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## **The Ideological Function of “Positive Energy” Discourse: A People’s Daily Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

*Following its emergence as a popular social byword, in 2012 the term “positive energy” was adopted into frequent usage in Chinese political discourse. Previous studies have analysed the term’s usage in a social context alongside a growing interest in positive psychology, resulting in a portrayal of its main function as that of spreading hope and optimism in the face of challenges. This study now seeks to understand the ideological function the term has served in the political sphere, arguing for a deeper understanding of positive energy discourse within a Gramscian framework of political consensus-building, aimed at reinforcing CCP hegemony. This is shown through an exploratory analysis of People’s Daily Online articles inspired by framing and content-analysis theory, which considers the thematic components, sub-frame problems and actors of the term since the beginning of Xi Jinping’s time in power. The results of this analysis reveal four key trends. These are a focus on challenges which undermine Party dominance; an emphasis on ideas of social responsibility, and communality of interest between the state and the people; a promotion of moral action a grassroots level; and the advocacy of state authority over the Internet. The results demonstrate how positive energy discourse has encouraged a popular consensus around CCP hegemony, creating a Gramscian “common sense” due to its grassroots origins, association with an increasingly popular positive psychology movement, and in-built connotations of happiness.*

**Keywords:** *positive energy, consensus-building, Gramsci, hegemony, People’s Daily, framing theory.*

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## Introduction

In August of 2012 the term “positive energy” (*zhengnengliang* 正能量), began to appear in the headlines of China’s political mouthpiece, the *People’s Daily*. This followed its spread as a cultural keyword at the grassroots level; it was rated as the most popular catchphrase of the year by leading linguistics magazine *Yaowen jiaozi* 咬文嚼字 (Shi, 2013). While its aspirational nature has since been used by the government to spread hope in the face of challenges and suffering (Sun, 2013), alternative sources describe its adoption by the state as a mechanism of control against negativity and dissent (Bandurski, 2014). These varying interpretations begin to paint the picture of an apparently simple term, coined by the people, which has gone on to serve a more complex political agenda.

The origins of the term “positive energy” can be traced back to the field of quantum physics, where it was used in descriptions of the world as a battleground between positive and negative energy (Yang, 2016). It was later adopted by British psychologist Richard Wiseman, whose self-help book *Rip It Up* (2012) was published in Chinese with the term as its title. Wiseman refers to concepts of competing energy forces outlined by physicists, but in this case, in relation to the human body, describes how modifying one’s behaviour can also improve levels of happiness. This places the emergence of positive energy at the grassroots level, in line with a growing interest in positive psychology, which has been central to its rising popularity (Hird, 2016; Wielander, 2017). According to China’s main online encyclopaedia, “positive energy” is now understood as a “healthy and optimistic, positive and progressive power and emotion, the positive behaviour of social life” (*Baidu baike*, n.d.).<sup>1</sup>

However, the focus of this paper is not the meaning of the term itself, but rather the ideological function it has served in Chinese official media. In line with Williams’s (1985) understanding of a “cultural keyword”, the term “positive energy” constitutes an area of social discussion, significant not so much for its actual meaning but rather how it has accrued power and effect as an ideological

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<sup>1</sup> Original text: “正能量”指的是一种健康乐观、积极向上的动力和情感，是社会生活中积极向上的行为。”

tool. The term's popularity at the grassroots level coincided with the start of Xi Jinping's leadership, when it was adopted from popular culture into Chinese Communist Party (CCP) political rhetoric. Though use of the term had been widespread on the Internet even before this point, very little has been written in academic literature about the relevance of this emergence, and less still on the function it has served in political discourse.

Looking at its initial appearance in popular culture, Du's (2014) work examines how the emergence of the grassroots "positive energy" movement during the run-up to the 2012 Olympics called attention to the exemplary behaviour of ordinary people, rather than glorifying the elite medal-winners. Du interprets this initial "positive energy" movement as a new form of non-political patriotism, providing an understanding of the term in popular culture strongly resembling positive psychology and its belief in the progressive power of positive thoughts and actions. These grassroots origins are key to the ideological function the term played after its appropriation into the political sphere, a function which remains largely unexplored in academic literature until now.

The only discussion of the appearance of "positive energy" in political discourse can be found in Hird's (2016; 2018) work on the use of the term in public service advertising, in an analysis which looks at happiness in the context of the formation of China's capitalist society. Forming a basis for his argument is Yang's (2013) work on the Chinese state's "psychologisation" mode of governance, which is argued to use positive psychology to encourage optimism and positivity amongst the people in the face of socio-economic problems. Hird builds on the idea that such happiness, and the emphasis on the individual typical of neo-liberal psychology, has been promoted by the government in part as a way of placing responsibility for social problems on the individual, turning public dissatisfaction away from the government. He develops Yang's ideas by offering a critical analysis of the appearance of "positive energy" in public service advertising, looking at how it has helped form subjectivities across China's different socio-economic stratas, leading to what Illouz describes as "new hierarchies of emotional well-being" (2007:73). Hird suggests that the discursive function of positive energy in this context differs from ideas of positive thinking in the West, in its emphasis on morally responsible behaviour,

as opposed to inward emotional insight, noting how state campaigns have linked the term with “citizenship values such as patriotism” (2018: 114).

