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SPOTLIGHT

Working Around the CCP's Insecurities

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Language is a sensitive matter for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a fact made clear by the well-documented mechanisms of party-state censorship and propaganda, which aim to repel criticism and set the agenda in the CCP's favor. Less widely acknowledged, however, is the extent to which even terms of praise and devotion must be subjected to careful scrutiny in China. Two recent catchphrases in particular that speak anew to deeper anxieties about the image of the CCP and its top leader, Xi Jinping. These are "low-level red" and "high-level black," odd phrases in English that invite some elucidation. The terms, which first emerged on the internet, refer in both cases to covert or unintentional acts of criticism. "Low-level red," or *dijihong* (低級紅), refers in official parlance to language or conduct that is intended to praise the Party or government, but which ultimately has the opposite effect because it is patently false, cheap, or ill-considered. "High-level black," or *gaojilei* (高級黑), refers on the other hand to more deliberate and skilful acts of disguised sabotage, in which language is deployed in obscurely humorous ways, or cloaked in academic respectability, in order to criticise or ridicule.

對中國共產黨來說，語言是一個敏感的問題，這在中國的審查和宣傳機制中得到了充分的證實。審查的目的是為了排斥批評，營造有利於中國共產黨的輿情。然而，鮮為人知的是，在中國，即使是讚美和奉承的詞彙也會受到審查。尤其是最近的兩個流行語——"低級紅"和"高級黑"，再次體現了人們對中共及其最高領導人習近平形象的深層憂慮。這兩個詞最早出現在互聯網，均為隱蔽或無意的批評。"低級紅"指的是那些旨在讚美黨或政府的語言或行為，但最終卻因明顯的虛假、低級或考慮不周而產生相反的效果。而"高級黑"則指更有心機、更有技巧的變相貶低。它以隱晦幽默的方式運用語言，或披上學術的外衣，以達到批評或嘲笑的目的。

Keywords: Censorship, CCP, Xi Jinping, Low-level red, High-level black, language, discourse, public opinion guidance, Xi Jinping Thought

關鍵詞： 審查，中共，習近平，低級紅，高級黑，語言，話語，輿論導向，習近平思想

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Language is a delicate matter for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). And nowhere is the leadership's hypersensitivity to language more obvious than through the well-documented mechanisms of party-state censorship and propaganda (Brady 2009, 9-30) which, building on a much older tradition of CCP media control under Mao Zedong (2003), have since 1989 sought to maintain regime stability under the rubric of "public opinion guidance." This is itself a raw-nerved reference, deeply tinged with insecurities about the Soviet collapse (Zhao 2010), to the press policies deemed by senior officials to have been fatally misguided in the run-up to the brutal suppression of the pro-democracy movement on June 4, 1989 (Qian 2009). Today, the same work of directing public views and restraining dissent is achieved through an elaborate and multi-layered system of technological and human controls, from daily and even hourly calls from propaganda officials to media outlets, to chat messages disappearing from social media in real time and the blocking of sensitive keywords (O'Neill 2009).

Less widely acknowledged, however, is the extent to which even terms of praise and devotion must be subjected to careful scrutiny in China, lest they throw unwanted shade on the leadership. Insights into the CCP's insecurities about praise and much else are possible thanks to another permutation of the Party's hypersensitivity to language – the production, on a constant basis, of an evolving canon of political discourse that for the careful observer can make its inner doubts more salient. Reading through official discourse, following László Ladányi's counsel to "[look] at China through Chinese spectacles," and, above all, "read the small print," (Ladányi w.y.) what glimpse do we have of the CCP's state of mind?

