

How Soft Propaganda Persuades

Comparative Political Studies
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–26
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DOI: 10.1177/00104140211047403
journals.sagepub.com/home/cps


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Abstract

An influential body of scholarship argues that authoritarian regimes design “hard” propaganda that is intentionally heavy-handed in order to signal regime power. In this study, by contrast, we link the power of propaganda to the emotional power of “soft” propaganda such as television dramas and viral social media content. We conduct a series of experiments in which we expose over 6800 respondents in China to real propaganda videos drawn from television dramas, state-backed social media accounts, and state-run newscasts, each containing nationalist messages favored by the Chinese Communist Party. In contrast to theories that propaganda is unpersuasive, we show that propaganda effectively manipulates anger as well as anti-foreign sentiment and behavior, with heightened anti-foreign attitudes persisting up to a week. However, we also find that nationalist propaganda has no effect on perceptions of Chinese government performance or on self-reported willingness to protest against the state.

Keywords

authoritarian regimes, propaganda, emotions, nationalism, China

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Introduction

Authoritarian regimes spend billions of dollars every year on propaganda. Recent scholarship suggests that the aim of much propaganda is not to persuade, but rather to intimidate citizens into compliance. State-run media in China, Russia, and Syria heaps praise on ruling parties, makes exaggerated claims about the process of leaders, and presents blatantly distorted information. The style of this “hard” propaganda is often stodgy, didactic, and wooden. Rather than being credible and convincing, hard propaganda shows how authoritarian states are able to monopolize public discourse and signals the state’s far-reaching coercive power (Carter & Carter, 2021b; Huang, 2015, 2018; Little, 2017; Wedeen, 1999).

Nonetheless, increasingly large portions of authoritarian regimes’ propaganda budgets are being dedicated towards producing what might be called “soft” propaganda, including movies, documentaries, soap operas, artistic performances, and viral social media content. These forms of propaganda occupy an important niche in the information ecosystem of several regimes, particularly China.¹ Soft propaganda is typically disseminated in slickly produced and entertaining media, and makes relatively credible claims, at least compared to the over-the-top claims that are characteristic of hard propaganda. However, it remains unclear whether soft propaganda is also effective at *persuading* citizens and changing political attitudes and behaviors.

To investigate the role of soft propaganda, we conducted a series of experiments in which we exposed over 6800 respondents in China to real propaganda videos drawn from state-run newscasts, state-approved television dramas, and state-backed social media accounts. Each video we selected had been viewed hundreds of thousands or millions of times and contained the nationalist messages favored by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). We selected treatments that encompass a variety of primarily “soft” messaging strategies and focused on themes that highlighted foreign violations of Chinese national sovereignty.

Our experiments show that each of the widely viewed propaganda videos we tested were highly effective at manipulating emotions and had a durable effect on nationalist attitudes. While recent studies suggest that CCP propaganda does not effectively strengthen nationalism (Cantoni et al., 2017; Huang, 2018), we show that the most emotionally rousing soft propaganda has long-lasting effects on nationalist political attitudes. Viewing nationalist soft propaganda videos increased anti-foreign sentiment both in surveys conducted immediately after exposure and in a follow-up survey 5 to 7 days later. Exposure to propaganda also made respondents more likely to sign a petition calling on Japan to apologize for its actions during the Second World War.

While nationalist soft propaganda succeeds in its likely aim—to stoke anti-foreign sentiment—we show that consuming propaganda did *not* reduce respondents’ self-reported willingness to protest against the government or increase their satisfaction with government performance. These results go against a deep-seated conventional wisdom that nationalist propaganda *directly* builds support for autocratic governments or at least reduces the likelihood of anti-regime protest (e.g., Adena et al., 2015; Chen & MacDonald, 2020; Chen & Xu, 2017; Huang, 2015, 2018; Peisakhin & Rozenas, 2018).²

We argue that credible, entertaining, and emotionally resonant soft propaganda can be an effective tool of persuasion. Whereas heavy-handed hard propaganda is a powerful tool to encourage fear and political compliance, soft propaganda can play a complementary role by amplifying persuasive and appealing messages. Our findings suggest that the two types of messages play different roles in the universe of authoritarian political messaging, allowing autocrats to selectively apply different types of messaging to strategically manipulate the public. Since our study is necessarily limited in scope, testing a small number of specific propaganda messages, further research might untangle how audiences respond to combinations of hard and soft propaganda.

Our findings shed new light on the wider universe of propaganda beyond traditional media outlets like newspapers and television news, and on political psychology in autocracy. To date, the literature on the role of emotions in sustaining authoritarianism has largely focused on the role of fear in repression (Carter & Carter, 2021b; Nugent, 2017; Rozenas & Zhukov, 2019; Young, 2019). Our findings build on recent studies highlighting the persuasive power of propaganda in Russia (Peisakhin & Rozenas, 2018; Rozenas & Stukal, 2019; Treisman, 2011), Germany (Adena et al., 2015; Barber & Miller, 2019), Rwanda (Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014), China (Pan et al., 2021), and Mali (Bleck & Michelitch, 2017). In contrast to these studies, our findings suggest that slickly produced soft propaganda produced by authoritarian regimes in the form of television dramas, glossy advertisements, and social media content are especially effective at pushing nationalist messages, but not necessarily building regime support, underscoring the importance of examining the wider universe of regime propaganda.

Can Soft Propaganda Manipulate Emotion and Political Attitudes?

Scholars of authoritarian politics have often focused on what Haifeng Huang refers to as “hard propaganda,” which is not designed to be credible or persuasive, but instead “signals the [ruling party’s] strength in social control and [its] capacity to meet potential challenges” (Huang, 2015, p. 435). As Huang points out, hard propaganda is frequently styled in a way that is

theatrical, wooden, and distinct from other forms of media. Studies focusing on this type of propaganda have generally found that it can induce fear and compliance with the state, but does not induce attitudinal change (Huang, 2015, 2018; Wedeen, 1999).

