

# NEW CHALLENGES, OLD RECIPES: COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA FOR CHINA'S YOUTH

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**S**ince the Communist Youth League (CYL) became a mass organization in its present form after the 1949 communist victory in China, it has been at the forefront of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) relation with China's youth. The CYL's main tasks have historically included political screening and preparation for Party membership, mobilization for developmental projects and campaigns, and propaganda. In regard to this last task, following the extensive decentralization of public communication in the PRC, the challenge for the League has been to rejuvenate its message and public profile in order to appeal to a youth audience that is increasingly confident in its own choice of sources of information. But economic reforms and marketisation do not only affect the expectations and attitudes of young people. They also affect the means available to the League as a specialized Party agency to carry out its "communication" with them. In turn, the efforts and failures of the League in this direction are indicative of the CCP's

limitations for positive intervention in public discourse, an aspect that has been overshadowed by its phobia of social media and the increasing sophistication of its censorship apparatus. What has been the League's institutional response to the call for the renewal of one of its core political functions in the new economic environment and how have young people received it?

### *The classic propaganda methods*

The most routine forms of propaganda at the grassroots level include the dissemination of information on party policies and campaigns distributed by local urban and rural League cadres through means that vary from posts on the announcement board, to bbs-email-sms messages and the distribution of leaflets in schools, work units, and even in fields during the harvest period. At higher levels, propaganda events are routinely carried out and replicated during political anniversaries and campaigns. According to the 2010 Beijing CYL committee diary, >>>

propaganda and political activities occupy the majority (63%) of the organization's annual schedule. This proportion includes only those activities that have a direct political and propaganda purpose, excluding volunteer work and cultural events that are usually ornamented with party and nationalistic themes anyway, indirectly propagandizing the CCP's political and moral beliefs, and familiarizing youth and the public with certain policies.

Propaganda activities mainly include ceremonies, parades and thematic events according to the PRC's political calendar and current politics. Next to the celebrations of May 4<sup>th</sup>, June 1<sup>st</sup> (Children's Day), October 1<sup>st</sup> etc, the League organises or participates in festivities throughout the country in conjunction with national events such as the successes of Yang Liwei, Zhang Zhigang and other Chinese astronauts, the Beijing Olympics, the Shanghai Expo, the Guangzhou Asian Games as well as for the purpose of publicizing the initiation of nationwide policies. In addition, League committees at every level of the administration are involved in government-organised publicity events, such as opening ceremonies of trade exhibitions, TV shows with a "patriotic"

theme and revolutionary kitsch that host popular singers and dancing troupes, sport competitions and other events that require the mobilization of volunteers. The League's role in these events varies from administration to dispatching youths to take part as background performers, viewers or, even, security personnel.

In addition, the League continues to create role models by awarding "outstanding" CYL members, cadres and youths for their achievements in promoting economic development, national pride, and officially sanctioned social issues. The use of such role models does not assume the study campaign dimensions of Lei Feng in the 60s and Zhang Haidi in the 80s, but is applied more conventionally to demonstrate the League's and party's legitimate claim to represent the most advanced forces of society. However, the League's own capacity for effective propaganda and public communication with young people is undermined by its organisational and discursive dependency to the Party and the pluralisation and marketisation that has accompanied the reforms.

Propaganda is by definition externally focused, and in this respect the traditional media affiliated with the League have had the role of familiarizing the public with the CYL's activities. After the initiation of the reforms, however, the media begun operating on commercial terms, and their affiliation to the League, from which they obtained the sponsorship necessary for their license, has been practically limited to an obligation to cover League-related news. In the cases of the China Youth Daily (CYD) and the Beijing Youth Daily (BYD), both newspapers have their Chief Editor formally appointed by the

