



VOLUME 20 • ISSUE 9 • MAY 15, 2020

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**China's *Long March* Rocket Program Sees Both
Dramatic Successes and Failures in Spring 2020**

By John Dotson

Introduction

The early months of 2020 have seen a number of significant launches for the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s *Long March* series of rockets (长征系列运载火箭, *Chang Zheng xilie yunzai huojian*). The venerable—but steadily evolving—*Long March* series dates its active history back to China's first satellite launch in 1970, and has long been the primary workhorse for launches associated with the PRC's satellite and space exploration programs. These programs are increasingly ambitious in scope, and launch activities in 2020 may exceed those of last year: PRC state media indicated early this year that at least 40 *Long March* launch missions “to serve national space programs” were planned for 2020, with intent to surpass the 34 launches made in 2019 ([Zhongguo Qingnian Bao](#), January 20; [China Daily](#), February 20).



Image: A Long March 2D rocket on lift-off from the Taiyuan Launch Center in Shanxi Province, January 15. The rocket carried four satellites into orbit, including two satellites made by the Argentine company Satellogic. (Image source: [China Great Wall Industry Corporation](#))

The early months of 2020 have seen continued successes for the PRC's launch programs—to include the delivery into orbit of new satellites, and the successful maiden launch of a *Long March 5B* and associated payloads intended to play a future role in the PRC's manned space program. However, there have also been major setbacks, as seen in the critical failures of two launch missions in mid-March and early April. It remains

to be seen to what extent these two failed missions will impact the PRC’s ambitious launch schedule projected at the outset of the year.

Successful Satellite Launches in Early 2020

Much of the work for the *Long March* program is performed by subordinate institutions of the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (中国航天科技集团有限公司, *Zhongguo Hangtian Keji Jituan Youxian Gongsij*), or CAST, one of the PRC’s two largest aerospace conglomerates. In particular, the CAST-subordinate China Great Wall Industry Corporation (中国长城工业集团有限公司, *Zhongguo Changcheng Gongye Jituan Youxian Gongsij*) is the lead institution for managing *Long March* launch services, operating out of three primary facilities: the Taiyuan (太原) Launch Center in northwest Shanxi Province; the Xichang (西昌) Launch Center in southern Sichuan Province; and the Wenchang (文昌) Launch Center on Hainan Island ([Great Wall Industry Corporation](#), undated).

The PRC’s 2020 cycle of *Long March* missions commenced on January 7, with a *Long March 3B* launch that delivered into geostationary orbit a *Tongxin Jishu Shiyan 5* (通信技术试验卫星五号) satellite, designed by the CAST-subordinate Shanghai Aerospace Technology Research Institute (上海航天技术研究院, *Shanghai Hangtian Jishu Yanjiuyuan*). PRC state press trumpeted the success of this launch, declaring that “This indicates that [CAST]’s first launch of 2020 has achieved a great start!” ([Xinhua](#), January 8).

Long March Rocket Launches in 2020				
Date	Location	Rocket	Mission / Reported Payload	Source(s)
Jan. 7	Xichang Launch Center (Sichuan)	Long March 3B	<i>Tongxin Jishu Shiyan 5</i> (通信技术试验卫星五号) satellite for delivery to geostationary orbit	(Xinhua , Jan. 8; Space Flight Now , Jan. 7; NASA Space Flight , Jan. 7)
Jan. 15	Taiyuan Launch Center (Shanxi)	Long March 2D	<i>Jilin 1</i> (吉林一号), <i>Tianqi 5</i> (天启星座05星), Argentinian <i>NewSat-7</i> and <i>NewSat-8</i> satellites	(Shang Guan News , Jan. 15; China Great Wall Industry Corp. , Jan. 15)
Feb. 20	Xichang Launch Center (Sichuan)	Long March 2D	Four unidentified satellites for testing “intersatellite links”	(China Daily , Feb. 20)
Mar. 7	Xichang Launch Center (Sichuan)	Long March 3B	The 54 th satellite of the <i>Beidou</i> constellation of global positioning satellites	(CAST , March 11)
Mar. 16	Wenchang Launch Center (Hainan)	Long March 7A	Maiden test flight of the <i>Long March 7A</i> ; rocket suffered critical failure	(Xinhua , Mar. 16; (SCMP , Mar. 18)

Mar. 24	Xichang Launch Center (Sichuan)	Long March 2C	Unidentified number of remote sensing satellites from the <i>Yaogan-30</i> (遥感30号) series	(Xinhua , Mar. 24)
Apr. 9	Xichang Launch Center (Sichuan)	Long March 3B	Indonesian communication satellite <i>Palapa-N1</i> for delivery into orbit; rocket suffered critical failure	(Xinhua , Apr. 9)
May 5	Wenchang Launch Center (Hainan)	Long March 5B	Maiden test flight of the <i>Long March 5B</i> ; carried aloft a “next-generation manned spacecraft” for orbital testing	(China Daily , May 5; China Daily , May 6)

This was followed by three more successful satellite launch missions in the following weeks: a January 15 *Long March 2D* launch from the Taiyuan facility that carried into orbit two Chinese satellites, and two imaging satellites made by Satellogic, an Argentina-based company ([Great Wall Industry Corporation](#), January 15); and a February 20 *Long March-2D* launch from the Xichang facility that orbited four satellites “tasked with demonstrating and verifying new technologies for intersatellite links as well as Earth observations” ([China Daily](#), February 20). Also noteworthy was a *Long March 3B* launch on March 7 that placed into orbit another satellite of the *Beidou* (北斗) constellation of global positioning satellites, thereby reportedly placing the PRC “only one step away from completing the whole global system” ([CAST](#), March 11).

Two Significant Launch Failures in March and April

Despite this successful record of satellite launches in the first several weeks of the month, a shadow was cast over the PRC’s rocketry program by major launch failures in mid-March and early April. On March 16, a *Long March-7A* carrier rocket was launched on a maiden flight from the Wenchang Space Launch Center in Hainan Province, reportedly on a mission to place an unidentified satellite into geosynchronous orbit ([Space News](#), March 16). Later that day, state media carried a terse announcement that the rocket had “experienced an abnormality” (出现异常, *chuxian yichang*), and that the launch mission failed as a result, with an investigation to be conducted into the cause ([Xinhua](#), March 16).

The *Long March-7A* has been identified as a payload rocket to deliver equipment and supplies for China’s future manned space station, thereby making the launch failure a setback for that program. Unverified amateur video posted online appeared to show an explosion approximately three minutes into the flight, leading to media speculation that the rocket experienced a critical failure in second-stage separation ([SCMP](#), March 18). However, no official cause has been made public.

A second significant failure occurred on April 9, when a *Long March 3B* launched from the Xichang Launch Center (Sichuan Province) was also destroyed in flight. A statement from Xinhua about this incident was

more forthcoming, stating that “The rocket worked in normal conditions in the first-stage and second-stage [but] abnormal conditions happened in the third-stage...Debris of the third-stage rocket and satellite had fallen, and the launch mission suffered a failure.” The rocket carried an Indonesian *Palapa-N1* communication satellite for delivery into orbit, which was presumably also destroyed ([Xinhua](#), April 9).



