
Praise from the International Community: How China Uses Foreign Experts to Legitimize Authoritarian Rule

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ABSTRACT

Authoritarian governments cultivate an image of popular support to legitimize their rule. One such strategy is to create the impression that their rule and policies are widely supported by the international community. In this study, I systematically explore how the Chinese Party-state uses foreign experts in its propaganda to provide extra legitimacy to Chinese government policies. I collected data on non-Chinese-national intellectuals cited in 31 major news outlets in China, from which I compiled a list of 723 foreign experts who were cited to provide positive evaluations of China. The experts were from 67 different countries but showed a clear US-centric focus. I identified five major issues that they most frequently were cited about and summarized their opinions. The findings of this study show a mixed picture of China's propaganda strategy: It is sophisticated but also stilted in conforming to existing power structures. It enriches our understanding of how an authoritarian regime like China's cultivates its image and shapes public opinion. It also draws attention to the social and ethical implications of the possible distortion and fabrication of expert opinions in the propaganda process.

On April 7, 2020, about one month after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, the state-run Chinese newspaper *Economic Daily* published an article titled "Foreign Experts Praise China's Anti-pandemic Measures as Bringing Hope to the World."¹ It quoted Greek physician Sotiris Tsiodras, who was in charge of Greece's COVID-19 management, South African diplomat Gert Grobler, and Nigerian scholar Charles Onunaiju, all of whom spoke highly of China's response to the pandemic. Similar articles were published in other Chinese media outlets, such as a *People's Daily* article published on May 7, 2020, in which multiple politicians and scholars from Asian, African, European, and South American countries were quoted to suggest that the world could "benefit from China's experience in fighting

1. See http://intl.ce.cn/sjjj/qy/202004/07/t20200407_34626844.shtml.

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the epidemic.”² Frequently, in a fashion similar to those two articles, voices from across the globe are prominently featured in propaganda pieces targeting China’s domestic audiences, some of whom are likely to perceive the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s governance as more legitimate after reading the quotations.

Citing foreign experts (*waiguo zhuanjia* 外国专家) to legitimize official policies and the Party’s rule is a common practice of the CCP. In another prominent example in recent years, foreign experts were cited to defend the CCP during the trade war between the United States and China. In late September 2018, Beijing released a 71-page Chinese-language white paper, arguing that China was a true defender of free trade and a victim of the trade disputes caused by the Trump administration’s “trade bullying practices.”³ Observers noted that the white paper contained 88 footnotes, the vast majority of which referred to non-Chinese experts “from former US Treasury Secretary Larry Summers to specialists at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington.”⁴ They spoke positively about US-China trade and were critical of the Trump administration’s trade policies.

In addition to expressing opinions on international affairs, some experts were also invited to comment on China’s domestic issues. For example, on December 15, 2016, the CCP’s main mouthpiece, the *People’s Daily*, devoted an entire page to foreign experts, who were effusively complimentary about one of the Party’s central policies under Xi Jinping’s rule: “The Party shall exercise strict self-governance in every respect” (*quanmian congyan zhidang* 全面从严治党). Under the large headline “Let the People Be More Confident in the Country” were opinions from five experts: American Robert Lawrence Kuhn, who had authored several books on China, including *The Man Who Changed China: The Life and Legacy of Jiang Zemin*; Russian professor and sinologist Yury Tavrovsky; Australian professor Jeffrey Riegel, who served as director of the China Studies Centre at the University of Sydney; Korean professor Jaeho Hwang, who served as dean of the Division of International Studies at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies; and former German politician Egon Krenz, who was the last Communist leader of East Germany.⁵

It would be wrong to assume that only Party mouthpieces were involved in this propaganda strategy. On March 18, 2016, *Southern Metropolis Daily*, a newspaper that is state-owned but commercially oriented, used two pages to introduce the ways in which 27 foreign politicians and scholars had positively interpreted China’s Thirteenth Five-Year Plan. These foreign sources included Cambridge University scholar Martin Jacques, York University professor Daniel Drache, Turkish economist Güven Sak, and similar figures.⁶

2. See <http://cpc.people.com.cn/gb/n1/2020/0507/c419242-31698920.html>.

3. See http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-09/24/content_5324957.htm.

4. Jane Cai, “Why China Used Foreign Sources to Paint Itself as Free-Trade Champion,” *South China Morning Post*, September 27, 2018.

5. See <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1215/c1002-28950465.html>.

6. See http://epaper.oeeee.com/epaper/A/html/2016-03/18/content_19149.htm.

In this study, I argue that this common practice of the CCP's publicity machine, a previously ignored aspect of the Party's propaganda, deserves close investigation. I also argue that the patterns of using foreign sources reveal China's complicated and contradictory perceptions of its relations with the world. To substantiate my arguments, I will provide the first systematic analysis of how and when foreign experts are utilized by the Party for the purpose of increasing the legitimacy of its policies abroad and at home and promoting the CCP's rule in China.