While Hird’s (2018) work marks the first step away from understanding “positive energy” as merely a cultural byword, offering an insight into its new political function, his study focuses mainly on public service campaigns. The current study complements his work by offering an alternative angle through which to understand positive energy discourse by looking at the term’s appearance in official media, in particular the CCP’s primary online political mouthpiece, the *People’s Daily Online*. The current study differs largely in its main argument, which is that key to the ideological function of positive energy discourse is the fostering of a popular consensus, with the ultimate aim not only of shifting responsibility from the government to the individual for social problems, nor of merely encouraging the right behaviour among the people, but more importantly of consolidating state hegemony.<sup>2</sup> Hird’s work is helpful, however, in providing a basis from which to understand how the term “positive energy” is suited to play this consensus-building role, key elements of which are its call for individual participation, association with an increasingly popular positive psychology movement, and in-built connotations of happiness (2018).

Providing an exploratory understanding of the ideological function of positive energy discourse in the *People’s Daily Online*, this article argues that the ideological significance of positive energy discourse lies in how it addresses challenges to CCP authority by encouraging consensus through ideas of social responsibility and commonality of interest, active popular participation, and the importance of state control. This idea of consensus differs from Yang’s collective “fake happiness” (2013), acting rather to support CCP authority as a response to the threat of the competing structures of belief which accompanied marketisation. In developing this argument, this article touches on how these trends have been supported by the term’s initial emergence as a grassroots movement drawing attention to individual moral models (Du, 2014), as well as its association with positive psychology and happiness (Hird, 2016; 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> In this study, the word “consensus” is used to describe a general agreement among the population.

The above arguments are reached through a content analysis of articles in the *People's Daily Online*, inspired by concepts from framing and agenda-setting theory. Although limited in its application of these methodological theories, the study provides at least an exploratory understanding of positive energy discourse. In so doing, it complements recent sociological and political analysis of the current trajectory of China's ideological propaganda campaigns, and fills a gap in the understanding of the political usage and significance of positive energy discourse.

The article will first outline theoretical considerations, followed by the methodological approaches used to analyse positive energy discourse in the *People's Daily Online*. It will then highlight key results of the data analysis, providing some initial explanations for empirically observed trends exhibited in extracts of *People's Daily Online* articles, and conclude with suggestions for future research.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

Central to this study is Gramsci's (1999) authoritative work on consensus-building ideology, which provides a framework within which to analyse how the function of positive energy discourse has contributed to a wider ideological campaign in support of Party hegemony. The understanding of ideology in this article is that of a set of doctrines crafted by a ruling political group which serve "to establish and sustain relations of domination" (Thompson, 1990: 56). Hegemony is discussed in line with the Gramscian understanding of the accepted dominance of the ruling elite over society. This is achieved through a process of "consensus armoured by coercion" (Gramsci, 1992: 263), the consensus element arising from the acceptance of an ideology as "common sense" by the people (Gramsci, 1999: 625). Compared with "good sense" which resembles coherent philosophy, Gramsci's idea of "common sense" "enters the consciousness of the masses as part of their confounded and fragmentary" understanding (Rupert, 1995: 30). It is this "common sense" nature of positive energy discourse which has allowed it to build consensus among the people, in what this article shows to be support for CCP hegemony.

The Gramscian framework has inspired a field of literature which looks at its application in contemporary Chinese politics. Just prior to completion of this research, Gow (2017) published an article of particular interest which used this same framework to analyse the emergence of Xi Jinping's "Core Socialist Values" (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhiguan* 社会主义核心价值观), identifying the latter as falling under a broader umbrella of consensus-building ideology epitomised by the "Chinese Dream" (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦) discourse. Gow describes how the "parameters of consensus are initially determined by the state vision" with Gramscian hegemony primarily relying "on the negotiation of consent and active participation by citizens through civil society institutions, which includes [...] media outlets" (Gow, 2017: 94). This understanding of the importance of citizen participation and the media for attaining popular consent is key to positive energy discourse, as discussed in the research analysis of this article. This in turn complements Li's work (2015), which applies Gramscian theory in its analysis of how the Chinese Dream has been used to achieve social hegemony when confronted with the effects of marketisation. While this suggests that positive energy discourse may play a similar role to that of the Core Socialist Values and the Chinese Dream, a comparison of these is beyond the scope of this article due to space limitations. It should also be noted that, unlike these official CCP slogans, "positive energy" originated at the grassroots level and was only adopted into political usage subsequently. For present purposes, the use of Gramscian theory in these analyses serves to illustrate its application to modern day Chinese politics, providing a framework through which to understand state efforts to consolidate its ruling authority.

The development of consensus-building ideology must be understood in the context of challenges to Party hegemony, a comprehensive overview of which is provided in academic literature. Zhang (2011) discusses how hegemony-endorsing ideology has been threatened by the liberalisation of the media, resulting in mass access to information and alternate beliefs which undermine CCP authority. This issue is further outlined in Mahoney's (2014) work, which describes competing "metanarratives", or overarching structures of belief, which have emerged as a challenge to Party dominance during the course of marketisation. At the time of its adoption in 2012, the threat of instability caused by such challenges would have been heightened by the upheaval surrounding Xi Jinping's transition to power. Within the context of

these challenges, this article will explore how acceptance of government control over the media, and the strengthening of state approved ideology, are key functions of “positive energy” discourse. As well as threatening state control over popular ideology, the sociological changes resulting from China’s move towards a market society also act to weaken CCP authority. Kleinman notes that emerging middle-class interests “represent a set of quests for meaning in everyday life among ordinary Chinese” which could radically alter Chinese society, describing a growing pressure on the state to cater to individual needs as well as those of the collective (2010: 1075). Yan’s (2011) work further highlights a trend towards individualisation at the expense of the collective, resulting in what Lam (2015) describes as a de-stabilising “morality deficit” in Chinese society which has further compounded a breakdown in social trust. Positive energy discourse can be seen as contributing to a narrative that seeks to address the metanarrative of marketisation, and the ensuing unhappiness among Chinese people.

