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THE PARADOX OF SOFT PROPAGANDA: HOW ENTERTAINMENT-INFUSED PROPAGANDA LEADS TO DISENGAGEMENT

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The Paradox of Soft Propaganda: How Entertainment-Infused Propaganda Leads to Disengagement

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Abstract

Digital platforms have expanded the reach of propaganda, elevating its sophistication to unprecedented levels. Soft propaganda, which embeds ideological messaging within entertainment formats, marks a departure from traditional propaganda toward audience engagement. This study examines its prevalence and effect in China's digital sphere using a mixed-methods approach: computational analysis of seven million posts from 96 state-owned media accounts (2009–2023) and two large-scale randomized experiments. Our findings reveal a sharp rise in soft propaganda over the past decade; however, this shift does not lead to greater audience engagement, improved political knowledge, strengthened emotional attachment to the government, or higher tolerance for misinformation. Instead, entertainment-infused propaganda alienates serious consumers, producing a cost on the persuasion effect that potentially weakens state influence.

Key words: propaganda, authoritarianism, emotion, social media, China

Introduction

"The greatest sound is rarely heard. The greatest form has no shape."

— Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*

Politics has long been the art of winning hearts and minds. With social media and algorithmic technologies wielding an ever-growing influence over public opinion, this battle has increasingly shifted to digital platforms. Around the world, political parties and leaders leverage these platforms to shape their public image, engage with voters, and mobilize electoral mobilization (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017; Groshek and Koc-Michalska 2017; Golovchenko et al. 2020; Schwartz, Nelimarkka, and Larsson 2023). Among the countries adopting this strategy, China stands out with its robust digital infrastructure, far-reaching propaganda apparatus, and long-standing Communist tradition of "thought work" combined with "emotion work" (Perry 2002; 2012). Over the years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has extended its ideological battle across digital spaces, striving to "occupy the battlefield of online public opinion" on every major social media network. A prime example is *People's Daily*, the CCP's flagship propaganda outlet, which commands over 153 million followers on Weibo—China's second-largest social media platform in China (akin to Twitter)—and 6.7 million followers on Twitter itself. Domestically, state-owned media outlets and government agencies maintain official accounts across all major platforms, encompassing Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin, ensuring a pervasive presence in China's online discourse(Lu and Pan 2022).

The widespread use of social media has elevated propaganda to unprecedented levels of sophistication. Existing research on computational propaganda highlights the exploitation of

algorithmic curation to spread misinformation, manufacture false consent, shape information flows, and influence democratic processes(Lukito 2020; Woolley and Howard 2016). However, a growing yet underdeveloped body of literature has begun to examine the evolving nature of propaganda itself—how it is being restyled to fit digital media narratives (Zou 2021; Mattingly and Yao 2022). Rather than relying on overt indoctrination, soft propaganda takes on a more subtle and engaging form, seamlessly blending ideology with entertainment. Highly aesthetic and emotionally compelling, it is packaged into interactive, immersive media formats that leverage digital affordances to evoke affective responses. This shift marks a significant departure from traditional propaganda, embedding ideological narratives into movies, music, videoclips, games, and lyrics, making them more palatable, pervasive, and seamlessly integrated into everyday digital consumption.

Despite its growing prevalence, key questions remain: How widespread is soft propaganda, and how effective is it in winning hearts and minds? Existing literature has demonstrated the effectiveness of propaganda through various mechanisms, including persuasion, repressive signaling, attention-capturing, nationalism stimulation, and presumed influence (Little 2017; Huang 2015, 2018; Esarey 2009; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017; Huang and Cruz 2022; Lu and Pan 2020). However, little is known about whether shifts in content and style increase exposure to digital propaganda in the first place—let alone whether they influence emotional attitudes toward the government, potentially wielding the non-persuasive power of propaganda. These factors, in turn, may ultimately contribute to long-term regime stability.

This study seeks to fill this gap by systematically examining the prevalence and effect of soft propaganda in China's evolving digital landscape, employing a combined computational and experimental design. Study 1 traces the rise of soft propaganda over the past decade by analyzing more than seven million posts issued by 96 Chinese state-owned media outlets and government-affiliated social media accounts from 2009 to 2023. To further estimate the causal mechanisms through which soft propaganda influences viewership and attitudes, we conducted Studies 2 and 3, two randomized experiments using novel designs, surveying approximately 8,700 Chinese respondents. By integrating computational and experimental evidence, our findings reveal a striking paradox: despite a sharp increase in the prevalence of soft propaganda, its impact remains largely unproductive. Contrary to expectations, exposure to soft propaganda has no significant causal effect on increasing viewership, fostering affective attitudes, or improving political knowledge across various policy domains. Instead, the entertainment-infused propaganda appears to have disengaged audiences who would have otherwise self-selected into consuming serious news, ultimately diluting the effectiveness of ideological messaging.

This study contributes to the literature on propaganda and authoritarian politics in several key ways. First, it offers the first large-scale, long-term measurement of the rise of soft propaganda in China's digital media landscape, quantifying the increasing use of culturally embedded, emotionally engaging, and subtly ideological messaging to promote state narratives. In doing so, it reveals how authoritarian regimes have adapted propaganda to the affordances of social media, marking a systematic shift in propaganda strategies. Second, by causally examining what soft propaganda does and does not achieve, this study offers critical

insights into the limitations of contemporary state-led digital persuasion efforts. While much of the existing literature examines how propaganda reinforces state power, our study highlights the potential costs of shifting propaganda strategies in an era of information overload—specifically, an unintended consequence: **audience disengagement**. These findings have broad implications for understanding state media adaptation in the algorithmic age, the evolving nature of political indoctrination, and the shifting dynamics of state-society interactions under digital authoritarianism.

