

Telling Stories of the Communist Party of China: Constructing the Soft Power of Model Cadres¹

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Since ascending as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2012–2013, Xi Jinping 习近平 has emphasized the need to “tell China's story well” [讲好中国故事 *jiang hao Zhongguo gushi*] to develop soft power and discourse power. Frequently featured in scholarly and official media analyses, Xi's concept of “China's story” includes “the story of the CPC” [中国共产党的故事 *Zhongguo Gongchandang de gushi*] (Xu 2020). This chapter investigates the interplay between the CPC's promotion of strategic historical narratives of its authority and the effort to enhance China's cultural strength, confidence, and appeal, both domestically and internationally. To do so, it takes a discursive approach to the analysis of soft power dynamics, focusing on the narrative construction of Party model cadre Jiao Yulu 焦裕禄 (1922–1964), considering it as a manifestation of “hero discourse” in its evolving historical, political, and institutional contexts. Exploring the instrumental use of exemplary historical figures as an incarnation of the Party's heroic image, the analysis builds on the three narrative shifts in the representation of “the Jiao Yulu Spirit” [焦裕禄精神 *Jiao Yulu jingshen*] in the *People's Daily* [人民日报 *Renmin ribao*] between 1966 and 2014 as identified by Chen and Sun

1 For the sake of convenience, the names of the events have only been provided in English.

(2016), expanding it with the examination of the *crafting* and *recrafting* of mainstream narratives of Jiao’s legacy across time and platforms. Specifically, contents drawn from official channels reporting Xi’s stories about Jiao are qualitatively analyzed, including Party- and State-affiliated news outlets, posts on the China state-controlled Facebook page *Xi’s Moments*, and translated materials designed for external propaganda, such as the volumes *Narrating China’s Governance: Stories in Xi Jinping’s Speeches* and *The Governance of China*.

“Telling Stories of the CPC Well”: Theoretical Underpinnings

The traditional study of China’s soft power, based on American political scientist Joseph Nye’s theory, has faced criticism for its limitations.² Choosing a resource-based conceptualization of soft power, scholars have focused on the PRC’s efforts to develop instruments to improve its global standing through significant investments and strategic initiatives. The media have been found to play an active role in building attraction, both as a soft power resource and as channels for its projection. However, Chinese soft power goes beyond projecting influence internationally as it is equally concerned with fostering internal cohesion among the Chinese people, cultivating a unified and harmonious national identity, and reinforcing the legitimacy of the CPC. A discursive approach to Chinese soft power, based on the analysis of strategic narratives, can help counter the understatement of this dual approach, balancing out the sole attention to the PRC’s attempts to exercise external influence.

A Discursive Approach to Soft Power: Strategic Narratives

Roselle et al. (2014, 71) emphasize that “strategic narrative is soft power in the twenty-first century.” This idea fuels studies hypothesizing a “discursive turn” in the discipline of International Relations (IR) and adding “intentionality” to narratives (Lams 2018, 388). Narratives, intended as “frameworks constructed to allow people to make sense of the world, policies, events, and interactions” (Roselle 2010, 6), are strategic because they tell “stories produced by political actors to achieve a desired purpose or intention” (Boc 2015, 537). Examining storytelling in IR, Hagström and Gustafsson (2019, 390) define “narrative power” as

² For an overview of the extensive literature on China’s soft power see Riva (2023).

