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# Propaganda and Censorship: Institutions, Resistance, and Implications

# Propaganda example

Who is Xi Dada?



Xi Dad

He came to our school and read him a poem  
我们学校来了位老师，因为他读了一首诗



If one dose of  
propaganda is  
not enough...

Xi Dada loves Peng  
Mama

# Propaganda institutions

## Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party

- Cyberspace Administration
- National Radio and Television Administration
- Film Administration
- People's Daily
- Xinhua News Agency
- CCTV

## Propaganda institutions

“Virtually every conceivable medium which transmits and conveys information to the people of China falls under the bureaucratic purview of the CCP Propaganda Department.” –David Shambaugh (2007)

Equivalent to a ministry *directly controlling* all media outlets from *the Guardian*, to BBC, to *Daily Mail*, as well as monitoring and supervising all social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

## How does it work in practice?

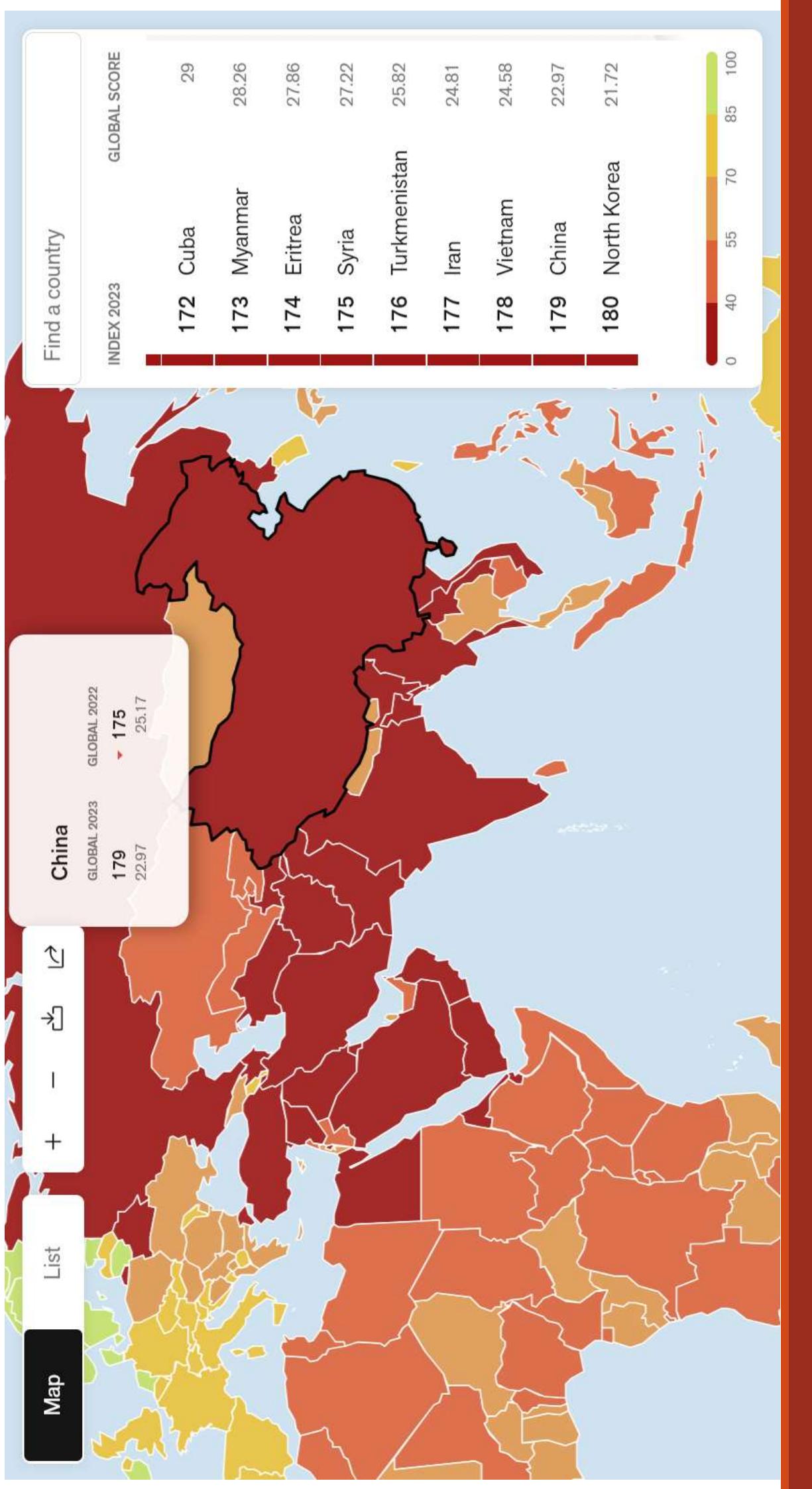
Examples of propaganda directives

“Reports on the situation in Ukraine that are unfavorable to Russia and pro-Western should not appear...When there are hot topics about the war, only use articles published by *the People’s Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and CCTV.*”

