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IDEAS AND IDEOLOGIES COMPETING FOR CHINA'S POLITICAL FUTURE

How online pluralism challenges official orthodoxy

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Kristin Shi-Kupfer, Mareike Ohlberg, Bertram Lang and Simon Lang

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Executive summary

COMPETING IDEAS IN CHINA'S ONLINE SPHERE: A CHALLENGE TO OFFICIAL ORTHODOXY

Unlike any other Chinese leader since the reform era, Xi Jinping has worked on forging a uniquely Chinese national narrative. The search for a unifying ideology, long submerged by the materialism and individualism unleashed during China's reform era, has taken center stage under his rule. The terms "China Path" and "China Dream" were coined to suggest a strong nation capable of global leadership and of representing an alternative model of governance that sets China apart from market-led capitalism or liberal democracy.

The Xi administration relies on increased censorship and repression of dissent, but it also makes use of persuasive practices. Beijing communicates its vision through modern formats and channels and it has enlisted the support of domestic multipliers in Chinese social media. Yet all these efforts have so far not produced the envisioned result: a broad societal consensus on China's future path. Pluralistic streams continue to exist despite the party state's top leaders focusing their energies on establishing a rigid ideological canon to tighten their grip on power.

In an analysis of debates on Chinese public social media platforms and an accompanying online survey among urban Chinese netizens, we observed a remarkable plurality of opinions. Despite the dominating role of party-state propaganda, the researchers were able to identify competing ideological clusters in these online debates, a number of which present a challenge to the official orthodoxy.

Constructing the "China Path" as an alternative to "Western values"

The party center under Xi Jinping aims at creating a distinct Chinese ideological framework, the "China Path," as an alternative to "Western" concepts. The party seems to view it as essential for its own survival to fill the perceived moral vacuum in a society which has been more inspired by consumption than by socialist campaigns ever since the reform and opening policy paved the way for China's economic rise. The CCP also tries to use the current crises in Western liberal democracies to discredit "Western" concepts of political and economic order.

Pluralistic ideas continue to exist despite the top leaders' focus on establishing a rigid ideological canon

The building blocks of this unifying ideology can be summarized as follows:

- Only a one-party system can effectively turn China into a prosperous, highly developed nation.
- Old slogans leading back to the communist founding fathers or Confucian thought are redefined for new purposes. The fight against corruption, for instance, is sometimes framed as the new manifestation of class struggle.
- Leninist principles are upheld as a constituting element of political life in China.
- Ideology needs to constantly adapt to changes in the world, technological advancement is defined as an integral part of China's future development.
- The CCP's ideology selectively draws on foreign ideas, institutions and concepts, for example by combining centralized economic planning and elements of market economy.
- Terms like "freedom" and "democracy" are borrowed from "Western" value systems and then redefined. Democracy for instance is not equated with a multi-party system with free elections but used to describe a "consultative" process of decision making.

Modernizing a decades-old propaganda apparatus

The CCP under Xi Jinping has moved away from the stiff and dull language of Sino-Marxism that characterized party communication for so long. Its propaganda experts have adopted a more accessible style to achieve the "massification of ideology":

- The CCP has developed a repertoire for digital communication, such as stylish cartoons and video clips to target the younger generation.
- Central party and state institutions, state-run media and individual cadres have become active social media users. China's messaging service WeChat features more than 100,000 official accounts, while the microblogging platform Sina Weibo has 180,000 profiles for state agencies and their representatives.
- For the first time, content production has been partially outsourced to non-party actors such as private PR companies with the aim of achieving more professional results.

The CCP does not only rely on the power of persuasion. It has taken drastic measures to suppress ideas it considers hostile. It also occasionally exploits nationalistic sentiment triggered by single events to systematically discredit foreign actors. Party and state institutions increasingly interfere in people's lives. The pressure on academics, journalists, and lawyers in particular has increased.

Diversity of ideas in online spaces challenges the CCP

The CCP is walking a tightrope, as this study shows. Harsh repression will fail to win over people's hearts and minds and carries the risk of backfiring. At the same time, the rather vague ideological canon, even if presented in modern formats, does not resonate with many citizens and seems too far removed from their everyday lives.

Opinions among China's urban netizens are far more diverse than official propaganda would suggest

The CCP's attempts to build a unifying ideology are challenged by highly fragmented public opinion in China's online space. These debates rarely reach a mass audience, and thus do not represent an immediate threat to party rule. It is, however, notable that most participants belong to the urban middle class, whose support is crucial for maintaining the stability of CCP rule.

This study set out to find out more about the ideological clusters populating China's open and private online platforms: we conducted an online survey in the summer of 2016 among more than 1,550 participants, most of them urban internet users from across China. The survey was complemented with research on online communities as well as interviews with experts and opinion leaders in China.

Taking into account distortions caused by censorship and manipulation of online information, this analysis can only provide an approximation of the ideological spectrum in China's online space. Nevertheless, the study allows for a conclusion to be drawn: public opinion among China's educated urban netizens is far more diverse than the official propaganda of a "China Dream" shared by everyone would suggest. A similar study would nowadays no longer be feasible due to the Xi administration tightening its control over public opinion.

Identifying ideological clusters: from "US Lovers" to "Party Warriors"

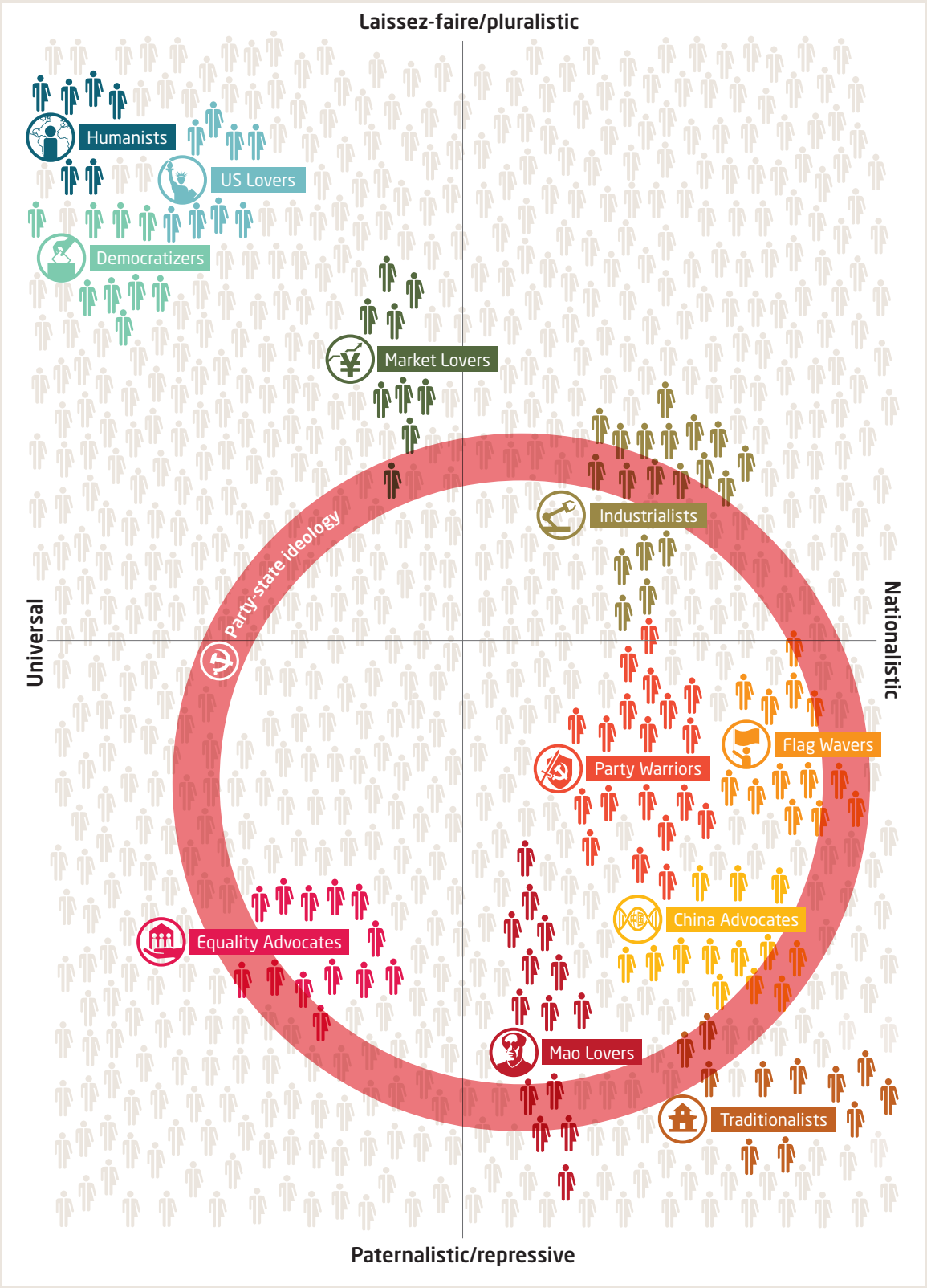
In this study, we identify eleven ideological clusters and label them according to their most characteristic properties. These groupings display varying degrees of conformity with or opposition to the official party-state ideology (see figure 1.1), for example:

- "Party Warriors" are most closely aligned with the CCP, and regularly support official views in social media discussions.
- "China Advocates," "Traditionalists," "Industrialists," and "Flag Wavers" represent different strains of nationalism. They support the "China Path," but not necessarily the policies of the CCP.
- "Market Lovers" fight with "Mao Lovers" and "Equality Advocates" over the best economic model for China. "Market Lovers" are increasingly in opposition to the party-state as the party moves towards tighter control of the market.
- "Democratizers," "Humanists" and "US Lovers" are the furthest removed from the party state ideologically. They defend freedom of expression and universal values as prerequisites for human dignity and democratic rule.

Figure 1.1

Conflicting ideologies put China's political stability at risk

Mapping China's societal ideological clusters



Source: Adapted from Pan/Xu 2016 and Veg 2014. Relative placement of clusters based on interviews with intellectuals; number of figures as approximation to visibility of clusters based on interviews, survey and literature.

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Online debates: ubiquitous party voices meet with resistance

The degree of influence of the ideological clusters on online debates differs considerably, as is evident in the media analysis of four political debates that unfolded online in 2015 and 2016. Data was crawled from Sina Weibo and from five other forums (Tianya, Maoyan, Tiexue, Guancha and Gongshiwang), using pre-defined keywords relevant to the respective debates. A total of 320 posts were then chosen for in-depth analysis and were coded according to their authors' ideological leaning, and their views on the CCP, China and the "West."

The following case studies represent debates on foreign, economic, media and education policy:

1. **Foreign policy:** Boycotting KFC – Rational patriotism versus hot-blooded nationalism (July 2016)
2. **Economic policy:** Western economic theories for China? – "New Normal" versus market-oriented reforms (May 2016)
3. **Media policy:** Defending China against pluralism – Party-state control versus professional journalism (February 2016)
4. **Education policy:** A ban on "Western values"? – Ideological control over the education system (January 2015)

The CCP's strategy of denouncing "Western values" has repeatedly backfired when netizens pointed out the lack of Chinese alternatives

The analysis shows that the party-state ideological line dominates most debates in quantitative terms. Besides official party-state actors, commentators belonging to the cluster of the "Party Warriors" help spread the party's message across all online forums. Among the "Top 20" most influential posts per forum and case, posts supporting and amplifying the party state's views made up more than a third. This share reached a peak of 56 percent in the debate on media loyalty towards the CCP.

Despite the dominance of party-state voices on social media and the bias caused by censorship, online debates on the above-mentioned topics involve a wide variety of arguments. The official party-state line comes under attack from different sides, and party-state voices do not succeed in dominating the discourse. However, this observation cannot prove the development of a unified opposition: disagreement within and between ideological clusters prevents a clear alignment against CCP ideology.

Nationalism and criticism of the "West": a double-edged sword for the CCP

Since 2016, CCP propaganda strategists and party-state media have systematically exploited the crises of Western liberal democracies to make the Chinese system look more attractive in comparison. This strategy resonates with the Chinese public, as this study shows. In the online survey, 62 percent of respondents said that China should be more assertive internationally. On the other hand, around 75 percent supported the "spread of Western values." This finding supports the conclusion that Chinese nationalism is not per se anti-Western and that the "West" is still perceived as attractive in Chinese society. The CCP's strategy of denouncing so-called Western values has repeatedly backfired when netizens pointed out the lack of better Chinese alternatives.

The hardware for ideological dominance is set up – caution is necessary

The Chinese government has not (yet) succeeded in gaining broad-based societal acceptance, nor has it eliminated competing ideologies from the online public sphere. But the hardware for the ideological dominance of the party state has been set up. This study defines a series of events as indicators of a completed transition to centralized ideological control:

- Regulations demanding ideological conformity, including from non-party members
- Mass mobilization for public displays of loyalty, denunciations of "enemies"
- High-frequency, mandatory ideology study sessions for every citizen

- Promoting a high-volume cult around the party leader and his wisdom
- Closure of online forums on political issues
- Curtailment of individual lifestyle choices, restrictions on traveling and studying abroad
- Drastically enhanced activity of party organs in private and foreign businesses
- Mergers of major privately-owned IT platform companies with party-state-controlled corporations

It seems that due to the diversity within the Chinese population and the CCP itself, a one-size-fits-all approach to ideology does not work. For China's domestic evolution, it will be decisive whether it is the "China Path" or the "Western model" that eventually convinces the Chinese public, especially the younger generation. Systemic competition will also become a defining factor in global politics: many countries and regions have the opportunity to choose between Chinese and Western developmental models and methods.

For Western liberal democracies, a gradual build-up of Chinese nationalism may turn out to be very challenging on a global scale. Amidst shared impressions of a decline of the United States, a well communicated international campaign for the "China Path" has the potential to resonate in countries from Hungary and Poland to Ethiopia, Rwanda, Cambodia and even Thailand. The political and economic elites of these countries are actively looking for alternatives to traditional Western models. Only if leading liberal democracies manage to revitalize their political institutions as well as their economic and technological capabilities will they be able to credibly stand up for their values when faced with the powerful counter-narrative that China's leadership is creating.

1. Introduction: ideas, ideologies and the "West" in official and online debates

1. Introduction: ideas, ideologies and the "West" in official and online debates

1.1 BUILDING PARTY-STATE IDEOLOGY AMID THE WEAKENING OF "WESTERN" SYSTEMS

An era of new ideological competition may have just begun. The rise of populist politicians in Europe and the United States has damaged the performance and credibility of liberal democracies and has called concepts of political and economic order in Western countries into question. Their principles and values, such as competitive elections, judicial independence and universal human rights, are in danger of losing their global appeal. The attractiveness of free markets and free trade has weakened as a growing number of countries have retreated to protectionist measures and have turned against multilateral trade regimes. Regional blocks like the European Union struggle with societal frustration over unequal wealth distribution, inflexible regulations and dysfunctional institutions.

For the Chinese leadership, as for other authoritarian governments, this has been good news. Chinese diplomats and official media have used the refugee crisis in Europe and the aftermath of the Brexit referendum as opportunities to systematically portray so-called "Western values" (西方价值观)[1] as ineffective and decadent. Beijing has forged the weaknesses of institutions and politics in Europe and the United States into a fundamental, systematic critique of a constructed "West" (西方). According to this narrative, the "hostile forces" and "foreign infiltration," which have long challenged China's political and economic order, may finally be stopped. "We should resolutely resist erroneous influence from the 'West': 'constitutional democracy,' 'separation of powers' and 'independence of the judiciary,'" China's Chief Justice Zhou Qiang warned in an attack on "Western concepts" in January 2017.[2]

The CCP still fears that Western values could undermine China's political system

There is a need for a deeper understanding of what lies behind such attacks on the "West." In this study, we will argue that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tries to exploit crises in liberal democracies because it secretly still fears that ideas and values from the EU and the United States have not lost the potential to undermine China's political system. Parts of the Chinese party elite as well as intellectuals and entrepreneurs have long advocated for the adoption of certain political concepts of liberal democracies as the only way to curb corruption and solve pressing problems like environmental pollution or social inequality. Many cadres have migrated their families and wealth abroad to Western democracies. Growing numbers of emigrant millionaires and a massive flight of capital to Western industrial countries pose a threat to China's political system and economic performance.

Halting the erosion of popular and cadre loyalty towards the CCP and avoiding the fate of the Soviet Union has been the most pressing task in the eyes of the Chinese leadership since the end of the Cold War. In an attempt to regain control over the elites, China's current party and state leader Xi Jinping has resorted to a host of repressive disciplinary measures.

First, he launched an anti-corruption campaign of a scope and intensity not seen since the end of the Cultural Revolution. This disciplinary purge has sent shockwaves through the entire party apparatus. Xi has extended the campaign to the military, where he initiated a major overhaul of the chain of command and organizational structure.

Second, the CCP leadership has banned from public debate the political concepts of liberal democracies as well as universal values. The party-state has vigorously persecuted liberal public intellectuals. In addition, the Chinese leadership has increased repression against and control over journalists, lawyers, religious believers and the employees of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). With a new law enacted in January 2017, the activities of foreign NGOs, including business associations and research centers, have been declared as pertinent to national security. These organizations are forced to register and redefine their scope of activities under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Security.

The costs of this broad-based repressive approach – referred to as "costs for stability maintenance" (维稳费) by Chinese government bodies – however, have greatly increased over recent years.

Beside this, repression does not generate active support for the current leadership. To the contrary, the arbitrary demonstrations of power by law enforcement authorities met with resistance from within the party and triggered social protests.

Therefore, the CCP has recognized the need for a more constructive and integrative approach. One example is the so called Social Credit System (社会信用体系) that is based on collecting online data from individuals and companies to track and influence not only economic honesty and credibility, but also social and potentially political behavior. The Social Credit System includes incentives for behavior defined by the CCP as "good" (rule-conforming) and disadvantages or outright sanctions for "bad" (rule-breaking) behavior.[3]

As a reference frame to define what is "good" or "bad," the CCP has intensified its ambitions to forge a unifying ideology among party cadres and society to boost loyalty to and support for the regime. At its core is the quest to lay out a unique "China Path" for China's future development. The current crises in Europe and the United States provide the CCP with enough ammunition to discredit "Western values" and to promote its own concepts as more effective and credible.

This study seeks to assess the success of the CCP's endeavor to promote China's political system as an alternative to "Western values" and concepts of governance. What is the role of the "West" in the party-state's effort to create an encompassing ideology? How much is the framing of the "West" by the CCP in line with ideas and values within Chinese society? What are the prospects of a rise in anti-Western sentiment in the People's Republic?

The CCP has intensified its ambitions to forge a unifying ideology among party cadres and society

Based on Michael Freeden's work, ideology can be defined as a political arrangement by which groups, organizations, governments or non-governmental activists attribute "decontested meanings" to a set of "mutually defining political concepts." Ideology in this definition establishes political concepts, positions and prescriptions that are supposed to be beyond contestation in order to support the respective political actors' status, interests or agenda.

Numerous studies have been published on the CCP's ideology pushes as well as on societal political preferences and opinion groups.[4] In this study, we take the analysis one step further by investigating the extent to which the party-state's top-down ideological prescriptions are accepted in online debates or contested by diverging political positions, concepts and labels that can be identified and traced as durable ideological clusters in online debates.[5]

In addition to China's ruling party's quest to establish a unifying and unassailable official ideology (orthodoxy) to sustain its power and priorities, this study explores the importance of non-official ideological clusters (in a more colloquial term: non-official ideological currents) that are shaping online debates based on mutually shared or mutually ascribed political labels, concepts and preferences that serve to characterize durable and differentiable opinion groupings in China's online ideological space.

To that end, we analyzed a wide range of CCP documents and speeches, conducted an online panel survey to assess the political preferences of 1,500 mostly urban Chinese netizens, and undertook quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from six different social media platforms in four policy fields.[6]

1.2 CHINA'S DIVERSE SOCIETAL DEBATES CHALLENGE THE CCP'S QUEST FOR A UNIFYING IDEOLOGY

The CCP faces two major challenges in creating a unifying ideology. First, Chinese society is becoming increasingly diverse. Living conditions, employment opportunities, communication patterns and identity choices differ greatly between rural and urban areas, but also between economically advanced coastal areas and impoverished regions in China's west. The resulting highly diverse interests and identities have produced varied ideas on the preferred economic, societal and political order. Different preferences are expressed most vividly in online political debates on current events, policy decisions or political statements. These debates touch upon the key relationship between the CCP, the state and society, as well as on the balance between a planned or state-controlled economy and the dynamics of market forces. Within these debates, there is no clear-cut distinction between the party-state on the one hand and society on the other, as many party members may and do influence online debates in their private capacities. At the same time,

different ideological clusters within society also extend into party-state ranks, where different groups vie for influence, including by mobilizing outside constituencies.[7]

Political concepts are also contested among ideological traditions and protagonists within the CCP. One example is Xi Jinping's determination that the 30 years of the PRC before the beginning of "reform and opening" in 1979 must be seen as equally important to China's revival under CCP leadership as the 30 years that have followed. Xi thus needs to reconcile the socialism of the Mao era (1949-1976), which was characterized by a planned economy, relatively equal income distribution and recurring ideological mobilization, with the "reform and opening" legacy of Deng Xiaoping, who promoted a large degree of openness towards ideas and methods originating in the United States and Europe.

Xi needs to reconcile the Mao Zedong era's socialism with the "reform and opening" legacy of Deng Xiaoping

Such internal ideological tensions have brought the CCP to the brink of a split several times. In March 2006, a group of high-ranking CCP officials, senior economists and legal experts came together at a closed-door "Symposium on China's Macro-Economy and Reform Trends" held by the China Society of Economic Reform, which is subordinate to the State Council of the People's Republic of China. According to a leaked internal conference protocol, suggestions for political reform, especially freedom of the press and a multi-party system, were heatedly discussed. Later on, the legal scholar He Weifang, who proposed these ideas, was denounced as a Trojan party member who wanted to sabotage the organization. The rise (and fall) of the former party secretary of Chongqing, Bo Xilai, and related debates on the superiority of a socialist "Chongqing model" versus a more liberal "Guangdong model" for development is another well-known example. In July 2016, disagreements within the CCP were illustrated by the crackdown on the magazine Yanhuang Chunqiu (炎黄春秋), which had long been backed by liberal-minded party elders, and the closure of the online platform Consensus Net (共识网), on which liberal-leaning party cadres had offered a space for controversial policy discussions among academics.[8]

These examples illustrate the party center's dilemma in building a unifying ideology. On the one hand, a national ideology that is too exclusive and rigid risks alienating segments of the political elite and parts of society whose support the CCP considers critical, like liberal-minded entrepreneurs, nationalistic soldiers and nostalgic Mao fans among the employees of state-owned enterprises. On the other hand, if the envisaged unifying ideology is too vague, it might fail to mobilize support or at least secure the silent consent of a sufficiently large part of the population.

In an attempt to gloss over this dilemma, the CCP has appealed to nationalism.[9] But it has come to recognize that nationalist sentiment as a dominant ideological force is a double-edged sword. Nationalism is a powerful mobilizing force that helps to build an imagined national community against perceived outsiders or enemies. It is also, however, a highly inflammable ideological notion that can easily turn against the leadership if the latter is perceived as not tough enough. In the 1990s and 2000s, the CCP leadership had a difficult time calming down nationalistic, xenophobic protests against the United States and Japan.[10] The example of nationalism shows why it is necessary to analyze ideologies as resulting from an interplay between top-down, party-state driven, and bottom-up, societal dynamics.

1.3 ANALYZING THE INTERPLAY OF IDEOLOGICAL CLUSTERS IN ONLINE POLICY DEBATES

This MERICS Paper on China takes a multi-faceted methodological approach to analyzing this complex dynamic. First, drawing on CCP documents and speeches, it focuses on the rationale, the goals, the actors, the content and the production of the party-state's ideology (chapter 2).

Second, the study presents a systematic profile of key ideological currents that can be traced in online debates. An online panel survey assessed the political preferences of 1500 mostly urban Chinese netizens as well as their attitudes towards a spectrum of competing ideological clusters. Additionally, we conducted in-depth interviews with Chinese public discussion leaders (chapter 3).

Third, the findings related to the party-state ideology as well as the ideological clusters within society are applied and tested by analyzing four policy debates in the fields of economy, foreign policy, media, and education using data crawled from six social media platforms (chapter 4). Finally, this study sketches out key factors that will influence or define the possible trajectories

of China's political future depending on the likelihood of totalitarian ideological control of Chinese society by the CCP and the likelihood of a rise of anti-Western nationalism within the People's Republic of China (PRC) (chapter 5).

This study shows that the party center under Xi Jinping aims to produce an encompassing and rigid ideological canon as an alternative to "Western" concepts of order. However, within Chinese society, the "West" continues to be seen as attractive in many respects, and the pluralism of ideas and ideologies in Chinese society is much more advanced than the CCP leadership might be prepared to accept.