Positive energy discourse has been identified as playing a key role in the Chinese happiness narrative (Hird, 2018), which is relevant when one considers the relationship between happiness and social control outlined in academic literature. The element of emotional control implicit in the development of positive energy discourse adds another dimension to its role as a consensus-building ideology. Wielander (2016a; 2016b; 2017) explores how the concept of positive psychology resonates with Chinese notions of self-cultivation in working to achieve a “correct” mindset, describing ideas of a state-imposed “normative happiness” (2016a), while Ahmed’s (2010) work provides a perception of happiness as something which demands universal consensus while simultaneously lending itself to outside definition by dominant social powers. Correct behaviour is promoted within established understandings of the desirability of happiness and positivity which, combined with the grassroots origins of the term “positive energy”, and associations with an increasingly popular positive psychology movement, creates a Gramscian “common sense”, acting as a powerful consensus-building tool.

## Methodology

The primary objective of this research is the identification of the main ideological function of positive energy discourse in the *People's Daily Online*. The *People's Daily Online* was chosen as the sole primary research source first for its significance as a media source. The *People's Daily* is widely viewed as the mouthpiece of the CCP (Wu, 1994), and has been analysed as such in many previous studies (Duckett & Langer, 2013; Li & Hovy, 2014; Xue, 2012; Zhao, 2014). It can be assumed that articles published through this source are representative of the wider political function of positive energy discourse. The second reason was practical. The *People's Daily Online* is easily accessible from outside China using the Dow Jones Factiva database, which allows for easy analysis of publications.

In order to gain an understanding of the main ideological function of positive energy discourse, a content analysis of a select group of articles was conducted. The design of this analysis was inspired by concepts from agenda-setting theory and framing theory, which are well suited to analysis of media forms and the way in which key ideas are conveyed through them, whether it be through themes, words or descriptions of events. While agenda-setting theory looks mainly at how salient a given issue is in the media, framing theory goes one step further to focus on the way in which said issue is presented (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). The concept of framing has been applied to many areas of research, including some which focus on the *People's Daily*, demonstrating the importance of this source as a means to understand the official position on events.<sup>3</sup> To date, no framing analysis of positive energy in official discourse has been conducted.

The application of framing theory to this research lies in the premise that a typical frame selects a salient issue and develops this through the communication of a problem, its cause, a moral judgment and a solution (Entman, 2007). In this study, it is assumed that the frames identified have been deliberately "embedded" in political discourse in order to impose a certain

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<sup>3</sup> See Xue (2012) for a comparative content analysis of the coverage of social emergencies in the *People's Daily* and Sina Weibo, and Duckett and Langer (2013) for an analysis of the media narrative on health care reform.

opinion or ideology on the audience (Kinder & Sanders, 1990: 74). Therefore, an analysis of the components of frames, or “sub-frame” elements (Matthes & Kohring, 2008), should help to form an overall understanding of the main ideological function of positive energy discourse. In taking this approach, this project echoes similar studies which have applied framing theory to a study of ideology. Bondes and Heep (2013) apply a framing approach in their analysis of how the state persuades the public that they are working for the common good in order to consolidate their ruling legitimacy, which Mahoney builds on in his assessment of the Chinese Dream narrative as a “framing discourse” (2014: 30). Framing theory plays a central role in determining the components of positive energy discourse, and how these come together to play an ideological function in the political media.

Using framing theory, several sub-research questions were identified to guide the data collection process. These include:

SQ1: What is the main thematic focus of positive energy discourse?

SQ2: What issues does positive energy discourse try to address?

SQ3: Which members of society does positive energy discourse relate to?

The first step of the data collection process involved identifying the target article group, consisting of Chinese language *People’s Daily* publications from 2012, when the term was officially adopted into political discourse, to the end of 2016. The selection of articles for analysis was conditional on the appearance of the term “positive energy” in the title. The first reason for this was the practical need to narrow down the field of inquiry from the 9,842 articles which featured the term in the main article. The second was based on the premise that, due to its prominent placement in the article, a headline has the greatest influence on the initial association between concepts for the reader, rendering it “the most powerful framing device of the syntactical structure” (Pan & Kosicki, 1993: 59). Further analysis found 186 articles to be duplicates, and a further six to relate to “clean” energy rather than the term as understood in this study, leaving 540 articles for analysis.

