

Greasing the Reels: Advertising as a Means of Campaigning on Chinese Television*

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Abstract

This article examines a major change in campaigning through the means of mass media during the reform era. As the media commercialized and partially privatized, the state has tried increasingly to involve societal actors in the production of public service advertisements (PSAs) on television. Today, PSA campaigns are initiated by state and Party units, but their funding, production and broadcasting is made possible by a collaborative effort between broadcasters, advertising companies and commercial enterprises who voluntarily support their further development. I conducted 27 in-depth interviews with officials, broadcasters and producers in Beijing to tap into the policy rationale behind the use of public service advertisements in campaigning and the incentive structure facilitating collaboration between companies and state units. Interviews with judges of PSA competitions and content analysis of price-winning advertisements reveal the standards of the central government to employ public service advertising as a means of campaigning.

Keywords: Media; campaigning; propaganda; legitimacy; spiritual civilization; corporate social responsibility

A group of Chinese primary school students are raising the national flag. Others salute and shout: “I tell the national flag: I love my homeland, I bless my homeland, wish the great homeland to prosper!” Cut. Background voices sing: “Become a moral person from saluting to the national flag” Cut. A label appears: “Welcome the anniversary, be civilized and follow the new trend – Sponsored by the Guidance Committee on Building Spiritual Civilization Construction, the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television, the General Administration of Press and Publication, and CCTV.”

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Public service advertisements (PSAs) like this one, produced to celebrate China's 60th anniversary, are shown several times a day on Chinese television. PSAs, *gongyi guanggao* 公益广告, are a modern version of the Chinese propaganda posters used for campaigning during the Mao years. However, they are significantly different in terms of delivery, style and content. PSAs are considered propaganda instruments, but take into account more strongly how the audience perceives the message, thus supposedly retrieving more positive reactions and support. In contrast to the Mao years, PSA campaigns are also quite diverse in content in that they represent the voice of different Party and state units as well as social organizations who are encouraged to initiate their themes. Formally, PSAs are directed at building a "spiritual civilization," which falls under the responsibility of the Guidance Committee on Building Spiritual Civilization Construction (GCBCS), a sub-agency of the Propaganda Department. In doing so, they are part of the task to create a modern set of values and norms to conform to "Socialism with Chinese characteristics." However, in practice PSAs can be part of a wide range of campaigns initiated by Party and state units at all levels of government. They are aimed at fighting corruption, improving treatment of migrant workers, protecting the environment and spreading legal knowledge, to give just a few examples. Since PSAs are often linked to specific policies and goals by various state and Party units they tend to have a political spin, which distinguishes them from their counterparts in Western Europe or the United States.

Despite the growing prevalence of PSAs in the Chinese media, there has been only limited research on the increasing involvement of advertising in campaigning. Since the Mao years the Chinese state has continued to employ campaign strategies in order to educate citizens and implement policies. Today, campaigns do not reach the same level of coercion and citizen involvement as mass campaigns during the Mao era¹; they are carefully planned and managed based on scientific insights in order to avoid class struggle and instead establish a harmonious society.² Despite these significant changes, the process itself remains remarkably similar, still including three stages of first raising awareness and mobilizing the public, subsequently identifying targets by encouraging citizens to report non-compliant behaviour, and finally punishing the targets of the campaign.³ During the first stage the media continue to play an important role. Via mass media public officials aim to create "a favourable environment" for the implementation of government policies by raising awareness as well as changing people's attitudes and behaviour.

1 Yongming Zhou, *China's Anti-Drug Campaign in the Reform Era* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2000); Melanie Manion, *Corruption by Design: Building Clean Government in Mainland China and Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Benjamin van Rooij, "Implementation of Chinese environmental law: regular enforcement and political campaigns," *Development and Change*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2006), pp. 57–74.

2 Elizabeth J. Perry, "From mass campaigns to managed campaigns: 'constructing a new socialist countryside'," in Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 30–61, 2011.

3 Manion, *Corruption by Design*.

While highlighting these changes and continuities in campaign strategy, most existing studies do not provide insights on the various means through which the state is trying to get citizens involved during the first stage of campaigning. Two recent campaigns suggest a change in the government's approach towards mobilizing citizens. During the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 semi-autonomous social organizations played a key role in organizing donations and volunteers, with incentives to work within the official framework set by the state.⁴ Similarly, during the Beijing Olympics in 2008 the Propaganda Department relied on a public relations strategy and PSA campaign that sold propaganda similar to the promotion of a new product, taking into account the needs and conditions of Chinese audiences.⁵ This new approach is also reflected in a change in the use of language when talking about campaigning: instead of “movement” (*yundong* 运动) the preferred term is now “activity” (*huodong* 活动),⁶ which emphasizes positive incentives to foster voluntary involvement in a campaign as opposed to the social pressure and coercion relied on during the Mao years.

The policy-rationale and incentive structure behind this new approach of mobilizing societal forces during campaigning becomes further visible when tracking the production of PSAs for Chinese television. Since its emergence in 1986 advertising has become increasingly used in campaigning, particularly since the GCBSC acknowledged its benefit by joining the State Administration for Industry and Commerce (SAIC) in managing PSAs. Central-level policy makers believe that it is a fast and effective means to set the political agenda and shape people's values and behaviour, not only because of the attractiveness of these commercials to Chinese media audiences but also because of their apparent success in counterbalancing the corrosion of socialist ideology in the Chinese media, advertising industry and businesses. PSA campaigns are initiated by state and Party units, but their funding, production and broadcasting are made possible by a collaborative effort between broadcasters, advertising companies and corporations who are given positive incentives to support their further development. PSAs have become a convenient means to display political correctness as an investment in one's future economic and personal success. Political correctness in this context denotes attitudes and behaviour in line with the goals and policies of state and Party units.

Development of Public Service Advertising

As with many political innovations in China, advertising as a means of campaigning developed out of an independent initiative that was later adopted as

4 Jessica C. Teets, “Post-earthquake relief and reconstruction efforts,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 198 (2009), pp. 330–47.

