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The Chinese Communist Party's Use of Homophonous Pen Names: An Open-Source Open Secret

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article examines the evolving commentary system in the People's Republic of China that utilizes homophonous pen names to transmit official Chinese Communist Party (CCP) views and assesses the system's utility as a credible information source for foreign analysts.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The CCP uses an evolving system of homophonous pen names to write authoritative commentary that accurately propagates its views. Since the mid-1990s, this system has been repurposed to circumvent growing resistance to CCP propaganda by both the Chinese public and the ranks of the CCP itself. Its commentary covers policy-relevant topics pertaining to China's most important domestic and foreign affairs, and at times has been used to issue ominous warning statements to foreign countries over sensitive areas of dispute. The article concludes that the pen names investigated within verily represent the views of their superior regime organ. While the system's effectiveness to achieve its intended purpose seems uncertain, these commentaries provide a readily exploitable resource for foreign analysts that can supplement the long-monitored and more authoritative premium commentary vehicles of the party mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- If foreign analysts systematically monitor and analyze the messages transmitted by the CCP's homophonous pen name system, then the policymaking community can take advantage of more complete information to devise more effective China-oriented policies.
- Analysts can accurately identify new homophonous pen names by understanding the history of established pen names and the commonalities found in their linguistic components.

An indispensable form of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been authoritative regime commentary. Written for the regime's official publications, such commentary conveys the collective views of party bodies and is meant to be recognized for its weight. Until the 1980s, the CCP's traditional commentary system enjoyed a full monopoly over shaping the Chinese public's views. Editorial content from CCP Central Committee mouthpiece the *People's Daily* (PD) was reprinted in local party newspapers nationwide and broadcast over state radio and television to a captive audience.¹ Although many Chinese citizens became numb to this constant barrage of dogma, they had no other opinion source to tune in to.

Unfortunately for party spin doctors, the commercialization of China's media that began with the reform and opening up (*gaige kaifang*) period—when most newspapers were made to operate by market principles in order to reduce the state's burden—introduced many new voices to the commentary landscape. The unintended result was that the country's media grew to have two masters: the party and the public. Before long, most Chinese found that commercial media sources better catered to their interests and, in critical ways, were more trustworthy than dogmatic party papers. Additionally, new information technologies such as the internet and social media platforms enabled a plethora of different opinions to spread nearly instantaneously. This relative diversity of views threatened the long-held monopoly on opinion-setting that the CCP considers vital to its resilience and power. As an important part of its solution, the party resurrected an old tool: homophonous pen names. This commentary system employs pseudonyms that at first glance look like an individual author's name but in actuality are homophones for specific CCP regime organs. By repurposing this system, propagandists hope to reassert dominance over China's opinion environment, which they perceive as chaotic and replete with messages that stray from the party line. Teams working under these pen names write prolifically on China's major domestic and foreign affairs in party papers and professional journals, as well as on official government websites.

Foreign analysts of China stand to benefit from this system if its commentary truly represents the views of the CCP center. To our knowledge, the only other publicly available English-language study addressing this system's authoritativeness was written by Wen-Hsuan Tsai

¹ Wu Guoguang, "Command Communication: The Politics of Editorial Formulation in the People's Daily," *China Quarterly*, no. 137 (1994): 194–211.

and Peng-Hsiang Kao in 2013. Titled “Secret Codes of Political Propaganda: The Unknown System of Writing Teams,” this article for *China Quarterly* insightfully concluded that the pen names of this system are utilized by professional writing teams to authoritatively represent their parent regime organ.² However, some observers have understandably questioned whether these pseudonyms represent the views of a CCP regime body or merely those of the authoring propagandists. This difference is important: a misreading of what can be construed as an acceptable stance versus an official party view might misguide policymakers, leading to ineffective or even deleterious policies related to China. In contrast, if these pen names are demonstrably authoritative and properly understood, policymakers can enhance their comprehension of the ruling party’s positions through the regular analysis of such commentary, thereby improving policies.

This article seeks to definitively assess the authoritativeness of the homophonous pen name system. Through an open-source investigation into official internet-based Chinese-language materials that discuss ten currently used homophonous pen names, the article finds that within the realm of each sponsoring regime organ’s purview, its pen name authoritatively propagates the regime’s views and directives.³ We ultimately conclude that while PD editorials and commentator articles will remain the preferred channels for the CCP’s most pressing messages, the homophonous pen name system offers foreign analysts an expanded inventory of sources for official party positions on nearly all of China’s most important affairs that can be readily exploited through open-source research.

This article is divided into the following seven sections:

- ≈ pp. 5–6 briefly review the authority and hierarchy of PD’s traditional commentary system.
- ≈ pp. 6–12 examine China’s increasingly complex and diverse commentary environment.
- ≈ pp. 12–34 analyze the authority and utility of ten prominent homophonous pen names.
- ≈ pp. 35–37 examine the future resilience of the homophonous pen name system and relevant patterns for identifying new pen names.

² Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Peng-Hsiang Kao, “Secret Codes of Political Propaganda: The Unknown System of Writing Teams,” *China Quarterly*, no. 214 (2013): 394–410.

³ The authors relied nearly exclusively on Chinese-language materials found on CCP-controlled or Chinese government-controlled websites to investigate the authority and scope of each pen name. Records of all internet-based sources are maintained by the authors and are available upon request.

- ≈ pp. 38 concludes that the systematic analysis of homophonous pen names can help observers better understand the official positions of the CCP.
- ≈ Appendix 1 shows the particulars of the ten pen names discussed in this article.
- ≈ Appendix 2 shows the original Chinese characters, English translations, and relevant context of all Chinese pinyin romanizations found in this article.

THE TRADITIONAL COMMENTARY SYSTEM

A basic understanding of the traditional PD commentary system is essential to fully grasp the CCP's utilization of pseudonyms. PD commentary is not authoritative because it possesses superior analysis, writing, or wisdom. Rather, the sole source of its authority comes from its utility as a command vehicle for the CCP Central Committee, the 376-member decision-making body comprising China's most powerful elite.⁴

Today, PD editorials (*she lun*) are the most authoritative commentary vehicle in use. Editorials directly represent the paper's editorial department, and by extension the CCP Central Committee. The process of writing and publishing an editorial is a strict operation. If the topic was not preselected by the Central Propaganda Department or other "higher ups,"⁵ the PD Editorial Department selects the topic and creates an outline, which is sent for review by central leaders.⁶ Writing the editorial is the duty of the PD Commentary Department, and drafts are transferred to relevant specialists for edits before finalization by the chief editor.⁷ If deemed necessary, it is once again sent for central approval before publication. This careful process is meant to eliminate all content deviating from the party line and put forth the "collective wisdom" (*jiti de zhihui*) of the paper. The publication frequency of such editorials has shifted throughout the years, but today they are relatively few and far between.⁸

⁴ Wu, "Command Communication," 194–211.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 199–201.

⁶ "Baozhi pinglun wenti de tedian ji xiezuo yaoling" [Newspaper Commentary Style's Characteristics and Writing Essentials], in *Xinwen Pinglun Xiezuo 2016 Ban* [News Commentary Writing 2016 Edition], ed. Quanguo Gaodeng Jiaoyu Zixue Kaoshi Zhidao Weiyuanhui and Zeng Jianxiang (Beijing: Waiyu Jiaoxue yu Yanjiu Chubanshe, 2016), 206–77.

⁷ "Renmin ribao jizhe jiemi 'Ren Zhongping' beihou de gushi" [People's Daily Reporter Reveals the Story behind "Ren Zhongping"], *People's Daily*, December 22, 2008 ≈ <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/32306/54155/57487/8560342.html>.

⁸ "Baozhi pinglun wenti de tedian ji xiezuo yaoling."

The second most authoritative form of PD commentary is the commentator article (*benbao pinglunyuán wenzhang*), which is also drafted by the Commentary Department.⁹ Although they lack the full weight of editorials, commentator articles represent the party center's views on major affairs and events of similar levels of importance. One benefit offered by these articles is that they are published more frequently than editorials, and a series of commentator articles can address one issue from several angles.¹⁰ The release of a series has historically signaled that a new concept has gained importance and warrants study.¹¹ Until recent years, PD editorials and commentator articles had no near-equivalents in terms of significance.

Below this level are various bylines that are quasi-authoritative, nonauthoritative, or of inconclusive authority. A core assertion of this article is that the homophonous pseudonyms discussed below possess (in correspondence with that of their sponsoring organ) "full authoritativeness" and do not belong to these categories.

THE ERA OF EVERYONE HAVING A MICROPHONE

China's transformation from a land of one microphone to a land of many started in the 1980s, when the commercialization of the country's media began to offer new information sources for citizens. The unprecedented Tiananmen Square protests and subsequent military crackdown in June 1989 strengthened the perception among propagandists that the party needed to both rejuvenate the country's economy and strengthen political thought if it was to stay in power.¹² Despite this consensus, the commercial media sector was eventually allowed to continue its expansion, ultimately outcompeting party outlets in attracting an audience. From 1993 to 2003, party newspaper circulation visibly declined as more commercial papers entered the market. For example, during that period the Beijing Party Committee's *Beijing Daily* saw a 27% drop in daily circulation from 523,000 to 380,000, the Guangdong Party Committee's *Nanfang Daily* saw a 14% decline in circulation from 876,000 to 750,000, and the CCP Central Committee's very own PD saw a 35% circulation

⁹ "Renmin ribao jizhe jiemi 'Ren Zhongping' beihou de gushi."

¹⁰ "Baozhi pinglun wenti de tedian ji xiezuo yaoling."

¹¹ Timothy R. Heath, *China's New Governing Party Paradigm: Political Renewal and the Pursuit of National Rejuvenation* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 55.

¹² Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

decline from 2.78 million to 1.8 million.¹³ The reality was that most Chinese grew to prefer the variety and more sensational stories of outlets that relied on their patronage. Commercial sources also increasingly gave readers more accurate reporting on sensitive stories than official outlets. This credibility gap became especially apparent in media coverage of developments related to law-enforcement abuses, public-health emergencies such as the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), high-profile corruption cases, and other serious crises.¹⁴ By 2006, Tsinghua University professor Li Xiguang warned in the annual *Report on Development of China's Media Industry* that a failure to reform “mainstream” (party) newspapers would result in “a serious disjoint between the party and government agenda and the public agenda.”¹⁵

As part of the broader reforms enacted to address these deficiencies, the CCP launched an overhaul of its commentary system. Most Chinese had become at best indifferent to the fanatical messages of CCP commentary. They generally continue to find it to be hollow and arrogant, proffering theories removed from their lives. While expounding on the superior qualities of the PD commentary pseudonym “Ren Zhongping,” former PD deputy chief editor Mi Bohua soberly assessed the public’s disinterest in his paper’s commentary work in 2009:

Improving party papers’ political commentary has been a problem strenuously considered by commentary workers for a long time now. Readers have largely reflected that the party’s political commentary has a lot of empty talk, boastful talk, meaningless talk, and bureaucratic talk; they wish that viewpoints were a bit more original, the writing style a bit more fresh, and the form a bit more lively.¹⁶

A common lamentation for propagandists has been the crowded commentary environment they now work in, in which various media platforms transmit a flood of messages that often contradict their efforts. The diversification of opinion sources has posed a challenge to the Central Propaganda Department, even with its legions of media minders. This is especially true on the Chinese internet. To be sure, just as the party

¹³ These official figures were not verifiable through an independent circulation audit but nevertheless help confirm a serious decline in party paper subscribers. See Qian Gang and David Bandurski, “China’s Emerging Public Sphere: The Impact of Media Commercialization, Professionalism, and the Internet in an Era of Transition,” in *Changing Media, Changing China*, ed. Susan L. Shirk (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 38–76.

¹⁴ Gang and Bandurski, “China’s Emerging Public Sphere,” 38–76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ Mi Bohua, “Ren Zhongping de tezhi he ping” [Ren Zhongping’s Nature and Character], *People’s Daily*, March 2009 ∞ http://paper.people.com.cn/xwzx/html/2009-03/01/content_387299.htm.

has measures to deter newspaper journalists from printing forbidden information, it too maintains tools for limiting information online. These include the “great firewall” of China, which imposes stifling restrictions on the websites that Chinese can visit; the outlawing of popular global internet platforms such as Facebook and Instagram; reprisals against social media personalities that cross ill-defined limits on discussion topics; and the “50 cent party,” a veritable militia of party-sponsored internet commenters that cheerlead for the regime in online forums. But these efforts only offer the regime incomplete control of the online agenda, and often risk alienating netizens who are otherwise apolitical.¹⁷

The relative freedom of expression provided by the internet is most apparent in China’s spirited social media domain. At a time when Chinese increasingly socialize online,¹⁸ propagandists criticize the current period as the era of “everyone having a microphone” (*renren douyou maikefeng*) and have linked social media and the spread of online rumors with the popular but “hidden” expectation for accurate mainstream narratives.¹⁹ While detailing the importance of *PLA Daily* commentary pen name “Xie Xiping” in 2016, veteran *PLA Daily* journalist Huang Kunlun intimated his paper’s frustrations with the perceived chaos of a space with more than one opinion and projected the *PLA Daily*’s own mandate to guide public opinion as the desire of the people:

In today’s information age of fierce competitive media and cacophony of noise, every type of viewpoint fiercely collides and different tides of thought move unrestrained; the demands of interests are multiple, observations are multidimensional, and thinking methods are diverse; at the same time that people use “we-media” platforms like Weibo and Weixin to issue their voice, they also long for an authoritative “opinion leader” to appear.²⁰

¹⁷ For an in-depth discussion on the ongoing struggle between online users seeking greater freedom of expression and the Chinese government forces opposed to them, see Bruce J. Dickson, *The Dictator’s Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party’s Strategy for Survival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 64–73.

