue-clamping-dome/

The main weakness of this data is that it is not representative. It is not the full population of censorship instructions, and it is not possible to know the motive of the people who have leaked the instructions, and therefore whether there may be systematic biases in what is leaked. Tai noted the difficulty of assessing how representative the leaks are (2014, 192). However, she argued that the detail in the instructions enabled her 'to explore the

multilayered meanings included in the directives to examine the real intention of the censorship authorities' (2014, 193). Other studies that have used the leaked instructions collected by CDT do not discuss possible limitations. It would, of course, be better to have access to the full body of censorship instructions but given the secrecy around the censorship system in China that is not possible. However, the fact that there are a large number of leaked instructions available, and that nearly all of these concern political issues, means that, with limitations, it is possible to identify specific categories of political information which have been censored on a significant number of occasions, how the CCP wanted these issues controlled and what types of legitimacy the Party is most focused on controlling. More broadly, the censorship instructions provide the best source of information about what content the CCP wanted to censor and therefore give a more accurate picture of the Party's concerns than looking at what articles or social media posts have been censored. The instructions also provide rich data e.g., about particular political issues or events that have been the subject of censorship and why certain topics have been censored (Image 1). For example, the instructions sometimes contain detailed orders about the urgency of implementing the instruction, and therefore they indicate what types of content are considered a particular priority, which helps in analysing the concerns of the censors. An additional issue is that the number of leaked instructions declined significantly after 2014 (Table 1). This could be because the instructions decreased over this period. However, China Digital Times is probably right to suggest that 'Increasing pressure on media workers, growing awareness of the lack of privacy and anonymity in online communications, and the punishment of some identified or alleged leakers all appear to have fuelled reluctance to risk distributing the secret instructions' (December 2017). Therefore, the conclusions that it is possible to draw from the analysis of the instructions will be limited to some extent.

Table 1: Changes in the number of leaked propaganda instructions

	2013	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**
Number of leaked instructions	174	213	81	78	51	81

The full population of leaked instructions was used for the content analysis (i.e., 678 leaked propaganda instructions over the period from 2013-2018). China Digital Times provides English translations of the instructions, and these are used for the analysis.

3.3 People's Daily posts on Weibo

The second data source for this thesis are posts by the People's Daily newspaper（人民日报）on Sina Weibo, a social media platform which was originally set up as a Twitter clone. The rationale for this choice is twofold. People's Daily is sponsored by the Central Propaganda Department under the CCP Central Committee and is generally seen as the main mouthpiece of the Chinese national leadership (Stockmann, 2013). By looking at People's Daily posts on social media, it is also possible to analyse what the newspaper was saying on a platform that was increasingly being used by ordinary members of the public to access content from state media. There are other Weibos but Sina Weibo is the most popular. In this study, Sina Weibo is normally referred to as just 'Weibo'. By the end of March 2017 Weibo had 340 million monthly active users (China Daily, May 2017). A survey in 2015 also showed that Weibo was the first choice among social media users to follow current news events and social issues, with twice as many people citing Weibo compared to the next platform that was mentioned, Qzone (Qin et al, 2017, 139). WeChat was becoming an important social media platform towards the end of the period covered by this study, but in this period, it was largely used for discussion among groups. People's Daily first opened an account on Sina Weibo in July 2012. It had 58 million followers (in July 2018) and by that time had produced over 87,000 posts. This is a good indication of the importance that the Party attaches to trying to ensure that its propaganda is disseminated effectively online as well as offline. Looking at all the content posted by People's Daily on Weibo makes it possible to analyse the CCP's approach to propaganda more broadly than research that focuses on individual propaganda campaigns or the use of propaganda in response to a particular incident.

Given the large number of posts by People's Daily on Weibo between 2013 and 2018 (99,350), it was necessary to select a sample for the content analysis. Firstly, a pilot study was run, to determine the best way to select the sample of Weibo posts for the main study. Every 200th Weibo post by People's Daily was selected, starting from the first post in 2013. This created a sample of 499 Weibo posts. Each of the posts was read to determine how many political topics were addressed in the posts e.g., content mentioning the CCP, the economy, or rule of law, as opposed to softer non-political topics such as entertainment, sport and the weather.

The posts by People's Daily are in Chinese. I have studied Chinese for over five years, but my knowledge of the language is not equivalent to that of a native Chinese language speaker. I therefore translated the posts using a combination of manual translation and Google Translate. Google Translate 'uses deep machine learning to mimic the functioning of a human brain', called the Google Neural Machine Translation system, or GNMT. Google had human raters evaluate translations on a scale from 0 to 6 and for Chinese to English Google Translate was rated an average of 4.3, while human translators got 4.6 (Boston Globe, 2016). Where a translation was still unclear, the translation was also checked with a native language speaker.

Initially the intention was to select the main sample for this study based on relevance (or purposive) sampling, selecting textual units that particularly 'contribute to answering given research questions' (Krippendorf, 2004, 119). The intention was to extract Weibo posts which mentioned the Communist Party, members of the Politiburo standing committee (the top leadership of the Party) including President Xi Jinping, and important former leaders – Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. However, selecting only posts that mention these keywords would mean that the posts in the sample would not have reflected the broader population of political posts. The pilot study showed that 385 posts (out of 499) included political content e.g., concerning economic or health policies. However, only 30 of these posts referred to the CCP or a CCP leader (rising to 35 if departmental spokespeople were included). Therefore, the sample that was originally planned would have missed out most of the political posts that this study is intended to focus on. Therefore, the decision was made to create a sample based on selecting every 50th Weibo post by People's Daily, to ensure that the sample reflected the whole population of posts. This created a sample of 1,787 Weibo posts. However, this was subsequently narrowed down to focus only on posts that mentioned one or more of the political content categories, excluding posts on topics such as entertainment and sport. This left a total of 1,267 political posts. This is a large enough sample to provide a good indication of the political content that People's Daily was posting across the period. There is a reduction in the number of People's Daily Weibo posts after 2014 (Table 2), but this is much less significant than the reduction in censorship instructions. Moreover, there are no reasons to believe that the sample is skewed. The number of instructions in each year means that it is also possible to get a sense of how the content of these posts changed across the period.

Table 2: Changes in the number of People's Daily political posts on Weibo

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
People's Daily Weibo posts	255	267	219	181	165	180

3.4 Analysis

The leaked censorship instructions and People's Daily posts on Weibo were firstly analysed using manual content analysis, followed by further in-depth qualitative analysis of the content of the instructions and posts. Content analysis is a particularly appropriate method for this study. It involves 'making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use' (Krippendorf, 2004, 18). The 'systematic reading of a body of texts narrows the range of possible inferences concerning unobserved facts, intentions, mental states, effects, prejudices, planned actions etc' (Krippendorf, 2004, 18). Content analysis is therefore often used 'to reveal' the purposes and motives of the communicators, as they are 'reflected' in the content (Berelson, 2000, 204).

The aim of the content analysis is to identify what content features in censorship and propaganda, what methods are used to control the information and how this relates to legitimacy types. For the censorship instructions and the People's Daily Weibo posts I coded for topic categories that are important in Chinese politics. I then grouped these topic categories according to the type of legitimacy they relate to. For example, the economy was selected as a variable because it is important in all countries and, as discussed in the previous chapter, it has been a particularly important issue in China. As discussed in the previous chapter, the economy clearly relates to performance legitimacy. Corruption was also selected as one of the variables because of its prominence as an issue in Chinese politics over recent decades. The development of non-corrupt institutions is regarded as a key element of institutional legitimacy (Holbig and Gilley, 2010, 24), so this was included as one of the categories under institutional legitimacy. Another of the variables is 'communist ideology' because this is often considered to be a key element in the Party's ideology. The aim was to ensure the list of variables selected covered the full range of political topics that might be expected to be covered in the instructions and posts. For the censorship instructions, I also coded for the type of instruction, to identify the different methods used to censor content. The full list of variables is shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: Main variables coded for censorship instructions

Type of instruction	
Delete	Use only authoritative sources
Control online	Guide public opinion
Don’t hype	General instructions
Topic of censorship instruction	
Categories linked to performance legitimacy	*Categories linked to ideological legitimacy*
Economy	Communist Party history
Health and education	Communist ideology
Foreign affairs and defence	Media and internet
Environment	Western values
Disasters	Nationalism
Public security	Moral values
Categories linked to institutional legitimacy	*Categories linked to the Party*
Corruption	Xi Jinping
Rule of/by law	Other CCP
	Other categories
	Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan
	Protests
	Other categories or categories unclear

Table 4: Main variables coded for People's Daily Weibo posts

Topic of People's Daily posts	
Categories linked to performance legitimacy	*Categories linked to ideological legitimacy*
Economy	Communist Party history
Innovation and technology	Communist ideology
Consumer rights	Media and internet
Health and education	Western values
Foreign affairs and defence	Nationalism
Environment	Moral values
Disasters	Traditions and culture
Public security	*Categories linked to the Party*
Categories linked to institutional legitimacy	Xi Jinping
Corruption	Li Keqiang
Rule of/by law	Other CCP
Participation and consultation	*Other categories*
Bureaucracy	Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan
	Protests
	Other Weibo posts

In the rest of this section, I firstly provide some more detail about how the variables were selected. I also provide further explanation of the rationale for the way the variables have been grouped according to their legitimacy type. I then discuss the development of the coding manuals and how these were tested to ensure reliability. I explain how I analysed the results of the coding and the additional qualitative analysis of the instructions and posts. Finally, I discuss the how these methods were applied in Chapter 6 to analyse the way censorship and propaganda are used together and to assess what this reveals about the CCP's legitimation strategy.

To develop the coding frame used in the next two chapters, I used a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. Initially the codes were developed based on (1) a review of the literature on legitimacy, particularly in China, and (2) my knowledge of Chinese politics based on other reading. The coding manuals used in work by Gilley and Holbig (2009) and Zeng (2014a) on the legitimacy debate in China from 2002 - 2007 and 2008 - 2012 respectively were used as a starting point. Both studies analysed discussions about the

legitimacy of the Chinese state and the CCP in Chinese academic journals. This list of variables was then adapted based on reading studies of what content is the subject of censorship and propaganda in China, the wider literature on legitimacy and other studies of legitimacy in China and a range of other sources, including articles in news media outside China and Party speeches and documents. For example, a communique on 'the Current State of the Ideological Sphere' (known as Document 9) issued by the CCP's General Office in 2013, Xi's first year as President, said the Party needed 'to guard against seven "perils," including constitutionalism, civil society, "nihilistic" views of history, "universal values," and the promotion of "the West's view of media"' (ChinaFile, 2013). The document said that all levels of the Party 'must pay close attention to their work in the ideological sphere and firmly seize their leadership authority and dominance' (ChinaFile, 2013). This document, therefore, provides a good indication of threats to its ideological legitimacy that the Party believed it faced at the start of Xi's presidency. As a result, Communist Party history, Western Values and the media and internet were added as separate categories (Tables 3 and 4).

The topic categories were then grouped according to the type of legitimacy they relate to. There is no generally agreed way to define what constitutes performance, ideological or institutional legitimacy. Performance legitimacy is probably the clearest cut of the legitimacy types. It involves delivering the goods for citizens in relation to topics such as the economy, health, education, the environment and public security. I also included disasters in performance legitimacy because the handling of disasters is generally seen as having an important impact on how Chinese citizens view the Party/state (Schneider and Hwang, 2014, 641). The definition of institutional legitimacy is based on work by Holbig and Gilley (2010) and Guo (2003) and includes corruption, the development of the rule of or by law, bureaucratic efficiency, participation and consultation.

The definition of ideological legitimacy is more debateable. Most definitions would include communist ideology, linked to the ideas of Marx and Mao, including the various updates to this ideology provided by CCP leaders. Like a number of other authors, I regard nationalism (Gilley and Holbig, 2009; Christensen, 1996) and moral / cultural values (Kubat, 2018; Gow, 2017; Brown, 2015) as part of the CCP's ideology. As discussed in the previous chapter, emotion places a vital role in ideology (Freeden, 1998, 764). Both nationalism and moral and cultural values can provide a valuable emotional connection between a Party's ideology

and the public. I have also included the ideological perils identified in the communique on 'the Current State of the Ideological Sphere' which was discussed above.

In addition, variables were added to the coding frame for the censorship instructions (Table 3) to identify the type of censorship that was used, to help answer the second research question. For example, I wanted to find out which instructions involved eliminating the content altogether and which instructions sought to minimise the information that was available, for example by insisting that media coverage was based only on official sources. This coding was based on reading a sample of the instructions. Further details about this part of the coding are provided in the discussion about Table 5 below.

A draft of the resulting frames was tested in a pilot of a sample of censorship instructions and Weibo posts. Every 20th censorship instruction was selected, starting from the first instruction in 2013, creating a sample of 34 instructions. The sample of 499 People's Daily Weibo posts described above was also used to test the coding. This confirmed that the codes that had been selected were clear, feasible to code and exhaustive (Bryman, 2016).

The original aim had been to use the same categories for both the censorship instructions and the People's Daily Weibo posts. Most of the categories selected are the same (e.g., the economy, the environment, nationalism and corruption). However, a few categories were identified in the sample of Weibo posts that do not appear in the censorship instructions (consumer rights, missing people, traditions and culture). It was felt that it would be useful to keep these as separate categories for the propaganda analysis. In addition, a couple of the categories used by Gilley and Holbig (2009) and Zeng (2014) - participation and consultation, and bureaucracy - appeared in the People's Daily posts but not in the censorship instructions. As these categories are linked to institutional legitimacy, the decision was made to retain these categories for the coding of the People's Daily posts. Therefore, two separate coding frames were produced for the censorship instructions (Table 3) and People Daily posts (Table 4). However, these have been kept as similar as possible to help comparison.

The unit of analysis was the entire censorship instruction or People's Daily Weibo post, and the coding was usually based just on the content of the instruction or post. However, where it was not possible to determine the focus of a particular Weibo post, any linked content e.g., an article or video, was also considered. In the case of the censorship instructions, it was also sometimes necessary to get additional information. Account was taken of background

information provided with the instructions by China Digital Times and additional information was obtained from other sources e.g., news reports or other documents that helped to explain what the censorship instruction referred to. For example, an instruction from June 2015 said 'Find and delete all news related to "Island's Sunrise" winning Song of the Year at the Golden Melody Awards' (China Digital Times, 29 June 2015). News articles showed that this song was produced to support a sit-in at the Taiwanese parliament by young people opposing a trade deal, and hence closer ties, with China. The post was therefore allocated to the category 'Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan'. It was possible to allocate most instructions and posts to just one category. However, in some cases an instruction or post contained content that was relevant to more than one category. Therefore, some instructions and posts were allocated to two or more categories.

A coding manual helps to ensure a consistency of approach to coding and improve the transparency of the coding process. Coding manuals were therefore produced which include instructions on coding and clear and detailed instructions for each variable (Appendix). As Bryman points out, it is 'almost impossible to devise coding manuals that do not entail some interpretation on the part of coders' (2012, 306). Even if only one person is involved, coding may vary at different times. Reliability was therefore further improved by testing the coding on a sample of the data (32 instructions and 45 Weibo posts) with a second coder who is a native Chinese language speaker and using a measure of intercoder reliability (Lombard et al, 2010). As suggested by Mayring (2000) the Cohen's kappa statistic was calculated using the website https://idostatistics.com/cohen-kappa-free-calculator/#risultati. A value greater than 0.7 is regarded as sufficient to establish adequacy in inter-rater reliability (Mayring, 2000). The first time this was done the Cohen kappa statistic was lower than required. After a discussion with the second coder adjustments were made to the wording of some of the instructions in the coding manuals and the decision was made to create a separate media category, rather than including this as part of the Western values category. After these changes were made, two new samples of 32 instructions and 45 Weibo posts were tested with the second coder. For the propaganda instructions sample the Cohen kappa statistic was 0.74 and for the People's Daily sample it was 0.88. This was therefore sufficient to establish adequacy in inter-rater reliability. The final coding manuals are included in the Appendix.

Credibility was further enhanced during the coding process by 'prolonged engagement' with the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, 1280). Drisko & Maschi (2015) also stress the importance of gaining a 'wide-ranging, in-depth knowledge of the data set'. This helps 'to build

awareness to context and nuance (…) to begin to notice key content and omissions of what might be expected content or perspectives, and to begin to identify connections within the data and preliminary categories' (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). The analysis therefore started by becoming very familiar with the data sets. All the sample of censorship instructions and People's Daily posts were read carefully 'to achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, 1279). The analysis was further improved by making use of evidence from other sources, particularly news articles, documents and the literature review, both to help explain the reasons for some of the censorship instructions and People's Daily posts and because triangulation with other data sources helps to improve the validity of the analysis (Krippendorf, 2004; Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In addition, censorship instructions and Weibo posts 'that do not seem to fit with the emerging conclusions' were carefully examined (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, 1280), to show that all the evidence and rival explanations had been tested to ensure they 'cannot be supported' (Yin, 2009, 144).

The analysis of the censorship instructions and People's Daily posts involved a number of steps. The results of the coding were summarised in tables in order to provide an overview of the results, one for the censorship instructions (Table 7 in Chapter 4) and another for the People's Daily posts (Table 8 in Chapter 5) (Bengtsson, 2015, 12; Bryman, 2016). A 'narrative' was then developed to provide answers to the research questions, supported by evidence (text and, in some cases, images) from the censorship instructions and Weibo posts (Krippendorf, 2004, 89). This involved looking for patterns and relationships in the results. I also sought to contextualise what I was finding based on other evidence about the circumstances surrounding the text from other articles and documents, and the literature (Krippendorf, 2004, 87).

In addition, to looking at what the number of leaked instructions and Weibo posts might reveal in relation to the research questions, I also did further qualitative analysis of the content of these instructions and posts. This made use of the in-depth knowledge and understanding of each of the instructions and posts gained during the content analysis, to identify other evidence that might help answer the research questions. I then found other news articles, government documents and academic literature to help further my understanding of what the propaganda authorities were seeking to achieve. This partly involved looking for additional detail about what aspects of each category the CCP chose to focus on. For example, in Chapter 4 I analysed leaked instructions on the economy to identify

what economic issues the CCP were censoring to protect their economic legitimacy. I developed some of the instructions and posts into mini case studies, consisting of examples from the instructions and posts, where appropriate supported by other evidence. I also looked at what the language used in the instructions might reveal about which content the propaganda authorities considered to be particularly important. For example, in Chapter 4 I identified that censorship instructions about the 1989 Tiananmen protests used particularly strong language, telling the media to *strictly delete* any information about commemorating the anniversary and emphasising that 'anyone found to be violating discipline during this inspection will be *severely punished*'. This underlined the sensitivity of this particular issue compared to ones that used less urgent language. In Chapter 4 I also identified that a number of the censorship instructions told media not to link the story being censored to other similar cases. This showed the importance the propaganda authorities attached to trying to prevent people becoming aware that these incidents were not isolated cases. The qualitative analysis was therefore able to add further detail relevant to the research questions that would not have emerged from the content analysis.

The censorship instructions and People's Daily posts were initially analysed separately (Chapters 4 and 5). In Chapter 6 the censorship and propaganda posts are considered together, looking for patterns and linkages that help to show how the CCP uses a mix of different censorship and propaganda methods to control certain information and to assess what else this reveals about the Party's legitimation strategy.

Analysis in Chapter 6

The first part of the analysis in Chapter 6 involved looking again at the sample of 678 leaked censorship instructions between 2013 and 2018 to see in which cases the instructions called for content to be eliminated and where the propaganda authorities instead sought to ensure that the information people could see was minimised in some way e.g., by only allowing media to use authoritative sources or telling internet companies to control online content about a particular topic. As discussed in the previous chapter, most studies of censorship simply seek to identify content that is eliminated (Ng, 2013, 2015; Vuori and Paltemaa, 2015; King et al, 2013; Bamman et al, 2012) but manipulating content can also have a significant impact on the information that people have available to them. The first type of content are ones that the CCP clearly do not want people to discuss at all, whereas the latter are ones

where some limited or controlled discussion of the content is considered acceptable or where complete elimination of the information is not possible.

Six different types of instruction were coded as part of the initial coding discussed above. These variables are presented again in Table 5. The first of these variables involves instructions which told media organisations to delete content or not to allow information to appear. This included all instructions which said that content on a particular topic should be deleted, removed or not used; don't report on the topic; or do not share content. This is the category which most clearly involves the elimination of content.

Table 5: Variables used to identify full or partial censorship

Full censorship/ complete elimination
Delete or don't report
Partial censorship/ manipulation
Control negative commentary online
Don't hype
Use Xinhua or other authoritative sources
Guide public opinion
General instructions

The other five types of instruction in Table 5 did not involve complete elimination of the information but the information was nevertheless manipulated. The first of these variables involved instructions to control negative commentary online. This includes instructions that refer to controlling, guiding or regulating content on social media platforms, forums etc. The second partial censorship variable involves instructions not to hype information. Some of these instructions use the phrase 'don't hype'. Other instructions tell media not to post articles in prominent positions e.g., on homepages, not to sensationalise stories or to downplay certain issues. The third partial censorship variable is instructions that tell media to only use content from Xinhua or other official sources. This includes instructions telling media to proceed according to a unified plan, or that no independent reporting is allowed. The fourth partial censorship variable involves instructions to guide public opinion. This is a form of reverse censorship. Some of these instructions simply tell media to guide public opinion or to 'strengthen positive reporting'. Other instructions tell media to publish a specific article or video. Imposing content in this way is 'a de facto form of censorship' (Ng, 2015) or 'reverse censorship' (King et al, 2017, 484). The final variable involves general

instructions that do not fit into the other categories. Further details are available in the coding manual in the Appendix.

The second part of the analysis in Chapter 6 was in two steps. Firstly, I analysed a sample of 20 of the censorship instructions for each year between 2013 and 2018. The number of instructions in each year were divided by 20 e.g., if there were 80 instructions, then every 4th instruction was selected. These were coded according to whether they involved attempts to eliminate the content, or whether the authorities were seeking to manipulate the content e.g., by insisting that it should not be hyped (i.e., made less prominent) or by only using the content provided by official sources. I then looked at whether People's Daily posted any content on Weibo related to each of the topics covered in these censorship instructions. People's Daily posts were reviewed for relevant content starting 10 days before the censorship instruction and continuing for 30 days after the instruction. If there were a lot of posts, a maximum of 50 were included in the analysis. We would generally expect state media, such as People's Daily, not to mention the eliminated content but they might post content about information the authorities had sought to minimise, as part of the strategy to manipulate the information.

The content of these People's Daily posts was then coded to show what type of strategy the authorities sought to focus on when they decided to manipulate this information. I developed the categories for the type of propaganda approach based on a review of the People's Daily posts related to censorship instruction topics and knowledge of the literature (Table 6 below). Given the strong focus in Chinese propaganda on positive messages, it might be expected that the authorities would seek to focus people's attention on *positive content about the Party /state* related to the incident/issue, such as information about how the CCP was changing policy to address the problem or achievements by or on behalf of the Party/state e.g. the actions of those involved in rescue efforts (see also Sorace, 2017; Brady, 2017; Schneider and Hwang, 2014). In some cases, it may also be necessary to provide factual news content e.g., about a natural disaster that has occurred. As discussed in Chapter 2, the CCP learnt from incidents such as the 2002/3 SARS outbreak that not providing any information when there was a crisis could backfire on them. This might also include information that might be perceived as negative, such as details about casualties. In some cases, the problem may be so severe that people will be looking for someone to blame, so the strategy in these cases may be to divert attention by *shifting the blame*, placing responsibility for the problem on individuals, companies or local/regional government and other bodies outside central

government (Yang and Wang, 2021; Miao, 2020; Wu and Wilkes, 2018). Another form of diversion may be to *focus on other countries* either as being responsible or as having more significant problems. Other possible approaches identified in the literature or in the posts include *positive information not related to government* (Yang and Tang, 2018; King et al, 2017) e.g., describing someone's achievements / benevolence, and acts of *commemoration* (particularly following a disaster). Propaganda may also be used to *focus on arguments against critics* in relation to the problem (see also Miller and Gallagher, 2016). Finally, it was felt appropriate to look at whether there were any cases where People's Daily themselves made *general critical comments*, which might imply some criticism of the Party/state, such as calls for reflection or improvements.

Table 6: Categories selected for analysis of People's Daily posts

Positive content about the Party /state related to the incident/issue. These are posts that focus on key CCP messages, government action, reassurance by official sources, or positive stories e.g., about police or rescue workers.
Factual / negative news content e.g., deaths, pollution statistics.
Shifting the blame. Content placing the blame for the problem on individuals, companies or local/regional government and other bodies outside central government.
Positive information not related to government e.g. describing someone's achievements / benevolence.
Content involving commemoration for victims of an incident.
Content focussing on arguments against critics.
General critical comments, calls for reflection/improvements, which imply some Party/state responsibility.
Content focussing on problems in other countries.
None of the other categories or unclear.

The results of the coding were summarised in a table (Table 10 in Chapter 6). I then developed a narrative to help answer the second and third research questions: how do the Chinese authorities use a combination of censorship and propaganda to control information and what types of legitimacy does the CCP focus on in its use of information control? This narrative was again supported by examples from the censorship instructions and Weibo posts. Where necessary I also provided further context based on news articles and/or the literature.

3.5 Limitations

The main limitation on this research, as discussed in section 3.2, is the fact that the censorship instructions are not the fully body of instructions issued by the propaganda authorities. Nevertheless, the censorship instructions provide the best source of information about what content the CCP wanted to censor. Given the number of instructions, it was possible to identify categories which include a significant number of censorship instructions, and therefore the types of issues that the Chinese authorities consider to be a particular threat to the CCP's legitimacy. As the Weibo posts are a representative sample of the political posts, it was possible to draw stronger conclusions about the CCP's use of propaganda. It was also possible to look at how the focus on different categories of People's Daily political post and different aspects of legitimacy changed over the period from 2013 to 2018.

The analysis of propaganda is also limited to some extent by the focus on People's Daily Weibo posts. Other parts of the state media may approach the same issues in a slightly different way in their online output but given the centralised nature of the CCP it is likely that these differences would not be significant. There may also be some differences in the way that state media posts content on different social media platforms. However, as explained above, during this period Sina Weibo was the first choice among social media users to follow current news events and social issues.

This thesis seeks to use the analysis of censorship and propaganda to draw conclusions about what the CCP aims to achieve by its use of information control, and particularly what it reveals about the Party's legitimisation strategy. Content analysis is most effective at analysing explicit content. Nevertheless, 'systematically reading' the text of the censorship instructions and People's Daily posts 'narrows the range of possible inferences concerning unobserved facts, intentions' etc (Krippendorf, 2004, 18). I considered the possibility of doing some interviews with journalists, people working on censorship in social media companies and/or officials involved in the propaganda system. This would have helped to support conclusions drawn from the content analysis about what the Party was aiming to achieve. A number of scholars have done similar interviews in the past, as part of their research on the Chinese media, for example, Stockmann (2013) interviewed editors, reporters and propaganda officials for her research on the effects of media commercialisation in China. However, early in this research, after consulting with academics with significant

experience of research on the media in China, I decided that it would not be possible to do interviews. The tightening of political controls in China under President Xi Jinping has meant that interviews like this have become much more problematic. Academic freedom in China has been significantly curtailed and the ability of overseas academics to conduct research has also become constrained (Ruth and Xiao, 2019). In 2016 legal scholar Eva Pils talked about 'the rise of rule by fear', including televised confessions, abductions, new legislation on national security, and surveillance of civil society organisations, while political scientist Minxin Pei argued that China under Xi was engaged in a 'revival of totalitarian scare tactics' (Pils et al, 2016). Control of the media has become significantly tighter under Xi. He toured key media organisations in 2016 demanding the media be loyal to Party (International Federation of Journalists, 2016, 11). Those working in the media face more risks of 'being fired and even jailed', for example Gao Yu was sentenced to nine years in prison for allegedly leaking state secrets to overseas contacts in 2014 (Zhao, 2016b). China ranks 175th out of 180 in the Reporters Without Borders' 2022 World Press Freedom Index and is 'the world's largest captor of journalists with at least 115 detained' (RSF, 2023). There have also been increasing warnings in China about interacting with foreigners. For example, on 'national security awareness day' in April 2018 the authorities launched a website for reporting espionage and released a cartoon warning people to be alert for 'spies who come as tourists, journalists, researchers or diplomats' (Guardian, May 2018). In 2023 a Chinese journalist was detained and accused of spying 'over his interactions with diplomatic and academic contacts from Japan and the U.S.' (Wall Street Journal, 2023). In this environment, it is likely that most of those involved in media organisations and the propaganda system would be unwilling to do interviews about a topic which has become increasingly sensitive. Those who were willing to do such interviews would be unlikely to feel that they could be honest about how the system works. In addition, anyone who did interviews would be placed at risk of punishment by the authorities, raising significant ethical concerns which could not be easily overcome simply by offering anonymity. Therefore, as discussed above, instead of doing interviews the decision was made to do further qualitative analysis of the content of the leaked censorship instructions and People's Daily Weibo posts, together with triangulation with the literature and other evidence e.g., news stories and government documents.

Finally, this thesis seeks to gain a better understanding of censorship, propaganda and legitimacy during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency. The CCP's approach to information control and its legitimation strategy is constantly evolving. Many of the points

identified in this thesis are likely to be relevant in later stages of Xi Jinping's presidency but it is not possible to use the results of this research to accurately describe or predict the Party's actions after 2018.

3.6 Conclusion

This research aims to gain an improved understanding of what was censored and how this information was censored, as well as what this tells us about the CCP's legitimation strategy during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency (2013 to 2018). The data for this research is based on the leaked censorship instructions and social media posts by the Party's main propaganda mouthpiece, People's Daily. Content analysis and additional qualitative analysis are used to look at what was censored and emphasised in propaganda and what this reveals about what types of legitimacy the Party was focused on controlling (Chapters 4 and 5). These methods are then used to analyse how censorship and propaganda are used together to control information and to see what more this can tell us about the CCP's legitimation strategy (Chapter 6).

Chapter Four: CCP censorship

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on what content is censored by the CCP and how this might contribute to the Party's legitimation strategy. The next chapter will focus on propaganda. Together, these two chapters seek to help answer the first and third research questions set out at the start of this thesis: (a) what types of political information do the Chinese authorities seek to control in the traditional news media and online using censorship and propaganda, and (c) what types of legitimacy does the CCP focus on in its use of information control?

Firstly, this chapter looks at what type of content the Chinese authorities seek to censor. As discussed in Chapter 2, a number of authors have looked at the focus of censorship (for example Gallagher and Miller, 2021; Jiang and Kuang, 2021; Vuori and Paltemaa, 2015; Gueorguiev & Malesky, 2019; Ng, 2013, 2015; Tai, 2014; King et al, 2013; Bamman et al, 2012). The most influential of these studies was a paper by King et al (2013) which looked at a period shortly before Xi Jinping became president (the first half of 2011). It suggested that online censorship in China was focused on preventing possible collective action and that otherwise Chinese citizens were allowed 'the full range of expression of negative and positive comments about the state, its policies, and its leaders' (2013, 14). King et al concluded that 'posts are censored if they are in a topic area with collective action potential and not otherwise' (2013, 33). Therefore, I start by looking at whether the data does indeed show that censorship focused largely on collective action, or whether it targets a wider range of content.

As discussed in the last chapter, other research finds that a wider range of content is censored but there is disagreement about the main focus of these censorship efforts. For example, some authors suggest that information control is particularly targeted at content that involves the CCP (Vuori and Paltemaa, 2015; Ng, 2015). Other research finds that the CCP censors are mainly concerned to stop certain critical views spreading and to set out the limits of acceptable discourse (Gueorguiev & Malesky, 2019). A number of studies identify particular policy areas or topics that have been subject to significant levels of censorship such as corruption (Ng, 2015), the environment (Cui, 2017) and the economy (Tai and Fu, 2020). However, as discussed in Chapter 2 there is contradictory evidence about which policies are

most commonly the subject of censorship. Therefore, I look at the data to see what type of content the leaked censorship instructions focused on.

The second part of this chapter focuses on how censorship contributes to the CCP's legitimation strategy, whereas other studies of information control either do not consider legitimacy or only do this in only very general terms (Gallagher and Miller, 2021; Brady, 2008, 2009b). As discussed in Chapter 2, authors also disagree about what type legitimacy is most important to the survival of the CCP. The content of censorship (and propaganda in the next chapter) is examined to identify which aspects of legitimacy the CCP focuses on in its information control efforts, in order to provide an insight into which type or types of legitimation the Party believes is particularly important to its survival.

This chapter seeks to provide a fuller picture of what content is censored by the CCP by addressing the limitations in previous research identified in Chapter 2. As discussed in Chapter 3, this analysis is based on leaked censorship instructions, and it therefore looks at what information the propaganda authorities wanted to control in both traditional media and online. The censorship instructions also provide a more complete picture of what the CCP was seeking to censor, rather than just focusing on what information does or does not get posted or published. This thesis also examines censorship over a six year period, whereas most other studies have looked at much shorter periods. It covers the period after Xi Jinping became president at the end of 2012.

There were 678 leaked censorship instructions over the period. As discussed in Chapter 3, content analysis was used to determine what political categories and legitimacy types the CCP were seeking to censor. I then carried out a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the instructions, reading them carefully to identify additional evidence about what types of information were censored and what the content of the instructions reveals about the CCP's legitimation strategy.

Several key findings can be highlighted. Section 4.2 shows that in the period from 2013 to 2018 a broad range of political content was censored. The results of this chapter therefore make it clear that since Xi Jinping became president at the end of 2012 the CCP has certainly not 'allowed the full range of expression of negative and positive comments about the state, its policies, and its leaders' as King et al suggested was the case at the time of their research in 2011 (2013, 14). Section 4.3 to 4.6 also provide an insight into how the CCP uses

censorship to limit risks to its performance, ideological and institutional legitimacy. The analysis of the censorship instructions also shows that about a quarter of the instructions were focused on influencing perceptions about the Party itself, including limiting critical or even simply embarrassing information about the CCP and its leaders. About a quarter of those instructions involved the censorship of content about President Xi Jinping, but these provide only limited support for the argument that there was an attempt to promote a form of charismatic legitimacy focused on the CCP leader.

4.2 What content is censored?

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is agreement in the literature that content is selectively censored but disagreement about what content the Chinese authorities seek to control. This section looks at what types of content the CCP focused on in the leaked censorship instructions. Table 7 firstly shows the number and percentage of leaked propaganda instructions by category, to identify the range of political topics covered in the instructions. The table also divides the content categories into the main legitimacy types: performance, ideological, institutional and charismatic legitimacy, as well as the reputation of the CCP (as discussed in the literature review). The first part of this analysis focuses on the political categories. The legitimacy types are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Table 7: Content of censorship instructions - categories and legitimacy types

	Number of leaked instructions	**Percentage of all leaked instructions (678)**
PERFORMANCE LEGITIMACY		
Economy	63	9%
Public security	59	9%
Foreign affairs	46	7%
Disasters	41	6%
Environment	39	6%
Health and education	29	4%
Total performance legitimacy*	***247***	***36%***
IDEOLOGICAL LEGITIMACY		
Media and the internet	55	8%
Western values	47	7%
Nationalism	35	5%
Communist Party history / Foundational myths	26	4%
Communist ideology	6	1%
Moral values	5	1%
Total ideological legitimacy*	***168***	***25%***
INSTITUTIONAL / 'RATIONAL-LEGAL' LEGITIMACY		
Corruption by officials	82	12%
Rule of law	46	7%
Total institutional legitimacy*	***127***	***19%***
Charismatic legitimacy		
Xi Jinping**	41	6%
CCP		
CCP (including Xi Jinping)	***159***	***23%***
Other instructions	14	2%
Xinjiang etc	61	9%
Protests	45	6%
Total *	875	n/a

* Some instructions appear in more than one category, therefore the total for each legitimacy type is not the sum of each of the categories and the total for all categories is larger than the total number of instructions (678).
** This is a subset of the CCP category.

