

**Chinese Short-Form Social Media Propaganda: A
Case Study of the Communist Youth League's
Douyin Content between November and December
2023**

East Asian Studies/Social Sciences

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Abstract.

Focusing on the popularity of the social media platform Douyin and its unique form of media content, this thesis aims to address research questions concerning contemporary ideotainment propaganda as it exists on the Chinese Communist Youth League's official account. The research questions for this thesis are: (RQ1) As reflected on its official Douyin page, how does the CYL's contemporary ideotainment propaganda approach show its adaptability to its target audience of modern youth (ages 18-30) in an era of advanced technology and social media within the specific November-December 2023 timeframe; (RQ2) By analyzing the narrative elements present in its official Douyin content, how is modern online youth culture (language, artifacts, aesthetic, values, and other cultural expressions) reflected in the way that contemporary propaganda is formulated for social media, and is there an impact on the modern digital propaganda aesthetic when compared to traditional socialist realist styles; (RQ3) Using a combination of analysis methods, to what extent does the content on the CYL's official Douyin utilize traditional style propaganda themes as identified in the pilot (*techno-nationalism, populism, historical narratives, progressive and advanced socialist China, and appeal to youth*) and how does it compare to the thoughtwork guidelines presented by Mao Zedong in the May 1942 Talks at Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art.

Employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, fifty of the CYL's short-form videos uploaded between November and December 2023 were manually collected and examined for traditional Chinese-style propaganda themes, especially those as outlined in the May 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art. The thesis also looked for examples of additional propaganda art styles, such as Chinese-style socialist realism and the contemporary positive energy style.

Through thematic, content, and descriptive statistical analyses, the study finds that the CYL utilizes a blend of traditional and modern digital techniques to generate propagandistic content that specifically appeals to young (aged 18-30) Chinese netizens. Propagandistic themes and styles were coded as either present or not based on the thematic and content analysis to find a percentage of occurrence. This analysis found that the themes were present at the following rates: 88% *appeal to youth*, 90% *populism*, 70% *modern & progressive Socialist China*, 66% *techno-nationalism*, 36% *historical narratives*, reflecting the CYL's ability to combine traditional CCP propaganda techniques with contemporary propaganda mediums and methods like social media and user-generated style content (UGC) to create content that is both party-approved and appeals to the target audience. Additionally, the research concludes that the CYL's Douyin still adheres to the guidelines for CCP thought work set by Mao Zedong at the Yan'an Forum in 1942. By incorporating modern digital artifacts and popular culture, it can be suggested that the CYL can modernize its content and appeal to both the Chinese youth and the CCP propaganda requirements. Finally, the results suggest that the CYL is increasingly able to fluently utilize youth culture to express the CCP's political ideologies in an entertaining and digestible format on social media.

Keywords: Douyin, Chinese Communist Youth League, Propaganda, Digital Populism, Socialist Realism, Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art 1942.

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1 Introduction

“As socialists imagined their ideal to be totally different from capitalism, they attempted to develop a culture that was entirely a matter of their own construction.”

— Andrew Kipnis¹

The Communist Party of China (CPC) was formed in 1921 during a turbulent early 20th century, and in 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded on the mainland, having forced the Kuomintang (KMT) to the island of Taiwan after a brutal civil war (1927-1937, 1945-1949) and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The PRC had maintained diplomatic isolation until the monumental Nixon visit in 1972, marking a global shift during the Cold War that influenced the opening of China up to the introduction of new technologies.

It was the introduction of one modernization that seemed to have the potential for disrupting the status quo in China: the *World Wide Web*. What made the internet appealing to the public is what presented an unprecedented challenge for the CCP: the potential for instantaneous sharing of ideas, global connections, and information dissemination,² all of which could challenge the carefully created image of the CCP in the people's minds.³ For the Party, maintaining ideological control over the Chinese public is of utmost concern as its longevity depends upon it. As such, it must maintain control over all forms of mass media. When the internet was introduced in China in the late 1990s, a new and powerful form of media entered into the Chinese sociopolitical sphere, becoming simultaneously a threat to and a tool for the CCP’s continuation.

Traditionally, controlling the spread of information in China was a straightforward top-down process. The CCP decided what to print, and the government body in control of the press published and distributed it. With no competing news outlets or other sources of varied information, there were no available means for citizens to cross-check information being presented to them. The internet, and later social media, had the power to disrupt this by providing a new outlet for media consumption and ushered in a new era of information flow. Despite the limited capabilities of the 1990s internet, its potential was something the CCP had never encountered previously. As the internet only continued to evolve, the CCP had to start taking proactive steps, implementing firewalls, among other measures, to

¹ Andrew B. Kipnis, *China and Postsocialist Anthropology: Theorizing Power and Society After Communism*, 2008, 15, <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB04912466>.

² I state ‘the potential for’ because of the obvious limitations the internet would have had generally and in 1970s China specifically. Moreover, I believe it would be the *potential* of something that would prove to be dangerous more so than the technology itself.

³ James Berniger, “Who Shall Control Cyberspace?,” in *Communication and Cyberspace: Social Interaction in an Electronic Environment*, ed. Lance Strate et al., 2nd ed. (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2002), 63, <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA43705260>.

control the flow of information coming into China and its spread once there. It viewed the Internet as an existential threat to the established political landscape in China, and the CCP was determined to maintain its control⁴ over both Chinese society and the internet.

Social media has become a significant catalyst in the changing relationship between the government and the governed.⁵ In the past, Party propaganda accounts on well-established social media platforms like Weibo were not generally popular among netizens but has shifted since 2016.⁶ As new generations come, the ways and traditions of the older generations become unfashionable, and government bodies like the CCP need to adapt to their changing styles, ideologies, and sensibilities (or at least maintain the appearance of doing so). Since social media platforms have become the primary source of news information and information sharing for most Chinese netizens, the CCP and CYL have also moved their information sharing online.

By examining a sample of the content found on the CYL's Douyin page, this thesis aims to address a gap in existing scholarship on Chinese social media and its function as a propaganda dissemination medium. Through this assessment and analysis, I hope to form a foundation for future research on the topic of youthful propaganda and the employment of social media, memes, and other youth cultures to make political content appealing. Chapter Two will establish the historical background of the CCP, the CYL, Chinese propaganda, and offer definitions of the propaganda themes that will be discussed in this thesis. Chapter Three will present the literature review and current research on the CYL and its relationship with youth, youth culture, and social media, followed by the methodology in Chapter Four. Chapter Five will list the findings of this thesis' analysis with a discussion of these results in Chapter Six. Finally, Chapter Seven will wrap up this thesis with a summary and suggestions for additional inquiries.

1.1 Thesis and Research Questions

This thesis suggests that the CYL's content uploaded to the platform Douyin is created to be youthful and relatable, which thus demonstrates its adaptability to changing cultural trends, social media cultures, and advancing technology. The CYL's contemporary propaganda employs an ideotainment

⁴ Johan Lagerkvist, "Internet Ideotainment in the PRC: National Responses to Cultural Globalization," *The Journal of Contemporary China/Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 54 (February 1, 2008): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560701693120>.

⁵ Zhengzhi Shi and Guobin Yang, "New Media Empowerment and State-Society Relations in China," in *The Internet, Social Media, and a Changing China*, ed. Jacques deLisle, Avery Goldstein, and Guobin Yang, 1st ed. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 72.

⁶ Shaohua Guo, "'Occupying' the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online," *Communication and the Public* 3, no. 1 (February 7, 2018): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047318755166>.

style, utilizing the interests of its target audience by appropriating its media culture, including memes, popular culture, and internet lingo – while still maintaining elements of the more traditional CCP propaganda style, socialist realism guidelines, and Mao Zedong’s directives given at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art.

This thesis endeavored to address the following research questions:

RQ1: As reflected on its official Douyin page, how does the CYL's contemporary ideotainment propaganda approach show its adaptability to its target audience of modern youth (ages 18-30) in an era of advanced technology and social media within the specific November-December 2023 timeframe?

RQ2: By analyzing the narrative elements present in its official Douyin content, how is modern online youth culture (language, artifacts, aesthetic, values, and other cultural expressions) reflected in the way that contemporary propaganda is formulated for social media, and is there an impact on the modern digital propaganda aesthetic when compared to traditional socialist realist styles?

RQ3: Using a combination of analysis methods, to what extent does the content on the CYL's official Douyin utilize traditional style propaganda themes as identified in the pilot (*techno-nationalism, populism, historical narratives, progressive and advanced socialist China, and appeal to youth*) and how does it compare to the thoughtwork guidelines presented by Mao Zedong in the May 1942 Talks at Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art?

1.2 Research Gap and Contribution

This thesis aims to address a gap in the existing scholarship about the function of Chinese social media as a medium for propaganda dissemination and form a foundation for future research to expand off of. By selecting a relatively new social media platform like Douyin, I intend to offer novel insight into how Chinese propaganda has adapted to contemporary digital culture in order to appeal to young adults and secure the Party’s continuing relevancy in an increasingly engaged and informed modern, technologically-advanced society.

During the 2016 Leon Dai Incident⁷ on Weibo, the CYL began to use language that mirrored the informal tone of young netizens influencing and inspiring patriotism and populism among young

⁷ The Leon Dai Incident refers to a scandal where renowned actor-director Leon Dai from Taiwan was suggested to have sympathies for Taiwanese Independence. His reputation suffered as a result of the backlash on social

users.⁸ From then on, it has continued to structure its online persona to match that of an influencer or idol rather than a government body.⁹ The research by Anthony Fung and Yunyi Hu (*Douyin, Storytelling, and National Discourse*, 2022) showed how Douyin can be a platform that underscores unity and cohesion through a new form of cultural production centered around its userbase. This research was fundamental for an intimate understanding of Douyin and the unique culture on the platform in terms of propaganda content. Additional research by Lu and Pan (*The Pervasive Presence of Chinese Government Content on Douyin Trending Videos*, 2021) on Douyin's trending page found that trending content often contained government related content and the "pervasive presence of the Chinese regime" on the platform.¹⁰ Their study focused on general trending content and took a commendably large dataset of over 50,000 unique videos. As such, this study does not focus on a specific user or content creator but a theme: trending content. Both of these studies were focused on different aspects of the platform and how it is used whereas this thesis attempted to focus on just one content creator, the CYL, and its specific content.

Research by Lu Yingdan and Jennifer Pan (*Capturing Clicks: How the Chinese Government Uses Clickbait to Compete for Visibility*, 2021) determined that government accounts on the instant messaging app WeChat use an advertisement-style propaganda content that utilizes clickbait and other such styles of attracting engagement.¹¹ While offering valuable insight into governmental use of advertising techniques in propaganda to promote engagement with content, their analysis focused solely on WeChat. Compared to Douyin, this app has a distinct user engagement style and content format, and other social media platforms. Research by Xu Chen, D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, and Jing Zheng (*#PositiveEnergy Douyin: Constructing 'Playful Patriotism' in a Chinese Short-Video Application*, 2021) addressed Douyin content and specifically positive energy style propaganda. Similar to the previous research on Douyin by Lu and Pan (*The Pervasive Presence of Chinese Government Content on Douyin Trending Videos*, 2021), this study contained a larger dataset than this thesis will use, in addition to using a different data collection method, the app walkthrough method.¹² Their conclusions were that the platform facilitated positive energy content and that Douyin has

media, especially on Weibo. Guo, "'Occupying' the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online," 20.

⁷ Guo, "'Occupying' the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online," 20.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Yingdan Lu and Jennifer Pan, "The Pervasive Presence of Chinese Government Content on Douyin Trending Videos," *Computational Communication Research* 4, no. 1 (February 1, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.5117/ccr2022.2.002.lu>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ben Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay, "The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (November 11, 2016): 881–900, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816675438>.

become “a digital enclave”¹³ for this style of playful patriotism.¹⁴ These two pieces of research focused on advertisement-style and positive energy style content, where the authorship of the content was less important than the themes.

The extensive research by An Xiao Mina (*Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man: A Case Study in Social Change Memes and Internet Censorship in China*, 2014; *Memes to Movements: How the World’s Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power*, 2019) on the sociopolitical aspects of memes was vital to this thesis because of its detailed analysis of memes in both Chinese and American sociopolitical contexts. While broad and not limited to a specific social media platform, her discussion of the nuances of Chinese memes detailed a history of internet-style youth culture through digital artifacts such as the grass mud horse.¹⁵ Her analysis was not even specific to the internet; she also discussed how memes can have real world impact on society. This in-depth analysis’ focus was on the creation of memes and how they spread in a digital environment. I attempted to take this understanding and build on how the CYL specifically appropriates this style of content creation for its own political purposes.

Further, Bingchun Meng’s research on memes (*From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: E Gao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet*, 2011) provided additional insight into memes in Chinese political discourse online. It introduced the concept of internet memes both as political discourse and as coded language used to circumvent government censors and express ideas and concepts that might be less than politically or ideologically correct.¹⁶ Meng’s research focused on the general use of memes in online discourses from the point of view of the netizen rather than from a government organization like the CYL. Both studies by Mina and Meng are focused on the youth’s authorship of memes and how these artifacts function for youth as a form of cultural expression and identity.

Arguably the most impactful research on the CYL and its shift to the use of youth culture online that was referred to for this thesis was the research by Jérôme Doyon (*Low-cost Corporatism?: The Chinese Communist Youth League and its Sub-organizations in post-Mao China*, 2019; *The Strength of a Weak Organization: The Communist Youth League as a Path to Power in Post-Mao China*, 2019; *Rejuvenating Communism: Youth Organizations and Elite Renewal in Post-Mao China*, 2023) and

¹³ Xu Chen, D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, and Jing Zeng, “#PositiveEnergyDouyin: constructing ‘playful patriotism’ in a Chinese short-video application,” *Chinese Journal of Communication* 14, no. 1 (May 12, 2020): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2020.1761848>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ An Xiao Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World’s Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power* (Beacon Press, 2019).

¹⁶ Bingchun Meng, “From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: E Gao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet,” *Global Media and Communication* 7, no. 1 (2011): 33–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766510397938>.

Konstantinos Tsimonis (2012, “*(De)Mobilising and (Mis)Representing ‘Youth’ in the Chinese Workplace: Political Dependency, Generational Subordination and Corporatisation in the Communist Youth League; ‘Keep the Party Assured and the Youth [Not] Satisfied’: The Communist Youth League and Chinese University Students*, 2017) and the research they performed together (*Apathy Is Not Enough: Changing Modes of Student Management in Post-Mao China*, 2022). These studies detail the CYL’s relationship with the youth and the CCP, illustrating how the government organization is adjusting its real-life community engagement, especially since the 1989, when the organization was facing increased oversight. Their research formed a foundational and fundamental base to understand the complicated history of the CYL, its complex relationship with the CCP, and how it interacts with youth through generations since its founding in the early 1920s.

By appropriating online and youth cultures, the CYL uses these contemporary styles of communication to continue to maintain its youthful, approachable appeal. This thesis intends to fill the gaps in the current understanding of how this specific CCP organization engages with youth and new forms of social media. By focusing on a specific platform, Douyin, a specific author, the CYL, and a specific time range, November to December 2023, I hope to offer an insight into how this specific organization has adapted its ideotainment propaganda model to function successfully on a unique social media platform.

2 Background

In order to establish a foundation for this thesis, a quick summary of the overall history of the Communist Party in China, the Youth League, Chinese propaganda styles and themes, among others will be presented in this chapter. This is not intended to be an in-depth presentation of Chinese history but just a summary of important events and concepts significant to this thesis.

Firstly, the Communist Party of China (CPC) was formed in 1921 during intense political and social upheaval and faced considerable hardships until 1949, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded on the mainland, after the Kuomintang (KMT) retreated to the island of Taiwan after a brutal civil war (1927-1937, 1945-1949) and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) that overlapped World War II (1939-1945). Afterward, the PRC maintained diplomatic isolation until the United States' President Richard Nixon's visit in 1972, which partly influenced the opening of China diplomatically in the middle of the Cold War. This opening up of the PRC to the world allowed for the introduction of modern technologies into the PRC in the time since it had closed itself off from the rest of the world. It was the introduction of one modernization in particular that held the most potential to disrupt the sociopolitical status quo in China: the World Wide Web.

What made the internet appealing to the public is exactly what presented this unprecedented challenge for the CCP. The potential for instantaneous sharing of ideas, global connections, and information dissemination,¹⁷ all of which could challenge the carefully created image of the CCP and its leadership in the people's minds.¹⁸ Traditionally, controlling the spread of information in China was a straightforward top-down process. The CCP decided what to print, and the government body in control of the media published and distributed it to the masses. With no competing news outlets or other sources for alternate or additional information, there were no available means for citizens to challenge or contradict the information being presented on a similar scale. The internet, and later various social media platforms, had the power to disrupt this expansive control that the CCP had carefully built for itself by providing a new outlet for media consumption and information sharing that could challenge the traditional top-down flow.

Despite the limited capabilities of the 1990s internet by today's standard, its potential for disruption was something the CCP had never encountered previously. As the internet only continued to evolve over time, the Party began to take proactive steps such as implementing firewalls among other measures to control the flow of information coming into China and its spread once there. It viewed the

¹⁷ I state 'the potential for' because of the obvious limitations the internet would have had generally and in 1970s China specifically. Moreover, I believe it would be the potential of something that would prove to be dangerous more so than the technology itself.

¹⁸ James Berniger, "Who Shall Control Cyberspace?," in *Communication and Cyberspace: Social Interaction in an Electronic Environment*, ed. Lance Strate et al., 2nd ed. (Hampton Press, 2002), 63.

internet as an existential threat to the established social and political order in China, and the CCP was determined to maintain its control¹⁹ over both by establishing total control over the internet.

2.1 Social Media and Internet Censorship in China

Internet censorship in China is multifaceted, ever evolving, and notoriously strict. It is prone to changing as the Party identifies new perceived threats to the sociopolitical status quo. There are many methods by which this censorship manifests. Famous and well-cited examples include the banning of popular Western social media platforms and search engines and the implementation of a powerfully restrictive firewall, popularly referred to as the Great Firewall of China. Aside from these examples, other well-known censored items include discussions of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre and the iconic image of Tank Man, along with politically sensitive terms like *human rights*. As one might expect, this strict and evolving censorship severely limits discussions online. However, to control the internet is to control the flow of information. By banning popular Western social media platforms, it can be assumed that the CCP was generally successful at moderating the internet in China. To fill the space left by Western social media, Chinese versions of these banned platforms emerged, including Sina and Tencent Weibo,²⁰ both microblogging sites akin to Twitter or Bluesky. These new platforms have proved popular by their own merit and have evolved into more unique platforms that have distinguished themselves from Western equivalents. For example, Weibo and RedNote both have an e-commerce aspect to them, which Twitter and Instagram do not yet have.²¹

Regardless of how these platforms have evolved over time, they are still subject to government censorship, to party control, and propaganda. Social media has become a significant catalyst in the changing relationship between the government and the governed.²² As new generations come, the ways and traditions of the older generations become unfashionable, and government bodies like the CCP need to adapt to changing styles, ideologies, and sensibilities (or at least maintain the appearance of doing so). Since social media platforms have become the primary source of news information and information sharing for most Chinese (and Western) netizens, the CCP and CYL have also moved their information sharing online.

As a core part of the party, the CYL's social media content has primarily been straightforward propaganda and governmental notices, and, consequently, the accounts were not very popular among

¹⁹ Lagerkvist, "Internet Ideotainment in the PRC: National Responses to Cultural Globalization," 121.

²⁰ Tencent has since absorbed Sina Weibo into its own and the platform is now known as just Weibo.

²¹ Separate from influencer marketing where brands pay influencers on websites like YouTube and TikTok to sell their goods or services, the customer would still have to be redirected to the brand or company website to purchase where goods can be bought directly on RedNote, for example.

²² Shi and Yang, "New Media Empowerment and State-Society Relations in China," 72.

young netizens who comprised their target audience.²³ In 2016, a notable shift in the ‘popularity’ of the CYL Weibo account occurred, specifically during the Leon Dai incident. Summarized succinctly by Guo Shaohua, the Leon Dai incident involved the Taiwanese actor-director, Leon Dai, who “was removed from his role in Zhao Wei’s film *No Other Love*, on 15 July 2016, because of his alleged ideological support of Taiwanese independence.”²⁴ The CYL’s Weibo posts during this time were crucial in inspiring nationalistic sentiment in young Chinese netizens and mobilized online collective actions.²⁵ Also during this timeframe, it became clear that the CYL had started to appropriate youth culture,²⁶ that is, altering its content style and tone to emulate the pre- and well-established internet culture of Chinese youth.

2.2 The Chinese Communist Youth League

Chen Duxiu is credited with the formation of the Chinese Communist Youth League (CYL) in the early 1920s.²⁷ The organization is comparable in size to the CCP and is “one of [the] most prominent political organizations in the world.”²⁸ The primary function of the organization is to train the next generation of CCP members,²⁹ recruit young people for mass mobilization efforts and political movements,³⁰ and act as a “reservoir” of and for the CCP.³¹ Since the Mao era, the CYL is the main channel for the ongoing recruitment of CCP officials³² and thus is essential to sustaining the current political status quo. Yet, maintaining the organization’s attractiveness to younger generations while also walking the party line leaves the CYL’s leading officials with an evolving challenge to retain their relevance in an ever-changing world.

Recent studies on the CYL have shown that its appeal to the youth has become limited at best, and its role for political indoctrination has declined since the 1980s.³³ After the Tiananmen Square democracy protests in 1989, and as an answer to the ever-evolving socioeconomic environment in China, the CYL

²³ Guo, “‘Occupying’ the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online,” 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20, 22.

²⁷ People’s Political Consultative Conference, “The May 4th Movement and the Establishment of the Chinese Communist Youth League,” Tianjin Research Institute for Advanced Equipment, Tsinghua University, May 4, 2017, <https://en.tsinghua-tj.org/news/4365.html>.

²⁸ Jérôme Doyon, *Rejuvenating Communism: Youth Organizations and Elite Renewal in Post-Mao China* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States of America: University of Michigan Press, 2023):781, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12291596>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Shaohua Guo, “‘Occupying’ the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online,” *Communication and the Public* 3, no. 1 (February 7, 2018): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047318755166>.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³² Doyon, *Rejuvenating Communism: Youth Organizations and Elite Renewal in Post-Mao China*, 21.

³³ Doyon, “The Strength of a Weak Organization: The Communist Youth League as a Path to Power in Post-Mao China,” 781.

was forced to change its strategies again in order to remain attractive to the youth.³⁴ Retaining university students as League members has been identified as an ongoing challenge for the organization³⁵ because “students exhibit an even more cynical stance on both the league's newfound inclusivity and efficiency,”³⁶ and yet membership is vital for the League to maintain the youth’s loyalties because they are “the social group from which the new middle class and socioeconomic elite will emerge,”³⁷ and as such, will become the next generation of CCP members and loyalty to the Party is paramount to its ongoing survival.

The CYL has adapted to social changes of the newer generations in order to maintain its attractiveness. In 2003, after President Hu Jintao instructed the CYL to “keep the youth satisfied”³⁸ by expanding and increasing offered services and recreational activities, it began to organize job fairs, CV seminars, and seminars on interview skills to empower recent graduates in the career hunt post-graduation.³⁹ Akin in many ways to the former Soviet Union’s Komsomol,⁴⁰ one of the CYL’s core aspects is providing recreational activities for young people in China and preparing them for life after university. For example, the CYL has organized “sports competitions, dinners and karaoke nights, visits to museums and parks, excursions, horse riding, climbing, calligraphy and [sic] painting classes,”⁴¹ among other activities that “promote values such as teamwork, loyalty to the company, vitality and [sic] creativity.”⁴² Despite this apparent increase in participatory activities, a 2010 survey showed that students at two elite universities in Beijing “either rejected the CYL outright or chose to participate as little as possible, with only two in ten students reporting participation in the CYL’s monthly events.”⁴³ While already over a decade old, this survey still provides some insight into why the Party was concerned about the state of students’ political participation and the subsequent actions taken to rectify it since.

³⁴ Doyon, “The Strength of a Weak Organization: The Communist Youth League as a Path to Power in Post-Mao China,” 18.

³⁵ Konstantinos Tsimonis, “‘Keep the Party Assured and the Youth [Not] Satisfied’: The Communist Youth League and Chinese University Students,” *Modern China* 44, no. 2 (October 6, 2017): 171, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700417732561>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

³⁸ Jérôme Doyon and Konstantinos Tsimonis, “Apathy Is Not Enough: Changing Modes of Student Management in Post-Mao China,” *Europe Asia Studies* 74, no. 7 (July 14, 2022): 1132, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2089349>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Konstantinos Tsimonis, “(De)Mobilising and (Mis)Representing ‘Youth’ in the Chinese Workplace: Political Dependency, Generational Subordination and Corporatisation in the Communist Youth League,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 20, no. 10 (May 31, 2017): 1374, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1333584>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1373.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Doyon and Tsimonis, “Apathy Is Not Enough: Changing Modes of Student Management in Post-Mao China,” 1133.