¹⁸ As of August 2017, the number of users communicating with the Chinese messaging app WeChat alone approached one billion. See Steven Millward, “WeChat Is Close to a Billion Users,” *Tech in Asia*, August 16, 2017 ~ <https://www.techinasia.com/wechat-near-billion-users>.

¹⁹ “‘Renren dou you maikefeng’ geng xuyao zhuliu shengyin” [“Everyone Having a Microphone” Needs Mainstream Voice Even More], *China Civilization Net*, November 10, 2016 ~ http://hz.wenming.cn/ycpl/201611/t20161110_2929960.htm.

²⁰ Huang Kunlun, “Cong zhengzhi huayu dao xinwen huayu—You ‘Xie Xiping’ xilie wenzhang kan junshi zhenglunwen zhuanxing” [From Political Talk to News Talk—Observing the Transition of Military Commentary from the “Xie Xiping” Series], *China Military Online*, February 19, 2016 ~ http://www.81.cn/jsjz/2016-02/19/content_6919233.htm.

The difficulties to which Huang alludes stem in large part from the fact that social media influencers churn out opinions faster than traditional commentary vehicles can, enabling the flow of ideas that can weaken public trust in the state. One prominent example of this reality came in July 2011, when a high-speed train crash killed dozens and left hundreds injured near the city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province. Netizens on China's microblog Sina Weibo exploded with indignation at their government's reticent reporting of developments, and the propaganda apparatus struggled to address accusations of corruption and conspiracy.²¹ Even before this tragedy, propaganda apparatchiks had been aware of the growing need to craft national narratives on major events early on if they were to protect their own credibility. While discussing the backstory of PD's development of new commentary brands in 2008, then deputy director of the Commentary Department Lu Xinning explained the paper's reasoning for addressing volatile topics instead of avoiding them:

Previously, PD did not have a column for issuing commentary regarding news events. When met with societal hot topic events, the general practice was to “not partake in hyping [the issue],” but in recent years, paper leaders feel, that if the party's paper is speechless at the key moment, it is the same as a dereliction of duty. When confronted with hot topic events of deep concern to the masses and problems of direct relation to the masses' interest, as the party's paper, if [we] do not utter a single word and offer no comment, in actuality this is a form of neglect and shortsightedness; if things continue this way, societal trust will be lost as a result, [and we will] resign ourselves to the periphery. [We] must meet public opinion hot topics head on, and partake in societal discussions; only then can [we] talk about influencing societal public opinion.²²

As difficulties with managing the public opinion environment multiplied, there was another growing problem that troubled propagandists: grassroots party cadres were increasingly exhibiting adverse reactions toward their own party's propaganda. According to interviews carried out by Tsai and Kao as part of their study on CCP pseudonyms, negative emotional responses were particularly apparent when cadres were issued propaganda tasks under the name of the ordering party body.²³ This response may correlate to the findings of a 2014 national survey of party members that asked why they joined the CCP. The survey found that those who joined the party after 1992 listed

²¹ Josh Chin, “Weibo Watershed? Train Collision Anger Explodes Online,” *Wall Street Journal*, China Real Time Report, July 26, 2011 ~ <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2011/07/26/weibo-watershed-train-collision-anger-explodes-online>.

²² “Renmin ribao jizhe jiemi ‘Ren Zhongping’ beihou de gushi.”

²³ Tsai and Kao, “Secret Codes of Political Propaganda,” 394–410.

“helpful to career” as their most common response, beating out more altruistic options such as “serve the people,” “work for communism,” and “only the CCP can lead China to prosperity and power.”²⁴ Put simply, cadre attention seems chiefly focused on career advancement and not propaganda edicts.

Such significant challenges required CCP commentators to think outside the Leninist box they had worked in since the days of Mao Zedong. Although the old commentary system still successfully served its purpose of transmitting unambiguous party messages to those who heeded them, new innovations were necessary to catch the attention of those who had tuned out. Across the bureaucracy, propaganda chiefs strived to develop their own opinion leaders to dominate this new environment of “commentary overload.” The perceived solution was to make party commentary vehicles as diverse and multidimensional as the competition.

To wage this propaganda war against competing voices in a complex commentary space, regime commentators took up an old tool that had served Chinese propagandists well before: the homophonous pen name system. The first homophonous pen names were used by Chinese Communists before their takeover of China to disseminate ideology while protecting their identity. Examples include Mao’s employment of the name “Er Shi Ba Hua Sheng” (a reference to the 28 traditional character strokes that made up his name) and Liu Shaoqi’s use of the names “Tao Shangxing” and “Mo Wenhua.”²⁵ During the Cultural Revolution, the pseudonym “Liang Xiao” was used by a group originally named the Peking University and Tsinghua University Criticism Group to push Maoist policies at the behest of Mao and Jiang Qing. The pen name is homophonous with *liang xiao*, or “two schools.”²⁶ Following the Cultural Revolution, Hu Yaobang and his reform-minded supporters briefly took up the pen name “Yue Ping,” which stood for “special commentator,” to advocate policies that were contrary to those of leader Hua Guofeng and his “two whatevers” faction, which supported a continuation of Mao’s policies.²⁷

²⁴ Dickson, *Dictator’s Dilemma*, 214–61.

²⁵ “Lingdaoren biming shang de shidai fengyun” [Era Trends in Leader Pen Names], *Dang Zheng Luntan*, March 2014, 50–51.

²⁶ Tsai and Kao, “Secret Codes of Political Propaganda,” 396.

²⁷ Shen Baoxiang, “Jiemi Renmin Ribao ‘teyue pinglunyuanyuan’” [Uncovering People’s Daily’s “Special Commentator”], CCP News Net, March 11, 2009. <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/GB/85039/8941769.html>. The byline “Yue Ping” was eventually shed for its true meaning (special commentator). In addition to offering anonymity, the byline special commentator also allowed PD to circumvent censorship regulations that called for editorials and important commentator articles to be reviewed prior to publication. These articles eventually helped steer elite opinion in favor of Deng Xiaoping’s proposed reform-oriented policies. See, for example, Ye Yonglie, “Jingxin xuanze tupokou” [Carefully Selecting a Breakthrough Point], in *Deng Xiaoping gaibian Zhongguo* [Deng Xiaoping Changed China] (Nanchang: Jiangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 2008), 257–61.

The usage of homophonous pen names by commentator teams found a more permanent place of influence in Chinese propaganda after its revival in 1991. That year, as China's overall economic reform stalled and Deng Xiaoping's influence over the media waned following the resurgence of leftists after the Tiananmen Square crackdown, Deng sought to breathe new life into his policies. Around Chinese New Year in 1991, his daughter Deng Lin quietly approached *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang Ribao*), the official mouthpiece of the Shanghai Party Committee, to enlist the paper's editorial support for her father's cause.²⁸ In response, party secretary of the newspaper Zhou Ruijin teamed up with Ling He of the paper's commentary department and Shi Zhihong of the Shanghai Party Committee Policy Research Office to author pro-reform commentary under the pen name "Huangfu Ping."²⁹ The Huangfu Ping series made big waves in the otherwise conservative commentary environment of the time and was initially met with harsh rebuke from PD and *Guangming Daily*. Seeing that his supporters were under threat of investigation, Deng used his momentous 1992 "southern tour"—his unorthodox but ultimately successful trip to southern municipalities to promote the accomplishments of his reform policies—as a chance to voice his support for the articles: "These articles are well written and the points they made are all correct. I heard that some people wanted to investigate the background of these articles. If they continue to do this, just tell them that I requested these articles and I made the points. Let them investigate me."³⁰

Deng's overt defense of the writing team helped embolden regional papers to take up his cause. Local media in Shanghai and Shenzhen reported on his tour before PD and other national outlets reported on the event, finally turning the tide in elite CCP politics in favor of economic reform. Years later, Zhou confirmed the exact meaning of Huangfu Ping, explaining that "huang" sounds very similar to "feng" in his native Southern Min dialect, which in context has the meaning of "receiving orders" (*feng ming*); "fu" (甫) is homophonous with "fu" (辅), which has the meaning of assist or help; and "ping" is the same character as that in Deng Xiaoping's name.

²⁸ Zhao Suisheng, "Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour: Elite Politics in Post-Tiananmen China," *Asian Survey* 33, no. 8 (1993): 748.

²⁹ Li Xiyan, "Cong Huangfu Ping dao Ren Zhongping dangbao zhuming zuozhe bushi yigeren zai zhandou" [From Huangfu Ping to Ren Zhongping, Not a One-Man Battle for Renowned Party Newspaper Author], *Liberation Daily*, November 3, 2015 ~ <http://msn.huanqiu.com/china/article/2015-11/7897480.html>.

³⁰ Zhao, "Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour," 749.

The resultant meaning is “receive the people’s order to assist Deng Xiaoping” (*feng renmin zhi ming fuzuo Deng Xiaoping*).³¹

TEN PROMINENT HOMOPHONOUS PEN NAMES OF THE CCP: AUTHORITY, CONTENT, AND UTILITY

Huangfu Ping would pave the way for an entire array of homophonous pen names that propagate the CCP’s messages and defend the party’s interests. Beginning with Ren Zhongping, subsequent pseudonyms would be utilized not to fight subversive ideological battles against competing party factions but instead to circumvent growing resistance to traditional forms of commentary. They rely on speed, less formulaic language, and the internet to extend their reach. The obliqueness of the pseudonym system aims to bypass readers’ hostile reactions to known regime sources and increase the success rate of thought penetration.³² However, it is equally important that readers are able to eventually decipher each pen name’s source of authority, so that it may be perceived as an “opinion leader.” In this sense, this system is less a secret code than an open secret meant to be discovered.

The nonexhaustive list of pen names discussed in this article are used by professional propagandists that disseminate the collective wisdom of their department and act as the voice of their superior party organ within their area of specialization. Just like party paper editorials, those speaking on behalf of a regime publication represent the views of that publication’s superior party body. Furthermore, carefully managed writing and editing procedures ensure that views are in line with those of the party center. Each pseudonym has been selected because its authority and active status are demonstrable.³³ By analyzing each pen name’s particulars, such as parent organ, home publication, and content, analysts can identify its relative authority and area of expertise. These names can then be integrated into a regular monitoring routine to enhance understanding of CCP concerns. The first four pseudonyms discussed belong to PD, and the final six belong to other regime organs.

³¹ Li, “Cong Huangfu Ping dao Ren Zhongping dangbao zhuming zuozhe bushi yigeren zai zhandou.”

³² Tsai and Kao, “Secret Codes of Political Propaganda,” 395.

³³ This study limits pen names to those that represent party organs, rather than merely authoritative individuals, and that have been active since the start of the 18th Party Congress.

Ren Zhongping: The “Gold Medal Author” of People’s Daily

As Lu Xinning states, Ren Zhongping is PD’s official “spokesperson.”³⁴ The origins of this pen name are closely tied to that of Huangfu Ping. After Deng and his reformers won back the support of the propaganda apparatus in 1992, it was not long before the party’s mouthpiece wanted its own pseudonym byline. In 1993, Zhou Ruijin was transferred to PD and put in charge of commentary work, where he was asked to write some articles “like Huangfu Ping.” Zhou promptly created the name Ren Zhongping, which stands for “important PD commentary” (*Renmin Ribao de zhongyao pinglun*). As Zhou explains, the Ren Zhongping writing team was specifically made to take up Huangfu Ping’s mantle as an advocate for continued reform and opening.³⁵ Even so, as the inadequacies of PD’s traditional commentary became apparent, its importance as an innovative propaganda vehicle grew.

Ren Zhongping first appeared in December 1993 with the commentary “From the 11th Central Committee Third Plenum to the 14th Central Committee Third Plenum,” which expounded on the essentials of reform and advocated for developing Deng’s path of socialism with Chinese characteristics.³⁶ Today, Ren Zhongping’s articles are widely reposted with great fanfare across the Chinese internet, and former PD director Zhang Yannong went as far as calling the brand the “focused embodiment of the PD political commentary advantage.” As director, Zhang played an important role in editing the brand’s articles.³⁷ Senior party leaders have also praised Ren Zhongping. In May 2003, then CCP general secretary Hu Jintao called Ren Zhongping articles clear-cut, penetrating, and fresh and asked that the brand be utilized to a greater degree.³⁸

A main reason that senior officials find Ren Zhongping to be a veracious commentator is because they guide its commentary topics. An illustrative article posted on PD Online and originally published in the *Press (Xinwen Zhanxian)*, the monthly magazine run by PD, explains that the byline’s topics

³⁴ “Renmin ribao jizhe jiemi ‘Ren Zhongping’ beihou de gushi.”

³⁵ Li, “Cong Huangfu Ping dao Ren Zhongping dangbao zhuming zuozhe bushi yigeren zai zhandou.”

³⁶ Ren Zhongping, “Cong Shiyijie Sanzhongquanhui dao Shisijie Sanzhongquanhui” [From the 11th Central Committee Third Plenum to the 14th Central Committee Third Plenum], *People’s Daily Online*, December 22, 1993 ≈ <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/192301/192351/201921/201922/12605741.html>.

³⁷ All-China Journalists Association, “Gaibian lishi de ‘Beijing Shijian’: Zhongguo xinwen jiang canping zuopin tuijian biao” [The “Beijing Time” That Changed History: China News Award Evaluating Work Recommendation Form], *Xinhua*, September 27, 2009.