The 678 leaked censorship instructions between 2013 and 2018 included a wide range of different political content. Only a small number of the leaked instructions focused on protests or potential protests (45, 6%). This probably underestimates, to some extent, the impact of censorship related to protests. Journalists and internet companies know that protests are sensitive issues, and therefore a significant amount of self-censorship can be expected in relation to protest actions. Protests have been an important factor in the collapse of a number

of authoritarian regimes (King et al, 2013) and, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the number of collective actions in China grew very rapidly in the reform era (Liu and Chen, 2012). The Party is therefore 'hypervigilant against uprisings' (Shambaugh, 2016, 62). Nevertheless, the range of other topics covered in the leaked instructions mean that during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency censorship was not largely 'oriented toward attempting to forestall collective activities' (King et al, 2013, 1). It suggests that the Chinese authorities were interested in controlling information across a much broader spectrum of issues.

There was a great deal of censored content concerning problems or criticisms related to a range of policy areas. This included the economy (63, 9%), public security (59, 9%) and the environment (39, 6%). For example, in 2014 the State Council Information Office said, 'All websites are kindly asked to delete the article "Report Says Pollution in Beijing Approaching Level Unsuitable for Human Habitation"' (China Digital Times, 12/02/2014[1]). The CCP was therefore not prepared to countenance people having access to information which suggested that its policies were leading to conditions which might not be suitable for human habitation. Discussion of smaller scale concerns may have been acceptable to the CCP, but not something that suggested the problems were this serious. When the Beijing authorities decided to evict tens of thousands of people in a crackdown on unsafe dwellings, the censors moved to prevent discussion of the impact on migrant workers. A censorship instruction told websites to 'immediately shut down related special topic pages, control interactive sections, refrain from reposting related content, and resolutely delete malicious comments. Print media must give prominence to policy reports and stop independent focus on the topic' (China Digital Times, 28/11/2017). The evictions had attracted considerable criticism. Just before the censorship instruction was issued over 100 Chinese intellectuals wrote an open letter calling the evictions a serious trampling of human rights (Guardian, November 2017). The instruction was therefore a clear attempt to limit criticism of this particular policy decision. Another instruction told internet companies to 'Intercept, find, and delete content attacking the World Internet Conference in Wuzhen on interactive platforms such as Weibo, blogs, public WeChat accounts, forums, and bulletin boards' (China Digital Times, 03/12/2017). The annual conference is a showcase to promote China's view of internet governance. Some criticism of more peripheral policies will generally be considered

[1] Censorship instructions are available on the China Digital Times website www.chinadigitaltimes.net in the section 'Directives from the Ministry of Truth'. The date shows when the instruction was posted on the website.

acceptable. However, the CCP was clearly not prepared to tolerate a significant amount of online discussion which involved criticisms of policies that were particularly important to it.

Many of the instructions were focused on censoring content about the CCP itself (159 instructions, 23% of the leaked instructions). For example, one instruction from the Central Propaganda Department during the Two Sessions in 2013, the annual meetings of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress, told media 'Do not report "shocking" news on representatives' (China Digital Times, 03/03/2013). After the death in prison of a Bo Xilai ally in 2015 internet companies were told, 'Pay attention to and delete online comments attacking the central leadership' (China Digital Times, 16/12/2015). Moreover, about a quarter of the instructions about the CCP mentioned Xi Jinping (41, 6%). For example, one instruction in 2013 said, 'All websites must strengthen management of posts reporting on Secretary-General Xi's activities and promptly delete harmful information' (China Digital Times, 23/07/2013). The analysis of the censorship instructions shows that the propaganda authorities were very sensitive about criticism of the Chinese president. Censorship therefore played a significant role in protecting the CCP and its leading members from criticism. This does not mean that all criticism was filtered out, but people would certainly have been less aware of criticism of the Party and its leaders as a result of censorship over this period. This contrasts sharply with the argument by King et al that the CCP allow 'negative, even vitriolic, criticism' of its leaders (2013, 1).

Further qualitative analysis of the content of the leaked censorship instructions shows that many of them explicitly told media and internet companies to eliminate anything attacking the state. An instruction after a stampede during New Year celebrations in Shanghai in 2015 told media to 'Delete malicious information, remove opportunities to attack the Party and the government, and information attacking the social system' (China Digital Times, 02/01/2015). The propaganda authorities therefore did not allow people to say what they like about the state. In situations like this, which attracted a significant amount of public attention, they were clearly determined to significantly limit the amount of criticism of the Party/state that people could see.

Therefore, this analysis of the leaked propaganda instructions shows that collective action was only one factor in censorship decisions. The censors also targeted a wide range of

content that included information about the CCP and its leaders, the state and also details about problems and criticisms of policies of the Party/state.

The following sections focus on what the data in Table 7 reveal about the types of legitimacy that the CCP focused on in the leaked censorship instructions.

4.3 Censorship of performance issues

It has often been said that the CCP's legitimacy is inextricably linked to performance (Hung and Dingle, 2014, 376; Saich, 2004; Guo, 2003; Chen, 1997). Indeed Table 7 shows that the largest number of leaked censorship instructions related to *performance legitimacy*. More than a third (36%) of the instructions censored content related to performance.

Journalists and scholars who emphasise the importance of performance legitimacy to the CCP in the reform era have placed particular emphasis on the economy (Financial Times, 2022; Chen, 1997). This argument suggests that very high levels of economic growth filled the legitimacy gap that was created when reform and opening up started and it became more difficult to claim that China was a communist country. The leaked instructions show that the CCP was certainly concerned to control some content concerning economic performance. Economic issues were censored in nearly one in ten of the leaked instructions (63, 9% of all instructions). For example, one instruction told media: 'Do not report on events related to foreign investment firms' successive withdrawal from China. Do not re-post or comment on related news' (China Digital Times, 05/03/2018). Investment by overseas companies has played a significant part in China's high growth rates and the instruction aimed to limit awareness of foreign firms leaving China, and therefore the potential impact this might have on the economy. Another instruction by the Central Propaganda Department told media that they had to use copy from Xinhua (the state news agency) for articles on a State Council report on income distribution and that they could not 'put the story on the front page, or lure readers to it', including by posting it on their social media accounts (China Digital Times, 06/02/2013). The State Council report set out proposals for further economic reforms, including reducing advantages for State Owned Enterprises (The Diplomat, 2013). The authorities clearly wanted to try to control the information available about reforms which could negatively impact some sections of society, and which might be seen as conflicting with its claims to be pursuing a socialist economic strategy. Similarly, a 2014 instruction told media not to report on falling house prices (China Digital Times, 10/04/2014) and a

2016 instruction told media not to report negatively on the property market, foreign exchange or the stock market (China Digital Times, 06/03/2016). These findings therefore show that economic legitimacy was an important factor in censorship decisions in the period from 2013 to 2018. The examples suggest that the CCP believed its economic legitimacy depended partly on preserving its reputation for generating high growth rates and better standards of living, but also on controlling the narrative around economic policies which many people would feel were inconsistent with being communist.

However, analysis of the leaked instructions shows that censorship in the Xi era has aimed to shape perceptions about a wider range of performance issues. Environmental problems featured in about 6% of the leaked censorship instructions (39) while health and education issues featured in 4% (29) of the instructions. For example, the media were told to 'absolutely discontinue coverage' of a documentary called *Under the Dome* which raised awareness of China's environmental problems and social media companies were told to 'resolutely block and delete speech [about the documentary] that uses this as an opportunity to cast doubt or attack the government' (China Digital Times, 03/03/2015). The environment has been an issue that concerns many Chinese people, particularly because of the problem of air pollution. The language used in the instruction shows that propaganda officials believed that discussion about the film had the potential to undermine the Party's legitimacy. In another instruction media were told to 'Close down comment sections on coverage of the Ctrip daycare mistreatment incident, including on Weibo and WeChat… do not publish or repost related reports' (China Digital Times, 10/11/2017). Following allegations of child abuse at a Shanghai daycare centre, tens of thousands of social media users expressed anger and concern about the incident (China Digital Times, November 2017). The Chinese authorities had allowed some coverage of the issue but then moved to stop, or at least significantly limit, further discussion about it. Although the incident involved a private company, it raised issues about government regulations and the instruction shows that the Chinese authorities wanted to limit the scope for significant criticism of government policy. The analysis of the leaked instructions therefore shows that the CCP did seek to censor content related to a range of social issues to influence people's perceptions about the Party's performance (see also Shambaugh, 2016; Bondes and Heep, 2013). It also shows that the Party is concerned to control certain information about the actions of private sector companies, as well as bodies that are under the direct control of the Party/state. As discussed in Chapter 6, the CCP is often happy for the private sector to be blamed for problems in society. However, as the censorship of the daycare scandals illustrate, it is concerned to

prevent or limit discussion where this may lead to questions about the Party/state's responsibility for those problems.

Analysis of the leaked instructions also shows the importance that the CCP attached to controlling the narrative around the state's performance following natural and manmade disasters. Effective management of disasters was traditionally seen as being vital to the ability of Chinese dynasties to maintain the 'Mandate of Heaven', the right to continue ruling. Indeed about 6% of the leaked censorship instructions (41) referred to these types of events. The censorship instructions show that the authorities were eager to stop or limit stories which might harm their legitimacy by suggesting they were not doing enough to look after the interests of people affected by natural or manmade disasters. For example, one instruction told all websites to remove a report that said over 10,000 people were still waiting for disaster relief following an earthquake (China Digital Times, 24/04/2013). Two days later, the Central Propaganda Department issued a broader instruction telling media: 'It is forbidden to carry negative news, analysis, or commentary on the April 20 earthquake in Sichuan' (China Digital Times, 26/04/2013). These instructions clearly aimed to reduce the amount of negative information that was available about the disasters and several instructions made it explicit that a key concern was to prevent coverage that criticised the Party or the political system. Similarly, after an industrial explosion at Tianjin in 2015, news websites were told that 'Content which seizes the opportunity to attack the Party, the government, or the social system will be investigated and lead to punishment. Delete such content immediately' (China Digital Times, 13/10/2015). The media were not prevented from covering the incident, but they were banned from saying anything which might suggest that the Party/state might bear some responsibility for what had happened. In a number of cases, the media were also specifically told not to make connections with other similar incidents. For example, after an explosion in Zhangjiakou, Hebei, media were told 'Do not speculate on the cause of the accident, and do not relate it to similar incidents' (China Digital Times, 27/11/2018). The intention was clearly to avoid people being reminded that similar industrial explosions have occurred elsewhere, and that this might therefore be a policy issue that government needed to address, rather than just an unfortunate isolated case. At the same time, the media were often explicitly told to increase positive reporting about the government's response to disasters. For example, on the 5th anniversary of the Wenchuan earthquake, media were told by the Central Propaganda Department to 'Maintain positive coverage' (China Digital Times, 11/05/2013). After a landslide at a mine in Tibet, the media were told to 'Cover disaster relief promptly and abundantly. Properly guide public opinion' (China Digital Times,

30/03/2013). As discussed in Chapter 2, this is a form of reverse censorship. The leaked instructions sought to ensure that, as far as possible, coverage of disasters focused on positive news to show that the disasters were being properly managed, while minimising negative information which would have undermined that image. In this way, the CCP sought to manipulate public opinion about disasters to limit the risk that it might be judged to have lost the Mandate of Heaven, i.e., that its legitimacy would be undermined. This shows, as Schneider and Hwang (2014, 641) have argued, that the 'heavenly mandate' discourse still 'influences the ways legitimacy can be imagined and represented in today's China'. The country's leaders believe that it is vital for them to be seen as managing disasters effectively.

There were also a noteworthy number of instructions about public security (59, 9%). There is very little mention in the literature of the importance of how people view the public security system to the CCP's legitimacy, but there were a similar number of censorship instructions about this category as there were about the economy. The public security category includes instructions about the abuse of police power and conflicts between citizens and the police (or other internal security personnel). For example, one instruction said '"Child Grasps Steel Pipe to Resist Chengguan" video, pictures, and news reports must all be removed from main news sections' and emphasised that 'News that unfavourably portrays the law enforcement community must be released with caution' (China Digital Times, 15/04/2016). The instruction followed the circulation of a video clip showing a toddler wielding a steel pipe at chengguan urban management officials to protect his grandmother after they challenged her about the location of a market stall (Buzzfeed, 2016). Once again, the instruction did not prevent all discussion of the incident, but it sought to minimise the amount of negative information about 'the law enforcement community' that people could see. Similarly, websites were told 'to find and remove the video "Actual Footage of Chengdu Police Surrounding and Beating Homeowners Who Were Defending their Rights' (China Digital Times, 22/04/2014). Effective internal security plays an important part in keeping most authoritarian regimes in power and China spends more on internal security than it does on external security (Wall Street Journal, 2018). Analysis of the instructions that sought to prevent or limit negative stories about the police and other parts of the internal security structure shows that the CCP saw maintaining public trust in its internal security system as playing in an important part in maintaining its legitimacy. The censorship instructions would not have prevented some negative information about those involved in law enforcement, but it would have meant that people saw less of this kind of content than would otherwise have been the case.

Many of the instructions on public security issues also concerned the performance of the system in keeping people safe. For example, media were told 'Don't report' a terrorist attack in Xinjiang 'until it has 'undergone unified planning' (China Digital Times, 08/03/2013). Another said, 'You may only use authoritative, standard sources when covering the knifing incident in Changsha… Filter online discussion of the issue' (China Digital Times, 14/03/2014). A number of these instructions also show that the authorities were concerned to try to stop the media linking these cases to previous incidents. Following a knife attack on children at a kindergarten in Chongqing, media were told 'do not compile lists of similar incidents in the past' (China Digital Times, 26/10/2018). As in the case of the industrial incident mentioned above, preventing the media from drawing links to similar incidents would have limited the potential for people to see patterns that might suggest the need for policy changes. CNN reported that one local resident had said that after the kindergarten attack, and a number of other incidents, 'he's increasingly sceptical of the government's ability to look after his own daughter' (CNN, 2018). The propaganda instruction shows that the Chinese authorities wanted to limit the possibility that other people might draw similar conclusions to the resident interviewed by CNN. After a number of terrorism incidents and other violent attacks in 2014 the propaganda authorities issued a wide-ranging instruction to websites, telling them 'from now on, do not hype, do not comment, do not modify headlines, do not distribute bloody photographs, do not link to old stories, do not publish commentary, and use only official wire copy on news related to violent terror attacks, trouble caused by mental disorders, or police opening fire' (China Digital Times, 18/06/2014). Hassid and Sun argue that 'an obsession with social stability continues to drive the contemporary CCP' (2015, 9). Censoring information about incidents like the ones mentioned here would have helped to limit the potential for a counter narrative to the CCP's claims that it is the guarantee of stability in China.

Censorship cannot eliminate all threats to the CCP's performance legitimacy. Some problems will be obvious to people from their own experience. Problems like the smog that regularly envelops large parts of China are not ones that that the Party can render invisible simply by using censorship. But censorship can still help to shape how people interpret these issues. The leaked instructions show that propaganda officials focused their efforts on minimising the availability of information which might have affected people's perceptions of the Party's performance, but which most of them would not otherwise be aware of. The instruction mentioned above in which the media were told to delete an article saying that

pollution in Beijing was "Approaching Level Unsuitable for Human Habitation" (China Digital Times, 12/02/2014) was one of a number of cases where censorship was used to limit the amount of information that was available about how serious the consequences of certain problems were. People would have been able to see the smog for themselves, but they would only be likely to have learnt about a report like this on the consequences of that pollution if it had been communicated through the media. Removing this kind of content would therefore not have eliminated people's concerns about pollution but it could potentially have reduced the importance that people attached to those concerns.

Unlike air pollution, disasters are events that do not directly affect most Chinese citizens. However, in the era of the internet, it is not possible to conceal information about most of these events entirely. Censorship instructions therefore focused on trying to control the narrative about the Party/state's performance in dealing with the disasters. The leaked instructions show that the Party sought to ensure that media coverage largely followed its own, 'authoritative', version of what happened. For example, when a boat, the Oriental Star, capsized on the Yangtze in 2015, with the death of most of the 450 passengers and crew, media were told, 'All coverage must use information released by authoritative media as the standard' (China Digital Times, 01/06/2015). As discussed further in Chapter 6, authoritative media such as Xinhua and People's Daily present a narrative that is most favourable to the CCP, avoiding particularly negative information, including anything that might be seen as critical of the Party. Therefore, there may have been a lot of coverage of an incident like the sinking of the Oriental Star, but people would have seen much less of the kind of information that the Party thought might damage its legitimacy. When a particular story about a disaster was simply negative, the authorities were more likely to ban the information altogether. For example, the Beijing Internet Management Office told websites 'Please immediately remove the Jinghua Times earthquake report "Over 10,000 Long Bitterly for Disaster Relief"' (China Digital Times, 24/04/2013). As Zeng has argued, legitimacy based on government performance does not directly stem from the government's performance but 'from citizens' subjective perceptions of this performance' (2016, 11). Censorship of information that people would not otherwise be aware of can therefore play an important role in maintaining the CCP's performance legitimacy in relation to problems such as disasters and pollution.

The analysis of leaked censorship instructions therefore shows that the CCP made significant efforts to influence people's perceptions about its performance by its use of censorship. It also shows that in the first six years of the Xi Jinping era the CCP believed it needed to

control information about a range of performance issues. As expected from the literature, the CCP were certainly concerned to try to influence people's perceptions about economic issues during this period. However, social issues such as environmental problems also featured strongly in the instructions, as did instructions about disasters. The leaked instructions about public security also show the importance the CCP attached to protecting the reputation of those involved in public security and to controlling information that might undermine CCP claims to be able to maintain social stability. It may have been the case that in the first decade or two after the start of reform and opening up, the CCP could mainly rely on economic growth to ensure its performance legitimacy. This analysis shows that during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency, the CCP believed that maintaining its performance legitimacy relied on limiting people's access to information which might suggest it was failing to deliver on a wide range of issues that concerned its citizens. Moreover, even if some issues are too obtrusive to completely remove people's concerns, the CCP seeks to shape perceptions of those problems, for example by limiting information about how widespread the problems were and strong criticisms of the Party/state. They also seek to remove content that people would not otherwise be aware of which might increase their concerns about the problems, and which might therefore make them more likely to blame the Party/state.

4.4 Censorship of ideological issues

The Chinese authorities did not limit their censorship efforts to information related to performance issues. The second largest number of leaked instructions (25%) related to *ideological legitimacy*. As discussed in Chapter 3, the categories that have been coded as part of ideological legitimacy for this research include Communist ideology (e.g., Communism, Maoism, Deng Xiaoping Thought and, more recently Xi Jinping Thought) and nationalism. Several other categories involve threats to CCP ideology, particularly 'Western values', the media and Communist Party history. As discussed in Chapter 3, these latter categories have been created and defined based on the perceived ideological threats mentioned in Document 9, an internal Party paper which said the CCP needed to guard against a number of political "perils" (ChinaFile, 2013). This section looks at the extent to which censorship focused on these different aspects of ideology, and therefore what this can reveal about the Party's ideological legitimation strategy.

As Table 7 shows, the biggest category related to ideological legitimacy involved the media (55, 8.1% of the leaked instructions). Document 9 said: ‘Some people, under the pretext of espousing “freedom of the press,” promote the West’s idea of journalism and undermine our country’s principle that the media should be infused with the spirit of the Party’ (ChinaFile, 2013). The media category therefore focuses on content about restrictions on media or internet freedom.

Some authors argue that the Party has an incentive to make people aware that censorship is taking place. Link (2002) suggests that awareness of censorship, and the potential penalties for publishing content the authorities deem unacceptable, plays an important part in encouraging self-censorship. However, the fact that so many of the leaked instructions concern the media shows that the Party does not want people to be aware of the full extent of its controls on the media and the internet. The censorship instructions concerning the media aimed to make sure that some information about the Party’s control of the media was either made less prominent or was not available at all. For example, websites were ‘forbidden from reporting on U.S. president Obama’s call at APEC for China to open the internet’ (China Digital Times, 11/11/2014) and told to ‘cease republishing’ an article entitled “Large-Scale Shuttering of Tencent WeChat Accounts” (China Digital Times, 14/03/2014). The State Council Information Office also told media ‘to delete the article “180 Countries Ranked in 2013 Press Freedom Index; China at 175th” and related content’ (China Digital Times, 12/02/2014). Several instructions told media not to report details about action that propaganda bodies had taken against publications or about the arrest of journalists or only to report information from official sources. For example, in 2016 an instruction told media not to report on changes to the editorial staff at a publication called Yanhuang Chunqiu and websites were told to add a filter to prevent people searching for information about the publication (China Digital Times, 15/07/2016). Yanhuang Chunqiu had had a reputation as a liberal and reformist publication but in 2016 it was forced to make a number of senior editorial changes, which subsequently led to it closing down. Some information about censorship is helpful to the CCP because it encourages self-censorship and it can also signal the strength of the regime ‘in social control and capacity to meet potential challenges’ (Huang, 2015, 22). However, if people know that the CCP is censoring a lot of information they might want to know about, that risks undermining their trust in the Party. The number of leaked censorship instructions about the media and the examples above show that the Party censors a wide range of content about censorship to try to ensure that people are not fully aware of the scale of their information control efforts.

Analysis of the leaked instructions about the media show that the Chinese authorities sometimes chose to manipulate critical information about the media using 'reverse censorship' rather than just banning information. For example, the CCP sometimes used information control to discredit journalists or influential netizens who were seen to have stepped out of line. In one case, a journalist, Chen Yongzhou, had been arrested after investigating financial irregularities at a state-controlled company. His newspaper, The New Express, had then run a front-page lead calling for him to be released, attracting widespread attention (BBC, October 2013). The State Council Information Office initially instructed media to remove articles and related commentary about the case (23/10/2013). However, a few days later, the media were instructed to run a Xinhua news agency story based on a TV confession in which Chen said he had taken bribes to write the stories (26/10/2013). The Committee to Protect Journalists has noted that televised confessions are 'among tactics deployed by Chinese authorities for dealing with journalists who cover sensitive stories' (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015). The Chen Yongzhou case had already received a lot of attention before the censors intervened. In this case simply trying to prevent further discussion of the issue would not have stopped some people believing that he had got in trouble for exposing corruption, a problem which Xi Jinping claimed to be tackling. Therefore, in some cases like this the propaganda authorities used a mix of outright bans and manipulation aimed at discrediting the original information (see also Chapter 6).

The second biggest category related to ideology was Western values (47, 6.9% of the leaked instructions). The Western values category focuses on issues such as democracy, religious freedom, universal values and civil society, including NGOs, dissidents, human rights lawyers or activists. Further analysis of these posts shows that in many cases the censors simply sought to ban or limit certain information related to Western values. For example, in 2014 the State Council Information Office told media organisations to 'find and delete all news related to the 6/22 Hong Kong referendum, thoroughly clean up related comments' (China Digital Times, 23/06/2014). The referendum was organised as part of the campaign for the public to be allowed to choose Hong Kong's chief executive. However, as in the case of Chen Yongzhou, the Chinese authorities also made use of 'reverse censorship' to frame some stories about democracy campaigners in Hong Kong in negative terms. During the Occupy Central protests in 2014, as part of the campaign for democratic elections, the propaganda authorities instructed websites in China to 'prominently re-post' articles purporting to link the protest organisers to the CIA (China Digital Times, 25/06/2014). Zeng

has argued that the CCP's ideology is often framed in negative terms, involving efforts to 'delegitimise alternative political systems – especially liberal democracy, which legitimates the current political system in reverse' (2016, 22). Given the scale of the protests in Hong Kong, it would have been more difficult to stop people in mainland China seeing some information and images about what was taking place, than to stop many of them learning about calls for a referendum. Discrediting alternative ideas and critics may be an effective strategy when the CCP cannot eliminate all access to this kind of information, and where they believe they can create a credible narrative to discredit those ideas. And the CCP would have been likely to calculate that the risk of people finding out about the protests was not as great as them learning about the referendum. Protests also take place on the mainland, but people do not try to organise votes on key political decisions. Given the amount of nationalist rhetoric in the Chinese media and online (see Chapter 5), it was also easier for the propaganda authorities to construct a narrative about the involvement of 'foreign forces' in protests than to discredit a process in which people expressed their opinions by voting. Therefore, the CCP used censorship both to limit discussion of content related to Western values and to discredit those values.

Another issue which Document 9 identifies as an ideological risk to the CCP is 'Promoting historical nihilism, trying to undermine the history of the CCP and of New China' (ChinaFile, 2013). There were 26 leaked instructions that involved censorship of content about the history of the CCP (4%). The language used in many of these instructions underlines just how sensitive the CCP is about criticisms of its history. For example, in 2014, several instructions concerned the anniversary of troops being sent in to crush the Tiananmen protests in 1989. One told media companies 'to strengthen on-duty work during this time of *highest sensitivity*. Closely observe reporting discipline. Ensure that a responsible editor is *always* present' (China Digital Times, 03/04/2014). Another told internet companies to '*strictly delete*' any information about commemorating the anniversary' and said that 'anyone found to be violating discipline during this inspection will be *severely punished*' (China Digital Times, 03/04/2014). Chinese netizens have found many ways to refer to sensitive events to bypass the censors (Yang, 2009), and the instructions show the propaganda authorities seeking to ensure that, as far as possible, this kind of content was also removed. For example, the instruction on deleting information about the Tiananmen anniversary made it clear that this also included 'so-called sideways expressions'. Another instruction told internet companies to 'Take care to find and delete the Tencent Entertainment article "Amnesiacs, With What Can We Save You?"' (China Digital Times,

03/04/2015). ‘Amnesiacs’ refers to the success of the Chinese state’s efforts in eliminating most information about what happened at Tiananmen in 1989, with the result that many Chinese citizens have little or no awareness of the event (Lim, 2014). Other instructions focused on key figures from the Party’s history. Xi Jinping has made it particularly clear that he regards criticism of Mao as unacceptable. Speaking in December 2013 to mark Mao’s 120th birthday, he said that simply ‘because leaders made mistakes, one cannot use these mistakes to completely negate their legacies, wipe out historical successes, and descend into the quagmire of historical nihilism’ (*Nieuwenhuizen, 2016).* Several of the leaked censorship instructions mention Mao. For example, one told websites ‘to clean out’ information which ‘severs the connection between Mao Zedong Thought and Marxist-Leninist Thought’ or which ‘smears Mao’s moral character and private life’ (China Digital Times, 19/06/2013). During the period from 2013 to 2018, the CCP clearly did not give its citizens full reign to critically discuss the Party’s past record. The leaked instructions show that the CCP was extremely sensitive about criticism of the Party’s history.

The largest category of leaked instructions which concern the CCP’s own ideology were about nationalism (35, 5% of all leaked instructions). As discussed in Chapter 5, nationalism is an important plank in the CCP’s ideology (also see Holbig, 2013; Callahan, 2006; Gries, 2005; Christensen, 1996). So why would the CCP want to censor some content related to nationalism? Further analysis of the instructions related to nationalism show that most of them involve threats to the CCP’s claim to be championing patriotism in China. One instruction told media and internet companies not to ‘hype or spread information’ about protests that broke out after China’s defeat in international arbitration over its claims in the South China Sea and to ‘delete inflammatory information’ (China Digital Times, 18/07/2016). China Digital Times (July 2016) noted that after the South China Sea ruling, Peking University had also issued a notice announcing that it had introduced ‘wartime stability procedures’ to ‘prevent large-scale gatherings, demonstrations, or even extreme behaviour’. Students at Peking University were at the heart of protests in 1919, which were seen as the start of a nationalist movement against foreign humiliations, undermining the then government and contributing to the eventual victory of the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP was therefore clearly concerned that public anger about the ruling could make the Party look as though it was allowing China to be humiliated again, and it therefore used censorship to try to bring nationalist sentiment back under its control. Similarly, in 2018, as important trade negotiations with the US continued, an instruction told internet companies that ‘Especially with malicious hyping of topics related to the “viewpoint of accepting

humiliation," promptly delete content, and deal with relevant accounts' (China Digital Times, 02/12/2018). The CCP had a strong incentive to try to end the trade war with the US but there were risks for the Party in being seen to give in to any of President Trump's demands. These examples show that the CCP did not simply rely on using propaganda to enhance its nationalist credentials (which is discussed in the next chapter) but that it also used censorship to tone down expectations about what China could achieve on the international stage and to limit any voices that suggested the Party itself was not being sufficiently patriotic. Callahan argues that by the mid-1990s nationalism had, to some extent, 'spread beyond official control' (2006, 187). Nationalism driven by people outside the Party is a potential threat to the CCP's legitimacy. Some scholars have even argued that the CCP fears it could lose power if the public believe it is weak in dealing with other countries and allowing China to be humiliated again (Shirk, 2011). The leaked censorship instructions show the censors actively seeking to limit content that undermines the Party's nationalist narrative, or which creates expectations that go beyond what the CCP believes it can meet (also see Reilly, 2012).

The analysis so far has demonstrated the importance of both performance and ideological legitimacy for the CCP. However, analysis of the leaked instructions shows that on some occasions the use of nationalism to enhance ideological legitimacy can conflict with the need to maintain performance legitimacy. This was reflected to some extent in the dilemma about how the CCP tried to deal with a more assertive US President in 2018, while avoiding risks to its economy that would have been inflicted by an escalating trade war. The same dilemma is apparent from the changes in how the Chinese authorities instructed the media to deal with *Amazing China*, a documentary which highlighted the country's achievements in a number of areas, including science, technology, industry and poverty reduction, since Xi Jinping became president. In March 2018, the media were instructed to 'expand the promotion of the "Amazing China" documentary' (China Digital Times, 07/03/2018). However, only a month later, the Central Propaganda Department issued an 'urgent' notice telling commercial video sites to 'immediately stop' showing the film (China Digital Times, 24/04/2018). Another instruction told media 'do not make further use of "Made in China 2025" or there will be consequences' (China Digital Times, 29/06/2018). Why the change? Made in China 2025 is an industrial master plan that aims to turn the country into a high-tech superpower. Although the Amazing China video and Made in China 2025 messages were ones that could be seen as enhancing the CCP's nationalist credentials, they also complicated their efforts to do a trade deal with the US which was necessary to avoid harming the economy, and therefore undermining its performance legitimacy. The New

York Times (2018) also noted that over this period 'the media coverage in China of the recent economic tensions with the United States has been largely free of nationalistic or inflammatory language'. Therefore, faced with a choice between performance legitimacy and enhancing its ideological legitimacy by boosting its nationalist credentials, the CCP clearly decided in mid-2018 that it was more important to try to protect its performance legitimacy. The balancing act between performance and ideological legitimacy at this time was clearly challenging for the CCP. A year later as the trade war continued, the approach had changed, and state media were themselves stepping up the nationalist rhetoric. A presenter on China Central TV told viewers "Talk? Our door is wide open. Fight? We will accompany you to the end" adding that as a country with 5,000 years of history "what kind of battle formation has the Chinese nation not seen?" (ABC, 2019). This suggests that as hopes of reaching a beneficial trade agreement and therefore securing the consequent economic gains were fading, the Party instead chose to use criticism of the United States to bolster its nationalist credentials.

While the CCP felt it necessary to use censorship to protect itself from threats to its nationalist credentials, there were very few censorship instructions about communism. Table 7 shows there were only 6 instructions (0.9% of all leaked instructions) concerning communism, whether that was traditional communist ideas or the various attempts that Chinese leaders have made to create updated versions, including Xi Jinping's own ideas. Xi Jinping's attempts to construct a new CCP ideology have received a great deal of attention in the West, including the China Dream and 'Xi Jinping Thought with Chinese characteristics', which was formally adopted by the CCP at the 19th Party Congress in 2017 (Guardian, October 2017). However, the lack of censorship instructions on these topics did not mean that people could say whatever they liked about these aspects of CCP ideology. Self-censorship means that the media would have been very likely to avoid criticism of communism and particularly anything that was critical of ideas promoted by Xi Jinping. Internet companies would also have been fairly rigorous about censoring this kind of content without having to be given instructions to do this, and these are topics that netizens will be more cautious about commenting on. It is also possible that given the risks, people were less likely to leak instructions on these topics.

Several studies look at the use of cultural and moral values in contemporary CCP ideology (Gow, 2017; Kubat, 2018; Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018). As discussed in the next chapter, cultural and moral values play a significant part in CCP propaganda. However, there

were only a very small number of leaked censorship instructions concerning moral values (5, 0.7%), and none of these related to traditional cultural values such as Confucianism. This underlines the advantages for the CCP of integrating these ideas into the Party's ideology. These are generally not controversial ideas and unlikely to attract significant criticism. Equally there were not large numbers of netizens who were putting forward a more purist form of cultural and moral values, and who therefore risked undermining the CCP's claims to leadership in this area.

This analysis shows that the CCP made significant efforts to censor ideas that might threaten its ideological legitimacy. In particular, the CCP sought to minimise or eliminate information about alternative values, as well as using censorship to limit awareness of the way freedom of information was being constrained. The CCP also used reverse censorship to delegitimise alternatives to the CCP's own ideology and journalists whose investigations went beyond what the CCP was prepared to tolerate. However, the language used in instructions about content concerning the Party's history show that the CCP is particularly sensitive about 'historical nihilism'. The Chinese authorities also used censorship to limit content that might threaten the CCP's ability to use nationalism to legitimise its rule, reinforcing evidence that nationalism plays a key role in the CCP's contemporary ideology (see Chapter 5).

4.5 Censorship of institutional issues

Censorship of content related to performance and ideology are therefore key elements in the CCP's legitimation strategy. However, a number of authors have also argued that *institutional or legal-rational legitimacy* has been taken increasingly seriously by the Party in the period since the CCP put down protests in Tiananmen Square (Chin, 2018; Zeng, 2016; Gilley and Holbig 2009; Nathan 2003). Table 7 shows that 19% of the leaked instructions included content relating to institutional legitimacy. In particular, the CCP used censorship to minimise or eliminate two types of content that are associated with institutional legitimacy: corruption and the rule of law.

Table 7 shows that 12% (82) of the leaked instructions involved content about corruption. Similarly, Ng (2015) also found that a lot of content which involved discussion of corruption was censored on WeChat. However, a number of scholars have shown that the CCP has encouraged the media and netizens to act as watchdogs to tackle corruption (Repnikova, 2017; Lorentzen, 2014; Shirk, 2011; Tong & Sparks, 2009). Indeed, there has been a great

deal of information in the Chinese media and online about corruption, including in posts by the People's Daily newspaper on Weibo (see Chapter 5). This is not only because media coverage has helped to expose corruption cases, but also because Xi Jinping was keen to show that he was tackling the corruption problem effectively. So why were there so many censorship instructions concerning corruption? Further qualitative analysis of the leaked censorship instructions shows that they were dominated by cases involving senior CCP leaders. For example, when Xu Caihou, the former vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, was under investigation for corruption, propaganda officials made it clear that the media should 'without exception, use only Xinhua wire copy' and that they should 'remove related reports from the headlines of the "double homepages"' (the homepage and the main news page), as well as taking care 'to control commentary' (China Digital Times, 01/07/2014). This instruction had three distinctive, if related, aims: to ensure that the media coverage reflected the official narrative; to ensure that this case was not presented as one of the top news stories; and to remove critical comments from netizens about the story. The CCP certainly did not want the media or citizens to independently investigate or comment on this case, or for it to be given too much prominence. According to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, around 2 million officials were investigated for corruption between the end of 2012 and mid-2018 (ChinaFile, 2018). However, it is notable that the people who featured in censorship instructions on corruption were also largely the 'tigers', senior officials like Bo Xilai, Zhou Yongkang and Xu Caihou, rather than the much larger number of 'flies', the lower-level officials. This will partly be because the leaked instructions are dominated by instructions from central propaganda bodies but the extent to which the censors focused on corruption cases involving senior Party leaders suggests the Chinese authorities were much more concerned about controlling the narrative about figures close to the centre of the Party. Their corruption would have had more potential to taint the image of the CCP if the narrative about these cases had not been handled carefully. And as discussed in Chapter 6, the Party is often happy to see the blame for problems focused on officials and Party members outside Beijing, while protecting the image of the core leadership. Therefore, the CCP allowed quite a lot of discussion of corruption, as long as this was consistent with their own narrative, and it did not have much potential to negatively affect the centre of the Party.

The priority for the CCP in this period was to show that Xi Jinping was successfully cracking down on corruption. Some of the censorship instructions also helped to achieve this by reducing the availability of information which highlighted any failure to control corruption

or to act against those responsible. In one case, propaganda officials told media to 'Find and delete harmful information related to the article "Corrupt Chinese Officials Who Flee Abroad Run off with Trillions, Money Impossible to Recover"' (China Digital Times, 07/05/2014). In this case, the story suggested a failure of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign and it would have been difficult for the authorities to give the story a positive spin, so the decision was made to try to ban it altogether.

