

Congressional Testimony

House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese
Communist Party

Engineers of the Soul, Part 2

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Introduction

Thank you, Chairman for the invitation to discuss with you the ideology and methodologies that sit behind China's approach to information warfare. Or "smokeless war" to use the Chinese terminology, as you put it to me.

In July 2017 I completed an interagency assessment of how authoritarian states were interfering in Australia's political ecosystem. The following month I returned to Canberra to deliver a talk in which I argued that only by coming to terms with China's ideological framework - as articulated by top leaders speaking to their own system - could we see the patterns and trends and strategic "intent" that link what might otherwise seem like isolated or even random events.

The title of my talk, "Engineers of the Soul", was a quote from Xi Jinping – who was quoting Mao Zedong, who was quoting Joseph Stalin. I described how Xi was talking seriously and acting decisively to progress a project of total ideological control wherever it was possible for him to do so:

The key point about Communist Party ideology - the unbroken thread that runs from Lenin through Stalin, Mao and Xi - is that the party is and always has defined itself as being in perpetual struggle with the "hostile" forces of Western liberalism.

... The audacity of this project is breathtaking. And so too are the implications. The challenge for us is that Xi's project of total ideological control does not stop at China's borders.

Since August 2017, governments across the democratic world have responded to the challenge of foreign interference, including my own in Australia.

But it is not clear to me that our governments have kept pace with Xi Jinping's China.

Two elements are worth highlighting.

The first is his strategic underwriting of authoritarian states – most notably the revanchist regimes of Russia, Iran and North Korea - in ways that could undermine the US-anchored rules-based order and accelerate his ambitions for annexing Taiwan.

The second is his strategic underwriting of exporting new technologies with surveillance and control capabilities, most notably electric vehicles and social media.

I'll touch on both below.

The main point I want to make is that in order to build a framework that has explanatory and predictive value – in order to keep up with Xi's China - we need to do a better job of grappling with the ideology that frames the language, perceptions and decision-making of Chinese leaders.

We need to understand the lens through which they view our world.

Unfortunately, this process of interpreting the Party's internal guidance is not straight forward. It requires interrogation of sources to identify which messages are intended for whom, for what purposes, and how they are changing over time and in different contexts. And we need to also grapple with the fact that the Party also runs an "external messaging" system that is not designed to convey truth, as such. It is often intended to confuse, divide and deceive.

Smokeless War

The Chinese Communist Party uses the term “smokeless war” and its close cousin, “peaceful evolution”, to describe the threats to its power that are perceived to be rooted in the values, ideologies and instruments of “Western liberalism”.

This language derives from Mao’s observations about the theories of then U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in the early 1950s, when he advocated for the liberation of Soviet-controlled countries through “processes short of war”.¹ But the concept of bloodless war is deeply rooted in the anti-capitalist ideologies of Lenin and Stalin.

The fact that this war is “peaceful” and “smokeless” means that the threat vectors are difficult to observe. They can’t be proved or disproved – until the point that regime change is underway.

In the 2000s, China added “Colour Revolution”² to its ideological armoury – to describe the point at which the “smokeless war” becomes visible and destructive.

This People’s Daily explainer from September 2021 provides a useful summary:

For a long time, some Western countries have been selling “universal values” and promoting “peaceful evolution” for their own political and economic interests and hegemonic ambitions. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, the drastic changes in Eastern Europe, the “colour revolutions”, the “Arab Spring”, etc. were all caused by the intervention of the United States and the West.ⁱ

According to the article, “the real purpose” of the language of “freedom”, “democracy” and “human rights” is to “*compete with us for positions, hearts, and masses, and ultimately overthrow the leadership of the Communist Party of China and our country’s socialist system.*”ⁱⁱ

Traditionally, China’s leaders have used this conspiratorial and provocative language sparingly, at times of great system stress, such as when Mao was mobilising the Party to prepare for its split with Khrushchev’s Russia and when Deng was mobilising the army to suppress the students in 1989.

On 7 March this year, however, Xi signalled a new and overtly confrontational phase of this ideological battle by personally naming the U.S.-led West for the first time publicly as the source of his nation’s ills:

Western countries – led by the United States – have implemented all-round containment, encirclement and suppression against us, bringing unprecedentedly severe challenges to our country’s development.ⁱⁱⁱ

This move, to openly name the U.S. as the source of harm, was a signal to all arms of China’s sprawling bureaucracy that the gloves can be removed.