Images: Workers at the Wenchang Launch Center (Hainan Island) work to assemble the stages of a Long March 5B rocket, which saw a successful maiden launch on May 5. (Source: [China Daily/YouTube](#))



Image: Recovery personnel pose for a group photo before the “trial version of China’s new-generation manned spaceship” following its return at the Dongfeng landing site in Inner Mongolia (May 8, 2020). (Source: [Xinhua](#), May 8)

The Long March 5B and the Test Orbiting of Its Manned Spaceflight Capsule

The sting of these two failures was alleviated somewhat by the successful May 5 maiden launch of a *Long March 5B* from the Wenchang Launch Center on Hainan Island. The *Long March 5B* is a new variant that is reportedly the largest of the PRC’s space-going rockets, and “central to the space station program [as] the

only Chinese launch vehicle capable of carrying large space station parts into orbit.” Per a spokesman for the China Manned Space Agency, three future *Long March 5B* flights are planned to put major components of China's manned space station aloft for assembly in orbit; and “four *Long March 2F* and four *Long March 7* missions will be made by the end of 2022 to ferry astronauts and cargo ships to build the station” ([China Daily](#), May 5; [China Daily](#), May 6).

Per state media, the rocket “placed prototypes of China's next-generation manned spacecraft and an experimental cargo retrieval craft as well as more than 10 experimental payloads in low-Earth orbit” ([China Daily](#), May 6). Successful testing of this “new-generation manned spaceship” (albeit unmanned for this flight), which is intended to support future manned lunar missions ([People's Daily Online](#), May 8), was particularly promoted as a dramatic success story. Xinhua reported that “the experimental spaceship flew in orbit for two days and 19 hours, during which it carried out a series of space science and technology experiments” before returning to Earth's atmosphere and conducting a successful landing via parachutes at the Dongfeng (东风) landing site in Inner Mongolia ([Xinhua](#), May 8). State media also issued a brief statement that the “flexible and inflatable cargo return capsule that China sent into space for test for the first time operated abnormally during its return to the ground” ([Xinhua](#), May 10), but this sour note was obscured amidst the larger good news story about the successes of the *Long March 5B* and the manned spaceflight capsule.

Conclusion

This string of combined successes and failures for Long March rockets in early 2020 is likely to impact the PRC's launches through the remainder of the year. At least one more major challenge lies ahead this year for China's space program: in March, PRC officials announced successful testing that would open the way for a *Tianwen-1* (天问一号) Mars probe launch to take place in July on a *Long March-5* carrier rocket, with plans for the probe to “orbit and land and deploy a rover on the planet” ([Xinhua](#), January 23; [Xinhua](#), March 10; [Xinhua](#), April 24). It remains to be seen whether or not the failed launches of March 16 and April 9 will delay this high-profile event, or whether they will cut into the forty Long March launches for 2020 predicted at the beginning of the year. Whichever the case, continued rapid advancements in China's space program are almost certain to continue.

John Dotson is the editor of China Brief. For any comments, queries, or submissions, feel free to reach out to him at: cbeditor@jamestown.org.

**Examining China's Organ Transplantation System:
The Nexus of Security, Medicine, and Predation /
Part 2: Evidence for the Harvesting of Organs from Prisoners of Conscience**

By Matthew P. Robertson

Editor's Note: For many years, stories have circulated about instances of alleged involuntary organ harvesting in the People's Republic of China. However, due to the difficulty of confirming these accounts—and due perhaps as well to their lurid and disturbing nature—the veracity of these alleged accounts has long been left as an unresolved question. Matthew P. Robertson, research fellow with the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation (VOC) and a PhD candidate in political science at the Australian National University, is engaged in an effort to direct an analytically rigorous approach towards this controversial topic—which has long been a marginalized issue in diplomatic and human rights discourses connected to the PRC. Mr. Robertson is the author of a detailed report on the topic published in March 2020 by VOC, available [here](#).

Our previous issue contained the first part of this series ([Examining China's Organ Transplantation System: The Nexus of Security, Medicine, and Predation / Part 1: The Growth of China's Transplantation System Since 2000](#)), which detailed the development and expansion of China's policy architecture and medical infrastructure for organ transplants over the past two decades. In this article, the second part of a planned three-part series in China Brief, Mr. Robertson examines the available evidence as to whether prisoners of conscience and targeted ethnic minorities in the PRC have been made subject to extrajudicial killing as part of this system of organ harvesting and transplantation.

The third and final part, to appear in a near-future issue, will examine the ways that PRC authorities have sought to leverage influence over international medical organizations in order to manage the narratives surrounding this issue.

Introduction

Part 1 of this series profiled the dramatic growth of the organ transplantation infrastructure in the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the year 2000, and also detailed the difficulty in plausibly explaining the sourcing of organs on a scale that could support such a large system. The discrepancies between the observed growth of China's transplant sector, and official explanations regarding the organ supply necessary to support a system of such scale, have raised significant questions as to the source of these organs. These discrepancies lead to the need for an alternate explanation, and into this breach a range of theories have been proposed: to include rogue doctors operating organ trafficking gangs ([Associated Press](#), March 15, 2018), and voluntary sales of kidneys for iPads and other consumer electronics ([BBC](#), April 6, 2012).

Reaching a judgment as to the source of this large supply of human organs requires evaluating competing hypotheses and making a judgement as to which is the most plausible. One of the most plausible—and disturbing—explanations is that prisoners of conscience in the PRC have been medically tested on a systematic basis while incarcerated, and subsequently executed in order to harvest organs that can be monetized for substantial profits by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials ([China Tribunal](#), March 1). Incarcerated persons represent the only population that can plausibly explain the sourcing of healthy organs on the scale observed in China’s transplant sector: these persons are held in captivity; pre-screened for organ function, health, blood-type, and (for kidney transplants) tissue-type; and they are available to be executed on demand. Furthermore, the generally higher state of health found among prisoners of conscience may make them more desirable as an organ source, as compared to regular criminal inmates—who are more likely to be affected by health issues such as drug abuse. When examining possible captive populations, prisoners of conscience are among the most numerous, suitable, and vulnerable.

Analysis of PRC transplant data, as well as admissions by officials, suggests that tens of thousands of transplants take place in China annually ([VOC Appendix 4](#), March 10). Death row prisoners are only estimated to number a few thousand, and only a portion of them would make suitable donors. The size of the voluntary donation system at present is unclear, but the systematic falsification of data (*see discussion further below*) suggests that it must be much smaller than claimed—meaning that there is still a gap in transplant volume that has not been explained.



Image: Zheng Shusen (郑树森) (center), is a leading liver transplant surgeon and anti-Falun Gong CCP cadre (see discussion further below). Lou Zhilang (楼志浪) (left) is head of the Zhejiang Province 610 Office, an extralegal CCP agency focused on the suppression of Falun Gong; and Lu Shanzeng (鲁善增) (right) is a CCP party secretary in the Zhejiang Province science office. Here, the three men are part of a panel at an “anti-cult” (反邪教, fan xiejiao) conference in October 2010. (Source: [Zhejiang University of Water Resources and Power](#), October 26, 2010)

Prison Populations That Could be Exploited as Organ Sources

The allegation that organs have been harvested from prisoners of conscience first emerged in 2006 from diaspora practitioners of Falun Gong, an indigenous Chinese spiritual practice suppressed by the PRC authorities since 1999. Prior to the emergence of the Falun Gong allegations in 2006, there was no legislation (or official regulations) regarding organ transplantation in the PRC; however, the first public interim guidelines on the issue were announced two weeks after the Falun Gong claims in March of that year ([Ministry of Health](#), March 14, 2006). The year 2006 was also significant in terms of official narratives: PRC officials initially denied that death row prisoners were used as a source for organs, then in April 2006 revised this claim to state that such prisoners were in fact a source (see [Part One](#) of this series).