the effect of “a story about concrete events and protagonists, which captures and exemplifies experiences that people can relate to and empathize with.” It is “the capacity of actors to produce effects by disseminating strategic narratives” or “the capacity of narratives to enable and constrain actors” (400). Similarly, Mattern (2005, 586) examines narratives in IR through the lens of “representational force” which she describes as “a form of power that operates through the structure of a speaker’s narrative representation of ‘reality.’” This chapter views soft power as the “power politics of identity” (611) and posits that narrative power and representational force—both used to interpret the implications of attraction in world politics—can be understood as forms of influence employed by the Chinese Party-State to cultivate appeal at home. This argument is based on the firm control exercised by the Chinese leadership on soft power strategies and the interplay of internal and external dimensions—with the former being a priority—in the official discourse defining these strategies. Taking the launch of the slogan “telling China’s story well” as an example, Xi Jinping linked “cultural soft power” [文化软实力 *wenhua ruanshili*] to “discourse power” [话语权 *huayuquan*]¹—that is, the “power” or “right” to speak exerted to shape a positive national image (Zhang 2012, 56)—and identified crucial areas for making China a “socialist cultural great power” [社会主义文化强国 *shehuizhuyi wenhua qianguo*]: working on cultural soft power resources, propagating contemporary Chinese values, showcasing Chinese culture, and enhancing international discourse power (Renmin ribao 2014). Besides closely connecting soft power and the media through discourse power, these directives confirm that to reinforce China’s cultural attraction, the Chinese leadership considers working on the channels functional to projecting soft power (e.g., building an external discourse system) and defining the messages to be spread both at home and abroad equally important: *stories* of a well-governed and civilized Eastern great power with a profound history, unity of diverse ethnic groups, and a harmonious and prosperous culture (Renmin ribao 2014). Party propaganda has thus been “re-Oriented” (Perry 2017), emphasizing the *Chineseness* of the stories to be told. Consequently, narratives can be said to act as strategic messages cumulatively constituting “China’s story” to be communicated to both internal and external audiences (Lams 2018). In a similar way, storytelling involves crafting political messages infused with emotional value (Miranda 2020).

These considerations form the heart of an increasing number of studies (e.g., Pan et al. 2020; Tang 2023a, 2023b; Xin 2020) advocating a discursive approach to analyzing China’s soft power, shedding light on how attraction works in terms of generation and circulation of positive meanings favorable to the Chinese leadership’s pursued objectives domestically and internationally. The focus is on the

discursive strategies and practices—that is, “*forms* of discursive construction, namely *how* a story is told” (Pan et al. 2020, 58)—employed in the intellectual and political discourses as well as in cultural products and news or entertainment media. Following the idea that soft power—and consequently discourse power—can be considered “a narrative- and linguistic-based phenomenon” (Solomon 2014, 724), it appears worthwhile to examine how stories are *crafted*, *recrafted*, and *circulated* in the PRC’s discourse system with the aim of defining China’s identity and communicating it to both national and international audiences. This will show how, by means of positive and persuasive narratives, discourse is a mechanism for shaping perceptions and drawing people in by making China appealing in political, cultural, and ideological terms.

Equally important to rebalance the attention on China’s “charm offensive” (Kurlantzick 2007) abroad is considering the impact of the Internet and the new media on the PRC’s contemporary discourse system. Nowadays, Party- and State-owned media exploit crossmedia storytelling—that is, the combination of different media channels—and convergence strategies to amplify the dissemination of their content, thereby advancing political and ideological objectives. This possibility is offered by the digital era, which allows stories to multiply and circulate more freely. Savina (2021) describes this process as a flow of “liquid” practices and “diffuse” tales characterizing what he defines as the “hall of mirrors” of the Chinese discourse system, a space where messages—both official and non-official—radiate, collide, and merge, notwithstanding the CPC’s tight control over communication. The line between internal and external propaganda is equally blurred, reflecting a unified communication approach with diverse audiences.

Nonetheless, the new media production strategies and cultural consumption patterns have not erased the consistency with which the center maintains discursive supremacy, making official, or “mainstream” [主流 *zhuliu*], narratives still worth exploring, provided that the dynamic media landscape in which they exist is borne in mind. Indeed, thanks to the cyberspace, the central propaganda apparatus creatively refracts official narratives, reaching national and international audiences (Lupano 2018). Hence, the CPC’s ideological goals are cohesively reinforced, boosting China’s soft power and discourse power.