Another category that is key to institutional legitimacy is the rule of law. Chin argued that the CCP had sought to show that its rule was, at least in part, 'legitimated in terms of rules and laws that are rationally established' (2018, 189). There are 46 instructions in this category (7% of the leaked instructions). Looking at the content of these instructions shows that the CCP generally sought to control information that called into question the fairness of the legal system or concerned problems ordinary people had getting justice. Some of these cases related to land grabs. For example, the State Council Information Office told media to delete an article "Pingdu Villagers Who Lost Land Tell Their Plight to Central Government Inspection Group, Are Arrested by Pingdu Police" (China Digital Times, 02/04/2014). People who have failed to get justice from their local authority often seek to petition central government to try to secure their help. However, local officials often try to prevent the petitioners from travelling to Beijing to submit their petition (South China Morning Post, November 2018). Censoring the story about the Pingdu villagers would have limited the number of people who became aware of a case which would have undermined the Party's claims to be strengthening the rule of law. Other instructions related to other attempts to seek justice. For example, a 2018 instruction told media 'Do not report on the Peking University open letter incident' (China Digital Times, 25/04/2018). The letter had been written by Yue Xin, a Peking University student and described how the university authorities has harassed her and her family after she had participated in a freedom of information request regarding a 1998 rape case involving a former professor (Muzzy, 2018). Similarly, after a court case following the death in custody of the husband of a CCTV news presenter, internet companies were told to 'quickly dispose of harmful information attacking our social system and judicial system' (China Digital Times, 23/10/2018). Prosecutors had subjected Lau Hei-wing to 80 hours of sleep deprivation and torture in an effort to secure a confession (Financial Times, 2018). Chinese courts are technically barred from extracting confessions by torture, but there have been many reports of torture and ill treatment in Chinese prisons (European Court of Human Rights, 2022). The CCP has made efforts to improve confidence in the rule of (or by) law in China (Chin, 2018) and cases like these risked undermining those efforts. The

number of instructions related to the rule of law together with the type of issues these dealt with show that the CCP was concerned to shape public perceptions about the fairness of the legal system.

4.6 Censorship of content related to the Party

The *reputation of the CCP* (its leaders and key institutions) is also vital to its legitimacy (Bondes and Heep, 2013). Indeed, analysis of the censorship instructions suggests that the Chinese authorities were extremely sensitive about content that mentioned the Party. About a quarter of the leaked propaganda instructions (159, 23%) directly mention the CCP.

Further analysis of the content included in these instructions shows that just over half the instructions about the CCP (82 out of 159) concerned corruption. A number of scholars both inside China and overseas argued that before Xi Jinping became president corruption had been the biggest threat to public perceptions of the CCP's moral performance (Zeng, 2016). The extent to which content about corruption was censored underlines the Party's concerns over this period about the impact that corruption was having on its reputation. As discussed above, the Party obviously wanted its anti-corruption efforts to be reported and there has been a lot of discussion about corruption in the Chinese media and online. However, the CCP also used censorship to control the narrative and limit the amount of coverage about corruption involving senior Party leaders. It also sought to limit information that might suggest failings in the anti-corruption campaign. Censorship was therefore used to try to influence people's perceptions of the corruption problem inside the Party/state and what the CCP was doing to tackle it.

The leaked instructions also show that the propaganda authorities wanted to ban other negative representations of the Party. The instruction mentioned earlier in the chapter telling media not to report "shocking" news on representatives to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress was one example of this (China Digital Times, 03/03/2013). Similarly, during the Two Sessions in 2016, media were told 'Do not report on delegates' personal wealth' (China Digital Times, 06/03/2016). The CCP therefore sought to remove or limit a range of negative content about itself that people could see.

Another common theme in the instructions about the CCP was efforts to limit content that mocked, or even just poked fun at, the Party and its leaders. An instruction by the State Council Information Office in 2013 said that recently there had been ‘considerably more online mockery and criticism of the Party’s mass line activities’ and instructed websites ‘to promptly delete all types of negative contents, focusing on increased management of comments posted to related news stories’ (China Digital Times, 09/07/2013). Another instruction the following year told internet companies to ‘Delete all online images of the “Yu Yuan Tan inflatable toad” and related commentary’ (China Digital Times, 23/07/2014). Netizens had been comparing a 72-foot golden toad installation floating on a lake at the Yu Yuan Tan Park in Beijing to former President Jiang Zemin, who was mockingly called ‘The Toad’ by Chinese netizens. China Digital Times (June 2014) noted that Xinhua and Sina soon removed reports on the installation from their webpages and that even innocuous Weibo posts about the installation began to disappear. As noted below, there were also a number of examples of instructions referring to mockery of Xi Jinping. Therefore, the Party was not just concerned about serious criticisms of the Party, it also banned or limited access to content that might undermine the image of its leaders as sober, serious, competent people who were focused on acting in the best interests of Chinese citizens.

This focus on protecting the image of the Party, its leaders and the system is also reinforced by the language used in a number of the leaked instructions. Twenty of the instructions specifically refer to the need to delete content online that ‘attacks’ the Party, leaders and or the political system. For example, the instruction mentioned above that was issued after the New Year’s stampede in Shanghai told internet companies to ‘remove opportunities to *attack* the Party and the government, and information *attacking* the social system’ (China Digital Times, 02/01/2015). When the Central Propaganda Department Vice Minister Lu Wei was investigated for corruption, an instruction told internet companies to ‘Find and delete negative comments *attacking* the system’ (China Digital Times, 22/11/2017). Similar language was used in a further eight instructions. For example, after a poor rural woman in Gansu killed herself and her children, internet companies were told to ‘eliminate any *politically harmful* content or commentary’ (China Digital Times, 13/09/2016). The New York Times reported that the case had prompted a debate in China about inequality in Chinese society and the effectiveness of the Party’s efforts to reduce poverty, which was a key policy of President Xi Jinping (New York Times, 2016). This was a debate that the Party was therefore keen to limit.

The Party clearly believed it needed to maintain and enhance its ideological, performance and institutional legitimacy but this thesis shows that a strong imperative was also to protect the image of the CCP itself and its top leaders. King et al's research suggested that in 2011, just over a year before Xi Jinping became president, the propaganda authorities allowed 'the full range of expression' about the CCP, and that the Party's leaders could be 'as embarrassed, as is often the case with elected politicians in democratic countries' (2013, 14). However, this research shows that during Xi Jinping's first six years as president, the censors sought to limit criticism of the Party and prevent their leaders being embarrassed or even gently mocked.

About a quarter of the instructions about the CCP mention Xi Jinping (41 instructions, 6%). As noted above, within a few years of Xi becoming President at the end of 2012, there was increasing discussion about the extent to which there was an attempt to develop a form of *charismatic legitimacy* based around Xi Jinping. The censorship instructions which mentioned Xi aimed to limit coverage in the traditional media or online of negative or embarrassing stories about the Chinese president. For example, the media were told to 'Resolutely block and delete the foreign media article "'Daddy Xi' Again Ignites Leader Worship Among the Chinese People" and related news' and to 'strictly control related commentary on interactive comment sections' (China Digital Times, 09/03/2105). Several instructions limited mockery of Xi Jinping. For example, one instruction said, 'No website may hype the story "Three-and-a-half-year-old Reads Xi Jinping's 'Governance of China' Cover to Cover"' (China Digital Times, 25/06/2015). This story emerged from a talent contest for children in which one three-year-old read from a page of 'The Governance of China', a collection of speeches and writings by the Chinese leader. China Digital Times suggested the directive was issued after a number of netizens had used the story to poke fun at Xi on Weibo. For example, one netizen wrote: 'I can't tell whether this is a good omen, or if it means the "Governance of China" is written for three-year-olds' (China Digital Times, June 2015). However, these instructions are similar to the way the CCP censored content about other senior leaders and the Party.

Some of the instructions also used reverse censorship, telling media to ensure that content centred on Xi Jinping was prominently displayed. One told the media to repost a positive story about Xi from a media outlet that is normally banned in China that said, 'All media are kindly asked to repost on the double homepages [main and news] the Duowei article "Xi Jinping Is Awakening China"' (China Digital Times, 19/08/2014). Another said, 'According

to instructions from central leadership comrades, all news media outlets must continue to deepen their study and transmission of the spirit of Secretary-General Xi Jinping's series of important speeches, revolving around the strategic positioning of the "Four Comprehensives," combined with deep concern for public opinion' (China Digital Times, 07/09/2015). The media were also told 'Do not let news of Malaysia Airlines [Flight 17] surpass reports on Xi and [Premier] Li in headline placement location' (China Digital Times, 17/07/2014). The Malaysia Airlines flight was shot down over Ukraine with the loss of all the passengers and crew. China Digital Times (July 2014) noted that Sina's news portal on 18 July reflected this instruction, with the first headline reading "Xi Jinping in Argentina; Countries Will Sign Multi-Domain Cooperation Agreements", while stories about the Malaysia Airlines flight appeared further down.

In some cases, the instructions explicitly told media to publish a positive story about Xi while preventing or limiting any negative comments on the story by the public. For example, during a trip Xi made to Europe, websites were told to 'promptly republish Xinhua wire copy, and interactive platforms must take care to control negative commentary' (China Digital Times, 01/04/2014). This determination to protect the image of the Party's top leader is also supported by some of the data collected for the research carried out for the next chapter. In Chapter 5 People's Daily posts on Weibo are analysed to look at how the CCP uses propaganda. The data showed that there was significant censorship of public comments about People's Daily posts where President Xi Jinping (as well as Premier Li Keqiang) were mentioned. There were very few comments on posts about Xi and Li between 2013 and 2016, compared to the number of comments on other posts. Ironically, one of the posts in 2015 was about Xi telling workers about the importance of cadres listening to opinions and suggestions from ordinary people and inviting the public to 'Please come to the door and spit out their real thoughts' (People's Daily, 17/07/2015[2]). This post had just 59 comments, compared with an average of 732 comments per post over the year. It is very unlikely that so few people were interested in commenting about stories involving the country's president. By contrast the post had about 64% of the average number of likes for People's Daily posts that year. People were clearly not welcome to spit out their thoughts about Xi Jinping (and Li Keqiang). The CCP did not want their propaganda messages about the two leaders undermined by any comments that might in any way be seen as critical. It was presumably easier to stop most of the comments on these posts rather than risking critical comments

[2] The date shows when the content was posted on Sina Weibo by People's Daily.

being available on the site for a period before they were removed. The number of comments on these posts increases from the beginning of 2017, possibly because of improved technology to filter out unwanted critical comments before they were posted.

Therefore, the censorship instructions were to some extent used to prevent critical or embarrassing comments about Xi Jinping, while using reverse censorship to enhance his reputation and to focus on his personal role in leading the country, rather than that of the CCP. However, this is not sufficient to support the argument that charismatic legitimation was starting to play a part in the CCP's legitimation strategy over this period. The number of instructions mentioning Xi Jinping was fairly small, only 6% of all the leaked instructions. The fact that a quarter of the instructions that mention the CCP or its leaders mentioned Xi is not particularly surprising in view of the prominence given to a country's leader. For the most part, these instructions were also similar to those used for the Party in general. The analysis of propaganda posts in the next chapter also shows there was much less emphasis on promoting Xi Jinping to the public over this period than might be expected from a strategy based on charismatic legitimation.

One other category stands out in Table 7 is the censorship instructions which mention disputed territories, particularly Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan (63 posts, 9%). These are territories where the CCP's legitimacy to rule is most in question. Indeed, Taiwan has been run as an independent state since the CCP came to power in 1949 but is still regarded by the CCP as part of China. The CCP's legitimacy is also threatened in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, where a significant number of people oppose rule from Beijing. Over the period covered by this research tensions were particularly high in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. In the former there were protests and acts of terrorism against Chinese rule, and information started to emerge towards the end of the period that large numbers of Uyghur Muslims had been put into internment camps (Guardian, October 2018). The CCP's sensitivity about these areas is underlined by the fact that they were mentioned in nearly one-in-ten of the leaked instructions. Most of the posts in this category concerned information about Beijing's authority in these areas. Some of these instructions also featured in the Western values category because they involved the operation of democratic processes or demands for democracy. For example, there were several very strongly worded instructions about the events leading up to the democracy protests in Hong Kong in 2014. As noted above, one instruction told media to delete all news about an unofficial referendum in Hong Kong planned for 22 June 2014 on demands for democratic elections. Internet companies were

told to ‘Forcibly cancel blogs and microblog posts reprinting harmful information’ and ‘ensure that no information related to the referendum appears online’ (China Digital Times, 23/06/2014). In addition, Guangdong Province (which borders Hong Kong) was told ‘to cut signal on all programs from Hong Kong television stations, especially on June 22’ (.ibid). Similarly, media were told not to hype the referendum in Crimea and not to connect the story to ‘our own country’s issues with Taiwan, Tibet, or Xinjiang’ (China Digital Times, 17/03/2014). About a quarter of the instructions (17) also featured in the category for public security issues, and these concerned terrorism in Xinjiang. For example, one instruction told media to ‘Delete the [Ta Kong Bao] article “Three Officials Killed by Terrorists in Kashgar, Xinjiang” (China Digital Times, 19/05/2014). The attack was probably considered particularly sensitive because it took place on the same day that Xi Jinping was visiting Xinjiang. Another 12 involved protests, mainly in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. These instructions show that the CCP was very concerned to limit discussion about these challenges to its legitimacy in these areas.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed leaked censorship instructions to help answer two of the research questions: (a) what types of political information do the Chinese authorities seek to control in the traditional news media and online using censorship and propaganda and, (c) what types of legitimacy does the CCP focus on in its use of information control? Looking at censorship instructions is particularly useful because it shows what information the CCP is particularly concerned to eliminate or limit. The content and language used in these instructions also provides additional insight into the importance that the CCP attaches to controlling particular types of information.

The chapter firstly looked at the range of politics topics covered in the leaked censorship instructions. The analysis in this chapter shows that in the period since Xi Jinping became leader, at the end of 2012, a broad range of political content was censored, including content about the economy, public security, the environment and the handling of disasters. There were also many instructions about the CCP, its leaders and the Party’s ideology. Although some of the instructions were about collective action, the CCP under Xi Jinping did not only, or even mainly, censor content related to collective action to remain in power. During the period from 2013 to 2018, the CCP certainly did not allow ‘the full range of expression of negative and positive comments about the state, its policies, and its leaders’ as King et al

argued in their paper based on an analysis of censored blogs in 2011 (2013, 14). The analysis in this chapter shows that the CCP were determined to minimise the amount of criticism of the state, its policies and its leaders that people could see. There are number of possible explanations for the difference in these results. As Gueorguiev & Malesky argue, the King et al results may be distorted by the fact that their research was only conducted over a 6-month period which coincided with state-led consultation campaigns that were aimed at soliciting critical public input on policy proposals, which meant that less critical content was censored (2019, 1545). The research by King et al also focused on deletions from longer blogs. This meant that social media platforms such as Weibo and traditional media such as newspapers were not included, and they did not consider other forms of censorship which limited the amount of content but did not censor it altogether. To some extent, the difference is also explained by the fact that the CCP has stepped up the control of information under Xi Jinping. This research also shows that the CCP were concerned about the content of information posted online, as well as who was promoting it. Although Gallagher & Miller convincingly argue that social media posts are more likely to be censored if they are posted by 'users who have the influence and the public following to cause real damage' (2018, 23), the analysis of leaked censorship instructions presented in this chapter shows that the CCP sought to censor some content more broadly, either by trying to eliminate that information, or by limiting the amount of information that people could see.

In terms of legitimacy, this chapter shows that a significant number of the leaked censorship instructions were used to influence perceptions of the Party's performance. The analysis of the censorship instructions shows that the economy remained important to the CCPs legitimacy, with a number of instructions designed to minimise the risks to their legitimacy as a result of bad economic news. However, the authorities also censored a range of other performance related content to reduce the risks posed by problems such as disasters, pollution and conflict between citizens and the police. The CCP deleted or limited the amount of negative information about its performance to reduce the scope for people to see some of the most negative information or alternative analyses of key problems facing the country. The additional qualitative analysis of the instructions provides further detail about what aspects of each legitimacy type the CCP were focused on controlling. For example, censorship of content related to the economy was focused on negative information about growth and stories that implied a conflict between economic reform and the Party's claims to be pursuing socialist policies. This part of the analysis also shows that the CCP do not generally seek to remove information about problems that many people are experiencing for

themselves, or which have already been widely communicated online. Instead, it focuses on censoring content that most people would not otherwise be aware of, in an effort to limit concerns about these issues and therefore the potential for people to blame the Party/state. The CCP also tries to prevent particular incidents being linked to other similar problems, so that people are less likely to see them as systemic problems that suggest wider failings by the Party/state.

There were also a large number of instructions about ideological legitimacy. These mainly sought to address ideological threats or 'perils' which were identified in a CCP paper known as Document 9 that was leaked in 2013, particularly Western values, media freedom and historical nihilism. Further qualitative analysis shows that the CCP sought to ban or delete some content related to Western values but in other cases it used the censorship instructions to frame these values, or those promoting them, in negative terms in an effort to delegitimise these alternative ideas. Similarly, the CCP often sought to censor content about its information control efforts but also used instructions to delegitimise journalists and netizens who produced content the Party disapproved of. The most strongly worded instructions concerned those about the Party's history, underlining the threat that the Party believes is posed by historical nihilism. The CCP also targeted information that might have undermined its ability to use nationalism as a source of ideological legitimacy. Further qualitative analysis of the nationalism instructions shows the censors was principally concerned to limit content that might suggest the CCP was failing to defend Chinese interests or which risked raising expectations beyond what the Party could deliver. Censorship therefore limited the potential for a counterhegemonic discourse to develop.

After Mao's death the Party sought to show that its rule was, to some extent, based on legal-rational principles and in the period covered by this research the CCP censored content related to institutional or legal-rational legitimacy, particularly information about corruption among senior Party leaders and content that could undermine people's confidence in the rule of law.

The Party therefore uses censorship to defend itself from a broad range of threats to its legitimacy. The analysis also shows that about a quarter of the leaked censorship instructions were focused on influencing perceptions about the Party itself. These included the instructions about corruption but further analysis of instructions which mention the CCP shows that the Chinese authorities were also concerned to limit other critical content or even

simply embarrassing information about the CCP and its leaders. During the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency, the Party did not allow people to freely express their views about the CCP. About a quarter of instructions that mentioned the CCP involved censorship of content about President Xi Jinping, but these provide only limited support for the argument that there was an attempt to promote a form of charismatic legitimacy focused on the CCP leader during this period.

The CCP therefore did not just focus on controlling information from certain individuals or on controlling one or two types of information and otherwise allow people to freely discuss other topics. The censorship instructions targeted content including criticisms of Party/state performance, alternative ideologies and negative content about the Party. This does not mean that all content that might be considered sensitive was censored, but the censorship instructions reflect a Party that was alert to potential threats from all directions. The Party did not try to ban everything that it did not like. Chinese citizens could therefore have seen some sensitive content about a range of issues over this period. However, far from allowing people to freely express their views on most political issues, the CCP sought to use censorship to manipulate enough of the information Chinese citizens were seeing to prevent their legitimacy being eroded. The next chapter looks at the content the Party focused on promoting using propaganda to try to enhance its legitimacy.

Chapter Five: CCP propaganda

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter looked at what content the CCP seeks to censor and how this related to their efforts to maintain and enhance regime legitimacy. This chapter focusses on propaganda. While censorship is largely about eliminating or minimising certain information, propaganda involves actively promoting content a regime wants people to see. As discussed in Chapter 2, in the period up to 2012 propaganda was one of the strategies most frequently mentioned by Chinese scholars as a tool to maintain and enhance the CCP's legitimacy (Zeng, 2014, 615; Holbig and Gilley, 2010). Together with the previous chapter, this chapter seeks to help answer the first and third research questions set out at the start of this thesis: (a) what types of political information do the Chinese authorities seek to control in the traditional news media and online using censorship and propaganda, and (c) what types of legitimacy does the CCP focus on in its use of information control?

As discussed in Chapter 2, scholars disagree about the focus of propaganda in China. For example some authors have suggested that propaganda is more focused on influencing the social agenda (for example Chan, 2007), others talk about propaganda framing the discussion of sensitive political issues (for example Wang, 2020 and Brady, 2017) and some point to evidence of propaganda being used to blame problems on individuals and regional government (Yang and Wang, 2021; Miao, 2020), while a number of authors suggest that propaganda mainly involves a focus on positive discussions or generating 'positive energy', while avoiding sensitive issues (for example, King et al, 2017 and Yang and Tang, 2018). As discussed in Chapter 2, there is also disagreement about what types of legitimacy the CCP focuses on. In this chapter I look at what the content of CCP propaganda reveals about the types of legitimacy the Party has focused on during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency.

This chapter focuses on the CCP's online propaganda from the start of Xi Jinping's presidency at the beginning of 2013 to the end of 2018. As discussed in Chapter 3, the internet has become an increasingly important source of news for people in China and Xi Jinping has emphasised the need to occupy the online 'public opinion battlefield' (Creemers, 2016). The analysis in this chapter is based on content analysis of a sample of social media posts by the People's Daily newspaper on the social media platform Sina Weibo. People's

Daily is the CCP's main propaganda mouthpiece. When he toured state media in 2016, Xi declared that 'all the work by the Party's media must reflect the Party's will, safeguard the Party's authority, and safeguard the Party's unity' (Guardian, February 2016). Therefore, for People's Daily, news and propaganda are very much one and the same thing. In 2014, Xi Jinping had also called for an acceleration of efforts by state media organisations to strengthen their online presence (South China Morning Post, 2014). Weibo is one of the most important sources of online information. A survey in 2015, showed that it was the first choice among social media users to follow current news events and social issues (Qin et al, 2017, 139) and People's Daily had 58 million followers on Weibo by July 2018.

As the discussion in Chapter 2 showed, much of the existing research on propaganda has tended to have quite a narrow focus. By contrast, looking at People's Daily posts on Weibo makes it possible to get a much broader perspective of CCP propaganda. This thesis also looks at propaganda over a much longer period than most other research on propaganda and therefore avoids the results being affected by short-term changes. This research also focuses much more than previous studies on what the content of the CCP's propaganda reveals about the Party's legitimation strategy.

As discussed in Chapter 3, every 50th Weibo post was selected, creating an initial sample of 1,789 Weibo posts. However, this was further narrowed down to focus only on posts that mentioned one or more of the political content categories, leaving a total of 1,267 political posts. The categories used for the analysis of the People's Daily posts are largely the same as those described in the previous chapter on censorship. In addition, to the content analysis, I also carried out a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the content of the People's Daily posts to find further evidence about the types of political information the CCP sought to promote online, and to see what additional evidence this revealed about the CCP's legitimation strategy.

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows. Section 5.2 provides an overview of the People's Daily political posts on Weibo. Section 5.3 shows that there was a strong focus in the posts on ideological legitimacy, particularly nationalism and moral and cultural values. Section 5.4 shows that there was also a lot of propaganda about performance legitimacy, covering a wide range of topics including the economy, disasters, public security and the environment. However, this analysis also shows that People's Daily increasingly avoided discussing sensitive performance issues. Instead, performance posts became more focused

on content where the Party/state was less likely to be held responsible for any problems. By contrast, section 5.5 finds very little evidence that that the CCP placed a high priority on institutional legitimacy. In Section 5.6, I argue that there was only limited evidence in this period that there was any shift towards charismatic legitimacy focused on Xi Jinping. Indeed, I find that the CCP and its leaders are mentioned much less often than might be expected, which suggests the Party would prefer Chinese citizens not to think too much about them. Section 5.7 notes that the analysis of People's Daily posts also shows that the paper increasingly sought to boost CCP legitimacy by promoting a positive and optimistic outlook in its Weibo posts.

5.2 Content included in the People's Daily political posts

This section provides an overview of the People's Daily political posts on Weibo over the period from January 2013 to December 2018. Table 8 is divided into legitimacy types and topic categories, as well as posts that mention the CCP and its leaders. The number of posts in each category is shown, together with the percentage of the sample of political posts. Posts about parts of China where Beijing's authority is disputed (mainly Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong) are treated separately, as they do not fit straight forwardly into one of the legitimacy categories.

The largest number of posts are included in categories related to ideological and performance legitimacy. The two categories with the largest number of posts – moral values and nationalism – are both linked to ideological legitimacy. The next two largest categories– the economy / innovation and disasters - relate to performance legitimacy. This suggests that ideological and performance legitimation were the biggest focus of the CCPs propaganda efforts on Chinese social media in this period. There is much less evidence that the CCP were seeking to promote institutional legitimacy on social media, as there were far fewer posts on categories related to this type of legitimacy. The following sections look in more detail at each type of legitimacy and the extent to which propaganda focused on the CCP itself.

Table 8: Content of People's Daily political posts – categories and legitimacy types

	Number of posts	Percentage
IDEOLOGICAL LEGITIMACY		
Moral / cultural values	377	29.7
Nationalism	143	11.3
Tradition & culture	62	4.9
Communist ideology	25	2.0
Communist Party history / Foundational myths	21	1.7
Total ideological legitimacy	*594*	*46.9*
PERFORMANCE LEGITIMACY		
Economy and innovation	130	10.3
Disasters	113	8.9
Consumer rights	84	6.6
Public security	82	6.5
Environment	64	5.1
Health & education	60	4.7
Foreign policy	47	3.7
Missing people	36	2.8
Total performance legitimacy	*595*	*47.0*
INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY		
Corruption	59	4.7
Rule of law	36	2.8
Bureaucracy	17	1.3
Participation	16	1.3
Total institutional legitimacy	*122*	*9.6*
CCP		
Other CCP	86	6.8
Xi Jinping	61	4.8
Li Keqiang	29	2.3
Total CCP	*176*	*13.9*
CHARISMATIC LEGITIMACY		
Xi Jinping	61	4.8
OTHER POSTS		
Disputed territories	22	1.7

N=1267 political posts
* This is a subset of the CCP category.

Note: Some posts have been included in more than one than one category, so the percentages do not add to 100%.

5.3 Ideological legitimacy

As discussed above, a number of authors have argued that the CCP has placed a higher priority on ideology since the early 2000s and particularly under Xi Jinping (Li and Sparks, 2018; Zhao, 2016; Zeng, 2016). The suggestion is that for a period after Mao's death, less emphasis was placed on ideology because reform and opening up under Deng Xiaoping made communism less credible, while rapid economic growth made it possible for the CCP

to rely on its performance to maintain its legitimacy. However, some authors believed that the collapse in support for communism was weakening mass support for the CCP and enabling alternative ideas to be promoted within China, which could become a dangerous threat to the Party if there was a significant decline in the country's high economic growth rates (Zhao, 2016). And by the time that Xi Jinping became president China's very high growth rates had started to decline. Analysis of the People's Daily posts shows that content related to ideological legitimacy accounted for 46.9% of all the political posts. Therefore, a significant amount of the political content that People's Daily was putting out on Weibo was linked to CCP ideology.

The biggest category related to ideological legitimacy was *moral /cultural values posts*, which accounted for about three out of every ten political posts by People's Daily on Weibo (30%). The behaviours and attitudes which are featured in the People's Daily posts reflect the definition of governing the country in accordance with moral principles in the 2014 Decision of the CCP Central Committee's Fourth Plenum of the 18th Party Congress - 'carrying forward China's traditional virtues, fostering social morals, professional ethics, household virtues and personal character' (Lin, 2019).

Further qualitative analysis of the posts in the moral /cultural values category show that many of them relate to traditional values. Confucius was mentioned by name in only a small number of posts. For example, a post marking the 2494th anniversary of the death of Confucius, included a number of Confucian sayings on subjects such as modesty and hospitality (11/04/2015[3]). However, Confucian, and other traditional values, such as filial duties, feature in a much larger number of posts. For example, People's Daily posts regularly promoted 'love of family'. One post ahead of the Spring Festival exhorted young people to be good to their parents (13/02/2013). Another post featured a family who helped one of their children, who had muscular dystrophy, get to school every day. It said: 'The stairs were high and the road was far away', but noted that 'the family did not give up' (26/11/2016). Another People's Daily post reported a speech by Xi Jinping in which he said, 'we must pay attention to family construction, pay attention to family, pay attention to family education, and pay attention to family style' (17/02/2015). In 2013, Xi Jinping had said, "The moral standards passed on by forefathers should be inherited, adapting ancient forms for present-day use" (China Daily, 2019). This emphasis on traditional moral values in the People's Daily posts underlines the priority it has been given by Xi Jinping.

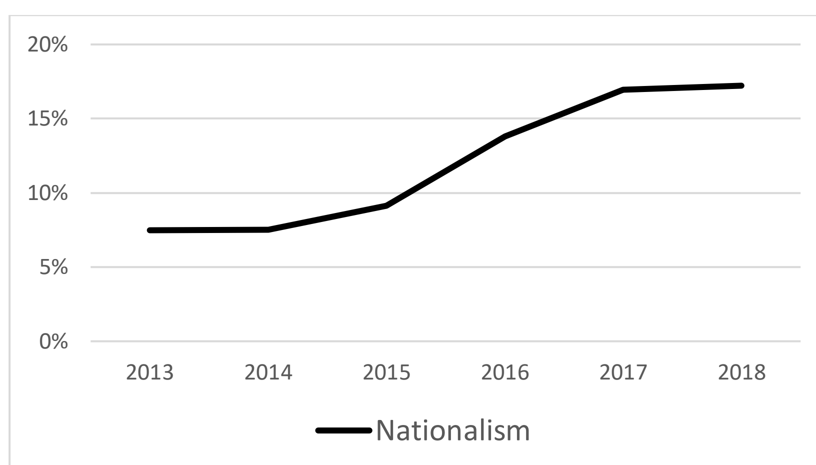
[3] The dates provided in this chapter show when the content was posted on Sina Weibo by People's Daily.

Some of the posts sought to foster social morals. For example, following the death of a sanitation worker, who was hit by a truck while sweeping the road, one post said 'Buses, private cars, beverage bottles, melon peels, the windows are opened, and the garbage is thrown away… The road is not a trash can, don't throw it away' (25/07/2013). Nearly 35% of the moral values posts are examples of good or bad behaviour by individuals or groups of people. Most of these focus on positive examples of behaviour, or what the CCP calls model citizens. Posts about model citizens cover a range of positive behaviours, usually involving helping people such as less well-off workers, sick, disabled or elderly people, as well as examples of filial behaviour. For example, one post focused on a hotel boss who provided free tea for sanitation workers, saying it was the fourth year she had done this and 'She said she hopes more shops will join' (30/05/2014). There were also a large number of posts with advice about personal character and how to achieve a happier / more successful life. These included a daily 'Night Reading' 夜读 post, such as one that encouraged people 'to spend more time thinking about the future, planning and direction', saying that 'every time you think about it after a deliberate struggle, it may be an opportunity to change your destiny' (11/02/2018). By placing an emphasis 'on the attitude, behaviour, and responsibility of the individual as the main recourse to socioeconomic and sociopolitical problems' these posts help to divert 'attention away from structural and institutional reasons' for problems (Miao, 2020b, 181).

This analysis of People's Daily posts shows the extent to which the CCP has changed its ideological focus, with People's Daily putting the kind of effort into promoting this system of moral / cultural values that they would once have put into promoting communist ideology (see also Feng, 2016). The People's Daily posts reflect many of the 12 Socialist Core Values introduced at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 (Kubat, 2018, 71; Gow, 2017, 99), particularly the values of civility, harmony, equality, justice, dedication, integrity and geniality. They show that the Party was seeking to put their interpretation of traditional moral and cultural values at the heart of its ideological pitch to Chinese citizens, making communism with Chinese characteristics effectively synonymous with these values (see also Kubat, 2018 and Gow, 2017). The number of People's Daily posts on moral /cultural values during Xi Jinping's first six years as president shows just how important the CCP believed this type of propaganda was for their legitimacy.

Much of the discussion about CCP ideology since Tiananmen has tended to focus on nationalism (for example Schneider, 2018; Wang, 2008; Callahan, 2006). The emphasis that the CCP places on nationalism is indeed confirmed by the analysis of the People's Daily posts. The second biggest category that is linked to ideological legitimacy are posts directly connected to nationalism (143, 11.3% of all political posts). Nationalism was also referred to in a sixth of the posts (10) where President Xi Jinping was also mentioned. This underlines Xi's personal emphasis on promoting nationalism. There was also a significant increase in the number of posts about nationalism over the period from 2013 to 2018 (Figure 1). Nationalism featured in just over 7% of political posts in 2013 and 2014 but by the end of the period posts about nationalism had doubled to more than 17% of all political posts. Therefore, the analysis shows that there has been an increasing emphasis on promoting nationalism to Chinese netizens during Xi Jinping's first 6 years as president.

Figure 1: Proportion of nationalism posts among People's Daily political posts on Weibo (2013-2018)

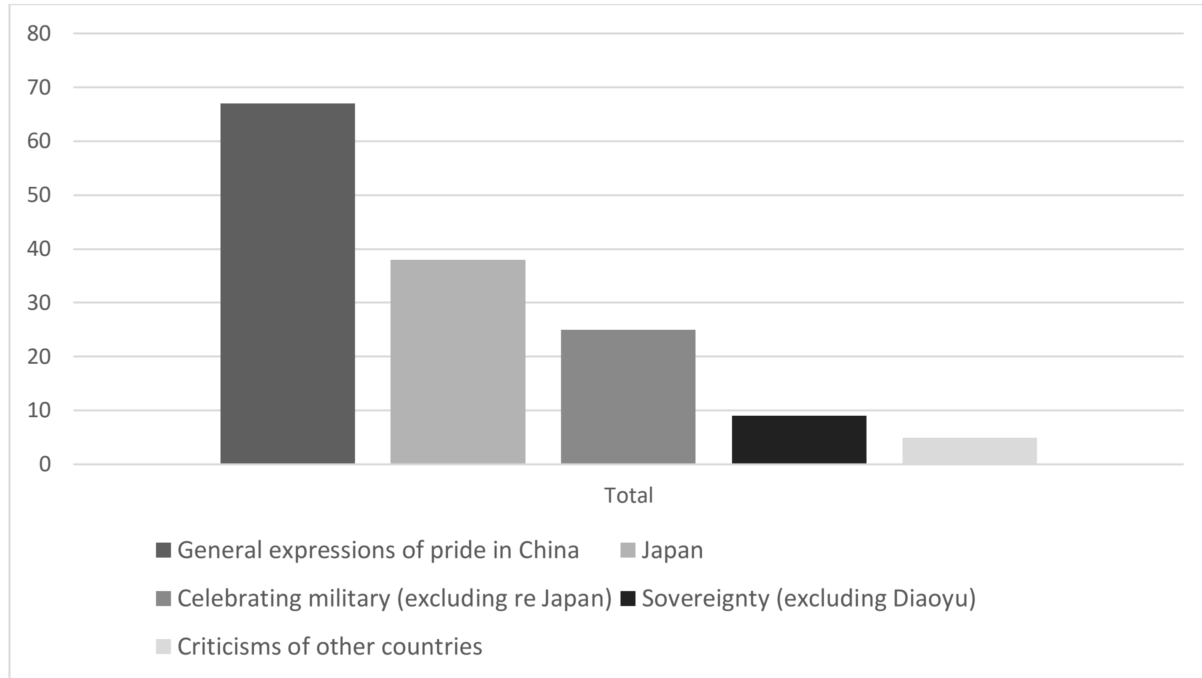


Ns are as follows: 2013=255; 2014=267; 2015=219; 2016=181; 2017=165; 2018=180

But what are these posts about and what do they tell us about what aspects of nationalism the CCP seeks to focus on? Further analysis of the nationalism posts shows that nearly half of them (67 out of 143) were general expressions of pride in China, including Chinese successes, particularly technological successes (Figure 2). For example, one post referred to the China Carrier Rocket Technology Research Institute's 60th birthday, saying that it 'has contributed to shaping the height and strength of China's rise' *(*16/11/2017). Another post, referred to the 'Great Power Project', referring to several engineering projects, including a manned submersible, high-speed rail and the world's first quantum satellite (01/12/2017). There were also general expressions of national pride such as a patriotic flash mob in a post

on 20/10/2016 (Image 2) and a post on China's national day in 2017, which included a video of the popular boy band the TFBoys singing a song called 'I love you China', encouraging people to post their own videos with them singing the song (01/10/2017).