The CYL “needs to expand... beyond [the] traditional tasks of indoctrinating, mobilizing, and preparing young people for party membership [to] moderate its formal and bureaucratic outlook and processes to allow for meaningful participation.”⁴⁴ A 2022 article suggested that university students were more likely to participate in CYL-organized activities, yet the majority still chose to participate as little as possible or not at all.⁴⁵ With the rate of engagement in real-life events being as dismal as detailed in these surveys and articles, it only makes sense then that the CYL would also attempt to engage with youth online as well.

However, the CYL faces another problem besides engagement. By design, its existence and continued operations are wholly dependent on the CCP.⁴⁶ By itself, the CYL is reportedly a weak organization that lacks proper funding.⁴⁷ In its 2022 White Papers on modern Chinese youth, the CCP clearly states that the CYL would have achieved little without the party’s assistance and continued support.⁴⁸ Highly dependent on the CCP, the CYL no longer retains much political power as it had in the past⁴⁹ and holds even less as the current party leader and president Xi Jinping continues to consolidate his control of the political sphere.⁵⁰

2.3 Chinese Propaganda

Broadly speaking, propaganda consists of five main components: (1) promoting a cause, (2) telling partial truths, (3) simplifying complex issues, (4) playing on emotions, and (5) repetition.⁵¹ However, the English term does not directly translate into Chinese. The Chinese equivalent of *propaganda* is 宣传 *xuānchuán*. Notably, *xuānchuán* does not contain the same negative connotative definition that the English term ‘*propaganda*’ carries. Instead, it is a benign term that is more often understood as “a positive way of imparting certain points of view to its intended audience.”⁵² In addition to providing typical propaganda-style content that promoted “glorified depictions of communist values” and state

⁴⁴ Tsimonis, “‘Keep the Party Assured and the Youth [Not] Satisfied’: The Communist Youth League and Chinese University Students,” 171–72.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 1135.

⁴⁶ Tsimonis, “(De)Mobilising and (Mis)Representing ‘Youth’ in the Chinese Workplace: Political Dependency, Generational Subordination and Corporatisation in the Communist Youth League,” 1376.

⁴⁷ Doyon, “The Strength of a Weak Organization: The Communist Youth League as a Path to Power in Post-Mao China,” 781.

⁴⁸ The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “Youth of China in the New Era.”

⁴⁹ Doyon, “The Strength of a Weak Organization: The Communist Youth League as a Path to Power in Post-Mao China,” 784.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 797.

⁵¹ Chang-Tai Hung, *Politics of Control*, eBook, *University of Hawaii Press eBooks* (University of Hawaii Press, 2021), 119, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824886905>.

⁵² Ibid.

affairs,⁵³ *xuānchuán* content was also used to exemplify the type of behavior that citizens should seek to model⁵⁴ in their daily lives. This is a core aspect of propaganda in China and is necessary to keep in mind when doing any research into the topic. As such, Chinese propaganda is not wholly negative. It cannot and should not be conflated with propaganda as it exists in the West, even if there are some commonalities between the two. In other words, *disseminating propaganda* in the contemporary Chinese context is more about *information sharing* than imparting biased or misleading information to promote a specific political cause, as it usually does in the West. This more positive interpretation of the concept suggests that, for China, *xuānchuán* “is not only communication information based on the leader’s will” but also that the imparting of this news is for the betterment of the people.⁵⁵ This is reflected, for example, in Mao-era propaganda posters but also in contemporary thought work like the government’s promotion of *positive energy* content. *Xuānchuán* is a highly complex and nuanced term and, although I will be using the term *propaganda* going forward, it should be understood with *xuānchuán* in mind.

Where Western-style propaganda is often negative, fearmongering, and based in mis- or dis-information, Chinese propaganda is a mode of information sharing combined with the glorification of the Party, its policies, and Party-approved thought. It relies on the idea that the information being shared is beneficial to the public, will improve their lives upon their consumption of the propaganda is thus markedly different from propaganda as Westerners tend to think of it. In the case of the PRC, much of what characterizes traditional CCP propaganda took shape during the Yan’an Era (1936-1947)⁵⁶ and, more specifically, in Mao Zedong’s speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art. While these methods may have adapted to changing circumstances over the decades since they were first developed, the hallmarks of these original party propaganda techniques are just as relevant today as they were then.⁵⁷

2.3.1 Defining Traditional Chinese Propaganda Themes

The themes that will be discussed in this thesis were determined after the pilot study described in the Methodology chapter and will be defined in this subchapter, especially as they relate to China and this study. Chinese propaganda spans a wide breadth of themes over as many years, so for the sake of brevity, only the themes and their associated motifs that are discussed will be defined: (1) *techno-*

⁵³ Michael Ranta, “Mao’s Homeworld(s) – a Comment on The Use of Propaganda Posters in Post-war China,” *Semiotica* 2020, no. 232 (January 1, 2020): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2019-0054>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Hung, *Politics of Control*, 119.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

nationalism, (2) historical narratives, (3) populism, (4) modern and progressive socialist China, and (5) appeal to youth.

Techno-nationalism has long been a significant and core theme of the propaganda and frames national pride around the *technology* the country produces. Within the Chinese context, techno-nationalism embodies the CCP's belief that technology and scientific advancement are a crucial element of national security, a vital national asset,⁵⁸ and a source of national pride.⁵⁹ Chinese techno-nationalism⁶⁰ was borne out of the Party's concerns about the lack of "indigenous technology" and thus China's dependency on foreign technology.⁶¹ As stated before, *techno-nationalism* links a nation's technological capabilities and advancements to its national security, economic prosperity, and social stability in response to increasing global competition between different economic development ideologies.⁶² Considering *technology* is a rather broad concept, the most common examples used in decades of Chinese propaganda seem to be military equipment and machinery, based on observation from the pilot phase for this research and exploration of the library of CCP propaganda posters from the Landsberger⁶³ Collection housed in the Netherlands.⁶⁴ Even as technology advances, the way it is portrayed in propaganda content remains remarkably consistent with the previous decades' often zealous portrayal as a source of national pride.

Additionally, *nationalism* "is a set of beliefs about the nation," formed around "a profound sense of togetherness and similarity," such as a common language.⁶⁵ It becomes a vital source of identity; "Nationalism says that our membership in a nation takes precedence and ultimately must guide our choices and actions."⁶⁶ As such, it is more than simple patriotism; it is the belief of nation over self. Chinese nationalism can be traced back to what is commonly referred to as China's "Hundred Years of Humiliation" and the struggle against Western imperialist forces since as early as the late 1830s with

⁵⁸ Hung, *Politics of Control*, 103.

⁵⁹ Anthony Fung and Yunyi Hu, "Douyin, Storytelling, and National Discourse," *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 9, no. 3–4 (December 1, 2022): 143, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40636-022-00259-z>.

⁶⁰ Like a lot of other concepts, there is a specific Chinese variant of techno-nationalism as well. Going forward, "Techno-nationalism with Chinese characteristics" is what I will refer to as 'techno-nationalism' unless otherwise stated.

⁶¹ Cong Cao, "Chinese Technonationalism", review of *China's Techno-Warriors: National Security and Strategic Competition from the Nuclear to the Information Age*, by Evan A. Feigenbaum, *Metascience* 13, (2004): 71.

⁶² "Techno-nationalism and Its Impact on Geopolitics and Trade," Hinrich Foundation, February 21, 2023, <https://www.hinrichfoundation.com/research/article/tech/techno-nationalism-impact-on-geopolitics-and-trade/>.

⁶³ Stefan Landsberger (1955-2024) was a sinologist from Leiden University in The Netherlands who was "fascinated by totalitarian propaganda". His collection of Chinese propaganda posters is one of the largest private collections in the world. May his memory be a blessing. "Stefan R. Landsberger (1955-2024)," chineseposters.net, October 2024, <https://chineseposters.net/about/landsberger>.

⁶⁴ "Chinese Posters" (Chinese Posters Foundation, September 2007), <https://chinaposters.net>.

⁶⁵ Renaud-Philippe Garner, "Nationalism," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, May 17, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.2039>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

the first Opium War (1839-1842).⁶⁷ In propaganda, this aspect of the *techno-nationalism* theme can appear in slogans and in national imagery.

The propaganda theme referred to as *historical narratives* in this thesis is when an event is repurposed to suit the needs of the propagandists, underscoring the importance of historical perception can be in forming nationalistic sentiments. The creation of a shared mutual identity can be found in a shared past. As such, history also becomes a core component of propaganda production, particularly in an era of social media and the internet when the potential for distribution is so extensive. A primary goal of the *historical narrative* theme in contemporary propaganda content is to create an emotional connection between a younger generation to the history of the nation and the history of the CCP in particular. *Historical narratives* is especially effective in ideotainment thoughtwork⁶⁸ like television dramas and movies because these can form compelling visual portrayals of the specific stories that the Party wants to tell⁶⁹ and have that narrative form in the memories of the audience, thus relying on the narrative to carry the desired political message.⁷⁰

Populism is a sociopolitical concept that has two main groups: the people and the elite. The people are presented as morally good, and the elite as corrupt and against the people.⁷¹ However, who makes up each group is malleable according to a politician's agenda. A prime example would be Republican President Donald Trump and 2016 Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, both running populist campaigns but from very different sides of the political aisle.⁷² How they identified 'the people' and 'the elite' could not have been more different, highlighting the difficulty in pinpointing an exact, concise definition of populism. An important aspect of *populism* is the exclusion of those "who are different from 'us'."⁷³

Moreover, populism in China manifests differently than how it might elsewhere. In China, populism is decentralized,⁷⁴ and "relies on spontaneous collaborative efforts for collective action."⁷⁵ Although generally having the same definition as above, how the two groups are defined is different from it might be in Western politics. There are three key aspects of what constitutes *the people* in Chinese

⁶⁷ Chen, Kaye, and Zeng, "#PositiveEnergyDouyin: Constructing 'Playful Patriotism' in a Chinese Short-Video Application," 101.

⁶⁸ Fung and Hu, "Douyin, Storytelling, and National Discourse," 143.

⁶⁹ Guo, "'Occupying' the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online," 21.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ "Populism," in European Center for Populism Studies, n.d., <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/populism/>.

⁷² Michael Kruse, "Trump Reclaims the Word 'Elite' With Vengeful Pride: Long the Resentful Outsider, Trump Took Aim at the 'Elites' to Win in 2016. Now, as President, He Wants to Claim the Title for Himself.," *Politico Magazine*, November 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/11/01/donald-trump-elite-trumpology-221953/>.

⁷³ Guo, "'Occupying' the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online," 22.

⁷⁴ Christo Pretorius and Radoslav Valev, "Populist Authoritarianism in China: National and Global Perspectives," April 28, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0055>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

populism: internal (Chinese) versus external (foreign), intellectuals and their domination over cultural production and institutions as well as the established values and norms, and impoverished, vulnerable, and marginalized netizens.⁷⁶ As such, in the Chinese context, non-Chinese foreigners⁷⁷ are more often than not considered to be of the elite group alongside Chinese intellectuals and other cultural elites.⁷⁸ Summarized by Guo Shaohua, the CYL's approach to (digital) populism has three core aspects: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and style.⁷⁹

Modern and progressive Socialist China closely resembles the ways in which China was to be portrayed in Maoist-era style Socialist Realism: as being both recognizable as modern China and as an idealistic, egalitarian representation of Chinese society. Of the themes in this thesis, this is the closest one to resembling traditional CCP propaganda⁸⁰ in modern digital contexts.

Appeal to youth is arguably the most important theme in this research given the CYL's target demographic of young adults aged 18 to 30. Therefore, appealing to them is very important for effective propaganda dissemination. Rigid political content is not typically well received by youth, who tend to be more interested in pop culture, sports, and games and concerned more about their daily situations, such as studying, working, and social lives. Thus, to get their attention in or to foster positive engagement while disseminating the party-approved narratives and themes, the CYL has adapted its propaganda strategy to incorporate more authentic depictions of everyday life, casual and relatable content along with political content while also using more casual language and employing the popular culture they enjoy.⁸¹ As discussed in previous sections, the CYL's initial foray into youth cultures was clumsy and not necessarily well received, thus not very successful. However, they have perfected the craft with more age-appropriate editing, the incorporation of memes, and linguistic choices.

2.4 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art

The Talks at Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in May 1942 was a pivotal moment for both the future course of art and propaganda in China moving forward, and for Mao Zedong as the future leader of the CCP and founder of the PRC. At this forum, Mao identified five core concepts in art,

⁷⁶ Pretorius and Valev, "Populist Authoritarianism in China: National and Global Perspectives."

⁷⁷ Dr. Ibrahim Ozturk's speech about Chinese populism and the Belt and Road Project indicates that 'foreigners' usually refers to European and American countries as opposed to African and other Asian countries. Pretorius and Valev, "Populist Authoritarianism in China: National and Global Perspectives."

⁷⁸ Pretorius and Valev, "Populist Authoritarianism in China: National and Global Perspectives"; Guo, "'Occupying' the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online," 30.

⁷⁹ Guo, "'Occupying' the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online," 22.

⁸⁰ "Chinese Posters."

⁸¹ Guo, "'Occupying' the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online."

information sharing, and cultural production in China: position, attitude, audience, work, and study.⁸² In his speeches, he identified cultural work as key to the ideological transformation of the country by giving support to everyday people (“workers, peasants, and soldiers”) and framing the ongoing narrative in such a way that it became possible for them to see themselves reflected in their own history and stories.⁸³ Using the 1919 May Fourth Movement’s cultural thought work as an example, Mao criticized the movement as being too intellectual and out of touch with the peasant class.⁸⁴ The main critique was that previous cultural thoughtwork was unsuccessful due to the intellectual authors who were making content that was too out of touch with the population and their experiences. It is only by creating cultural artifacts that both glorify the ideology of the CCP while also lauding the experiences of the peasant class that the artifacts can be successful as a medium for propaganda dissemination.⁸⁵

Mao’s speech at the Yan’an Forum was the point in which it was determined that artwork under the Communist Party should serve two main purposes: (1) the extolling of the “struggles, aspirations, and ‘brightness’ of the people”⁸⁶ and (2) exposing the darkness and evil of the enemy, which, in the 1940s, was predominantly imperial Japan but could ultimately be any foreign power encroaching on China.⁸⁷ Mao suggested that the only way for the current intellectual class to avoid the errors of the 1919 May Fourth Movement was “through immersion and work in the countryside.”⁸⁸ Only in this way “could these urban intellectuals transform themselves into revolutionary workers and produce artistic creations that truly served the people” and effectively utilize the “rich, lively language of the masses.”⁸⁹ This forum became the basis for cultural production by which the Communist Party would abide going forward until the current era.

From the formation of the PRC, the Party has “spent considerable time and energy building a network of cultural control of the Chinese people”⁹⁰ and has recognized the importance of adapting to social changes to retain its power. Party leaders have been dedicated to cultivating a very specific worldview for its people. From the Yan’an Talks on Art and Literature to the present day, the Party has proven its ability to adapt along with evolving sociopolitical landscapes and use culture to create propaganda that speaks to the people. The CCP works hard to provide the people with one truth as opposed to a “plurality of ideas”⁹¹ that may differ from the very carefully crafted worldview. This is representative

⁸² “Go To Yan’an: Culture and National Liberation,” Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, May 16, 2022, 8, https://thetricontinental.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/20220511_Dossier-52_EN_Web.pdf.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Hung, *Politics of Control*, 120.

⁹¹ Ibid, 121.

of the traditional style of propaganda dissemination, which flows from the top (the state) down (the people). What is being witnessed on social media platforms in China today is the CCP's ability to adapt to evolving trends and technologies. The CCP is adapting its political and cultural thought-work methodologies for an era of increasingly advanced technologies and for a contemporary population who are increasingly engaged with the world through social media.

2.5 Socialist Realism

Socialist realism is an artistic and literary style which originated in August 1934 in the USSR during the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers under the leadership of Maksim Gor'kii. During this congress, rules for a new official aesthetic for all artforms were outlined and would have to be adhered to.⁹² These new rules declared that reality is to be depicted optimistically and made to foster complete and total trust in the Party, its leaders, and its policies.⁹³ Art under this style needs to depict “the indescribably glorious future already illuminating the wonderful present... or risk execution.”⁹⁴ It also required artists to show only “the struggle between ‘good and better’”⁹⁵ in the nation because the opposite, “the struggle between ‘bad and worse,’” belonged to the “evil West.”⁹⁶ With these constraints in mind, the depiction of what is ‘real’ is not necessarily an accurate depiction of the lived reality. In more modern vernacular, these depictions could possibly be described as having *rose-colored lenses*. The reality displayed in socialist realism was the “detailed, pseudo-realistic depiction of reality” and was no more than “dreams of reality.”⁹⁷ This concept is present as well in the cultural creation under the Yan’an Forum’s suggestion; by depicting the brightness of the people and of current events, this dissemination of information through art is a prime example of Chinese-style propaganda in the early years of the CCP.⁹⁸ Only six years after its creation in the Soviet Union, socialist realism became the favored style of the Chinese Communist Party and took on a slightly different form so that it was more suitable to the Chinese populations.⁹⁹

Chinese propaganda art made “extensive use of Socialist Realism”¹⁰⁰ even before it became the mandated style in the 1940s¹⁰¹ and after, many Chinese artists were sent to the USSR for additional

⁹² Masing-Delic, ed., *From Symbolism to Socialist Realism, From Symbolism to Socialist Realism* (Brighton, Massachusetts, United States of America: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 306, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kutu/detail.action?docID=3110481>.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁹⁸ “Go To Yan’an: Culture and National Liberation,” 9.

⁹⁹ Ranta, “Mao’s Homeworld(s) – a Comment on The Use of Propaganda Posters in Post-War China,” 58.

¹⁰⁰ “Visualizing the Future,” *ChinesePosters.net*, n.d., <https://chinesePosters.net/themes/future>.

¹⁰¹ Ranta, “Mao’s Homeworld(s) – a Comment on The Use of Propaganda Posters in Post-War China,” 58.

training in the art form.¹⁰² Like previously mentioned, it was adapted to better suit China's cultural and artistic tastes¹⁰³ which is a major indicator that the CCP is not exactly rigid in the application of its strategies. It is willing to take advantage of different styles and techniques if they work and adapt them to best suit its needs. Propaganda art created during this time quickly became a vital medium for transmitting party-approved ideology,¹⁰⁴ in particular, Mao Thought,¹⁰⁵ and attempted to transition Chinese society from Confucian superstition by replacing it with the party's political themes¹⁰⁶ and ideologies in an early attempt to modernize Chinese culture from the CCP's perspective. Another major aspect was that it incorporated instructive narratives that told the "politically and/or morally endorsed stories of model citizens."¹⁰⁷

Although there are aspects of socialist realism reflected in Mao Zedong's Yan'an 1942 speech, there are key differences to note, such as the importance of the peasant class and the role they ought to have in the propaganda. Typical propaganda themes during the early years of the PRC included role models like Mao and model peasants,¹⁰⁸ along with military or revolutionary successes,¹⁰⁹ industrial settings and agrarian utopias,¹¹⁰ domestic and international forces that threaten the social order,¹¹¹ the superiority of the Han people,¹¹² social life,¹¹³ (pseudo-) historicism,¹¹⁴ and the Communist Party.¹¹⁵ Many of these themes have proven longevity in the Chinese propaganda machine, such as the depiction of a strong military, threats to the Chinese social order/status quo, social life, and the Communist Party. Although the media environment in China has certainly changed since the Mao era, current propaganda content still maintains many of these themes.

Contrasting with traditional approaches of propaganda content that often functioned as education for viewers on socialist, revolutionary, and/or party doctrine,¹¹⁶ these traditional propaganda topics and techniques do not readily adapt to the digital media environment,¹¹⁷ especially on social media platforms where users are encouraged to actively engage with the site's content. Because users are

¹⁰² Ranta, "Mao's Homeworld(s) – a Comment on The Use of Propaganda Posters in Post-War China," 58.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 60.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 58-59.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 62.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 64.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 67.

¹¹² Ibid, 68.

¹¹³ Ibid, 70.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ "Visualizing the Future," Chinese posters.net, n.d., <https://chinese posters.net/themes/future>.

¹¹⁷ Xiaoxuan Ma, "Chinese Communist Youth League: Your Next Influencer," *Masters of Media* (Master's Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2022), <https://mastersofmedia.hum.uva.nl/2019/10/chinese-communist-youth-league-your-next-influencer/>.

now able to interact with the media in a public forum with various levels of anonymity, overt misrepresentations of the truth or the experiences of a group can more easily be challenged with counter-narratives. Through the sharing of personal experiences online, propagandists attempting to manipulate reality have become more likely to face public critique through netizens pointing out alleged falsehoods or misrepresentations.

2.6 Ideotainment

Due to the declining appeal of hard propaganda and traditional socialist ideals,¹¹⁸ government propagandists are understandably looking for new methods to appeal to the masses. Not wanting to retire the traditional methods, the government is undertaking the difficult task of transforming the tried-and-true socialist realist methods into something that would appeal to younger audiences¹¹⁹ with whom traditional propaganda content is proving to be ineffective. As already stated, propaganda is traditionally a top-down engagement, where the top – the government – created the propaganda materials they wanted the bottom – the people – to consume. For the CCP, one way in which they perform this top-down dissemination is through the control of mass media. By utilizing the media, the CCP is able to use popular entertainment methods and technology as a “vehicle for political thought work” to expand the messages to as many people as possible.¹²⁰

Ideotainment, coined by Johan Lagerkvist, is when efforts are made to shape public opinion by combining subtle ideological imagery with popular entertainment cultures, such as the internet and mobile phones, using “symbols and images liked, used, and judged to be ‘cool’ by younger generations.”¹²¹ Propagandists in China have discussed the need for new ways to gain the people’s attention and favor in order to “keep loyalty to the Communist Party intact.”¹²² Ideotainment forms the relatable and fun content that the CYL uses to promote nationalistic and populist ideology and alter the way that a jaded and media-literate generation perceives both it and the CCP. In previously conducted research, it was found that “authoritarian regimes have found themselves in competition with celebrities, entertainers, and influencers,”¹²³ suggesting political propaganda needs to be just as entertaining and just as captivating as celebrities and other non-political personalities. Therefore, government bodies like the CYL have started to behave more like idols than officials on their social media accounts; take for example the posts made by the CYL especially during the 2016 Leon Dai

¹¹⁸ Guo, “‘Occupying’ the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online,” 20.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Lagerkvist, “Internet Ideotainment in the PRC: National Responses to Cultural Globalization,” 123.

¹²² Ibid, 125.

¹²³ Lu and Pan, “The Pervasive Presence of Chinese Government Content on Douyin Trending Videos,” 69.

Incident.¹²⁴ In addition, it explains why government bodies in charge of propaganda have increasingly utilized ideotainment methods in the creation of their content.

Ideotainment is a key concept of this thesis because the continued success of any social media user hinges on the entertainment value of the content they upload. If the content is not entertaining, viewers will not continue to engage, resulting in the CYL not being able to reach their intended audience and failing in their mission to continue the CCP's agenda. It is generally understood that social media is a public space populated by average people mostly engaging in non-political activities.¹²⁵ It has also been recognized as a space where people are increasingly getting their news information rather than from more traditional sources like television, radio, or newspapers; this is especially true for younger generations.¹²⁶ As an increasingly valuable aspect of daily life,¹²⁷ social media sites have morphed into a tool for politicians interested in engaging in social control.¹²⁸ In other words, social media platforms have become a new medium for propaganda dissemination,¹²⁹ around the world and across the political spectrum.

Ideotainment is an ever-evolving concept that adapts and changes over time. Examples of what may have been ideotainment for past generations, such as revolutionary dramas produced by Jiang Qing,¹³⁰ during the Cultural Revolution, will only look aged and perhaps even obvious to the current generation. Similarly, the use of popular communication mediums is just as important to the success of propaganda regardless of its status as ideotainment; until somewhat recently, the most popular mediums for both news and entertainment alike were television and radio. Of all the communication methods available, perhaps the most important has become the internet and social media both, especially when considering who the target audience of the CYL's message is.

2.7 *Tuantuan*, Fandom, and Chinese Civil Society

The role of social media in society as both a platform to connect with people and as a medium for government bodies to engage with citizens is only increasing as technology becomes smarter and more pervasive. In its assistant role to the CCP, the CYL acts as the manager of youth affairs,¹³¹ and has

¹²⁴ Guo, "'Occupying' the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online," 20.

¹²⁵ "Cyber Populism," in European Center for Populism Studies, n.d., <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/cyber-populism/>.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ "The Cultural Revolution," Asian Traditional Theatre & Dance, 2016, <https://disco.teak.fi/asia/the-cultural-revolution/>.

¹³¹ Doyon, "The Strength of a Weak Organization: The Communist Youth League as a Path to Power in Post-Mao China," 780.