The allegation that prisoners of conscience are exploited for their organs is composed of many parts of evidence—many of which, although not all, are connected to practitioners of Falun Gong. **[1]** The most salient include the following:

1. Falun Gong detainees have reported being made subject to unusual blood tests, chest X-rays, and ultrasounds of abdominal organs while in custody; some refugees have reported that only Falun Gong detainees were called out by guards for such physical exams and blood tests, without explanation. Subsequent to this testing, these prisoners began disappearing.
2. There is an extensive catalogue of telephone calls made to Chinese transplant hospitals by investigators outside China posing as potential patients, relatives of patients, and doctors. These investigators have elicited admissions from nurses and doctors that organs are available on demand. In a number of these calls, hospital personnel have stated that the organs come from practitioners of Falun Gong. **[2]**
3. China's transplantation sector began its rapid transformation (in 2000) approximately six months after the campaign against Falun Gong began (in 1999), at a time when China's death-row prison population was going into decline.
4. Many cases have been documented of summary cremations of young, healthy Falun Gong detainees who die mysteriously in custody. No information is provided to the family, who receive an urn of ashes.
5. Cases have also been documented of family members of deceased detainees seeing the bodies with scars consistent with organ removal. In one case in Chongqing, the police admitted that the organs were removed immediately after death, but claimed that this was done in order to take medical specimens.

The Overlap Between Medical and “Anti-Cult” Officials

In addition to the list above, a further salient point of evidence is found in the overlap between medical personnel performing transplants, and the CCP cadres carrying out the ongoing anti-Falun Gong campaign.

One prominent example of this overlap is found in the case of Dr. Zheng Shusen (郑树森), a leading liver surgeon and vice-president of the China Medical Association. Until 2017, Dr. Zheng was also chairman of the Zhejiang Provincial Anti-Cult Association, a party-led body established to pursue the CCP's campaign of repression against Falun Gong and other religious organizations proscribed by the state. In the preface to a 2009 internal circulation anti-Falun Gong book, Dr. Zheng (in his security role) described Falun Gong as an "evil religion," a "virus," and a "cancer." [3] In recent years Dr. Zheng co-founded a private hospital with his wife (a leading health official in Zhejiang), which offers organ transplantation as a therapy ([Zhejiang News](#), May 13, 2017). The couple advertises a specialty in short-notice, emergency organ transplants ([Sina](#), December 20, 2017).

The Suspicious Nature of the PRC's Official Data on Organ Donations

As discussed in Part 1 of this series, the PRC's official narratives regarding the sourcing of transplant organs have shifted in an inconsistent and evasive manner over time. Furthermore, official PRC statistics are implausible: forensic statistical analysis of China's organ donor registry data (performed by the present author, in collaboration with a statistician and a cardiac transplant surgeon) indicates that the country's medical authorities have falsified the data associated with their voluntary donor system. This finding, which was published in a leading medical ethics journal late last year, found that China's official donor datasets conform at a 99.9% level to a quadratic equation. China's figures are thus between one and two orders of magnitude smoother than comparable transplant data from any other country, even those whose transplant systems have grown at a rapid pace ([BMC Medical Ethics](#), November 14, 2019).

A range of subsequent statistical findings bolstered this initial discovery (including a significant simplification of the initial model when the PRC published more data). This further corroborated our argument that the data was in fact generated in accordance with a simple model, rather than from actual transplant activity. A range of other qualitative findings cast further doubt on the integrity of the data, including a range of implausible and impossible anomalies in China's Red Cross figures (such as a claim of 21.3 organs per donor for a two week period in 2016). Provincial Red Cross offices appear to have been involved in the scheme: we conducted five detailed provincial case studies that found implausible leaps in reported donations (such as simple doublings, erratic organ/donor rates, and more), and mismatches between transplants and transplant capacity as reported by hospitals and the respective provincial Red Cross offices.

In a review of the paper, Sir David Spiegelhalter, former president of the Royal Statistical Society and professor at the University of Cambridge, noted that "the anomalies in the data... follow a systematic and surprising pattern," and that "the close agreement of the numbers of donors and transplants with a quadratic function is remarkable, and is in sharp contrast to other countries who have increased their activity over this period... I cannot think of any good reason for such a quadratic trend arising naturally" ([Spiegelhalter](#), March 19, 2019).

Questions Surrounding the Incarceration and Exploitation of Uyghur Detainees

The current mass internment of Uyghur Muslims ([China Brief](#), May 15, 2018; [China Brief](#), November 5, 2018) has also led to questions about the vulnerability of this population to execution and organ harvesting. As compared to the Falun Gong allegations, a similar constellation of evidence exists in the case of Uyghur Muslim prisoners of conscience, though it is not yet as fully developed. In this case, too, Uyghurs have reportedly been subjected to systematic and coercive blood and DNA tests. Former detainees report forced medical examinations of the health and functioning of thoracic and abdominal organs. There are also many instances of disappearances of Uyghurs in custody. [4] Multiple reports and leaked video footage indicate secret transfers of Uyghur detainees on rail to different parts of China (*see image below*)—which does not, in itself, prove that these persons are being exploited for organ harvesting, but does demonstrate extrajudicial and unaccountable state control over this vulnerable population.



Images: Uyghur prisoners, bound and blindfolded, are moved from a detention facility in Kashgar (Xinjiang) to other, unknown facilities (October 2019). The mass arrest of ethnic Uyghurs provides another population of incarcerated persons potentially vulnerable to state predation. ([Radio Free Asia/YouTube](#))

The fact that religiously observant Muslims are more likely to abstain from drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco may make them—similar to members of Falun Gong, underground churches, and other religious groups—potentially more desirable as an organ source, as compared to regular criminal inmates who are often more affected by drug abuse and other health issues. If Uyghur detainees are indeed being targeted in this fashion, it would be another instance of the CCP “learning” lessons from its two decades-old campaign against Falun Gong ([China Brief](#), February 1, 2019).

While it may be difficult at present to arrive with absolute certainty at a conclusion as to the truth of these allegations, in a recent report for the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation we addressed this question with a straightforward argument: that extrajudicial execution and organ sourcing from prisoners of conscience is the most plausible explanation for the majority of China's transplant activity since 2000 ([VOC](#), March 10). If PRC officials have an alternate and more compelling explanation, they should present it, rather than obfuscating the issue with falsified data.

Within the organ transplantation system that has developed over the past two decades, the CCP thus promotes its objective of cleansing the social body of groups thought to pollute it—while CCP members are enabled to reap personal profits as they carry out the task. As this takes place, Beijing leverages key relationships it has cultivated with international medical elites in order to win praise for its transplant reforms. This latter issue will be the subject of the third and final article in this series.

Matthew P. Robertson is a research fellow in the China Program at the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation and a doctoral student in political science at the Australian National University. His dissertation research examines the political logic of state control over and exploitation of the bodies of Chinese citizens, with a focus on the case of the organ transplantation industry.

Notes

[1] The evidence in this section is adapted from the author's previous work in: *Organ Procurement and Extrajudicial Execution in China: A Review of the Evidence* (Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, March 2020), pp. 35-36. This document also contains a list of supporting references. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5aa6d4759772aebd11e6fe04/t/5e628619cf65b0241d5b0020/1583515189395/Organ+Procurement+and+Extrajudicial+Execution+in+China_VOC+2020.pdf.