The [Hi]Story of the CPC

According to the Deputy Secretary General of Xinhua News Agency Xu Shanna 徐姗姗, “the core of ‘China’s story’ is the ‘story of the CPC’, and the key to

telling this story well is properly explaining why the CPC ‘can’ [rule]” (Xu 2020). Here, “can” [能 *neng*] significantly shows how portraying a competent image is an intrinsic element of the CPC’s politics. The Chinese Party-State has always considered historiography and historical narratives essential to legitimize its rule and ensure its survival. Nowadays, the refinement of institutional tools designed to cultivate awareness of the past among the people has expanded the significance of memory in Chinese public life (Miranda and Giunipero 2024, 6). Historical representations are no longer a unique prerogative of historiography and propaganda but also ingredients of commercial activities contributing to the promotion of new narratives of past and recent history through memory policies, literature, art, mass media, and social media (6, 10). Stories regarding the CPC, as Xu (2020) explains, should scientifically demonstrate that the Party was chosen by history as China’s leader because of its political wisdom and care for the people, establishing it as an example for political parties in developing countries and a guide for the world.

In Chinese academic literature, “telling the CPC’s story well” is described as a strategic endeavor requiring a variety of increasingly sophisticated methods. First, scholars highlight the abundance of stories accumulated over one hundred years of CPC’s history testifying to the Party’s ability to operate (Liu 2022; Qiu 2023). Spreading these stories is necessary to “pass on the red genes” by “telling facts, images, emotions, and reasons” (Liu 2022, 38). Thus, shaping the domestic and international image of CPC’s members in order to “create a credible, lovable, and respectable image of the CPC” does not only operate on a logical level by “convincing people with facts,” but also on an emotional one, “infecting people with feelings” (Qiu 2023, 6).

Secondly, the Chinese intellectual discourse suggests that telling the CPC’s story well helps avenge the feeling of having been humiliated by foreign imperialism deeply felt by the country over the course of its history. Xi himself views “history as a mirror to build the future” [以史为鉴、开创未来 *yi shi wei jian kaichuang weilai*] (Renmin ribao 2021), distinguishing between the “correct” perspective and the “wrong tendencies of thought” promoted by “hostile forces” inside and outside China (Zhang 2017). As Liu (2022, 33–5) puts it, too often has China “been scolded” because the CPC’s story “of seeking happiness for the Chinese people, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and harmony for the world” has been wrongly told. Similarly, Zheng (2023, 9) highlights how in Xi’s New Era, enhancing the international image of the CPC is inevitable to “respond to international voices vilifying” the Party and “face the hegemony of the Western discourse.” The goal is to shape a global narrative fairly portraying the CPC as the

people's servant, an innovative vanguard, the courageous backbone of the nation, and a great party open to the whole world (Zheng 2023, 3).

Third, the discussion leads back to soft power: once the right to speak in the international community is gained, it will be easier to enhance the influence of Chinese culture (Liu 2022, 33). Indeed, according to Yan and Ma (2024, 10), the CPC's international image is a "soft strength" playing a "hard role" in the promotion of Chinese-style modernization: once the CPC's story is told well, the world will certainly see the Party's commitment to the happiness of the people and the progress of mankind.

This brief overview points to how telling the CPC's story well is perceived as a type of *not-so-soft discursive power* functioning in a similar way to narrative power (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019) and representational force (Mattern 2005). With narrative power comes narrative resistance, involving "the dissemination of 'counter-narratives', or 'small' stories that seek to resist and challenge 'bigger' stories, or master narratives" (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, 389). Thus, from the perspective of the Chinese leadership, the hegemony of the Western discourse on the CPC must be countered by turning the CPC's "small" story into a leading one. Liu (2022, 33) sees this as a cause-effect relationship: the CPC is the largest party in the world, and, deservingly, "big should be big."

The Jiao Yulu Spirit

In the online multilingual database *Keywords to Understand China* [中国关键词 *Zhongguo guanjian ci*], Jiao Yulu's "spirit" [精神 *jingshen*] appears among the constituents of the "Spirit of the Chinese Nation" [中国精神 *Zhongguo jingshen*], alongside better known examples such as Lei Feng 雷锋 (1940–1962), Zhang Side 张思德 (1915–1944), and Norman Bethune (1890–1939). Jiao's inclusion in the database is worth exploring in light of the emphasis placed by Xi Jinping on "taking heroes and role models as examples" [以英雄模范为榜样 *yi yingxiong mofan wei bangyang*] to build a strong China (Xinhua 2024). This has been a key principle of contemporary Chinese politics and nowadays constitutes a strategic move to exploit the past for the present need of unifying and mobilizing the nation in the New Era (Chang 2024). During Maoism, ordinary yet exceptional individuals (soldiers, workers, farmers, teachers, students, government officers, etc.) embodying values and ideals of the CPC were elevated as examples [榜样 *bangyang*] or models [模范 *mofan*] to provide guidance and reinforce loyalty to the socialist cause and social cohesion. Today, the *bangyang* concept includes

scientists, athletes, frontline workers, and even celebrities, demonstrating the CPC's evolving strategy to maintain ideological influence and foster collective identity in Chinese society.