“gradually changed its rhetorical style and narrative strategies to better approach the Internet audience, thereby departing from the rigidity of official rhetoric,”¹³² while still spreading CCP-approved ideology. In its central purpose is to “mold the thinking of youngsters,”¹³³ it is “an apparatus for control.”¹³⁴ To do this, it uses appealing and persuasive techniques “by appropriating up-to-date entertainment culture and newer technological platforms.”¹³⁵ In doing so, the CYL infiltrates the areas of the internet where their core audience is and provide political ideological thoughtwork in a language that appeals to them. In theory, this strategy should influence both the youth’s engagement with political posts and how the youth view the CYL itself. Whether or not it does is entirely another matter.

The CYL has sought to cultivate a dedicated fanbase of netizens that resembles the passionate commitment and devotion of fans in idol fandoms.¹³⁶ In order to achieve this, it has become increasingly able to co-opt popular artifacts of online communities and use them to spread pro-state ideology.¹³⁷ By using these online cultural artifacts sourced from its own constituents’ online communities, the CYL has shown its ability to alter its own persona based on its desired outcome.

Where idol fandoms have a celebrity to idolize, the CYL needed to create a personality for its audience to engage with the way they would any other celebrity persona. Its success in this endeavor can perhaps best be measured by increased positive engagement with its audience and by noting the nickname bestowed upon it by its fans: 团团, *Tuántuán*.¹³⁸ *Tuántuán* is derived from the CYL’s official name, 共产主义青年团 *Gòngchǎn Zhūyì Qīng Tuán*, where 共产主义 means *communism*, 青 is *youth*, and 团 means *group*. In China, it is common practice to show affection or a certain level of closeness with another person by doubling a syllable of their name; for example, 博博 *Bobo*, short for idol 王一博 Wang Yibo or 战战 *Zhanzhan*, short for 肖战 Xiao Zhan, both nicknames made using the same formula as *Tuántuán*. The duplication of 团 *Tuán* implies a certain level of affection or closeness that netizens might have with the organization (or the level of affection the CYL *wants* netizens to have with it). This is not to suggest that the term is never used by netizens sarcastically or ironically, but the existence of the name and the apparent widespread unironic use of it by the CYL and other netizens shows a certain level of humanization and closeness to the government organization.

¹³² Guo, “‘Occupying’ the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online,” 26.

¹³³ Klaus H. Pringsheim, “The Functions of the Chinese Communist Youth Leagues (1920–1949),” *The China Quarterly* 12 (December 1, 1962): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0305741000020762>.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Guo, “‘Occupying’ the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online,” 20.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Chen, Kaye, and Zeng, “#PositiveEnergyDouyin: Constructing ‘Playful Patriotism’ in a Chinese Short-Video Application,” 104.

¹³⁸ Guo, “‘Occupying’ the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online,” 26.

Established online fan clubs are generally well organized. Commonly, these fan clubs have a sophisticated internal structure with a president and moderators, and larger fan clubs developed internal groups dedicated to anti-criticism and “purifying comments and news,”¹³⁹ flooding social media with only positive content of their idol to drown out negativity or criticism. Other general fan activities include crowdfunding, social media management, data analysis, video modification or editing, image sharing, media commentary, and media streaming.¹⁴⁰ These activities are done in users’ spare time and are not monetarily compensated like a job or career would be.¹⁴¹ It is this level of dedication that the CYL intends to cultivate for itself.

The sometimes overly zealous nature of fans and fandom activities can have real-world impacts. Some activities organized by fan clubs or actions taken by fans in the name of their idols have had negative real-world impacts, such as food waste and irresponsible spending by youth.¹⁴² The impact is felt not only by the fans but can also have wider-reaching effects and more permanent implications, such as the infamous case of Yang Lijuan’s obsession with celebrity Andy Lau, which ultimately led to her father’s suicide.¹⁴³ On the other hand, offline actions taken by fans can have altruistic effects, even if the original intention was only to raise the public profile of their idol, not perform civil society-adjacent work. For example, a large fan club for the actor-idol Xiao Zhan donated over 4.42 million yuan¹⁴⁴ in addition to medical supplies, daily necessities, school bags, books, and stationery in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴⁵ Xiao Zhan’s fans were not the only ones to have done this during the pandemic; the fan clubs of actor-idols Luo Yunxi,¹⁴⁶ Yao Chen,¹⁴⁷ and Cai Xukun¹⁴⁸ had also made substantial donations as well. These charity projects are not limited only to pandemics and/or other

¹³⁹ Qian Zhang and Keith Negus, “East Asian Pop Music Idol Production and the Emergence of Data Fandom in China,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (February 10, 2020): 505, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920904064>.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 506.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 504.

¹⁴² Viola Zhou, “Why Chinese-Pop Fans Are Spending Millions on Milk (It’s Not for Drinking),” VICE, May 5, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/chinese-pop-idol-contest-milk-vote-youth-with-you/>.

¹⁴³ More can be read on Yang and the impact of her obsession with Andy Lau here: Keng Fatt Loh, “Andy Lau Fan Regrets Obsession With Actor That Led to Suicide of Her Father in 2007,” *The Straits Times*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/entertainment/andy-lau-fan-regrets-obsession-with-actor-that-led-to-suicide-of-her-father>.

¹⁴⁴ Approximately EUR€583,218 or USD\$607,978 as of January 2025

¹⁴⁵ Yin Yin, “Fan Culture and the Spread of Public Benefit During the Pandemic of COVID-19: A Case Study of Fans Clubs of Cai Xukun and Xiao Zhan,” *Proceedings of the 2020 3rd International Conference on Humanities Education and Social Sciences (ICHESS 2020)* 496 (2020): 1136–37, <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.201214.683>.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 1138.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

natural disasters, they became very visible at the time amid the backdrop of ill-prepared hospitals and official government-sponsored NGOs¹⁴⁹, like the Red Cross Society of China.¹⁵⁰

The charity projects performed by fans in the name of their idols are a unique form of civil society in a socialist country without much by way of civil society activities. China is a socialist corporatism and clientelism hybrid,¹⁵¹ and is understood to be a ‘semi-civil society’.¹⁵² According to general Western definitions of the term, for a nation to be considered a ‘civil society,’ it must be both a pluralistic democracy and a capitalistic economy,¹⁵³ of which China is neither. “Some scholars have proposed modified versions of the concept of civil society to explain the Chinese reality, such as state-led civil society,”¹⁵⁴ but it is still not considered to be a traditional ‘civil society’ based on the established definition presented previously. In the 1990s, Chinese civil society organizations achieved an unprecedented level of success thanks to the rise of the internet;¹⁵⁵ however, the CCP’s restrictions on civil society organizations have all but crippled their efficiency and power.¹⁵⁶ Some civil society organizations continue to function but they are fragmented and their activities limited.¹⁵⁷ This is why the charity actions of idol fan clubs are so extraordinary and perhaps highlights a reason why the CYL is attempting to change its image into something akin to a fan club.

In order to accomplish this *idol-ification* of its image, the CYL is active on social media. It has a rather small presence on Douyin so far, as opposed to its larger platform on the YouTube-adjacent social media platform Bilibili, for example.¹⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, the content uploaded to its platforms is primarily related to the CCP ideals¹⁵⁹ and other nationalistic, populist content. It generally employs the platforms’ unique style and linguistic patterns that form a “platform vernacular”¹⁶⁰ in its posts,

¹⁴⁹ A Chinese NGO (non-governmental organization) is non-governmental in that it is not an organization of the government but “not-for-profit organizations formed by citizen volunteers which carry out activities aimed at realizing the common aspirations of their members in accordance with organizational articles of association”. For more information, read Guangyao Chen, “China’s Nongovernmental Organizations: Status, Government Policies, and Prospects for Further Development,” *The International Journal of Not-For-Profit Law* 3, no. 3 (March 2001), <https://www.icnl.org/resources/research/ijnl/chinas-nongovernmental-organizations-status-government-policies-and-prospects-for-further-development>.

¹⁵⁰ Yin, “Fan Culture and the Spread of Public Benefit During the Pandemic of COVID-19,” 1139.

¹⁵¹ Simon Shen and Shaun Breslin, eds., “When China Plugged in: Structural Origins of Online Chinese Nationalism,” in *Online Chinese Nationalism and China’s Bilateral Relations* (Lexington Books, 2010), 7, <http://repository.lib.ied.edu.hk/jspui/handle/2260.2/11002>.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Frolic, B. Michael. 1997. “State-led Civil Society.” Pp. 46–67 in *Civil Society in China*, edited by Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic. New York City, NY: ME Sharpe, recounted in Runya Qiaoan, “Civil Society in China?,” in *Civil Society in China: How Society Speaks to the State* (Routledge, 2021), 26, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003049319-2>.

¹⁵⁵ Alison Sile Chen, “Nevertheless, Chinese Civil Society Persisted,” *ChinaFile*, August 8, 2022, <https://www.chinafile.com/ngo/analysis/nevertheless-chinese-civil-society-persisted>.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ma, “Chinese Communist Youth League: Your Next Influencer.”

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

including creating meme content to break the perceived barriers between itself and its target audience.¹⁶¹

2.8 User-Generated Content

User-generated content (UGC) has become a fundamental part of the social media environment due to its accessibility and low threshold of participation,¹⁶² there is no minimum buy-in for users to create content except for the necessity for access to a computer (or a smartphone) and the internet. UGC, and in the specific case of this thesis, memes allow for the development of a “visual [nonverbal] and verbal language”¹⁶³ that creates a community around a common understanding, situation, hobby, and so on. These can be identifiers of members of an in-group and may not be mutually understandable to those outside.

Netizens can shape and define a narrative using satire, repetition, and intentional overproduction, creating a narrative that has the potential to resonate broadly over wider swaths of communities¹⁶⁴ and circumvent censors due to the unintelligible or misunderstanding of the memes being used. This unique aspect of memes is difficult to reproduce in other forms; memes can “spread across borders and territories to involve much larger groups of people”¹⁶⁵ regardless of linguistic and cultural barriers. Memes offer a visual understanding of a narrative while retaining the ability to challenge competing narratives.¹⁶⁶ Memes can thus attract attention to social issues quicker than other forms of communication. As a result, there is the potential for memes to inspire group solidarity in a way that might previously been impossible.¹⁶⁷ The popularity of “selfies and hashtags has helped create a sense of physical co-presence”¹⁶⁸ as it has become a way of showing solidarity for international issues.¹⁶⁹ Memes can “remind us of... our shared humanity”¹⁷⁰ and give us the power “to construct an alternative story” to the official narrative.¹⁷¹ Memes in China serve an important role on the highly censored, highly curated internet. They can take many forms and styles; they can manipulate language and create a sense of community among people that might otherwise have not had a chance to meet in real life. They allow for a level of expression that netizens located elsewhere might take for granted.

¹⁶¹ Ma, “Chinese Communist Youth League: Your Next Influencer.”

¹⁶² Fung and Hu, “Douyin, Storytelling, and National Discourse,” 140.

¹⁶³ Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power*, 110–11.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 108.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 22.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 107.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 22.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 17.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 85.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

Memes can be fun, but research shows that they play an important role in the sociopolitical environment on the Chinese internet.

2.9 Populism in China

The European Center for Populism Studies defines *populism* as a generally conservative “range of political stances” that puts emphasis on the dichotomy of the virtuous, morally good ‘people’ against the corrupt, self-serving ‘elite’.¹⁷² However, the definition of the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’ is arbitrary and is determined by ‘the populist’ leader(s) themselves.¹⁷³ Generally, the ‘elite’ is “a homogeneous entity” that works against the interests of the ‘people’, putting their own interests and the interests of other groups, such as large corporations, foreign countries, foreigners, and so forth.¹⁷⁴ Another definition presented by Jack Z. Bratich summarizes populism well is that populism “pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice.”¹⁷⁵ A prime yet extreme contemporary example of this type of thinking can be found in the American conspiracy group *QAnon*. Originating on the social media platform 4Chan,¹⁷⁶ QAnon is “a decentralized far-right political movement” that believes in the “baseless conspiracy theory that the world is controlled by the “Deep State,” a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles,” that can only be defeated by Donald Trump.¹⁷⁷ In this theory, the ‘people’ are the QAnon followers¹⁷⁸ led by Trump who acts as the lead populist fighting the good fight against the establishment and the US government is the ‘elite’, or to borrow the parlance of this theory, the *cabal*.

Populism is a well-established political concept in both the West and in China and now, with the rise of the internet and increasingly advanced technology, also come the rise of *digital populism*. Digital populism is described as “a new type of political behavior marked by the political use of the Internet

¹⁷² “Populism.”

¹⁷³ Jan-Werner Müller, “The Rise and Rise of Populism?,” 2018, in “Populism,” in *European Center for Populism Studies*, n.d., <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/populism/>.

¹⁷⁴ “Populism.”

¹⁷⁵ Jack Z. Bratich, “The People and the Public: Cyber-demagoguery and Populism as War,” eBook, in *Mapping Populism*, ed. Amit Ron and Majia Nadesan, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2020), 42.

¹⁷⁶ 4Chan is a controversial imageboard social media platform and contains a wide variety of content that ranges from normal, general discussion boards to boards containing child pornography. It is the origin of many controversies, such as Gamergate. More information on 4chan can be found here: “What Is 4chan and Why Is It Controversial?,” in *Internet Matters*, 2025, <https://www.internetmatters.org/advice/apps-and-platforms/social-media/4chan/>.

¹⁷⁷ “QAnon,” in *Anti-Defamation League*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/qanon>.

¹⁷⁸ QAnon is a fascinating social phenomenon in the United States that has deep roots in American sociopolitical culture that exhibits some aspects found in traditional cults but is also an excellent example of populist ideology.

as both a form of political participation and an instrument of mobilization.”¹⁷⁹ The internet allows for a new method of communication between the public and government officials.¹⁸⁰ As internet users keep getting younger, the earlier the party-approved narrative is imparted, the easier it will be to maintain that narrative for a lifetime. On average, the typical Chinese netizen is under 30 years of age, either still a university student or is in the beginning of their career, and often accessing social media platforms from their home internet.¹⁸¹ Users under the age of 30 account for approximately two-thirds of internet users in China.¹⁸² By using social media platforms and adapting their methods to conform or co-opt popular engagement methods to blend in better with the general population of users opens a channel to near-constant communication of and about the CCP-approved message. An essential aspect of delivering this messaging is controlling the spread of information, a task made more difficult by the popularization of the internet and increasing social media use in China.

Nevertheless, Chinese populism manifests somewhat differently than it does in the West. The definitions of who makes up ‘*the people*’ and ‘*the elite*’ is generally different. Like in the West where these definitions can be manipulated to suit the speaker’s ambitions,¹⁸³ in China, populism is decentralized¹⁸⁴ and “relies on spontaneous collaborative efforts for collective action.”¹⁸⁵ In Chinese populism, there are at least three identified categories that can define ‘*the people*’: (1) the ‘Chinese,’ however that identity might be defined,¹⁸⁶ as opposed to foreign ‘others,’ and elite Chinese who betray the identity, (2) common or ordinary people who reject elite-dominated cultural production and

¹⁷⁹ Youngmi Kim, "Digital Populism in South Korea? Internet Culture and the Trouble with Direct Participation," *The Korea Economic Institute* vol. 3, no. 4 (2008): 1-8, in "Digital Populism." In *European Center for Populism Studies*, n.d. <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/digital-populism/>.

¹⁸⁰ Simon Shen and Shaun Breslin, eds., "When China Plugged in: Structural Origins of Online Chinese Nationalism," in *Online Chinese Nationalism and China's Bilateral Relations* (Lexington Books, 2010), 4, <http://repository.lib.ied.edu.hk/jspui/handle/2260.2/11002>.

¹⁸¹ Sow Keat Tok, "Nationalism-on-demand? When Chinese Sovereignty Goes Online," in *Online Chinese Nationalism and China's Bilateral Relations*, ed. Simon Shen and Shaun Breslin (Lexington Books, 2010), 22.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁸³ For example, President Donald Trump and Senator Bernie Sanders are both populists. Where Senator Sanders identified the elite as the billionaire class in America, President Trump seems to identify the elite as simply ‘the political elite,’ which can be just about anyone. Hannah Kesner, "Trump and Sanders: Populism on the Right and the Left," Democratic Erosion Consortium, March 14, 2022, <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2022/03/14/trump-and-sanders-populism-on-the-right-and-the-left/>.

¹⁸⁴ Christo Pretorius and Radoslav Valev, "Populist Authoritarianism in China: National and Global Perspectives," April 28, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0055>.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁸⁶ Identities such as ‘Chinese’ can be ambiguous and can be manipulated. For example, there are over 50 recognized minorities in China, one of which is the Uyghur people in Xinjiang. The cultural heritage of the Uyghur people and the cultural heritage of the Han people, for example, are quite different. If the Chinese identity is defined by a shared cultural heritage, are the Uyghur still Chinese? Or if it was to be defined by a common language, the Uyghur people also have their own language which has more in common with Arabic languages than the standardized Chinese language mandated by the government. This is why I phrased the sentence the way I did.

institutions, norms and values, and (3) impoverished, vulnerable, marginalized people.¹⁸⁷ It takes a “bottom-up approach” in the Chinese concept, where “grassroots movements often [use] collectivist [language],” and thus relies on collective spontaneous efforts, such as “disseminating contested information” to instigate a grassroots populist movement.¹⁸⁸

Similarly to populism, Chinese digital populism takes a slightly different shape. As identified by Guo Shaohua, the CYL’s primary approach to digital populism takes three forms: (1) pro-people, (2) anti-elite, and simply (3) style.¹⁸⁹ It aligns itself with the millennial youth, identifying them as the ‘people’ of their populism¹⁹⁰ as opposed to the more notably flexible definition of ‘people’ in Western forms of digital populism. The *style* aspect is also an important part of Chinese digital populism; Guo points out that the CYL was quick to adopt a certain rhetorical style that was effective in its previous activism.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Pretorius and Valev, “Populist Authoritarianism in China: National and Global Perspectives.”

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Guo, “‘Occupying’ the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online,” 22.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

3 Literature Review

The CCP has demonstrated remarkable skill in adapting to the sociopolitical changes in China, altering its propaganda styles and political entertainment for public consumption. Mass media, and particularly the internet, has become an integral part of people's daily lives. Naturally, as the internet grew to be increasingly prevalent in society, it has become a new and vital propaganda dissemination tool with the ability to reach a wider audience than traditional media. As the internet has become so widespread, it has become a propaganda medium that exists in the palm of our hands.

This thesis argues that the CYL has successfully adopted the short-form social media platform Douyin and its user-generated content style to suit the interests and sensibilities of modern Chinese youth. By using artifacts and styles from youthful internet culture, such as memes and slang, the CYL has been able to transform itself into an appealing organization that resonates with youth similar to that of an online idol.¹⁹² Additionally, this thesis aims to use a so-called 'snapshot' of the CYL's uploaded content between November and December 2023 to show that its propaganda dissemination technique has been updated for a new style of social media while maintaining the more traditional CCP propaganda themes and styles. Furthermore, this research intends to show that Chinese Communist propaganda has not changed so much as adapted in order to suit the modern sensibilities and new social media styles rather than conform entirely to any shift in contemporary youth ideology. The questions that I pose for this thesis are:

RQ1: As reflected on its official Douyin page, how does the CYL's contemporary ideotainment propaganda approach show its adaptability to its target audience of modern youth (ages 18-30) in an era of advanced technology and social media within the specific November-December 2023 timeframe?

RQ2: By analyzing the narrative elements present in its official Douyin content, how is modern online youth culture (language, artifacts, aesthetic, values, and other cultural expressions.) reflected in the way contemporary propaganda is formulated for the CYL's social media platform, and is there an impact the modern digital propaganda aesthetic compared to traditional socialist realist styles?

RQ3: Using a combination of analysis methods, to what extent does the content on the CYL's official Douyin utilize traditional CCP style propaganda themes as identified in the pilot (*techno-nationalism, populism, historical narratives, progressive and advanced socialist China, and appeal to youth*) and how does it compare to the definitions of thoughtwork art

¹⁹² Guo, "'Occupying' the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online," 25.

content as laid out by Mao Zedong in the May 1942 Talks at Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art?

3.1 China's Modern Youth

The modern youth is a core demographic causing the CCP concern in an ever-evolving, increasingly interconnected world. For authoritarian regimes, "university students are a source of anxiety"¹⁹³ as authoritarian governments "fear the growth of a critical intelligentsia."¹⁹⁴ Jérôme Doyon and Konstantinos Tsimonis have said that, in recent years, "the Chinese leadership has become increasingly anxious about students' disassociation from official politics."¹⁹⁵ University students have regularly been a source of social and political unrest in China; in fact, the CCP itself was founded out of Beijing University and other prestigious universities in Beijing in the early 1920s, and then in 1989, the student protests in Tiananmen Square were primarily led by university student activists and occurred not long after the Democracy Wall, a period of relative open expression,¹⁹⁶ just to name a few instances of student-led upheavals in the established status quo in China. Especially in the CCP's case, having control over the university students within China is a primary issue that could have catastrophic consequences to the established order, so it has created "an educational system with clear winners and losers to limit incentives for coalitions."¹⁹⁷ In this way, the government is attempting to pit students against one another in perhaps a 'divide and conquer' style approach in order to create a culture of competition inside universities.

In addition to this initiative, the CCP exercises its influence over students and young adults in an attempt to compel or coerce acceptance without resistance. Due to China's size and population, obtaining sufficiently representative information from enough students for a more literal statement is impractical. In general, according to Konstantinos Tsimonis, Chinese citizens are "outspoken and demanding,"¹⁹⁸ and that "their loyalty to the regime"¹⁹⁹ depends heavily on the state institutions' ability

¹⁹³ Doyon and Tsimonis, "Apathy Is Not Enough: Changing Modes of Student Management in Post-Mao China," 1124.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 1124–25.

¹⁹⁶ According to Universität Wien: "The wall delaminates a bus terminal adjacent to [a busy intersection], where tens of thousands of [people] pass by every day. It is said that the first [poster was] posted here on November 19 by the son of a veteran communist cadre, criticizing Mao's 'misguided idea' of class struggle during the Cultural Revolution." "The 'Xidan Democracy Wall,'" *The Chinese Democracy Movement of 1978-1981*, n.d., <https://pekinger-fruehling.univie.ac.at/en/the-democracy-movement-1978-1981/the-democracy-wall/>.

¹⁹⁷ Doyon and Tsimonis, "Apathy Is Not Enough: Changing Modes of Student Management in Post-Mao China," 1124.

¹⁹⁸ Tsimonis, "'Keep the Party Assured and the Youth [Not] Satisfied': The Communist Youth League and Chinese University Students," 170.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

to “offer meaningful and effective responses to current problems and demands.”²⁰⁰ He describes this loyalty as being “more conditional than ever,”²⁰¹ in recent years and, although it is not explicitly stated in this particular research by Tsimonis, It is reasonable to infer that part of students’ increasingly conditional loyalty is due to, in part, the rise of accessible technology and increasing ease of information sharing over vast networks. Chinese modern youth are very media literate, especially regarding social media and the internet.

A specific subculture that I wanted to explore for this thesis that can be found online is fandom. Fandoms are small communities of fans who share a common interest in the same content. This can range from video games to actors and does not have limits. If it exists, there is a fandom for it. Fan activities “include making or modifying videos, emojis or jokey memes; writing and circulating blogs; editing and trafficking images and photos of idols; creating brief witty [sic] comments within Sina Weibo’s limit of 140 words; forwarding and sending out gossip; continuously streaming music.”²⁰² Fandoms and fan communities are well documented and are not a new or modern concept with the advent of social media. The reason fandom is mentioned is because of the zealotry that fans tend to possess that government bodies such as the CYL would like to imitate. This can be seen in how the CYL engaged with fans and netizens during the 2016 Leon Dai scandal that has been mentioned previously in this thesis and how its online behavior shifted since 2016 to use the same language and patterns as netizens used. This zealotry of fans has led to the creation of well-organized online communities, complete with leaders and secretaries and treasurers, and have begun to undertake civil society activities in the name of the object of their adoration. This phenomenon was well documented during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Wuhan. For example, the fans of actor-idol Xiao Zhan donated large sums of money and medical equipment to hospitals in Wuhan in his name.²⁰³ These donations were handled very well; Xiao Zhan’s fan club for example, was very transparent with how much funds were raised and when, to whom the money was donated to and when, and provided all the information one might need from a normal civil society foundation.²⁰⁴ This fan zealotry can be negative as well, such as in the bagged milk scandal, which resulted in the wanton waste of product, careless spending, and the cancellation of the finale of a popular idol production competition

²⁰⁰ Tsimonis, ““Keep the Party Assured and the Youth [Not] Satisfied’: The Communist Youth League and Chinese University Students,” 170.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Zhang and Negus, “East Asian Pop Music Idol Production and the Emergence of Data Fandom in China,” 506.

