



## The Weaponization of Mandarin Chinese

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### Abstract

This article investigates the weaponization of Mandarin Chinese by analyzing four components of weaponized language: propaganda, disinformation, censorship, and mundane discourse deployed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The weaponization of Mandarin Chinese particularly targets religious people, including Christians, Falun Gong practitioners, and believers of sects unsanctioned by CCP, minorities, and prodemocracy activists. The weaponization of the Chinese language demonstrates that the CCP authorities possess the power to manipulate language so that it shapes public discourse and affects public perception, opinion, and behavior.

**Keywords:** weaponization of Mandarin Chinese, propaganda, disinformation, censorship, mundane discourse

### Authoritarian and Totalitarian Countries' Weaponization of Language

Weaponizing language is one of the discursive strategies used by authoritarian<sup>1</sup> and totalitarian<sup>2</sup> governments to consolidate power within their nations, often by demonizing or dehumanizing their own citizens. Weaponized language is more than slurs and euphemisms for violence; it shapes public discourse and affects public perception, opinion, and behavior (Pascale, 2019). Further, weaponized language is a systematic, affective manipulation that amplifies resentments, deepens social divisions, and destroys the integrity of public information spaces. Through the weaponization of language, authoritarian and totalitarian movements establish their own authority as unaccountable and render the violence they enact ordinary.

The People's Republic of China, under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is described either as an authoritarian or a totalitarian country. Human Rights Watch (2021), an international nongovernmental organization committed to uncovering human rights abuses, describes

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<sup>1</sup> I use *authoritarian government* to describe a political system that concentrates power in the hands of a leader or a small elite that is not constitutionally responsible to the body of the people. It prefers the blind submission of its citizens to authority.

<sup>2</sup> I use *totalitarian government* to describe a centralized government that does not tolerate parties of differing opinion and that exercises dictatorial control over many aspects of life.

Communist China as a one-party authoritarian state that systemically curbs fundamental rights. The US Department of State (n.d.) says that “the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is an authoritarian state in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the paramount authority” (para. 1). Following Friedrich and Brzezinski’s (1965) six traits of a totalitarian state, which includes (1) an official ideology, (1) a single political party typically led by one man, (3) secret police, (4) party control of mass communications, (5) party control of the military, and (6) a centrally directed economy, Edwards (2020) conducted a thorough analysis and concluded that China is already totalitarian in five of the six traits and an authoritarian structure regarding the centrally controlled economy.

Thus, it is necessary to delve into how the CCP weaponizes one of its most valuable resources, Mandarin Chinese, to maintain its status and power in the global community and to tighten its control over ideology and people. In this article, the analysis of the CCP’s weaponization of Mandarin Chinese focuses on propaganda, censorship, disinformation, and mundane discourse, which are imposed on religious people, ethnic minorities, and prodemocracy activists.

### **Weaponizing Mandarin Chinese in the People’s Republic of China**

The weaponization of Mandarin Chinese is not new in mainland China, and it has targeted various groups of people since the PRC was founded in 1949. In the Maoist era (1949–1976), particularly during the Cultural Revolution, intellectuals, members of Black Five Categories,<sup>3</sup> and ethnic minorities suffered weaponization of Mandarin Chinese, and many of them became victims of the discursive strategy. For example, the language of political movement was always dictated from above to manipulate thought. Mao and the Party created a hereditary system, particularly two dichotomous classes. The revolutionary class was red, with Mao himself identifying as the reddest object; by contrast, the forces of ‘darkness’ were associated with the color black. Mao placed his closest aides in charge of the *Red Flag*, *People’s Daily*, and *Guangming Daily*, the Beijing Party newspapers, as well as the New China News Agency so that he and his aids could manipulate political discourse in the country as a whole. The official press led the way, calling class enemies “devils,” “demons,” “vampires,” “apparitions and specters,” “monsters,” and “Yama”—the King of the Dead. The language used to condemn class enemies dehumanized potential victims, fostered hatred toward them, and encouraged violent attacks on them.