Our central hypothesis, which builds upon this work, is that “soft propaganda”—which is intended to make credible claims, be aesthetically appealing, and frequently embeds political messages in art and entertainment—is especially effective at manipulating emotion, and has durable effects on political attitudes. Some varieties of soft propaganda, such as soap operas and films contain encouraging and aspirational messages. Other varieties, including war serials and some viral video content, contain hard-edged and combative messages, for example, promoting anti-foreign nationalism. Our empirical focus is on these latter varieties.

In particular, we explore the effectiveness of soft propaganda at fomenting anti-foreign nationalist attitudes. The importance of emotional manipulation is particularly core to nationalism: In his classic book on the origins of nationalism, Ernest Gellner observes that “nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent...[and] nationalist *sentiment* is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle” (Gellner, 1983, p. 1, emphasis in original).

We also build on a growing literature in political psychology that focuses on how emotionally charged messages can be particularly effective at shaping political opinions (e.g., Marcus, 2000). Brader (2005) demonstrates that emotionally laden political ads are more persuasive; Brady et al. (2017) produce a complementary finding that emotionally charged messages spread faster through online social networks in the United States; and Grzymala-Busse (2019, p. 35) argues that emotionally charged messages are leveraged by politicians in Europe to exploit fears over increased immigration and its alleged threat to national integrity. Some recent studies have extended this body of work to authoritarian countries: for instance, Greene and Robertson (2020) show that increased emotional engagement centered around pride and positivity buoyed a surge of support in Russia for Vladimir Putin.

We argue that effective nationalist propaganda not only stirs up emotions, but gives them a clear object—in our case, a foreign source of grievances.³ This argument is distinct from theories that claim that pure emotions, regardless of basis, change political opinions (see Young (2019) on pure fear and political dissent, and Banks (2014, p. 43) on pure anger and racial politics).⁴

We also consider alternative mechanisms through which propaganda might persuade its targets. One possibility is that consuming propaganda videos might change a viewer’s priors on a factual issue, such as the belligerence of the United States or Japan. Another possibility is that viewing propaganda may have a priming or attention effect, increasing the salience of anti-foreign conflict. Finally, it may signal the political correctness of a given political

position, and induce citizens to match their responses to what they believe to be politically desirable. In a study of this sort, we cannot rule alternative mechanisms out, but we find only weak evidence or no evidence for each of them.

A natural follow-up question is how nationalist propaganda influences perceptions of state performance. The literature provides conflicting expectations for this relationship. Theories of diversionary nationalism suggest that elites employ nationalist propaganda to indirectly bolster support for the government, by distracting attention from domestic economic and political woes. (e.g., [Mansfield & Snyder, 1995](#); [Pickering & Kisangani, 2010](#); [Smith, 1996](#); [Solt, 2011](#)). Particularly in the Chinese context, scholars argue “Beijing has routinely exploited nationalist feelings to divert attention from domestic problems” ([Zhao, 2005](#), p. 76).

Nonetheless, evidence that nationalist soft propaganda messages directly change attitudes about state competence is inconsistent with some existing work. For example, [Treisman \(2011\)](#) shows that in Russia, public approval for the president is largely a function of economic performance, with patriotic acts providing a smaller boost. Other studies have shown no effect or have even suggested that propaganda can reduce national pride ([Cantoni et al., 2017](#); [Huang, 2018](#)).

Our view is that nationalist propaganda does not directly influence perceptions of the state’s performance, insofar as “state performance” reflects the government provision of goods and services. While we expect that nationalist propaganda affects recipients’ feelings towards the national community, we do not expect that it causes recipients to revise their factual assessments of the government goods and services that they receive. We leave open the possibility that nationalist messages may indirectly change attitudes about state performance by influencing issue salience. For example, if nationalist messages increase the relative strength of individuals’ preferences for aggressive foreign policy or military action, it may override dissatisfaction with provision of public goods and services, such as healthcare and education.

Background: Soft Propaganda and Nationalism in China

The CCP has built one of the most extensive propaganda apparatuses in the contemporary world. As David Shambaugh notes, “virtually every conceivable medium which transmits and conveys information to the people of China falls under the bureaucratic purview of the CCP Propaganda Department” ([Shambaugh, 2007](#)).⁵ The CCP’s propaganda bureaucracy directly controls a constellation of state-run newspapers, publishers, radio stations, social media accounts, and television channels. In addition, the party also monitors and supervises privately owned media and internet companies, and issues directives about news coverage and censorship of online discussion.

Although these platforms are not formally affiliated with the state, a major responsibility of the propaganda apparatus is to ensure that their content harmonizes with the aims of the party and the state.⁶ In recent years, the state has increasingly turned its focus towards content control on the internet, with the Cyberspace Administration of China gaining increasing independence and power alongside the traditional propaganda bureaucratic bodies (Creemers, 2017).⁷

The CCP propaganda apparatus is particularly focused on promoting nationalist messages. These messages often play on historical grievances, especially the “Century of Humiliation” in which China suffered a series of defeats against foreign adversaries, particularly British during the Opium War and the Japanese during the Second World War (Wang, 2014; Zhao, 2004). This messaging strategy is not unique to China. Anti-imperialism has remained a touchstone of nationalist rhetoric and propaganda in authoritarian countries with experiences under imperialism, including Venezuela, Hungary, and North Korea. These messages often have heavy components of emotional and cultural appeals, reflecting a long tradition in Chinese propaganda. For example, Perry (2002) shows how the Communist Party under Mao used “emotion work” in order to mobilize people for political campaigns like land reform efforts. Perry (2017) has also highlighted the importance of “cultural governance” for the CCP’s propaganda efforts.

Party propaganda in this vein often portrays the CCP as the nation’s savior after a series of defeats at the hands of foreign powers, and as the leader of the “great revival of the Chinese people” (中华民族伟大复兴). Efforts to highlight this narrative extend beyond overt propaganda efforts. For example, as King et al. (2017) show, social media posts fabricated by the Chinese government generally focus on patriotic tropes and China’s revolutionary history.