Figure 2: Main topics within Weibo posts on nationalism (2013-2018)



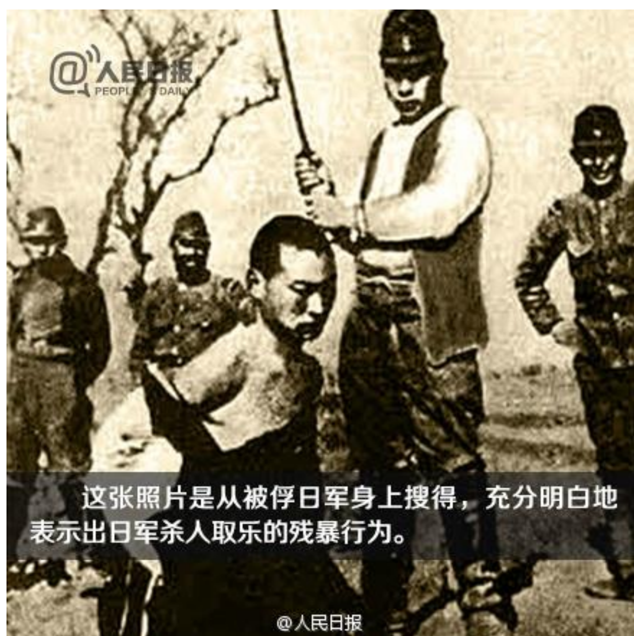
The y axis shows the number of posts in each sub-category
N is 143

Image 2: A patriotic flash mob in a post on 20/10/2016

Figure 2 also shows the importance that is placed on messages about Japan as part of the Party's efforts to promote nationalism in China (see also Schneider, 2016). About a quarter of the nationalism posts were about Japan. Most of these were about the war with Japan

(usually referred to in China as the war of resistance against Japanese aggression). For example, one post reminded people that 'In Nanjing, the Japanese army slaughtered 300,000 prisoners of war and innocent civilians; in Hebei, Shanxi and other anti-Japanese bases, the Japanese army raided with the "three light policy" and created countless tragedies' (06/07/2016). These posts were often accompanied by images from the war, showing Japanese brutality against Chinese citizens (Image 3). However, some of the posts focused on the contemporary dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. For example, one post on the islands said: 'We demand that the Japanese side stop all acts that harm China's sovereignty' (26/11/2014). These posts show how CCP propaganda seeks to present a negative stereotype of Japan as part of its efforts reinforce Chinese nationalism. As Carrico and Gries have noted, CCP propaganda seeks to perpetuate 'a view of Japan as a fascist state perpetually frozen in time in 1945' (2016, 430).

Image 3: Image from a post on 1/12/2014



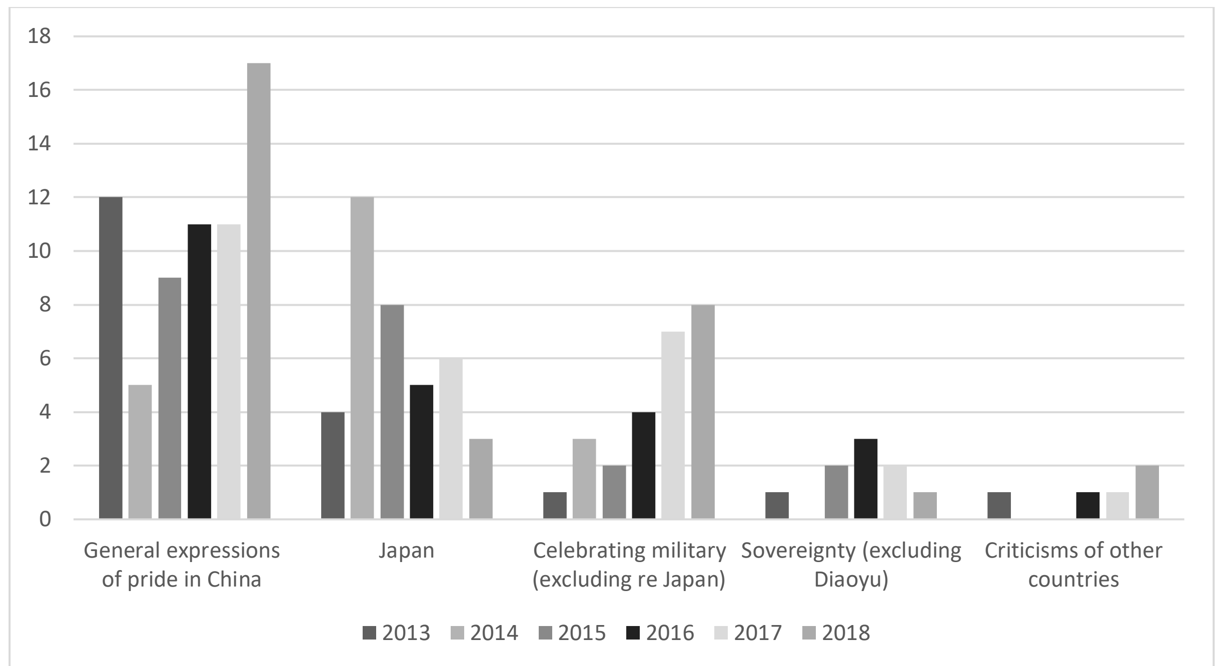
The wording on the image says: 'This photo was found from the captured Japanese army, and clearly shows the Japanese army's brutal behaviour of killing for amusement'.

It is notable that there were fewer posts about Japan in 2018. The Chinese authorities had an incentive to try to improve relations with Japan that year, as the trade war with the United States was becoming more serious. This is consistent with evidence that the Chinese authorities have varied the amount of anti-Japanese rhetoric, depending on their diplomatic objectives at the time. Reilly (2012) found that the state successfully clamped down on anti-Japanese sentiment after anti-Japanese riots in 2005 and even forced the media to run

sympathetic stories about Japan. And indeed, sentiment towards Japan improved significantly. The percentage of people with positive views of Sino-Japanese relations rose from 10.5% to 74.5% (Reilly, 2012, 197).

The third largest group of posts in the nationalism category were about the military (25, 17%). The proportion of posts about the military also increased significantly over the period (Figure 3). The proportion of People's Daily posts about the military was significantly higher in 2017 and 2018, compared with earlier years. In fact, there were more posts about Japan than there were about the military before 2017. In contrast, posts about the military accounted for about a quarter of the nationalism posts in the final two years. One post said 'This is our motherland, our Chinese soldiers! Love you, China; tribute, military!' (04/11/2017) and the message was reinforced by a stirring video showing images of the Chinese military (Image 4). Another post (03/12/2017, Image 5) referenced one of the patriotic rabbit videos that became popular with China's online nationalists in the mid-2010s (Sixth Tone, 2016). As Sixth Tone noted, 'With the tagline "Every rabbit has its dream of becoming a big power," the series did not disguise the intense patriotism that underlined its message' (.ibid). In Zeng's analysis of the Chinese literature on legitimacy between 2008 and 2012, one author, Wang Haizhou, noted that 'the demonstration of military power can enhance legitimacy by increasing national pride' arguing that China's National Day Military Parade had enhanced legitimacy by serving as 'a political ceremony' (2014, 626). The emphasis on the military as a source of national pride played a significant part in the increasing focus on nationalism in the People's Daily posts over the period from 2013 to 2018.

Figure 3: Changes in topics mentioned in People's Daily Weibo posts on nationalism (2013-2018)



The y axis shows the number of posts in each sub-category

Ns are as follows: 2013=255; 2014=267; 2015=219; 2016=181; 2017=165; 2018=180

Image 4: Image from video celebrating the Chinese military in a post on 04/11/2017

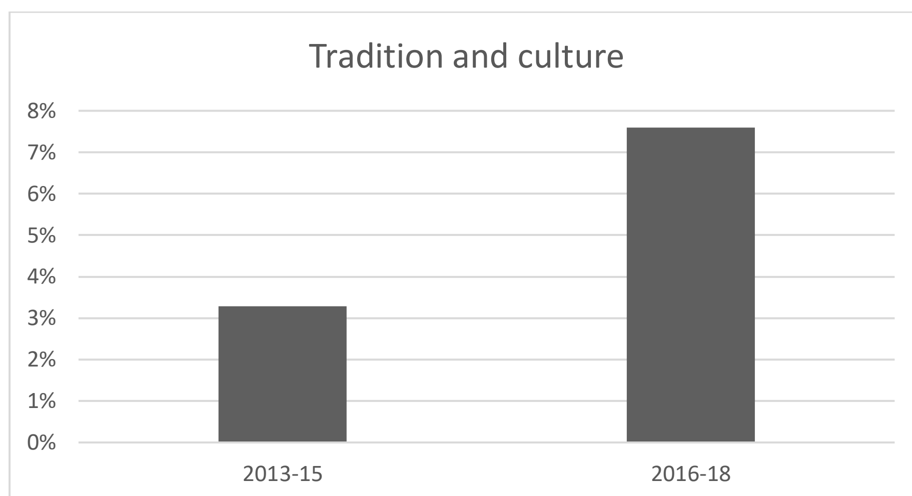
Image 5: Image from patriotic rabbit video in a post on 03/12/2017

The emphasis on nationalism in the People's Daily posts was reinforced by the moral / cultural values category, which is also strongly linked to nationalism. Zeng found that a number of Chinese scholars who wrote about CCP legitimacy between 2008 and 2012 considered promoting Socialist Core Values 'as a helpful tool to increase Chinese people's national identity' (2014, 626). Huang also describes Confucianism as 'a nationalist ideology emphasising the Chinese people's loyalty to the ruler and to the state' which can 'solve the problem of generating loyalty to the Party by combining Confucian doctrine with nationalism' (2013, 46). This link between moral values and nationalism has also been repeatedly emphasised by Xi Jinping. In one of the People's Daily Weibo posts on a message the Chinese leader had sent to young people about the importance of values, he was quoted as saying, 'The most important ambition of life should be linked to the motherland and the people' (13/11/2016). In 2019 he also said: 'We should advocate combining the love for family with the love of country so that every individual and every family can make contributions to the big family of the Chinese nation' (China Plus, 2019). An important focus of the CCP's nationalism is a desire to persuade Chinese citizens that Chinese values are very different from Western values, and therefore to discourage them from adopting these values. In 2014 Xi Jinping said: "If our people cannot uphold the moral values that have been formed and developed on our own soil, and instead indiscriminately and blindly parrot Western moral values, then it will be necessary to genuinely question whether we will lose our independent ethos as a country and a people" (quoted in Gow, 2017, 97-8). The posts about moral and cultural values therefore had a dual purpose, they aimed to legitimate the

CCP as the Party that upholds traditional Chinese values, as well as seeking to reinforce the Chinese people's sense of national identity.

Another category which is strongly linked to nationalism is tradition and culture. There were 62 posts about tradition and culture (4.9% of political posts). These posts focused largely on traditions such as Chinese New Year and culture, poetry, art and food. It is notable that there was a significant increase in the number of these posts between the first and second half of the period (Figure 4). Just over 3% of posts were about tradition and culture between 2013-15 but this more than doubled to over 7% between 2016-18. At the 19th National Congress in 2017 Xi Jinping described culture as 'a country and nation's soul' and he said China 'will thrive only if our culture thrives, and our nation will be strong only if our culture is strong. Without full confidence in our culture, without a rich and prosperous culture, the Chinese nation will not be able to rejuvenate itself' (China Daily, 2019). Therefore, these posts were also used by the CCP to foster nationalism in China.

Figure 4: Proportion of culture and tradition posts among People Daily's political posts on Weibo Posts, 2013-15 compared with 2016-18



N is as follows: 2013-15=741; 2016-8=526

As discussed in the previous chapter, a number of authors have argued that the CCP has to some extent lost control of the nationalism agenda (Callahan, 2006). However, the strong and growing emphasis on nationalism in the People's Daily posts, combined with the fact that increasing numbers of these posts focused on the military, show that the CCP was unashamedly seeking to instil a stronger sense of nationalism in China. As economic growth slowed, the Party was clearly hoping that linking itself to a stronger sense of nationalist identity could maintain its legitimacy and keep it in power. However, this strategy is not

without risks for the CCP. A stronger sense of nationalism, and particularly one which emphasises the military, will inevitably lead to rising tensions with other countries, which could negatively impact China's trade and therefore harm its performance legitimacy. As discussed in the last chapter, the CCP has at times struggled to balance promoting nationalism with the need to ensure good economic growth in order to maintain its economic legitimacy.

By contrast to the large number of posts on moral values and nationalism in the ideological legitimacy category, there were only a small number of posts about communist ideology (2.0%) or foundational myths (1.7%). The communist ideology category included posts about concepts put forward by Xi Jinping, such as the China Dream and Xi Jinping Thought. This shows that the CCP did not make a significant effort to promote communist ideology to the public. Instead, public facing propaganda focused on enhancing ideological legitimacy by emphasising a mix of moral / cultural values, nationalism, and traditions and culture. As noted in the previous chapter, this informal ideology contrasts with formal ideology, which is targeted at Party members, and which does focus very strongly on Xi Jinping thought and on communism (Zeng, 2016). The limited number of posts on foundational myths contrasts with the Party's efforts to censor content that was critical of elements of the Party's history (Chapter 4). The CCP believed that it needed to limit the scope for criticism of its record, what Xi has called historical nihilism, but it did not make a significant effort in its online propaganda aimed at the public to promote the Party's history. This suggests that the CCP does not generally see the Party's history as an opportunity to boost its legitimacy among the public but recognises that its record is a potential threat to its legitimacy if people are allowed the freedom to discuss aspects of its past such as the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen massacre.

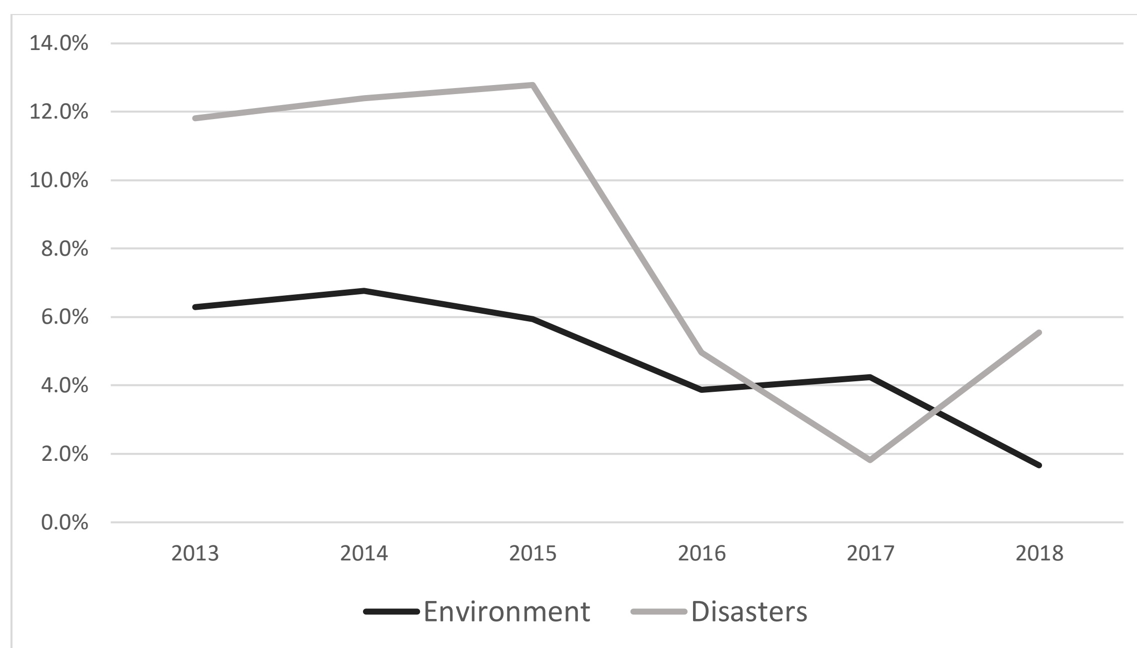
It is striking just how much of the People's Daily posts on Weibo were related to ideology. Performance issues such as environmental problems, disasters, education and health, which are discussed below, are more obviously the sort of content that constitutes 'news'. Most of the ideological posts discussed above are much less clearly news. The fact that nearly half of all the political posts were related to ideology therefore underlines just how important the CCP believes ideology is in maintaining and enhancing its legitimacy.

5.4 Performance legitimacy

The analysis of People's Daily Weibo posts shows that although there was a significant emphasis on ideology in the CCP's propaganda after Xi Jinping became president, 47% of all the political posts included content related to performance legitimacy. The largest category related to performance legitimacy was the economy and innovation (10.3% of political posts), reflecting the ongoing importance of economic legitimation. However, there were also a significant numbers of posts in other performance categories, particularly disasters (8.9%), consumer rights (6.6%), public security (6.5%), the environment (5.1%) and health and education (4.7%). The economy is a category where the CCP had had a good story to tell over the previous two decades, with China having experienced a long period of high growth. Growth remained high, above 6.75%, during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency, although it was declining. However, most of the performance legitimacy categories are ones which have presented legitimacy challenges for the CCP, including natural and man-made disasters and the environment, with air pollution having been a significant feature of life in China's cities for the last two decades. The range of categories related to performance legitimacy shows that the CCP did not see its legitimacy, or even its performance legitimacy, as being largely based on the economy. Instead, a broad mix of performance issues were discussed in the People's Daily posts. However, the paper's approach to performance legitimacy posts changed over the period covered by this research. Further analysis of posts in the performance categories over the period from 2013 to 2018 shows that, over time, propaganda focused less on seeking to persuade people that the Party was successfully dealing with big problems.

Posts about two of the categories – disasters and the environment –declined significantly after 2015 (Figure 5). About 12% of political posts between 2013 and 2015 concerned disasters or major accidents. However, the proportion of posts about disasters fell by about half in 2016 and remained low in the following two years. Similarly, about 6% of the People's Daily Weibo posts were about the environment between 2013 and 2015 and then the number of posts fell to around 4% in 2016 and 2017, and just 2% in 2018.

Figure 5: Proportion of disasters and environment posts among People Daily's political posts on Weibo (2013-2018)



Ns are as follows: 2013=255; 2014=267; 2015=219; 2016=181; 2017=165; 2018=180

The decline in posts about disasters and environmental issues does not simply reflect declines in these issues as problems, which would make them less newsworthy. The number of deaths from natural disasters in China did fall from about 1,400 in 2013 to around 500 in 2015 but it rose to about 1,000 in 2016 and was 600 in 2017 (Our World in Data, Natural disaster deaths by country). One type of man-made disaster that features in the People's Daily posts is mining accidents. The number of deaths in mining accidents has fallen significantly since the mid-2000s, when several thousand miners died every year, to 333 by 2018 (China Labour Bulletin, 2019). However, China Labour Bulletin noted that accident rates, death tolls and the incidence of occupational disease in the workplace in China 'are all still comparatively high, with 134 work-related accidents each day on average in 2018' (China Labour Bulletin, Work Safety). Therefore, there was not such a dramatic reduction in the number of disasters and major accidents after 2015 that would justify the sudden reduction in the amount of coverage for this kind of story.

Similarly, the reduction in posts about the environment cannot be adequately explained by the reduction in environmental problems. According to Greenpeace (2018), average PM2.5 concentrations fell by 33% from 2013 to 2017 in 74 cities for which data is available but ozone pollution increased. The death rate from air pollution fell from about 200 per 100,000 people in 2005 to around 120 per 100,000 in 2017 but remained high, for example it

compares to a death rate of around 25 per 100,000 in the UK (Our World in Data, Death rate from air pollution 2005-2015). There is also a lot of evidence of environmental protests continuing though the period from 2013-18. For example, in December 2016 there were protests against pollution in Chengdu, with some residents placing pollution masks on statues (Guardian, December 2016) and there were protests against plans for an aluminium factory in the north eastern city of Daqing in February 2017 (Reuters, 2017). Therefore, the significant reduction in coverage of environmental issues in the People's Daily posts does not seem to be adequately explained by the reduction in pollution or declines in public concern about these issues.

A similar pattern can be seen in posts about terrorism, a subset of the public security category. There were only 11 posts about terrorism in total over the whole period. Ten of these were in 2014, starting with a knife attack at Kunming Station in March 2014. Otherwise, it is surprising that there was only one other post about terrorism in the sample (in 2016), particularly given the fact that between 800,000 and two million people (mainly Uyghurs) have been sent to re-education camps since April 2017 because of concerns about terrorism (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). Similarly, there were six posts with negative stories about the police but the last of these was in 2015. Although the numbers here are small, this is consistent with the evidence about disasters and environmental issues that negative topics were discussed less often after 2014/15.

Overall, then, the analysis over the time period suggests that the CCP sought to focus less on the most difficult issues. Disasters and the environment are topics that have produced particularly negative stories for the Party. A number of authors had previously found that, as long as the Party believed it could persuade people that it had a solution, then it would seek to set the agenda in relation to problems (Brady, 2008). However, discussing difficult problems, such as environmental pollution, even if the focus is on the Party/state's actions, may simply serve to remind people about those problems, rather than people feeling grateful for the efforts the Party is making to resolve them. The finding that People's Daily were discussing difficult issues less after 2014/15 is consistent with other changes that occurred around this period, such as the clamp down on rights lawyers and civil society, which occurred in 2015 (Guardian, July 2015). The CCP under Xi was becoming less willing to allow challenging issues to be discussed or to tolerate criticism, even if the issues were ones that the Party was seeking to address.

By contrast to the reduction in posts about disasters and the environment over the period, there was little change in the proportion of posts that were about consumer rights, missing people or public security. Further qualitative analysis of the content of these posts shows that they were largely about problems caused by individuals or groups of individuals. Most of the consumer rights posts were either about police/court action against people committing fraud, new laws or regulations, or advice about avoiding specific kinds of fraud. For example, one post featured a shop owner who was sentenced to three months after he was found to be adding aluminium to his buns, in order to improve the taste (07/11/2018). Posts about missing people were dominated by stories about missing, abducted and abandoned children. For example, one post said 'When the child disappeared, he was playing in the health center. His mother was busy looking after the business and found that the child was missing.' (4/05/2017). Similarly, about half of the posts about public security (43 out of 82) were about crime. For example, one post reported that a policeman had been stabbed while attempting to arrest a drug dealer (27/04/2016). These issues are more of a win-win for the Party, compared to topics like the environment and disasters. These posts focused people's attention on problems caused by individuals and businesses, rather than those that the Party was responsible for. People are more likely to be grateful for action by government departments and the police that can help to increase their confidence when they are buying products and services, or which might lead to the return of missing children or the apprehension of criminals, without blaming the Party for creating the problems in the first place. By contrast many deaths caused by disasters and the country's pollution problems are in part the result of state failings, such as poor safety regulations and corruption. Roberts discusses how 'government distractions can divert citizens to information that is less dangerous to the regime' (2018, 5). This analysis shows that the Party actively used propaganda posts on Weibo to divert people's attention away from bigger problems that were difficult for the Party to resolve, towards micro level issues where the Party could be presented as stepping in to protect citizens from problems caused by individuals and organisations outside the central Party/state.

This analysis of the People's Daily posts on performance issues shows that there was a significant amount of content related to performance legitimacy. It would be difficult for a 'news' organisation not to discuss performance issues and this analysis shows that a broad mix of these issues were discussed in the posts. However, it also shows that the way the CCP sought to maintain and enhance its performance legitimacy evolved during the first 6 years that Xi Jinping was president. Brady (2008) and Stockmann (2013) both found that in the

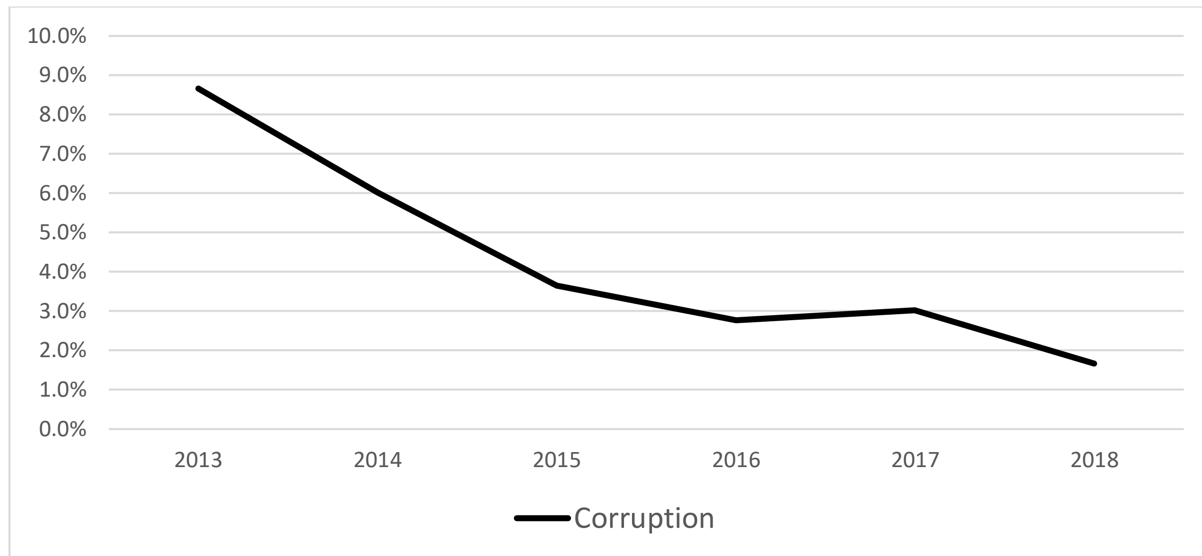
period before Xi became president an important factor in whether a problem was covered by the Chinese media was whether a particular problem could easily be resolved or whether the Party had a solution. This analysis shows that a few years after Xi Jinping became president People's Daily shifted its coverage on Weibo away from problems that were the responsibility of the Party/state, even where the CCP were doing things to address those problems, towards problems where the state could be seen as helping to resolve problems caused by individuals or businesses.

5.5 Institutional / legal-rational legitimacy

There was relatively little focus in the People's Daily posts on institutional legitimacy (9.6% of political posts). The only significant category in Table 8 related to institutional legitimacy is corruption (4.7% of political posts). However, the proportion of posts about corruption falls over the period, from 6.5% of all political posts in 2013 to just 1.1% by 2018 (Figure 6). This is despite the fact that the number of corruption cases continued to increase, from 172,000 in 2013 to 527,000 in 2017, and 302,000 in just the first half of 2018 (ChinaFile, 2018). The Party was therefore continuing to tackle the problem of corruption while reducing the number of times that it referred to the anti-corruption campaign in its online propaganda. Talking tough about corruption has had advantages for Xi Jinping and the CCP. Zeng's analysis of journal articles by Chinese intellectuals between 2008 and 2012 found that 43% of Chinese scholars saw corruption as one of the main threats to the CCP's legitimacy (2014, 615). Xi himself described corruption as the greatest threat to the survival of the Party (Guardian, 18 October 2017). Therefore, showing that the Party was tackling its corruption problem might be expected to enhance its legitimacy. And People's Daily posts about corruption, particularly in the early part of the period, were very strong. For example, a post in 2013 about the prosecution of Bo Xilai said: 'everyone is equal before the law, there is no exception… and no one has the privilege of transcending the law. No one should believe the wishful thinking that "senior officials will not be punished"' (26/07/2013). However, there is also a risk with spending too much time using propaganda to remind people about a negative issue. The majority of People's Daily posts across the whole period (50 out of 86) about the CCP that did not mention either President Xi Jinping or Premier Li Keqiang, were about officials being investigated or prosecuted for corruption. This did not present a positive message about the Party. Once they judged that people had got the message that Xi was committed to tackling corruption, those involved in propaganda would have had good reason

not to continue to give corruption the same kind of focus that it got immediately after Xi became president.

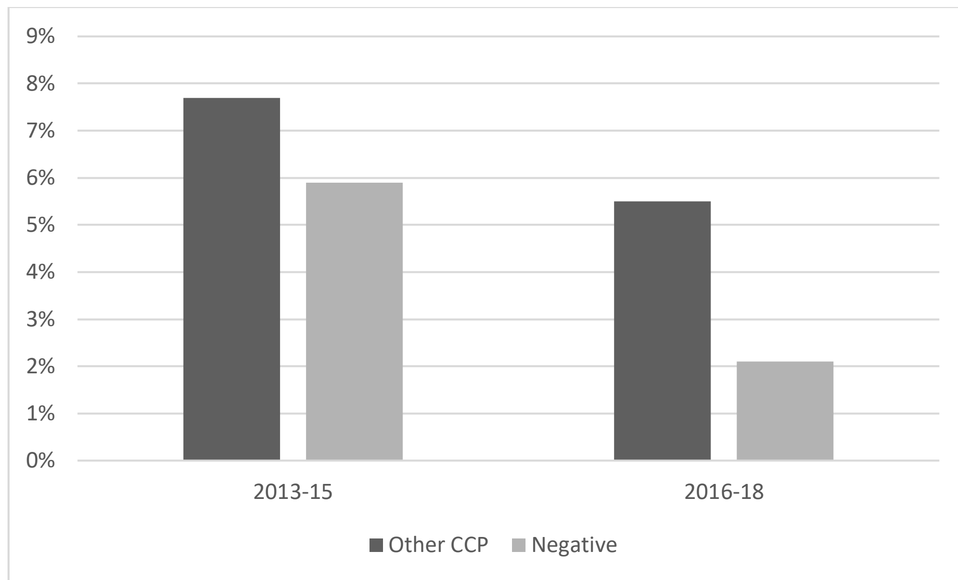
Figure 6: Proportion of corruption posts among People Daily's political posts on Weibo (2013-2018)



Ns are as follows: 2013=255; 2014=267; 2015=219; 2016=181; 2017=165; 2018=180

The reduction in posts about corruption also reflects the shift away from discussing negative stories identified in the last section. As Figure 7 shows, about 77% of posts about Other CCP (CCP posts excluding mentions of Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang) between 2013-15 were about corruption and other negative issues (including a few posts about bureaucratic failings and crimes). However, in the period from 2016-18, this had fallen to 38%. It again shows that in the second half of the period, there was much greater concern to limit coverage of negative issues that were the responsibility of the Party/state, even where the CCP were doing things to address the problems concerned.

Figure 7: Proportion of other CCP posts about corruption and other negative issues among People Daily's political posts on Weibo (2013-2018)



Ns are as follows: 2013-15=741; 2016-8=526

Other aspects of institutional legitimacy were given much less prominence by People's Daily. In the period prior to 2012, improvement of the rule of law was one of the strategies most frequently mentioned by Chinese scholars to maintain the CCP's legitimacy (Zeng, 2014, 615). The rule of law is also one of the Core Socialist Values and Chin (2018) found that the rule of law had been used 'as a core rationale in the Party's legitimation efforts'. However, only 2.8% of political posts mentioned the rule of law (Table 8). Mentions of the rule of law also declined across the period. In 2013 and 2014 nearly 5% of posts mentioned the rule of law (Figure 8). This meant that it featured in the People's Daily Weibo posts more than Xi Jinping himself in these years. For example, one post addressed concerns about the way some urban management officials were aggressively seeking to move on hawkers in some Chinese cities. It said 'Urban management cannot be a cold-blooded law enforcement machine. If we can't respect civil rights and conserve people's livelihood, what does it mean for fairness and justice, let alone the rule of law?' (15/04/2013). However, mentions of the rule of law fell to less than 2% of political posts in the following four years. Whereas People's Daily had been prepared to directly address concerns about the actions of some of those involved in law enforcement in 2013, by 2016, as noted in the last chapter, the propaganda authorities were telling media organisations that 'News that unfavourably portrays the law enforcement community must be released with caution' (China Digital Times, 15/04/2016). And a year earlier the CCP had launched a crackdown on human rights lawyers with more than 100 rights lawyers and activists detained or questioned by police

and state media denouncing them as a “criminal gang” (Guardian, July 2015). The relatively small number of posts about the rule of law between 2015 and 2018 suggests the CCP wanted to draw less attention to the concept. Too much discussion about the rule of law risked raising expectations the CCP were clearly unwilling to fulfil. The narrative around the rule of law before 2015 had led to an increase in the number of people challenging decisions by the state, supported by the growing number of rights lawyers. It would have been difficult to remove the rule of law from the posters promoting the Core Socialist Values across China, but it was much easier to simply mention it less often in media coverage while censoring particularly negative stories about the infringement of people’s rights (see Chapter 4).

Figure 8: Proportion of rule of law posts among People’s Daily posts on Weibo (2013-2018)

Ns are as follows: 2013=255; 2014=267; 2015=219; 2016=181; 2017=165; 2018=180

And, like corruption posts, discussing the rule of law often serves to remind people about negative stories, in this case involving the infringement of people’s rights. The reduction in rule of law posts is therefore also consistent with evidence that the CCP was seeking to limit coverage of negative issues that were the responsibility of the Party/state.

Participation and bureaucratic reforms are also seen as important elements in developing a more institutional form of legitimacy. Zeng found that in the period before 2012, Chinese scholars identified ‘building a more responsive, transparent and predictable bureaucratic structure that is more efficient and effective’, as being important to maintain the CCP’s legitimacy (2014, 615). If the CCP was serious about reforms like these, it is likely that they would want to promote these changes to the public. However, participation and bureaucratic

reforms were each mentioned in less than 1.3% of posts over the period and two-thirds of these posts appeared in the first half of the period. For example, one post in 2013 said: 'The two sessions are not only a gathering of people's wisdom and public opinion, but also a platform for implementing citizens' right to know, express, participate and supervise. Sun Yat-sen said that politics is a matter for everyone' (09/03/2013). This analysis suggests that Xi Jinping did not see it as a priority to demonstrate that the Party was increasing participation and carrying out bureaucratic reforms to make the state more transparent and responsive. Under Xi politics is not a matter for everyone. Instead, politics is a matter almost exclusively for the CCP, and in particular for Xi himself as the Party's core.

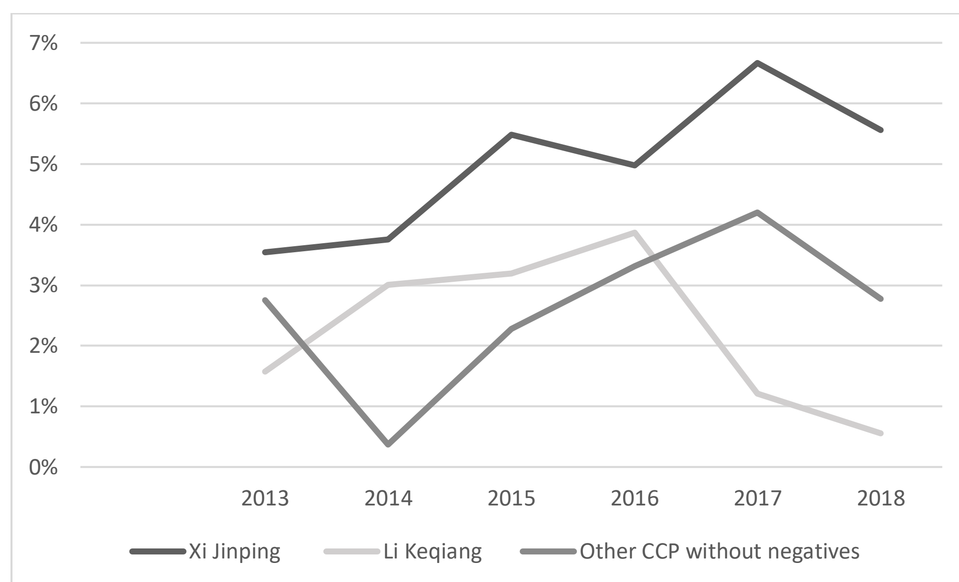
In her research on the period before Xi became president, Chin (2018, 189) found that the CCP had been keen to show that its rule is, at least in part, 'legitimated in terms of rules and laws that are rationally established'. Zeng also suggested that institutional development was playing a 'significant role in maintaining popular legitimacy' in that period (2016, 56). However, this research shows that, particularly after 2015, there was very little focus on issues related to institutional legitimacy in the People's Daily Weibo posts. As was also shown by the decision in 2018 to end presidential term limits (BBC, 2018), Xi Jinping is not a leader who wants to be constrained by 'rules and laws that are rationally established'.

