

Multiple Ideological Dilemmas in China's Political Transformation

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Abstract. China has gradually emerged as a new regional and world great power in recent years. The Chinese government has also carried out political transformation in diplomatic strategies, internal propaganda, and other fields to cope with realpolitik. However, the new contradictions in politics and the remaining problems make the propaganda discourse and its internal logic adopted by the Chinese government more challenging to be self-appropriate. These problems become the “ideological dilemma” faced by the Chinese government. This study takes a qualitative analysis of Chinese propaganda in several fields over the years, makes a critical discourse analysis to discuss the intrinsic logic and the ideology behind the contradictions in it, and concludes the switch of Chinese diplomacy among traditional Confucianism, Marxism, and the modern nation state. These ideas support each other on many occasions and provide legitimacy, but in a broader context, they cannot be self-consistent and produce far-reaching negative political implications. Finally, this study takes Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan as an example to analyze the specific practical discourse application, their public impact, and the contradictions of Chinese official propaganda.

Keywords: Chinese governance; Chinese Diplomacy; Discourse conflict; Ideological narrative analysis.

1. Introduction

For a long time, there has been much debate about the concept and practice of China as a rising power. Earlier, China described itself as a victim of the world capitalist system. With many political and economic events represented by Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese position and posture in the international order as an increasingly important force has been revalued. The Chinese government has been using the image of “responsible power”. It has been more active in changing its international political behavior -- from focusing only on the economic sphere to pan-political and military issues, which are analyzed as the common product of realist considerations and traditional Confucian political ideology [1].

For several years, Chinese economic and military development has changed the balance of powers in the world. With the coronavirus pandemic, the global political rightward turn and regional political polarisation have led to the rise of radical ideologies in China. This process is exacerbated by the influence of Chinese governance, which, to some extent, is called “authoritarian” by some western scholars and politicians. In contrast, in recent years, Chinese diplomacy has also seen substantial hardening and transformation, and its diplomatic posture and image are significantly more radical. The “War Wolf diplomatic” has been used in this radical diplomatic strategy, associated with the image of “rising power” continuously propagated in recent years. Some western comments interpret it as more aggressive, which may release China's tentative attitude towards getting regional and even world power. Internally, this undoubtedly has the significance of government image construction and meeting ideological needs [2]. However, this strategy requires diplomatic posture and internal diplomatic logic that is a far cry from the Chinese diplomacy in the past, as expressed by the Chinese idiom “Tao Guang Yang Hui”, which means to keep a low profile and to be self-effacing. The “War Wolf diplomatic” is either in the Confucian tradition or in a moderate approach close to pragmatism or neorealism.

Facing the changing international environment and domestic political situation, the Chinese government is undergoing a multi-faceted political transformation, including political decision-

making logic, the narrative discourse of authority, diplomatic posture, and so on. Given this, due to the vast amount of population and the significant differences within the population, such as economic and social status, the ideological composition of the Chinese public is very complex, and it has been challenging to achieve discourse integration for a long time. Meanwhile, the political change in the transition process has intensified the discourse contradictions in many internal politics and diplomacy fields of the Chinese government. The massive and complex discourse system of Chinese government requires completely different political needs and orientations. Furthermore, there are many sets of contradictions in the internal logic of the propaganda and image-building narratives that support these discourses. This study focuses on the ideological dilemma faced by the Chinese government, which consists of an array of interlinked and inter-affects discursive contradictions.

2. Literature Review

In general, China's public ideology and cultural factors are worthy of discussion. However, they are rarely discussed in academia due to the emphasis on analysis and the cost of research. There are two studies on the logic of China's diplomatic decision-making in the traditional hegemony theory. According to the realism theory of various schools, analyzing the Chinese government's diplomatic strategy by the classical paradigm is often regarded as an offensive neorealist attitude [3]. The other is to deprive China of its subjectivity and become the completely suspended other, which makes China's foreign decision-making a part of the East Asian system [4]. Both of them will undoubtedly miss the valuable factor of "public" in many Chinese policy analyses, especially in the relationship between diplomacy and international image and public ideology.

In cultural politics, most studies regard the Chinese government as a unified subject, especially in the case of prominent regional events, which will deviate from the actual government behavior and the feedback from the public society [5]. At the micro level, the public's response is mainly regarded as the basis for coping with specific policies. Some scholars also refer to the specific political feedback of the Chinese public as a unique right-wing populist tendency. However, a practical aspect is that China does not adopt Western-style democracy in the usual sense. At the same time, China's authoritarian public opinion management makes it difficult to measure the influence of the government's agenda-setting and propaganda tools of the official media, as well as the influence of the domestic public ideology on policies.