³⁸ Zhang Yannong, “Ren Zhongping zai lushang” [Ren Zhongping on the Road], *People’s Daily*, Fall 2009 ≈ http://paper.people.com.cn/xwzx/html/2009-03/01/content_387298.htm.

are regularly selected by the heads of PD and even “central leading comrades” (*zhongyang lingdao tongzhi*), a term that usually refers to leaders of the CCP Central Committee Politburo or Secretariat rank.³⁹ Joseph Fewsmith has posited that this comrade may be the Central Propaganda Department head or the member of the Central Secretariat managing ideological work.⁴⁰ At the time of writing, Propaganda Department head Liu Qibao seems to meet this profile, as he sits on both the Politburo and the Central Secretariat, where he manages the ideological work and media portfolio.⁴¹

Under the direction of the PD Commentary Department, the Ren Zhongping writing team’s methodology is guided by the motto, “seven to eight guns, seven submissions and eight revisions, seven mouths and eight tongues” (*qiba tiao qiang, qishang baxia, qizui bashi*).⁴² According to Zhang, “seven to eight guns” signifies that the team’s members frequently number around eight individuals from several PD departments and include department directors, seasoned journalists, and young employees; “seven submissions and eight revisions” represents that the team’s works pass back and forth for revisions more than eight times, with some enduring as many as fourteen drafts; and “seven mouths and eight tongues” represents the democratic atmosphere that the group allegedly enjoys, in which every member is encouraged to voice opinions regardless of rank. Zhang states that debates frequently take place over article structure and even punctuation, and are sometimes resolved in the end by a vote.⁴³ When consensus has been reached, the draft is sent to the paper’s director and chief editor for finalization before publication.⁴⁴ If its own understanding of an issue is inadequate, the team consults PD specialists and outside experts. For example, Tian Junrong, a journalist in the economics department and a former Ren Zhongping collaborator, recalled that for a July 2004 article titled “Another 20 Years—On Our Country’s Key

³⁹ Cao Huanrong, “Zoule jin liangnian de qi” [A Chess Move Spanning Almost Two Years], *Xinwen Zhanxian*, Fall 2009 ~ http://paper.people.com.cn/xwzx/html/2009-03/01/content_387301.htm. For example, the CCP Central Organization Department’s website, Communist Party Member Net, has a page titled “Central Leading Comrades Activities Page” (*zhongyang lingdao tongzhi huodong zhuanye*) covering the activities of the CCP Central Committee Politburo and Secretariat. See CCP Central Organization Department, “Zhongyang lingdao tongzhi huodong zhuanye” [Central Leading Comrades Activities Page], Communist Party Member Net ~ <http://news.12371.cn/leaders>.

⁴⁰ Authors’ telephone conversation with Joseph Fewsmith, April 26, 2017.

⁴¹ For Liu’s full biographical profile, see “Liu Qibao,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, China Vitae ~ http://chinavitae.com/biography/Liu_Qibao%7C1294.

⁴² Lu Xinning confirms that Ren Zhongping is written under Commentary Department auspices. See “Renmin ribao jizhe jiemi ‘Ren Zhongping’ beihou de gushi.”

⁴³ Zhang, “Ren Zhongping zai lushang.”

⁴⁴ Li, “Cong Huangfu Ping dao Ren Zhongping dangbao zhuming zuozhe bushi yigeren zai zhandou”; and All-China Journalists Association, “Gaibian lishi de ‘Beijing Shijian.’”

Period of Reform and Development,” drafters from the economics and theory departments hosted a panel of eight experts to partake in a discussion forum.⁴⁵

With regard to content, Mi Bohua explains that although Ren Zhongping covers all affairs of national importance, its angle is always political, and its articles are often meant to bring “proper” understanding to a given issue. Mi cites a July 2000 article series that promoted Marxist views as relevant to the average citizen’s life as an example of relating theoretical concepts in a down-to-earth manner.⁴⁶ Although he admits that Ren Zhongping cannot stray from sanctioned theories nor abandon the party’s solemn language, he does not view this as limiting commentary to the mundane. His optimism is based on Ren Zhongping’s attempt to utilize emotion-laden and concise language that readers can easily absorb. Although a review of recent commentaries by this pen name shows this to be a challenge, careful wording aims to relate with each reader’s own experiences, thereby transmitting lessons that guide them down the “correct” path.⁴⁷

All things considered, how does Ren Zhongping’s importance stack up against that of PD editorials and commentator articles? One indicator comes from a 2016 university-level textbook on news commentary writing released by education publishing house Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. Seemingly in reference to quality, the book calls Ren Zhongping’s works “Editorial Department commentary articles” with standards that are “higher than ordinary commentator articles, even surpassing editorials.”⁴⁸ Indeed, the fact that each finished Ren Zhongping article involves a multitude of writers and many successive drafts explains why in recent years only five to six pieces have been published annually. By comparison, PD published three times as many editorials in 2016.⁴⁹ There are other signs that this pen name should be held in high regard. In a political culture where the order of precedence matters greatly, it is worth noting that at some point between November 2007 and May 2008, Ren Zhongping displaced PD commentator articles as the second-listed commentary type on the PD Important Opinions Library webpage, just after

⁴⁵ Tian Junrong, “Tian ‘zhuan’ yu qiu ‘bo’” [Adding “Specialty” and Seeking “Variety”], *Xinwen Zhanxian*, Fall 2009 ∞ http://paper.people.com.cn/xwzx/html/2009-03/01/content_387304.htm.

⁴⁶ Ren Zhongping, “Nuli peiyu shiyong shehuizhuyi xiandaihua yaoqiu de ‘siyou’ gongmin—Lun shijieguan, renshengguan, jiazhiguan” [Strive to Cultivate “Four Haves” Citizens of Socialist Modernization Requirements—On World Views, Life Views, and Material Values], *People’s Daily*, July 2000 ∞ http://www.360doc.com/content/15/1110/08/1433596_512061408.shtml; and Mi, “Ren Zhongping de tezhi he pingge.”

⁴⁷ Mi, “Ren Zhongping de tezhi he pingge.”

⁴⁸ “Baozhi pinglun wenti de tedian ji xiezuo yaoling,” 213.

⁴⁹ “Renmin Ribao zhongyao yanlunku” [People’s Daily Important Opinions Library], *People’s Daily Online*, June 11, 2017 ∞ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/8213/49160/index.html>.

PD editorials. It had previously been placed third after PD commentator articles.⁵⁰ These indicators help signify Ren Zhongping's status as a premier commentator for PD as an institution. One could argue that its articles have become second only to PD editorials as a significant representative of the paper, even if PD commentator articles maintain their traditionally superior status as an unambiguous command vehicle for the CCP Central Committee.

In review, observers can consider the Ren Zhongping brand to be a highly polished, secondary form of PD editorial that receives frequent input from senior party members and accurately represents the Central Committee's views on major topics. Although the very nature of the CCP's message deters many would-be readers, the Ren Zhongping team sugarcoats the message to make it more palatable, paving the way for other commentary units to do the same under their own pseudonyms.

He Zhenhua: The "Sensitive Hot Issue Brand"

To counter foreign influencers that are deemed hostile to the CCP's interests, PD created the pen name "He Zhenhua." This pseudonym was officially confirmed in a 2008 Commentary Department interview to stand for "how to invigorate China" (*ruhe zhenxing Zhonghua*), and as a pseudonym originally used by the Commentary Department, it seems likely to remain under the department's management today.⁵¹ Following the March 2008 unrest in Tibet, which ended in violence and a government-sanctioned "people's war" against the "Dalai clique," PD was ordered to launch a propaganda blitz to gain control of the narrative on unfolding events.⁵² Lu Xinning, deputy director of the Commentary Department at the time, led two junior commentators to establish the He Zhenhua writing team. Once established, it wasted no time in pumping out dozens of articles by the end of the year to battle against the perceived separatist forces that were supposedly behind the unrest.⁵³ Successive articles accused the Dalai Lama of orchestrating a violent uprising in Tibet.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ This comparison was made by accessing archived versions of the "People's Daily Important Opinions Library" from November 24, 2007 and May 12, 2008. See "Renmin Ribao zhongyao yanlunku," *People's Daily Online* ~ <http://opinion.people.com.cn>.

⁵¹ "Renmin Ribao jizhe jiemi 'Ren Zhongping' beihou de gushi."

⁵² "Renmin Ribao zongbianji: Jianchi zhengque daoxiang, tigao chuangxin nengli" [People's Daily Chief Editor: Maintain the Right Direction and Improve Creativity], *Xinhua*, June 19, 2009 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2009-06/19/content_11566630.htm.

⁵³ "Dangbao pinglun nv zhubi" [The Chief Female Hand of People's Daily Commentary], *People's Daily Online*, September 5, 2012 ~ <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2012/0905/c348664-18925302.html>.

⁵⁴ He Zhenhua, "Renmin Ribao renmin luntan: Qipian yu liyong" [People's Daily Public Forum: Deception and Manipulation], *People's Daily Online*, April 2, 2008 ~ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/40604/7072875.html>.

One three-part series argued that Tibet was not an issue of religious or human rights but rather one of Chinese sovereignty.⁵⁵ Other pieces took aim at Tibet activists who interfered with the 2008 Olympic torch relay by emphasizing that such efforts were contrary to the spirit of the games.⁵⁶ He Zhenhua's use of persuasive reasoning to defend China's sovereignty and prestige earned it praise from then Politburo Standing Committee member and propaganda boss Li Changchun, who stated that the pen name's effectiveness had made it an important "sensitive hot issue brand."⁵⁷

Content analysis shows that He Zhenhua is not one-dimensional and has written about other topics that "invigorate China." For example, this pen name took a break from battling the Dalai Lama in order to guide public opinion following the tragic May 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which left more than 87,000 people dead or missing.⁵⁸ The writing team has maintained a low profile in more recent years, but a three-part series published in January 2016 attacked billionaire investor George Soros. Referencing his statement at the World Economic Forum in Davos that a hard landing for China's economy was "practically unavoidable," He Zhenhua retorted that Soros, by "shorting China, is only shorting himself" and offered various counterarguments that the world's second-largest economy would not be rocked by "a few speculators."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ He Zhenhua, "Renmin Ribao renmin luntan: 'Xizang wenti' bushi zongjiao wenti" [People's Daily Public Forum: The "Tibet Issue" Is Not a Religious Issue], *People's Daily Online*, April 29, 2008 ∞ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/7177623.html>; and He Zhenhua, "Renmin Ribao renmin luntan: 'Xizang wenti' bushi renquan wenti" [People's Daily Public Forum: The "Tibet Issue" Is Not a Human Rights Issue], *People's Daily Online*, April 30, 2008 ∞ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/7182793.html>.

⁵⁶ He Zhenhua, "Renmin Ribao renmin luntan: Tingzhi ganrao fangde renxin" [People's Daily Public Forum: Only by Halting Your Interference Can You Win Hearts], *People's Daily Online*, May 12, 2008 ∞ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/7224490.html>.

⁵⁷ "Renmin Ribao zongbianji: Jianchi zhengque daoxiang, tigao chuangxin nengli."

⁵⁸ "Sichuan 2008: A Disaster on an Immense Scale," BBC News, May 9, 2013 ∞ <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-22398684>. This hiatus ended about a month later when He Zhenhua accused the British parliament of hurting the feelings of 1.3 billion Chinese people by inviting the Dalai Lama to attend a May 22 hearing on Tibet's situation. See, for example, He Zhenhua, "Renmin Ribao renmin luntan: 'Renquan weishi' men de qingxiangxing shiming" [People's Daily Public Forum: "Human Rights Warriors" Selective Blindness], *People's Daily Online*, June 4, 2008 ∞ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/7337654.html>.

⁵⁹ Katherine Burton, "Soros Says China Hard Landing Will Deepen the Rout in Stocks," Bloomberg News, January 21, 2016 ∞ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-01-21/george-soros-says-he-expects-hard-landing-for-chinese-economy>; He Zhenhua, "Renmin Ribao renmin luntan: 'Kankong' Zhongguo haowu yiju" [People's Daily People's Forum: "Underestimating" China with No Evidence], *People's Daily Online*, January 28, 2016 ∞ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0128/c1003-28090613.html>; He Zhenhua, "Renmin Ribao renmin luntan: 'Zuokong' Zhongguo zhihui zuokong ziji" [People's Daily Public Forum: "Shorting" China Means Shorting Yourself], *People's Daily Online*, January 29, 2016 ∞ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0129/c1003-28094046.html>; and He Zhenhua, "Changshuai' Zhongguo zhishi ziqiqiren" [To Disparage China Is to Deceive Yourself], *People's Daily Online*, January 30, 2016 ∞ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0130/c1003-28097517.html>.

In summary, He Zhenhua seems to have evolved into a combative tool for PD when the paper needs to counter foreign influencers who could disrupt stability, whether regarding Tibet or the national economy. The employment of the pseudonym signals to analysts that a sensitive narrative has become threatening, requiring rebuke. Its apparent evolution away from Tibet issues suggests that this pen name will likely be used against a widening range of challengers in the future.

Guo Jiping and Zhong Sheng: China's Voice and Alarm Bell on International Affairs

PD maintains two writing teams that officially voice PD's commentary stance on foreign affairs: "Guo Jiping" and "Zhong Sheng." The brands are complementary, addressing slightly different purposes but never straying from the same sanctioned views. Their articles are occasionally translated or summarized in English, appearing on PD Online and other official outlets in order to reach Western audiences.