Since Xi Jinping and the CCP took power in 2013, the weaponization of Mandarin Chinese has been heavily mobilized by the government in order to centralize his authority and back policies that tighten control of civil society. The use of Mandarin Chinese as a weapon has allowed the government to justify attacks on religious people, ethnic minorities, and prodemocracy activists in the country during Xi’s era. Presently, the CCP weaponizes Mandarin Chinese in four ways: censorship, propaganda, disinformation, and mundane discourse. In the sections below, I explore these four ways in which the CCP weaponizes Mandarin Chinese in the nation by delving deeper into the topics of religion, ethnic minorities, and prodemocracy activists. Religious groups, especially Christians and Falun Gong practitioners, ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, Tibet, as well as other regions, and prodemocracy activists are usually deemed as threats to the CCP rule, so they are victims of Mandarin Chinese weaponization.

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<sup>3</sup> During the period of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in the People’s Republic of China, Mao Zedong identified groups that he considered enemies of the Revolution. The phrase *Five Black Categories* referred to the following five political entities: Landlords, Rich farmers (peasants), Counter-revolutionaries, Bad-influencers [“bad elements”], and Rightists.

## Censorship

Censorship prohibits language that threatens hegemonic power. In the information age, media censorship may be the hallmark of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes around the globe. The media environments in China are among the world's most restrictive because the CCP relies on censorship to control information in the news, online, and on social media. In addition to the Chinese government blocking certain Western websites deemed potentially dangerous (e.g., BBC, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Epoch Times, Radio Free Asia, etc.), specific material considered a threat to political stability is banned, including controversial search terms, photos, and videos. The government is particularly keen on blocking reports of issues that could incite social unrest, like official corruption, the economy, health, and environmental scandals, certain religious groups, and ethnic strife within China.

### *Religion*

Authorities in China have removed online Bible apps from app stores in the country, as well as taken down prominent Christian chat accounts. Bibles are not readily available, and their sale is largely restricted to sellers associated with the Patriotic churches. Xi Jinping has continued to tighten his grip on Christians, with many in the Party regarding Christianity as inherently subversive and bound up with 'Western' values, especially around the dignity of the individual. "Clearly, the Chinese Communist Party sees the growth of Christianity in China as a threat to its wealth and power" (*The Tablet*, 2021, para. 8).

The Chinese government has published new censored versions of classic texts for Chinese children to read in schools in 2019. In these new textbooks, which include the works of Daniel Defoe, Hans Christian Andersen, and Anton Chekhov, religious language, such as *Bible*, *God*, and *Christ*, has been removed. For example, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* originally mentioned the Bible as well as some prayer books. The original text reads: "also, I found three very good Bibles, [...] some Portuguese books also; and among them two or three Popish prayer-books, and several other books all which I carefully secured" (Defoe, 2014, p. 35). The new version of the text published by the Chinese government simply refers to the religious works as *Portuguese books*. Similarly, in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Match Girl," a passage that originally read, "when a star falls, a soul was going up to God" (1846, p. 2) was altered to say *when a star falls, a person is leaving*. Various references to religion in Anton Chekhov's short story "Vanka" (1886) have also either been removed or changed.

In addition to censoring religious texts that teach ideology opposing Communism and Socialism, the Chinese government has also censored religious groups and leaders whose activities threaten the CCP regime. One of the most prominent religious movements censored by the CCP is the Falun Gong. The Chinese government's repression of Falun Gong officially started in July 1999. The movement's skyrocketing popularity and its Buddhist-like precepts of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance are regarded as an existential threat to the CCP's doctrines of atheism, class struggle, and violent revolution. Although the CCP leadership initially respected, praised, and awarded Falun Gong's movement, it then blocked internet access to websites mentioning Falun Gong and declared it a heretical organization that threatened social stability. Censorship has become one of the strategies used by the Chinese government to crack down on Falun Gong. The inability to report on the movement drew the media's great concern between 1999 and 2001. All Falun Gong-related websites have been blocked since the CCP launched the internet censorship project in 2000, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)'s website at one point because it hosts the MIT Falun Gong club (<http://web.mit.edu/falundafa/www/home.html>).