[2] For a full discussion of these telephone calls, including the means by which they were verified and evaluated, see: Matthew P. Robertson, "Authentication and Analysis of Purported Undercover Telephone Calls Made to Hospitals in China on the Topic of Organ Trafficking," China Studies Working Paper 1/2020 (Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, Feb. 11, 2020). <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3536155>.

[3] Zheng Shusen *et al* eds., *Selected Academic Papers on Evil Religion Prevention Research in the New Era* (新时期邪教防治研究学术论文精选, *Xinshiqi Xiejiao Fangzhi Yanjiu Xueshu Lunwen Jingxuan*) (Zhejiang Anti-Cult Association / Science and Technology Press, 2009).

[4] Sources and details are treated in Robertson, *Organ Procurement and Extrajudicial Execution in China: A Review of the Evidence*, pp. 36-40.

**“Land Apart, Shared Sky”: Sino-Japanese Relations
Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic**

By Oana Burcu and Weixiang Wang

Introduction

Over the last several years, Sino-Japanese relations have registered steady progress. Despite the intensified international criticism directed toward the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) for its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the administrations in both Beijing and Tokyo seem keen to maintain this newfound status quo. Russia, Cambodia, and a number of the PRC’s traditional partners commended the country for its responsible handling of the health crisis; however, few would have expected Japan to be among them. As reported in PRC press, during a January phone call with PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅), his Japanese counterpart Toshimitsu Motegi praised China’s “positive and powerful measures” to control the virus “under the leadership of President Xi Jinping,” and expressed its willingness to be a “friend in need” ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), January 26). Umeda Hiroshi, an official from the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare, even condemned the rumor that China was deliberately spreading the virus, arguing that such statements are “violating China’s human rights” ([NHK](#), February 2). Later, when more countries woke to the devastating effects of the virus and held Beijing responsible for a coverup and lack of transparency, the Japanese government remained silent.

The cordial meeting between PRC President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in Beijing last December ([Japan Times](#), December 23, 2019) contrasted sharply to their meeting during the 2014 APEC summit, remembered particularly for the awkward handshake indicative of the sour bilateral relations at the time. Subsequently, the successful holding of the 8th China-Japan-South Korea summit in Chengdu in late December 2019—which included a meeting between Abe and PRC Premier Li Keqiang—signaled further positive developments ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), December 24, 2019). President Xi’s scheduled visit to Japan this spring—the first since Hu Jintao’s visit in 2008—has been postponed due to the pandemic, but also underscores the recent improvement in bilateral relations. Amid these circumstances both governments have chosen to maintain friendly relations, regardless of the virus outbreak and other incidents that in the past might have unleashed nationalistic fervor.

Helping China: “A National Effort” for Japan

During an interview on January 28, Nikai Toshihiro, Secretary-General of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), pledged “a national effort” to assist China ([Xinhua](#), February 8). From January 28 to February 17, Japan sent five charter flights of medical aid—containing over 6.3 million masks, 1 million pairs of gloves, 22,900 sets of protective gear, 83,200 pairs of goggles, 16,000 thermometers and 1.15 tons of disinfectant—to Wuhan alone to help ease the supply shortage (Embassy of Japan in China, [February 7](#),

[February 17](#)). In a powerfully symbolic move, Nikai even announced on February 10 that every LDP party member, including Prime Minister Abe, was to incur a pay cut of \$47 (5000 yen) and donate the money collected to relief efforts in China ([Xinhua](#), February 17).

Notably, diverse public and private actors in central and local governments, companies, and civil organizations, as well as private individuals, have participated in this “national effort.” More than sixty local governments in Japan have sent aid to their Chinese counterparts ([Embassy of Japan in China](#), February 6). Oita, the sister city of China’s epicenter Wuhan, acted quickly on January 27 to donate 30,000 masks, 600 sets of protective gear, and 400 goggles, and also arranged several fund-raising events afterwards ([Embassy of People’s Republic of China in Japan](#), February 4). Businesses and other civil organizations have also followed suit. Honda, Toyota, and Suzuki, the “big three” Japanese automobile manufacturers, all offered financial donations to China. Canon donated a piece of medical CAT scan equipment worth more than \$400,000 to Wuhan ([Embassy of Japan in China](#), February 7).



Image: At Tokyo’s Haneda Airport, cargo is loaded on board a charter flight of medical supplies bound for the epidemic-stricken Chinese city of Wuhan (undated, late January or early February 2020).

(Source: [Embassy of Japan in China](#), February 6).

Some of the Japanese aid packages included poetic lines that captured the Chinese public’s attention. Aid packages from the HSK Chinese proficiency test center, organized under the Japanese Youth Development Association, included notes that read: “Lands Apart, Shared Sky” (山川异域, 风月同天) ([Beijing News](#), February 3). Other organizations, often led by ethnic Chinese in Japan, also adopted phrases like “Fear not the want of armor, for mine is also yours to wear” (岂曰无衣, 与子同裳); “Though separated by a mountain, we will share the same clouds and rain / The bright moon belongs not to a single town” (青山一道

同云雨，明月何曾是两乡); and “Liao River thaws, while flowers bloom in Toyama / Of the same breath and from joint branches, we hope together for the spring to come soon” (辽河雪融，富山花开；同气连枝，共盼春来) ([Xinhua](#), February 15).

Regardless of their source of origin, the poetry has been often attributed to Japan. The responses from Chinese netizens have since been overwhelmingly positive, best epitomized in a Weibo user’s post: “A friend in need is a friend indeed, neither Japanese nor South Korea are that evil as we once deemed” (患难之际见人性，日韩原来非寇仇) ([Sina Weibo](#), February 8). Asked about the Japanese aid, PRC Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying (华春莹) underlined the “sympathy, understanding and support” received from the Japanese government and its people, and noted that Chinese netizens have well received these developments ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), February 4). Even nationalist PRC news outlets expressed appreciation for the support received from Japan, and commented on the thawing of both people-to-people and government-to-government relations ([Huanqiu Wang](#), January 29; [Global Times](#), February 9).

China’s “Deepened Friendship” with Japan

China responded to Japan’s aid efforts not only with verbal recognition of the “deepened friendship” that “China will remember and hold dear” (PRC Foreign Ministry, [February 21](#), [February 16](#)), but also with aid when the outbreak later erupted in Japan. PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang (耿爽) pledged to help Japan “to the best of our capabilities as the need arises” ([Chinese Foreign Ministry](#), February 17). China has indeed sent aid to Japan, including masks and test kits ([Global Times](#), March 29). The exchanges between sister cities again stood out. For example, Wuxi and Changzhou, two cities in Jiangsu Province, each donated more than 50,000 masks to their sister cities Toyokawa and Tokorozawa, respectively ([NHK](#), April 15; [BBC](#), March 28).

When Japan faced a dire situation involving the stranded cruise ship *Diamond Princess*, the Chinese government ordered a batch of testing kits that were later donated to the National Institute of Infectious Diseases of Japan ([PRC Embassy in Japan](#), February 20). Jack Ma, the Chinese billionaire recently renowned for his charitable undertakings in fighting the virus, also donated one million masks to Japan through his foundation, which was returned with Nikai’s letter expressing sincere gratitude ([Huanqiu Wang](#), March 3).