This study makes a significant methodological contribution by employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates computational text analysis to track long-term trends in propaganda styles with experimental evidence to test causal effects on audience perception. This multi-method design offers a more comprehensive understanding of both the supply and reception of digital propaganda. Particularly, by adopting a novel two-stage experimental design, the study distinguishes between global and local treatment effects. The global effect, which measures exposure to propaganda while allowing respondents to exit the media outlet, provides a more realistic assessment of propaganda's impact in an era of fragmented attention. Strikingly, while the local effect of soft propaganda appears negligible, the global effect is negative, indicating that exposure may actually lead to disengagement rather than persuasion. This finding carries significant methodological implications: had the study focused solely on local effects, it might have failed to capture the broader dynamics of information consumption in digital environments. Given the tendency for audiences to retreat into personalized echo chambers, this approach offers a more accurate lens for evaluating the real-world effectiveness of political communication.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We first examine the rapid evolution of soft propaganda, using China as a case study. Sections 2 and 3 outline the theoretical framework and hypotheses, drawing from affective politics and the CCP's long-standing tradition of "emotion work." Section 4 details the data and methods used across three studies designed to test our hypotheses. Section 5 presents the key findings, followed by a discussion of their broader implications in the concluding section.

The Rise of Soft Propaganda

Propaganda has long been a core strategy of authoritarian regimes, serving as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, reinforcing ideology, and maintaining political control (Kenez 1985; Adena et al. 2015; Nietzel 2016; Guriev and Treisman 2015). In the digital age, propaganda has evolved into more sophisticated forms, including personalized messaging, cross-platform tailoring, and co-opting of subcultural communities to amplify nationalist narratives, among others (Bolsover and Howard 2019; Repnikova and Fang 2018; Gorman 2017; Zou 2019; Brady 2009). While existing literature largely focuses on these trends, a less studied phenomenon is the rise of soft propaganda—an asthetically appealing, market-friendly, high-tech, and emotionally resonant form of state messaging. First introduced by Huang (2015), soft propaganda refers to "relatively subtle and sleek messages" that take the form of credible news or engaging artistic works. More recently, Mattingly and Yao (2022) have described soft propaganda as aestheticized political messaging embedded in art and entertainment, designed to appear credible, appealing, and engaging.

Building on this line of work, we conceptualize soft propaganda as subtle messaging that promotes state narratives or ideological agendas through entertainment, culture, or seemingly

apolitical content. Unlike traditional propaganda, which relies on blunt slogans and rigid ideological indoctrination, soft propaganda integrates entertainment, pop culture, and digital engagement, making ideological messaging more appealing and immersive. A prime example of this new propaganda style is the Chinese Communist Party's engagement with "main melody films" and "positive-energy news", which blends elements of entertainment (influence through attraction) and propaganda (strategic persuasion) to shape public perception and behavior[1].

Soft propaganda possesses several distinctive affordances. Content-wise, it replaces dry political news and overt indoctrination with soft news, entertainment, and lifestyle content, seamlessly embedding ideological messaging into popular discourse. A key strategy is entertainment infusion—using movies, TV shows, music, social media, and cultural content to subtly promote mainstream narratives. Style-wise, it moves away from formal, bureaucratic language in favor of a conversational and personalized tone— incorporating slang, listicles, personal pronouns, emojis, and visually stimulating format to enhance engagement. The sophisticated use of multimedia formats—such as videos, bolded text, music, and dynamic visuals—further exploits the interactive affordances of digital platforms.

[1] The movie *The Wandering Earth II* (2023) serves as an example of soft propaganda. Much like *Wolf Warrior* (2017) and *The Wandering Earth* (2019), it embeds nationalist, collectivist, and socialist ideals under the guise of science fiction. Following the film's box office success, the *People's Daily* capitalized on its popularity by joining the trending discussion on Weibo, posting: "*You imagine it, and we make it real*! @Chinese National Nuclear Corporation. Netizens reply: '*Dream alliance*!'" Accompanied by an edited movie poster subtitled "*Strong nuclear power, strong country. We will benefit humanity across the world,*" the post seamlessly blended patriotic sentiment, technological optimism, and nationalistic pride with popular entertainment. The post appeared alongside a mix of explicit propaganda messages, such as "*Let's study President Xi's words*", and soft, engaging content, including lifestyle tips on post-COVID workplace health and visually captivating posts like "*the most beautiful crystal pine you've ever seen*."

It appeals to emotions, identity, and cultural pride rather than rational persuasion, making it more emotionally relatable. While often state-aligned, soft propaganda does not always carry an explicit government label, allowing it to blend into entertainment spaces—often through influencers and platform strategies.

Does Soft Propaganda Work

This evolution raises critical questions about the audience reception and broader implications for authoritarian resilience. Specifically, how effective is soft propaganda in increasing viewership and fostering affective capital, or does it risk audeience disengagement and political apathy? The question of whether—and how—the popularization of soft propaganda exerts political influence remains an issue of debate. One strand of literature views propaganda as a tool for political control, operating alongside censorship and survellience. In this view, propaganda functions as a repressive signal, influencing the credulous while serving as a coordination mechanism for others, even without fundamentally altering their beliefs (Little 2017; Huang and Cruz 2022). Propaganda can signal state capacity and reinforce social stability, yet paradoxically, it may also dampen regime support (Huang 2015). Another perspective sees social media propaganda as a means of attracting attention, showcasing state achievements, and inflaming nationalism (Mattingly and Yao 2022; Pan 2019). Yet, neither political control theory nor attention theory fully explains the pervasiveness of soft propaganda, which does not exert control as coercively as hard propaganda. Instead, its influence operates through subtler, more strategic mechanisms beyond mere symbolic purposes. It remains unclear whether and how entertainment-infused

propaganda translates into a political resource that the ruling party can effectively leverage.

We draw attention to a largely neglected perspective: affect. At the core of affective politics is the idea that political judgments and behaviors are shaped not only by cognition but also deeply by emotions (Marcus 2000). *Affectual attitude*—the emotions and feelings one holds toward an object—constitutes a fundamental component of attitude formation, alongside cognitive and behavioral attitudes (Ostrom 1969). Similarly, *affective legitimacy,* which we define as positive feelings, emotional bonds, and biases favoring the ruling party and government, plays a crucial role in sustaining authoritarian legitimacy, complementing procedural and performance-based legitimacy. This concept aligns with Max Weber's identification of affective attitudes as one of the four fundamental sources of legitimacy: "by virtue of affectual attitudes, especially emotional" (Weber, 1964, p.124, see also Spencer, 1970, p.123).