As the Chinese official media report, Xi often tells Jiao's story, warmly recalling when he first learned the model official's good deeds on February 7, 1966, on the verge of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). His middle school politics teacher tearfully read the *People's Daily* newsletter “A Model County Party Secretary—Jiao Yulu” [县委书记的榜样——焦裕禄 *Xianwei shuji de bangyang—Jiao Yulu*] to the class³ and Xi recounts how “the Jiao Yulu Spirit” took root in his heart: “I was especially deeply shocked when I heard that Comrade Jiao Yulu still persisted in his work during later-stage liver cancer, with a stick pressed against the liver area. The other end of the stick made a big hole in the right side of the chair...” (People's Daily Department of Commentary 2020, 56). Xi's praises of Jiao as a responsible model official for other cadres to revere can be extensively found in posts appearing on the Facebook page *Xi's Moments* with the hashtags #StoriessharedbyXi, #JiaoYulu, #QuotesfromXi, #StoriesofCPCmembers, #CPCcentenary, and others, at important historical moments, including the 100th anniversary of Jiao's birth on August 16, 2022, commemorations of his death on May 14, or the celebration of the CPC's centenary. Videos featuring Xi visiting Jiao's memorial hall in Lankao County in Henan Province—where Jiao worked—on March 17, 2014, during his campaign to end poverty in the countryside, or talking to the students at China University of Political Science and Law on May 3, 2017, complement his quotes comparing “the Jiao Yulu Spirit” to a beacon always guiding him forward (Xi's Moments 2024).

Who is Jiao Yulu?

As stated by Laughlin (2002, 256), Jiao is “depicted as a county Party secretary who literally worked himself to death in an effort to transform a disaster area that had been relying entirely on government aid into a paradise of socialist productivity.” Nevertheless, as Murong Xuecun (2014) points out, Jiao's narrative as a national hero dates back to 1966, when state-media journalists conducted research on the cadre in Lankao, making it hard “to decipher fact from party fiction” in regard to his life. The volume *Narrating China's Governance: Stories in Xi Jinping's Speeches*, published by the *People's Daily* editorial team in Chinese in

3 The text is analyzed in Zhejiang ribao (2014) and Laughlin (2002, 255–62).

2017 and in English in 2020, reports Xi's speech on Jiao at the enlarged meeting of the Standing Committee of the Lankao County Party Committee of Henan Province on March 18, 2014, followed by a commentary providing details about the cadre: born in Shandong province to a poor family of farmers in August 1922, he volunteered as a militiaman after the Japanese were defeated in 1945, to then join the CPC in 1946 (People's Daily Department of Commentary 2020, 55). In 1948, he followed a work team to the south and in 1962, during the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), was transferred to Lankao to be the County Party Secretary and help improve the impoverished area afflicted by the “three serious threats”: waterlogging, sandstorm, and soil salinization (People's Daily Department of Commentary 2020, 55).

State-run China Global Television Network (CGTN) news channel overdramatizes the reasons why Jiao is loved: he served the people wholeheartedly, pursued his goals of researching the harsh local environment and mobilizing the residents to plant saline soil-resistant paulownia trees despite having liver cancer, and did not care about money nor did he restrain from overwork until the illness killed him in 1964 (at the age of 42) (CGTN 2018; Hu 2021). Jiao's legacy, the narrative continues, has been so inspirational for the following generations that thanks to the use of paulownia wood in Lankao's major activity of manufacturing musical instruments, the county overcame poverty, being consequently removed from the list of impoverished counties and made into a model for green development (CGTN 2018; Hu 2021). The “Spirit of the Party” is thus crystallized in Jiao's voluntarism, attachment to the land and people, and unwillingness to let his illness win: even when bedridden, he wished for his ashes to be sprinkled on those sand dunes in Lankao still stubbornly refusing to be controlled (Laughlin 2002, 262).