Details from youth.cn



Central and Beijing CYL committees respectively, and they are expected to cover League events, devote pages on propaganda articles and publish leaflets and thematic magazines (as for example the *Volunteer Magazine* circulated by the BYD) that have minimal -if any- commercial value in terms of circulation. But their affiliation to the League has a much more limited political meaning than actually being a League mouthpiece (*houshe*) similar to what the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* was for the Komsomol in the USSR. The point made here in relation to the League's affiliated media is that the CYL is organisationally indistinguishable from the CCP in the wider configuration of the Party-press relation in the PRC and it is not involved in the daily operation of those newspapers. There are no League cadres in their capacity as CYL functionaries censoring articles or writing editorials for a newspaper directed to League branches, members, or ordinary young people.

The kind and combination of control mechanisms that impose direct and indirect structural, political and commercial constraints on the free operation of the CYD and BYD, as well as the opportunities created for greater autonomy by marketisation, are similar to other government newspapers. Zhao Yuezhi, analyzes in detail the challenges and opportunities faced by both CYD and BYD in the 1990s. The CYD, the "only outspoken central-level official paper in the country," that maintains "a certain degree of autonomy from officials in the CYL" has managed to resist top-down control initiatives such as an appraisal system that links bonuses to endorsement of articles by officials, and even to openly criticize a former CYL secretary and a League appointed

editor.<sup>1</sup> The BYD tactfully used opportunities arising from marketisation, (namely advertising and the stock market), and its political capital with the Beijing municipal government to eventually become a commercial success. This success, however, came with the price of abandoning its aggressive reporting on social issues during the 1990s for the sake of appealing to the consumerist desires and elitist reflexes of the moneyed classes, effectively covering "the most valuable audience market niche".<sup>2</sup> What does all this mean for the newspaper's relation with the League? Zhao, answering this question, quotes Zhang Yanping, the BYD's editor, who when asked to describe the meaning of the inclusion of

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the word "youth" in the paper's title replied that "[it] only speaks of our institutional origin."

Classic censorship, job insecurity, weak legal protections for the freedom of speech, and the indirect promotion of self-censorship are top down dynamics confronted by journalists.<sup>3</sup> Those that wish to expand autonomous reporting have to push the limits of the sphere of the party's discursive domination by adopting strategies that also include the manipulation of the lofty ideals of the CCP's own rhetoric and pronounced goals, a process that has been described as "bounded innovation"<sup>4</sup>. The CYD for example, has established the "Legal System and Society" column, that urges



viewers to report law violations or seek legal advice, while its online version has discussion forums and blogs by experts devoted to issues of legal protection. But, in a system that offers opportunities for personal career advancement and wealth while being clear about the severity of potential punishment and vague regarding the exact limits of journalistic autonomy, self-censorship is a choice frequently made by journalists.<sup>5</sup> As an editor in BYD explained during an informal discussion regarding the impact of the CYL on a journalist's career in the newspaper, it is not the CYL but the CCP that is in charge and one simply needs to avoid problems by not causing any ("bugei mafan jiu keyi le").

The importance of the above remarks is to determine the expectations one can have when referring to "CYL newspapers." In fact there is no such thing. Provincial or city League committees may have a weekly or monthly printed publication but these are small in circulation and are targeted internally to local League committees. Overall, the media affiliated with the League, such as the CYD and the BYD, operate under market principles and pressures in the political context set by the party-state, and with the actual or potential intervention of the central government and individual officials. The League's affiliation serves as official patronage for media seeking sponsorship to operate, which is the reason why there are so many magazines

and newspapers under the CYL's umbrella, and for journalists who may gain access to officials and inside information.<sup>6</sup> In return, League-related news and leaflets are routinely, yet not very frequently, published. Other than that, in the post-reform era the League does not possess autonomous communication machinery in the field of popular printed media.

