'Telling China's Story Well' as propaganda campaign slogan: International, domestic and the pandemic

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Abstract

The article critically examines 'Telling China's Story Well' (TCSW), a popular propaganda campaign slogan proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. Drawing on theories about storytelling and propaganda and using the COVID-19 as a contextualised example, the paper discusses how the slogan was adapted into 'Telling China's Anti-pandemic Story Well' to mobilise domestic and external propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the pandemic. We argue that TCSW should be understood as a well-crafted political watchword which promotes and commands strategic narratives of doing propaganda. It has the rhetorical power to integrate and reinvigorate domestic and external propaganda, and to facilitate their convergence. Adapting this slogan to mobilise propaganda campaigns of national or global importance and interest demonstrates the CCP's ambition to harness strategic storytelling to improve the coherence, effectiveness and reputation of its propaganda at home and abroad.

Keywords

CCP, pandemic, propaganda campaign, slogan, strategic storytelling, Telling China's Story Well

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Introduction

On 19 August 2013, in a speech at the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference, Xi Jinping proposed the notion of 'telling China's story well' (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*, hereafter TCSW), calling on the Party-state media and even quasi-private actors to 'strengthen and innovate external propaganda' by creating 'new concepts, new categories and new expressions' to better send China's voice out to the world (China Media Project, 2021). The notion soon became a popular political slogan and its implementation in different contexts has generated a series of 'storytelling' campaigns, such as 'telling the story of China's 'One Belt One Road' well', 'telling the story of China's poverty alleviation well' and 'telling China's anti-pandemic story well'.

As a top-down, nationwide initiative, TCSW has drawn extensive media and scholarly attention in the last decade. Western media widely see it as 'China's audacious global propaganda campaign', through which the CCP aims to attract international audiences and reshape the US-dominated global information environment (Lim and Bergin, 2018). Critical China studies scholars argue that the 'narrative propaganda' campaign has deployed 'a full spectrum of technologically enabled propaganda' in order to 'influence narratives on matters of national importance' to China (DiResta et al., 2020: 47). Extant discussion and research on TCSW largely focus on the outward-going dimension of this campaign (Brown, 2020; Huang and Wang, 2019). The campaign's domestic dimension has yet to be paid sufficient attention, which hinders understanding of the overall political objectives of the CCP-led initiative for propaganda.

When TCSW was first proposed by Xi in 2013, it stressed the aspect of 'external propaganda' (*wai xuan*) to enhance China's international discursive power and image building. However, in practice, when non-state actors beyond the Party-state media were encouraged to participate in the campaign, the target audiences were not necessarily international audiences but domestic Chinese. As Professor Chen Xianhong, the academic advisor of the annual 'Tell China's Stories' Contest since 2019, commented, TCSW should realise the convergence of 'top-down communication' and 'participatory communication,' as well as the convergence of 'internal communication' and 'external communication' (Chen and Song, 2019). TCSW serves both external and domestic propaganda in its implementation due to the participation of various state and non-state storytelling actors. This paper aims to fill the gap in English academic literature and media coverage on TCSW by looking at both the internal and external dimensions of the campaign. We use 'telling China's anti-pandemic story well' (hereafter TCAPSW) as a contextualised example to demonstrate its double dimensions and political implications.

Xi Jinping proposed TCAPSW in a speech about tackling the coronavirus outbreak in February 2020. He emphasised that state media in doing international communication must 'take the initiative to lead and effectively influence international public opinion' by 'proactively responding to the international concerns' and 'telling China's anti-pandemic story well' (Xi, 2020). In its implementation, TCAPSW had also become a slogan to guide domestic propaganda and generated a lot of storytelling practices targeting domestic audiences. It thus provides an ideal case study to understand the practices and politics of the TCSW.

In the following, we will first critically review storytelling and propaganda with a particular focus on China. We will then examine the case study of TCAPSW. Finally, we will conclude the paper by arguing that TCSW should be understood as a well-crafted political slogan which promotes and commands strategic narratives of doing propaganda. TCSW has the rhetorical power to integrate and reinvigorate domestic and external propaganda, and to facilitate their convergence. Adapting this slogan to mobilise propaganda campaigns of national or global importance and interest demonstrates the CCP's ambition to harness strategic storytelling to improve the coherence, effectiveness and reputation of its propaganda at home and abroad.