2. Party-state ideology under Xi Jinping: constructing the "China Path" as an alternative to "Western" values and models

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KEY FINDINGS

- Since Xi Jinping assumed the leadership of party and state, the CCP has intensified its quest to construct a comprehensive party-state ideology as a more permanent source of legitimacy than economic performance or nationalism.
- The goal is to secure long-term CCP rule by creating confidence in a "China Path" as an alternative to "Western" political and economic systems.
- Unlike previous administrations after 1978, the CCP under Xi has the ambition to win over almost all segments of Chinese society to gain widespread legitimacy and ensure regime security. It has started to use new channels, formats and language to mobilize China's diverse society.
- Even though the party appears to be aware of the risk that excluding some opinions from public discourse could radicalize their representatives, it has opted to tighten control over what can and cannot be said in China.
- If Beijing further increases censorship and repressive measures, it risks reaching a tipping point at which large segments of society view their lifestyle choices as threatened. At this point, only a further increase in repressive measures could keep societal pushback at bay.

Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the party has embarked on a coordinated effort – unprecedented in size and scale since 1978 – to limit the impact of "Western" ideas while simultaneously redoubling its efforts to create a unifying ideology. This set of ideas is intended to inspire confidence in China's development model, or the "China Path" (中国道路), as official party publications call it, and ultimately turn it into a credible alternative to "Western" political and economic systems.

In December 2012, in one of his first major speeches, Xi Jinping warned that despite China's economic success, the country should not forget the lessons of the fall of the Soviet Union. Besides corruption and military disloyalty, Xi identified a failure to maintain ideological unity as one of three major factors that brought down the Soviet Union. In August 2013, when Xi chaired the CCP's annual work meeting on propaganda and ideology, he again called "ideology work" (意识形态工作) an "extremely important task" (极端重要的工作) that was vital to unite Chinese society in the face of unprecedented challenges. While to outside observers, ideas and ideology might seem less important than ensuring economic growth or containing growing inequality, the party seems to have concluded that a credible and comprehensive ideology is essential for its survival.[11]

The party seems to have concluded that a credible and comprehensive ideology is essential for its survival

This chapter examines the CCP's efforts at ideological reconstruction and explains the reasons and goals behind the current ideological push. It will show that the CCP leadership believes it needs normative power in the form of a comprehensive ideology shared by most Chinese people as a more permanent source of legitimacy than mere economic performance or raw emotional nationalism.

From the CCP's perspective, there are many signs that confidence in the Chinese political and economic system, rather than national pride alone, is badly needed to prevent elite defection, popular dissatisfaction and, ultimately, regime collapse. After all, Western countries continue to have strong appeal for China's richest and most influential citizens.

Even though expectations that the internet would lead to democratization in autocratic regimes have not been validated, the party is deeply concerned about the new com-

munication environment in the 21st century. New media has circumvented the party's monopoly on information. Consequently, Xi Jinping himself talked about the "struggle for public opinion" (舆论斗争).[12]

Instead of solely battling "hostile" ideas that flow through the cracks in China's censorship regime, the CCP wants to actively communicate its views, especially on current affairs. The overall aim is to increase the party's "ideological security" (意识形态安全)[13] by convincing the overwhelming majority of Chinese people that the CCP is the most credible interpreter of reality and eventually can offer a convincing alternative to guiding principles provided by Western countries such as liberal democracy or neoliberal economics.

> "Whether or not we can get ideological work right is of great concern to the future and destiny of the party, the long-term peace and stability of the country, as well as the cohesion and centripetal forces of the nation."
>
> Xi Jinping, August 19, 2013

2.1 THE RATIONALE: LEGITIMACY FOR THE CCP, NORMATIVE POWER FOR CHINA

China's ideological policy is motivated by a sense that a rising great power needs normative influence

The CCP's ideological policy is motivated both by fear of regime collapse and by a sense that China as a rising great power needs normative influence commensurate with its status. It is linked to the CCP's rethinking and broadening of its understanding of regime security as elaborated in Xi Jinping's "overall national security outlook" (总体国家安全观).[14] A Chinese alternative to "Western" systems that is widely accepted in China and abroad is seen as an important element in securing the CCP's ruling position at home while garnering respect for its ideas and concepts to match its economic and increasing military strength. The two areas are linked, as the party hopes that ideational power abroad will also increase its legitimacy at home.

Some observers have branded the focus on ideology under Xi Jinping as a break with the pragmatism of the 1990s that characterized CCP policy under Xi's predecessors Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao up until 2012. However, the renewed emphasis on ideology is not a complete turn-around in policy. Rather, it should be understood as a decisive move to act on issues that many in the party have long considered overdue to adapt to the challenges of the 21st century. Building on the groundwork laid under the Hu-Wen administration, the Xi administration has reasserted control over the CCP and has intensified ideological work since 2013.

From the perspective of the party leadership, two major factors are preventing ideological unity: The first is the plurality of ideas and ideologies caused by the party's own reform and opening policy. As China continues its market reforms and the gap between rich and poor continues to grow, social stratification leads to the formation of different interest groups. The second is the fear of "ideological infiltration" (意识形态渗透) by supposedly "hostile forces" (敌对势力) to cause regime change through "peaceful evolution" (和平演变) in China, i.e. the attempt by foreign organizations or individuals to overthrow the CCP by spreading "Western values" and "Western" concepts of political order in China.[15]

This second narrative has dominated the CCP's political discourse with varying degrees of intensity since the crackdown on the urban protest movement around Tiananmen Square in 1989. The threat of being undermined by dangerous ideas was emphasized again after the party witnessed the Color Revolutions in Central Asia, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia between 2000 and 2004. Subsequently, the CCP first admitted that a legitimacy crisis could cost the party its ruling position in a resolution issued in 2004. The Arab Spring of 2010 and 2011 rekindled fears of "ideological infiltration" and triggered another round of self-reflection that has contributed to the resurgence of ideology since 2012.[16]

While concerns about regime security are clearly the more urgent driving force, the vision of China returning to great power status not only in terms of hard economic and military but also ideational power plays an important role as well. In particular, the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009 was widely viewed within the CCP and among party-affiliated scholars as a window of opportunity to present the Chinese political and economic model as an alternative to "Western" concepts

of order. The crisis revealed the weaknesses of financial deregulation and lack of oversight in the United States. Chinese scholars argued that China's more careful reforms could prevent a similar development. This led to the first extensive round of discussions of the "China Model" (中国模式) in Chinese academic circles.[17]

The main goal of the CCP's ideological policy on the home front has been to create confidence in the "Chinese system, Chinese theory, the Chinese path, and Chinese culture," also known as the "Four Confidences" (四个自信).[18] Together, these are presented as an alternative to the "Western" political and economic order as well as the idea of universal values.[19] In order to achieve its goal, the party pursues a dual strategy of developing and promoting "Chinese" ideas and values while attacking and limiting the influence of supposedly dangerous "Western" ideas, such as freedom of the press and multi-party elections.

The CCP leadership under Xi wants more direct control over what people think and believe

While the current initiative and rhetoric show significant continuity with previous ideological work, the CCP leadership under Xi Jinping wants more direct control over what people think and believe and has acted more decisively. The party's pursuit of "ideological security" means the previous administrations' more minimalist approach of preventing dissent on only a few basic issues is no longer regarded as feasible. Instead, the CCP wants as many people as possible to actively support it and be on board with its vision of China's future.

This has generated new formats that make it more likely that the Chinese population will accept the party's perspective, but it has also necessitated a more aggressive approach, which carries the risk of backfiring if it is too restrictive or too intrusive in people's lives. The following sub-chapters will analyze the basic set-up and examine the shifts and changes under Xi. They will introduce the actors involved in the creation of content, the party's ideological repertoire,[20] and the channels used to distribute the CCP's ideology as well as to limit competing ideas.

2.2 THE ACTORS: IDEOLOGICAL WORK RESTS ON MANY SHOULDERS – THE CCP REMAINS IN CHARGE

The CCP's propaganda bureaucracy, which is responsible for creating and spreading party-state ideology, has been in place for decades.[21] This is both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, the CCP can fall back on well-established structures and procedures in its ideological work. On the other hand, existing bureaucratic structures are prone to becoming rigid and resisting the changes that are necessary to adapt to the communication environment of the 21st century and the CCP's new ambition to win over more people rather than merely create indifference or deter dissent. Since Xi came to power, the party has succeeded in instituting some changes by involving new actors and trusting them with producing content that was previously strictly controlled by the party bureaucracy.

The most important change since 2013 in terms of production of ideology has been the massive expansion of research institutions and think tanks to provide academic backing for the "China Path".[22] Many old and new think tanks try to foster collaborative research with foreign institutions through invitations to conferences in China and visits abroad. In part, this is because the CCP wants more academic research to back its Chinese alternatives to "Western" concepts and values.

In terms of distribution, the most important change under Xi Jinping has been the CCP's newfound ability to delegate tasks involving political content to non-party actors such as public relations companies. These new actors have found new ways to communicate the party's message, especially to the younger generations. They have been integrated into the existing multi-layered structure, which will be briefly explained below (see also figure 2.1).

First, at the highest level, there are several task forces called leading small groups working in the broader field of ideology. At the very top, there is the Central Leading Small Group (LSG) for Propaganda and Thought Work (中央宣传思想工作小组) headed by Liu Yunshan. Xi Jinping has become personally involved in this LSG's affairs, for instance by chairing the annual work meeting for propaganda and thought work in 2013 and possibly in the following years as well. Xi personally heads the Central Leading Small Group on Cyber Security and Informatization (中央网络安全和信息化领导小组), which has evolved as a core actor in propaganda and the censorship of cyberspace since its establishment in 2013. Therefore, its operational importance is at least at a

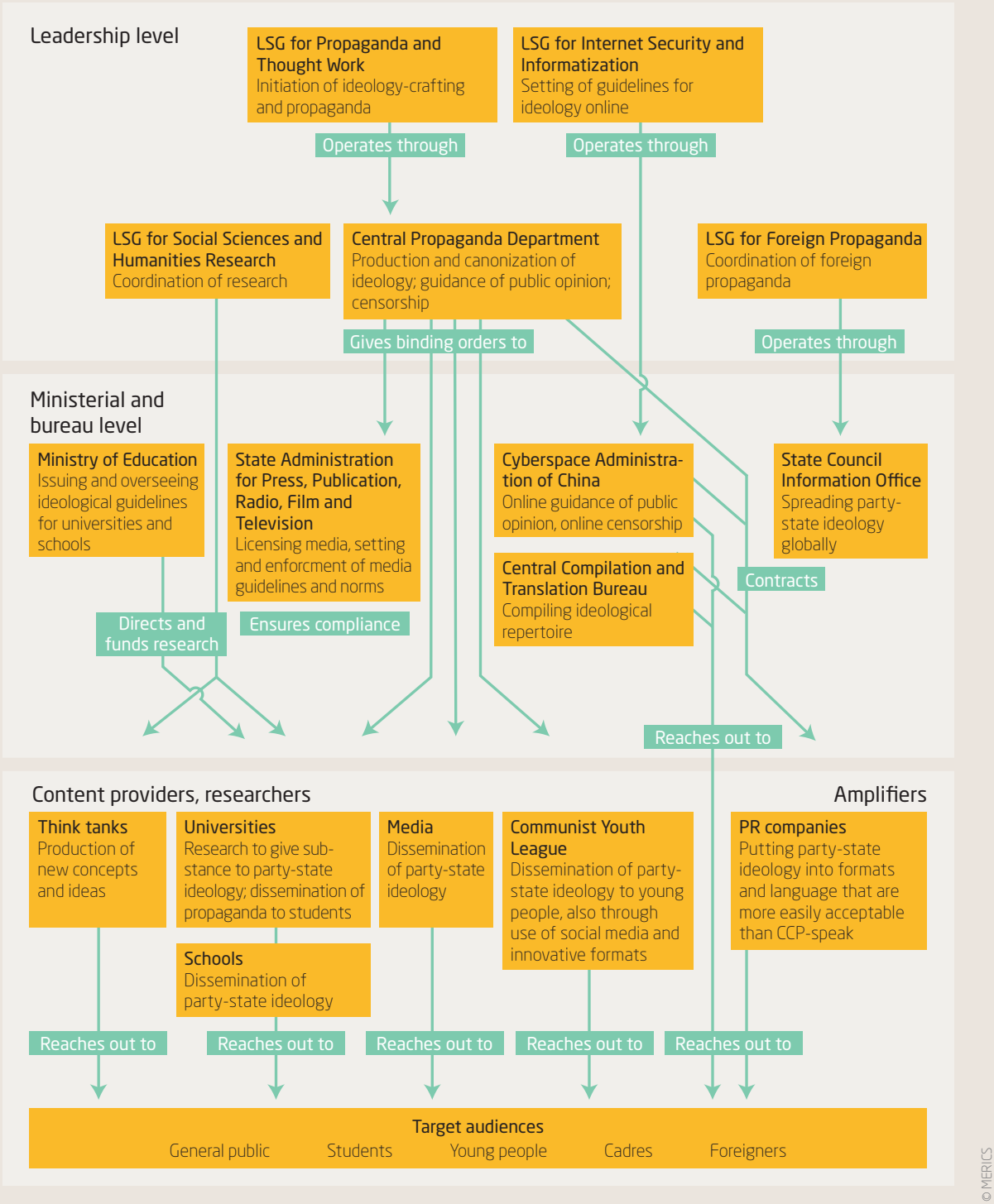
similar level as the LSG for Propaganda and Thought Work.[23] The General Office of that LSG, the Cyberspace Administration of China, appears to be more powerful than standard ministerial-level bodies given its very broad regulatory powers over national cyberspace. In governing practice, the guidance and regulation of China's extremely rapidly expanding cyberspace, including the filtering of information dissemination and online debates, has resulted in a massive expansion and transformation of the CCP's traditional propaganda practices.

In addition, there are other subordinate LSGs, such as the LSG for Planning in the Humanities and

Figure 2.1

How the "China Path" is made

Actors, processes and target audiences in the production and dissemination of ideology [24]



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Social Sciences (全国哲学社会科学规划领导小组) and the LSG for External Propaganda Work, which assist with specific sub-fields of propaganda and ideology.

Below the level of the task forces, bureaucratic organizations are responsible for day-to-day work. The most important organization is the Central Propaganda Department (most significantly its Theory Bureau), along with its equivalents at lower levels in the party bureaucracy. In addition, there are other departments in the propaganda system, such as the Central Translation and Compilation Bureau and the Office of Party Literature, which translate, compile and canonize texts that become part of the official ideology.

Academic institutions and think tanks conduct research that is used to support CCP ideology and provide a theoretical foundation for the Chinese political and economic system. China has various academies for Marxism at high level research institutions such as the Central Party School and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, as well as at universities across the country. China's National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences (the office of the LSG for Planning in the Humanities and Social Sciences) and China's National Social Science Fund, which hands out grants for research projects, has an entire section reserved for research projects on Marxism and "Scientific Socialism."[25]

In addition to a large research budget for ideological production, the CCP under Xi has set up think tanks and new research institutes across the country that also contribute to the production of ideology. In 2015, the party published a policy document outlining its plans to establish between 50 and 100 "high-end" think tanks (高端智库).[26]

Finally, party ideology is communicated through the education system, through party-state media, through campaigns organized by party and government departments at all levels and, increasingly, through new media, cartoons, videos and infographics. A wide range of institutions are involved in distribution, including all schools, universities, and party-state media, organizations such as the Communist Youth League, governments and party committees at all levels, as well as PR companies.

2.3 THE REPERTOIRE: AN ECLECTIC MIX OF OLD AND NEW IDEAS

Due to the diversity within the Chinese population and the CCP itself, a one-size-fits-all approach to ideology does not work. The challenge therefore lies in creating an ideology that appeals to as many people as possible without being overtly fragmented. At the same time, the party also has to contend with its ideological legacy from before 1978. This has become particularly evident under Xi Jinping's leadership, with the Mao Period (1949–1976) making a comeback as an integral part of China's history that cannot be separated from the post-1978 period.

The building blocks of the party's ideology consist of at least four different components of very different origins that are combined in an eclectic mix:

The challenge lies in creating an ideology that appeals to many without being too diluted

First, the CCP has to work with and around the ideological legacy of the "Communist founding fathers." For instance, references to Marxism or Mao Zedong's legacy cannot be completely rejected in favor of an exclusive focus on the "China Path." However, when old slogans or ideological components are revived, they can be redefined for new purposes. For instance, the fight against corruption has been cast as the new manifestation of class struggle in China by some commentators.[27] Other parts of the ideological legacy are not highlighted much in public but continue to exert influence in the background. The Leninist principles of organization,[28] most importantly the idea of a "vanguard party" with carefully selected and supervised nomenclature and strict party loyalty, are not stressed in the party's public propaganda material, but continue to exert decisive influence on how political life is organized in China.

Second, each generation of leaders has to work with the ideological legacy left by its predecessors since the beginning of reform and opening period. For instance, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao could not simply disregard Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" (三个代表), just as Xi Jinping could not single-handedly decide to ignore Hu and Wen's ideas of more balanced development, summed up under the label "scientific development outlook" (科学发展观). Nonetheless, there is some flexibility, as new leaders are expected to make their own contributions in line with the CCP principle that ideology needs to keep up with and continue to reflect the changes in the world (与时俱进).

Third, the CCP's ideology selectively draws on foreign ideas, institutions and concepts. More recently, the CCP has looked to Singapore for its concept of autocratic governance by technocrats and is also generally willing to adapt ideas from countries with democratic systems. Even though the CCP opposes what it calls "wholesale Westernization," it is willing to selectively appropriate concepts that were first developed in Western academia or Western political contexts. Both the reliance on foreign ideas and the notion that they need to be adapted to Chinese circumstances have been part of the CCP's self-definition since its earliest days. For instance, according to the party's master narrative, Mao Zedong adapted Marxism to Chinese conditions, e.g. by declaring the peasants and not the workers the key agents of the revolutionary movement.

Despite fundamental changes in its ideology, the party tries to maintain the impression of consistency

Fourth, the party has borrowed from Chinese traditions. This was particularly obvious under the Hu and Wen administrations, when China opened Confucius Institutes around the world, proclaimed that China would rise peacefully because Chinese culture was inherently peaceful, and gave China's premodern past a prominent place in the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. After Xi Jinping came to power, there was a short revival of references to Confucianism, and Xi himself visited the birthplace of Confucius. The CCP then somewhat de-emphasized Confucianism and refocused on China's more immediate, Maoist past and "Chinese culture" in more general terms. That said, the party still selectively integrates concepts from China's premodern past in its overall ideology and has incorporated "traditional" values such as "harmony" (和谐) in its set of "socialist core values" (see 2.4 below).

The party tries to maintain an air of ideological consistency despite fundamental changes over the years. For the current leadership, the deep ideological divide between the time before and after 1978 (the turn away from political "class struggle" towards economic "reform and opening") is the most difficult to bridge. Therefore, despite the apodictic nature of official statements (e.g. "only socialism can save China"), CCP ideologues have kept the content and goals of "socialism" adaptable. They are meant to change along with the party center's redefinitions of the most pressing "contradictions" and the resulting "work priorities" for the government. This ideological and political adaptability allows the CCP to enact major policy changes and accommodate diverse interest groups within the party while maintaining a seemingly consistent set of basic socialist "viewpoints" through time.[29]

2.4 A NEW FOCUS: CONSTRUCTING THE "CHINA PATH" AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO "WESTERN" SYSTEMS

In the current version of ideology that is promoted under Xi, the most explicit focus is placed on the uniqueness of a Chinese system that was created in response to unique Chinese "national circumstances" (国情) and the efficiency and selflessness of the party working towards turning China into a modern, developed country. The basic message that China must not be evaluated by Western standards but rather on its own terms has been the central thrust of the CCP's argument for decades.

However, the current undertaking is more comprehensive than previous initiatives, which usually focused on a "Chinese alternative" in individual fields, such as a Chinese understanding of human rights. Instead, the CCP has now systematized its attempt to come up with a Chinese "grand alternative" to "Western" political and economic models that covers everything from "consultative democracy," "rule by law," the "socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics" and visions of international order, such as "the community of a shared human destiny," to more specific ideas such as "internet sovereignty" and "constructive journalism" (see table 2.1).

Table 2.1

From ideological repertoire to canon
Key components of CCP ideology

Concept	Chinese	Definition
Four Confidences (2012)*	四个自信	Confidence in China's overall path of development, the Chinese system, Chinese theory, and Chinese culture
China Dream (2013)	中国梦	Achieving strong but balanced economic development while restoring China to a respected place in the world
Community of Shared Destiny (2013)	人类命运共同体	China's official foreign policy propaganda slogan; the world faces many of the same problems, so it needs to work together to solve them
Socialist Core Values (2014)	社会主义核心价值观	Set of twelve values drawn from pre-modern sources, the Chinese socialist tradition, and reinterpretations of concepts such as democracy and freedom
Four Comprehensives (2014)	四个全面	Policy goals in four areas: development, overall reforms, judicial reforms, and party discipline
Consultative Democracy (2014)	协商民主	Incorporation of different political organizations and societal forces under single-party rule

*Year indicates beginning of widespread promotion

Source: MERICS research

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As the "Western" political and economic order is seen as the biggest threat to the CCP's ideological security, most of the concepts the CCP tries to promote were implicitly or explicitly formulated as responses and counter-models to "Western" ideas. For example, the Chinese concept of consultative democracy is promoted as superior to "Western" democracy because it draws on consultative organs in addition to (very basic) elections.

One important campaign that the CCP has pursued both to counter "Western values" or "universal values" and to fight what it views as a moral vacuum in China is establishing "socialist core values" (社会主义核心价值观). Started under the Hu-Wen administration, this project is intended to respond to the perceived lack of values in Chinese society or to the perception that the only value in Chinese society is "money" (钱), a sentiment commonly expressed in the survey that accompanies this study and in conversations with Chinese academics (see chapter 3). The socialist core values consist of 12 different values the CCP wants all Chinese to internalize. They are divided into three levels: national, societal, and individual (see table 2.2).

The search for a comprehensive ideology under Xi has included a vision of a greater Chinese role in the international order

The core values explicitly include terms such as democracy and freedom to show that the "West" does not have sole interpretative authority over them.

In the past, the CCP has usually limited itself to concepts pertaining to China's domestic order or, at most, concepts such as the "peaceful rise" that concerned China's interaction with other countries. But the search for a comprehensive ideology under Xi has included a vision of a greater Chinese role in the international order. This shows the ambition of the new ideological policy: as Western countries are weakened by internal or systemic crises, China sees a chance to try to discredit the "West" and to offer an alternative vision of global order to the world (see also table 2.3).

Table 2.2

Counter "Western values" and fight the moral vacuum
"Core socialist values" as propagated by the CCP

Values and goals at the national and state levels (国家层面的价值目标)	Prosperity and power (富强), democracy (民主), cultural development (文明), harmony (和谐)
Values and orientations at the societal level (社会层面的价值取向)	Freedom (自由), equality (平等), justice (公正), rule by law(法治)
Values and norms on the level of individual citizens (公民个人层面的价值准则)	Patriotism (爱国), professional dedication (敬业), honesty (诚信), friendliness (友善)

Source: Heilmann, Sebastian (ed.) (2017). China's Political System. Lanham et al: Rowman & Littlefield, 56

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It is difficult to assess whether the CCP will succeed in popularizing its ideas. However, studies show that the "patriotic education" campaigns begun in the 1990s in response to the 1989 student protests have been successful to a large degree.[30] The party seems to hope that over time its efforts to create confidence in the "China Path" will also pay off.

2.5 BROADENING THE DISTRIBUTION: NEW CHANNELS TO REACH ALL TARGET AUDIENCES

To secure long-term ideological predominance and stability, the CCP's goal is to win over all segments of society, or at least as many as possible (excluding only people who have been identified as "fifth column" working on behalf of "Western hostile forces"). This is reflected in the adoption of new formats and language to better communicate and reach more target groups than the rather stiff language used by the CCP in the past was able to.

The CCP has adopted new formats and language to reach more target groups

Yet there remains a hierarchy of importance. Cadres and party members are the most important group: if the party cannot convince its own members and officials, it has truly failed in coming up with a persuasive narrative. Groups such as journalists and teachers are considered important amplifiers by the party. Students are a vital target audience because they are considered malleable and important to the future of the party. In May 2015, the CCP identified Chinese students overseas, Chinese employees of Chinese-foreign joint ventures and of social media companies as "new social groups" that would need to be drawn into the party's official orbit.[31]

By tasking private companies, even foreign PR companies, to come up with more innovative ways to market its ideas and values, the party hopes to reach a broader audience. The CCP has long realized that the language of Sino-Marxism used internally is dull and does little to "inspire" (鼓舞) most Chinese people, much less resonate internationally. Therefore, aside from coming up with new Chinese concepts, the CCP is also investing time and money into how to sell these ideas in an appealing way, known as "massification" (大众化) of ideology.[32] Therefore, the CCP has developed a comprehensive repertoire for digital communication, especially targeting the younger generation, within a short period of time. Since the end of 2011, central party and state institutions, state-run media and individual party cadres have been setting up government social media accounts (政务微博). By the end of 2014, there were more than 100,000 official accounts of this kind on WeChat, and Sina Weibo had 180,000 profiles for state agencies and agency representatives.[33] The goal is to disseminate officially authorized information quickly, including information

Table 2.3

How party-state media present the "West"
A compilation of key statements from the People's Daily and Xinhua from 2016

Statement	Source
"Countries reproducing Western democracy face starvation, poverty, disorder and bloodshed"	Xinhua (November 3, 2016); People's Daily (July 8, 2016, October 23, 2016)
"The world order dominated by western countries is decaying and incapable of coping with challenges"	People's Daily (July 8, 2016)
"Western macro-economic theory is based on Western developed countries and does not apply to other countries"	People's Daily (June 16, 2016)
"The Chinese model (both political and economic) is more advanced than the Western model"	Xinhua (November 26, 2016)
"Western countries disregard China's progress because China has a different political system"	People's Daily (March 19, 2016)
"The rise of populism discredits the Western system"	Xinhua (November 2, 2016); People's Daily (February 26, 2016)
"Western countries are ruled by money politics"	People's Daily (March 19, 2016)
"China can offer an alternative to the Western model to developing countries"	Xinhua (July 10, 2016)
"Western media are not neutral"	Xinhua (November 7, 2016)
"The West does not have an interpretative monopoly on terms like democracy, human rights and freedom"	Guangming Daily (September 8, 2016)

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on current events, in order to present the leadership as credible, responsive and creative. The CCP under Xi is also promoting what it calls "new official-speak" (新官话) to make the language of the party more accessible for "ordinary," especially younger, Chinese. Officials are encouraged to use colloquial terms.