One important strain of Chinese nationalist propaganda highlights Japan’s brutal occupation and invasion of China, and the CCP’s success in guerilla warfare against the invaders. In recent years, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping has discussed the war with Japan in over 60 speeches;⁸ the CCP has established three national holidays to commemorate the war; television stations have broadcast up to 70 anti-Japanese television series per year;⁹ and the state-run nightly news program has run over 500 segments discussing the war since Xi Jinping took office.¹⁰ The legitimacy of the CCP is, in many ways, tied up in its performance during this conflict. Today, anti-Japanese sentiment is further inflamed by a territorial dispute over islands in the East China Sea (Incerti et al., 2020).

A second and related propaganda trope underscores foreign interference in contemporary Chinese politics, especially supposed American attempts to derail China’s rise. For example, when protests erupted in Hong Kong in summer 2019, propaganda emphasized American intervention in the

autonomous region, referencing the passage of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act by the U.S. Congress and further alleging that American diplomats, spies, and aid workers had covertly aided and encouraged the protests. The *People's Daily's* social media accounts, which have over 100 million followers, made frequent allegations of American interference in the protests, stirring angry online conversations among mainland Chinese internet users about supposed American meddling in a domestic affair.

Research Design and Data

The video clips used in our experiment focused on soft propaganda. To make the propaganda treatments as realistic as possible, the videos we chose were from actual television programs and social media clips watched by millions of people in China. Translated transcripts of each propaganda clip and our pre-analysis plan are provided in the online appendix.¹¹

Our study included three rounds of surveys. The first round tested the effect of two propaganda videos related to the Japanese invasion of China against a pure control condition. The second round tested the effect of two propaganda videos, including one video from the first round, and a video about American interference in the Hong Kong protests, against a placebo control condition. A follow-up to the second round survey recontacted the participants in the second round survey to examine whether attitudes persisted several days after viewing the propaganda clips.

While the propaganda clips we selected were all instances of nationalist propaganda, they represent distinct stylistic approaches to communicating those themes. Among the two propaganda videos in the first round, one is a state-run newscast, which mixes elements of “hard” and “soft” propaganda. The other, a clearer-cut instance of “soft” propaganda, is an entertaining and emotionally gripping fictional narrative about the Japanese invasion of China. In the third round, we examine another soft propaganda video, a viral social media clip promoted by the Chinese state media about the Hong Kong protests, which took an emotionally charged approach.

The participants in the survey were drawn from a national panel from a market research firm. To strengthen confidentiality, the survey was hosted on an encrypted site that stored data in the United States. Our sample is not representative of the general population, and contains a higher proportion of younger, better-educated, and urban respondents. The relatively young and urban population was of special interest to our study, since it is this population that has historically been most likely to mobilize in nationalist protest. [Table 1](#) shows descriptive statistics for each of the three survey rounds. In each round, we used a pre-treatment attention check to screen out participants who did not carefully read the questions.

Table I. Sample descriptive statistics.

Statistic	N	Mean	St. dev	Min	Max
Round one study					
September 2019					
Under 40 years old	5043	0.748	0.434	0	1
College educated	5043	0.539	0.499	0	1
Resides in major city	5043	0.493	0.500	0	1
CCP member	5043	0.160	0.366	0	1
Income over 200k yuan	4858	0.185	0.389	0	1
Female	5042	0.499	0.500	0	1
Round two study					
November–December 2019					
Round one participants not eligible					
Under 40 years old	1834	0.541	0.498	0	1
College educated	1835	0.592	0.492	0	1
Resides in major city	1834	0.786	0.410	0	1
CCP member	1832	0.160	0.367	0	1
Income over 200k yuan	1826	0.227	0.419	0	1
Female	1834	0.494	0.500	0	1
Round two recontact study					
December 2019					
Recontact of round two participants after 5 to 7 days					
Under 40 years old	790	0.568	0.496	0	1
College educated	790	0.722	0.449	0	1
Resides in major city	789	0.830	0.376	0	1
CCP member	787	0.177	0.382	0	1
Income over 200k yuan	788	0.287	0.453	0	1
Female	790	0.513	0.500	0	1

An important concern was whether watching propaganda videos with emotionally affecting content represented a risk to subjects. In our study design, we took care to select widely disseminated propaganda videos that adults would be likely to encounter in their daily lives. To ensure informed consent, we included a content warning about the videos in our consent form before participants began the study, and respondents had an opportunity to opt-out then and at any point in the study.

We were mindful of the need to take steps to reduce the likelihood that “demand effects” drove the results—in other words, that subjects might infer the purpose of the study and select the answers that they think the survey designers hoped to hear. To put respondents at ease, we reduced the proportion of political questions by including a large number of straightforward questions about general television viewing and internet usage habits. We also solicited

respondents' opinions about different forms of online and television content. In this context, it was natural to be shown clips from television programs and the news. Moreover, the pattern of survey responses—in particular the fact that viewing the propaganda clips did *not* improve ratings of government performance—made it less likely that respondents who viewed the propaganda clips were simply uniformly selecting the politically correct answers.

Round One Study

The focus of our first round study was examining soft propaganda highlighting the Japanese invasion and occupation of China in the 1930s and 40s and the role of the Communist Party in repelling the invasion. As discussed above, this form of propaganda remains common in contemporary China.

One treated group viewed an excerpt drawn from the Communist Party's nightly newscast *Xinwen Lianbo* (新闻联播). The newscast focused on Xi Jinping's participation in the annual national commemoration of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, one of three public holidays memorializing the war. As described by [Chang and Ren \(2016\)](#), *Xinwen Lianbo* is not only the most influential and widely viewed television program in China, it is also regarded as a direct reflection of Chinese politics and official ideology. As [Chang and Ren \(2016\)](#) note, "Every move' of the Chinese political choreography has been explicitly or implicitly reflected in the language and format of the program, ever since its first broadcast on 1 January 1978."