The Discursive Construction of Jiao's Legacy Across Time and Platforms

As Connerton (1989, 1) notes, “control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power.” Inspired by Connerton's ideas that “our experiences of the present largely depend upon our knowledge of the past” and “that our images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present social order” (3), Chen and Sun (2016) analyze the discursive construction of the collective memory of “the Jiao Yulu Spirit” based on *People's Daily* reports between 1966 and 2014. They identify three narrative changes in the national discourse corresponding to the periods with the highest number of related articles published by

the CPC's mouthpiece: 1966–1968, 1989–2008, and 2009–2014. Providing a useful framework for interpreting the discursive construction of “good cadre Jiao Yulu” in the half a century between the Cultural Revolution and Xi's rise to power, these shifts serve as a basis for discussing further developments in the representation of Jiao's image.

Between 1966 and 1968, “the Jiao Yulu Spirit” was constructed as both “the revolutionary spirit of rising to the challenge” [迎难而上的革命精神 *ying nan er shang de geming jingshen*] and the image of a good student of Chairman Mao (Chen and Sun 2016, 2–4). The report “A Model County Party Secretary—Jiao Yulu” portrayed cadre Jiao as “a real socialist saint moulded in the image of Mao” (Laughlin 2002, 256), while the *People's Daily* carried the editorial “Learn from Comrade Jiao Yulu—Good Student of Comrade Mao Zedong” [向毛泽东同志的好学生焦裕禄学习 *Xiang Mao Zedong tongzhi de hao xuesheng Jiao Yulu xuexi*], launching a campaign engaging all cadres and CPC members in the study of Jiao's revolutionary spirit (Li and Lok 1995, 186–7). Party officials were encouraged to emulate Jiao by assessing local conditions carefully, engaging directly in work, and practicing effective leadership, while motivating the people to overcome difficulties. Jiao's commitment, pragmatism, and entrepreneurial spirit were central merits in the construction of his image and various characteristics were emphasized depending on political needs. Chen and Sun (2016, 4) highlight the success of this campaign arguing that the PRC's economic achievements in early 1966 were due to nationwide efforts inspired by “the Jiao Yulu Spirit.” However, they also note that the official narrative portrayed this spirit as synonymous with “doing exactly what Chairman Mao said,” which, in their view, contradicts Jiao's authentic character (4–5).

Jiao's legacy was revived after the Cultural Revolution and the early 1990s saw the launch of a campaign encouraging people to emulate the hardworking role model (Sorace 2016, 49). Chen and Sun (2016, 6) identify a second surge of interest in “the Jiao Yulu Spirit” from 1989 to 2008, the period between the Tiananmen protests (1989) and the intensification of the Reform and Opening-Up policy—that is, the economic reforms guided by Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 in the 1980s. The *People's Daily* published numerous editorials urging Party officials to follow the “Jiao Yulu-style good cadre” model and Jiao's “good hardworking style” [艰苦奋斗的优良作风 *jianku fendou de youliang zuofeng*] was positioned alongside other icon “spirits” such as that of Lei Feng, aiming to reinforce self-reliance and nationalism as a defense against foreign threats (Chen and Sun 2016, 6). In this regard, Barmé (1999, 107–108) notes that Lei symbolized selflessness and austerity for society as a whole, while in response to rising corruption among Party cadres, Jiao was allegedly an exemplar of Communist values for officials,

resulting in the reshaping of his image as a role model demonstrating the CPC's incorruptibility and reconciling the masses with the Party.