Cartoon videos or video clips are one important new format (see table 2.4). They are sometimes produced for a specific event (such as a trip abroad by Xi or the release of a new document). Most of them contain between one and three key messages, such as "the CCP selflessly works on behalf of the people to realize the China Dream," "Xi is taking care of China as he would take care of his own family," or "US elections and politics are skewed by money."

Table 2.4

Selling the party through new formats
Selected video clips conveying the CCP's message

Video clip (language, year)[34]	Produced by	Key ideas
The Communist Party is with you along the way (EN/CN, 2013)	Road to Revival Studios	The CCP works hard on behalf of the people to realize the China Dream
How leaders are made (EN/CN, 2013)	Road to Revival Studios	US elections and politics are skewed by money while China's leaders are carefully trained
Who is Xi Dada? (EN/CN, 2015)	People's Daily	Xi is taking care of China as he would take care of his own family. Everybody loves him.
Going with Uncle Xi, US edition (EN, 2015)	Road to Revival Studios	The United States benefits from business with China
The Shisanwu (EN, 2015)	Road to Revival Studios, BBDO	China's five-year-plans are based on careful and thorough research
The Leading Small Group on Comprehensive Reforms is turning two (CN, 2015)	CCTV	Efficient task force fighting on behalf of the people by eliminating corruption and pushing through reforms
The Kung Fu of the Chinese Economy (EN, 2016)	Road to Revival Studios	China's "new normal": economic slowdown is intentional, strategic and smart
The legend of the online volunteers (CN, 2016)	Communist Youth League	Rational, patriotic Party Warriors fight selflessly for truth, order and cybersecurity in the chaotic internet
Who am I (CN, 2016)	CCTV	The CCP is working selflessly and tirelessly on behalf of the Chinese people
Belt and Road bedtime stories (EN/CN 2017)	China Daily	China's effort to bring prosperity and peace to regions along the ancient Silk Road, told as bedtime stories by an English-speaking Western father to his daughter
How amazing is it to live in China? Let's hear it from a German (GER/EN/CN, 2017)	Xinhua (New China) TV	A German student calls for learning from China's innovative and flexible cashless economy

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Nonetheless, other tried and tested ways of getting people to internalize ideas or values still exist alongside these new distribution mechanisms. For instance, nationwide study campaigns and campaigns that encourage learning from models are still common. The "socialist core values" are spread through a mixture of old and new methods. On the one hand, PR companies produce slick videos. On the other hand, governments and party committees pick "model citizens," whose stories they spread through traditional media and the internet. This ensures that the party can target anyone from Chinese millennials to older or rural audiences who may still respond well to older formats.

Most importantly, the advent of new technology and approaches to working with big data will allow the CCP to keep track of and enforce key parts of its ideology within the Chinese population. A good example of a tool that will gain in importance in this area is the Social Credit System, which assigns citizens scores based on a variety of criteria.

2.6 LIMITING THE COMPETITION: IDEOLOGICAL PROTECTIONISM ON THE RISE

Drawing on groundwork laid under Hu and Wen, the CCP under Xi Jinping has launched arguably the most extensive campaign to popularize its ideology since 1978. Its intense measures to suppress ideas it considers hostile or dangerous interfere in the personal and professional lives of an increasing number of people, including professors, journalists and lawyers. In April 2013, the CCP internally distributed the Notice on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere. Better known as "Document No. 9," this directive prohibits the promotion of seven "harmful" concepts, namely constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, neoliberalism, freedom of the press, criticism of the CCP's historical achievements, questioning the reform and opening policies and their "socialist nature."[35]

The censorship and repression that accompany the creation of a more comprehensive Chinese ideology should be understood as a form of ideological protectionism. They are considered necessary because the CCP perceives itself to be in a weaker position vis-à-vis the "West" (西强我弱), especially when it comes to making its "voice" (话语权) heard internationally.[36] The idea is similar to keeping out foreign competitors to allow the growth of "national champions" in the business world or in the charity sector: the party needs to keep the foreign competition at bay until China's own companies and NGOs are strong enough to compete with or replace their foreign counterparts.

The CCP has a large toolkit for enforcing official ideology and eliminating unwanted ideas from public discourse

Like the channels for distribution, the CCP's toolkit for enforcing official ideology and eliminating unwanted ideas from public discourse is large and consists of a range of different means to punish infractions. CCP organizations at all levels have been tasked with enforcing adherence to party ideology akin to the responsibility system that the CCP has used to control the media. In this system, individual editors and journalists can be held personally accountable and are fined or fired for infractions. For instance, journalists and editors have been punished for failing to notice a reference to Tiananmen in English on a photo reprinted in a paper or for failing to remove the word "country" in reference to Taiwan when reproducing a news item from a foreign news agency.[37] More recently, party committees at all levels, including at universities, have established responsibility systems to determine who will be held personally accountable for ideological mistakes.[38] This is a very effective means of controlling what people publish, teach, research and say, as they can be held accountable not only for their own statements but also for those of their subordinates.

A key task for the party, according to its own definition, is to correctly assess China's current domestic and global circumstances so that it can come up with the correct policies. The CCP leaders think in terms of dialectics: to them, the key to correct policy lies in defining the most important "contradictions" that stand in the way of the CCP's developmental goals and political principles. Political resources are then focused on combating and mitigating the forces that cause these contradictions. The dialectical approach of contradiction analysis also applies to the treatment of political viewpoints: "hostile" ideas and protagonists that work towards undermining and overthrowing Communist Party rule have to be suppressed, while exploratory, "constructive" viewpoints and proposals can be tolerated as long as they do not get in the way of the CCP's shifting priority agendas.

The CCP currently deals with debate and dissent by dividing contentious issues into three different types, each of which requires a different response: exploratory academic issues, issues of understanding and misunderstanding, and politically dangerous issues (see table 2.5). This explains the very different reactions both Chinese and foreigners (e.g. NGOs) can experience when dealing with the CCP or simply operating in China. If harsh punishments are meted out for seemingly minor infractions, it means the party's decision-makers have come to the judgement that the underlying problem is politically malicious and destabilizing in nature. Under Xi Jinping, the parameters for what counts as politically malicious have clearly been expanded.

Table 2.5

Different problems, different approaches
How the CCP classifies and deals with debates[39]

Type of issue	How the CCP sees it	How the CCP deals with it
Academic issue (学术问题): topics on which the CCP has not defined a right or wrong position	Non-malicious statement in the context of academic exploration	Open discussion and exchange on an equal level
Misunderstanding (思想认识问题): topics on which the CCP has a clear stance	Misguided, yet non-malicious, opinion	Convincing people with "logic and reasonable arguments"
Political issue (政治问题): topics on which the CCP has identified a single correct position	Hostile and premeditated provocation	Firmly refuting and combating the incorrect position

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2.7 THE CCP IS WALKING A TIGHTROPE BETWEEN REPRESSION AND INNOVATION

So far, Beijing has mainly been successful in reworking and innovating the hardware of ideology: the CCP has incorporated new actors into ideological production, has developed new channels, such as social media, and has invented new formats. In this regard, the CCP under Xi has made significant progress in adopting a more accessible style. This stands in contrast to the Hu-Wen administration, during which CCP propagandists tended to use stiff, anachronistic language.

The "China Path" receives a boost as liberal democracies are experiencing testing times

The "China Path" is currently getting a boost as liberal democracies are experiencing testing times. Both Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as US president have been used by the CCP to demonstrate to its citizens that direct democracy and multi-party elections will lead to "bad governance" and social instability. Increasing tension, for example with Washington, might also inspire the Chinese population to turn to a "China Path." If the CCP can continue to build an ideology with a credible connection to everyday life without resorting to overly harsh repression, it could succeed in winning over more and more Chinese people to support its course.

However, until now the CCP has not been very successful at presenting a substantive alternative to the "Western" political and economic order. Also, due to a very eclectic and even partially contradictory ideological repertoire, the ideological concepts have to remain vague. The "four confidences" or the "core socialist values" remain too removed from the reality of day-to-day lives. The most clear-cut defining factor of the current party-state ideology is that it should not be built on "Western" concepts and ideas. If the CCP continues to expand restrictions of political space by declaring more and more topics as off limits to discussion and by meting out harsh punishments to dissenters, it risks alienating a growing number of people, driving them underground and potentially radicalizing them, including key public discussion leaders in influential positions.

3. Consensus out of reach: ideological diversity in Chinese online spaces

3. Consensus out of reach: ideological diversity in Chinese online spaces

KEY FINDINGS

- The CCP's attempts to build a unifying ideology are challenged by highly fragmented public opinion in China's online space. Most participants in online debates belong to the urban middle class, whose support for the government is important for guaranteeing political stability.
- China's online space is populated by different ideological clusters, which compete over ideas about the political and economic order. These clusters display varying degrees of conformity with or opposition to the official party-state ideology depending on the issue at stake.
- The clusters that stress Chinese uniqueness seem to enjoy the biggest institutional and financial support from the CCP. At the other end of the spectrum, those clusters that support liberal values like democracy and human rights are labeled as too "pro-Western" by the government.
- Nationalism is a common theme among respondents in our accompanying survey: 62 percent think that China should be more assertive internationally.
- Participants in the survey expressed ambiguous attitudes about "the West." However, about 75 percent of survey respondents are in favor of the "spread of Western values."

As chapter 2 has shown, China's party-state establishment is working hard to define a coherent, officially sanctioned ideology. This is not an easy task in the face of various inner-party groups with different ideas and interests, but also with respect to a Chinese society that is more heterogeneous than ever before. In this chapter, we will introduce eleven durable and differentiable clusters of ideological positions that we were able to identify in China's online debate space – to the extent possible in a restrictive system that curtails dissenting views and manipulates online information and communication like almost no other country. These ideological clusters do not display strong organizational cohesion, nor are they linked to specific institutions. They should be understood as consisting of individuals who express very similar lines of thought and share very similar political ideas, concepts and preferences, but are mostly not connected in their offline life. We believe that mapping such clusters is the best way to illuminate China's usually hidden political and ideological diversity, which will come to be a shaping factor in China's future should cracks appear in the current economic or political system.

China's urban residents in particular are divided by growing disparities in wealth and education levels as well as lifestyle choices. The real estate owner's interests are different from those of the young couple looking to rent an apartment. Families with an urban household registration have better access to education than families of rural migrant workers. The younger generation is free to pick from a variety of individual choices on issues like work-life balance, gender and sexuality. Urban Chinese are also increasingly globally orientated. No other country sends as many students abroad and no other nationals spend more money overseas while travelling.

Based on these different interests and identities, Chinese citizens hold varied views on the nation and its role, as well as on the political, economic and social order. These differing views are expressed in vivid online discussions. While Chinese netizens do not have access to internationally popular social media channels like Facebook and Twitter, they can engage in a variety of domestic online communities which, despite being monitored and censored by authorities, provide important platforms for public debate (see chapter 4). Strikingly, no unified ideology predominates in China's online forums where views on politics, economics or society are intensely disputed.

No unified ideology predominates in China's online forums where politics, economics and society are intensely disputed

Netizens use labels to refer to their own political positions or to those of likeminded individuals, but they also label their political opponents.[40]

Researching these online clusters can yield important insights into China's societal ideologies. In a system that obstructs the open articulation of political ideas, especially those in opposition to the present political and ideological system, many netizens use either positive or negative labels for certain clusters as a vehicle to express their own ideological leaning.[41]

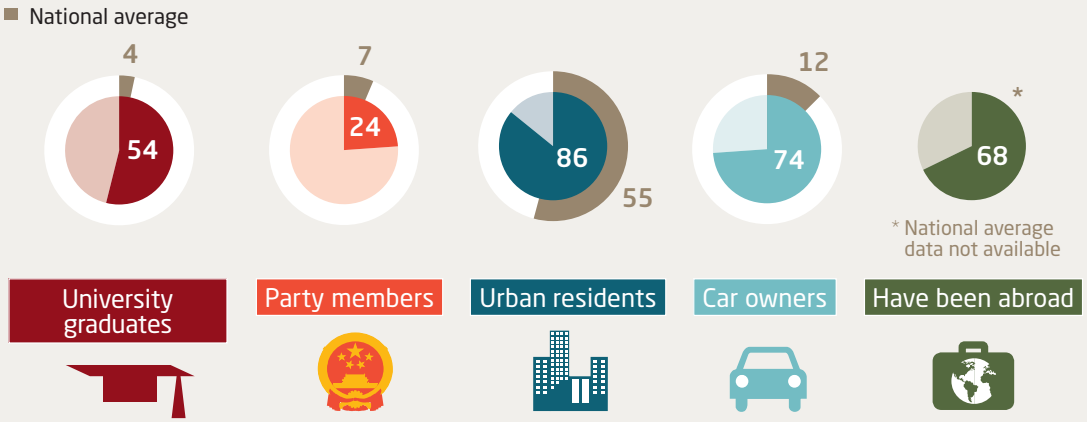
Box 3.1

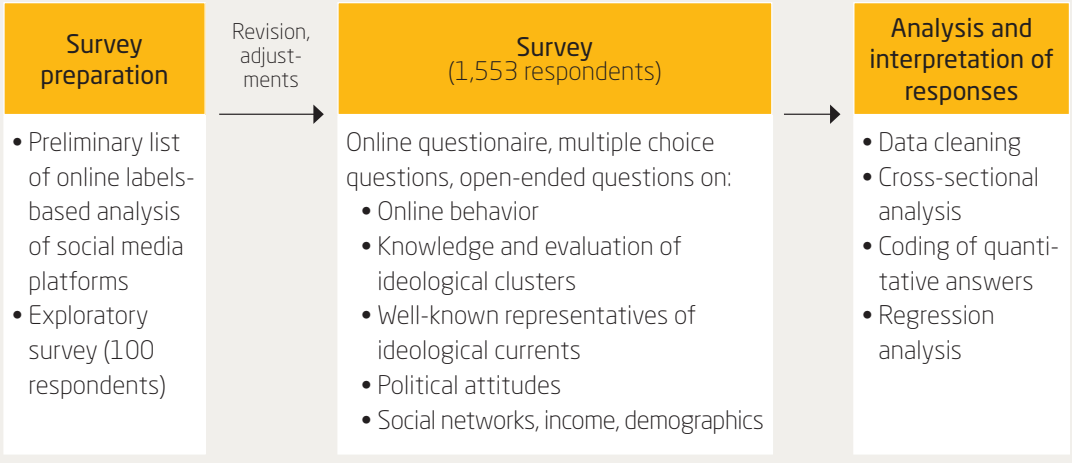
Examining ideological clusters in Chinese society

Based on our exploration of Chinese online communities, we drafted a preliminary list of labels that were frequently used to describe debate participants' political positions. We then discussed and refined this list in an exploratory survey among 100 online-savvy Chinese people selected from our own networks to determine if these labels and their associated political or ideological meanings were sufficiently well known. To minimize sample bias, the selected participants had diverse backgrounds and no academic insights into the topic. The sample consisted of people from all walks of life such as teachers, entrepreneurs, doctors and students.

Analyzing societal ideologies based on online labels

Basic facts about the survey conducted by MERICS and ERC





Sources: MERICS research, Statista, China Daily, National Bureau of Statistics, Xinhua, State Council

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Based on these results, we[42] drafted a comprehensive online survey in which participants were asked to position themselves in relation to six of the selected labels[43] and to reveal their personal political attitudes and socio-economic backgrounds. They were also asked to name well-known representatives of the respective clusters. The 1,552 participants of this survey were selected by a Chinese polling company from among urban internet users across China (excluding Xinjiang and Tibet). The distribution of gender, age, region, education level and socio-economic background of this online panel mirrors the composition of China's internet population. The results allow insights into common definitions of ideological online labels and on their societal acceptance. They also provide clues on the socio-economic background of their followers. For example, survey participants who expressed sympathy for the positions of "Mao Lovers" were more likely to live in smaller-sized cities compared to the average sample.

Survey respondents furthermore answered multiple choice questions on values, the role of the market economy, their attitudes towards the nation state, European countries and the United States, as well as on their preferred mode of governance. We adapted the questions to take into account the difficulties of opinion surveys in authoritarian systems, especially on political issues. For example, participants were not asked to comment directly on their own values or on concepts like democracy, but they were asked to name values they believed to be mainstream within society.

The answers from the qualitative sections and the knowledge and evaluation of the camps were coded respectively[44] and served as the basis for assigning attributes to ideological clusters and for determining the most prominent representatives of each ideological cluster.[45]

Based on the survey results, we drafted a preliminary ideological mapping, which we presented to a review panel. The 16 panel members were selected from among influential representatives of the respective clusters, whom we contacted after their names had been mentioned by our survey participants, as well as from among additional representatives who were recommended by those we contacted (based on the "snowball" principle). The panel suggested adding ideological labels that had not been included in the survey.[46] Based on the interviews, we then refined the ideological mapping and determined the assumed size of ideological clusters, as well as their assumed locations on two scales ranging from universal/nationalistic to paternalistic/laissez-faire. Based on a survey of Chinese netizens, interviews with experts and opinion leaders in China, and our own research of online communities, we identified 11 widely acknowledged ideological clusters (figure 3.1 and table 3.1).

We chose neutral names for each cluster and in some cases avoided using the original Chinese terms, for example if they contained judgments or if they would be misleading when employed in a non-Chinese context. We also tried to limit the confusion over the fact that some Chinese terms are used as self-referentially while others are solely employed to reference others.

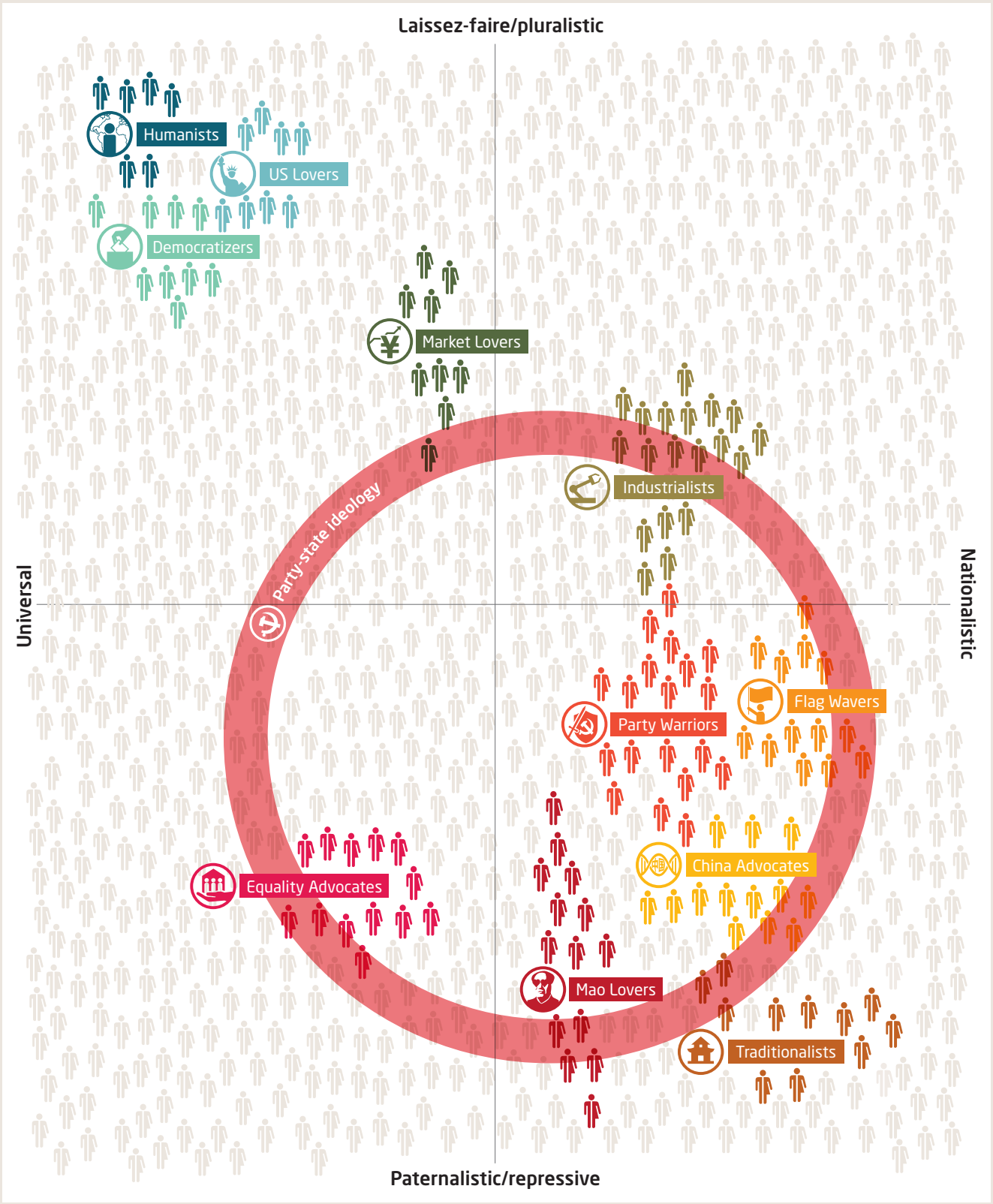
The clusters display varying degrees of conformity with or opposition to the official party-state ideology. The Party Warriors are most closely aligned with the CCP, while US Lovers are the most likely to be stigmatized as propagating so-called "Western values." Some clusters overlap as their members share certain ideas and beliefs. For example, Humanists and Democratizers have in common that they defend freedom of expression as a prerequisite for human dignity (Humanists) and democratic participation (Democratizers).

Correlating statements to ideological clusters is not always possible and the analytical framework thus serves as an approximation of the ideological spectrum as manifested in online debates. China's population has been exposed to a multitude of ideological shifts in recent history, and the sometimes contradictory positions adopted by netizens mirror the fragmentation of ideological clusters that even the CCP struggles to reconcile internally.

Each ideological cluster's influence over public discourse varies depending on the issue. As shown in case studies of several high-profile online debates in chapter 4, some clusters are particularly strong in one policy area, but play only a marginal role or no role whatsoever in others. Other clusters may be marginalized by censorship and taboo and yet their arguments may break through to the mainstream on certain issues. The interplay between these clusters reveals a remarkably persistent degree of plurality and non-conformity in China's overall restricted space for political debate.

Figure 3.1

Conflicting ideologies put China's political stability at risk
Mapping China's societal ideological clusters



Source: Adapted from Pan/Xu 2016 and Veg 2014. Relative placement of clusters based on interviews with intellectuals; number of figures as approximation to visibility of clusters based on interviews, survey and literature.

Profile of major ideological clusters

Cluster	Description	Typical followers
Party Warriors*	Defenders of the party-state. The term "Fifty Cent Army" (五毛党) describes paid commentators spreading CCP propaganda. The term "Online Volunteer Army" (自干五) stresses voluntary commitment to CCP ideas.	Online commentators; often use pen names; followers in survey tend to be poorer and more ethnocentric than average.
Flag Wavers	Nationalists. Chinese term "Angry Youth" (愤青) describes (now aging) Leftists. A group of young women who circumvent censorship to post on international social media call themselves "Little Pinks" (小粉红). Radical followers are called Fascists (法西斯派).	Young, tech savvy university students and young professionals; followers in survey tend to be male and to have travelled abroad more than average.
Democratizers	Called Liberals (自由派). In the Chinese context the term is used to label people associated with the political liberalism advocated by democracy activists.	Middle-aged intellectuals; many experienced the 1989 protest movement; background in media and education; civil rights activists.
Humanists	Called Globalists (全球派). In China, the term "Globalist" refers to proponents of universal values.	Middle-aged intellectuals; often lawyers, journalists and social scientists.
US Lovers	Called US fans (美粉). Their critics often use the derogatory term "Paving the way Party" (带路党) to portray them as a "party" whose goal it is to "pave the way" for US hegemony.	Upper-middle class entrepreneurs and intellectuals; followers in survey have more contact with foreigners and travel abroad more than the average.
Mao Lovers	Called Mao Fans (毛粉). Nostalgic for China's Maoist past; camp formed in context of growing inequality and corruption, which triggered a Mao revival in China.	Former and current SOE employees in medium-sized cities; followers in survey live in smaller Chinese cities, tend to be male and ethnocentric, tend to have travelled.
Market Lovers	Called Neo-Liberals (新自由派). Liberals in the economic sense, similar to definition in Europe and North America.	Upper-middle class entrepreneurs.
Equality Advocates	Called New Left (新左派). Closer to European welfare models than adherents of the "Old Left" (老左派), who advocate pre-1978 socialism.	Academics, often from humanities; survey participants close to this cluster are relatively poor compared with average.
Traditionalists	Often called Neo-Confucianists (新儒家). Base belief system mainly on Confucian classic texts and traditions.	Researchers at think tanks; teachers in private schools.
China Advocates	Called China Modelists (中国模式派). Advocate a "China Path" with distinct political and economic concepts.	Researchers at think tanks and universities; economists and social scientists.
Industrialists	Called Industry Party (工业党). See technological advancement as key to global leadership; align with China Advocates.	Young, tech-savvy intellectuals; young researchers in think tanks.