The clip we selected displays many of the linguistic and symbolic features typical of party rhetoric and of *Xinwen Lianbo* segments. Since Xi Jinping's accession to the General Secretary post in 2012, the nightly news program has run some 579 segments discussing the Anti-Japanese War or Nanjing Massacre. Like many other segments on the newscast, the clip we selected opens with a recitation of the names of several core party and government bodies. Throughout the clip, top party officials and large numbers of party cadres are displayed prominently alongside images of the national flag and soldiers marching in formation. Furthermore, speakers explicitly and repeatedly reference several slogans that have become cornerstones of Chinese political rhetoric in recent years, such as "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people" (中华民族伟大复兴) and the "China dream" (中国梦). These explicit visual and linguistic evocations of state and party symbols and official ideology arguably make this an example of hard propaganda—and in our pre-registered design, we conceived of it as such. However, the segment lacks the kind of over-the-top praise of the party and unrealistic claims associated with hard propaganda as defined by [Huang \(2015\)](#). Therefore, we think it fair to argue that the clip sits on the line between soft and hard propaganda.

A second treated group viewed a television drama about the Sino-Japanese War. In the 2010s, television stations in China aired as many as 70 different

series each year about the Second Sino-Japanese War. The clip was drawn from a popular drama called “The Time of the Snow Leopard” (雪豹坚强岁月), which was broadcast throughout China starting in 2014. The episode focuses on a Japanese platoon invading a village full of unarmed Chinese civilians, who they threaten and mistreat in order to gain intelligence on Communist guerilla forces; at the end of the clip, Communist guerillas arrive and decimate the Japanese platoon.

This clip was selected because its themes—the brutality of the Japanese and the heroism of the Communist-led resistance—encapsulated the main political message of these types of dramas. Extremely popular anti-Japanese television dramas in recent years, such as “My Chief and My Regiment” (我的团长我的团) (2009), “The Patriot” (爱国者) (2018), and “Forever Designation” (永不磨灭的番号) (2011) have prominently and repeatedly featured scenes of Japanese soldiers displaying excessive cruelty while mocking, torturing, or killing Chinese soldiers or civilians. They also frequently feature scenes of Communist skill, bravery, and martyrdom, such as individuals or small groups winning victories although outnumbered and outgunned, singing anthems, or saving villagers. These shows draw from a well-established repertoire of tropes and storylines, which emphasize Chinese soldiers’ underdog status and moral goodness, and Japanese soldiers’ villainy and moral corruption. While our clip encapsulates many of these themes, no single clip can capture the entire breadth of themes and ideas from a genre as varied and long-lived as Chinese television dramas about the war against Japan.

A control group viewed no television clip and continued directly to questions about political attitudes and beliefs. A disadvantage of not including a placebo is that it induced differential levels of attrition between the control and two treated groups. The second round of the survey accounted for this issue by including a placebo video treatment.

All treatments were approximately the same length, about 4 minutes long. After the treatments, we asked respondents a battery of questions to measure nationalist sentiment, emotional states, and attitudes towards the government.

Round Two Study

To replicate and extend the results of the first round study, we fielded a second round study. This study also contained three arms, and respondents were randomized into one arm out of the three. Individuals who responded to the first round study were excluded from the second round. Two arms of the study again contained nationalist propaganda messages. One arm of the study was shown the same Sino-Japanese War drama as in the first round study.

To understand whether our first round results might apply beyond messages targeting Japan, a second arm viewed a video containing a message denouncing American interference in the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The clip

drew on a video produced by China Central Television which had been viewed 1.4 million times and “liked” by close to 70,000 people on a popular video-sharing site. This clip was chosen because its themes—foreign interference on domestic territory—were relevant to our theoretical focus on anger connected to foreign violations of national integrity. In coverage of the Hong Kong protests, Chinese state-run media repeatedly and heavily emphasized narratives of foreign (typically, American) responsibility for inciting and planning the protests, as well as the destructiveness and violence of the “rioters.”¹² For instance, during the height of the protests in 2019, Xinwen Lianbo aired 100 news broadcasts that contained the terms “United States” and “interference,” which was as many as the prior 12 years combined. Furthermore, these narratives were often publicized through the social media accounts of state-run media outlets, reflecting a greater turn towards social media networks in order to reach a younger generation of citizens. As William Zheng writes, propaganda disseminated through social media is often engineered by “millennial new media specialists who eschew the jargon-heavy style of traditional propaganda in favour of stories designed to resonate with younger, web-savvy citizens.”¹³ Therefore, this clip provides an example of soft propaganda designed to be appealing in a non-traditional media environment, as well as a way to test if our theory has legs beyond the context of the Sino-Japanese war.

The second round study included a placebo comparison condition. The placebo treatment group watched an excerpt of a nature documentary about arctic seals escaping from a pod of killer whales. We chose the video because it was non-political, entertaining, and approximately the same length as our other treatments. Again, all treatments were approximately the same length, around 4 minutes. After watching the treatment videos, respondents again answered a battery of questions about their political and social attitudes.

Round Three Study

Five days after completing the second round survey, all participants in the second round were sent an invitation to complete a follow-up survey. (In the initial survey, they were told that they would be recontacted). They were not shown the videos again or reminded of them. In order to measure persistence, the survey simply re-asked the same questions from the second round political and social attitudes module. In total, 38% of respondents completed the follow-up survey within the 5 to 7 day window for measuring persistence (specified in our pre-analysis plan).

Outcomes

Our primary outcomes of interest were anger, anti-Japanese sentiment (Rounds One and Two), and anti-American sentiment (Round Two). We

measured anger by asking each respondent to rate their current feelings of anger (愤怒) on a 1 to 5 scale. Our wording draws on the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) questions widely used by psychologists to measure emotional states. We were particularly interested in anger, as the primary negative emotion directed towards perceived foreign threats to the nation. While we focus on anger due to its theoretical relevance to the cases we study, we also measure other emotional outcomes (pride, sadness, and happiness) were using the same methodology and report results for these outcomes in the appendix.