¹ U.S. Senate, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations on the Nomination of John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State Designate*, January 15, 1953, 83rd Congress, 1st Session (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1953), pp. 5-6; “*Memorandum at Discussion at the 277th Meeting of the National Security Council*,” February 27, 1956, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957: Soviet Union, Eastern Mediterranean, Vol. XXIV*, ed. United States Department of State (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. 59-61.

² Georgia’s Rose Revolution (2003); Ukraine’s Orange Revolution (2004), Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution (2005), Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution (2005) and Burma’s Saffron Revolution (2008)

Defence Turns to Attack

It follows from the Party's fear of Western values and discourse, and its aspirations for total control of words and ideas, that it invests enormous resources in shutting down discordant voices and shaping and elevating more favorable ones. This defensive war has always had a global, offensive, remit. The Party counters the smokeless war against it by waging one of its own.

The tools for defending against ideological and discursive threats to China's "cultural security"^{iv} include propaganda, censorship, political "thought work", and "international public opinion struggle". According to a leaked "transmission outline" of a 2013 speech given at the National Propaganda and Thought Work Conference speech, Xi is supposed to have remarked that the West was carrying out "cultural infiltration" against China and that the "struggle and contest we face in the ideological domain is long-term", with the Internet as its "main battlefield".^v

Ideological struggle with the West is not new for the CCP, but a key development under Xi is that this struggle, which impacts the international image, reputation, and overall security of other countries, is being intensified outside of China. And the Party's "international public opinion struggle" is relatively unconstrained by norms of truth.

In December 2020 members of the CCP Politburo, the Party's highest decision-making body, met to deliberate plans to strengthen and enlarge the country's national security system.^{vi} Also invited to the session was Yuan Peng, head of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, a Ministry of State Security think tank.^{vii} While the content of Yuan's lecture was not revealed, in an essay published at about the same time he described the following as one of three main long-term trends impacting China's international strategy and security:

*All kinds of social "waves of thought" are surging against one another, and the "post-truth era" is causing people to reflect. The "theory of the clash of civilisations" is making a comeback, xenophobia rules, extremism has again floated to the surface, and adventurism is rising against the trend... In the Internet era, "when the false pretends to be true, then the true is also false". What is real and what isn't, truth and falsehood, are hard to distinguish. **What is truth and what is a lie is already unimportant, what's important is who controls discourse power ["the right to speak"], this is nothing other than the twisted nature of the "post-truth era".** In the face of this strange phenomenon, without precedent in the past century, it is only by maintaining resolve, "not fearing the floating clouds", and refusing impulsivity, that we will ultimately be able to emerge victorious from amidst this strategic game."^{viii}*

China's forces for controlling global narratives and competing with other countries through discourse power are not located within one single institutional "home". The 2016 *Cyber Security Law* states that ICT authorities should "promote the spread of socialist core values" and punish overseas attacks through national security institutions.^{ix} In December 2016 the Xi Jinping-chaired Comprehensively Deepening Reform Commission issued a guiding opinion on "One Belt, One Road" soft power construction, stating:

Soft power is an important booster for the construction of One Belt, One Road. It is necessary to strengthen... discourse system construction; promote public opinion and public opinion guidance work; strengthen capacity-building in international communication; and

provide strong theoretical support, public opinion support, and cultural conditions for the construction of One Belt, One Road.^x

Building pro-China communication networks through One Belt, One Road not only provides China with a more robust civilian platform for “*telling China’s story well*” - a phrase frequently attributed to Xi - but also cover for more targeted influence and information operations abroad.^{xi}

Starting in 2021, Xi launched a series of new programs - the Global Security Initiative, Global Civilisations Initiative and the Global Development Initiative – each of which purport to advance China’s discourse power.

The Discourse Trap

China’s messaging and influencing systems are vast and complex, but the messages themselves are straightforward.

Boiled down, the Party’s meta-narrative goes like this:

1. China is inherently peaceful and beneficent,
2. The growth of China’s relative power is inexorable, and
3. China is vengeful and dangerous if provoked.

The different and internally contradictory story lines are often delivered at different stages through different channels, but they are remarkably consistent over time. Together, the messaging orchestra is designed to condition audiences into believing that the rewards of cooperation are great, resistance is futile, and outright opposition may be suicidal.

Crucially, the alleged conspiracy of the US-led West to infiltrate, subvert and overthrow the Chinese Communist Party is not contingent on what any particular Western country thinks or does. It is an equation, a mathematical identity: the CCP exists and therefore it is under attack.

Importantly, no amount of accommodation and reassurance can ever be enough - it can only ever be seen as a tactic, a ruse.

Another, related, “discourse trap” is to work different messaging channels to convince outside audiences that their “relationship” with China is an end in itself (rather than the means to an objective).