According to an article posted on PD Online and originally published in the *China Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television Journal*, a newspaper managed by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, the pseudonym Guo Jiping stands for "relevant international important commentary" (*youguan guoji de zhongyao pinglun*) and was created in 2005 under the auspices of the PD International Department.⁶⁰ The mastermind behind the brand's creation was the department's then director Wu Changsheng, who sought to strengthen the paper's ability to respond authoritatively to international events.⁶¹ PD states that Guo Jiping's writing team is staffed by professionals of its International Department, and that each article represents the department's collective wisdom.⁶² From what is known about the Zhong Sheng writing team's production process (described below), it can be surmised that the International Department director also plays an important role in finalizing Guo Jiping articles before publication. With the occasional exception of Ren Zhongping, Guo Jiping remains PD's most important pseudonym commentator on international affairs and is used to express the paper's position on consequential international situations.⁶³

⁶⁰ Fan Zhanying, "Huangjin shidai' de meili huying" [A Beautiful Echo to the "Golden Age"], *People's Daily Online*, October 27, 2015 ~ <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2015/1027/c192374-27745693.html>.

⁶¹ "Wu Changsheng tongzhi gongzuo jianli ji zhongyao shiji he yewu chengji" [Comrade Wu Changsheng's Work Experience, Important Accomplishments and Achievements], *Xinhua*, June 5, 2007.

⁶² "Guo Jiping / Zhong Sheng" [Guo Jiping / Zhong Sheng: Recommended Columns], *People's Daily Online* ~ <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/8212/145010/index.html>.

⁶³ Fan, "Huangjin shidai' de meili huying."

Guo Jiping articles are long, generally ranging between 4,000 and 5,000 Chinese characters.⁶⁴ This length naturally extends the writing and editing process and means that articles are not intended to quickly shape public opinion but instead aim to offer deeper analysis for more inquisitive readers.

Guo Jiping's earliest articles focused on a wide range of topics. During Hu Jintao's tenure as general secretary, the writing team helped proclaim his major strategic concept of building a "harmonious world," which embodies the CCP's push for greater Chinese international influence, accommodation of its core interests, and the rejection of universally accepted political systems and values.⁶⁵ In the month following Hu's September 2005 speech at the UN summit calling for the building of a harmonious world, Guo Jiping repeated his call for the abandonment of a "Cold War mentality," respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and respect for each country's chosen societal system.⁶⁶ Other articles focused on promoting the "new security concept," which centers on advancing a multipolar global order, deepening globalization, and upholding the United Nation's authority. As the Iraq War raged on with climbing costs to the United States, Guo Jiping argued in December 2007 that unilateralism and hegemony did not match the period's international security situation and promoted the new security concept as China's contribution to international peace.⁶⁷ More recently, it has pushed for a more equitable financial system in the wake of the international financial crisis, heralded the beginning of a "new golden age" in relations with the United Kingdom following Xi Jinping's state visit there in October 2015, and welcomed the beginning of a "new era" in China–Latin American relations before Xi's regional tour in November 2016.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ This figure comes from a *People's Daily Online* study published in April 2014: Liang Kun, "Zhongsheng' qiaoxiangle shenme?" [What Kind of Bell Did "Zhong Sheng" Ring?], *People's Daily Online*, April 22, 2014 ~ <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2014/0422/c382352-24928717.html>.

⁶⁵ For more on Hu's "harmonious world" concept, see Heath, *China's New Governing Party Paradigm*.

⁶⁶ "Build Towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity: Statement by Hu Jintao, President of the People's Republic of China at the United Nations Summit," United Nations, September 15, 2005 ~ <http://www.un.org/webcast/summit2005/statements15/china050915eng.pdf>; and Guo Jiping, "Lianheguo Chengli 60 zhounian: jianshe hexie shijie de liangda mingti" [United Nations 60th Anniversary: Two Key Questions for Constructing a Harmonious World], *People's Daily Online*, October 24, 2005 ~ <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/30178/3793989.html>.

⁶⁷ Guo Jiping, "Gongtong weihu shijie heping wending" [Mutually Maintaining World Peace and Stability], *People's Daily Online*, December 6, 2007 ~ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/6618818.html>.

⁶⁸ Guo Jiping, "Huhuan gongping heli de guoji jinrong xinzhi" [Calling for a Fair System for International Financial Markets], *People's Daily Online*, November 6, 2008 ~ <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/1030/8291119.html>; Fan, "'Huangjin shidai' de meili huying"; and Guo Jiping, "Yingjie Zhongla mingyun yugong de lishi xinshiqi" [Welcoming a New Era of China–Latin American Relations under a Common Destiny], *People's Daily Online*, November 16, 2016 ~ <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n1/2016/1116/c78779-28870818.html>.

Guo Jiping's partner Zhong Sheng first became active in November 2008 and is also managed by PD's International Department. The homophone has been confirmed in PD publications and other reputable sources to have the meaning of "voice of China" (*Zhongguo zhi sheng*), but one PD Online study has posited a more covert translation of "sounding the alarm bell" (*jingshi zhongsheng*).⁶⁹ This second meaning fits well with many of the pen name's alarmist messages. Zhong Sheng can be thought of as a sidekick to Guo Jiping; its writing team also comprises journalists and editors of the International Department, and each article is a collective departmental work.⁷⁰ Two official commentary evaluations of Zhong Sheng articles from 2012 and 2013 show the responsible editor of the works to be then department director Lv Yansong, which strongly suggests that all articles under this pen name are reviewed and finalized by the department head. Under the "societal effect" section, these evaluations also observe which international news outlets discussed and shared these articles, signaling a keen awareness of Zhong Sheng's foreign influence.⁷¹ Its articles are noticeably shorter than Guo Jiping's, with most coming in under 1,500 Chinese characters. This has allowed Zhong Sheng to publish at a much more frequent rate than Guo Jiping.⁷² Such brevity also suggests that this pseudonym is meant to respond to events more quickly than its senior commentary partner.

In terms of content, Zhong Sheng has a clear focus on international relations, with considerable coverage of economics, trade, and security affairs. Its articles have especially focused on Sino-U.S. relations. For example, a May 2012 piece called on both nations to jointly defend world peace and promote sustainable development.⁷³ But true to the alternative translation of its name, Zhong Sheng has also admonished targeted countries. Examples include its

⁶⁹ Liang, "'Zhongsheng' qiaoxiangle shenme?"; and Jing Dong Group, *Daguo zhisheng* [The Voice of a Great Power], June 11, 2017 ~ <http://item.jd.com/10402049014.html>.

⁷⁰ "Guo Jiping / Zhong Sheng."

⁷¹ All-China Journalists Association, "GJ Pinglun: Buneng renyou waibu ganshe shixian zhengquan gengdie: Zhongguo xinwen jiang canping zuopin tuijian biao" [GJ Commentary: We Cannot Let Foreign Interference Beget Regime Change: China News Award Evaluating Work Recommendation Form], Xinhua, June 24, 2013 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjc/2013-06/24/c_132481545.htm; All-China Journalists Association, "Xuliya Wenti, dangxin 'moshi' beihou de sihuo: Zhongguo xinwen jiang canping zuopin tuijian biao" [The Syria Problem: Beware of Hidden Information behind the Obvious: China News Award Evaluating Work Recommendation Form], Xinhua, June 15, 2014 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjc/2014-06/15/c_133409121.htm. Lv is now a deputy chief editor at PD: "Lv Yansong jianli" [Lv Yansong's Curriculum Vitae], *People's Daily Online* ~ <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/50142/208383>.

⁷² This figure comes from a *People's Daily Online* study published in April 2014: Liang, "'Zhongsheng' qiaoxiangle shenme?"

⁷³ Zhong Sheng, "Zouchu Zhongmei xinxing daguo guanxi zhilu" [Walking the Road of a New Type of Major Power Relations between the U.S. and China], *People's Daily Online*, May 6, 2012 ~ <http://finance.people.com.cn/GB/17817455.html>.

November 2008 inaugural article, “Whoever Hung the Bell on the Tiger’s Neck Must Untie It,” which blamed French president Nicolas Sarkozy’s decision to meet the Dalai Lama for China’s postponement of the 11th EU-China Summit.⁷⁴ “Be Vigilant of the Wishful Thinking in Japan’s Delay Tactics,” a September 2012 article widely shared on Chinese Foreign Ministry websites, warned that China “[has] the confidence to fight an ‘encountered engagement,’ and [has] the preparation to fight a ‘prolonged war’ with Japan” (*you he Riben da “zaoyu zhan” de xinxin, yeyou da “chijiu zhan” de zhunbei*) in response to the Japanese government’s nationalization of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.⁷⁵ “America, Stop Using ‘National Security’ as a Pretense,” published in May 2013, protested Washington’s alleged obstruction of Chinese business activities in the United States on national security grounds.⁷⁶ It is worth noting that a key target in recent years has been the Philippines’ South China Sea arbitration case at The Hague, which threatened to delegitimize Beijing’s claims over the area. In 2016 an eight-part series aggressively attacked the Philippines, the West, Japan, and the entire tribunal process.⁷⁷ Zhong Sheng struck a more conciliatory tone in a January 2017 article explaining the themes of China’s first white paper on Asia-Pacific security cooperation, emphasizing the country’s desire to meet global challenges together with regional nations in the face of various “black swan” events and “anti-globalization” thoughts.⁷⁸

In summary, the Guo Jiping and Zhong Sheng writing teams work together to guide public opinion on foreign affairs through both long analytical commentaries and concise opinion pieces supporting China’s most important strategic initiatives on the world stage. Of note, Guo Jiping articles have often been published to provide supporting commentary surrounding trips abroad by the Chinese president. Similarly, the posting of shrill Zhong Sheng articles threatening preparedness for war on official Foreign Ministry websites suggests that this commentary brand may play a low-level role in the

⁷⁴ Zhong Sheng, “Jieling haixu xilingren” [Whoever Hung the Bell on the Tiger’s Neck Must Untie It], *People’s Daily Online*, November 29, 2008 ∞ http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-11/29/content_148024.htm.

⁷⁵ See “Jingti Riben yitudaiban de jiaoxing xinli” [Be Vigilant of the Wishful Thinking in Japan’s Delay Tactics], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), September 17, 2012 ∞ <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/diaoyudao/chn/xwdt/t975491.htm>.

⁷⁶ Zhong Sheng, “Meiguo, shaona ‘guojia anquan’ dang huangzi” [America, Stop Using National Security as a Pretense], *People’s Daily Online*, May 3, 2013 ∞ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2013/0503/c1003-21348757.html>.

⁷⁷ Michael Swaine, “Chinese Views on the South China Sea Arbitration Case between the People’s Republic of China and the Philippines,” Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, no. 51, August 4, 2016, 6 ∞ <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CLM51MS.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Zhong Sheng, “Yi hezuo cu heping de daguo dandang” [Fostering Peace through Cooperation Is the Virtue of a Superpower], *People’s Daily Online*, January 13, 2017 ∞ <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0113/c409499-29020812.html>.

PRC's hierarchy of warning statements for international crises. Both brands offer analysts authoritative views on international affairs that collectively represent the position of the CCP's mouthpiece.

Qiu Shi: Flagship Ideologue of the Central Committee's Journal

The “Qiu Shi” commentary brand is published exclusively in *Qiushi Journal* (*qiushi*), the theoretical periodical under the direction of the CCP Central Committee. Like the journal itself, these articles are used to communicate the theoretical underpinnings of CCP authority and related Central Committee policy directives. Qiu Shi's articles are frequently posted on *Qiushi Journal's* affiliate website. Even rudimentary Chinese-language skills are unnecessary for one to recognize that the pen name is a homophone for the journal itself. *Qiushi Journal* has specifically reported on its special employment of the pseudonym to support top CCP gatherings, such as the 18th Party Congress, further corroborating the pen name's status as a heavyweight representative of the journal.⁷⁹

Little information can be found on the composition of the Qiu Shi writing team, but the makeup of the Ren Zhongping writing team—the Central Committee's other mouthpiece—suggests that it may consist of editors, journalists, and theorists from different departments of the journal. Like the journal's editorials, Qiu Shi articles undergo an exhaustive approval process prior to publication. According to debriefing materials provided to a December 2004 experience-sharing conference and a meeting of chief editors and station directors, commentaries are initially reviewed by an appointed editor before undergoing a review and approval process by the relevant departmental director or deputy director, an editorial board member, a second on-duty editorial board member, and the chief editor.⁸⁰ Although this process may have been adjusted since 2004, these materials nonetheless confirm that Qiu Shi commentary is *Qiushi Journal's* highly polished flagship product.

⁷⁹ “Shi ba da zhongda zhuti xuanchuan: ‘Qiushi’ fabiao qiu shi xilie wenzhang” [Propaganda on the Important Theme of the 18th Party Congress: Qiushi Journal Publishes Qiu Shi Article Series], *Qiushi*, 2012 ~ <http://www.qstheory.cn/special/2012/qswzxbd/>.

⁸⁰ *Qiushi Journal*, “2004 nian 12 yue jingyan jiaoliu hui (shang): Shenru chijiu kaizhan ‘san xiang xuexi jiaoyu huodong’ jingyan jiaoliu hui ji zong bian, tai zhang huiyi cailiao: Qiushi Zazhi she kaizhan ‘san xiang xuexi jiaoyu huodong’ qingkuang huibao” [December 2004 Experience Sharing Conference (Part 1): Deeply and Persistently Launch “Three-Points Study and Education Campaign” Experience Sharing Conference and Chief Editors, Station Directors Meeting Materials: Qiushi Journal Opens “Three-Points Study and Education Campaign” Situation Debriefing], *Xinhua*, December 24, 2004 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2007-01/05/content_5567791_4.htm.