There is a long history to this. Since the early revolutionary years of the CCP, foreigners have played an important role in helping to cultivate the Party's image and disseminate its messages abroad. As explained by Anne-Marie Brady, the CCP followed the strategy known as "using foreign strength to propagandize China" and cultivated a group of foreign friends who could benefit the Party.⁷ In the 1930s and 1940s, American journalists Agnes Smedley, Anna Louise Strong, and Edgar Snow, who were later called the "3 Ss," were among the most prominent foreigners who reported from the Party's revolutionary base areas and maintained good relationships with Party leaders, including Mao Zedong.⁸

The primary role of Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China* was to present the CCP and its leader Mao Zedong in a positive light to a Western audience. The book was published in English in 1937 and "played a big role in swaying Western opinion in favor of Mao."⁹ To use the CCP's terminology, Edgar Snow and other Western journalists contributed to external propaganda (*duiwai xuanchuan* 对外宣传), which "targeted foreign audiences and promoted the Party's image abroad."¹⁰ Because non-Chinese sources were able to connect with their fellow citizens, better propaganda outcomes could be produced.¹¹ At the same time, these foreign sources were also used in "internal propaganda" (*duinei xuanchuan* 对内宣传), which targeted Chinese domestic audiences and sought to use foreign praise to bolster the Party's legitimacy and support both before and after it achieved power in 1949. *Red Star over China* has been read widely in China and was effective in cementing the Party's historical legitimacy.

This article is informed by and contributes to the literature on the Party's legitimacy. I present the empirical findings on recent use of foreign experts' praise and a discussion of the implications for our understanding of Chinese propaganda,

7. Anne-Marie Brady, "'Friendlit,' or How to Become a Friend of China," *Revue Bibliographique de Sinologie* 16 (1998): 389–97.

8. John Maxwell Hamilton, *Edgar Snow: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

9. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 190.

10. David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions Processes and Efficacy," *China Journal* 57 (2007): 25–58; Kingsley Edney, "Soft Power and the Chinese Propaganda System," *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 78 (2012): 899–914.

11. Mei Li, "Delivering Chinese Voices to Australian Audiences: CCTV's Search for Congruence between Its Frames and Those of Audiences" (diss., Macquarie University, Sydney, 2017).

China's relations with the world, and relations between foreign intellectuals and the authoritarian state.

LEGITIMACY AND PROPAGANDA: THE UNDERSTUDIED ROLE OF FOREIGN ENDORSEMENTS

In an article on the CCP's propaganda and thought work, Anne-Marie Brady adopted Seymour Martin Lipset's definition of legitimacy: "Legitimacy involves the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society."¹² Similar to Lipset, Bruce Gilley, a political scientist who specializes in China, conceptualizes legitimacy as the degree to which a political authority "holds and exercises political power with legality, justification and consent from the standpoint of all of its citizens."¹³ States seek legitimacy to make sure that their governance is widely accepted by the public without resorting to overt coercion.

The legitimacy of the CCP has attracted significant scholarly attention because it has "always been contested and often rejected explicitly by significant portions of China's population."¹⁴ During recent decades, the Party has been facing challenges that include the death of revolutionary ideology, growing inequality, social unrest, collective actions enabled by digital technologies, and international pressures. Scholars have developed various explanations for how the CCP has endured a "crisis of legitimacy."¹⁵ Two major factors are widely believed to contribute to its resilient legitimacy: economic growth and nationalism. Scholars argue that the Chinese people accept the CCP's rule because the Party can ensure excellent performance in economic growth and defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁶

However, as Heike Holbig and Bruce Gilley argue, the Party's performance, be it in economic growth or in defending national sovereignty, has to be translated into a discourse that is accepted by the public.¹⁷ In other words, how the regime presents and frames its performance matters the same as, if not more than, its actual performance. The CCP is acutely aware of this and has been emphasizing

12. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 69–105.

13. Bruce Gilley, *The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 11.

14. Heike Holbig and Bruce Gilley, "Reclaiming Legitimacy in China," *Politics & Policy* 38, no. 3 (2010): 395–422.

15. Vivienne Shue, "Legitimacy Crisis in China?," in *State and Society in 21st Century China*, ed. Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen (London: Routledge, 2004), 24.

16. See, e.g., André Laliberté and Marc Lanteigne, eds., *The Chinese Party-state in the 21st Century: Adaptation and the Reinvention of Legitimacy* (London: Routledge, 2007), 8; Philip P. Pan, *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 323.

17. Holbig and Gilley, "Reclaiming Legitimacy," 396.

the importance of propaganda since its early days, as reflected in Mao's argument that the two most effective weapons for achieving and maintaining power are the barrel of the gun and the shaft of the pen.¹⁸

Some scholars dismiss the propaganda discourse as stiff and obsolete. Haifeng Huang argues that its propaganda mainly functions as a signal, which suggests that the Party-state is strong enough to defeat any resistance.¹⁹ Some others claim that the propaganda's content actually matters and deserves careful examination. For example, based on an analysis of the discursive content of the Party's publicity after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Christian Sorace demonstrates how the Party "reminds China's citizens that their well-being is the result of its benevolence."²⁰ In the context of digital media, Maria Repnikova and I show that the CCP has been utilizing more interactive participatory content to increase people's support for the regime and the supreme leader.²¹

Media and communication studies have long examined the "source effect," which refers to how a message's source can make the message more (or less) persuasive.²² Experiments suggest that even for the same content, people perceive it to be more trustworthy if it comes from a source with greater expertise and higher attractiveness.²³ This branch of studies has important implications for our understanding of how regimes enhance their legitimacy by carefully selecting sources.

FOREIGN SOURCES IN THE PARTY'S PROPAGANDA

How then could non-Chinese sources cited in Chinese news media engender and maintain this belief? Multiple factors may have been involved. First, internationally renowned non-Chinese could boost the credibility of media articles. As Susan Shirk observed, after the nationalistic tabloid *Global Times* intentionally featured foreign experts' opinions, its content was regarded by PRC academics as "informative and credible."²⁴ While doubt may be cast by Chinese readers as to whether Party media are trustworthy,²⁵ audiences had more confidence in a

18. Anne-Marie Brady, *Holding a Pen in One Hand, Gripping a Gun in the Other* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2020).