Novels, TV dramas, films, and plays featuring Jiao became increasingly popular, with a notable example being the 1990 biopic about his late career, which was both a box office success and a source of public inspiration. Media reports indicate that the film not only brought fame to the actor playing Jiao, but also allowed the cast to experience “spiritual sublimation” during production, while moving many viewers to tears (Yi 2009). Among those influenced could have been the rural film projectionist Guo Jianhua, who has reportedly shown movies to villagers in Xiangfu (Kaifeng, Henan) since 1976. Her story, tellingly highlighted together with other tales featuring inspiring women by the All-China Women's Federation during the 20th CPC National Congress, presents the biopic as the film which influenced her the most as it emphasizes Jiao's love for peasants (Fan 2021). Guo's career is celebrated as a success demonstrating the impact of following heroes like Jiao: stimulated by the film, she pursued and fulfilled her dream of becoming a distinguished Party member by devoting her life to educating farmers through cinema (Fan 2021).

The socio-political climate of the 1990s made Jiao an ideal role model for Xi Jinping, who saw in his example the value of pragmatism and hands-on leadership. Xi's admiration for Jiao is evident in official narratives, such as the stories posted on the Facebook page *Xi's Moments*, which portray Xi as a leader who, like Jiao, is “down-to-earth” and dedicated to solving problems through research and direct engagement, so much so that with the aim of eliminating poverty he conducted “over fifty inspections and research studies on poverty alleviation” including “visits to all fourteen regions with the highest concentration of extreme poverty” (Xi's Moments 2023a). Xi's emphasis on practical skills and intellectual development is also rooted in his early career, for example in his 1982 talent scouting program in Zhengding county (Hebei), when he invited experts from across China to discover and foster innovators, transforming the area under his leadership as secretary of the Party committee into a testing ground for progressive initiatives (Xinhua 2021).

Xi's esteem for Jiao is reflected in his literary tribute, the classical-style poem titled “Jiao Yulu: In Memoriam—To the Tune of *Niannujiao*” [念奴娇·追思焦裕禄 *Niannujiao-zhuisi Jiao Yulu*]. Inspired by the article “People Yearn for the Return of Jiao Yulu” [人民呼唤焦裕禄 *Renmin hubuan Jiao Yulu*], which he read on the night of July 15, 1990, while serving as secretary of the Fuzhou municipal committee of the CPC, the poem was then published on the front page of the

Fuzhou Evening News (Cai 2014; Gao 2014).⁴ He later recited it at the meeting with Lankao county officials during his visit to Jiao's memorial hall in 2014, further linking his leadership style to the role model (Xi's Moments 2023b). Xi's poem now circulates across various official media channels (e.g., the English website of the PRC Ministry on Foreign Affairs, the *China Daily*, the Facebook page *Xi's Moments*) and constitutes an example of the intertwining of narratives targeting domestic and international audiences discussed in this chapter in relation to China's discursive system. In October 2015, a student of Chinese at a British Confucius Institute recited Xi's poem at the UK Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms Annual Conference attended by Xi. Reporting on the event, the *China Daily* highlighted Xi's appreciation for the performance in perfect Putonghua as well as the student's admiration for Jiao and his belief that "both President Xi and Jiao Yulu are dedicated to serving the people" (China Daily 2021). In the newspaper's view, Xi's mission to revive Jiao's spirit is aligned with the broader goal of realizing the Chinese dream of a happier life for the people (China Daily 2021). The story also appears on the Facebook page *Xi's Moments* with the hashtag #XiDiplomacy, framing it as a symbol of China-UK relations (Xi's Moments 2022).

Chen and Sun's framework identifies Jiao's "sentiment of a public servant honestly pursuing public affairs" [廉洁奉公的公仆情怀 *lianjie fengong de gongpu qinghuai*] as the narrative change characterizing his image in the timespan 2009–14 (Chen and Sun 2016, 7–8). In those years, Xi took three research trips to Lankao (April 2009, March 2014, and May 2014) feeling "moved and educated" every time (Xinhua 2014). This culminated in the official definition and promotion of Jiao's legacy as the "good public servant" [人民的好公仆 *renmin de hao gongpu*] and "example to all Party members" (全党的榜样 *quan Dang de banyang*), with his spirit of affection for the people, hard work, pragmatism, courage, and devotion being elevated to the status of a "red line" [红线 *hong xian*]—a metaphor for "correct thought"—to be constantly followed to "build up spiritual strength" [强大精神力量 *qiangda jingshen lilian*] (Xuexi xiaozu 2015).