The writing team has been disseminating theoretical commentary for a relatively long time, with articles dating back to the Jiang Zemin era. Its commentaries were an important part of the well-coordinated media campaign to propagate Jiang's main theoretical contribution, "the important thinking of the Three Represents." The Three Represents was a radical departure from 80 years of the party's emphasis on recruiting from traditional sectors of society, such as workers and farmers, and opened recruitment to newer "advanced productive forces" of society: professionals from the private sector. This controversial about-face thus required all the commentary support it could get.⁸¹ In the run-up to the 16th Party Congress in November 2002 and the 10th National People's Congress in March 2003, Qiu Shi articles declared that the Three Represents concept embodies "the modernization of socialism's overall layout" and named it as part of the CCP's guiding ideology alongside Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, and Deng Xiaoping Theory.⁸² Subsequent articles have covered a variety of topics, ranging from provincial modernization to the issue of borrowing from the "excellent civilizational achievements" of other countries. They have also connected economic development to the CCP's "socialist core value system" (*shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi tixi*), contending that it provides the very foundation on which China's economic growth can be realized.⁸³

Qui Shi articles often take a hard line on competing ideologies and party discipline. Examples include a May 2009 article that dismissed capitalism as the ideology of Western aggressors and a more recent December 2016 piece that expounded on the importance of strict party governance with Xi Jinping at the helm.⁸⁴ Qiu Shi has also appealed to the nationalistic tendencies of the Chinese public to support CCP theories. As one September 2009 article straightforwardly states, "only socialism is capable of saving China, and only

⁸¹ For more on the Three Represents, see David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 111.

⁸² Qiu Shi, "Qiushi: 'Lun dang de zuidi gangling yu zuigao gangling de tongyi'" [Qiushi Journal: "Discussing the Integration of the Party's Lowest Program and Highest Program"], *Xinhua*, May 27, 2002 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2002-05/27/content_410648.htm; and Qiu Xuan, "Qiu shi zazhi fabiao qiu shi wenzhang: Lishi xing de juece he gongxian" [Qiushi Journal Publishes Qiu Shi Article: Historic Strategic Decision and Contribution], *People's Daily*, January 11, 2003 ~ <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/guandian/29/98/20030111/905655.html>.

⁸³ Qiu Shi, "Jiandingbuyi de jianchi shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi tixi" [Unswervingly Adhere to the Socialist Core Values System], *Qiushi*, June 1, 2009 ~ http://www.qstheory.cn/qsqz/qsqt/200906/t20090622_1948.htm.

⁸⁴ Qiu Shi, "Weishenme bixu jianchi Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi daolu er buneng zou bie de daolu" [Why [We] Must Persist on the Road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Must Not Walk Another Road], *Qiushi*, May 1, 2009 ~ http://www.qstheory.cn/qsqz/qsqt/200906/t20090609_1845.htm; and Qiu Shi, "Puxie quanmian cong yan zhi dang xin pianzhang" [Composing a New Chapter in Strictly Governing the Party Comprehensively], *Qiushi*, December 16, 2016 ~ http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2016-12/16/c_1120107682.htm.

socialism with Chinese characteristics is capable of developing China; this is the scientific conclusion developed from Chinese patriotism since modern times.”⁸⁵

As demonstrated, the Qiu Shi pen name speaks authoritatively on behalf of its parent publication, offering observers an accurate source for the CCP Central Committee’s latest theoretical views. It is utilized to promote updates to the party’s ideology, bolster the initiatives of China’s top leaders, and portray CCP theory as the only viable foundation for China’s economic success. This last task is critical, since the CCP is uniquely qualified to implement the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics that it upholds as the only correct theory for China’s advancement.

Xie Xinping and Xie Zhengping: The “Opinion Leaders” of the Chinese Military

The pen names “Xie Xinping” and “Xie Zhengping” serve as two prominent commentary brands representing the mouthpiece of the CCP Central Military Commission (CMC), *PLA Daily*. The CMC has supreme command over the Chinese armed forces, which are currently led by CMC chairman Xi Jinping. Since their inception, both pen names have been utilized by the paper for the purpose of guiding opinion on China’s most important military affairs, especially the current anticorruption and military modernization efforts by the People’s Liberation Army. Persuasively addressing corruption is a particularly critical task for military propagandists if the public’s faith in the military is to be restored.

Xie Xinping was masterminded in 2013 by the former chief propagandist of the PLA General Political Department, Yu Guang, during his tenure as director of *PLA Daily*.⁸⁶ Xie Xinping has been confirmed by *PLA Daily*’s Huang Kunlun to have the homophonous meaning of “*PLA Daily* news commentary” (*Jiefangjun Bao xinwen pinglun*). Like its peer civilian writing

⁸⁵ Qiu Shi, “Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi qizhi shi shehui zhuyi yu aiguo zhuyi xiang tongyi de qizhi” [The Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics Is the United Banner of Socialism and Patriotism], *Qiushi*, September 16, 2009 ~ http://www.qstheory.cn/qsqz/qsqt/200909/t20090911_11308.htm. Another similar example is found in the previous issue. See Qiu Shi, “Cong aiguo zhuyi dao Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi” [From Patriotism to Socialism with Chinese Characteristics], *Qiushi*, September 1, 2009 ~ http://www.qstheory.cn/qsqz/qsqt/200908/t20090831_10485.htm.

⁸⁶ Yue Huaijiang, “Yuan zong zhengzhi bu xuanchuan bu buzhang Yu Guang shaojiang churen junwei zhengzhi gongzuo bu zhuren zhuli” [Former General Political Department Propaganda Department Head Rear Admiral Yu Guang Becomes CMC Political Work Department Assistant Director], *Paper*, January 19, 2016 ~ http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1422469; and Liu Liu, “Miji tiaozheng hou junwei hexin bumen fasheng xin bianhua” [After Intensive Adjustments, New Changes Occur at CMC Core Departments], Jiyuan City Zhicheng Town Public Information Net, February 17, 2017 ~ <http://www.zhicheng.gov.cn/guonaxinwen/20170217/32161.html>.

team Ren Zhongping, the Xie Xinping writing team jointly produces articles through a collaborative process and comprises senior paper leaders, department directors, experienced editors, and promising new talent. Overall planning is reportedly spearheaded by the “Xie Xinping studio.”⁸⁷ An official commentary assessment of Xie Xinping’s inaugural article shows that the team consisted of three main writers and was edited by Commentary Department director He Minghong and paper director Yu Guang. It also stated that the pen name was created as “the military’s Ren Zhongping.”⁸⁸ This suggests a review process mirroring that of Ren Zhongping, where drafts are submitted to the paper’s leadership for final approval before publication. Xie Xinping’s commentaries are regularly posted on *PLA Daily’s* affiliated website, China Military Online, as well as the official websites of party organs, including PD, *China Daily*, and the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. Xie Xinping works have been compiled into a book released by *PLA Daily’s* publishing house in December 2014.⁸⁹

According to Huang, the Xie Xinping brand represents nothing less than an innovation of the military’s political commentary to meet the challenging requirements of the “new situation,” a concept that encompasses a broad set of “contradictions” challenging China in the period from 2000 to 2020. The new situation’s competitive commentary environment is replete with opinion sources that often undermine sanctioned narratives. As mentioned previously, Huang’s writings portray a crowded environment where “everyone has a microphone” and social media platforms allow for a low commentary threshold, necessitating the creation of an authoritative “opinion leader.” As the key opinion leader in *PLA Daily*, Xie Xinping represents the CMC’s voice at important times and on crucial topics.⁹⁰

The first article by this pseudonym appeared on *PLA Daily’s* front page in September 2013 and discussed the importance of CCP and PLA members maintaining party loyalty in an increasingly materialistic society.⁹¹ Since that piece, Xie Xinping has published many articles in support of Xi’s bold anticorruption drive and military modernization.

⁸⁷ Wu Tianmin, “‘Xie Xinping’ shi shei?” [Who Is “Xie Xinping”?] Ministry of National Defense (PRC), July 25, 2014 ~ http://www.mod.gov.cn/intl/2014-07/25/content_4524360.htm.

⁸⁸ All-China Journalists Association, “Lun xinyang yu zuofeng: Zhongguo xinwen jiang canping zuopin tuijian biao” [Discussing Faith and Work Style: China News Award Evaluating Work Recommendation Form], Xinhua.

⁸⁹ *Jiefangjun bao Xie Xinping jilu* [PLA Daily Xie Xinping Compilation] (Beijing: Long March Press, 2014) ~ <http://book.kongfz.com/235283/673550828/>.

⁹⁰ Huang, “Cong zhengzhi huayu.”

⁹¹ *Ibid.*; and Xie Xinping, “Lun xinyang yu zuofeng” [Discussing Faith and Work Style], *PLA Daily*, September 25, 2013 ~ http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xcyj/qfwy/201309/t20130924_43754.html.

A February 2014 article, for example, highlighted the urgency of realizing the martial counterpart of the “China dream”—the “strong military dream” (*qiang jun meng*)—by unifying the mindset and actions of the PLA.⁹² On the eve of the 120th anniversary of the First Sino-Japanese War, *PLA Daily* published another Xie Xinning article that similarly advocated reform as the catalyst of military modernization.⁹³ This piece, along with a December 2015 article, strongly condemned the pandemic of rule-breaking, opportunism, and bribery for eroding soldiers’ morale; the latter article characterized vested interests as the “umbilical cord” that impedes military reform.⁹⁴ The PLA’s incomplete military transformation and ongoing discipline issues strongly suggest that Xie Xinning will have much to write about for some time to come.

Xie Xinning’s sidekick at *PLA Daily* is Xie Zhengping, whose name has been confirmed to stand for “*PLA Daily* Political Department and Commentary Department” (*Jiefangjun Bao zhengzhi bu yu pinglun bu*).⁹⁵ The origins of this pseudonym are linked closely to Xie Xinning, which was created by the same person, Yu Guang.⁹⁶ Sources suggest that in addition to the two departments referenced in the name, the Xie Zhengping team was also founded by the *PLA Daily* chief editor’s office, the Theory Department, and other main divisions of the paper.⁹⁷ Articles under this pen name are published directly on the China Military Online website. In fact, the Xie Zhengping program was reportedly pioneered by the General Political Department to spearhead internet public

⁹² Xie Xinning, “Shenru xuexi guanche xi zhuxi guanyu guofang he jundui jianshe de zhongyao lunshu” [Deeply Study and Implement Chairman Xi’s Important Expositions on National Defense and Military Building], *PLA Daily*, February 17, 2014 ≈ <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0217/c83083-24376791.html>.

⁹³ Xie Xinning, “Dao zhongliu jishui: You feng ‘jiawu’ lun gaige” [Hitting the Water Midstream: Coming Along “Jiawu” to Discuss Reform], *PLA Daily*, July 25, 2014 ≈ http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2014-07/25/content_6064377.htm.

⁹⁴ Xie Xinning, “Sheng zhan zhi lu—Shenhua guofang he jundui gaige zankai shishi zhiji lun shizhanhua xunlian” [The Road to Victory—Deepening Defense and Military Reform Opening Implementation during Discussion of Improving the Realism of Combat Training], *PLA Daily*, December 14, 2015 ≈ http://jz.chinamil.com.cn/gd/2015-12/14/content_6813977.htm.

⁹⁵ Jiang Xi, “Da Peng you tongchi jun zhong ‘da laohu’ Xu Caihou de ‘Xie Zhengping’ shi shei?” [Answering Peng Pai Readers: Who Is the “Xie Zhengping” Denouncing the Military’s “Tiger” Xu Caihou?], *Paper*, October 29, 2014 ≈ http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1274081; and “Xin jin da qu fu jiangling yishou dazao tong pi Xu Caihou Gu Junshan xiongwen” [Newly Appointed Deputy Leader of Theater Personally Writes Powerful Article Lambasting Xu Caihou and Gu Junshan], CCP Suzhou City Wujiang District Party School, February 15, 2017 ≈ http://www.wjdx.gov.cn/UpFile/template/contentpage/wjgf_mb1/item.aspx?id=27835&p=0.

⁹⁶ Yue, “Yuan zong zhengzhi bu xuanchuan bu buzhang yu guang”; and Liu, “Miji tiaozheng hou junwei.”

⁹⁷ Guo Yuandan, “Xie Zhengping huo xi zong zheng yulun gongzuo bumen siwei huoyue geng tie di qi” [Xie Zhengping May Be Connected with General Political Public Opinion Work Department; Characterized for Having an Active Mind and Being Down to Earth], *People’s Daily Online*, August 5, 2015 ≈ <http://sn.people.com.cn/n/2015/0805/c358036-25856742.html>; and Jiang, “Da Peng you tongchi jun zhong ‘da laohu’ Xu Caihou de ‘Xie Zhengping’ shi shei?”

opinion and is meant to be well-versed in online language.⁹⁸ This pseudonym is also distinguished from Xie Xinping by its more concentrated focus on championing Xi Jinping's anticorruption operations in the Chinese military.

Xie Zhengping made its debut in March 2014 in the PD Online column Netizens Discussion (*wangyou lailun*).⁹⁹ The article, which contrasted the corruption scandal of Lieutenant General Gu Junshan with morally upright PLA soldiers, appeared just one hour after the scandal broke.¹⁰⁰ As was reportedly divulged to the *Paper* by a veteran *PLA Daily* journalist, this first article appeared in the PD Online forum to train the writing team in the use of the proper style.¹⁰¹ The *Paper* further personified the author as clearly being a "hot-blooded" man of around 30 years in age, whose expression evokes the masculinity and passion that Xie Zhengping exudes.¹⁰² From these facts, it stands to reason that the writing team aspires to a stout, patriotic writing style that it hopes will earn rapport with China's young nationalistic netizens.