* In the survey we only asked about the term "Online Volunteer Army" (自干五).

Source: MERICS research

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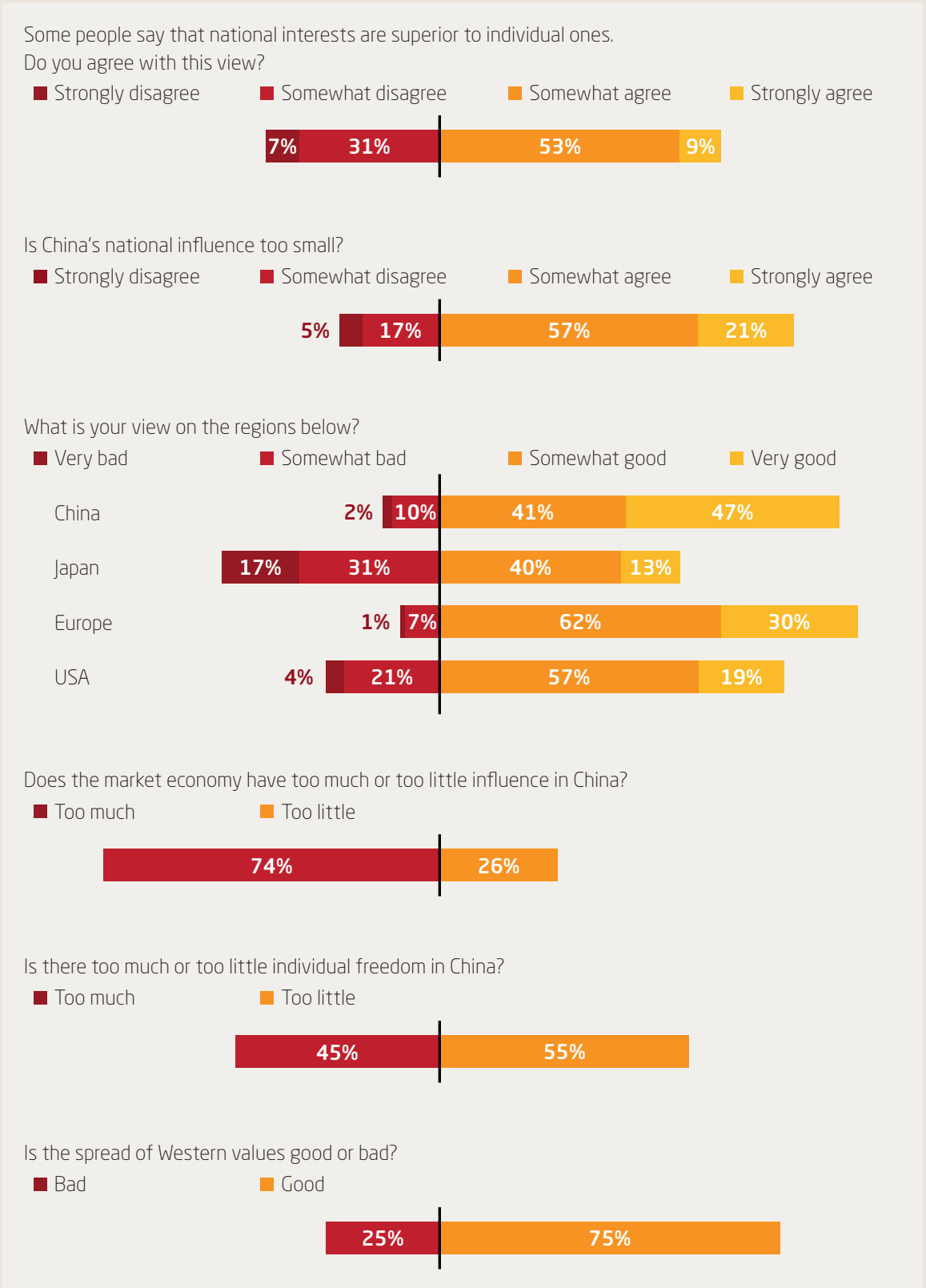
Figure 3.2

Chinese society is favorable towards pluralistic ideas and "the West"
Key results of the survey



Source: MERICS research (online survey)

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3.1 THE DREAM OF A STRONG CHINA PRODUCES DIFFERENT STRAINS OF NATIONALISM

The ideological clusters that propagate patriotism and debate over a uniquely Chinese path to national strength seem to enjoy the highest institutional and financial support. Yet not all of these clusters are automatically in line with party-state ideology. This depends on the degree to which definitions of a strong China equate national strength with CCP rule. Because of the sometimes violent protest movements in the 1990s and 2000s, the CCP worries about extreme brands of anti-Western or ethnic nationalism or even fascism that could spiral out of control and turn against the party. In the following sub-chapters, the different strains of nationalism represented by the Party Warriors, China Advocates, Traditionalists, Industrialists, and Flag Wavers are explained.

3.1.1 Party Warriors: loving the country means loving the party

The Party Warriors are closest to the party-state ideology, which places them at the center of China's ideological spectrum displayed online. This group defends CCP policy on all issues, and its followers equate "love of the country" with "love of the party" (爱国爱党). It stands for the concept of "rational patriotism" (理性爱国主义), which is increasingly being promoted by the CCP.[47]

From the outside, it is difficult to tell whether Party Warriors volunteer to defend the party line (自干五, "Volunteer Army") or if they are paid commentators (五毛党, "Fifty Cent Army").[48] Based on our survey we can say that respondents who expressed closeness to this cluster's positions tended to be CCP members. Another finding was that sympathizers of this cluster are more likely to be dissatisfied with their personal economic situation.

Party Warriors equate "love of the country" with "love of the party"

Of all clusters, the Party Warriors enjoy the most open and active support from the CCP in online debates. Several party-state initiatives aim to recruit these people as paid commentators. Interestingly though, it seems that they do not necessarily have to be CCP members. In online debates, the posts of Party Warriors are rarely censored, and are instead prominently featured. [49] The campaign "China's good netizen" (中国好网民), launched in 2015 by the Cyberspace Administration of China (国家互联网信息办公室) in cooperation with party-state media outlets and the Twitter equivalent Weibo, represents one such attempt to highlight stories and slogans that "spread positive energy" (传播社会正能量).

Another campaign in line with these efforts is the Communist Youth League's "Youth Internet Civilization Volunteer Campaign" (网络文明志愿者队伍), which was also launched in 2015. On social media, Party Warriors are called upon by the CCP to "guide public opinion" (大舆论引导任务) by regularly publishing "positive" messages and criticizing "negative" ones. They are supposed to lend a voice to what Zhang Yiwu, a prominent professor of literature at Beijing University, has called the "silent majority." This implies that even though critics are vocal, they only constitute a minority in China.[50]

The voluntary Party Warriors (自干五) received positive appraisals from survey respondents. They are linked to attributes such as "objectivity" (客观). Survey respondents also see them as "volunteers" (志愿者) who "love their country and their people" (爱国爱民).[51] The attributes assigned to them mostly echo the official party line,[52] although some observers compare the Party Warriors, even the voluntary ones, to the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution and warn of the potential harm to society of their overzealousness.[53]

3.1.2 China Advocates: in search of a "China Path"

The China Advocates are in lockstep with official efforts to forge a coherent Chinese ideology and to counter the perceived failure of liberal "Western" political and economic concepts (see chapter 2.1). The global financial crisis in 2008/2009 as well as the recent rise of populism in the United States and Europe have propelled this cluster to the center of the party-state ideology. The China Advocates see China as being in a systemic competition with "the West."

Compared to the Party Warriors, who appear as true believers, followers of this cluster have a more utilitarian view of the Communist Party. They view the CCP as a guarantor of stability, and they argue that the current authoritarian regime is better equipped for rational policy making and crisis management than parliamentary democracies.[54] China Advocates also point out the risks of economic downturns or social unrest when authoritarian countries transition to more liberal political systems, such as the countries that were swept up in the Arab Spring.[55]

China Advocates view the CCP as a guarantor of stability

On economic issues, many China Advocates promote the "Beijing Consensus" (北京共识) or the "China Model" (中国模式) – concepts initially coined by Western scholars to describe an alternative to the "Washington Consensus," the IMF and World Bank-defined standard for economic development.[56] China Advocates disagree with many of these "Western" policy prescriptions, which include calls for eliminating budget deficits, financial liberalization and privatization of state-owned enterprises.[57] Some China Advocates make the case for a "globalization with Chinese characteristics," a phrase that mirrors the term "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which was coined after the start of China's economic reforms in 1978.

The China Advocates rose to their current prominence after the 2008/2009 financial crisis, when former Premier Wen Jiabao blamed Western nations for the global economic downturn and started to promote an "authoritarian capitalist model of development." Today, a number of think tanks that represent this ideological cluster receive generous support from the CCP and substantial government funding. Many of these think tanks are working on a "contemporary China research discipline" called "Studies on China's National Condition" (国情研究). This line of thought contains the notion that China is peaceful by nature and will therefore, unlike other rising nations, not be aggressive but will pursue "benevolent pacifism" and "harmonious inclusionism."[58]

The China Advocates demand that national interests be placed above individual ones. Most survey respondents share this notion. But there are also critics who claim that the intellectual integrity of this group of academics has been compromised by their proximity to the party-state.[59]

3.1.3 Industrialists: China's technological catch-up race with the "West"

Industrialists see China as being in a global race for economic superiority, and they believe that technological advancement is the only way to compete in this race. They share the China Advocates' perception that the "West" seeks to impose its own political and economic system on China. Both camps share the goal of strengthening China and changing global power relations.[60] Like the China Advocates, the Industrialists started gaining traction with the onset of the economic crisis in Western capitalist countries in 2008.[61]

The Industrialists are in line with CCP policy as long as they view it as the best basis for industrial upgrading and high tech development. But while, for example, the China Advocates tend to reject the Washington Consensus, the Industrialists focus on raising China's competitiveness within the existing global economic framework. They believe that China should prioritize its technological development driven by market mechanisms and not primarily by top-down political guidance.[62]

Industrialists believe that China should prioritize technological development

When discussing their preferred political system, Industrialists do not debate concepts such as participation versus stability. For them, the key virtue is effectiveness, and the debate revolves around which political system can deliver the best results towards this end.[63] Some Industrialists view participatory democracy as outdated and favor an autocratic system as long as it does not hinder economic development, while others argue that liberal democracies provide more room for entrepreneurial activities.[64]

The goal of effectiveness also guides this cluster's views on the welfare state, which are closer to neoliberal economic views than those of clusters seeking to reconcile China's socialist heritage with market forces. The Industrialists are in favor of a state that maximizes investment returns and economic performance, for example by raising the retirement age or by reducing wasteful spending. They reject state intervention that distorts the market by hindering competition and undermining transparency.

For the CCP, this is a double-edged sword. The Industrialists can help rally support for planned economic reforms, but on the other hand, representatives of this cluster are not shy about criticizing

the party-state when its policies don't meet their standards. "The government has spent large sums on meaningless welfare and excessive construction of infrastructure," complained one prominent Industrialist.[65] Concerning health policy, prominent representatives of this cluster criticize state-subsidized medicine and want to limit "medical overconsumption." Industrialists have also been very vocal in pointing out policy paralysis at the local level, implying criticism of the Xi-Li administration's anti-corruption campaign, which is said to have caused this impasse.

Within the online debates, Industrialists base their arguments much more on numbers and facts, and not on ideological principles like the Party Warriors. However, some netizens see them as simply a rational, more scientific expression of Party Warrior preferences. According to others, Industrialists focus too much on the "hardware" of a nation's development, are too inward-oriented and lack a strategic outlook for China's international relations or concepts of social order.[66]

3.1.4 Traditionalists: seeking strength in China's imperial past

While China Advocates and Industrialists share a forward-looking vision in which China shapes modernity in competition with the rest of the world, other clusters take a more conservative stance. Traditionalists agree with China Advocates on the need to strengthen China, but their views on how this can be achieved differ radically from both China Advocates and Industrialists. While Industrialists view traditional culture as an obstacle to modernization, Traditionalists reject "Western" concepts of modernity, arguing that China should instead draw its national strength from its long history and cultural uniqueness.

Traditionalists blame "Western modernity" for an increase in individualism, for a corrosion of family values such as respect for the elderly, for a general decline in morality and even for environmental degradation.[67] Representatives of this cluster blend the writings of Confucius with some elements of Daoism and Buddhism to forge uniquely Chinese social and political concepts. The Confucian Network (儒家网), a platform for Traditionalists, even uses a calendar based on the birth date of Confucius rather than Jesus Christ.

Traditionalist academics refer mainly to Confucian classical texts to justify their longing for rigid hierarchies and a "benevolent leader," and they believe that the relations between rulers and their subjects should mirror those between parents and their children. This concept of filial nationalism is compatible with party-state ideology in that it can lend legitimacy to the CCP as a "benevolent ruling party."[68] Some Traditionalist scholars contribute to the CCP's efforts to legitimize its authoritarian rule by portraying it as the rightful successor to the imperial system.

Traditionalists refer to Confucian classical texts to justify rigid hierarchies

Party-state media sometimes emphasize the importance of tradition for achieving Xi Jinping's "China Dream" (中国梦).[69] The classical concept of "everything under heaven" (天下) placed China at the center of the world as the ultimate source of civilization, with other peoples on the fringes of the empire considered uncivilized "barbarians." This idea resonates in the "China Dream" concept's emphasis on national rejuvenation.

Nevertheless, the Traditionalists could pose a challenge to the eclectic party-state ideology, which mixes a whole range of "traditions," among them communism and socialism, which the Traditionalists reject as "foreign."[70] Their belief in meritocratic political leadership based on education and morality, which is sometimes labeled "political Confucianism" (政治儒学), is often perceived as in opposition to socialism and Chairman Mao (反共立场，也反对毛主义).[71] Mao, after all, defamed Confucianism as a system of feudal ideas during the Cultural Revolution.

The Traditionalists evoke mixed responses from the public. On the one hand, their advocacy of Confucianist ideas has gained traction since the early 2000s in an atmosphere of increasing concern over Chinese society's lack of "morality." This perception has led a growing number of parents to send their children to schools that are privately run by wealthy Traditionalists.[72] Traditionalists have also become more visible in public debates, criticizing family planning policies and funeral regulations, among other issues.[73]

On the other hand, their influence is likely to remain limited, as their family values do not reflect the day-to-day reality of many young urban Chinese. Marriage ages in China have consistently increased, as has the number of divorces.

Representatives or sympathizers of other ideological clusters criticize the Traditionalists for their authoritarian tendencies and their alleged opposition to progress. The above-mentioned Democratizer commented: "When you say you are a Confucian, then you cannot do things that have been adopted in China during the past 100, 150 or 200 years."[74] Even at the nationalistic and paternalistic end of the ideological spectrum, many warn that reviving obsolete traditions could lead China back to the era of "national humiliation" at the hands of foreign powers in the waning days of the Chinese empire and therefore end up weakening, rather than strengthening, the nation-state.

3.1.5 Flag Wavers: promoting an aggressive brand of nationalism

The type of nationalism promoted by the Flag Wavers differs from all the previous clusters in its outwardly aggressive form. Similar to the Traditionalists, the Flag Wavers want to draw a clear line between China and the rest of the world. But rather than shutting China off from allegedly harmful influences, they aim to retaliate against those who are seen as harming Chinese interests.

In contrast to the "rational patriotism" promoted by official party-state ideology, Flag Wavers express themselves through populist rhetoric and sometimes open xenophobia. Their current is comprised of middle-aged Maoists who are known by the misleading label "Angry Youth" (愤青) as well as educated and media savvy youngsters who engage in "spontaneous online nationalism" to protest against events that are "perceived as threatening China's sovereignty."[75]

Coordinated online actions, like spamming the Facebook page of Tsai Ing-wen, the then newly elected president of Taiwan, with nationalistic slogans,[76] have generated an enormous amount of visibility for the young nationalists.

Survey respondents perceived this group as the largest ideological cluster of those presented to them. They described them as former Chinese students overseas who feel disappointed about how their home country is portrayed in European and North American media. After their return, these former students allegedly feel obliged to stand up to fellow citizens who criticize China from within. This might explain why the survey appears to indicate that experience of traveling abroad does not in general diminish nationalist sentiments.[77]

Flag Wavers share some traits with populist movements in Europe and the United States

Despite their high visibility, Flag Wavers do not seem to enjoy broad societal support. At least in our survey, the feedback on this cluster contained some of the most negative connotations overall. Its representatives were seen as "extreme" and "radical," and they were perceived as people who like to "criticize society" and who are "dissatisfied with reality." The latter observation implies the possibility that their exaggeration of certain issues could expose the Flag Wavers to ridicule.[78] For example, when angry Flag Wavers boycotted the US fast food chain KFC to protest an international tribunal's ruling on China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, many in the public saw this reaction as exaggerated (see chapter 4).

The Flag Wavers share some traits with contemporary populist movements in Europe and the United States. Mirroring anti-establishment rhetoric in Western countries, they turn against "white leftists" and "white liberals" who allegedly want to dominate China.[79] "White" in this context refers to segments of the political left in Europe and the United States that champion multiculturalism and social inclusion, but also to Chinese intellectuals who embrace similar positions.

Chinese Fascists (法西斯派) could provide the intellectual foundation for the most extreme Flag Wavers. Public fascist discourses have been a historical taboo in the PRC since Mao Zedong defeated the "Chinese fascist" Chiang Kai-Shek in China's civil war.[80] But there are discussions about fascism on Chinese social media, and some intellectuals defend or promote ideas resembling fascist ideology.[81] Key elements are strong Han chauvinism, combined with preference for a strongman leader, a powerful military and an economic system that serves the national interest.[82] Many of these academics use Carl Schmitt, a prominent legal scholar in Nazi Germany, as a proxy to express their own "distaste for liberalism and socialism" (流氓左派和流氓自由派勿进).[83]

While Party Warriors are willing to take directions from the CCP, the Flag Wavers' populism and even fascism are political wild cards. They could potentially threaten the party-state if they perceive it as too lenient in dealing with restive ethnic minorities or as not assertive enough on the international stage. They also appear to be the most likely cluster to initiate xenophobic protests and to call for aggressive or even violent actions directed against other countries.

Both the domestic and international implications of these ideological propositions could be troublesome for the CCP leadership. Ethnic nationalism (民族主义) is a heavily destabilizing factor in a multi-ethnic nation like China. This became clear when self-identified Han Chinese accused ethnic minorities of trying to harm the nation's stability and reputation during the unrest in Tibet before the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Intensifying international conflicts such as the territorial disputes in the South China Sea could radicalize a broader segment of the Flag Wavers and turn their populist sentiments into fascist ideology. Should this cluster gain traction, the CCP would be under huge pressure to at least partially give in to demands to adopt a more dominant and aggressive global stance, even though this could be extremely harmful to a country as heavily dependent on global markets as China.

3.2 PROFIT VERSUS EQUALITY: DIFFERENT CLUSTERS FIGHT OVER THE ROLE OF THE MARKET

Healthy economic development, in which economic growth lifts all boats, is the main source of political legitimacy for the CCP, which is why debates on economic issues play an important role in China's societal discourse. China's increasingly unequal income and wealth distribution since the turn of the millennium provide the context in which three clusters fight over the ideal balance between the market and the state in China. These are the Mao Lovers, the Equality Advocates and the Market Lovers.

For the CCP, there are no clear allies in the economic debate. Due to its own struggle with contradictory economic and ideological legacies (ranging from Mao era egalitarian collectivism to the intense commercialization of present times), the party needs to cater to all three currents. The party will face legitimacy issues if it fails to deliver on ensuring growth, but it will also be held responsible if it does not succeed in reining in the perceived excesses of a capitalist economy. The Chinese leadership seems to have understood that growing economic disparities endanger social stability, as they could lead to widespread labor protests or other forms of collective action. Since he took power, Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of strengthening the middle class as a basis of the CCP's legitimacy and power. In his 2017 work report to the National People's Congress, Premier Li Keqiang also admitted that people are dissatisfied with income inequality in China.

3.2.1 Mao Lovers: nostalgia for communist equality

The Mao Lovers would like to turn back the clock on the introduction of capitalism to China and return to a state-dominated economy. They view the reform and opening policy as the root cause of China's extreme levels of income and wealth inequality. They also blame neoliberalism for unemployment, financial crises and systemic corruption.[84] Representatives of this cluster share a nostalgic longing for the time after Mao Zedong's Communist Revolution, when economic competition was not as fierce as it is today, and when China's sparse resources were more evenly distributed.

Mao Lovers would like to turn back the clock on the introduction of capitalism

These notions are especially common among former employees of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in small- and medium-sized cities, who saw their personal wealth and their communities' resources decline after many of these companies were closed. The survey reveals that people who associate with this camp tend to be men who are dissatisfied with their standard of living. They are also the least likely to live in provinces with high GDP per capita and with high foreign investment. This geographical distance from foreign influences might explain why survey respondents who identified with this cluster are also the most likely to express a negative view of the "spreading of Western values."

Apart from their preference for the former communist economic system, Mao Lovers also subscribe to authoritarian leadership under a strong helmsman. They idealize Mao as a symbol of a purer and nobler China, whose citizens allegedly held higher values than the individual accumulation of material wealth. With the aim of promoting collective values such as charity or respect for the elderly, the Mao Lovers highlight historical role models such as the legendary soldier Lei Feng, who was revered as a model citizen during the Cultural Revolution.

The Mao Lovers present a dilemma to the Communist Party. Its leadership has no intention of returning to a state-run economy, but it also sticks to a version of history in which the shortcomings of the "Great Chairman" are superseded by his accomplishments. Mao remains an important part of the CCP's legacy, and any public denial of the party's founder, as Xi Jinping personally put it, would amount to a "denial of the CCP."[85] Also, this cluster's nostalgia for the PRC's early days could turn against members of the current leadership who are seen as having benefitted disproportionately from China's economic opening. It is telling that children of party cadres are not only referred to as "second generation red" (红二代), but also as "second generation rich" (富二代).[86]

There are many examples that show how conflicted the CCP is about the best way to deal with its Maoist heritage. On the one hand, the party-state invests in "red tourism" to glorify the beginnings of the CCP. But when businesses and local communities in Henan province donated about three million yuan to build a giant statue of the late leader in January 2016, local authorities had it demolished.

Bo Xilai, the former "red" governor of Chongqing who was sentenced for corruption, likely as a result of a power struggle with Xi Jinping, is the most prominent leadership figure to embrace Mao nostalgia, or at least to use it to boost his popularity.[87] He invested in social housing and revived cultural traditions from the Mao era, such as the public singing of "red songs." Even though Bo no longer represents a challenge to the current leadership, Xi Jinping has adopted some of his rhetoric and policy approaches.

Similar to the CCP, parts of the Chinese public are wary about reviving Maoist ideas and using Maoist insignia.[88] Many associate Mao's rule with the "chaotic times" of the Cultural Revolution.[89] In our survey, Mao Lovers were characterized by others as "extreme left" (极左) and as "worshipping Mao Zedong" (崇拜毛泽东). Survey participants also described this camp as holding the most negative views on the market economy.[90]

The response shows that just like the Flag Wavers, the Mao Lovers do not enjoy broad societal support. But their populist message could easily gain influence in times of crisis.

3.2.2 Equality Advocates: taming capitalism with a social welfare state

Equality Advocates prioritize "social fairness" (公平) over profit. One of their major concerns is the fair distribution of wealth, and they advocate for workers' rights and rural-urban equality. Unlike the Market Lovers, they believe that the state has a responsibility to correct these imbalances by intervening in the economy. Many of them believe that most state-owned enterprises have veered too far from their original mission. According to this line of criticism, rather than providing public services, they now act as state-financed private companies, serving the interests of a few.[91]

Equality Advocates blame the free flow of capital for rising inequality

Similar to critics of globalization in other countries, the Equality Advocates oppose the free flow of capital as a cause of rising inequality. Some of them see speculation in global financial markets as the source of the 2008 financial crisis, which led to public debt crises and rising income disparities around the world. Their emphasis on equal opportunities, as well as on social and economic fairness, compares to the philosophy of northern European welfare states.[92]

This "New Leftist" thinking (新左派), as it is called in China, first rose to prominence around 1994 when China's rapidly growing social and income inequality became obvious.[93] Representatives of this line of thought compare China's current situation to European industrialization in the 19th century, which produced a wealthy elite and a poor working class with no access to healthcare and social services.[94]

Numerous representatives of this cluster have lived abroad for some time, which allowed them to gain first-hand experience of other economic models. But in recent years, many followers have become disillusioned with Western systems. They are concerned about Europe's inconsistent response to the refugee crisis and about the rise of populism in the United States and in other liberal democracies.[95] Abandoning their previous admiration of northern European countries, many have instead moved closer to the position of the China Advocates in search of a homegrown Chinese model for providing social justice.