²⁰³ Yin, “Fan Culture and the Spread of Public Benefit During the Pandemic of COVID-19: A Case Study of Fans Clubs of Cai Xukun and Xiao Zhan,” 1137.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 1138.

show.²⁰⁵ However, if the CYL is attempting to transform its online image into that resembling an idol,²⁰⁶ then it follows that it is also attempting to foster for itself the same kind of dedication.

In an article by Qian Zhang and Keith Negus, they illustrate how idol fans specifically are able to manipulate their online data and “understand how their online activities are tracked.”²⁰⁷ Identified as *data fandom*, it is the practice in which an idol fan uses social media to exercise their influence on idol production, music industries, and cultural production.²⁰⁸ Data fans “strategically seek to impose their presence, using knowledge of the impact of data statistics (quantities and metrics), and an understanding of how semantic data can influence an idol’s popularity and contribute to this traffic; [sic] increasing the commercial and cultural value of idols.”²⁰⁹ This kind of intimate understanding of how their presence and activity online is transformed into data that is then utilized by governments and industries to adapt their own media practices is a perfect example of how knowledgeable and aware the youth are in terms of their influence. Every keystroke, search term, click of the mouse becomes a piece of data that can influence any number of things from social media hashtags to changing fan engagement for popular television series.²¹⁰ “Digital platforms and social media have amplified the importance of rankings and facilitated the proliferation of other charts (searches, trends, news, tweets) and expanded the idea of participation through opportunities for types of voting, comment and [sic] feedback.”

3.2 The CYL’s Function and Shaping Youth Ideology

Charles Parton describes the CCP as “a jealous god [that] fears for its immortality.”²¹¹ It is vital for the CCP to maintain its importance in the daily lives of the people to maintain its relevance in an increasingly modern, increasingly advanced world in which people might not need to rely on the party as much as they had in the past. In an effort to remedy this, the CYL has been bestowed with the vital role of raising the next generation of CCP leaders and maintaining the continuing status of the party by continuing the indoctrination of younger generations of Chinese citizens. Despite serving this vital role, the relationship between the CCP and the CYL is a complex one. The CCP maintains a strong hold on the CYL to prevent it from becoming a force akin to the Red Guards during the Cultural

²⁰⁵ Lianzhang Wang, “Chinese Idol Show Shut Down Over Spilled Milk,” #SixthTone, May 6, 2021, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1007386>.

²⁰⁶ Guo, “‘Occupying’ the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online,” 29.

²⁰⁷ Zhang and Negus, “East Asian Pop Music Idol Production and the Emergence of Data Fandom in China,” 493.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 495.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 501.

²¹⁰ Wang, “Chinese Idol Show Shut Down Over Spilled Milk.”

²¹¹ Charles Parton, “China’s Communist Youth League: Eternally Young at a Hundred,” Metrics, May 18, 2022, <https://metrics.org/en/comment/chinas-communist-youth-league-eternally-young-hundred>.

Revolution (1966-1976) and from acting “as a catalyst of insurrection like the students of 1989.”²¹² Still the CYL plays a huge role in the continuing success of the party through its appeal to the youth. If the party cannot get the support of the next generation, then it will ultimately fail – or at least have an enormous problem on its hands within a few years. Thus, the CYL’s indoctrination role is vital for the Party.

The use of social media by the CYL is becoming more advanced and more masterful since 2016. It shows that it is increasingly youth culture-literate, understanding how the youth engage with content, their preferences, and how they communicate online. For example, a 2020 Douyin White Paper states that “videos related to government accounts on the platform have been played more than 1.6 billion times.”²¹³ Although this clearly refers to *videos related to government accounts* and not *from* government accounts, it shows how influential social media, and Douyin in particular, is to the young netizens who use it. Moreover, reports also “show that the frequency of ‘believing’ the authorities and ‘insisting’ the current direction of the government increases with frequent use of Douyin.”²¹⁴ This directly implies that there is a correlation between the time spent on Douyin and the increase in the support of the CCP which only further highlights the importance of the app on the Chinese sociopolitical landscape.

Konstantinos Tsimonis states that the CYL’s mission has become to “address the problems young people face in China today as a means of maintaining their loyalty to the regime.”²¹⁵ In this role, it organized a number of recreational activities such as sports competitions, karaoke nights, and other leisure activities.²¹⁶ Offering these kinds of activities, none of which are particularly political in nature, is most likely an attempt to get the participants to associate the CYL with positive emotions should they participate. Whether or not there is a political motive for the organization of these events, the nature of the activities described by Tsimonis are not particularly *bad*. They seem to be fun, engaging activities, however with a nation as large and populous as China, it must be difficult for these activities to be arranged everywhere, by all locale’s own CYL branch. Yet, it is only logical to assume that, when these groups are well organized and well-funded, it keeps youth busy, too occupied to participate in less-desirable activities. The problem then becomes the funding, and it has been established that the CYL does not have a lot of funding at its disposal.²¹⁷ Moreover, like previously mentioned, the size of China hinders the CYL’s ability to apply these kinds of ‘maintaining their

²¹² Parton, “China’s Communist Youth League: Eternally Young at a Hundred.”

²¹³ Fung and Hu, “Douyin, Storytelling, and National Discourse,” 140.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Tsimonis, “(De)Mobilising and (Mis)Representing ‘Youth’ in the Chinese Workplace: Political Dependency, Generational Subordination and Corporatisation in the Communist Youth League,” 1363.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1373-74.

²¹⁷ Jérôme Doyon, “Low-cost Corporatism: The Chinese Communist Youth League and Its Sub-organisations in post-Mao China,” *China Perspectives* 2, no. 2019 (June 8, 2019): 40, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.9084>.

loyalty' activities nationwide. Especially in more impoverished areas, these activities might not exist at all. This could very well lead to having the opposite effect, potentially leaving youth 'unsatisfied.' Additionally, this issue with attracting real-life engagement would also suggest that the CYL's attempts at online engagement would be to close this gap of sorts by attracting their attention on the platforms where they are. In other words, the CYL is not so much waiting for the youth to come to it but are now going to where they already are.

3.3 Propaganda, Positive Energy, and Public Relations

Like previously mentioned, Chinese propaganda has its foundations in Yan'an movement and "represented the quintessential Leninist 'transmission belt' for indoctrination and mass mobilization"²¹⁸ and additionally, is a "sprawling bureaucratic establishment, extending into virtually every medium concerned with the dissemination of information."²¹⁹ In the modern, increasingly digital era, this extends to the internet and social media, as well. The CCP has maintained its propaganda practices by incorporating new methodologies, including the introduction of public relations (PR) and advertising techniques from the West.²²⁰ These techniques were used in combination with "the tried and true" methods already in place,²²¹ explains Anne-Marie Brady. By adapting and combining techniques, it ensures that the content being pushed is evolving in time with society and technology, making sure that it continues to appeal to the intended audience in a way that would feel more authentic and genuine than had the CCP maintained its old practices without adapting any new techniques. Moreover, it ensures the continued accessibility and dissemination of content for whatever mode or medium becomes the dominant in society and the most popular with the CCP's constituents.

By moving online, the government is effectively going where the people are, arguably the same way the Communist Party always had, and disseminating cultural thought work where the most people would be able to see it. Unfortunately, the internet is an entirely different medium than radio or television and it comes with its own linguistics, customs, and hierarchies. This presents a problem for the CCP, and particularly for the CYL in the case of this thesis, because it typically becomes easier to spot artificially manufactured culture when it stands out as much as a traditional socialist realist poster

²¹⁸ David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy," *The China Journal* 57 (January 1, 2007): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1086/tcj.57.20066240>.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ Anne-Marie Brady, "Regimenting the Public Mind: The Modernization of Propaganda in the PRC," *International Journal Canada S Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 57, no. 4 (January 1, 2002): 570, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40203692>.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 570.

would on a microblogging platform where other users are uploading pictures of their lunches or their pets and talking about their daily lives.

Propaganda in China is not seen as negative by either the CCP or the public and is understood to be a “legitimate tool” to be used to educate and shape society.²²² This understanding of Chinese-style propaganda can explain how it is not a stretch that positive energy has become a genre of “grassroots” content that is “aligned with” the ideologies and values of the CCP.²²³ Positive energy has a complex history that entered China’s political lexicon in 2012.²²⁴ Keeping in mind that Mao Zedong’s own Yan’an Forum speech suggested that the party’s thought work should include model citizens and should exemplify the lived realities of the people, albeit often idealized or highly constructed vision of these realities, positive energy content is a solid modernization of his concept of how thought work should be.

An aspect of thought work, the adaptation of PR is uniquely important. Public relations (PR) is based on the theory that the public mind is malleable;²²⁵ but where PR techniques as used by the West were to manufacture the consent of the public for the ruling elite, manage public opinion,²²⁶ and design stories that encourage the public to choose a side,²²⁷ however, in China, PR was meant to foster a “greater affection amongst the Chinese people for Chinese politicians.”²²⁸ The distinct difference being that, in the west, PR is about coercion of the public perhaps with mis- or dis-information whereas in China, it is employed to design a specific image of party leaders that markets them as being more likeable and more human. The effectiveness is often reflected in the legacies of members of the ruling elite in the CCP since its foundation and in the way that current events are reported upon and presented to the public. It is an effective strategy especially when implemented in conjunction with other CCP propaganda techniques. Now, with the addition of social media as a medium, the potential for the effectiveness of these strategies has only increased as the potential for content creation also improves.

²²² Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy,” 29.

²²³ Chen, Kaye, and Zeng, “#PositiveEnergyDouyin: Constructing ‘Playful Patriotism’ in a Chinese Short-Video Application,” 98.

²²⁴ Peidong Yang and Lijun Tang, “Positive energy”: Hegemonic intervention and online media discourse in China’s Xi Jinping era, 2018, in Chen, Kaye, and Zeng, “#PositiveEnergyDouyin: Constructing ‘Playful Patriotism’ in a Chinese Short-Video Application,” 97.

²²⁵ Brady, “Regimenting the Public Mind: The Modernization of Propaganda in the PRC,” 573.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 571.

²²⁷ Gabriel Tarde, in Brady, “Regimenting the Public Mind: The Modernization of Propaganda in the PRC,” 571.

²²⁸ Brady, “Regimenting the Public Mind: The Modernization of Propaganda in the PRC,” 573.

3.4 Digital Media Propaganda

Sue Barnes, in part recounting from Joshua Meyrowitz's 1985 study 'No Sense of Space,' explains that electronic forms of media have altered the way we engage with other people and provide the public with a new means of communication, one that has a longer lasting impact on individuals that are "relatively lasting and inescapable"²²⁹ and are no longer inhibited by physical barriers, time, and space.²³⁰ She points out how digital media can impact us on a human level: "We are now exposed to views, values, and visions that we would not normally come into contact with through face-to-face encounters."²³¹ The version of the internet that existed when Joshua Meyrowitz conducted his study was vastly different from the internet that we are accustomed to today, but his point still stands. This information-sharing is not just in reference to internationality, but in countries as large as China and the United States, cultures can vary widely from west to east coast, north to south. These cultures are no longer as restricted to us as it once was, thanks to the expansion of the internet and other digital technologies. It is this aspect of the internet that proves dangerous to the CCP, which had previously maintained strict control over the specific information made available to the public, how it was made public when it was made public, et cetera. Now, internet 'journalists' can update the internet in real-time on occurrences that the party or local governments might have wanted to keep quiet, like public protests or intercity rail accidents.²³²

Anthony Fung and Yunyi Hu point out that social media "has become the main platform people use to acquire information, share opinions, and participate in interactions"²³³ and has "become a vital channel for establishing national image and spreading national culture."²³⁴ Thanks to increasingly affordable advanced technologies that allow us to keep the internet and social media platforms right in our hands, it has become an inseparable part of our daily lives for many people. As such, it becomes an invaluable medium for government organizations to allow them to reach a captive audience anywhere there is access to the internet. Additionally, social media allows for the curation of a certain style of content, allowing for propaganda content to be more covert and more entertaining.

Lu Yingdan and Jennifer Pan theorized that "the proliferation of social media and digital technologies has made it necessary for governments to expand their strategies beyond crafting political propaganda

²²⁹ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Space*, 1985, no page number given, quoted in Sue Barnes, "Cyberspace: Creating Paradoxes for the Ecology of Self," in *Communication and Cyberspace: Social Interaction in an Electronic Environment*, ed. Lance Strate et al., 2nd ed. (Hampton Press, 2002), 248.

²³⁰ Sue Barnes, "Cyberspace: Creating Paradoxes for the Ecology of Self," in *Communication and Cyberspace: Social Interaction in an Electronic Environment*, ed. Lance Strate et al., 2nd ed. (Hampton Press, 2002), 247.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 248.

²³² Zoe Murphy, "China Struggles to Censor Train Crash Coverage," *BBC News*, July 28, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-14321787>.

²³³ Fung and Hu, "Douyin, Storytelling, and National Discourse," 142.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

content in order to disseminate propaganda effectively.”²³⁵ Young people do not congregate in the same places that their parents do, which is indication enough that the style of propaganda would need to change in addition to the method the government uses to spread it. Even on the internet, different generations do not always use the same social media platforms, and these platforms can go in and out of style for any number of reasons. The CYL and other propaganda accounts need to be able to adapt just as quickly as the youth opinion can change. Lu and Pan also point out that government-owned social media accounts “that use clickbait more extensively are also more likely to have greater visibility and reach.”²³⁶ There is a saying that goes along the lines of *people won't remember what you said, but they will remember how you feel*, and clickbait is a great way of inspiring *feeling* in a viewer. Additionally, good clickbait is snappy and/or clever, making it more sharable and generally more enjoyable than general headlines or notices using polite or formal language.

Similar to socialist realism is the more modern propaganda style called positive energy, which becomes a major component of studying social media in China. The term positive energy has a long history in China, going as far back as 2012 but for this thesis, the political and propaganda meanings of the term are the most important and most relevant. Core components of positive energy are emphasizing positive narratives, state-driven or state-approved ideology, and positive patriotism and populism. Xu Chen, D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, and Jing Zheng have defined positive energy as “a popular expression that has embodied mainstream political ideology in China since 2012”²³⁷ and “generates a kind of ‘transcendental Chinese patriotism.’”²³⁸ Positive energy was eventually co-opted by the state (in 2012) when it was then altered in meaning to correspond more with the “attitudes or emotions that are aligned with the ideological or value systems” of the state.²³⁹ The appropriation of this concept has made positive energy a propaganda art form that is not very different from the socialist realism style the CCP used in previous decades. Positive energy and socialist realism styles share common traits, including but not limited to both being state-sponsored and -driven, emphasizing positive narratives, positive depictions of the party and its policies, patriotism, and populism. Regardless of these similarities, it does appear that positive energy content is actually quite popular with netizens in general despite its appropriation by government bodies. Xing Lu and Zhicong Lu reported that 22 of their 28 interviewees reported enjoying positive energy content, that it makes them “feel confident about humankind and humanity,”²⁴⁰ and that they think that “there should be more

²³⁵ Yingdan Lu and Jennifer Pan, “Capturing Clicks: How the Chinese Government Uses Clickbait to Compete for Visibility,” *Political Communication* 38, no. 1–2 (July 20, 2020): 24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1765914>.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ Chen, Kaye, and Zeng, “#PositiveEnergyDouyin: Constructing ‘Playful Patriotism’ in a Chinese Short-Video Application,” 97.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁴⁰ Xing Lu and Zhicong Lu, “Fifteen Seconds of Fame: A Qualitative Study of Douyin, A Short Video Sharing Mobile Application in China,” in *Social Computing and Social Media: Design, Human Behavior, and Analytics*,

content about positive energy [sic] on Douyin.”²⁴¹ The fact that netizens often were left with a positivity for humanity after consuming the content suggests that, at least on some level, the propaganda style does work. Even if aware the content is state-sponsored or pushing a certain narrative, if it leaves its audience with a memorable impression either good or bad, then that means it is an effective style of propaganda.

An Xiao Mina recounts this explanation from Anne-Marie Brady regarding the party’s propaganda model: “The main model for the transformation of China’s propaganda work is the West’ and Western political media strategy, with a multimedia effort that varies depending on the audience.”²⁴² By offering this multimedia approach to propaganda, the CCP and CYL can customize their approach to each target group in Chinese society based on where the content was to be hosted. By posting content online, the CYL is able to customize its approach to propaganda by not only going to where its target audience congregates (online, on popular social media platforms) but also accommodating the audience’s sensibilities, hobbies, and/or lingo.

ed. Gabriele Meiselwitz, vol. 11578 (Springer, Cham, 2019), 239, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21902-4_17.

²⁴¹ Lu and Lu, “Fifteen Seconds of Fame: A Qualitative Study of Douyin, A Short Video Sharing Mobile Application in China,” 239.

²⁴² An Xiao Mina, “Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man: A Case Study in Social Change Memes and Internet Censorship in China,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (December 1, 2014): 368, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412914546576>.

3.5 Memes, UGC, and Censorship in Chinese Cyberspace



3-1 The river crab wearing three wristwatches. Image by China Digital Times

Will Styler defines a meme as “a unit of cultural information, such as a cultural practice or idea, that is transmitted verbally or by repeated action from one mind to another.”²⁴³ A meme is a multifaceted concept that is difficult to pin down but encompasses culture, tangible and intangible concepts, and linguistics.²⁴⁴ These can include *press F to pay respects*,²⁴⁵ videos of Freddie Mercury with audio clips of his vocals to tell a story,²⁴⁶ and links that send users to 1980s English pop singer-songwriter Rick Astley’s *Never Gonna Give You Up* music video instead of the intended content.²⁴⁷ More importantly for this thesis, Xu Chen, D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, and Jing Zheng identify memes as “a form of

²⁴³ Will Styler, “The Linguistics of Memes,” Save the Vowels, n.d., https://wstyler.ucsd.edu/talks/meme_linguistics_handout.html#:~:text=What%20is%20a,mind%20to%20another.me_linguistics.html#/.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ This meme comes from a video game in which, at a funeral, the player was instructed to press the F button on their controller to pay their respects to the dead character. It became a meme soon after, indicating sending condolences to another netizen due to something embarrassing they have done. Morris and LiterallyAustin, “Press F to Pay Respects,” Know Your Meme, 2015, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/press-f-to-pay-respects>.

²⁴⁶ An example of this meme: Walf Archives, “Freddie Mercury Slips on Ice and Can’t Get Up,” 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-gPcpDgeI4>.

²⁴⁷ This specific meme is called Rickrolling. Jamie Dubs and LiterallyAustin, “Rickroll,” Know Your Meme, 2009, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rickroll>.

sharable and remixable visual content spread through imitation and competition among users²⁴⁸ and that they play “an important role,”²⁴⁹ in Chinese Cybernationalism. This is true for both the CCP and government organizations like the CYL as well as netizens who are often the originators of such content. That is not to claim that the CYL or other similar accounts do not or cannot create memes, however generally, memes are considered artifacts of netizens rather than government official accounts.

In her article, Bingchun Meng argues memes make up a “significant component of civic culture that offers both political criticism and emotional bonding for all participants.”²⁵⁰ Through the use of memes, and specifically *egao* style memes as Meng describes, netizens can create methods that allow them opportunities for self-expression, to communicate with each other and form a sense of community, and criticize situations with reduced personal risk which Meng also argues: “Although *e gao* activities may appear to be rather incoherent or even chaotic, they represent innovative strategies for articulating social critique and fostering societal dialogue in a heavily controlled speech environment.”²⁵¹ Meng further explains that “the participation in and sharing of *e gao* activities cultivates decentralized grassroots communities where a sense of belonging is constructed through a common understanding of jokes and satire.”²⁵² The *common understanding* aspect of memes or *egao* is the most important. Memes, like any other form of language, require meaning to be attributed by their users. Regarding the specific *grass-mud horse* meme, Meng says: “It is quite obvious that the dirty pun of *Grass Mud Horse* represents the average [Chinese] internet users’ anger and frustration at censorship, and with the help of digital technology this unique form of expression is evolving into a collective attempt at resistance.”²⁵³ In this way, participation in online *meme-ing* communities is not simply an aspect of youth culture²⁵⁴ and internet culture but it becomes a form of societal and political commentary based on lived experiences in real time. By participating in *egao* (memes), “Chinese netizens form an alternative imagined community that defies the official order.”²⁵⁵ Social commentary memes such as the *grass mud horse* and *Batman vs Pandaman* represent a rift in the singular media

²⁴⁸ Chen, Kaye, and Zeng, “#PositiveEnergyDouyin: Constructing ‘Playful Patriotism’ in a Chinese Short-Video Application,” 102.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Bingchun Meng, “From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: E Gao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet,” *Global Media and Communication* 7, no. 1 (2011): 35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766510397938>.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 46.

²⁵² Ibid, 35.

²⁵³ Ibid, 44.

²⁵⁴ I phrase it like this because typically speaking, meme cultures are cultivated by members of younger generations. This is not to say adults and older people cannot create or participate in memes. This is just from observation in online communities as a netizen myself.

²⁵⁵ Meng, “From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: E Gao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet,” 46

environment... one reason memes resonate specifically is that they turn the tools and methods of state propaganda against itself.”²⁵⁶

As previously mentioned in the Background chapter of this thesis, censorship in China is notoriously rigorous, especially on the internet. An Xiao Mina explains that anyone “who crosses a line can expect to see their messages deleted or their entire account frozen.”²⁵⁷ Depending on the violation, however, one might anticipate their account being removed from the platform²⁵⁸ or, “in more extreme cases, an unpleasant visit from the police, popularly known as *hecha*, or drinking tea.”²⁵⁹ 喝茶, or *drinking tea*, is an otherwise innocuous phrase that can suggest a more nefarious situation in the same way *let's have a chat* can be a benign way to invite someone to a less than pleasant discussion. Similarly, the phrase *being harmonized* (or literally: *being river-crabbed*) can be used online to express being censored. The *river crab* meme is deeply embedded in Chinese culture and political history and is an interesting example of a linguistic meme and is sometimes combined with the *wearing three wristwatches* meme (image 2.1 above). Likewise, to discuss politically sensitive concepts related to #MeToo using the *rabbit* and *rice* emojis, as the Chinese word for *rice* is *mi* (米) and the word for *rabbit* is *tu* (兔), homophonous with the English phrase *me too* or #MeToo. By using the emojis that are homophonous with the English hashtag, netizens are freer to express themselves without fearing repercussions. These are a few examples of the way linguistic meme creation can be used to allow for some candid discussion online. By playing on words, netizens can create a language unique unto themselves that the censors are not immediately privy to.

An Xiao Mina's book, *Memes to Movements*, is a novel record of the importance of social media and memes in modern culture both on and offline. She explains the “rise in popularity of selfies and hashtags has helped create a sense of physical co-presence,”²⁶⁰ allowing people to engage with people that they likely never would have been able to without the use of the internet. Effectively, the internet makes the world smaller by letting information travel faster and removing physical borders and giving netizens the feeling of proximity even if they are physically oceans apart. One can obtain the headlines from another part of the world just as quickly as they can from their own country and similarly, memes and hashtags can travel just as fast. Specifically, the use of hashtags makes information easier to find, more searchable so long as one knows the right phrase. Selfies, however, present a more complex case, as searching by image is inherently more difficult and requires more steps than simple keyword entry. It is the hashtag that usually accompanies a memetic selfie, such as hashtags associated

²⁵⁶ Mina, “Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man: A Case Study in Social Change Memes and Internet Censorship in China,” 369.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 264.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ An Xiao Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power* (Beacon Press, 2019), 17.

with the famous sunglasses selfies in support of Chen Guangchen or selfies of Native Americans and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples with a red handprint over their mouths,²⁶¹ that allow for information sharing over just presenting the image alone. Without prior knowledge of the hashtag #MMIWG2S,²⁶² the specific significance of the red handprint or sunglasses, or awareness of current social issues, the images' potential for information sharing outside the in-group is limited at best without the viewer doing their own research or reverse image search. In this case, it is the hashtag that provides the potential for information sharing. Nevertheless, memes and hashtags "reflect an important form of social change, a broadening of the visual language of dissent through a key form of the creative vernacular of the internet."²⁶³ Yet, as a form of information sharing, the meanings of these memes must be evident, or it might not work as intended. If the goal is persuasion, to gain the viewers' appreciation and approval, and especially if the intention is to convert new viewers who might not immediately understand the in-group lingo, there needs to be a way for that messaging to get across as well.

Additionally, An Xiao Mina states, "how people and organizations respond to attention [on social media] is just as important as the attention happening at all."²⁶⁴ However, for a government entity like the CYL, *how* it responds is more important due to its tenuous relationship with both the CCP and the youth. The CYL is in a precarious position where it needs to satisfy both the youth and the CCP itself so all of its responses to any viral content need to be in line with party ideals while also being relatable to netizens who made the content viral in the first place. It cannot use too much party vernacular, for example, because those terms may not resonate as well with netizens and may stunt any attention it is receiving.