### *Ethnic Minorities*

Mainland China is home to 56 ethnic groups, and 55 of them are minorities. Xinjiang and Tibet are the provinces where over 40 ethnic groups dwell. Like ethnic Tibetans who constitute the majority of the population in Tibet, Uyghurs, a Turkic-speaking ethnic group, outnumber other ethnic groups in Xinjiang (China Internet Information Center, n.d.). The CCP authorities' rule over Xinjiang and Tibet depends on military strength. Social issues, including discrimination against ethnic minorities and forceful implementation of government policies, result in protests and separatist activities, which are on a minor scale and have lacked organization and weapons. Although they have not threatened Beijing's hold on the two regions, the CCP censors news coverage about protests. In addition, the Chinese government blocks any news stories questioning what the CCP has done in the regions where ethnic minorities are the majority. To make things more complicated, accurate information on the ongoing atrocities is nearly impossible to access on the Chinese internet.

Some of the topics that the CCP has censored throughout the years about Xinjiang include the 2013 Tiananmen Square Attack, concentration camps, and forced labor. In 2013, a terrorist suicide attack in which the East Turkistan Movement claimed responsibility happened in Beijing. Coverage in the Chinese State media largely downplayed the incident, with only brief reports. The CCP authorities' oppression of Turkic Muslims has reached unprecedented levels in recent years. It is estimated that a million people have been arbitrarily detained in 300-400 facilities, including 'political education' camps, pretrial detention centers, and prisons. Detainees and prisoners are subjected to torture and other ill treatment, cultural and political indoctrination, and forced labor. The US, Canada, and the Netherlands have determined that China's conduct constitutes genocide (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Undoubtedly, no news stories regarding concentration camps and forced labor in Xinjiang are allowed to show up on the internet in China.

In a similar manner, the CCP tightly controls the flow of information inside and outside of Tibetan areas, so anyone seeking to report on Tibet faces severe restrictions and repression by the government. Social media censorship is one of the controls used by Chinese authorities to keep information from reaching Tibetan regions. News stories about protests and political struggles in Tibet are particularly banned by authorities. One form of protest that Tibetans have used as a statement of opposition to the Chinese government crackdown is self-immolations. These protests have enormously escalated since 2009, but the mainland Chinese State media barely covered self-immolation cases, and Chinese authorities did not permit any independent media to attend the trial of the protesters (Crete-Nishihata & Tsui, 2021). "The Chinese people have no opportunity to know our issue," said the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, the Buddhist monk who Beijing has branded as a dangerous separatist for demanding Tibetan self-determination (Reuters, 2010).

Censorship occurs in Inner Mongolia as well. The Chinese government has imposed a systemic crackdown in Inner Mongolia, shutting off the only Mongolian-language social media platform in China, Bainu (<http://bainu.com/>). Other content relating to the government's policy to erase Mongolian-language education, mainly on the Chinese social media app WeChat (<https://www.wechat.com/>), has been heavily censored, with over 28 WeChat users being summoned by the authorities because of their posts. Moreover, over 450 WeChat users have received warnings, either in person or by telephone, threatening them with punishment if they continue to question the Chinese policy online (South Mongolian Human Rights Information Center, 2020).

### *Prodemocracy Activists*

China, under the CCP's rule, is an authoritarian regime that does not tolerate any criticism, so advocates of democracy have been targeted by the Chinese government. These prodemocracy activists

include some prominent figures such as Lu Xiaobo, Ai Weiwei, Wang Dan, Wei Jingsheng, Joshua Wong, and many more who remain unknown. These prodemocracy activists have pushed the boundaries of Chinese society, criticizing the policies of the government. The CCP authorities have censored these individuals, their names, their online posts chastising the government, and any other published materials, like books, authored by them. Books by young activist Joshua Wong (Wong & Ng, 2020) or prodemocracy politician Tanya Chan (Chan, 2014) became unavailable in China after the Chinese national security law censoring them was passed. The national security law includes the removal from libraries of published content by prodemocracy figures and the editing of textbooks.

In the same vein, the CCP has always censored prodemocracy events. An example of such events is the Tiananmen Square Protests (also known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre), which were student-led demonstrations held in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, in 1989. During these protests, moderates, such as Zhao Ziyang (the Party General Secretary), advocated negotiating with protesters and concessions. However, moderates were overruled by hardliners led by Chinese premier Li Peng and supported by paramount elder statesman Deng Xiaoping who insisted on forcibly suppressing protests. By the beginning of June, tanks and heavily armed troops advanced toward Tiananmen Square, opening fire on or crushing those who tried to block their way. Once the soldiers reached the square, a number of the few thousand remaining demonstrators there chose to leave rather than face a continuation of the confrontation. By morning the area had been cleared of protesters.