The "Core" is Sensitive

There are two recent catchphrases in particular that speak anew to deeper anxieties about the image of the CCP and its top leader, Xi Jinping. These are "low-level red" and "high-level black," odd phrases in English that invite some elucidation. The terms, which first emerged on the internet, refer in both cases to covert or unintentional acts of criticism. "Low-level red," or *dijihong* (低级红), refers in official parlance to language or conduct that is intended to praise the Party or government, but which

ultimately has the opposite effect because it is patently false, cheap, or ill-considered. Perhaps the most classic case of *dijihong* occurred in November 2018 as He Yinli, a Chinese runner competing in the Suzhou Marathon, was interrupted by a race volunteer who handed her a Chinese flag during her final sprint to the finish line (Zuo 2018). As a result of this interruption, she narrowly lost the race, and the incident became closely associated with “low-level red” – in this case, a cheap display of nationalism or pro-Party feeling that backfired in its absurdity. “High-level black,” or *gaojihei* (高级黑), refers on the other hand to more deliberate and skilful acts of disguised sabotage, in which language is deployed in obscurely humorous ways, or cloaked in academic respectability, in order to criticise or ridicule. In other cases, “high-level black” may involve interpreting CCP ideals, principles, policies, and discourse in such a way as to achieve a critical, or “black,” result.

Such acts of indirect or even unintended criticism may seem beneath the notice of high-level CCP leaders, who are presumably concerned with loftier and more pressing matters of national governance. But they are in fact regarded as a serious matter, meriting clear and decisive action – but even more, clear and decisive language. This is why, when the CCP (2019) released in February 2019 its *Opinion on the Strengthening of Party Construction* (中共中央关于加强党的政治建设的意见), meant to promote stricter governance within the Party, the document included mention of both “low-level red” and “high-level black” (CCP 2019). Referring explicitly to the “two safeguards,” CCP jargon for the need to safeguard Xi Jinping as the “core” leader and to ensure the authority of the CCP’s Central Committee, the document read: “[We] must with correct recognition and correct action firmly exercise the ‘two safeguards,’ resolutely preventing and correcting all erroneous words and deeds that deviate from the ‘two safeguards.’ [We] must not engage in any form of ‘low-level red’ or ‘high-level black,’ and resolutely must not permit outer devotion and inner opposition toward the CCP Central Committee, allowing double-dealing or ‘pseudo-loyalty.’”

Several months later, the official journal *Seeking Truth* (求是) commented that some officials tended to “over-simplify, vulgarise, go to extremes, or employ low-brow tactics to deceptively express ‘pseudo-loyalty,’” in this way “drawing ridicule” (Wu 2019). What could account for such extreme insecurity over questions of sincerity?

One possible explanation is that this sensitivity results from Xi Jinping's own position of waxing grandeur within the Party leadership, unprecedented in the reform era (Johnson 2010). Xi's elevation, evidenced early in his first term, began in earnest in October 2016 with his designation as the "core" leader (以习近平同志为核心的党中央) in the communiqué emerging from the Sixth Plenum of the 18th Central Committee (Buckley 2016). He was the first leader since Jiang Zemin to have been designated as the "core," but the language, "powerful political currency," signalled that Xi had in fact attained a level of personal power not seen since Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong. There were signs in early 2017, months in advance of the 19th National Congress of the CCP, that Xi Jinping's still unannounced "banner term," the political catchphrase used to encompass his policies and legacy, might be the first since "Deng Xiaoping Theory" (邓小平理论), to include his personal name, something neither Jiang Zemin nor Hu Jintao had managed with the "Three Represents" (三个代表) and "Scientific View of Development" (科学发展观), respectively (Qian 2012). By the time the Congress commenced in October 2017, Xi's moves to assert and secure his personal dominance were clear. His new banner term, "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era" (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想), indeed bore his name (what Chinese political scholars referred to as an act of "crowning"), and would need only slight abbreviation to become "Xi Jinping Thought" (习近平思想), putting China's latest "core" leader on the same level as Mao Zedong. The banner term, and therefore Xi's name, was formally added to the CCP's constitution. "China tilts back towards a cult of personality," reported the *Financial Times* (2017b). Term limits on the state presidency – the only limits to which Xi was subject – were removed from the state constitution months later at the National People's Congress.