Like previously discussed, the CYL has notably begun to emulate youth culture in recent years in order to compete with more entertaining social media users. Researchers Jun Lang and Zhuo Jing-Schmidt, suggest that "state media accounts are perhaps trying too hard in crafting an informal, cutesy, and supposedly popular voice, resulting in a netspeak overkill."²⁶⁵ Usually, when government accounts use popular netspeak it can be seen by netizens who originated the lingo as contrived or forced and the result is completely ineffective. While there may be an increase in engagement, it is not taken

²⁶¹ More information can be found here: "No More Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women #MMIW Canada," Amnesty International Canada, 2025, <https://amnesty.ca/what-we-do/no-more-stolen-sisters>; "MURDERED & MISSING INDIGENOUS WOMEN," Native Womens Wilderness, n.d., <https://www.nativewomenswilderness.org/>.

²⁶² #MMIWG2S means *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit*, a broader term for the #MMIW (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women)

²⁶³ Mina, "Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man: A Case Study in Social Change Memes and Internet Censorship in China," 368.

²⁶⁴ Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power*, 84.

²⁶⁵ Jun Lang and Zhuo Jing-Schmidt, "The Blurry Lines Between Popular Media and Party Propaganda: China's Convergence Culture Through a Linguistic Lens," *PLoS ONE* 19, no. 1 (January 25, 2024): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0297499>.

seriously but instead becomes fodder for memes and derision. When used effectively, slang or netspeak can result in propaganda content that resonates with the target audience in the language that they speak. It is a powerful tool for groups like the CYL and the mastery of it is highly important to its success.

One of the most provocative statements from Mina's *Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man* article was:

*“Memes, as micro-actions of media remixing and sharing, are particularly important in a censored, propagandized state, which seeks first to isolate individuals who express opinions contrary to state interests, and then to deaden the sort of public debate that fosters a diverse sphere of opinion.”*²⁶⁶

As previously mentioned, the CCP has long since exercised its control of mass media, including television, radio, and the press, but taking the same control over the internet is significantly more difficult. Unlike traditional mass media, the internet is infinitely more vast and controlling everything is near impossible. Controlling content posted online is no longer as simple as restricting what can be presented on the evening news or implementing temporary martial law. The significance of the internet and thus of social media cannot be understated. They give power to regular people by creating a shared public space for self-expression, creation, and debate, which to an organization like the CCP can be very dangerous if left unchecked. Such activities in physical shared public spaces are easier to control and governments have done so successfully for a long time but the internet can allow for a disruption in the status quo; through the virality of memes and hashtags, the world learned about the Hong Kong protests and were able to voice their support on a forum that has the potential to be more influential than a protest in Times Square.

Furthermore, Anthony Fung and Yunyi Hu identify another important aspect of memes and UGC beyond virality and control: it shows the importance of *authorship* in media.²⁶⁷ UGC has morphed the role of the audience from simply being passive receivers of information and ideas to active participants or creators.²⁶⁸ Brian McNair describes a new internet phenomenon: citizen journalism. Citizen journalism entails journalistic efforts undertaken by average citizens.²⁶⁹ As such, these are amateur attempts at journalism with varying levels of quality.²⁷⁰ It is another form of UGC that a wide

²⁶⁶ Mina, “Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man: A Case Study in Social Change Memes and Internet Censorship in China,” 362.

²⁶⁷ Fung and Hu, “Douyin, Storytelling, and National Discourse,” 141.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Brian McNair, “The internet and the changing global media environment,” in *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, ed. Andrew Chadwick and Philip N Howard, 1st ed. (London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Routledge, 2008), 223, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203962541>

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

range of individuals can contribute to, but, as McNair states, "...that they [amateur journalist UGC accounts] exist at all is a significant causal factor in the increasingly chaotic information environment confronted by political actors."²⁷¹ Anyone can be an internet journalist and it is not a phenomenon limited to China; in the West, it is a popular genre on YouTube and TikTok perhaps inspired by a fascination with true crime. Popular content is both mainstream and alternative current events and presentation can range from more formal exemplified by Swoop's coverage of the Idaho massacre (mainstream)²⁷² or more casual such as Atozy's coverage of nuisance streamer Johnny Somali in South Korea (alternative)²⁷³. This phenomenon risks becoming problematic when there is oversaturation in the genre which might lead to participants engaging in unethical practices to gain viewership, such as spreading misinformation or half-truths, lying about events or people, among others. In the case of China, an additional issue is when online netizens report on events that the government would rather conceal. If such reports gain virality, it will then force the Party to address these situations potentially sooner than it would have preferred. It could even pressure the CCP to act and require it to take immediate action to pacify public scrutiny. McNair also recounts a speech in which media executive Rupert Murdoch was once quoted as saying, "Power is moving away from those who own and manage the media to a new and demanding generation of consumers – consumers who are better educated, unwilling to be led and who know that in a competitive world they can get what they want, when they want it."²⁷⁴ Although primarily referring to Western consumers, these implications can also apply to modern Chinese netizens. By engaging in first-hand citizen reporting and subsequent reposting by others, netizens are able to expose lived realities before the Party can get control over the narrative.

²⁷¹ McNair, "The Internet and the Changing Global Media Environment," 223.

²⁷² The Idaho massacre refers to the murder of four University of Idaho students in their off-campus home in November 2022. As of writing, there is a suspect in custody, Brian Kohberger, and he is still awaiting trial. Erik Ortiz, "Idaho College Student Killings: A Summary and Timeline: The Quadruple Homicide Stunned the College Community of Moscow, Sparking Weeks of Speculation and Thousands of Tips Before Culminating in an Arrest.," NBC News, May 15, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/idaho-college-student-killings-summary-timeline-rcna63818>; SWOOP, "The Horrifying Idaho Murders: NEW DETAILS of Bryan Kohberger's Plan & Complete Timeline.," January 31, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIXDkUmqcs8>.

²⁷³ Johnny Somali is an internet personality who made a name for himself through his insensitive, offensive, and criminal acts he makes while livestreaming. As of writing, he is under a travel ban and has pled guilty to three charges with more charges still being filed. There are some online news networks like South China Morning Post reporting on it but Youtubers like Atozy and Legal Mindset have made multiple, in-depth reports about Johnny that offer more details than the official news channels. Hae-Rin Lee, "YouTuber Johnny Somali's Legal Troubles in Korea Deemed 'Self-inflicted' Amid Backlash," The Korea Times, April 25, 2025, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/society/20250425/youtuber-johnny-somalis-legal-troubles-in-korea-deemed-self-inflicted-amid-backlash>; Atozy, "Disrespectful IRL Streamer Arrested in Korea.," 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_60--aBL94; Legal Mindset, "Johnny Somali May 16 Trial Summary & New Charge (Fast Facts)," May 16, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xpuh3QD_9uE.

²⁷⁴ McNair, "The Internet and the Changing Global Media Environment," 225.

3.6 The Internet as a Propaganda Tool

Jérôme Doyon states that “ideological factors cannot explain the attractiveness of the regime”²⁷⁵ and that studies “on the early post-Mao era have stressed how the CYL’s core political indoctrination activities lacked appeal for a generation whose horizon was broadened by the liberalizing reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s.”²⁷⁶ Since then, these horizons have only increased irrespective of whether liberalizing continued and, although propaganda has also evolved since the 1970-80s, it is no longer enough to just *evolve*. It should also be entertaining to both reach and maintain an audience. Lu Yingdan and Jennifer Pan note that “mass media gave authoritarian regimes the capability to easily reach large, captive audiences”²⁷⁷ in a top-down fashion, allowing the regime to determine content and timing. The government in these situations had complete control over the flow of information to the people and there was not much that ordinary citizens could do to counter it or refute the information, especially not in a way that could reach the same numbers that the government’s media could. However, the internet fundamentally redefined the concept of mass media, changing the structure of information sharing beyond the traditional top-down paradigm. As such, “digital media [is] fundamentally reshaping government efforts to control information online.”²⁷⁸ With new phenomena such as citizen or amateur journalism taking root and countering the official narrative, the CCP and CYL must find a new means to reassert control over the internet should they wish to regain the same type of all-encompassing control over mass media that they once enjoyed.

Nevertheless, the accessibility of the internet and technology proves to be an invaluable tool for the Party in as much as it is also a threat. Another study by Lu and Pan states that thanks to modern entertainment platforms, government propaganda “have found themselves in competition with celebrities, entertainers, and influencers.”²⁷⁹ It is not enough to simply upload conventional CCP propaganda online and expect it to be successful with modern netizens. Because it is both sharing space with but also competing with entertainment, government bodies such as the CYL need to find ways to adapt their content to be just as appealing as these internet celebrities otherwise their content will simply be ignored (if not outright *meme-ed*). By taking advantage of the accessibility of the internet, of social media, and of youth culture, government organizations have the ability to reassert control over mass media and the access to the platforms that will allow them to do it.

²⁷⁵ Doyon, *Rejuvenating Communism: Youth Organizations and Elite Renewal in Post-Mao China*, 1.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

²⁷⁷ Lu and Pan, “Capturing Clicks: How the Chinese Government Uses Clickbait to Compete for Visibility,” 25.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

4 Methodology

Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, this thesis analyzed a total of fifty videos for examples of youthful appeal along with more traditional CCP propaganda themes like techno-nationalism and populism. These videos were sourced from November and December 2023. This time range included the most recent uploads at the time of data collection and was thus chosen to offer a timelier glimpse into the sort of content that the CYL was choosing to upload. In addition to these videos, the three pinned videos were also included in this research irrespective of their original upload dates. This was a deliberate choice made on my part because these three videos, no matter what the CYL uploads in the interim, will remain at the top of their page until manually unpinned. This indicates the strategic importance of these videos to the message being delivered.

Through an analysis of CYL's videos, this research identified specific thematic strategies the CYL used in order to adapt its messaging for internet youth culture. This included examining how internet youth culture influenced the narrative and visual aspects of its contemporary digital propaganda and comparing this new aesthetic style to traditional socialist realist approaches. Furthermore, this thesis aimed to show how this specific social media content aligned with the propaganda themes and motifs as determined in the pilot which, in no particular order, were:

- *techno-nationalism*
- *populism*
- *historical narratives*
- *progressiveness/advanced socialist China*
- *appeal to youth*

Initially, the use of a data scraper was considered for collecting information en masse from the CYL's Douyin page because of how the website platform was formatted, the main issue being the inability to highlight text overlaying the video (the video titles). The video URLs also proved to be non-specific, meaning it was not guaranteed that it would refer back to that specific video. These were major issues that led me to consider the use of a data scraper, partly because videos were lost in the initial phases of this research so finding a solution was in the forefront of my mind when making decisions on data collection. In order to overcome this, data scraping as a method to collect comprehensive publicly available information, including a stable URL, the videos' *like* and *share* counts, and the number of comments could be gathered and stored in a spreadsheet was a primary option considered. However, for ethical reasons, this method was not used, specifically due to the inability to ascertain the legality of using a data scraper or similar tools on Douyin, coupled with a lack of clear guidelines from ByteDance concerning research-related data extraction making it necessary to find another option. Consequently, a manual data collection method was used to acquire the necessary information.



4-1 Screenshot of the share feature on a Douyin video (Screenshot taken by me in April 2025)

After concluding that the videos were going to need to be manually collected and populated into a spreadsheet, the stable URL issue had to be addressed. The CYL uploads content regularly, and considering the long-term nature of this research, a way to secure the videos being used was paramount. Eventually, I discovered that stable URLs could be obtained through Douyin's *share* feature. By clicking on the *share* feature, a link icon was presented in a pop-up among other sharing methods. By clicking on the link icon, Figure 4.1 is then shown. By clicking on the link button (under the circle in the figure above), the following text is copied, which includes a stable URL for the specific video:

8.43 01/21 A@g.od Tlp:/ 核污水到来之前, 再看一看你手机里最美的海# 日本核污染水 <https://v.douyin.com/P-vsr6wi3Wc/> 复制此链接, 打开Dou音搜索, 直接观看视频!

This action solved two crucial issues at the same time: the URL issue and the inability to highlight the video titles. In the same example above, the title of the video would be: 核污水到来之前, 再看一看

你手机里最美的海 # 日本核污染水 (Take a look at the most beautiful sea scenes in your phone gallery before the arrival of nuclear wastewater #JapaneseNuclearPollutedWater) before the stable URL (<https://v.douyin.com/P-vsr6wi3Wc>).²⁸⁰ So, although data scrapers would not be used in this thesis, this method made the manual transfer of information to a spreadsheet significantly more manageable.

4.1 The Pilot

While still developing the methodology for this thesis research, I was also conducting a pilot project. This project consisted of indiscriminately watching a range of content from the CYL's Douyin page to identify any patterns or commonalities. After analyzing approximately 100 different videos from this wide range of available content, I determined a core set of themes and motifs, including: *populism*, *techno-nationalism*, *historical narratives*, emphasis on influential party members and martyrs, and narratives of a progressive socialist country. These themes influenced the development of the research questions listed in the Introduction Chapter. The CYL made sure that the style of content it uploads conforms to the style commonly found on Douyin, thus making the propaganda content appear to be proper user-generated content. By doing this, the CYL can make content that is able to appear user-made and organic in the algorithm, whether it is pushed by Bytedance, government ordinance or not. Examples of this can be seen in the stylistic choices made by the CYL, such as choice of video formatting, song, meme, etc.

The pilot determined the themes that would be used in this thesis and helped to formulate the research questions that would be posed. It also informed me the way I would end up approaching data collection and the storage of data by informing me that 100 or more videos, like originally intended, was too much given personal circumstance. Moreover, it explicitly showed the way the CYL has been consistently appropriating aspects of youth culture to better align itself with young Chinese netizens. This then warranted the decision to make *appealing to youth* a propaganda theme for this research rather than just a campaign or video style because it showed that it is a deliberate choice that is being made in the content's creation phase.

²⁸⁰ The other videos, their corresponding numbers, and their URLs can be found in the Appendices.

4.2 The Themes

The core propaganda themes featured in this research project were determined after careful analysis in the pilot phase. These themes are: (1) *techno-nationalism*, the use of a country's technological feats to inspire nationalism in the population, (2) *historical narratives*, the use of the nation's history being retold in carefully crafted narratives to inspire and reinvigorate a population's patriotism and nationalism, (3) *modern and progressive Socialist China*, which aims to showcase how the CCP's socialist approach to governance has facilitated China's modernization and societal advancement, and, (4) *appeal to youth*, the careful and deliberate use of aspects of a nation's youth culture to widen the appeal and approval of government, its narratives, and its initiatives. These themes will be examined and defined in greater detail along with each associated motif in the following sections.

In order to determine if a theme was present in a video, at least one of the theme's associated motifs had to be marked present. Motifs were considered present on a simple presence/absence basis and the data then populated manually into a spreadsheet. The raw numbers were then totaled up to determine a percentage to show relative frequency of each motif and theme. When presenting the results in the next chapter, both percentages and a graph will be presented to allow for better visualization.

4.2.1 Techno-nationalism

As previously stated, *techno-nationalism* is a specific form of nationalism that links a nation's technological capabilities and advances to its national security, economic prosperity, and social stability in response to increasing global competition between different economic development ideologies.²⁸¹ In China, this sentiment stems from the Party leaders' concerns that China had a distinct lack of technology that is domestically invented, developed, and manufactured,²⁸² consequently resulting in China's dependence on foreign technology. Although China's current advancements in technology may suggest diminishing reliance on foreign technology, nevertheless, it is a theme that has structured Chinese politics and propaganda work for decades.

The motifs for techno-nationalism that helped to identify the presence of this theme in the content are (1) *advanced military technology*, (2) *AI & IT*, (3) *aerospace science*, and (4) *Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mechanics (STEM)*.

²⁸¹ "Techno-Nationalism and Its Impact on Geopolitics and Trade."

²⁸² Cong Cao, "Chinese Technonationalism", review of *China's Techno-Warriors: National Security and Strategic Competition from the Nuclear to the Information Age*, by Evan A. Feigenbaum, *Metascience* 13, (2004): 71.

4.2.1.1 *Advanced Military Technology*

For the motif *advanced military technology*, the presence of imagery used to convey the size and might of the PLA and its advanced technological capabilities was coded. Examples include:

- military-grade machinery
- guns
- tanks
- warships
- military planes
- other tools of modern warfare.

This motif encompasses content displaying China's military prowess and ever-expanding capabilities in terms of the mechanics of war. Importantly: this motif does not include the depiction of soldiers as individuals. This motif was for the *display* of military and technological might, not the human aspect of the military. Some ambiguity exists with this motif's coding as sometimes soldiers can be simultaneously representing military might and soldiers as model individuals. In these cases, best discretion was used although most of the time, both motifs were marked as present.

4.2.1.2 *AI & IT*

Any display of technological advancements in artificial intelligence and information technology would indicate the presence of the motif, *AI & IT*. This could include:

- displays of advanced AI systems
- the internet connectivity/services
- computer technology (or computer hard/software)
- mobile devices
- depictions or discussions of virtual assistants
- smart devices
- chatbots
- facial recognition systems
- e-commerce
- cybersecurity
- streaming platforms
- GPS and navigation

Generally, these would most likely be presented positively due to the nature of propaganda and this theme (*techno-nationalism*). However, for this thesis, any depiction — positive or negative — were included because it was important enough to the Party for the CYL to have posted it at all.

4.2.1.3 Aerospace Sciences

Aerospace science is another motif that has long been a core feature of CCP propaganda, often featuring in the background of propaganda posters, and has crossover with *advanced military technology* due to both motifs applying to military planes, for example. In cases of overlap, best discretion was applied to determine whether one or both motifs were indicated. This motif included:

- aircraft (e.g., civilian aircraft, military aircraft, drones)
- spacecraft
- space exploration activities/achievements
- satellites

Depending on context, depictions of those who made great strides in *aerospace sciences* for China would also be included under this motif.

4.2.1.4 Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mechanics (STEM)

The final motif for *techno-nationalism* is *science, technology, engineering, & mathematics (STEM)*, an umbrella concept to ensure that as many aspects of this theme as possible are accounted for. This motif has a wide scope encompassing various scientific disciplines (including but not limited to natural, formal, biological, social sciences). Examples of this motif include:

- energy production (e.g., new energy sources, power grids)
- public and personal transportation vehicles (e.g., high-speed rail, electric vehicles)
- communication technology (e.g., 5G, telecommunications infrastructure)
- agricultural technology
- construction techniques and projects
- specific engineering disciplines (e.g., civil, mechanical, electrical, chemical engineering)

Given its wide scope, there will be significant overlap with other categories under this theme. When overlap occurred, the content was coded under the more specific and better-suited motif, rather than *STEM*. This way, the overall presence of the theme *techno-nationalism* would not be skewed.

4.2.2 Historical Narratives

In Chinese propaganda, the theme *historical narratives* would indicate the depictions of China's history as told through the lens of the Party to shape the collective memory and establish a specific narrative that favors the CCP. The motifs identified to help define this theme include: (1) authentic audio/footage of historical events, (2) dramatized depictions of actual events, (3) revolutionary heroes, (4) artifacts, and (5) the narrative of a victimized China. Should any of these be indicated as present, the video will be determined to have utilized the theme *historical narratives*.

4.2.2.1 Authentic Audio-visual Content of Historical Events

This motif, *authentic audio-visual content of historical events*, referred to the use of any piece of authentic media of a historical event. This does not include original movie cuts unless accompanied by additional information that may alter the context of the piece of media. While the film itself might not be considered for this motif, the *filming or production* of the film may be included. As such, this motif includes:

- Footage or recordings of Mao Zedong
- Footage or recordings of Zhou Enlai, or other pivotal Party leaders
- Footage or recordings of battles or wars
- Footage or recordings of scientific advancement (in the past)

This motif had some limitations. For example, while the *audio* of a Mao Zedong speech would be included, not an image of it simply due to the nature of a still image. The image of a Mao speech would most likely be best suited to *artifacts*. However, if the image is of a *photograph* of Mao giving a speech, it would be classified as both. Additionally, to establish what constituted *historic*, for the sake of simplicity and uniformity for this thesis, I determined that anything pre-1976 (Mao's death year) would be considered *historic*.

4.2.2.2 Dramatized Depictions of Actual Events

The motif *dramatized depictions of actual events* is reenactments of historical events captured with cinematographic intent to tell a particular story rather than document an event for journalistic

purposes. This footage is often dramatic and shot with an intentional slant, designed to inspire a visceral, emotional reaction on the part of the viewer. Examples include:

- Reenactments of foundational Party events
- Staged re-creations of real footage to achieve new angles or add synchronous audio (e.g., not silent film)

This motif can be employed in collaboration with the *popular culture* motif under *appeal to youth*. For instance, when popular actors are cast as historical figures, or a song by a popular artist is used over the footage, the propagandistic impact of these dramatized depictions of events has the potential to be significantly amplified.

4.2.2.3 *Revolutionary Heroes*

The motif ‘*revolutionary heroes*’ had an admittedly narrow scope as it referred only to individuals considered to be Chinese revolutionary heroes, including:

- photographs of a revolutionary hero(es)
- direct quotations or citations of a hero’s words
- statues or other commemorative items in their honor

There can be potential for some overlap with other themes, such as *artifacts* and *authentic audio-visual content of historical events*. For example, direct quotations from a revolutionary hero could be an indicator of the *revolutionary heroes* motif but if it is written in the author’s own handwriting, then it could also fall under *artifacts*. In this example, both would be selected as they are both highly suitable. However, this motif is rather strict in what can be classified as a *revolutionary hero*, making it a rather straightforward motif.

4.2.2.4 *Artifacts*

As a motif in this research, the term *artifact* refers to *historical* artifacts. This would be in opposition to *digital* artifacts, a term that will also be used later in this thesis. *Artifacts* motif includes tangible artifacts from any Chinese historical era, not limited to things related to more contemporary events. Like previously noted, *historic* will refer to anything pre-1969 to just have a definite definition to the term. Things that will be looked for include:

- pottery
- clothes (e.g., hanfu or Tang suit)

- traditional musical instruments
- photographs
- artwork (e.g., paintings, calligraphy, music)

To clarify, the inclusion of photographs in this motif refers to the physical, tangible photograph, not the subject. Therefore, an *image* of Mao might be best classified under *revolutionary heroes*, but the actual, physical photograph of Mao would be considered an *artifact* because the photograph itself is the important factor. In this example, both motifs would most likely be selected for an image of Mao. Perhaps a better example would be a photograph of a citizen from the Nanjing Massacre, where the photograph itself is the point rather than the person being depicted. Nevertheless, some level of ambiguity will remain in this decision, so good-faith discretion was employed.

4.2.2.5 Narrative of a Victimized China

The *Narrative of a victimized China* motif refers to depictions of slights against China committed by an outside force, such as the USA or Japan. The timeframe for which is not restricted to either historical or contemporary periods for this thesis. Examples of what this motif might look like could include:

- Headlines depicting China as a victim of an unfair event
- References to foreign politicians saying negative things about China
- Surveys showing unfavorable views on China

This motif proved challenging to classify exclusively under either *historical narratives* due to its relevance and importance to both *historical narratives* and Chinese populism. As such, there is strong potential for overlap between these motifs and, like with the other instances of overlap, best discretion would be applied.

4.2.3 Populism

Populism is a complex concept that, at its core, can be understood as a sociopolitical theory that identifies and separates society into two groups: *the people* (morally good) and *the elite* (corrupt and working against the people's interests).²⁸³ In China, *populism* presents as a grassroots theory where *the people* are identified as the Chinese people and *the elite* are generally non-Chinese foreigners but can

²⁸³ "Populism."

include intellectuals and others in Chinese society as well.²⁸⁴ The motifs for this theme are: (1) *buzzwords*, (2) *national imagery*, (3) *military/soldiers*, (4) *everyday heroes*, (5) *volunteerism/civil society*, and (6) *revolutionary spirit*.

4.2.3.1 Buzzwords

The motif *buzzwords* encompassed any word or phrase that holds special meaning or weight to a member of the in-group who hears it. In this style of content, *buzzwords* typically appeared in video titles and hashtags rather than the content itself but could occur in either. Examples of what would constitute a *buzzword* are:

- emo
- hero
- martyr
- foreign
- China/Homeland
- comrade

Identifying this motif presented a unique challenge due to my non-native proficiency in Chinese. To compensate, online language-learning sources and China-focused articles were consulted regarding what typically constitutes a buzzword in China and specifically in the Chinese sociopolitical environment. English and Chinese language articles from Realtime Mandarin,²⁸⁵ QQ,²⁸⁶ Go East Mandarin,²⁸⁷ Global Times,²⁸⁸ and China Media Project²⁸⁹ were referenced.

²⁸⁴ Pretorius and Valev, “Populist Authoritarianism in China: National and Global Perspectives.”

²⁸⁵ Andrew Methven, “China’s Top Internet Buzzwords of 2023,” *RealTime Mandarin* (blog), December 16, 2023, <https://www.realtimemandarin.com/p/chinas-top-internet-buzzwords-of-e67>.

²⁸⁶ 咬文嚼字编辑部, “《咬文嚼字》编辑部发布‘2023年十大流行语,’” Weixin Official Accounts Platform, n.d., <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/OXqvaRUME7CcVWC56XShvA>; 纵相新闻, “2023年10大网络流行语出炉: ‘I人/E人’‘遥遥领先’上榜_腾讯新闻,” Tencent, December 8, 2023, <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20231208A04OQR00>.