Xie Zhengping's timely writing continued to target military corruption, including the most sensitive cases of malfeasance. An article published in June 2014 offered a historical analysis of military corruption in the Ming and Qing dynasties, concluding that "the most dangerous type of corruption is military corruption; for the military to condone corruption is to condone failure."¹⁰³ This motif was further expounded on in October 2014 articles that lamented the downfall of former CMC vice chairman Xu Caihou and endorsed the creation of a military with "zero tolerance" for corruption. That month, on the same day that Xinhua announced Xu was stripped of his military rank and CCP membership for accepting massive bribes, the Xie Zhengping team published a prominent commentary that both recognized the seriousness of Xu's offense and sought to offset its damage to military morale and

⁹⁸ Guo, "Xie Zhengping huo xi zong zheng yulun gongzuo bumen siwei huoyue geng tie di qi."

⁹⁹ Jiang, "Da Peng you tongchi jun zhong 'da laohu' Xu Caihou de 'Xie Zhengping' shi shei?"

¹⁰⁰ Xie Zhengping, "Wei gua 'Gu' liao du de jiefangjun dian zan" [Liking the PLA's Scraping Treatment of the 'Gu' Disease], *People's Daily Online*, Netizens Discussion forum, March 31, 2014 ~ <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2014/0331/c1036-24786046.html>; and Jiang, "Da Peng you tongchi jun zhong 'da laohu' Xu Caihou de 'Xie Zhengping' shi shei?"

¹⁰¹ Wu Yaoqian and Jiang Xi, "'Xie Zhengping' tongchi junzhong 'da laohu', 'Xie Xinping' you shuole shenme?" ["Xie Zhengping" Denounces the Military's "Tigers," What Has "Xie Xinping" Said?], *Paper*, November 2, 2014 ~ http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1274982.

¹⁰² Jiang, "Da Peng you tongchi jun zhong 'da laohu' Xu Caihou de 'Xie Zhengping' shi shei?"

¹⁰³ Xie Zhengping, "Jundui juebu yunxun you fubai fenzi cangshen zhidi" [The Military Will Never Permit Hideouts for Corrupt Elements], Ministry of National Defense (PRC), June 18, 2014 ~ http://www.mod.gov.cn/intl/2014-06/18/content_4517091.htm.

public trust.¹⁰⁴ Later articles seem to have characterized the corruption issue as a side effect of the PLA's rapid development.¹⁰⁵

The Xie Zhengping team also produces works other than written commentary. In 2015 a series of slick political cartoons about the PLA were released by the "Xie Zhengping studio" (*Xie Zhengping gongzuoshi*), a unit controlled by the same team behind the Xie Zhengping commentaries.¹⁰⁶ Using lively cartoon characters, internet language, and even profanity, one video released for China's Army Day celebrated Chinese military victories over foreign aggressors such as "little Japan" and applauded "Big Daddy Xi's" anticorruption drive against military "tigers" and "flies." It further described China's military upgrades with the popular internet slang *gao da shang*, meaning high-end, impressive, and high-class. The video had over 90 million viewers shortly after its release.¹⁰⁷ A similar video artfully framed current military reform policies in the long historical context of an ever-evolving Chinese military.¹⁰⁸ Of final note, the studio has also produced colorful graphics explaining the new structure of the military following reforms.¹⁰⁹ These works seem to represent an additional push to connect with a younger generation that is jaded by both PLA corruption and traditional propaganda through leveraging "new media" formats.

In summary, analysts can monitor Xie Jinping and Xie Zhengping for authoritative and timely opinions on the PLA's most pressing issues, specifically related to ongoing military reforms and the evolving narrative on PLA corruption. Tracking Xie Zhengping commentary is particularly useful

¹⁰⁴ "China to Put Decorated General on Trial over Corruption," *Guardian*, October 28, 2014 ~ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/28/china-general-xu-caihou-bribery-corruption>; and Xie Zhengping, "Xie Zhengping: Tan fu qiongtu lu qiang jun zheng dangshi" [Tie Zhengping: Corruption's Dead End Road the Right Time for a Strong Military], China Military Online, October 28, 2014 ~ http://www.81.cn/jwgz/2014-10/28/content_6202290.htm.

¹⁰⁵ Xie Zhengping, "Fanfu fengbao zhong de jundui, ni zenme kan?" [The Military at the Center of an Anticorruption Storm, What Do You Think?], China Military Online, April 26, 2015 ~ http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2015-04/26/content_6461078.htm.

¹⁰⁶ Guo, "Xie Zhengping huo xi zong zheng yulun gongzuo bumen siwei huoyue geng tie di qi."

¹⁰⁷ Xie Zhengping Studio, "Dongman: Wu fenzhong du dong jiefangjun hua feng hao 'renxing'" [Cartoon: Understand the PLA in Five Minutes the Style Is Really "Headstrong"], China Military Online video, 4:33, July 31, 2015 ~ http://tv.81.cn/sytj-tupian/2015-07/31/content_6609934.htm; and Guo Yuandan, "Xie Zhengping huoxi zongzheng yulun gongzuo bumen, siwei huoyue geng jiediqi" [Xie Zhengping Could Be a General Political Public Opinion Department, Nimble Thinking Makes It Down to Earth], *Global Times*, August 5, 2015 ~ <http://mil.huanqiu.com/china/2015-08/7193978.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Xie Zhengping Studio, "[Meng Dongman] wu fenzhong liaojie jundui gaige de qianshi jinsheng" [[Cute Cartoon] Understand Military Reform's Past and Present in Five Minutes], China Military Online video, 4:25, December 1, 2015 ~ http://tv.81.cn/sytj-tupian/2015-12/01/content_6794074.htm.

¹⁰⁹ Xie Zhengping Studio, "Yi zhang tu du dong junwei jiguan jigou shezhi tiaozheng gaige" [Understand CMC Organs Structural Set Up and Adjustment Reforms in One Picture], China Military Online, January 11, 2016 ~ http://www.81.cn/syjd/2016-01/11/content_6852763.htm.

for discerning the very latest opinions on anticorruption news before other military commentators can chime in.

Zhong Zuwen and Zhong Zuxuan: Party Whips on Cadre Management

The CCP Central Organization Department (COD) maintains two writing teams to act as its official commentary voice under the pseudonyms “Zhong Zuwen” and “Zhong Zuxuan,” standing for “COD article” (*zhongyang zuzhibu wenzhang*) and “COD declaration” (*zhongyang zuzhibu xuanbu*), respectively.¹¹⁰ Their rhetoric centers on the processes of party-building and thought-building among CCP cadres, which they seek to inculcate with ideological zeal and a strict sense of discipline. Articles under these pseudonyms are written in a cheerless form, though party cadres are expected to respond receptively based on their source of authority. The COD is one of the most powerful systems of CCP control through its management of appointments to thousands of top posts in the CCP, government, military, large businesses, banks, universities, and other bodies.¹¹¹

Ever since its appearance in PD in September 2001, Zhong Zuwen has been hailed as a “weather vane for cadre management and appointment.”¹¹² A 2012 book compilation of Zhong Zuwen works edited by the COD Research Office’s Policy and Regulation Bureau expressly states that Zhong Zuwen articles are authored by the department to “strengthen thought propaganda, implement policy guidance, point out problems of contradiction, promote healthy trends, and play an important role in propagating the Central Committee’s voice, educating CCP cadres, and consolidating consensus.”¹¹³ Zhong Zuwen publishes exclusively in PD.

The Zhong Zuwen writing team maintains a problem-oriented tone, emblematic of the serious issues the department must address throughout the CCP’s ranks. For example, a January 2008 article titled “Don’t Let the

¹¹⁰ “Ni renshi ‘Guo Ping’ me? ‘Guo Ping Lun Tianxia’ yi shu chu xin ban” [Do You Know “Guo Ping”? “Guo Ping Discusses All Under Heaven” Releases a New Edition], Xinhua, September 18, 2016 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-09/18/c_129286355.htm; and Liu Dongshu, “Zhongguo guanfang ‘xiezuo’ shuming you shenme jiangjiu?” [What Particular Selections of China’s Official “Writing Teams” Signatures Are There?], Elite Reference, June 25, 2014 ~ http://qnc.kcyol.com/html/2014-06/25/nw.D110000qnc.20140625_2-02.htm.

¹¹¹ For more on the CCP’s departments and organs, see Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 41–76.

¹¹² “Jiemi guanfang biming: ‘Guo Ping’ ‘Zhong Zuwen’ dou shi shei?” [Unmasking Official Pen Names: Who Are “Guo Ping” “Zhong Zuwen”?], Sina, October 30, 2014 ~ <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2014-10-30/151431070044.shtml>.

¹¹³ COD Research Office Policy and Regulation Bureau, *Shiqi da yilai Zhong Zuwen huibian* [Honest Righteousness: Zhong Zuwen Compilation since the 17th Party Congress] (Beijing: Dangjian Duwu Chubanshe, 2012), 2.

Honest Person Suffer” pointed out that many party members have schemed to advance their own interests at the expense of the CCP’s image. An April 2008 article titled “Cadre Selection Must Stress Morality and Ability, Morality Comes First” recognized that a minority of cadres have “introduced market rules into inner-party political life” and engaged in the buying and selling of government posts. As a final example, a January 2011 article titled “Responsibility from Start to Finish Is Necessary When Working” highlighted the frequent problem of unclear division of labor as hampering organization work at the outset of the 12th Five-Year Plan.¹¹⁴ Zhong Zuwen’s attention to these issues—particularly “the buying and selling of government positions” (*maiguan maiguan*)—reflects a candid assessment of the personnel management system’s failures, a dire reality that in October 2014 spurred Xi Jinping to admit that the CCP’s cadre management system is “for show only.”¹¹⁵

The writing team’s style is formulaic and bureaucratic, and articles typically name a litany of tasks that must be done. Zhong Zuwen offers commentary support for Xi’s anticorruption campaign by revealing problems lurking just underneath the personnel system’s surface. Decrying “the promotion of sick cadres” (*daibing tiba*)—cadres engaged in corruption and other dubious acts—is a central theme in several pieces. A series posted on PD Online from August 30 to September 1, 2016, seized the opportunity to comment on the CCP Central Committee General Office’s “Opinion on Preventing the Promotion of ‘Sick’ Cadres,” cautioning against the dangers of such practices, but also offering remedies for catching unfit cadres.¹¹⁶

Departing from Zhong Zuwen’s stern warnings, Zhong Zuxuan has typically featured a more action-oriented and positive tone. Its articles are initially published in *China Organization Personnel Newspaper*, which is sponsored by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security. Following publication, they are featured primarily on the PD Online–hosted website CCP News Net and the COD-managed Communist Party Member Net. Zhong Zuxuan’s works date back to at least 2007, evidenced by a commentary

¹¹⁴ COD Research Office Policy and Regulation Bureau, *Shiqi da yilai Zhong Zuwen huibian* 3, 47, 193.

¹¹⁵ Minxin Pei, *China’s Crony Capitalism: The Dynamics of Regime Decay* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 78.

¹¹⁶ For a discussion of dangers, see Zhong Zuwen, “Fangzhi ganbu ‘dai bing tiba’ de youli wuqi” [The Powerful Weapon to Guard against Cadre “Sick Promotion”], *People’s Daily*, August 30, 2016, 2 ~ http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2016-08/30/nw.D110000renmrb_20160830_2-02.htm. For a discussion of remedies, see Zhong Zuwen, “Fangzhi ‘daibing tiba’ bixu ya shi zeren” [To Guard against “Promoting Sick Cadres” [We] Must Take Real Responsibility], *People’s Daily*, August 31, 2016, 6 ~ http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2016-08/31/nw.D110000renmrb_20160831_2-06.htm.

in *China Organization Personnel Newspaper* that encouraged party members to improve party-building research.¹¹⁷

Zhong Zuxuan has often sought to rally party members to a specific cause, lauding COD initiatives and focusing on implementing them more efficiently. For example, a February 2016 article praised the meticulous inspections of party secretaries nationwide and local governments' commitment to those inspections.¹¹⁸ Likewise, an October 2016 piece emphasized that party-building and disciplined executives are essential to bolster state-owned enterprises (SOE).¹¹⁹ Such commentaries point to a continuation in the CCP's approach to SOE reform, which aims to enhance party leadership of SOEs while simultaneously reducing the state's overbearing interference.¹²⁰

In sum, both COD pen names offer observers a forthright window into personnel issues within the CCP, many of which directly threaten the party's political legitimacy. Zhong Zuwen appears to be the more senior of the two; it targets the most serious problems and levies heavy demands upon its readers. In contrast, Zhong Zuxuan often seeks to bolster party morale as the CCP tackles chronic deficiencies, while also directing cadres to take bold action.

Guo Ping: The Party's Crack Cyber Commentary Team

If Ren Zhongping marked the modern institutionalization of the pseudonym writing team system, then Guo Ping marks its continued adaptation to the internet era. The pen name can be translated as "Cyberspace Administration of China Commentary" (*guojia wangxinban pinglun*),

¹¹⁷ Zhong Zuxuan, "Shenru xuexi guanche dang de shiqi da jingshen qieshi jiaqiang dang de jianshe ji dangjian yanjiu" [Deeply Study and Implement the Spirit of the 17th Party Congress, Earnestly Strengthen Party Building and Party Building Research], Guangzhou Personnel Information Network, November 22, 2007 ∞ http://www.gzpi.gov.cn/rsxx/200711/T20071122_57188.htm.

¹¹⁸ Zhong Zuxuan, "Zhong Zuxuan: Tuijin jiceng dang zuzhi jianshe quanmian jinbu quanmian guoying" [Zhong Zuxuan: Advance Grassroots Level Party Organization Building's Comprehensive Improvement and Comprehensive Excellence], CCP News Net, February 1, 2016 ∞ <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0201/c117092-28101349.html>.