Since 2014, officials have been urged to "sweat corruption out" (Xinhua 2014) and the revival of "the Jiao Yulu Spirit" appears to have shifted toward emphasizing values such as frugality, integrity, and commitment to the welfare of the people. Promoting accountability through Jiao's legacy aligns with Xi's ongoing anti-corruption campaign and the CPC's broader ideological objective to restore

4 The poem in Chinese and English can be found on the website China Heritage (n.d.).

public trust in the government. This is visible in videos of Xi admiring Jiao's personal mementos, such as his worn-out shoes and clothes, as well as in the volume *Narrating China's Governance*, where Xi's 2014 speech about Jiao's work ethics is included in the section "Stories of Morals: 'Governing the Country After Cultivating One's Moral Character and Managing the Family's Affairs Well.'" The focus of the excerpt is on "Party discipline" [党纪党规 *Dang ji Dang gui*]: Jiao's "Ten Never-Dos for Officials" [干部十不准 *Ganbu shi bu zhun*] and an anecdote about how he punished his own son for accepting a bribe are brought as examples of honesty and self-discipline (People's Daily Department of Commentary 2020, 55). Similarly, Xi's speeches mentioning Jiao included in *The Governance of China* [习近平谈治国理政 *Xi Jinping tan zhiguo lizheng*] show how his image is discursively constructed to promote "discipline and rules" [纪律和规矩 *jilü he guiju*].⁵ For instance, during a meeting at the Central Party School on January 12, 2015,⁶ Xi explained how to emulate Jiao: "be loyal to the Party, be of service to the people, be aware of responsibilities, and be strict with discipline" [心中有党、心中有民、心中有责、心中有戒 *xin Zhong you Dang, xin Zhong you min, xin Zhong you ze, xin Zhong you jie*], while taking "clean governance and self-discipline" [廉洁自律 *lianjie zilü*] as principles for Communists in official positions (Xi 2017, 154, 161–2). In a speech on December 12, 2016, he praised Jiao alongside other model Party secretaries, such as Gu Wenchang 谷文昌 (1915–1981) and Yang Shanzhou 杨善洲 (1927–2010), as "self-disciplined and law-abiding" [遵纪守法 *zunji shoufa*] officials promoting a family culture with a healthy lifestyle impacting not only their own households, but the whole Party and government (Xi 2017, 385).⁷ In Xi's view, by strictly following a code of discipline and rules [严守纪律和规矩 *yanshou jilü he guiju*], cadres can avoid making mistakes (Xi 2017, 212). They should reflect on themselves [反省自己 *fanxing ziji*] and learn from the past [以殷为鉴 *yi ying wei jian*] to meet the standards for Party members embodied by "exemplary" [英雄模范 *yingxiong mofan*] officials devoted to the cause, such

5 *The Governance of China* was selected for this study as a significant example of political translation. Published simultaneously in Chinese and English, the multi-volume series aims to consolidate domestic consensus, while informing foreign readers and giving China a voice in international politics (Zappone 2021, 89–90). The present analysis considers vol. II and III, which reference Jiao.

6 The Chinese texts reported here are drawn from the Chinese editions of *The Governance of China*. The citations refer to the English volumes. This speech is contained in vol. II and is titled "Be a Good County Party Secretary" (做焦裕禄式的县委书记 *Zuo Jiao Yulu shi de xian wei shuji*).

7 "Family Values, Family Education and Family Tradition" (注重家庭, 注重家教, 注重家风 *Zhuzhong jiating, zhuzhong jiajiao, zhuzhong jiafeng*), *The Governance of China*, vol. II.

as Jiao Yulu, Zhang Side, Norman Bethune, Mai Xiande 麦贤得 (1945–), and Zhang Fuqing 张富清 (1925–2022) (Xi 2017, 212; Xi 2020, 630).⁸

Xi's speeches cover various themes, including his "people-oriented thought," exemplified by his efforts to eradicate poverty and establish a clean government. Historical figures such as Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮 (181–234), Sima Guang 司马光 (1019–1086), and Zhang Boxing 张伯行 (1652–1725), in addition to those mentioned before, are invoked to emphasize responsibility for the people's hardships and incorruptibility. The case study on Jiao's evolving image is particularly significant because it draws a parallel between narrative shifts and Xi's career, showing how past heroes are used for present-day political priorities. Narratives highlight how Xi, similarly to Jiao, conducted extensive field investigations in Zhengding and Ningde (Fujian), bringing innovation to the former and lifting the latter out of poverty. And, like Jiao, Xi promotes honesty and diligence against a poor work style which would cause the CPC to lose the people's support.