²⁸⁷ “Mandarin Chinese Online Slang Buzzwords,” *GoEast Mandarin* (blog), 2024, <https://goeastmandarin.com/online-chinese-buzzwords/>.

²⁸⁸ Mengying Bi, “Top 10 Chinese Buzzwords of 2023 Released,” *The Global Times*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202312/1303082.shtml>.

²⁸⁹ “CCP Slogans for 2021,” China Media Project, April 14, 2021, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2021/04/14/ccp-slogans-for-2021/>; “The CCP’s 2021 Propaganda Blueprint,” China Media Project, April 18, 2021, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2021/04/18/the-ccps-2021-propaganda-blueprint/>.

4.2.3.2 National Imagery

The motif *national imagery* consisted of anything considered emblematic of China. Generally, this was to refer to man-made features, such as the Great Wall of China. This was a broad topic that could include:

- famous historical landmarks such as the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, the Great Wall
- iconic imagery such as the national flag or pandas
- the CCTV building, the Shanghai World Financial Center

In general, natural scenes were considered representative of *environmental/ism* under *modern and progressive Socialist China* unless they were somehow symbolically representative of China as a nation like the Yangtze River, in which case both were selected. This choice was made because the CYL tended to use many general nature scenes that primarily emphasized the beauty and abundance of China's natural landscapes. Due to the more specific nature of the Yangtze River, for example, and because it is often used as representative of China, it would qualify as both *national imagery* and *environmental/ism*.

4.2.3.3 Military/Soldiers

The motif *military & soldiers* is another straightforward motif that included anything related to the military and personnel. As such, it notably overlaps with the *advanced military technology* motif (under *techno-nationalism*), but this motif was to emphasize the *human* aspect of the military and its functions, rather than the technological strength aspect (which is the intention of *advanced military technology*). There will also be crossover with the following motif, *everyday heroes*, regarding the imagery of individual soldiers. The classification was dependent on portrayal. If a depiction of the soldier/s is more about *military*, then they will be marked under this motif but if it was more about highlighting the soldier/s role as a model citizen, it was marked under both motifs. Imagery coded under this motif included:

- casual, general depictions of soldiers in uniform
- wide shots of any branch of the CCP's military, not including depictions including only technology or other machinery
- historical depictions of People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers
- scenes depicting the training and daily life as a soldier

4.2.3.4 *Everyday Heroes*

This motif, *everyday heroes*, encompassed everyone included in the CYL's content that is not a celebrity, politician, or other person with an elite status. Soldiers were selectively included in this motif because they traditionally are considered everyday model citizens.²⁹⁰ However, due to soldiers having a motif of their own (*military and soldiers*), how the soldier was being portrayed was taken in account. If they were shown as a model citizen, they were included here in addition to being included in the previous motif. This was a deliberate choice on my part because of the importance of the military and of model citizens in CCP propaganda.

- athletes
- students
- scientists
- mechanists
- volunteers
- doctors
- soldiers

4.2.3.5 *Volunteerism/Civil Society*

This motif, *volunteerism/civil society*, focused on the action of volunteering rather than the human aspect of the volunteers. This motif aimed to determine how often civil society is portrayed in the CYL's content, especially since volunteer work is one of its organized activities since the early 1990s.²⁹¹ Depictions of the volunteers themselves would be better suited to the *everyday heroes* motif because the volunteer is behaving as a model citizen. Coding for this motif is straightforward and included:

- volunteering in areas of need
- volunteering at national events (e.g., the Olympics)
- volunteering at social welfare initiatives (e.g., community food programs, public assistance initiatives, food pantry/food assistance organizations)
- volunteering for organizations that focus on housing (e.g., Habitat for Humanity, homeless shelters, public housing)
- volunteering as a traveling healthcare provider for impoverished regions

²⁹⁰ Ranta, "Mao's Homeworld(s) – a Comment on The Use of Propaganda Posters in Post-War China," 61.

²⁹¹ Doyon, *Rejuvenating Communism: Youth Organizations and Elite Renewal in Post-Mao China*, 18.

4.2.3.6 Revolutionary Spirit

When considering the coding for *revolutionary spirit*, this summary of party learning was considered:

“... [E]very period of revolutionary history of our Party is a vivid textbook full of ideal[s] and belief[s]. All Party members must remember where we started in the first place, keep moving forward and always cherish the memory of the forefathers who have made great sacrifice[s] and contributions to the Chinese people and the Chinese nation, forever preserve the fighting spirit that Chinese Communists demonstrated and forever preserve our devotion to our people to create a better and happier life for them.”²⁹²

Harkening back to more traditional styles of CCP propaganda, this motif was to connect the youth with the concept of eternal and ongoing revolution. As this concept is essential to China, and its propaganda and politics, the inclusion of this motif was vital. Displays of *revolutionary spirit* included both historical and contemporary portrayals, such as:

- depictions of or relating to The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and other Mao-era campaigns
- references to hardship, struggle, and self-reliance
- references to the Long March
- idealizing self-sacrifice, heroism, and unwavering determination against all odds
- continuous learning and self-improvement (e.g., advanced education students, adult learning)
- patriotism and national pride, the Chinese spirit
- romanticization of selfless devotion, resilience of the people

This motif was more complex to codify due to the ambiguity of the concepts listed above. Consequently, good-faith discretion was heavily involved when determining the presence of *revolutionary spirit*.

²⁹² “Revolutionary Spirit Is the Precious Wealth of the Party and Country: A Glorious Century-long Journey of the CPC the Platform for Learning Party’s History,” International Department Central Committee of the CPC, March 22, 2021, https://www.idcpc.gov.cn/ztwy/tbtj/jdbnglhceng/introduction/202103/t20210322_145481.html.

4.2.4 Modern and Progressive Socialist China

The version of China that is depicted by *Modern and Progressive Socialist China* is similar to how it was portrayed in Maoist-era style *socialist realism*, where the reality that is displayed was the fabricated and idealized version of reality²⁹³ that shows only “the struggle between ‘good and better’”²⁹⁴ in society. This theme is closely tied to both *Populism* and *Techno-nationalism*, as it aims to cultivate an image of a 'modern and progressive China' often showcased through its technological, cultural, and societal advancements. The motifs used to identify the presence of this theme in the content include: (1) inclusivity, (2) advanced public spaces, (3) environment/alism, and (4) global China/China as a world leader.

4.2.4.1 Inclusivity

The motif *Inclusivity* is a broad motif that encapsulated a wide number of groups. Most commonly, this term included:

- women
- gender and sexual minorities
- religious minorities
- disabled/differently-abled people
- Chinese ethnic minority groups
- Non-Chinese foreigners

Non-Chinese foreigners and Chinese ethnic minorities needed to have been portrayed neutrally or positively for the portrayal to be included and does not include world leaders. Foreigners as criminals and/or anti-China would be included under a separate theme (*populism*) and motif (*victimized China under the history theme*), depending on context. If ethnic minorities were portrayed negatively, context would determine which motif it was marked as. For example, negative portrayals of ethnic Uyghurs or Chinese Muslim groups would most likely fit under the *victimized China* motif, as negative depictions of Muslim groups are generously synonymous with terrorism and in these cases, Uyghurs are typically not portrayed as ‘real Chinese’ in these instances. Likewise, negative portrayals of foreigners would most likely belong under the *populism* theme.

²⁹³ Masing-Delic, *From Symbolism to Socialist Realism*, 317.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 311.

4.2.4.2 *Advanced Public Spaces*

The motif *advanced public spaces* was to emphasize the depictions of highly advanced public spaces and is distinct from westernization or gentrification concepts. Its purpose was to highlight the advanced societal capabilities under socialism in China, as displayed in its propaganda content. This motif had some crossover with *STEM* and both might have been marked based on best discretion of what was being depicted. Examples of this motif included:

- high-speed rail (e.g., bullet trains)
- large-scale bridges over wide expanses of water
- modern public facilities (e.g., advanced public hospitals, libraries, shopping centers, theaters)
- expansive public transportation
- developed parks, gardens, beaches, hiking trails, and outdoor recreational spaces
- well-managed and safe road and sidewalk infrastructure
- modern community centers

4.2.4.3 *Environment/alism*

Shortened to *environment/alism*, this motif included both *environment* and *environmentalism*, encompassing both depictions of natural Chinese environment and the concept of environmental care. Examples include:

- emphasizing the importance of taking care of the environment
- showcasing China's landscapes
- highlighting benefits of participating in nature and nature conservation
- using Chinese landscapes for tourism purposes
- depicting nature that is unique or otherwise special to China (e.g., Zhangjiajie, the Yuncheng Salt Lake, or the Tiger Leaping Gorge)

4.2.4.4 *Global China/China as a World Leader*

The *Global China* or *China as a world leader* motif included any depiction of China establishing itself as an international leader and exercising influence (e.g., Africa or Southwest Asian nations), or interacting with other world leaders, such as the American, Russian, or Japanese political leaders or diplomats. A specific example would include references to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It also included depictions of:

- Confucian Institutes and other Chinese language and cultural centers with ties to the government
- assisting with and/or funding other countries' infrastructure development
- Chinese leadership (e.g., Xi Jinping or previous leaders), or Chinese diplomats participating in world organizations (e.g., the World Health Organization [WHO], the United Nations [UN])²⁹⁵

4.2.5 Appeal to Youth

Although this is not a typical or conventionally recognized propaganda theme when discussing Chinese propaganda thoughtwork, the concept *appeal to youth* is vital for understanding the CYL's strategies. It is included as a core propaganda theme to identify and analyze how the Party appropriates aspects of youth culture to make more youthful and appealing propaganda. The operational motifs used to identify the presence of this theme in the content include: (1) popular culture, (2) meme & popular video editing formats, (3) informal and casual content or tone, and (4) relatable depictions of everyday life.

4.2.5.1 Popular Culture

When considering how to codify *popular culture*, this quote from Shaohua Guo was kept in mind:

*“...[T]he Youth League’s appropriation of fan culture and capitalization on digital populism are the key strategies used to engage patriotic netizens.... Thereby cultivating their own fanbase, but they also foster an alliance between the Chinese nation and its citizens, and between themselves and nonofficial actors.”*²⁹⁶

Popular culture includes a wide breadth of content but, when considering propaganda and the type of social media platform Douyin is, this motif generally referred to film and audio content that could be used in a short-form video for social media. However, it could also have included celebrities and idols,

²⁹⁵ This is especially true since the USA has left the WHO under the US’s 47th President’s direction, leaving a void for China to fill should it want. This is as of June 2025; due to the one-year notice, it is not set to take effect until 2026. Refer to these press releases by both The White House and the WHO for more information: The White House, “Withdrawing the United States From the World Health Organization,” Press release, The White House, January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-the-worldhealth-organization/>; World Health Organization: WHO, “WHO Comments on United States’ Announcement of Intent to Withdraw,” Press release, January 21, 2025, <https://www.who.int/news/item/21-01-2025-who-comments-on-united-states--announcement-of-intent-to-withdraw>.

²⁹⁶ Guo, “‘Occupying’ the Internet: State Media and the Reinvention of Official Culture Online,” 20.

and references to these things. For it to be effective, it had to be people and/or content that is not just popular, but specifically popular with youth. Examples for this motif include:

- popular celebrities and idols (e.g., Wang Yibo and Zhou Shen, both of whom have collaborated and created content for the government in the past)
- pop music (e.g., music by Lü Koukou [吕口口] and Dengshenmejun [等什么君])
- clips from television, net dramas, movies both Chinese and international
- references to television, movies, music, net dramas, light/web novels²⁹⁷

This motif encompassed anything that one might consider modern youth culture as far as media consumption is concerned as opposed to popular slang, which is linguistic and considered a *buzzword* for this project, for example. Additionally, the origin of the content (if it is produced in China or abroad) was not taken into consideration when codifying this motif. This was a deliberate choice on my part as a researcher because I do not believe the *origin* matters so much as long as it is *popular*, it serves the same purpose.

4.2.5.2 Memes and Popular Video Edit Formats

A meme is “a unit of cultural information,” “transmitted verbally or by repeated action” between members of the same group or community.²⁹⁸ It is multifaceted and encompasses culture, tangible and intangible concepts, and linguistics.²⁹⁹ For this motif, determining what constituted a meme within content produced by a government organization was uniquely challenging so I attempted to be sure that what was included was not content that was ‘silly for the sake of being silly’, but an actual, identifiable meme or a reference to one. However, common examples that were used to codify *meme* and *popular video editing formats* included:

- recognized formulaic images (e.g., *woman yells at cat*, *Kermit drinking tea*)
- recognized formulaic videos (e.g., *cool guy wiping mirror*, *outfit transformation*)³⁰⁰
- WordArt-style text

²⁹⁷ In Chinese, a light novel 轻小说 (qīng xiǎoshuō) and a web novel 网络小说 (Wǎngluò Xiǎoshuō) or 网络文学 (wǎngluò wénxué) refers to serialized fiction published online. Many have enjoyed success outside of China, such as Heaven Official’s Blessing and You Fei. Xuejiao Cai and Qi’an Chen, “Here Are the Top Reads From China’s \$5 Billion Online Literature Market: From Romances and Period Dramas to Coming-of-age Tales and Martial Arts Epics, Here Are the Stories That Hooked China’s E-bookworms in 2020.,” Sixth Tone, January 15, 2021, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006710>.

²⁹⁸ Styler, “The Linguistics of Memes.”

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ I did my best to give these memes a recognizable title but it might still be confusing. An example of the first one is “镜子该换了 It’s time to replace the mirror,” November 16, 2020, <https://v.douyin.com/ij5W5UsJ>.

- phrases such as *that moment when* and *if you know you know*
- remixed songs in a higher pitch and faster tune to create a funny effect

4.2.5.3 *Informal and Casual Content or Tone*

The *informal and casual content or tone* motif describes the general tone of the content analyzed, as opposed to stiff or formal delivery often associated with traditional propaganda content. While inherently subjective, this motif encompassed any stylistic choices that would give the CYL an approachable and casual image. Despite significant overlap with the other motifs of this section, I chose to keep the *informal and casual content or tone* motif as its own distinct motif. This separation is important to identify the instances where content may not be casual or informal, even if other youthful elements are used and will allow for a more nuanced analysis of when and on what topics the content deviates from an informal approach.

4.2.5.4 *Relatable Depictions of Everyday Life.*

Finally, the *relatable depictions of everyday life* motif encompassed anything related to the daily life of youth in China. Topics could range from studying for university examinations to depictions of camaraderie and family. When codifying this motif, I found it important that it is not to be confused or somehow conflated with the *popular culture* motif because, although they do share some overlap in the way that popular culture can be considered relatable, I intended *relatable depictions of everyday life* to focus strictly on situational relatability. This means the motif was coded when the content depicts situations and concepts from daily life that resonate with the viewer, rather than simply featuring popular media or celebrities. This could include:

- playing with friends outside, playing sports, or games
- studying or doing homework
- having meals
- depictions of partaking in hobbies or chores

4.3 Data Collection, Limitations, and Ethical Considerations

The data that was to be used for this thesis was naturally going to be videos from the CYL's Douyin account. Deciding how many videos were to be collected, how they would be collected, and what

exactly was going to be analyzed for this research were the decisions that needed to be made. Originally, I had intended on collecting the information I needed for this research by using a data scraper. By using a scraper tool, publicly available information like URLs, titles, *likes*, *shares*, number of comments and so on, would be gathered and stored in a spreadsheet. However, due to the ethics issue about whether tools like scrapers can be used on Chinese social media platforms was uncertain, it was decided that videos were to be collected manually. This decision informed my other decisions regarding how many videos were to be used and the upload period that would be used.

After making the decision about the scraper, the video collection time range needed to be decided. Originally, this thesis was going to be an analysis of a year's worth of content (or an approximation thereof) that was going to be selected using a random number generator. However, another problem was encountered, that being the format of the desktop version of Douyin's website. The platform was designed with an *endless scroll* feature that allows for endless new videos to watch. This was a problem for the randomized data selection strategy because it would make it incredibly difficult to identify or retrieve a specific video from an unquantified and ever-expanding pool of videos. For example, had the number 233 been chosen by a random number generator, 232 videos would have had to have been counted to find number 233, which is both unmanageable and unreasonable.

For personal reasons and due to the ethical question just discussed regarding the use of a data scraper, it was determined that the number of videos to be used in this thesis could not be as many as I originally would have liked and a more manageable number had to be found. Based on the dates of the CYL's uploaded videos, a two-month period would yield approximately 60 videos. In order to make the process as simple as possible, the number of videos to be collected was rounded to the nearest fifty, thus the number of videos selected for this study.

By using the most recent uploads, there is no risk of accidentally introducing researcher bias and the amount of time it would take for data selection was as long as it would take for me to manually populate a spreadsheet.

As previously mentioned, the data for this thesis was to be collected manually. Starting from the first video (the pinned video), the title and the stable URL from the *share* link was saved to a spreadsheet. When first starting this project, the CYL did not have English titles for their videos, so I had translated them myself. However, at some point during this project, English titles were added so those were also collected later, replacing my translations as these would provide more insight than my translations would have. From there, the videos were analyzed for the previously mentioned motifs, indicating whether or not a propaganda theme was present. Totals were collected at the end to show the frequency in percentages of each motif and each theme present in the fifty videos.

A major limitation that had to be considered when performing this research is, like stated by Lu and Pan, there is no formally agreed upon or established standards for how video content should be analyzed.³⁰¹ Due to this, a lot of the results of this thesis are based on my earnest objectivity when coding the videos. Nevertheless, I did my utmost to ensure that the definitions and the coding were made as clear and as understandable as possible so that the logic behind why a video was coded in such a way is as transparent as it can be.

³⁰¹ Lu and Pan, “The Pervasive Presence of Chinese Government Content on Douyin Trending Videos,” 70.

5 Results

This thesis examined fifty videos from the CYL's official Douyin account uploaded between November and December 2023 to show that its propaganda dissemination technique has been updated for highly interactive social media platforms while maintaining traditional Chinese Communist style propaganda themes and styles. These traditional themes were *techno-nationalism*, *historical narratives*, *populism*, *modern and progressive Socialist China*, and *appeal to youth* as identified by a pilot project. As such, Chinese Communist propaganda has not changed so much as it has adapted to contemporary pop styles. In the following sections of this chapter, each theme and its associated motifs will be individually presented with the results found in this research's analysis stage.

5.1 Report: Themes

Using a simple present/not present data analysis process, motifs were identified through careful examination and, if even one motif was present, the associated theme was also determined to be present. The results will be presented in the following sections, each named after the relevant theme and/or motif, in order from most to least frequent. In total, out of fifty, each theme was present at the following rates:

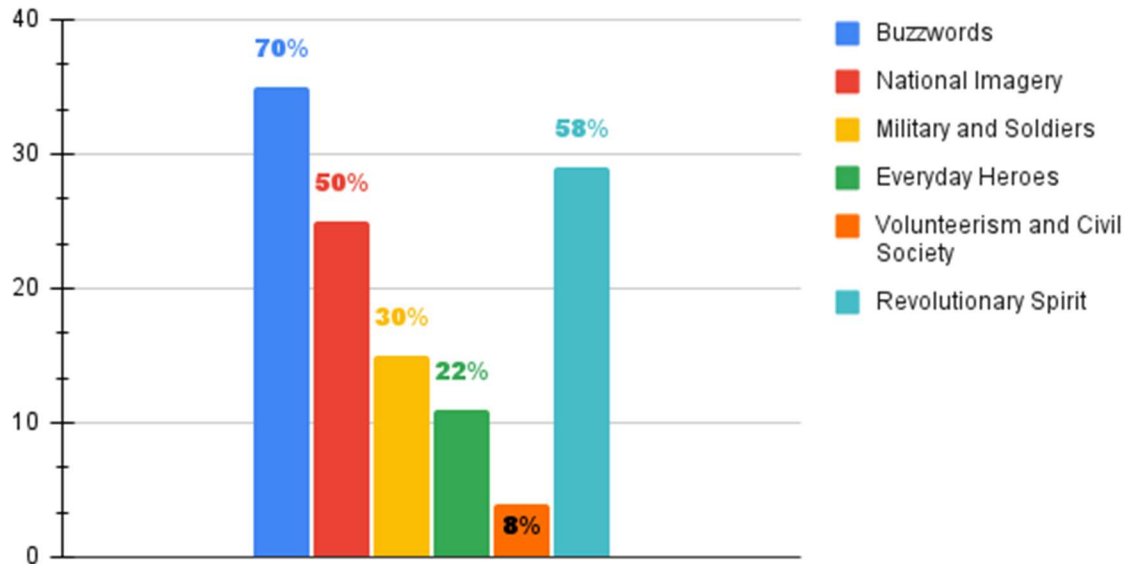
- Populism: 90%
- Appeal to Youth: 88%
- Modern and Progressive Socialist China: 70%
- Techno-nationalism: 66%
- Historical Narratives: 36%

In addition, the general analysis indicated that the CYL uploaded approximately one video per day and skipped uploading on only four days, all of which were in December (December 2, 18, 21, and 27).

5.2 Report: Populism

Populism

The frequency of populist motifs out of 50 videos



5-1 Chart showing the occurrence of Populist motifs in the fifty selected douyin videos, broken down into the following subsections: buzzwords, national imagery, military/soldiers, everyday heroes, volunteerism/civil society, and revolutionary spirit.

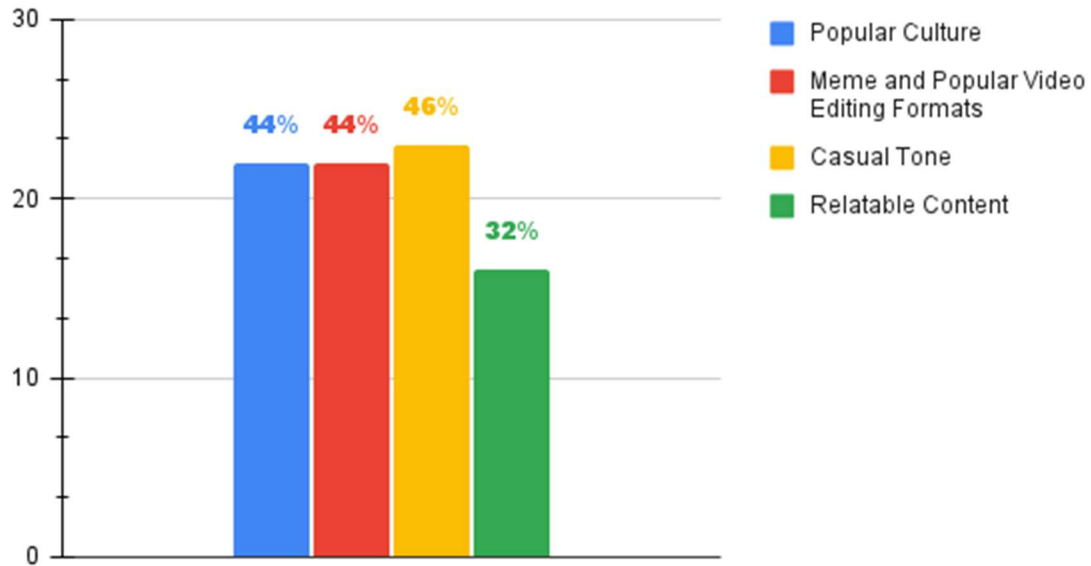
Populism appeared in 90% of the fifty videos uploaded by the CYL to Douyin between November and December 2023. The frequency for each motif is as follows, from most to least frequent:

- National imagery: 50%
- Military/soldiers: 30%
- Revolutionary Spirit: 58%
- Buzzwords: 70%
- Everyday heroes: 18%
- Volunteerism/civil society: 8%

5.3 Report: Appeal to Youth

Appeal to Youth

The frequency of youthful motifs out of 50 videos



5-2 Chart showing the occurrences of the Appeal to Youth motifs in the fifty selected douyin videos, broken down into the following subsections: popular culture, memes and popular video editing formats, casual in nature, and relatable/slice-of-life.

