With Xi Jinping taking the reins of power, the dismantling of the previous model of governance in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) began. There was a modification of the arrangement initiated by the reforms of the late 1970s. The place of collective leadership, partial decentralization, moderation in foreign policy and a focus mainly on economic development was taken by one-man rule, increasing political and economic centralization, assertive and often even aggressive policies, and a growing ideology (Bogusz, 2022; Bogusz & Jakóbowski, 2019; Góralczyk, 2021). Instead of liberalization, there was an increase in censorship, and propaganda implemented on a different basis than before began to gain in importance, aimed, moreover, not only at mainland Chinese citizens, but also at Westerners1. One aspect of these changes, related to social media, is discussed in the book under review.

Its author is Titus C. Chen, a professor of political science at Sun Yat-sen National University in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, specializing in international relations theory and PRC politics, among other subjects. His body of work already includes works on propaganda and new media (Chen, 2010; Sear, Jensen, & Chen, 2018). In *The Making of a Neo-Propaganda State...* he focuses on the legal and institutional background and propaganda mechanisms used in Chinese social media. There are already good studies available on the market introducing Chinese social media (e.g., Che & Ip, 2018). However, as the author rightly points out, most works on the Chinese internet focus on the issue of censorship (e.g., King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; Tai & Fu, 2020), and the topic of propaganda in the digital world is less common (Chen, 2022). The book under

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1 One example is the appearance on the publishing market of Xi Jinping’s speeches (see, e.g., 2022) translated into English, which can be purchased, among others, in many press outlets in Poland. Studies on Chinese soft power are already available (e.g., Edney, Rosen, & Zhu, 2020), but the issue of propaganda aimed at foreign audiences requires further research, as the author of the book under review rightly emphasizes.
review fills this gap and is one of the more comprehensive studies on the issue of propaganda in Chinese social media under Xi’s rule.

*The Making of a Neo-Propaganda State...* consists of eight chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. Completing the substantive part are lists of illustrations and tables, a bibliography and a factual index. In the first chapter, the author presented the plan of the book and outlined the main issues covered in its later sections.

The second chapter describes the media market prior to Xi Jinping’s rule. Referring to the extensive literature on the subject, Chen (2022) emphasizes that the economic liberalization that occurred in China as a result of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms did not lead to the emergence of new content and increased freedom of expression. This was due to continued pressure from the authorities. Media players, on the one hand, had to adapt to the new situation by looking for ways to increase profits, while on the other hand, they were still subject to strict control by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As a result, self-censorship became widespread, and the media became information-gathering organizations for the authorities, facilitated by the phenomenon of false credibility of supposedly more independent media. The emergence of social media changed this situation, as the CCP’s control apparatus was not prepared for the new challenge. The years 2009-2013 can therefore be considered, according to Chen, as the “golden period” of China’s social media. In this part of the book, the author interestingly portrayed the changes in China’s media market and the challenges that faced the new team after taking power in 2012. However, despite the reference to extensive literature on the subject, there are some gaps, such as the lack of reference to Wenbo Kuang’s (2018) interesting publication on the impact of social media in China or Kingsley Edney’s (2014) book on propaganda.

The emergence of social media in China, with its significant impact on socio-political life, has forced a change in the CCP’s strategy. The next section of the paper is devoted to this issue. Chen (2022) emphasizes that “from the early moments of his rule, Xi Jinping had identified the ‘new media’ [...] as the critical battlefield on which the Party’s thought control apparatus would fight for hearts and minds of the governed” (p. 38). He describes a campaign of discipline targeting, among other things, celebrities on social media, which he rightly sees as the end of a phase of freedom in Chinese social media. The campaign coincided with an important speech by Xi, who outlined the main principles of the new propaganda. Chen discusses the basic concepts introduced by Xi and his colleagues, such as “main melody,” “positive energy,” “grand propaganda” and “cyber sovereignty.” A special place is given to the “media convergence” initiative, according to which state media were to activate their presence in social media. The book also outlines the legal and institutional changes that allowed the CCP to take complete control of social media. The chapter includes an explanation of the conceptual grid and basic solutions necessary to understand the transformation of China’s social media activities (and thus the subsequent parts of the publication).