A Softer Tone Regarding Sovereignty Claims in the East China Sea

More importantly, events that in different circumstances would have derailed bilateral relations have now been downplayed by Beijing. When on March 24, the Japanese government approved new school textbooks claiming sovereignty over the disputed Diaoyu Islands (called the Senkaku Islands in Japan) in the East China Sea, PRC officials expressed a moderate tone than relative to other instances in the past. Though PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang still adopted a standard response in stating that the “Diaoyu

Island and its affiliated islands have been China's inherent territory since ancient times,” this was not reiterated as forcefully as seen in the past. Historical incidents were not invoked to promote nationalism, and *People's Daily* and Xinhua both kept quiet on the matter ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), March 24).



Image: PRC Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying speaking at a press briefing on March 31. When asked about a collision between a Japanese destroyer and a Chinese fishing vessel the previous day, Hua reasserted PRC sovereignty claims—but adopted a moderate tone that contrasted with some earlier incidents in the East China Sea. (Image source: [PRC Foreign Ministry](#))

In a different instance, responding to the March 30 collision between a Chinese fishing boat and a Japanese SDF destroyer in East China Sea, PRC Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying asserted that “the collision occurred in the coastal waters of China,” and that “the Chinese side has expressed concern to the Japanese side over the Japanese SDF warship sailing in the relevant waters and endangering the safety of the Chinese vessel.” However, Hua adopted a moderate tone, and stated that “We are in communication with the Japanese side over this and hope they will cooperate to determine the cause as soon as possible and prevent such incidents from happening again” ([Chinese Foreign Ministry](#), March 31). Coverage of the incident was either censored in China, or simply reported briefly and objectively both in China and Japan ([Beijing Daily Online](#), March 31; [The Japan Times](#), March 31). This contrasted sharply with a 2010 incident in which a Chinese trawler collided with a Japanese Coast Guard vessel, leading to the detention of the Chinese crew and the suspension of high-level bilateral contacts ([People's Daily Online](#), September 7, 2010).

Similarly, when in April the Japanese government offered a \$2.2 billion stimulus package to Japanese companies willing to relocate their production out of China, PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian (赵立坚), generally known for inflammatory responses, simply commented: “We hope other countries can also take measures to avoid further impacts on the world economy and global supply chains... We need to make concerted efforts to safeguard the stability of global supply chains and bring the world economy back onto the

normal track” ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), April 8). This stands in stark contrast with Beijing’s fury toward several countries that closed their borders and ceased trade, accusing them of setting a “bad example” due to “fear and overreaction” ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), February 3).

Conclusion: Effective Diplomacy, Unknown Future

The Sino-Japanese diplomatic relationship continues to see ups and downs. On April 13, spokesman Zhao Lijian angrily protested against a report by the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun*, which blamed the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese government for the global pandemic, calling it “ignorance, prejudice, and arrogance” ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), April 13). In one of the latest high-level exchanges between the two foreign ministers, on April 21 Wang Yi reiterated to his counterpart Toshimistu Motegi China’s appreciation for Japan’s early support amidst the COVID-19 epidemic, and expressed Beijing’s willingness to continue to support Tokyo. He reportedly cautioned, however, against “the ‘political virus’ that breeds division and hatred” and attempts to “blame and discredit China” ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), April 21). Wang’s statement is a warning that bilateral relations could still abruptly sink to a new low.

Regardless of such frictions, since the outbreak of COVID-19 Japan has aimed to preserve warm bilateral ties with the PRC. Multiple state and non-state actors have contributed to relief efforts through a combination of substantial donations and expressive gestures, such as offering donations deducted from politicians’ salaries and attaching poems to aid packages. So far, these measures have been well received by both Chinese officials and the public. Despite this encouraging trend, however, an overly positive prediction of future Sino-Japanese relations could be premature. As the pandemic in Japan expands, Abe could be forced to change tack; and should Japan join countries like the United States in blaming China for the outbreak’s extensive spread, Beijing is likely to retaliate.

Dr. Oana Burcu is an Assistant Professor in Contemporary Chinese Studies and Fellow of the Asia Research Institute in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham, UK. She specializes in Chinese foreign policy, Sino-Japanese relations, and the impacts of nationalism on regional geopolitics.

Weixiang Wang is a Master’s student and future doctoral candidate in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham, UK.

**Chinese Private Security Contractors:
New Trends and Future Prospects**

By Sergey Sukhankin

Introduction

In addition to the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Support Base in Djibouti, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has indicated ambitious plans for future “strategic strong point” naval bases in the Indian Ocean and Africa ([China Brief](#), March 22, 2019), and has pursued this goal with varying degrees of success ([China Brief](#), April 13). One of the key ideas behind these bases is to provide security to Chinese workers and businesses abroad. By late 2016, more than 30,000 Chinese businesses had invested offshore (with a total investment of \$1.2 trillion) and nearly one million Chinese citizens were working abroad ([China Daily](#), July 14, 2017). Many of these workers are either employed, or in the near future could be employed, along Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) routes that traverse over some of the world's most unstable and dangerous areas ([China Brief](#), February 15, 2019; [China Brief](#), April 1).



Image: Personnel of Hua Wei International Security (华卫安保国际, Hua Wei Anbao Guoji) stand alongside other representatives of international private security companies at a conference in Macao, June 2015.

(Source: [Hua Wei Security](#))

The PRC has sought multiple means to improve regional security in BRI-affiliated countries, to include promoting a greater role for the Central Asia-based Shanghai Cooperation Organization ([China Brief](#), July 16, 2019). The PRC has also sponsored the “Beijing Xiangshan Forum” (北京香山论坛, *Beijing Xiangshan Luntan*) which has been promoted as “the security component” of the BRI, and as a cooperative framework intended to strengthen military-technical cooperation with BRI-associated countries ([Belt and Road News](#) October 28, 2019; [China Brief](#), November 19, 2019).

However, traditional means of security assurance do not always correspond to the new realities and the new needs of China's increasing overseas presence. In this evolving environment, other instruments—to include the growing Chinese private security industry—are attaining a crucial role. Previous work by this author has detailed many aspects of the growing use of Russian private military companies in unstable regions and conflicts throughout the world ([Jamestown](#), multiple dates). This article seeks to provide insights into the growth of China's private security industry, which to date has not been as closely examined.

Chinese PSCs in Transition: The Milestones

The development of Chinese private security companies (PSC) has been shaped by tragic incidents involving Chinese nationals abroad. First emerging in the 1990s, Chinese PSCs became more prominent after 2004, when 11 Chinese construction workers were killed in Afghanistan by the Taliban ([China.org.cn](#), June 10, 2004). Following a series of subsequent incidents in East Timor, Chad, Lebanon, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Thailand, Haiti, and later Libya and Egypt, the necessity to protect Chinese nationals abroad became a more pressing necessity. These incidents involving Chinese nationals resulted in the rapid rise of the Chinese PSC industry.

In September 2009, the PRC State Council issued the “Regulation on the Administration of Security and Guarding Services” (保安服务管理条例, *Baoan Fuwu Guanli Tiaoli*). This measure was the PRC's first attempt to establish a regulatory framework for the private security industry, and gave *de facto* legalization to PSCs. The regulation recognized two main types of PSCs: “security companies” (保安服务公司, *baogan fuwu gongsi*), and “security companies engaged in armed escorting services” (从事武装守护押运服务的保安服务公司, *congshi wuzhuang shouhu yayun fuwu de baoan fuwu gongsi*). The regulation provided a basic legal framework for PSCs operating domestically within China, but made no clear reference to overseas activities ([Law Info China](#), October 13, 2009).