19. Haifeng Huang, "Propaganda as Signaling," *Comparative Politics* 47, no. 4 (2015): 419–44.

20. Christian Sorace, "Party Spirit Made Flesh: The Production of Legitimacy in the Aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake," *China Journal* 76, no. 1 (2016): 41–62.

21. Maria Repnikova and Kecheng Fang, "Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0: Netizens as Thought Work Collaborators in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 113 (2018): 763–79.

22. Erica Weintraub Austin and Qingwen Dong, "Source v. Content Effects on Judgments of News Believability," *Journalism Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (1994): 973–83.

23. Elizabeth J. Wilson and Daniel L. Sherrell, "Source Effects in Communication and Persuasion Research: A Meta-analysis of Effect Size," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 21, no. 2 (1993): 101–12.

24. Susan L. Shirk, "Changing Media, Changing Foreign Policy in China," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 8, no. 1 (2007): 43–70.

25. Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Harvard professor appearing in the *People's Daily* than a Central Party School professor, even if they expressed identical positive evaluations of official policies.

Second, foreign sources are arguably more trustworthy to audiences when they comment on issues about their own countries because they are presumably more familiar with them. Therefore, they have been cited in stories that are critical about foreign societies and Western liberal democratic systems. In a study, Haifeng Huang found that if a Chinese citizen had more positive perceptions about the socioeconomic conditions in foreign countries, he or she would have more negative evaluations of China.²⁶ As a result, to boost Chinese citizens' confidence in China's situation and political system, citing foreign sources who held negative opinions about their own countries is an effective strategy, and it has been increasingly used during the past decade. In a content analysis of CCTV's *Xinwen Lianbo* 新闻联播 (News Simulcast), Zhang and Boukes found that the program portrayed Western countries in a more negative light (as enemy, victim, or failure) after President Xi Jinping took office and tightened control over Chinese media.²⁷

In addition, citing experts from multiple countries indicates support from the international community, which is then used to bolster the Party's domestic image. Since Mao, a commonly accepted rhetoric in the Party's propaganda has been Mencius's "a just cause enjoys abundant support" (*de dao duo zhu* 得道多助).²⁸ Foreign experts' praise is used to increase *mianzi* 面子 for the Party-state. *Mianzi* (face) is a key concept in Chinese culture. It refers to one's respect, pride, and dignity in society. It is rooted in social interactions when individuals "seek the approval or respect of others and desire to achieve a position of approbation in the social group to which they belong."²⁹ Benjamin Ho expanded this concept to understand how China interacts with the world, pointing out that the Chinese government cares a great deal that the world appreciates its accomplishments and actively engages in criticizing Western countries in the hope of occupying the moral high ground and gaining *mianzi*.³⁰

Among the few studies that have examined the use of foreign sources in the CCP's propaganda is an article which argues that the newspaper *Reference News* (*Cankao xiaoxi*), makes use of foreign sources to boost the legitimization of

26. Haifeng Huang, "International Knowledge and Domestic Evaluations in a Changing Society: The Case of China," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 3 (2015): 613–34.

27. Xiaodong Zhang and Mark Boukes, "How China's Flagship News Program Frames 'the West': Foreign News Coverage of CCTV's *Xinwen Lianbo* before and during Xi Jinping's Presidency," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12, no. 4 (2019): 414–30.

28. Kun Qian, *Imperial-Time-Order: Literature, Intellectual History, and China's Road to Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 117.

29. Xiaoying Qi, "Face: A Chinese Concept in a Global Sociology," *Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 3 (2011): 279–95.

30. Benjamin Tze Ern Ho, "About Face—the Relational Dimension in Chinese IR Discourse," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 98 (2016): 307–20.

Beijing's post-Mao rulers.³¹ In this study, I aim to fill the gap in the literature by answering these questions: Which types of non-Chinese experts are cited in the Chinese media for the purpose of legitimizing the CCP's rule? On which types of issues have foreign experts been most commonly cited, and what are their cited positions? What patterns are revealed in this citing of foreign experts? What implications can we draw for China's relationship with the global intellectual community?

DATA AND METHOD

The empirical information analyzed in this study was collected through a systematic examination of the journalistic sourcing patterns of 31 major news outlets in China in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016. Data were drawn from newspapers, magazines, broadcasting, and websites. The outlets were selected according to the following criteria. First, the 31 media outlets are in Chinese and target domestic audiences. For example, I included in the data set the domestic Chinese version of *Global Times* (*Huanqiu shibao*) rather than the English version. Second, they were influential in terms of circulation, viewership, or traffic in 2016. Third, the selection was representative in terms of (a) including both Party media and commercial media and (b) covering both the ruling party's "authoritative voice" (e.g., *Qiushi* 求是, the official magazine published by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China) and investigative journalism (e.g., the *Southern Weekly* 南方周末 and *Caixin* 财新 magazine). I also surveyed 51 previous studies on Chinese media published in top English-language academic journals to ensure that no major outlet that had previously been utilized by other scholars was overlooked. The final sample of media outlets is shown in table 1.