Since Xi has consolidated power, stacking the CCP leadership with acolytes and associates (Financial Times 2017a), dispensing with the façade of collective leadership, and effectively taking China back to the era of "personalistic rule" (Shirk 2018) few have dared to criticise him. To the extent that China has returned under Xi to "an orthodox form of personalist authoritarianism," (Düben 2018) turning away from consensus-driven collective leadership, the substance of power relies increasingly on its

manufacture through rituals of loyalty-signaling more reminiscent of the pre-reform era (Qian 2020). Sincerity is crucial in this context because the genuine participation of CCP officials in rituals of leader worship is a way of achieving the key function of coordination with the “core” leader’s agenda. In a 2018 case study on the leadership cult of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, scholar Xavier Márquez (2018, 265) might have been talking about Xi Jinping’s China as he addressed the “persuasive aspects of cult messages,” the “construction of charismatic authority,” and the need for credible participation (my emphasis):

From this point of view, what is most striking about leader cults is not the production or over-production of particular positive representations of the leader, the exclusion of alternative images, or even the excessive praise addressed to the leader in official media, but the degree to which many people participate in rituals of leader worship, where they are expected not merely to consume leader propaganda passively but to act in ways that credibly indicate high levels of respect, or even adoration, for the leader. Here, as we shall see, the key function of a leader cult as a political strategy is coordination, and the main question of interest concerns the way in which participation in such rituals signals support or enhances commitments to the leader or some larger group, including the state.

As Márquez (2018, 266) suggests, the act of signalling, a form of participation, is absolutely critical in the “construction of charismatic authority.” This, I suspect, is also where the CCP’s redoubled sensitivity about sincerity enters the picture. It is important, when the manufacture of charismatic power displaces the need for consensus, to ensure that participation is heartfelt, and that it is not undermined through covert criticism. The bricks of devotion must be built of stern stuff.

The danger in the “new era” of charismatic power is that Party or government officials might simply parrot the “core” leader, or that they might resort to satire, twisting official discourse so as to achieve a critical effect. Or, alternatively, they might damage the Party’s credibility through excessive zeal. These fears of disproportionate praise were in fact sufficiently serious that in November 2017, right on the heels of the 19th National Congress, the Party released a “Decision” on the implementation of the “spirit” of the

Congress(中共中央关于认真学习宣传贯彻党的十九大精神的决定) that included three phrases that could acceptably be used to describe the status of Xi Jinping (CCP 2017). The phrases were: “Endorsed by the entire Party” (全党拥护); “loved and respected by the people” (人民爱戴); and “fully worthy and deserving [of core leadership status]” (当之无愧).

Pause for a moment to consider the absurdity of the situation facing the CCP leadership: the construction of legitimacy around charismatic leadership requires positive representations of the leader, and ever-mounting acts of adulation and loyalty-signaling; this language of praise must be sincere, lest disingenuousness (“high-level black”) become an undermining force, or the power of the leader seem to be imposed; and finally, and here is where the dog seems to bite its tail, the language of praise must be carefully scripted so as to avoid the appearance of insincerity. Let that logic sink in for a moment. Scripted sincerity, mandated from on high.

The Highs and Lows of Adulation

Despite Xi Jinping’s apparent near-cult status, the evidence suggests the Chinese Communist Party does not feel sufficiently secure to allow sincerity to speak for itself. One important case in point came shortly after the release of the list of acceptable phrases. On November 9, 2017, not long after the 19th National Congress, Guizhou’s *Qianxinan Daily* (黔西南日报), a local CCP paper, published a front page that included an airbrushed image of Xi Jinping with the caption, “Great Leader General Secretary Xi Jinping.” The term “great leader,” or *weida lingxiu* (伟大领袖), has been used in the past only to refer to Mao Zedong, and this extreme expression of loyalty to Xi was a step too far – particularly as overweening propaganda (and plans already announced to scrap presidential term limits) put the Party on the defensive over the apparent re-emergence of a cult of personality (Reuters 2017).



Page One of the May 1, 1974, edition of the People's Liberation Army Daily

Though the “great leader” reference appeared in a small regional paper, it was shared with undertones of scorn on Chinese social media, and it did not escape notice by Hong Kong media and overseas Chinese websites (Yang 2017). This was a point of embarrassment for senior leaders, and *Qianxinan Daily* was forced to quietly remove the front page from its online archive, replacing it with a fake version. So much for sincerity. Was the *Qianxinan Daily* use of “great leader” a case of “high-level black,” intended to damn Xi Jinping through insincere enthusiasm? Or was it a case of true sincerity, so intensely felt that a local leader lost all sense of proportion? To recap, there is a word for such an embarrassment of praise: “low-level red.”

