Lisa Richaud, “The Effects of Propaganda in the Chinese Authoritarian Regime – The Case of Chinese University Students”


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Abstract

While scholars have emphasised the ongoing importance of propaganda in the Chinese authoritarian regime (Brady, 2009), its efficiency has been more assumed than empirically observed from the standpoint of the individuals. The objective of this paper is twofold. First, it intends to examine the effects of propaganda on university students. Second, it thereby intends to propose a re-conceptualisation of propaganda, combining a macro-level approach with micro-sociological analysis. Defining propaganda as “the attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and thereby, behavior” (Kenez, 1985), I hypothesize that its efficiency do not consist in persuasion and positive inculcation of values it seems to convey. Instead, the influence of propaganda is rather negative, resulting in depoliticisation and disempowerment. Data is provided by a two months fieldwork I conducted in Beijing in 2009-2010, consisting of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with Chinese students. The paper is organised as follows: First, it focuses on the effects of political education, a form of propaganda directly imposed to university students. Through an interpretation of respondents' perceptions, I demonstrate that while political education fails as a means of inculcation, students' sceptical attitudes paradoxically lead to indifference towards the relation of domination. Second, I argue that propaganda is therefore not reducible to a tool of persuasion and inculcation. Beyond political education or other tangible and external forms, propaganda should be regarded as an order of discourse, in which omissions and silences matter as much as messages. Such discursive order establishes norms which are internalised and reproduced by individuals through socialisation process and social interactions.

Introduction

Since Tiananmen Square protests, the Chinese political system has managed to overcome the legitimacy crisis and strengthen the popular consent to authoritarian rule.1 While the success of market liberalisation has sometimes been regarded as the sole source of legitimacy (Zhao, 2009), the means of legitimation used by the CCP (hereafter CCP) are not reducible to the economic performance. Despite the assertions about an alleged decline of the Propaganda State due to the fading of Marxist-Leninist ideology (Lynch, 1999a, 1999b ; Shambaugh, 2007), recent works have stressed the ongoing importance of mass persuasion or propaganda to the maintenance of the regime (Brady, 2008). The CCP has worked towards the modernisation of the Propaganda State, adapting its methods of thought control in order to persuade the Chinese population that authoritarian rule is most suitable.

These recent works have partially filled the vacuum to what remains a relatively understudied object.2 However, scarce attention has been given to the reception of propaganda work. Thus, its efficiency remains more assumed than empirically observed. Students of Post-1989 Chinese propaganda have examined the production and circulation of different forms of media discourse using a top-down approach. Challenging the existing research on Chinese propaganda, I argue that its effects still need to be demonstrated. If propaganda is defined as “the attempt to
transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and thereby behavior” (Kenez, 1985: 4), then does the transmission process actually result in the internalisation of propaganda messages by individuals? The question is far from settled.

The objective of this paper is twofold. First, it intends to examine empirically the effects of propaganda by taking the case of students from different universities in Beijing. Second, it thereby attempts to propose a re-conceptualisation of propaganda, combining macro-sociological analysis. The logic of “variable analysis” that would consist in identifying and isolating propaganda as the “independent variable” and behaviours as dependent variables is purposively precluded. Instead, I consider that its influence should be studied qualitatively, directly in the actors' contexts of experience. This methodological necessity has roots in the complexity and the difficulties to circumscribe the boundaries of propaganda. In China, the first noticeable feature of propaganda lies within its omnipresent visibility in public spaces. Scrolls (tiaofu) and billboards (xuanchuan zhuanglan) around playgrounds, residential communities or schools, television screens in public transports transmit and shape political messages. Despite this ostensible symbolic interference of the political power, propaganda can hardly be reduced to what presents itself under the name of propaganda. Slogans claiming “Build the Harmonious Society” (Goujian hexie shehui) or “Build Socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Jianshe Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi) hung in front of skyscrapers under construction are suggesting an interpretation of the urban landscape, which in return embodies the “construction of socialism”. Such extensive conception of propaganda stresses its elusive dimension. Having said that, it is required, as a Western scholar, to be conscious of one's representations and avoid postulating that which attracts our attention has equal importance in the eyes of the local population. Furthermore, the researcher needs to enter the field being aware of possibly deceiving appearances of propaganda, whose pervasive presence could be a make-believe in its efficiency. Hence, one has to clarify the theoretical posture regarding the recipients of official discourse. On the one hand, it is assumed that all the individuals are not subject to propaganda in the same way. On the other hand, the discourse-subject relationship is neither linear nor monologic: the individual has to be “conceived as already constituted in other discourse formations and social relations” (Morley, 1980: 161).

The focus on university students is relevant in several respects. During the 1980's, Chinese youth has been described as “radical” (jijin) and “idealist” (lixiang zhuyi) (Chen, 2002 ; Xiao, 2008). Since 1989, in the context of increased market liberalisation and consumption society, the following generations of university students have been depicted as “pragmatic” (wushi), materialistic and poorly interested in political matters (Xiao, 2008: 144-145). Such representations of Chinese youth are held true both in common discourse and scientific literature (Rosen, 2004), and have been reinforced by the absence of overt political protest. Beside the influence of social and economic evolutions, the propaganda apparatus has apparently contributed to these changes in behaviours, and to shaping the relationship to the political. In this regard, the CCP have maintained the imposition of political education, a peculiar form of propaganda, in secondary schools and universities. Due to the aforementioned pervasiveness and somehow elusive dimension of propaganda, it was necessary to focus on actors whose exposure to propaganda discourse could be directly observed. Meanwhile, Chinese university students have access to discourse and knowledge that might come in contradiction with official propaganda. The existence of incompressible and growing spaces over which the political power has less control creates a paradoxical situation, justifying to address the effects of propaganda. I hypothesise that the efficiency of propaganda do not consist in persuasion and positive inculcation of values it seems to convey. Instead, its influence is rather negative, resulting in depoliticisation and disempowerment. Depoliticisation is here considered as a discourse on a lack of interest for politics, and more importantly, a significant weakness of political expression in everyday life and interactions. Disempowerment is retroactively construed as the feeling of incapacity to influence or act towards the political power.
Following the presentation of theoretical framework and methods guiding this research, the remainder of the paper is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the effects of political education. Through an interpretation of respondents' perceptions, I demonstrate that while political education fails as a means of persuasion, students' sceptical attitudes paradoxically lead to indifference towards the relation of domination. In the second part, I argue that propaganda is therefore not reducible to a tool of persuasion or ideological inculcation. Beyond political education or other tangible and external forms, propaganda should be regarded as an order of discourse, in which omissions and silences matter as much as messages. Such discursive order establishes norms which are internalised and reproduced by individuals through socialisation process and social interactions.

**Theoretical Framework**

In order to take full account of the complexity of the object of inquiry, this theoretical framework is built upon interdisciplinarity, bringing together concepts from different fields in social sciences, from mainstream political science to Cultural Studies and interactionist sociology. The aim is to combine macro considerations of propaganda with a micro-level approach of its effects.

As it is hardly detachable from the underlying political setting, Chinese propaganda is viewed through the lens of authoritarianism. This concept as defined by Juan Linz (2000) lays emphasis on the weak ideological dimension of this category of regime, along with the endeavours to create a popular political apathy. Contrasting with the ambitions of totalitarian systems to organise the “total politicization of society” (Linz, 2000: 66), authoritarianism rather organises the depoliticisation of the population. During the totalitarian phase of the Chinese political system, the Propaganda State (Kenez, 1985) can be seen, from a functionalist perspective, as a means for mass politicisation and mobilisation. In the contemporary authoritarian setting, total politicisation and mobilisation are no longer the purpose of propaganda, which is mostly utilised in order to ensure stability and legitimacy by using other means than solely coercion or repression. Certainly, discourse on political apathy and depoliticisation are charged with normative significance, as it refers to a loss of interest in politics. Furthermore, aside from their conceptual inaccuracy, such phenomena remain hardly observed on empirical grounds. Nonetheless, I argue that depoliticisation can be relevant to the analysis of Chinese propaganda if otherwise construed. From a top-down standpoint, despite the maintenance of political education, the apparent absence of state-organised political mobilisation confirms the significance of depoliticisation attempts as an “authoritarian dispositif” (Vairel & Zaki, 2011). In reverse, from a bottom-up perspective, instead of taking depoliticisation as a synonym for political apathy or disinterest in politics, I rather define it as a discourse on a lack of interest for politics, and more importantly, scarce political expression in everyday life and social interactions. In that sense, depoliticisation is closer to what Eliasoph (1997, 1998) has termed the “work of avoiding politics”.