5 Anne-Marie Brady, “The Beijing Olympics as a campaign of mass distraction,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 197 (2009), pp. 1–24; Stefan R. Landsberger, “Harmony, Olympic manners and morals – Chinese television and the ‘new propaganda’ of public service advertising,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2009), pp. 331–55.

6 See also Brady, “The Beijing Olympics as a campaign of mass distraction”; Perry, *From Mass Campaigns to Managed Campaigns*.

government policy. The first PSA, entitled “save water” (*jiyue yongshui* 节约用水), was broadcast in 1986 by Guiyang city’s local television station in Guizhou. The Guiyang city government’s office for saving water had approached the television station about propagating water conservation. Since media staff was also producing commercial advertising in the 1980s, the television station advanced the idea of relying on a television commercial. This PSA was supposedly highly effective as people used less water that year.⁷

Inspired by Guiyang, China Central Television started a special programme, *guang er gao zhi* 广而告之, which roughly translates into “spreading the message far and wide.” The programme broadcast 30-second to one-minute spots once or twice a day from October 1987 onwards, making a total of 844 different advertisements by the end of 1995. Soon local television stations, including Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Hunan, Henan, Shandong and Anhui, among others, set up their own PSA programmes. By 1995 there were 27 PSA programmes on Chinese television.⁸

Since PSAs were invented by producers of advertising, they first fell under the responsibility of the SAIC. In the early years they were primarily developed by advertising staff within television stations who met at four PSA conferences between 1994 and 1997. These conferences were initiated by Chi Feng 迟锋, then deputy director of Hunan television station, who believed that television stations needed a network to exchange experiences and improve the production of PSAs. One result of these meetings was the formation of a group of expert advisers for CCTV, composed of CCTV deputy editor-in-chief of the editing department Chen Hanyuan 陈汉元, Beijing Film Academy professor Situ Zhaodun 司徒兆敦 and China Advertising Association’s expert committee member Tang Zhongpu 唐忠朴, who had also established a PSA centre in Beijing. This advisory group institutionalized the production of PSAs at CCTV by creating rules, evaluating PSAs and educating staff members. Within this framework of nationwide meetings and CCTV advisory committee, television stations started to experiment with different methods to collaborate and thus lower the production costs.⁹ Similar structures fostering collaboration between the different actors involved in the production of PSAs continue to provide the framework for its further development today.

In the mid-1990s central-level policy makers discovered PSAs as a means of campaigning. In 1996 the central-level SAIC initiated the first nationwide PSA campaign, entitled “China’s good customs and manners” (*Zhonghua hao feng shang* 中华好风尚), which could include such topics as “public morals, environmental protection, care of the elderly, women and children.”¹⁰ Since then central Party

7 Interview with two producers, December 2008 (nos. 7, 26). Peiai Chen, *Zhongwai guanggao shi* (*A History of Advertising in China and Beyond*) (Beijing: Zhongguo wujia chubanshe, 2008).

8 Yun Wang and Yichi Feng, “Gongyi guanggao shiwu nian” (“15 years of public service advertising”), *Xinwen daxue* (*Journalism University*), Vol. 76, No. 2 (2003), pp. 76–79.

9 Interview with central-level official, December 2008 (no. 13).

10 Interview with two central-level officials and competition judge, December 2008 and October 2009 (nos. 6, 10, 7). *Guanyu kaishan “Zhonghua hao feng shang” zhuti gongyi guanggao ye huodong de tongzhi*

and government institutions have launched at least one PSA campaign per year, usually a collaborative effort between the GBCS, the SAIC, the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television, and the General Administration of Press and Publication.¹¹ For example, in 2008, the two central PSA campaigns targeted relief efforts after the Wenchuan earthquake and the “Welcome the Olympics, be civilized, and follow the new trend” campaign for the Beijing Olympics; in 2009 the centre targeted the 60th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China and anti-corruption efforts, and in 2010 central-level campaigns focused on building unity and harmony among ethnic groups, equal status of girls as part of the one-child policy, and the Expo in Shanghai.¹²

There were several reasons for greater involvement of the centre in PSA activities. First, the media had become increasingly commercialized and profit-oriented, and thus not always willing to produce and broadcast PSAs for state and Party units. Second, policy makers were worried that increased marketization would corrode people’s values and morals to the extent that they only cared about making money. Chinese society therefore needed guidance to construct a socialist spiritual civilization.¹³ Accordingly, in the mid-1990s spiritual civilization re-emerged on the political agenda of central-level officials.

This term was first raised in 1979 by Ye Jianying 叶剑英, then Minister of Defence and a Party conservative, as a criticism of Deng Xiaoping’s stress on economic development as opposed to “thought reform” during the Mao era.¹⁴ Spiritual civilization became an official policy direction in 1986, after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had launched the campaign against spiritual pollution in 1983–84 and just before it initiated the campaign against cultural liberalization in 1987.¹⁵ These campaigns were aimed at clamping down on the corrosion of socialist ideology in Chinese society, particularly intellectuals, which was revealed in the spread of corruption and pornography, an increasing crime

footnote continued

(*Announcement on the Zhonghua Hao Feng Shang PSA Activity*), SAIC, 18 June 1996, available at http://www.pt.fjaic.gov.cn/law_show.asp?law_type=GSXZ1305, accessed 24 November 2009.

- 11 Interviews with three central-level officials and two competition judges, December 2008 and October 2009 (nos. 3, 6, 8, 10, 11). For an example see *Guanyu kaizhan “ying guoqing, jiang wenming, shu xinfeng” gongyi guanggao xuanchuan huodong de tongzhi* (*Announcement on the “Welcome the Anniversary, be Civilized, Follow the New Trend” PSA Propaganda Activity*), CPD, GCBSC, SAIC, SARFT, GAPP, 25 May 2009, available at http://www.wenming.cn/gygg/2009-06/03/content_16701018.htm, accessed 11 January 2010.
- 12 In addition to the four main institutions mentioned above, other political actors were involved in these campaigns. E.g. the first one in 2009 was initiated by the top leaders and the second by the central-level Discipline Inspection Committee; “Ethnic groups unite to build a harmonious society” (*minzu tuanjie, shehui hexie*) in 2010 by the CAA. Interviews with two central-level officials, October and November 2009 (nos. 8, 14).
- 13 Interviews with two central-level officials, December 2008 (nos. 3, 6).
- 14 Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).
- 15 Daniel C. Lynch, “Dilemmas of ‘thought work’ in fin-de-siècle China,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 157 (1999), pp. 173–201.