By the time the BRI was formally announced in 2013, 4,000 entities employing more than 4.3 million security personnel were registered in China ([Asia Sentinel](#) September 3, 2018). This year was also marked by the beginning of Erik Prince's involvement in the Chinese PSC industry via the creation of Hong-Kong registered Frontier Services Group (FSG) (先丰服务集团, *Xianfeng Fuwu Jituan*). [1] Later, Prince explicitly stated that FSG would be oriented towards providing logistical assistance and security training to Chinese businesses and government personnel working on BRI projects ([Global Times](#), March 21, 2017).

Between 2014 and 2016, a series of international incidents in Iraq and South Sudan required the evacuation of Chinese nationals. These incidents directed international attention to two Chinese PSCs in particular: VSS Security (伟之杰安保公司, *Weizhijie Anbao Gongsi*) and DeWe Security (北京德威保安服务有限公司, *Beijing Dewei Baoan Fuwu Youxian Gongsi*). This also resulted in a 2016 statement by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping on the necessity to render all necessary protection to Chinese

companies working in dangerous regions. By 2016, the overall number of Chinese PSCs working abroad rose to twenty, with 3,200 security professionals deployed overseas (Global Times, June 23, 2016; [China Daily](#) April 22, 2016). However, the international market share of Chinese PSCs remained miniscule in comparison with their Western counterparts.



Image: Personnel of the private security firm Bojing Teweï (博警特卫) conduct martial arts and bodyguard training (undated, circa 2016). (Source: [CGTN/YouTube](#))

New Developments in 2019

The year 2019 was marked by several important transformations within the Chinese PSC industry, to include a trend towards increasing professionalism. Early 2019 saw the announcement that Frontier Services Group would create a “training base” in the Xinjiang region, with the company pledged to invest \$600,000 in a center capable of training 8,000 people per year ([Sputnik News](#), February 1, 2019). When asked about this, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang declined to give any comments ([SCMP](#), February 1, 2019).

The issue of PSCs also entered into the PRC’s domestic discourse in 2019. Speaking at the annual Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in March 2019, CITIC Capital Holdings Ltd. Chairman Zhang Yichen made a number of comments about PSCs, including the following:

- China needs to drastically increase budgetary spending on the security of its overseas embassies and key infrastructural projects—to include further funding for Chinese private security forces, whose capabilities should be upgraded to the level of their Western counterparts;
- Coordination between government departments and private security firms should be strengthened;
- A national fund with a focus on overseas security projects should be established;

- The *Beidou* (北斗) satellite navigation system should be relied on, which will “allow Chinese companies to acquire a massive amount of security information in overseas markets without relying on Western technologies” ([Belt and Road News](#), March 10, 2019).



Images: Publicity photos from the Chinese private security contractor Hua Xin Zhong An (华信中安), advertising the capabilities of the company’s shipboard security personnel. (Source: [Hua Xin Zhong An](#))

What are Chinese PSCs, and Whose Interests Do They Serve?

Among Sinologists who have studied the topic, viewpoints on Chinese PSCs—regarding both their levels of professionalism, and the extent of their ties to the state—vary widely. Alessandro Arduino contends that Chinese PSCs are “neither an extension of the PLA nor an armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party,” and views them as underdeveloped, privately-run enterprises ([The Diplomat](#), March 20, 2018). Alexey Maslov, head of the School of Asian Studies at the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow, has argued that Chinese PSCs “are not very effective and quite unprofessional,” and that “there is no concrete proof that these companies are somehow related to the Chinese state” ([Current Time.tv](#), February 2, 2019).

Another Russian source, however, maintains that “Chinese PMCs are hardly market players... They are created by former military and police personnel and controlled by state bodies, whereas their clients are large state corporations” ([Ria.ru](#), March 23, 2017). A similar conclusion was made by the Mercator Institute for China Studies, which argued that “Chinese PSCs are entirely under the control of the state, through the Ministry of Public Security (MPS).” [2] It is the author’s own opinion that, based on available references, statements of notable Chinese figures, and PRC political traditions, it is unlikely that Chinese PSCs operate independently of the state.

Table 1: Selected Chinese Private Security Companies

	China Security and Protection Group 中安保安实业有限公司	Shandong Huawei Security Group 山东华泰保安集团股份有限公司	China Overseas Security Group 中国海外保安集团	Hua Xin Zhong An 华信中安（北京）保安服务有限公司	Beijing DeWe Security Services Limited Company 北京德威保安服务有限公司	Frontier Services Group 先丰服务集团	Zhongchengwei Security Service Group Co., Ltd. 忠诚保安服务有限公司	Beijing Security Service General Company 北京市保安服务总公司
Number of employees	+30,000	+6,000	Total unknown	+15,000	Total unknown, +350 based abroad	Total unknown, 432 in hdqtrs.	Unknown	+ 77,000
Top leader(s)	Liu Wei 刘伟	Xun Jinqing 荀金庆	Wang Guobao 王国保	Yin Weihong 殷卫宏	Li Xiaopeng 李晓鹏	Chang Zhenming 常振明	Not reported	Zhang Tao 张涛
Year founded	1994	1993	2015	2004	2011	2014	2009	1986
Where they claim to work	Focused on the BRI	Africa (strategic cooperation agreement with the Australian MSS Security Group)	Argentina, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Iraq, Jordan, Sri Lanka, Laos, Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, Malaysia, Cambodia, Mozambique, South Africa and Thailand.	Focused on the BRI	Overseas operations (up to 50 countries)	Focused on East Africa, Northwest, Southwest and Middle East & North Africa. Hdqtrs. in Hong Kong and Beijing; offices in Shanghai, Dubai, Nairobi, Botswana, Malta, Johannesburg.	Nationwide; focus on the BRI	Focused on the Chinese market (33 branches, 1 security training school and 12 security training branches)

(Source: Compiled by the author)

Chinese PSCs: Weaknesses and Challenges

Despite its growth, the Chinese PSC industry continues to face challenges—with three issues standing out in particular. The first is the lack of a legal framework: while Chinese PSCs have a legal status for operations inside China, they lack clear guidelines for international operations. This stems from the “Law of the PRC on Control of Guns” (中华人民共和国枪支管理法, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Qiangzhi Guanli Fa*) adopted in 1996, which allows only the PLA, the police, and the militia to possess weapons (China.org.cn, February 14, 2011). Furthermore, according to PRC criminal statutes, those who possess weapons overseas may face imprisonment. As stated by a security guard who worked at an oilfield in Iraq, Chinese PSCs operating abroad are unable to effectively protect themselves and their clients, and are limited to reporting potential threats to local police (Global Times January 23, 2015). Thus, while operating abroad, many Chinese businesses actually prefer to employ Western PSCs.

Second, deficiencies exist in training and qualifications. As noted by Tian Buchou, a veteran of the Chinese special forces who worked in private security in the Middle East and Africa, in terms of training and expertise Chinese PSCs are far behind their Western counterparts, which have a “comprehensive operational system covering logistics, weapons, high-technology and even medical support”, whereas “more than 80 per cent of Chinese security personnel have just a basic education” (SCMP July 15, 2018). He also identified the lack of knowledge of foreign languages among Chinese PSC personnel, and a reluctance to learn new skills. Another serious issue is low pay, and the fact that Chinese PSC members “are paid by the mission without other benefits.” This greatly affects the prestige and desirability of jobs with PSCs (SCMP, July 16, 2018).