Undeniably, the underlying political system of China is entirely different from that of conventional democratic countries, making its particular political operation path difficult to apply to traditional theoretical analysis fully. For the same reason, in-depth research and information acquisition require more cost and corresponding social and cultural knowledge support. The construction of China's diplomatic image in existing studies often ignores the differential influence of public political participation at different levels under the political system [6]. In addition, some analyses of organizational behavior or department levels, such as the concrete government affairs analysis that takes politicians and government generations as the research objects [7], rarely take coherent government decision-making and public social influence as a whole systematic, unified mechanism analysis. However, due to the complexity and size of Chinese civil society, and even the influence on the reciprocal response of the Chinese government, the case of China can neither be fully explained by classical government-public and policy-ideology paradigms nor should it be ignored as an important influence of social side.

This study recognizes the basic assumption of agenda-setting theory in political communication. It holds that public opinion will generate from a series of issues created by the media and be guided by them to produce public ideology. At the same time, the media itself has adjusted in this process. Considering that the Chinese media is generally close to the government department of tradition, many mainstream media can be viewed as intuitive feedback or extension of Chinese official policies. Moreover, the spread of government - media - the public path can also be seen as a part of China's special grassroots political mechanism without direct effects of the subjective behavior of politicians.

It could be attempted to interpret the path as the common consequence of the Chinese government's special organizational structure and power transmission logic.

This study proceeds as follows and adopts the way of critical discourse analysis, takes China's diplomatic transformation in recent years as the essential background, describes and analyzes China's government behavior and the use of official discourse in domestic and foreign affairs, and puts it in a broader context to explore its internal logic, to clarify the ideological dilemma faced by China. Finally, this study takes the events related to Pelosi's visit to Taiwan as the entry point for case analysis, investigates the response phenomenon of China's official image management on the Internet and public opinion under the special political mode of China, discusses its operation logic and tries to explore its interaction mechanism to support the previous views. This study explores the interaction between the Chinese government's image and public ideology, which is rarely involved in international politics. It will also help to re-observe the ideological trend and the logic of the formation of great power in China.

3. The Dilemma of the Construction of China's Diplomatic Image

3.1 Multiple Contradictions in China's Internal and External Publicity

In the context of China's political transformation, a core narrative underpinning its aggressive diplomatic posture is the modern nation-state narrative, the basic narrative used by the Chinese government to strengthen national identity. In general, in the development of modern nation-states, reasons such as hegemonic construction and expansion with solid practical significance can be easily connected with traditional nationalism. The government usually uses this to endorse radical policies, construct the national image through government actions, bind government interests with the national community, and seek policy benefits. In the case of China, multiple ideological contradictions risk these political actions. Internal propaganda needs to be compounded with the official Marxism narrative. In other cases, it is necessary to give legitimacy to China's absolute hegemony and expansionist diplomacy, which often contradicts the traditional Confucian logic of Chinese politics. This means that the Chinese government has to adopt a completely conflicting political discourse in many areas.

Therefore, how to choose the narrative and make it self-consistent has become a difficult task that the Chinese government has to face. The government does not perform well and often avoids this problem. In practice, the actual policy implementation of the Chinese government needs different ideological support to provide legitimacy, and these policies directly or indirectly affect the ideological orientation of the public. In the context of China's transformation, due to the transmission of specific policies to public cognition, the public ideologies corresponding to different government behavioral logics will also fall into confusion and even lead to doubts about the policies, just like the different attitudes and contradictory implementation of the provincial and local governments in China towards coronavirus.

In the context of official ideology, even with numerous "socialist theories with Chinese characteristics", the Chinese government still faces the contradiction between the Marxism ideology and marketization and commercialization that has already plagued it for a long time. Especially in recent years, an expansion of the private enterprise capital expansion makes this contradiction increasingly exposed to public view. At the same time, the central government's demands for ideological dominance have been so intense in recent years that dissent from the official system has become increasingly intolerable. This process is roughly synchronized in time with the political transformation mentioned above and follows the same political logic. This political discourse of "Marxist theory with Chinese characteristics", while trying to strengthen the subject identity of a modern nation-state, also completes the identification of the "Western" as "the other" rather than "ourselves". Opposition to the government and even dissent has begun to be stigmatized by the concept of "Western" and "foreign forces", extending to dissident Marxists.