As propaganda seeks “to transmit social and political values” (Kenez, 1985: 4), it contributes to establish and perpetuate the order of discourse and render diverging discourses unacceptable or irrational to the recipients. The Foucauldian concept implies that “the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.” (Foucault, 1981: 52) The use of Foucault's work enables to highlight the incongruousness of political expression within the discursive normative framework underpinning social experience. In the mean time, discourse is not taken here in its linguistic dimension, but is rather considered as a discursive and social practice (Fairclough, 1992), “produced, circulated, distributed, consumed in society” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000) and that might be studied in the actors' interactional context (Goffman, 1959 ; Goffman, 1969).
These considerations somehow thicken the initial definition of propaganda borrowed from Kenez's work, and provide further theoretical shifts. Traditionally, the transmission of messages aiming at influencing people's behaviours has been apprehended either as crowd-psychological stimuli (LeBon, 1895) or, more recently, through the lenses of social psychological theories of individual cognitive schemes inherent to the process of persuasion (Zajonc, 1968; Cacioppo & Petty, 1986; Boehm, 1994). Taken as a straightforward recipient-stimulus relationship, persuasion is viewed as a "communication-induced attitude change" (Cacioppo & Petty, 1986: 125). Propaganda is often equated or at least associated with persuasion (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2002). It has sometimes been described as a form of "organized persuasion" (DeVito, 1986: 239). However, other scholars have insisted on the fact that the concepts are not one and the same (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2011; Markova, 2008) but remain two different types of communication. I side with this latter view, according to which "propaganda employs persuasive strategies, but it differs from persuasion in purpose" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2011: 2). Indeed, as Markova (2008: 39) puts it, "propaganda is part of the whole structure and process of institutions. Institutions have much broader aims than changing people's minds. [...] propaganda may help the institution to maintain the existing status quo". To a certain extent, this study also seeks to address the persuasive effects of propaganda. References to social psychological theories such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Cacioppo & Petty, 1986) or cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Aronson, 1997) are conducive to illuminating the individual's active involvement in the process of reception. However, this type of social psychological concepts are plagued by their universalistic and decontextualised approach to persuasion. For one of my basic assumptions is that the individuals are not exposed to propaganda in like manner, the sociological dimension of persuasion has to be brought back into the analysis. Indeed, as asserted by scholars in the field Cultural Studies (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980), reception has roots in the peculiar social context underpinning the actors' experience. Therefore, the process of persuasion should not be considered without an understanding of the recipients' "meaning structures" (Hall, 1980).

Insofar as propaganda is viewed as establishing an order of discourse, its influence cannot be analysed only in terms of persuasion. I advocate to look beyond the conception of propaganda as transmission of value-laden messages aiming at persuading the recipients. In other words, propaganda should not be reduced to its didactic aspects. Instead, the notion of order implies that the object of the transmission does not only reside within the discourse or messages per se. Propaganda puts forth what can and cannot be expressed both through discourse and omissions or silences lying behind the messages. In that sense, the effort to transmit norms might rather be conceptualised as state-organised political socialisation than as persuasion. Political socialisation might not be construed as "a univocal and essentially didactic process, but as a notion referring to a plurality of learnings and acquisitions, of which combination can only be seized in the individual" (Lagroye, 1994: 130). The extension of this theoretical framework to this concept enables to trace out the invisible aspect of what propaganda attempts to transmit, the latent norms and "practical knowledge" (savoirs pratiques) (Lagroye, 1994: 130) internalised by the subject. The latter is not merely a passive agent in the process of political socialisation process. Rather, the individual actively works to the reappropriation of social norms and is likely to bring these norms into question (Percheron, 1993).

As already suggested, the influence of propaganda is to be mapped within the actors' social experience and interactions inside the other spheres of political socialisation such as family or peer groups. The focus on social interactions clearly stem from the interactionist sociology which lays emphasis on the individuals' joint actions that contribute to the construction of social processes (Blumer, 1969) without downplaying the importance of social structures (Goffman, 1959, 1971). Social situations are therefore taken as a relevant framework to see how meanings and norms imposed by propaganda are perpetuated or modified through interactions.
Methodology

Before entering more specifically into the subject, I briefly sketch out the fieldwork techniques and methods of data analysis used in this research. The authors of *Doing Fieldwork in China* (Heimer & Thogersen, 2006) have noticed that concrete details about the way fieldworks are actually done, such as the language used during interviews and the like, are seldom described by scholars. Therefore, aside from the usual informations one might expect in a section dedicated to methodology, the aim here is to provide the reader with these generally underemphasised aspects.

Conducted in Beijing between December 2009 and March 2010, this research has focused on 36 students (16 girls and 20 boys) from different universities of the city. Firsthand observations of students' behaviours in “Basic Marxist principles” class were made during the academic year 2007-2008, and from these preliminary empirical findings originated the idea to study the effects of propaganda. The intention was not to measure quantitatively, using broad survey methods, the influence of techniques designed to control thoughts and behaviours. I have not sought to establish causal inferences (King, Keohane & Verba, 1994), setting up propaganda as the independent variable and behaviours as the dependent variable. Such a methodology would have been at odds with the chief theoretical stances of this research as presented earlier. Conversely, I have employed a qualitative approach, focusing on the micro-sociological level as an invaluable entrée to the understanding of the processes of norms internalisation.

The two-months fieldwork have essentially consisted in semi-structured interviews entirely conducted in Mandarin, complemented with participant observation of courses at university, students' spare time activities, Party cell meeting, family life (albeit exceptional) and “go-along ethnography” (Kusenbach, 2003). Out of 36 respondents, 17 have been contacted on student public discussion groups (xiaozu) on the website Douban. They received requests to participate in an interview allegedly about students in China's capital city. As for the other 19 students, some have been met during participant observation, while other encounters occurred with the help of former respondents. At several times, some students have differentiated themselves from their peers on the basis that, contrary to “the others”, they (“I”) have interest in and views about politics. In these cases, I used a method inspired from Katz and Lazardfield's “snowball” interviews (1955), asking these students to nominate one or two future interviewees among those who they referred to as “the others”.

During interviews, questions have covered a range predefined topics, but discussions have allowed a large space to the respondents' talk and unpredictable subjects. I have endeavoured to understand the mechanisms of political socialisation by interrogating the students about political education, family narratives of political or historical events, involvement in activities at university, to name the most prominent topics. Beside the informations gleaned from the actors' discourse, interviews have served as a method of ethnographic observation. Face-to-face communication with students unlikely to talk or who sometimes felt free to bring a friend with them offered a means to experience the norms of interaction. This ethnographic sensibility (Schatz, 2009) has been reinforced by the work of immersion during the whole time spent in Beijing.

In between field-driven and theory-driven approaches, the empirical phase has been designed according to the premise that the fieldworker concerned with political processes has to come as close as possible to the contexts of experience of the local actors (Blumer, 1969 ; Schatz, 2009 ; Beger, Céfaï & Gayet-Viaud, 2011) to generate insightful views of the object of inquiry. Due to time and practical constraints, the ethnographic ideal of prolonged contact with the people under study could not have been attained. Because some of the situations relevant to the analysis could not have been observed directly, interpretations rely on the sole accounts of the respondents. Certainly, narratives and discourse are crucial to understand the meanings that local actors attribute to their own social experience, but in-situ observations remain indispensable to trace out the processes of norms internalisation and/or the “disruptions” (Goffman, 1959) in the interaction
order. Despite these flaws, the collected data has allowed me to formulate some answers to the research question.

Relying on the empirical data, I have endeavoured to map the dissemination of propaganda and in the students' everyday life and its influence upon their relationship to the political. The combination between ethnographic observation and interviews has been conducive to elaborating an interpretive analysis emphasising the social and discursive construction of political norms both by the authoritarian regime and through the individuals' social experience. Despite the attention given to the actors' discourse, and the conceptualisation of propaganda as order of discourse, the interpretation does not follow the methods of discourse analysis, since it does not dwell upon “the linguistic features and organisation of concrete instances of discourse” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000: 448). I have sought to identify and interpret the actors' shared perceptions and representations with regard to their contexts of experience, in order to understand the process of norms internalisation.