Storytelling and propaganda

The political potency of storytelling has been widely recognised and studied. Storytelling has the power to elicit sympathy, mobilise official actions against social wrongs, help construct new collective identities, provide counternarratives to the dominant discourse and more (Polletta and Lee, 2006). Fernandes (2017) argues that curated storytelling 'has extended deep into contemporary social life and political culture and institutions'. Stories can be utilised as a craft for pursuing transformative social changes by different actors, such as philanthropists, advocates and social movements.

Storytelling has long been seen as an effective way for doing propaganda (Piechota, 2020). As a form of communication that attempts to persuade the public and influence their attitudes and behaviours to further the intent of the propagandist (DeVito, 1986; Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018), propaganda requires effective communicative qualities and techniques to win the hearts and minds of the recipients. In propaganda activities, 'stories' include various forms of narratives, such as news, autobiography, folk tale, novel, poem, etc. The media formats for propaganda storytelling are also diverse, including print, audio-visual materials, theatre, speech and so on.

In China, storytelling has a long tradition of being used for nation building, propaganda and political mobilisation. At the turn of the 20th century, Liang Qichao – pioneer of China's New Culture Movement (1915–1923) – in his seminal article titled 'On the Relationship between Fiction and Mass Governance', elevated the status of fiction to that of a key tool for achieving national salvation (Chen, 2018: 30). He criticised the stale repertoire of the imperial state's old-style narrative fiction genre as contributing to the doping of the masses with poison and called for vernacular-style 'political fictions' to enlighten the Chinese people (Liang, 1996: 79). As the experienced editor of a few premier newspapers (1895–1922), Liang is arguably the first propagandist in China who incorporated news propaganda using vernacular language into political reform and believed in 'saving the nation with public opinion' (*yulun jiuguo*) (Li, 2019). His propaganda thoughts – which underscored the educational function of newspapers in 'moistening people's minds silently' for the purpose of enlightenment and cultivation into modern citizens – greatly influenced the propaganda thoughts of Mao Zedong and the propaganda activities of the CCP.

Since its establishment in 1921, the CCP has attached high attention to the roles of literature and arts in telling socialist stories for propaganda and political mobilisation. Mao Zedong, in his famous Yan'an talk for artists and writers in 1942, called for literary

and artistic workers to engage in creative work for common people (the workers, peasants and soldiers), to reflect positive socialist reality in their works and to transform people into conforming and contributing socialist subjects (McDougall and Louie, 1997). Folk artisans were also organised and educated to help the CCP achieve its goals. For example, in early 1945 the CCP established The Storytelling Group of the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region Cultural Association, which aimed to remould local folk storytellers and their stories to serve the CCP's propaganda and mass education in their everyday performance (Hung, 1993).

The forms and tactics of CCP's political storytelling have been evolving alongside the development of media technologies and changes in audience reception, achieving more effective propaganda effects. To give an example, 'transmedia storytelling' (Jenkins, 2008) has been used to better target the young generation with anti-Japanese war stories for patriotic edutainment. The 'Red Classic' anti-Japanese war film *The Tunnel War* – released in 1965 – was adapted into a children's animation in 2015 (Vanderstaay, 2017). In 2005, the Chinese Communist Youth League, in cooperation with an online gaming firm, developed an educational online game for young players, titled *Anti-Japan War Online* (China Daily, 2005).

As discussed, the CCP has a long tradition of doing propaganda using various genres and mediums of storytelling. However, it is Xi Jinping who first elevated storytelling to a strategic height by proposing TCSW. The initiative mainly aims to reform China's state-led external propaganda which is widely criticised as inauthentic, unreliable and propagandist in nature by Western governments and audiences (Brown, 2020). Xi's call to tell China's story well for external propaganda echoes with the global trend of public diplomacy with an emphasis on narrative strategies. Hedling (2020) examines storytelling in EU public diplomacy using a campaign on social media conducted by the European External Action Service (EEAS) as a case study. She argues that narrative strategies on social media could 'tap into the power of dramaturgy and visual elements to mediate emotions and identity in international politics.' Rachel Gandin Mark, Program Director of the American Film Showcase (AFS), the premier film and TV diplomacy program of the US government, said in an interview: 'Some of our country's biggest diplomatic challenges today stem from conflicting global narratives. Film and TV, when produced with authenticity and nuance, have the potential to complicate narrative and reveal a shared human experience' (Roemer, 2019). This demonstrates that the world's major political powers have all realised the importance of the art of storytelling in global communication and public diplomacy. As John Hartley (2023: 74) astutely observed, 'theories of narrative and discourse have become crucial to strategic statecraft.' He argued that in the digital era the deployment of strategic stories is no longer solely relied on by the state, but 'statecraft' should also involve the 'entire noosphere', including civil society, corporate entities and the market (Hartley, 2023: 73).