Equality Advocates are in line with official efforts to rebalance the growing disparities between urban and rural development as well as to build up solid social security systems and a "moderately prosperous society" (小康社会). But just like the Industrialists, they can become antagonistic to the CCP if they feel that the leadership is not delivering on its promises.

3.2.3 Market Lovers: defenders of global capitalism

Market Lovers are the closest equivalent to neoliberals in Western countries. They would like to continue down the path of economic liberalization that started in the 1980s. Adherents of this cluster believe that China's current economic problems such as slower growth and corruption are caused by the continuing oversized influence of state-owned enterprises that leads to market distortions. This camp advocates freeing businesses from state intervention. They want businesses, to be subject to the same regulatory framework regardless of whether they are domestic or foreign.[96] Market Lovers oppose welfare states and are in favor of privatizing public services, which sets them apart from the other two camps that focus on economic issues.[97]

Market Lovers would like to continue down the path of economic liberalization

At least at present, this camp does not seem to have much agency vis-à-vis the party-state since the Chinese leadership is ambiguous about market forces as drivers of reform. The CCP under Xi Jinping has promoted some elements of economic liberalism, for instance by introducing free trade zones (自由贸易区). But ever since the global financial crisis and in light of growing dissatisfaction with freewheeling capitalism at home, the CCP has also portrayed neoliberalism as an economic system that proved to be destructive to former socialist countries.

In the more recent past, the party-state has even taken action against this cluster. In January 2017, the website of the Unirule Institute of Economics (天则经济研究所) was taken down. This institute promotes economic as well as political liberalization, blending Market Lover ideas with those of the Democratizers. The institute's founder Mao Yushi is a well-known advocate for free markets and an outspoken critic of Mao Zedong. Mao Yushi has also frequently offended Mao Lovers in recent years, who have called for a lawsuit against him.[98] After the shutdown of the institute's website, the English-language party-state publication "Global Times" criticized Mao Yushi sharply in an editorial. The online version of the editorial was retracted from the "Global Times" website only hours later, which might hint at the leadership's ambivalence toward neoliberalism.[99]

At the time of writing this study, Market Lovers did not seem to enjoy much popular support. In the accompanying survey, a clear majority agreed with the statement that there is "too much free market" in China.[100] Many survey participants answered "fairness," "equality," and "socialism," when asked to name what they believed to be mainstream values. Yet many also listed "money" or "the economy" as mainstream values, pointing to the strong influence of materialism and capitalism on Chinese society (see figure 3.2). If getting rich is seen as a value, the CCP's legitimacy will continue to depend on ensuring growth by all means, regardless of concerns over the negative side effects of market mechanisms. As one interviewed intellectual put it: "When money becomes an intrinsic value, then there is no way to put the brakes on."[101]

3.3 CHINESE LIBERALISM: SIDELINED, BUT NOT SILENCED

Democratizers, Humanists and US Lovers are at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum to the nationalistic and paternalistic Flag Wavers. These ideological clusters promote universalism, pluralism, personal liberties and a laissez-faire approach to the economy. Their ideas pose the most direct challenge to the party-state's legitimacy. Especially since the CCP issued "Document No. 9," which denounced all concepts of political liberalism and human rights, they have been almost entirely excluded from the officially sanctioned discourse. But despite all this, they have not totally disappeared from online debates. Paradoxically, although some netizens harshly criticize these clusters as too "pro-Western," many of their values and concepts, such as freedom and democracy, seem to enjoy popular support.

3.3.1 Democratizers, Humanists and US Lovers: the most pro-Western clusters

Democratizers are arguably the group with the clearest historical connection to political dissent in China. Representatives of what is known as the "liberal camp" (自由派) in Chinese online forums focus on the political dimension of liberalism as the solution to China's problems. Many of them experienced or participated in the urban protest movement around Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989, and have never given up the quest for freedom of the press, judicial independence, political checks and balances, and competitive elections.

The US Lovers (美分) are closely related to this view, with the exception that they focus exclusively on the US American system as representing the above-mentioned liberal values. The Humanists, also called "Globalists" (全球派), take a broader perspective. They focus less on the desired political system and more on the need for a global society based on common values. They are similar to the Traditionalists in that they complain about moral decay as China's core problem. Yet unlike the Traditionalists, they don't propose a set of uniquely Chinese values to fill this vacuum, but instead promote universal values and human rights.

In the survey, the respondents who described themselves as attracted to liberal ideas seemed to hold the most positive attitudes towards globalization. People who said they felt close to one of the above clusters rated "the spread of Western values" more positively than the average, and tended to advocate "cultural liberalism."[102] The survey also showed that respondents who identify with one of these clusters tend to live in mostly urban regions with relatively high GDP per capita.

Rather than demanding systemic change, many followers of the liberal clusters today call for democratic reforms within the CCP (党内民主) as a more realistic way forward for China.[103] At the same time, they worry that a lack of broader-based democratic experience could lead to populism and social unrest if the system were to collapse. They use the developments during the Arab Spring as an example of what can happen when citizens are suddenly liberated from autocratic regimes but have no experience with democracy. Their representatives also struggle with the election of the populist Donald Trump as US president, because they see it as exposing the flaws in the decision-making process in liberal democracies.[104]

The party-state views these pro-Western clusters as ideological antagonists

The party-state has moved to reduce the space available to these clusters, which it views as ideological antagonists. Attempts by Democratizers and Humanists to encourage more open discourse in schools and universities have been thwarted by the increased political control of these institutions under Xi Jinping. Many of the more outspoken inner-party reformers have been silenced. Journalists who worked for formerly more liberal publications have increasingly been replaced, such as the editorial board at the liberal journal Yanhuang Chunqiu (炎黄春秋) and similar outlets. At the same time, China's authorities have cracked down on human rights and labor rights activists: more than 200 activists, lawyers and their relatives have been detained or interrogated since July 2015.

3.3.2 Ambiguous perceptions of "Western values"

While the party-state is unequivocal in its rejection of the liberal clusters, perceptions among the public are more complex. Overall, societal support for liberal or "Western" models of governance seems to have declined.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution and at the beginning of China's economic reforms in 1978, a majority of Chinese saw political liberalization and modernization as inevitable, and Democratizers in particular had a big lobby for their ideas.[105] The crackdown on the urban protest movement in 1989 dealt a severe blow to their ambitions. In the more recent past, the failed attempt to register an oppositional "Chinese Democratic Party" in 1998, as well as the publication of the liberal political manifesto "Charter 08" in 2008, which triggered heavy repression and led to the arrest of its key author and later Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, were the last coordinated efforts to place China on the path of political liberalization. Fearing repression and political persecution, many followers of these clusters have left China in recent decades.

According to the Asian Barometer survey in 2002, 72 percent of more than 3100 Chinese participants responded that they viewed democratic systems as "always preferable to any other kind of government." Nine years later, in 2011, only 52 percent expressed this view. Based on data from the latest Asian Barometer survey (conducted between 2014 and 2016), support for this statement has declined further to 41.5 percent. [106] Of course, this change in attitude might have been caused by increased reticence to support democratic ideas in the aftermath of the crackdown on the authors of the "Charter 08."[107]

Even so, there is evidence that the increased skepticism of democratic systems among the Chinese public is at least in part genuine. Party-state media regularly report on quarreling and shouting members of Taiwan's parliament, on social instability and poverty in the world's largest democracy, India, and on allegedly corrupt or elitist politicians around the world, from Hillary Clinton to Donald Trump.[108] Researchers from the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) portray "liberal democracies" today as a mere cover for elitist-autocratic systems. While "Westerners" reflect on the malfunctioning of democratic systems, according to CASS, they still strive to export this model to the rest of the world, ignoring that the appeal of liberal democracy has faded.[109]

Chinese researchers portray "liberal democracies" as a mere cover for elitist-autocratic systems

On the economic side, capitalism is portrayed as suffering from deep-rooted, almost irreconcilable structural crises, leading to economic recessions, extreme income inequality and insufficient funding for education. Some Chinese authors, often belonging to the Equality Advocates cluster, believe that these disparities are the cause of rising populism, and they even blame liberal capitalist democracies for racial discrimination (e.g. against Native Americans and African-Americans in the United States). The authors argue that in such unequally structured societies, "true" democracy is impossible to achieve.[110] Some even state that these "weaknesses" lead Western elites to fear and attack China as a competitor.[111]

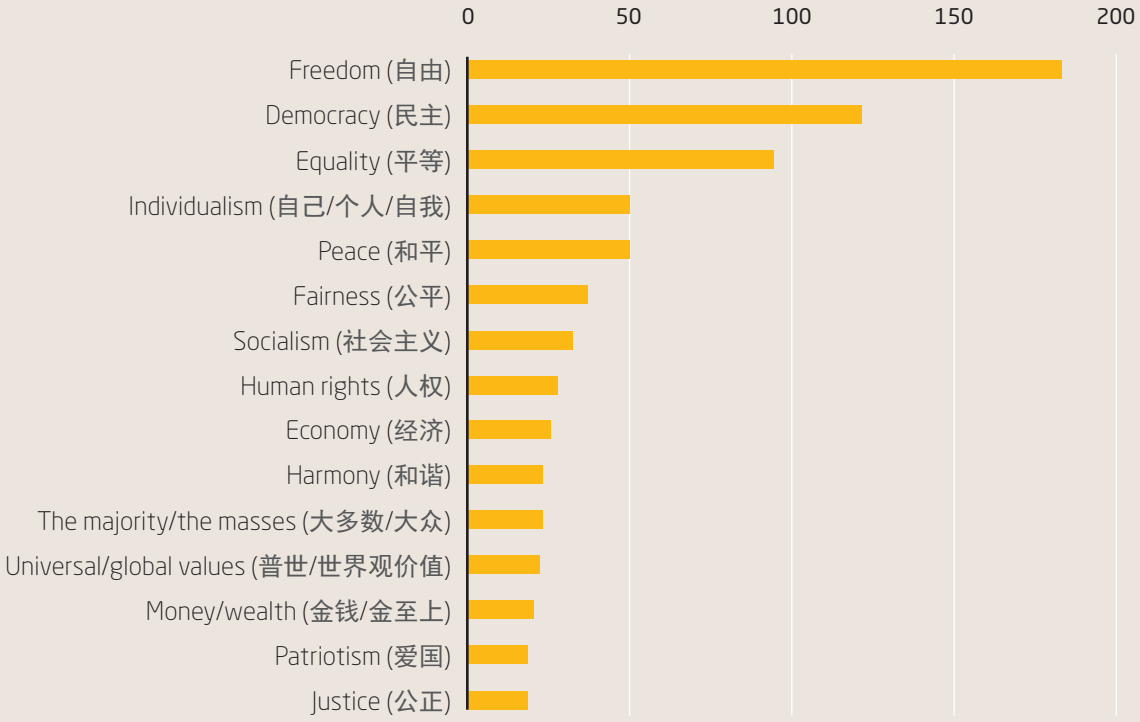
This perceived decline of Europe and the United States might explain the negative attributes respondents to our survey used to describe followers of these clusters. The US Lovers were accused of being opposed to the party-state or the nation.[112] They were characterized as "worshipping foreign countries," as intending to "smear China's image," or as "being in love with the US dollar."[113] The hostility increased when survey questions referred to the US Lovers by the derogatory term "Paving the Way Party" (带路党) instead of the more neutral "US Fans" (美分). The term was understood as referring to those who "pave the way for economically powerful nations," and the representatives of this line of thought were labeled "traitors" and "spies."

The extremely negative characterization of the liberal clusters contrasts with other results of the survey, in which 75 percent of respondents claimed to support the "spread of Western values." Moreover, the terms "democracy" (民主), "freedom" (自由) and "the individual" (自己/个人/自我), were among the most frequently mentioned terms in responses to an open-ended question about "mainstream values" (主流价值观) (see also figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3

Survey respondents value "freedom" and "democracy"

"What are mainstream values according to you?" (frequency of terms in reply to open-ended question)



Source: MERICS research

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It would require a new research project to investigate what respondents associate with these values. For example, does the word "freedom" imply notions of liberation, self-development, democracy, or human rights?[114] Or does it only refer to material choices as in the "freedom to buy," a concept promoted by the party-state to boost domestic consumption?

The survey suggests that the understanding of "freedom" in China is contested. The majority of survey participants (54 percent) stated that there is "too little personal freedom" in current Chinese society. Yet the majority in the same sample agreed that individual rights ought to be suspended when it is in the national interest. Findings like these may suggest that many in China have accepted or embraced a paternalistic worldview that is indeed closer to the party-state ideology than to that of China's beleaguered liberal clusters.

3.3.3 Liberals between isolation and radicalization

Support for liberal concepts of governance seems to have fallen to a record low in China since the beginning of reform and opening in the 1980s. The decline of this line of thought has its roots in the systemic repression of its proponents, in the rise of homegrown Chinese theories, which offer paternalistic alternatives to Western liberal democracy, as well as in the current crisis of confidence among Western democracies.

However, while the proponents of liberal ideas may have been marginalized, they have not been silenced. Netizens in favor of political liberalization continue to voice their opinions in online communities, though the increasingly harsh censorship has drastically reduced the space available to them and their visibility. For China's leaders, finding the right balance is a tricky proposition.

If they push these groups further into isolated discursive spaces or echo chambers, they risk alienating them even further and potentially radicalizing them.

This potential for radicalization is likely to remain dormant as long as the system retains its current stability, but it could be mobilized against the CCP as soon as government policies lose their effectiveness and stop delivering results in times of political or economic crisis.

3.4 WHO IS UP AND WHO IS DOWN: THE SHIFTING POTENTIAL FOR MOBILIZATION

The overlapping and competing ideological clusters that shape China's online debate space present opportunities as well as challenges for the CCP's quest to unify public opinion behind a coherent party-state ideology. China's relatively pluralistic online discourse can provide important insights into which clusters dominate in which issue areas. Chapter 4 will examine this dynamic in four case studies.

Despite Xi Jinping's quest for a monist party-state ideology, many political and economic issues are still subject to internal disputes within the CCP. Therefore, controversial online debates help the CCP assess which arguments are more likely to gain popular support. Allowing them to unfold – within designated red lines – also puts the CCP in a position to identify potential supporters and opponents.

For now, Party Warriors and China Advocates are clearly supporters. The Party Warriors help to propagate the official party line and they respond swiftly to shifts if the party chooses to emphasize one argument or de-emphasize another. The China Advocates provide the CCP with the building blocks for the emerging definition of a "China Path." The party benefits from the fact that new concepts and arguments emanating from China Advocate research institutions can be tested in online debates.

Allowing a certain degree of pluralism in online debates also makes it easier for China's authorities to identify the level of dissent and its causes. At present, US Lovers, Democratizers and Humanists are the farthest removed from the party-state on the ideological spectrum. They are closely followed by the Market Lovers, as the party increasingly tries to distance itself from "Western" economic concepts. These clusters are presently sidelined but not entirely suppressed, which allows the leadership to assess their level of societal support and potential threat to the party-state.

Allowing a certain degree of pluralism in online debates makes it easier for China's authorities to identify dissent

The other ideological clusters can be mobilized or even manipulated by the party-state in certain situations and based on certain issues. The Industrialists might be allies when it comes to promoting industrial policy. The Flag Wavers can be mobilized to defend China's national interest in an international crisis. Mao Lovers and Traditionalists come in useful when the CCP seeks to present itself as the legitimate heir of an idealized version of China's past.

But all of this could backfire if the mobilization turns against the party in times of crisis. An economic crisis, such as a drastic decline in growth as a result of state intervention, could lead to a resurgence of the Market Lovers, whereas a popular backlash against SOE reform could turn Equality Advocates and Mao Lovers against the party-state. All three clusters demand transparency and integrity of their officials, which would explain why the leadership assigns such high priority to its fight against corruption.

If the leadership is seen as unable to provide transparency and accountability, for example in responding to natural disasters or environmental or food scandals, this could also trigger a domestic political crisis, giving rise to the currently sidelined demands for more press freedom and political participation, if not democratic elections. In this case, a revival of the liberal clusters cannot be ruled out.

An international crisis could amplify those voices that are currently viewed as too radical by the CCP. An aggressive nationalism could end up not just pitting China against the rest of the world, it could also become a threat to China's own leadership.

4. Conflicting ideologies in interaction: controversial debates on China and the "West" in four key policy fields

4. Conflicting ideologies in interaction: controversial debates on China and the "West" in four key policy fields

KEY FINDINGS

- Nationalist arguments are common in online debates on foreign, economic, media and education policy. The notion of nationalism is, however, highly contested. A majority of the ideological clusters within Chinese society reject the party-state's equation of "loving the country" (爱国) and "loving the party" (爱党).
- Anti-Western sentiments are not dominant in the analyzed social media debates. Broad public support for nationalism does not necessarily correlate with generally hostile sentiments towards the "West" or a rejection of "Western interference" in China.
- Discussions involving the "West" cover a broad range of topics, from the actions of Western governments and businesses to concepts like liberal democracy, media pluralism or neoliberalism.
- Chinese social media continue to provide diverse spaces for controversial political debates. The analysis of online debates provides insights into ideological cleavages within the CCP as well as within Chinese society.

Following the analysis of the CCP's top-down effort to establish a unifying ideology (see chapter 2) and the mapping of different ideological clusters within society (see chapter 3), this chapter focuses on the interaction between top-down, party-state ideology and bottom-up ideological clusters.[115] Social media debates in four key policy fields, namely foreign, economic, media and education policy, are analyzed with a special emphasis on the role of the "West" in arguments.

The political relevance of online debates in China has been widely acknowledged in recent years.[116] Online platforms serve as important channels for information sharing, expression and even limited political participation in a system that makes this nearly impossible offline. In recent years, the CCP has started to control online debates more closely, and to manipulate them for its own purposes. This is illustrated both by the massive resources used for developing ever more sophisticated tools for social media data analysis, censorship and targeted public opinion control (see also chapter 2). Analyzing online debates is meaningful for thinking about China's political future: they indicate not only what is still permissible to say in public, but also what people from different backgrounds feel confident to say, and in how far these discussions unfold independently from, or even outside of, CCP control.

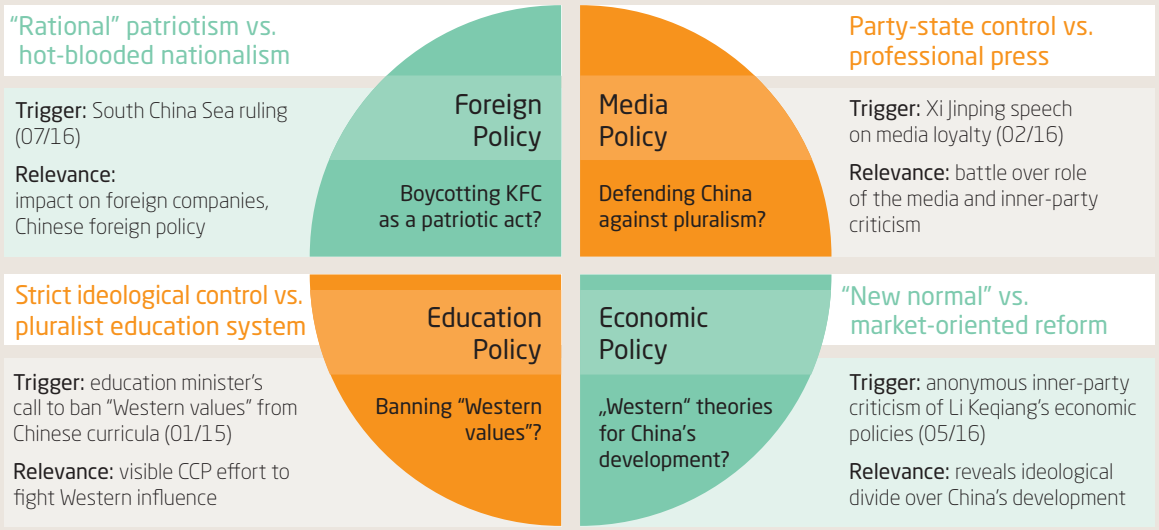
The CCP has tightened its control over online debates in recent years

Despite the retreat of many outspoken bloggers from Sina Weibo[117] into closed, non-public forums like WeChat,[118] our analysis of ideological clusters suggests that many political controversies are still fought out in the open, e.g. on publicly accessible online platforms.[119] The social media platforms analyzed in this study offer diverse spaces for policy debates. They are neither CCP propaganda platforms nor one-sided ideological echo chambers[120] belonging to a single societal cluster.

The case studies underlying this analysis were designed to test the above assumptions about both power relations within Chinese society and the prevalence of anti-Western sentiment in today's China. Four controversies from the fields of foreign, political, economic and social policy (see figure 4.1) provide a broad, albeit not representative, picture of political discourse in Chinese social media. The specific cases were selected according to two criteria: they reflect open online controversies over issues of high relevance to the Communist Party and foreign actors dealing with China.

Figure 4.1

Party-state ideology is challenged in different policy fields
Analysis of online debates based on four case studies



In Chapter 3 we looked at different ideological clusters. It is difficult to assess their size and influence. The following chapter tries to approach such an assessment by analyzing the relative importance and prevalence of arguments attributable to the respective clusters. The aim is to gain insight into the salience of certain clusters in important and controversial debates.[121] The selection criteria and methodology used to obtain and analyze data from six social media platforms are summarize in box 4.1.

4.1 FOREIGN POLICY, EDUCATION, MEDIA AND ECONOMICS: PARTY-STATE IDEOLOGY MEETS SOCIETAL RESISTANCE

Disagreements within and between ideological clusters have prevented a clear alignment against the CCP ideology

The topics selected for our analysis touch upon issues that are politically sensitive for different reasons. Despite the undeniable bias caused by party-state censorship and active "guidance" of political discussions online, public debates surrounding all four topics display a wide variety of arguments that deviate from the official party-state line.

While the debates in all case studies display a high degree of controversy, lines of confrontation between different ideologies vary heavily depending on the policy field and issue at stake. In all four cases, the official party-state line came under heavy attack from different sides. However, the disagreement within and between ideological clusters prevented a clear alignment against the CCP ideology. A closer look at the four controversies also reveals the shifting boundaries and overlaps between the different ideological clusters in Chinese online debates.

4.1.1 Foreign policy debate: rejecting "irrational patriotism" in the KFC boycott

On July 12, 2016, an arbitration tribunal in The Hague rejected China's claims to historic rights in the South China Sea. Many in China accused the United States of being behind the Philippines' appeal to the tribunal as well as behind the ruling itself. Demonstrators gathered in front of restaurants belonging to US fast food chain KFC in several Chinese cities, calling for anti-American boycotts.[122]

Box 4.1

Method of analysis of social media debates: data crawling and manual coding

Data for the case studies was crawled from the most famous microblogging site Sina Weibo, as well as from five other forums based on identical keywords for each case (see appendix, available as a seperate download on the MERICS website). The forums were selected a) due to their accessibility for open data crawling and b) to include forums with different sizes and ideological leanings.

From the complete dataset for each forum, the 20 most influential posts (with lengths varying between a few lines up to several pages) in terms of reach and debate intensity were selected ("Top 20" posts) for each debate on Weibo, Tianya, Maoyan and Tiexue for in-depth analysis (totaling 320 posts). In addition, we selected all posts from Guanchazhe and Gongshiwang that contributed to the same debate.

These posts were coded according to different categories including their authors, ideological leaning, and sentiment towards the CCP, China and the "West" (see appendix).

This analysis sought to identify common lines of argument, their stance vis-à-vis official party-state positions in the respective policy field, and their attitudes towards both the Chinese nation and "the West."

Additional background research on the authors of top articles helped to match them with ideological clusters. Institutional accounts of Communist Party organs (such as the Communist Youth League's Weibo account) and retweets of party-state media articles were considered part of the party-state ideology. The most influential authors were categorized as "Public Discussion Leaders."