5.6 Charismatic legitimacy and the Party

Does the shift away from the limited institutionalisation of Chinese politics, including Deng Xiaoping's efforts to ensure no one individual could ever again dominate the CCP leadership, mean that there has been a reversion back towards the focus on charismatic legitimacy seen in the Mao era? As discussed earlier, there were not a significant number of People's Daily posts about Xi Jinping across the period. Figure 9 shows the trend over time in posts that mention Xi, Premier Li Keqiang and the rest of the CCP over the period. The latter category has been adjusted to show only positive posts about the CCP, so with negative posts about topics such as corruption removed. Figure 9 shows that posts mentioning President Xi Jinping increased significantly after 2014. In 2013 and 2014 less than 4% of posts mentioned Xi but this rose to about 6% between 2015 and 2018. Mentions of Li Keqiang also rose up to 2016 and then fell in the following two years, to less than one-sixth of the mentions of Xi Jinping. Positive mentions of other CCP leaders and the CCP in general varied between 2% and 4% of all political posts. After 2013 this meant that positive mentions for the rest of the CCP were well below the share of posts that mentioned Xi Jinping. The increased focus on

President Xi, together with the fact that he was mentioned more than the Premier and the CCP in general, could be seen as marking some shift towards charismatic legitimation. There were also examples within the posts that mentioned Xi of a focus on his personal strengths and characteristics. For example, several posts referred to the President as Xi Dada. One post simply said, 'Xi Dada's expression' and included photos of Xi meeting various world leaders (10/11/2014). Chinese media later stopped using this term to describe Xi, but some other posts referred to his past and his family or were about Xi meeting ordinary people, reinforced by videos and photos (for example see Images 6 and 7). Glassman argued that manufacturing charismatic legitimacy involved using media to 'create an atmosphere in which the political leader seems ever-present and larger than life' and that the 'the constant presence - in bright print - helps manufacture such leader-led relationships' (1975, 630). The number and type of posts about Xi Jinping in the People's Daily Weibo posts is not sufficient to suggest that these posts were part of an effort to manufacture a form of charismatic legitimacy in the way Glassman described. However, the fact that mentions of Xi among the People's Daily posts on Weibo were rising over the period might suggest that propaganda was moving towards an emphasis on charismatic legitimacy.

Figure 9: Proportion of positive posts mentioning Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang and other CCP among People's Daily posts on Weibo (2013-2018)



N's are as follows: 2013=255; 2014=267; 2015=219; 2016=181; 2017=165; 2018=180

Image 6: Image from a video entitled China's Red Dreams in a post on 22/10/2017

The video contains various images of Xi including this picture of him after he was ‘sent down’ to Liangjiahe in Shaanxi Province.

Image 7: Xi visiting descendants of a Red Army martyr in Jiangxi in a post on 02/02/2016

Compared to the data analysed here, Esarey (2021) found stronger evidence that there was a ‘Xi Jinping effect’ in People’s daily coverage between 2013 and 2018. His study focused on coverage in the People’s Daily newspaper, rather than the paper’s posts on Weibo. He suggests that ‘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’, with Xi getting much more coverage than his predecessor Hu Jintao, ‘a deemphasis on other historical figures, including such revolutionary heroes as Mao and Deng’ and coverage allocated to Premier Li Keqiang being much lower than was the case ‘for Hu Jintao’s Premier Wen Jiabao’ (2021, 896). This thesis has not made the historical comparison, which would not be possible given that Weibo only started towards the end of Hu Jintao’s time as president. There is certainly evidence of an increasing focus on Xi over the period from 2013-18 in both studies. However, it is also likely that the Party differentiates between what it puts into the full newspaper and what it posts on social media. The former is more clearly focused on

Party members, while the latter aims to influence discussion among a much broader audience on social media. This would suggest that, in this period at least, there may have been more focus on Xi in propaganda aimed at Party members, compared with propaganda aimed at the public. It may therefore be reasonable to talk about 'the near deification of Xi Jinping' (Esarey, 2021, 900) in the full People's Daily newspaper, but the analysis for this thesis does not suggest that there was a similar effort by People's Daily to deify Xi on Weibo. This is similar to the distinction between formal ideology aimed at Party members and informal ideology aimed at the wider public (see Zeng 2016). However, if mentions of Xi among the People's Daily posts on Weibo continued to increase after the period covered by this research, and focused more on his personal characteristics, then there would be a stronger case for talking about a return to charismatic legitimacy in China.

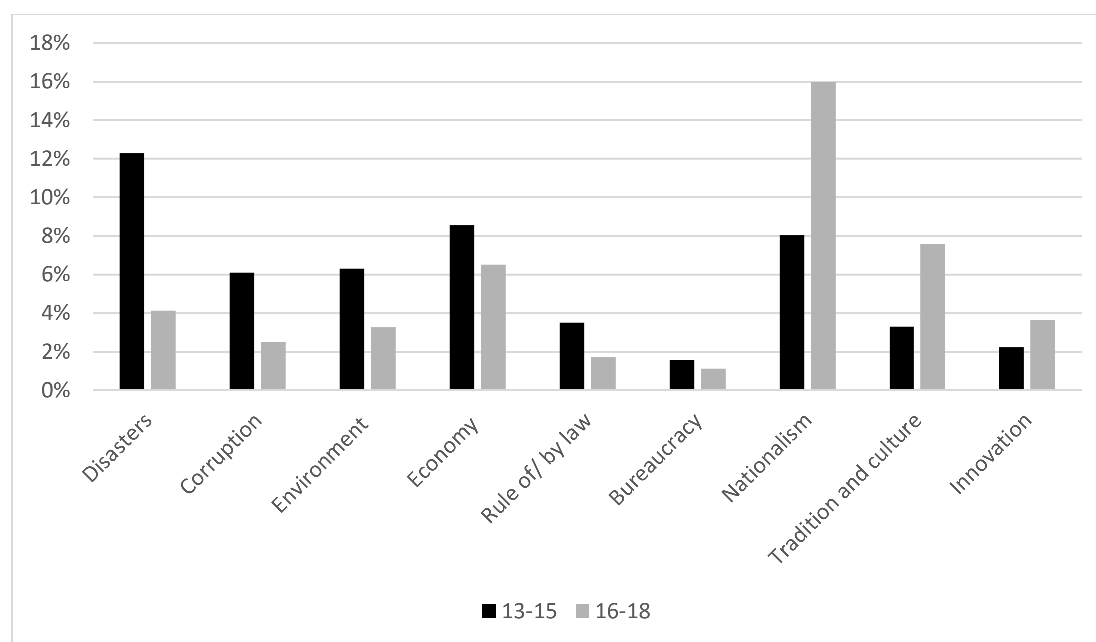
More striking than the number of posts about Xi Jinping, is the fact that the CCP and its leaders are mentioned in a relatively small proportion of People's Daily posts. There were only 121 positive mentions of the CCP and its leaders in the political posts (including the posts about Xi and Li but excluding posts about CCP corruption cases and other negative posts). That is less than one in ten (9.6%) of political posts. Not only does this analysis suggest that there was not an effort to generate charismatic legitimacy focused on Xi Jinping, but they show that the Party did not even put itself front and centre in its online political propaganda. For the most part, political issues were discussed without mention of the CCP. In the online environment at least, the Party generally sought to take itself out of discussion of political topics, or even to depoliticise what would generally be considered as political issues. Western media commentary on China often gives the impression that the Party has an ever-present role in people's lives, but this research shows that online, at least, the Party did not make significant efforts to draw attention to itself. It suggests the CCP did not want ordinary Chinese citizens to think much about either their leader or the wider Party.

5.7 Promoting positive energy

In addition to the topics that People's Daily focuses its attention on, analysis of the paper's Weibo posts shows that they also increasingly sought to boost CCP legitimacy by promoting a positive and optimistic outlook. The increase in positive content and reduction in posts about negative issues was discussed above in the context of performance legitimacy. However, there was also a broader increase in posts about positive topics and a reduction in posts about negative issues. Figure 10 compares the proportion of posts in categories with

the biggest increases or decreases between the first half of the period (2013-2015) and the second half (2016-2018). As discussed above, there were significant reductions in posts on environmental problems and disasters, which are some of the biggest problems that the CCP has faced in recent years. Another category which has seen a significant reduction is posts about the economy (excluding posts about innovation and technology). As discussed earlier in the chapter, for the most part, the economy was not a negative issue during this period, but the steady decline in China's growth rate over the period, from an average of more than 10% per annum in the 2000s to less than 7% in 2018 (World Bank), meant that economic growth was becoming a less strong source of performance legitimacy. There were also reductions in posts about corruption, bureaucracy and the rule of law. Information about corruption shows the CCP in a bad light, even if the stories are about efforts to tackle the problem, bureaucracy is generally about failings, while the rule of law also encompasses issues that have caused significant difficulties for the Party, including disputes about land rights. Similar patterns can be seen within some of the other categories. As noted earlier, 10 (out of the 11) posts about terrorism were in 2014, and the only other post about this topic was in 2016. Similarly, there were six posts with negative stories about the police between 2013-15 and none in the period from 2015 to 2018. Although the numbers for terrorism and the police are fairly small, taken together with reductions in other categories, it is clear that there was a pattern of fewer posts with content about negative issues across this period.

Figure 10: Categories where there are significant reductions or increases in the proportion of People's Daily posts on Weibo between 2013-15 and 2016-18



Ns are as follows: 2013-15=741; 2016-8=526

By contrast there were significant increases in some categories that typically involve more upbeat/positive content. Posts about nationalism and tradition and culture roughly doubled between the first and second halves of the period. Posts about innovation and technology also increased. These posts included content about recent technological achievements. For example, one included a video about "Made in China", showing several big projects (06/12/2018). These are all categories that fit well with the idea of generating positive energy (see Yang and Tang, 2018).

Moral values is another category that generally helps to generate positive energy and this category accounted for a significant number of posts throughout the period. Several authors have discussed how the Core Socialist Values play a role in efforts to increase people's happiness (Wielander, 2018; Puppin, 2018). Some of the moral / cultural values posts very directly encouraged people to think positively about their own lives. For example, one post told people not to compare themselves to others, saying 'everyone has their own strengths', adding 'if you think you are happy, you should cherish it' and 'follow your heart' (02/10/2013). Another post encouraged people to spend less time hoping and looking back and to focus on the present, instead saying, 'Give yourself a reasonable goal, a suitable plan, a reason to stick to it, a chance to change. More effort, to better yourself. Come on!' (19/07/2015). Another People's Daily post asked, 'Are you a person who delivers positive

energy?' and it said, 'The more people release positive energy, the greater the positive energy of the whole society' (13/03/2013).

Further analysis of the moral values posts shows that over a third of them (131 posts, 10.3% of all political posts) promoted positive energy by focussing on positive role models, or what the Party often refers to as model citizens. These posts covered a range of positive behaviours, usually heart-warming stories involving help for people such as less well-off workers, sick, disabled, or elderly people. For example, one post was about 201 university students who bought air-conditioning for the cleaning staff at their dormitory when they graduated (26/06/2013) and another talked about the 'good hearted citizens' who came to the aid of a 70-year-old man who fell down in the street (05/05/2016). Another (Image 8) featured an elderly cancer patient who became a 'hero' when he saved a young boy who fell into the water (19/01/2017).

Image 8: Cancer patient who saved a boy who fell in water from post on 19/01/2017

The use of role models has long played an important part in the CCP's efforts to enhance its legitimacy. The most famous model citizen was Lei Feng. After his death in 1959, he was used as a model of 'love' for 'the newly founded People's Republic, Mao Zedong, socialism, and Chinese people' but more recently there has been a renewed focus on Lei Feng 'to promote national unity and pride by combining the themes of "commemoration", "volunteering" and "civic-mindedness"' (Jeffreys, 2017). As early as 2007, an ethical role model initiative was launched to recognise ordinary people for their outstanding deeds, including helping other people, devotion to work, and acts of filial piety, with 333 people receiving the honour by 2017 (State Council Information Office, 2018). At the 2017 award ceremony, Xi Jinping encouraged these ethical role models and pioneers to make new contributions to raising 'socialist cultural-ethical standards' (China Daily, November 2017).

The stories about the modern-day model citizens featured in the People's Daily Weibo posts therefore not only promote a range of positive values but also aim to generate positive energy among those who read the posts.

Wielander argues that 'the emphasis on happiness is part of a continued effort on the part of the CCP to instil the 'correct spirt' (正确的精神) in China's population' (2018, 12) and 'the level of happiness in the Chinese population... serves as a measure of the ruling party's legitimacy' (2018, 38). She suggests that the CCP is 'very much enamoured with positive psychology', which argues for greater emphasis on the many 'beautiful and positive things in the world' (Wielander, 2017, 138). A number of other authors have written about the Party's efforts to promote a more positive attitude among its citizens. Yang and Tang show how the Party adopted the phrase 'positive energy', which had become popular among netizens in 2012 and then 'started to appear frequently' in Party communications (2018, 2). The Chinese online encyclopaedia Baidu Baike says 'positive energy' refers to 'all positive, healthy, endeavour-encouraging, power bestowing, hope-filled people and things' (Hird, 2018, 110). King et al's research on internet commentators also found that the so-called 50-cent army focused on 'cheerleading and positive discussions' and 'do not engage on controversial issues' (2017, 485 and 495). This emphasis on positive energy also pressures people 'into avoiding critical or negative feelings about societal and political matters because such sentiments are stigmatised as "negative energy"' (Yang and Tang, 2018). The increased focus on positive energy in the People's Daily posts is therefore itself an important part of the CCP's legitimation strategy.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed posts on Weibo by People's Daily to help answer two of the research questions: (a) what types of political information do the Chinese authorities seek to control in the traditional news media and online using censorship and propaganda, and (c) what types of legitimacy does the CCP focus on in its use of information control? People's Daily is the main state newspaper. Most previous research using their coverage has focused on content in the full paper, which is targeted at Party members and officials. However, People's Daily posts on Weibo, a key news source for Chinese citizens, aims to help shape political discussion among the general public online. They therefore give a better indication of what propaganda the CCP was targeting at ordinary citizens, as opposed to Party members and officials.

The analysis in this chapter suggests that a significant focus of the Party's propaganda between 2013 and 2018 was on ideological legitimation. Some authors (for example Chan, 2007) argued that after Mao the CCP moved away from promoting ideology. However, the results in this chapter support the argument that there has been a significant focus on ideology under Xi Jinping (see also Li and Sparks, 2018; Brown and Čerenkova, 2018; Zeng, 2016). This chapter suggests that under Xi there is greater belief in the Party's ability to shape what people think.

This analysis also shows that nationalism was a key focus of the People's Daily posts related to ideological legitimacy in this period. A number of authors have discussed the importance that the CCP placed on nationalism after Tiananmen (for example Christensen, 1996; Gries, 2005). However, the People's Daily posts show that the propaganda focus on nationalism increased during Xi Jinping's first six years as president. By the end of the period People's Daily posts which were directly related to nationalism had doubled to more than 17% of all political posts. Posts about moral values and traditions and culture are also strongly linked to nationalism. These three categories together accounted for 45% of all the political posts. In fact, the increase in the number of posts in the nationalism and traditions and culture categories meant that the proportion of posts linked to nationalism rose to 56% of all political posts in 2017 and 2018. Therefore, just over one out of every two of the People's Daily political posts that people saw on Weibo by 2018 were ones with a link to nationalism.

Callahan (2006) has argued that from the mid-1990s, nationalism was increasingly driven from the bottom up, rather than by the Party. However, between 2013 and 2018, the promotion of nationalism was the most significant focus of the People's Daily political posts, and this became increasingly important across the period. Bislev argued that with the creation of historical anti-Japanese TV-series and films, national humiliation history lessons and encouraging visits to patriotic education sites, the CCP was seeking 'to fan the nationalist fires' (2014, 132). The increasing focus on nationalism in the People's Daily Weibo posts underlines just how important nationalism had become as a legitimation strategy for the CCP under Xi Jinping's leadership, and the extent to which the nationalist fires in China were being fanned by the CCP, rather than nationalism being driven by public opinion.

The analysis in this chapter also shows just how important moral and cultural values have become in CCP propaganda. The CCP may not have transformed into the Chinese Confucian Party but the emphasis on moral values is an attempt to persuade people that the CCP is still relevant, by setting themselves up as the champions of a value system that the Party once reviled but which is much more deeply embedded in Chinese culture than communism.

There were very few posts about communist ideology. As several authors note, reform and opening up in China made communism less credible (Zhao, 2009; Zeng, 2016). However, there was also very little in the People's Daily posts on Weibo about contemporary updates of communism, including the China Dream and Xi Jinping Thought. This contrasts with propaganda aimed at Party members, for example, efforts to ensure they learn Xi Jinping Thought (Guardian, February 2019). As Zeng (2016) has argued, this 'formal ideology' is focused mainly at CCP members, while the Party promotes 'informal ideology', focused on moral and cultural values and nationalism, to ordinary citizens.

Many People's Daily posts did also address issues which are relevant to different aspects of performance legitimacy. This suggests that performance legitimacy remained important in the CCP's propaganda. However, the analysis in this chapter confirms that it is wrong to argue that the Party saw its legitimacy as largely depending on its economic performance. The People's Daily posts covered a wide range of other performance issues, including the environment, disasters and health. The range of issues included in the People's Daily posts reflects the fact that as China has become more prosperous, there has been an increasing emphasis on a broad range of social issues (see also Bondes and Heep, 2013). Analysis of these posts over the period from 2013 to 2018 also suggests that the nature of performance legitimation changed over this period. There was less coverage of the most sensitive issues, even if the Party could be shown to be doing things to address them. By contrast, there was little change in coverage of issues where the Party could be presented as stepping in to protect citizens from problems caused by a small number of bad individuals and organisations, rather than problems the Party could be held responsible for.

There was very little emphasis on institutional legitimacy in the People's Daily posts. Less than one in ten of the political posts relate to this kind of legitimacy. Deng Xiaoping sought to deal with the overconcentration of power that occurred under Mao by introducing a number of institutional changes (Bandurski, 2019). During the 1990s and 2000s the CCP increasingly sought to show that its rule is, at least in part, 'legitimated in terms of rules and

laws that are rationally established' (Chin, 2018, 189). Many Chinese scholars in the period just prior to Xi Jinping becoming President at the end of 2012 also recommended an even greater focus on issues like the rule of law, corruption and participation (Gilley and Holbig, 2009; Zeng, 2016). Xi Jinping launched a big anti-corruption campaign after he became president, and initially that campaign featured strongly in the People's Daily posts. However, posts related to institutional legitimacy reduced over the period from 2013 to 2018, including posts about corruption and the rule of law. This is consistent with the decision to lift Presidential term limits, made at the Party Congress in 2018 (BBC, 2018) and the crackdown on human rights lawyers in 2015 (Guardian, 2015). The CCP's 4th plenum in 2019 said: "We must adhere to the [principle that] the CCP leads everything—the Party, the government, the military, society, education, east, west, north and south" (Bandurski, 2019). Developing institutional legitimacy - particularly improvements to the rule of law and participation - involves constraining the Party and its senior leaders and is therefore incompatible with Xi's desire to concentrate more power in the hands of the Party's top leaders, and particularly Xi Jinping himself as its core.

The CCP may have sought to concentrate even more power in its own hands but the analysis in this chapter does not suggest the Party felt it needed to 'insistently remind China's citizens that their well-being is the result of the Party's benevolence' (Sorace, 2017). Only about one in ten of the People's Daily posts contained positive mentions of the CCP and its leaders. The Party therefore generally sought to take itself out of politics, or even to depoliticise what would generally be considered as political issues. The Party appears not to want people to spend too much time thinking about it. The analysis in this chapter also does not suggest that there was an attempt to create a form of charismatic legitimacy focused on Xi Jinping. There was a growing emphasis in the People's Daily posts on President Xi Jinping but not to the extent that might have been expected if there was a shift towards charismatic legitimation in the Party's propaganda.

This analysis also shows that there was a strong, and increasing, focus on promoting 'positive energy' in the People's Daily posts. By trying to make people feel optimistic and positive, as well as limiting the focus on the Party, the Chinese authorities seek to divert people's attention away from any problems that might lead them to question the CCP's continued rule. To the extent that it can do this, it will be less reliant on traditional legitimation strategies.

People's Daily posts therefore focused very strongly, and to an increasing extent, on promoting an ideology based on nationalism and traditional Chinese moral and cultural values. At the same time there was a bigger emphasis on content that would make people feel more positive and fewer references to problems, to generate positive energy among the general public. The Party itself is generally kept in the background in People's Daily's coverage of political topics on Weibo. This propaganda seeks to make people think positively and patriotically, but not politically.

Chapter Six: Analysis of the link between censorship and propaganda

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 focused on censorship and Chapter 5 focused on propaganda during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency (2013-2018). Together, these two chapters provided some answers to the first and third research questions set out at the start of this thesis: (a) what types of political information do the Chinese authorities seek to control in the traditional news media and online using censorship and propaganda**,** and (c) what types of legitimacy does the CCP focus on in its use of information control? This chapter focuses first on answering the second research question: (b) how do the Chinese authorities use a combination of censorship and propaganda to control this information? This analysis is then used to help provide a more in-depth answer to question (c).

In contrast to this thesis, most studies look either at censorship (Vuori and Paltemaa, 2015; Ng, 2015; King et al, 2013; Bamman et al, 2012) or propaganda (Xu and Sun, 2021; Miao, 2020; Sorace, 2017; King et al, 2017). However, the Chinese Communist Party often uses a mix of different types of censorship and propaganda to control information that they consider to be sensitive and to maximise their ability to enhance the Party's legitimacy. Sometimes the focus is on censorship and at other times it is mainly on propaganda. However, on many occasions it clearly makes sense to use these tools in combination. Focussing research on just on one of these tools can therefore give a distorted impression of how the Party seeks to manipulate public opinion.

In section 6.2 I look again at the sample of censorship instructions between 2013 and 2018 which were analysed in Chapter 4, to see in which cases the instructions called for complete elimination of the content and where the Chinese authorities instead sought to minimise the content. As discussed in chapter 3, the latter includes instructions that tell media to only use content from Xinhua or other official sources and instructions not to hype information. Instructions that require the elimination of content are ones that the Party clearly does not want people to discuss at all, whereas the minimisation instructions are ones where some limited or controlled discussion of the content is considered acceptable or even useful to the CCP, or where complete elimination of the information is not possible.

Section 6.3 looks at what, if anything, People's Daily posted on Weibo about the stories which had been the subject of censorship instructions. As explained in Chapter 3, the content of the People's Daily posts was coded to show what type of strategy the authorities sought to focus on when they decided to post information related to these stories. For example, to what extent did they seek to tell people something positive about what the Party/state was doing about the problem or were they seeking to focus blame for the problem on other actors.

In section 6.4, the information from the previous sections is used to present a typology of China's integrated information control system. In section 6.5 I look at what types of legitimacy these different types of censorship and propaganda are focused on, to gain a more in-depth understanding of the CCP's legitimation strategy.

There are several key findings. This chapter shows that more than half (55%) of all the leaked instructions between 2013 and 2018 required a complete ban. Most of the remaining instructions involved a more limited form of censorship. Where People's Daily posted content about censored topics, there were three common approaches: promoting Party/state policies and achievements, providing factual details, and distracting attention away from the central Party/state by focussing on the responsibility of individuals, companies and regional government. In a smaller but significant number of cases where People's Daily reported on issues covered by specific censorship instructions, the paper distracted attention by focusing on moral issues. However, this analysis also shows that during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency there was to some extent a shift back to a strategy involving more reliance on total bans. I present a typology of the propaganda system based on two main types of censorship – elimination censorship and minimisation censorship, and two types of propaganda – extensive propaganda and limited propaganda. I also provide a hypothesis about the information control decision making process for content that potentially threatens CCP legitimacy. Finally, I conclude that ideology was the focus of the CCP's strongest information control efforts. Ideological threats were more likely to be *eliminated* and People's Daily used *extensive propaganda* to focus people's attention on the Party's contemporary ideology, a mix of nationalism and moral values.

6.2 Elimination or minimisation?

This section looks at what types of content the CCP seeks to simply eliminate and what types of content they seek instead to manipulate by only minimising the content. The latter include instructions to use only authoritative sources, not to hype, to control content online or to post particular content / guide public opinion. It also considers whether the balance between these types of censorship changed over the period.

Table 9 shows a breakdown of the type of instructions that appear in the leaked censorship instructions collected by China Digital Times. The most common type of instruction (55% of the total, 373 instructions) were outright bans, where media organisations were told to delete content, not to report certain information or not to allow that information to appear online e.g., in social media. For example, in February 2013 Beijing Municipal Propaganda Department told media 'Do not report on the glass that was broken at the [Chairman Mao] Memorial on Tiananmen Square' (China Digital Times, 25/02/2013[4]). This instruction would have left media organisations in no doubt that the incident was something they could not mention. In another case, an instruction from the Central Propaganda Department in 2013 said 'Do not report or comment on the May 11 villagers' attack on government workers in Dongqiao Township, Hui'an County, Fuzhou, Fujian Province' (China Digital Times, 22/05/2013). Residents in the village of Dongqiao had clashed with locals officials about plans to requisition land for an oil refinery, capturing one of the town's vice mayors and a riot police officer (China Digital Times, 22 May 2013). This story linked to several issues that have been extremely sensitive in China: the requisitioning of people's land for development, the siting of oil and chemical facilities close to people's homes and attacks on government officials and public security officers. Therefore, the propaganda authorities tried to ensure that most of the public were not aware of the incident.

[4] The dates show when the instructions were posted on the China Digital Times website.

Table 9: Leaked censorship instructions 2013-2018 categorised by type of censorship

Category	Number*	Percent*
Complete elimination		
Delete or don't report	373	55
Partial censorship/ minimisation		
Use Xinhua or other authoritative sources	153	23
Don't hype	135	20
Control negative commentary online	81	12
Guide public opinion	52	8
General instructions	27	4

Number of censorship instructions 678

* Instructions can appear in more than one category

Alternatively, the propaganda authorities used a more subtle form of censorship. Media were sometimes told to use only authoritative sources (23%, 153 instructions), such as copy from the Xinhua news agency, or not to hype a particular story (20%, 135). For example, one instruction told media, 'Strictly adhere to Xinhua wire copy in covering the Bo Xilai and Wang Lijun incidents and related issues' (China Digital Times, 29/01/2013). The instruction meant this story could be reported. As discussed in Chapter 4, Xi Jinping had launched a major anti-corruption campaign and would have wanted people to know that the man who had only recently been seen as his main rival (Bo Xilai) was under investigation for corruption. However, the instruction made it clear that the authorities did not want media organisations to do their own journalism or analysis. Instead, they were seeking to ensure that the Party controlled the narrative about this story.

In some cases, the word 'hype' was used in the instruction. "Do not hype" means to limit the amount of coverage, not to place it prominently and/or to ensure that it was played down (Tai, 2014, 194). For example, one instruction told media, 'Do not *hype'* a report by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that cyanide had been detected in products packaged by a pharmaceutical company in Tianjin (China Digital Times, 23/12/2015). The Food and Drug Administration reported that it had detected hydrogen cyanide contamination in two shipments of drugs from the Tianjin company, after explosions at the port of Tianjin (Bloomberg Law, 2015). The pharmaceutical company was 18 miles from the site of the explosions. The story therefore risked causing concerns about the safety of medicines but also about the risk to people living in the area around where the explosions had occurred. In

another case, an instruction in 2018 told media 'Do not hype any content related to "MeToo." Strictly control commentary and news related to Zhu Jun' (China Digital Times, 27/07/2018). Zhu Jun was a prominent CCTV host who had been accused by a former intern of sexual harassment (Hollywood Reporter, 2018). Media were not prevented from covering these stories, but they were clearly expected to minimise their impact, in terms of how the stories were discussed and where they were situated in the paper or on a website.

Posts which did not use the word hype, but which told media to limit coverage in some way were also included in this category. For example, a post about an explosion in Guangzhou in 2013 said 'Do not put the story on the front page or lure readers to it. Do not exaggerate or sensationalize it' (China Digital Times, 19/01/2013). The authorities did not seek to eliminate all the information about these stories, but they did want to reduce the chances that people would see them and to try to ensure that they were reported in a way that would cause as little concern as possible.

Some instructions were also explicit that certain aspects of a story had to be played down. For example, as discussed in Chapter 4, a number of instructions that did not involve outright bans told media organisations and internet companies to delete anything that attacked the Party or the system. Similarly, some instructions told media not to speculate on the causes of an event and or link it to similar events that had occurred in the past. For example, after an explosion in 2018, media were told 'Do not speculate on the cause of the accident, and do not relate it to similar incidents' (China Digital Times, 27/11/2018). People are more likely to be critical of the authorities and the political system if they can see that an incident is not simply a one off but part of a pattern. If similar incidents had occurred in different parts of China in the recent past, that may have suggested that there was an issue with the way a particular industry was regulated. By preventing people making those links, it was easier to avoid discussion of potential systemic problems. While doing so, they avoided having to censor the story entirely and hence run the risk that people lost confidence in the information they were getting from official sources.

A similar approach can be seen in instructions to internet companies. After the environmental documentary *Under the Dome* had circulated widely online, internet companies were told that 'Online public opinion [about the documentary] must be regulated' (China Digital Times, 28/02/2015). The authorities did not seek to eliminate all information about the film, but they were keen to ensure that film did not become a rallying point for

large scale criticisms, and potentially protests, about the environment. During severe flooding in Shandong websites were told to control information on 'self-media' platforms, taking 'care to delete unconfirmed rumors, photos, videos, malicious comments, and so on' (China Digital Times, 23/08/2018). The authorities did not attempt to eliminate all information about the flooding and the problems it was causing but they clearly wanted to ensure criticism of the Party on the internet was significantly limited. Instructions like these limit the chances of people becoming aware of speculation about policy failings and criticisms of the Party. Therefore, there may have been a lot of information about a particular incident or story, which may have given people the impression that information was freely available. However, information that might have harmed the CCP's legitimacy had been filtered so that people got a version of events that was less negative for the Party than it would have been if the propaganda authorities had allowed open discussion of the issues.

About 25% of instructions to use authoritative sources also said not to hype. For example, one instructions said, 'Authoritative sources covering the Xu Zhiyong case must prevail on all websites. Do not hype or highlight the story' (China Digital Times, 26/01/2014). Combining the two instructions would further minimise the potential impact of the story. In these cases, the posts were coded in both categories.

Further analysis of the content of instructions involving *minimisation censorship* shows that in some cases, they were reinforced by telling media not to send reporters to the scene of an incident. For example, following the sinking of the Oriental Star cruise ship on the Yangtze in 2015, media were told that 'coverage must use information released by authoritative media as the standard' and they 'must not dispatch reporters to the scene. Reporters already there must be immediately recalled' (China Digital Times, 01/06/2015). The instruction not to send reporters occurred in several cases involving disasters and was clearly intended to further limit the ability of the media to investigate what had happened. This made it easier for the narrative to be defined by the key state media, such as Xinhua, People's Daily and China Central TV, whose reporters were given access to the scene (New York Times, June 2015).

Some instructions asked media and internet companies to 'control' online content (12%, 81). This included instructions to internet companies to control comments made on social media and instructions telling news organisations to control the comments made on online news stories. This might mean deleting some content or could involve making it less accessible

e.g., by preventing people finding it using the search function. For example, following an outbreak of bird flu, one instruction by the Chongqing Internet Propaganda Office told internet companies 'to strictly supervise contents' related to the outbreak' and 'If a post raises suspicions of "panic," delete it immediately!' (China Digital Times, 11/04/2013). The clear expectation was that the internet companies would ensure that the most sensitive content was removed, or that measures were taken to prevent that content being posted in the first place. In another case, a 2015 instruction ahead of a planned demonstration in Hong Kong told internet companies 'Carefully find and delete text, images, and video which touches on this protest, and strictly guard against the online spread of harmful information in support of the demonstration' (China Digital Times, 01/07/2015). As discussed in Chapter 4, the CCP would have been sensitive about people on the mainland seeing information that showed large scale protests or which highlighted Chinese people campaigning for democratic reforms. These instructions were unlikely to stop all the relevant sensitive content appearing online. People may have used wording or images that the censors failed to pick up (Yang, 2009; Diamond, 2010; Edney, 2014; Qiang, 2011, 2014). The internet companies may also have deliberately allowed some of the content to be posted in order to maintain their competitive advantage (Miller, 2018). However, as discussed in the literature review, this probably became less common over this period, as pressure on these companies to strictly apply instructions from the propaganda authorities increased. Wording such as 'delete it immediately' and 'carefully find and delete' also made it very clear just how important the propaganda authorities thought these instructions were and therefore implied that there would be serious consequences for failing to comply effectively. These instructions can therefore be expected to have had a significant impact on the amount of sensitive content that was available, and therefore the chances that it would be seen by other netizens.

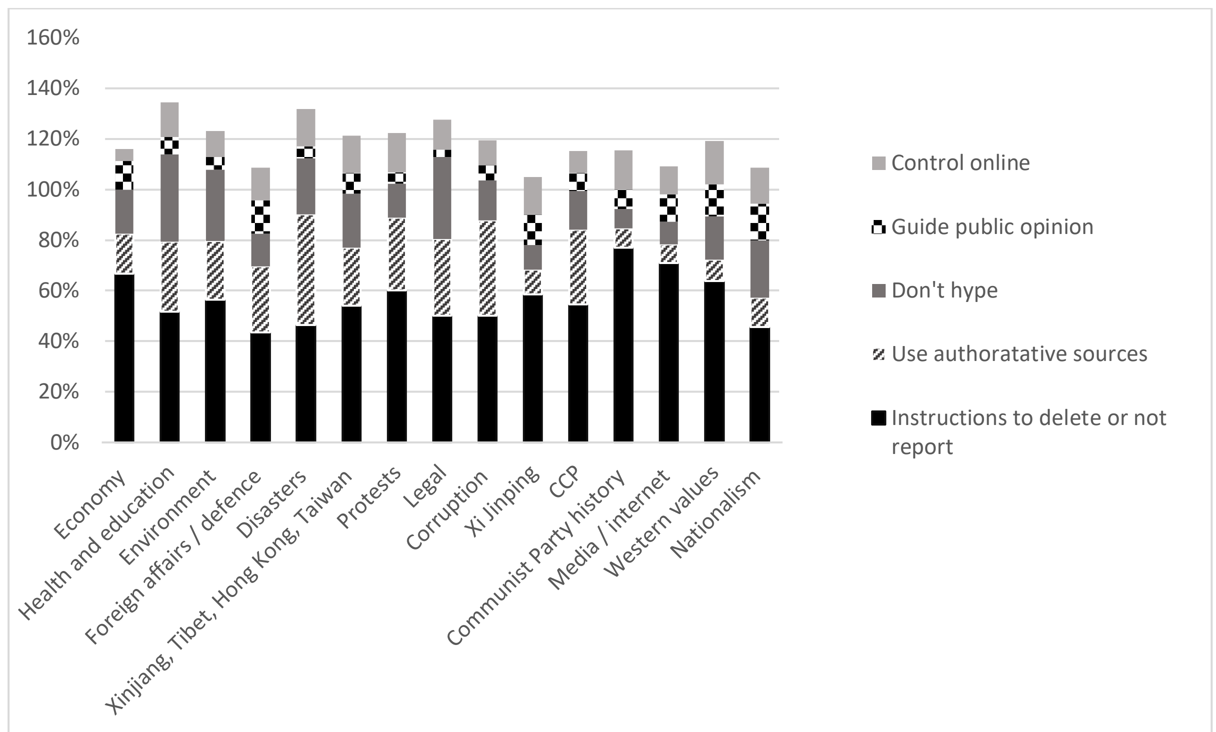
A smaller number of the leaked censorship instructions told media to use specific content (4.3%, 29). As discussed in Chapter 2, this is a form of reverse censorship. For example, one instruction said: 'For the next 48 hours, all media websites must prominently display the Xinhua editorial "Upheaval Would Leave China Only More Tragic than the Soviet Union" on their twin homepages' (China Digital Times, 01/08/2013). Similarly, some instructions told the media to guide public opinion on a story (3.0%). For example, in 2018 amid concerns about the economy, partly because of trade tensions with the United States, an instruction told the media to 'Give prominence to reports on economic bright spots and developments, showing our economy's prospects for continued steady improvement' (China Digital Times,

29/06/2018). The instruction made it clear that the media needed to avoid reporting negative information about the economy and instead replace it with a more positive spin.