The Ambivalent Effects of Political Education: From Boredom and Scepticism to Indifference

Notwithstanding the relative autonomisation of higher education from the regime's pseudo-ideology, Chinese universities are not free from the institutional and symbolic interference of the political power. Beside the presence of Party organisations such as the Communist Youth League Committee (Tuanwei) which supervises student activities, propaganda materialises the intrusion of official discourse within the walls of universities. Nonetheless, the exhibition of political symbols and messages in the visual environment does not mean that actors actually give attention to billboards (xuanchuan lan) and slogans on red scrolls. Compulsory exposure to the dominant discourse is circumscribed to peculiar time-spaces, namely political education courses (zhengzhi jiaoyu ke).

In continuation of the secondary school curriculum, students are to attend each week overtly ideologically-oriented courses. Due to the fading faith in Marxist-Leninist ideology, along with the state emphasis on patriotism (aiguo zhuyi) (Fairbrother, 2003a, 2003b), little importance has been attached to Marxism courses and the like, and to the students' perceptions of this aspect of political education. Yet, in 2008, the CCP's Central Propaganda Department and Education Department have reasserted their views to “reinforce political and ideological theory courses in higher education” and to “push forward the work to make Socialism with Chinese characteristics (Zhongguo tese shuehuizhuyi) enter textbooks, enter classrooms, enter students' heads” (Central Propaganda Department and Education Department, 2008). From its inception in 1949, political education has served “the regime's idealised presentation of itself” (Wedeen, 1998: 522). The doctrinal continuities and adaptations have thereby been integrated into a pseudo-ideological framework.

Students of Chinese political education (Sautman, 1991; Fairbrother, 2003a, 2003b) have, thoughtfully or not, avoided the use of the term “propaganda” to label their object of inquiry. Neither have research on propaganda (Brady, 2008) given much attention to political education. However, the ambitions underlying these courses correspond to Kenez's definition of propaganda as “the attempt to transmit social and political values [...] to influence [...] behaviours” (1985: 4), and can be suspected of seeking to impose one true worldview and thereby disqualify other discourse for being “unhealthy” (bu jiankang). While the transmission of official discourse is mediated by professors who can, consciously or not, diverge from the state-determined content, students still have to memorise the original version printed in textbooks before political education exams.

The seeming importance of political education to the CCP does not suffice to ascertain its efficiency. Participant observation in “Basic principles of Marxism” (Makesizhuyi jiben yuanli) courses provides a puzzling view of students displaying boredom and casualness. While such behaviours could presumably be interpreted as a form of resistance, the analysis of interviewees'
responses brings this interpretation into question. Former research of students' national attitudes has contended that their scepticism and critical thinking towards political education lead to a form of resistance to state hegemony. However, I argue that while students' perceptions cast doubt on the capacity of political education to transmit Socialism with Chinese characteristics, the inquiry should not be limited to the respondents' own judgements. One must also see what lies behind students' scepticism so as to highlight a rather negative influence of propaganda.

“*It is not so efficient*: The Failure of Political Education as Persuasion

Classrooms where political education takes place weekly can be depicted as what Goffman has called a social establishment, that is, “a place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place” (1959: 238). Given the political dimension of the situation, the courses might also be viewed *a priori* as a performance of “public transcript” (Scott, 1990), both on the part of those entitled by the powerholders to transmit official discourse and of the audience. Drawing on the interactionist perspective (Goffman, 1959 ; Blumer, 1969), the aim here is to understand, first, how students make use of the situation which is imposed upon them, and what meaning they ascribe to political education. Observation and interviews reveal the failing attempt of persuasion.

Scenes of students half-lying on their table, finishing English exercises, eating or chatting with classmates indicate that political education courses are reappropriated by students as the occasion to perform boredom and disinterest. These descriptions result from what has been observed at Beijing Foreign Studies University, but beside this particular case, interviews with respondents from other universities have confirmed that similar performances occur elsewhere.

– And for example, during classes, how are the students, their behaviours ?
– Their behaviours... They do everything and anything... (*laughs*)
– For example?
– For example, phoning, sleeping...
– What else?
– Others prepare their English exercises...
– What about you ?
– Me, I take a book that I like, because we have to get the grades, so we can't not go, but it's a very boring (*wuliao*) class, yes, political education courses.

(Respondent n° 8, female, 21 years old, Shanxi province, second-year Media studies student at Beijing City University (Beijing Chengshi Xueyuan), non-member of the CCP ; mother: employee at the Bureau of Land and Resources (Guotu Ziyuan Ju), member of the Chinese Democratic League (Zhongguo Minzhu Tongmeng) ; father: works in a transportation company and member of the CCP)

Political education largely ranks on top of the most boring (*wuliao*) and uninteresting (*kuzao*) courses. Such assessment is common to students in different disciplines, from social sciences to technical fields. The variety of courses (Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought, Marxist Philosophy and the like) makes little difference, since students mostly refer to political education as a “this whole thing” (*zhe yi tao, zhe yi fangmian*). What is most likely to be impugned is the repetitiveness of these contents and modes of learning, and, in many cases, the boring, textbooks-based lectures of the professors, who may eventually ask “not to think whether it is right or wrong” (respondent n° 9). Students unanimously point out that political education is only useful for taking the final examination (the “torture of Marx” (*Makeisi de zhemo*), a girl said to her table-mate right before attending the exam). One respondent has confessed that he and his schoolmates would make a joke out of political education, referring to it as “what is studied to be forgotten” (respondent n° 18).
What is noteworthy about the lack of interest is that it is shared by respondents who have expressed critical views towards the political system and those claiming support for the CCP. But of greater significance is that the casualness is publicly expressed in front of the professor who does not condemn his audience's behaviour. Once offstage or before attending class, students complain about the obligation and might take advantage of teachers who will not check the absentees' names to escape the dull constraint. To take liberties with Scott's terminology, the frontier between public and hidden transcripts is transgressed as students do not conceal their disinterest towards political education. A « tacit agreement » between both parties contribute to maintaining a « definition of the situation » (Goffman, 1959: 238) in which political education courses do not represent neither a coercive transmission of official discourse nor an obligation for individuals to manifest acceptance of such discourse. Indeed, apart from the ultimate strain to fill examination papers faultlessly with textbooks contents, students are not, in any case, sanctioned out for their overt casualness during classes.

One could opine that, in the eyes of those assigned to follow these courses, the passive and non-coercive behaviours of the instructors, together with the prevailing importance of the examination, somehow obscure the state-subjects relationship at stake through political education. Conversely, as indicated by a former survey, students clearly identify “the state's efforts to control their attitudes through schooling” (Fairbrother, 2003a: 618). More than a decade later, interviews conducted as part of the present study confirm these previous findings.

- And how is Maogai [Introduction to Mao Zedong thought]?
- Maogai, this stuff, it imposes (qiangjia) you some kind of value system (jiazhi zhidu)… and this kind of stuff (slight laughter), I think that I don't like this at all. I think that if you do things right, people follow you, but if you don't do things right, and you impose that to others, it's useless.
  (Respondent n° 20, female, 18 years old, Hunan province, first-year Art student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Zhongyang Meishu Xueyuan), non-member of the CCP; mother: accountant and non-member of the CCP; father: engineer and non-member of the CCP)

While Fairbrother's quantitative analysis suggests that respondents that are overtly critical towards the political system are more likely to perceive the intentions underpinning political education, qualitative methods highlight that students expressing support to the CCP's rule have referred to these courses in similar terms, albeit without hinting at the compelling dimension of the state's action (as indicated in the following extract by the use of the verb “transmit” instead of “impose”).

- And why do you have to have this kind of courses in university?
- Because it transmits a value system (jiazhi zhidu), it enables you to understand the history of the country, to guide a deep love for the country (re'ai guojia), but it's not very useful. [...]  
  (Respondent n° 21, female, 21 years old, Hubei province, International trade graduate student at the China Agricultural University (Zhongguo Nongye Daxue), in expectation of admission in postgraduate education, non-member of the CCP (applied once); mother and father: high-ranking civil servants in local government and members of the CCP)

In the macro-context peculiar to China, where the CCP's direct modes of control over behaviours have slackened, thus increasing the possibilities for individuals to access knowledge that might contradict official discourse, scepticism can arise from dissonance between political messages displayed in classrooms and knowledge acquired elsewhere. Political education is then viewed as biased and deceiving.