The CCP has considered the Tiananmen Square Protests and similar prodemocracy events a threat to the political stability of the nation and has passed laws banning future acts. In June 2013, the censorship around the Tiananmen anniversary reached new heights, with Chinese social media blocking even vague, tertiary references to the incident. CCP authorities even imposed censorship on prodemocracy activists based in the US, demanding that Zoom Video Communications Inc. (<https://zoom.us/>) deactivate these activists' Zoom accounts because they hosted events via Zoom to commemorate Tiananmen Square protests.

### **Propaganda**

Propaganda has played a critical role since the CCP was founded in China in 1921. The CCP deployed propaganda to win popular support, particularly the support of the Chinese people under Guomindang rule before 1949. From 1949 to 1978, the CCP propaganda system became a vital tool for the Party to direct the communist revolution. Since the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, the CCP has continued strengthening its hold on power by propagating the Party's ideology using Western technologies such as the internet, technological surveillance, etc. The CCP divides propaganda into two categories, internal and external, as well as four types: political, economic, cultural, and social (Brady & Junto, 2009). The purpose of the CCP propaganda is to deliver the Party's political message to party members, the Chinese people, and "the enemy," often portrayed as those who do not agree with communist ideologies. The propaganda agenda has emphasized patriotism, collectivism, socialism, and scientific consciousness in the post-1989 era.

### *Religion*

Religious and spiritual groups pose a political threat to the CCP, so the Party launched a political campaign named *Scientific Consciousness* against Falun Gong in 1999 due to its rapid growth. In this political campaign, the CCP defines Falun Gong as an antihumanity, antisociety, and antiscience evil cult (Cook, 2017). Television and radio broadcasts flooded the airwaves with testimonials by bereaved relatives of Falun Gong victims who railed against the 'evil cult' that had led their loved ones astray. Sobbing denunciations of Master Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong, blamed the movement's

supreme leader for the tragedies of insanity, suicide, starvation, and even murder that had befallen parents, children, and spouses.

The CCP authorities have deployed two kinds of propaganda tactics regarding Christianity. On the one hand, the CCP spreads the view that Christianity is a Western religion introduced to China rather than an Indigenous religion, so Christianity is often depicted as a tool utilized by Western countries to fool the Chinese and overthrow the rule of the Chinese government. The repression of Christian churches and Christians is framed in terms of developing Chinese religions instead of the Western religion. On the other hand, CCP authorities claim that Christianity loves the CCP. In July 2021, an exhibition titled “One Heart, One Virtue, One Path: Chinese Christianity Loves the Party, the Country, and Socialism Theme Exhibition” claimed that “the advanced members of the Christian community have always been of one mind and one direction with the Party, leaving a beautiful footprint and bearing wonderful witness” (Zhang, 2021, para. 5).

### *Ethnic Minorities*

The CCP has carried out propaganda with a two-fold purpose regarding Xinjiang and Uyghurs. One purpose is to showcase the prosperous and peaceful life in Xinjiang, and the other is to justify atrocities Chinese authorities have done throughout Xinjiang and to minorities by smearing Uyghurs as terrorists. The Chinese government has engaged in a propaganda campaign to defend its actions in Xinjiang. In April 2021, the Chinese government released propaganda videos titled *Xinjiang is a Wonderful Land*, and produced a musical titled *The Wings of Songs* in order to portray Xinjiang as harmonious and peaceful. Kao et al. (2021) downloaded more than 5,000 videos posted on these websites, including Pomegranate Cloud, Twitter, and YouTube, between January 23 (the date of the first campaign video following the US State Department’s January 19 declaration of genocide in Xinjiang) and May 31. These researchers catalogued more than 3,000 unique campaign videos out of the more than 5,000 collected by running a sample of its frames through the Google Cloud Vision image labeler. These campaign videos highlight the message that the people in Xinjiang live a good and happy life under the CCP’s rule.