rate, a growing emphasis on making money, and other “unhealthy ideologies” associated with Western influence and undermining the leadership of the Party.¹⁶ At the Sixth Plenum of the 14th Party Committee in 1996 Jiang Zemin called for specific measures to build a socialist spiritual civilization, including the creation of a guidance committee.¹⁷ Soon after its establishment the SAIC started to share primary responsibility for PSAs with the GCBSC.¹⁸

In practice, the catch phrase “spiritual civilization” can embody many different meanings. During the Olympics, PSA campaigns taught people how to interact with foreigners, promoted helping others in difficulty, and targeted indiscretions such as queue-jumping, spitting in public and littering.¹⁹ Yet apart from the promotion of these public-spirited values, campaigns for promoting the public good can focus on a wide range of topics, including corruption, environmental protection, public security, family planning, unemployment, legal reform and patriotism – pretty much any topic that could help create a “favourable social environment” for the implementation of policies by China’s manifold political entities.

Over time, the central government has paid increasing attention to the possibility of PSAs serving as propaganda instruments. In a welcome letter to a newly established National Research Centre for PSA Innovation, Chen Zhili 陈至立, vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the 11th National People’s Congress and former vice-president of the Beijing Olympics Organizing Committee, writes: “PSAs are an important instrument for the establishment of a socialist spiritual civilization and a catalyst for social harmony. In recent years, Party and state units have adopted powerful measures, strengthened PSA propaganda, used methods such as thematic collections of PSAs, competitions, and PSA publications and broadcasting to greatly enhance socialist core values, achieving remarkable success.”²⁰ Similarly, Wang Shiming 王世明, dedicated deputy director (*zhuanzhi fuzhuren* 专职副主任) of the GCBSC, praised “the special benefit of the important development of PSAs” during the Beijing Olympics campaign and encouraged increased engagement of PSA campaigns to “increase the attractiveness and enthusiasm” for work during his address to the National Meeting of GCBSC heads in

16 Shu-Shin Wang, “The rise and fall of the campaign against spiritual pollution in the People’s Republic of China,” *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1986), pp. 47–62; Randall Stross, “The return of advertising in China: a survey of the ideological reversal,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 123 (1990), pp. 485–502.

17 Lynch, “Dilemmas of ‘thought work.’” After its establishment GCBSC immediately started to investigate the spread of *falun gong* among Party members, a concern that may have also affected the decision for its creation. *Zhongyang jingshen wenming jianshi zhidao weiyuanhui di yi ci quanti huiyi jiyao* (Notes on the First Full Gathering of the Guidance Committee on Building Spiritual Civilization Construction), GCBSC, 26 May 1997, available at www.godpp.gov.cn/zlzx/zywj.htm, accessed 5 November 2009.

18 Interviews with two central-level officials, December 2008 (nos. 3, 6). The GCBSC appears for the first time on public announcements by the SAIC in 1999. *Guanyu jin yi bu zuo hao gongyi guanggao gongzuo you guan wenti de tongzhi* (Announcement on Gradually Solving Problems Related to PSA Work), CPD, SAIC, 22 October 1999, available at <http://www.jxcs.org.cn/system/2008/08/06/002814574.shtml>, accessed 24 November 2009.

19 Conversation with central-level official (no. 13), December 2008. See also Brady, “The Beijing Olympics as a campaign of mass distraction.”

20 See Jieyang City Consumer Council website, available at <http://www.gdgy315.gov.cn/zxzx/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=2458>, accessed 8 July 2010. For the National Research Centre for PSA innovation see <http://www.cnpad.net/nirbpsa/xueshu/tuandui/>, accessed 7 October 2011.

January 2010.²¹ From the perspective of central-level officials PSAs constitute an effective means to promote the healthy development of Chinese society as defined by the CCP.

Today, PSAs have become a widespread phenomenon that Chinese television audiences, now reaching 80.2 per cent of the urban and 74.8 per cent of the rural population, cannot avoid.²² According to CTR market research conducted between January and July 2009, 67 per cent of government-initiated PSA were broadcast on city-level television, 24 per cent on provincial television, 5 per cent on CCTV and 4 per cent by others. Among provincial stations, Beijing was leading in terms of the percentage of government-initiated PSAs among commercial advertising, followed by Guangdong and Qinghai.²³ PSAs are primarily broadcast in the evening during “golden time” on Chinese television.

The Political Structure behind PSAs

On the side of the Party, the main organization in charge of PSAs is the GCBSC. This body co-ordinates public education on ethics and morals among various Party and state units. It is part of the broader propaganda system supervised by the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) on which it depends financially and in terms of personnel appointment.²⁴ The close relationship between the two Party units also expresses itself in leadership: Liu Yunshan 刘云山, currently minister of the CPD, is also the deputy head of the GCBSC, while Li Changchun 李长春, currently head of the GCBSC, simultaneously serves as the head of the Central Leading Group on Propaganda and Ideological work, of which Liu Yunshan is the deputy head.²⁵ However, since the CPD guides public opinion more broadly, the GCBSC considers PSAs its responsibility. At the central level, officials wear the hat of the GCBSC in meetings dealing with PSA development while simultaneously also being members of the CPD. For example, the GCBSC is often represented by Wang Shiming, dedicated deputy director of the GCBSC and simultaneously a member of the decision-making committee of the CPD. Although his main tasks fall within the work of the GCBSC, the

21 See Xuzhou GCBSC website, available at <http://www.xzwmw.com/html/zyjh/2010/201001203664.shtml>, accessed 8 July 2010.

22 Percentages are based on the China Survey 2008, conducted by the College of Liberal Arts of Texas A&M University in collaboration with the Research Centre of Contemporary China at Peking University. It is based on a random stratified multi-stage probability sample of all Chinese adults, employing the GPS sampling technique and thus included migrant workers. See also Pierre F. Landry and Mingming Shen, “Reaching migrants in survey research: the use of the global positioning system to reduce coverage bias in China,” *Political Analysis*, No. 13 (2005), pp. 1–22.