More significantly, the ideological inculcation is challenged by the socio-political context itself, as it shapes the actors' contexts of experience. Beside the lack of what social psychologists
have termed the “personal relevance” (Cacioppo & Petty, 1986) of the political messages, the individuals perceive a dissonance between discourse and the lived reality. In Post-reform China, the expression of loyalty to and belief in what is now termed “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” is no longer demanded by the powerholders. As they experience the shallow ideological setting prevailing in everyday life, students interpret political education as an artificial attempt from the state to perpetuate communist beliefs and ideas. Interviewees have claimed their own absence of ideological conviction to illustrate the failure of state-organised “thought management” (respondent n°33), at least upon themselves and the majority of their peers.

- Do you think it [political education] is efficient?
  - I think that... every one... the students criticise it for its absence of efficiency, but I believe that it's efficient, in the long run, because since being little, for so many years, unconsciously, it influences the peoples' life.
- Do you feel that influence upon yourself?
  - (long silence) Hum... that's alright (hai xing), I'm not one of this type of, someone very “Red and expert” (hen hong hen zhuang). But I'm neither... It's that I'm neither Left nor Right.
  (Respondent n° 33, female, 18 years old, Beijing, first year Journalism student at Beijing University (Beijing Daxue), non-member of the CCP; mother and father: doctors and members of the CCP)

The line drawn between “I” or “we” (as the majority) and “the Reds” or “those who believe in Communism” reveals the actors' impression of remaining untouched by propaganda. If one admits that the state's ambition is, indeed, to perpetuate communist values and beliefs, students' responses might then be deemed contrary to the state's expectations. Nonetheless, the fieldworker's analysis should not be confined to what respondents say about his/her object of inquiry. An additional layer of interpretation might be given to these accounts. To paraphrase Howard Becker, “to see we must forget the name of thing we are looking at” (Becker, 2002: 143). The perception of inefficiency is largely determined by the lenses through which students are looking at propaganda. Their predefined idea about what the effects might be prevents them from seeing the other dimensions of its influence.

Criticism Without Resistance: The Making of Indifference

The avowed and open performance of boredom might appear contrary to the regime's expectations. Given the unobservable attention and approval towards the dominant ideological discourse, scepticism and critical thinking can be viewed as a “response to state hegemony”, “a form of self-emancipation that challenges the relations of domination” (Fairbrother, 2003a: 606, 607). Here, I intend to reconsider this interpretation afresh, by laying emphasis on the negative influence of propaganda. The results of the present research show that, if persuasion is not obvious, political education succeeds in making itself bearable and indirectly acceptable.

The main line of argument here bears upon the relatively depoliticised attitude of recipients towards propaganda. By “depoliticised”, I imply a slightly different meaning than the definition of depoliticisation set out earlier. Students' perception is characterised by the fact that no “conflictual stakes endowed with a political sense throughout the generalisation (montée en généralité) of claims” (Vairel & Zaki, 2011: 92, emphasis is original) are related to political education. Dealing with this depoliticised view does not negate the students' capacities to perceive the political dimension of these courses (the state's attempt to “impose a value system”). However, what is striking about the respondents' discourse is the scarceness of protests against political education as an unacceptable or illegitimate instrument of the authoritarian state. Its excluding function is seldom, if at all, mentioned. Most of the students rise against the individual obligation without protesting much about the political constraint. If the use of verbs such as “dislike” certainly mirrors
a disapproval, it is nonetheless not akin to a total rejection or refusal. As the following extract shows, in spite of their reluctance, scepticism and critical thinking, students do not yearn for the abolition of political education for being propaganda. In other words, they rather complain about political education-as-practice than as content.

- And what about the students’ behaviours during classes?
- I think that 90%, 80% to 90% all find that... it's really uninteresting... It's compulsory, and this phenomenon is really important.
- And concretely, can you describe a bit?
- There are some who resist (laughs), who absolutely don't want to go and why do you need to have a course like that... I personally think that this course should be optional because 5% to 10% listen anyway and are interested. There are some people who want to study! But some like me, basically, I think it's really uninteresting, this stuff. I think it's not good.

(Respondent n° 9, female, 23 years old, Liaoning province, first year Farm management Masters student at University of Science and Technology of China (Zhongguo Keji Xueyuan), member of the CCP ; mother and father: farmers and non-members of the CCP)

Likewise, and perhaps more relevant to the argument here is the decontextualised justification built by students, including respondents who have expressed reservations about the current Chinese political system, of the maintenance of political education.

- And you think that it actually “crashes down other things”?
- (silence) I think that any political party will do that, it's just the way of doing things, the concrete manner is different.

(Respondent n° 8, female, 21 years old, Shanxi province, second-year Media studies student at Beijing City University (Beijing Chengshi Xueyuan), non-member of the CCP ; mother: employee at the Bureau of Land and Resources (Guotu Ziyuan Ju), member of the Chinese Democratic League (Zhongguo Minzhu Tongmeng) ; father: works in a transportation company and member of the CCP)

Being asked whether he considered political education as propaganda, another research participant has similarly argued that “each country has its propaganda, but it's just that the method is different”. (respondent n° 32) Scientific discourse has been invoked on several occasions (“You might know this as well, these are political science stuff, well, I'm telling you anyway...”), (respondent n° 31) to support the (certainly reasonable) idea that any form of political power would employ propaganda.

As Bourdieu points out, “Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness.” (Bourdieu, 1977: 164).

Then, students’ performance might not be equated with a public political refusal. On the one hand, their perception and experience of the state's “inefficient” attempt to “impose a value system” lead them to downplay its significance. Conveying the impression that its recipients are out of reach from what they consider to be a very common tool for political power, propaganda renders any protest useless. Instances of resistance-as-misbehaviour during classes are, albeit occurring, extremely rare according to students' accounts. While the risks of sanction certainly discourage overt confrontations, I argue that the absence of rebellion hides a form of indirect compliance. Thus, on the other hand, students' scepticism and aversion (fangan) paradoxically overlap with indifference.

This indifference epitomises what I have called the negative influence of political education. The noncoercive form of propaganda thereby contribute to the permanence of the relation of domination. Expressions such as “I/we just don't care” (zhi shi bu guan) convey a sort of resignation. After all, by giving students enough space to enact their disinterest or, in Goffmanian
terms, to contribute to the definition of the situation, political education courses are made more bearable or tolerable. Such an effect is amplified by the instructors' “irresponsibility” and by the fact that the sole strong constraint comes with the final exams. Remembering these classes, a PhD student from Qinghua University (respondent n° 16) has described them as an “occasion to have fun”. Interestingly, he himself has described political education as “already very theoretical, very depoliticised (qu zhenghihua)”, where the professor “on a very depoliticised basis, depoliticises some more, […] he speaks in a […] very superficial manner, well it is not superficial but easier to accept, more acceptable.”.

In some cases, the teachers manage to turn his audience's boredom and indifference into enjoyment. For some respondents, particularly these attuned to their parents' comments on the Chairman, the memories left by interesting professors' narratives about Mao Zedong's childhood and other anecdotes contrast with the usual “dryness” (kuzao) of political education. Other students have underscored their affection towards young instructors who “understood” them and would talk about other topics than politics. Finally, some students appreciate their professors for speaking “objectively” (keguan) (but still within the limits of the dominant discourse), either about leaders or about the current situation undermined by “corruption” (fubai). To a certain extent, these professors might help students to foster a form of critical thinking, but they also contribute, perhaps unthoughtfully, to legitimising political education, by making it a course where “objectivity” can be expressed. Furthermore, it sets a particular mode of criticism that is not completely dissonant with the official discourse.