We measured anti-Japanese and anti-American sentiment by combining answers to several questions using principle components analysis (PCA). Following our pre-analysis plan, we constructed the index for anti-Japanese sentiment using several questions about individual attitudes towards Japanese people, as well as two political questions. The political questions asked about whether individuals believe that the Japanese government has not apologized sufficiently for its actions in World War 2 and whether China should take military action against Japan in the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, which are a point of significant territorial dispute between China and Japan. We constructed our index of anti-American sentiment in a similar way to the anti-Japanese sentiment. Using PCA, we combined answers to several questions about individual attitudes towards American people, as well as two political questions. The political questions asked about individuals' beliefs about western countries' responsibility for the protests in Hong Kong, as well as whether foreign countries have been attempting to weaken Chinese territorial sovereignty. Due to an error on our part, our pre-analysis plan amendment did not clearly specify how we would measure anti-foreign sentiment against the United States, so results for the anti-American sentiment outcome are exploratory.

In our results section, we focus on anti-Japanese and anti-American sentiment because we believe these to be most theoretically relevant in our cases. However, in Appendix [Supplementary Figures A1 and A2](#) we report results for all pre-registered outcomes, including indices of pro-China sentiment and preference for using military force to resolve international conflicts (hawkishness). These outcomes were also measured using indices were constructed using PCA, following the questions described in our pre-analysis plan. For simplicity of exposition, given the number of outcomes we examine, we do not include these results in the main text. An important caveat with all indices we construct is that not all readers will agree that each of the questions included in the index may capture the underlying concept, in this case the strength of anti-foreign attitudes.

We cannot rule out the possibility of preference falsification—in other words, the potential that participants' public behavior does not match their internal attitudes. However, we argue that the fact that propaganda so strongly

affects expressed attitudes and behaviors is in itself politically significant. We also note that some of the expressed opinions—such as a significant proportion of the population stating their willingness to protest the local government—show that preference falsification is unlikely to be universal.

Results

Nationalist Propaganda Stirs Citizen Anger

Figure 1 shows results for the propaganda treatments on self-reported anger. Both the hard and soft propaganda treatments in Round One and Round Two of the survey drove extraordinarily large increases in self-reported anger. In both the placebo and pure control conditions, people generally reported feeling somewhere between “2 - a little” to “3 - some” anger. Each of the treatments increased the amount of self-reported anger by one and a half points out of five, to an average of “4 - rather strong” anger. (Results for other emotions are reported in the Appendix.)

The television drama was marginally more effective at manipulating emotion than the newscast, highlighting the persuasiveness of non-traditional formats of propaganda. In the Round One study, the anti-Japanese television drama caused a slightly larger, but statistically significant, increase in anger compared to the anti-Japanese “hard” propaganda. In the Round Two study, the two non-traditional soft propaganda treatments (the drama and social media clip) caused nearly identical increases in anger.

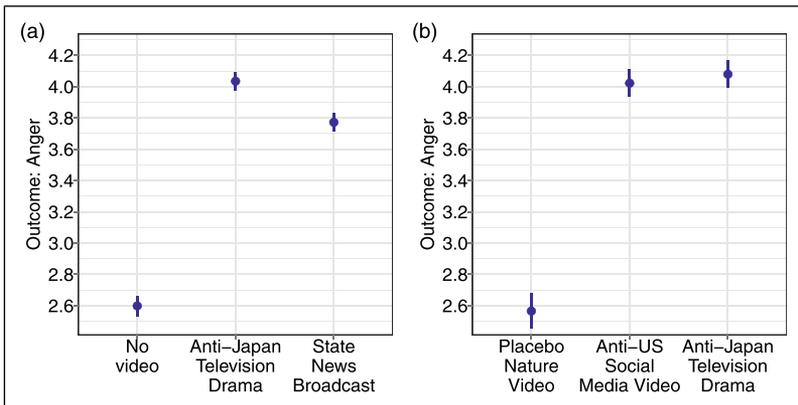


Figure 1. Treatment effects of propaganda on self-reported anger on a 1 to 5 scale. Comparison groups include no video (Round One) and a placebo video (Round Two). Each dot represents one respondent. Bars show 95% confidence intervals for the mean for each condition. Visualization design here and throughout adapted from Coppock (2019).

It is possible that for some respondents, anger was reported but not genuinely felt. However, in debriefings with participants who took pilot versions of the survey in the United States, they generally reported the treatments were genuinely emotionally affecting. As shown in the appendix, the results remain significant after controlling for multiple comparisons.

Soft Propaganda Strengthens Anti-foreign Attitudes

Figure 2 plots results for anti-foreign sentiment against Japan and against the United States. The outcome variables are the indices of anti-foreign sentiment and anti-American sentiment constructed using principle components as described in the Research Design section. Additional results for individual questions are presented in the appendix, and are also generally statistically significant and consistent with the results presented here.

Each of the propaganda treatments had large and statistically significant effects on anti-foreign attitudes. Notably, the television drama soft propaganda clip had the largest effect, increasing anti-Japanese sentiment by 0.38 of a *SD* in the Round One survey and a nearly identical 0.35 of a *SD* in the Round Two survey, where the comparison group viewed a placebo video instead of no video. The television news propaganda clip covering Nanjing war memorials increased anti-foreign attitudes in our index by 0.26 of a *SD*. The social media clips about US interference in Hong Kong increased anti-foreign attitudes by 0.22 of a *SD*. (In the appendix we show results for individual questions.) The results remain robust after controlling for multiple comparisons, as we discuss in the appendix.