As new formulations in the official discourse, “low-level red” and “high-level black” might be seen as symptoms of this renewed sensitivity over the terms of power-signaling as charismatic authority comes to dominate the political field in China. At first glance, their presence might seem oddly out of place. After all, why should such insecurities come to the fore at the very moment when Xi Jinping’s position seems assured? But these dynamics of power and insecurity will not seem strange to anyone with a grasp of CCP history. The drive for overarching control can lead to an almost compulsive fear of criticism hiding between the lines, and of peril lurking in the smile. There are many such cases in the history of media in the People’s Republic of China, most taking us back to the pre-reform era. And one of the most illustrative for Xi’s

“new era” might be the so-called “Black Box Scandal” (黑框事件) that unfolded in 1974 at the *Liberation Army Daily* (解放军报), the official mouthpiece of China’s military and one of three publications dominating the press during the Cultural Revolution.

Reading Peril Between the Lines

The scandal at the *Liberation Army Daily*, which ultimately would result in the disgrace of two editors, was unknown to staff at the paper until a meeting was urgently called in the newspaper’s conference room on the evening of July 8, 1974 (Zhang 2015). When the paper’s senior editors had finally gathered, a deputy editor from the Criticise Lin Biao, Criticise Confucius Office (批林批孔办公室) sternly presented them with a copy of the May 19 edition. He spoke of an unacceptable “overlap” between page one and page two. Page one of the edition included two photographs of Mao Zedong meeting with Makarios III, the first President of the Republic of Cyprus. In one of these images, the leaders were shaking hands. In the second image, Mao was seated in a semi-circle with Makarios III and several others, including his translator.



Page One of the November 9, 1974, edition of the *Qianxinan Daily*.

Both photographs were acceptable. What could possibly be the problem? Page two of the edition included several reports, including one about an earthquake in Yunnan and Sichuan provinces. But the issue was with an obituary printed at the bottom right-hand side of the page. This was for Lu Han, a respected former Kuomintang general who had defected to the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, an obvious point of pride for the PLA. The photo of Lu was surrounded by a thick black box, typical in China for photos of the deceased.



The inside page of the May 1, 1974, edition of the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, with an image of deceased general Lu Han.

The problem had nothing to do with language. Each page was fine on its own. But the trouble became clear when the paper was held up, as many readers might do, and the black box around the image of General Lu Han on the inside page could be seen hemming in the image of Mao Zedong on the front page.



Composite image of the first and second pages of the May 1, 1974, edition of the *People's Liberation Army Daily*.

Suddenly, the implications were catastrophic – an intimation of the death of Chairman Mao, an act of unspeakable carelessness. But it was not regarded as mere carelessness by the leadership. “The appearance of this problem is surely not an accident,” the paper’s editors were told. “This is a serious political error.” In fact, Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s wife, had demanded a full investigation of the scandal. An investigation was carried out, and two of the paper’s editors, Wu Yongchuan and Xue Zhen, were forced to make public admissions of guilt.

The scandal resulted in another change at the newspaper. From that day forward, all page proofs had to be inspected carefully using a specially created desk with a bulb under a glass pane, allowing editors to spot any overlaps or juxtapositions that might suggest dissent or criticism. In an article in 2015, one of Wu Yongchuan’s former colleagues, Zhang Xinyang (2015), said this process, which involved what they called the “searchlight table” (探照桌), was even used to inspect the Chinese characters

appearing on the back sides of photos, ensuring words like “criticise” (批判) or “overthrow” (打倒) were not printed atop images of Party leaders.

“I think readers today would find it difficult to imagine such trials in getting a paper to press, or such a way of reading a newspaper,” Wu Yongchuan concluded in his own December 2000 account of the “Black Box Scandal.” At the turn of the century, however, China was in a period of evolving collective leadership, which also corresponded to a period of rapid commercialisation during which Chinese media were exploring their professional roles in a changing society. Openness was the name of the day, and journalists were ready to reimagine themselves. Censorship was ever-present, but the space for criticism – even for hard-nosed investigative reporting – could also be found. Fast forward to March 2016 and we have a case in Xi Jinping’s “new era” with astonishing similarities to the “Black Box Scandal” and belying Wu Yongchuan’s sense of progress – around the question, no less, of press controls.