The CCP’s propaganda demonizes Xinjiang minorities, especially Uyghurs, who stand up to the CCP. While depicting Uyghur resistance as terror and of those fleeing Chinese oppression as inherently dangerous, the CCP continues to exploit the language of the war on terror and Islamophobia to label modest dressing, long beards, protests, or even trivial offenses as evidence of Islamic extremism and terrorism. By rebranding the war on separatism as part of a global war on terror and portraying spontaneous, unorganized clashes between Uyghur civilians and Chinese security forces as acts of organized terrorism, the CCP successfully aligned its ethnic repression with the West’s war on terrorism in the name of freedom (Yehan, 2021). The blatant distortion of reality is used to justify atrocities made by the CCP in Xinjiang.

The CCP launches the propaganda campaign in order to laud their own work in Tibet and counter Tibetan monks’ threat to its rule. The Chinese government released a white paper portraying the annexation as a ‘peaceful liberation’ in 2021 (Xinhua Net, 2021). The white paper claimed that Tibet has seen an “enormous transformation” and blamed “Western anti-China forces” (p. 35) for stirring unrest there, the state-run China Global Television Network reported. The International Campaign for Tibet, a Washington, DC-based nonprofit, and other activist groups rejected the white paper as simply more propaganda in the CCP’s long campaign to erase Tibet’s rich past while exploiting its natural resources and strategic location (Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 2021).

Since Xi Jinping came to power, the CCP has mobilized more rigorous propaganda campaigns to ‘sinicize’ Tibetan Buddhism. The campaigns include tightening control over monastic affairs,

monitoring activities of the monks and nuns, and increasing mandatory indoctrination training sessions in monasteries and nunneries across Tibet (Lhamo, 2021). The efforts are undertaken by China in order to remake Tibetan culture into mainstream Chinese culture.

### *Prodemocracy Activists*

The 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests were a turning point in China's overall political system as well as its approach to propaganda and thought work. Deng Xiaoming (paramount elder statesman) said that the weak propaganda work from the Chinese government until that point resulted in the Protest. As such, new leadership was required to rebuild the CCP's propaganda system to secure its regime and rule. In post-Tiananmen China, authorities shifted to cultural-cum-nationalist propaganda, which is a strategy with which the CCP controls information scattered in the public sphere and has proven to shape public opinions. Propaganda departments identify local sites to serve as 'educational bases' where instruction in the history of China and the indispensable role of the CCP in unifying and modernizing the nation could be effectively conducted. Propaganda stresses that the CCP is the chief custodian of the Chinese civilization, credited with perpetuating an allegedly uninterrupted party tradition of protecting ancient cultural relics as national treasures.

While justifying their right to rule, the CCP applies specific words and phrases, including "brainwashed by the West," "separatism," "subversion of state power," among others, to dissidents and prodemocracy activists. The propaganda sows division and incites hostility toward prodemocracy activists in the country. Protesters in Hong Kong, for example, are labeled as cockroaches and locusts in order to provoke disgust and potentially imply that such vermin deserve extermination. At the same time, the CCP's propaganda attacks Western democracy as divisive and confrontational in an attempt to boost Chinese confidence in socialism with Chinese characteristics. CPP's propaganda submerges the interests of ordinary people beneath those of corporations and governments, and effectively uses the language of ideals to obscure otherwise objectionable ends (Stanley, 2018).

### **Disinformation**

Disinformation is a subset of propaganda. It is false information spread systematically through media and public announcements to intentionally confuse or mislead the public. The consistency of the system that generates facts persuades the public more than facts do (Arendt, 1967). Under the CCP's rule, religion, ethnic minorities, and prodemocracy activists have proved a fertile ground for fake news. CCP authorities try to justify the repression of these and other groups they do not approve of.

### *Religion*

In mainland China, the CCP has used social media to denounce a few religions as 'pseudoreligions' or 'cults.' Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God (CAG), for example, have been victims of CCP's disinformation and are listed as 'cults,' which has served as justification for the government to persecute their practitioners.

