

The Pathology of Hard Propaganda

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Authoritarian governments often impose crude and heavy-handed propaganda messages on society. Is such hard propaganda effective in sustaining authoritarian rule? With an original survey experiment featuring messages from China's ongoing propaganda campaign, this study finds that hard propaganda can backfire and worsen citizens' opinions of the regime, while at the same time signaling the state's power and reducing citizens' willingness to protest. Thus, hard propaganda can deter dissent and help maintain regime stability in the short term, but it can also decrease regime legitimacy and aggravate the government's long-term prospects, especially when its power and control capacity do not keep up with propaganda.

Is propaganda effective in sustaining authoritarian rule, or can it backfire and worsen citizens' political attitudes toward the state? If the latter is true, why do authoritarian regimes still often engage in crude and heavy-handed propaganda? This article addresses these questions with an original survey experiment in China, drawing materials from the country's ongoing propaganda campaign.

Existing studies have yielded mixed results about the effects of authoritarian propaganda. On the one hand, scholars have shown that authoritarian media and propaganda can affect the public's political attitudes and behavior in ways favored by the regime (Adena et al. 2015; Cantoni et al. 2017; Peisakhin and Rozenas, forthcoming; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014). Theoretical studies have also analyzed various mechanisms by which propaganda can help sustain authoritarian rule (Chen and Xu 2017; Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Guriev and Treisman 2015; Huang 2015; Little 2017). On the other hand, there is well-documented evidence that citizens are aware of government propaganda and often ignore, resist, or ridicule authoritarian states' efforts at persuasion, whether in China (Chen and Shi 2001; Shih 2008), the former Soviet bloc (Havel 1985), Syria (Wedeen 1999), or the United Arab Emirates (Bush et al. 2016).

One reason for the seeming disagreement is that propaganda comes in various forms. Some authoritarian propa-

ganda messages are crude, heavy-handed, or preposterous; they can therefore be seen through by citizens and do not induce persuasion. Other propaganda is subtler and sleeker and can thus be more persuasive. What is heavy-handed or subtle depends on the context and audience; therefore, a precise delineation is difficult. Nevertheless, some propaganda messages in a given political context can generally be recognized as crude and heavy-handed. In the contemporary Chinese context, such propaganda may include "posters with wooden slogans, mawkish movies with patriotic themes, [or] meticulously censored newspapers written in dry, impenetrable language" (Hernandez 2016), while soft propaganda can be a piece of seemingly credible news or engaging artistic work. For simplicity, crude and heavy-handed propaganda messages can be called "hard propaganda," while relatively subtle and sleek messages are "soft propaganda" (Huang 2015).

Recently, it has been argued that although hard propaganda may not induce persuasion, it can signal a regime's power by the simple fact that it can command great resources and organizational capacity to impose such unpersuasive messages on society and thus deter dissent (Huang 2015; Svobik 2012, 80–81). For example, even though Chinese citizens frequently dislike and ridicule the state's flagship TV news pro-

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gram *Xinwen Lianbo*, the fact that the regime easily bombards the nation with the program daily at 7:00 p.m. manifests its power. Scholars have also shown various other forms of evidence consistent with the signaling theory (Marquez 2016; Mertha 2017; Wang 2016; Wedeen 1999).

This study has two goals: (1) to examine whether hard propaganda might not only fail to persuade but actually backfire and (2) to experimentally test the signaling theory of hard propaganda. Existing studies on propaganda focus on its positive or null effects; a few notable exceptions (Adena et al. 2015; Peisakhin and Rozenas, forthcoming) have found some negative effects of propaganda on aggregate-level behavioral outcomes but not on individual-level attitudes. Existing evidence for propaganda's signaling role is also primarily qualitative or observational, and the nonrandom assignment of propaganda may introduce biases into causal inference. This study integrates the two diverging effects into one framework and provides experimental evidence.