The state initiative of TCSW is, using Hartley's words, one such 'strategic statecraft' which tries to incorporate the 'entire noosphere' to serve the CCP's propaganda. From an initial focus on external propaganda, the campaign has developed its domestic dimension via implementation in various contexts. The following section uses the TCAPSW as a contextualised example to examine how the external and internal dimensions of propaganda work together to fulfil the CCP's propaganda agenda in crisis.

Method

In China's Party-guided and state-funded research system in social sciences, important speeches, instructions and policy statements from top leadership usually inspire scholars in public universities, government-affiliated research institutes and think tanks to conduct research and publish. These research outputs, usually published in Chinese academic journals, target domestic researchers and policy makers; further interpret these official instructions, perspectives and policies or discuss how they are successfully applied in practice using case studies; and offer policy or practical recommendations. Although lacking a critical perspective, these publications provide important empirical sources from which we can gain a deeper understanding of the top-level instructions, policies and their implementations, as well as concrete practices generated by such implementations at various levels.

To understand the implementation and practice of TCAPSW, we searched academic journal articles that contained the keywords '*jianghao kangyi gushi*', the Chinese translation of TCAPSW, from China National Knowledge Infrastruture (CNKI) (http://www.cnki.net/index/), which owns the largest full-text database of Chinese journals published in China. When we did the search on 20 May 2023, 91 articles had been published from March 2020 to January 2023. We read each article and identified and categorised concrete practices of TCAPSW discussed in them. In doing this we did not aim to comprehensively review the Chinese academic literature on the topic. Instead, we wanted to collect representative examples of TCAPSW for our critical analysis of the nationwide storytelling campaign through the authors' discussions, arguments and findings.

Among the 91 articles, 25 discussed external-oriented storytelling in the pandemic. The other 66 discussed internal-oriented storytelling practices. In the following, we will analyse the two dimensions of TCAPSW to understand who participated in the campaign, what they did, through what means and for what purposes. We not only refer to the practices mentioned in the selected articles but also refer to practices that are reported by Chinese or English media. We endeavour to map the storytelling networks that contain multiple storytelling players and channels for achieving the CCP's propaganda agenda in the pandemic. Our critical analysis also aims to shed light on understandings of the practices and politics of TCSW beyond the pandemic context.

International dimension

Since 2008, the Chinese government has pushed the 'going global' of China's state media to boost their global influence and China's soft power (Thussu et al., 2017). China's state media have been playing the most important role in challenging the monopoly of US-dominated media discourses on China and endeavour to make China's voices heard globally (Zhang, 2010). Hu (2020) wrote an article summarising the work of the China Media Group (CMG) in international communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to him, China Global Television Network (CGTN) under CMG broadcast news about China's fight against COVID-19 in 44 languages through its TV channels and online platforms. In addition to the intensity of coverage, he concludes some communication strategies applied by CGTN. First, proactively combating the anti-China

discourses by citing authoritative and scientific sources. For example, Dr Richard Horton, editor-in-chief of The Lancet, and Dr Peter Forster, internationally renowned geneticist at the University of Cambridge, were interviewed to refute China as the origin of COVID-19 using scientific evidence. Second, using personal storytelling to build empathy and enhance authenticity. For example, CGNT interviewed some foreigners who lived in China during the pandemic to tell their own experiences and comment on China's COVID-19 control strategy. Third, proactively expressing China's voices on mainstream media overseas. More than 100 Chinese or foreign journalists working for CMG refuted anti-China sentiment and insulting remarks about China by accepting interviews with and being a guest on news programmes or providing news articles for overseas media. Fourth, using 'outflanking tactics' for communication. This means to collaborate with and utilise media in countries that have good diplomatic relations with China, such as some African and Middle Eastern countries, to help break the monopoly of Western media over global public opinion.