The second element, and central primary research contribution, was the content analysis of all 540 articles. The unit of analysis selected was the entire article, although the primary emphasis was the context of the appearance of the term “positive energy”. With regard to SQ1, it was assumed that each article had a central theme which could be classified under one of several categories of frame (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). For this project, a “theme” is understood as “an idea that connects different semantic elements of a story [...] into a coherent whole” (Pan & Kosicki, 1993: 59). This contrasts with the idea of a central “topic”. For example, if an article discussed how a particular book, in which a woman dedicated her life to serving the community, transmitted positive energy to society, while discussion of the book itself would be the topic of the article, the main theme would be “serving the community”. When no clear overall theme was manifest, or when two or more separate themes were salient, that which dealt most directly with positive energy was considered. In addition, key sub-theme components were recorded to enable a more detailed qualitative analysis of trends within the frames. Finally, coding for the sub-frame elements, “problems” and “main actors”, sought to answer SQ2 and SQ3 respectively. Only problems which were explicitly stated in the article were recorded. Due to space limitations, only one main “actor” was recognised in each article, and these were simplified to include only the key players in society. These included the “Government”, the “People”, the “Media” and “Enterprises”.<sup>4</sup> These classifications allowed for a more focused interpretation of the appearance of “positive energy” in each frame.

It is important to state that this research was not able to carry out a content analysis to its fullest possible outcomes. In particular, the fact that all coding was carried out by the author alone leaves room for subjective interpretation as well as individual error due to a language barrier. This project must therefore be seen mainly as an exploratory analysis of positive energy discourse in a political context.

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<sup>4</sup> The names of these “actors” will be capitalised throughout the rest of the study. Reference to “Government”, therefore, indicates the category of actor identified in the context of the framing analysis, while “government” is used in discussion to refer more generally to the Chinese government.

## Results

### 1. Frames

SQ1: What is the main focus of positive energy discourse?

One of the central contributions of this project is the provision of frames through which to analyse positive energy discourse in the *People's Daily*. Following a thematic content analysis of all 540 articles, the main themes were grouped into 10 frames (table 1).

Frame	Code	Main Theme
Morality	CatM	Morality and exemplary behaviour, particularly at the grassroots level.
Reform	CatR	Reform, both within government and generally.
International Relations	CatIR	Positive energy in China's relationships with other countries and regions, and role in the world economy.
Media Management	CatIM	Importance of spreading positive energy on the Internet and other forms of media, and advocating the use of control mechanisms.
Other	CatO	Themes which did not appear to be linked to any larger frame.
Development and Innovation	CatDI	Social and technological development and innovation, and the importance of entrepreneurship.
Entertainment	CatE	Positive energy as something which brings feelings of warmth and happiness.
Nationalism and Chinese Dream	CatNCD	Nationalism, patriotism and the Chinese Dream.
Tradition and Culture	CatTC	Traditional Chinese culture.
Hardship and Perseverance	CatHP	Stories of individuals experiencing hardship and challenges, and yet finding ways to be happy.

*Table 1. Frames identified by theme.*

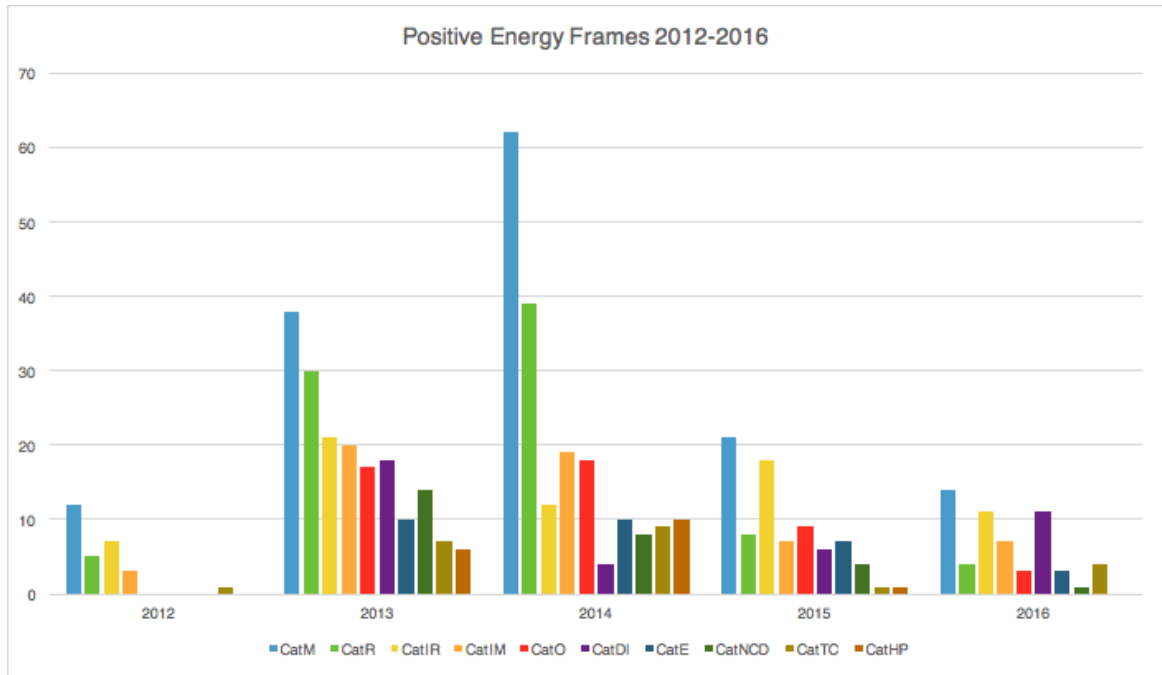


Figure 1. Frequency of appearance of each frame (2012-2016).