The Soul of the Media

On February 19, 2016, Xi Jinping paid a high-profile visit to three central-level “news units,” the *People’s Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, and China Central Television. By this point, just 15 months after he assumed leadership, Xi was already surrounded with an unmistakable halo of devotion, referred to fondly (even in song) as “Uncle Xi,” with a carefully crafted myth emerging around his past, including his youth in the countryside, and his image becoming nearly ubiquitous (Ramzy 2014). During Xi’s visit to Xinhua that day, one deputy editor, Pu Liye, found it impossible to restrain his adulation. In a poem positively quivering with excitement, making reference to the “camel bells of the Belt and Road” (它伴随一带一路的驼铃), and to the “mighty wind of the high-speed rail” (以及巨轮高铁暖风浩荡), Pu wrote:

General Secretary, my eyes follow in your wake, 总书记，您的背影我的目光

And in these eyes, my verse takes shape. 我的目光催生这首诗

My mobile grows hot as my fingers move. 我的手指正让手机滚烫

How long this verse of mine has brewed. 这首诗我酝酿了很久 (Bandurski 2016)

Devotion was also the chief message of Xi Jinping's speech later that afternoon at a conference on "news and public opinion work" attended by propaganda officials and representatives from party-state media. Xi demanded the unquestioning obedience of the media, which he said must be "surnamed Party" - meaning that they must remain faithful to the CCP's Central Committee and recognise that their role is to "love the Party, protect the Party, and serve the Party" (爱党、护党、为党).

As love and devotion crested, inundating media and politics, it was difficult to escape the appearance of tawdriness. Pu Liye's verses were the object of ridicule on the Chinese internet, and in the Hong Kong media he was compared to the twentieth century poet-politician Guo Moruo, who "never forgot to eulogise [Mao Zedong for] his unprecedented achievements and his unchallengeable leadership of the Chinese Revolution" (Yang 2016, 147). As for the scandal that unfolded the next day at *Southern Metropolis Daily*, one of the country's leading commercial newspapers, the jury is still out today on whether what happened was an intentional act of criticism by stealth, or merely a colossal error.

For papers like the *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市报), which for more than a decade had managed to find some limited space for professional news coverage, sometimes running afoul of the leadership, Xi Jinping's renewed claim to lordship over the media was a tragedy unfolding over many months, beginning in January 2013 with the *Southern Weekly* incident, in which authorities ultimately tamed what had long been regarded as China's "greatest newspaper" (Repnikova/Fang 2015). But few dared to speak openly about the worsening of the CCP's censorship regime.

On the morning of February 20, the front page of the Shenzhen edition of *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported news of Xi Jinping's media speech the previous day with a bold headline across the top of the page: "Party and Government Media are Propaganda Positions and Must Be Surnamed Party" (党和政府主办的媒体是党和政府的宣传阵地，必须姓党). This would have been mandated as the top news of the

day, to be given exactly this sort of prominent treatment. Directly underneath this headline was a photograph taking up most of the page that showed a funeral at sea held near Shenzhen for Yuan Geng, one of the chief founders of the Shekou Industrial Zone. Yuan had died two weeks earlier, and now his ashes were being scattered. The headline superimposed on the photograph read: “A Soul Returns to the Sea” (魂归大海).



Front page of the February 20, 2016, edition of the Shenzhen edition of *Southern Metropolis Daily*.

As in the 1974 scandal at the *PLA Daily*, the problem was juxtaposition. Newspaper readers and Chinese internet users soon realised that the two headlines, if read vertically, became what is referred to in Chinese as a “hidden-head” message:

媒体
姓党
魂归
大海

*Media Are
Surnamed Party
Their Souls Return
To The Sea*

Read in combination, the headlines seemed a desperate cry from journalists facing a level of Party control that fundamentally threatened their hopes of even marginal independence. Was this an intentional act of protest against the worsening information landscape under China's new strongman? Or was this a garden-variety error, as in the case of the "Black Box Scandal"?