“Political practices that encourage dissimulation register the participants' fluency in the rhetorical operations that the regime puts forth. The regime's power resides in its ability to sustain national fictions, to enforce obedience, to make people say and do what they otherwise would not. This obedience makes people complicit.” (Wedeen, 1998: 519). One telling illustration of the, if not enforcement, at least perpetuation of the relation of domination, is provided by the capacity of some students to “act 'as if' ” (Wedeen, 1998) despite their critical awareness of the state's attempts. A young girl from the People's University of China (respondent n° 36) has also insisted on appreciating her Introduction to Mao's thought (Maogai) teacher, “despite him being the Maogai teacher”, because of his objectivity towards the leaders. The girl has sometimes discussed political matters with her professor “in private” (sixia). Meanwhile, she has related that once, during Maogai class, the students were to write their impressions of the “somewhat phony” (you dian jia) film “The Founding of A Republic” (Jianguo Daye). Then, notwithstanding her teacher's disposition for being “objective”, she “sang the CCP's praises”. In this case, strategic reasons account for the student's choice, to avoid potential “negative effects”. She distinguishes between what she has called “usual communication” with her professor and the exercise “being a part of the of the examination mark”. Thus, by “acting 'as if'”, the actors might not endorse the content of the official discourse, but nor do they resist to the relation of domination.

In a nutshell, I have endeavoured to analyse the effects of political education by deciphering the students' behaviours and perceptions. If this form of propaganda seems to fail as a tool of ideological transmission and persuasion, the weakness of opposition to political education somehow proves another aspect of its efficiency, which I have termed the negative influence. The inculcation of value-laden discursive knowledge on politics is only one aspect of political education, behind which one might see a mode of perpetuation of practical norms. Getting students used to the having political courses in their curriculum each year, making them attend the class every week, and become familiar with the official discourse is part of a political socialisation process. The interactions with the instructor, even when fostering critical thinking, are based on peculiar forms of expression which do not threaten the relation of domination at stake in political education classes. Obviously, the individuals' socialisation is not confined to these state-organised spaces dedicated to the transmission of pseudo-ideology, and nor is propaganda only located within
school walls. The symbolic display of power, however, is not always wrapped in such discernible contours. While political education has served as an entrée to the study of propaganda, it is necessary to shift our analytical gaze away from its most visible forms, and fumble for its dissemination first where its political dimensions are not presented as such, and then within more hidden social sites (Scott, 1990), in the spaces of the individuals' socialisation which are free from the direct interference of the political power.

**Propaganda as Order of Discourse: Maintaining the Incongruousness of Political Expression**

Beyond the façade of bogus ideological inculcation, and despite the variety of its means, Chinese propaganda has to be apprehended in a more systematic way. Following Blumer's guidance for the study of mass-media effects, I contend that propaganda “cannot be regarded as operating in separate and clearly demarcated arenas, but rather as flowing into a vast common arena” (1969: 185). The assemblage of discourses (verbal and non-verbal), the meanings and representations they are shaping, together with the rules underlying their production and diffusion set out an order of discourse (Foucault, 1971) establishing political and social norms. Such conception rather lays stress upon the pervasive and elusive dissemination of propaganda.

In the Foucauldian conception, the order of discourse relies, in part, on “the procedures of exclusion” (1971: 52), setting out the conditions for, and rarefying speech. In an authoritarian context, censorship constitutes a formal barrier affixed by the political institutions to the diffusion of expression. As Lippmann (1922) has noted, without censorship, propaganda would be powerless. However, such a method of control alone fails to guarantee the maintenance of the discursive order, which hinges on the actors' self-restriction and their reappropriation of constraints. If the regime's use of censorship mainly eradicates subversive speech, propaganda establishes an outward “division” and “rejection” (Foucault, 1971: 53) which prevents the emergence of counterdiscourse. Therefore, the order of discourse might not be examined only from its outward aspects. The visible dimension of propaganda conceals and excludes undesirable behaviour and thereby limits the possibilities of their occurrence. Thus, with a subtle interplay between implicit and explicit representations, between messages and omissions, propaganda “put[s] forth the guidelines for politically acceptable speech and behavior” (Wedeen, 1998: 520).

In post-1989 China, one of the main reasons accounting for the CCP's propaganda work is the maintenance of political stability. Obviously, as Wedeen rightly puts it, “It is impossible to get into policymakers' heads and come away with exact knowledge of why they do what they do.” (1998: 522). However, it is conceivable that the regime seek to shape the subjects' relationship to the political and confine political expression in order to ensure its ongoing hold on power. In this respect, controlling the political behaviour of the educated youth, who had been responsible for the “political commotion” (zhengzhi fengbo) and deemed easy to “agitate” (shandong) appears as a necessity for the CCP.

Hence, the purpose here is not to infer whether propaganda directly determines the individuals' behaviours or, conversely, to demonstrate that propaganda finally exerts little influence since the norms are already internalised within the spheres of primary socialisation. Rather, I endeavour to illuminate the complex interwoven, mirroring processes between the display of the official order of discourse and the daily order of interactions. A linear and behaviouralist understanding of propaganda-recipient relationship is untenable, inasmuch as the subjects are embedded in their own contexts of experience. Moreover, bearing Foucault in mind, power is not located in one, bounded space from which it would exert a straightforward influence and determine the individuals' behaviour. The pervasiveness of propaganda is one of the tools of the power dissemination. Therefore, it is indispensable to inquire into the social sites where the power interference is not totally visible, if at all.
Although the research is mainly concerned with the issue of reception, an overview of the content of student activities is necessary, albeit still viewed from the actors' standpoint. Therefore, the first part of this section examines the omissions of politics as a means to erase “radical” (jijin) behaviour. Needless to say, these omissions do not imply that propaganda has lost its political significance and purpose. I assume that such a depoliticised order of discourse plays a major part in the individuals' political socialisation. The production, content and internalisation of the official order of discourse might not be so clear-cut, as the students involved in student activities participate into the making of propaganda. In the second part, I undertake an incursion into the individuals' spheres of socialisation outside of the state-organised political socialisation. The examination of everyday life interactions provide insightful clues about the construction of subjects-power relationship, here construed as a socially-grounded and not straightforward process. The norms conveyed by state propaganda mirror the norms of interaction prevailing in the students' social experience.

Erasing “Radicalism”: The Omission of Politics in (Political) Propaganda

Compared with the totalitarian phase during which the political system aimed at organising total mobilisation of the population, Post-reform propaganda has conveyed a depoliticised order in which the Chinese citizens are not compelled to perform an active support to the CCP. Particularly visible after the Tiananmen crackdown, the insistence on “stability” (wending) has superseded the rhetoric of the movement (yundong) which had been prominent during the Maoist period.

Because the educated youth had played a major part into the “disorder” (dongluan) that occurred in 1989, I partially endorse other scholars' view that propaganda work has been of the utmost importance for the regime to attempt to avoid the occurrence of new protests (Brady, 2008). If the extreme politicisation of the youth had been a major dispositif of power during the Communist period, I argue that one of the tasks for the CCP in Post-1989 China has been to redefine the role of the youth so as to erase the possibilities of “radical” (jijin) behaviour and speech.

In her analysis of the Chinese youth culture, Chen Yingfang (2002) illustrates how the representation of a radical youth involved in cultural and social changes has been shaped along the 20th century, from the 1919 May 4th or 1935 December 9th movements to the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 demonstrations. The official discursive construction of these historical events has been conducive to the making of representations in which the youth has bee associated with radicalism, one of the most telling image being that of the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution. Once glorified and encouraged, radicalism has then been equated with what is deemed utterly nefarious to the political stability, namely “disorder” (dongluan, hunluan, daluan). Today, the state-organised political socialisation therefore mirrors this attempt to endow the youth with a meaning coinciding with the new values of Reform and Post-reform China.