These results show positive energy discourse in the *People's Daily Online* to be a multidimensional construct. An analysis of the data shows that use of the term developed to become more complex in 2013 and 2014, during which time the two dominant frames were those of “Morality” and “Reform” (figure 1). The “International Relations” and “Media Management” frames are the third most commonly appearing in 2013 and 2014 respectively. Overall, these frames are the four which dominate the period under study, providing an initial understanding of the use of positive energy discourse in the political sphere. While it can therefore be said that the emphasis on morality seen in the term’s emergence at the grassroots level seems to reappear following its adoption as a political tool (Du, 2014; Hird, 2018), the same cannot be said for ideas of the term as related to positive thinking to combat popular unhappiness and social challenges (Hird, 2016; Wielander, 2016a; 2016b; 2017), which would have presumably resulted in the higher prevalence of CatHP. We are therefore looking at an alternative understanding of the term’s more recent function in political discourse.

Of the four most frequently appearing frames, Morality, Reform and Media Management all focus on domestic affairs within China. Moreover, the analysis of sub-theme components developing on the role of positive energy in the articles revealed key overlapping trends across these three frames. This pattern is significant, providing a clear indication of a central function uniting the three dominant “domestic” frames. For this reason, and due to space limitations, this article will focus only on these three frames.

## **Problems**

SQ2: What issues does positive energy discourse try to address?

The three main frames selected as the focus of this project were also those which most commonly featured sub-theme “problems”, appearing within the main identified theme of the relevant articles. These findings provide a clear indication of the role of positive energy discourse as a solution to problems, which in turn brings into question the nature of the issues it addresses. While only the fourth most frequently appearing frame overall, the Media Management frame was that which saw the highest appearance of such “problems”, seemingly giving weight to Zhang’s (2011) work on the threat posed to state hegemony by the liberalisation of the media, resulting in a direct ideological response to a new competing “metanarrative” (Mahoney, 2014). These issues will be examined in the next section, which brings together these quantitatively measured trends with a deeper qualitative analysis of the articles.

## **Actors**

SQ3: Which members of society does positive energy discourse relate to?

Each of the main frames had a clear association with a particular “actor”. In the Morality frame, the main actors detected were predominantly the “People”, whereas in the Reform frame these were largely the “Government”. Articles with these frame-actor combinations were given particular consideration in identifying key trends in positive energy discourse. The main actors in the Media

Management frame are evenly split between the Government and the “Media”.<sup>5</sup> While the Media appears as a key actor in this frame, these articles almost exclusively focus on the importance of maintaining the Internet as a source of positive energy. While featuring the same “problems” and clearly highlighting the importance of positive energy on the Internet, Media actor articles lacked substance in comparison with those with a Government actor, and did not seem to play an equally important ideological role. Therefore, the following sections will focus on Media Management frame articles with a Government actor. Therefore, in response to SQ3, this project will consider that the key focus of positive energy discourse relates predominantly to the People and Government actors, serving to reaffirm the relationship between the two.

### **The Ideological Function of Positive Energy Discourse**

The results of the analysis paint an interesting picture of positive energy discourse in the *People’s Daily*, indicating that its principle domestic focus can be understood through three main frames, namely “Morality”, “Reform” and “Media Management”. As discussed, the most prominent frame-actor combinations are those of Morality-People, Reform-Government and Media Management-Government. A qualitative consideration of both sub-theme components and sub-frame “problems” highlights trends within and between each of these frames. Collectively, and in response to the main research question, these elements combine to create an understanding of the main function of positive energy discourse as a consensus-building ideology, broken down into several key points:

Argument 1: Positive energy discourse addresses problems which challenge CCP authority.

Argument 2: The spread of positive energy is portrayed as a social responsibility and in the common interest.

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<sup>5</sup> Here, it is important to raise a key limitation of the research design, which allowed for only one main actor for the sake of simplicity. In many articles, secondary actors also played a key role. While in this frame the Media and the Government are the main agents of positive energy, the People were often mentioned as important supporters of this initiative.

Argument 3: Popular moral action at the grassroots level is shown to be a key source of positive energy.

Argument 4: The government justifies its control of the media through its ability to spread positive energy.

These points lead the structure of this section, illustrated though reference to extracts from example articles referred to by the number allocated to them at the time of data collection.

### **Challenges to CCP Authority**

Argument 1: Positive energy discourse addresses problems which challenge CCP authority.

Across all three main frames, positive energy discourse was largely directed at issues which challenge CCP hegemony, often related to changing social and moral systems following marketisation and the development of the media. While only occasionally stated as such, these issues can be understood as a source of “negative energy” to which positive energy provides a solution. This trend can be shown with reference to articles from each main frame.<sup>6</sup>

In the Morality frame, positive energy discourse primarily targets moral loss among the common people. This challenges CCP hegemony by threatening social stability and deeply altering a collective-based social structure conducive to authoritarian rule. In article 20, these problems are attributed to “profound changes in China’s economic system [...] and the profound changes in ideological concepts”, which have resulted in “complex and fickle characteristics [...] in popular morality” (*People’s Daily*, 2012a). The severity of such developments is demonstrated through reference to the death of Little Yueyue, as well as multiple food safety incidents, quoting Wen Jiaobao in lamenting the

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<sup>6</sup> Relevant extracts of articles have been translated by the author, while the numbers used to refer to individual articles relates to their chronological placement in the body of articles analysed.