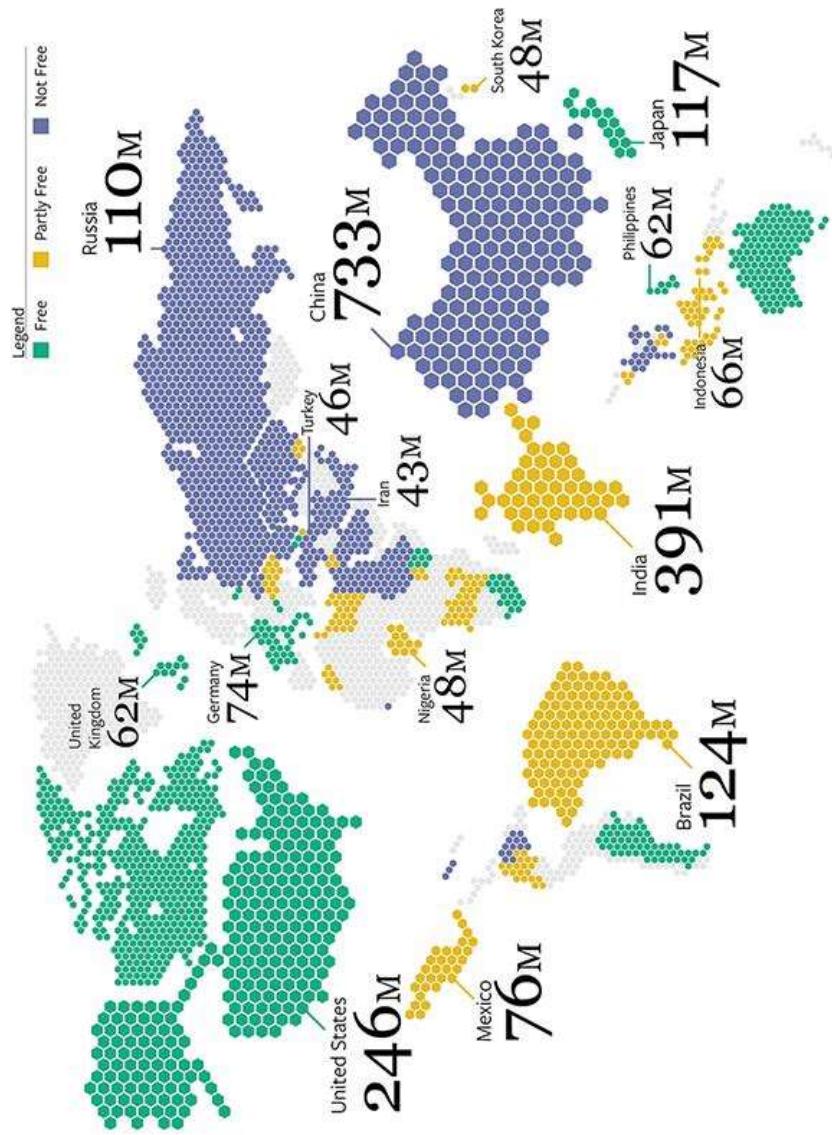
Propaganda directive, February 2, 2022

“Regarding the death of Dr. Li Wenliang of Wuhan Central Hospital, strictly regulate the source of manuscripts, and strictly prohibit using unauthorized reporting. No notifications, no comments, and no trending. The popularity of discussion should be carefully controlled; do not create trending topics, gradually remove trending searches, and harmful information should be strictly controlled.”

Propaganda directive, February 6, 2020



# Distribution of Global Internet Users by Country and Internet Freedom Status



## DISTRIBUTION OF INTERNET USERS WORLDWIDE BY FOTN STATUS

The 65 countries covered in Freedom on the Net represents 87 percent of the world's internet user population. Over 1.2 