Outside of the temporalities dedicated to political education, the activities organised by the Communist Youth League Committee (Tuanwei) and the Propaganda Department (Xuanchuan bu) leave little space to politics as such. Students clubs' activities (xuesheng hui), evening parties and other celebrations such as sports meeting or the “December 9th great choral” (Yi Er Jiu da hechang, a commemoration of the 1935 revolutionary movement) that punctuate the academic years make student life in Chinese campus not so different from student life in Western universities. Whenever asked about the “political aspects” (zhengzhi secai) of these activities and festivities, students have expressed their perplexity in response to my questions. With a slight smile of pride on her face, one of the interviewee (respondent n° 27) has recounted how her team-mates and herself won the singing competition on the December 9th festivities, where the performers mainly sing fashion tunes (liuxing). In like manner, the students involved in the making of their university newspapers or radio shows describe the contents as being dedicated mostly to “very normal subjects”, such as
“music, films, or also, travelling, gastronomy, fashion. […], feelings […] (respondent n° 12, North China University of Technology). Yet, in spite of its innocent appearances, this depoliticised order of discourse does contribute to the political socialisation of the students. Following the argument developed by Percheron, the process of political socialisation might not be reduced to “the conscious transmission of the representations most directly related to the ‘political’ sphere in its ordinary sense.” (1993: 28) Thus, the omission of politics helps to hide the political significance of such practices. The student in charge of the head of the Propaganda/Public media Department (xuanchuanbu) at the Central Academy of Fine Arts has confessed that the work undertaken in the Department purposively allows no or small place for politics. While other respondents involved in the Department have merely negated the “political atmosphere” (zhengzhi fenwei) (respondent n° 20) of these activities, he has added that this “avoidance” (huibi) itself remains “political” (you zhengzhixing).

Beside this small space left to politics is the impression of optimism and happiness conveyed by student activities. As Brady (2008) has shown, “positive propaganda” is one of the main guidelines underlying the production of information. Such insistence on “positivity” is visible in the students’ accounts of school festivities. For instance, one respondent (n° 16) has reported that the students in charge of the organisation had been instructed to open the shows with “praises to the beauty of life” (gesong meihao shenghuo). Beside of this type of instruction, the examination of the students' accounts reveals that they do not perceive any forms of direct control from the Communist Youth League Committee (Tuanwei). Some of them have asserted that they have never “seen the shadow of the Comittee” (respondent n° 17). The perception of imposed criteria is not evident, since the students have often emphasised that they all know clearly (mingbai) what they are able and forbidden to say, radical or subversive (fandong) expression obviously falling into the latter category. Given this apolitical definition of the situations, the sudden emergence of political expression is pictured as an incongruous disruption of the dominant order.

And, when we organise big activities, big accidents (da chacuo) mustn't occur.
- Do they [the Comittee] phrase it like this?
- Yes, this is very, this is very important, and in fact we can understand as well. It's for, it's for instance, suddenly a person comes, and says... says some words that nobody likes to hear, I think that, in France, that can happen, but here it's very, very difficult.
- The “words that nobody likes to hear” you are referring to, what kind of words is that?
- (silence, and then laughing) It's for instance to come up on stage, how do you say that... you in, you in school you can say in public, err, say... say that the government is no good, say that Sarkozy is no good?
- Hmm...
- In fact, yes, it's possible, in fact, we also can, but, but in official occasions, it's not good anyway. Offi.. in official occasions, you can also?
- Hmm...
- It's very good.
(Respondent n° 16, male, 26 years old, Shaanxi province, PhD student in Chemistry at Qinghua University (Qinghua Daxue), member of the CCP ; mother: employee in a library, member of the CCP ; father: works in a state company of aircraft manufacture, non-member of the CCP)

What is interesting about this respondent's discourse is that he refers to political expression as unpleasant in peculiar circumstances, while he himself has been likely to discuss politics freely and has pointed out the lack of critical thinking of other students.

Another forceful illustration of the depoliticised order of discourse has been provided by the observation of a Party cell meeting at Qinghua University, often deemed to be one of the most “Red and expert” (you hong you zhuang) academic institutions according to students from other
universities. If one could expect the meeting to be an occasion for the young members to manifest their “redness”, such representation has been proved wrong by the fieldwork. Party cell meetings are nothing but another occasion not to talk politics. “Self-criticism” (ziwo piping) and “Mutual criticism” (huxiang piping) are not designed to prove the audience one's faith in Socialism, but rather to present one's career strategy or confess sentimental issues. One by one, the students speak out their worries about not finding a suitable job, not finishing to write their thesis on time or not publishing sufficiently. The audience's attention is not at its best, as some stare at their mobile phones while others are busy observing a card game brought there for the needs of the second part of the meeting, being the last one of the semester. The sole reference to politics was made by a boy who was about to obtain the full status of Party membership, who claimed he had learnt a lot from the “Concept of scientific development” (Kexue fazhan guan). I was explained later by another student that he therefore had to respect the etiquette. By the end of the gathering, one of the girls enquired for my impressions. On purpose, I told the students I was expecting them to discuss some of the CCP's theories. My comment encountered laughters and perplexity.

It is now well known that joining the CCP is no longer a matter of ideological belief or political engagement, since previous research has underlined how the Chinese citizens have positively endorsed the new officially-praised social values that have brought to the “triumph of materialism” (Rosen, 2004). Photographs of young Party members displayed on propaganda billboards under the slogan “Party members are next to you” (Dangyuan zai ni shenbian) reveal these changes. While the short text under each picture presented the students' curriculum, the iconography would worth a thorough semiologic analysis of which I only outline a few components. The photographs presented the young people in informal clothe, during a trip in Europe, as suggested by the architecture behind them. This extract of the official visual discourse reflects the values promoted by the regime: the “myth” (Barthes, 1957) of cultural, economic and social ascension, which makes sense to the emerging Chinese middle-class. The overt representation of changes of values conceals its negative dimension, that is, the omission of a visible political role.

It would be over-simplified to conclude that depoliticised image of the youth moulded by the regime at the macro level determines the students' political behaviour. Indeed, this assertion would be contrary to the theoretical and methodological commitments underlying this research. As already noted, individuals are embedded in complex social interactions within other spheres of political socialisation. The absence of political expression during the Party cell meeting or student activities is less of a direct product of state propaganda than it is due to socially-shared norms and “meaning-making practices” (Wedeen, 2002) originated by the actors themselves and which contribute to perpetuating the order of discourse.

The Exclusion of Politics in Everyday Life: Silences, Avoidance and Disruptions

In order to better understand the construction of the relationships to the political, the analysis might not be limited to that of propaganda-based political socialisation. The researcher has to seek for the symmetrics or discontinuities between the official depoliticised order of discourse and the discursive and interactional norms where the dissemination of propaganda is mostly unfindable. In the final part of this paper, I intend to illuminate the making of the boundaries of political expression through everyday interactions.

For the fieldworker who intends to study the relationship to the political, face-to-face interactions with local actors provide a relevant material to the analysis. Learning about my academic background (often vaguely referred to as “the study of (Chinese) politics”), some of the students have performed disinterest in and ignorance about the subject. At the beginning of the interviews, they have conveyed their perplexity: “I find it very strange that you do political science...” (respondent n° 27).“I don't know anything about politics (bu liaojie)” (respondent n° 6).
Students expressively distance themselves from the political sphere, which has sometimes been explicitly or implicitly distinguished from “social issues” (shehui wenti). The feeling of lack of understanding (bu liaojie) and perplexity towards my own interest in politics attend an overemphasised indifference. “Politics in the West, it’s very different from politics in China […], I’m not sensitive (mingan) to politics” (respondent n° 18). What is striking about such an avowed indifference is that students do not only describe it as a personal attitude. They claim that the disinterest also characterises their schoolmates and friends. “They might be even more indifferent (danmo) than I am, yes.” (respondent n° 17). Conversely, the discourse of those who have affirmed their interest in politics reveal a division of these students’ social world between “I”, the atypical (bu dianxing) ones, and “them”, referring to the great majority of their peers. Facing these assertions, the researcher might not consider the students’ attitudes as an objective clue of apathy resulting from the regime's attempt to depoliticise the population. Instead, it is necessary to look to the social and discursive processes underlying such claims, so as to understand the internalisation of dominant norms.