I extracted articles from these 31 media outlets that met the following two criteria. First, they discussed political, economic, and social issues rather than entertainment, sports, and so on. Second, they cited intellectual sources; that is, they included the keywords "professor" (教授), "researcher" (研究员), "economist" (经济学家), "political scientist" (政治学家), "sociologist" (社会学家), or "commentator" (评论员). After selecting the articles, I implemented a Natural Language Processing (NLP) algorithm that recognized names in Chinese characters based on the requirement that the names appeared within 10 characters of the aforementioned keywords.³² These names included non-PRC experts whose names were transliterated into Chinese characters.³³ A large spreadsheet was then produced. Each row of the spreadsheet contained the following information:

31. Jörg-Meinhard Rudolph, *Cankao-Xiaoxi: Foreign News in the Propaganda System of the People's Republic of China* (Baltimore: University of Maryland School of Law, 1984).

32. Specifically, I used the Chinese model in Stanford Named Entity Recognizer (NER) to extract names; see <https://nlp.stanford.edu/software/CRF-NER.shtml>.

33. For example, Niall Ferguson was transliterated into 尼尔·弗格森 in Chinese media. The algorithm was able to identify these transliterated names.

Table 1. Media Outlets in the Sample by Type (31 Total)

Title (Chinese)	Title (English)	Circulation (Thousand)
Newspapers (22):		
人民日报	<i>The People's Daily</i>	3,334
广州日报	<i>Guangzhou Daily</i>	1,850
南方都市报	<i>Southern Metropolis Daily</i>	1,826
钱江晚报	<i>Qianjiang Evening News</i>	1,580
环球时报	<i>Global Times (Huanqiu shibao, Chinese version)</i>	1,165
楚天都市报	<i>Chutian Metropolis Daily</i>	1,012
南方日报	<i>Nanfang Daily</i>	968
华西都市报	<i>Western China Metropolis Daily</i>	824
南方周末	<i>Southern Weekly</i>	760
经济日报	<i>Economic Daily</i>	756
光明日报	<i>Guangming Daily</i>	730
新民晚报	<i>Xinmin Evening News</i>	601
今晚报	<i>Today Evening Post</i>	505
湖北日报	<i>Hubei Daily</i>	440
羊城晚报	<i>Yangcheng Evening News</i>	417
浙江日报	<i>Zhejiang Daily</i>	408
江南都市报	<i>Jiangnan Metropolis Daily</i>	400
北京晚报	<i>Beijing Evening News</i>	330
中国青年报	<i>China Youth Daily</i>	300
新京报	<i>The Beijing News</i>	281
北京青年报	<i>Beijing Youth Daily</i>	250
京华时报	<i>Beijing Times</i>	247
Magazines (4):		
求是	<i>Qiushi</i>	1,729
财新周刊	<i>Caixin Weekly</i>	220
三联生活周刊	<i>Sanlian Life Weekly</i>	750
南风窗	<i>Nanfeng Chuang</i>	660
Broadcast (2):		
新闻联播	<i>Xinwen Lianbo (News simulcast)</i>	
焦点访谈	<i>Focus</i>	
Websites (3):		
澎湃新闻	<i>The Paper</i>	402 (Alexa rank in China)
界面新闻	<i>Jiemian</i>	469 (Alexa rank in China)
观察者网	<i>Guancha.cn</i>	1,738 (Alexa rank in China)

name cited, media title, article headline, article date, and the full sentence in which the name appeared. After obtaining the large spreadsheet as “raw” data, with the help of three research assistants I cleaned the data by removing duplicate³⁴ and irrelevant quotes,³⁵ and I identified and marked transliterated names that referred to the same person,³⁶ as well as data on the country of origin and area of specialization.

I conducted a further manual cleaning of the data to exclude citations that provided only background information³⁷ or expressed critical assessments of the Party-state’s performance.³⁸ The final data set included 2,076 quotations from 723 non-PRC experts. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, I have examined the most commonly quoted persons, the types of experts who were cited, and the major issues and opinions discussed by them.

WHO WAS CITED?

Among the 723 individuals, 382 (66.7 percent) were cited only once, and 22 of them (3.0 percent) were cited no fewer than 10 times. Table 2 lists the 20 most frequently cited experts.

As shown in table 2, most of the frequently cited experts were Western economists, which suggests that China’s economic performance is the major area in which the Party-state seeks to publicize positive evaluations by foreign experts. It echoes the popular argument of legitimacy based on economic performance, suggesting that the Party cares about not only economic growth but also how the growth is presented to the public. In fact, 41.4 percent of the 723 cited experts were economists, followed by foreign specialists in international relations (32.0 percent), political scientists (12.4 percent),³⁹ and legal scholars (3.5 percent).

The most frequently cited expert was Columbia University economist and Nobel Prize laureate Joseph E. Stiglitz, who was quoted 97 times and in all 31 media outlets. Although he is not considered a China expert in the conventional sense,

34. One quotation might be picked up twice by two different keywords.

35. The following types of data entries were extracted by algorithm but then removed by hand: (a) science and engineering scholars cited, as they were predominantly quoted to explain specific science and technology issues without commenting on the social and political implications; (b) political leaders visiting university campuses and meeting with professors; (c) scholars winning awards; (d) scholars being appointed to political positions; (e) intellectuals being the protagonists or the witnesses in a news story, rather than providing analysis and opinions.

36. For example, both 史蒂芬·罗奇 and 斯蒂芬·罗奇 refer to American economist Stephen S. Roach.

37. For example, explaining how the GDP is calculated without providing any evaluation on the GDP performance of China.

38. Although much rarer than positive comments, Chinese media do sometimes feature critical voices from both domestic and foreign experts.

39. In this study, I place political science researchers who focus on international relations and those in other areas in different categories because they tend to comment on different issues, as indicated by findings presented in the next section.