The ongoing propaganda campaign in China presents an excellent opportunity for this research by providing a heightened propaganda environment and a great deal of hard propaganda. Media control and propaganda are nothing new in the country, but in the last few years the Chinese government has significantly curtailed freedom of expression, reinforced ideological lecturing, and cultivated a personality cult, calling previous propaganda too "weak" (Gan 2016). Given China's progress in openness and pluralization in recent decades, many messages in the current campaign appear particularly crude and old-fashioned, helping to illuminate the effects of hard authoritarian propaganda.

HYPOTHESES, DESIGN, AND DATA

Definition and hypotheses

Traditionally propaganda is often defined as "the attempt to transmit social and political values" (Kenez 1985, 4). Rather than assuming a particular goal or consequence for propaganda, I focus on its manifestation and refer to government propaganda as inaccurate, exaggerated, or fabricated information or rhetoric that favors the regime or disfavors its antagonists.

This study focuses on crude and heavy-handed forms of propaganda, or "hard propaganda." My first hypothesis is that hard authoritarian propaganda worsens citizens' opinions of the state rather than improving them. This is because these ossified or preposterous messages will heighten people's awareness of the regime's absurdity and the country's political plight. Consequently, they will not only fail to resonate with the audience but actually alienate them. This is consistent with the backfire effect identified in previous psychological and political behavior studies, in which unpersuasive messages and

those incongruent with the receivers' prior opinions provoke them to counterargue with the messages and move further away from the positions advocated by the messages (Chong and Druckman 2010; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Taber and Lodge 2006).

Although such propaganda may worsen citizens' political attitudes, according to the signaling theory it can nevertheless demonstrate the state's power, hence deterring citizens from challenging the state. In my experimental setting, seeing a piece of actual hard propaganda will remind the subjects that the government has the resources and capacity to impose such messages on society. They may also be reminded that other citizens know the state is powerful too, given the prevalence of such propaganda and the lack of overt opposition in their daily lives. Since failed protest in an authoritarian setting would incur punishment by the regime, participation in such actions depends on not just individuals' opinions of the government but also their assessment of the state's power and the likely outcome of protest. Therefore, while hard propaganda may make citizens dislike the government more, it will also decrease their willingness to protest. This is likely why some authoritarian states with a strong repressive capacity adopt this kind of propaganda in the first place. My second hypothesis is therefore that hard propaganda will make citizens less willing to participate in protest against the government. In other words, even though the state's hard propaganda can backfire on political attitudes, it has the intended effect on citizen behavior through signaling power.

Experimental design and data

The survey experiment was conducted in April 2016. Participants were first asked several questions on sociopolitical predispositions such as political interest, national pride, and belief that China needs a strong government. Then they were randomly assigned into one of four groups: three groups that each received a different propaganda message (see below) and a control group that received no propaganda treatment. Afterward, all participants were asked a series of questions on their opinion of China and the Chinese government, including satisfaction with China's overall situation, assessment of government responsiveness, support for the ongoing anticorruption campaign, interest in moving abroad, and attitudes toward government propaganda. These items will be combined into an Aggregate Attitude index in the following analysis. I then asked about respondents' willingness to participate in protest against the government, employing a well-understood code word: "collective walk." The wording of these questions is in appendix 1 (apps. 1–7 are available online). Sociodemographic questions were asked at the end.

The first treated group was shown a poem by an editor of China's official Xinhua News Agency in tribute to General Secretary Xi's February 2016 inspection tour of three premier state media entities. The poem, titled "General Secretary, the Sight of Your Back and the Look of My Eyes," idolizes Xi in extravagant language (see Sudworth [2016] for an English translation). Accompanying the poem was a photograph taken during the inspection tour, showing the following slogan: "Central Television is surnamed Party; absolutely loyal; please inspect us."¹

The second treatment was a state media editorial that vehemently attacked Ren Zhiqiang (RZQ), a well-known real estate tycoon and outspoken government critic, using a language reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution.² RZQ had most recently irked the government by using his popularly followed microblogging account to publicly challenge General Secretary Xi's demand that media be loyal to the Party (Buckley 2016). Soon afterward, he saw his microblogging account closed and himself called an embarrassment to 80 million Chinese Communist Party members.