severity of China's "integrity deficit and moral decline" (*People's Daily*, 2012a).<sup>7</sup> The spread of "moral positive energy" can be seen to provide a solution in response to this (*People's Daily*, 2012a). This is seen again in article 232, in which positive energy promotes "the advance of society" to fight the ills of marketisation, which brought in its wake the loss of a moral "bottom line" as well as the development of "the worship of money, hedonism, and extreme individualism" (*People's Daily*, 2013e). This is echoed in article 353, which questions "the moral conscience and value recognition of the people of this era" (*People's Daily*, 2014b). The idea of a moral loss echoes what Lam has termed China's "morality deficit", which has led to a breakup in social relations and cost the nation "RMB 585 billion a year" (2015: 280), undermining the stability which is seen as key to the legitimacy of CCP authority (Fewsmith, 2016; Sandby-Thomas, 2011). Yan provides a related analysis of changing moral structures, describing a movement "away from an authoritarian, collective ethics of responsibilities" towards individualism (2011: 40).

Similarly, a lack of moral integrity in government appears as a key problem in the Reform frame, calling for the spread of "anti-corruption positive energy" in response. The problem of corruption, and the resulting discontent among the people, is another clear example of a threat to the authority of the state, referred to as a matter of "life and death" for the Party (*People's Daily*, 2014c). Article 207 states that among the "most pressing concerns of the people" are the loss of morality, extravagance and waste, and the need to improve official work style (*People's Daily*, 2013c). The development of positive energy is presented as a solution to this discontent, as officials are told to "inspire positive energy in alleviating negative mindsets" (*People's Daily*, 2013c). In line with this, article 520 emphasises the need for "sustained release of anti-corruption positive energy", focusing in particular on the "construction of honest culture" (*People's Daily*, 2014e). This is further supported by article 254 which describes issues relating to corruption in officials as "detested by the masses" (*People's Daily*, 2013f). The issue of morality loss within the Party itself, manifested through widespread corruption and resulting in popular discontent, is a significant threat to CCP authority (Lam, 2015; Mahoney, 2014).

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<sup>7</sup> Two year old "Little Yueyue" 小悦悦 was hit by a van on October 13, 2011. As she lay dying in the street, many people walked by but failed to help her. The event led to a wide-spread questioning of morality in China.

Finally, the same pattern can be seen in Media Management frame articles, which focus on challenges accompanying the development of the media. Positive energy is portrayed as a force against “negativity” and disunity on the Internet. This is seen in article 212, which describes how “in the clamour of mass voices of the mass media era, the ideological sphere is flooded with noise” (*People’s Daily*, 2013d). As a solution, readers are called to “spread positive energy amid the clamour of mass voices” (*People’s Daily*, 2013d). Similarly, article 698 points to economic incentives as causing the contamination of the “Internet’s cultural environment” (*People’s Daily*, 2016b), encouraging the spread of “maximum levels of positive energy” in guiding reform efforts (*People’s Daily*, 2016b). This is supported by article 346, which cites “false information” among the problems caused by the growth of Internet use (*People’s Daily*, 2014a). The development of the media poses a clear threat to the dynamics of control in China, providing a means through which to challenge the Party’s monopoly over information (Mahoney, 2014; Saich, 2011).

These examples illustrate that, across all the three main frames, the spread of positive energy is portrayed as a solution to a moral loss both amongst the common people and in government, resulting from marketisation and the development of the media. These challenge CCP authority by proposing a competing “metanarrative”, creating an ideological conflict which positive energy discourse seeks to address (Mahoney, 2014; Li, 2015).

### **Social Responsibility and Common Interest**

Argument 2: The spread of positive energy is portrayed as a social responsibility and in the common interest.

A qualitative analysis of sub-theme components highlighted how, across all three frames, the spread of positive energy was represented as both a universal duty and in the common interest. Positive energy discourse portrays the resolution of problems as a social responsibility, encouraging consensus around the need for general reform. It thereby extends responsibility for anti-corruption efforts and the cultivation of a moral culture to the common people as well as

government, going some way to neutralise the challenge of popular dissatisfaction.

The Reform frame is the most significant in this regard. One of the main features was that, while the Government was the main actor in leading the “positive energy of reform”, the sub-theme components of most articles positioned reform itself as a wider social responsibility. A clear example of this can be seen in article 520, which states that “in promoting the construction of honest culture, we must not only make the Party leadership officials the focus, but we should also turn towards all members of society and cover all of society” (*People’s Daily*, 2014e). Similarly, article 354 describes “anti-corruption” as a “social responsibility” (*People’s Daily*, 2014c). This is supported by article 65 which, in turn, calls people to “take up responsibility, everyone contribute positive energy” (*People’s Daily*, 2013a). This trend creates a consensus around the idea of a group reform effort, and positive feelings towards the government in leading this endeavour.

The Reform frame also shows that the government’s responsibility to spread positive energy is closely aligned with the interests of the people. One common representation of this is through the “mass line” campaign, which is described in article 65 as a “great channel through which we can contribute positive energy” (*People’s Daily*, 2013a), while article 207 requires officials to “pay attention to the compilation of points of mass focus and develop positive energy” (*People’s Daily*, 2013c).<sup>8</sup> Key to the function of positive energy discourse here is the creation of a positive perception of government as working to serve the people, with officials told to “amass consensus in responding to society’s main points of concern” and “inspire positive energy in alleviating negative mindsets” (*People’s Daily*, 2013c). Article 354 also closely aligns the anti-corruption campaign, which can be seen to spread positive energy, with the need to satisfy the expectations of the masses (*People’s Daily*, 2014c). This outlining of a commonality of interest supports the creation of consensus within society.