Table 2. Most Frequently Cited Foreign Experts, Ranked by How Many Times They Have Been Cited

	Name and Nationality	Position
1	Joseph E. Stiglitz, US	Professor of economics at Columbia University, former senior vice president and chief economist of the World Bank, and recipient of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences
2	Jim O'Neill, UK	Former chairman of Goldman Sachs Asset Management, known for coining the acronym BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China)
3	Stephen S. Roach, US	Senior fellow at Yale University, former chairman of Morgan Stanley Asia, and chief economist at Morgan Stanley
4	Nicholas R. Lardy, US	Senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics
5	Thomas Piketty, France	Professor of economics at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS)
6	Yongnian Zheng, Singapore	Former professor of political science at the National University of Singapore
7	Olivier Blanchard, France	Former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund
8	Francis Fukuyama, US	Senior fellow at Stanford University, author of <i>The End of History and the Last Man</i>
9	Ardo Hansson, Estonia	Former World Bank chief economist in China
10	John Ross, UK	Senior fellow at Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, former director of economic and business policy of London
11	Ted Galen Carpenter, US	Senior fellow at the Cato Institute
12	Arvind Subramanian, US/India	Former senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics
13	David Dollar, US	Senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and former World Bank country director for China and Mongolia
14	Martin Jacques, UK	Senior fellow at Cambridge University and author of <i>When China Rules the World</i>
15	Eswar Prasad, US	Professor of economics at Cornell University, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and former head of the International Monetary Fund's China Division
16	Ian Storey, Singapore	Senior fellow at the ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore (formerly the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies)

Table 2. (Continued)

	Name and Nationality	Position
17	Ezra F. Vogel, US	Emeritus professor of sociology at Harvard University
18	Maurice Obstfeld, US	Professor of economics at the University of California, Berkeley and former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund
19	Daniel A. Bell, Canada	Dean of the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University and professor at Tsinghua University
20	Kenneth Lieberthal, US	Senior fellow emeritus at the Brookings Institution and former senior director for Asia on the US National Security Council

Stiglitz was widely cited in the Chinese media because of his positive comments on the Chinese economy, his concept of “the China Century,”⁴⁰ and his claim that urbanization in China would be one of two keys to humankind’s development in the twenty-first century (the other key is technological innovation in United States),⁴¹ as well as his critical opinions about neoliberalism, the Iraq War, and other US policies. The second most frequently cited expert was the former chair of Goldman Sachs Asset Management, Jim O’Neill, who has been known for coining the acronym BRIC (i.e., Brazil, Russia, India, and China). He was quoted because of his congratulatory comments on the contribution of China to the world economy as well as his firm denial of China’s alleged currency manipulation to gain an unfair advantage in global trade. The third most frequently cited expert was Stephen S. Roach, senior fellow at Yale University, former chair of Morgan Stanley Asia, and chief economist at Morgan Stanley. He was cited as a champion of China’s economic development and a defender of China’s economic policies against attacks from the United States.

Figure 1 illustrates the geographic distribution of the experts, and table 3 shows the top 20 countries with the largest number of cited individuals. A striking finding is that 41.2 percent of the cited experts are from the United States, followed by 11.2 percent from the United Kingdom. Combined, experts from the United States and the United Kingdom comprise more than half of the individuals. These numbers could be interpreted from two perspectives. First, it may

40. Joseph E Stiglitz, “The Chinese Century,” *Vanity Fair*, January 2015, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/01/china-worlds-largest-economy>.

41. Staff reporter, “Building the Dream,” *Economist*, April 19, 2014.



Figure 1. Geographic distribution of cited experts

Table 3. Countries with the Largest Number of Cited Experts

Rank	Country	Cited Experts
1	US	298
2	UK	81
3	Japan	67
4	Russia	49
5	Australia	28
6	Germany	24
7	Brazil	21
8	France	19
9	Canada	16
10	Singapore	15
11	India	13
12	South Africa	11
13	Egypt	10
13	Mexico	10
13	Philippines	10
13	South Korea	10
17	Sweden	9
18	Switzerland	8
18	Argentina	8
20	Indonesia	6

have resulted from a pragmatic calculation that, as a foreign scholar has observed, “An American ‘friend’ was far more valuable than a Romanian one” because of the relative importance of the United States.⁴² Second, it reveals that China’s propaganda machine has conformed to, rather than challenged, the hierarchical structures in global politics. Despite rising tensions between China and the United States and the increasingly hawkish narratives toward the United States in the Chinese media, China still mostly seeks confirmation from across the Pacific when it wants to project its own strengths domestically. This ironic phenomenon points to the contradictions in China’s domestic propaganda strategies—at times anti-Western, while valuing approval from the West. More discussions on this issue will be provided in a later section of the article.

Japanese sources also played an important role in the propaganda, reflecting Japan’s importance in China’s foreign relations. Russian experts were overwhelmingly cited for their anti-US position. Ranked fifth, Australia demonstrated its strategic importance in the Asia-Pacific region, as experts from this country provided opinions on the South China Sea disputes and the United States’ Asia policy. In comparison, experts from EU countries received relatively less attention. One possible explanation is that there is no direct territorial or other dispute between China and Europe, so there is less need for external justification of China’s policies. Notably, too, individuals from 67 countries in all five continents were cited in the sampled media. This diverse range of foreign sources indicates the breadth of global support that the CCP’s publicity machine attempted to show.