The third aspect presents a far more complex issue: the activities of Chinese PSCs abroad, and potential complications surrounding the right to carry lethal weapons, are likely to result in incidents that could aggravate negative perceptions of China in developing countries. Specifically, incidents involving Chinese PSCs in Zambia in 2010 and South Sudan in 2012 caused a huge uproar. Moreover, the example of Pakistan—where the PRC has tried to use its PSCs to protect its economic interests along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), but saw them pushed out—clearly demonstrated that many countries are reluctant to have Chinese paramilitary personnel on their soil (Reuters, August 19, 2012).

Conclusion: What Happens Next?

Despite challenges associated with its PSC industry, the PRC is bound to take further steps to support this industry for two main reasons. First, the growing global presence of Chinese businesses will require protection—which, given China’s image and ambitions, excludes permanent reliance on foreign PSCs. Secondly, China has a large number of military veterans—57 million as of 2018, with growing discontent

among this group ([China Daily](#), March 14, 2018)—and PSCs may provide a means of employment for some of these veterans.

The Chinese are analyzing their foreign experiences and evaluating the different models available on the market. The Western model is premised on full legalization; use of force as an extreme measure; greater transparency and openness to domestic and international scrutiny; and independence from the state. However, this model presumes greater transparency and a larger role for private ownership—elements that are likely unpalatable for the Chinese government. The Russian model, by contrast, is predicated on near complete dependency on the state; illegal status and next to zero accountability for actions; and plausible deniability that could be enjoyed by the state and sponsors of these entities ([War by Other Means](#), March 20, 2019). This pattern, however, carries the risk of negative international publicity, and requires personnel with extensive fighting experience—an element that the Chinese military, unlike its Russian counterpart, does not have.

Most likely, the Chinese model will differ from both patterns. Legalized entities are likely to remain under tight control of the state, which will allow the Chinese government to use its PSCs to promote Beijing’s geopolitical and economic interests in strategically important areas. As the PRC’s economic presence continues to expand overseas, China’s growing private security industry is likely to follow in its stead.

Dr. Sergey Sukhankin is a Fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, and an Advisor at Gulf State Analytics (Washington, D.C.). He received his PhD in Contemporary Political and Social History from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. His areas of interest include Kaliningrad and the Baltic Sea region, Russian information and cyber security, A2/AD and its interpretation in Russia, the Arctic region, and the development of Russian private military companies since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. He has consulted or briefed with CSIS (Canada), DIA (USA), and the European Parliament. He is based in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Notes

[1] Eric Prince was one of the lead founders of the PMC “Blackwater USA” in 1997. The company has gone through multiple name changes over time, to include “Xe” in 2009, and then “Academi” in 2010. Prince left his formal positions with the company in 2009. Academi continues operations as a component of the Constellis Holdings Group, an umbrella company for multiple PMCs.

[2] This source further notes that “In 2010, China’s Ministry of Commerce issued a follow-up set of rules and regulations for firms operating abroad, creating very strict security requirements for them, and thus indirectly encouraging Chinese PSCs to go international, even though they are not directly mentioned.” See: *Guardians of the Belt and Road. The Internationalization of China’s Private Security Companies* (Mercator Institute, . 2018) p.9.

**AI-Powered Propaganda and the CCP's Plans for
Next-Generation "Thought Management"**

By Devin Thorne

Introduction

The propaganda apparatus of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is in full swing: to ward off the negative international repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PRC's diplomatic corps and state media are actively asserting Beijing's perspectives online. For example, in April the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) International Liaison Department tweeted links to a series of "public prevention" tip videos in 5 languages, seeking to spotlight positive elements in China's epidemic management strategies ([Twitter](#), April 17). The PRC's propagandists also aim to redirect anger and blame toward other actors, such as when China's state television network CGTN and Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian (赵立坚) both promoted the theory that the SARS-CoV-2 virus originated in the United States ([Twitter](#), March 12; [YouTube](#), March 17).

However, such attempts to divert public attention and manipulate narratives to protect China's image are rudimentary compared to the CCP's latest public relations project: propaganda powered by artificial intelligence (AI). Last year, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping urged China to "explore the application of AI for news collection, production, [and] dissemination... to comprehensively increase [our] ability to lead [public] opinion" ([National Academy of Governance](#), January 25, 2019). Intended for both domestic and international application, the system envisioned by CCP analysts and communications theorists will identify early warning indicators of social unrest, assist state journalists in producing effective content, and disseminate approved narratives to target audiences. If successful, AI will amplify the Party's voice and boost its influence over public opinion.

The CCP's Quest for Next-Generation "Thought Management"

As demonstrated by developments in the past year, the CCP is placing a renewed focus on propaganda and ideological indoctrination throughout Chinese society ([China Brief](#), April 24, 2019; [China Brief](#), December 10, 2019; [China Brief](#), December 31, 2019; [China Brief](#), April 13). A review of Chinese government statements, commentaries carried by government publications and state media, and academic analyses all reveal the trajectory of China's propaganda and "thought management" (思想管理, *sixiang guanli*) apparatus, and the intent of the CCP to dominate electronic media in particular. The Communist Party sees the internet as "the frontline in the struggle over [people's] opinions" ([Cyberspace Administration of China](#), December 17, 2019). The CCP perceives a continuing weakness in its control over the issues that people focus on, and an inability to respond to those issues in a timely and compelling manner—and, thus, impaired influence over public opinion on the internet ([Cyberspace Administration of China](#), December 17, 2019; [People's Daily Online](#), November 19, 2010).

The plurality of voices and speed at which public opinion evolves online, especially in times of crisis, are at the heart of these challenges ([Cyberspace Administration of China](#), December 29, 2016). The CCP's communications theorists especially emphasize the need to reform the type (i.e., text, video, etc.) and sophistication of Party content, as well as to improve the speed of its dissemination. Doing so, they argue, will increase the timeliness and efficacy of state propaganda in leading public opinion online ([QS Theory](#), April 21; [Cyberspace Administration of China](#), December 17, 2019; [People's Daily Online](#), August 15, 2019).



Image: An electronic information display in the “central kitchen” (中央厨房, zhongyang chufang) of the CCP’s flagship newspaper People’s Daily. In the state media article accompanying this photo, the facility is described as a center for “innovating the production, processing, and dissemination model of news products; it is a powerful tool for every news organization to quicken the advance of the construction of media fusion.”

(Source: [Xinhua](#))

To rectify its perceived inability to control opinions online, the CCP has identified AI as the next weapon it will deploy to this frontline. To this end, in August 2019 the CCP’s Central Propaganda Department (CPD), along with several government ministries, issued a document titled “Guiding Opinions on the Promotion of Deeper Integration of Culture and Technology.” This document calls for exploring “the use of artificial intelligence for news gathering, production, distribution, reception, and feedback; for comprehensively improving [the state’s] ability to guide public opinion; [and] for making personal customization... and intelligent push notification services to serve positive publicity” ([Beijing News](#), August 26, 2019).

Beijing’s approach to next-generation “thought management” will rest on three core pillars: early warning, effective content, and targeted distribution, as further detailed below.