23 6.7% for Beijing TV, 4.4% for Guangdong TV and 3% for Qinghai TV. PSAs were measured as advertising initiated by Party or state units and did not include those financed by companies, thus underestimating their percentage. *Zhongguo guangbo yingshi (China Radio Film and TV Magazine)*, December 2009.

24 Interview with competition judge, December 2009 (no. 10). See also David L. Shambaugh, “China’s propaganda system: institutions, processes, and efficacy,” *The China Journal*, No. 57 (2007), pp. 25–58; Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*.

25 See Shambaugh, “China’s propaganda system.”

CPD position strengthens his authority over media outlets which the GCBSC as a guidance committee does not have.²⁶

The GCBSC has established co-ordination offices at different levels of government that are in charge of organizing PSA campaigns by guiding their content and emphasis according to the broader policies of the centre and the specific focus of local governments.²⁷ Apart from PSA work, the GCBSC also awards the label of “civilized work units” to corporations and organizes evaluations of “civilized cities.”²⁸ When explaining the GCBSC’s function some of my interviewees compared the institution to a church or religious organization as it sets ethical standards for social behaviour considered suitable to China’s economic development and progress towards a modern society.

On the side of the state administration, the SAIC is the government organ in charge of issuing licences to companies, including corporate advertisers and advertising companies, as well as implementing advertising policy more generally; PSAs therefore also fall under its jurisdiction. Advertising offices at different levels of government are in charge of organizing and managing PSA campaigns according to rules and regulations.²⁹ Although the GCBSC as the Party organ is the more powerful unit, in practice the SAIC has a lot of influence on PSA development. First, the SAIC is the expert on the implementation of PSA campaigns and therefore provides feedback on how to realize the broader goals of the government. In addition, it can act as a decision maker when it also initiated the respective PSA campaign.³⁰

As well as these Party and state units, the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) in charge of administering broadcasting and the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) responsible for print publications co-operate with the GCBSC and the SAIC in the formulation of rules and regulations relevant to PSAs; they also help to implement PSA activities by passing on directives to broadcasting and print media. In addition, the China Advertising Association (CAA) assumes an important role in the development and implementation of PSA policies as it links the advertising industry with state institutions: it is the official representative of advertising companies while also working under the leadership and guidance of the SAIC.

State and Party units co-ordinate policy-making by publishing official documents regarding the management of PSAs and initiation of PSA campaigns, and by co-sponsoring competitions for PSA prizes. As a result of the participation of a number of Party and state units, in practice the implementation of

26 Interview with competition judge, December 2009 (no. 10).

27 *Announcement on Gradually Solving Problems Related to PSA Work*.

28 *Quan guo chengshi ceping xiti (Evaluation System for Nationwide Civilized Cities)*, GCBSC, 14 September 2004, available at http://www.godpp.gov.cn/zlzx/2004-09/27/content_2941774.htm, accessed 11 January 2010. See also Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*.

29 *Announcement on Gradually Solving Problems Related to PSA Work*.

30 Interviews with two central-level officials and competition judge, December 2009 (nos. 10, 13, 26).

PSA policy is fragmented. Once the general structure for campaigns and competitions has been decided at collaborative meetings, each state administrative body interprets these documents and solves occurring problems “from their own perspective,” that is the SAIC deals with advertising companies, while SARFT oversees broadcasting and GAPP print media. Within this fragmented structure of shared responsibility policy makers set general guidelines which are then interpreted and implemented by other societal actors. As one central-level official put it: “PSA is a national endeavour incorporating commercial enterprises, advertising companies and the media. The government really does not need to get directly involved, it can provide support, but does not need to evaluate or order a topic by itself. The rules of the SAIC are also basically not decided by means of research or experts, just thought of by a few people.” In the absence of tight control by Party and state units, the production of PSAs presents an opportunity to observe the incentive structure that ties Chinese economic and political elites together, thus providing insights on the central government’s approach towards mobilizing societal actors to participate in campaigning.

Production

Except in rare cases, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics or the 60th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China, China’s central leadership does not directly approach respective government or Party units, or television stations to start developing PSA campaigns. All government and Party organs can initiate PSAs since they receive small amounts of funding for propaganda purposes. Social organizations, such as the All China Federation of Workers or the All China Federation of Women, may also do so. Most of the time, a number of state and Party units will collaborate with one another as this is considered to provide additional support for the campaign. For example, in 2009 the CAA contacted the SAIC about co-sponsoring a PSA campaign on harmonious ethnicity, a hot topic after unrests in Tibet in 2008 and in Xinjiang in 2009.³¹ Some topics are also initiated by television stations themselves. For example, every year around the spring festival CCTV has its own PSA campaign; in 2010 it focused on traditional holidays. In this case, senior personnel within television stations decide on the topic.

At the central level, there is usually only one PSA campaign propagated by central-level institutions at a time, in order to guarantee that “all societal forces are mobilized to propagate that issue in order to have the largest effect.”³² This is a function of the broader Chinese political system, in which policies can be more easily implemented when the centre places much emphasis on only a few issues at a time. With respect to the cadre responsibility system, for example, the division of performance criteria into primary and secondary targets helped the centre to

31 Conversation with central-level official, November 2009 (no. 14)

32 Interview with central-level official, November 2008 (no. 6).

reinforce commitment to Party goals at the local level.³³ Compared to the cadre responsibility system, PSA campaigns provide a more flexible and quick means to communicate the importance of policy goals to other levels of government as well as ordinary citizens.³⁴ They serve as signals about the political agenda of Party and state administrative units.