Do Party media tend to cite non-PRC experts more frequently than commercial media? The findings indicated that while the domestic commercial media on average contained 44.7 quotations each, the Party media more frequently contained foreign quotations (mean = 67.2). The discrepancy would be even larger if we removed *Global Times*, which is a nationalistic commercial tabloid that published the greatest number of foreigners’ comments, with 358 quotations.⁴³ There are two possible explanations for why, overall, the Party media cited more foreign sources. First, from an economic perspective, it usually costs more in terms of time and resources to interview a foreign source than a domestic source, and commercial media tend to be more concerned about the cost. Second, from a political perspective, if most of the foreign sources serve propaganda purposes, then the results indicate that Party media are more willing to follow the “Party line” and participate in propaganda campaigns.⁴⁴

42. A. Tom Grunfeld, “Review of Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People’s Republic,” *China Journal*, no. 52 (2004): 147.

43. *Global Times* is sometimes mistaken as a Party newspaper, but in fact it is a market-oriented subsidiary of the Party newspaper the *People’s Daily*.

44. Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

**WHAT ISSUES WERE DISCUSSED?
WHAT OPINIONS WERE PROVIDED?**

Below are the major issues discussed by the quoted foreign experts. It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive list of the areas in which the CCP is cultivating public support, but non-PRC experts are most often injected into the propaganda process vis-à-vis these following five topics.

The “Superiority” of the Chinese Political System

Foreign experts, most of whom are political scientists, were cited to prove the alleged “superiority” (*youyuexing* 优越性) of the Chinese one-party system. A prominent example is Francis Fukuyama, a Stanford University scholar well known for his book *The End of History and the Last Man*. According to quotations in the Chinese media, Fukuyama is impressed by China’s development and decided to change his previous assertion that Western liberal democracy may be the endpoint of humanity’s sociocultural evolution and the ultimate form of human government. The Communist Youth League’s newspaper, *China Youth Daily*, quoted him as stating, “The effectiveness of the ‘China Model’ proves that Western liberal democracy is not the end of history,” and “the treasure house of human thoughts should reserve a place for Chinese tradition.”⁴⁵ The nationalistic *Global Times* made the message even clearer. Its headline claimed: “American professor reflects on ‘strong government’ because he feels disappointed by the political decay in the US.”⁴⁶ The article discussed Fukuyama’s book, *Political Order and Political Decay* (2004), in which he emphasized three pillars of the modern state: state capacity, rule of law, and democratic accountability. *Global Times* focused on state capacity as the main point and reframed it as “strong government” (*qiang zhengfu* 强政府). As I will show, this practice of reframing was commonly seen in quotations.

In addition to “strong government,” other aspects of China’s political system were highlighted in the quotes. The first was the meritocratic system, characterized by a selection and promotion process that aims to produce a group of highly competent officials who must undergo years of governance experience before being appointed to top positions. The Canadian political scientist Daniel A. Bell, who serves as dean of the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University and professor at Tsinghua University, is among the top 20 most cited foreign experts and was quoted in promoting this system in his 2015 book *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* and in his interviews with the media. He suggested that China’s meritocracy

45. See http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2014-02/18/nw.D110000zgqnb_20140218_1-10.htm.

46. See <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2014-10/5166660.html?agt=15422>.

is a superior alternative to Western democracy. The Party's official magazine *Qiushi* also quoted Harvard sinologist Mark C. Elliott's claim that China's meritocratic system can provide effective channels for any ordinary citizen to be promoted to political leadership.⁴⁷

Other quotations refer to the adaptability of the CCP. In an article published in *Qiushi*, New York University political scientist Pasquale Pasquino argued that the CCP was effective in learning, adapting to new situations, absorbing talent, and accommodating the interests of different social classes and groups.⁴⁸ Political scientist David Shambaugh was quoted in the official media for allegedly arguing that the CCP has successfully adapted to many challenges and thus would continue to rule China without major disruptions, be it collapse or democratization,⁴⁹ which contradicts the China collapse thesis that he proposed in 2015.⁵⁰

It was also frequently suggested in the foreign quotations that China's system is pragmatic and highly efficient. Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard, director of the Asia Research Centre at Copenhagen Business School, commented that the most important advantage of the political system in China is that resources from throughout the nation can be centralized to achieve breakthroughs and increase the efficiency of development.⁵¹

Problems with Liberal Democracy and the Capitalist System

Many of the experts cited in China's media expressed negative opinions about Western political systems. For example, problems in the US presidential elections were highlighted in multiple quotations. On election day in 2016, a researcher at a French university and a professor at a Russian university were featured by *Global Times* to expose the unfair lobbying power of corporate money and question whether "Western democracy is the correct road or the wrong way to go."⁵² Similarly, *Xinmin Evening News*, a Shanghai-based commercial newspaper, quoted British economics commentator Martin Wolf in an article titled "Chaos in American Elections Highlights the Problems in the System." Wolf allegedly claimed that the democratic system had become "unbearable" that and capitalism was gradually losing its legitimacy because of increased inequality and slowed economic growth.⁵³

Critics of capitalism were welcomed by the Chinese media. Stiglitz was regularly quoted criticizing growing inequality in the United States and claiming that "the American dream is now a myth." According to *Global Times*, Stiglitz argues that

47. See http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2012/201224/201212/t20121211_199523.htm.

48. See <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/0701/c49150-25221769.html>.

49. See http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2014/201407/201403/t20140328_334805.htm.

50. David Shambaugh, "The Coming Chinese Crackup," *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2015.

51. See http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2014/201407/201403/t20140328_334805.htm.

52. See <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/1152/2016-11/9645775.html>.

53. See http://xmwb.xinmin.cn/lab/html/2016-10/09/content_8_3.htm.

the income of the middle class has remained stagnant for a long time.⁵⁴ Another Nobel Prize laureate, Paul Krugman, was cited by multiple media outlets because of his criticism of the inequality caused by deregulation in the United States.⁵⁵ Another prominently quoted critic is French economist Thomas Piketty, whose book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013) was a global bestseller. Quoted more than 40 times in 2014–16, he was the fifth most frequently cited expert. Piketty's book was cited as evidence that the capitalist system is deeply flawed and has encountered severe trouble in the Western world. Although most of these quotations did not mention China, the implicit message was that the Western system is problematic and should not be considered a better alternative to the Chinese system.