Emotional bonds with charismatic political figures often translate into loyalty and support (Madsen and Snow 1991). In Weber's theory of authority, affective bonds between leaders and the people serve as the foundation for charismatic authority, reinforcing regime stability and shaping the moral justification of government actions. One psychological mechanism contributing to this process is the *halo effect*, a cognitive bias where a positive impression of a person or entity unconsciously shapes overall perceptions (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). Once individuals form a favorable impression, they often struggle to reassess their judgments objectively, even when confronted with new or contradictory information. Extensive research confirms that support for particular candidates can lead to biased

judgments about political figures, policies, and opposing parties (Westerwick, Johnson, and Knobloch-Westerwick 2017; Rydgren and Ruth 2013; Miller and Grubesic 2021).

Emotionally charged ideological persuasion is one of the most enduring legacies of the Chinese Communist Party. Elizabeth Perry (2002) refers to "the mass mobilization of emotions" as a key factor in the CCP's revolutionary victory. From its revolutionary era to the present, the CCP has embedded emotional appeals within propaganda, political campaigns, and mass mobilization efforts. The cultivation of affective bonds between the Party and the people is also vividly reflected in the *mass line* principle—"*from the people, to the people*." The legacy of emotion work continues in contemporary China, particularly in anti-corruption campaigns, where the Party emphasizes the doctrine of "maintaining the flesh-and-blood relationship with the people." As Perry (2002) observes, the CCP has "never abandoned the commitment to emotion work"(p. 123).

Drawing on the literature on affective politics, we argue that soft propaganda represents a digital transformation of the CCP's long-standing strategy of "emotion work", serving as a strategic tool to bolster legitimacy through popularity, emotional bonds, and trust on an affective basis. This shift rejuvenates "the mass mobilization of emotions" with a technological adaptation, aligning with social media's interactive and emotionally contagious nature. To strengthen these affective ties, state media's social media accounts are encouraged to engage with followers in an interpersonal manner, a practice formalized as the *digital mass line* (*wangshang qunzhong luxian*). These strategies aim to cultivate a sense of *gemeinschaft* with the Party and government's online presence, fostering shared identities, values, and loyalty. This, in turn, may translate into political trust and legitimacy in real-world settings.

By leveraging affective capital, soft propaganda may serve broader political and economic goals. Guided by this theoretical framework, we propose three hypotheses:

> **H1:** The **softening of propaganda**—through **entertainment-infused political content and a personalistic style**—**increases audience engagement.**
>
> **H2:** The **softening of propaganda**—through **entertainment-infused political content and a personalistic style**—**enhances positive emotional attitudes toward the government**.
>
> **H3:** The **softening of propaganda**— through **entertainment-infused political content and a personalistic style** —**increases tolerance for misinformation**.

Winning Hearts— and Minds as Well?

Beyond its affective impact, we further examine the persuasive influence of soft propaganda on political knowledge and attitudes. Existing research on individuals' exposure to political news alongside entertainment presents mixed findings. Some studies suggest that politics-lite soft news can expose inattentive voters to political information but does not necessarily enhance political knowledge (Prior 2003; Baum and Jamison 2006; Baum 2002). Others argue that the depoliticization of political news may foster political apathy, discourage critical thinking, and reduce motivation to gather information for informed policymaking (Flinders and Buller 2006). Research on authoritarian politics further suggests that regimes prioritize entertainment and consumerism not to persuade, but to distract the public from political engagement (Morozov 2012).

The question of propaganda's persuasiveness also remains debated. While some studies find that propaganda shapes political attitudes, others suggest that its effects are limited to those who actively self-select into consuming it (Di Tella, Galiani, and Schargrodsky 2021;

Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017). In some cases, propaganda may even produce a boomerang effect, reinforcing scepticism among individuals who initially hold opposing views (Della Vigna et al. 2014). This suggests that propaganda may function less as a persuasive tool and more as a mechanism for reinforcing pre-existing beliefs. In the Chinese context, we expect that soft propaganda, which blends political messaging with entertainment, may increase incidental exposure to political news and propaganda. This unintentional exposure could, in turn, influence political knowledge and shape attitudes.

> **H4: The softening of propaganda—through entertainment-infused political content and a personalized style—increases political knowledge and influences political attitudes.**

Data and Methodology

To study the effect of shifting propaganda strategies, we employ two methodologies: computational and experimental. The computational approach demonstrates the prevalence of soft propaganda in contemporary Chinese social media. The experimental approach assesses whether and how effective such change is for their intended recipients. In carefully designed, multi-stage, online experiments, we aim to detect the global versus the local effect of the softening of propaganda, as delivered through social networking platforms. The local effect is the article-level effect obtained from force-exposure experiments, while the global effect incorporates both the article-level persuasive effect (if any) and the channel-level selection effect of the audience due to the changed contents and styles.

Study 1 : A Computational Approach Showing the Prevalence of Soft Propaganda

We first analyze all posts published by 96 Chinese state-owned media and governmental

departments published between 2009 and 2023 on Weibo, a Chinese equivalent of X (formerly Twitter), the largest of its kind in China, with 257 million daily active users as of 2024. Weibo is believed to be a significant channel where state-controlled media and government accounts propagandize (Qin et al., 2017).

Table 1. Example of Chinese State-owned Media and Governmental Social Media Accounts

Level	State-owned Media	Governmental Social Media Account
National	The *People's Daily*	Youth Central League
Provincial	*Chongqing Morning Post*	Sichuan Govt Bulletin
Municipal	Wuhan Evening Post	Chengdu Govt Bulletin

Table 1 records examples of the Chinese state-owned media and governmental departments' accounts in our scraped sample from Weibo. The research team selected the social media accounts based on their geographical representativeness and the extent of their influence. Our sample covers all of the provinces on the Chinese mainland and the major central media outlets (see the complete list in Appendix A). We collected a total of 7.02 million posts and the number of likes, comments, and reposts linked with these posts. We employed the supervised learning models to classify the proportion of Weibo posts containing "positive energies"[2], social media expressions (listicles, clickbait, slang, pronouns, exclamation marks, hashtags, videos, and pictures), or mobilizations. To train the supervised

[2] Positive-energy posts refer to propaganda content that highlights heroic acts, economic achievements, social harmony, and socialist values, often employing an entertainment-framed approach to reinforce ideology and shape public sentiment. This new genre of propaganda aligns with directives from President Xi Jinping, who has emphasized that the media should "spread positive energy" and foster a "healthy online public opinion environment."

learning models, we randomly hand-coded a subset of 6,000 posts from the entire dataset. We then labelled the unlabelled posts using the trained model. Logistic models, random forests, decision trees, a support vector machine (SVM), and K-Nearest Neighbor (KNN) were experimented with during the model selection stage. The results here are classified by the logistics models with a L2 norm penalty, due to their superior performance.