In the actual government operation, the authority mainly propagandizes bureaucratism, taking Marxism as the legitimate source. The contrast is with how society and government operate, which comes from China's long Confucian political tradition and emphasizes actual power based on individuals and relationships rather than legal-rational power based on positions, like the “pattern of difference order” in Chinese anthropology. In this regard, the latter operation case also implies a pre-modern model of how politics works. However, official propaganda completely erases the inevitable reality of how government works, especially at higher levels of government. All this makes it harder for the public to bridge the gap between propaganda and the actual reality of policy implementation.

At the diplomatic level, the political transformation can be seen more directly. In the past, prominent and direct diplomatic positions often gave way to conservative diplomatic strategies and ideological statements. However, in the transformation of solid hardening of diplomacy, it is difficult for the Chinese government to adopt and maintain a more coherent diplomatic posture in the face of similar or different political demands from the past. In addition, although China denies the hegemonic tendency of development, the theory of hegemonic stability can still provide a reference for the case of China as a great power. Its fundamental theory points out that the construction of hegemony requires ideological or political orientation that can be shared, and the hegemonic subject has to share and consume its resources in constructing order. This certainly does not fit China's previous political logic: realism, Confucianism, or expansionism.

However, constructing China's diplomatic image urgently needs more rationality and legitimacy support. It is generally accepted that China's diplomatic behavior in the transformation process fails to adapt to its rising status. This study believes that the Chinese government has also failed to find a sophisticated way to meet the needs of internal diplomatic propaganda. In its description of the international political environment, whether diplomatic or internal, the Chinese government consistently identifies an image of a hegemonic “Western” as the other, usually characterized by illegal aggressive behavior. At the same time, faced with realpolitik demands, the Chinese government has to adopt a similar path to formulate national policy. However, on formal occasions, the application of “hegemonic” imagery of the Chinese government has still been shunned. In the discourse describing the international community, a group of “China” and “the West” as the main subject in the opposition is the core of this narrative, while a more grand, complex, and realistic international society is missing.

On the other hand, unlike domestic issues, the Chinese government rarely uses Marxism as it propagates on diplomatic occasions. In contrast, in dealing with and explaining domestic issues, the Chinese government adopts the expression of Marxism and avoids using descriptions related to the existing international order. Although the accusations of “foreign force” are sometimes made to stifle domestic doubts about the government.

These representations are riddled with contradictions. The first is that the Chinese government's confused representation of the international community fails to answer fundamental questions about how to define a modern state's rightful place in the international community and how far that ideal position is from China's actual situation. Most Chinese governments' descriptions of the international situation are in such binary opposition. Although such identification of “the West” as the other did play an essential role in strengthening the construction of national identity, in the over-simplified description of the international community, the government of China cannot very well describe the relations with other countries in reality or explain China's international situation beside this set of opposing principal contradiction. It undoubtedly exacerbates political ideology, public polarize, and xenophobia. At last, dueling international portrayals are a tense propaganda tactic internally and will exacerbate political and public ideological radicalization and xenophobia.

In a word, the Chinese government's and mainstream media's propaganda on relevant international issues has always been logically chaotic. It needs to provide mutual support with propaganda on domestic affairs. As mentioned above, its internal propaganda is also full of contradictions.

3.2 Public and Official Discourse Propaganda

The extension of these problems to public management is the contradiction in the development of China's civil and political society: the contradiction between universal pre-modern civil society, authoritarian management that promotes Marxism, and the modern nation-state narrative the government needs. In the vast underdeveloped areas of China, grassroots political construction is backward and not out of touch with the pre-modern era. Under the propaganda of Marxism, which is disconnected from the actual operation, the lack of transparency in government decision-making is further from public political participation.

This is detrimental to the public perception of the government and may make the public suspicious of it and its ideas. However, under the pragmatic tradition of the Chinese public, it can also be considered by the public that the actual participation of the public in political life can exist independently of Marxism or other ideological propaganda. Either outcome is at odds with the modern nation-state narrative that China's political transformation requires.

On the other hand, the application of Marxism makes the official discourse a fixed tone, which is especially seen in internal propaganda and is reflected in the special power transmission process in China, especially in the surface discourse. In fact, at the level of public opinion, the official attitude towards applying Marxism tones is often in line with the pragmatic tradition. This is a corollary because China's official Marxism ideology only plays a primary role in maintaining institutions. This may explain some of the contradictions in its propaganda since it does not directly play into the ideological perception of China's progress as a modern nation-state or rising hegemony.