billion internet users, or 40 percent of global users, live in three countries — China, India, and the United States — that span the spectrum of internet freedom environments, from Free to Not Free.



[www.freedomonthenet.org](http://www.freedomonthenet.org)

Censorship

## History of the internet in China

- 1994: internet arrives in China
- 1998: “Golden Shield” project begins
- 2006: completion of “Golden Shield”
- 2009: Facebook and Twitter blocked
- 2009-2010: internet blackouts in Xinjiang, Tibet
- 2010: China blocked Google. Google China moved servers to HK
- 2013: New York Times blocked
- 2016: VPN crackdowns begin

# THE GREAT FIREWALL

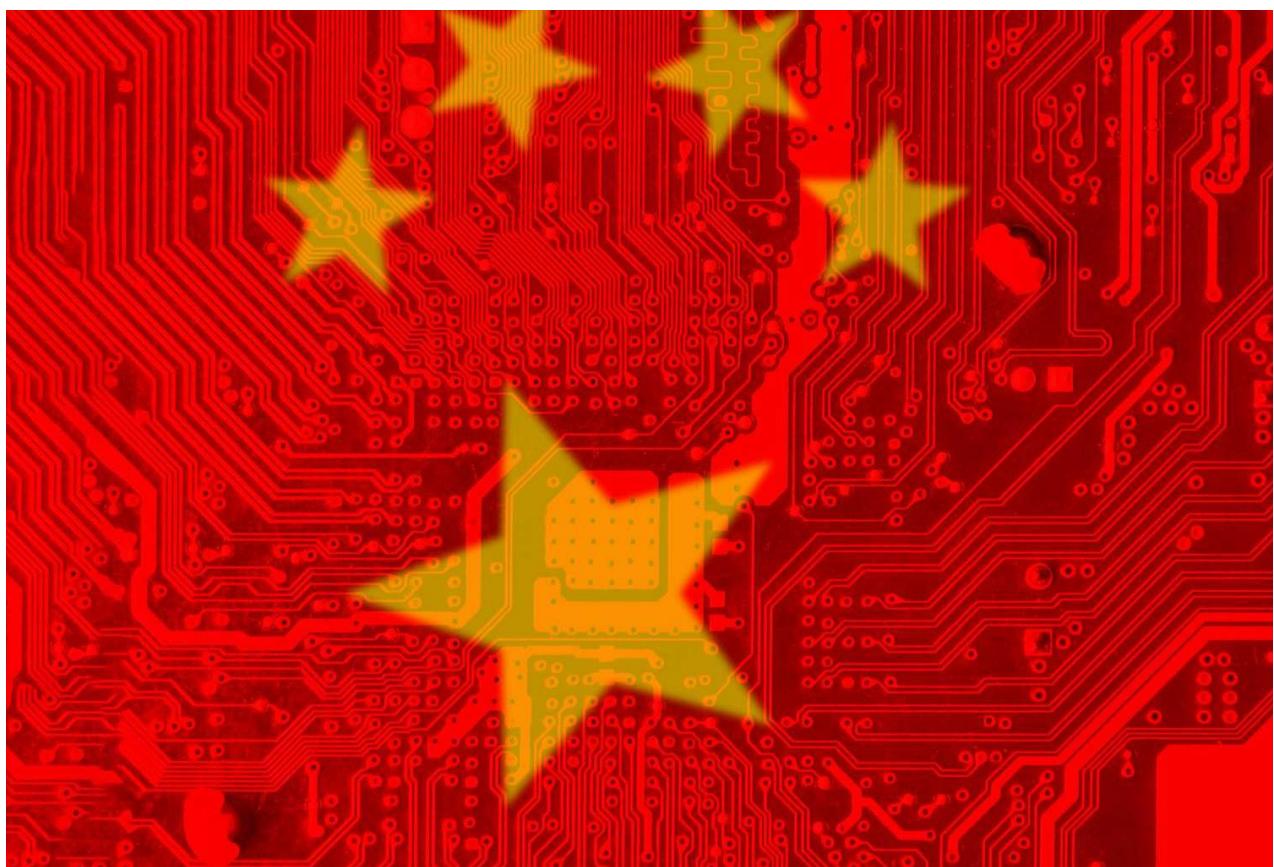
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Developed between 1998-2006

