



Chinese propaganda and cyber-nationalism under the Russia–Ukraine war

Daqi (Reinhardt) Fang 

High School Department, Student in Yungu School, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China

Correspondence: Daqi (Reinhardt) Fang, High School Department, Student in Yungu School, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China.

Email: Reinhardt114514@outlook.com

In the diplomatic field, China's role is described as taking a neutral position. On February 25, 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi advocated “peaceful settlement and respect for territorial integrity” of Ukraine (People's Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). However, the Chinese head of state Xi Jinping, in a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, said that he would “respect” Russia's actions to Ukraine (Reuters, 2022).

Although in the diplomacy and international publicity fields, China seems to have created the image of a “rational adjudicator,” it actually engages in propaganda. China's propaganda system is divided into “external propaganda” (*waixuan*, 外宣) and “internal propaganda” (*neixuan*, 内宣), with the former aimed at foreigners and overseas Chinese, while internal propaganda is akin to political brainwashing of its citizens. The internal propaganda system of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses official media and private media but under official control to support Russia and to find excuses for Russian aggression.

The reporting methods and positions of Chinese state media on the Russo–Ukrainian war have always been questionable. For example, two days before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the internal censorship guidelines of Chinese state media were accidentally leaked to *Weibo* (China's Twitter), which calls for restrictions on posting “unfavorable to Russia” and “pro-Western” content (Carl Samson, 2022). On the day Russia launched a military invasion of Ukraine, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Youth League released a video on the official account of the video platform *Bilibili* (China's YouTube), the content of which was the Soviet song “Katyusha” that, expresses its pro-Russian stance. The Chinese state media favored Russia in the aftermath of the Bucha massacre. The Bucha massacre was the killing and abuse of Ukrainian civilians by Russian armed forces during the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the fight and occupation of the Ukrainian city of Bucha. On April 5, 2022, China Central Television (CCTV) quoted Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Viktorovich Lavrov's saying that the Bucha massacre was fake news and that Ukraine and the West were “spreading fake news” (CCTV, 2022), while also blaming the United States (US) support for Ukraine as “taking advantage of the fire to commit robbery” (see Figure 1).

According to a data set by Maria Repnikova and Bret Schafer, in the first 4 months of 2022, we see “special military operations” used nearly 800 times, and “invasion” used more than 600 times (Repnikova & Bret, 2022). It is even a little misleading as many of the “invasions” references were talking about past US incursions, not Russian operations in Ukraine.

Simultaneously, the Chinese media also adopted the argument that “Ukrainians are neo-Nazis and Ukraine needs to be de-Nazified” (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Youth League, 2022). There are also outright conspiracy theories and disinformation promoted by Chinese officials, including Zelensky's fleeing to Warsaw or Munich, and the United States having a secret biological weapons laboratory in Ukraine (China Youth Network, 2022).

Some China watchers have argued that in recent years, high-ranking CCP politicians have turned to populism as a way to revive public opinion, thus populism in China has also largely been officially acquiesced (Miao, 2020).

Since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, there have been a lot of controversial comments on Chinese social media. Chinese public opinion generally supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine and agreed with Putin's position. On the one hand, there were many remarks in support of Russia. Such opinions agreed with and focused on Russia's concerns about national security and doubts about Ukraine's own problems. Simultaneously, they blamed the cause of Ukraine's aggression on NATO's eastward expansion and believed that Ukraine is already a “puppet” of NATO. This supports Russia's use of force against Ukraine and praises Putin as a hero who dared to challenge the West (Deutsche Welle, 2022).

There is evidence of Chinese populist support for Russia in Chinese social media (*Weibo* and *Bilibili*) (see Figure 2).

The reason why China's propaganda machine supports Russia is worth discussing. Sino-Russian relations are getting closer in many fields, including economic and trade

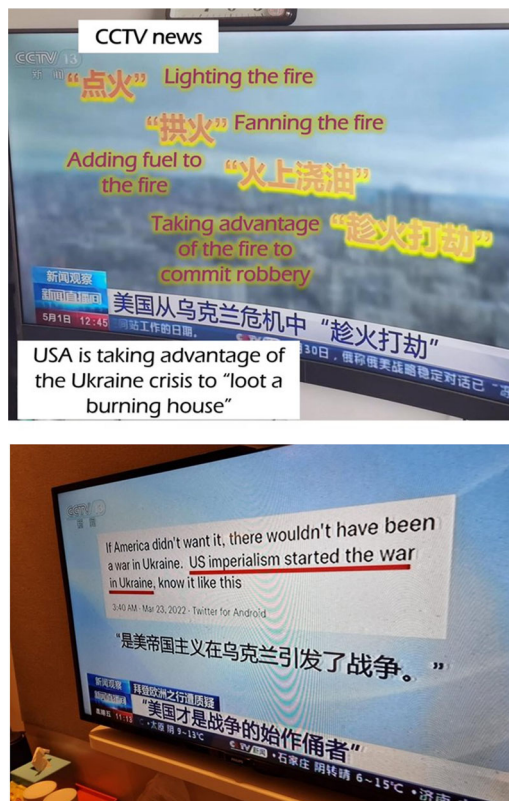


FIGURE 1 China Central Television claims United States as “robbery”

seems very happy ZZZZZZZ
they are laughing
snip each other
Slavic superman
Please be careful
like setting off firecrackers
pleasing nice job
pure fighting nation
Thanks for the cannonball
Sorry, I can't stop laughing
Single shot, with scope, is a sniper gun
so happy very happy
Hahhahah

the-weebies here, and the firefights begin

Chechnya soldiers use RPG to attack Nazi settlement in Ukraine, and cheers.