It appears that political conversations are inconvenient regarding the interaction order. The emergence of political expression might appear as a “disruption” (Goffman, 1959) of the definition of the social situations in which the individuals are attributed specific roles and tacitly expected to preserve these roles. In this respect, parents-child interactions offer an illustration of this social avoidance of politics (Eliasoph, 1997, 1998). As Lagroye has noted, “The knowledge about the political, the opinions (are they implicit) guiding the perception of it, including the right to talk about it, are situated in the space where the adults exert their exclusive authority.”(Lagroye, 1994: 130). Research on political socialisation in democratic settings has emphasised the “exclusion of politics” by the parents, for whom politics is associated with a dangerous source of violence and conflict (Percheron, 1993: 18-19). Family as a sphere of primary political socialisation contributes to making the child's behaviour acceptable for and suitable to the norms of the society he or she belongs to. The children have to conform themselves to the social expectations bearing upon them, of which political concerns and expression are excluded. One of the students who have claimed to be particularly interested in politics (respondent n° 32) has underlined that “mother and son” are more likely to speak about “things of life” in general than politics, which remains seldom discussed, even with his father, a “very pragmatically person”, who talks to him about “job, earning money, this kind of questions”. In like manner, a girl (respondent n° 21) has reported that:

“[…] When I was in high-school, I asked my parents [about the Cultural Revolution], also about June 4th political commotion (Liu Si zhengzhi fengbo) [one of the official expression to refer to 1989 protests], but it doesn't have much to do with my parents. At home, there is no atmosphere to discuss politics. Plus at that time, I was still a little kid, they were not going to talk to me about this, they would find it weird, why would I (gan ma) ask about this?”
(Respondent n° 21, female, 21 years old, Hubei province, International trade graduate student at the China Agricultural University (Zhongguo Nongye Daxue), in expectation of admission in postgraduate education, non-member of the CCP (applied once) ; mother and father: high-ranking civil servants in local government and members of the CCP)

In the Chinese authoritarian context, the “work of avoiding politics” (Eliasoph, 1997, 1998) within families has to be understood in some cases as a form of prudence and protection from possible “consequences” (houguo), sometimes inherited from “past behaviours” (Percheron, 1993: 173-189).

- Do you remember in which circumstances your parents told you not to talk politics in public?
- It's... concretely, I forgot, anyway, it was when I was very little, I said something (shenme shenme) about the Communist Party, maybe it also about expressing my point of view on the high-ranking civil servants in local government and members of the CCP)
And what was it?
I forgot, but anyway, that, this thing shouldn't be like this, I might have expressed a doubt, about some of its policy, or actions, a doubt, that kind of stuff, and then my parents said, said, said like that...
But I guess you didn't shout in Tiananmen Square...
(laughing) No, I said it at home, and they told me, you, that kind of talk, when you go out, it's better not to say it.
And you didn't ask them why they told you this?
Err, no, in fact, at that time, it was that, I had the impression that it might be because that kind of stuff, since the governing party (zhizhengdang) is the Communist Party, to say these things once outside, they might have been scared that I could be instrumentalised (bei liyong), [this expression has been employed in the official discourse to refer to the students during Tiananmen protests] by other, other, other people, that might be because them, after experiencing the Cultural Revolution, they have the impression that, they are scared, or, say, regarding the public expression of one's opinions, not really, not really brave (yongqi).

Later during the fieldwork, I have been invited by another student (respondent n° 5) to stay at his family house in a village of Beijing South-eastern suburbs for a couple of days. After dinner, the boy asks his uncle whether he is a member of the Communist Party. “Bullshits (Goupi)! I'm not satisfied with the Communist Party!”, he answers, looking furtively towards the window, “well, I'm saying it here, no one hears me.” The spatialisation and forms of political expression follow the line dividing back and front regions, that is, “any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception.” (Goffman, 1959: 106). Given the regime's imposition of a depoliticised order of discourse, back regions or backstages (Goffman, 1959 ; Eliasoph, 1997) are unsurprisingly mostly restricted to “hidden” sites (Scott, 1990). But beyond this common idea, political expression is constructed as unusual, including within these hidden sites. Indeed, when parents tell their young daughter not to speak her mind outside of the house, or when one's gaze instinctively turns to the window to make sure that no one is listening, they are somehow reproducing the norms of the dominant order of discourse, by indicating the inappropriateness or unusualness of the political speech, and drawing the contours of what can be said. For those adults who underwent the Cultural Revolution or witnessed the Tiananmen crackdown, concrete images might be associated to the representation of the possible punishment. But for young people who never experienced direct coercion, the anticipated retaliation is most often abstract. It is merely referred to as “effects” or “influence” (yingxiang) or “consequences” (houguo). As a student has confessed (respondent n° 6), “I know there is a limit (xianzhi), but I don't what this limit is”.

Aside from the actors’ representation of the power-subject relationship in which the powerful could distribute potential sanctions in case of transgression of the discursive order, another interrelated process contributes to the construction of the incongruousness and unusualness of political expression. The norms of interaction within different spheres of political socialisation often exclude, not on the possibilities, but also the thought of political discussions. This avoidance -as-normality is rather observable within students' peer groups or middle-class families than in working class or rural milieux, where politics is “something that absolutely has to be discussed” (respondent n° 9). A number of examples illustrate the banalities of the avoidance of politics. After an interview and lunch with a young girl (respondent n° 17) at her university, we encounter one of her classmates while she is walking me to the bus station outside the campus, situated in a relatively remote side of the capital city. The girl explains my presence to her friend without much details about the object of my research. The other girl asks about the topic of discussion. “Politics (zhengzhi)”, the first one replies. “Zhengzhi!”, her friend cries, astonished and somewhat
frightened, “And you have done it?”.

Other instances show how political expression with friends is conceived as a disruption of the order of discourse. “Suppose I would be drunk and and suddenly come to talk to her [one of her friend (respondent n° 21) who is at once not interested in politics and very satisfied with the CCP] about these things, she would talk to me in like manner [as she talked to you], but I won't go and talk to her about the things (laughing).” The transgression of the interaction order could result in a social sanction which would consist in the audience' judgement of the incongruousness of talk. The anticipation of the others' misunderstanding or different opinions render political discussion “impossible” (mei fa, literally, no means). One respondent who has defined himself as opposed to the CCP has pointed out that, “perhaps, when we talk, we try to avoid this kind of, we don't talk about this kind of... that could lead to, everyone, is not happy, this kind of talk [...]” (respondent n° 1). For the students who describe themselves as “radical” (jijin) (particularly respondents n° 28 and 29), that is, highly interested in politics, it has become unthinkable to talk to the others about it, as indicated by their feeling of powerlessness:

“[...] I have become apathetic (manu) [...] I have become insensitive (bu guomin), I have the impression that everything is normal [...] I have the impression that there is no solution (mei banfa). On the one hand, it is that I don't dare to talk, on the other hand, no one talks, so who can I talk with? That's what is important.”

(Respondent n° 29, male, 22 years old, Anhui province, first year Economics Masters student at the Central University of Finance and Economics (Zhongyang Caijing Daxue), non-member of the CCP ; mother and father: farmers and non-members of the CCP).

In sum, the limitation of political expression, along with its confinement into intimate, bounded spaces (one of the example being that of the students being “radical” in their dormitory, as related by respondent n° 28 and 29) contribute to the perpetuation of the dominant and depoliticised order of discourse as conveyed by propaganda.

Conclusion

The persistence of Chinese “popular authoritarianism” (Brady, 2008) is sometimes regarded as the result of the regime's “manufacture of consent” through propaganda and thought work (Lippman, 1922: 248 ; Brady, 2008: 68). However, in this paper, I have tried to show the necessity to shift away from such straightforward approaches of propaganda and its effects. From a macro perspective, this necessity has roots in the definitional ambiguities and complexity of the object, along with the difficulties in delineating propaganda. At the micro level, the question of reception has to be situated within the subjects' contexts of experience and social practices. Giving this configuration, instead of seeking to establish the direct effects of propaganda over the individuals in terms of persuasion, I have attempted to analyse the process of transmission and internalisation of norms in everyday interactions. In this respect, propaganda has been considered in a systematic way, as an order of discourse aimed at perpetuating the relation of domination and the scarceness of political expression. This conception implied an analytical shift from what is immediately identified as or presented under the name of political messages and propaganda, to its less visible, less apparently political dimensions. I have tried to highlight the negative influence, that is, to focus on what propaganda aims at making disappear rather than its persuasive effects on the students' belief or conviction. In other words, I have examined the discourse and social practices rather than the political “attitudes”. As such, this paper has implicitly brought into question the notion of “effects” which is often underpinned by a decontextualised approach to propaganda.