Blocks sensitive comments and websites

Channels internet users to domestically run, state-monitored sites

Creates a Chinese domestic internet with parallel search engines, webpages etc.



Facebook (and Messenger)  
Instagram  
Pinterest  
Twitter  
Blogger  
Tumblr  
Blogspot

YouTube  
Netflix  
Vimeo

New York Times  
The Financial Times  
The Economist  
The Wall Street Journal  
Bloomberg  
Google News  
Wikipedia

Google Search  
Bing  
Yahoo  
DuckDuckGo

Messenger (and Facebook)  
WeChat  
Snapchat  
Telegram  
Signal

[Test if a site is blocked in China](#)



Intranet

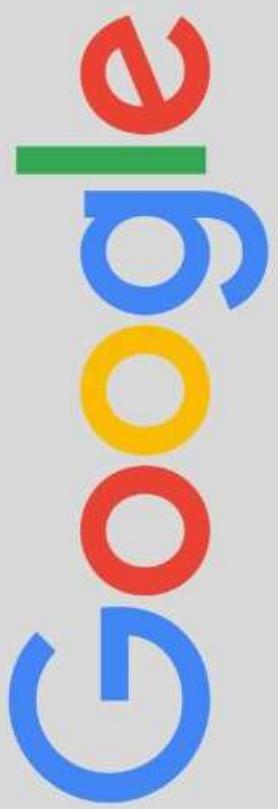
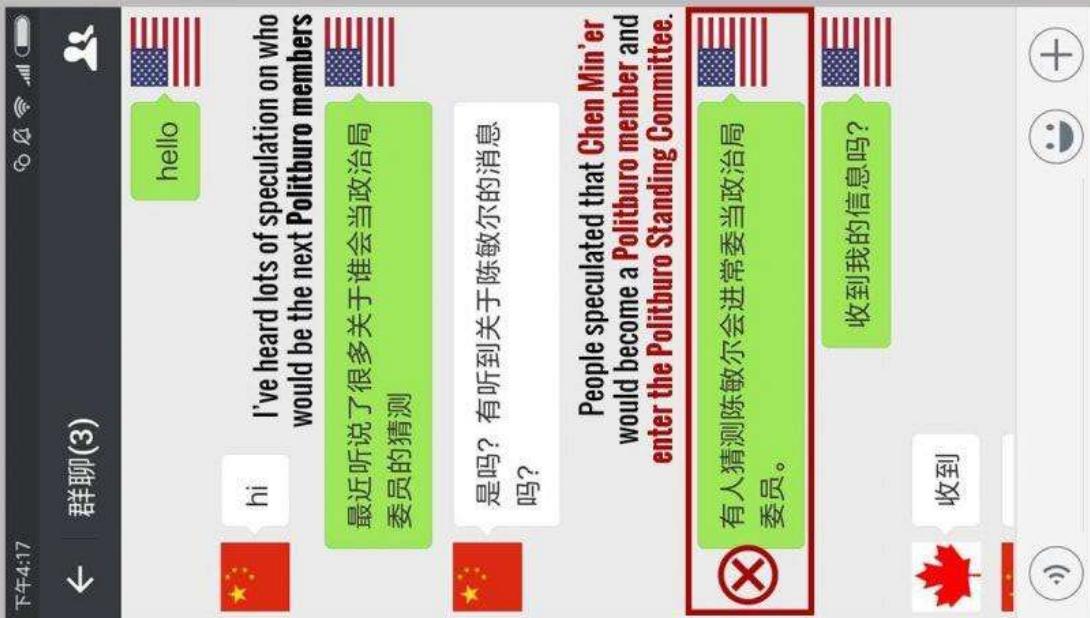