Whatever the case, Liu Cuixia, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* news editor immediately responsible, was fired from her job, and the Nanfang Daily Group, the paper's Party-run publisher, sent out a release internally to staff that called the incident "a serious matter of guidance" (BBC 2018). Interviewed anonymously by the *New York Times*, however, one of Liu's colleagues suggested such an act of intentional sabotage would be unthinkable given the new level of controls facing media: "It can't have been deliberate. It's just very, very serious. And these days no one would dare to do something like that." (Tatlow 2016)

Circum-invention

The problem with seriousness is that it begets ridicule in its most subtle forms. The CCP has grappled with this dilemma through much of its history. Consider the "veiled attacks" on Mao Zedong conceived in the early 1960s by the so-called "Three Family Village" (三家村), a trio of writers and senior propagandists consisting of Deng Tuo, Wu Han, and Liao Mosha (MacFarquhar 1997). It alleged that Deng, a poet who had served as editor-in-chief of the *People's Daily* until 1958, had even "feigned a correct posture" while seemingly criticising a "reactionary" drama by Wu Han (Cheek 1981). Deng's lampooning of Mao Zedong was "high-level black" of the highest order.

Humor and subterfuge have also long been important characteristics of "online contention," which has supported a vibrant "meme culture," employing "creative practices

that sidestep the mechanics of internet censorship in China.” (Yang 2009) One prominent example in the 2000s was the emergence of the term “river crab,” or *hexie* (河蟹), a homophone of the word “harmony” (和谐), to subtly critique Hu Jintao’s notion of the “harmonious society,” which had been used to justify internet censorship (An 2014). Siu-yau Lee (2016, 1061) has referred to these as “satirical tactics,” noting that “satirical campaigns are most likely to survive when activists adopt the tactic of ‘parodic satire,’ whereby activists mimic a specific practice of the state and skilfully transplant it to other contexts.”

Cases of direct and outspoken criticism have become exceptionally rare in the Xi Jinping era. Back in April, Ren Zhiqiang, a prominent former real estate developer and CCP member, penned an article that circulated online criticising the substance of a February 23 teleconference on China’s response to the Covid-19 epidemic. Though not mentioning Xi Jinping by name, Ren implied both incompetence and a grasping desire for power. “I saw not an emperor standing there exhibiting his ‘new clothes,’” he wrote, “but a clown who stripped naked and insisted on continuing being emperor. Despite holding a series of loincloths up in an attempt to cover the reality of your nakedness, you don’t in the slightest hide your resolute ambition to be an emperor, or the determination to let anyone who won’t let you be destroyed.” (Rudolph 2020) Ren noted that attention in the February 23 meeting had focused on “great accomplishments,” and that there had been an utter lack of critical opinions. Soon after the post circulated, Ren was incommunicado, apparently under detention. Finally, in April, the CCP announced that he was under investigation for “serious violations of discipline and law.”

But when criticism must hide, it becomes an invisible force – feared all the more for its ability to strike unanticipated, rising suddenly from the depths of public anger. This is the dilemma of charismatic power: that even as devotion surges, the beloved leader cannot feel entirely secure in the authenticity of the love to which he feels entitled. Sometimes, the emperor realises his own nakedness. He dreads the moment when the thin veil of deception falls in the midst of his grand procession – all because a child notices the obvious.

Hans Christian Andersen's folktale of the vain emperor, the substance of Ren Zhiqiang's critique, was replayed in March this year in the city of Wuhan, ravaged by the coronavirus epidemic and the lockdown that followed. On March 5, Vice-Premier Sun Chunlan visited Wuhan ahead of a planned tour by Xi Jinping that was supposed to mark a key turning point in the "war" against the virus. At one point, as Sun and her entourage processed through a gated community of residential high-rises, residents shouted from their windows: "Fake! Fake! Everything is fake!" (假的! 假的! 都是假的!) This was captured in a video that briefly spread like wildfire across Chinese social media, before being expunged from the internet inside China. The next day, the new top leader in Wuhan, Wang Zhonglin, surely embarrassed by the incident, was quoted in the local CCP newspaper as suggesting during an internal leadership meeting that there was a need to "carry out gratitude education among the citizens of the whole city," giving them a greater appreciation of the efforts of Xi Jinping and the Party (Bandurski 2020). Wang's remarks became a full-blown crisis on the internet, necessitating an emergency video conference in which propaganda officials across the country assessed what had gone wrong in what was called "a classic case of public opinion created by our own work."