Concluding Remarks

Retracing the *crafting*, *recrafting*, and *circulation* of the collective memory of Jiao Yulu in the national discourse and the crossmedia storytelling of his image up to the present has highlighted how the Chinese Party-State makes use of models to symbolically justify its legitimacy, nurture consensus, and unite the nation. This requires a fluid dissemination of *stories* to enhance the "spreadability" and impact of top-down narratives across multiple platforms and ensure the resonance of consistent themes and messages with both domestic and global audiences. As demonstrated by the examples discussed earlier, historical and cultural symbols supporting the CPC's moral and political authority adapt to the specific needs of the time in which they are promoted. Thus, if done effectively, "telling stories of the CPC" can generate a type of *not-so-soft discursive power* with the fundamental aim to foster a collective memory reinforcing, in the first place, the PRC's national identity, political continuity, and social stability, while simultaneously projecting a positive international image for the Party. In other words, the CPC's *storytelling* can be viewed as a heterogenous propaganda operation under what

8 "Meet the Standards for Party Members" [用共产党员的标准严格要求自己 *Yong Gongchandangyuan de biao zhun yange yaoqiu ziji*], Xi's speech delivered on August 13, 2017 at a Party branch meeting in his capacity as an individual Party member, reported in *The Governance of China*, vol. II, and "Remain True to Our Original Aspiration and Founding Mission—An Ongoing Campaign" [持续推动全党不忘初心、牢记使命 *Chixu tuidong quan Dang bu wang chuxin, lao ji shiming*], January 8, 2020, reported in *The Governance of China*, vol. III.

Perry (2017, 29) defines as “cultural governance,” meaning “the deployment of symbolic resources as an instrument of political authority.”

The case study on the narrative of “Party model cadre Jiao Yulu” has exemplified these dynamics contributing to the understanding of the notion of *storytelling* in the Chinese context and showing how a discursive approach to the analysis of Chinese soft power and discourse power can reveal the internal dimension of building attraction as a means to strengthen national unity and socio-political stability. The inclusion of “the Jiao Yulu Spirit” in the online reference tool *Keywords to Understand China* is significant as the Party- and State-affiliated multilingual platform is a product of publicity translation aiming to play a crucial role in amplifying China’s voice globally by reaching political, media, academic, and diplomatic institutions worldwide (China.org.cn 2014). Nevertheless, the analysis has shown how the definition of Jiao’s legacy as that of a “model county Party secretary” [县委书记的榜样 *xianwei shuji de bangyang*], a “good official of the Party” [党的好干部 *Dang de hao ganbu*], and a “good servant of the people” [人民的好公仆 *renmin de hao gongpu*] (China.org.cn 2020) is just the tip of the iceberg in the evolution of representing a hero in the national discourse. Through Jiao’s case, this chapter has only touched upon the investigation of the official construction of the “hero discourse” in the PRC and scratched the surface of the relation between the storytelling of model Party cadres and the enhancement of China’s soft power. For instance, to measure the effectiveness of Jiao’s example, it would be advisable to explore the reception of editorial and media products portraying his story, such as the 2015 volume *Becoming a Jiao Yulu-style County Party Chief* [做焦裕禄式的县委书记 *Zuo Jiao Yulu shi de xian wei shuji*] or the 30-episode historical TV drama *Jiao Yulu* 焦裕禄 (2012), of which the former is based on Xi’s speeches and reportedly became a “guide on how to be a good county boss” (Gan 2015). In this sense, this study’s findings are limited and could be corroborated by future research addressing the ideological and practical impact of the “stories of the CPC” or other hero stories on Party cadres and the larger Chinese society.

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