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<sup>8</sup> The “mass line” campaign is an education programme enforcing “correct” behaviour. For further reading, see Thornton (2011); this research considers how the mass line movement has been used to encourage consensus, indicating a continuation of Leninist ideology under post-Mao leadership. Lam (2015) also provides an interesting overview of this.

A similar trend is seen in the Media Management frame. Here, the primary goal of positive energy is the creation of a “clean” network environment. Article 346 states that “as long as the government, operators, and Internet users [...] unite and work together”, everyone will have “a safe and clean network environment” (*People’s Daily*, 2014a). Similarly, article 212 describes the need for society to form a consensus in “safeguarding the health of cyberspace” (*People’s Daily*, 2013d). This is supported by article 675, which calls to “uphold an attitude of responsibility towards society and the people” in controlling the online environment (*People’s Daily*, 2016a), adding that “cyberspace is the common spiritual home of millions of people” and “in order to create a clean and positive atmosphere the government, online businesses and each one of us Internet users needs to fulfil their responsibilities” (*People’s Daily*, 2016a). In this frame, positive energy discourse aims to build a strong feeling of shared interest in the safeguarding of the Internet.

Finally, clear examples of this function can be seen in the Morality frame, in which positive energy is understood as a positive mindset which can be passed on to others, entailing a responsibility for each individual to do their part in cultivating this mindset for the good of society. In article 102, we see that positive energy is spread through a “virtuous circle [which] relies on the effort of every individual” (*People’s Daily*, 2013b). This is echoed in article 20, which states that “whether it be officials or the common people, irrespective of which industry they work in, everyone should [...] fully display moral positive energy in order to promote social harmony” (*People’s Daily*, 2012a). Article 43 also shows that positive energy at the grassroots level has become “an important complement to government forces” (*People’s Daily*, 2012b).

These examples demonstrate how positive energy discourse mitigates threats to the dominant authority of government by framing moral reform as a common responsibility, while commonality of interest in turn is an effective tool in the creation of consensus (Bondes & Heep, 2013). It is appropriate to consider how the concept of positive energy as something which encourages positive emotions, and which is associated with happiness, is conducive to promoting social consensus and responsibility (Hird, 2016; Wielander, 2016a). One significant parallel between academic descriptions of happiness, and positive energy discourse, is the understanding of something which is both self-

reinforcing and transmissible to others (Ahmed, 2010). By virtue of the fact that their own behaviour will have a direct impact on that of people around them, individuals have a greater responsibility to spread positive energy, while the term's association with positive thinking and happiness also makes it desirable. This suggests that "positive energy" itself is inherently suited to the state consensus-building agenda, which was likely a reason behind its adoption from popular usage.

### Active Popular Participation

Argument 3: Popular moral action at the grassroots level is shown to be a key source of positive energy.

While the first two points describe trends across all three main frames, dominant characteristics of individual frames also highlight how positive energy discourse has contributed ideologically to social consensus. In particular, one primary feature of the most frequently appearing Morality frame is that it draws attention to the actions of individual moral models.

In this frame, positive energy is transferred through the moral acts of individuals towards society. Examples of this can be seen in article 232, in which a series of "most beautiful" stories contribute positive energy in response to a perceived moral loss (*People's Daily*, 2013e).<sup>9</sup> This is seen again in article 546, which is an example of a monthly "Positive Energy News Inventory" (*People's Daily*, 2015). This features accounts of individuals performing good deeds such as queuing to donate blood after an accident, a young boy collecting scraps to pay a sick father's medical bill, and even a man losing his life in an effort to save another (*People's Daily*, 2015). Well-known moral models such as Lei Feng are also used as examples, for instance in article 102 (*People's Daily*, 2013b).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For an example of such a compilation of stories displaying examples of good moral models, see: "Good People 365" (*haoren 365* 好人 365) [http://www.wenming.cn/sbhr\\_pd/hr365/](http://www.wenming.cn/sbhr_pd/hr365/).

<sup>10</sup> While details of Lei Feng's 雷锋 (1940-1962) life are disputed, he is thought to have been a soldier in the People's Liberation Army under Mao. He was posthumously portrayed as a symbol of model conduct in CCP propaganda campaigns, encouraging selfless behaviour and devotion to the Party.

This frame's emphasis on the active participation of moral individuals in civil society, as opposed to an outlining of ethical theory alone, demonstrates a powerful form of consensus based on an understanding of actions as a result of "collective will" (Gramsci, 1999: 688). This is further enhanced by the fact that this frame echoes the emphasis on individuals of the grassroots positive energy movement, harnessing the support this acquired and reinforcing its appeal to the people (Du, 2014). As discussed above, it is perceived that marketisation undermined China's traditional moral and social structures, challenging Party authority through a competing "metanarrative" which proposed prioritisation of the individual and economic benefit over the good of the collective. The nature of the Morality frame directly targets the threat of new developments, calling attention to traditional Confucian values, and figures such as Lei Feng who was also used as a model of good socialist morality under Mao (Wielander, 2016a). The emphasis on collective values, for example filial piety and self-sacrifice for the community, is significant in two ways. The first is that, as something which is deeply familiar to Chinese people and a characteristic element of traditional culture, this discourse is likely to achieve strong popular resonance, and therefore achieve the Gramscian concept of "common-sense" status among the populace (Rupert, 1995). Secondly, this emphasis on moral behaviour and tradition can be understood as another strategy for social control. The outlining and promotion of model behaviour creates new "norms", while the traditional nature of these contributes to a resistance against the competing influences of modernity (Bakken, 2000).

