

# Organized spontaneity : the Chinese communist party and its grassroots correspondents

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asienengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie**

Band (Jahr): **51 (1997)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **13.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147356>

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## ORGANIZED SPONTANEITY: THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY AND ITS GRASSROOT CORRESPONDENTS

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sees press-work as an integral part of its overall propaganda work. Today, even the CCP is ready to admit that her understanding of the term “propaganda” (*xuanchuan*) is close to the understanding of the term by the Catholic Church who in 1622, under Pope Gregory XV, established the sacred congregation *de propaganda fide*.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, in both cases propaganda is understood and organized as an attempt to change the attitudes and beliefs of the people under the influence of the organization. Hierarchical structures to ensure a strictly top-down flow of commands and the harsh (at times cruel) treatment of those trying to resist propaganda are further aspects found in the propaganda work of both organizations. Most studies on CCP press-work so far concentrated on the players at the top of the hierarchy, partly because they were influenced by a model of description that took a strong, totalitarian Party and state for granted (e.g. Chang 1989).

I propose, in contrast, to start an enquiry into the problem of CCP propaganda from the basis and, as far as sources allow, from within the structure. I will try to understand how the Party organized those persons responsible for providing the raw material out of which the CCP formulated its strategies for agitation and propaganda, and, subsequently, its policies. In order to reach a better understanding of how CCP propaganda in general and its press work in particular worked I shall study the phenomenon of *tongxun yuan* (from now on: TXY).

1 See Robert JACKALL (ed): *Propaganda* (London: Macmillan, 1995, p. 1) and the reference to the Catholic origin of the term in *Zhongguo gongchandang zhishi daquan* (Ha'erbin: Ha'erbin chubanshe 1991, p. 221). Comparing the two varieties of propaganda can, however, not be fully convincing in the end; as Peter Kenez in his *The Birth of the Propaganda State* pointed out: “The greatest problem is that while we all think we know perfectly well what propaganda is, in fact we have no precise definition that would be value free and valid regardless of time or political culture” (Kenez 1985, 1).

According to the definition in the 1980 *New China Dictionary* (*Xinhua cidian*), a TXY is “a person working in industry, agriculture, in the army, or in other organizations, who is responsible for providing reports about the situation in his working-unit to newspapers, periodicals and broadcasting stations; he is a reporter who provides information on the opinions and desires of the masses”. The definition of the TXY as well as the groups from which TXY were to be recruited changed considerably over the time, as well as the dependence of the TXY on Party directives. But from the beginning the Party showed great interest in leading and controlling the TXY.

TXY are *not* professional journalists. The texts they produce are a kind of report about the situation in their surrounding. What they write is seen by the Party as a particular type of raw material which allows its leading organs on different levels of the hierarchy to gain a better understanding of the situation at grassroot-level. Their reports are not necessarily published, and according to some sources only as little as five percent of all reports written by the TXY were actually meant to be published; thus the large majority of the texts were obviously treated as a source of confidential information. Evidently, the organization of TXY and the materials produced by TXY deserve scholarly attention. Despite the importance of the phenomenon the topic has, to my knowledge, not been written about systematically outside China. In the People’s Republic of China itself there is no unedited material written by TXY available so far. However, we have a wealth of information on the *organization* of TXY by the Department of Propaganda in the CCP’s Central Committee.

As will become clear, the system of TXY as described and organized by the CCP has been growing steadily in complexity over the years. Reading the extensive communications about the question of TXY written by the CCP Party-centre reveals the high priority that the system must have had for CCP propagandists. Even without the actual material written by the TXY we can learn what the TXY actually meant to the CCP and what the problems in their reporting must have been.

For the time being, all information available on TXY between 1921 and 1956 is in the three-volume-collection “published for internal use” (*neibu faxing*) by the Chinese Academy of Social Science’s Newspaper Research Institute in 1980: *Collection of material on newspaper-work of the CCP* (*Zhongguo gongchandang xinwen gongzuo wenjian huibian*, from now on quoted as XGW).