The logical chaos of these discourses has a subtle effect on the public through the characteristic of the Chinese power transmission mechanism. The impact of such contradictory discourses on different social groups can be divisive in the face of policies that require different political logic. On the one hand, some traditional and conservative groups have been under moderate and ideological propaganda for a long time, and their current understanding of China's national image is likely to conflict with the changing radicalized diplomatic behavior, which may lead to their confusion about the policy and even their general suspicion of the government. On the other hand, with the influence of realpolitik and public opinion in China under the government's agenda-setting in recent years, a right-wing community with ultra-nationalism and realistic authoritarianism as the core has gradually emerged in China. They desire radical state action, while the government's transformation of radicalization also requires the legitimacy and identification of radical nationalist action, which undoubtedly caters to and encourages the development of this community. Under these multiple contradictions, the ideal publicity effect is often difficult to achieve. Moreover, pre-modern civil society operates against official Marxism. Officially-directed right-wing communities tend to be more extreme in their political views and more challenging to control than previous public ideologies subject to authoritarian governance. Finally, the confusion also means that the Chinese government has been unable to construct a genuinely modern national image internally - both domestically and diplomatically - and this will undoubtedly continue to hinder China's domestic civil and political development and external image construction.

It should be pointed out that among the contradictions in this array is not a single subject but politicians, departments, and organizations across the government and even every grassroots executive with discourse power. As noted above, their effective functioning requires completely different political contexts and bases of legitimacy, many of which are at odds with each other. These contradictions in government running can be cushioned by China's tradition of interpersonal power but may become a factor hindering its modernization and efficiency. The most direct effect on public ideology at the social level exacerbates the Chinese public's ideological confusion. They point to different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and sources, and there is partly a causal relationship in its process of formation and development.

In conclusion, these problems will continue to surface in the process of political transformation in China, and it is unclear whether the attitude of avoidance adopted by the Chinese government will continue to work.

4. Case study

This part analyzes the events related to Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 from the perspective of China's ideological dilemma in the context of political transformation.

After US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made political noises about her intention and schedule to visit Taiwan in 2022, the Chinese government responded strongly in mid-July, followed by many domestic media outlets spreading primary and secondary information. By the end of July, Pelosi confirmed her trip, and the Chinese government began several rounds of diplomacy.

In this process, domestic public opinion mostly continues the previous nationalism narrative, and there is still a significant proportion of nationalism with an attitude that she did not dare to come. By the afternoon of August 2, most of the official contents of the domestic mainstream media focused on whether Pelosi would visit Taiwan and how the situation would escalate if the military countermeasures were taken, which led to public opinion and increased the public attention of the event. Meanwhile, the Chinese government did not update the information. The discussion then peaked as her flight approached Taiwan.

By the time Pelosi officially announced her arrival in Taiwan, some related discussions had become decentralized, many online media platforms had pulled information, and broadcast was interrupted. Then the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued several rounds of protests and announced countermeasures. On August 5, the Chinese government issued multiple countermeasures, including some that affected China's international communication posture. During this period, public opinion was sharply divided between those who were satisfied with the countermeasures and official statements and those who were deeply disappointed with the government's conservatism. As with any recent public event in China, the buzz around the event has cooled considerably since the official announcement. It has been hard to see a statement of sufficient interest since August 10.

"Weibo" and "Zhihu" are China's primary open and interactive text social media. Both platforms have a sizable and diverse audience in China, and the information on these social platforms can be considered representative. It should be pointed out that although the government censors these platforms to a certain extent, they are all private enterprises serving the core interests of the board of directors, which requires a balance between political risk and traffic. This process is carried out under the power transmission with Chinese characteristics. The operation of the platform will be subject to the unclear pressure of the government departments, which also means that it is challenging to study objective public opinion because the strict public opinion control jointly by the procedure and the manual is even carried out simultaneously with the public opinion [8].

The study takes the following information on September 30, 2022, after the public opinion leveling off. On Weibo, a reference to August 1, the topic group of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman's article "if Pelosi dared to Taiwan, it remains to be seen" is the highest in the whole event, all topics related to discuss (over 240,000) and browse (over 2 billion) [9]. The second is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' response and report on Pelosi's arrival in Taiwan (190,000 discussions, browse 1.7 billion) [10]. Among the other topics, the discussion on the official response of China is the most discussed one [11]. It should be noted that in the data collected after the event, its browse volume is still as high as 1.6 billion, but the number of existing discussions is less than 90,000. The platform's control of this topic and subsequent discussions seems very obvious.

The platform Zhihu, on the other hand, has prominent characteristics of non-timeliness and decentralization, and its user group also has stronger right-wing nationalist characteristics mentioned above. The most popular discussion in existing data is on China's official countermeasures, and a separate group is discussing the dissatisfaction with the government's countermeasures [12]. The government should encourage the heated discussion of highly sensitive events on mainstream platforms or at least acquiesce to the government. Compared with the discussion of other more strictly controlled events, it is evident that the many public grievances left behind by them have not achieved the government's intended purpose.

