

Books

## PR, Communist-style

by Simon Cartledge

*Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* by Anne-Marie Brady, Rowan & Littlefield, Lanham, 2008.

The Communist Party has spent enormous effort upgrading its propaganda apparatus

Anne-Marie Brady's *Marketing Dictatorship* is a hugely interesting and important book. In a concise 230 pages it explains how since 1989 the Chinese Communist Party has renewed, extended and strengthened its propaganda apparatus. Brady shows how the Party has confronted the challenge of managing a population that is better informed because of the internet, and whose members can easily communicate with each other via fax, cell phones and email. She concludes that the Party has enhanced its ability to rule by skillfully using communications tools to increase its legitimacy. As a result, the Party has greatly improved its chances of ruling far into the future, and should see no need to introduce democratic reforms.

Brady's book challenges two principal schools of thought about China's likely political development: the camp that believes China will evolve in the direction of some kind of multi-party democracy, and the group that argues (despite all the evidence to the contrary) that the Party's grip on power is tenuous. It makes sobering reading for human-rights advocates and other liberals who would like to believe that popular pressure will force the regime to move to greater openness. Hard-nosed political realists may find themselves vindicated, but even they may be surprised at the effectiveness of the Party's opinion-shaping machine that Brady explores.

### Ouch!

Creeping liberalization – only in your dreams

One great pleasure of the book is the directness with which Brady punctures optimistic puffery about China's creeping liberalization. Refuting a claim by leading American sinologist Michel Oksenberg, published in an essay just after his death in 2001, that China's economic reforms led to a "reduction in the strength of the propaganda apparatus," she writes:

*Such analysis is at least ten years out of date. ... China's economic reforms in the propaganda sphere, especially since the 1990s, have been geared toward privileging Party interests and has [sic] succeeded in increasing, not decreasing, the overall strength of the propaganda apparatus.*

Claims such as Oksenberg's have been made airily at many times over the last 20 years, usually buttressed by comments about the availability of news on the internet, the greater ease of communication via cell phones, and China's increased contacts with the rest of the world. Yet Brady shows that the Party has not simply acquiesced to such developments. On the contrary, it devotes massive effort to obstructing the free flow of information, and to using the internet to promote its own views.

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This is not simply censorship. Yes, an unknown number of officials police the internet (estimates generally fall in the tens of thousands). Far more important, however, are guidelines that direct opinion in specific directions and bar it from others. Brady summarizes these as:

- Think positive and emphasize achievements.
- No bad news during holiday periods or around sensitive dates.
- Don't raise problems that can't be easily solved.
- Talk up the economy.
- Demonize the United States.
- Don't promote the views of enemies.
- Selectively use international news to show China's in a good light.
- Pay attention to language – control phraseology on certain specific subjects.
- Repeat after me: "Taiwan is part of China."

Other control mechanisms include various laws and regulations, oversight bodies at all levels of society and government, and a massive growth in infotainment. So while the huge expansion of China's media has given many people more vehicles for reading, viewing and listening and expressing themselves, there are plenty of tools to guide views, indicate what subjects are off limits, and penalize any who overstep the invisible line of impermissible comment. China has seen a vast realm of subjects opened up for discussion – but also the creation of a correspondingly vast array of mechanisms by which the propaganda apparatus can ensure that people stay on message.

### **Many messages**

Propaganda is not just about the internet, and not just about news. Coverage of sport and national disasters in print and on radio and television plays a part. Censorship and threats are tactics, but so are incentives such as allowing media companies to publish or broadcast money-making entertainment magazines and programs. Intellectuals and academics get the freedom to research, travel, choose their own job, enjoy culture – provided boundaries on political activism are never crossed. Young people, particularly students, are subjected to intense patriotic education, whose effectiveness was demonstrated this year in the outbursts of national solidarity seen over Tibet and the international legs of the Olympic flame's journey. A continual barrage of messages both obvious and subtle highlight the shortcomings and crimes of Western countries, while playing up China's plusses.

In short, China's propaganda process depends less on passive brainwashing than on the active involvement of many actors: officials, opinion leaders, media businesses, and pretty much anyone who wants to work in culture and entertainment. Another crucial factor is the Party's agility in

The molding of opinion is far more important than direct censorship

Material incentives play a key role in shaping the direction of media coverage and academic research

Fans of Tony Blair's spin

spotting new channels of information flow (email, blogs, internet video) and co-opting them before they can be used against the regime.

This modern propaganda machine is the result of thorough study of new methods, including the most successful public relations and marketing strategies used by governments and companies around the world. Chinese information officials have closely scrutinized the “spin” techniques of former British prime minister Tony Blair, as well as the practices of nominally democratic countries with entrenched traditions of one-party rule – notably Japan, Singapore and Mexico.