The state media also actively used Western social media platforms that are blocked in China, such as Twitter (X), YouTube and Facebook, for TCAPSW, such as Xinhua News Agency's official Twitter (X) account (Tan and Ma, 2021). Moreover, English-language media in some metropolitan cities, such as Shanghai and Shenzhen, also fulfilled their local-level external propaganda role to report local COVID-19 stories (Dong and Deng, 2020; Information Office of Shanghai Municipality, 2020). Both the central and local English media emphasised the importance of telling ordinary people's 'heartwarming' stories in the pandemic for building empathy and being transparent to gain credibility among global audiences.

A few papers specifically discuss the strategic use of foreigners in TCAPSW. Engaging foreigners for persuasive purposes is not a new practice in the CCP's history. For example, towards the end of the Second Sino–Japanese War in 1944, the CCP invited a press party group that included six journalists from the US, Great Britain and Soviet Union to the Yan'an headquarters of the CCP. The foreign journalists gave highly favourable reports based on their visit and helped to promote a positive image of the CCP internationally (Brady, 2003: 58–59). In the pandemic, the role of foreigners in helping with external propaganda has been underscored, especially those foreign influencers (*laowai wanghong*) who are based in China and have many followers on both Chinese and Western social media platforms (Information Office of Shanghai Municipality, 2020). Wu and Wu (2021) argue that these influencers can tell China's stories from 'the others' perspective' and help increase the authenticity and persuasiveness of China's stories in international communication. Though this is widely seen as an innovation of China's external propaganda by scholars in China, it is criticised as a part of the CCP's 'decentralised disinformation campaign', which aims to manipulate global public opinion by spreading pro-China digital media information (Wallis and Zhang, 2021).

In addition to the media, either state level, local level or 'self-media' run by foreign influencers, we noticed that non-media players were also mobilised to participate in the TCAPSW campaign. Chinese embassies and overseas cultural and tourism organisations sponsored by the Chinese government were required to introduce and share China's successful experiences of controlling COVID-19 and providing humanitarian support to overseas Chinese and people in local countries in the pandemic (Ministry of Culture and

Tourism, 2020). All these actions were labelled as TCAPSW and aimed to gain international support and build China's responsible global image. Thus, the international dimension of TCAPSW was not limited to traditional international communications conducted by China's outward-facing state media, but also contained various humanitarian, cultural and public diplomacy activities organised by state-affiliated organisations overseas. Both media and non-media actors worked together to strengthen external propaganda for the purpose of enhancing China's global discourse power and national image in the pandemic.

Domestic dimension

From the beginning of the 21st century, the Chinese government has gradually realised that proactive and effective communication with the public in times of crisis is pivotal to preserve, even enhance, the credibility of the government, guide the direction of public opinion, defuse public discontent and avoid potential social panic and unrest (Xu, 2016; Xu and Sun, 2021). During the pandemic, the state media at various levels covered COVID-19 using traditional and online channels. The death toll, infected numbers, preventative measures, quarantine policies, etc were reported in a timely manner. On the other hand, various propaganda forms and persuasion techniques were applied to mobilise public sentiment to unite and support the CCP's anti-pandemic work.

For example, CMG and some other state media produced anti-pandemic TV dramas under the call of the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). These TV dramas aimed to use 'small story to tell big truth' in the pandemic. Touching, dedicated and uplifting stories of medical workers, police, community workers, volunteers and ordinary people were featured to reflect the unity and resolve of the Chinese people in crisis (Liu, 2021). Documentaries, animations, movies and songs were also produced and broadcast to achieve the same goals (Xu et al., 2023). Representing these selected 'good stories' in artistic and affective ways was framed as TCAPSW and helped to persuade the public to stay positive, unite as one and trust the government to combat the pandemic.