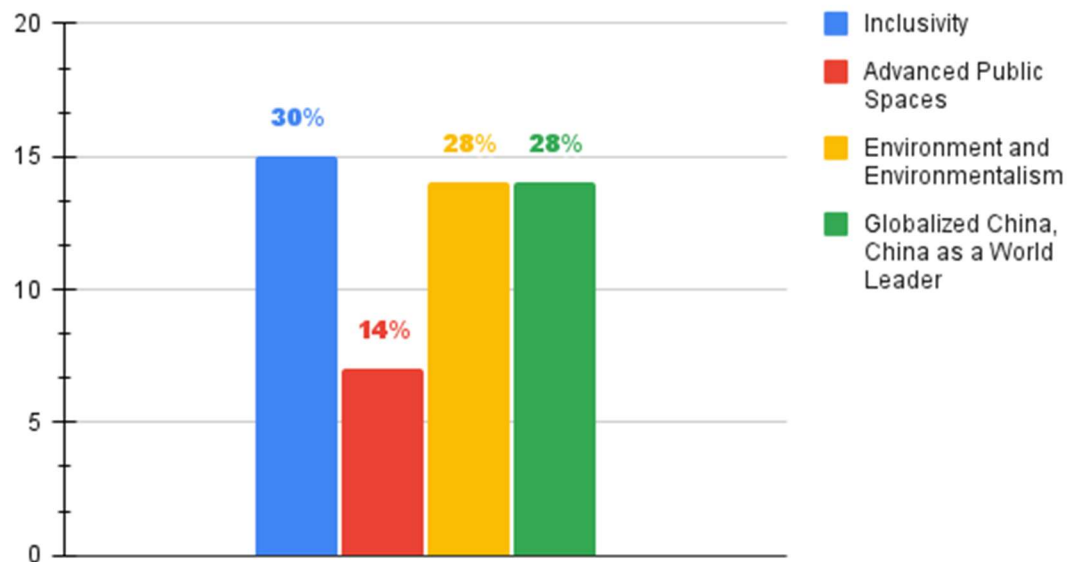
Of the themes presented in this thesis, *appeal to youth* was the second most common motif in this research and its motifs were:

- Casual tone: 46%
- Popular culture: 44%
- Meme and popular editing formats: 44%
- Relatability: 32%

5.4 Report: Modern and Progressive Socialist China

Modern and Progressive Socialist China

The frequency of modern and progressive socialist motifs out of 50 videos



5-3 Chart showing the occurrences of Modern and Progressive Socialist China motifs in the fifty selected douyin videos, broken down into the following subsections: inclusivity, advanced public sectors, environment/alism, and globalized China/China as a world leader.

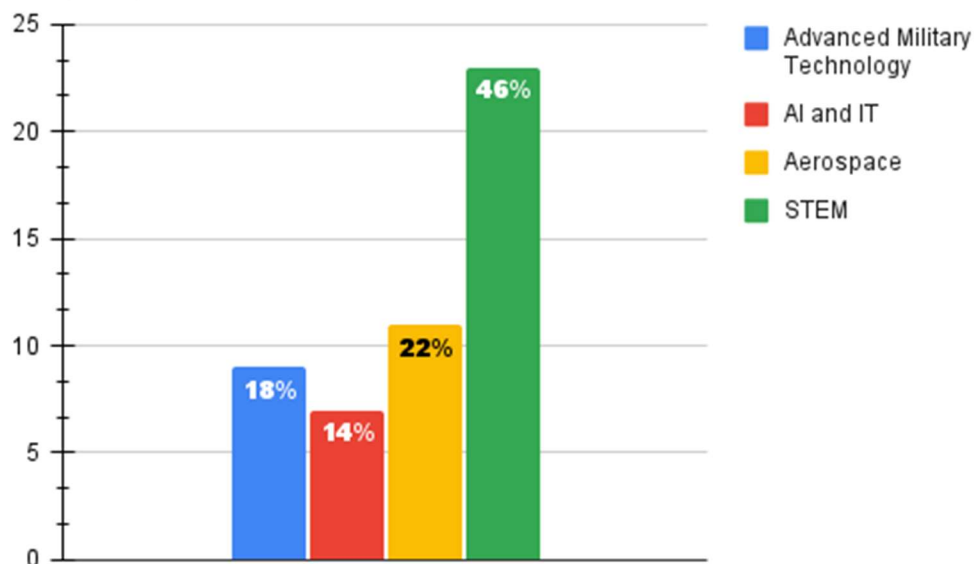
Modern and Progressive Socialist China appeared in 70% of the fifty videos the CYL uploaded between November and December 2023. The motifs for this theme, from most to least frequent, were:

- Inclusivity: 30%
- Environment/alism: 28%
- Globalized China/China as a world leader: 28%
- Advanced public spaces: 14%

5.5 Report: Techno-Nationalism

Techno-Nationalism

The frequency of techno-nationalist motifs out of 50 videos



5-4 Chart showing the occurrences of Techno-nationalist motifs in the fifty selected douyin videos, broken down into the following subsections: advanced military technology, artificial intelligence (AI) and information technology (IT), aerospace science, and science, technology, engineering, and mechanics (STEM).

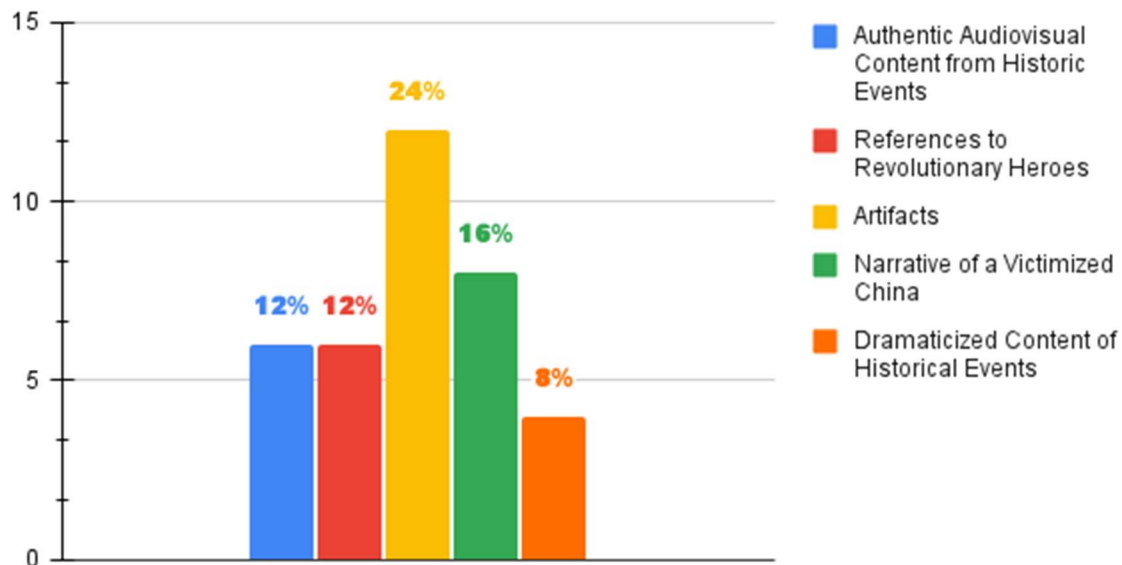
Techno-nationalism appeared in 66% of the fifty videos uploaded between the November and December time range. The frequency of this theme's motifs is as follows, from most to least frequent:

- STEM: 46%
- Aerospace technology: 22%
- Advanced military technology: 18%
- AI and IT: 14%

5.6 Report: Historical Narratives

Historical Narratives

The frequency of historical narrative motifs out of 50 videos



5-5 Chart showing the occurrences of Historical Narratives motifs in the fifty selected douyin videos, broken down into the following subsections: authentic footage, revolutionary heroes, artifacts, victimized China, and dramatized depictions of actual events

The *Historical narrative* theme appeared in 36% out of the fifty videos. The frequency of this theme's motifs is as follows, from most to least frequent:

- Artifacts: 24%
- Victimized China: 16%
- Authentic audio/video footage: 12%
- References to revolutionary heroes: 12%
- Dramatized depictions of events: 8%

6 Discussion

“没错，我就是团团”

— CYL, Douyin

This thesis determined that the two most significant propaganda themes for the CYL at the end of 2023 are *populism* and *appeal to youth*. Between November and December, the most frequently utilized theme was *populism* at an occurrence rate of approximately 90%, and *appeal to youth* was a close second at 88%. These are significantly higher than other core propaganda themes like *historical narratives* (36%) and *techno-nationalism* (66%). The ways in which the CYL was able to apply both populist and youthful content was through the use of pop music, memes, and even physical comedy to make the populist motifs more palatable. These methods helped establish a direct connection between the CYL and its audience by creating the appearance of familiarity and approachability, building upon its ongoing idol-like rebrand.

To gain an even deeper insight into this content and its political themes, an October 2023 dataset by Xinyu Li and Sabariah Mohamed Salleh, found that 75% of over 300 Chinese youth, most engaged with government content on Douyin so some extent and only 9% were “disgusted”³⁰² by it.³⁰³ Although this dataset was not about the CYL specifically nor did this thesis attempt to measure the effectiveness or the reception of its content by its viewers, this dataset provides an understanding of the general consumption and engagement with this style of content by youth. When asked if the government content that Douyin was pushing to them was “too orthodox,” or not, 75% of respondents indicated no. While not being “too orthodox” does not necessarily translate to the content being enjoyable per se, it does suggest that the propaganda theme *appeal to youth* is quite effective as ‘orthodox’ tends to be the antithesis of ‘youthfulness.’ As such, employing *appeal to youth* to populist content for social media platforms like Douyin.

One thing of note in this survey was that respondents were predominantly women (69%).³⁰⁴ As will be discussed in a later section, women were not often featured as a primary focus in the CYL’s content

³⁰² This is the direct term used in the English translation of the data set that is provided by the researchers. Due to not having a copy of the original Chinese-language survey, I do not know what Chinese term was used and thus I cannot say if there is a better or more appropriate English equivalent so I will directly quote their translation. I want to make this note because ‘disgusted’ is a very loaded term that might imply a meaning beyond what was intended by the original Chinese term. However, in the case that this is the intended meaning, I wanted to make sure that my discussion accurately expressed their findings.

³⁰³ Li Xinyu and Sabariah Mohamed Salleh, “A Dataset of Young People’s Perception on Dissemination of Government Propaganda and Socialist Culture Content in China,” *Journal of Open Humanities Data* 10 (2024): 28, <https://doi.org/10.5334/johd.200>.

³⁰⁴ Li and Salleh, “A Dataset of Young People’s Perception on Dissemination of Government Propaganda and Socialist Culture Content in China.”

(at the end of 2023, at least), nor did they often appear in the background. This dichotomy between the number of women who consume this content (and are willing to complete a survey about it) and the frequency of their inclusion in the content (by the CYL specifically) is stark. For one, it implies that women are engaging more with the ‘mainstream content’ despite the content that, at least as it is presented by the CYL, often seems to relegate them to the background. This stark contrast between representation and engagement by women of government content would be an interesting topic for further exploration.

6.1 Language of Netizens

The CYL uses the same casual language and tone of netizens in its social media content. This adaptation to how contemporary youth uses language and mirroring the same vernacular in government propaganda content reflects the formula outlined by Mao in the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art:

“Workers in literature and art are unfamiliar with the people they write about and with the people who read their work, or else have actually become estranged from them.... Yours is that language of intellectuals, theirs is the language of the popular masses. I have mentioned before that many comrades like to talk about ‘popularization,’ but what does popularization mean? It means that the thoughts and emotions of our workers in literature and art should become one with the thoughts and emotions of the great masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers. And to get this unity, we should start by studying the language of the masses.”³⁰⁵

In this digital age, the CYL learns and appropriates the language of the netizen youth to foster better communication and to make its thoughtwork more appealing. Memes may not have been the kind of ‘rich and lively language of popular life’³⁰⁶ that Mao had in mind when he spoke the above quote, but they have become a popular communication method, especially on social media. Memes, whether used to criticize government policies (‘the river crab’), to bring attention to current events (‘sunglasses selfies’), or simply for entertainment, are a relatively new form of internet vernacular that is popular with the CYL’s target audience. They are vibrant, complex, and fluid, and the CYL has seemed to master the use of them. They have, even in the short timeframe of this thesis, formulated their own

³⁰⁵ Bonnie McDougall, Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary (Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States of America: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1980), 60–61,

<https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/41559/9780472901333.pdf>.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 69.

memes that are successful due to their repetitiveness, their use of bright colors and other youthful aspects, and other forms of popular culture.

One example of the CYL utilizing the linguistic play common with youth and netizens is in the hashtag #2024 一研为定 found in video 8. Following the linguistic play found in memes like the *grass mud horse*, the CYL replaced one character in this idiom to change the meaning. This homophonic substitution is a play on the words 言 *yán* (to speak) to 研 *yán* (to research).³⁰⁷ The actual idiom is “一言为定 *yì yán wéi dìng*”, and while it does not translate into English well, it means something similar to *all is said and done*³⁰⁸ with the understanding that the result cannot be changed.³⁰⁹ By changing the verb, the meaning of the idiom also changes, thereby expressing something more specific and relatable to the audience. The resulting phrase is difficult to translate directly into English, but my best attempt would be: *once (一) researched/studied (研) made definite (为定)* or, if I were to take a little more liberty: *to take research/studies (研) as definite (为定)*, where *yì* (一) might possibly be understood as *yǐ* (以).³¹⁰ Although this kind of linguistic play is not unique to netizens or youth, this example demonstrates how the CYL is using wordplay to engage with its target audience about a topic that they would have a deep understanding of or relationship to, in this case graduate examinations. One of the most trying times of any student’s life is the season of preparing for examinations. During this period, the CYL posted a motivational video using this hashtag and homophonic substitution in the title. This video features state-of-the-art libraries and diligent students and culminates in fireworks bursting over an image of a peaceful mountain, adorned with overlaid motivational words.

Another example can be found in video 27, using the phrase “别 emo 啦~” which the CYL translated as ‘don’t be upset’ in its English version of the title. While this translation is not incorrect, ‘upset’ does not quite encapsulate the meaning of the more literal translation of ‘don’t be *emo*.’ *Emo* is a unique and rich youth subculture that is not adequately represented by the term ‘upset’. Although this subculture might not exist in the way that it had used to, aspects of it still exist today, perhaps most

³⁰⁷ I should note that, according to Baidu’s page for this character, both the second tone and fourth tone *yàn* are correct, and the use of either is dependent on context and other factors. However, I use the second tone in this discussion because the word 研 is referring to 研究 *yánjiū* (meaning study or research), which uses the second tone *yán*. More on this word and its tone can be found here: “研,” 百度百科, n.d., <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%A0%94/2657233>.

³⁰⁸ This is my translation of the idiom as the phrases offered by Wikionary, MDBG and similar do not convey the same finality meaning. That said, this phrase is not necessarily used the same way we might use the English translation I have given.

³⁰⁹ “一言为定,” 百度百科, n.d., <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%B8%80%E8%A8%80%E4%B8%BA%E5%AE%9A/14246>.

³¹⁰ This is only my interpretation as a non-Native speaker of Chinese and someone still learning Chinese. By using *yǐ* (以) in the place of *yì* (一), the grammar structure 以 *x* 为 *y* is created, meaning ‘to take *x* for/as *y*’. As such, the phrase becomes 以研为定, which I translated above as to take research/studies as definite. However, this could be wrong. Please do not take that translation or interpretation as fact, it is just my best attempt to translate it and make it make sense in English.

notably in music (e.g., My Chemical Romance, Fall Out Boy, and Paramore) but the subculture does still enjoy relative popularity where it does exist. The use of *emo* in this title is a multi-layered meme. On the surface, it represents the adoption of an English term (*'emo'*) that has become a meme phrase on the Chinese internet. According to Chinese netizens, *emo* means “upset,” “disappointed,” “depressed,” and/or “frustrated,” and can be used synonymously with these terms on Chinese internet.³¹¹ Second is *code-switching*. By switching to a commonly understood English word in the middle of an otherwise Chinese sentence, the CYL incorporates code-switching, aware that its youthful demographic would understand. By doing this, the CYL demonstrates awareness of common memes and how to use them. Using such meme formulas makes the organization seem more human and relatable, more authentic, rather than a cold government body. Beyond the linguistic aspect, the video features brightly colored WordArt flying in overtop footage of military tanks firing missiles into a blue sky and the audio is cute and upbeat, two concepts that might be considered opposite in tone to the footage being shown. By combining all these aspects into a video that is ultimately about military technology and is a display of military strength, it softens the message and even attempts to normalize military presence in daily life. To summarize, it and the previous example are prime examples of Mao’s concept of using the ‘language of the masses’.

The utilization of youth culture in these examples and in the rest of the fifty videos are a proper example of how the CYL is still following this idea also by Mao Zedong:

*“... the thoughts and emotions of our workers in literature and art should become one with the thoughts and emotions of the great masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers. And to get this unity, we should start by studying the language of the masses.”*³¹²

This thesis presents how the CYL’s Douyin page leverages digital platforms and youth culture to fulfil its objectives. This strategic adaptation is a direct reflection of a broader transformation as ‘cultural work’ increasingly evolves on social media platforms.

6.2 Cultural Work Goes Online

In the 1943 Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao also discussed the need for two armies that work together to achieve the communist dream: a “cultural army” and a revolutionary army. “We still need a cultural army,”³¹³ Mao explained in his speech, “this kind of army is indispensable in achieving

³¹¹ “emo 是什么意思?” 知乎, August 28, 2021, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/405673429>.

³¹² McDougall, Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary, 60–61.

³¹³ Ibid, 57.

unity among ourselves and winning victory over the enemy.”³¹⁴ In his time, this *cultural army* was limited to literature and art, in whatever form they may take. However, now there is a new frontier—a vast digital landscape to which the Party must adapt for its message to effectively reach its audience. In the time of social media, the CYL has enjoyed varying levels of success in its appropriation and co-opting of youth culture to make itself appealing to a new generation of young people in China. In order to rehabilitate its online persona, the CYL had to change the netizens’ perceptions of it, from being an out-of-touch government body to a personality that youth could identify with and relate to. By appropriating the culture of modern youth, the CYL has been able to go from being just a government youth organization to *Tuantuan*, an internet personality with over 100 million fans on Douyin, as of March 2025.³¹⁵ With this perspective change, the CYL is able to continue its cultural work on Douyin, taking traditional propaganda themes and infusing a youthful twist on it to create memorable, sharable propaganda that is not dissimilar to the other user-generated content that is typical of the other content found on Douyin.

The true level of success that the CYL has obtained in this style shift, while beyond the scope of this thesis, may not be adequately reflected in its follower count. And yet, the style of its content appears to be resonating with enough youth that it continues to upload this style of youthful populism, not to mention the 75% of youth surveyed in Li and Salleh’s dataset reporting that they found the content to be enjoyable and were unbothered by it being pushed by the platform to their recommendations.³¹⁶

By moving to Douyin and engaging with its constituents there, the CYL appears to be effective in Mao’s concepts of using the language of the people and the culture of the people in order to propagate the Party’s thoughtwork in a way that not only resonates with them but also is enjoyable.

6.3 Contemporary, Digital Socialist Realism

Socialist realism, established in the USSR in the 1930s, was the prescriptive formula that all Soviet art and literature had to adhere to. In China, the style was adopted and adapted to suit the Chinese audience. By using traditional art styles and applying more traditional Chinese elements (but not the bourgeois, feudal, “slavish”³¹⁷ cultural aspects), socialist realism became Chinese socialist realism, using aspects of the culture that the people were already familiar with and adapting socialist realism to

³¹⁴ McDougall, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, 57.

³¹⁵ 共青团中央, “共青团中央官方抖音号,” 抖音, n.d.,

<https://www.douyin.com/user/MS4wLjABAAAAReXxwTVnBAfcJ6-JIQRd4ZrCjxqrWi-cnT8kvK5zinc>.

³¹⁶ Li and Salleh, “A Dataset of Young People’s Perception on Dissemination of Government Propaganda and Socialist Culture Content in China.”

³¹⁷ McDougall, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, 57.

it in order to spread a narrative. While much has changed in China since the 1940s, neither this approach nor the socialist realism aesthetic has faded from governmental use and a prime example of this is positive energy and is best exemplified in this thesis by the theme *modern and progressive socialist China*.

Positive energy is a co-opted concept itself and is an example of contemporary socialist realism on the internet. Socialist realism was meant to show a glamorous, glorious, and optimistic version of reality that not only fosters complete trust in the party but also in its leaders and its policies.³¹⁸ *Modern and progressive socialist China* and *populism* themes included many aspects of both socialist realism and positive energy style propaganda, including the depiction of model citizens. The majority of the fifty videos were positive, upbeat, and uplifting, even the one commemorating the death of a young soldier. The only overtly negative ones were about Japan, such as the wastewater pollution video, the Nanjing Massacre, and the Yasukuni Shrine videos. A majority of the videos depicted prime model citizens, soldiers, and examples of advancements in Chinese-born technology all of which are also components of socialist realism. This furthers the already established understanding of how traditional ideological objectives are being adapted for the contemporary digital landscape, blurring the lines between political messaging and popular social media content.

6.4 Inclusion and Exclusion

When analyzing media, it can be informative to identify who is and is not included and because this can be just as informative as any other piece of information. When examining the media of my youth, as a then-middle-class White American, many if not all of the content I consumed was about other White Americans – *Full House* (1987-1995), *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) and *Grounded For Life* (2001-2005), to name a few. The program *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), a highly popular sitcom featuring a primarily Black cast and formative to my youth, was one of the only examples of Black-centered content that achieved widespread appeal. When discussing media from the late 1990s and early 2000s, one typical argument is that it was just a product of its time and as such, it is logical that a sitcom about a group of friends in New York City would be White and straight – *Friends* (1994-2004)³¹⁹ – when New York City is famous for its diversity. However, I would argue that it is more of an example of casual segregation in American media because media was not lacking for content by and/or about minority groups in the 1990s and early 2000s. Nonetheless, while the media landscape, sociopolitical context, and the demographics of China differ from those of the United States,

³¹⁸ Masing-Delic, *From Symbolism to Socialist Realism*, 306.

³¹⁹ It should be noted that *Friends* was allegedly inspired by another sitcom that featured a primarily Black cast called *Living Single* (1993-1998). However, the argument for the lack of diversity can be made regarding both casts.

examining patterns of inclusion and exclusion remains an important aspect of media and textual analysis.

The fifty videos used in this thesis predominantly featured Han-appearing Chinese young men. Strikingly, only one video was about a woman (video 32) and women were generally relegated to the background in only a small number of videos. The lack of representation of women in the CYL's content might not have been intentional but it is revealing. Such limited representation implies an exceptionally high bar for women to gain central visibility in the CYL's content and, even when a woman's achievements earn her a dedicated video, her name might not be included in the title, such as in video 32. Compare this with the videos about men (videos 5, 13, 26, and 45)³²⁰ whose names are all prominently featured in the titles or in a hashtag. Even the birthday of the Shandong Ship (video 15), a warship, received a video featuring its name in the title, yet the woman in video 32 did not. This is also in stark contrast to more traditional Chinese Communist propaganda artwork, specifically posters, which feature women quite prominently. Even if not explicitly named, the higher incidence of posters that featured women as the central figure suggests a more important societal role than that implied by this snapshot of the CYL's content.

Additionally, minorities of other kinds, such as disabled/differently-abled, religious or ethnic minorities were rarely if at all included. In this thesis, for representation of these groups to be coded into the data sheet, it had to be evident beyond reasonable doubt that the person meets any of the descriptors that would identify them as a 'minority'. Aspects indicating the inclusion of a minority group in a video included, but were not limited to, the action of prayer, the use of sign language, the presence of regional/ethnic foods, or a generalized or even stereotyped physical appearance (e.g., Uyghur-style braids or ethnic clothing). In the fifty videos used in this thesis, none featured disabled/differently-abled people beyond reasonable doubt. For other minority groups, only one video included a potentially identifiable member of a minority religious group: a brief background shot of a child in a single video about the earthquake relief efforts in Gansu. However, this identification was admittedly generous because it is still deniable. Compared to the CYL's content as represented by this thesis's fifty videos, traditional Chinese Communist propaganda artwork placed greater importance on unity amongst minority groups, while concurrently promoting Han superiority. This snapshot would suggest that the CYL still uses the promotion of Han superiority and unity as a core message in its content but limits the presentation of minority groups.

³²⁰ Mao Zedong (video 5) and Xi Jinping (video 13) are included as examples of men whose names are prominently featured in the analyzed content. The observation that their names are explicitly featured (unlike women's) remains pertinent to the broader argument about differential patterns of individual recognition.

6.5 The Pinned Videos

The three pinned videos provide an even more direct snapshot of the CYL's propaganda style on Douyin. A quick summary of each video: video 1 is about the Japanese nuclear wastewater issue, video 2 is about the Taiwan independence issue, and video 3 is about the Japanese Yasukuni Shrine controversy. Notably, these three videos remained pinned throughout the two years of this research. These videos contain depictions of issues of long-term importance to the CYL and the CCP. Key observations from these videos reveal that:

- Two of the three focus on Japan (video 1, uploaded in August 2023; video 3, uploaded in August 2021)
- Two address long-term issues of importance to the CCP, specifically Taiwanese Independence (video 2) and the Yasukuni Shrine controversy (video 3).
- All three present a strong *historical narratives* theme and two present China as a victim to an imperial force (videos 1 and 3).