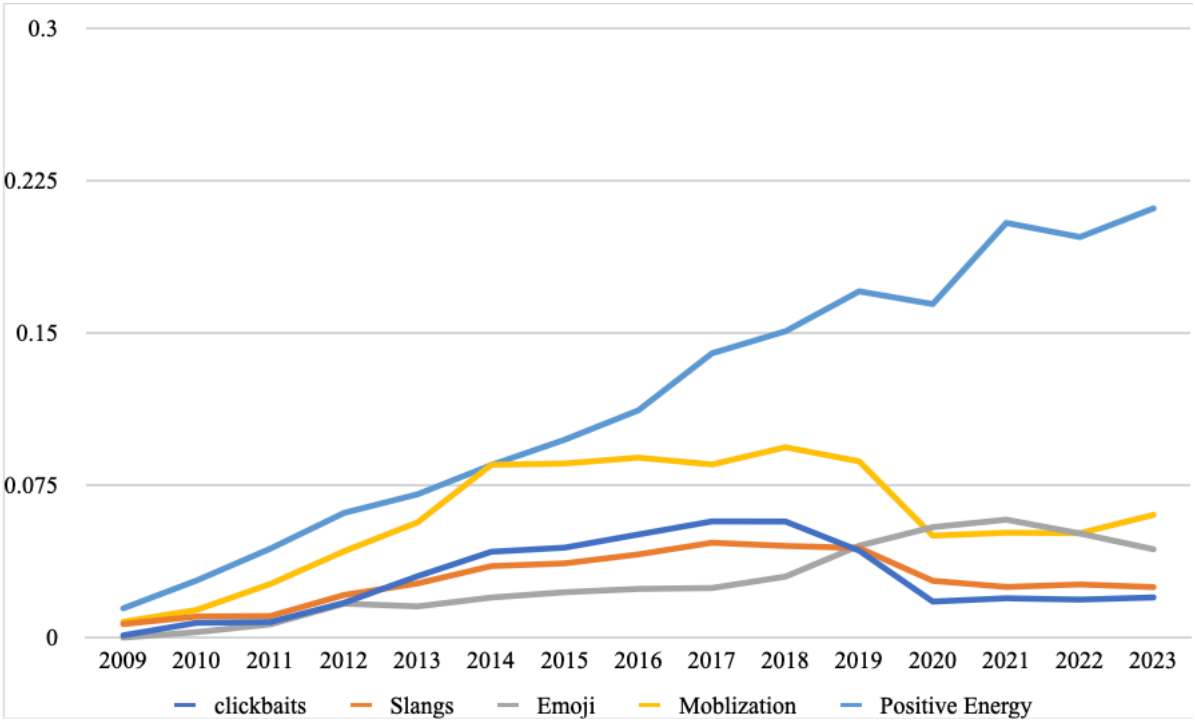

Figure 1. Estimated Proportions of Soft Propaganda Strategies Employed by the Official Media Outlets on Weibo.

Figure 1 reports our classification results, showing the increasing trend in propaganda content that delievers "positive energe", as published by the state-owned media and governmental social media accounts during the period 2009-2023. The proportion of soft propaganda on social media was at a low level of no more than 5% in 2009. By 2023, a substantial proportion of the propaganda had been softened: about 21% reporting a "positive energy", 6% engaging in mobilization or using hashtags, and 4% appealing to emojis. We

observe that propaganda changed not only in terms of its content (e.g. the increasing proportion of positive-energy posts) but also in its tone and style (e.g. the increasing usage of clickbaits). We refer to these two dimensions as the entertainment-infused propaganda content and a personalistic style. Aside from potential measurement errors, we conclude that soft propaganda has clearly been a popular strategy.

Study 2: An Experiment Showing the Null Effects of the Entertainment-infused Propaganda and Personalization of Style across Different Topics

Experimental Treatments

We collected authentic short articles published by state-controlled online media in China. The articles focus on an anti-poverty campaign, an anti-corruption campaign, and the Winter Olympic Games, respectively. For each topic, we gather a serious version and an entertaining version. This aims to test whether the entertaining style of a propaganda article on the same topic influences the audience. The different topics are included to assess whether our theory has sufficient external validity across various propaganda themes.

We also collected articles on apolitical topics and content, such as a forecast for a meteor shower and the splendid view of a city park. This is to test the effect the state-controlled media has on its audience by refocusing its broadcast content on a depoliticized one. Appendix B presents the titles of the articles we employed in the experiment. Using authentic articles and titles, we created screenshots[3] of newsfeed interfaces similar to those used by state-controlled media outlets and embedded them in our questionnaires. We then asked the

[3] See a simulated experimental interface in Appendix H.

respondents for their opinions on these hypothetical newsfeeds[4]. We have embedded manipulation check questions in the questionnaire to ensure the validity of our experimental instruments.

Survey Sample

We conducted two separate waves of experiments using two different online panels, consisting of 4,300 and 4,000 respondents respectively, to examine the hypotheses[5]. The first wave was performed by a prestigious university in China between July and August 2021. The respondenets are recruited through a convenicence snowball sampling. The second wave was implemented through the online panel of WenJuan.com, a marketing survey firm and member of China Marketing Research Association[6], in January and February 2022. Although this sample is not a random sample of China's population, we employ a quota sampling strategy that maximizes its resemblance to the nation's age, gender, and education structure to ensure the diversity of our respondents.