As outrageous as Wang's remarks were, they perfectly illustrated the problem inherent in devotion politics. As an official deeply invested in the system, Wang understood implicitly that devotion was now the most valued currency. Understandably, he was eager not just to secure praise and validation for his own work and for Sun Chunlan, but to reflect it upwards to the "core" leader as well. But his crass exposure of this political culture of praise - which of course also was his own expression of devotion - ultimately became yet another instance of self-inflicted ridicule through excess of zeal. As one commentator wrote on an overseas Chinese news platform: "Using this 'low-level red' means of demanding thanks from the people to show political loyalty [to superiors] harms not only the image of the ruling party and the government, but also seriously hurts the feelings of the people, ultimately becoming a form of political disloyalty."

"Low-level red" can also occur at the highest of levels. In late February, even as China still struggled to contain the epidemic and its social and economic fallout, the CCP's

Central Propaganda Department released a book in six languages called *A Great Nation Battles the Epidemic* (大国战“疫”). According to the official Xinhua News Agency, the book was “a concentrated reflection of General Secretary Xi Jinping as the leader of a great nation, having feelings for the people, taking on the mission, showing strategic foresight and outstanding leadership” (Xinhua News Agency 2020). On March 8, just two days before Xi Jinping’s tour of Wuhan, media in Hong Kong reported that the book, which had drawn derision on social media, had been pulled from shelves. The Hong Kong outlet HK01 explained that such acts of “low-level red” are a symptom and legacy of authoritarian political cultures, even going back to China’s feudal era, in which civil servants stood to benefit from such flattery. “This ‘low-level red’ may seem to be cloaked in an outer garment of ‘political correctness’ conveying loyalty, but in fact it harbors an extremely selfish psychology of opportunism,” the article said. “What it actually accomplishes is to take the image of the leader and the nation and roast it over the fire, deconstructing rather than strengthening the image and power of the leader and the nation.” (HK01 2020)

Ridicule surfaced again from the depths as Xi Jinping made his high-profile visit to Wuhan, meant to signal that China had successfully brought COVID-19 under control. This was a serious opportunity to project an image of strength, of Xi Jinping as the commander who had led the people to victory in the war against the coronavirus. Censorship of the media and the internet was correspondingly severe, the authorities keen to ensure that nothing spoiled the atmosphere of devotion. As controls snuffed out all attempts to counteract the all-consuming CCP narrative, Chinese on social media platforms reached dizzying heights of creativity to make themselves heard.

The day of Xi’s tour, a series of feature stories had been published in China’s *People* magazine. They included a lengthy interview in which the director of an emergency department at one local Wuhan hospital spoke out about her decision to share information back in December 2019 about a patient suffering from a case of atypical pneumonia – what would later, after weeks of cover-up, be designated COVID-19. Ai Fen and other local Wuhan doctors had been harshly disciplined for daring to share information about the emerging outbreak. In the interview, she affirmed the need to speak up, and said she regretted not having spoken out more forcefully.

As the Ai Fen interview was censored on the day of Xi Jinping's Wuhan visit, internet users began sharing cloaked versions of the text in a viral effort to circumvent controls. One user shared a version that had been machine translated into Korean (but could easily be translated back into Chinese). Another rendered the text using emoticons. Still another managed to share the text by converting each of its Chinese characters into the unique five-digit codes once used in China to send telegraph messages.



Three different versions of a censored in-depth report from China's *People* magazine shared through the WeChat social platform, rendered in Korean (far left), in emoticons (center) and in telegraph codes.

On the day of Xi's glorious procession in Wuhan, Chinese found thousands of different ways, each more creative than the next, to work around the CCP's insecurities. Such acts of digital dissent are sure to continue, even as the Party itself turns to digital tools, like its study app for the ideas of Xi Jinping, in an effort to manufacture devotion as a means to charismatic power. And even as the authorities refine the technologies used to ferret out and obliterate acts of irreverence, hiding like "digital samizdat" in the corners of chatrooms and comment sections, the leadership will have to contend with the constant and unforeseen consequences of devotion itself (Barmé 2020). Whether through criticism or praise, the emperor is always exposed.

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