Underlying the idea of negative influence, I have hypothesised in the introduction of this paper that propaganda results in depoliticisation and disempowerment. The former has been explicitly examined throughout the paper, which has laid emphasis both on depoliticisation as a
feature of the Chinese authoritarian order of discourse, and as a social process leading to the “avoidance of politics” (Eliasoph, 1997, 1998) in everyday interactions. I therefore construe this avoidance as mirroring the dominant order rather than as an effect directly determined by the depoliticised order of discourse. The interplay between macro and micro levels is of the utmost complexity and deserve further fine-grained analysis. In order to better understand the mechanisms underlying the perpetuation of domination and the construction of the relationship to the political, one has to look beyond the traditional distinction between the two levels, to understand how the subjects themselves become performers and makers of the global discursive order. Beside the question of depoliticisation, the idea of disempowerment still needs to be discussed, as it has been more implicit in the analysis. On the one hand, the idea refers to an objective process, resulting from the indifference and absence of protests towards the relation of domination, as visible for instance through the students' behaviour in political education courses. On the other hand, disempowerment might characterise a subjective process. Again, what I have defined as the feeling of incapacity to influence or act towards the political power (embodied by the self-claimed “radical” students' words “there's no solution” (mei banfa)) has to be re-situated in the actors' contexts of experience. The transgression of the dominant order of discourse does not only imply a transgression of the power-subject relationship. Rather, disempowerment results from the feeling of incapacity to talk about “sensitive” (mingan) political matters to one's relatives or friends. Thereby, disempowerment implies active mechanisms of self-censorship due to the internalisation of the socially-constructed incongruousness of political expression.

It could be objected that the overemphasis on this negative influence has led to overlook other important, and more positive aspects of propaganda such as the transmission of a Chinese nationalism or patriotism. Indeed, through the students' perception, I have essentially described political education a state-organised transmission of the CCP's bogus ideology rather than as “patriotic education” (Fairbrother, 2003a, 2003b). I have chosen to focus on what remains, in my view, an understudied and perhaps less ostensible aspect of Chinese propaganda, that is, the attempt to maintain pseudo-ideological appearances and its perception by the individuals. However, the affective construction of a relationship to official and national symbols could have been a relevant framework to understand the students' (a)political behaviour.

As a final remark, I suggest that further research on the process of norms internalisation could have advantage to get rid of “propaganda” as an umbrella term recovering an infinity of process. Socio-linguistic analysis of the students' discourse, representations (such as that of “disorder” (dongluan) which has not been referred to in this paper) might be conducive to insightful propositions regarding the construction of the relationship to power.

Notes

Introduction

1 The definition of authoritarianism used in this paper derives from Juan Linz's seminal work (1964, 2000) according to which authoritarian regime is characterised by “limited pluralism”, the weakness of ideological content, relatively institutionalised and predictable limits to leadership, and the depoliticisation or political apathy of the population.

2 Most of the works dedicated to Chinese propaganda are related to the Communist period (e.g. Houn, 1961; Lifton, 1961; Yu, 1964; Schurmann, 1966; Chang, 1997. For studies of visual propaganda art, see Evans & Donald, 1999; Landsberger, 1995).

3 Kenez work's only focuses on Soviet Propaganda. However, his « broadest possible definition » (1985 : 4) has since been used by Brady (2008) in her study of China's post-1989 propaganda.
4 This methodological position derives from Blumer's “suggestions for the study of mass-media effects” (1969: 183-194), here applied to research on propaganda. In his paper, Blumer develop several lines of argument to criticise “variable analysis” for producing results that are detached from “the empirical world in which the influence is operating” (192). The “pinning down” (183) of three variables (the influence itself, the population who is subject to this influence, and the effects on behaviours) Due to the permanent variations of its content, mass-media cannot be conceptualised as a monolithic and homogeneous object. Instead, students of media-influences should take “temporal and spatial contexts” into account.

5 One of the most common representations is that propaganda is a hallmark of authoritarian regime. Yet, the use of propaganda in pluralistic settings is generally acknowledged among scholars (see Pratkanis & Aronson, 2002 ; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006). Although the matter is not debated here due to the lack of space, I embrace this latter position.

6 These spaces where the Chinese people, especially the educated youth, can obtain knowledge that is usually controlled or retained by the regime are most noticeably the Internet, where “crosswall softwares” (fanqiang ruanjian) enable users to sidestep official restrictions, but also the increased possibilities to study abroad, the countless number of translated books including social science works, available in independent bookshops. In addition, the diminution of control over universities favours interactions and discussions with scholars who are likely to hold critical views on the political system.

**Theoretical framework**

1 The concept of politicisation has long suffered from a definitional inaccuracy (Flinders & Buller, 2006), as scholars have generated a goodly number of statements about its meaning. Schematically, depoliticisation has referred on the one hand, to one of the governments' dispositif or strategy both in democratic settings (Flinders & Buller, 2006) and authoritarian contexts (Linz, 1964, 2000 ; Vairel & Zaki, 2011) designed to avoid citizens' participation. On the other hand, the concept has been used to describe the political behaviours of the populations as a response or effect of the regime's strategy for demobilisation (Linz, 1964 ; 2000). In the latter case, depoliticisation is sometimes equated with apathy.

2 As Pratkanis and Tuner (1996) put it, persuasion leaves the door open to contradiction. Moreover, the “strategies” of propaganda are not reducible to persuasion.

3 I deliberately use the concept of “norms” instead of that, more elusive, of “values” as used in Kenez's conception of propaganda. I rely on Goffman's definition of norm as “that kind of guide to action that is supported by sanctions” (Goffman, 1967: 62).

**Methodology**

1 The 36 research participants were respectively born between 1980 and 1991. One of them (respondent n° 11) replied to my request but confessed during the interview that he was not a student anymore, since he recently abandoned his Masters to start a business. I chose to consider this case as relevant to the analysis.

  The respondents respectively belong to one of the following university: China Youth College for Political Sciences (Zhongguo Qingnian Zhengzhi Xueyuan), Central Academy of Fine Arts (Zhongyang Meishu Xueyuan), Beijing University (Beijing Daxue), Qinghua University
(Qinghua Daxue), Capital Normal University (Shoudu Shifan Daxue), China University of Geosciences (Zhongguo Dizhi Daxue), Beijing City University (Chengshi Xueyuan), University of Science and Technology of China (Zhongguo Keji Xueyuan), Beijing Film Academy (Beijing Dianying Xueyuan), North China University of Technology (Beifang Gongye Daxue), Beijing Wuzi University (Beijing Wuzi Xueyuan), People's University of China (Renmin Daxue), China Agricultural University (Zhongguo Nongye Daxue), Central University of Finance and Economics (Zhongyang Caijing Daxue) and China Foreign Affairs University (Waijiao Xueyuan).

2 At that time, I was an exchange student in Beijing Foreign Studies University (Beijing Waiguoyu Daxue).

3 See note 4 from the introduction.

4 I followed some of the students to concerts in “underground” (dixia) music bar, projections of documentaries and organised discussions. Thanks to one of the respondents (n° 16), I could once attend a group of Qinghua PhD students' Party cell meeting where non-members are generally not allowed. I also had the occasion to spend a few days with a student and his family at their residence in a Beijing suburban village.

5 The users of this website are known to be educated young people with a high cultural capital.

The Ambivalent Effects of Political Education: From Boredom and Scepticism to Indifference

1 The notion of “pseudo-ideology” here derives from what Linz (2000) characterises as a feature of authoritarian regime different from totalitarian ideology. In the Chinese case, it refers to the maintenance of Marxist-Leninism as the doctrinal basis of the regime, despite further adaptations.

2 The main courses are “Ideological and moral education” (Sixiang daode xiuyang), “Marxist Philosophy” (Makesizhuyi zhexue) “Basic principes of Marxism” (Makesi zhuyi jiben yuanli), “Introduction to Mao Zedong thought” (Mao Zedong sixiang gailun) or “Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory and 'Three represents’” (Mao Deng San). “Scientific socialism” (kexue shehuizhuyi) or “Natural dialectics” (Ziran bianzhengfa) are taught to Masters students (shuoshi yanjiusheng).

3 December 30th 2009, Beijing University, participant observation.

4 The expression is part of the definition of politicisation by the authors.

Propaganda as Order of Discourse: Maintaining the Incongruousness of Political Expression

1 Beijing Foreign Studies University, 2008.

References