An examination of the demographic summaries of the respondents available in Appendix F shows two waves represent different sub-population of Chinese residents. Wave 2 is closer to the national average where 59.7% of the respondents have a level of education below high school while Wave 1 represents a better educated class where 14.8% have a graduate level literacy. Thus, the two waves combined can ensure the diversity of the pool of the

[4] We did not claim these screenshots to come from real state-controlled media in the questionnaire.

[5] Like other research using online subjects, the respondents are generally younger and better educated compared with the average citizens. We save the demographic information of our respondents in the Appendix for the sake of space.

respondents, and enhance the external validity of the empirical pattern we document in the later part of this paper.

Experimental Design

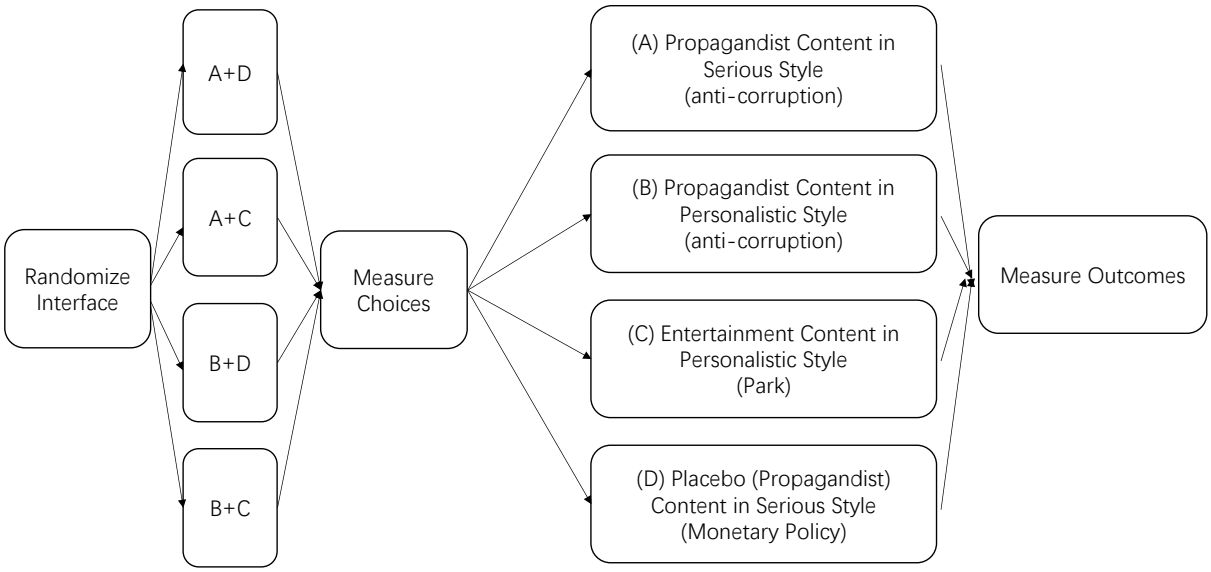

Figure 2. Flow Chart illustrating the Experimental Design.

To capture the full effect of the softening of propaganda, especially how the introduction of entertainment-infused political contents and the personalistic style might respectively cause readers to self-select specific articles, we designed a two-stage experiment, further developed upon the idea of Knox et al. (2019). Figure 2 summarizes the full experimental design in both stages of one variant where the theme of the treatment article is on an anti-corruption campaign. Within each wave, respondents are randomly drawn into one variant of the experimental series. The experimental series are otherwise identical except for the theme of the treatment articles.

In the first stage, we showed the respondents two randomly assigned article titles and

asked which one they preferred to read. We aim to detect how the changed composition[6] of articles available to readers may affect their self-selection into different media outlets.

The second stage is a canonical force-exposure experiment. Regardless of the preference of the respondent expressed in the first stage, we randomly showed each of them one of the four articles and then asked them post-treatment questions to test our four hypotheses. In this stage, we aim to delineate the effect of the "force exposure" on entertaining propaganda contents and personalistic styles, in comparison to the traditional serious propaganda contents and serious styles[7].

The four hypotheses were tested respectively with the following four post-treatment questions: (a) whether they would like to read either one of the articles or neither in the channel (H1), (b) the emotional attitude toward the government (H2), (c) the degree of tolerance for government misinformation (H3), and (d) the levels of persuasion and knowledge (H4). Had one of the four hypotheses we aimed to test been true, we would have expected the respondents assigned to read different articles to have answered these post-

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[6] We randomize readers over four possible compositions, which resembles four different "media environments", from the most serious one to the most entertaining one. To take the anti-corruption campaign treatment as an example, in the first environment, readers only see serious news reports, a serious article title on the campaign, and an article title on the central bank's monetary policy. In the second environment, the media outlet instead broadcast about the campaign and a newly opened park, an entertainment content. In the third environment, the media outlet has still broadcast about the campaign and the monetary policy, but the campaign would be written with a personal perspective and thus become propaganda content with a personalistic style. In the fourth environment, no serious news item appears, and the only stories are the anti-corruption story with a personalistic style and the news about the park view.

[7] The current experimental design presumes that entertainment contents cannot be of a serious style, and are of personalistic styles.

treatment questions differently.

By doing so, in addition to the "forced exposure" local effect, we also managed to estimate the "global effect" that incorporates readers' changed self-selection into the media outlets due to the changed contents and styles. Media outlets do not exist *per se*. They differentiate between each other because of different contents. The replacement of an article can have an effect beyond a change in the persuasive power of the replace article; it may also incur a change in its readership. Assuming the same article can have a heterogenous persuasive power on different people, even the remaining unchanged article may have a different persuasive power caused by the changed readership.

As a result, the total effect of a change of contents and style for a media outlet should be the sum of a persuasion effect and a selection effect. The effect estimated from the "forced exposure" design only captures the changed persuasion effect, but does not incorporate the selection effect. In the real world, readers can always choose to walk away anytime if they find the content or style of that outlet unenjoyable. In our two-stage experiment, we allow the readers to express their preference regarding which article to read, or neither, in the first stage. This setting provided us with additional data to further detect the selection effect, and thus the sum, a global effect[8].