All of these narrative devices were on full display a fortnight ago in San Francisco.

My reading of the Xi-Biden summit is that next year will be extremely challenging.

Taiwan

Following the Xi-Biden summit, a senior U.S. official told reporters that Xi described the Taiwan issue as “the biggest, most potentially dangerous issue in U.S.-China relations”. According to the official, Xi said his “preference was for peaceful reunification but then moved immediately to conditions that the potential use of force could be utilised”.^{xiii}

When Biden responded by “assuring Xi that Washington was determined to maintain peace”, Xi’s retorted: “Look, peace is . . . all well and good but at some point we need to move towards resolution more generally.”^{xiii}

This exchange, as relayed by the senior U.S. official, was immediately reinforced by the Chinese official read-out, which said that Xi had told Biden:

*The United States should embody its stance of not supporting “Taiwan independence” in concrete actions, stop arming Taiwan, and **support China's peaceful reunification**. China will eventually be reunified and will inevitably be reunified.*^{xiv}

Later that evening, Xi put the finishing touches on his discourse trap, telling business leaders that he needed their help in convincing Washington that “China is willing to be a friend and partner to the United States.”^{xv}

Beijing’s orchestra of tailored messages in San Francisco reflects a rhetorical stratagem developed over decades – to convey that China is peaceful, but not changing course, and so it is up to Washington (and others) to “take concrete steps” to accommodate and get out of the way.

But now Xi has added a new step to the old demand of accommodation. He is saying that it is no longer enough for the United States to refrain from supporting Taiwan's formal independence from China. Now, Xi is demanding that Washington actively support the Chinese Communist Party in taking over Taiwan “peacefully” – or else.

In case Washington missed the signal, China’s former ambassador, Cui Tiankai, followed up with an English language interview: “So this is something like a life-or-death question for China ... there’s no room for concession,” he told the South China Morning Post. “This is life and death for all Chinese. So we have to be prepared to do anything to defend our national sovereignty.”^{xvi}

In my assessment, Xi has just significantly raised the stakes. He has put President Biden on notice that he needs to bend over backwards and accommodate in order to avoid responsibility for things getting very messy over Taiwan next year.

Xi is working to position the U.S. as the aggressor, should events turn bad.

The Messaging Platforms

The Party flexes its “discourse power” through a remarkably complex, adaptable and deeply institutionalised global system. It uses overt propaganda and diplomacy, quasi-clandestine fronts and proxies, and covert operations to frame debates, manage perceptions and, ultimately, shape the way decision-makers talk, think and behave.

Some of these external messaging systems are transparently labelled and intended to influence, such as the People’s Daily, or Xi Jinping talking directly with President Biden.

But many others are designed to operate in covert, deceptive or coercive ways that cut against the norms of our open, rules-based societies.

TikTok

China’s online social media platforms are growing with remarkable scale and sophistication.

Beyond the Chinese language media, the most important of these platforms is TikTok, which is owned by ByteDance, a PRC company that is subject to all the influence, guidance and de facto control to which the Party now subjects all significant PRC technology companies.

Our research shows how **ByteDance’s 10-year development journey tracks with Xi Jinping’s efforts to “meticulously build an external discourse mechanism [and] utilise the role of emerging media”**, as Xi told a “Study Session” for China’s Politburo in December 2013.^{xvii}

In May 2021, Xi convened another Politburo “Study Session” and instructed his colleagues to use the “external discourse mechanisms” that they had built in order to “*target different regions, different countries, and different groups of audiences*” with “*precise communication methods*” in order to “*make friends, unite and win the majority, and constantly expand our circle of friends who know China and are China-friendly.*”^{xviii}

Xi did not name TikTok in the official meeting readout, published by Xinhua. Subsequently, however, the People’s Daily (Overseas Edition) elaborated on Xi’s message in an article (republished by Xinhua) that called for China to “*allow short video platforms to become ‘megaphones’ for telling Chinese stories well and spreading Chinese voices well*”.^{xix} The article mentioned TikTok specifically as the representative example of short video platforms.

The Spectre of Election Interference

In Washington, in the pre-TikTok era, Russian intelligence actors “interfered in the 2016 presidential election in sweeping and systematic fashion”, according to the Mueller report.^{xx} They did this by waging “a social media campaign that favoured presidential candidate Donald J. Trump and disparaged presidential candidate Hillary Clinton”, while seeking to “provoke and amplify political and social discord in the United States”.^{xxi}

Mueller found no evidence that Russia caused the election of Trump or that Trump had colluded with Russia. Nevertheless, Russia’s interference fed perceptions that bitterly divided Americans and wounded the faith of many that the election had been free and fair.