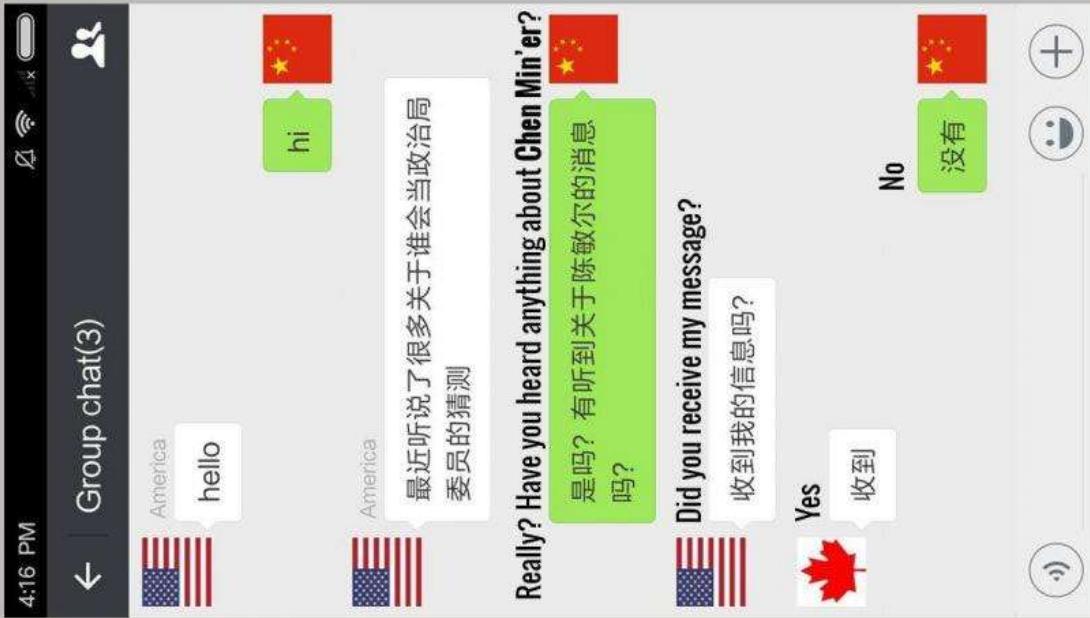
The Google logo is displayed vertically in its signature colors: blue for 'G', red for 'O', yellow for 'O', green for 'G', blue for 'G', red for 'L', and green for 'E'.A dark blue circular graphic containing the letters 'vs' in white, positioned between the Baidu and Google logos.A large, solid red rectangular box occupies the bottom half of the slide. Inside, the text 'Search engine examples' is centered in a white, sans-serif font.

Illustration of one-to-one user chat censorship in WeChat by CitizenLab at the University of Toronto

## United States Account



## China Account



他们为了打野猪不下饭吃掉 打野了洞



CCTV6

And then there  
is resistance.