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Although marketisation has in practice excluded the CYL from active involvement in the published press, the League has expanded its presence on the Internet in an attempt to open channels of communication with League members and youth in general. The fact that the CYL has chosen to have a separate identity on the Internet from that of its affiliated newspapers reasserts the previous argument that the CYL's impact in its traditional media is limited. In the direction of establishing an online presence, the CYL has instructed committees at every level of the administration to establish websites (with separate domains or integrated into those of the local governments), while at the national level it has set up portals, such as youth.cn, that offer diversified content.

The CYL's presence on the Internet exemplifies the "relevance" challenge of the League in two ways: first, the content of the local committees' websites

remains overtly political; second the portal youth.cn is a clumsy attempt to create a website with a more youthful

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appearance that mirrors both the vagueness of the League’s understanding of “youth” as a social group and an inability to catch up with trends on the Internet. Regarding the first, a district-level committee member in Beijing who had also been involved in the effort to establish the CYL online presence at the local level, admitted that very few young people actually visit the website, which is overloaded with CYL announcements, propaganda banners and photos of study sessions, award ceremonies, activities and official visits. It can be assumed that the overtly “red” theme of League websites and the limited useful information available results in low levels of visits among users that are not interested in League-related news. The table below presents web traffic estimates from two online analytics software tools, showing that central, Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong League committee websites<sup>7</sup> fare very low both in Chinese website rankings

(quantitative measurement) and average time spent on site and bounce<sup>8</sup> rate (qualitative measurements).

Concerning the League’s central portal, in a country that has 485 million Internet users, 57% of which are under 30 years old<sup>9</sup>, the importance of the Internet for an organisation that aims at appealing to a youth audience is straightforward. Recognizing this, the CYL Central committee set up the portal youth.cn, replacing the previous cycnet.cn that was outdated in both form and content and had no interactive capacities. Cycnet was little more than a CYL news feed with articles on League activities, unsophisticated reports on youth issues, and general news. Compared to its predecessor, youth.cn, which has been running in its present form since 2010, demonstrates significant improvements. The website is less congested and with far fewer flashing communist symbols and waving flags. The content is more

Website	Description	Est. Daily Visits: April – Oct. 2011 <sup>(1)</sup>	Ranking in the PRC <sup>(2)^</sup> #	Average time on site <sup>(2)^</sup>	Bounce % <sup>(2)</sup> ^^
youth.cn	The CYL Youth portal	10.000-70.000	2.143	2:43 min	62.3
gqt.org.cn	Communist Youth League	4.000 - 7.000	47.882	1:42 min	48.5
bjyouth.gov.cn	Beijing Communist Youth League	1.500-4.000*	34.787 (China) 17.414 (Beijing)	3:30 min	54.4
shyouth.net	Shanghai Communist Youth League	N/A	114.335	3:36 min	45.3
gdcyl.org	Guangdong Communist Youth League	4.000-10.000**	58.707	1.57 min	57.4
zgzyz.org.cn	China Volunteers portal	1000***	28.753	3:32 min	46.5
y.net.com*** *	Beijing Youth Daily	700.000 – 1.000.000	94	5:45 min	34.2

The League’s presence online

Sources: (1) Double Click Ad planner by Google – Web traffic analytics Nov. 26, 2011; (2) Alexa.com – Web Information Company: research on Nov. 26, 2011

^Ranking is calculated using a combination of average daily visitors and pageviews on the website from users from China over the past 3 months. Baidu is ranking number 1.

^^Period Aug-Nov 2011

\*Available for March, April and October 2011 \*\*available for Feb-Jun 2011 \*\*\*available for October 2010

\*\*\*\*used here as a measure for comparison



diversified and better organised, with CYL and politics being assigned certain locations next to issues that range from society and finances to education, fashion and recreation, culture and online games. Apart from links to CYL affiliated organizations and projects, youth.cn also offers a blogging service (*boke*) and an online discussion forum (*luntun*).