Exploring other dimensions of nationalism, we find tentative evidence that viewing propaganda may increase pro-China patriotism and foreign policy hawkishness. In the Round One survey, the anti-Japan soft and hard propaganda treatments increased the pro-China sentiment by 0.10 and 0.19 of a *SD*, and increased foreign policy hawkishness by 0.20 and 0.11 of *SD*. However, the Round Two survey did not replicate these results. The differing results may be due to lower statistical power in the second round survey, and the relatively small degree to which this kind of propaganda moves pro-China patriotism. We found tentative evidence that Hong Kong protests treatment increased patriotism, but further research is needed to better understand what types of soft propaganda are effective at increasing patriotism.

Our design allows us to show that viewing propaganda caused an increase in self-reported anger. It also gives us leverage on whether viewing propaganda caused an increase in anti-foreign sentiment. A natural follow-up question is whether anti-foreign sentiment is mediated by anger. In the appendix, we present results using mediation analysis; the results support the notion that anger mediates increases in nationalist sentiment. However, key

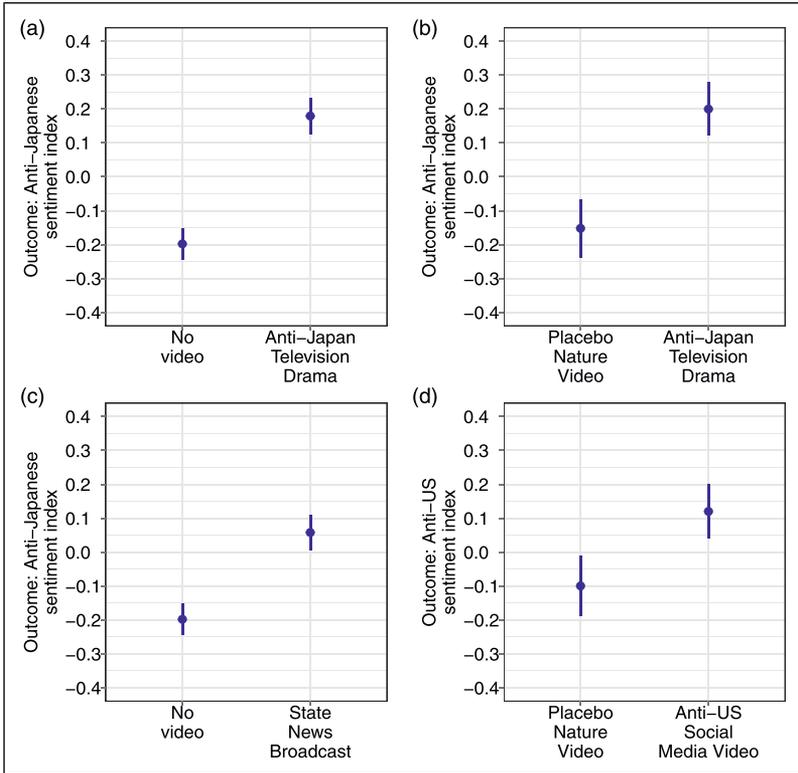


Figure 2. Treatment effects of propaganda on anti-foreign attitudes index created through PCA (see text). The index has been standardized within each round. Comparison groups include no video (Round One) and a placebo video (Round Two). Each dot represents one respondent. Bars show 95% confidence intervals for the mean for each condition.

assumptions of mediation analysis are unlikely to be met, rendering interpretation difficult.

Soft Propaganda Has Durable Effects

Do the effects of soft propaganda endure? To examine persistence, we re-contacted participants in the Round Two survey 5 days later. They had a 3 day window to complete a survey with the same political and social questions we asked in the prior round. One might expect that propaganda’s effects on attitudes decay quickly over time, given prior findings that propaganda is not especially persuasive as well as the pervasiveness of propaganda, which

suggests that authoritarian governments think repeated exposure is needed to reinforce messages.

However, Figure 3 shows that soft propaganda's persuasive effects can endure for as long as a week. The effect of the anti-Japan drama remains statistically significant after five to 7 days, and the size of the effect has declined slightly from 0.35 to 0.22 of a *SD*.¹⁴ The estimated effect size of the anti-US social media clip declined at a slightly faster rate, from 0.22 to 0.10, and is no longer statistically significant.

While soft propaganda videos led to a large spike in self-reported anger immediately after viewing, emotions returned to baseline after a week. The finding that changes in anti-foreign attitudes can persist even after anger has cooled suggests a potential psychological mechanism where emotions such as

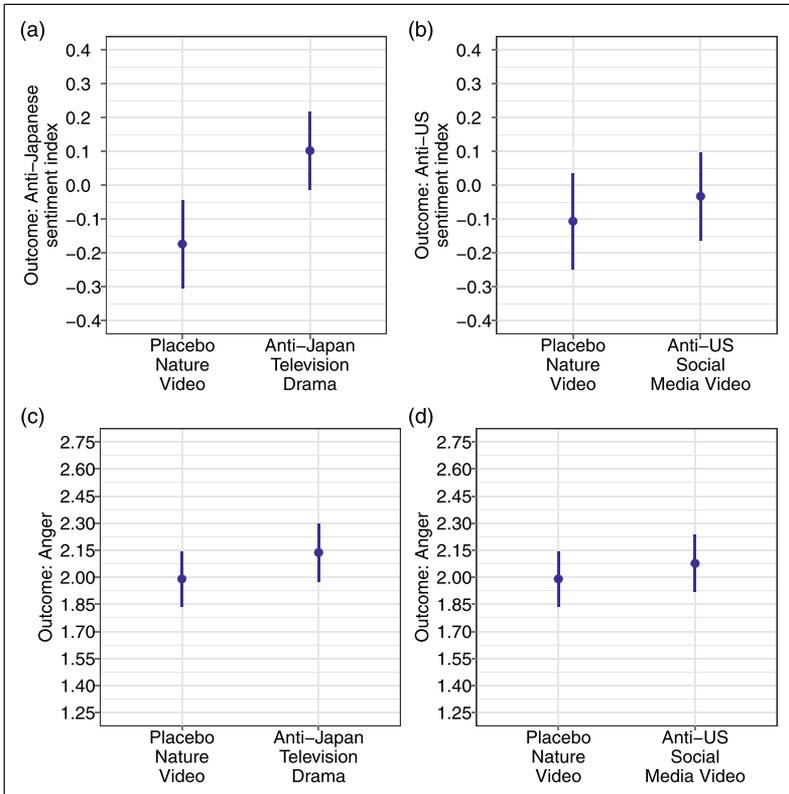


Figure 3. Treatment effects measured 5 to 7 days after initial exposure. Each dot represents one respondent. Bars show 95% confidence intervals for the mean for each condition.

anger and frustration consolidate changes in attitudes. However, further research is needed to understand this mechanism in greater detail.