Like most countries with disputed territories, China has always taken a firm stance on the issue of Taiwan. Focusing on many disputed territorial issues is a meaningful way to maintain national

identity. In fact, on the night of the event, the Chinese government did not give a direct response to specific response measures. Until late August 2, just hours before Pelosi arrived, it was still tough and fuzzy the spokesman's position, the specific countermeasures, and the widely discussed military action response at the routine news conference hosted by the Chinese foreign ministry [13]. However, there was a significant deviation from the information conveyed by most Chinese media simultaneously, with obvious military implications.

One possible explanation for the previous official hardline stance and vague response is that it has been a failed deterrent. However, from the perspective of public management, the deviation between the construction of the government image and the spread of public opinion on the Internet became a terrible accident of public relations when the schedule and flight of Pelosi's visit to Taiwan were confirmed. It shows the difference in the propaganda discourse of purely domestic and foreign affairs in China, and these differences have brought about considerable consequences. Due to the continuous lack of description by the international community in China's internal propaganda, based on the solid position maintained by the government in advance, no matter whether the government directly controls the media or not, all follow the interpretation of the official internal propaganda and have a significant misjudgment on China's expected decision. The overall public response to the event even included expectations of military intervention, in contrast to the government's inaction due to realpolitik circumstances. However, after Pelosi's arrival, the Chinese government insisted on the usual tough diplomatic posture, especially some official media continued to reiterate the relevant voice. Objectively, it was made more highlighted the Chinese official image of "tough posture but actual weak action".

On the other hand, most official responses to the whole event adopt the modern nation-state narrative, and the posture of the subject only about China and the United States can also be regarded as an extension of the logic of "China" and "West" as a binary opposition. However, in the daily press conference on August 3, regarding the question of the Chinese public's questioning voice and the government's guidance of public opinion, the Chinese spokesman used the language of "Chinese Communist Party" in the international topic, referring to China as the main body of the political entity, and followed the discourse with the vital ideological topic [14]. This is undoubtedly a reflection of the multiple ideological contradictions in China. When it comes to public issues in China, the government has to adopt the narrative of the Chinese Communist Party, the same structure as the government, which brings a kind of internal legitimacy supported by historical experience and makes the current operation of the public and the whole country trapped in this logic. The statement also suggests an undisguised internal propaganda calculation by the Chinese government. However, the reality is that the Chinese Communist Party itself has historical policy and ideological differences, much less a convincing explanation for them to the public.

Then, public opinion questioned the government's diplomatic toughness, lack of response, and state-directed domestic propaganda. The demands for direct military action against Pelosi and even Taiwan indicate the radicalization of China's nationalism, which is propagated, connived, and even guided by the government through special powers and amplified on commercial social media platforms. Among them, a considerable number of extreme opinions hold that the Chinese government should take destructive military action against Taiwan [12], which precisely shows that the internal discourse system of the Chinese government is not compatible with the construction of self-subjectivity and the description of the status quo of international society. Moreover, Taiwan's position in this discourse system is just in the awkward position between "the West" and "China". The Chinese government has also evaded the issue [15].

On August 5 and beyond, as major countermeasures were enacted and implemented by the Chinese government, supporters of the government on media platforms viewed China's countermeasures as serving particular Chinese interests. They praised the government, while the dissatisfied public still largely believed in more direct military action. The supporters are guided by authoritarian public opinion management. They ignore the contradiction of official discourse and support government propaganda and policies, which cannot solve this contradiction. The discontented faction, on the other

hand, sees problems in the internal decision-making from these contradictions but still wants a more radical solution commensurate with the strong initial remarks of the Foreign Ministry. Either view is out of step with the whole international environment.

5. Conclusions

This study analyzes the Chinese authority's discourse regarding domestic and international problems during the Chinese political transition. These discourses have switched among Confucian tradition, Marxism, and modern nation-state narrative in explaining government organization, ideological core, and policy needs, and follow different political logic and incorporate different ideological propaganda. They are not self-consistent in the broader context and reality of problems. In constructing China's regional great power, many new problems that must be explained undoubtedly aggravate these contradictions.

It is expected that the government will undergo a new internal structure and power transfer following the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Whether the political transition going on for years will be smooth or more intense is unknown. However, the legacy of discursive contradictions and ideological dilemmas will continue to have a profound impact.

The interpretation and choice of these problems mean how the Chinese public and political society develop, whether Chinese internal ideological issues can be better dealt with and whether the Chinese government can carry out political activities more reasonably.

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