Early documents on *tongxun yuan*

During the many years these documents cover we can observe a continuously rising level of diversification of the organization of the TXY. Many of the characteristics we find in the post-1949 documents are already present in pre-liberation materials, enabling us to follow the development continuously and “from the inside” of the CCP’s Department of Propaganda.

One of the earliest statements concerning the question of TXY is included in the draft for a decision submitted to the third meeting of the Central Committee of the CCP in September 1926:

In order to know, to analyse and eventually to lead the mood among the masses it is absolutely necessary for our Party to put into practice the resolution on worker- and peasant-correspondents. There are roughly four different ways to organize the worker-and peasant correspondents: (1) The Department of Propaganda chooses those among the workers who can write correspondences and makes them report freely on the circumstances of their lives, their working conditions and their family situation; thus they can speak out about their feelings and their understanding of political problems; (2) The Department of Propaganda selects a few students and sends them to the workers or the peasants districts and lets them make notes of their conversations; (3) The Department of Propaganda entrusts the CCP’s worker’s deputies and peasant’s deputies to find worker- and peasant correspondences; (4) In the case of strikes and resistance against rent and taxes the Department of Propaganda specially sends its people to worker- and peasant quarters ... (XGW I, 33, 34).<sup>2</sup>

From these early Party directives the paradox of “organized spontaneity” becomes evident: on the one hand, the Party is interested to know the situation among workers and peasants, is interested in their spontaneous reactions to working conditions etc. On the other hand, the knowledge gained with the help of those workers and peasants is not enough for the CCP, and the Party immediately wants to go one step further to try to lead and control them.

2 This document does not talk of *tongxun yuan* (“correspondents”) but speaks of *tongxin yuan*. The two terms are, however, synonymous.

A few years later, in 1930, a document bluntly demands better control over the TXY, seeks to supervise their work, decides which movements they should take part in and orders their mistakes to be corrected (XGW I, 66).

It became clear early on that TXY usually could not be trusted, that they “needed guidance”. Because their level of education was usually low, the Party wanted to include different types of TXY into its network of informants, thus increasing the complexity of the organization gradually: In a telegram to its local branches in 1944 the Xinhua news agency elaborated on the system of information-gathering and the role of TXY within this system. A three-level structure was to be erected in order to put into practice the Leninist principle of “The whole Party runs the paper”: at the lowest level there are the worker- and peasant correspondents (*gongnong tongxun yuan*) who are called a “self-defense army” (*ziwei dui*). On a level above them there are the “core-correspondents” (*jigan tongxun yuan*), colloquially called “people’s soldiers” (*minbing*). On top of these “footsoldiers” are the regular troops or “main force” (*zhuli*): the journalists (*jizhe*) (see XGW, I, 149). From this same document we also learn that the network of TXY was also extended to the military, where it is said to be of vital importance for the fighting capacity of the troops (*ibid.*, 150).

Winning the civil war, the CCP since 1947 became more and more eager to establish a nation-wide network of its own administration. A network to control public opinion was one of the most formidable tasks: the CCP’s success was to a great extent (at least in the CCP’s own eyes) grounded in the trust of wide segments of the population. To enhance this trust, and eventually to control it, disseminating the new creed via newspapers was crucial. Since a majority of Chinese could not read, special “newspaper reading groups” (*dubao zu*) were founded. It was among the most active members of these “newspaper reading groups” that the TXY began to be recruited in large numbers soon after 1949.

On March 29, 1950, half a year after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Hu Qiaomu, then director of the Central government Press office (*Xinwen zongshu shuzhang*) gave a long report on the expected development of press work under the new government.<sup>3</sup> In this report Hu

3 Press work was coordinated and run by the Party’s Central Committee. For a brief period, between 1950 and 1952, the Press department was nominally run by a

showed the development of the communist press work, outlined its dependence on the theories of Lenin and Stalin and pointed out again and again that the press work done by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was to be made a model for the press work of the CCP.