**The secret of longevity?**

The implications for China's political future are striking. Brady persuasively argues that current propaganda techniques have succeeded in deepening the Party's claim to legitimacy. In the Mao era, the Party claimed a right to rule based on Communist morality. Today, the Party claims a right to rule based upon popular support. This is a far more profound source of legitimacy than the simplistic notion (held by many Westerners) that the Party's rule rests simply on an ability to deliver economic growth. Economic growth is just one strand in a web of claims that also include: nourishing the spirit of the “ancestral land” (*zuguo*); maintaining cultural continuity via an emphasis on Confucianism; protecting the nation from foreign threats (especially the United States); and delivering international recognition, for instance via the Olympics.

China's political system suits its leaders

Two other implications, not discussed by Brady, logically follow. First, the political model China has in place is the one its leadership wants; this model has grown enormously stronger in the last two decades, and its leaders can anticipate it becoming even stronger in the coming years. Therefore the China we see now is likely to be pretty much the China that will be there a couple of decades hence. Second, the country's leaders are dead set on making China a major power and using their power to shape the world to China's benefit.

If the reality of a strong, Communist-ruled, authoritarian China is to be with us for at least another two decades, the question that then arises is how others should respond to this reality. One obvious non-starter is waiting for things to go wrong. Brady writes:

*The “collapse thesis,” which dominates Western analysis of China's future is clearly erroneous and based on stereotypical assumptions. By re-emphasizing and modernizing propaganda and thought work since 1989, the CCP has managed to overcome these various crises [such as peasant and worker unrest, and SARS], emerging re-strengthened and as dominant in Chinese society as ever.*

Another false trail is the resort to facile confidence in the victory of Western values. As Brady observes, this assumption underlies much Western writing about China: “Since the events of 1989 in China and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, a triumphalist mentality that emphasizes the moral superiority of the Western demo-

cratic model over the communist model has become prevalent in Western scholarship.”

Even accounts sympathetic to China often embrace such triumphalism. A good example is *China: Fragile Superpower*, a book published in 2007 by Susan Shirk, a noted American sinologist who served as a foreign policy advisor in the Clinton administration. The main theme of the work is a plea to consider the difficulties facing China’s rulers as they struggle to cope with manifold economic, social and environmental problems. In Shirk’s view the Party suffers from weak legitimacy and its leaders “have boxed themselves into a dangerous corner” which allows little room for policy maneuver. Her policy recommendations to the Chinese leadership all assume that the goal of the Party is, or ought to be, to convert China to Western values:

- Stop official sponsorship of assertive nationalism
- Cultivate positive nationalism (downplay hostility to foreigners)
- Empower private business
- Strengthen civilian control of the military
- Decontrol the media
- Open up dialogue with the Taiwan government

It is all but inconceivable that any Party leader could take such recommendations seriously. Controlling the media is vital to Communist longevity; private business can be allowed freedoms provided it also can be co-opted to maintain Communist Party rule; foreigners (particularly Europeans and North Americans) are part of the problem precisely because of their opposition to continuing Communist rule; and Taiwan remains a topic that can be usefully called on to rally people at sensitive times. Indeed, the almost universal belief within China that Taiwan and Tibet are inalienable parts of the country is one of the greatest successes of the Party’s propaganda effort. Why on earth would the Party want to reverse such an achievement?

As Brady makes clear, the Party leadership does see much of the rest of the world as hostile to China – precisely because of calls like Shirk’s which seem designed to undermine the basis of the Party’s rule.

Shirk’s concluding recommendation to American foreign policy makers is oddly at variance with this simple truth: “Our best hope is that as China’s leaders address their domestic problems, they will be able to deal with the world in an increasingly responsible way.” Shirk’s idea of basing US foreign policy on a “hope” that China’s leaders become more “responsible,” seems simultaneously naïve and guilty of the triumphant moralism that Brady criticizes.

### Get real

Brady avoids policy prescriptions, but presents a simple message: don’t be naïve. China is not a “fragile superpower.” Its leaders scrutinized the

America’s China policy is still missionary...

...but the Chinese aren’t interested in converting

Hope-based foreign policy?

China doesn't want to become more like other countries – why should it?

reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union and its client states in Eastern Europe, and have worked assiduously to avoid making the same mistakes as those regimes. These leaders are a tough bunch of people who have survived numerous crises and govern a country that – in their own eyes, the eyes of the majority of the Chinese population, and increasingly in the eyes of many foreigners – is successfully run. The Party's achievement in selling the idea of permanent Communist Party rule, to both domestic and world audiences, is as much a success story as is China's record of economic development over the past two decades.

This success, of course, is not unqualified. Many, especially in the West, remain hugely suspicious of the Party's political motives and long-term international agenda. But just as China's economic growth poses challenges to many countries around the world, so does the world view espoused and promoted by the Chinese Communist Party. Brady's book makes clear the nature of that challenge, and should give pause to anyone who believes (or would like to believe) that China will become more like other countries, especially Western ones. The Party has put enormous effort into making sure that this will not happen – and has been surprisingly successful in enlisting the people of China in support of that effort.