Early Warning

The first goal of China's AI systems will be to take the pulse of the communities the CCP hopes to influence. In order to create effective propaganda content, authorities and state media must map the issues around which ideologically incorrect thinking exists, and identify imminent crises. Thus, CCP analysts see AI as a means to “continuously monitor websites, forums, blogs, Weibo, print media, WeChat and other information, [to reach a] timely, comprehensive, and accurate understanding of... trends in public opinion and public attitudes and sentiment” ([Cyberspace Administration of China](#), December 29, 2016). AI would build and accurately interpret audience “comprehensive profiles of ideological behavior” (思想行为的整体画像, *sixiang xingwei de zhengti huaxiang*) from big data, identifying “ideological confusion” (思想困惑, *sixiang kunhuo*) and supporting the development of “personalized countermeasures” ([University of Electronic Science and Technology](#), April 27, 2018). Researchers hope that natural language processing and machine learning will allow authorities to identify potentially controversial domestic and international stories before unapproved narratives go viral ([Cyberspace Administration of China](#), December 29, 2016; [China Social Sciences Net](#), January 4, 2017).

Effective Content

The second goal of China's AI systems will be to assist propagandists in generating influential and ideologically correct content. Once AI has helped authorities and state media identify impending unrest, it will improve the quality and production speed of content for managing public opinion. AI will assist content planning, lead identification, data collection, data visualization, writing, and video production ([People's Daily Online](#), April 18, 2019; [Cyberspace Administration of China](#), August 2, 2018). AI would further assist editors of state media in assessing the impact of their content, in order to further refine their production algorithms ([Reference Net](#), September 16, 2019). Particularly for international audiences, AI would help China's journalists identify the keywords around a topic of concern so that they can use the correct terms when creating external-facing propaganda, thus maximizing viewership and resonance ([China Social Sciences Net](#), January 4, 2017). Likewise, machine translation will expand the reach of China's messaging around the world ([People's Daily Online](#), April 18, 2019).

Targeted Distribution

The third goal of China's AI systems will be to disseminate content for maximum impact. Armed with a trove of data on their audience's online behavior, state media officials hope to tailor content distribution to meet personalized needs (that is, supply the right “countermeasures” to “guide” a wayward individual back towards the Party line). AI will selectively push out propaganda based on “interest tags” (兴趣标签, *xingqu biaoqian*) derived from the individual's “profile” ([People's Daily Online](#), April 18, 2019; [Reference News](#), June 18, 2019). AI will allow state media to tailor content based on variables including how long a person spends consuming news, what time of day they are online, the type of content they engage with, and myriad other factors ([People's Daily Online](#), May 24, 2019; [University of Electronic Science and Technology](#), April 27, 2018).

AI is also intended to support real-time distribution, further increasing the timeliness of propaganda to guide how individuals perceive events ([Reference Net](#), September 16, 2019). Outside of specific points of “ideological confusion,” interest-based dissemination is also possible because CCP propaganda is often not overtly political: narratives are economic, cultural, and social in nature, and authorities often strive to package their lessons in entertainment. [1] Similarly, content for international audiences should highlight the positive aspects of the country’s culture, history, economy, and participation in global affairs ([People’s Daily Online](#), February 22, 2019).

Artificial Intelligence as a New Foundation for Propaganda Management

Attempts to harness AI for propaganda will be grafted onto ongoing attempts to unify messaging across China’s disparate channels of communication, both at home and overseas. Since at least 2014, Xi Jinping has urged the “media fusion” (媒体融合, *meiti ronghe*) of both traditional and emergent forms of communication in order to strengthen the Party’s ability to provide “public opinion guidance” (舆论引导, *yulun yindao*) across all channels of dissemination ([People’s Daily Online](#), August 18, 2014; [National Academy of Governance](#), August 24, 2019). In response, China’s news services are actively working to expand their reach and messaging across the “media matrix” (媒体矩阵, *meiti juzhen*), which comprises newspapers, websites, online interactive and mobile apps, official social media, personal social media, and third-party representations ([Xinhua](#), April 7, 2017; [People’s Daily Online](#), September 3, 2018). [2]



Image: Xinhua Vice President Liu Siyang (刘思扬) speaking at the 2018 China Internet Media Forum in September 2018. Liu told the audience that “humans lead, machines assist” in the formulation of more effective state media content for the internet era. (Source: [CCTV](#))

China’s modern propaganda foundation will integrate domestic and international thought management. The CCP seeks to “effectively expand [China’s] positive voice [on the world stage], firmly protecting national

interests and the national image” ([Cybersecurity Administration of China](#), December 17, 2019). China’s theorists call on state media to recognize and make use of the fact that internal reports have international impact, and that international discourse can affect citizens at home ([People’s Daily Online](#), December 11, 2019). Under these conditions, China’s government, its diplomats, and media personalities are all taking to international social media. [3] In addition to social media, China’s news outlets have greatly increased their reach into traditional communication channels overseas, such as through paid content in foreign publications and the creation of a new international news service ([Global China Television Network](#), undated).

Finally, AI will require copious amounts of data from which to generate insights. This data will be mined from across the “media matrix,” pulled from public sources like Weibo as well as from opt-in services like WeChat or the mobile apps developed by state media outlets ([People’s Daily Online](#), August 15, 2019; [Cyberspace Administration of China](#), December 29, 2016). Internationally, it is likely (but not explicitly stated) that data will be harvested from news websites, Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms. Other services, such as machine translation, provided overseas both directly and indirectly by state-owned companies, may also be used to collect data that facilitates the Party’s “efforts to shape, manage and control its global operating environment” ([Australian Strategic Policy Institute](#), October 14, 2019).

Of course, the pivot to AI is not without challenges. Collecting, structuring, and integrating information on the scale that China’s researchers propose is daunting, likely requiring advanced computer applications. Thus, these efforts must be seen in the context of the PRC’s broader push to build an industrial base prepared to harness big data ([Gov.cn](#), August 31, 2015). With regards to implementation, relying on AI to disseminate content based on individual interests may detract from editors’ discretion to determine what content is consumed, cause echo chambers in society, or even diminish people’s grasp of ideology by propagating non-political subjects ([People’s Daily Online](#), May 24, 2019; [Orator Net](#), July 16, 2019; [Legal Daily](#), November 8, 2019). With these and other challenges in mind, the vice president of Xinhua reminded attendees to the 2018 China Internet Media Forum that “humans lead, machines assist” ([CCTV](#), September 6, 2018).

Conclusion

While heavy censorship allows the CCP to prohibit certain topics of discussion, it cannot actively promote the Party’s values. Achieving the latter requires a sustained and responsive online presence. CCP propaganda theorists and communications researchers see AI as a means to establish such a presence. If the challenges are overcome, the PRC’s new AI-powered propaganda will strengthen what Dr. Samantha Hoffman has called China’s “Autonomic Nervous System” for protecting threats to the party-state ([MERICS](#), December 12, 2017). AI will preemptively identify and address emerging crises in public opinion, push out government messaging before unapproved narratives go viral, and disseminate personalized content to individual readers and viewers. As in every communications revolution, propaganda will evolve—and as conceived by the CCP, processors and algorithms will form the foundation of next-generation “thought work.”

Devin Thorne is a Senior Analyst at the Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS). Follow his research on Twitter @D_Thorne.

Notes

[1] Anne-Marie Brady, "Conclusion: The Velvet Fist in the Velvet Glove: Political and Social Control in Contemporary China," in *China's Thought Management*, ed. Anne-Marie Brady (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), 193-194.

[2] In PRC state media's formulation, the "media matrix" consists of "print media + websites + user applications + official Weibo + independent media + representative operations" (纸媒+网站+客户端+官微+自媒体+代运营).

[3] For a thorough listing of Chinese State-linked Twitter accounts see the Hamilton 2.0 Dashboard ([Alliance for Securing Democracy](#), undated).