The final category is general instructions (4%). This includes a range of instructions to media organisations about the control of information. Some of them help to chart the increase in controls of the media under Xi Jinping. For example, one instruction reminded editors that ‘Party control of the media is an unwavering basic principle’ (China Digital Times, 7/01/2013) and another said that ‘For the time being, regional media must cease monitoring public opinion outside the borders of their jurisdiction’ (China Digital Times, 3/03/2013).

To re-cap, just over half the leaked instructions across the whole period involved outright bans on content and the remainder were mainly more subtle forms of censorship. One factor that might have affected the decision about whether to try to eliminate or to minimise the information might have been the type of content that was involved. Therefore, the data was also analysed based on the topic categories used for the content analysis in Chapter 4. Figure 11 shows the censorship instructions by instruction type and topic category. This shows that outright bans were the most common type of instruction regardless of topic.

Figure 11: Leaked censorship instructions by instruction type and topic (2013-18)



Note: Excludes the 'Other' category and the two smallest categories (moral values and communist ideology). Instruction type excludes 'General instructions'. The total is generally more than 100% because some instructions include more than one type of censorship.

Elimination of content (instructions to delete or not report) were more common for certain categories of content than for others. The categories where elimination of content (delete or do not report) was highest were mainly those identified by the CCP in Document 9 as ideological threats: Communist Party history, the media and Western values (ChinaFile, 2013). Elimination of content was highest in instructions about Communist Party History. 77% of these instructions involved telling media organisations to delete or not to report the information concerned (22 out of 26 instructions) compared with the average of 55% for all instructions. For example, in 2013, the State Council Information Office, said, 'All websites are asked to clean out harmful information which: 'smears Mao's moral character and private life' (China Digital Times, 19/06/2013). Document 9 said that 'By rejecting CCP history and the history of New China, historical nihilism seeks to fundamentally undermine the CCP's historical purpose, which is tantamount to denying the legitimacy of the CCP's long-term political dominance' (ChinaFile, 2013). If the Party considers that criticisms of key figures or events from its history will have such severe consequences then it will be more inclined to eliminate content like this altogether, rather than simply minimising its availability. This analysis shows that the CCP usually wanted to try to remove as much content involving historical nihilism as possible, rather than trying to minimise the information.

Another category where there was a high proportion of instructions involving elimination of content is the Media category (71%, 39 out of 55). As discussed in Chapter 4, Document 9 described 'the West's idea of journalism' as a threat to Party to control of the media (ChinaFile, 2013). Therefore, the Chinese authorities tried to ensure that most people did not see content that could significantly undermine that control. For example, websites were simply told to delete the article mentioned in Chapter 4 about the fact that China was ranked 175th out of 180 countries for press freedom (China Digital Times, 11/02/2014). Information like this cannot easily be spun. Chinese citizens are aware of controls on media and internet freedom, but the CCP generally seeks to give the impression that they are focused mainly on controlling those issues that are harmful to society in some way, rather than censoring discussion of political issues. A ranking which showed that China had one of the worst records in the world for media freedom underlined just how strictly the CCP controls the country's media. In these circumstances, it was much simpler to try to prevent people seeing the information, rather than to use a tactic such as trying to justify it or to blame the issue on someone else.

Similarly, there were a high number of elimination instructions concerning the Western values category (64%, 30 out of 47 instructions). For example, websites were told they 'must take care to delete content related to … Cao Shunli's nomination for the human rights "Nobel"' (China Digital Times, 20/04/2014). Cao was detained after a two-month sit-in at the foreign ministry with other activists, campaigning for the public to be allowed to participate in a UN human rights review. Cao suffered from several serious health conditions but was denied treatment and died in February 2014 (Guardian, March 2014). This is also not an easy issue to spin. Criticising the decision to nominate Cao for a Nobel prize would have drawn attention to him and what he did. Even if the official information did not include details about his motivations and the circumstances of his death, some people may have tried to find this information e.g., by using a VPN to access information from abroad. Therefore, the easiest option for the authorities was to try to prevent people learning anything about Cao or the Nobel nomination.

Elimination instructions were also higher than the average in instructions about the economy (67% compared with the average of 55%). This was higher than for any other category related to performance legitimacy. In part this is likely to be because the CCP still attached greater importance to economic legitimacy than other types of performance legitimacy, even

if issues such as health and the environment had become an important part of the Party’s performance legitimacy. As discussed in Chapter 5, the steady decline in China’s growth rate over the period meant that economic growth was becoming a less strong source of performance legitimacy. Therefore, the number of negative economic stories was likely to be increasing. However, the large number of elimination instructions probably also reflects the fact that a lot of information about the economy can be deleted without the censorship being too obvious because it does not directly affect many people. For example, one instruction said, ‘Do not report on events related to foreign investment firms’ successive withdrawal from China’ (China Digital Times, 05/03/2018). Most people would not have direct experience of the firms withdrawing from China; therefore, they would probably only have found out about this from media stories or posts on social media. Banning news stories about these withdrawals would have meant that most people would therefore have remained in ignorance of this negative economic news. As in the cases above, this is also the kind of story that it would be difficult to spin. Blaming the withdrawals on Western countries, for example, would simply have served to highlight that it was happening. Therefore, the easiest option was to try to eliminate the information altogether. When an economic issue was one that people would directly have experienced the propaganda authorities were more likely to minimise the amount of negative information that was available rather than eliminating it. For example, in 2013 the Central Propaganda Department told media that they could only report on a new price fixing mechanism for petrol using Xinhua wire copy (China Digital Times, 26/03/2013). Anyone who needed to buy petrol would have seen the effect of the change, so it made more sense for the CCP to manipulate the information available about the change rather than trying to remove any mention of the story. The censorship instruction would have meant that people were less likely to see information and analysis of the change that was critical of the Party/state, and more likely to see the Party’s narrative about the decision.

Although elimination instructions were the most common type of censorship for every category, more subtle forms of censorship were more common for some topics than for others, particularly those related to performance legitimacy. The most common form of minimisation censorship involved instructions telling media that they could only report a story using authoritative sources. Nearly a quarter (23%) of all the instructions included this type of censorship (Table 10). However, 44% of instructions about disasters required media to use authoritative sources (Figure 11). A lot of people will learn about large scale disasters from friends and family and so much information will often be posted on the internet that

details can spread widely before propaganda officials are able to have the information removed. Therefore, it is difficult to simply pretend the disaster has not happened. A small number of people voicing specific criticisms about the way an issue such as a natural or manmade disaster is being handled may also not inflict serious damage. At the same time, there is some danger that a complete denial of the existence of the problem may not be believed, a problem which some Chinese scholars identified with Soviet propaganda (Munro, 2008). On the other hand, if large numbers of people are voicing similar criticisms this may erode the Party's legitimacy over time. The Party clearly worries about the potential for it to be blamed for having failed to respond adequately to a particular incident, and therefore being blamed for the number of deaths and injuries. As discussed in Chapter 4, the 'heavenly mandate' discourse means that the Party places a high priority on being seen to manage disasters effectively (Schneider and Hwang, 2014). In these circumstances, the CCP has an interest in minimising the amount of negative information about the incident, but it does not necessarily need to eliminate it altogether. Manipulating the information available to people is therefore more effective than trying to suppress all information about the incident. One way to do that is to ensure that the coverage of the incident very closely follows the official messages, which generally means the reports from the Xinhua news agency or other Party media such as the People's Daily newspaper. For example, following the stampede during New Year's Eve celebrations in Shanghai discussed in Chapter 4, the media were told to 'strictly use authoritative copy from central and Shanghai major news units', and were prohibited from using 'information from Weibo, WeChat, other social media, or foreign media', as well as from publishing 'excessively tragic and bloody images' (China Digital Times, 02/01/2015). In some cases, instructions like this were combined with instructions to control information online, with internet companies also being told to 'Delete malicious information, remove opportunities to attack the Party and the government, and information attacking the social system' (.ibid). And sometimes media would also be instructed to guide public opinion by providing positive information. For example, during flooding in Yuyao in 2013, the media were told 'to strengthen positive reporting' (China Digital Times, 09/10/2013). Therefore, the propaganda authorities did not seek to eliminate all information about these incidents but instead sought to ensure that the Party's narrative dominated the information that was available, with media running the official line, and as much critical content being removed as possible. Information about these incidents was therefore available to people around China but it was manipulated to a significant extent.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the limits of banning information in a disaster situation were exposed when the media were initially prevented from covering an outbreak of SARS in 2002/3. A number of the leaked instructions show that faced with similar situations over the period covered by this study, the propaganda authorities chose to manipulate the coverage of these issues, rather than banning that coverage altogether. For example, during an outbreak of H7N9 avian flu in 2013, in which at least 10 people had died, the Central Propaganda Department told media: 'Regarding the epidemic situation in Shanghai, give first place to Xinhua wire copy and information issued by authoritative departments' (China Digital Times, 10/04/2013). In this case the media were not banned from doing some reporting of their own, but the instruction sought to ensure that the official narrative would dominate the coverage. This would have reduced the risk of the incident causing panic and people looking elsewhere for information and increased the likelihood that people accepted the Party's version of what was happening.

Nevertheless, old habits die hard. At the starts of the Coronavirus outbreak in late 2019 (after the period covered by this research) the Chinese authorities in Hubei did initially react by seeking to prevent any discussion of the topic. Dr Li Wenliang, who had told fellow medical professionals about the new virus in a chat group on 30 December 2019, was accused of "rumour-mongering" and the outbreak was only publicly acknowledged three weeks later (Financial Times, 2020). This is consistent with the evidence discussed below that after 2013 there was an increased tendency for the authorities to seek to eliminate sensitive information altogether, rather than trying to manipulate that information. The Coronavirus outbreak started less than 12 months after the end of the period covered by this thesis. Once the outbreak was acknowledged, Chinese media and citizens were given more or less free reign to discuss what was happening in Wuhan for the following few weeks (Repnikova, 2020). But then the authorities started to clampdown and regain control over the narrative, insisting on the use of content from authoritative sources and imprisoning or harassing citizen bloggers who tried to independently report on what was happening (China Media Bulletin, 2020).

The second most common form of minimisation censorship were instructions telling media not to hype a story. One in five (20%) of all the instructions included this type of censorship (Table 10). The category where this type of instruction was used most often was health and education, with 34% of instructions telling media not to hype the story. In some cases, this was combined with the instruction only to use authoritative sources. Many of these stories

will have been ones that directly affected large numbers of people, or which had already received a lot of attention on social media. For example, a number of the instructions were about doctor-patient relations, which has been a controversial issue in China. There were also several instructions in 2017 about scandals at daycare centres for young children. Simply deleting stories about these issues would not have significantly reduced anxieties about the issues and may have made people feel that the problems were simply being ignored. However, making the stories less prominent at least gave people some information about the issue but played down their significance. For example, following a scandal about abuse at a daycare centre for young children, the media were told, 'Do not send any more push notifications concerning the Ctrip daycare abuse incident' and 'Related news must be moved out of immediate sight' (China Digital Times, 13/11/2017). Deleting all information about a story that a lot of people were aware of might have aggravated concerns. But adopting a strategy of significantly reducing the focus on the story would have increased the chances that anyone who was not directly affected by it would have lost interest in it. Similarly, not alerting people to related stories would have meant that it was less likely that they would have seen this as part of a pattern that might have led to concerns about what might be happening in their own area, therefore raising wider questions about government policy. In another case, media were told 'Do not reprint or hype The Paper's article "Hundreds of Millions of Yuan in Unrefrigerated Vaccines Flow into 18 Provinces: Possibly Affect Human Life"' (China Digital Times, 22/03/2016). The media were not prevented from covering the issue entirely, but they would have been clear to play down the potential implications of the incident. People would therefore have been less likely to be alarmed by what had happened and therefore to be critical of the authorities and make calls for policy changes.

Do not hype instructions were also relatively high for content about the environment (28% compared with the average of 20%). For example, in 2013 the Central Propaganda Department issued an instruction telling media to 'Firmly rein in the degree of coverage of the Shenzhen Binhai power plant. Prevent malicious sensationalization' (China Digital Times, 23/05/2013). Over the previous decade there had been a large number of protests about the siting of industrial facilities, such as chemical factories and power plants. For example, in 2007, local authorities in the city of Xiamen decided to move the site of a planned PX chemical factory after 20,000 people took part in protests organised on the internet and by text, following warnings about the health risks published in a blog (Yang, 2009; Huang & Yip, 2012). In the case of the Shenzhen Binhai power plant, the authorities

did not try to eliminate all coverage of the issue. However, their aim was clearly to significantly reduce the amount of coverage and the strength of that coverage, which they would have hoped would reduce the risk of large-scale protests. Fewer people would have become aware of the issue and people would have been less aware of the kind of details that might have encouraged them to take part in any protests. This meant that some information about these issues was available, but propaganda officials sought to make sure that the coverage was less prominent and played down.

Another category where media organisations were often told that they could report a story but that they had to use authoritative sources was corruption. Although 50% of instructions about corruption banned any coverage, 38% of the instructions told media to use authoritative sources (compared with the average of 23%). Corruption is an issue that many people are aware of. Therefore, simply banning all coverage of corruption would not have stopped the issue being discussed and saying nothing about the issue would have done nothing to assuage people's anger about the problem. In these circumstances the challenge for the propaganda authorities was to try to ensure that it was discussed in a way that was less damaging for the CCP. President Xi Jinping had also launched a major anti-corruption campaign shortly after becoming leader at the end of 2012. Therefore, the Party did not want to simply ban all coverage of corruption. In this case, it served the Party's interests to ensure that some corruption cases were covered, as long as they were ones that the Party was dealing with or prepared to deal with. The priority in this situation was for the propaganda authorities to ensure that any coverage was largely compatible with their own narrative about corruption. For example, the Bo Xilai corruption case was one of the big stories of Xi's first year as president. A number of propaganda instructions carefully guided coverage of the story. One told media to 'Strictly adhere to Xinhua wire copy' and emphasised 'No media or website is to independently produce any other form of report or comment, or to link to other material' (China Digital Times, 29/03/2013). Similarly, once the Party had formally charged the former Minister of Railways, Liu Zhijun, with graft they were happy for the story to be reported but the media were told that 'coverage must employ Xinhua wire copy' and not to 'produce detailed reports, do not comment, and do not exaggerate the story' (China Digital Times, 08/07/2013). In both these cases the media were permitted to cover the stories but were fairly tightly constrained, with the propaganda authorities seeking to ensure that, as much as possible, people only saw what the CCP wanted them to see.

On the other hand, information about corruption that was simply negative, was banned altogether. For example, websites were told to 'please self-inspect and delete all content related to the "Panama Papers" leak, including news reporting, microblogs, WeChat, forums, community pages, bulletin boards, cloud storage, comments and other interactive media (China Digital Times, 04/04/2016). The Panama Papers included details about eight relatives of senior CCP figures. For example, Jasmine Li, who was the sole shareholder in two British Virgin Islands companies, was the granddaughter of Jia Qinglin, at that time the fourth ranked politician in China (Guardian, April 2016). Xi Jinping's brother-in-law was also shown to be an investor in an offshore company (ibid.). These were clearly not stories the Chinese media could easily explain away. Hence, the decision to ban them rather than attempting to provide an official narrative. The authorities were therefore more likely to use minimisation censorship when it was possible to show the Party in control of a widely perceived problem, while seeking to eliminate information that might undermine that message.

The censorship approach may also be affected by a number of other factors. One of these is the extent to which information is spreading online. If a lot of potentially harmful content has already been communicated on the internet, the propaganda authorities may judge that it is best to try to counteract that information with official narratives communicated via the media, while doing what they can to limit the spread of negative content online. For example, following a riot in Xinjiang in 2013 the State Council Information Office told media and websites 'only to republish domestic Xinhua News Agency wire copy regarding the riot', while 'material from other sources must be removed without exception' (China Digital Times, 26/06/2013). At the same time, they instructed companies to 'Close forum threads, strictly control interactive platforms, and delete harmful contents which sow or spread rumors, contain bloody images, or seize the opportunity to attack the Party and the government.' (.ibid). The scale of the rioting (CNN, 2013) meant that a lot of information would probably have circulated online, despite the efforts of the censors. The Chinese authorities therefore did not try to eliminate all information about the riots, but they did seek to remove as much of the most critical information as possible from the internet, while trying to ensure that the media only used information from official sources.

It is notable that not all instructions concerning collective action involved bans. King et al (2013) suggested that censorship was largely focused on preventing collective action. It might be expected that instructions about protests would overwhelmingly involve bans.

However, the number of elimination instructions was only a little higher than the average (60% compared with the average of 55%). There were also a higher number of instructions to use authoritative sources (29% compared with 23%). The different approaches may to some extent relate to factors such as the scale and duration of the protests. In one case, where there were protests about an oil refinery in Anning, near Kunming, the Central Propaganda Department initially told media to 'report in strict accordance with Xinhua wire copy or authoritative information formally issued by the local government in the region' (China Digital Times, 08/05/2013). China Digital Times commented that, at that time, 'the protests were peaceful and unhindered by the police' (China Digital Times, 2013). This suggests a tolerance of at least some small-scale protests. However, eight days later, the Central Propaganda Department told media 'Without exception, do not republish, report, or comment on the assembly of the masses in Kunming to protest the construction of a PetroChina oil refinery' (China Digital Times, 16/05/2013). It seems likely that in this case, the authorities concluded that the protests had gone on too long, and perhaps were also growing in size. The risk of further escalation in these circumstances would be likely to worry the Chinese authorities. In addition, the longer that the protests continued, the more likely it would be for news about them to spread around the country, including to other places with similar issues. Given that there have been a number of protests about environmental issues around China, the CCP is likely to worry that news of protests in one area could encourage similar action to be taken in other places. Therefore, the Chinese authorities may well feel that heavy handed elimination censorship is not necessary when protests are fairly small but try to completely eliminate information about protests that have been going on for some time and/or are growing in size.

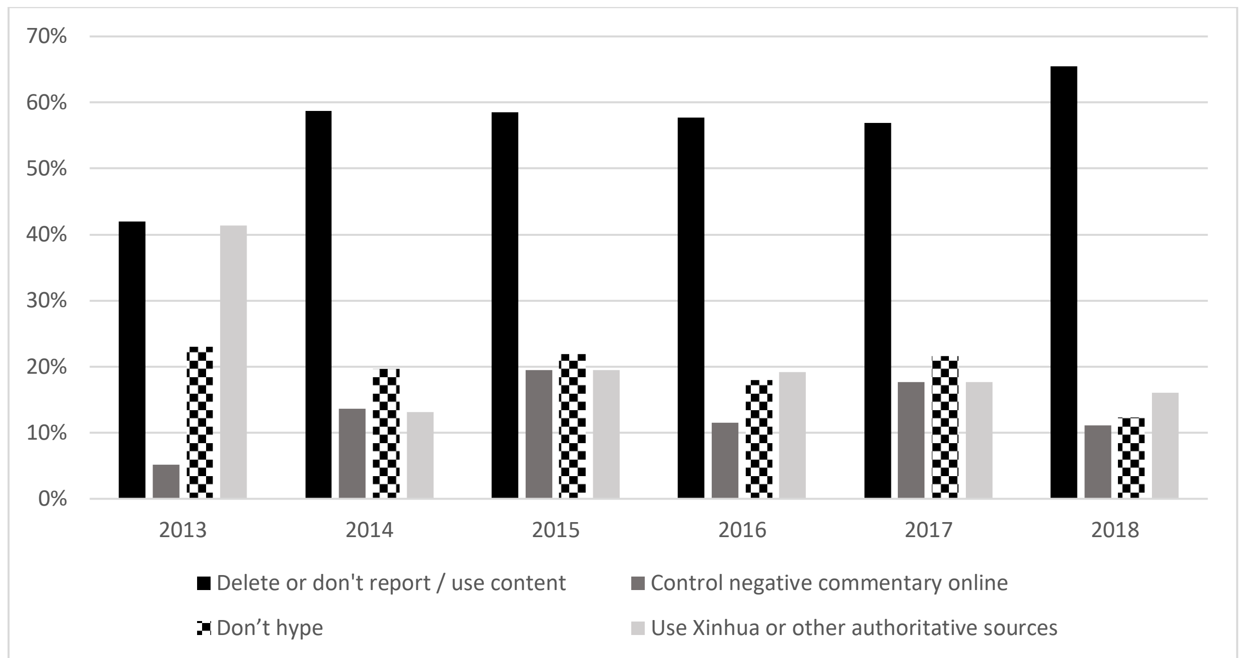
The scale and duration of reaction to stories also affected the approach to censorship in other types of cases, such as the response to the environmental film *Under the Dome*. Initially, the People's Daily website and other outlets posted links to the film, along with an interview with the former CCTV presenter Chai Jing who produced and presented it, and it was praised by the minister of environmental protection (New York Times, March 2015). This was despite the film having a very strong message. Chai Jing exhorted viewers to take a stand, saying "This is how history is made. With thousands of ordinary people one day saying, 'No, I'm not satisfied, I don't want to wait…I want to stand up and do a little something'" (Wall Street Journal, March 2015). However, within a couple of days over 200 million people had viewed the film (New York Times, March 2015) and the propaganda authorities did an about turn, saying 'all media must refrain from further promoting' it (China Digital Times,

01/03/2015). Two days after that, another instruction from the Central Propaganda Department went further, telling all media to ‘absolutely discontinue coverage of the documentary *Under the Dome* and its creator, as well as reports, commentaries, interviews, and special topics that concern or extend to this film’ (China Digital Times, 03/03/2015). An instruction from the Beijing Internet Management Office also told the media to: ‘remove all reports, commentary, and other contents about the film from the home pages and news pages and from [mobile] clients before 9 p.m. We will check in five minutes.’ (.ibid). This is consistent with findings from other studies showing that content was censored, or censorship was stepped up, after an escalation of public interest in an event, what is often referred to in China as a public opinion emergency (Lorentzen, 2014: Repnikova, 2017).

Elimination censorship is therefore a fairly blunt instrument, which is used when the CCP believes information is a significant threat to them and it is possible to stop most of that information reaching the public. *Minimisation censorship* is a more subtle form of censorship which has a number of advantages when information is sensitive, but the harm can be effectively mitigated by manipulating the information, or when it is not practical to completely remove the information and manipulation is simply the best alternative.

Although there are good strategic reasons for the propaganda authorities to use more subtle forms of censorship in some cases, there is evidence in the data that there was a shift towards banning more information outright shortly after Xi Jinping became president. Figure 12 shows the change in instruction type over the period from 2013 to 2018. Despite the limitations in the sample, it gives some indication that there was a significant shift in strategy after 2013. In 2013, 42% of the leaked instructions involved outright bans, while 41% involved instructions to report using authoritative sources. However, in the following four years, about 57-59% of instructions involved outright bans, and this increases again in 2018 to 65%. At the same time, the number involving instructions to use authoritative sources fell to below 20% after 2013. The proportion of instructions telling media not to hype stories remained at around 20% for most of the period, although it had fallen to 12% in 2018.

Figure 12: Censorship instructions by instruction type, changes over the period 2013-18



Note: ns are 2013=174; 2014=213; 2015=82; 2016=78; 2017=51; 2018=81

Although the number of leaked instructions in later years is relatively low, these results do suggest that there was some shift away from a more subtle strategy in which certain information was manipulated e.g., by ensuring it was only based on the official narrative and/or instructions not to hype stories, to a more traditional form of elimination censorship. The propaganda authorities clearly became less tolerant of negative content. For example, in 2017 a censorship instruction told media organisations to 'Immediately launch strict control measures' for the annual Spring Festival Gala (China Digital Times, 27/01/2017). Media organisations were told not to publish 'vile expressions of opinion, such as comments ridiculing the gala' and internet companies were told to 'permanently close any accounts' found to be making comments like these. The gala is seen as an important propaganda event for the CCP but had been the subject of a significant amount of ridicule on social media. The authorities had clearly become less tolerant of this kind of content in either the traditional media or on social media. This increased tendency to simply try to eliminate sensitive content is consistent with the initial reaction of the authorities during the Coronavirus outbreak in 2019 which was to ban any mention of a new virus. The change in strategy suggests that the CCP was concerned that allowing even limited discussion of certain sensitive issues risked gradually undermining the Party's legitimacy. It seems likely the Party became less confident that it could maintain sufficient control by manipulating the information about some stories, rather than seeking to eliminate as much of the information as possible.

6.3: How does the Party seek to refocus people's attention?

This section looks at how (if at all) content dealt with in the censorship instructions was covered in the People's Daily posts. Specifically, given the emphasis on using authoritative sources, it is important to look at how those authoritative sources were covering these issues. The People's Daily is the main state newspaper and is one of the key propaganda mouthpieces of the CCP (Stockmann, 2013). Given the importance Xi Jinping has attached to these propaganda outlets spreading the CCP's messages online, the People's Daily Weibo posts should provide a good indication of how the Party wanted to shape the narrative on these sensitive issues.

As discussed in Chapter 3, I looked at whether People's Daily posted any content on Weibo related to the topics covered in a sample of the leaked censorship instructions. In most cases (62%, 74 out of the 120 sampled instructions), when there was a censorship instruction, there were no posts by People's Daily on that topic/issue. This is consistent with the finding above that the most common approach to censorship is an instruction that seeks to eliminate the information concerned, rather than trying to manipulate the information in some way the CCP tried therefore to avoid any discussion of these issues altogether. However, People's Daily did post at least one item on Weibo related to the other 38% of censorship instructions in the sample (46 of the 120 instructions that were sampled). In total there were 314 People's Daily posts related to these 46 censorship instructions in the 10 days before the instruction and/or the 30 days after the instruction. I then wanted to identify the different strategies People's Daily used to cover issues that had been the subject of a censorship instruction. In Table 10 the 314 People's Daily posts are split into the strategy categories discussed in Chapter 3.

Table 10: Strategies used in the People's Daily posts related to the sample of censored topics

	No. of posts	Percent
Posts related to instructions		
Positive content about the Party /state related to the incident/issue. These are posts that focus on key CCP messages, government action, reassurance by official sources, or positive stories e.g., about police or rescue workers.	122	38
Factual / negative news content e.g., deaths, pollution statistics etc.	66	21
Shifting the blame. Content placing the blame for the problem on individuals, companies or local/regional government and other bodies outside central government.	57	18
Positive information not related to government e.g., describing someone's achievements / benevolence.	16	5
Content involving commemoration for victims of an incident.	16	5
Content focussing on arguments against critics.	15	5
General critical comments, calls for reflection/improvements, which imply some Party/state responsibility.	4	1
Content focussing on problems in other countries.	4	1
None of the other categories or unclear.	14	4

N = 314

People's Daily posts related to 45 (of the 120) sampled censorship instructions.

Author's data from People's Daily posts on Sina Weibo from 01.01.2013 to 31.12.2018.

Where People's Daily did cover stories that had been the focus of a censorship instruction, their main focus was on providing *positive content about the Party /state related to the incident/issue*. This type of post accounted for about 38% of the posts (122 out of 314). This included posts that focus on key CCP messages, government action, reassurance by official sources, or positive stories e.g., about police or rescue workers. For example, in 2015, a censorship instruction said 'no website may repost images related to the knifing incident at a railway station in Guangzhou… This type of negative news must absolutely not be

promoted during the Two Sessions' (China Digital Times, 6/03/2015). Nine people had been injured in a knife attack at a station in Guangzhou (Yahoo, 2015). The censorship instruction did not seek to eliminate all information about the incident, but it clearly sought to minimise the amount of negative information. People's Daily posts about this incident focused on the response of the police and the health services. They reassured the public that 'The police on duty at the scene dealt with it decisively, killing one suspect on the spot, arresting one suspect, and rushing the 9 wounded to the hospital for treatment' (6/03/2015[5]). In another post, the paper reported that 'one of the police officers was chopped and wounded in his right hand when he captured the murderer' and they wished him 'a speedy recovery' (6/03/2015). Therefore, while banning content that might provoke particularly negative or emotive responses, the Chinese authorities pushed content that would be likely to make people feel more positive about the Party/state. People's Daily emphasised the effectiveness of the response and the heroism of the police officers.

A similar approach was taken to the serious floods in Yuyao in Zhejiang province in October 2013. When residents started to protest about the flood recovery efforts, a censorship instruction told media 'Do not report the Yuyao Daily story "Yuyao Flood Spurs Mass Petitioning; Minority Behave in Extreme Manner"' (China Digital Times, 16/10/2013). Protests had been taking place in Yuyao for a week, with thousands of residents angry about the relief effort, throwing stones and overturning vehicles in front of the government office there (BBC, 16 October 2013). As noted earlier in this chapter, an instruction on the 9th of October had also told media organisations to strengthen positive reporting about the flooding. There were no People's Daily posts on Weibo about the Yuyao floods or the protests after the censorship instruction on the 16th. People's Daily did post a number of items in the days after the flooding started on the 7th of October. The main focus of these posts was praise for the rescue efforts. For example, one post said that the Nanjing Military District in Hangzhou had dispatched more than 20 military vehicles and more than 100 soldiers to help with the evacuation of people trapped by the floods (8/10/2013). Another post the same day said that 'two 50-year-old police officers rushed into waist-deep water' to rescue people. The following day People's Daily posted a photo of soldiers asleep in a local school gym 'after a day of exertion' (9/10/2013). Another post reported that the Zhejiang Military Region had now sent 'more than 2,000 officers and soldiers to the rescue' (9/10/2013). The censorship instructions therefore ensured that negative information which could harm the reputation of

[5] The dates show when the content was posted on Sina Weibo by People's Daily.

the Party was removed or minimised. At the same time, the Party's main mouthpiece emphasised positive information about the Party/state related to the incident, particularly the effectiveness of the response by the army and the emergency services and the heroism of the officers involved in the rescue efforts. Ensuring information like this was available reduced the risk that people might feel that the Party/state had failed in its responsibilities. Similarly, Xia et al (2022) found that state media made use of heroism framing 'to steer public opinion during the COVID-19 epidemic', with medical workers being praised as "heroes," "models," and "pioneers".

This kind of manipulation of information would be unlikely to influence those who had direct experience of the events concerned. In the Yuyao case, the contrast between praise for what the Party/state did and the reality on the ground may have gone too far. The BBC reported that the anger of the protesters was said to be 'fuelled by state-run media which have praised the government's relief efforts' (BBC, 16 October 2013). However, the People's Daily posts would have meant that most people around China who got information on Weibo would have gained a much more positive view of these events than would otherwise have been the case, and certainly one that would have been likely to make them feel much more positively towards the Party. The most common approach adopted by the Chinese authorities therefore sought to portray the Party/state as being in control of events.

About 21% of the People's Daily posts (66 out of 314) provided straightforward *factual / negative news content* e.g., about the number of deaths following a disaster or accident. For example, People's Daily posts about the Yuyao floods provided information about the impact of the flooding, including the loss of seven lives. Similarly, after the stampede during the New Year's Eve celebrations in Shanghai in 2015, the censors had told the media to 'strictly use authoritative copy', and prohibited them from using 'information from Weibo, WeChat, other social media, or foreign media', as well as publishing 'excessively tragic and bloody images' (China Digital Times, 2/01/2015). Therefore, the Chinese authorities sought to limit the scope for people to see particularly negative information about the incident. However, the 'authoritative' information from media like People's Daily did itself include some negative information about what had happened. Over the following days, 12 People's Daily posts provided factual updates about casualties. For example, their first post said the stampede had 'resulted in 35 deaths and 43 injuries' (1/01/2015). This is consistent with the change of approach following the 2002/3 SARS outbreak discussed above. In the case of the Shanghai stampede, the number of people attending the New Year's Eve event and the fact

that it was in a city of about 25 million people, would have meant that it would have been impossible to prevent information and rumours circulating. If there was no official information, people would have had to rely on these accounts. Therefore, it made sense for the Chinese authorities to ensure that basic factual details about the incident was available from official sources, even if that meant providing some negative information.

Nevertheless, the authorities did seek to significantly limit the amount of negative content people saw in these cases. The factual content about the stampede was much more limited than a British paper would have provided about something like this. Although people would have known about the large number of casualties following the Shanghai stampede, they would have been less likely to see the kind of images and emotional accounts of the incident that people were posting on social media and that might have made them feel angrier and more likely to ask questions about what the Party/state could have done to avoid the tragedy. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Chinese media are often also told not to speculate about causes or to relate stories to 'similar incidents'. The CCP does not want to risk anyone speculating that an incident may, at least in part, have been caused by policy failings. Linking incidents would suggest that they are not one-offs and that there may therefore be broader policy failings that need to be addressed. Therefore, although the Chinese authorities provided facts in many cases, it was very much a filtered version of the facts focused on the most basic details that would be less likely to have led to people drawing conclusions about the failings of the authorities and broader policy implications.

Another important part of the approach in the People's Daily posts relating to censored topics involved *shifting the blame*, more specifically ensuring that where there was blame, it was firmly focused away from the central Party/state. Nearly one in five posts (18%, 57 out of 314 posts) suggested that someone should be blamed for the problem, but they sought to focus attention on individuals, companies or local/regional government and other bodies outside central government as the cause of the problem. For example, following an instruction to just use 'authoritative information' when covering a story about dead pigs floating in the Huangpu River (China Digital Times, 12/3/2013) People's Daily said that the relevant regional government 'still seems to be somewhat passive in responding to queries and disclosing information' (12/3/2013). Several weeks after the Shanghai stampede, People's Daily reported that 'the Huangpu District Party Secretary and District Chief were removed from their posts' and that nine other officials who were 'responsible for the incident' had also been punished (21/01/2015). Studies have shown that people in China generally

have less trust in local/regional government than central government (Wu and Wilkes, 2018). It may be that the lower levels of trust in local/regional government make them a convenient scapegoat for Party leaders. However, the tactic of regularly blaming local/regional government for incidents like those on the Huangpu and the Shanghai stampede, while preventing any blame for Party leaders or central government, is likely to negatively affect levels of trust in local and regional government, while protecting the central Party and government.

In some cases, propaganda focused on the responsibility of companies or individuals for a problem. After an explosion in Zhangjiakou, in which 23 people died, media were told to 'base reports strictly on authoritative information from the relevant parties' (China Digital Times, 27/11/2018). People's Daily reported that the explosion 'was due to a leak in the vinyl chloride gas cabinet of Hebei Shenghua Chemical Co., Ltd' and said that 15 people from the company had been arrested (30/11/2018). The combination of censorship and propaganda ensured that people were not provided with information which might suggest there was a possibility that there were failings which the CCP needed to address and focused attention solely on the people involved in this particular incident. In some cases, posts focused on the responsibility of individuals. For example, one of the posts about the dead pigs on the Huangpu reported that a farmer was being investigated for dumping the pigs in the river (13/3/13). Individuals or companies will often bear some, or much of, the responsibility for incidents like this. However, People's Daily posts on Weibo rarely looked beyond individual or corporate responsibility. And where it did do this, as noted above, it then directed responsibility to local/regional government or specific government bodies, rather than exploring wider systemic failings that might have led to critical questions about the role of the Party.

Two other types of post by People's Daily about issues covered in censorship instructions focus on *moral values*: either by discussing positive actions taken by individuals or calling for acts of commemoration. People's Daily posted positive information not related to government in about 5% of the posts (16 out of 314). Most of these posts were about positive actions taken by individuals to help overcome a problem. For example, during the Yuyao floods People's Daily reported about a man who took his jeep out to rescue vehicles that had become trapped in the flood waters (9/10/2013). Another post reported that a business had taken in 700 people whose homes had been flooded and that a local chef was supplying meals to people who had escaped the flooding (11/10/2013). Similarly, after an explosion in

the port of Tianjin, People's Daily posted about local people queuing up to donate blood (13/08/2015). As discussed in Chapter 5, there is a big focus in People's Daily propaganda on model citizens both to promote socialist core values but also to generate positive energy among Chinese citizens. Posts like these, and those praising the Party/state's response therefore seek to reframe tragedies to some extent as positive stories.

In about another 5% of the posts (16 out of 314), People's Daily posts encouraged people to commemorate those who had died in incidents. For example, after a bus explosion in Xiamen in 2013 a censorship instruction told media to 'reprint only Xinhua reports and photos. Do not use reports from any other sources. Do not use the contents of blogs or Weibo as news. Do not show bloody images' (China Digital Times, 7/06/2013). Several days after the explosion, People's Daily posted a list of those who had died saying, 'Each of them has their own life story, had unfinished life hopes, such as the college entrance examination... Condemn violence and love life!' (11/06/2013). Similarly, after the Shanghai New Year's Day stampede in 2015, People's Daily posted a list of the names of those who had died saying 'A moment of silence for the dead and a blessing for the wounded' (2/02/2015).