[8] The global effect of the entertaining-driven article is defined as the difference of potential outcomes between the original media and an alternative media where the original media replaces one of its articles with one or more entertaining-driven ones. It captures self-selection effect into and the persuasive effect of the replaced article. We identify the global effect with the preference from the first stage of the experiment and the persuasive effect from the second stage of the experiment on those who happen to be assigned to the article that they preferred to read. See the proof of assumptions in Appendix H.

Results

Causal Effect on Media Consumption: Nullifying H1

We utilized experimental results estimated from the choices selected by the respondents from the first stage of the experiments to test our first hypothesis: whether the softening of propaganda—through entertainment-infused propagandist content and personalistic style—increases the viewership. The first stage of the experiment randomly presented respondents with one of the four hypothetical social network news interfaces, each including two article titles.

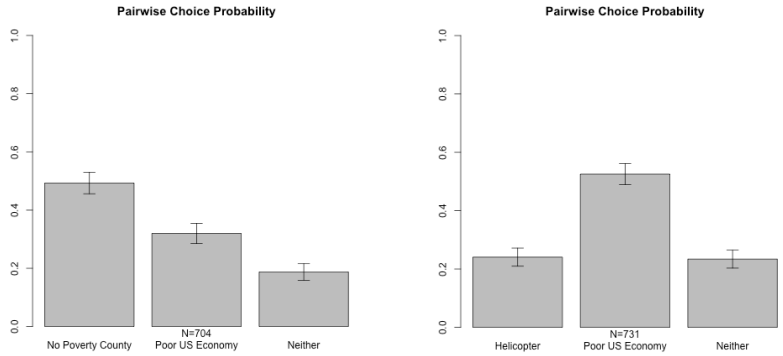
Figure 3 shows the barplots for the estimated pairwise choice probabilities under different media environments from one variant of our experiments. In this variant, we focused on testing the hypothesis under the theme of the claimed success of the anti-poverty campaign in China. This variant was conducted in Wave 1 (see Appendix B for the protocol). The four titles are respectively, "All 832 Poverty-Stricken Counties across The Country Have Been 'Cleared'" ("No Poverty County"), "Zero! Mi-26 Helicopter Built the Road for 1 Year!" ("Helicopter"), "Absolutely Beautiful! 700 of the Most Beautiful Meteor Showers Appeared in Lijiang, Yunnan!" ("Meteor Shower"), and "U.S. Economy under the Pandemic: the Number of People Applying for Unemployment Benefits Soars" ("Poor US Economy"). The first two represent propaganda content in a serious style and propaganda content in a personalistic style, which are the main article-level treatments of interest. The latter two represent an entertainment content in a personalistic style, and a placebo content in a serious style, used to test whether the inclusion of pure entertainment-driven contents distract readers. The error bars show the 95% confidence interval.

We first examined how the behavior of the respondents changes if the style of the propaganda content changes. The left figure of Panel A indicates that the estimated proportion of readers who prefer to read a serious news item on the success of the anti-poverty campaign is 49.29%. On the other hand, the right-hand figure shows that only about 24.07% of the respondents preferred to read the personalistic version of the article on the same topic, while about the same proportion of respondents would read neither news item. This shows that changing the communication style of propagandist materials in a serious style into the personalistic style caused about 25% (t-statistic 10.24, $p<0.01$) of the respondents not to read the article on the topic, when holding the content and style of the other title, e.g. the one about the US economy, the same. A horizontal comparison of figures of Panel B replicated the result when holding the other title as one on the Meteor shower. This indicates that regardless of whether the control article is in a serious style or not, replacing the anti-poverty success article with one in a personalistic style reduced the proportion of readers who would select to read on this propaganda topic.

We then examined how the introduction of entertainment content affects the behavior of the respondents. A vertical comparison of the left figure in Panels A and B shows that the replacement of the article title on poor-performing US economy with an entertaining article title on the meteor shower distracted readers from the propaganda anti-poverty article but did not reduce the proportion of readers who chose to read either article. This indicates that despite the cost of losing the attention of existing subscribers towards propaganda contents but would not gain additional subscribers, official news outlets may not gain any new subscribers by introducing depoliticized contents. We managed to replicate qualitatively

similar results in all topics that we tried on, namely, the one on the anti-corruption and the Winter Olympics. Results are saved in Appendix C for space.

Panel A:



Panel B:

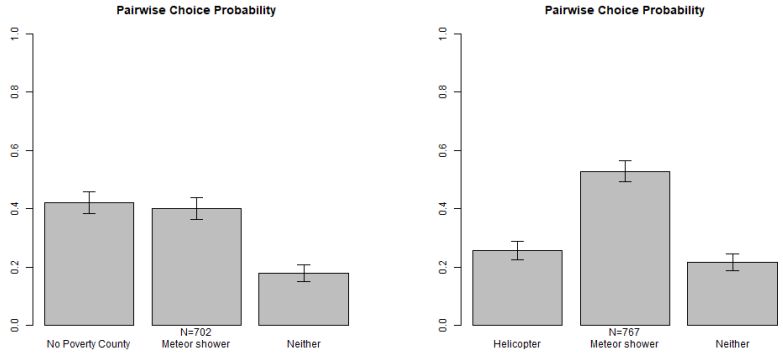


Figure 3. The Respondents Show Little Interest in Entertaining Titles.

Causal Effect on the Affective Thermometer: Nullifying H2

We tested our second hypothesis: whether the softening of propaganda improves emotional attitudes toward the government, with data obtained from the second stages of our experiments.

Following the respondents' "forced exposure" to the articles, we asked them to rate their

affective distance from the government and their perceived temperature of the official media outlet (from which the article comes) and the government agency. If Hypothesis 2 is correct, we should expect that those who have read the personalistic version of the article or the entertaining article would feel emotionally closer to the government or perceive the government as warmer.

Table 2 hows the results we obtained in the anti-corruption story variant of our study in Wave 2. In this variant, the propagandist contents under manipulation are in the theme of the anti-corruption campaign in China, while the entertainment content and the placebo content are about the spring view of a park and a monetary policy from China's central bank ("PBOC"). We also included a pure control group where respondents are not presented with any article.