### **Government Control**

Argument 4: The government justifies its control of the media through its ability to spread positive energy.

As with the Morality frame, the Media Management frame articles also conveyed a clear message, appearing to support the role of the government in controlling the Internet. This builds on the trend of positive energy as something which serves the common interest in working against "negativity". The portrayal of government authority as an important source of positive energy creates consensus around the need for control, overriding the importance of popular

freedom of speech and access to information. Article 212 describes the role of positive energy as strongly related to control, achieved by the “purification of the network environment” by public security organs (*People’s Daily*, 2013d). Article 698 similarly states that in order to achieve “maximum levels of positive energy [...] government departments should strengthen supervision of online culture” (*People’s Daily*, 2016b). It expresses the need to “construct a strict social supervision network [...] [and] to help Internet users improve their moral cultivation” (*People’s Daily*, 2016b), while article 675 highlights a need to “strengthen the governance of cyberspace according to law” (*People’s Daily*, 2016a). Finally, article 346 associates the spread of positive energy with Internet supervision, and “stringent measures to curb bad behaviour and language on the Internet”, issuing the reminder that “freedom of speech has boundaries” (*People’s Daily*, 2014a).

The clear advocacy of government control in these articles further suggests that positive energy discourse supports Gramscian concepts of hegemony, which identify force and coercion as necessary complements to consensus (Gramsci, 1999). By highlighting the important role of government management in solving social problems, positive energy discourse fosters popular consensus towards CCP authority, building on the notion, covered in previous sections, that issues such as an unhealthy Internet environment are part of a wider loss of morality, the resolution of which is in the common interest of both citizens and government alike. While the importance of rule of law and government control did appear to some extent in the Morality and Reform frames, this presence was not as central as in the Media Management frames. In the Reform frame in particular, government involvement is to be assumed and therefore does not require a significant mention in the analysis of ideological discourse.

## Conclusion

International and domestic media alike have had their say in a discussion surrounding one of the most popular Chinese catchphrases of the last few years, revealing an application as wide in scope as the term is aspirational in nature. This exploratory research project has sought to identify the ideological function

which positive energy discourse has served in the political sphere, and in so doing, to fill a gap in the understanding of the term in academic literature.

Previous theories relating to the term's significance rested on understandings of a "fake happiness" (Yang, 2013), exploring a state-led positive energy discourse which encouraged morally responsible behaviour and positive mindsets in order to overlook destabilising social problems (Hird, 2016; 2018). The findings of this project develop on this work, seeking to provide a broader understanding of the significance of the term's use in political media. To this end, a framing analysis conducted on *People's Daily Online* articles sought to establish the thematic focus of positive energy discourse, the issues it addressed, and which members of society it related to. Trends revealed by the data include a focus on societal and moral issues accompanying marketisation and undermining Party dominance, the reinforcing of a common duty to resolve such problems in unison with the state, a promotion of active moral behaviour, and support for state control of the Internet. While reaffirming previous studies' discussion of the innate connection between positive energy and moral action at the grassroots level, this study departs from existing literature in key respects. In particular, it is argued that, rather than encouraging a cheerful overlooking of destabilising social problems, positive energy discourse has in fact promoted the active resolution of challenges through collaboration between the people and the state. The results of this analysis thus outline how positive energy discourse has encouraged a popular consensus around CCP hegemony in response to a competing "metanarrative" of marketisation, which in turn feeds back into literature on the power of happiness, and in particular the positive psychology movement, in fostering popular support (Ahmed, 2010; Weiland, 2016a).

This article raises interesting topics for future research. The first of these is the extent to which positive energy discourse as framed by the government was successfully naturalised in the minds of the people.<sup>11</sup> Such a study would have to look at whether the popular understanding of the term has evolved from the initial non-politicised byword used around the time of the 2012 London Olympics (Du, 2014), to approximate the governmental interpretation

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<sup>11</sup> See the work of Entman (1989) and Graber (1988) for further reading on the process through which ideas are naturalised. This provides an insight into the theory of public opinion formation through media framing.

discussed in this article. As previously highlighted, it would also be interesting to see how positive energy discourse complements the Core Socialist Values and Chinese Dream campaigns, among others, in support of CCP hegemony. Finally, while this project excludes an insight into the frequently appearing International Relations frame due to space limitations, further research into this area might highlight whether the consensus-building element of positive energy discourse extends beyond domestic boundaries.<sup>12</sup>

While much study remains to be done on the role of the term in Chinese politics and society, what the current project has made apparent is that the power of positive energy discourse, stemming from the term's grassroots origins, associations with an increasingly popular positive psychology movement and in-built connotations of happiness, has been harnessed and channelled in the *People's Daily*, serving a complex ideological function at a time of political and social change. Crucially, the discourse aimed to leave readers with a perception of state hegemony as nothing less than "common sense".

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<sup>12</sup> See Li (2015) for further reading on how the Chinese Dream discourse affects China's international hegemony. This is one way in which the "International Relations" frame of positive energy discourse could be significant.

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