An old lady mistakenly enters war zone where Russian troops are attacking the "Azov Battalion"! Russian troops cease fire and help her evacuate safely, then combat vehicles and shells...

老妇人误入俄军攻击“亚速营”战区！俄军停火扶老奶奶安全撤出，随后战车炮弹...

1.06m views 5721 bullet screens It's ranked 62nd in the Bilibili video ranking

4月24日 俄罗斯特别军事行动 April 24 Russia's Special Military Operations!
198k views 1578 bullet comments April 26, 2022

RT今日俄罗斯 RT
Russia today
228k followers

弹幕列表：Bullet Comments List

Come on, Russia, you will definitely win.
一只睡烂鸡的小佩琪 俄罗斯加油！你们一定会赢！
22-4-28 12:52 来自四川

No matter how difficult it is, you will definitely win.
东周西周兔 俄罗斯加油！你们一定会赢，不管前路有多少荆棘
22-4-28 12:54 来自辽宁

Come on Russia.
真亮京京 俄罗斯加油！
22-4-28 12:54 来自湖北

Victory belongs to Russia and the world anti-imperialist anti-fascist alliance.
HeavenOnFire 胜利属于俄罗斯和全世界反帝反法西斯联盟
22-4-28 13:06 来自上海

Come on, Володя! Justice must prevail! This righteous battle against the Ukrainian Nazis will win!
熊大要吃鸡腿 俄罗斯加油，正义必胜！这场反乌纳粹的正义之战必胜！
22-4-28 12:54 来自中国香港

FIGURE 2 Evidence that Chinese cyber-nationalist are pro-Russian

exchanges, as well as people-to-people and cultural exchanges. In addition, the relationship between Xi Jinping and Putin is also a unique one. During Putin's visit to China on February 4, 2022, before the outbreak of the war, China announced that the next step in the relationship between the two countries would be "infinite friendship." Therefore, there are reasons to think that the Chinese propaganda machine supports Russia, and one of them is through cyber-nationalism.

The rise of China's cyber-nationalism dates back several years, and China watchers have dubbed cyber-nationalists groups the "Little Pink" (*xiaofenhong*, 小粉红). Their characteristic is blind allegiance to the Chinese party-state. Simultaneously, the CCP's reinvention and appropriation of Little Pink further highlight the CCP's adaptability in using the Internet to embrace and strengthen nationalist discourse (Repnikova & Fang, 2018). Moreover, the CCP's management of China's cyberspace has also changed from a blatant and crude strategy in the past to a more refined and orderly mechanism now. This includes the digital transformation of state media (e.g., CCTV, and the Communist Youth League) and the official promotion of nationalist unofficial blogs (Repnikova & Fang, 2018).

Pro-Russian cyber-nationalists in China get more information from Chinese official media, and most of them view Russia's war in Ukraine through anti-Western angles. It has Chinese observers points out that because of the mistrust accumulated over the years, if the United States thinks this matter is positive, then the Chinese must think it is negative, and vice versa (Wang, 2022). In addition, China has the Great Firewall (GFW) and this makes Chinese netizens unable to access media such as Twitter and YouTube, so Chinese propaganda machines can take advantage of the information gap to distort reports, create fake news, or make anti-US remarks.

However, the state propaganda machine is also being challenged. China's censorship agencies' indulgent attitude toward cyber-nationalist and pro-Russian speech has caused a backlash on public opinion. For example, opponents of the CCP rallied on Twitter and Reddit to launch "The Great Translation Movement" (TGTM) "where they translate China's anti-Western rhetoric and the extreme and even anti-human rhetoric of Chinazist into English or other languages and make it public. In an interview, they said that their purpose is to expose China's antihumanitarian rhetoric and the CCP's truepropaganda" (https://www.reddit.com/r/CLTV/comments/tu7zxz/a_survery_about_tgtm/). Although compared with the CCP's propaganda machine, the TGTM has limited resources and limited influence on international politics, this decentralized social media activity presents CCP with a huge challenge.

Second, as the US gradually begins to pay attention to China's pro-Russian rhetoric, the US has also begun to investigate China and possibly impose sanctions in the future. The recent Assessing Xi's Interference and Subversion Act (AXIS-ACT) passed by the US Congress is evidence of this. China may soon find itself in a more isolated position in international politics because of its own internal propaganda of pro-Russian rhetoric and cyber-nationalism.

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ORCID

Daqi (Reinhardt) Fang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8594-0250>

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