We aimed to show how exposure to a specific article affects the affective distance from the government and the perceived government's temperature: compared with respondents who have not been assigned to read any article, those who are assigned to read a propagandist anti-corruption article in a serious style, an anti-corruption article with a personalistic style, an entertainment-related article or an article on the central bank's monetary policy did not feel any closer to the government nor that the government is perceived warmer. The findings hold neither in absolute terms nor relative to their feelings about their friends.

In addition, the pairwise difference is not statistically significant at the conventional levels either. This means that having been assigned to read the propagandist anti-corruption article in a serious style did not make a respondent feel closer to the government compared with being assigned to read an anti-corruption article with an entertaining style. Instead, the

reader would even perceive the government as warmer compared with friends when the anti-corruption article is serious, though the difference is statistically insignificant (p-value: 0.89).

Finally, we note this is not because the respondents are not paying attention to the articles – manipulation checks show readers are complying with the treatment and the treatment is cuing respondents as expected (see Appendix D for more details). We further obtained qualitatively similar results in the experimental variant where the propagandist content under manipulation is about the Winter Olympics (see Appendix D).

To conclude, our results obtained from the thermometer show that Hypothesis 2, which argues that the softening of propaganda improves emotional attitude toward the government, does not exist in our experiment.

Table 2. Local Effects of Anti-Corruption Articles.

	Dependent variables					
	Dist with Govt	Dist with the Media outlet	Temp of the Media outlet	Temp of Govt	Temp of the Media - Temp of Friends	Temp of Govt - Temp of Friends
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Propagandist Anti-Corruption article in Serious Style	-0.448	-0.935	0.015	-0.714	0.217	-0.512
	(1.770)	(1.765)	(1.648)	(1.742)	(1.623)	(1.734)
Anti-corruption Article in Personalistic Style	-0.349	-1.148	-0.927	-1.286	-0.819	-1.177
	(1.762)	(1.759)	(1.644)	(1.737)	(1.619)	(1.729)
East Lake Park (Entertainment)	2.244	0.292	2.160	0.651	2.278	0.677
	(1.773)	(1.769)	(1.649)	(1.744)	(1.624)	(1.736)
PBOC Reserve Requirement Change (Placebo Serious Style)	1.066	0.165	-1.743	-1.708	-1.143	-1.109
	(1.765)	(1.761)	(1.648)	(1.742)	(1.623)	(1.734)
Constant	57.699***	59.102***	59.231***	63.164***	-11.345***	-7.411***
	(1.253)	(1.248)	(1.164)	(1.230)	(1.146)	(1.224)

Observations	1,858	1,860	1,880	1,879	1,880	1,879
R2	0.002	0.001	0.003	0.001	0.003	0.001

Note: Robust Standard Errors (HC2) in parentheses.

*p<0.1**p<0.05***p<0.01

Causal Effect on the Tolerance of Misinformation: Nullifying H3

We further tested our third hypothesis: whether the softening of propaganda leads to increased tolerance for governmental misinformation, with data obtained from the second stages of our experiments.

We measure the downstream outcome of the halo effect, to see whether the respondents are more tolerant of government misconduct. Specifically, we asked the respondents, following their exposure to a randomly assigned article, whether they thought that they could tolerate unverified information (mistakenly published by the government) being circulated via the government-affiliated or state media accounts. Our results are null again, same as those we obtained for Hypothesis 2 - there is no statistically significant difference between respondents assigned to read different versions of the articles across both arms of the experiment where we have this post-treatment measurement on the topics of the Winter Olympics and the anti-corruption campaign. We direct interested readers to Appendix E for this part of the results for the sake of space.

Study 3: testing H4 – Persuasion versus Self-Selection

All three hypotheses tested previously are all "local" in the sense that we did not incorporate the self-selection of respondents into propagandist contents when we studied their response to the changed style. To test Hypothesis 4, whether the softening of propaganda increases

political knowledge and influences political attitudes, we utilized data from both stages of the experiments to infer the global effects.

Table 3 shows the estimated average of the responses for the Winter Olympic variant of the experiment from Wave 2, if the respondents can walk away from the media outlet entirely with information obtained from stage 1 of the experiment where their preference has been asked. The difference between these estimated averages are the "global effects."

The results show that if the state media outlets switch completely from one broadcasting propagandist contents in a serious style only to one broadcasting propagandist contents in a personalistic style and entertainment contents, the feeling of the respondents towards the USA would increase, statistically differently, from 33.82 to 40.59, where 100 means an entirely positive feeling about the Unites States. Considering that the alleged intention of the propagandist contents during the Winter Olympics period was to criticize the US, the results showed that the softening of propaganda, if anything, only hurts the agenda by failing to move the political attitudes towards the intended direction through disengaging respondents who would otherwise be exposed to serious propagandist contents. In contrast, had a researcher only studied local effects, they would obtain a null result ("Local Effects of Olympic Articles" in Appendix D), and thus failed to reach the conclusion.

On the other hand, the results also show that if the state media outlets switch completely from propagandist contents in a serious style to propagandist contents in a personalistic style and entertainment contents, it has no statistically significant impact on respondent's belief on

the number of delegations who would play in the Games, which nullified the hypothesis that the softening of propaganda may increase people's political knowledge.

Table 3. Global Effects of the Olympic Article.

Question	Setting	Est	Lower	Upper	Std. Err.	N
Feeling toward the USA	B+C (most entertaining)	40.59	34.92	46.60	3.08	500
	A+D (most serious)	33.82	28.37	39.42	2.85	500
No. of Delegates	B+C (most entertaining)	116.94	108.38	125.53	4.53	500
	A+D (most serious)	115.00	105.04	124.39	4.97	500

Lessons from "Global Effects"

These empirical results suggest that soft propaganda, in our experimental settings, does not appear to exert a persuasive effect, on average. Instead, propaganda plays an important role by providing those who would self-select traditional propaganda with what they prefer to have and persuades them toward the direction that the government prefers. Our results show that the forced exposure of the traditional propagandist materials in a serious style to all is not persuasive on average. But, those materials would persuade those readers who would self-select to consume them. Appendix I shows the self-selected serious propaganda readers tend to be less wealthy, older and worse educated compared with an average reader. The softening of propaganda blocks the channel that allows readers to self-select traditional propaganda and thus may, overall, make the propaganda less effective by disengaging those "serious"

readers[9]. However, the majority of existing literature may not have realized such possibility of disengagement, a potential cost of soft propaganda. Readers may respond to a more entertaining media environment by changing their reading behavior – dropping out completely or being forced to read something less preferrable by them. In either sense, the persuasive effect would be reduced. The changed reading behavior, coupled with a change in the composition of readers, leads to negative global outcomes.