When selecting a topic for PSA campaigning, initiators follow the rule of “digesting two heads, one is the centre, the upper head, the other one is the lower head, the masses.”³⁵ To learn about political directives, they watch speeches and official documents on important meetings of the Party and People’s Congresses very closely. To form a basic impression of the concerns of ordinary people, they talk to friends or surf the internet. Yet not all possible themes that serve the state and the needs of society can be worked into a PSA campaign. A suitable topic also has to leave enough room for creativity among producers.³⁶

Once the topic has been decided, initiators usually get in touch with broadcasters, unless they work at a television station themselves. In rare cases, the government, broadcasters and advertising companies all get together to develop PSAs. For example, in 2008 the Central Discipline Inspection Committee’s anti-corruption campaign was planned at such a meeting.³⁷ As a rule of thumb, topics that serve national policy directives are organized in collaboration with CCTV and those that serve local policies with local television stations.³⁸

The television station’s advertising department then divides up production among advertising companies. Over time, the production of commercials has become more specialized so that they are no longer made by the television station’s own advertising department but by specialized advertising companies which compete for access to commercial time. Based on their network, broadcasters distribute the production of PSAs among advertising companies that they have existing business relations with.³⁹ Sometimes celebrities such as film director Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 or basketball legend Yao Ming 姚明 participate in their production. Most of the time, however, PSAs are created by regular producers of commercial advertising, though a small number of advertising agencies have become specialists on PSA production, such as the Beijing-based Sanghua Ad Agency.⁴⁰

Though PSAs borrow techniques from commercial advertisements, in fact the considerations affecting their production are quite different. In contrast to

33 See e.g. Susan H. Whiting, “The cadre evaluation system at the grass roots: the paradox of party rule,” in Barry Naughton and Dali L. Yang (eds.), *Holding China Together: Diversity and National Integration in the Post-Deng Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 101–19.

34 Interviews with two central-level officials, October and November 2009 (nos. 8, 11).

35 Interview with central-level official, December 2008 (no. 7).

36 Interviews with central-level official and producer, November 2008 and November 2009 (nos. 6, 12).

37 Interviews with central-level official and competition judge, November 2008 (nos. 6, 10).

38 Interview with central-level official, December 2008 (no. 3).

39 Interview with central-level official, October 2009 (no. 8). On the relationship between advertising companies and CCTV see Jing Wang, *Brand New China: Advertising, Media and Commercial Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

40 Landsberger, “Harmony, Olympic manners and morals.”

commercial advertisements, producers are not given detailed instructions about the target audience in official documentation. When asked which kind of people they hope to attract, all officials simply responded that these advertisements constituted propaganda instruments targeted at “ordinary people” (*laobaixing* 老百姓). Similarly, none of the producers I interviewed had a specific social group in mind when creating PSAs, but instead always indicated that they seek to attract a wide audience. They were eager to point out that this situation differed considerably from the instructions given when producing commercial advertising.

Besides the broader topic, official documents initiating PSA campaigns rarely specify the content of the topic. For example, instructions for the content of the PSA campaign to celebrate China’s 60th anniversary primarily contain keywords and slogans, such as “carrying forward the core value system of socialism,” “establishing civilization” and “sparking passion for patriotism.”⁴¹ Often instructions are even more vague, with producers only being told the slogan of the campaign without further information. As a result, they interpret the content of the political message when designing specific advertisements. For example, when looking for an idea for a PSA campaign on “traditional holidays,” initiated by CCTV for broadcasting in early 2010, a director indicated that she was only given instructions on the format and interpreted the topic based on her knowledge of the political aims of the government: “the country now emphasizes traditional holidays because everyone celebrates foreign holidays and not the traditional ones. But we have our own traditional holidays so I thought I would make a PSA about that.”⁴² Although the advertising company selected this PSA for the programme, CCTV later decided against its production since it did not assess it to be creative enough. A creative PSA was considered one that captured the attention of the audience within the very limited time available (about 30 to 60 seconds). In the end, Global Earth Day and the Foundation Day of the CCP were also included as PSA themes due to their political relevance, but without any obvious connection to the general topic of traditional holidays.⁴³ Vagueness of slogans therefore gives producers much leeway when interpreting the content of the political message. Overall, although PSA campaigns are initiated by Party and government units, their content depends strongly on what producers associate with the slogans and consider salient issues on the political agenda.

Decisions about which advertisements should be broadcast are usually made by high-level media staff, not by officials. Just like commercials, PSAs are approved twice, once when the advertising company has made a script and once after filming and editing. At the first stage the specific content of the campaign is decided. Once PSAs go into production, everyone already knows that

41 *Announcement on the “Welcome the Anniversary, Be Civilized, Follow the New Trend” PSA Propaganda Activity.*

42 Interview with producer, November 2009 (no. 15).

43 Participant observation of a meeting at an advertising company, November 2009.

they are in line with the campaign topic. Therefore, it is usually the media outlets and advertising companies which evaluate the quality of PSAs and decide which ones should be broadcast. Only when the campaign is of great importance to the central government, such as during the Beijing Olympics, do officials get more directly involved in the production and evaluation of specific advertisements.⁴⁴

Once PSAs have been produced, the television committee under the CAA is in charge of distributing them among local and national television stations. Television stations can download individual advertisements through an online data base.⁴⁵ SARFT monitors the implementation of PSA broadcasting by randomly sampling specific days. A monthly report provides a rough estimate as to whether television stations are complying with the rules outlined by the central government.⁴⁶ If broadcasting differs considerably, the SARFT can force television stations to substitute commercial advertisements with PSAs, as happened, for example, in Ningxia in 2007.⁴⁷ However, this is not to say that all television stations comply with the regulations of the central government, as shown in the next section.

Finances

One of the main problems officials and media staff raise is the funding of PSAs. Although government organs, such as the GCBSC, receive a form of state subsidy that they can spend on propaganda, this funding is not sufficient to purchase the desired advertising time when television ratings are high. The state requires television stations to spend at least 3 per cent of commercial time during prime time between 7.00 pm and 9.00 pm on PSA campaigning, including holidays.⁴⁸ This takes away opportunities for television stations to make a profit. CCTV loses approximately 20 million yuan of profit per month by broadcasting PSAs instead of selling this valuable time for commercial advertising. Broadcasting time for the Beijing Olympics PSA campaign across all CCTV channels was estimated to amount to 655 hours between May 2007 and April 2008, worth three

44 Interviews with two producers, director and two competition judges, December 2008 and November 2009 (nos. 2, 4, 10, 11, 12).

45 *Quan guo xixiang daode gongyi guanggao zuopin*, available at www.cnpad.net, accessed 22 October, 2009.