¹¹⁹ Zhong Zuxuan, "Zhong Zuxuan: Jiang quanmian cong yan zhi dang yaoqiu luo dao shichu kaichuang guoyou qiye dang de jianshe xin jumian" [Zhong Zuxuan: Practically Implement Comprehensive Strict Party Governance, Initiate a New Phase in SOE Party Building], CCP News Net, October 19, 2016 ∞ <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1019/c117092-28791415.html>. See also Zhong Zuxuan, "Zhong Zuxuan: Dui biao yaoqiu zhao chaju miaozhun wenti zhua zhenggai" [Zhong Zuxuan: Find Deficiencies toward Target Requirements, Take Aim at Problems, and Grasp Rectification], CCP News Net, January 22, 2017 ∞ <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0122/c117092-29040940.html>.

¹²⁰ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2016 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, H.R. Rep. No. 114, 2nd Session (November 2016) ∞ https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/annual_reports/2016%20Annual%20Report%20to%20Congress.pdf.

or simply “National Commentary” (*guojia pinglun*).¹²¹ Since Guo Ping’s inaugural article in April 2014, its works have quickly circulated on the Chinese internet following initial publication in official outlets such as PD Online and Xinhua Net. The writing team has been credited with “opening up the era of traditional media reprinting commentary from the internet” and “realizing the milestone transfer of roles between internet and print media.”¹²² Its commentary focuses on both domestic and foreign events, and its analysis on Xi’s activities has won it recognition by the CCP’s propaganda apparatus.¹²³

After a year of official hype that included media promotions and intimations of its authority from “relevant persons,” a compilation of Guo Ping’s works published in July 2015 by the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau confirmed the pen name’s authors to be a writing team of the CCP Central Internet Security and Informatization Leading Group (CISILG) Office, more commonly known by its State Council title, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC).¹²⁴ CISILG is in charge of policing China’s internet and is headed by Xi himself.¹²⁵ The Guo Ping brand was created under the CAC’s orders to “organize a commentary team; voice opinions without delay on major events, important matters, and sensitive matters; and effectively guide internet public opinion.”¹²⁶ Official media outlets strived to quickly increase the public’s knowledge of the pseudonym’s importance. In February 2015, Guo Ping even became the only collective group to win the prize of China Internet Person of the Year, which was sponsored by PD Online (other winners were actual persons).¹²⁷

¹²¹ Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), “Guo Ping shi shei? Ni renshi ‘Guo Ping’ ma?” [Who Is Guo Ping? Do You Know “Guo Ping”?], in *Guo Ping lun tianxia* [Guo Ping Discusses All Under Heaven] (Beijing: Zhongyan Bianyi Chubanshe, 2015), 4; and “Ni renshi ‘Guo Ping’ me?”

¹²² CAC, “Bianhou” [Afterword], *Guo Ping lun tianxia*, 1045.

¹²³ “‘Guo Ping’ ronghuo ‘2014 Zhongguo hulianwang niandu renwu’” [“Guo Ping” Honored as “2014 China Internet Person of the Year”], *Ta Kung Pao*, February 12, 2015 ~ <http://news.takungpao.com/mainland/focus/2015-02/2921281.html>.

¹²⁴ Li Tianrui, “Jiemi guanfang biming: Juzhong ruoqing de ‘Zhong Zuwen’ men dou shi shei?” [Unmasking Official Pen Names: Who Are the “Zhong Zuwen” That Make Lifting Heavy Weights Look Easy?], National Party Building Website Alliance, November 11, 2014, 2 ~ <http://www.12371.gov.cn/html/djbl/dnck/2014/11/11/063950364816.html>; and CAC, *Guo Ping lun tianxia*.

¹²⁵ “Zhongyang wangluo anquan he xinxihua lingdao xiaozu diyici huiyi zhaokai Xi Jinping fabiao zhongyao jianghua” [Central Internet Security and Informatization Leading Group Convenes First Meeting, Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech], Office of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs, February 27, 2014 ~ http://www.cac.gov.cn/2014-02/27/c_133148354.htm.

¹²⁶ “Niandu hulianwang renwu pinglun yuan ‘Guo Ping’ shi shei?” [Who Is the Annual Internet Person Commentator “Guo Ping”?], Xinhua, July 10, 2015 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2015-07/10/c_134400020.htm.

¹²⁷ “Niandu hulianwang renwu pinglun yuan ‘Guo Ping’ shi shei?”; and “‘Guo Ping’ ronghuo ‘2014 Zhongguo hulianwang niandu renwu.’”

An official list of prize-winning news articles and several unofficial sources suggest that the CAC Internet News Information Dissemination Office is in charge of the Guo Ping commentary program.¹²⁸ Guo Ping differs from other writing teams in that it is not an internal unit of its official sponsor. Instead, the team is composed of members from across China's official media, state organs, and academic institutions. A core group of around five to six individuals is responsible for selecting topics and overall planning and drafting, and the team is organized to achieve a balance of age and specialty.¹²⁹

In fulfillment of its CAC mandate, the Guo Ping commentary team works faster than any other team currently operating and is reportedly able to publish within two to three hours after a major story breaks. Its speed is in part enabled by its source of authority. Unlike other teams, Guo Ping apparently has a direct and open line to senior officials. According to Guo Ping's book and reconfirmed by an article posted on the CAC website, the team's writers are close to the "core information source" (*hexin xinyuan*). To some, this may suggest that they have access to Xi, the "core leader" and CISILG head, but a more conservative conjecture is that the writing team is in direct contact with CAC management or other members of the CISILG itself. In the interest of speed, these officials reportedly edit and review articles on their mobile devices when time is of the essence.¹³⁰ This unorthodox working arrangement represents a serious innovation that cuts past the usual bureaucratic process that commentary entails, sacrificing layers of review to rapidly seize the public opinion high ground. Guo Ping's ability to quickly comment on behalf of the CCP leadership was exhibited in December 2014, when a commentary regarding the discipline violations of Ling Jihua, ally of Hu Jintao and former director of the CCP Central Committee General Office,

¹²⁸ All-China Journalists Association, "Di 25 jie Zhongguo xinwen jiang huojiang zuopin mulu" [The 25th China News Award Winning Works Table of Contents], Xinhua, October 30, 2015 ∞ http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2015-11/02/c_134771803.htm; and "Zong dingzhe zong shuji dongxiang xie gao de 'Guo Ping' shi shei?" [Who Is "Guo Ping" of the Writings Always Watching the General Secretary's Movements?], *Hexun*, September 21, 2016 ∞ <http://news.hexun.com/2016-09-21/186118623.html>.

¹²⁹ "Guo Ping lun tianxia: Si jian ben chuban: Gaosu ni 'Guo Ping' weihe shou huanying" [Guo Ping Discusses All Under Heaven: Four Published Volumes Tell You Why "Guo Ping" Is Popular], Office of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs, September 20, 2016 ∞ http://www.cac.gov.cn/2016-09/20/c_1119590710.htm.

¹³⁰ CAC, "Bianhou," 1046; "Niandu hulianwang renwu pinglun yuan 'Guo Ping': Dashi yaoshi minganshi jishi fasheng" [Voice Opinions without Delay on Major Events, Important Matters, and Sensitive Matters], Office of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs, July 10, 2015 ∞ http://www.cac.gov.cn/2015-07/10/c_1115885153.htm; and China Civilization Net, "Zhongyang bianyi chuban she: Guo Ping lun tianxia" [Central Compilation and Translation Press: Guo Ping Discusses All Under Heaven], Wenming Online, August 11, 2015.

appeared on Chinanews.com only 73 minutes after Xinhua broke the story.¹³¹ This is proof enough that Guo Ping is worth following.¹³²

In terms of coverage, the team writes on a broad range of affairs from international relations to party discipline. Pieces frequently revolve around the successes of Xi's latest diplomatic trips. For example, "The European Lion Greatly Admires the China Dragon," published in April 2014, juxtaposed the admiration Europe showed China on Xi's first visit to the continent with its humiliation of China more than a century earlier. "Being Four Kinds of People' Is the New Values Benchmark for Party Cadres," published in July 2015, explained the values expected of local cadres in order to strengthen the party's governing capacity.¹³³ More recently, a January 2017 piece celebrated Xi's prescription of the "China remedy" to treat the backlash against globalization around the world.¹³⁴ An August 2017 article celebrated China's Army Day by touting the country's troops as a manifestation of strong CCP leadership, but also reiterated the PLA's need to strengthen its "political consciousness" and "core consciousness."¹³⁵ This article exhibits how the pseudonym is used to advance political priorities on national holidays just as traditional commentary vehicles have long done.

In sum, Guo Ping will likely continue to be a prolific source of official views on China's important affairs. Its emphasis on internet publication and speed makes the pen name unique, allowing it to frame events before alternative (and potentially threatening) narratives can take hold. Astute observers can read Guo Ping articles for authoritative insight into the party's initial position before other commentary vehicles weigh in.

¹³¹ Xinhua, "Niandu hulianwang renwu pinglun yuan 'Guo Ping' shi shei?"; and Guo Ping, "Guo Ping: Laohu cangying yiqi da, fan fubai shen de dangxin minxin" [Guo Ping: Strike Tigers and Flies Together, Opposing Corruption Won Over the Party and the People], Chinanews.com, December 22, 2014 ~ <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2014/12-22/6900892.shtml>.

¹³² Pei, *China's Crony Capitalism*, 4.

¹³³ Guo Ping, "Guo Ping: 'Zuo si zhong ren' shi dangyuan ganbu de jiazhi xin biaogan" [Guo Ping: "Being Four Kinds of People" Is the New Values Benchmark for Party Cadres], CNTV, July 1, 2015 ~ <http://opinion.cntv.cn/2015/07/01/ARTI1435719120900688.shtml>.

¹³⁴ Guo Ping, "Guo Ping: Xinnian shou fang shixian Zhongguo waijiao jingcai kaiju" [Guo Ping: The First Visit of the New Year Realizes the Opening of China's Brilliant Foreign Diplomacy], China.org.cn, January 19, 2017 ~ http://www.china.com.cn/news/txt/2017-01/19/content_40137485.htm.

¹³⁵ Guo Ping, "Guo Ping: Xiang renmin zidibing zhijing" [Guo Ping: Saluting the Soldiers of the People], China.org.cn, August 1, 2017 ~ http://news.china.com.cn/txt/2017-08/01/content_41329262.htm.

FUTURE TRAJECTORY

The Resilience of the System

As this article shows, the homophonous pen name system is an elaborate operation that propagates party positions in order to bolster CCP legitimacy and power. Ongoing efforts to expand and improve its commentary over the past two decades show that the CCP is serious about updating its Leninist “transmission belt” for indoctrination in the so-called new situation.

In a larger sense, these changes to the propaganda apparatus point to its rising importance in the lead-up to 2020, the year the party has promised to achieve a “moderately prosperous society,” which is a key benchmark toward the “China dream.” Some may doubt this conclusion, arguing instead that China’s impressive economic growth over the past three decades has led to the waning significance of propaganda in the eyes of the party leadership. To be sure, the country’s rapid development has undeniably improved the lives of the vast majority of Chinese citizens (however unevenly), constituting a key source of performance legitimacy for the regime. However, this factor alone can never be enough to uphold one-party rule. As Timothy Heath has noted, there is nothing unique about good governance in China that inherently mandates CCP rule, a truth that the party can never allow to take root among its citizens. It is thus imperative that the CCP effectively emphasize the connection—however tenuous—between its supposedly superior methodology and its own theories, which are said to uniquely qualify CCP governance.¹³⁶ Chinese citizens must be made to have exclusive confidence in China’s CCP-led political system (what Xi Jinping calls *zhidu zixin*) based on this link.

The propaganda apparatus’s growing importance derives from its ability to advance the CCP as the only party capable of underwriting the material benefits, public goods, political values, and international prestige required for a moderately prosperous society and the realization of the “China dream.” Any foreseeable decline in the importance of propaganda seems implausible unless a different kind of political legitimacy—one that derives from liberalizing political reforms—becomes available to the regime. Barring an unexpected leadership consensus to once again manage incremental political reforms from above, this prospect seems dim. The result is that the homophonous pen name system seems likely to continue

¹³⁶ Heath, *China’s New Governing Party Paradigm*.

its evolution, given its perceived utility in transmitting the CCP's messages in a complex media environment. Xi's recent order for propaganda outlets to leverage new media formats and promote innovative content suggests that the system has a secure place in party commentary at least through Xi's leadership tenure, and probably beyond.¹³⁷

Spotting New Pen Names

Given the system's projected resilience, it is useful to note several patterns that our research discovered among authoritative pen names (including those not investigated in this article) that may help analysts tune in to new emerging bylines. First is a common circumstance under which several pseudonyms, including three that are homophonous, appear to have been taken up: an urgency to counter others in the party at pivotal moments while taking care to mask public splits. Examples include Hu Yaobang's use of Yue Ping to counter Hua Guofeng's brand of Maoism, and Deng Xiaoping's use of Huangfu Ping to push market-oriented reform against resistance from Chen Yun's conservative camp. At the time, both Hu and Deng lacked control of the traditional propaganda apparatus to support their mission. More recent pseudonyms appear to share similar circumstances, although their source of authority is not proven beyond all doubt. In 2010 the pseudonym "Zheng Qingyuan," which almost certainly stands for the idiom "solve a problem from its root/strike at the root of the evil" (*zhengben qingyuan*), wrote several prominent commentaries that forcefully opposed any movement toward Western-style democracy. Credible sources strongly indicate the byline was used by the Hu Jintao-led Politburo to oppose Wen Jiabao's proposals for such political reform.¹³⁸ Similarly, in 2016, the somewhat unimaginative byline "Authoritative Person" (*quanwei renshi*) appears to have been used by a Xi Jinping confidant to criticize those who were distorting economic policies during China's "critical stage" of racing toward a moderately prosperous society. Some posited that this byline was used to chastise Premier Li Keqiang for his perceived stalling on economic reforms, but Alice Miller offers a convincing argument that the

¹³⁷ "China Focus: One Year On, Xi's Speech Injects Vitality into Media," Xinhua, February 19, 2017 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-02/19/c_136068476.htm.