Forum	Reasons for selection & assumed ideological leaning
Weibo (2009) 新浪微博	Most popular and most influential microblogging platform, continues to be widely used across the ideological spectrum
Tianya Luntan (1999) 天涯论坛	One of the oldest and most popular bulletin board system websites (120 million registered users); broad range of topics and viewpoints
Maoyan kanren (2000) 猫眼看人	Most prominent bulletin board system for liberal viewpoints; strong focus on political topics; relatively small number of users (1.1 million)
Tiexue luntan (2001) 铁血论坛	Most prominent nationalist bulletin board system (10 million registered users); strong focus on political topics
Guanchazhe (2009) 观察者	Left-leaning news website, strong focus on international affairs, translates articles from foreign media on China; said to have official support as CEO was prominent journalist at former party-state media
Gongshiwang (2010) 共识网	Liberal-leaning website but also discussion platform for different ideologies, taken offline in October 2016, posts were still accessible via search engines

Source: MERICS research

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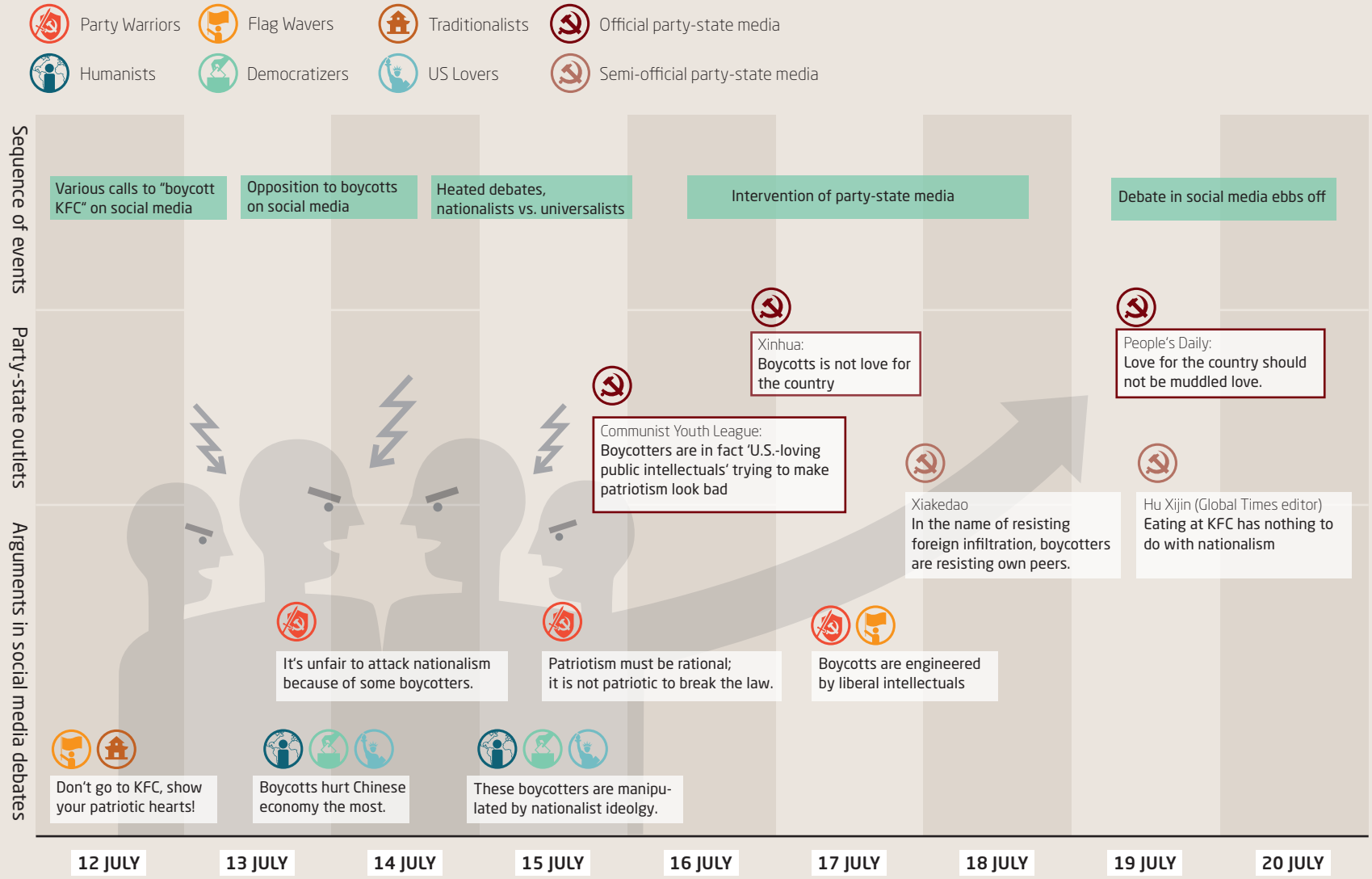
Some protesters tried to drum up nationwide support via social media. The success of this strategy was limited and instead it provoked a considerable backlash against "irrational patriotism" (不理智爱国主义). The boycotters' demands were spread across and discussed in all analyzed forums, but only found broader support among contributors to the radical militaristic forum Tiexue. The boycott calls did, however, lead to increasingly heated debate in all analyzed forums, eventually causing top-level party-state media outlets (Xinhua and People's Daily) to intervene by warning protesters against illegal behavior and urging "rational patriotism." This illustrates the continued potential of online forums to provide netizens with a certain bottom-up agenda-setting power (see figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2

The 2016 KFC boycott as an example of bottom-up agenda-setting

Online clashes between nationalists and universalists trigger party-state media intervention



Source: Analysis of posts on Weibo, Tiexue Luntan, Tianya Luntan, Maoyan Kanren

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The majority of the authors of trending posts rejected the KFC boycotts as harmful to China. Some ridiculed the protesters, others demanded that they be punished. The popular argument that the radical boycotters did harm to China was presented in different ways within the nationalist clusters, and was often associated with calls for the government to take a tough stance on the protesters:

> *"[These] supposedly 'patriotic' feelings only serve to vent personal discontent, or to suppress economic competitors by illegally taking advantage of 'nationalistic sentiments.'" (15, 18/07/2016, Tianya)*[123]

> *"Chinese people who become violent out of nationalistic fervor need to go to jail to make China more civilized." (54, 21/07/2016, Maoyan)*

Another blogger, active on Tianya and Maoyan, argued that the furious protesters impeded China's "great rejuvenation" (中华民伟大复兴) more than any outside forces:

> *"We need to boycott these idiots so the nation can rise again." (13, 19/07/2016, Tianya)*

In his posts, this blogger used standard anti-Western terms like "Western enemy forces" (西方敌对势力) or "intruders" (侵略者), and CCP propaganda terms like national "rejuvenation" (民族复兴). At the same time, he criticized radical nationalists for their stupidity and low "personal quality" (素质). This also shows how opposition to the boycotters, who are decried as "traitor-nationalists" (爱国贼), is compatible with deriding party-state terms like "national rejuvenation" and rejecting the "West" in the same breath. Other frequent lines of attack include derogatory comparisons between boycotters and the anti-Western Boxer movement (义和团), or even criticism of the entire Chinese population as backward and uncivilized:

> *"We really need to rethink our concept of nationalism and come up with something new. Protests like these KFC boycotts recall the Boxer uprisings and have achieved nothing but harm in the past 100 years. We need concepts that nurture civilized, progressive, law-abiding citizens." (51, 18/07/2016, Maoyan)*

Very different argumentative approaches are also visible among CCP-affiliated actors. The official party-state media Xinhua and People's Daily tried to calm down the debate by stating that "torturing oneself is not loving the country" (折腾自己不是爱国). But just days before, the Communist Youth League (CYL) had stoked rather than soothed the discussion:[124] Instead of defending the boycotters, the CYL's official Weibo account asserted that "US-loving intellectuals" (美分公知) had posed as radical KFC boycotters with the aim of giving "honest patriots" in China a bad name. The CYL thus engaged in the very kind of rumor-driven and emotional debate the leadership usually tries to avoid. This conspiracy theory became quite popular within the ranks of Party Warriors, undermining the CCP's aim of keeping such controversies at a low-key level.

Instead, the usually outspoken editor-in-chief of the Party-approved nationalist newspaper Global Times, Hu Xijin, chose to diminish the relevance of the boycotts by stating that he "bought KFC today because this has nothing to do with patriotism."

The universalists (Humanists, US Lovers and Democratizers) often refrained from criticizing the boycotters, but did attack the political context that led to and tolerated such protests – including the allegedly biased Chinese police forces:

> *"These troublemakers are breaking the law in the name of 'patriotism' [...] Why did the police turn a blind eye? If it had been us protesting, they would have known in advance and done something about it. These boycotters are not real patriots, but heavily brainwashed relics of the cultural revolution, stupid 'Flag Wavers.'" (30, 19/07/2016, Maoyan)*

Another popular Humanist author on Maoyan went even further by openly attacking the Chinese leadership in a statement going far beyond what could normally be voiced publicly in China:

> *"I am almost as annoyed by people talking about ' real patriotism' as I am of boycotter-idiots because 'loving the country' itself is meaningless and stupid; it's just a weapon to beat others up. […] The term 'foreign hostile forces' is used by dictatorships to make idiots feel unsafe and divert attention away from the fact that they are living in a dictatorship." (47, 20/07/2016, Maoyan repost)*

The debate over anti-foreign boycotts confirms the agenda-setting power of ideologically motivated citizens in online debates over China's foreign relations.[125] This analysis suggests that it is not hot-blooded nationalists alone, but also clashes between different nationalistic ideological clusters as well as between nationalists and universalists that can present challenges to the party-state line. The diverging lines of argument show that there continues to be an open debate over the type and degree of nationalism suitable for the Chinese nation and society.

4.1.2 Education debate: academics denounce CCP demand to ban "Western values"

The education debate is the most obvious example of an attempted top-down exploitation of anti-Western sentiment to crack down on liberal ideas and distract from internal problems in China. However, the effort to do just that, spearheaded by Education Minister Yuan Guiren, generated a significant online backlash from across the ideological spectrum.

Education policy is a potentially dangerous field for the party

In January 2015, a commentary in a party journal aggressively targeted liberal academics after President Xi Jinping had called for better "ideological guidance" of teachers and students. Education Minister Yuan translated Xi's words into proposals for a general ban on spreading "Western values" in the Chinese education system, sparking protracted online controversy and fierce backlash from high profile academics. Several reformist professors from leading universities in China exposed the internal contradictions in the Minister's statement.

A renowned liberal law professor at Peking University first informed the public of Yuan's intentions on Weibo. Another professor from Shanghai University wrote a long article for the BBC's Chinese website, which was then reposted and widely discussed on Maoyan and other forums. The author provocatively questioned Minister Yuan about the inherently "Western" nature of China's entire university system and education policy, not to mention the Western origin of Marxist orthodoxy. This view was supported by a professor from Renmin University, a so-called "Big V" (a blogger with a verified account and a substantial number of followers – over 800,000) on Weibo.[126] The professor demanded that China's education policy address the much more urgent problem of the low quality of Chinese universities rather than engaging in "nit-picking discussions" over students' beliefs.

> *"No Chinese talents will be fostered with a 'closed door policy' […] the rich and powerful will still send their children abroad to study." (82, 31/01/2015, Tianya)*

In addition to this scholarly critique, party-state articles on Yuan's proposals, which were reposted on forums, received overwhelmingly negative feedback. Uncensored comments to a Xinhua article on the forum Tianya included questions and sarcastic comments such as: "Are we back in 1989?" "The education minister needs education," or "Are we in North Korea?"[127]

Elite professors affiliated with universalist clusters were not the only ones who attacked Yuan for his comments. A typical representative of the China Advocate cluster agreed with the minister's observation that "Western" values have too much influence in China. The author blamed failed government education policies, such as the "1,000 talent program," that idealize Western education systems instead of building confidence in Chinese approaches:

> *"There are many who admire Western values, but few who think independently […] If China's whole education system is only about catching up with US benchmarks, it's no wonder China lacks its own path to education development." (113, 06/02/2015, Tianya)*

Even fervent nationalist Flag Wavers who support the idea of banning "Western" values from Chinese schools and universities criticized Yuan for "talking the talk, not walking the walk." But since Flag Waver contributions only accounted for eight percent of top posts in this debate, it can hardly be argued that radical nationalists push the party-state towards more radical anti-Western education policy.

Education policy is an important and potentially dangerous field for the ruling party because it affects almost every family. There is a visible conflict between the goals of internationalization (apparent at an individual level with rising numbers of Chinese willing to attend school and university abroad) and the emphasis on ideological orthodoxy. This debate exemplifies the high potential for controversy around educational curricula. Party-state actors supported by Flag Wavers and sometimes Mao Lovers and Traditionalists have repeatedly pushed for increased orthodoxy in recent years. Both universalists and a number of China Advocates, however, portray the CCP's anti-Western rhetoric as a tactical move to distract people's attention from the many deficiencies in China's own education system.

4.1.3 Media debate: legitimizing party-state media control to deter "foreign" influence

The media policy debate was sparked by the well-known public intellectual and real estate tycoon Ren Zhiqiang, who has 30 million followers on Weibo. He criticized party-state leader Xi Jinping's remarks that "the party media needs to bear the surname 'party'" (党媒姓党).[128] "Since when did the people's government change its name to the party's government?" asked Ren, "doesn't the party's money come from its members' fees?" In a second post he declared "when all the media are working for something other than the people's interest, people are left behind and forgotten."[129]

Ren's posts garnered considerable support all over the Chinese internet, and they were quickly deleted, along with his entire Weibo account. Three days later, party-state media started to attack Ren, a CCP member, on the grounds that he had violated party discipline. According to the CCP statute, cadres are not allowed to "criticize the party center" (妄议中央).

The focus on Ren as a person and a CCP member rather than on an official defense of Xi's remarks was very likely a deliberate choice, made with the goal of laying down the red lines for this debate. Numerous Party Warriors subsequently criticized Ren for his disloyalty to the party. However, representatives of other ideological clusters ignored the Chinese leadership's attempt to guide public opinion by focusing on the alleged wrongdoing of Ren Zhiqiang, instead using his controversial comments as a starting point for discussion of the role of the media.

Humanists and Democratizers engaged in the debate by calling for media freedom. Apart from considering it a value in itself, some of them also stressed freedom of speech as a precondition for successful political and economic modernization.

> *"However, what we need is not a machine, but the ability to be truly free and to think independently and – for society, for the country, for every individual – to create an environment of freedom of decision and freedom of criticism. As long as there is no environment of academic freedom, you can spend as much money as you want, the results will be nothing more than a copy shop." (146, 20/2/2016, Tianya)*

Netizens expressed their support for freedom of speech in the form of comments in posts on Weibo accounts run by foreign organizations (see box 4.2). These posts steered clear of the ongoing debate in China, but drew attention to international events in honor of freedom of the press.

But even representatives of ideological clusters closer to the party-state line disagreed with overly strong control of the media. The China Advocates emphasized that, above all, the media should first serve the interests of the people:

> *"Some people with malicious intentions only stress that the 'media has to follow the party,' deliberately pitting the party against the people. But the party is an institution that serves the people. Party members are the servants of the people, the media has to follow the party, but even more the people." (170, 28/2/2016, Weibo)*

Box 4.2

Foreign organizations on Chinese social media platforms – spaces for more freedom of speech?

Foreign organizations focus their Chinese social media activities on Weibo and WeChat. They inform Chinese readers about their activities and related news but rarely participate in Chinese policy debates.

Drawing on evidence from the media policy debate, Chinese netizens perceived posts by foreign organizations to be "safe spaces" in which to vent anger and dissatisfaction with the party-state line in the comment section. Chinese users seem to assume that posts by foreign institutions are less likely to be censored than similar posts by Chinese users.

In the media policy debate, three posts by European and US institutions were among the five most influential:

- A widely shared post by the US embassy quoting then Secretary of State John Kerry. Kerry had spoken at the headquarters of the Washington Post about the necessity to stand up and speak up for oppressed and harassed journalists (143, 1/29/2016, Weibo)
- A post by the official UN Weibo account, disseminating a speech by former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon on press freedom. The speech did not refer to China directly, but it triggered a vibrant and potentially sensitive debate on the virtues of universal freedom of opinion (154, 9/3/2016, Weibo).
- A post from the FT Chinese Weibo account containing a passage about the New York Times, which has won two cases against the party-state referring to the constitution and freedom of expression (169, 774/2016, Weibo)

In comments on these posts, Chinese users express concern that the accounts of foreign institutions might be closed and that a seeming "safe haven" for critical comments might be lost.

Another representative of the China Advocates argued that excessive media control may lead to cover-ups of events like environmental disasters:

> *"In many places, after an environmental pollution incident, they [the subnational authorities] wished for a 'blackout' (灯下黑), thus many local media could not report. I think this is another kind of social 'smog!' Right now, you maybe don't have the desire to be informed. But if one day you become a victim and you hope the media stands up for your rights, the media may already have lost this function." (158, 7/3/2016, Weibo)*

The role of the media is highly contested among ideological clusters

Mao Lovers and Equality Advocates were the only ones who supported more party-state control over the media. If the press were to be privatized, they argued, capitalist owners of media companies would easily misuse their influence and produce distorted, or even false, information to protect their business interests. This would end up harming the Chinese people and the nation. Authors from these two clusters also pointed to media conglomerates in the "West" to support their argument.

Support of stricter media controls, however, does not necessarily equate to support of China's official media policy. Both Mao Lovers and Equality Advocates denounced the current mainstream news media for focusing on scandals and gossip. They also criticized the Chinese government for failing to protect patriotic viewpoints and national heroes from online criticism:

> *"The decay of certain media [...] what kind of news is broadcast all day long? Such-and-such a star married, got divorced or had an affair... [...] and we are in a very weak position to express our opinion publicly. When we publish patriotic speech, traitors call us 'angry youth' (愤青), patriotic extremists [...]." (181, 26/2/2016, Tiexue)*

As this debate shows, the role of the media is highly contested among ideological clusters. There is no clear-cut division between advocates and opponents of a free press. Therefore, any change in media policy or any larger media policy-related event might trigger a controversy that could increase pressure on the CCP to deliver more substantial arguments.

Concerning the potential to mobilize anti-Western standpoints, it was interesting to note that even the Mao Lovers did not denounce the general idea of freedom of speech as a "Western value." The rejection of the "West" and the destructive impact of "foreign enemy forces" (境外敌对势力) in this media policy debate was limited to criticism of capitalism.

> *"Can you find any praise of Mao Zedong Thought in the West, or anything unmasking the evil of capitalist media corporations? […] Don't be fooled by this talk about freedom of speech." (201, 28/2/2016, Tianya)*

The debate on the role of the media illustrates that societal ideological clusters challenge and successfully circumvent attempts to guide and unify public opinion through narrow, top-down interpretations of events or developments. In this case study, Humanists and Democratizers, but also China Advocates and Mao Lovers shifted the focus of the debate from the potential wrongdoings of one person to a systematic discussion of the role of the media in today's China.

4.1.4 Economic policy: intra-party divisions spark clashes over future course of reform

For many years, economic policy was a subject that could be discussed quite openly in China. Since early 2015, however, tightened controls and sanctions against economic news outlets and journalists, as well as tighter ideological restrictions at universities, have significantly reduced the space for open criticism of government policies. In this context, the economic policy debate selected for our analysis stands out for being triggered by the appearance of open inner-party division in party-state media, which subsequently encouraged many academics, journalists and other netizens to discuss China's economic path. The debate was loaded with strong ideological connotations and frequent anti-CCP sentiments.

On May 9, 2016, the People's Daily[130] published an interview with an unnamed "authoritative person" within the CCP leadership who openly criticized current government policies and predicted a long-term recession in the Chinese economy. The solution suggested by the "authoritative person" was to implement bold supply-side reforms instead of stimulating growth through excessive credit growth.

In the interview, this anonymous representative of the Chinese leadership admitted for the first time that China's economy might lose momentum. Thereby, he broke a taboo: party-state media are not allowed to discuss the possibility of an economic slump. The interview, which seemed to reveal disagreement within the leadership, fueled existing economic controversies on social media.

Emboldened by the top-level criticism of China's current development path, many social media commentators predicted an even stronger decline in economic growth than the "authoritative person":

> *"The policy goal of 6.5-7 percent is far too high. […] Without a financial crisis, we can maybe reach about 4.5 percent over the next 10 years. But under the pressure of exaggerated policy goals, nobody and no policy can attain any results without destroying the underlying basis of our future." (287, 21/07/2016, Maoyan)*

In comparison with the other policy fields, this debate was most clearly dominated by disagreements between university professors of different ideological leanings. Besides the usual divide among economists over whether supply-side reforms or stimulation of demand are the better recipes for China's economic development, these professors held diverging views on the influence of "Western" scholarship in Chinese debates. One famous economist even criticized the "use of Western economic theory to solve China's problems" in a controversial essay on Maoyan.

> *"This authoritative figure's comment is a typical example of using Western economists' arguments to try and solve China's problems […]. But if you fully apply Western economists' ideas of macroeconomic regulation, China's economy will inevitably collapse." (242, 17/06/2016, Maoyan)*

However, rather than echoing officially sanctioned anti-Western lines of argument, several Mao Lovers and Equality Advocates (most of them well-known economics professors) combined their assault on "Western" neoclassical theories with sharp criticism of CCP economic policies:

> *"The authoritative figure's ideas are outdated [...] the Chinese cannot afford to wait until 'new drivers' get to work. [...] All government-affiliated economists are steered and corrupted by US economic thought." (239, 20/05/2016, Maoyan)*

Netizens are critical of China's current economic development model

The suggestion of supply-side reforms from within the inner party circle triggered a renewed clash in social media between advocates of free market policies and those of paternalistic state control. Moreover, almost all social media comments other than those by official party-state actors also displayed highly critical attitudes towards the current development model and Prime Minister Li Keqiang's economic policies. Party Warriors cheerleading for the official CCP line made up only four percent of all comments, while neoliberal defenders of free market policies and supply-side reform (Market Lovers) were most strongly represented (28 percent) in this online debate.

The Market Lovers' positions reflect mainstream ideas in Western economics. In China, these positions are mostly voiced by economic and business journalists rather than by scholars. A line of argument that unites Market Lovers and Humanists bluntly attacks the "unreasonable" tightening of censorship, claiming that these measures distort the information base of Chinese economists and thus prevent meaningful discussion on economic policies.

Overall, the rather technical questions at the heart of the authoritative person's public critique are eclipsed by a more fundamental ideological clash over China's future economic development. The simultaneous disagreement of Market Lovers and Mao Lovers – originating from the two opposing ends of the spectrum on economic issues – with current government policies points to a potential danger for the CCP's economic policy: the leadership risks either completely alienating one of the two clusters or simultaneously dissatisfying both if it continues its "muddle through" approach to economic reform.

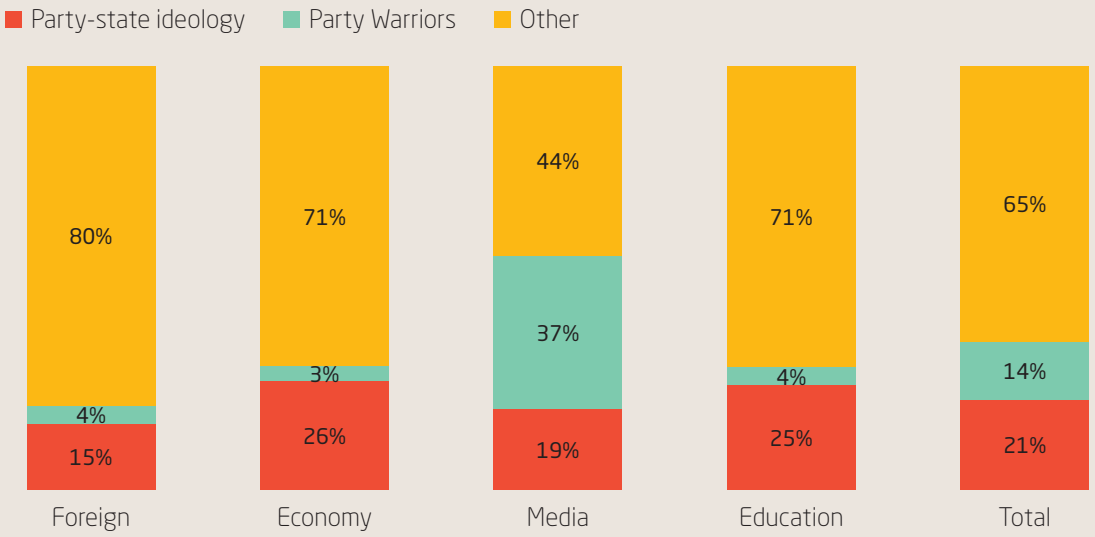
4.2 WHO SETS THE TONE? PARTY-STATE ACTORS WIN BY NUMBERS, NOT BY ARGUMENTS

The party-state ideological line dominates most debates in terms of the quantity of posts. Besides official party-state actors, Party Warriors[131] contribute to spreading the party's voice across all online forums, mainly by reposting party-state media articles.

According to our analysis of the Top 20 most influential posts per forum and case, the combined share of party-state-affiliated posts and posts by Party Warriors amplifying the CCP line averages at more than a third of all posts (see figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3

Party-state voices have a major share, but do not dominate policy debates
Proportion of party-affiliated voices and societal ideologies by case study



Source: MERICS research (social media analysis)

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This share, which peaks at 56 percent in the media policy debate, shows the dominance of party-state voices on social media, but at the same time it still leaves enough room for diverse opinions.