Discussion

This study presents the first systematic examination of the rise of soft propaganda in China's digital landscape, conceptualizing it as a digital transformation of the CCP's long-standing tradition of "emotion work" to boost its legitimacy on an affective basis of popularity, emotional bonds, and public trust. Using a mixed-methods approach—combining computational analysis of state-affiliated social media contents with experimental evidence—we find that the state has increasingly leveraged social media cultures to expand its reach over the past decade. However, despite its growing presence, our findings suggest that soft propaganda does not necessarily lead to greater public engagement, improved political knowledge, or stronger affective bonds. Instead, its entertainment-infused nature appears to foster audience disengagement, deterring those who might otherwise engage with serious political news while failing to attract those inclined to avoid it in any case— thereby diluting ideological messaging rather than reinforcing state influence.

[9] We see qualitatively similar answers across all experimental arms with different topics, the Winter Olympics, the anti-poverty campaign and the anti-corruption campaign, and respondents from different demographic backgrounds, from both the better educated in Wave 1 and less educated in Wave 2.

This research highlights the enduring legacy of emotional governance, demonstrating how the CCP's tradition of emotion work continues to shape contemporary governance in China. By embedding ideology into immersive, entertainment-driven formats and emotionally resonant narratives, the government seeks to shape public attitudes in a more subtle yet pervasive manner. This integration of political messaging with entertainment and everyday content reflects a strategic effort to seamlessly weave ideology into the rhythms of digital life, making propaganda feel organic rather than imposed form of direct state coercion. As such, soft propaganda functons not only as an informational instrument but also as a strategy for psychological engineering. By saturating social media with an overwhelming volume of entertainment and positive energy, it may serve as a social stabilizer, diverting public attention from dissatisfaction and suppressing liberal dissidents. Alongside traditional and computational propaganda, as well as other informational techniques, the rise of soft propaganda illustrates the party-state's increasingly sophisticated ability to penetrate ideologies and shape public opinion.

Our findings challenge conventional views of propaganda as an effective tool for persuasion by revealing the limitations of entertainment-infused, state-led digital propaganda in shaping public attitudes. This study reveals a paradox: while the state increases the supply of soft propaganda, public demand remains uncertain. Instead, audiences may disengage when state narratives become overly pervasive. The results suggest that the effectiveness of propaganda may be overestimated, particularly in an era where information is abundant and highly selective audience attention. While traditional studies focus on the gains of propaganda, they often overlook its costs. This study highlights the hidden costs of the shift

toward soft propaganda: Since media platforms must replace one article with another when introducing soft propaganda, and audiences are inherently selective, this softening of propaganda may inadvertently crowd out attention to serious political news. This underscores a critical constraint on political communication in the social media environment—more sophisticated messaging does not necessarily translate into greater influence.

These findings also suggest that soft propaganda may face diminishing returns, if not negative ones. It fails to generate meaningful cognitive or attitudinal change but instead contributes to a shift in media consumption patterns. While charismatic authority and digital emotion work play a crucial role in cultivating political trust, the personalization and aestheticization of propaganda do not necessarily strengthen emotional bonds with the state. Instead, excessive reliance on entertainment-driven messaging may lead to audience apathy rather than deeper civic engagement. These findings support a large body of research suggesting that the depoliticization of political messaging may lead to disengagement.

While entertainment-framed propaganda aims to foster a sense of shared identity and belonging, our findings suggest that it may fail to sustain audience interest or reinforce ideological commitment. Rather than strengthening affective bonds, it risks alienating serious consumers of state media who seek substantive political news. Unlike traditional propaganda, which thrived on information scarcity and direct ideological appeals, soft propaganda operates within an attention economy, where audiences actively filter and engage with content. This challenges the assumption that more propaganda necessarily leads to stronger ideological influence, suggesting instead that the success of state messaging depends on how

it resonates within dynamic digital ecosystems. It also raises important questions about the long-term effectiveness of ideological persuasion in digital spaces, where audience attention is fragmented, and competition for engagement is intense. As political parties continue to refine their approaches to digital propaganda, understanding the limits of algorithmic persuasion and the consequences of audience disengagement will be critical for evaluating the future of state-society relations in the digital era.

Methodologically, we differentiated the global versus local effects with the novel experimental design. The finding of a null local effect but significant global effect urges a rethinking of the methodology to estimate the media effect in an environment that is overflowing with information. Contemporary studies of the media's effect must consider the context in which political messages spread. The empirical result of this paper calls on researchers to study the global effects, beyond the current practice of working on the article-level local effects only, which will offer a broader picture, and so capture the behavior of the respondents. Research that only focuses on the local effect of exposure to propaganda may be inconclusive, due to the null results in the local effect estimation.

While this study provides a comprehensive empirical analysis of the reach and effects of soft propaganda, several avenues for future research remain. First, our study focuses exclusively on social media-based propaganda, meaning our findings do not necessarily imply a null effect for other forms of soft propaganda embedded in short videos, television, films, or music lyrics. Second, our experimental approach examines only a limited set of dimensions. It is possible that soft propaganda is effective in other areas, such as generating cultural pride and fostering nationalistic sentiments. A focus on affect does not exclude

alternative explanations for the impact of soft propaganda—it may still contribute to the affective legitimacy of the party-state through alternative mechanisms. Third, experimental research could further disentangle the psychological mechanisms behind propaganda reception, particularly how entertainment, affect, and ideology interact in shaping political attitudes. Future research may explore additional components and measurements of affective legitimacy and examine how soft propaganda influences different audiences in diverse ways. Lastly, comparative research across different authoritarian regimes could investigate whether soft propaganda functions similarly in other digital autocracies or whether its effects are unique to China's media landscape. We hope this paper will stimulate discussions on the symptoms and causal effects of soft propaganda in contexts beyond single-party states.

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