Xi’s centralisation of external propaganda
SCIO and the Central Propaganda Department

Jichang Lulu, Filip Jirouš and Rachel Lee

25th January 2021

The State Council Information Office (SCIO, 国务院新闻办公室) is the government nameplate used by the party agencies at the core of the CCP’s external propaganda bureaucracy. The precise identity of these agencies has changed over time: for most of its existence, SCIO was the state nameplate of the Office of External Propaganda (OEP, 中央对外宣传办公室) under the CCP Central Committee. Its current status, however, appears to have largely escaped foreign attention: in 2014, soon after the Xi era’s first conference on propaganda and thought work, OEP was absorbed by the Central Propaganda Department (CPD, 中宣部), thus making SCIO one of the CPD’s nameplates. The elimination of OEP, arguably Xi’s first major propaganda reform, coincided with the elevation of OEP’s Internet affairs component to a centrally-led cyberspace affairs system, as well as personnel changes that included an expulsion from the party and a (self-)defenestration. The reform, which brought much of the network of external propaganda agencies formerly overseen by OEP closer to the Propaganda Department, arguably anticipated the 2018 restructuring of media-control organs.\(^1\) A similar institutionalisation trend characterises Xi’s tenure elsewhere, notably in the united front system.

This note describes the 2014 reform and some of its consequences, updating existing descriptions of OEP and the CCP external propaganda bureaucracy.\(^2\)

---


2. Well-known works on the CCP propaganda system, including its external propaganda component, include David Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy”, The China Journal 57 (2007), Anne-Marie Brady, Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China, Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, and later publications by those and other authors. The most complete study of CCP external propaganda, including a detailed treatment of the bureaucracy behind OEP until early 2013, is Mareike Ohlberg, “Creating a favorable international public opinion environment: External propaganda (duiwai xuanzhuang) as a global concept with Chinese characteristics”, PhD thesis, University of Heidelberg, 6th Mar. 2013, whose account our first section largely follows. Although we have not found mentions of the elimination of OEP in secondary literature, it should of course be assumed that other authors have noticed some of the multiple mentions of the change in Chinese-language sources. We welcome references to earlier secondary publications noting the dissolution of OEP and would gladly update the article to reflect their existence.
SCIO before Xi and the Office of External Propaganda

SCIO was set up in 1991 as the state nameplate of the central External Propaganda Small Group (EPSG, 中央对外宣传小组), which had been restored a year earlier as part of the post-Tian'anmen revitalisation of propaganda. The well-known double-nameplate arrangement was formalised in 1993: the party body behind the SCIO name became a self-standing organ under the Central Committee, the Office of External Propaganda (OEP, also translated as Office of Foreign Propaganda, 中央对外宣传办公室).

The EPSG, established in 1980, was dissolved at the central level in 1988, months after a renewed focus on domestic propaganda crystallised in the establishment of the central Propaganda and Thought Work Leading Small Group (中央宣传思想工作领导小组) (Brady, op. cit., ch. 7; Ohlberg, op. cit., pp. 243 sqq., 276 sq., 298 sq., 303). The latter, currently chaired by Wang Huning 王沪宁, still forms the apex of the CCP propaganda system. For a recent treatment of the roles and structure of (leading) small groups and commissions, see Wen-Hsuan Tsai & Wang Zhou, "Integrated Fragmentation and the Role of Leading Small Groups in Chinese Politics", The China Journal 82 (2019), with further references.

The EPSG, established in 1980, was dissolved at the central level in 1988, months after a renewed focus on domestic propaganda crystallised in the establishment of the central Propaganda and Thought Work Leading Small Group (Central Propaganda and Thought Work Leading Small Group) (Central Propaganda and Thought Work Leading Small Group) (Ohlberg, op. cit., pp. 413, 486 sqq.). The central EPWLSG has had a limited public footprint, leaving us with little to add to Ohlberg’s 2013 discussion; in particular, the impact of Xi-era restructurings of the propaganda system on it remains unknown. Ohlberg’s mention of Ministry of Public Security representation at the group can now be confirmed with more official sources, documenting the central group’s existence as of 2009 ("应急管理部领导班子名单和简历 黄明任党组书记 王玉普任部长", 中国经济网, 23rd Mar. 2018; "留党察看二年、行政撤职处分", 新华, 31st July 2017; for the expected LSG membership of CPD deputy head-level cadre, see, e.g. "吉林胡锦涛简历", 东北网, 25th Apr. 2012). Recent sources do, on the other hand, confirm that EPWLSGs have remained active at the provincial and lower levels. An article on studying the spirit of Xi’s speech at the 2013 propaganda conference by a Nanning propaganda cadre, focused on province and city-level propaganda work, noted a need to improve the system of EPWLSG joint meetings (联合会议) (冯力, "创新对外宣传工作应在四方面下功夫——学习领会习近平总书记8·19重要讲话精神", 广西日报, via 中国共产党新闻网, 15th Oct. 2013). Xi-era evidence shows that at least some EPWLSGs have
A 2011 OEP press conference, showing a euphemistic translation of the organ’s name. Source: 中国政府网.