The high number of debate participants who are not affiliated with the party-state, as well as the large number of arguments that deviate from or openly contradict the official line, are even more remarkable in light of the highly asymmetric censorship of Sina Weibo in particular. This can be illustrated by comparing the non-censored dataset with censored posts in the education debate made available by Weiboscope.[132] An analysis of the most popular censored posts on Weibo confirms that most of them were deleted for defying then education minister Yuan Guiren and other party members who had openly denounced "Western values" in Chinese education. Apart from many personal allegations that Yuan's son and family benefitted economically from a new set of ideologically purified textbooks, several bloggers also referred to Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening policy to counter the CCP's current anti-Western narratives. The fact that no such arguments could be found among the uncensored posts shows just how sensitive CCP censors have become to arguments exposing contradictions within the party-state ideology.[133]

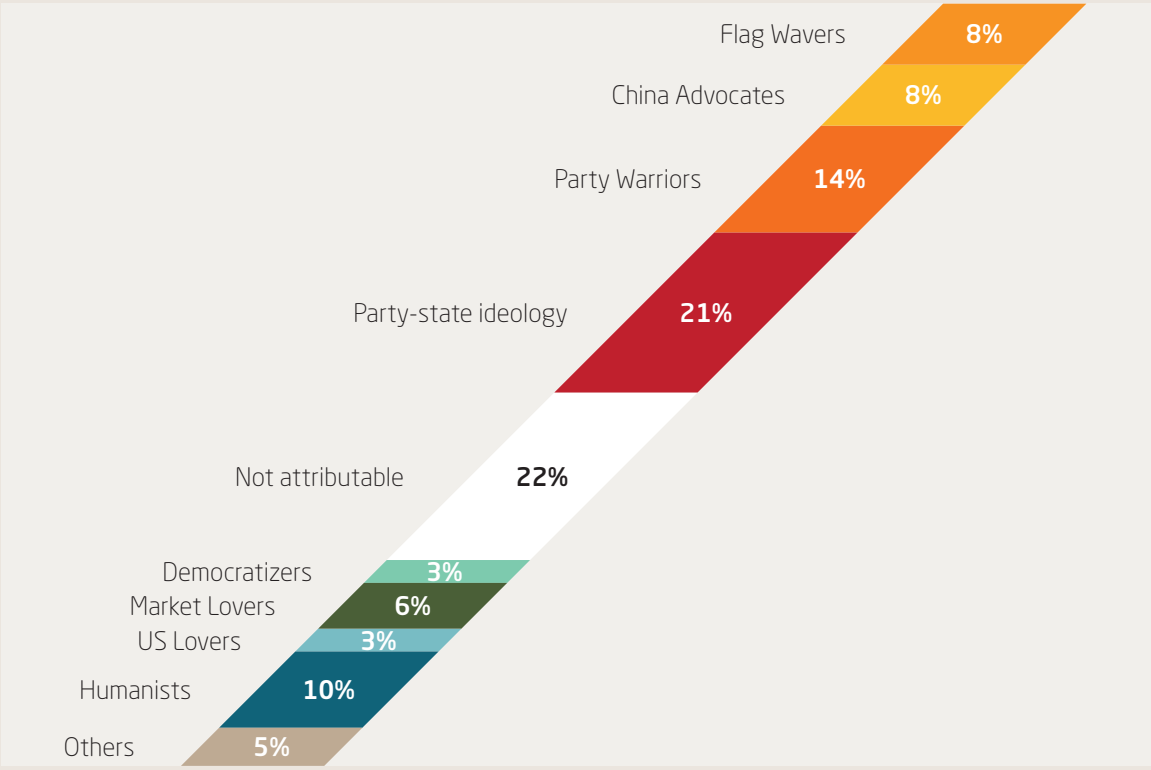
Moreover, the considerable quantitative presence of official and unofficial party-state voices in uncensored online content does not mean that they generally succeed in setting the agenda of policy debates. Most discussions sparked by party-state articles reposted on social media

are either highly critical of or run completely independently from the official party-state line. As contributions to the comment sections of Weibo and other forums appear to be much more loosely controlled than main posts, netizens also tend to use party-state media articles as a protective cover under which more critical issues can be raised and discussed.

Based on the relative presence of arguments associated with ideological clusters in the most prominent posts in all four debates,[134] figure 4.4 presents a weight-adjusted picture of the impact of the ideological clusters presented in chapter 3 in all social media controversies.

Figure 4.4

Ideological diversity despite party-state dominance
Share of ideological clusters among posts across all forums and debates



Source: MERICS research (social media analysis)

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Defensive universalists and stronger, but divided nationalists

Notwithstanding the varying alignments of different clusters presented in section 4.1, there is a broad divide between universalists (Humanists, US Lovers, Democratizers) on the one hand and nationalists (Flag wavers, China Advocates, Party Warriors, Mao Lovers) on the other, with very little common ground.

The voice of universalists is weaker, but more homogenous compared to the nationalists. Support for the universality of fundamental rights and values or calls for the respect of international standards are two very common topics among universalists. In all four debates, representatives of the universalist cluster were unified in their rejection of nationalist arguments and party-state rhetoric, but rarely dared to voice and discuss their own visions for China's development and role in the world. Furthermore, the weak presence of US Lovers in the debate could be explained in light of the chaotic US election campaign in 2016, which made it difficult to uphold the US political system as a role model.[135]

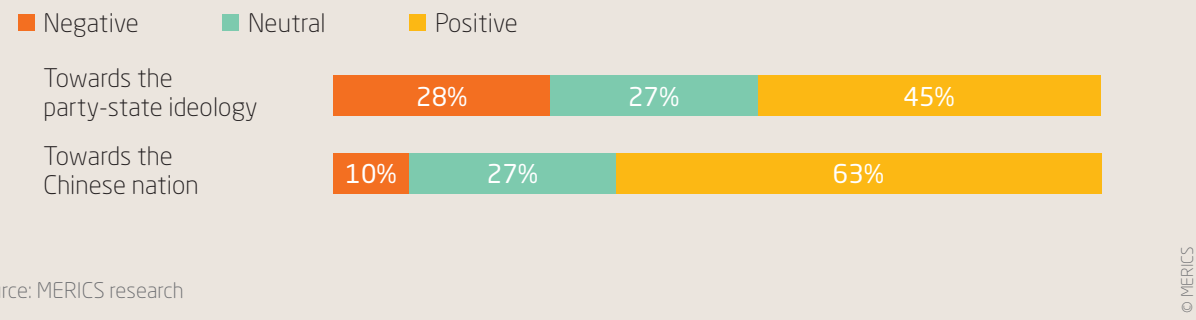
"Loving the country" does not equal "loving the party"

The presence of nationalists (China Advocates, Flag Wavers, Mao Lovers) in the debates confirms the contested notion of nationalism. On the militaristic forum Tiexue, nationalist netizens fight most of the heated debates among themselves without a strong visible influence of party-state actors or even CCP ideology. Most patriotic or nationalist comments by netizens are unrelated to the CCP's anti-Western lines of argument presented above (see chapter 2). Moreover, the CCP's active promotion of "rational nationalism" (理性爱国主义 or 理智爱国) to bolster its own legitimacy does not equate to societal support for the Chinese nation or nationalist attitudes.

Across all topics, criticism of the party-state line is much more common than criticism of China or the Chinese nation (figure 4.5).[136] Nationalism in the sense of "loving the country" (爱国) is clearly a mainstream value in online debates. Even within the clusters at the universalist end of the spectrum, only a minority express negative views of China (33 percent of Democratizers, 20 percent of US Lovers and only 14 percent of Humanists), whereas a majority of universalist posts are critical of the party-state line or CCP policies (100 percent of Democratizers, 60 percent of US Lovers and 41 percent of Humanists). Moreover, the few authors who explicitly reject "love of

Figure 4.5

Criticizing the party-state ideology is easier than criticizing the Chinese nation
Attitudes in posts across all debates and forums



Source: MERICS research

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the country "or criticize the "Chinese nation" are fiercely criticized by other online commentators. But even if direct criticism of the CCP is rare within the nationalist cluster (peaking at nine percent among Flag Wavers in our sample), understandings of "love of the country" deviate in important ways from the official line in most posts. The role of the Flag Wavers deserves particular attention. While their total share of posts across all four debates is only 10 percent, their calls for a more aggressive type of Chinese nationalism – which challenges the CCP's calls for being "rational" – are very vocal in the foreign policy debate, and they comprise roughly one third (32 percent) of the most influential posts.

Despite tighter restrictions on freedom of expression online, discussion platforms continue to exist in 2017 and provide space for political debates among and across different ideological clusters. Due to huge political pressure, Weibo has mostly degenerated into a channel of ranting and cynicism. But Chinese netizens still use other online political forums to exchange opinions. The quantitative impact of these smaller scale online forums is limited in comparison to the most active Weibo period. But debates on the specialized political forums tend to be better informed and are conducted in a more serious manner.

Box 4.3

Public Discussion Leaders: alternative voices to party-state ideology

We identified a total of 88 Public Discussion Leaders (PuDLs) in all four debates. Of these, 69 could be matched with one of the ideological clusters (see appendix). Some Public Discussion Leaders affect the debate by simply copying and pasting posts from other media. This is true for many anonymous accounts belonging to Party Warriors.

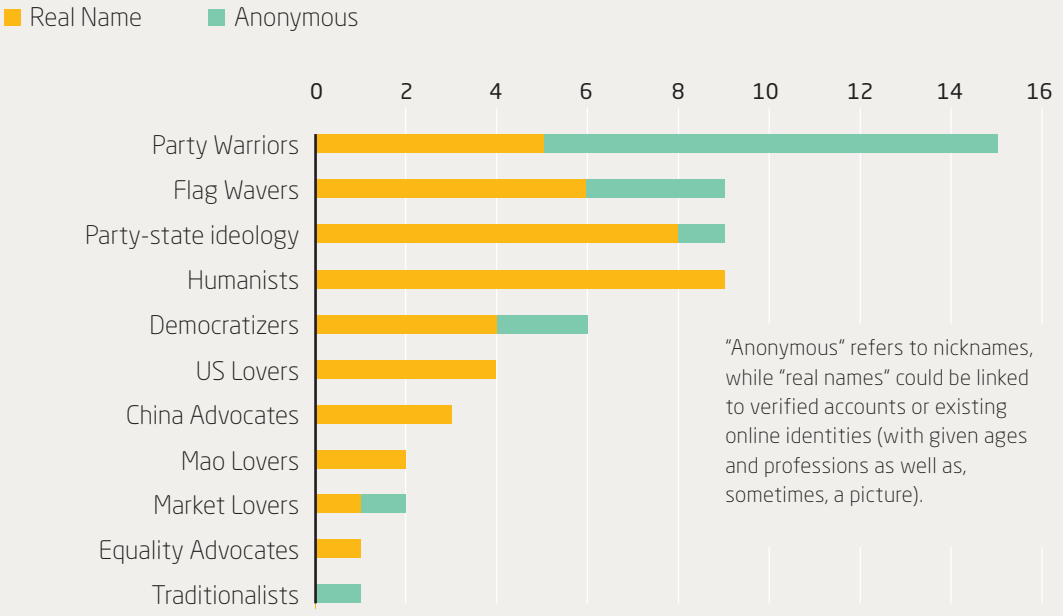
Academics, professors and journalists, however, post their own analyses and opinions and are able to initiate new debates that then attract comments. They might also add their opinion to an ongoing debate or – albeit rarely – provide new information.

The identified PuDLS come from four different backgrounds:

- **Professors and teachers from (mostly elite) universities**
  Many renowned professors from elite universities, but also a number of secondary school teachers, have their own Weibo accounts, which allows them to directly reach out to followers and be heard in public debates.
- **Journalists (from both party-state and private media) posting in a private capacity**
  Most journalists of party-state media outlets act primarily as Party Warriors, but journalists from private media tend to take a more nuanced and often more critical stance toward the CCP in debates.
- **Anonymous accounts owned by Party Warriors**
  Party Warriors are the group with the most anonymous authors. Two types of Party Warrior accounts can be distinguished: long-term, multiple-issue accounts vs. ad hoc accounts only created for the purpose of one debate. The Communist Youth League's verified Weibo ac-count played a peculiar role in the Foreign Policy debate.
- **Celebrities (Big Vs) with some influence on policy debates**
  "Big Vs" (大V) are mainly apolitical celebrities, but some prominent independent bloggers continue to voice criticism of the party-state line and defend universalist positions in value debates, especially on the forum Maoyan.

Party Warriors prefer to stay anonymous while Humanists use real names

Public Discussion Leaders in the four case studies, by ideological cluster



Source: MERICS research

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4.3 ANTI-WESTERN SENTIMENT IN ONLINE DEBATES REMAINS FRAGMENTED AND CONTROVERSIAL

In light of our initial assumption that the CCP strives to establish a distinctly Chinese ideological alternative to allegedly "Western" ideas and influence, the permeation of anti-Western sentiments in social media debates is of particular relevance for assessing societal acceptance of the CCP's ideological framework.

As official propaganda tends to portray the "West" as a single and coherent entity, it is important to differentiate between different uses of the term "Western" (西方). Table 4.1 provides an overview of different types of anti-Western sentiments as well as common pro-Western counterarguments used in the four policy debates.

Table 4.1

The term "Western" is used to refer to many different things

Prevalent concepts of "the West" in different policy fields based on (coded) posts from all forums

Policy field (case)	Representations of "the West"	Typical anti-Western argument	Typical pro-Western argument
Foreign policy	US companies and products US foreign policy	Western products must be boycotted to defend China's sovereignty, China needs to excel and outcompete "the West"	Aggressive boycotters harm China's image and interests, China must get along with other countries.
Education policy	Liberalism, pluralism, all kinds of heterodox thinking in education	Western intellectual hegemony in China needs to be stopped	"Western values" are only a scapegoat, China should rather improve its own education system
Media policy	Press freedom, commercial media	Western media is not free, but is dominated by capitalist cartels	Press freedom is also crucial for China, not an alien "Western" value
Economic policy	"Western economic thought," e.g. neoliberalism, financial capitalism	Reliance on "Western" thought caused China's economic problems	Many references to arguments of US economists proposing supply-side reform, without labelling them as "Western"

Source: MERICS research

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The strategy of blaming the "West" to detract from domestic problems is only partially successful

Since 2016, CCP propaganda strategists and party-state media have sought to systematically exploit the apparent internal crises of liberal democracies with the goal of making the Chinese system look more attractive in comparison.[137] The strong correlation found between positive attitudes towards the party-state line and negative attitudes towards the "West" supports the

assumption that those in favor of the party-state line are also more likely to hold anti-Western views.[138]

Outright chauvinist claims of the inherent superiority of the Chinese nation or Chinese people were far less common and only noticeable in the foreign policy debate.

Some representatives of the nationalist clusters, ranging from Mao Lovers to Flag Wavers, used criticism of Western systems as a strategy to voice their views on Chinese politics more openly. The focus of the foreign policy and education debates in particular suggests that references to the "West" mainly serve as a foil for discussing issues of more direct concern to China (see also table 4.1).

Direct criticism of "Western" notions by party-state actors often backfired as it caused many netizens to point out the lack of a better Chinese alternative. This is particularly true for the media and education debates, where the rejection of liberal ("Western") media pluralism or "Western values" in education triggered a debate about the quality of China's education system. Netizens clearly saw through the strategy of using anti-Western sentiments to distract attention from domestic problems:

> *"If you blame the government for food poisoning or having your house demolished, you are labeled a Western hostile force [...] What's scary about these fervent nationalists is not their ignorance but their disregard for their own lives, which is why they are so eager to go to war." (37, 17/07/2016, Maoyan)*

Many commentators also point out the inconsistency and hypocrisy behind many nationalistic expressions of anti-Western sentiment. For example, several netizens disseminating calls for a boycott of KFC via their (US made) iPhones were widely ridiculed on social media. Other opponents of anti-Western boycotts pointed to the impossibility of distinguishing between Chinese and foreign products in a globalized economy, or argued that boycotting supposedly foreign goods would hurt the Chinese economy the most:

> *"A nation that only ever refers to its 5,000 years of history and refuses to learn from the positive spirit of other nations will go nowhere. We don't have to boycott US or Japanese products; we have to boycott idiots." (28, 14/07/2016, Maoyan)*

Interestingly, several of the most influential posts in the foreign policy debate also attack Chinese nationalists' double standards by arguing that they should vent their anger on Russia instead, or even define Russia, rather than the United States, as China's real enemy:

Support for nationalism should not be equated with hostile sentiments towards the "West"

> *"So, these [anti-American] boycotters are free to break the law and do what they like? [...] On what basis should they be allowed to demonstrate against the United States, but not against Russia? [...] Protesting a country that has never occupied Chinese territory is considered patriotism, but protesting against Russia which has annexed large parts of Chinese territory is considered stirring up trouble?" (31, 19/07/2016, Maoyan)*

> *"Russia, not the United States, is China's enemy. [...] it was Russia that insisted on its claims to Mongolian territory and cut a big chunk out of China, a quarter of its territory." (37, 17/07/2016, Maoyan)*

These posts point to a significant weakness in the CCP strategy of targeting "foreign" or "Western hostile forces" (境外/西方敌对势力) in a quest to fight the influence of liberal democratic ideas and values in China. This strategy is based on the logic that fostering nationalistic sentiments and exposing negative aspects of the US political system or foreign policy will trigger a rejection of liberal democratic values by association. But such nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments could just as well be directed against other autocratic systems, with potentially undesirable consequences for the party-state itself.[139]

4.4 THE "WEST" IS ONLY AN IMPORTANT CONCEPT FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO DENOUNCE IT

The case studies revealed a high degree of controversy regarding values and ideas sometimes referred to as "Western." Direct references to the "West" are less prevalent than could be expected given the conscious selection of case studies. Although all debates implicitly or explicitly touched upon China's position with regard to "the West," direct discussion of Western countries or supposed "Western" influence in China was present in less than half (42 percent) of analyzed posts. Roughly 60 percent of these used the term "Western" (西方) with negative connotations or to denounce developments abroad, while only 14 percent used it with positive associations. However, these numbers must be viewed with caution: While active support for "Western" ideas is indeed rare, anti-Western arguments are frequently rejected by other netizens, especially in forum comment sections. But as "universal values" (普世价值) are not necessarily associated with the "West" by their proponents, they do not appear in the statistics above.

The analysis of social media debates thus confirms the survey findings presented in chapter 3: broad support for nationalism should not be equated with generally hostile sentiments towards the "West" or the rejection of perceived "Western interference" in China. Warnings from government organizations against "hostile enemy forces" do not seem to have permeated social media debates. Instead, debates over "Western" influence in China mostly serve as a foil for Chinese discussions about the country's own path.

5. Conclusion: CCP ideology, "Western values" and China's political future

5. Conclusion: CCP ideology, "Western values" and China's political future

This study set out to assess the CCP's endeavor to promote China's political system as an alternative to "Western values" and "Western systems." Our result is mixed: The party-state has set up the hardware for its ideological dominance. But up to now, the Chinese government has neither succeeded in fostering broad-based societal acceptance nor in eliminating competing ideologies from the online public sphere.

As analyzed in chapter 2, the party-state under Xi Jinping has intensified its quest to construct an encompassing ideology, the "China Path," as an ultimate source of legitimacy and purpose for the CCP. The aim of this "China Path" is to provide an alternative to "Western," meaning liberal, political and economic, orders (see chapter 2).

So far, the CCP has focused its efforts on putting the "hardware" of this ideological campaign in place: it employs new popular language and propaganda formats and uses new channels for distribution.

The party-state has stepped up the pressure on the media, education and entertainment sectors (through campaigns, legislation and arrests) to discourage and sanction deviations from this ideological conformity.

The content of the "China Path," however, remains eclectic and vague. The CCP has only stated clearly what its ideology should not include: the so-called "Western values."

The party-state has set up the hardware for ideological dominance

As chapter 3 has shown, the CCP's attempt to build a unifying ideology clashes with the fragmentation of public online opinion, especially within the urban middle class. During our survey and analysis of the online space, we identified 11 ideological clusters which display varying degrees of deviation from (and sometimes opposition to) the party-state ideology. Many ideological clusters express basic support for a unique model for China's future, but disagree on the specifics of a distinctly Chinese socio-economic and political order. Whereas this provides the CCP with an opportunity to watch and act on potential opponents and allies, it illustrates the ongoing challenge of streamlining all these opinions.

Besides, the "West" remains far more attractive for China's population than the CCP might be prepared to accept. Even though respondents to our survey provided negative characterizations of the liberal ideological clusters, a majority supported the "spread of Western values" and held a very favorable view of the United States and Europe.

In the public debates on foreign affairs, economics, media and education, which were analyzed in chapter 4, support for the party-state line was prominently expressed, but did not dominate. Support for nationalism was common, but the specific concepts and expressions of nationalism were not. A majority of the ideological clusters rejected the party-state's equation that "loving the country" means "loving the party." Also, discussions involving the "West" remained diverse: anti-Western sentiments did not dominate in the analyzed policy debates. Broad societal support for nationalism can thus not be equated with hostile sentiments towards the "West" or fears of "Western interference," which the CCP attempts to stoke.

LOOKING AHEAD: THE POTENTIAL FOR COMPLETE IDEOLOGICAL CONTROL AND ANTI-WESTERN NATIONALISM

The results of this study seem reassuring for liberal democracies, at least for now. Potentially disruptive developments within the People's Republic like a major economic crisis or environmental catastrophe and a highly volatile international environment – given the tensions around North Korea or the South China Sea – might rapidly change the picture.

Therefore, it is important to analyze the dynamics that could change the current trajectory in favor of a more effective penetration and a broader acceptance of the CCP's "China Path" within Chinese society and perhaps even beyond China's borders.

Consequently, we need to ask two questions:

1. Following our analysis of the CCP's efforts to form a unified ideology, what is the likelihood of complete and centralized ideological control of Chinese society by the CCP?
2. Following Beijing's goal of rejecting "Western systems" and values, what is the likelihood of a rise in anti-Western nationalism within the PRC?

The concluding parts of this study will address these two questions by looking at recent developments, by analyzing possible triggers as well as facilitating and constraining factors, and by assessing the possible consequences if the potential becomes a reality. The aim of this analysis is to prepare the liberal Western publics to imagine the challenges that would arise from an increasingly ideologically aggressive and closed-off China that might become openly hostile towards liberal democracies in the West.

WHAT IS THE LIKELIHOOD OF COMPLETE AND CENTRALIZED IDEOLOGICAL CONTROL?

As China moves into Xi Jinping's second term, the totalitarian potential of the country's future development has been pointed out by various scholars and observers.[140] Focusing on ideology, this would mean an increased effort by the CCP to reach into all areas of life, including the private sphere, either through coercive measures or through more subtle mechanisms of manipulation and persuasion. Box 5.1 provides an overview of several "red flags" that would indicate a transition towards much more intrusive, coercive and all-encompassing ideological controls.

Box 5.1

"Red flags": indicators of a transition to centralized and complete ideological control

- Official regulations demanding ideological conformity not only from party members, but also from non-members and normal citizens
- Mass mobilization for public displays of loyalty and denunciations of "enemies"
- Frequent, mandatory ideology study sessions for every citizen
- Promoting a high-volume cult around the party leader and his wisdom
- Closure of online forums that debate political issues
- Encouragement of "citizen guards" to check on political and ideological deviants
- Curtailment of individual lifestyle choices (e.g. shopping, online gaming, traveling)
- Hard restrictions on traveling and studying abroad
- Drastically enhanced activity of party organs in private and foreign businesses
- Forced mergers of private IT companies with state-controlled telecom enterprises

A major socio-economic crisis with an ensuing political crisis could lead the CCP to adopt more rigid and openly coercive measures, resulting in drastically increased mass surveillance and political repression. In a stable economic and political environment, Beijing is likely to continue its current course of subtle ideological reinforcement. If the Xi Jinping administration secures stable socio-economic development, e.g. making advances in mitigating environmental pollution and providing food security, a majority of the ideological clusters analyzed in this study would probably not oppose CCP ideological dominance and further tightening.

The Social Credit System that is currently being built up would likely be a major factor in securing that dominance. This novel, big data-enabled approach to regulating markets and society will rate market participants and citizens according to their economic trustworthiness and political loyalty, and will reward good behavior with access to credit and other benefits. The system will

monitor whether citizens follow traffic rules and make their mortgage payments on time, but it will also assess online social behavior, friendship circles and political statements. When this system is operational, it will nudge everyday behavior towards support of the party-state. Many citizens would then probably think twice before voicing dissent in online debates or becoming online friends with someone who has been sanctioned for his or her "negative" opinions. Peer pressure will add to the likelihood of adopting "positive" behavior.

Even if the CCP continues on its current path of curtailing the parameters for dissenting political opinions, China's ruling party could increasingly be confronted with the aforementioned "dictator's dilemma": by way of silencing or jailing its critics, the party-state might alienate parts of society, lose track of potential opponents and their viewpoints and perhaps even radicalize certain groups.

Moreover, the public backlash against certain elements of party-state ideology, for example against official demands that "Western learning" be banned from schools and universities, signals that there might be a limit to the degree of ideological control Chinese citizens are willing to accept. Official restrictions on education choices, but also on entertainment, traveling or shopping, are likely to trigger societal resistance.

For liberal democracies in the West, an increasingly control- and security-fixated Chinese government will become a much tougher actor to deal with than in the past, most prominently in areas like cyber security, civil society, and rule of law. As described in chapter 2, the vigorous rejection of so-called "Western values" (like human rights) is part of official ideology. Therefore, if the CCP's ideological prescriptions come to be accepted and internalized by large parts of Chinese society, it will probably strengthen the emergence of anti-Western nationalism in China.

WHAT IS THE LIKELIHOOD OF ANTI-WESTERN NATIONALISM IN THE PRC?

As seen in this study, the content of patriotism ("love of country" vs. "love of the party") as well as of anti-Western arguments (e.g. rejection of "Western democracy" and "Western capitalism") is highly contested within public debates in Chinese society. The nationalistic ideological clusters in our study take pride in the PRC's rising economic and political weight and advocate a more assertive stance for China. But this does not necessarily imply an increased negative view or even hostility against the people, the culture or the policies of liberal democracies, especially the United States, but also Western Europe.