Despite innovations in form and content, youth.cn exhibits many shortcomings that affect its popularity and consequently its capacity as a propaganda tool. Although its ranking is significantly higher than any other League affiliated website, youth.cn still fares in unsatisfactory levels as visit time is short and bounce rate very high. This shows that despite the fact that in Google and Baidu searches on youth issues youth.cn is relatively high on the results, its ability to maintain interest is low. In addition, the blogging service on offer has a small number of users while its highly categorised discussion forums in two years of operation have generated very modest participation<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, despite being tempered to a “light red” outlook, the political content is still very much present, covering two out of the eight thematic categories and most of the advertising banners. Also, the articles repeat in an uncritical manner the official line on social and youth affairs, echoing

official morality as only “sanctioned” subgroups of youth and rather politically correct issues are given voice. Similarly, reporting on social problems confronted by working class young people and children is presented only in relation to the League’s volunteer work, with no critical analysis of causes, no appraisal of government policies and no commenting function. The silence of youth.cn regarding the demolition of migrant children’s schools in Beijing in August 2011 is characteristic of the portals’ standing on controversial issues that spark criticism from Chinese media and netizens. In sum, despite its youthful cover the youth.cn approach to “youth affairs” is faithful to the CCP’s traditional conservative understanding of the term and does not contest the limits of official discourse.

#### Conclusion

The League’s failed attempts at communicating its message exemplifies the challenge of appealing to China’s young people in the context of marketisation and the pluralisation of public discourse. First, the impact of economic reforms has rationalized the operation of the CYL’s printed media, thereby minimizing the League’s influence on their content. Second, the CYL’s own online ventures are indicative of the organization’s adaptation efforts that tend to replicate institutional weaknesses rather than amending them. This comes at a cost, as the League’s limited ability to address public opinion on youth affairs and provide an online space for discussion is translated into reduced penetration of its target group of young netizens, thus showing that



not only political participation at the grassroots level, but also the League's online presence is undermined by the same dependency on the language, aesthetics, conservative morality and political phobias of the current political structure of authority in China.

**Notes:**

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1. Zhao Yuezhi, *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power and Conflict* (NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), p. 41-44, 57-61
2. Ibid, p. 116-120
3. Esaray, Ashley, 'Cornering the Market: State strategies for controlling China's Commercial Media', *Asian Perspective*, Vol 29, No 4, 2005 ; Pan Zhongdang, 'Improvising Reform Activities: The Changing Reality of Journalistic Practice in China,' in Lee, Chinchuan (ed.), *Power, Money, and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China* (IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000)
4. Pan Zhongdang, 'Improvising Reform Activities: The Changing Reality of Journalistic Practice in China,' in Lee, Chinchuan (ed.), *Power, Money, and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China* (IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000) p.113
5. Hassid, Jonathan, 'Controlling the Chinese Media: An Uncertain Business', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (May/June 2008): p.421
6. Interview with BYD Journalist, Beijing, September 2010
7. Sub-city level websites are not accessible by web traffic software due to their very low level of visits.
8. A "bounce" refers to a website visit during which only a single page is viewed and the user does not surf in the particular website looking for information etc. A high bounce rate (more than 35%) means that a website does not engage visitors to stay and use the website in search of information etc. However, results based on bounce rate should be contextualized according to the particular website and discussed along other traffic statistics. Cnn.com, for example has a high bounce rate of 48.9%, but it ranks 54 in the world. The high bounce rate is explained by the nature of the website that appears on web searches on current issues, that cause higher single-visits in the form of reading an article or viewing an online video and then exiting.
9. China Internet Information Network Centre website, accessed 28/11/2011
10. Youth.net has 700.000 registered users (unknown active), in comparison to 300 million of Sina weibo. The most popular topics in the public discussion forums are: "volunteers" exchange" (zhiyuanzhe jiaoliu) with 140.000 posts, "campus feelings" (xiaoyuan qinggan) with 76000 posts, and "study experience exchange" (xuexi jingyan jiaoliu) with 65000 posts.