46 Interviews with central-level official and producer, October and November 2009 (nos. 8, 20).

47 Landsberger, "Harmony, Olympic manners and morals." According to my interviews, the Ningxia case is not representative of SARFT reactions to violations of PSA regulations. SARFT only rarely intervenes even after several warnings have been issued.

48 *Guanyu zuo hao gongyi guanggao xuanchuan de tongzhi* (Announcement on How to Do PSA Propaganda Well), CPD, SAIC, SARFT, GAPP, 4 August 1997, available at <http://www.gapp.gov.cn/cms/cms/website/zcfgs/layout3/index.jsp?infoId=450908&channelId=782&siteId=48>, accessed 24 November 2009. In 2002 this rule was changed towards "on average every day between 7 and 9 pm" *Guanyu jin yi bu zuo hao gongyi guanggao xuanchuan de tongzhi* (Announcement on Gradually Improving PSA Propaganda), CPD, GCBSC, SAIC, SARFT, GAPP, 12 December 2002, available at http://www.cnlyjd.com/fagui/fagui/bumenguizhang/xuanchuanguiding/200212/fagui_1767947.html, accessed 24 November 2009.

billion yuan.⁴⁹ Even though advertising staff at media outlets such as CCTV are aware of their “duty” as a state medium to serve the collective good of society by publicizing propaganda in the form of PSAs, government officials and producers recognize that lack of funding makes them hesitate to co-operate. Some even state that the media would not broadcast PSAs if it was not supported by official documents.⁵⁰ In the presence of official support, PSA broadcasting currently exceeds the 3 per cent rule set by the state in Beijing, Guangdong and Qinghai, but not necessarily in other provinces and municipalities, according to 2009 CTR data.⁵¹

The government’s attitude towards this problem is to divide up the costs among different societal groups, most importantly state media and corporations. As one central-level official put it: “I think if all of society was mobilized and everyone would give a little bit of money, then there would be even more funding than currently.” In order to mobilize co-operation for funding, the state has therefore agreed to several initiatives by the broader advertising community. Since 1997 media outlets are allowed to sell some PSAs to corporations and display their corporate brand in return. However, they may not “call attention to the brand or trademark and may not place products or information about the provision of services in the ads.” On television, corporate logos cannot be shown longer than five seconds and cannot be larger than one-fifth of the screen.⁵² These regulations are not always strictly enforced, as shown by content analysis below, and central institutions had to remind local Party and state units as well as broadcasters and producers about their content in later documents.⁵³

Television broadcasters are currently trying to address the problem of lack of funding in several ways. First, television stations can provide an advertising company with a certain amount of time for commercial and PSA advertising, which the producer then sells as a package to commercial advertisers. For example, most PSAs for CCTV’s *gongyi guanggao shi yi zhan deng* (公益广告是一盏灯, “PSA is a light (guiding in darkness)”), substituting their more regularly broadcast PSA programme *guang er gao zhi*, are produced based on this method. This is also common among provincial-level television stations.⁵⁴ A second way is to sell PSAs to corporations at a discount while broadcasting their logo at the end in return. In this case, the television station may get in touch with corporations before or after the production of the advertisement.⁵⁵ In both cases, broadcasters and advertising companies cover production fees and may make some profit, but

49 These figures only constitute rough estimates. Interviews with producer and competition judge, December 2008 and July 2010 (nos. 2, 10).

50 Interviews with two central-level officials and two producers, December 2008 and November 2009 (nos. 2, 6, 7, 8).

51 See n. 23.

52 *Announcement on How to Do PSA Propaganda Well.*

53 *Guanyu kaizhan gongyi guanggao huodong de tongzhi* (Announcement on Developing PSA Campaigns), SAIC, 7 April 1998; *Announcement on Gradually Solving Problems Related to PSA Work*; *Announcement on Gradually Improving PSA Propaganda.*

54 Interviews with central-level official, two competition judges and producer, October and November 2009 (nos. 8, 10, 11, 20).

55 Interviews with two producers, December 2009 (nos. 20, 7).

it does not cover the amount that would be obtained by commercial advertising.⁵⁶ So, why do broadcasters, producers and corporations collaborate in the production of PSAs?

The standard answer to this question is that participating in the production of PSAs is the person's or organization's "social responsibility" (*shehui zeren* 社会责任) and duty to serve the "collective good" (*gongyi* 公益). In order to mobilize financial support for PSAs, government officials have linked them to ideas about corporate social responsibility. There is no standard definition for this term, but it often describes a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations on a voluntary basis.⁵⁷ When Chinese officials and producers involved in central-level PSA campaigning use the term, they refer to the social responsibility of the media, advertising companies and commercial enterprises to engage voluntarily in propaganda activities aimed at shaping China's social, environmental and political development as defined by the government. Producing political commercials that support the state's construction of a spiritual civilization has become a convenient vehicle for displaying a work unit's "correct" state of mind by supporting official state policies.

Most actors involved in the production of PSAs admit that others (themselves being exceptional) may also have motives that go beyond serving the collective good. The incentive structure among broadcasters, producers and corporations is like a "cycle whereby everyone mutually supports each other."⁵⁸ The cycle starts with media staff. Television personnel can improve their image with officials and senior personnel by fostering PSAs, thereby helping their own career prospects.⁵⁹ For example, a central-level official explained: "Producing PSAs lets everyone know that I am committed to that issue; as head of a TV station you hope that this kind of thing can expand your space, let everyone learn about you and improve your reputation."⁶⁰ As a result, some television stations stress quantity over quality of PSA broadcasting, thus superficially displaying social responsibility without a real intention of persuading the public.⁶¹

The second part of the cycle involves advertising companies. To share production costs broadcasters turn to advertising companies who in turn regard PSAs as an investment: when producing PSAs companies gain free commercial advertising time that they otherwise would have to purchase; they also hope to get preferential treatment for broadcasting commercial advertising in the

56 Interviews with three producers, December 2008, January and November 2009 (nos. 1, 2, 20).

57 See e.g. Commission of the European Communities, "Green paper: promoting a European framework for corporate social responsibility," Brussels, 2001. On China see Karin Buhmann, "Corporate social responsibility in China: current issues and their relevance for implementation of law," *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, No. 22 (2005), pp. 62–91.

