

Chinese propaganda machine places hopes in cartoon rappers

March 4 2016, by Gerry Shih And Aritz Parra



In this Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2016 photo, staffers work at the Xinhua All-Media Service to produce animated political cartoons in the newsroom of China's official Xinhua News Agency in Beijing. Carrying echoes of the party-promulgated "Red Songs" that drowned out folk music 50 years ago, the catchy mix of click-baiting animation and old-fashioned propaganda is a reminder that, for all its ambitions of becoming a savvy, media industry leader with global appeal, Xinhua's core mission is to serve as the party's mouthpiece, something Chinese President Xi Jinping reinforced last month in a politically charged newsroom visit. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

What's the world's largest propaganda organ to do when it finds itself struggling to get TV drama-obsessed young Chinese to pay attention to the latest raft of Communist Party slogans?

Standing over a video-editing computer on the third floor of the Xinhua News Agency headquarters, Li Keyong is convinced the answer lies in a cartoon character rapping while performing the 1990s dance move known as "raising the roof."

"Look at how we got this bald fat guy and a tiny cute girl singing together," said Li, a deputy director of Xinhua's All-Media Service, as he watched two animated characters promoting President Xi Jinping's "Four Comprehensives" political doctrine with a mix of high-tempo rap and choir singing in what might be called a neo-Communist hip-hopera.

"We thought, 'With such an abstract political theme, it's difficult for young people to accept,'" Li said. "Young people want fun, they want joy."

The fun and joy that Xinhua is searching for reflects a quandary facing China's leadership: As Xi navigates a difficult phase of his administration, his messaging machine—for decades one of the Communist Party's most crucial levers of power—has been struggling to make itself heard.

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In this Wednesday, March 2, 2016 photo, an elderly Chinese woman in an electric wheelchair past by a traditional government propaganda with the Chinese words "Freedom, Equality, Fairness, Rule by Law" on the outskirts of Beijing. As Chinese President Xi Jinping navigates a difficult phase of his administration, his messaging machine—for decades one of the Communist Party's most crucial levers of power—has been struggling to make itself heard.(AP Photo/Andy Wong)

During a recent office tour by The Associated Press, Xinhua officials spoke about their challenges and argued that it's their delivery, not the party's message, that needs a refresh at a time when Chinese youth are glued to their smartphones watching streaming dramas and game shows.

"We used to be number one, the biggest," said Qian Tong, a former diplomatic reporter who, like Li, is a deputy director of Xinhua's All-Media Service, a new newsroom division formed in 2014 to organize the agency's efforts penetrating the online market and manage social media.

The Associated Press interviews with Li and Qian were the first with a foreign media outlet about the division's work.

"If you wanted to read anything, you opened a newspaper, and you read us."

Like news agencies in the West, Qian said, Xinhua was squeezed by digital rivals. "Our social status isn't guaranteed anymore," he said. "The question is: 'Can we change fast enough?'"

It's something the top leadership has been aware of. Immediately upon assuming power in 2012, Xi instructed a top-level committee to find new "innovative ways" of promoting propaganda on the Internet. In a communique published in January, Xinhua reported that government bodies at all levels has been investigating and improving the use of influential social media accounts and new media channels as "critical channels that connect the party to the masses."

Xi's efforts to shore up official media were prominently broadcast last month when he toured the three major state outlets—Xinhua, China Central Television and the People's Daily newspaper—and urged its journalists to ramp up their coverage of positive news, pledge complete loyalty and to "love the party, protect the party and act for the party."

The tour became a flashpoint in online discussions. This week, Internet censors deleted the account of a prominent government critic after he said state media funded with taxpayer money should serve the country as a whole, not the ruling party.

Fu King-wa, a media professor at Hong Kong University, said the Xi administration tactic of promoting ideology with a irreverent touch mirrors how state media has used a "more down-to-earth image to try to humanize Xi Jinping himself" even as he simultaneously wages an

intense battle against dissent within the party and clamps down on numerous aspects of civil society.



In this Wednesday, March 2, 2016 photo, Chinese women walk past traditional propaganda in the form of a mural promoting values aligned with the Chinese communist party on the outskirts of Beijing. As Chinese President Xi Jinping navigates a difficult phase of his administration, his messaging machine, for decades one of the Communist Party's most crucial levers of power, has been struggling to make itself heard.(AP Photo/Andy Wong)

Ying Zhu, a Chinese media expert at the College of Staten Island-CUNY and the author of "Two Billion Eyes, the Story of China Central Television," said that while Xinhua was "clever" to turn to pop culture, it was too late.

"People have long tuned out," she said. "This is an old political campaign

with a modern PR twist."

The All-Media Service occupies a gleaming, remodeled area in Xinhua's Beijing newsroom. Its more than 20 employees manage concerns like Xinhua's recently launched mobile app and the agency's accounts on microblogging platform Weibo and messaging app Weixin, as well as what executives have identified as three key global platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, all of which are walled off from ordinary Chinese by Internet censors.

In a modern twist on one of Xinhua's historic functions as a gatherer of domestic and foreign intelligence, which it compiles into briefings for internal party consumption, the digital center also monitors public sentiment on Chinese and international social media using analytical software.

On a recent morning shortly after Xi's visit, Li introduced employees mostly in their 20s and plucked from across text, photo and Web departments. One bearded graphic artist worked in Photoshop on the agency's yet-to-be-unveiled mascot, which vaguely resembled a slimmed-down blue Teletubby clutching a microphone.

"Xinhua has a cute side too," Li said. "This gives us a sense of affinity, as if we're close to the people."

On Friday, the All-Media Service debuted an animation explaining China's annual meeting of the nominal parliament, the National People's Congress, which opens Saturday. Dotted with colorful flowers and springtime themes, the three-minute spot aims to show how this political season is aimed at boosting discussion and participation in policy-making.

It also plans to roll out four additional animations in nine languages in

the coming days, and will try to experiment with virtual reality broadcasts.

So far, top Xinhua officials are convinced they struck gold with the videos, Li said. He said his biggest hit, with lyrics like "Repeat after me: four comprehensives, four comprehensives, party-building is the key" has attracted 70 million views and appeared on thousands of online accounts.

Xi himself watched precisely 40 seconds of it during his visit. Li counted.

The video has drawn a deluge of responses—not all positive, Li acknowledged. On Xinhua's Weibo account, many found the video catchy while others complained that too much propaganda material had been forced into state media during the Lunar New Year period.

One user suggested the lyricist who came up with the line "four, four, four, four, four comprehensives" had obsessive-compulsive disorder, and a propaganda official from China's Inner Mongolia region offered dubious praise, calling the song "bewitching and brainwashing."

What pleased him most, Li said, was that final sentiment, when commenters say they could not get the song out of their heads, or that they sometimes found themselves involuntarily humming it.

"This," he said, "is what we call all-media."

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