Soft Propaganda May Influence Protest Behavior

Can nationalist propaganda influence behavior as well as attitudes? In order to extend our findings, in the Round One survey we asked respondents to sign a virtual petition requesting that the Japanese government make a formal apology for its role in the World War 2. Respondents were given the opportunity to sign with their last name only in order to protect subjects; because of the small number of Chinese surnames relative to the population, it is for practical purposes impossible to use the surname to identify an individual given the basic demographic information we collected.

Figure 4 shows that viewing propaganda may influence real-world protest behavior, although the results are tentative. First, watching the anti-Japan television drama increased the rate at which individuals signed the petition by 8 percentage points. The difference is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, but unlike the results presented above it is not significant after adjustment for multiple comparisons. Those who watched the state-run newscast were 6 percentage points more likely to sign the petition, a difference that was not significant with or without adjusting for multiple comparisons.¹⁵ The relatively costless nature of signing this virtual petition make these results suggestive of real-world behavior but not conclusive.

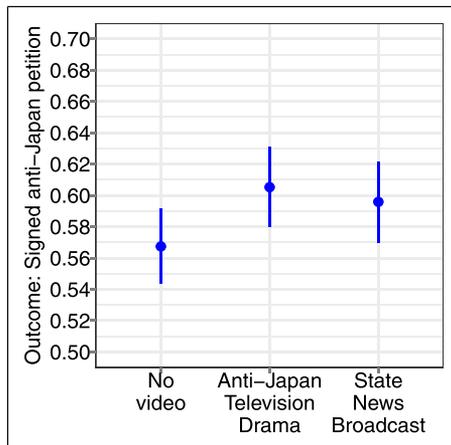


Figure 4. Treatment effects of propaganda on willingness to sign a petition (using last name only) calling for Japan to make a formal apology for its wartime actions. Bars show 95% confidence intervals for the mean for each condition.

Nationalist Propaganda Does Not Divert From Poor Government Performance

Theories of diversionary nationalism would lead us to expect that viewing nationalist propaganda might reduce willingness to protest against the Chinese state. By this logic, propaganda which plays up the presence of a foreign adversary leads citizens to rally around their government. Theories of propaganda as a power-signaling mechanism would also lead us to expect that nationalist propaganda reduce likelihood of protest against the government, since citizens are less likely to believe that protests will succeed against their powerful regime.

To examine this, we asked respondents if they would participate in a street demonstration (参加游行活动) in the event they felt unsatisfied with government services. Our question draws on one asked by [Huang \(2018\)](#), who found exposure to propaganda sharply reduced willingness to participate in a hypothetical protest against the government.

Strikingly, especially in comparison to [Huang \(2018\)](#) and [Carter and Carter \(2021a\)](#), we find that exposure to nationalist propaganda does *not* reduce likelihood to protest against the government. [Figure 5](#) shows results across both waves. Across all waves, about a quarter of respondents indicated they would participate in the protest, regardless of condition. The point estimates are generally very small. In the appendix, we show nationalist propaganda does not increase or decrease self-reported satisfaction with government services. However, given government investment in nationalist propaganda, it seems likely that exposure to propaganda benefits the government in some other way, such as by reducing the salience of domestic grievances relative to international politics.

An “Angry Youth” Phenomenon?

Are young people most susceptible to emotionally driven nationalist propaganda? Western and Chinese analysts have argued that nationalism in China is strongest among the country’s “angry youth” (愤青) who consume a diet of anti-foreign and patriotic media, and who have organized boycotts and protests both in China and in foreign countries. Academic studies have taken a mixed view of this supposed phenomenon. [Johnston \(2017\)](#) finds little evidence of rising nationalism among Chinese youth in Beijing, instead finding they are more cosmopolitan than their elders. By comparison, [Weiss \(2019\)](#) finds that youth are more hawkish, although she notes that it is unclear whether propaganda is responsible for this shift.

We find no evidence that nationalist propaganda is more effective among younger generations of Chinese at stoking anti-foreign sentiment or hawkishness. (See online appendix [Supplementary Figures A12 and A13.](#)) At the

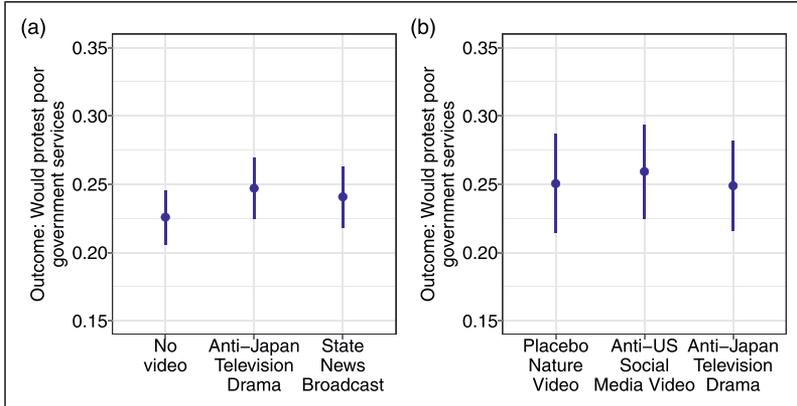


Figure 5. Treatment effects of propaganda on willingness to protest against the government. Each dot represents one respondent. Bars show 95% confidence intervals for the mean for each condition.

same time, in both survey rounds, propaganda clips were most effective at stoking anger among younger respondents. One possible interpretation, consistent with reporting on the “angry youth” phenomenon, is that younger people respond with more emotional intensity in response to nationalist issues. To some degree, this emotional intensity might be performative, since it does not correspond with larger changes in attitudes or behavior. It may also be that young people voluntarily consume more patriotic and anti-foreign media than older generations. Future studies might examine this, perhaps by using the design outlined in [De Benedictis-Kessner et al. \(2019\)](#), who incorporate preferences for media consumption into the experimental design.