58 Interview with producer, November 2009 (no. 19).

59 Interviews with journalist specializing on PSA, competition judge, producer and director, December 2008, October and November 2009 (nos. 9, 11, 2, 12).

60 Interview with central-level official, November 2009 (no. 26).

61 Interview with producer, November 2009 (no. 20).

future.⁶² Others believe that advertising companies can also attract corporate clients when producing PSAs. “After producing two PSAs S company gained prestige, many corporations approached them and let them do commercial ads.”⁶³ Advertising companies thus gain both economic benefits and prestige.

The cycle ends with corporate advertisers. To share costs further, advertising companies “pull in” corporations that they believe may benefit from getting involved. These corporations in turn seek to improve their image among government officials. “They are state-owned, so they want to let the government notice that they have made this kind of contribution. When making PSAs, many Chinese corporations have the goal of making a PSA for the government.”⁶⁴ A representative of the China Association of National Corporate Advertisers explained that PSAs are a convenient means for enterprises to raise their reputation and thus enhance their business opportunities. Allegedly, some companies also get preferential treatment when applying for loans at the bank and get better deals on commercial advertising when supporting PSA campaigns.⁶⁵ By means of mutual collaboration everyone shares costs while benefiting personally in terms of potential promotion or business revenue.

Interviews with public officials, producers and competition judges suggest that an important incentive behind engaging in the production of PSAs is the belief that the producer may derive some personal advantage from it. Though it is difficult to test whether these rumour-based statements are empirically adequate, what matters is that people believe they are true as this belief influences their own actions.

This is not to say that all actors involved in the production of PSA are faking their sense of social responsibility. Some people became sincerely excited when talking about PSAs, or held religious beliefs that served as inspiration to serve the collective good. Others point out that a sense of social responsibility and personal benefit are not mutually exclusive.⁶⁶ In addition, broadcasters and producers often face difficulties in getting corporations involved in PSA campaigning. According to a representative of the China Association of National Corporate Advertisers, corporations prefer sponsoring public service events as those provide a more direct means of establishing contact with government officials. PSAs may be watched and talked about by government officials, especially when receiving a prestigious price in a competition, but sponsorship of public events provide opportunities to meet officials face-to-face and establish connections. Furthermore, the central government also prohibits partial funding by corporations of some PSA campaigns it deems important, such as the 2008 Olympics

62 Interviews with two central-level officials and producer, October, November, December 2009 (nos. 8, 19, 27).

63 Name of advertising company omitted by the author. Interview with central-level official, November 2009 (no. 26).

64 Interview with competition judge, November 2009 (no. 11).

65 Interviews with and two central-level officials, December 2008 and December 2009 (nos. 7, 26).

66 Interviews with two producers, December 2008 and November 2009 (nos. 4, 20).

campaign.⁶⁷ Therefore, the primary incentive behind engaging in the production of PSAs may not always be economic or personal benefit to the individual.

Nevertheless the financing of PSAs cannot solely be explained by selfless behaviour on the part of broadcasters, advertising companies and commercial enterprises. PSAs provide media outlets and corporations with a convenient “measure” for their degree of political correctness. They constitute a quantifiable means to convey a person’s or organization’s willingness to co-operate in China’s ongoing transformation under the guidance of the CCP. Officials drop names and talk favourably about those involved in the production of memorable PSAs. For example, a central-level official mentioned that the winner of the 2005–06 PSA competition “was a very moving story called “mother’s lies” (*muqin de huangyan* 母亲的谎言) This was done by a north-eastern company, Hairun.” Participating in PSA activities is a way to enter China’s elite circles (*chenggong renshi* 成功人士). As a result, PSA campaigns are not completely “top-down,” but instead made possible by a collaborative effort between officials, broadcasters, producers and corporations. These actors aim to please higher levels when producing PSAs, but they also have a considerable amount of leeway when interpreting the slogans and themes of PSA campaigns. The central government guides the campaigns by organizing competitions that set standards for and encourage their further development, but collaboration with broadcasters, producers and corporations also ensures that PSAs take into account the needs and conditions of television audiences, as shown by content analysis below.

Content of Price-Winning PSAs

There exist a variety of PSA competitions in China, some sponsored by corporations such as MaoTai Liquor, but the most important one is organized bi-annually by the central government. The broader goal of competitions is to improve the quality of PSAs, to increase their broadcasting in the Chinese media, and to foster their development and acceptance among Chinese society. When the centre awards a price to a PSA it encourages broadcasters, producers and financiers to invest in PSAs. As one central-level official put it, “if there is a competition then people will be mobilized and you can push forward further development.” In addition, competitions provide a convenient means to co-ordinate and update the standards for evaluating what constitutes a “good” PSA since they bring together key actors involved in campaigning. Competition juries are composed of officials, senior personnel from advertising departments in major media outlets (such as CCTV or the *People’s Daily*), advertising companies and academics. These juries take into account the needs of the government as well as audiences when evaluating PSAs.

For the national competition the GCBSC and SAIC outline specific criteria to evaluate PSAs. In 2009, these criteria included five broad categories: political

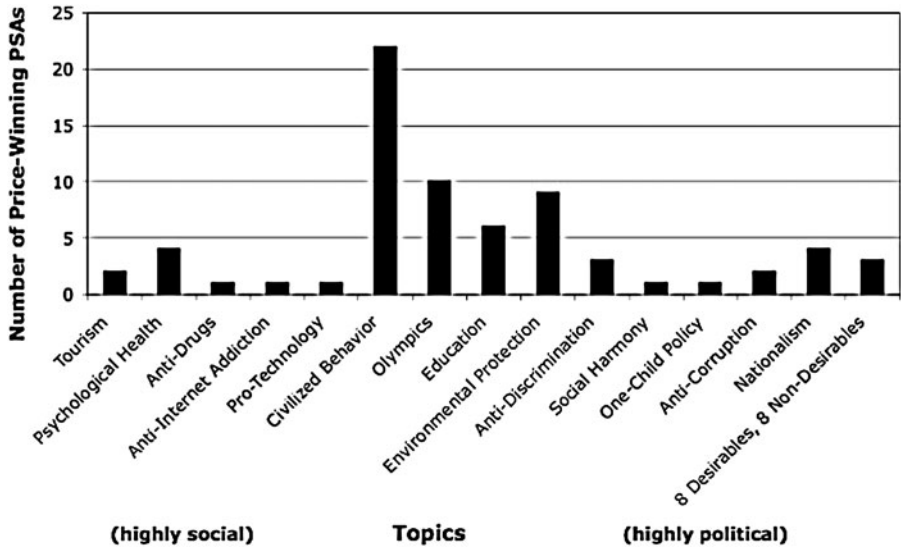
67 Interviews with two producers, December 2008 and November 2009 (nos. 2, 20).