The third treatment was a shortened version of a state media report, titled "95% of Overseas Audience Satisfied with the 2016 CCTV Spring Festival Gala," which extolled said gala.³ The annual Spring Festival Gala of China Central Television is a mainstay of Chinese New Year celebrations and the country's largest annual television show. In 2016, the government turned it into a four-hour-long megapropaganda event full of overt glorification of the party leadership (Lu and Whiteman 2016). Given the prevalent online ridicule of the gala, the claim about the show's popularity is doubtful.

These three messages are all fairly crude and heavy-handed and can therefore generally be regarded as hard propaganda. They were selected because they covered different formats (positive vs. negative; rhetoric vs. information) and issues and could to some extent exemplify the breadth of hard propaganda in China. I also used real propaganda messages to enhance the study's external validity. In designing the experiment, my main interest was not in comparing the different treatments (although the gala propaganda may be seen as somewhat less "hard" than the other two messages) but in

comparing those who received a propaganda message versus those who did not.

The 598 study participants were recruited from a popular Chinese crowd-sourcing website similar to Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and then directed to a US-based website where they completed the survey anonymously.⁴ Recruiting experimental subjects from crowd-sourcing platforms has become common in social science research, and online surveys are particularly useful for studying issues related to media and information that Chinese Internet users often come across (Huang 2017; Huang and Yeh, forthcoming), including propaganda. A recent validation study shows that results based on the Chinese crowd-sourcing platform's samples can be used to make valid attitudinal inferences about the Chinese Internet population (Li, Shi, and Zhu 2016). The platform also has a potential advantage over MTurk; political opinion survey tasks are fairly new on the platform, and so the possibility of platform users becoming professional survey takers is not (yet) an issue.

Appendix 3 shows that the participants had diverse sociodemographic backgrounds, with the occupational, regional, and urban/rural distributions quite close to those of China's general Internet population. Over half of China's population is now online, and the Internet has become the center of activism in the country. The sample was better educated than China's general population (and often in their 20s and 30s, partly because the platform's users are predominantly working-age adults), but the young and better-educated generations are also more politically active and represent China's future, so their opinions and behavior are worth particular attention.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows *t*-test results of the group mean differences in the posttreatment attitudes and protest intention.⁵ As the column "Inspection – Control" clearly indicates, propaganda materials from General Secretary Xi's inspection tour lowered the subjects' opinions of their country and government, made them more interested in moving abroad, and, naturally, worsened their aggregate attitude, consistent with the backfire hypothesis. At the same time, propaganda reduced their willingness to participate in protest, as the signaling theory of hard propaganda predicts. The RZQ treat-

1. Propaganda messages often come in bundles, and this study is interested in the package rather than the relative effect of the poem versus the photograph.

2. See <http://goo.gl/KORl6W> (last accessed December 26, 2016) for a copy of the editorial.

3. See <http://goo.gl/b7sxgo> (last accessed December 26, 2016) for a copy of the report.

4. See app. 2 for more details about participant recruitment and quality control.

5. Appendix 4 shows that balance was achieved on most covariates. Appendix 5 displays the group means and confidence intervals of the outcome variables.

Table 1. Effects of Propaganda: Group Mean Differences

	Inspection–Control	RZQ–Control	Gala–Control	Treated–Control
China overall	–.085*** (.030)	–.055* (.029)	.005 (.030)	–.045* (.025)
Government	–.086*** (.032)	–.016 (.032)	–.022 (.032)	–.041 (.026)
Anticorruption	–.034* (.019)	–.009 (.017)	–.008 (.16)	–.017 (.014)
Move abroad	.061** (.026)	.068*** (.026)	.014 (.023)	.047** (.020)
Propaganda	–.047 (.031)	–.055* (.031)	–.015 (.031)	–.039 (.026)
Aggregate attitude	–.313*** (.094)	–.203** (.093)	–.053 (.090)	–.188** (.077)
Protest	–.067* (.034)	–.084** (.033)	–.059* (.034)	–.069** (.028)