Introvigne (2018) expounded six cases where the CCP manipulated disinformation against the Church of Almighty God. The cases include the McDonald's murder, the story of Guo Bin, predicting the end of the world in 2012, the CAG monetary compensation for religious conversions, Evangelical Christian leader kidnapped by the CAG, and the international campaign of 2017. In the first two cases, the CCP was trying to give false attribution of the crimes to the CAG; in the third story, the Chinese sources tried to prove that the CAG had announced the end of the world in 2012; the derogatory information in the fourth case was spread because of a post-McDonald's laundry list of accusations against the CAG published by the official newspaper of the Chinese regime, the *People's Daily* (People's Daily, 2014); in the fifth case, the CCP realized that the incidents were of interest to Western scholars

after the news traveled from Chinese Evangelicals to Evangelicals abroad, so the CCP added them to its laundry list of anti-CAG propaganda items; in the sixth case, the Chinese government media claimed that only 18 members of the CAG had been arrested while nearly 600 CAG members were arrested in Zhejiang Province. The disinformation fabricated by the CCP aims at discrediting the Church of Almighty God.

Christians and Christian churches unsanctioned by the CCP authorities have been persecuted by the Chinese government, and persecution has escalated in recent years. Chinese media reports the charges that the CCP authorities make up for Christians who stand up to the government. Some of the most common accusations fabricated by the Chinese government to inculcate Christians and Christian churches include subversion of state power, illegal operation of a business, and organizing an evil cult. Pastor Wang Yi, along with other leaders and lay believers of the Early Rain Covenant Church located in Chengdu, Sichuan, have been imprisoned and/or interrogated on such charges. Although Christianity is one of the five religions recognized by the Chinese government (along with Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and Catholicism), the CCP smears some churches and Christians in an attempt to curb its development in China.

#### *Ethnic Minorities*

Chinese authorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) are believed to have held up to 1.8 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in a vast network of internment camps since early 2017. A proliferation of credible evidence, including media reporting, independent research, testimonies, and open-source data, has revealed abuses including forced labor, mass detention, surveillance, sterilization, cultural erasure, and alleged genocide in China's Xinjiang region (Finley, 2021). Zhao Lijiang, a Chinese government spokesperson, tweeted that "the Uyghur population in Xinjiang has been growing steadily in recent years." China in 2019 changed tactics and began describing the facilities as residential training centers that provide vocational training for Uyghurs, discourage radicalization, and help protect the country from terrorism.

The CCP creates and sows rumors, disinformation, suspicion, and hatred around individuals who advocate for Uyghurs with the goal of discrediting them and, by extension, their claims. A victim of this practice is Halmurat Harri Uyghur, a 33-year-old doctor currently living in Finland who began his online activism in a bid to find his parents. In response to Halmurat Harri Uyghur's activism, the CCP launched a massive disinformation campaign against him, claiming he was not even Uyghur but Jewish, and flooding his social media messages with vitriol and abuse. Eventually, Halmurat Harri Uyghur gave up public activism, deleted his Facebook account, and went back to his medical studies.

#### *Prodemocracy Activists*

In response to widespread prodemocracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, the Chinese government crafted an online disinformation campaign calling the protesters cockroaches, and casting them as members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), according to disclosures made by Twitter and Facebook. An August 11, 2019 post from China Daily alleged that one of the protesters fired a US-manufactured grenade launcher (Dotson, 2019). The falsified content intended to support PRC state media narratives that Hong Kong protesters are violent terrorists and that the US is fueling the unrest from behind the scenes. Chinese state-run media agencies like China Daily, Xinhua News, and China Global Television Network (CGTN) discredited the protesters or painted them as disruptive.

### **Mundane Discourses**

Mundane discourse can be perceived as the linguistic channel through which weaponized language enters the mainstream (Pascale, 2019). Weaponized language, including metaphors and linguistic

frames, seeps into everyday discourse and gradually becomes a part of society's worldview. Hate, discrimination, bias, bigotry, and xenophobia are normalized through purportedly ordinary language.

### *Religion*

Christianity originated in Israel and was introduced to China in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, but it has long been regarded as a Western religion among Chinese folks. Christians and Catholics were assaulted and even murdered during the Boxer Rebellion from 1899 through 1901 because of the association with Western countries. The phrase “worship foreign things and fawn on foreign powers” (崇洋媚外 chong yang mei wai) is often applied to Chinese Christians and Catholics. This phrase is used to describe people who look up to foreign cultures and things but despise their own cultural heritage. The Chinese government's policy of sinicizing Christianity over recent years strengthens the impression that Christianity is a foreign religion. In addition, Christianity is described by the government as the weapon mobilized by Western countries to invade China and fool the Chinese people.