guidance, creativity, persuasiveness, quality of production and the overall result. Members of the jury interpret the concrete meaning of these categories. According to the judges, the most important criterion, not surprisingly, is the first one, referring to the strength of political thought contained in the message. However, they emphasize that creativity, persuasiveness and the quality of production constitute important criteria as well. PSAs are supposed to take into account features that make advertising attractive to audiences, including artistic value, methods of delivering the core message and technical features. Though the government does not have a clear idea about how PSAs are perceived by television audiences as no such research has been done so far in China, it relies on expert opinions to evaluate PSAs' persuasiveness by including representatives of groups involved in their production.

Which content does the central government consider important? In order to answer this question I conducted a content analysis of all first, second and third prize-winning PSAs in each competition since 1999. These advertisements were selected from all television PSAs submitted by each province and municipality according to the guidelines issued by the central-level GCBS and SAIC. Generally, provincial and municipal units first hold a local competition from which they submit the best to enter the national competition. In the past ten years a total of 70 advertisements received prizes in five biannual competitions. About 40 per cent of these prize-winning advertisements were produced by units based in Beijing; the remaining ones predominantly originated from China's more developed east coast.

Figure 1 shows which topics the prize-winning PSAs focused on. The x-axis sorts them by their relevance to politics, with relevance increasing from left to right. The y-axis displays the number of PSAs focusing on each of these topics. As illustrated in Figure 1, PSAs emphasize a wide range of issues, involving major political slogans on the agenda of President Hu Jintao, such as, for example, social harmony or the "eight desirables and eight non-desirables" (*ba rong ba chi* 八荣八耻), but also highly social topics such as internet addiction or psychological health. Most, however, deal with civilized behaviour, major events such as the Olympics, education, or environmental protection. These often overlap with other themes, such as implementing laws and regulations or caring for weak groups in society (especially the elderly and children).

Yet when awarding prizes political topics fare better than social ones, and PSAs dealing with nationalism and opposing discrimination against weak groups of society tend to be the ones receiving prizes. For example, in 1999/2000 the first prize was awarded to an advertisement opposing discrimination against people infected with HIV-AIDS, starring actor Pu Cunxi 濮存晰. In 2001/2002 the first prize went to a PSA celebrating people's admiration for the Chinese national flag. And in 2007/2008 one of the first prizes told the true story of Liao Zhi 廖智, a survivor of the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008: despite losing her legs she continued dancing and participating in public performances, thus encouraging others to adopt a positive attitude towards life despite difficulties. While in line with the

Figure 1: **Topics of Price-Winning Public Service Advertisements, 1999–2008**

agenda of the central government these advertisements are also adjusted to the tastes of Chinese television audiences. Judges point out that the best PSAs are those that move the viewer emotionally. Indeed, all the first prize winners rely on music and images that endorse empathy and identification with the key figures featured. They also tend to be more professional in terms of the techniques employed to tell the story.

Nevertheless, these advertisements do not always conform to the standards spelled out in official regulations. Surreptitious advertising is quite common, either by displaying corporate labels in the background or by featuring well-known television moderators as models for civilized behaviour. Some display the telephone number of their corporate sponsor along with its logo. Involving non-state actors in the production and funding of PSA facilitates the mobilization of societal forces in campaigns and helps to create advertising that attracts Chinese television audiences, but also causes problems in distinguishing political from commercial advertising.⁶⁸

Greasing the Reels

Compared to the Mao years the Chinese state now focuses less on coercion and instead emphasizes positive incentives to get citizens engaged in campaigning. With respect to PSA campaigns Party and state units primarily assume a

68 Similar mechanisms apply to the Chinese film industry. Yuezhi Zhao, *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

stimulating role by initiating campaigns and organizing national PSA competitions. Despite this remote involvement and a fragmented political structure behind managing PSA campaigns the centre is still able to achieve its policy goals of broadcasting PSAs on Chinese television by involving societal actors in their production, financing and evaluation. Television stations, advertising companies and corporations have incentives to share production costs as they receive personal and economic benefits when displaying social responsibility. By involving these societal actors in the process of campaigning, officials are also able to adjust PSA content to the taste of Chinese television audiences, thus possibly increasing the persuasiveness of propaganda.⁶⁹ Political and societal actors mutually benefit from each other's involvement in PSA campaigning.

The close relationship between China's political and economic elites is, of course, not particularly new in Chinese politics. Private entrepreneurs are not pressing actively for political reform, but have instead joined the CCP itself and rely on informal institutions that tie political and economic elites together.⁷⁰ This study of the production and funding of PSAs makes visible the role that political correctness plays in informal relationships between state and non-state actors. Since non-state actors compete with each other for access to resources and promotion tied to political elites, participating in PSA campaigning has become one vehicle by which to signal support for the goals and policies of the government. Being socially responsible and serving the collective good bring labels that many non-state actors seek to gain personal or economic advantage, thus helping the state to define political messages and deliver them by means of television into people's living rooms.

69 For a test of PSA effectiveness see Daniela Stockmann, Ashley Esarey and Ji Zhang, "Advertising Chinese politics: how public service advertising prime and alter political trust in China," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Seattle, WA, 2011.

70 Kellee S. Tsai, "Adaptive informal institutions and endogenous institutional change in China," *World Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2006), pp. 116–41; Jie Chen and Bruce J. Dickson, "Allies of the state: democratic support and regime support among China's private entrepreneurs," *The China Quarterly*, No. 196 (2008), pp. 780–804.