China's Economic Achievements

China's impressive economic growth and its contribution to the global economy were also discussed by non-Chinese experts. For example, Nicholas R. Lardy, senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, was quoted by the commercial newspaper *Qianjiang Evening News* claiming China was the main engine of global economic recovery after the 2008 financial crisis.⁵⁶ Lardy's positive appraisal of China's economic achievements and his optimistic predictions for future growth were frequently quoted in Chinese media, and he is the fourth most frequently cited expert. Interestingly, 14 researchers at the Peterson Institute for International Economics are in my sample, significantly more than other think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution and the Heritage Foundation.

Although China's economy has slowed down in recent years, foreign economists have been cited frequently to boost confidence. In November 2018, Nobel Prize laureate Thomas J. Sargent was interviewed by *Zhejiang Daily* and was quoted as saying, "China's economic development during recent decades is the largest miracle in global economic history" and "I have always been optimistic about the driving forces of China's economy."⁵⁷ Stephen S. Roach was quoted by *Economic Daily* as saying, "China's economic slowdown is actually a good thing rather than a bad thing because it shows that China's growth model is changing."⁵⁸

Sovereignty, Territory, and Other International Disputes

Foreign experts were also frequently cited regarding issues of sovereignty and territorial disputes. One of the most frequently discussed topics has been the South China Sea. Arbitration between the Philippines and China took place from 2013

54. See <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2012-06/2811313.html>.

55. See http://views.ce.cn/main/qy/201201/13/t20120113_22996688.shtml.

56. See <http://zjnews.zjol.com.cn/05zjnews/system/2012/11/09/018934658.shtml>.

57. See <https://zj.zjol.com.cn/news.html?id=487766>.

58. See http://paper.ce.cn/jjrb/html/2014-04/12/content_265684.htm.

to 2016. The arbitral tribunal ruled in favor of the Philippines and claimed that China had “no historical rights” based on the “nine-dash line” map.⁵⁹ Media outlets in China covered this issue extensively, and their opinions were similar in rejecting the arbitration. Dozens of foreign legal scholars and international relations experts were cited to support China’s position. For example, the *People’s Daily* quoted Oxford law professor Antonios Tzanakopoulos and other Western scholars to support China’s claims and condemn the arbitration because it damaged the stability of the area.⁶⁰ Canadian professor David Welch was quoted in *Zhejiang Daily* as criticizing Western media as misleading and unfair to China on this issue.⁶¹ South African foreign affairs expert Shannon Ebrahim was quoted in the *Economic Daily*, arguing that the United States was the director of this “farce” (*naoju* 闹剧), which was used to contain China.⁶² Ian Storey, senior fellow at the ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore (formerly the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), was quoted in multiple outlets assuring readers that the arbitration would not be enforced.⁶³ Some Filipino scholars were cited widely because of their arguments against their own country’s position. Retired economist Victor N. Arches II’s argument that the Scarborough Shoal belongs to China was quoted in at least four Chinese newspapers.⁶⁴ University of the Philippines professor Roland Simbulan was quoted because of his claim that any conflict with China would be unwise and harmful to the Philippines.⁶⁵ His colleague Eduardo Tadem was quoted as saying that “China’s position is much more tenable than the Philippines” in an article titled “In Fact, Filipinos Do Not Support Fighting for the Scarborough Shoal.”⁶⁶ The implied message was that such experts are insider voices who therefore are especially convincing when arguing for China’s position.

Similarly, regarding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island dispute with Japan, the Taiwan issue, and the trade wars, foreign experts, mainly in the area of international relations, were cited blaming China’s opponents and supporting China’s claims. These quotations supported the legitimacy of the Party’s defense of national interests and echo the nationalistic sentiment among the Chinese public.

Bilateral Relations and China’s Contribution to the Global Order

Whenever the Chinese president visits a foreign country, experts in that country are quoted in the Chinese media offering positive evaluations of the relationship

59. Jane Perlez, “Tribunal Rejects Beijing’s Claims in South China Sea,” *New York Times*, July 12, 2016.

60. See <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0711/c1001-28543262.html>.

61. See http://zjrb.zjol.com.cn/html/2016-07/07/content_2986518.htm?div=-1.

62. See http://intl.ce.cn/specials/zxgjzh/201607/12/t20160712_13718905.shtml.

63. See <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2014-04-02/015929843795.shtml>.

64. See <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/157278/17843858.html>.

65. See <http://world.huanqiu.com/hot/2012-05/2744556.html>.

66. See <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/17972366.html>.

between China and that country. For example, during President Xi Jinping's first European visit in 2014, experts in France, Spain, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium were quoted as praising the visit because of its contribution to China-Europe relations.⁶⁷ Similarly, opinions that praised China's contributions to the global order were quoted after international summits held in or sponsored by China. For example, after the 2016 G20 Hangzhou Summit, scholars in Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Italy, Jordan, Mexico, Senegal, Singapore, Turkey, the United States, and the United Kingdom expressed congratulatory comments in interviews with Chinese media.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

This article has systematically examined how non-PRC experts were used by Chinese news media in propaganda for a domestic audience to support the legitimacy of the Party-state. The CCP has been increasingly sophisticated in this approach to propaganda. Many of the quoted experts are indeed prominent voices on the topics they are cited about. By selectively quoting their supportive comments, the CCP projects a glowing view to the Chinese people of its political system, economic performance, and global status.