Song of the "Grass Mud  
Horse"

**Does  
propaganda  
work? If yes,  
how?**

- Propaganda that mobilizes people
- Propaganda that coerces people
- Propaganda that signals to foreign audiences
- Propaganda that diverts attention
- Propaganda that pacifies nationalists

# Propaganda that mobilizes the domestic population

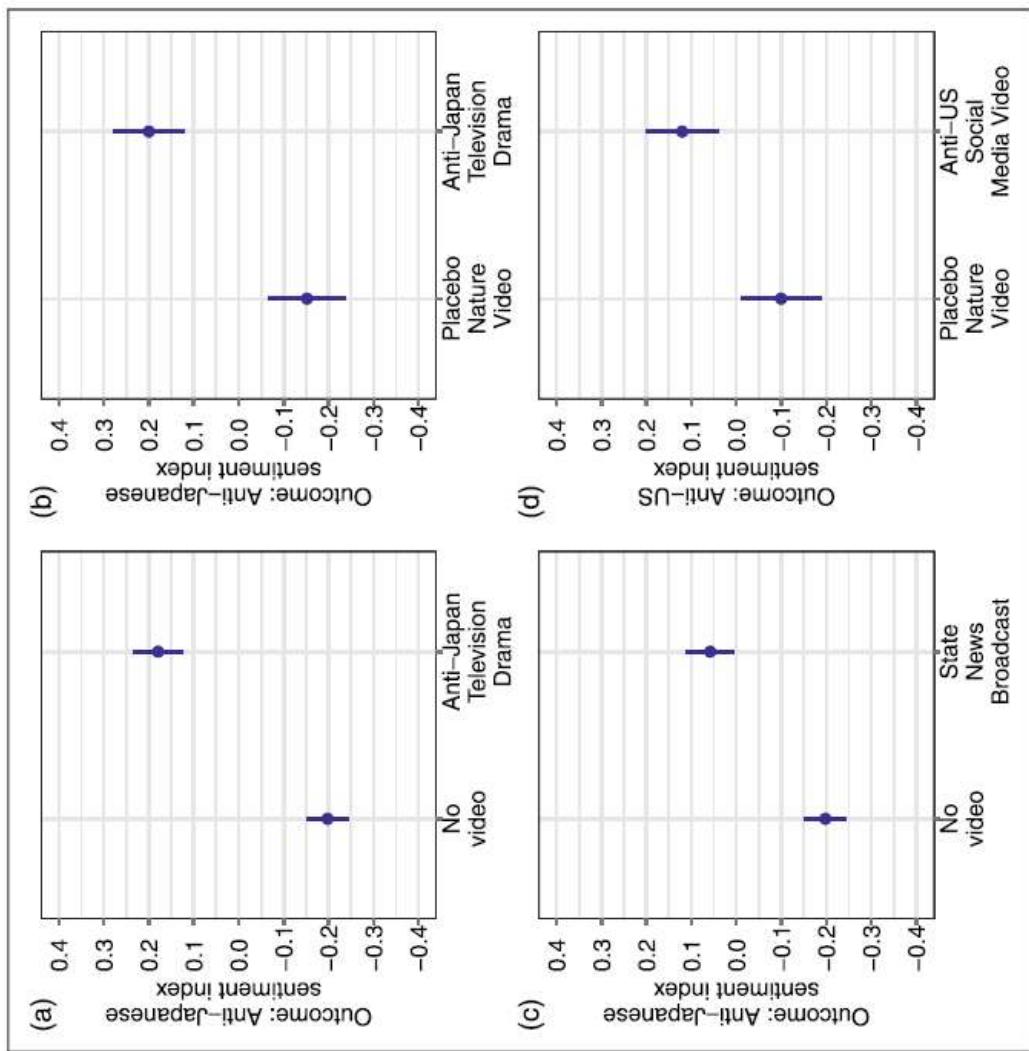
CAN PROPAGANDA  
CONTENT AROUSE ANTI-  
FOREIGN ATTITUDES?