TCAPSW has gone beyond the guidelines for media propaganda and has further permeated into 'ideological and political education' (*sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu*), especially at the university level. Seventeen articles among the 66 on TCAPSW in China discussed how to incorporate TCAPSW into classes of ideological and political education. Ideological and political education is defined as 'a social practice in which a society or a social group uses certain ideas, concepts, political views and moral norms to improve students' ideology and enable them to form ideological and moral qualities that confirm to the social status quo' (Jiang et al., 2019: 67). It constituted an important part of the CCP's propaganda campaign in the pandemic, through which the CCP could mobilise and educate young people – the most politically active social group – to identify with China's anti-pandemic policies, and turn the crisis into an educational opportunity to influence students' political views and moral outlooks.

Scholars also argue that 'good stories' that occurred during the pandemic could be utilised as great examples for patriotic education in class (Li and Wang, 2020). Wang (2020) categorises these good stories into four categories: good stories that demonstrate 'socialist core values', such as the dedication of frontline medical staff; good stories of

observing discipline and policies, such as obeying the quarantine policy; good stories that demonstrate patriotic spirit, such as donations from overseas Chinese; good stories that show advantages of China's socialist system and governance, such as the efficient top-down, command-style implementation of the 'zero Covid' policy. Scholars also point out effective ways of telling these good stories to students, such as using digital storytelling, livestreaming, animation and so on (Ma, 2021).

Many schools, universities and communities organised public speech contests on the theme of TCAPSW. Anti-pandemic heroes, such as frontline medical workers and CCP members, were invited to give public speeches in the name of TCAPSW and carrying forward the anti-pandemic spirit. Public speaking has a long history of being used in propaganda (Graves, 1941; Johnson, 1939). Speakers try to persuade, mobilise and influence their immediate audiences by telling stories with emotion and logic. This propaganda model compliments the vertical and unidirectional form of persuasive communication conducted by mass media and co-opts the public to physically engage in propaganda through storytelling and story-listening. Although participation in such events is usually organised and directed, it has some characteristics of 'participatory propaganda' – that is, to actively engage the target audience 'in the spread of persuasive communications' to achieve 'the desired intent of the propagandist' (Wanless and Berk, 2022: 113).

As discussed, TCAPSW also commanded domestic journalistic and propaganda practices in the pandemic. It emphasised how to narrate and utilise 'good stories' in media, in classrooms and in everyday life to shape people's perceptions and manipulate their cognitions to gain their trust and support. Telling uplifting and touching stories helped the CCP mobilise nationalist sentiments in a time of crisis. The rise of individuals' national emotions in health crises, according to Fiedler and Tagespiegel (2020), can trigger greater cohesion within countries and hostility between countries. Such consequences assisted the CCP to gain public support in policy making and social governance domestically and shifted the focus of contention from domestic problems to Western countries that held competing views with China.

Conclusion

By studying the TCAPSW as a contextualised example of TCSW, this article aims to bring the domestic dimension of TCSW back to English academia and media and call for a holistic understanding of the state-led narrative campaign. We argue that TCSW should be understood as a well-crafted political slogan that promotes and commands strategic narratives of doing propaganda in China's Xi era. Without having a concrete subject, TCSW could be interpreted as the responsibility of various agencies, from the government, state media and civil society to ordinary people, calling for their commitment and loyalty in creating and spreading good stories about China. TCSW is easy to remember and emotionally engaging and can help depoliticise the very political and ideological term 'propaganda'. More importantly, it could help break the boundary of the domestic and external propaganda spheres, which have long been seen as different in China. With the dramatic changes to the global communication environment in the digital age, the information gap inside and outside China has been significantly reduced. This requires the CCP to treat domestic and external propaganda as an organic whole to ensure their

reliability and effectiveness. TCSW has the rhetorical power to integrate the two dimensions of propaganda and facilitate their convergence.

As shown in our case study, neither the internal nor external storytelling (propaganda) practices under the umbrella of TCAPSW are novel and both exist beyond the pandemic context. What is more important is how the political watchword TCSW has been strategically adapted into TCPSW to encapsulate various journalistic and propaganda practices targeting domestic and international audiences in the pandemic to achieve the Party's political objectives. Sloganeering TCSW itself is a propaganda project for the purpose of integrating and reinvigorating the CCP's propaganda work. Adapting this inclusive and adjustable slogan to mobilise propaganda campaigns on crucial agendas, such as the One Belt One Road initiative, and China's Winter Olympic Games, demonstrates the CCP's ambition to harness strategic storytelling to improve the coherence, effectiveness and reputation of its propaganda at home and abroad.

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