In a paragraph revealing a close reading of the Soviet experience Hu “finds out” for his own Party’s press, what the CPSU had found out in 1919: reports in provincial Party papers neglect local news badly. All they write about is central policies, central decisions and central concerns. In order to improve this situation Hu suggested to build a “network of worker- and peasant-correspondents” (*gong nong tongxun yuan wang*). As in the Soviet Union, workers, peasants and persons employed on the lower levels in the vast Party administration were encouraged to write reports about their working place, about their superiors, about mistakes and achievements.

Hu stressed the point that the TXY have to be seen as an important political force, and every newspaper in the whole country was obliged to build a network of TXY. The idea was to get a lot of information from the grassroot level in a short time. In Hu’s authoritative article, the work of these TXY was described as the origin of a information-network: the most advanced ideas among the masses could be gathered by the TXY, enabling newspapers and periodicals to disseminate the information among its readers quickly (XGW II, 53-54). Hu did not say, however, that the Party was also interested in the reports of the TXY as a means to control its lower level cadres.

### *Tongxun yuan* in Heilongjiang

During a recent trip to China I have been able to get hold of several internal (*neibu*) journals that were produced by provincial Party papers for their TXY. The most complete series in my possession was edited under the title “Correspondent’s Work” (*Tongxun gongzuo*, from now on: TG) by the editors of Heilongjiang Daily (*Heilongjiang ribao*). Although TG does not contain unedited material written by TXY, we get a much clearer

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Government organ. After February 1952 press work was again put under strict control by the Party (Zhu 1995, 116).



picture of the TXY, their work and the Party's attempt to organize and control them.

TG was produced for internal use and carries the note "Internal periodical. Do not loose!" on its title page. The editorial office of this provincial paper was responsible for recruiting, leading and educating TXY in the whole province. The organization grew considerably in a short time: in October 1951 there were already 2'300 TXY working for *Heilongjiang ribao* (TG 7, 2).<sup>4</sup>

As in many other domains in the early 1950s, the CCP personalized debates. In the case of the debate on TXY in TG this means that two prototypes were created, one positive, the other negative. By the end of October 1951 the Party was ready to call the positive examples by name: Wang Zhanshun and Zhang Shoutian are the two happy ones. Their names also stand for a program: like their famous brothers and sisters in the pages of contemporary prose, they have telling names: Zhanshun "the one who occupies easily" and Shoutian, "the one who guards the fields" are the exemplars, Wang standing for the efforts in industry, and Zhang for the efforts in agriculture, a job sharing clearly indicated by their respective given names.

The reasons why they are chosen as model-TXY are given in the article introducing the debate: they are themselves engaged in the production process, their working style is an extremely active one, they link up with the paper frequently, they regularly reflect the voices of the masses, their opinions and their needs (TG 7, 2).

Their negative counterparts are still left without a name, yet their character traits are drawn out distinctly, as a warning for all those TXY who still do not live up to the style of Wang Zhanshun and Zhang Shoutian. The list of a TXY's negative characteristics yields information about the difficulties the CCP faced in its propaganda work at the time: many TXY do not understand what the political significance of the TXY is. They do not write their articles as part of the fulfilment of their political duties but rather to improve their writing style and raise their cultural level. When writing, they use a lot of time for finding the correct word or phrase and ask for corrections once they have sent in their manuscripts (TG 7, passim).

4 For comparison, Fujian Daily (*Fujian ribao*) is said to have had 5'000 TXY, Hebei Daily (*Hebei ribao*) 1'600 (Zhu 1995, 103).

From these brief passages it becomes clear how narrow the leeway had become for the TXY (and for press work in general): “spontaneity” had, already in 1950, been almost completely replaced by “organization”. The CCP embarked on its arduous path of “creating legitimacy” by forcing those to comply, who actually should have been spontaneously convinced by the Party’s wisdom.

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