

**The Evolution of the Image of Xi Jinping in the Chinese  
Media During His First Term**

A Research Proposal Presented to  
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by

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## Abstract

On November 15, 2012, Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC). On March 14, 2013, he was elected as the President of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Within only 5 years Xi Jinping has become widely popular among ordinary Chinese, and has built a reputation for being one of China's most powerful leaders in the last thirty years. To some extent, these have been achieved through a propaganda campaign launched in the Chinese mass media by the Communist Party of China, and designed to build a positive image of country's current leader. This paper analyses media coverage of Xi Jinping in three State newspapers, namely, the "People's Daily", "Global Times", "Guang Ming Daily", and one weekly periodical, the "Liaowang Xinwen Zhoukan", from November 2012 to November 2017. In this study, we aim to describe key trends in the media coverage of political leaders in China, and find out if the CPC is attempting to produce a cult of personality of Xi Jinping. The study will be based on mixed-methods research approach. The results of the paper may reveal key features of building the image of political leaders in China, and become a theoretical base for further research.

*Keywords:* Chinese media, Xi Jinping, cult of personality, image of a leader, propaganda campaign.

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### **Introduction**

In the modern world it is impossible to underestimate the impact of mass media on political processes. The media have for centuries served as a means of communication, facilitated interaction between people and penetrated into all spheres of society. That is why political leaders try to make better use of the media so as to create a certain public image.

China is one of the countries where a great deal of attention has been given to the creation of the image of a political leader through the various means of mass communication. There has been an increasing understanding that the Chinese media is trying to build a cult of personality of current Chinese leader Xi Jinping, who was elected to the post of President of the PRC on 14 March 2013. During five years of his rule he has become one of the most powerful China's leaders.

A number of studies have found that during the first years of his rule Xi Jinping has launched a large-scale propaganda campaign in the media in order to create a political image appealing to the broader public, built a cult of personality, and maintain and consolidate power (Brown, 2017; Chang, & Ren, 2017). A completely opposing view was expressed by Batke and Ohlberg (2016), who claim that there is no sufficient evidence proving that a cult of personality is being built around Xi Jinping. The authors suggest that a new wave of official propaganda aims to build a positive image of the Party in general, enhance the credibility of the Government, and contribute to building public trust in the political institutions.

Despite the fact that scholars have recently become more interested in the images of different Chinese leaders, there is little scientific research on the image of the current Chinese

leader. No serious explanation has been given to the process of political image building in China. It remains largely unclear what strategies the Chinese media use to build a positive image of Xi Jinping. Thus, exploration of this topic presents a worthwhile research avenue.

The purpose of this research is to describe the image of Xi Jinping built by the Chinese media, and find out whether the CPC is attempting to construct a cult of personality of Xi Jinping.

In this study, we will employ a mixed-methods research approach with the combination of qualitative and quantitative data analyses methods. Qualitative content analysis will be used to investigate how the media have covered the main events that are directly related to the image of different Chinese leaders. Quantitative data analysis will be conducted to compare volumes of coverage of top national politicians.

This study may extend knowledge on the image of Xi Jinping, and shed a powerful light on significant changes in the media coverage of Chinese political figures.

## Literature Review

In this study, we will mainly concentrate on the area that is related to the image of political figures, particularly in China. Before proceeding to a comparative analysis of the image of Xi Jinping, it is important to explain briefly what the image of a political leader consists of.

Kernell (1997) defined the image of a political leader as a set of certain personal qualities, and political position that people associate with a particular political figure. Several studies report that a basic mechanism of a leader's image formation involves the following strategies: a) the representation of background information of a leader (information about the education, family, personality qualities, hobby et cetera); b) the representation of political concepts, views and action programs; c) the representation of visual images (clothing, hairstyle, facial expression, rhythm of speech, body language, etc.) (Pochepcov, 2001; Schnee, 2017; Yiannis, 2015).

A French political scientist Blondel J. (1992) emphasized that the image of political leaders cannot be considered in isolation from the environment in which they operate because their behavior and actions are guided by this environment. According to the author, the environment implies institutional structures, a society and international trends. Thus, one can infer that the image of a leader is a reflection of all values, attitudes, aspirations, and desires that exist within a country and abroad.

Despite the fact that studies examining the images of political leaders present some evidence that image is critical to success of politicians (Coleman & Freelon, 2015; Kernell, 1997), one should not overestimate the significance of the personal characteristics and appearance. For instance, Nikolaev, A., Geraskin, S., and Borisov, I. (1999) suggest that a leader who does not have expressive features, such as specific manner of speaking, a mustache or

baldness, may be doomed to fail. According to the authors, it explains unpopularity of Andropov U., Malenkov G., and Chernenko K. In our view, the arguments presented by Nicolaev et al. appear to be highly controversial. Most people base their evaluation of politicians, above all, on their policies and actions rather than purely on appearance and personal characteristics.

After analyzing some key concepts related to the image of political leaders we can proceed to the examination of the central issue of our study, namely, the image of Xi Jinping. A number of scholars believe that since Xi Jinping became the President of the PRC the Chinese media have been paying particular attention to propaganda with the intention of building a cult of personality of Xi Jinping (Brown, 2017; Chang & Ren, 2017; Tsang & Men, 2016).

As Chang and Ren observe, the Chinese media have made an unprecedented move in representing the Chinese leader by revealing a vast amount details about current president's private life, with particular attention to his wife Peng Liyuan. Another example of innovative approach to propaganda is the use of animated political cartoons. The authors claim that this fairly common method of presenting information has become popular not long ago in China.