Posts related to positive behaviours and commemoration reflect the emphasis on moral values discussed in Chapter 5. Focusing on the moral dimension to a problem is another way of trying to distract people's attention from any possible big political questions for the Party. In this case, rather than distracting people by blaming specific organisations or individuals, the posts distract attention by a more positive focus on moral values (see also Miao, 2020, 231).

Only 5% of the People's Daily posts (15 out of 314) *challenge criticisms* or claims by other people. For example, during the Yuyao floods, People's Daily reported that the local government denied that efforts to tackle the disaster were 'slow' (11.10.2013). However, this involved a criticism of local government and, as discussed above, the CCP is less sensitive about criticisms of local government than it is about the central Party/state. It was very rare for People's Daily to address criticisms of the central Party/state. One case where this did occur was in relation to Gao Yu, a journalist who had sent the secret internal Party document known as Document 9 to a news website. In 2014, a censorship instruction told media to 'find and delete Zhang Xuezhong's article "Gao Yu's Actions Should Not Constitute a Crime"' (China Digital Times, 7/05/2014). The following day People's Daily posted that 'According to Xinhua News Agency, Beijing police confirmed that Gao Yu was

recently detained on suspicion of illegally providing state secrets abroad. In August 2013, an overseas website published the full text of a central confidential document, which caused widespread concern' (8/05/2014). In this case, People's Daily acknowledged a criticism of the CCP and sought to challenge that criticism. However, overall People's Daily posts do not seek to challenge criticisms of the Party, focussing instead on either banning this kind of content altogether, promoting positive messages about the Party/state's achievements or diverting attention.

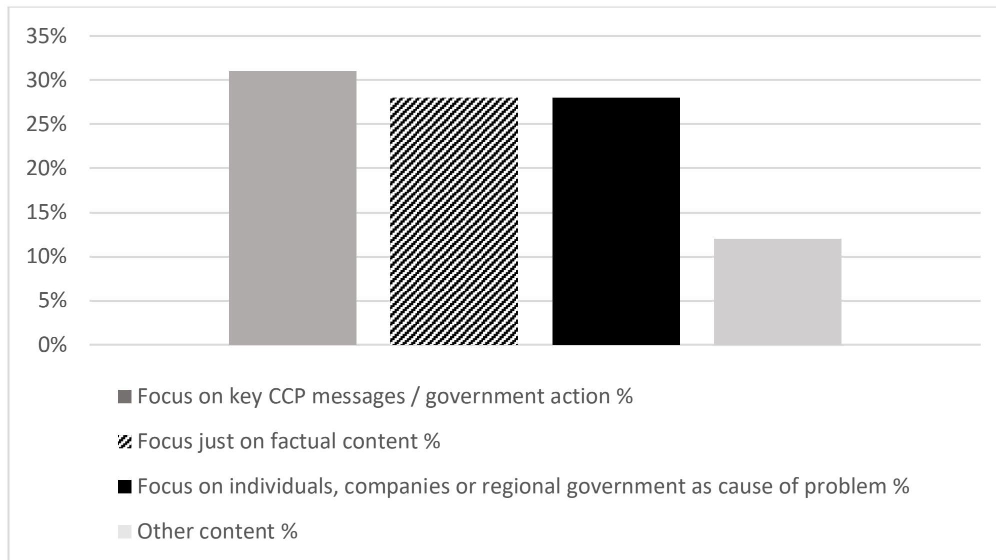
More general critical comments that could be perceived as raising issues for the central Party/state were very rare (only about 1% of the posts). The strongest of these came after the incident involving dead pigs floating down the Huangpu river. A People's Daily post said that 'bad news related to environmental degradation has spread from all directions' and suggested that alarm about the problem 'has reached a tipping point' (9/04/2013). However, even in this case, the post did not directly say who was to blame or whether action needed to be taken by the central Party/state. Censorship and propaganda are therefore overwhelmingly used to paint a picture of country where the central Party is without fault.

I conceptualise this kind of propaganda as *limited propaganda*. Unlike *extensive propaganda,* which is upbeat and celebratory, *limited propaganda* is much more cautious and aims to manipulate information about issues that are generally negative to limit the risks that they pose for the Party. Does the approach that the CCP takes to propaganda related to censored topics differ from its approach to propaganda about sensitive performance issues in general (whether or not they have been censored)? I looked again at the People's Daily posts on health and education, the environment and disasters analysed in Chapter 5. These are some of the most sensitive issues for the Party because they are ones where there are often significant challenges. The analysis in Chapter 5 showed that the number of People's Daily posts about the environment and disasters had also reduced despite their continuing importance, reflecting the CCP's sensitivity about these issues. These categories included some of the most commonly censored stories. Together they accounted for 16% of all the leaked censorship instructions. All the People's Daily posts covering these categories which were collected for the analysis in Chapter 5 were analysed again. There were 60 posts on health and education, 63 posts on the environment and 113 posts on disasters.

This analysis looks at how these issues were presented in People's Daily posts, using the same criteria set out in Table 10. The results, shown in Figure 13, reveal that there was a

similar approach to covering these broader topic areas to the ones People's Daily used to cover specific stories that had been the subject of censorship instructions.

Figure 13: People Daily's approach to covering health and education, the environment and disasters in Weibo posts



N = 235

People's Daily did provide a large amount of *factual detail* about these three topics, information which was often fairly negative. Figure 13 shows that across the period, 28% of the posts provided factual information. For example, one post in 2013 reported that 179 people had died in an earthquake in Sichuan Lushan, with another 6,986 people injured (21/04/2013). Another post warned that 'a yellow warning of heavy air pollution' had been issued for Beijing and told people to 'remind children, the elderly and patients with respiratory and cerebrovascular diseases to stay indoors as much as possible' (24/03/2014). As noted in the Chapter 4, these are issues that large numbers of people would be aware of, so simply trying to cover them up would be ineffective. These posts again show the authorities learning from the handling of earlier crises, that providing some basic information about incidents like these reduces the risk of people searching for that information in non-government sources and the risk of panic because people feel they have no idea what is going on.

However, 31% of the posts focused on *positive CCP messages* or government action related to the problem. For example. one post about the Tianjin port explosion in 2015 was about comments by President Xi Jinping telling Party committees and governments at all levels to resolutely curb the occurrence of serious safety production accidents (15/08/2015). Another

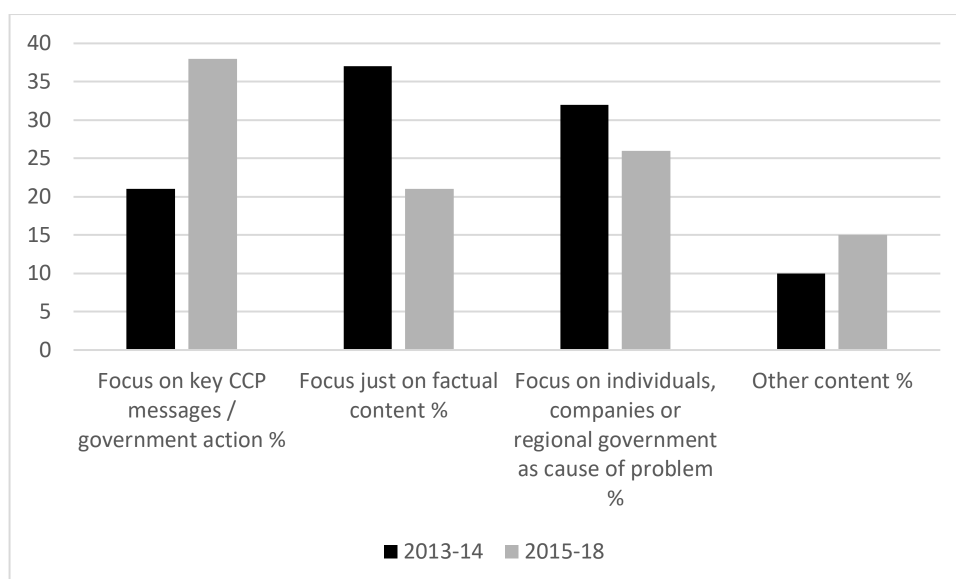
post about a fire at a residential building in Hubei in 2016 was about a firefighter putting his breathing mask on a girl before he took her out of the fire and called on people to ‘pay tribute’ to the firefighters (23/02/2016). A post in 2014 said that the Ministry of Environmental Protection was using satellite images to identify the causes of air pollution (9/04/2014). These posts show the Party/state working to protect the interests of its citizens, from the senior Party leaders down to the heroic efforts by individual state employees.

Analysis of the People’s Daily posts on these topic areas also shows that there was a strong emphasis on *problems that are caused by individuals* and *companies and regional government*, as opposed to ones that might be blamed on the central Party/state. Across the period, 28% of the posts focused on the actions of individuals, companies or regional government. For example, one post on pollution in the Tengger Desert in September 2014 reported, ‘Local residents said that chemical companies in nearby industrial parks discharged sewage directly into the desert’ (06/09/2014). People’s Daily focused on blaming a company and avoided any discussion of how the central Party/state might bear some responsibility for this kind of pollution. Another post was about wild birds being caught in nets saying ‘Save them! Refuse to eat wild birds and refuse to buy wild bird feathers or other products!’ (01/04/2017). A post in September 2018 urged people not to buy or eat pangolin products (29/09/2018). A similar picture emerges from posts about health (a subset of the health and education posts). Eleven of the 24 posts on health issues were about doctor-patient relations, or the related topic of the quality of doctors. This has been a prominent issue in China in recent years (Guardian, 2013). However, this is also an issue which focuses more on individuals, rather than on state decisions (such as the level of healthcare resources). On the one hand, People’s Daily criticised attacks on doctors, for example, talking about ‘zero tolerance’ towards violent attacks (14/12/2018). On the other hand, they referred to the need for doctors to change the way they behave, for example by making more effort to listen to patients (23/01/2015). In effect, the Party / People’s Daily was positioning itself as a neutral arbiter in disputes between citizens and doctors. By contrast, policy issues, such as access to or improvements in health care, very rarely featured in the posts. Therefore, People’s Daily often sought to focus attention away from broader policy issues that could lead to criticisms of the central Party/state towards problems caused by individuals or businesses.

Posts on these three performance categories also became more positive after 2014 (Figure 14). In 2013 and 2014 only 21% of the posts across the three topics focused on positive stories about the Party/state but this increased to 38% between 2015 and 2018. At the same

time, the number of posts with factual details declined. In 2013-14 37% of the posts about the three topic areas provided factual details but this fell to just 21% in the period from 2015-18. The Chinese authorities therefore seem to have become more wary even about providing basic factual information. This contrasted with the increase in the proportion of posts with more positive content about the Party/state's policies. The numbers in these samples are fairly small, but this result is consistent with other evidence about the increasing emphasis on spreading 'positive energy' under President Xi Jinping which was discussed in Chapter 5 and the increased tendency for censorship instructions after 2013 to involve the complete elimination of sensitive information, which was discussed above.

Figure 14: People Daily's approach to covering health and education, the environment and disasters in Weibo posts, 2013-14 compared to 2015-18



2013-14 n = 95   2015-18 n = 141

The change in emphasis in these posts was most marked in the coverage of disasters. The most common type of posts about disasters in 2013 and 2014 were posts with factual information, accounting for 78% of disaster posts over this period. However, factual information only accounted for 29% of posts about disasters between 2015 and 2018, while posts about Party/state policies and achievements accounted for 36% of the posts. It suggests that the change which took place after the 2002/3 SARS epidemic, with greater emphasis being placed on the need to provide factual information when there was a disaster or crisis, had to some extent gone into reverse. The focus on 'positive energy' is inconsistent with providing factual information which is generally 'negative' in cases like these. This change helps to explain why information about the coronavirus outbreak at the end of 2019 was initially censored. Propaganda authorities which were focused on spreading positive energy would be unenthusiastic about allowing people to post negative information about a possible new virus.

Therefore, where People's Daily did post content related to stories that had been the subject of censorship, the most common approach was to use *limited propaganda* - providing positive information about the Party/state, diverting blame to actors outside the central Party/state and providing some basic factual information about the problem. And a similar approach was taken to dealing with the most sensitive categories in general, whether or not

the stories had been the subject of a censorship instruction. However, the use of *limited propaganda* did change to some extent over this period.

6.4: China's integrated information control system

The analysis presented so far has enhanced our knowledge of how censorship and propaganda work together. In a step further, this thesis presents a typology of the censorship and propaganda system. Based on the findings discussed earlier, I propose that the information control system uses two main types of censorship – elimination and minimisation, and two types of propaganda – extensive propaganda and limited propaganda - to try to protect and enhance the CCP's legitimacy (Table 11). Elimination censorship and extensive propaganda were generally used for core issues, which the Party believed were essential to regime survival. Minimisation censorship and limited propaganda were used to control sensitive issues where the risks to the CCP were lower but which the Party believed it still needed to manage, or where elimination of information was likely to be ineffective or counter-productive.

Table 11: Typology of China's integrated information control system

	Censorship	**Propaganda**
Core issues	*Elimination censorship* Content that the CCP believes presents an existential threat and that it therefore needs to go as far as possible to eliminate to protect its legitimacy.	*Extensive propaganda* The core messages that the CCP wants people to see, that it believes will enhance its legitimacy and that it therefore promotes very strongly and extensively, with mainly optimistic and celebratory content.
Sensitive issues	*Minimisation censorship* Content that the CCP believes is sensitive but where it believes complete elimination is not practical or not necessary to protect its legitimacy.	*Limited propaganda* Content that the Party believes is sensitive. It typically avoids talking very much about these issues but seeks to minimise the threat to its legitimacy by providing a limited amount of information showing what the Party is doing to address the problem or by diverting blame for problems to people and organisations outside the central Party/state.

Elimination is what people generally think of as censorship. As discussed earlier in this chapter, it involves banning or removing certain content altogether, or at least attempting to do so and the majority (55%) of the leaked instructions involved this kind of censorship. Some topics, such as historical nihilism, were clearly considered to be so important that any discussion of negative information about them was considered an existential threat to the Party's legitimacy, so that *elimination* of this information was the norm.

However, 45% of the leaked propaganda instructions did not involve *elimination* of content. Most of these instructions sought to achieve the *minimisation* of the content concerned. This kind of information control would not be picked up by research that only focuses on what is deleted. Minimisation involves reducing the amount of certain content or trying to make it less visible or less easy to access. As discussed above, there are a range of methods that the CCP use to do this. In particular, censorship instructions may tell media that they can only report a story using authoritative sources or not to hype a story.

Minimisation is to some extent a softer form of censorship than eliminating all information about a particular issue. However, as Roberts (2018) shows, although porous censorship still enables some information about a problem or an issue to permeate, it is still very effective. As she notes, the fact that it is possible to access information about an event gives the impression that the information is freely available, but most people will not take the time and effort 'to seek out information that is difficult to access' (Roberts, 2018, 165). Filtering political content fractures public discourse, reducing the possibility of citizens developing 'shared critical opinions' and therefore for 'oppositional political awareness' to build up (Vuori and Paltemaa, 2015, 413, 419). As discussed in Chapter 2, studies show mass mobilisation is most likely to occur in authoritarian states 'when citizens are aware that anti-regime grievances have become widespread' (Reuters and Szakonyi, 2015, 49). Therefore, the Party can allow critical opinions to be published 'as long as they are not easily and widely circulated and accessible' which means that grievances remain localised and do not find their way into broad networks and movements (Ringen, 2016, 60). This kind of *minimisation* censorship can therefore have a significant effect on what information is available to citizens, but it would not be picked up simply by focusing on what content was banned or deleted.

This research has also shown that two main types of propaganda are utilised by the CCP. *Extensive propaganda* directs people's attention towards information that the authorities believe will enhance the CCP's grip on power, by overwhelming them with large amounts

of mainly optimistic and celebratory content. This is not necessarily, or mainly, false propaganda. People sometimes associate propaganda with the kind of exaggerated reporting of topics like agricultural harvests in the former Soviet Union under Stalin or in China under Mao. Modern Chinese propaganda is generally much less simplistic. For example, as discussed in Chapter 5, between 2013 and 2018, People's Daily posts included content about real technological achievements, such as China's space programme. *Extensive propaganda* in this period particularly focused on ideology, particularly nationalism, traditional moral values and culture. As the analysis in Chapter 5 showed, these three categories accounted for 45% of all the political posts by People's Daily between 2013 and 2018. For example, posts celebrated China's military, its technological achievements, and expressed patriotic pride. These posts were upbeat and would have been likely to leave people feeling more positive about their country and the Party. A large number of posts also provided positive examples of people exhibiting the sort of virtues lauded by ancient Chinese thinkers and in the Socialist Core Values that have been widely promoted in recent years. However, *extensive propaganda* can sometimes involve stirring up anger or criticism. For example, posts about Japan, encouraged nationalist feelings by creating anger about past injustices. Extensive propaganda closely reflects Freeden's (1998, 16) definition of ideology as 'idea complexes', which in the Chinese case focus on 'consciously or unconsciously held values, understandings, interpretations, myths and preferences' about national identity and moral and cultural values, and which are designed to mobilise people in support of the Party.

In contrast, *limited propaganda* focuses on problems. It involves deploying a range of messages which are less about trying to mobilise people to support the Party, and more about trying to limit the risks that certain problems might turn people against the CCP. *Limited propaganda* is often combined with censorship, particularly *minimisation censorship*. In most cases where the Chinese authorities used minimisation censorship, rather than seeking to eliminate information altogether, People's Daily posted propaganda on Weibo that sought to further shape the narrative about that story. This research shows that this was different from the *extensive propaganda* used to promote the CCP's key messages. For the most part, this type of propaganda did not involve the kind of optimistic and celebratory content that we see in *extensive propaganda*. Instead, the main concern was to mitigate the harm from sensitive issues. *Limited propaganda* tended be lower key than *extensive* propaganda. It was used where saying nothing about an issue carried the risk that, even with the use of censorship, the critics may have determined the narrative in ways that would have undermined the CCP's legitimacy. Together with *minimisation* censorship, the aim of

limited propaganda was to manipulate the information that Chinese citizens saw about problems facing the country.

As discussed in the previous section, there were three main focuses in *limited propaganda* over this period. It generally included basic factual information about the issue; positive content about the actions of the Party/state; and/or putting the blame on people or organisations outside the central Party/state for any errors. This is similar to what some authors have called 'public opinion guidance': it involved seeking to 'shape the discursive parameters' and redirect public opinion, when it was not thought necessary or possible to stop discussion altogether (Bandurski, 2015c; Schneider, 2018). However, *limited propaganda* did not give these issues too much prominence because the Party preferred to keep people focused on the topics it was promoting through *extensive* propaganda.

The overall effect of this manipulation is clearer when you look at censorship instructions together with the relevant propaganda posts. For example, after the bus explosion in Xiamen mentioned above, the State Council Information Office had issued an instruction to use only content from Xinhua and to delete any 'harmful' information (China Digital Times, 07/06/2013). 47 people were killed in the explosion. There had been a number of similar incidents over the previous decade, often caused by people who had grievances against the authorities. These incidents had therefore become extremely sensitive, and the instruction was worded very strongly, to try to ensure effective control over the way the story was communicated. People's Daily initially published a couple of posts with basic factual information about what had happened and details about casualties, and they said that 120 ambulances were on the scene. The following day several posts emphasised that the authorities had quickly identified the person responsible. The next few posts named the person who caused the explosion and commemorated the people who had died. The authorities therefore limited the scope for discussion about the way the aftermath was handled or about factors that may have led to someone blowing up a bus and avoided any discussion of wider implications. At the same time, People's Daily met the public's basic need for information, presented the authorities as dealing with the aftermath effectively, identified a culprit without considering wider social implications and then focused on encouraging people to commemorate the victims, thereby suggesting that was the end of the issue. Therefore, there appeared to be quite a lot of information available about the incident, but the CCP had made significant efforts to manipulate discussion of the issue in ways that limited the potential for damage to CCP legitimacy.

The same approach occurred after the explosion in Zhangjiakou, Hebei in 2018, which was discussed in Chapter 4. Media were again told to base their coverage on 'authoritative information' and were specifically told not to speculate on the cause of the explosion or to link it to similar incidents (China Digital Times, 27/11/2018). The first four posts by People's Daily provided basic factual details, including casualty numbers. Two days later two People's Daily posts focused on the responsibility of the company for the explosion and the arrest of several people from the company. This was then followed by two posts that focused on commemoration for the victims. As in the previous case, the authorities therefore met people's need for basic details about the incident, identified culprits and then wrapped up the story by talking about commemorating the victims. This avoided discussion of links with previous incidents and therefore wider systemic issues, such as whether weak regulations might have been a factor in industrial incidents that had occurred in China. This will have reduced the risk of people criticising the Party or calls for policy changes.

A similar pattern can be seen in relation to a censorship instruction about pollution in 2014. The State Council Information Office said, 'All websites must take care to resolutely delete content which puts the issue of smog on the shoulders of politics, as well as all content and commentary which stir emotions or incite disturbances' (China Digital Times, 07/04/2014). This was during a period when smog levels had been particularly bad in China for a number of weeks. The authorities had allowed some critical reporting about the issue but had increasingly moved to limit discussion of the problem. The instruction sought to limit the scope for the public to see content that discussed the Party's responsibility for the problem. It also sought to eradicate any passionate views about the issue or talk about protests. Two weeks earlier, People's Daily had been explicit about the seriousness of the smog problem, informing people that 'Beijing issued a yellow warning of heavy air pollution' and warned 'children, the elderly and patients with respiratory and cerebrovascular diseases to stay indoors as much as possible' (24/03/2014). Two days after the censorship instruction, People's Daily sought to reassure people that the authorities were taking appropriate action and focused blame on businesses responsible for creating the smog. It said that the Ministry of Environmental Protection was using drones and satellites to identify key areas and to take 'photographic and video evidence' to identify enterprises responsible for environmental violations (09/04/2014). Another post ten days later reassuringly said that 'The government, enterprises and the masses act together and resolutely declare war on pollution, so that we can always be accompanied by clean air' (19/04/2014). The authorities therefore acted to

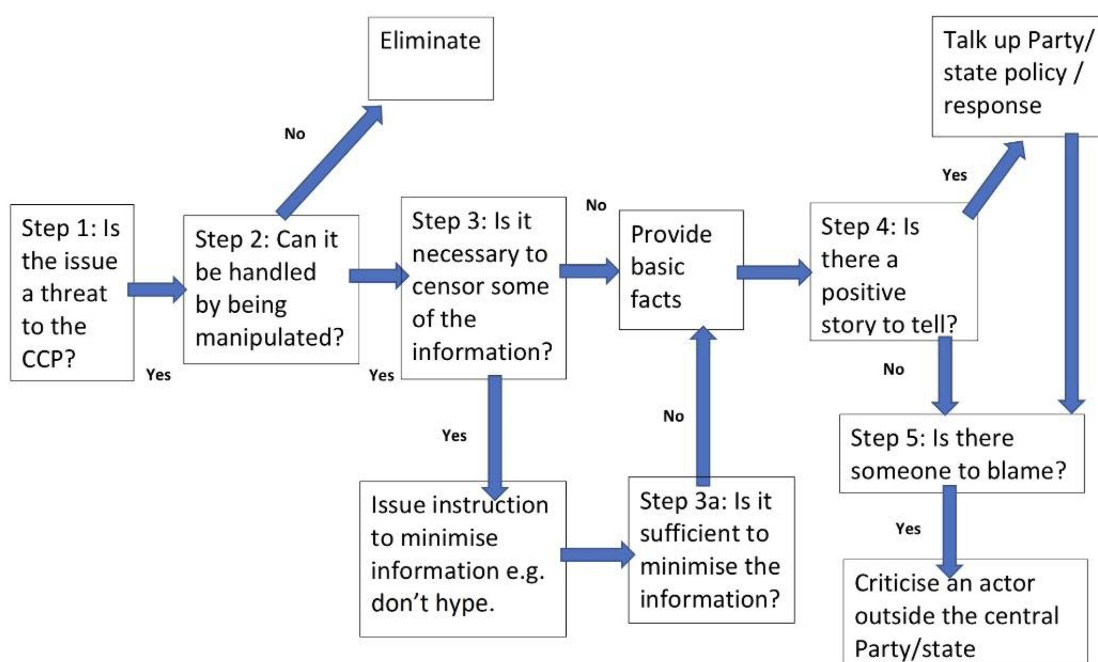
reduce the scope for people to become aware of critical views and analysis of the pollution problem and pushed out more reassuring messages about the government taking action to resolve the problem, while ensuring that blame for the problem was focused simply on businesses.

These cases show the limitations of research which just focuses on elimination censorship. The Chinese authorities did not simply seek to manipulate information by banning certain content related to stories. They also aimed to limit certain negative information about other stories and sought to ensure that people saw alternative facts that were much more favourable to the Party, particularly highlighting the actions that were being taken by government bodies and staff, as well as focussing any blame on individuals, businesses or parts of the government system well away from the centre. Looking only at what was deleted may have given the impression that the amount of control exercised by the state in relation to these stories was relatively limited. It is true that not all information about problems is removed, and some critical information can be found, particularly online. However, by minimising some of the most negative information and rearticulating the meaning of the information concerned, the Chinese authorities are seeking to achieve 'discursive hegemony', changing the narrative to create consent among Chinese citizens (Yang and Tang, 2018, 8). This kind of 'hegemonic intervention' contrasts with the more simplistic suppression of all critical information that was associated with more repressive control under Mao (Yang and Tang, 2018, 8).

However, *minimisation censorship* means that a certain amount of negative information is allowed to reach the public. Similarly, *limited propaganda* serves to some extent to draw more attention to problems. The use of these information control methods therefore involves difficult judgments for the propaganda authorities. The risk is that this information creates a 'counter-public sphere' (Liu, 2013, 1016) and could even erode public confidence in the CCP over time (Tang and Huhe, 2014). As the analysis above and in Chapter 5 has shown, after 2013 there was a tendency to use *minimisation censorship* less often and to reduce the amount of *limited propaganda* focused on problematic issues such as the environment and disasters, while increasing *extensive propaganda* on issues like nationalism and tradition and culture. At the same time, *limited propaganda* shifted towards a stronger focus on Party/state achievements and actions, with less negative factual information. The CCP therefore under Xi Jinping therefore appears to be more concerned about the risks involved in using these 'softer' information control methods.

The analysis in Chapters 4-6 makes it possible to produce a reasonable hypothesis about the information control decision making process for content that potentially threatens CCP legitimacy. This is visualised in the flowchart below (Figure 15). Step 1 is a decision about whether an issue is sensitive and therefore poses some threat to the CCP. Step 2 is to decide whether the issue should be eliminated altogether or whether it could be handled by manipulating the information through *minimisation censorship* and/or *limited propaganda*. Even if the propaganda authorities decided that elimination of the information would be desirable, they might still opt to use minimisation censorship if it was clear that elimination of the information could not be effectively achieved.

Figure 15: Illustration of the information control decision making process



If the decision is not to try to eliminate all the information, Step 3 involves deciding whether it is necessary to minimise the negative content. If the answer to this is yes, a censorship instruction will tell media organisations and/or internet companies to use some form of minimisation censorship e.g., don't hype or use only authoritative sources. If the answer to question 3 is no, then manipulation will focus on using limited propaganda. Even if the decision is made to minimise the amount of negative content using minimisation censorship, the authorities will often decide that they also need to use limited propaganda to further manipulate the information (Step 3a). If limited propaganda is used, some basic, authorised

facts would usually be provided. It is then necessary to decide whether there is other information the propaganda authorities can provide to mitigate the impact of the sensitive issue.

Step 4 involves deciding whether there is scope to talk up the Party/state policies or response to the problem. This usually involves focussing on the practical actions being taken to deal with the problems. For example, after a knifing incident at Guangzhou station, People's Daily reported that the police had dealt decisively with the issue and the wounded had been rushed to hospital (06/03/2015). Some posts focused on the heroism of government employees. For example, one post during the Yuyao floods in 2013 showed an image of exhausted soldiers resting after supporting rescue efforts (09/10/2013).

Step five involves considering whether there was an individual or an organisation outside the central Party/state that could be held responsible for a problem. This could be an ordinary citizen, a business, a government organisation or a local/regional tier of government. However, the Party and the central government are usually only mentioned if they are involved in resolving the problems.

In a small number of cases the authorities will use other approaches as part of their limited propaganda e.g., reporting positive stories related to the issue that did not involve the Party/state, but which helped to mitigate the negative aspects of the story.

Overall, the analysis so far shows that it is necessary to consider the different types of censorship and propaganda, and how they interact, to assess the extent to which information in China is being manipulated. Looking at just one part of this system can give a misleading impression about how much the information people see has been altered, and therefore the extent to which Chinese citizens could access and discuss political issues. The next section shows that looking at the information control system as a whole provides additional insight into the CCP's legitimation strategy.

6.5 China's integrated information control system and legitimacy

The approaches the CCP takes to controlling information help to provide a clearer picture of the Party's legitimation strategy. In this section I look at whether there were differences in the way the CCP used censorship and propaganda to control information related the types of legitimacy that have been analysed in this thesis, as well as to control discussion of the Party itself (Table 12). The CCP generally applied its hardest forms of censorship and propaganda to content that involved ideology. As discussed above, the CCP usually *eliminated* critical content about ideology and *extensively* promoted its own ideological messages. However, when it came to performance legitimacy, the Chinese authorities resorted to this more simplistic form of information control less often. In many cases, the Party sought to mitigate the problem, using *minimisation censorship* to remove the most negative aspects of the story or to limit access to the story and/or they used *limited propaganda* that sought to create a narrative that reduced the potential for criticism of the Party. When it came to discussion of the Party itself and President Xi Jinping, the authorities usually adopted *elimination censorship* to remove negative or embarrassing content. However, while there were People's Daily propaganda posts on Weibo about the CCP and its leader, these were much less *extensive* than for posts about ideology. There were fewer posts mentioning the CCP than those that mentioned nationalism or moral values. Information related to institutional legitimacy tended to involve a mix of all these approaches.

Table 12: How information control varied according to the type of legitimacy

	Censorship	**Propaganda**
Hard information control	*Elimination censorship* Ideological threats: historical nihilism, Western values, media and censorship Content about the CCP	*Extensive propaganda* Ideological legitimacy focused on moral values, nationalism and Chinese culture
Information control aimed at mitigation	*Minimisation censorship* Focussing censorship on the most negative aspects of stories, mainly about performance issues	*Limited propaganda* Providing a narrative about negative stories, mainly about performance issues

The analysis presented in Chapter 4 and in section 6.2 shows that content related to ideological legitimacy was much more likely to be subject to *elimination censorship* than content related to other forms of legitimacy. Three of the four categories with the highest

proportion of ban instructions were related to ideology: Communist Party history, the media and Western Values (Figure 13). This shows that the CCP believed that this type of content could not usually be mitigated by limiting the content related to these stories and providing an alternative narrative. The fact that so much of this kind of content was eliminated shows that the Party was generally not prepared to countenance discussion about anything it considers to be a threat its own ideology.

At the same time as eliminating a high proportion of what it considered to be threats to its ideological legitimacy, the CCP extensively promoted its core ideology through the People's Daily Weibo posts. The analysis of People's Daily posts in Chapter 5 shows that the CCP saw its ideological legitimacy as being largely based on three categories: moral values, nationalism and traditions and culture, which together accounted for 45% of all the People's Daily political posts (573 out of 1,267). In fact, by 2017 and 2018 these three categories accounted for 57% of all the political posts. All these categories are directly or indirectly related to nationalism. The significant and increasing amount of People's Daily's *extensive propaganda* that was linked to nationalism after Xi Jinping became President shows that the Party saw nationalism as being an increasingly key element of its ideological legitimacy.

In contrast, it is notable that communism barely featured in the CCP's extensive propaganda. There were only a small number of People's Daily posts about communist ideology (2.0%), including ideas such as Xi Jinping thought, or foundational myths (1.7%). The CCP certainly wanted to eliminate much of the content that criticised or ridiculed these aspects of its ideology, but People's Daily made very little effort promote them on Weibo. This kind of propaganda attracts at lot of attention in the West. However, as Zeng (2016) has argued, this 'formal ideology' is focused mainly at CCP members. Instead, *extensive propaganda* directed at ordinary citizens focused on what Zeng (2016) refers to as the Party's 'informal ideology', which this research shows was largely a mix of moral and cultural values and nationalism.

Therefore, the CCP places a very high priority on promoting its own informal ideology while censoring perceived ideological threats. The result is that the information that Chinese citizens see about ideology is manipulated to a significant extent. The Party seeks to flood the information environment with their current ideology while eliminating alternative ideas and anything that is critical of communism or Communist Party history.

In contrast, the CCP's approach to performance legitimacy was more often about mitigating threats to its legitimacy, rather than seeking to actively enhance their legitimacy. There was still no question of the CCP allowing people to have an open discussion on all performance issues. Chapter 4 showed that 277 out of the 678 leaked censorship instructions targeted content related to performance issues. As Figure 13 shows, a significant proportion of these instructions involved complete bans. For example, the analysis in this chapter shows that 56% of the leaked censorship instructions about the environment involved complete bans, as did 52% of the instructions about health and education. Nevertheless, the propaganda authorities were more likely to choose an approach which involved minimising rather than eliminating information when the content was about performance issues than when it concerned ideology. The analysis earlier in this chapter showed that censorship of performance issues often required media organisations not to hype information or to just use authoritative sources, rather than insisting that the topic could not be covered at all.

Performance issues were also more likely to be the focus of *limited propaganda*. In some cases, the risk posed by issues like pollution was mitigated just by using limited propaganda. In other cases, having reduced the scope for critical information to be made available by using minimisation censorship, the Party then often sought to add in information that would further reduce the risk that people would draw conclusions unfavourable to the CCP. As discussed above, this limited propaganda usually involved a mix of basic factual information, talking up positive details about the role of the Party/state and placing the blame on anyone except for the central Party/state. This is a much less blunt approach than using *elimination censorship* and *extensive propaganda*. Nevertheless, information about these performance topics was still significantly manipulated, which meant that any discussion about them was likely to be significantly distorted. Therefore, the CCP appears to have generally seen performance issues as ones where they needed to focus on trying to maintain the CCP's legitimacy, rather than as issues where there was an opportunity to enhance the Party's legitimacy.

The approach to economic stories differed from other performance issues. Nearly one in ten of the leaked propaganda instructions (63, 9% of all instructions) concerned economic issues. There were also a large number of *elimination* instructions about the economy (67%, compared with the average of 55%). This is much higher than for any other category related to performance legitimacy, and similar to the kind of censorship used in the case of ideological threats. This shows that the CCP places a higher priority on simply removing

negative information about the economy than it does about other performance issues. However, the Party did not *extensively* promote economic topics during this period. Indeed, the reduction in the proportion of People's Daily posts that were about the economy over the period suggests that the CCP believed the economy was moving from a legitimacy opportunity to a potential legitimacy threat. The proportion of political posts that focused on the economy in general fell from 8.5% between 2013-2015 to 6.5% between 2016-2018. Therefore, there was a significant effort to manipulate the information available about the economy and to influence people's perceptions about economic performance, by taking out negative stories. However, unlike the approach to ideological issues, the Party did not make significant efforts to promote positive economic stories.

The CCP's approach to institutional legitimacy was similar to that for performance legitimacy. There was significant censorship of content related to institutional legitimacy, which suggests the Party felt it necessary to protect itself from threats to its reputation in this area. However, the proportion of censorship instructions involving elimination of content was close to the average for all the leaked instructions. At the same time, there were not a significant number of People's Daily posts related to institutional legitimacy between 2013 and 2018, and the number of posts on topics such as corruption and the rule of law fell in the second half of the period. This suggests that the Party did not see institutional issues as providing strong opportunities to boost its legitimacy. As was the case with performance legitimacy, the CCP's approach suggests the Party under Xi has seen its main priority as being to limit threats that these issues pose to its legitimacy. This period saw a clear shift away from the institutionalisation of the system that was started by Deng Xiaoping.

This analysis of information control shows that in the six years after Xi Jinping became president the CCP saw ideology - particularly nationalism and moral and cultural values - as being vital to enhancing CCP legitimacy. It also manipulated information about performance issues with the aim of limiting threats to the Party's legitimacy. There was much less focus on institutional legitimacy. This suggests that in the period from 2013 to 2018 the Party believed that its ability to strengthen its control on power depended mainly on ideological legitimacy.