The findings portray a mixed picture of China's domestic propaganda strategy. On the one hand, the mass media are quite experienced in cultivating an image for domestic audiences that its policies hold global support. The scale and breadth of the quotes from foreign experts entailed careful selection of different types of experts for different issues, as reflected in Filipino scholars commenting on the South China Sea disputes. On the other hand, the Chinese propaganda machine operates within the existing power structure to such an extent that much of this coverage is stilted and repetitive. It has become a highly routinized practice, as seen in the utilization of experts' quotes vis-à-vis state visits and bilateral relations. Such conformity and routinization may render the propaganda messages less effective among the public over time.

Moreover, the regularly orchestrated use of foreign sources reveals the Party-state's inner anxiety. The Party has been emphasizing confidence in China's path, ideology, system, and culture, but oftentimes it still exhibits a need for external approval, even on domestic policies and affairs. This appears to be a truly felt desire that sits alongside the Party-state's propaganda strategy. In fact, the heavy reliance on sources from the United States and the United Kingdom suggests that it is acknowledging Western dominance despite the strong rhetoric of resisting Western influence. This is in accordance with Elena Barabantseva's argument

67. See http://zjrb.zjol.com.cn/html/2014-04/03/content_2598483.htm?div=-1.

68. See <http://tv.cctv.com/2016/09/07/VIDE6vhbiG7uCDbGmeehLZuw160907.shtml> and <http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2016-09-01/doc-ifxvqefm5241980.shtml>.

that instead of developing an alternative model to the West, China largely follows and “plays the game” of the West.⁶⁹

In terms of how the Chinese state sees the global order, the pattern of foreign citations indicate a contradictory view of both egalitarian and hierarchical principles. The propaganda machine quotes experts from a diverse group of countries, but clearly relies more on the Global North. This echoes Andrew Nathan and Boshu Zhang’s analysis that China deploys the theme of equality of all states in the international system but also adopts a hierarchical view of the international system.⁷⁰

Finally, the findings of this study indicate that non-PRC-based experts are systematically exploited by the propaganda apparatus in China. This raises the following question: To what extent are their opinions reframed, distorted, or even fabricated without their consent to serve the interests of the CCP? It is difficult to check the authenticity of the quotations because the original sources are rarely provided. Even if the quotations are authentic, they are subject to reframing and distortion. As Anne-Marie Brady has observed, the CCP has a long tradition of “making foreigners serve China.”⁷¹ Since quoting foreign experts is part of this tradition, the foreign intellectual community, especially scholars in China studies, should consider the social and ethical implications of this practice, because many prominent figures as well as academics, possibly including themselves, have (willingly or unwittingly) been involved in this strategy.

A recent incident illustrates the consequences of this practice. In February 2019, the *People’s Daily* published an article titled “We Need to Learn to Listen to China.” According to the byline, the piece was written by former New Zealand prime minister Dame Jenny Shipley, who later denied writing the glowing pro-China article. It was revealed that the CCP’s propagandist had constructed the piece based on an interview conducted in December 2018. The unprofessional practice and propagandistic purpose of the *People’s Daily* caused confusion in New Zealand and trouble for Shipley. It was suggested that she should not have agreed to be interviewed in the first place.⁷² However, such refusals do not prevent Party mouthpieces from quoting excerpts from Western media outlets and reframing them for their own purposes. There is no ready way to prevent this

69. Elena Barabantseva, “In Pursuit of an Alternative Model? The Modernisation Trap in China’s Official Development Discourse,” *East Asia* 29, no. 1 (2012): 63–79.

70. Andrew J. Nathan and Boshu Zhang, “‘A Shared Future for Mankind’: Rhetoric and Reality in Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping,” *Journal of Contemporary China* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1926091>.

71. Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People’s Republic* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

72. Eleanor Ainge Roy, “New Zealand Former PM Denies Writing Glowing Pro-China Piece for Beijing Paper,” *Guardian*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/20/new-zealand-former-pm-jenny-shipley-denies-writing-pro-china-piece-for-beijing-paper>.

practice, though non-PRC scholars can share cases of distorted or fabricated quotes, alongside the original undistorted content, through websites and their social media accounts.

From the perspective of the CCP's larger ambition to achieve global prominence and support, observers around the globe have noted that in recent years the Party has become more aggressive in its international United Front work to forge a wider coalition of interests and approval of China's political system and policy agendas.⁷³ As this grand project progresses, the CCP's strategy of publicizing praise from the international community is highly likely to continue and warrants increased attention from the academic and policy communities.

73. Thorsten Benner et al., "Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe" (report, Global Public Policy Institute, Berlin, February 2018), https://www.gppi.net/media/Benner_MERICS_2018_Authoritarian_Advance.pdf; Julia Bowie Gitter David, "Abroad or at Home, China Puts Party First," *Foreign Policy*, December 5, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/05/abroad-or-at-home-china-puts-party-first-global-influence-united-front/>.