After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, atheist education/indoctrination has changed people's perception of religions. The mainstream idea that religion and science are opposites justifies the belief that the illiterate and weak are religious. Education, ideology, and policy—all of which are dominated by the CCP—restrict mundane discourse about Christianity to its downside, and people have few options of the vocabulary to use when talking about Christianity. Christianity, to the majority of the Chinese, is less valuable than and inferior to Indigenous religions such as Daoism and folk religions.

### *Ethnic Minorities*

In a study, Yi (2007) interviewed Chinese governmental officials, academic commentators, mainstream teachers, and students and found that minority cultures and subjects are rendered by the cultural mainstream as inferior and less valuable to the modernization of China. The high-frequency words emerging in the mainstream discourse at the individual, academic, and government levels include *primitive, backward, uncivilized, inferior, and less valuable* (Yi, 2007). In China, minority cultures are often treated as a means of entertainment and equated with beautiful dancing, colorful dresses, or mysterious legends. They are largely a kind of decoration in mainstream daily life. Some stereotypes about minorities continue to prevail due to CCP's influence. For instance, Muslims are often depicted as profiteers, short-sighted, and untrustworthy. On the other hand, Tibetans are depicted and thought of as an uncultivated ethnic group who tends to lack self-discipline, and resort to violent or disruptive behavior. A lack of cultivation and discipline also presumably results in their limited intellectual merit, which is why the CCP has promoted an alienating discourse where Tibetans are depicted as unable to fit in within the increasingly modernized Chinese society.

### *Prodemocracy Activists*

Nationalism has been on the rise in modern-day China, encouraged by the CCP and put to effective use by President Xi Jinping. China's nationalism today is shaped by its pride in its history as well as its century of humiliation at the hands of the West and Japan. China's nationalism is associated with anti-West sentiment. Prodemocracy activists advocate for the democratic model, which is heavily used in Western countries. Therefore, there is division and even hostility between Chinese nationalists/pro-Beijing people and prodemocracy activists within the nation.

Pro-Beijing rhetoric applies labels of “跪美(gui mei; kneel to the US), 反中(fan Zhong; anti-China), 舔美(tian mei; lick the US), and 辱骂祖国(ru ma zu guo; insult the motherland)” to pro-

democracy activists. One of the official accounts affiliated with the *Global Times* published an article titled “The Death of a Person Who Kneels to the US” in December 2020, claiming that hundreds of tweets directed toward Ding Jianqiang (a prodemocracy activist) included the phrases/keywords “anti-China” and “lick the US” (VOA, 2020). One of the articles by Xinhua News Agency in December 2020 made the phrase “kneel to the US” go viral (Xinhua Net, 2020). Liao Yiwu, a Chinese author, reporter, musician, poet, and critic of China’s Communist regime, was compared to a “shepherd dog” raised by the Western countries and was called an evil public intellectual and traitor in that article (Baidu, 2019).

Other beliefs about prodemocracy activists prevalent among the Chinese government is that leaders of prodemocracy events are supported by the Western anti-China forces; that they are the tools used by the US Central Intelligence Agency to fight against China; and that they should not regard themselves as angels of justice (BBC News, 2011). The public discourses reveal Chinese folks’ lack of empathy and bias against prodemocracy activists, which is both the outcome of the CCP’s use of weaponized language and the avenue where language weaponization is strengthened.

## Final Thoughts

Reviewing the CCP’s strategies for the weaponizing of the Mandarin Chinese language within and outside the nation provides evidence supporting the thought that “the weaponization of language is a systematic process which is essential to constituting and consolidating authoritarian power” (Pascale, 2019, p. 901). In recent years, language weaponization has escalated in the PRC since Xi Jinping came to power. CCP authorities manipulate information by direct censorship, propaganda, and disinformation but also by interfering in mundane discourses. Religious practitioners, ethnic minorities, and prodemocracy activists are the victims of weaponized Mandarin Chinese because they stand up to some of the CCP’s policies and conducts. The weaponization of Mandarin Chinese amplifies resentments, deepens social divisions, and destroys the integrity of public information spaces in China. More importantly, the weaponization of Mandarin Chinese demonstrates how authoritarian and totalitarian governments can use—and have used—language to assert control and spread fear and inequity in society.

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