Robustness

The appendix contains a number of robustness checks. These include visualizations of covariate balance, which show that the experimental randomization worked; results for the individual survey questions that comprise our index; a discussion of the multiple comparisons problem; analysis of survey attrition; and results using regression with controls.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that “soft” propaganda, which is produced to be visually and emotionally compelling, is particularly effective at manipulating nationalist attitudes. We argue that it is effective when it inflames emotions, particularly anger, which catalyze attitudinal change. We show that these

attitudinal changes persist for up to a week. However, nationalist propaganda does not appear to influence citizens' perception of government performance or their willingness to protest against their government. Therefore, our study suggests that authoritarian control is maintained through a more complex landscape of propaganda, responsive institutions (e.g., [Chen et al., 2016](#); [Distelhorst & Hou, 2017](#); [Distelhorst, 2017](#); [Distelhorst & Fu, 2019](#)), and repression (e.g., [Fu, 2018](#); [Fu & Distelhorst, 2018](#); [Mattingly, 2020](#); [Svolik, 2012](#)), with nationalist propaganda playing a supportive role.

Our results do not necessarily contradict prior studies that have argued that some types of propaganda signal the regime's power and aim to instill fear rather than persuade ([Huang, 2015, 2018](#); [Wedeen, 1999](#)) or studies that have shown that certain types of propaganda increase government support (e.g., [Chen & MacDonald, 2020](#); [Peisakhin & Rozenas, 2018](#)). Instead, our study points towards the importance of the diversity of propaganda produced by autocratic regimes.

Can soft propaganda persuade at the same time that hard propaganda intimidates? Do nationalist and state-building messages clash with each other? What is the cumulative effect of viewing hundreds or thousands of hours of propaganda? We leave important and thorny questions about the interaction between different types of propaganda and potential general equilibrium effects for future studies.

Acknowledgments

We thank Kaiping Chen, Charles Crabtree, Yaoyao Dai, Harris Doshay, Haifeng Huang, Holger Kern, Lachlan McNamee, Elizabeth Nugent, Frances Rosenbluth, Xiaoxiao Shen, Milan Svolik, Jessica Teets, Rory Truex, Jessica Chen Weiss, Xu, Lauren Young, Jiahua Yue, and seminar participants at Yale, the University of Wisconsin, Madison, New York University, and APSA for comments, suggestions, and support. We are grateful to the Japan Foundation's Center for Global Partnership for the grant that supported this project as well as the Betty and Whitney MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale and the Council on East Asian Studies. Our design was preregistered with EGAP (#20190903AB) and approved by Yale University's Institutional Review Board (#2000026082). All errors remain our own.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Center for Global Partnership.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Notes

1. In the city of Shanghai alone, for example, the local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) branch spends more than \$500 million U.S. dollars per year on its propaganda efforts, and the largest line item in the budget is 75 million USD (500 million yuan) for “artistic performances.” See “Shanghai Municipal Budget of 2018: Budgetary Authority - Publicity Department of the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China.” (上海市2018年市级部门预算：预算主管部门：中国共产党上海市委委员会宣传部) Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20191015154156/http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/Attach/Attaches/201802/201802110940163948.pdf>.
2. In addition, as shown by [Chen \(2019\)](#) and [Little \(2017\)](#), propaganda is unpersuasive to some groups and persuasive to others.
3. Our findings build on evidence that in democracies, the most widely shared political messages on social media are wrapped in emotional appeals ([Brady et al., 2017](#)). See also work by [McClendon \(2018\)](#).
4. Notably, our research design cannot help us determine whether inducing a state of anger through some non-political stimulus might induce nationalism. It is possible it might. We simply wish to note that our hypothesized psychological mechanism is different than these studies.
5. The Propaganda Department has recently re-branded itself in English as the Publicity Department.
6. An extensive recent literature discusses the scope, aims, and consequences of censorship in China (e.g., [King et al., 2013](#); [Lorentzen, 2014](#); [Chen & Xu, 2017](#); [Roberts, 2018](#); [Hobbs & Roberts, 2018](#)).
7. Prior to 2014, the Cyberspace Administration of China was known as the State Internet Information Office.
8. Author dataset.
9. Murong Xuecun. “China’s Television War on Japan.” *The New York Times*. February 9, 2014. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/10/opinion/murong-chinas-television-war-on-japan.html>.
10. Author dataset.
11. Replication materials and code can be found online. See [Yao and Mattingly \(2021\)](#).
12. For several examples, see: Steven Lee Myers. “In Hong Kong Protests, China Angrily Connects Dots Back to U.S.” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2019. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/05/world/asia/china-hong-kong-protests.html>

13. William Zheng. "How official Chinese propaganda is adapting to the social media age as disaffection spreads among millennials." *South China Morning Post*, February 10 2019. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2185300/how-official-chinese-propaganda-adapting-social-media-age>
14. The analysis relies on the assumption that the treatments did not influence the decision to participate in the follow-up wave. Consistent with this assumption, the treatment and placebo conditions remain balanced on observable covariates in Round Three.
15. In part because our Round Two study had less statistical power than Round One, we elected not to ask this question again since we thought we were unlikely to be able to detect an effect.

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