OEP/SCIO, while led by CPD, came to oversee its own extensive component of the wider propaganda system. The office’s tasks included organising press conferences and other exchanges with foreign and domestic media, guiding the work of its local-level analogues, writing and publishing white papers, overseeing foreign-language publications, guiding online news and “building and managing Internet culture.” These tasks were assigned to a dedicated bureaucracy, with subordinate units that included, at a point, nine numbered functional bureaus, as well as supervised organs, notably the Foreign Languages Publishing Administration (中国外文出版发行事业局) and its controlled companies running print and online media outlets.


5OEP was headed by a CPD deputy head except for a few years around the turn of the century. See Ohlberg, op. cit., pp. 484 sq., 599.

6“机构设置”, 中国共产党新闻网; Ohlberg, op. cit., pp. 454 sqq.

(CSHRS, 中国人权研究会), established in 1993. CSHRS organises Tibet-themed propaganda tours abroad, runs its own human rights events and plays a central role in the CCP’s work to install its narrative on human rights at the UN. SCIO’s Internet-management component, by then consisting of its Fifth and Ninth Bureaus, was upgraded with the 2011 establishment of the State Internet Information Office (SIIO, 国家互联网信息办公室). At first just an OEP/SCIO nameplate, SIIO soon acquired full-time staff, while still preserving links to the Fifth Bureau.

SCIO under Xi

Months after the Xi era’s first propaganda and thought work conference, amid a renewed stress on controlling public opinion and the challenges of the online domain, OEP’s Internet management component became the office of a new leading small group while the rest of OEP was merged into the CPD.

The Central Committee abolished OEP in March 2014. In February, SIIO, previously subordinate to SCIO, had been made the office of the new Central Cybersecurity and Informatisation Leading Small Group (中央网络安全和信息化领导小组), with the state nameplate now known in English as the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC). The reform coincided with the loss of some SCIO Internet affairs personnel.

Days after the Central Committee decision, Li Wufeng 李伍峰, a SCIO deputy director who had been Fifth Bureau director and later SIIO vice director, fell to his death from an office window. In April, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI, 中央纪委) had announced a Central Committee decision on a cadre investigation of Li, who had been for over a decade the Fifth Bureau director and from 2014 the director of SIIO. The reform coincided with the loss of some SCIO Internet affairs personnel.


12 中共中央机构改革概要, 中央机构编制委员会办公室, 18th Jan. 2019. Earlier evidence of the change includes a 2016 prospectus filed by a Xinhua Shanghai-listed subsidiary that referred to “the former OEP’s” (前中宣部) responsibilities, which were later re-allocated to the newly established CAC. (新华文摘, 26th Dec. 2017). Biographies of bureau and lower-level officials, cited below, provided further evidence.


announced it was investigating a Fifth Bureau deputy director.\textsuperscript{15} CAC’s link to SCIO was further diluted in 2015 when CAC officials with Fifth Bureau backgrounds, including a deputy director, were moved to other posts.\textsuperscript{16} The Cybersecurity and Informationisation LSG was upgraded to a commission and acquired new competencies in 2018.\textsuperscript{17}

The 2014 reform reduced SCIO to a CPD nameplate, primarily used for the activities of one of its bureaus, with its subordinate units now directly controlled by CPD and double-plated with SCIO names.\textsuperscript{18} Like all his predecessors except one, today’s SCIO director, Xu Lin 徐麟, is concurrently a CPD deputy head. In recent appearances, CPD officials using SCIO capacities often have current or past links to the CPD External News Bureau (对外新闻局), which appears to continue the former OEP First Bureau.\textsuperscript{19} SCIO deputy director Guo Weimin 郭卫民, currently a member of the CPD departmental affairs conference (部务会议), headed the OEP First Bureau until its abolition and immediately became head of the CPD External News Bureau.\textsuperscript{20} Guo’s successor and the bureau’s post-reform deputy directors are typically described as affiliated with the CPD or SCIO External News Bureau, or both.\textsuperscript{21} A SCIO webpage gives the names of External News Bureau personnel as CPD and SCIO spokespersons, again pointing to the interchangeability of the positions.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{15} 中央对外宣传办公室五局副局长高剑云涉嫌严重违纪违法问题被立案调查, CCPL, 18th Apr. 2014. He was expelled from the party and removed from office in September ("中央网信办副局级干部高剑云被开除党籍和公职"), CCPL, 26th Sept. 2014.


\textsuperscript{17} 中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》, 新华网, 21st Mar. 2018.