When it comes to controlling content about itself, the CCP seemed to be more concerned about eliminating or minimising negative content about the Party and its leader than doing anything to encourage positive discussion about them. The fact that there were 159 leaked

censorship instructions about the CCP shows that the Party was highly sensitive about negative or embarrassing content about itself. However, only 10% of People's Daily posts about political issues mentioned the CCP or its leaders in a positive way. As discussed in Chapter 5, in the online environment at least, the Party seems to want to divert attention away from itself.

This research therefore suggests that the CCP placed most emphasis on ideological legitimacy to strengthen its hold on power. Ideological threats were more likely to be *eliminated* and People's Daily used *extensive propaganda* to focus people's attention on the Party's contemporary ideology, a mix of nationalism and moral values. By contrast, the CCP sought to limit many of the threats to its performance legitimacy using *minimisation censorship* and *limited propaganda* to shape the narrative about problems that did not need to be, or could not be, simply eliminated. Propaganda targeted at the public emphasised ideology but not the Party itself. The Party clearly believed it needed to eliminate or limit certain content that was critical about it and its leaders, but the CCP was mentioned much less often in People's Daily Weibo posts than most people would expect. Indeed, the Party appeared to want people to think about domestic politics as little as possible. It limited the amount of content about performance issues and mentions of the CCP, focusing people instead on an ideology based on nationalism and moral values.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter shows that elimination censorship was an important part of the CCP's information strategy but that the Chinese authorities also used more subtle minimisation censorship and limited propaganda to manipulate other content. More than half (55%) of all the leaked instructions between 2013 and 2018 required a complete ban. King et al, looking at six-month period in 2011, had found that most of the content censored online related to collective action, and otherwise people largely say what they like about 'the state, its policies, and its leaders' (2013, 14). However, when looking at leaked censorship instructions over the whole six-year period since Xi Jinping became president at the end of 2012, complete bans were the most common instruction in every political category. This kind of elimination censorship was in fact used most for categories linked to ideological legitimacy. Total bans were also very high for instructions about the economy.

However, 45% of the leaked instructions did not involve a complete ban. Instead, the propaganda authorities sought to manipulate the information that was available about a story by using minimisation censorship, mainly requiring media organisations just to use content from official sources and/or to reduce the visibility of the information, and filtering some of the most critical content online. These approaches were more common for categories related to performance legitimacy, in cases where the issue was one that affected a large number of people e.g., smog, and/or where a large amount of information had already circulated online, which meant that a total ban would be ineffective. In these cases, the authorities prioritised shaping the narrative. Other factors that seem to have influenced decisions not to go for an outright ban also included the scale and duration of an incident such as a protest. In some cases, particularly corruption cases, the Chinese authorities clearly believed that there was often more to be gained from showing them tackling a problem, rather than completely suppressing information about it. Therefore, in some cases information was manipulated in ways that sought to show the Party/state in control of a problem, while seeking to limit certain content that most risked undermining that message.

This research shows how limited propaganda contributed to these efforts to manipulate information that was considered sensitive. Where People's Daily posted content on Weibo about censored topics, there was a focus on three approaches. This limited propaganda often included factual details, which is consistent with evidence discussed in Chapter 2 about the learning from incidents such as the SARS outbreak in 2002/3. People's Daily also often promoted Party/state policies and achievements in relation to the censored issue (also see Brady, 2017; Schneider and Hwang, 2014). A significant number of the propaganda posts also involved distracting attention away from the central Party/state by focussing on the responsibility of individuals, companies and regional government (also see Yang and Wang, 2021; Miao, 2020). In a smaller but significant number of cases where People's Daily reported on issues covered by specific censorship instructions, the paper also distracted attention by focusing on positive issues not related to government, particularly moral issues. However, there was much less evidence of propaganda being used to challenge critics. The CCP also adopted a similar limited propaganda approach to dealing the most sensitive issues even where they were not subject to a censorship instruction. The Party therefore sought to alter the balance of information about these issues in ways that reduced the risk to its legitimacy.

These changes are likely to have given Chinese citizens a significantly different view of politics in China than they would have got without the efforts of China's propaganda officials. It presented a world in which there were fewer problems and these problems appeared less serious than they would have done without the intervention of the censors. People would have been more likely to believe that based on the available information the Party had a good grip on challenging issues and that responsibility for the most serious problems was due to bad individuals and companies, or fallible regional government officials, in fact anyone who was not part of the central Party/state. The Party was never to blame for any problems that occurred, in fact the long list of people who could be seen causing difficulties for the rest of society would have helped to remind people just how much they needed the CCP to protect them.

This Chapter has also presented a typology of the censorship and propaganda system. I suggest that the information control system uses two main types of censorship – elimination and minimisation censorship, and two types of propaganda – extensive and limited propaganda - to try to protect and enhance the CCP's legitimacy. By looking at which of these approaches the Chinese authorities used for different types of content, I was able shed further light on the CCP's legitimation strategy. This shows that during Xi Jinping's first six years as president, the Party mainly focused on enhancing its ideological legitimacy. This was the focus of both *elimination censorship* and *extensive propaganda*. Other forms of legitimacy, particularly performance legitimacy, also featured in the CCP information control efforts but in these cases the CCP's approach was much more defensive, focusing largely on trying to maintain their legitimacy in the face of threats either by eliminating content or by using *minimisation censorship* and/or *limited propaganda*. Surprisingly, the CCP's approach to content about itself was also mainly defensive; the Party made significant efforts to *eliminate* negative content about itself and its leaders but made much less effort to promote itself using *extensive propaganda*.

However, this analysis also shows that during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency there was to some extent a shift back to a strategy involving more reliance on *elimination censorship* and *extensive propaganda*, rather than attempts to mitigate the risk posed by certain information. After 2013 a higher proportion of the leaked instructions involve complete bans. Propaganda posts about some of the most sensitive issues also declined over the period. And where the authorities did still choose to manipulate information, rather than banning it, propaganda focused more on the Party/state's achievements and less on the

negative factual details. This is consistent with the evidence from Chapter 5 that there was an increasing focus on positive content under Xi Jinping, and less coverage of more sensitive topics. It suggests that during the first six years of Xi Jinping's leadership the Party feared that trying to mitigate certain risks, rather than eliminating information about them, would gradually undermine CCP legitimacy.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This thesis has improved our understanding of censorship and propaganda in China, and in particular how information control is used to maintain and enhance the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, focusing on the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency (2013-2018). It has done this by looking at the following research questions. Firstly, what types of political information do the Chinese authorities seek to control in the traditional news media and online using censorship and propaganda? Secondly, how do the Chinese authorities use a combination of censorship and propaganda to control this information? Thirdly, what types of legitimacy does the CCP focus on in its use of information control? The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains a large scale system for controlling information. However, it does not censor everything that it considers potentially damaging to the Party and propaganda is much less simplistic than it was in the Mao era (1949-76). The Party has to decide what it needs to control using censorship and propaganda and how it should control that information to maintain its hold on power. In particular, information control plays a vital role in the Party's legitimation strategy. This thesis argues that a better understanding of what is controlled and how it is controlled can reveal valuable information about the CCP's legitimation strategy and in particular what types of legitimacy the Party sees as its priority.

The research questions have been answered by an analysis of leaked censorship instructions sent to media organisations and social media posts by the People's Daily newspaper, the CCP's main propaganda mouthpiece, focusing on the first 6 years of Xi Jinping's presidency (2013-2018). This has made it possible to address some of the limitations of previous research on information control, which has been fairly narrowly focused. By analysing censorship instructions, it has been possible to look at different types of censorship, rather than focussing on just one type. As these instructions are sent to traditional media and internet companies, it is possible to get a broader view of what the CCP was seeking to censor across a number of different channels, compared with looking at censorship on one particular communications channel. The use of all the leaked censorship instructions and a representative sample of People's Daily Weibo posts over the period, gives a broader view of the CCP's information control than studies that have focused on how censorship or propaganda is using during certain events. By looking at data over a six-year period, this research also avoids the risks of the results being influenced by short-term events. The methodology for this research has involved a mix of content analysis together with a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the content included in the instructions and posts.

In terms of the first research question, this thesis shows that during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency information control targeted a wide range of political content. This contrasts with some recent studies focused on censorship. For example, Gallagher and Miller (2021) suggested that the Party does not routinely target sensitive information but focuses instead on people with a large following on social media who post sensitive content. One influential study, conducted shortly before Xi Jinping became president, suggested that the Party focuses on censoring content related to collective action and that otherwise it allows 'the full range of expression of negative and positive comments about the state, its policies, and its leaders' (King et al, 2013, 14). This research shows that in the six years after Xi Jinping came to power this was not the case. During this period the CCP used both censorship and propaganda to control a wide range of political content related to the state, its policies and its leaders.

In terms of the second research question, this thesis shows the limitations of research on information control which has only a narrow focus on one type of censorship or propaganda. It shows that there is a need to look at different types of both censorship and propaganda, and at how censorship and propaganda interact with each other. This thesis has presented a typology of the censorship and control system. The propaganda system uses two main types of censorship – elimination and minimisation censorship, and two types of propaganda – extensive and limited propaganda - to try to protect and enhance the CCP's legitimacy. It also shows that it is important to look at how the CCP uses the mix of these different types of information control.

Most existing research on censorship in China has focused on the elimination of information (Vuori and Paltemaa, 2015; Ng, 2015; King et al, 2013; Bamman et al, 2012). However, this gives a misleading impression of the extent to which the CCP controls information. The Chinese authorities do often seek to completely eliminate certain content. However, on other occasions, information is minimised to reduce the amount of negative content about the topic that people can see. For example, the media may be told that they can only use information from authoritative sources or to make a story less prominent. Internet companies may be told to control information posted online, to limit negative comments. As Roberts (2018) has shown, making it more difficult to access to certain information can have a significant impact. Sensitive information about a particular topic may be available online or in the traditional media. However, if it is more difficult to find this content, fewer people will see it. This

reduces the possibility of citizens developing 'shared critical opinions' and therefore for 'oppositional political awareness' to develop over time (Vuori and Paltema, 2015, 413, 419). This means that to get a more accurate picture of information control it is necessary to consider both elimination and minimisation censorship to get a full picture of what is censored by the CCP.

Similarly, this research suggests that two main types of propaganda were utilised by the CCP. Extensive propaganda directed people's attention towards information the authorities believed would enhance the CCP's grip on power, by overwhelming them with mainly optimistic and celebratory content. It closely reflects Freeden's (1998, 16) definition of ideology as 'idea complexes containing beliefs – encompassing consciously or unconsciously held values, understandings, interpretations, myths and preferences, to mobilise people in support of a regime. By contrast, limited propaganda was more cautious, focusing on topics where the CCP did not have as strong a message to sell, and seeking to create an alternative narrative that limited the risk the public might blame the CCP for these problems. People's Daily often provided some basic factual information about sensitive issues but also added in alternative facts that were more favourable to the CCP. This particularly involved highlighting the actions that were being taken by the Party/state, as well as focussing any blame on individuals, businesses or parts of the government system well away from the centre.

This thesis also shows that where the CCP used a form of minimisation censorship it often supplemented this with limited propaganda. By removing much of the most sensitive content, including attacks on the Party or the political system, while adding in positive content about the Party/state and/or criticisms of other actors, the CCP was therefore attempting to significantly alter the information available to most citizens.

This thesis therefore shows that it is difficult to reach conclusions about what is being controlled and for what purposes without looking at the censorship and propaganda system as a whole. During the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency, if the CCP did not seek to eliminate sensitive content, they nevertheless often sought to significantly manipulate the information available to people by the use of minimisation censorship and/or limited propaganda. Even if information was not deleted, people would have been presented with a view of what was happening in the country which was significantly more favourable to the

Party than what they would have been able to see without the intervention of the CCP's information control apparatus.

In Chapter six I presented a reasonable hypothesis about the information control decision making process for sensitive content that potentially threatens CCP legitimacy, visualised in a flowchart (Figure 15). The decision about the mix of censorship and propaganda techniques that were used appears to have depended on a range of factors including the perceived threat or benefit from people seeing the information; the extent to which people were aware of an issue from personal experience; and the extent to which information had circulated widely online. The authorities were more likely to manipulate information using minimisation censorship and/or limited propaganda, rather than simply trying to eliminate everything, when it was possible to show the Party/state in control of a widely perceived problem, either because of the policy response or the heroic actions of those working for the state. If a lot of people were aware of a problem from their personal experience or a lot of potentially harmful content had already been communicated online, the most effective response was often to try to counteract that information with official narratives communicated via the media and/or doing what they could to minimise the spread of the most negative information. If some issues were too obtrusive to completely remove people's concerns, the CCP often sought to shape perceptions of those problems, for example by minimising the amount of information about how widespread the problems were and strong criticisms of the Party/state. They also sought to remove information about issues that people would not otherwise be aware of, and which might increase their concerns about the problems. And they tried to prevent particular incidents being linked to other similar problems that had occurred, so that people were more likely to see them as one-offs, rather than systemic problems that suggested wider failings by the Party/state. Scale and duration also appear to be important factors in the decision about what type of censorship to use, e.g., in the case of protests. If the size of the problem increased and/or went on for a long time the authorities were more likely to be concerned about its impact and therefore to seek to eliminate the information.

However, this thesis also shows that there was to some extent a shift in the Party's information control strategy after 2013, involving a greater reliance on elimination censorship. A higher proportion of the leaked censorship instructions after 2013 involved complete bans. And where the authorities did use limited propaganda, after 2015 this included fewer negative factual details, focusing more on adding in positive content about

the Party/state. At the same time there was an increasing focus on extensive propaganda under Xi Jinping, and less use of limited propaganda focused on some of the most sensitive topics, such as the environment and disasters. Minimisation censorship and limited propaganda may prevent individual incidents turning into crises. However, it means that people will see some sensitive information, including criticisms of the Party/state. The use of these information control techniques is therefore likely to mean that over time more people will gain a better understanding of problems and their causes than would be the case with a more simplistic approach to information control, based on elimination censorship and extensive propaganda. The fact that the approach to censorship and propaganda evolved under Xi Jinping suggests that the Party became more concerned that manipulating rather than eliminating sensitive information risked gradually undermining CCP legitimacy.

In terms of the third research question, this thesis uses the information about the political content the CCP controls, and the way they use censorship and propaganda to control that information, to determine what types of legitimacy the CCP emphasised in its efforts to strengthen its control on power. This research finds that the propaganda authorities' strongest focus was on enhancing the Party's ideological legitimacy, with ideological content more likely to be subject to *elimination censorship* and *extensive propaganda*. Meanwhile, the Party adopted a more sophisticated approach to information control aimed at maintaining its performance legitimacy in the face of threats. A lot of performance content was the subject of *elimination censorship*. However, the CCP was more likely to use *minimisation censorship* and *limited propaganda* to manipulate sensitive information related to performance legitimacy than ideological legitimacy.

This thesis also shows that the ideology the CCP seeks to promote to ordinary citizens is a mix of nationalism and moral and cultural values. This popular ideology is in contrast to ideology targeted at Party members which has a strong focus on communism and Xi Jinping Thought (see also Zeng, 2016). The focus on moral and cultural values shows that the CCP has been seeking to make communism with Chinese characteristics effectively synonymous with a long-standing value system that is more deeply embedded in Chinese society than Marxism or Maoism. As discussed in Chapter 5, the CCP's promotion of moral values is also strongly linked to nationalism. This means that nationalism was by far the biggest focus of the CCP's propaganda efforts during the first six years of Xi Jinping's presidency. The emphasis on nationalism also increased across this period. In 2017 and 2018 more than half of all political posts were related to nationalism. This underlines the centrality of nationalism

in the CCP's efforts to justify the regime's right to rule and define what is in the common interest under Xi Jinping.

The CCP's information control regarding performance issues generally focused on efforts to maintain its legitimacy in the face of problems such as disasters, pollution and conflict between citizens and the police, rather than trying to actively enhance its legitimacy. This kind of information was less likely to be eliminated than information involving ideology. Information that was as a lower-level threat, that people were aware of from their own experience, or which had already spread widely online was often manipulated using minimisation censorship and/or limited propaganda. In these cases, people were not entirely prevented from voicing criticisms and concerns, but the propaganda authorities did shift the overall narrative in ways that were more favourable to the CCP. This does not suggest that the Party believed performance issues were ones where there were significant opportunities to increase their legitimacy.

However, information about the economy was more likely to eliminated than content involving other performance issues. The approach to content involving economic issues shows that the economy still has a special place for the CCP among performance issues. The approach to censorship of economic issues was more like that for perceived ideological threats. This suggests that although the CCP is alert to other threats to its performance legitimacy, it still has a particular concern that people's perceptions about the economy play a more important part in their assessment of the Party's legitimacy. However, the economy was promoted less extensively by People's Daily than the CCP's ideology, and posts about the economy also fell between 2013 and 2018. This probably reflects the fact that economic growth was slowing over this period. After relying on economic legitimacy for the previous quarter of a century, the Party was concerned to limit the risks posed by negative economic news, but it also had less good economic news to promote. This suggests that the CCP no longer saw the economy as an opportunity to boost its legitimacy but as a legitimacy threat to be controlled.

This thesis also shows that the nature of performance legitimation changed over this period. As noted above, during Xi Jinping's first six years as president the number of censorship instructions involving complete bans increased. The analysis of the People's Daily posts also shows that after 2015 serious performance problems were less likely to be discussed by the paper and where these issue were mentioned, the paper included fewer factual details. This

suggests that the Party under Xi became less confident about its ability to contain legitimacy threats by manipulating information about sensitive performance issues and decided instead to avoid any discussion about a greater range of negative performance stories. This may help to explain why the propaganda authorities initially sought to avoid any discussion of the Coronavirus pandemic, in contrast to the more proactive approach they had taken to the provision of information in crisis situations in the decade after the SARS outbreak in 2003/4.

The propaganda authorities placed less emphasis on institutional legitimation. This thesis shows that the Party felt it necessary to protect itself from threats to its institutional legitimacy, with a significant number of leaked censorship instructions on topics such as corruption and the rule of law. However, there were not a large number of People's Daily posts related to these topics between 2013 and 2018, particularly in the second half of the period. Developing institutional legitimacy – particularly improvements to the rule of law and participation – involved constraining the Party and its senior leaders and was therefore incompatible with Xi Jinping's desire to concentrate more power in the hands of the Party's top leaders, and particularly himself as its core.

Although Xi was widely considered to be the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao (Guardian, February 2018), this does not mean that there had also been a return to the kind of charismatic legitimacy seen under Mao. This research suggests that although there was significant censorship of criticism and mockery of the CCP leader, he was not promoted in the People's Daily Weibo posts in a way that made him seem ever-present and larger than life. This contrasts with Esarey's (2021) research, over the same period covered by this thesis, which found evidence of 'the near deification of Xi Jinping in China's official media' (2021, 900). This suggests that, like their approach to ideology, Xi Jinping was presented differently in People's Daily propaganda aimed at Party members compared to propaganda targeted at the public. Charismatic legitimation may have been an objective of propaganda focused on Party members and officials, but in the first six years of his presidency the Chinese authorities did not seek to generate charismatic legitimacy in their use of online propaganda aimed at the general public.

More surprisingly, the CCP is also not ever present in the Party's propaganda on Weibo. The Chinese authorities seemed to be more concerned about stopping negative references to the Party and its leader than making significant efforts to encourage positive discussion about them. The 159 leaked censorship instructions about the CCP show that the Party was highly

sensitive about negative or embarrassing content about itself. However, it is striking that only 10% of the political posts on Weibo by People's Daily mentioned the CCP and its leaders. This does not suggest that the CCP believed its legitimacy relied on 'insistently' reminding people 'that their well-being is the result of the Party's benevolence' (Sorace, 2017). For the most part, political issues were discussed without direct mention of the CCP. Western media commentary on China often gives the impression that the Party plays a central role in people's lives, but this research shows that online, at least, the Party does not make significant efforts to draw attention to itself. It suggests that the Party do not just want Chinese citizens not to discuss anything that criticises or mocks them, they would prefer ordinary citizens (as opposed to Party members) not to think and talk about them very much at all.

This thesis also agrees with those scholars who have argued that the Party's focus on generating positive energy is an important part of its legitimation strategy. By focusing to an increasing extent on content that was straightforwardly positive, while eliminating a lot of negative information, posting less content about sensitive issues and limiting the amount of discussion about the Party, the CCP seeks to make people feel optimistic and positive and to divert their attention away from difficult political problems. To the extent that it can do this, it will be less reliant on other legitimation strategies.

One limitation of this research has been the fact that the censorship data were not all the instructions issued by the propaganda authorities. This is a difficult problem to overcome while censorship instructions remain secret. This thesis has also focused on propaganda by People's Daily on Weibo. It would be useful to look at whether other propaganda aimed at the general public, e.g., Party media posts on WeChat, propaganda posters, and television programmes, follows the same patterns. This thesis provides valuable evidence about information control during the first 6 years of Xi's presidency. However, censorship and propaganda in China are constantly evolving. Future research could look at whether the focus on ideology, the changes in the approach to performance legitimacy and the lack of focus on institutional and charismatic legitimacy that are identified here continued after 2018.

Overall, this thesis shows that a wide range of content was controlled using censorship and propaganda during Xi Jinping's first six years as president. The CCP controlled this content using a mix of elimination or minimisation censorship, together with extensive or limited propaganda, depending on the type of information and the circumstances. Looking at the

content that was controlled and the way it was controlled shows that the focus of the CCP's information control efforts over this six-year period was on enhancing its ideological legitimacy among the general public, particularly by focussing on moral values and nationalism. The Party's approach to performance and institutional legitimacy by contrast was much more defensive, aimed at maintaining its legitimacy in the face of a range of threats. At the same time there was an increase in positive propaganda attempting to make Chinese citizens feel happier and more optimistic and divert their attention away from problems. The CCP kept itself largely in the background, eliminating negative content about the Party and its leaders, but not trying to insistently focus people on them in propaganda aimed at the public. Information control under Xi Jinping has therefore used a mix of censorship and propaganda approaches to focus people on ideology based on nationalism and moral values, while manipulating and limiting discussion of challenging performance issues and the Party itself. This has created an anaesthetised information environment which encourages people to feel patriotic and positive, but where politics is as unpolitical as possible.

Appendix: Coding manuals

Coding manual – Censorship instructions

General coding guidelines:

- Unless specified, the unit of analysis is the entire censorship instruction.
- Where possible, censorship instructions should be coded only on the content of the instruction. However, in some cases it will be necessary to refer to other evidence, in order to understand the purpose of the instruction. Some background information, identified by China Digital Times, is provided in column E. In some other cases, it may also be necessary to search for other evidence about the issue referred to in the instruction e.g., news articles.

1. ID
ID for censorship instructions: CDT plus the number of the propaganda post starting with 001 for the first post in 2013.

2. Date (day, month year e.g., 150814)

Type of censorship instruction

Note: Censorship instructions can be included in more than one of the following categories:

3. Does the censorship instruction say: Delete / don't report / don't use content?
0. No
1. Yes: it says that content on a particular topic should be deleted, removed or not used; don't report on the topic; or do not share content. These instructions prevent any reporting. If the post bans independent reporting and says reporting should be based on official / authoritative sources, it should be recorded as 6 instead.

4. Control / supervise negative commentary online: Does the propaganda post say that commentary should be controlled / guided / regulated?
0. No
1. Yes: it says that content concerning a particular topic should be controlled / guided / regulated on social media, forums etc

5. Don't hype: Does the propaganda instruction say not to hype the issue?
0. No
1. Yes: it says not to hype content concerning a particular topic, including instructions not to post articles in prominent positions e.g. on homepages, and instructions not to sensationalise stories or to downplay certain issues

6. Use only authoritative sources: Does the propaganda post say that only copy from Xinhua, or other authoritative sources, can be used or that there can be no independent reporting?

0. No

1. Yes: it says that only copy from Xinhua, or other authoritative sources, can be used or to proceed according to a unified plan, or that no independent reporting is allowed

7. Guide public opinion: Does the post say media must reuse a specific article /video / social media post e.g. an article from a named paper or a named video?

0. No

1. Yes: it says that media should use a specific article / video / social media post

8. General instructions: Does the instruction provide more general instructions than those included in 3-7?

0. No

1. **Yes:** it provides general instructions that do not relate to a specific issue.

Topic of censorship instruction

Note: Most instructions focus on only one issue. However, where instructions refer to more than one issue, they can be included in multiple categories. In particular, instructions should go into more than one category where they refer to specific locations such as Xinjiang, protests or Xi Jinping / other CCP leaders e.g. instructions that refer to terrorism and Xinjiang or environment and protests.

8. Economy: Does the instruction refer to the economy or incomes?

0. No

1. Yes: it focuses on the economy; including economic growth, incomes, shortage of jobs, workers, labour disputes, inequality, prices, taxes, pensions etc.

9. Health and education: Does the instruction refer to health or education services?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to health or education services, including the safety of medicines.

10. Foreign affairs and defence: Does the instruction refer to foreign affairs or defence?

2. No

3. Yes: it refers to foreign affairs or defence.

11. Environment: Does the instruction refer to the environment?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to environmental issues.

12. Disasters: Does the instruction refer to a natural or manmade disaster which has affected Chinese people or to safety issues which could lead to a disaster?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to a natural or manmade disaster / incident which has affected Chinese people or to safety issues (e.g. concerning the railways) which could lead to a disaster (Note: These can be incidents that affect just one person, as well as ones that affect large numbers of people)

13. Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan: Does the instruction refer to Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan? (Note: If an instruction involving Xinjiang, Tibet or Hong Kong also mentions other issues such as protests or terrorism, it should also be included in that category.)

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan or to people / organisations from these places.

14. Protests: Does the instruction refer to protests, demonstrations or riots in mainland China, Hong Kong or other authoritarian countries? (Note: Instructions included in this category should normally also be included in another category which indicates what those protests were about e.g. the environment, rule of law.)

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to protests, demonstrations or riots in mainland China, Hong Kong or other authoritarian countries, including their aftermath, comments, worries or criticisms about how the authorities responded, as well as indirect reference to protests such as Tiananmen in 1989.

15. Public security: Does the instruction refer to news concerning the police, crime or terrorism?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to the police, or news concerning crimes or terrorism.

16. Corruption and other inappropriate behaviour by officials: Does the instruction refer to corruption and other inappropriate behaviour by CCP / public officials?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to cases involving corruption and other inappropriate behaviour by CCP / public officials, including public officials abusing their position, the personal assets of officials, references to officials being subject to a Central Discipline and Inspection Committee investigation or the trial of officials etc. (Note: Instructions included in this category should also be included in 18 or 19 (Xi Jinping or Other CCP) if they refer to specific officials, state organisations or the CCP. Corruption or fraud that only involves private companies should be included in the economy category, not in this category.)

17. Rule of/by law: Does the instruction refer to news concerning the legal system?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to news about the rule of / by law, the workings of the legal system, justice etc. (e.g. forced land/property seizures, people being beaten/killed in detention, claims that possible crimes are not being treated seriously), the one-child policy, forced confessions etc.

18. Xi Jinping: Does the instruction refer to comments or coverage concerning Xi Jinping?
0. No
1. Yes: it refers to refer to Xi Jinping.

19. Other CCP: Does the instruction refer to issues related to the CCP, senior CCP leaders or state institutions, including meetings of the CCP and other institutions? (Note: This category only includes posts or instructions that do not mention Xi Jinping or a family member, which should be coded as 18 above. It also only includes current, or very recent, events/people, rather than historical events/people, which should be included in the next category.)
0. No
1. Yes: it refers to issues related to the CCP and leaders (other than Xi Jinping), including meetings of the CCP and other Party/state institutions e.g. the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC), government departments.

20. Communist Party history: Does the instruction refer to historical figures and events related to the CCP?
0. No
1. Yes: it refers to historical figures and events related to the CCP, including dead former leaders such as Mao and Deng, as well as revolutionary heroes or other heroes such as Lei Feng, and events such as the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen.

21. Communist ideology: Does the instruction refer to negative comments about communism, socialism or ideas/thought connected to CCP leaders? (Note: This category can overlap with previous categories e.g. Xi Jinping and other CCP.)
0. No
1. Yes: it refers to CCP ideology including communism, socialism or ideas connected to CCP leaders e.g. China Dream, Mao, Deng or Xi thought.

22. Media and internet: Does the instruction refer to the media or the internet?
0. No
1. Yes: it refers to the media or the internet, including references to the arrest of journalists, censorship, propaganda, websites or apps being suspended etc. This excludes content related to entertainment.

23. Western values: Does the instruction refer to issues the CCP has related to 'Western values' (excluding the media)?
0. No
1. Yes: it refers to issues such as democracy, civil society including NGOs, dissidents, human rights lawyers or activists, religious freedom, universal values, foreign influence, the Nobel prize, Western traditions etc.

24. Nationalism: Does the instruction refer to something that might affect national pride, or which might damage the CCP's nationalist credentials?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to something that might affect national pride, or which might damage the CCP's nationalist credentials, including critical information /comments about foreign policy decisions; actions taken by or in other countries that are bad or embarrassing for China; protests or attacks against China / Chinese people in other countries; information concerning sovereignty e.g. references to Taiwan, the South China Sea or the Diaoyu Islands; information about the military etc.

25. Moral values: Does the instruction concern moral values?

0. No

1. Yes: it concerns moral values e.g. Confucian values, family relationships, helping other people, excessive demonstrations of wealth etc

26. Other instructions or instructions unclear: Do the instructions not fit into one of the other categories, or are they unclear?

0. No

1. Yes: the instruction does not fit into one of the previous categories or the purpose of the instruction is unclear.

Coding manual – People's Daily Weibo posts

General coding guidelines

- Unless specified, the unit of analysis is the entire People's Daily Weibo post.
- It will normally be possible to code the post just on the content of that post. Where the content of a Weibo post is not sufficiently clear, it may be necessary to look at the linked content or a previous post (if the post is an addition to an earlier post). In some other cases, it may also be necessary to search for other evidence about the issue referred to in the instruction e.g., news articles.

1. ID

ID for Weibo posts: PD plus the number of the Weibo post starting with 001 for the first post in 2013.

2. Date (day, month year e.g., 150814)

Additional details about Weibo posts

3. Reposts: Number of times the post had been reposted.

4. Comments: Number of comments on the post.

5. Likes: Number of likes for the post.

6. Addition to earlier post (repost).

0. No. It is an original post.
1. Yes. It is a follow up to a previous Weibo post and includes a link to that post.

7. Additional content.

0. No linked content.
1. Image(s) or GIF(s)
2. Video(s)
3. Url link to article(s) or other webpages

Topic of People's Daily Weibo post

Note 1: Where a post lists more than one topic, it can be included in more than one category. Posts should normally go into more than one category where they refer to Xi Jinping / other CCP leaders e.g., a post involving Xi Jinping discussing poverty should go into the categories for Xi Jinping and incomes.

Note 2: With the exception of Foreign Policy and Nationalism, items 8-21 should usually relate to posts about China or Chinese people. For example, stories about the economy of other countries or crimes in other countries should go in the 'Other' category unless they also concern Chinese foreign policy or nationalism.

8. Economy: Does the post refer to news concerning the economy or incomes?

0. No

1. Yes: it focuses on news about the economy; including economic growth, poverty, workers, or reference to relevant government policies / actions.

9. Innovation and technology: Does the post refer to news concerning innovation and technology?

0. No

1. **Yes**: it refers to news concerning innovation and technology, e.g. Chinese space technology, or reference to relevant government policies / actions.

10. Health and education: Does the post refer to news concerning health or education services?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to news about provision health or education services, or reference to relevant government policies / actions.

11. Consumer rights: Does the post refer to news concerning consumer rights?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to news involving consumer rights.

12. Missing people: Does the post refer to missing people / children / trafficking?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to missing people / children / trafficking.

13. Foreign affairs and defence: Does the post refer to news concerning foreign policy (but which does not involve nationalism)?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to news in relation to another country or positive reference to government foreign policy / actions, but which is not nationalistic (see no.48).

14. Environment: Does the post refer to news concerning the environment?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to news about environmental issues.

15. Disasters: Does the post refer to news concerning a natural or manmade disaster or accident that has taken place?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to news concerning a natural or manmade disaster, including epidemics, fires, the role of the emergency services, military.

16. Public security: Does the post refer to news concerning the police, crime or terrorism?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to the police, or news concerning crimes or terrorism.

17. Corruption and other inappropriate behaviour by officials: Does the post refer to news concerning corruption and other inappropriate behaviour by CCP / public officials?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to cases involving corruption and other inappropriate behaviour by CCP / public officials, including public officials abusing their position, the personal assets of officials, references to officials being subject to a Central Discipline and Inspection Committee investigation or the trial of officials etc. (Note: Posts included in this category should also be included in 20, 21 or 22 (Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang or Other CCP) if they refer to specific officials, state organisations or the CCP. Corruption or fraud that only involves private companies should be included in the economy category, not in this category.)

18. Rule of/by law: Does the post refer to news concerning the legal system?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to news about the rule of / by law, the workings of the legal system, justice etc.

19. Participation and consultation: Does the post refer to information about participation and consultation?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to information about participation and consultation, including public supervision of officials.

20. Bureaucracy: Does the post refer to information about bureaucracy or poor administration?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to information about bureaucracy or poor administration.

21. Xi Jinping: Does the post refer to news about Xi Jinping?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to news focused on Xi Jinping, e.g. about his leadership, his relationships with family etc. (Note: the content needs to be about Xi Jinping.)

22. Li Keqiang: Does the post refer to news about Li Keqiang?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to news focused on Li Keqiang.

23. Other CCP: Does the post refer to other news related to the CCP, leaders and key state institutions, including meetings of the CCP and other key institutions? (Note: This category only includes posts or instructions that do not mention Xi Jinping or Li

Keqiang, or family members. It also only includes current, or very recent, events/people, rather than historical events/people e.g. Mao, which should be included in the Foundational Myths category.)

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to content related to the CCP, leaders (other than Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang) and key state institutions, including meetings of the CCP and institutions e.g. the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC).

24. Communist Party history: Does the post refer to historical figures and events related to the CCP?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to refers to historical figures and events related to the CCP, such as Mao (excluding Mao thought which should be included in 25), or figures related to the CCP, e.g. revolutionary heroes and model citizens such as Lei Feng.

25. Communist ideology: Does the post refer to comments about communism, socialism or ideas/thought connected to CCP leaders? (Note: This category can overlap with previous categories e.g. Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang and other CCP.)

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to positive comments about CCP ideology including communism, socialism or ideas connected to CCP leaders e.g. Mao, Deng or Xi thought.

26. Nationalism: Does the post refer to something that might boost national pride, or which might enhance the CCP's nationalist credentials?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to something that might increase national pride, or which might enhance the CCP's nationalist credentials, including references to sovereignty (eg Diaoyu Islands and South China Sea), mention of national pride, the motherland, China's legitimate rights, foreign policy successes, China's military strength, criticisms of other countries and disputes with other countries, previous humiliations e.g. Japanese aggression, etc, examples of Chinese achievements.

Note: Categories 27 and 28 concern moral values or content about how people should / should not behave.

27. Moral values: examples of people behaving positively/ morally or people behaving badly / immorally: Does the post refer to people who have done something which provides an example of positive / moral behaviour or negative / immoral behaviour?

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to examples of good behaviour e.g. people being filial or caring for a partner / child, being helpful to other people, model citizens, people behaving in an inspirational way etc or people behaving badly. [Note: posts on values / behaviour should either be put into this category or the next one, but not into both.]

28. Moral values - information about what a good citizen should do: Does the post provide information about what good citizens should or should not do?

0. No

1. Yes: it provides information about what good citizens should or should not do e.g. references to civilised behaviour, delivering positive energy, advice about how to bring up your children, books everyone / children should read, habits / behaviour to make you a better person e.g. being diligent, being filial, being helpful to other people, learning first aid skills, reading books, drive carefully, including motivational content. [Note: posts on values behaviour should either be put into this category or the previous one, but not into both.]

29. Tradition and culture: Does the post include reference to traditions or culture?

0. No

1. Yes: includes reference to traditions or culture such as poetry and festival day traditions

30. Other Weibo posts: Does the post refer to other types of news or lifestyle / entertainment news.

0. No

1. Yes: it refers to general Weibo posts, including advice about issues such as health (but not including moral behaviour), trivia, weather, lifestyle, entertainment sport and other general news (including international news which does not involve criticism of another country).

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