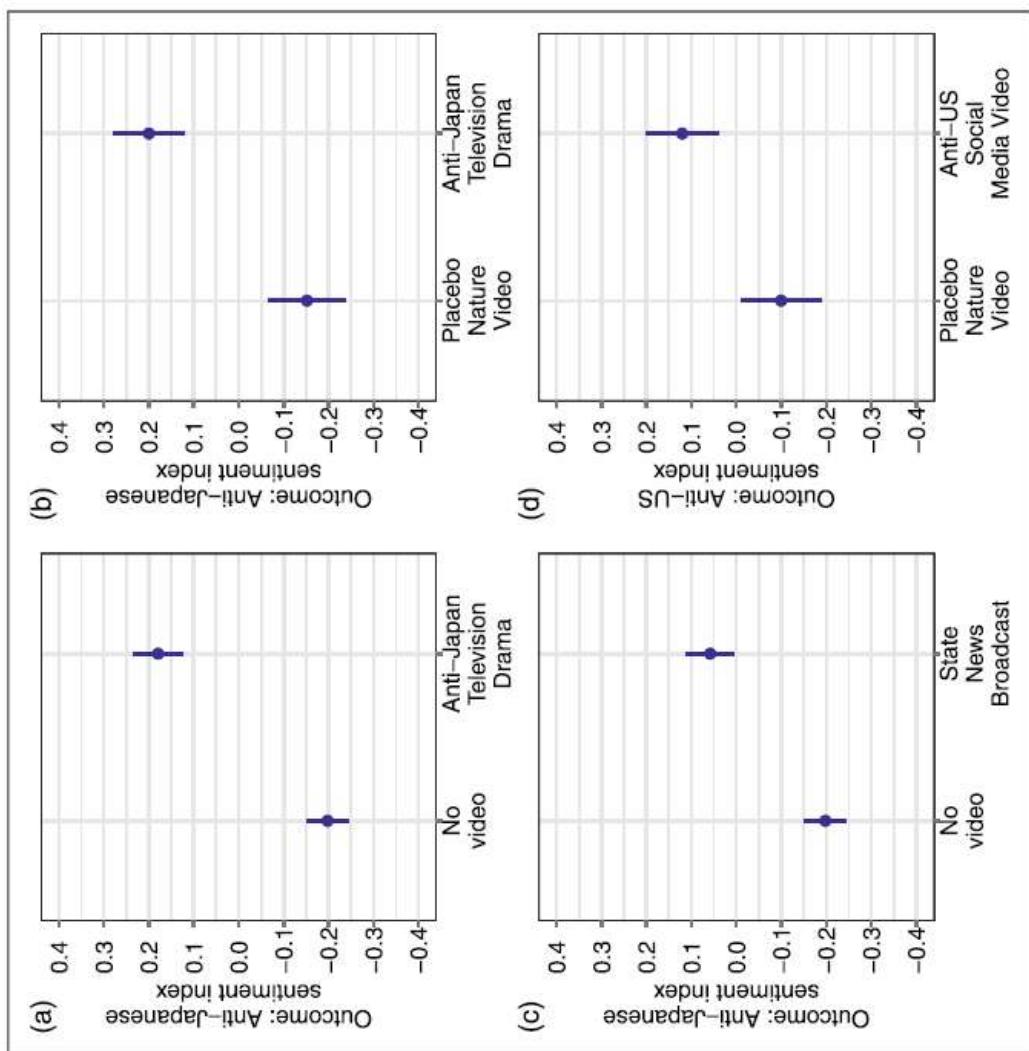
# Can propaganda content arouse anti-foreign attitudes?

Mattingly and Yao 2022

Headline findings: Propaganda effectively manipulates anger as well as anti-foreign sentiment and behavior, with heightened anti-foreign attitudes persisting up to a week.