In Canberra, the spectacle of Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election provided impetus to an Australian Government investigation into authoritarian interference in the Australian political system. According to media reports, the classified inter-agency report delivered in 2017 found that “the CCP’s operations are aimed at all levels of government and designed to gain access and influence over policy making.”^{xxii}

According to then-Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, this analytical work “galvanised” the Australian Government to deliver a comprehensive counter foreign interference strategy, with bipartisan support.^{xxiii} In Ottawa, intelligence agencies reportedly found in 2017 that the CCP was interfering at “all levels of government”.^{xxivxxv} In March 2023, while battling allegations of turning a blind eye,^{xxvi} Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced two probes into foreign interference and a special rapporteur who will have “a wide mandate to make expert recommendations on protecting and enhancing Canadians’ faith in our democracy”.^{xxvii} Whatever is revealed, the damage already caused to Canadian democracy is real.

The United Kingdom, Canada and the European Union have delivered or are working to deliver transparency legislation modelled loosely on Australia's. Whether these laws are effective depends on enforcement will and capability.

But no Western democracy, to my knowledge, has developed a credible response to the capacity that China has now developed to “weaponise” TikTok, WeChat and other messaging platforms.

As ever, the challenge is to deal with the potential for foreign interference before “elite capture” becomes “state capture”.

If the risks remain unaddressed, **the integrity of future elections including next year's U.S. presidential election could be vulnerable to allegations from both analysts and opportunists that elections have been “rigged” by a condominium of politicians and China's super-app TikTok.** Much of it might be overstated, but – in the absence of effective policy action – there will be enough truth to make the allegations stick, leaving the credibility of democratic processes in doubt.

A Military Intelligence Case Study

The Liaison Bureau of the Central Military Commission's Political Work Department is a vast military intelligence bureau which is tasked with conducting information warfare and other forms of political warfare efforts behind enemy lines. It has described its activities as “*serving the Party's and the state's political and military strategy through work to disintegrate enemy armies, unite friendly armies, turn enemies into friends, and prevent friends from becoming enemies.*”^{xxviii} Formerly known as the Department of Enemy Work, it is one of the most secretive organs within the Party and perhaps the least studied Chinese intelligence agency.

The Liaison Bureau holds a special importance in the CCP influence system because it has been the institutional home of many of China's leading princelings, including supreme leader Xi Jinping. Xi inherited his role in this work system, or *xitong*, from his father, Xi Zhongxun, who made his first major contribution to the revolution by performing “enemy work” inside a KMT-aligned army in the early 1930s. The Bureau's main front organisation, the China Association for International Friendly Contact, is headed by Chen Yuan, the son of China's second-ranked leader in the 1980s, Chen Yun. Chen Yuan took over from Deng Rong, the daughter of Deng Xiaoping. The Liaison Bureau was created in around 2016 as part of broader reforms of the Chinese military.^{xxix} The small amount of open-source information available indicates that it has changed little, if at all, from its predecessor, the Liaison Department of the General Political Department. The last head of the department, Xing Yunming, was purged on corruption charges in 2015.^{xxx}

A classified history of “liaison work”, produced by the Liaison Bureau's predecessor agency in 1998 for internal use, offers frank insights into Chinese political warfare that are still relevant today. It stresses the long and unique tradition of political warfare within the Chinese military:

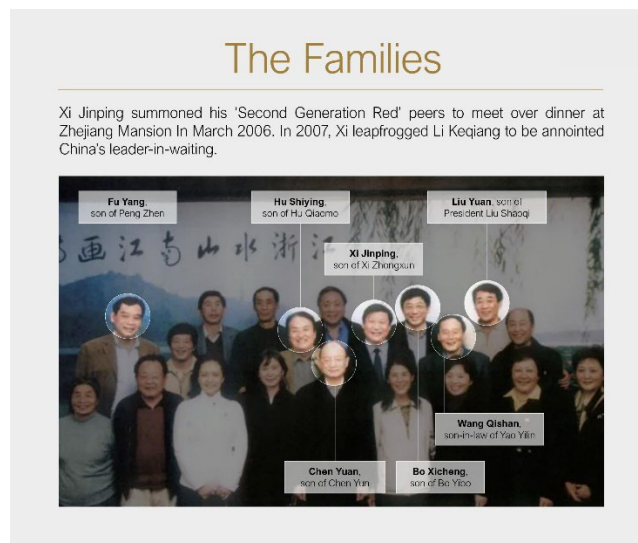
It is an invention of the Chinese Communist Party in establishing the people's army, and a unique feature of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, to have dedicated liaison

departments within the military's political organs for disintegrating enemy armies and uniting friendly armies.^{xxxii}