In the next chapter, Chen focused on the steps taken by the media to adapt to the new government policies. At the beginning of this part of the work, the author presents a propaganda model adapted to Chinese conditions, based on a proposal by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (2002). In his view, it is an important tool to enable the authorities to regain control over social media. He goes on to outline the actions of the state-run People’s Daily Group taken to implement the program developed by the authorities with Xi at the helm. The choice of this media group is fully justified because of its importance in the Chinese media sphere. Of particular interest is the description of the services of analyzing the opinions of Internet users and censoring content. The conclusion of this section of the paper describes the ways in which pro-government content is disseminated on social media.
The fifth chapter contains a quantitative-qualitative study of the content of posts made by six pro-government accounts on WeChat between 2013 and 2018. The reason for choosing this platform was the degree of its popularity among PRC citizens. In turn, the adoption of an almost five-year time frame allowed the author to trace changes and important features of the propaganda discourse; however, it should be noted that the text does not explicitly justify the choice of this particular period. The analysis looks at such features as the number of entries or visual materials, among others. The author also traces communication strategies, shows thematic diversity and changes over time. An important observation concerns the increase in the level of emotionality of the posted content. However, the decline observed between January 2015 and August 2016 is explained rather too briefly. Summarizing the changes that have taken place in China’s social media environment, Chen (2022) emphasizes that it has become an environment where “compulsory positivity and hyperbolic patriotism” reign (p. 125).

Chapter six discusses and presents a typology of political signals that can be read by analyzing posts made on party and pro-government accounts on the WeChat platform. According to the author, one of the functions of messages disseminated on social media can be to show the level of foreign policy determination. The chapter presents two examples of analysis of posts made on WeChat conducted using the proposed typology. The first concerns the tariffs imposed on Chinese products by the US administration in May 2019, and the second concerns the US sanctions imposed on Huawei. Thus, two events of great importance for US-China relations were chosen, which led to significant tensions in bilateral relations. The manner of response, as measured by the cost of diplomatic signals, differed significantly in the two cases. Regarding the tariff dispute, the author emphasized the existence of high information coordination costs measured by the similarity of the posted content and the degree of synchronization. The examples confirmed the applicability of the proposed typology to read diplomatic signals sent by PRC authorities for both foreign and domestic audiences.

Chapter seven was devoted to the PRC authorities’ social media campaign in the wake of the outbreak of protests in Hong Kong against the proposed new extradition law. Its target audience included PRC citizens living outside Hong Kong, as well as residents of the special autonomous region and foreign governments. Again, posts made on WeChat were chosen as the object of analysis. The causes and history of the emergence of the protest movement were presented, and the transformation in the PRC authorities’ approach to the demonstrations was shown, from their disregard, to the restriction of access to information, to the discrediting of their participants. Referring to the typology of political signals presented in Chapter Six, the goals and concerns of the Chinese authorities regarding, among other things, the possibility of Western support for the protesters are shown. An interesting aspect of the research is an analysis of the use of pop culture symbols to win the support of PRC citizens and discredit protesters. One manifestation of this was the “flag defenders” campaign launched after the Chinese flag was thrown into the sea by protesters in August 2019. This section of the book thus presents a comprehensive analysis of Chinese propaganda regarding the Hong Kong protests.

The last chapter of the book summarizes the entire discussion. In addition, the importance of Chinese propaganda aimed at residents of other countries, especially Western ones, is pointed out. Examples are given of actions related to events in Hong Kong and the COVID-19 outbreak. The chapter also includes suggestions for further research. According to the author, these could include propaganda disseminated through international social media or how central government orders are implemented by local authorities and the public perception of propaganda campaigns. In addition to the ideas put forward by Chen, it would also be worth examining the ways in which messages are tailored to different audiences and the extent of propaganda disseminated by different types of institutions.
As for the layout of the book, it is generally logical, however, attention is drawn to the rather numerous repetitions, such as emphasizing in several places the nature of the relationship between the requirements of the authorities and the market. From the perspective of a reader who wants to read the entire work, this is unnecessary – it only expands volume, without added informational value.

The monograph is based on extensive literature related to the subject. The bibliography includes 480 items. It consists of scientific publications by such authors as Manuel Castells, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, James D. Fearon, Robert Jervish, Kai Quek and Jessica Chen Weiss, among others. They are supplemented by newspaper articles, as well as official documents and speeches. This selection of materials has allowed the author to provide a fairly comprehensive account of the problems of PRC propaganda operations. Chen, however, did not include some of the important studies.

*The Making of a Neo-Propaganda State...* is an important contribution to the study of Chinese social media and the propaganda mechanisms and strategies employed by the PRC authorities. Its merit is a very thorough presentation of the research methods used. It is noteworthy that the author posted datasets and R language scripts created for the analyses conducted in the book on Figshare. Such an approach is becoming more common, but is still not the norm. The book also has the advantage of clearly depicting the evolution of the PRC authorities’ attitude toward social media and propaganda activities. The most important part of the work is the empirical research showing, with concrete examples, the change in the approach to new media and the flexibility of Xi and his associates. Chinese government media publish not only propaganda content, daily life topics and other popular content are playing an increasingly important role. Also interesting and inspiring for further research are the observations on political signals that can be read by analyzing posts on Chinese social media. The book is not free of the flaws mentioned above when presenting the content of each chapter. However, the issue of repetition, the lack of reference to some relevant works and the not always sufficient interpretation of the observed phenomena do not change the fact that this is a publication worth recommending to researchers of new media and political communication.

**Bibliography**