Outbursts of nationalism in China could become harder to contain

Aware of the "double-edged sword" of nationalism, China's leaders so far have typically refrained from stirring up xenophobia, albeit that they sometimes allow anti-Western protests to a certain level. It might be tempting for Beijing to appeal to nationalistic pride to divert attention from an internal crisis (like a major industrial accident, health scandal or a stock market crash). But Beijing would have to weigh its ability to control such protests against the potential damage to political and business relations with the United States and Europe. In our foreign policy case study (debate over the boycotts of KFC restaurants to protest the allegedly US-influenced South China Sea court ruling in July 2016), Chinese authorities eventually denounced the boycotts as acts of "irrational patriotism."

Rather than being anti-Western, violent xenophobic actions in China have recently been primarily directed against Japanese or South Korean government policies. Still, the United States and the "West" in general have repeatedly been the targets of brief but fierce nationalist rage online. Those actions were typically not triggered by the actions of the respective governments, but by individual misconduct. Examples include a German car manager who got into a fight with a local Chinese driver in November 2016, a Westerner posting a video bragging about a female conquest in March 2017 or the mistreatment of an allegedly Chinese passenger on a United Airlines flight.[141] But most of these online outbursts, triggered by the ideological cluster of the "Flag Wavers," turned out to be short-lived.

Such public outbursts, however, could become more sustained and harder to contain as the party-state steps up its anti-Western rhetoric and propaganda. The Xi Jinping administration has revived warnings of "infiltration" and "hostile foreign forces." Beijing has so far refrained from openly portraying representatives of liberal democracies as "enemies of the state," but the

Chinese leadership has identified foreign NGOs as well as foreign nationals in China as potential threats to national security. A new NGO law has placed all foreign organizations under the surveillance of the Ministry of Public Security. Public alerts to guard against and report "foreign spies," (such as a cartoon series warning Chinese women against being seduced by male "Western" spies) and instructions to Chinese universities to increase the surveillance of foreign students, can easily foster an atmosphere of distrust and hostility between "Westerners" and Chinee.

Such a diffuse atmosphere of anti-Western suspicion may not trigger open anti-Western hostility, but rather a gradual and more subtle distrust. Amidst this diffuse distrust, the display of a rather reflected Chinese patriotic pride is another more likely, less aggressive version of a "disenchanting the West" form of nationalism. Disillusionment with "Western values" and models of governance is already quite pronounced among the ideological clusters of the "China Advocates," the "Traditionalists," the "Mao Lovers" and the "Industrialists." Their representatives often had considerable exposure to a Western education and lifestyle. Their public revelations of the weaknesses of "Western systems" like populist challenges to the democratic system, ailing social security systems and inefficient bureaucracies, provide justification for promoting an alternative "China Path." Only if major scandals or catastrophes (information that cannot be suppressed or manipulated by the CCP) reveal structural flaws in the Chinese system, or if Beijing overreaches in its ideologization of personal lifestyle choices, would these nationalists lose their momentum. Box 5.2 summarizes the factors that could foster anti -Western nationalism.

Box 5.2

"Red flags": indicators of the emergence of broad-based anti-Western nationalism

- Enforced ban of Western textbooks and literature in the education system
- Designation of "Western" actors as "enemies of the state" and as "endangering" China's national security and global status
- Increasing arrests of foreigners for "spying" or for political offenses
- Increasing official incentives for denouncing "Westerners" and "Western systems"
- Escalation of military tensions with the US resulting in nationalist mobilization within China

For China's domestic evolution, it will be crucial which model – the "China Path" or the "Western model" – can attract and inspire the younger generation in the medium to long term. The looming ideological competition, however, will not just shape China's trajectory and determine the level of popular support for Communist Party rule. It will also become a defining factor in global politics: many countries and regions will now have a choice between Chinese and Western developmental models and methods.

For Western liberal democracies, a gradual build-up of Chinese nationalism may turn out to be very challenging on a global scale. Amidst widely shared impressions of a decline of the United States a well-communicated international campaign for the "China path" has the potential to resonate countries like Hungary, to Ethiopia and Cambodia. The political and economic elites of these countries are actively looking for alternatives to traditional Western models. Only if leading liberal democracies manage to revitalize their political institutions as well as their economic and technological capabilities, will they be able to credibly stand up for their values when faced with the powerful counter-narrative that China's leadership has in the making.

Endnotes

1 | We put terms related to the "West" or "Western values" in quotation marks to indicate the propaganda use of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

2 | Bloomberg News (2017). "China Slams Western Democracy as Flawed." January 22. https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-01-22/china-slams-western-democracy-as-flawed-as-trump-takes-office. Accessed: January 30, 2017; Kou, Xiaomi (2017). "2017:西方的终结？" (2017: The End of the West?) January 12. https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/24853644. Accessed: January 31, 2017; Rudolph, Josh (2017). "Top Judge Warns Against Judicial Independence." China Digital Times. January 16. http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2017/01/top-chinese-judge-warns-judicial-independence. Accessed: March 3, 2017.

3 | Cf. The Economist (2016), "China Invents the Digital Totalitarian State." http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21711902-worrying-implications-its-social-credit-project-china-invents-digital-totalitarian. Accessed: March 1, 2017; Meissner, Miriam (2017). "China's Social Credit System: A Big-Data Enabled Approach to Market Regulation With Broad Implications For Doing Business in China." MERICS China Monitor No. 39, May 24. https://www.merics.org/en/merics-analysis/china-monitor/merics-china-monitor-no-39. Accessed: July 20, 2017.

4 | Cf. Jost, John T., Christopher M. Federico and Jamie L. Napier (2009). "Political Ideology: Its Structure, Functions, and Elective Affinities" New York University: New York; Brown, Kerry (2012). "The Communist Party of China and Ideology." China: An International Journal, 10 (2); 52-68.

5 | Here again following Freeden, as for him "[...] ideologies compete over the control of political language as well as competing over plans for public policy; indeed, their competition over plans for public policy is primarily conducted through their competition over the control of political language." Freeden, Michael (2003). Ideology. A Very Short Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 55.

6 | Detailed information concerning the methodology of this study is available at www.merics.org.

7 | Göbel, Christian (2016). "Co-Producing Authoritarian Resilience: E-participation and Regime Performance in China." RESPONSIVENESS Working Paper 05/2016, University of Vienna.

8 | Cf. Cheng, Eva (2006). "China: Pro-Socialist Forces Denounce Right-Wing Gathering." November 17, GreenLeftWeekly. https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/china-pro-socialist-forces-denounce-right-wing-gathering. Accessed: July 20, 2017; Wang, Zhen (2006). "Beijing University Professor Proposes Multi-Party System at Xishan Meeting." April 30. The Epoch Times. http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/1728516-beijing-university-professor-proposes-multi-party-system-at-xishan-meeting. Accessed: July 20, 2017; Wagner Givens, John (2012). "China's Next Top Model: Guangdong Beats Chongqing?" The Huffington Post. November 4. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-wagner-givens/bo-xilai_b_1414250.html. Accessed: February 10, 2017; Anderlini, Jamil (2012). The Bo Xilai Scandal: Power, Death, and Politics in China. London, UK: The Financial Times Ltd.; Yu, Verna (2016). "The Death of a Liberal Chinese Magazine – A Hostile Takeover by a State Institution Forces the Closure of the Reform-Minded Yanhuang Chunqiu" The Diplomat, July 19. http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/the-death-of-a-liberal-chinese-magazine. Accessed: January 31, 2017; Bandurski, David (2016). "The End of Consensus." China Media Project, October 2. https://medium.com/china-media-project/the-end-of-consensus-21a267eb42c0#.a3pm68w9d. Accessed: March 3, 2017.

9 | Cf. Unger, Jonathan (2016). Chinese Nationalism. London: Routledge; Carlson, Allen R. et al. (eds.). "Nations and Nationalism Roundtable Discussion on Chinese Nationalism and National Identity." Nations and Nationalisms, 22 (3): 415–446; Gries, Peter et al (2015). "Popular Nationalism and China's Japan Policy: the Diaoyu Islands Protests, 2012–2013." Journal of Contemporary China, 25 (98): 264–276.

10 | Holbig, Heike (2010). "In Search of Legitimacy in Post-revolutionary China: Bringing Ideology and Governance Back in." GIGA Working Papers 127/2010; Xu, Guangqiu (2012). "Chinese Anti-Western Nationalism, 2000–2010" Asian and African Studies, 16 (2): 109-134.

11 | Guangming Daily 光明日报 (2014). "维护我国意识形态安全的基本路径" (Protect the basic path of China's ideological security). April 7. http://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2014-04/07/nw.D110000gmrb_20140407_1-05.htm. Accessed: March 8, 2017; Holbig, Heike and Bruce Gilley (2010). "Reclaiming Legitimacy in China." Politics & Policy, 38 (3): 395-422. Search for Yishi xingtai anquan on CNKI Trends reveals gradual increase between 2008 and 2013 and a steep increase in the number of articles starting in 2013.

12 | The term "struggle for public opinion" is not new and was used under previous leadership generations as well. But its use waxes and wanes. Since 2013, talk of this struggle has intensified again. Cf. Qian, Gang 钱钢 (2013). "'舆论斗争'是一个危险信号" ("Struggle for public opinion" is a signal for danger). Lianhe Zaobao (联合早报). September 26. http://www.zaobao.com.sg/special/zbo/commentary/story20130926-257586. Accessed March 9, 2017.

13 | The concept of ideological security, which in part emerged from the CCP's debate of its own soft power, forms a part of Xi Jinping's overall national security concept (总体国家安全观). Cf. Zhong, Guoan 钟国安 (2017). "以习近平总体国家安全观为指引 谱写国家安全新篇章" (Using Secretary General Xi Jinping's view on national security as a reference. Writing a new version of national security for the general public). Qiushi (求是). April 15. http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2017-04/15/c_1120788993.htm. Accessed April 21, 2017.

14 | Ibid.

15 | Cf. National Defense University (国防大学) et al. (2013). "较量无声" (Silent contest). October 26. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_8lSjcoSW8. Accessed: February 1, 2017.

16 | Keck, Zachary (2014). "Four Things China Learned From the Arab Spring." The Diplomat, January 4. http://thediplomat.com/2014/01/four-things-china-learned-from-the-arab-spring/. Accessed: March 9, 2017; Fallows, James (2011). "Arab Spring, Chinese Winter." The Atlantic. September 2011 Issue. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/09/arab-spring-chinese-winter/308601. Accessed: March 9, 2017.

17 | As the "China Model" was perceived as emerging in Western discourse about China, most Chinese were very hesitant to use it as a description for the PRC Cf. Fewsmith, Joseph (2011). "Debating the 'China Model.'" China Leadership Monitor, No. 35. http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM35JF.pdf. Accessed: December 12, 2016; Bandurski, David (2010). "How Should We Read China's Discourse of Greatness." China Media Project, February 23. http://cmp.hku.hk/2010/02/23/reading-the-political-climate-in-chinas-discourse-of-greatness, Accessed March 7, 2017; Holbig, Heike (2010). "'Das Land hat einen Plan. Der Westen nicht.' China als autokratisches Erfolgsmodell?" *Berliner Debatte Initial,* 21 (3): 67-77. Only after 2010/11 did a few academics suggested self-assertively using the term in order to break the "Western discourse hegemony." However, the concept did not enter the official party discourse; rather, the idea was officially labelled "China Path."

18 | The first three were already canonized in Hu Jintao's work report at the 18th Party Congress. The fourth, "confidence in Chinese culture", was added by Xi Jinping in 2014.

19 | For an overview of what this Chinese alternative development model entails, see Table 7.6 in Heilmann, Sebastian (ed.) (2017). China's Political System. Lanham et al., Rowman and Littlefield, 421.

20 | The term "ideological repertoire" refers to the different components or building blocks from which official ideology is generated. Not everything that's in the repertoire is used in official narratives, but it is a repertoire, or pool of ideas, that the leadership can draw on. Cf. Chen, Chang (2016). The Return of Ideology: The Search for Regime Identities in Postcommunist Russia and China. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press. 109.

21 | Brady, Anne-Marie (2007). Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

22 | In 2014, there were reportedly 435 think tanks in China. Cf. Menegazzi, Silvia (2014). "Building Think Tanks With Chinese Characteristics: Current Debates And Changing Trends." China Brief 14 (24). https://jamestown.org/program/building-think-tanks-with-chinese-characteristics-current-debates-and-changing-trends/. Accessed: March 8, 2017.
Chen, Ziyan (2017). "Nine Chinese Think Tanks Among World's Best." China Daily, January 26. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-01/26/content_28061576.htm. Accessed: March 8, 2017.

23 | For a comprehensive study on the Central Leading Small Group for Cybersecurity and Informatization as well as the Cyberspace Administration of China cf. Alsabah, Nabil (2016). "Information Control 2.0: The Cyberspace Administration of China Tames the Internet." MERICS China Monitor, No. 35, September 15. http://www.merics.org/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/China-Monitor/MERICS_China_Monitor_32_Eng.pdf. Accessed: July 28, 2017.

24 | Partly based on and adapted from Brady, Anne-Marie (2007). Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 11.

25 | The list of projects funded by the China's National Social Sciences (国家社会科学基金项目2017年度课题指南) is downloadable via: http://download.people.com.cn/dw2016/zhinan1216.doc. Accessed: July 19, 2017. The section "Marxism and Scientific Socialism" (马克思主义・科学社会主义) even ranks first. For an analysis of the shifts in research grant policy, see Holbig, Heike (2014). "Shifting Ideologies of Research Funding: The CPC's National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences." *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs,* 2: 13-32.

26 | General Office of Central Committee the CCP中共中央办公厅and Office of the State Council 国务院办公厅 (2015). "关于加强中国特色新型智库建设的意见" (Opinion on strengthening the construction of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics). Xinhua Net (新华网). January 21. http://news.xinhuanet.com/ zgjx/2015-01/21/c_133934292.htm. Accessed on: July 19, 2017; Yu, Xiaojie余晓洁and Yujin Shi 施雨岑 (2015). "中国打造新型智库体系重点建设近百个高端智库" (China builds up system of new types of think tanks, will set up close to 100 high-level think tanks). Xinhua Net (新华网). January 21. http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2015-01/21/c_133934323.htm. Accessed April 21, 2017. This goal was also mentioned in the CCP's Thirteenth Five-Year-Plan. Cf. Xinhua News Agency 新华社 (2016). "中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十三个五年 (2016-2020年) 规划纲要" (Outline of the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for the economic and social development of the People's Republic of China (2016-2020)). http://www.sh.xinhuanet.com/2016-03/18/c_135200400.htm. Accessed April 21, 2017.

27 | Cf. Chen, Ansheng 陈安生 (2016). "反腐败是一场阶级斗争" (The fight against corruption is a class struggle). June, 6. http://www.kunlunce.cn/ssjj/guojipinglun/2016-06-15/104516.html. Accessed: March 7, 2017.

28 | Cf. China's Political System 2017: 46-49

29 | For a concise introduction to "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" and the CCP's approach to Marxist dialectics see "China's Political System" 2017: 49-56

30 | See for example Callahan, William (2012). China: The Pessoptimist Nation. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 79.

31 | CCP News Net 中国共产党新闻网 (2015). "中国共产党统一战线工作条例 (试行)" (Trial Regulations for the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work). People's Net (人民网), September 23. http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2015/0923/c64107-27622040.html. Accessed: July 19, 2017. For a general overview cf. Cadre Bureau of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China中共中央宣传部干部局组织 (2006). 新时期宣传思想工作. (New era of propaganda and ideological work). Beijing: Xuexi Chubanshe.

32 | CCP News Net 中国共产党新闻网 (2012). "人民日报：用大众化方式推进理论大众化" (People's Daily: popularize the theory using massification measures). September 27. http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2012/0927/

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42 | In collaboration with Daniela Stockman, see acknowledgments.

43 | The clusters contained in the survey are 毛粉, 美分, 带路党 自干五, 愤青, and 新左派.

44 | The following categories were used for coding: "West," "party-state," "market economy," "societal structure," "official party line connotation." Within these categories, the qualitative answers were coded "negative," "positive," and "neutral." For more detailed information see the appendix.

45 | Attributes were assigned by drafting a top 10 of the most frequently mentioned terms in the survey.

46 | Our interviewees proposed including the following additional clusters: 全球派 (Globalists), 法西斯派 (Fascists), 自由派 (Liberals), 新自由派 (Neo-Liberals), 新儒家 (Neo-Confucianists), 中国模式派 (China Modelists), and 工业党 (Industrialist Party). English translations added by the authors of this study.

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115 | To this end, we limit the understanding of "party-state ideology" to arguments voiced by people and institutions directly affiliated with the party-state and its propaganda apparatus (i.e. political leaders, CCP bodies, party-state media or journalists working for these media). There is, however, no clear-cut distinction between party-state on the one hand and society on the other, as many party members may and do influence online debates in their private capacity. At the same time, different ideological clusters identified in society also extend into party-state ranks, where different groups struggle for their own interests and ideas, including by mobilizing outside constituencies. Cf. Göbel, Christian (2016). "Co-Producing Authoritarian Resilience: E-participation and Regime Performance in China." RESPONSIVENESS Working Paper 05/2016, University of Vienna.
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118 | This is what Eva Pils, for instance, describes with regard to human rights lawyers. In search of safer communications channels such as the encrypted messaging apps Telegram and Signal, they are creating their own, private echo chambers where discussions are detached from any of the public debates that can be observed in forums (cf. Pils, Eva (2016). "The '709 Incident:' Some Testimony from the Human Rights Lawyer Community." China Change, July 8. https://chinachange.org/2016/07/08/the-709-incident-some-testimony-from-the-human-rights-lawyer-community/. Accessed: February 2, 2017.
119 | Besides Weibo, online platforms or so-called bulletin board systems (BBS) have continued to be highly popular for more in-depth and specific debates among urban netizens. Cf. Wang, Chunzhi and Benjamin Bates (2008). "Online Public Sphere and Democracy in China." http://web.cci.utk.edu/~bates/papers/iamcr08-wang-bates-publics.pdf. Accessed: February 3, 2017.
120 | According to the "echo chamber hypothesis," social media platforms reinforce existing ideological cleavages in society. This study suggests that the "echo chamber" effect depends very much on the respective social platform. Cf. DiFonzo, Nicholas (2009). The Watercooler Effect: An Indispensable Guide to Understanding and Harnessing the Power of Rumors. New York: Penguin.
How far this hypothesis is applicable to China's highly state-controlled media environment has been widely discussed in recent years, with scholars split between those emphasizing the increasing "group polarization" due to segregated online spaces and those praising internet forums as the only spaces where people of different ideological leaning can exchange views in China's authoritarian setting. Cf. Xin Wenjuan and Han Lai Han (2015). "群体极化视域下网络舆情的演化机制研究——以微博网民讨论"浙江温岭杀医案"为例. " (A Study on the Evolution Mechanism of Network Public Opinion from the Perspective of Group Polarization - A Case Study of the "Wenling Killing Case" on Weibo, China). Journal of Intelligence, 34 (2): 47-5; Wei, He (2016): Networked Public: Social Media and Social Change in Contemporary China, Berlin: Springer.
121 | The four case studies cannot provide a representative picture of Chinese online media debates. The approach used here could, however, be replicated and further expanded to a broader set of policy debates to assess the relative weight of ideological clusters more comprehensively.
122 | Cf. Ramzy, Austin (2016). "KFC Targeted in Protests Over South China Sea." July 19. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/20/world/asia/south-china-sea-protests-kfc.html?_r=0. Accessed: February 10, 2017; Zhao, Yashan 赵雅珊 (2016). "肯德基再遭中国网民抵制背后：爱国该怎么爱" (The background of Chinese netizen's KFC boycott: to what extent should you "love your country?"). BBC Chinese (BBC 中文网). http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/institutional-38652839. Accessed: February 10, 2017.
123 | Numbers indicate position in our dataset. We use these instead of real names for the sake of anonymizing the quotes.
124 | The CYL was and is under political pressure due to negative results during the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection's visit. It seems that Xi wants to sideline their influence and therefore it may be a necessity to actively display loyalty. Cf. Hornby, Lucy (2016). "China Party Scales Back Communist Youth League." Financial Times. August 3. https://www.ft.com/content/92412b4e-593a-11e6-9f70-badea1b336d4. Accessed: February 10, 2017.
125 | Cf. Shen, Simon and Shaun Breslin (2010). Online Chinese Nationalism and China's Bilateral Relations. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
126 | For further explanation on the "Big V" phenomenon cf. Shi-Kupfer, Kristin and Yi Zhu (2013). "'V-Leute' im Rampenlicht – Chinas virtuelle Meinungsmacht und ihre Macher." MERICS China Monito, 1, 2013. https://www.merics.org/fileadmin/templates/download/china-monitor/2013-11-18/china-monitor-v-leute.pdf. Accessed: February 9, 2017.
127 | See post No. 121 dated January 30, 2015 on Tianya in our sample.
128 | Wong, Edward (2016). "China Puts a Tycoon, Ren Zhiqiang, on Probation for Criticizing Policies." May 2. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/world/asia/china-ren-zhiqiang.html?_r=0. Accessed: February 9, 2017.

129 | Post from Ren Zhiqiang, January 19, 2016 on Weibo; Freedom House (2016). "Outspoken Social-Media Commentators Purged After Xi Speech." China Media Bulletin. 113. March. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/CMB113_English-FINAL.pdf. Accessed: February 9, 2017.

130 | Gong Wen龚雯, Zhifeng Xu 许志峰and Qiuyu Wu 吴秋余 (2016). "开局首季问大势——权威人士谈当前中国经" (Asked for the general trend of the first quarter – authoritative person talks about the current Chinese economy). People's Daily (人民日报). May 9. http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2016-05/09/nw.D110000renmrb_20160509_6-01.htm Accessed: February 9, 2017.

131 | Based on the content of the post and due to the anonymity of most bloggers, it is impossible to differentiate between "50-cent bloggers" (五毛党) paid by the state and those committed citizens spreading the party's voice on their own (自干五). As the effect on online debates remains the same, all articles by non-party-state affiliated authors reiterating party-state ideology were coded as "Party Warriors."

132 | Relevant posts were selected from the Weiboscope repository of censored Weibo posts, using identical keywords and timeframe as those of the original Weibo crawling. Given that Weiboscope does not cover the full range of Sina Weibo content, the number of relevant censored posts was likely higher. Just like the original dataset, Weiboscope data also includes the number of comments and likes a post had received at the moment of deletion, thus making it possible to identify the most influential censored posts in quantitative terms.

133 | King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E Roberts (2013). "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." American Political Science Review, 107 (2): 1-18.

134 | Based on our knowledge about ideological clusters identified above, we tried to match Top 20 posts with ideological clusters based on their content and context (mainly through background research on the author and his other posts) wherever possible. About one third of the posts could not be clearly affiliated.

135 | In addition, the fact that the ascriptive term 美分 ("US Fans") is primarily a derogatory label means that Party Warriors would likely use that label for many people coded as Humanists in this study.

136 | Furthermore, the correlation between the two variables "attitude towards nation" and "attitude towards party-state" is positive but low (r = 0.22), which indicates that positive attitudes towards the Chinese nation do not imply support for the CCP's interpretation of patriotism. To test the relation and potential link between the concepts of "loving the country" (爱国) and "loving the party" (爱党), which should be synonymous according to CCP ideology, each Top 20 post was coded with regard to the author's attitude towards, on the one hand, the Chinese nation/China as a country and on the other hand, the Communist Party and/or the party's stated line on the issue at hand.

137 | Gong, Jasmin, Bertram Lang, and Kristin Shi-Kupfer (2016). "Question Not the EU, but the Western System", MERICS China Monitor, 33, http://www.merics.org/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/China-Monitor/MERICS_China_Monitor_33_EU_crisis_in_chinese_media_web.pdf. Accessed: February 17, 2017.

138 | r = 0.76.

139 | Anti-Russian nationalist pressure on the Chinese government is not an entirely new phenomenon, as large-scale online protests surrounding Sino-Russian high-level state visits have shown in recent years. Cf. Luo, Chris (2013). "Chinese Nationalism Flares up Ahead of Xi's Visit to Russia." March 20. South China Morning Post. http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1195286/chinese-nationalism-flares-ahead-xis-visit-russia. Accessed: February 10, 2017.

140 | Cf. Ringen, Stein (2016). The Perfect Dictatorship. China in the 21st Century. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; Anonymous (2016). "China Invents the Digital Totalitarian State." The Economist. December 16. https://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21711902-worrying-implications-its-social-credit-project-china-invents-digital-totalitarian. Accessed: July 25, 2017; Pils, Eva et al. (2016). "Role of Fear?" A China File Conversation, February 18. http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/rule-fear. Accessed: July 25, 2017.

141 | AFP (2016): "'All Chinese Are Bastards' Leads to Daimler Boss Sacking." The Local. November 22. https://www.thelocal.de/20161122/all-chinese-are-bastards-leads-to-mercedes-boss-sacking. Accessed: July 23, 2017; Ye, Josh (2017). "Westerner Stirs Anger in China With Video About His Female Conquests." South China Morning Post. March 15. http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/2078784/westerner-stirs-anger-china-video-about-his-female-conquests. Accessed: July 23, 2017; JAVIER C. Hernandez, Javier C. and Li Cao (2017). "Video of United Airlines Passenger Creates Furor in China, Too." The New York Times. April 11. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/11/world/asia/united-airlines-passenger-dragged-china.html. Accessed: July 28, 2017.

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