This text described military liaison work as “a special battlefield” which owed to “the long-term nature of domestic and foreign class struggle.”^{xxxiii}

Reflecting the breadth of CCP security and political warfare work, PLA liaison work is situated within a greater mosaic of Party organs. According to the classified internal history, liaison work is “closely connected to united front, propaganda, [state] security, public security, ethnic affairs, and foreign affairs agencies.”^{xxxiii} These agencies, through their networks and their own political warfare efforts, can complement the military's liaison work.^{xxxiv} The leader of the PLA Liaison Bureau is generally awarded a seat on the UFWD-run Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference as a member of the “foreign friendship” constituency-together with the most senior MSS political influence officer.^{xxxv}

The photograph below shows Xi Jinping in 2006 gathering support from several “red princeling” peers, who purport to be custodians of this Red Gene. Each of the highlighted individuals owe their status to a father (or father-in-law, in the case of Wang Qishan) who rose to the Politburo. Each of those patriarchs, in turn, owed their leadership positions to their intelligence handling capabilities.



ⁱ “五位一体”谱华章（习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想学习问答（34）），*People's Daily*, 2-Sep-2021, <https://archive.md/VTytyu>.

ⁱⁱ “五位一体”谱华章（习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想学习问答（34）），*People's Daily*, 2-Sep-2021, <https://archive.md/VTytyu>.

ⁱⁱⁱ 习近平看望参加政协会议的民建工商联界委员时强调:正确引导民营经济健康发展高质量发展, *Xinhua*, 6-Mar-2023, <http://archive.today/MFli0>.

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- iv Johnson, “Safeguarding socialism.”
- v “网传习近平 8•19 讲话全文：言论方面要敢抓敢管敢于亮剑,” 中国数字时代/*China Digital Times*, 4-Nov-2013, <https://archive.vn/mtvA1>.
- vi “习近平在中央政治局第二十六次集体学习时强调 坚持系统思维构建大安全格局 为建设社会主义现代化国家提供坚强保障”, *Xinhua*, 12-Dec-2020, <https://archive.vn/gQpAO>.
- vii Profile (English-language): “Yuan Peng”, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, <https://archive.vn/wip/qYiDo>.
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- ix “《中华人民共和国网络安全法》”, *Xinhua*, 7-Nov-2016, <https://archive.fo/IwrOs>.
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- xiv 习近平同美国总统拜登举行中美元首会晤, *Xinhua*, 16-Nov-2023, <https://archive.md/wip/kHECd>.
- xv 汇聚两国人民力量 推进中美友好事业——在美国友好团体联合欢迎宴会上的演讲, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://archive.md/wip/RaDLl>.
- xvi “Exclusive | ‘Life-or-death question’: US must grasp Taiwan’s importance to China, former envoy Cui Tiankai says”, *South China Morning Post*, 20-Nov-2023, <https://archive.md/Gr4pE>.
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- xxix _See, for example: “纪念隐蔽战线无名英雄尤柳门在台英勇就义 65 周年追思会在京隆重举行” (*Zhonghua hun wang*, March 21, 2019); “吉林省高校体育专业 2018 届毕业生供需见面洽谈会在我校举行” (*Jilin Institute of Physical Education*, December 1, 2017); “体院新闻：我校杰出校友叶乔波回访母校并为师生作精彩报告” (*Chuangxin Chuangye Tuan via Sohu*, December 1, 2017).

^{xxx} Minnie Chan, “Chinese military intelligence chief Xing Yunming held in graft inquiry,” *South China Morning Post*, 4-Mar-2015, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1729631/chinese-military-intelligence-chief-xing-yunming-held-graft-inquiry>.

^{xxx}ⁱ 王骏 et al (eds), “中国人民解放军联络工作史”, 187.

^{xxx}ⁱⁱ 王骏 et al (eds), “中国人民解放军联络工作史”, 185.

^{xxx}ⁱⁱⁱ 王骏 et al (eds), “中国人民解放军联络工作史”.

^{xxx}^{iv} Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, “The People’s Liberation Army General Political Department: Political warfare with Chinese characteristics,” Project 2049 Institute, 14-Oct-2013, https://project2049.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/P2049_Stokes_Hsiao_PLA_General_Political_Department_Liaison_101413.pdf, 72.

^{xxx}^v Currently Yi Xian 乙先. The practice goes back as far as three decades ago.