Furthermore, like Chang and Ren, the same topic, the construction of positive image of the political leaders in China, was discussed in the work of Luwei L. (2016). She, however, not only explores major transformations that have been made in China's propaganda, but also specifies problems that new propaganda campaigns might face. The challenges ahead are twofold: firstly, the recent expansion of a cult of personality has raised concerns about possible impact it may have on the image of the party and country in general. If the propaganda fails to build positive image of Xi Jinping or if the image is undermined, the legitimacy of the decisions made and actions taken by the party will be increasingly questioned. Secondly, although the propaganda and strict censorship are effective mechanisms for curbing unfavorable information

concerning the current Government, activists have invented new ways of combating the dominance of official propaganda.

In contrast to Chinese scholars, some European researchers suggest that the issue of Xi Jinping's cult of personality seems exaggerated. In particular, Batke and Ohlberg (2016) point out that high media coverage of China's present leader may be attributed to the desire of the CPC to create a positive image not of the leader, but of the party in general. After considering the arguments provided by the researchers, it seems that the presented findings are unconvincing. In their research, Batke and Ohlberg concentrate solely on analyzing media coverage of Xi Jinping and two previous Chinese leaders, namely, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Instead of simply comparing the total number of mentions of the leaders, they should have studied media coverage of different party officials and compare it with media coverage of country's leaders. For example, Jaros and Pan (2017) found that Xi Jinping receives greater media coverage than other political actors. By contrast, high volumes of coverage for top politicians were common during Hu Jintao's rule. Thus, the study may confirm the hypothesis that the cult is being built around Xi Jinping rather than around the Party.

Given the recognized significance of the image of political leadership and China's rising power, it is surprising that the image of Xi Jinping has received remarkably little attention in scientific literature. Particularly in Russia before our study it was mainly journalistic publications and non-scientific essays that tried to describe the image of Xi Jinping, identify specific features of media coverage of different political leaders in China, and explore different mechanisms of the Chinese leaders' images formation, and yet neglected several questions.

Thus, the purpose of this research is to extend the knowledge about the media coverage of Xi Jinping. We set out to proceed further with describing the existing image of Xi Jinping



formed by Chinese media. The study also will attempt to find out if the Chinese media really intent on creating a cult of personality of a current leader.

## **Methodology**

Our study's aim is to describe the image of Xi Jinping reflected in the Chinese media. The study also tries to find out whether there is a cult of personality of the current leader. Hence, with the intention of examining the former questions, we attempt to use mixed-methods research approach with the combination of qualitative content analysis and quantitative data analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Grounded on the works of previous scholars (Batke & Ohlberg, 2016; Brown, 2017; Chang & Ren, 2017; Luwei, 2016) we will perform secondary data collection. The scope of the data collection will mainly include information and specific details on the way of depicting the country's core executives and propaganda strategies of the state media, as these topics of study will provide us with the most useful information needed for the research, including key features of building the images of different Chinese leaders, and statistical data on media coverage of different party officials.

### **Data Analysis**

We intend to use content analysis, which implies the analysis of three major Chinese newspapers and one weekly periodical, namely, the "People's Daily", "Global Times", "Guang Ming Daily" and "Liaowang Xinwen Zhoukan", from November 2012 to November 2017. This approach will allow us to explore the media coverage of Xi Jinping and his political predecessors, identify particular characteristics of their public images, and detect systematic shifts in the media coverage of different Chinese leaders.

Next, quantitative data analysis will be conducted. It will be based on the calculation of the frequency of using specific words and phrases in the abovementioned sources (e.g. Xi

Jinping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, Li Keqiang, Wen Jiabao, the “core” leader, etc.). Based on these frequencies, the occurrence of key political figures in newspaper articles can be measured and their media coverage can be compared. By comparing the total number of mentions of different party officials we can indicate if the cult of personality is being built around the CPC or around particular person – Xi Jinping.

An important limitation of this study is that our analysis of the image of Xi Jinping is based solely on Chinese newspapers. Without the analysis of the image of current Chinese leader in such media platforms as television and Internet, the findings may be incomplete.

## Expected Outcomes

In this study we attempt to explore the key strategies of political image building used in the Chinese media, and analyze the media coverage of personal life and political activity of Xi Jinping. A study such as this one is expected to shed a powerful light on how the images of political leaders in China are being built, and enhance knowledge about the current Chinese president Xi Jinping by presenting a deep analysis of his political image created in the Chinese media, namely, in the newspaper articles and weekly periodical, and provide the theoretical base for further research works.

Our preliminary findings indicate that since Xi Jinping became the General Secretary of the CPC, and the President of the PRC there has been a significant shift in the style of media coverage of political leaders. Some new strategies involve wide use of infographics, the depiction of China's leaders in form of comics, and cartoons. Furthermore, the official media is trying to build a positive image of Xi Jinping by making emphasis on his personality, personal life and family through publishing a vast amount of Xi Jinping's photos. In this regard, it is noteworthy that previous Chinese leaders revealed few information containing personal details, and seemed distant and remote from ordinary people. These findings may support Jaros and Pan's (2017) idea that the Chinese media is intended on building a cult of personality of Xi Jinping with the help of new technological tools and modern methods of mass communication and persuasion.

Results of the study will be presented to the faculty of World Economy and World Politics at National Research University Higher School of Economics and the work itself to Foreign Languages Department. Upon conclusive results, the data obtained could stand for publication in an academic journal such as "China", which publishes research works on China's

economy, politics, culture, etc., or in an academic journal of Higher School of Economics where academic works of students and future researchers are published.

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