

Rethinking Propaganda Discourse: Convergence and Divergence Unveiled

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Abstract : Propaganda, understood as a 'deliberate attempt to persuade people to think and behave in a desired way', contributes to the fabric of mass media discourse as an important component, albeit often under various alternative expressions except 'propaganda'. When the word 'propaganda' does appear in the mainstream media of the West, it is often selectively applied upon undesiring parties such as China, the North Korea, Russia's Putin, or terrorists, etc.. This attitude reveals an 'us versus them' mentality; and a presupposition that propaganda is something only 'they' do whilst 'we' do not. This phenomenon not only runs in danger of generating political naivety, but also calls for the necessity of re-examining propaganda which will benefit from analysing it in contrasting social and political environments. Therefore, this paper aims to compare how propaganda has been understood and put in practice both in the Anglo-American context and by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). By revealing the convergence and divergence of the propaganda discourses between China and the West, it will help clarify the misconception and misunderstanding of the term. Historical narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis are the main methodologies. By carefully examining data from academic research on propaganda in both English and Chinese, the landscape of how propaganda is defined throughout different eras is mapped, with special attention paid to analysing the parallelism and/or correspondence between China and the West when applicable. Meanwhile, critically analysing the official documents such as speeches and guidelines for propaganda administration given by top-rank CCP leaders will help reveal that in contrast to the West's 'us-them' mentality, China sees oneself in no difference with the Western democracies when propaganda is concerned. Major findings of this study will identify a series of convergence and divergence between Chinese and Western propaganda discourses, and the relationship between propaganda the 'signified' (its essence) and propaganda the 'signifier' (the term itself), including (yet not limited to): 1) convergence in China catching up with the West, acknowledging the perceived pejorative connotation of the term 2) divergence in propaganda activities disassociated from the term in the West; and convergence in adopting such practice when China following suit in its external propaganda towards the West 3) convergence in utilising alternative notions to replace 'propaganda', first by the West, then imported and incorporated enthusiastically by China into its propaganda discourse 4) divergence between China's internal and external propaganda and the subsequent differentiation between in which contexts the CCP sees fit to utilise the concept 5) convergence between China and the West in their English language propaganda discourses, whilst simultaneous divergence in their presuppositions: 'us-them' by the West and 'we are the same' by China. To conclude, this paper will contribute to the study of propaganda and its discourse by analysing how propaganda is understood and utilised in both worlds, and hence to uncover the discourse power struggle between the two, which contributes to the propaganda discourse itself. Hence, to untie the misconception of propaganda.

Keywords : China, discourse, power, propaganda

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