\textsuperscript{18} 中央直属机构人物库, 中国经济网. In addition to the transfers discussed below, one may note that OEP/SCIO’s last known secretary was identified as a CPD deputy secretary the year after the reform, while remaining active in external propaganda tasks and participating in a SCIO new year reception ("雷并校友毕业 30 年返校: 1979 年是一个春天", 南开大学, 21st Oct. 2013; "我校成功举办第六届世界大学女校长论坛", 中央传媒大学, 29th Sept. 2014; "才华秘书长与香港传媒高层在上海参观访问", SCIO, 19th Dec. 2013; "首届中国—加勒比媒体研讨会在格林纳达举行", 驻格林纳达大使馆, 24th Aug. 2015; "国新办 2016 年新年招待会", SCIO, Dec. 2015).

\textsuperscript{19} The CPD External News Bureau, possibly created in 2014 to absorb the OEP First Bureau, remains distinct from the CPD News Bureau ("中宣部新闻局局长张小国视察国际台直播台", CRI, 17th Oct. 2017; "汇聚优质内容创造融合精品", 人民日报, 3rd Dec. 2019).

\textsuperscript{20} 中华人民共和国外交部新闻办公室, SCIO; "机构设置", 2017.

\textsuperscript{21} Both CPD and SCIO capacities have been used by current bureau director Hu Kaihong 胡凯红 (deputy until 2017) and deputys Xi Yanchun 袭艳春 (until 2020) and Wen Ge 温革. Another deputy is Xin Huina 許惠娜. See "中央对外宣传办公室副局长袭艳春, 调任山东省政府新闻办主任", 新京报, 15th June 2020; "我的2020" 光影捕捉不平凡瞬间 (海外网直击)", 人民日报海外版, 1st Jan. 2021; 孔令诺, "国务院新闻办公室对外新闻局副局长温革参加 2019 中国扶贫国际论坛", 中国网, 18th Oct. 2019; "人民日报社举办 2020 国际十大新闻评选会", 人民网, 18th Dec. 2020.

\textsuperscript{22} 中央国家机关和地方 2020 年新闻发言人名录, SCIO, 16th Dec. 2019.
SCIO under Xi

CPD Human Rights Affairs Bureau director Lu Guangjin addresses the 2018 edition of the CSHRS Europe-China Human Rights Seminar, held at the Collège d’Europe in Bruges. Source: [中国人权网](#).

CSHRS, previously run by the OEP/SCIO Seventh Bureau, now functions as a front of the CPD Human Rights Affairs Bureau, occasionally using an additional nameplate as an identically named SCIO bureau.²³

The CPD has continued to use the SCIO name to run the spokesperson system after the reform, regularly evaluating departments based on the frequency of their press releases, their ability to deal with sudden events, reflect social concerns and shape public opinion.²⁴ On the other hand, an OEP unit that participated in propaganda cadre training migrated to CAC in 2015, with its remit now restricted to the cyberspace affairs system.²⁵


Years after the abolition of OEP at the central level, some subnational jurisdictions continued to maintain a unit of that name, in some cases as late as 2021. While one provincial OEP had been reduced to a nameplate by 2017, the case of Shanghai shows a surviving unit with its own structure and budget as of 2020. Some local OEPs have been dissolved since 2018, mirroring the earlier central-level reform. It remains unclear how many of the recent mentions of local OEPs refer to persistent standing bodies, as opposed to mere propaganda department nameplates. As related offices usually coalesce at smaller, lower-level bureaucracies, the impact of the reform would be less significant in party committees at the prefecture level and below.

---


---
Conclusion

The 2014 absorption of OEP into CPD can be seen as an early sign of the Xi-era’s centripetal restructuring of the propaganda system. Given the number of external propaganda agencies overseen by OEP/SCIO, the change was at least as significant as the better-known 2018 reform that collapsed former government organs into the CPD. The trend is analogous to that affecting the united front system, with the establishment of a leading small group in 2015 and the 2018 absorption of state diaspora and religious affairs offices by the United Front Work Department. The consolidation of a cyberspace affairs system, anchored in a CPD-led office but overseen by a commission chaired by Xi himself, likely reflects a need to coordinate a policy domain that involves security and other agencies beyond propaganda. While the personnel issues at OEP’s former cyberspace affairs units around the time of the reform might look like a purge, a reading as a sign of the new leadership’s dissatisfaction with OEP’s Internet management work must remain speculative.

The dissolution of OEP, a major reform of the CCP’s external propaganda bureaucracy, is six year-old news. Although, as common with party propaganda organs, the change was not publicly announced at the time, Chinese-language sources pointing to the change have been available for years. The lack of reflection of the change in much secondary literature further points to the need for original-language research to regularly update knowledge of key components of China’s political system.

Tobiáš Lipold’s contributed research and Martin Hála and Ondřej Klimeš’s comments on an early draft are gratefully acknowledged.

Sinopsis is a project implemented by the non-profit association AcaMedia z.ú., in scholarly collaboration with the Department of Sinology at Charles University in Prague.