¹³⁸ Tsai and Kao, "Secret Codes of Political Propaganda." Chinese official sources suggest that Zheng Qingyuan articles were CCP Politburo-level "public opinion guidance" regarding the sensitive topic of political reform: "Zai renmin ribao lianxu fabiao shuming wenzhang shi shi 'Zheng Qingyuan?'" [Who Is "Zheng Qingyuan" of PD's Consecutive Signed Articles?], *WCC Daily*, November 5, 2010 ~ <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64387/13140170.html>; and CAC, "Guo Ping shi shi? Ni renshi 'Guo Ping' ma?"

target was in fact lower-level officials who had strayed from the consensus policy line.¹³⁹

A second pattern for detecting new authoritative pen names relates to the linguistic components of each name. These can be broken into three general indicators:

- The pseudonym's first character is homophonous for the first character (at least through one of its pronunciations) of the name of the publication in which the pseudonym's commentaries are published. Examples include Ren Zhongping, Qiu Shi, and Xie Zhengping. Xie Xinping roughly falls in this category, although in this case the first character of the pseudonym and the publication name are identical, with each using two alternative pronunciations.
- The pseudonym's first and sometimes second characters are homophonous for the characters of the CCP organ's name that they represent, with commentary matching the areas of responsibility of that organ. Examples include Zhong Zuwen, Zhong Zuxuan, and Guo Ping.
- The pseudonym's final character is homophonous for (or the same as) "ping" of the word for commentary (*pinglun*), "wen" of the word for article (*wenzhang*), or "xuan" of the word for declaration (*xuanbu*). Examples include Ren Zhongping, Guo Jiping, Zhong Zuwen, and Zhong Zuxuan.

A final pattern is the concerted effort by propagandists to spread awareness of a significant pseudonym, often through the republishing of its commentaries and conspicuous allusions to its authority before the source of the pen name is made public. Recent examples include the promotion of Zheng Qingyuan by Xinhua Net in 2010, which "guessed" in a prominent homepage article that the pseudonym represented Politburo-level "public opinion guidance" on the sensitive topic of political reform.¹⁴⁰ Another example is the promotion of Guo Ping in 2014, which saw party websites repost an *Honest Outlook* article asserting that Guo Ping "very possibly is not a real person's name" and that a "relevant person" revealed that the pen name "probably has the meaning of 'commentary article organized by a relevant subordinate organization of the Cyberspace Administration of China.'"¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Alice Miller, "'Core' Leaders, 'Authoritative Persons,' and Reform Pushback," Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, no. 50, summer 2016.

¹⁴⁰ "Zai renmin ribao lianxu fabiao shuming wenzhang shei shi 'Zheng Qingyuan'"; and CAC, "Guo Ping shi shei? Ni renshi 'Guo Ping' ma?"

¹⁴¹ Li, "Jiemi guanfang biming."

CONCLUSION

While the homophonous pen names discussed in this article have significantly augmented the traditional commentary system with their oblique tactics, provocative language, and extended reach, their utility in convincing an increasingly sophisticated target audience to heed regime messages remains to be seen. If a key reason that party commentary lacks appeal is that the theories at the core of its messages are alienating, then these new commentary vehicles only treat the symptoms of the ailment. Even so, one area where this system may prove competent is in the timely framing of events that are potentially threatening to the CCP. In particular, pen names that focus on speed, such as Guo Ping, may successfully propagate the party's preferred agenda on sensitive situations as they unfold. So long as China's army of censors can scrub away alternative narratives, Chinese once again will be left with only one opinion source.

Setting aside the question of efficacy, these accessible commentary vehicles speak authoritatively for their party sponsors on China's most important domestic and international affairs, and foreign analysts can readily monitor their messages. Their opinions are collectively crafted, polished to a fine sheen, and published under the name of their sponsoring regime organ. This ensures that such commentary is in step with official views and not merely the opinion of small groups of authors. Some pen names, like Ren Zhongping and Guo Ping, even have direct input from senior party officials. Of special note, the posting of a Zhong Sheng commentary boasting China's readiness for war over a territorial dispute to multiple Chinese embassy websites suggests that foreign analysts should monitor this and other bylines for low-level warning statements emanating from the Chinese leadership.

PD editorials and commentator articles will almost certainly remain the Chinese leadership's first choice when unambiguous transmission of its views are needed. Notwithstanding, foreign analysts can treat commentary pseudonyms with roughly the same level of authority as that held by their regime sponsor within that sponsor's purview. Coupled with analysis of leadership statements, the systematic analysis of all forms of open-source authoritative commentary can help observers better understand the official positions of the CCP. The result will be a fuller comprehension of what matters most to China's enigmatic political regime, which in turn enables the implementation of more effective policies. ◆

APPENDIX 1

Ten Homophonous Commentary Pen Names and Their Particulars

Name	Homophonous meaning	Topics covered	Publication
Ren Zhongping / 任仲平	Important <i>People's Daily</i> Commentary / 人民日报的重要评论	Nationally important issues	<i>People's Daily</i>
He Zhenhua / 何振华	How to Invigorate China / 如何振兴中华	Tibet, countering the Dalai Lama, countering foreign influence	<i>People's Daily</i>
Guo Jiping / 国纪平	Relevant International Important Commentary / 有关国际的重要评论	International affairs	<i>People's Daily</i>
Zhong Sheng / 钟声	Voice of China, Sounding the Alarm Bell / 中国之声，警世钟声	International affairs, issuing warnings	<i>People's Daily</i>
Qiu Shi / 秋石	<i>Qiushi Journal</i> / 求是	CCP ideology, party-building	<i>Qiushi Journal</i>
Xie Xinping / 解辛平	<i>PLA Daily News Commentary</i> / 解放军报新闻评论	Military reform, military discipline	<i>PLA Daily</i>
Xie Zhengping / 谢正平	<i>PLA Daily Political Department and Commentary Department</i> / 解放军报政治部与评论部	Military anticorruption, military reform	<i>China Military Online</i>
Zhong Zuwen / 仲祖文	Central Organization Department Article / 中央组织部文章	Personnel issues, party discipline	<i>People's Daily</i>
Zhong Zuxuan / 仲组轩	Central Organization Department Declaration / 中央组织部宣布	Personnel issues, party-building	<i>China Organization Personnel Newspaper</i>
Guo Ping / 国平	Cyberspace Administration of China Commentary / 国家网信办评论	Nationally important issues	<i>People's Daily Online</i> , Xinhua Net, and other official internet sources

APPENDIX 2
Glossary of Chinese Terms

Article page number	Name in Chinese characters	Name in pinyin	English translation	Context (if applicable)
3	改革开放	<i>gaige kaifang</i>	reform and opening up	–
5	社论	<i>she lun</i>	editorials	In reference to <i>People's Daily</i> editorials
5	集体的智慧	<i>jiti de zhihui</i>	collective wisdom	–
6	本报评论员文章	<i>benbao pinglunyuwan wenzhang</i>	commentator articles	In reference to <i>People's Daily</i> commentator articles
8	人人都有麦克风	<i>renren douyou maikefeng</i>	everyone having a microphone	Fostered by the internet age; refers to the ease with which individuals can spread their own ideas online
11	解放日报	<i>Jiefang Ribao</i>	<i>Liberation Daily</i>	–
11	奉命	<i>feng ming</i>	receiving orders	–
12	奉人民之命辅佐邓小平	<i>feng renmin zhi ming fuzuo Deng Xiaoping</i>	receive the people's order to assist Deng Xiaoping	The homophonous meaning of Huangfu Ping a pseudonym once used by the <i>Liberation Daily</i> to support and spread Deng Xiaoping's ideas on reform
13	人民日报的重要评论	<i>Renmin Ribao de zhongyao pinglun</i>	important <i>People's Daily</i> commentary	The homophonous meaning of Ren Zhongping, a pseudonym created by the <i>People's Daily</i> to publish authoritative political commentary
13	新闻战线	<i>Xinwen Zhanxian</i>	the Press	–
14	中央领导同志	<i>zhongyang lingdao tongzhi</i>	central leading comrades	–

Appendix 2 continued

Article page number	Name in Chinese characters	Name in pinyin	English translation	Context (if applicable)
14	中央领导同志活动 專頁	<i>zhongyang lingdao tongzhi huodong zhuanye</i>	central leading comrades activities page	–
14	七八条枪，七上 八下，七嘴八舌	<i>qiba tiao qiang, qishang baxia, qizui bashe</i>	seven to eight guns, seven submissions and eight revisions, seven mouths and eight tongues	A motto used to characterize the Ren Zhongping writing team's methodology
16	如何振兴中华	<i>ruhe zhenxing Zhonghua</i>	how to invigorate China	The homophonous meaning of He Zhenhua, a pseudonym created by the <i>People's Daily</i> Commentary Department to counter foreign influencers hostile to CCP interests
18	有关国际的重要评论	<i>youguan guoji de zhongyao pinglun</i>	relevant international important commentary	The homophonous meaning of Guo Jiping, a pseudonym created by the <i>People's Daily</i> International Department to strengthen its coverage of international events
20	中国之声	<i>Zhongguo zhi sheng</i>	voice of China	The homophonous meaning of Zhong Sheng, a pseudonym created by the <i>People's Daily</i> International Department to supplement Guo Jiping commentary
20	警世钟声	<i>jingshi zhongsheng</i>	sounding the alarm bell	A secondary homophonous meaning of Zhong Sheng, which characterizes the alarmist messages spread by this pseudonym

Appendix 2 continued

Article page number	Name in Chinese characters	Name in pinyin	English translation	Context (if applicable)
21	有和日本打“遭遇战”的信心，也有打“持久战”的准备	<i>you he Riben da “zaoyu zhan” de xinxin, yeyou da “chijiu zhan” de zhunbei</i>	the confidence to fight an “encountered engagement,” and the preparation to fight a “prolonged war” with Japan	A statement from a 2012 Zhong Sheng commentary on China's territorial dispute with Japan in the East China Sea
22	求是	<i>qiushi</i>	<i>Qiushi Journal</i>	–
23	社会主义核心价值观体系	<i>shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi tixi</i>	socialist core value system	–
24	解放军报新闻评论	<i>Jiefangjun Bao xinwen pinglun</i>	<i>PLA Daily news commentary</i>	The homophonous meaning of Xie Jinping, a pseudonym created by the <i>PLA Daily</i> that focuses on military reform and discipline
26	强军梦	<i>qiang jun meng</i>	the strong military dream	–
26	解放军报政治部与评论部	<i>Jiefangjun Bao zhengzhi bu yu pinglun bu</i>	<i>PLA Daily Political Department and Commentary Department</i>	The homophonous meaning of Xie Zhengping, a pseudonym created by the <i>PLA Daily</i> that focuses on military anticorruption efforts and reform
27	网友来论	<i>wangyou lailun</i>	Netizens Discussion	<i>A People's Daily Online</i> column
28	谢正平工作室	<i>Xie Zhengping gongzuoshi</i>	Xie Zhengping studio	A unit controlled by the Xie Zhengping writing team that produces cartoons and graphics propaganda

Appendix 2 continued

Article page number	Name in Chinese characters	Name in pinyin	English translation	Context (if applicable)
29	中央组织部文章	<i>zhongyang zuzhibu wenzhang</i>	CCP Central Organization Department article	The homophonous meaning of Zhong Zuwen, a pseudonym created by the CCP Central Organization Department that focuses on personnel issues
29	中央组织部宣布	<i>zhongyang zuzhibu xuanbu</i>	CCP Central Organization Department declaration	The homophonous meaning of Zhong Zuxuan, a pseudonym created by the CCP Central Organization Department that focuses on personnel issues
30	买官卖官	<i>maiguan maiguan</i>	the buying and selling of government positions	-
30	带病提拔	<i>daibing tiba</i>	the promotion of sick cadres	A term used to describe the promotion of cadres engaged in corruption and other dubious acts
31-32	国家网信办评论 / 国家评论	<i>guojia wangxinban pinglun / guojia pinglun</i>	Cyberspace Administration of China commentary / national commentary	The homophonous meaning of Guo Ping, a pseudonym created by the Cyberspace Administration of China that focuses on important national issues
33	核心信源	<i>hexin xinyuan</i>	core information source	Refers to the high-ranking official(s) that is/ are the source of authority and information for the Guo Ping writing team
35	制度自信	<i>zhidu zixin</i>	system confidence	Confidence in China's CCP-led political system

Appendix 2 continued

Article page number	Name in Chinese characters	Name in pinyin	English translation	Context (if applicable)
36	正本清源	<i>zhengben qingyuan</i>	solve a problem from its root/ strike at the root of the evil	The probable homophonous meaning of Zheng Qingyuan, a pseudonym that was thought to be managed by the Hu Jintao-led Politburo
36	权威人士	<i>quanwei renshi</i>	authoritative person	A pseudonym that seems to have been used by a Xi Jinping confidant to criticize those who were distorting economic policies during China's "critical stage" of racing toward a moderately prosperous society
37	评论	<i>pinglun</i>	commentary	–
37	文章	<i>wenzhang</i>	article	–
37	宣布	<i>xuanbu</i>	declaration	–