To the CYL, these pinned videos highlight its top three current political issues: Taiwanese independence (video 2), Japanese war crimes in the Second Sino-Japanese War (video 3), and the potential for Japanese nuclear pollution of Chinese waters (video 1). By having a video about the Yasukuni Shrine (video 3) and the Japanese wastewater (video 1), one can infer that Japanese wrongdoings toward China are an ongoing issue of importance to the CCP, encompassing both historical grievances and contemporary concerns beyond physical violence. Additionally, Taiwanese Independence has been a long-standing sociopolitical issue for the CCP and having video 2 pinned, it maintains its salience in the minds of younger audience.

A phrase in the title of video 1 was of particular interest to me. The full title is 核污水到来之前，再看一看你手机里最美的海 # 日本核污染水 (the official English translation is *Take a look at the most beautiful sea scenes in your phone gallery before the arrival of nuclear wastewater #JapaneseNuclearPollutedWater.*) The phrase of interest is in both iterations: 你手机里最美的海 (*the most beautiful sea scenes in your phone gallery*). The CYL is asking netizens to look at images of the sea in their phone galleries instead of suggesting that they visit the sea directly or encourage them to somehow experience the sea in real life. Generally, it is not viable for many people to go to the sea on a whim, but by specifying that its audience use their phones to enjoy the sea, it not only keeps its audience on their phones but also on social media where they are more likely to encounter additional CYL or other positive energy content. Although it can be innocuous and/or inconsequential phrasing, it was still a deliberate choice by the CYL that I found particularly interesting as it encourages continuous use of the audience's electronic devices and of the internet rather than going or experiencing something in real life. It can also imply a certain level of urgency. By suggesting that

maybe there is not enough time and that it can only be through the phone that netizens can experience the sea before the nuclear waste from Japan irrevocably contaminates it, it can make viewers feel a sense of urgency and like a wrong is being committed against them. While the video does not contain a call to action, it brings the contamination issue into the forefront of viewers' minds and makes it seem more urgent than it perhaps is. Moreover, this video was pinned to the top of the CYL's Douyin for a not insignificant period of time.³²¹

³²¹ As of performing my last edits to this thesis before submitting it, the pinned videos have changed. Although I do not know when exactly this change was made, all three videos have been 'unpinned' from the top of the CYL's page, and two new videos were pinned. Both new pinned videos are about college entrance exams and the results of the exams. Although I cannot say for sure when this change occurred, it would have had to have happened within the last few weeks as I have visited this Douyin page quite frequently within these last few years since 2023. Had this change occurred any sooner, I would have made a subsection dedicated to discussing it but unfortunately, there is no longer enough time, and a footnote will have to suffice for now.

7 Conclusion

This thesis argued that the CYL's propaganda on Douyin posted between November–December 2023 is youthful, relatable, while still conveying the party line thus demonstrating the organization's increasing astuteness to changing cultural trends and advancing technology. Using memes, linguistic patterns, and popular culture, the CCP's contemporary ideotainment propaganda on social media manages to maintain elements of more traditional socialist realism while still appealing to its young constituents. In this final chapter, the key findings will be summarized, along with addressing limitations and suggestions for further study. For reference, these are the research questions that this thesis sought to address:

RQ1: As reflected on its official Douyin page, how does the CYL's contemporary ideotainment propaganda approach show its adaptability to its target audience of modern youth (ages 18-30) in an era of advanced technology and social media within the specific November-December 2023 timeframe?

RQ2: By analyzing the narrative elements present in its official Douyin content, how is modern online youth culture (language, artifacts, aesthetic, values, and other cultural expressions) reflected in the way that contemporary propaganda is formulated for social media, and is there an impact on the modern digital propaganda aesthetic when compared to traditional socialist realist styles?

RQ3: Using a combination of analysis methods, to what extent does the content on the CYL's official Douyin utilize traditional style propaganda themes as identified in the pilot (*techno-nationalism, populism, historical narratives, progressive and advanced socialist China, and appeal to youth*) and how does it compare to the thoughtwork guidelines presented by Mao Zedong in the May 1942 Talks at Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art?

7.1 Key Findings and Contribution

The video content on the CYL's official Douyin demonstrated the prominent themes: *techno-nationalism* (66%), *historical narratives* (36%), *populism* (90%), *modern and progressive Socialist China* (70%), and *appeal to youth* (88%).³²² The CYL has been able to adapt to contemporary social trends and internet culture to disseminate its propaganda more effectively in a modern era where the internet and social media are at the center. By using popular social media platforms, current memes

³²² For detailed methodology and data analysis, see Chapter 3 (Methodology).

and trends, popular culture, and entertaining positivity to facilitate the spread of political propaganda, the CYL has been successful in maintaining its online rebrand and engaging with the younger generation of Chinese citizens. The CYL's presence on Douyin represents the latest in its continuous attempts to adapt its image to make both the League and the Party more appealing to modern youth, whom they fear are increasingly disengaging with politics.

The CYL's contemporary ideotainment propaganda approach demonstrates its adaptability to changing cultural trends by both employing the interests of its target audience and by utilizing the same social media platforms, such as Douyin. The content uploaded by the CYL during this November-December period had a notably high frequency of *populism* and *appeal to youth*, clearly underscoring that these are the prevalent propaganda themes for the organization. It also underscores a core interest of the CYL and the Party through its high rate of populist content. By using the memes and entertainment-oriented content to convey the ideological messages of the Party, the CYL can both appeal to its audience in a way that is enjoyable while also featuring the core and long-standing themes found in Chinese propaganda, such as *populism*, *techno-nationalism*, and *modern and progressive socialist China*.

Modern youth culture is reflected directly in the contemporary propaganda on the CYL's official Douyin. Through the strategic use of memes, linguistic patterns, editing formats, popular culture, the content uploaded to Douyin is remarkably youthful and often relatable. The content that did not feature this youthful style consisted of notices regarding important current events, such as the earthquake in Gansu, which subsequently returned to an official style. However, the majority of the CYL's content uploaded between November and December 2023 was influenced by youth culture, suggesting the CYL's adaptability to this still-evolving subculture and its desire to grow a *fan club* of followers. Through this approach, it will advance both its relevancy and that of the CCP as a whole.

Additionally, the CYL demonstrated a willingness to include darker, more explicit content on its social media regardless of the topic sensitivity or its audience's sensibilities. For example, the 13th of December is the National Memorial Day for Nanjing Massacre Victims in China and the CYL commemorated the event with two dedicated videos that featured authentic graphic footage of the massacre. Other commemorative videos uploaded by the CYL were significantly less graphic (such as video 21). The videos 20 and 29 both feature clips captured by Rev. John Gillespie Magee of the massacre (refer to Figure 4.4, for an illustrative example of this content).

The explicit nature of this content warrants particular attention; examples of the graphic content that these videos include execution and decapitated heads (these are clearly marked with a content warning on the video spreadsheet). While the footage is somewhat blurry, this diminished clarity is due to its age, not an attempt to censor the violence. The CYL did not consider this footage to be too inappropriate but rather determined that it ought to be seen by its audience of young internet users. It

is inherently difficult to make *appeal to youth* style videos about the Nanjing Massacre while still maintaining the necessary sensitivity that depictions of such events require. However, the use of meme-style and movie-style editing can have the ability to make a video with such sensitive imagery be ideotainment. Notably, these videos were bracketed by other uplifting, optimistic, and entertaining videos.

The digital style of propaganda on the CYL's Douyin account retains elements of the more traditional socialist realist style. While Chinese socialist realism historically served as a medium for Maoist ideology, promoted modernization, and featured moral model citizens, this thesis found an absence of themes relating to the transition Chinese society away from superstition. This absence suggests that transitioning away from superstition is no longer a primary goal of the modern CCP, making its omission from the CYL's digital propaganda on Douyin unsurprising. However, while transitioning from superstition may no longer be a primary goal, transitioning into modernization is still an enduring theme. Consistent with the socialist realism theme of socialist society being a struggle from good to better, this struggle is still present in the CYL's propaganda.

The videos in this research featured other core aspects of socialist realism, such as the celebration of modernization and advancements in Chinese culture, the portrayal of model citizens, and the emphasis on common citizens – as opposed to wealthy or otherwise 'elite' citizens. Through the *techno-nationalism* and *Modern and Progressive Socialist China* propaganda themes, the videos underscore Chinese self-reliance and independence from outside forces, a core aspect of Maoism. In terms of artistic presentation, there is a distinct difference between the traditional styles used early on by the CCP and the contemporary digital style targeting youth, that is, a more *Hollywood* style. This shift to more *ideotainment*-style propaganda is reflective of a new generation of Chinese youth with their own cultures, technologies, and aesthetics.

As previously mentioned, the explicit videos of the Nanjing Massacre are especially noteworthy and warrant particular attention. The content of these videos, including video 3, are clear examples of how *historical narratives* appear in contemporary propaganda. The videos' narrative asserts that not only did Japan commit severe human rights violations against China but also portrays modern Japan as committing acts of violence through the potential release of nuclear waste (video 1). The narrative includes the caveat that Japanese culture can be enjoyed, and Japanese products and people can be liked but Japan cannot be forgiven (video 1). By showing the graphic footage, the CYL implies that the wounds of the Second Sino-Japanese War remain open and still demand either vengeance or an apology. This narrative is present throughout the videos addressing Japan in this study and is a clear example of the *historical narratives* propaganda theme.

Additionally, this narrative is representative of the style of propaganda thought work outlined by Mao Zedong. In the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, the CCP established that its thought work

should include content that vilified both domestic and international forces that threaten Chinese social order. The United States is also mentioned as a threat to China, but unlike the comprehensive narrative used for Japan, it is framed in the past tense and only in the Chinese title of one video (video 48) through the mention of the Korean War — known in China as “抗美援朝战争” or the Resist USA and Aid Korea War. Importantly, at no point is the USA-related imagery shown in the video’s visual content.

7.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study

This research contains two significant limitations: (1) the collection period, as it is only two months long at the end of 2023, and (2) the limited number of videos used as data sources, only fifty in total. These two points limit this study in its scope and the generality of the results; therefore, these findings should not be applied to a wide range of the CYL’s Douyin content but be taken only as the snapshot it is presented as rather than a comprehensive representation. These results cautiously suggest trends from the latter half of 2023, extending into the beginning of 2024.

Future research would benefit from avoiding the limitations identified in thesis by utilizing a wider scope and thus larger dataset by including videos from previous years, for example. Doing so would offer invaluable insights not only into the long-term development of online propaganda but also how this content reflects changes in the sociopolitical landscape for Chinese youth and how the government modifies its strategies as situations develop. For example, the disproportionate emphasis on Japan as an outside threat compared to the single mention of the USA in reference to the Korean War (the “抗美援朝战争” or the Resist USA and Aid Korea War) highlights a potential limitation of this study’s scope. Due to the time frame this research focused on (November to December 2023) and, given that the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Day is in December, it is logical for the Party to focus on Japan’s wrongdoings rather than the USA’s during this period. Yet, considering the particularly volatile 2024-2028 US Presidential Administration and Xi Jinping continuing to consolidate power and influence, outside of December, the CYL’s content may place less emphasis on Japan’s threat.

Additionally, an aspect highlighted in the Discussion chapter may warrant further research into the intersection of gender and propaganda. An apparent contrast appears to exist between the representation of women in governmental social media content and their actual engagement with it, which is not exclusive to the CYL’s content. This discrepancy becomes apparent when comparing the October 2023 dataset by Xinyu Li and Sabariah Mohamed Salleh showing most viewers/respondents were women and this thesis’ finding that women (among other minority groups) were overwhelmingly not featured (or were only in the background), in the CYL’s content. However, acknowledging the

limited scope of this research, future studies might reveal that women and other minorities are frequently featured than they were here. Nevertheless, even this finding would prove worthy of deeper investigation. It would present unique insight into the intricate intersectionality between propaganda, gender roles, and societal impact with additional exploration into the CYL's content appeal to certain demographics within their audience and the potential strategic intentionality behind how these demographics are appealed to.

7.3 Summary Conclusion

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that the Communist Youth League's strategic adaptation of its propaganda for social media represents that it has a sophisticated understanding of both its core target demographic and its responsibility to the overall Party. Since 2016, the CYL has adapted the way it uses social media platforms, and in so doing it altered its online reputation, turning itself into something more akin to an internet personality than a stiff government organization. The CYL is increasingly able to utilize youth culture to express political ideologies in an entertaining and digestible format on social media while also working to curate a fan club of followers who would have the same dedication for the CYL and the Party as fans do for their idols. This content blends the traditional socialist realism style, concepts from the 1942 Yan'an Forum, and modern entertaining memes, internet lingo, and popular culture, to create a unique form of ideotainment that is perfect for short-form UGC style social media platforms like Douyin and thereby positioning the CYL as a dynamic and highly relevant force in shaping youth ideology.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Videos

See next page.

#	Date	URL	Title	CYL's English Verbatim Titles	Content Warning
1	24-Aug-23	https://v.douyin.com/i8nJ5SgU/	核污水到来之前, 再看一看你手机里最美的海 # 日本核污染水	Take a look at the most beautiful sea scenes in your phone gallery before the arrival of nuclear wastewater #JapaneseNuclearPollutedWater	
2	17-Mar-23	https://v.douyin.com/i8nJNPP1/	国防部: 反“独”促统, 台湾当归!	Ministry of National Defence: Opposing "Taiwan independence" and promoting national reunification. Taiwan must return to the embrace of the motherland!	
3	14-Aug-21	https://v.douyin.com/i8nJtN6A/	拜鬼	Fuck you!	* Content Warning
4	28-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/i8neRvqm/	温馨提醒: 雪天路滑, 注意安全!	A friendly reminder: The roads are slippery during snowy weather, so please be careful!	
5	26-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/i8ndAx7V/	今日之中国, 如您所愿! # 毛主席诞辰130周年	Today's China is just as you envisioned it! #The 130th Anniversary of Chairman Mao's Birth	
6	25-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/i8ndG8UF/	严寒中的救灾安置点, 红马甲守护的每一张笑脸都是希望!	In the disaster relief and resettlement sites amidst the bitter cold, every smiling face guarded by the "Red Vests" represents hope!	
7	24-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/i8nRy97v/	有他们在, 震区的孩子们就不会怕 # 祖国的未来被最勇敢的人们保护得很好	With them around, the children in the earthquake-stricken areas have nothing to fear. The future of our motherland is well protected by these brave heroes.	
8	23-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/i8nRtg1t/	团团相信, 披星戴月的路, 总会繁花满地, 考研加油! # 2024一研为定	Believe that your hard work and dedication will ultimately pay off. Good luck on your postgraduate entrance exams! #2024OneShotToMakeIt	
9	22-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/i8n8grPu/	冬至快乐! 来碗“唐饺”吧~ # 原来千年前西域古人就已经吃上饺子了 # 团团看文化	Happy Winter Solstice! Come and try "Tang Jiao"! #It turns out that people in the Western Regions were already eating dumplings a thousand years ago #Exploring Chinese Culture	
10	20-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/i8nLCJ2V/	今天, # 澳门回归24周年, 一起祝福澳门, 祝福祖国!	Today marks the 24th anniversary of Macau's return to the motherland. Let's celebrate together and wish Macau and our great nation a bright future!	
11	20-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iL1wFJuG/	别怕! 人民子弟兵来了(新闻来源:@中国军号)# 抗震救灾子弟兵在一线	Don't worry! The People's Liberation Army has arrived (News source: @Chinese Military News) #EarthquakeRescue: Our heroic soldiers are on the front line.	
12	19-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iL1wthk4/	中国青年基金会紧急拨付首笔100万驰援灾区	The China Youth Development Foundation has urgently allocated its initial fund of 1 million yuan to assist the disaster-stricken areas.	
13	19-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iL1wnGPR/	习近平对甘肃临夏州积石山县6.2级地震作出重要指示	Xi Jinping issued important instructions on the 6.2 magnitude earthquake that occurred in Jishi Mountain County, Linxia Prefecture, Gansu Province.	
14	19-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iL1K2pVq/	29名勇士, 祝凯旋! # 中国第40次南极考察内陆队出征	To the 29 brave heroes, we wish you a triumphant return! #China's 40th Antarctic Expedition Inland Team is about to set off.	
15	17-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iL1KxsaU/	2019年12月17日, 我国第一艘国产航空母舰山东舰交付海军。今天, 山东舰入列4周年。# 山东舰生日快乐	On December 17, 2019, the Shandong, China's first domestically built aircraft carrier, was delivered to the Navy. Today marks the 4th anniversary of the Shandong's commissioning. #HappyBirthdayShandongShip	
16	16-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iL1ERfb/	热“雪”沸腾! 一起共赏冬日盛景! # 冰雪中的青春力量	This is absolutely awesome! Come and enjoy the spectacular winter scenery together! #The Power of Youth in the Ice and Snow	
17	16-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iL1En9ajL/	浩瀚星空, “长征”永不止步! # 我国成功发射遥感四十一号卫星	In the vast expanse of the universe, the "Long March" will continue forever! #China successfully launched the Remote Sensing 41 satellite	
18	15-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iL1oJAvd/	“真”没点才艺都不敢玩雪了! # 第一批玩雪的人已经卷起来了	Wow, anyone without any real talent wouldn't even dare to play with snow anymore! #The first batch of people playing with snow have already upped their game.	
19	14-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iL1oHLBD/	硬核版《踏雪》, 还得看中国军人(新闻来源:@中国军号)# 多兵种跨昼夜实弹演练	For a truly intense and realistic portray of soldiers battling in the snow, you have to watch this video featuring the Chinese military (news source: @Chinese Military News). #Multi-Arms-Night-Live-Firing-Training	

#	Date	URL	Title	CYL's English Verbatim Titles	Content Warning
20	13-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iLJ1dd29/	这段被同胞鲜血浸透的历史，不敢忘，不能忘！# 国家公祭日	The History, which is stained with the blood of our fellow countrymen, must never be forgotten! #National Day of Remembrance [sic]	* Content Warning
21	12-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iLJ1xqy1L/	300000，一个被同胞鲜血浸染的数字，勿忘国耻，吾辈自强！# 国家公祭日	300,000, a figure stained with the blood of our fellow countrymen. We must never forget our national humiliation, and it's up to our generation to make our country strong and prosperous! #National Memorial Day	
22	12-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iLJ1u4gW/	论“顶流”，还得是人民子弟兵的作训大衣！	When it comes to true trendsetters, it has to be the training jackets worn by our brave military personnel!	
23	11-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iLJ1kqmw/	先生您看，如今中国的航天事业已然崛起！# 钱学森诞辰112周年	Sir, as you can see, China's space industry has truly taken off! #The 112thBirthDayofQianXuesen	
24	11-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iLJ1x5xj/	探索未知！我国南极考察队发现月球陨石。网友：南极黑芝麻丸，你值得拥有！	Explore the unknown! Our Antarctic expedition team has discovered a lunar meteorite. Netizens comment: "Black sesame pills from the South Pole, you deserve to have them!"	
25	10-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iLJ1dhe1/	听说最近流行爆改？来看看5G→6G # 一种很新的反差大爆改	I heard there's a trend lately of extreme makeovers? Come check out these stunning transformations from 5G to 6G! #A Brand New Kind of Dramatic Makeover	
26	9-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQbjhBg/	那个爱吃橘子的少年让山河铭记清澈的爱。生日快乐，戍边烈士陈祥榕！	The young man who loved eating oranges will always be remembered for his pure and selfless love. Happy birthday, border defense hero Chen Xiangrong!	
27	8-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQg1PYg/	别emo啦～看防空导弹在空中划出的弧线，正好绕了太阳一圈耶！	Don't be upset! Look at the arc drawn by the air defense missiles in the sky, they just circled the sun!	
28	7-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQbBYNe/	全球首座第四代核电站正式投入商业运行，标志着我国第四代核电技术领域已达世界领先水平！	The world's first fourth-generation nuclear power plant has officially been put into commercial operation, marking that China's fourth-generation nuclear power technology has reached the world's leading level!	
29	7-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQbw9VA/	铁证如山！日军南京大屠杀罪行再添新证	The evidence is overwhelming! New evidence has emerged of the Japanese army's atrocities during the Nanjing Massacre.	* Content Warning
30	6-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQg84NH/	他们用AI技术修复照片，为走失孩子照亮回家路！	They used AI technology to restore photos, helping lost children find their way home!	
31	6-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQgAW3a/	运-20运输机2.5G全机静力破坏试验画面首次公开！以极致的破坏证明了卓越的性能！	The footage of the 2.5G full-scale static load test of the Y-20 transport aircraft has been made public for the first time! The extreme destruction demonstrates its outstanding performance!	
32	5-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQgLUkX/	面对困境，她选择心中有阳光.....	In the face of adversity, she chose to stay optimistic and positive.	
33	4-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQgQnCm/	严惩不贷！今年前10个月共起诉电信网络诈骗犯罪3.4万余人	Stringent punishment must be meted out! In the first 10 months of this year, more than 34,000 people were prosecuted for telecommunication and cyber fraud.	
34	3-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQg9u2h/	天外吃播上新，来看神十七乘组的快乐生活片段！	New content has been uploaded on Tianwai Eating Show, featuring the hilarious daily life of the Shenzhou 17 crew!	
35	1-Dec-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQgKwEt/	请看大东北，冬天贼拉美！	Just take a look at Northeast China, its absolutely stunning during the winter!	
36	30-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQpU36W/	中国空间站全貌高清图像首次公布！	High-resolution images of the entire Chinese space station have been released for the first time!	
37	29-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQpAJHy/	深圳到中山从2小时缩短至20分钟！国家重大工程# 深中通道 主线贯通	The travel time from Shenzhen to Zhongshan has been shortened from 2 hours to 20 minutes! The main line of the national major project, the Shenzhen-Zhongshan Bridge, has been completed and opened for traffic.	
38	28-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQpkD5p/	中国CPU无需依赖任何国外授权技术！# 新一代国产CPU正式发布	China's CPU doesn't need to rely on any foreign licensed technologies! The new generation of domestic CPUs has been officially released.	

#	Date	URL	Title	CYL's English Verbatim Titles	Content Warning
39	28-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQp83Tt/	烈士的遗物是遗留在体内的子弹.....	The relics of a martyr are the bullets that remained inside his body...	
40	27-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQpHExD/	浅浅展示一些我国的新突破！	Just a quick showcase of some of our country's new breakthroughs!	
41	26-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQpCs6d/	# 穿越千年的文物 墨笔丹青绘就盛世中华 青铜器具铭刻不老神话，一起来感受不一样的中式之美！	#Artifacts Spanning Thousands of Years: Ink paintings depict the prosperity of ancient China, and bronze artifacts are engraved with timeless myths. Come and experience the unique beauty of traditional Chinese art!	
42	26-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQpWqXN/	全球首创！国产双飞翼垂直起降固定翼无人机亮相。网友：这就是用科技诠释“比翼双飞”	A world-first! A domestically-made twin-wing vertical takeoff and landing fixed-wing drone has been unveiled. Netizens are saying: This is technology-driven interpretation of "flying together side by side".	
43	25-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQpqpQy/	# 穿越千年的文物 泱泱华夏，金彩华彩，陶器独领风骚，一起来感受两种瑰宝不同的魅力，共赏国宝之美！	# Cultural Relics Spanning Thousands of Years: In the long history of China, ceramics have always been a shining highlight. Come and experience the unique charm of these two treasures, and appreciate the beauty of national treasures together!	
44	25-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQpff33/	穿越千年的文物 瓷器精巧，玉器华美，感悟文化魅力，共赏国宝之美	With exquisite porcelain and stunning jade artifacts dating back thousands of years, we can appreciate the charm of traditional culture and marvel at the beauty of these national treasures.	
45	25-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQsMeHn/	11年前的今天，他用生命托举歼-15舰载机完美升空！# 罗阳离开我们十一年了	Eleven years ago today, he sacrificed his life to successfully launch the J-15 carrier-based fighter jet! #It's been eleven years since Luo Yang left us.	
46	24-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQsFmRx/	“人肉开盒”？官方出手整治！	Exposing people's private information online? The authorities are taking action to rectify the situation!	
47	23-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQsSe78/	# 家国安时是归期，英雄请安息！	When the country is at peace, it will be the right time to return. Rest in peace, our fallen heroes!	
48	23-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQsVt2N/	# 志愿军家书版那些人儿 让我们一起走进# 歌声和家书里的抗美援朝，感受定格在字里行间、跨过漫长岁月的卫国意志和儿女情长。	#LettersFromKoreanWarVeterans: Come with us and delve into the stories behind the songs and letters from the Korean War, feeling the patriotism and personal emotions frozen in the words and transcending the long years.	* Content Warning
49	22-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQsQFtP/	家国安时是归期。山河已无恙，英雄回家乡！# 英雄回家	When the country and the family are at peace, it's time to go home. Now that the nation and the people are safe and sound, heroes can finally return to their hometowns! #HeroesReturnHome	
50	22-Nov-23	https://v.douyin.com/iNQsSKAu/	北斗系统今后全球民航通用 网友：天上的星星参北斗，地上的导航跟中国北斗	The Beidou system will become a global standard for civil aviation in the future. Netizens comment: "The stars in the sky align with Beidou, and navigation on the ground follows China's Beidou."	