Note. All individual outcome variables are rescaled to vary from 0 to 1 for easy interpretation. “Aggregate attitude” is the sum of the five individual attitude variables, with “move abroad” reverse coded. “Treated” combines all treated groups. Standard errors in parentheses. The *t*-tests are under the assumption of unequal variances, and the *p*-values reflect two-sided hypothesis tests.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

ment also worsened the subjects’ aggregate attitude as well as some specific attitudes, while reducing their willingness to protest. The Gala treatment turned out to be the weakest among the three: it did not significantly change opinions on the regime, although the coefficients generally have the “correct” signs. This is likely because the language of this message was relatively bland compared to the other two messages. Still, the state’s ability to pull off an obvious exaggeration signaled its power, and this made the respondents less willing to protest.

These results can be summarized in the last column, which compares the three treated groups jointly with the control group: propaganda worsened the subjects’ opinions of the country and aggregate attitude and made them more willing to move abroad, while reducing their willingness to protest. For a robustness check, appendix 6 reports regression results, with a set of sociodemographic covariates and attitudinal predispositions controlled. The results are consistent with table 1.

Some previous studies argue that citizens with higher political awareness, education, or antiregime predispositions are more likely to resist authoritarian propaganda (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Kennedy 2009; Peisakhin and Rozenas, forthcoming). Appendix 7 therefore reports the subgroup mean differences along several pretreatment dimensions: education, political interest, national pride, and belief in a strong government. The lower number of observations in each subgroup reduces the statistical significance of the treatments in some cases, but every subgroup developed worse attitudes toward the regime because of some propaganda messages; no subgroup became more positive, including those more likely to support the regime *ex ante*. This suggests that hard propaganda can be repugnant to a broad set of citizens

rather than just certain subgroups.⁶ It also shows that study participants’ reduced willingness to protest was not because propaganda made some individuals more progovernment and thus reduced others’ willingness to protest because of the collective action problem.

Note that all three propaganda events occurred before the experiment. Undoubtedly, some of the subjects had been exposed to the treatments before, which would have reduced the experimental effects. Therefore, the results reported here may well underestimate the effects of hard propaganda. One may wonder whether the subjects’ answers might reflect criticisms they had previously seen about the propaganda rather than their own reactions. But if that were the case, the Gala treatment should have yielded the greatest experimental effect; the 2016 Gala was watched by hundreds of millions of viewers, and it was overwhelmingly criticized as being among the worst in history (Lu and Whiteman 2016). The study’s participants were almost certainly more aware of criticisms of the Gala than of the other two propaganda events, and yet the Gala treatment had the weakest effects, clearly suggesting that being previously exposed to the propaganda reduced rather than induced the experimental effect.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that hard propaganda often backfires and worsens citizens’ opinion of the state; at the same time, it can signal the regime’s power and reduce citizens’ willingness to

6. The subgroup analysis also reveals some heterogeneity. In terms of aggregate attitude, the inspection treatment tends to have more significant effects on subjects with low education, low political interest, and low belief in a strong government, while the RZQ treatment has more significant effects on subjects with the opposite characteristics.

protest. By helping to deter dissent, such propaganda can facilitate the regime's rule in the short run. But by eroding the legitimacy of the state and public satisfaction, it may aggravate the regime's long-term prospects, especially if its power, unity, and control capacity falters at some point. This can be called the pathology of hard propaganda.

Why do authoritarian regimes not reject crude and heavy-handed propaganda in favor of softer forms of propaganda but instead use it so often? One likely reason is that political expediency sometimes requires the use of hard propaganda to achieve a more immediate signaling effect. China's current embrace of crude propaganda, for example, coincides with the country's slowing economic growth. Another potential explanation is that, for lower-level bureaucrats used to a regime's old-fashioned and clumsy methods, hard propaganda is easier to produce than softer and more persuasive propaganda, even though imposing it on the whole country demands a strong capacity of the state. The question of when a regime would adopt different kinds of propaganda cannot be addressed in full in this article, but it can be explored in future research.

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