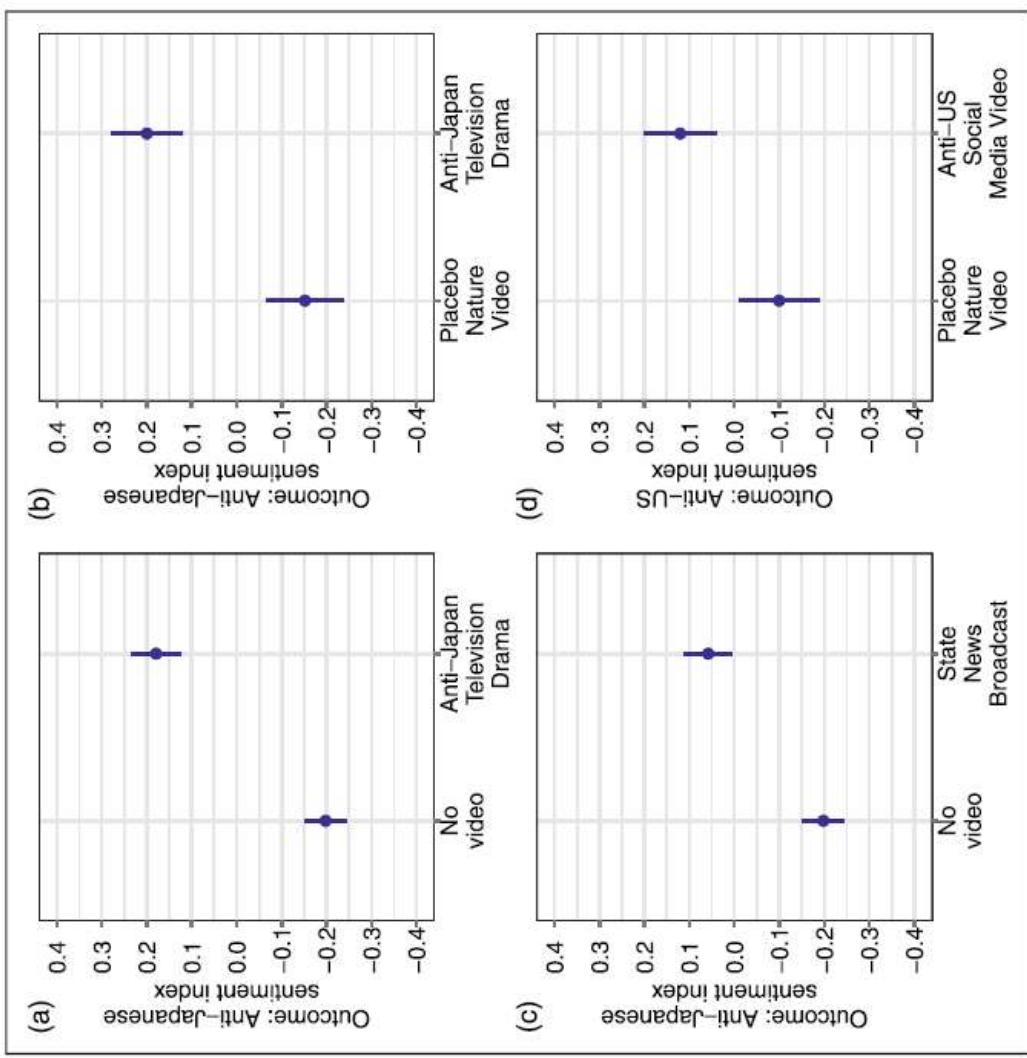


**Figure 2.** Treatment effects of propaganda on anti-foreign attitudes index created through PCA (see text). The index has been standardized within each round. Comparison groups include no video (Round One) and a placebo video (Round Two). Each dot represents one respondent. Bars show 95% confidence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



**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.

- Anti-Japan television drama = a television drama about the Sino-Japanese War;
- State news broadcast = newscast focusing on Xi Jinping's participation in the annual national commemoration of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, one of three public holidays memorializing the war;
- Anti-US social media video = a video containing a message denouncing American interference in the 2019 Hong Kong protests.

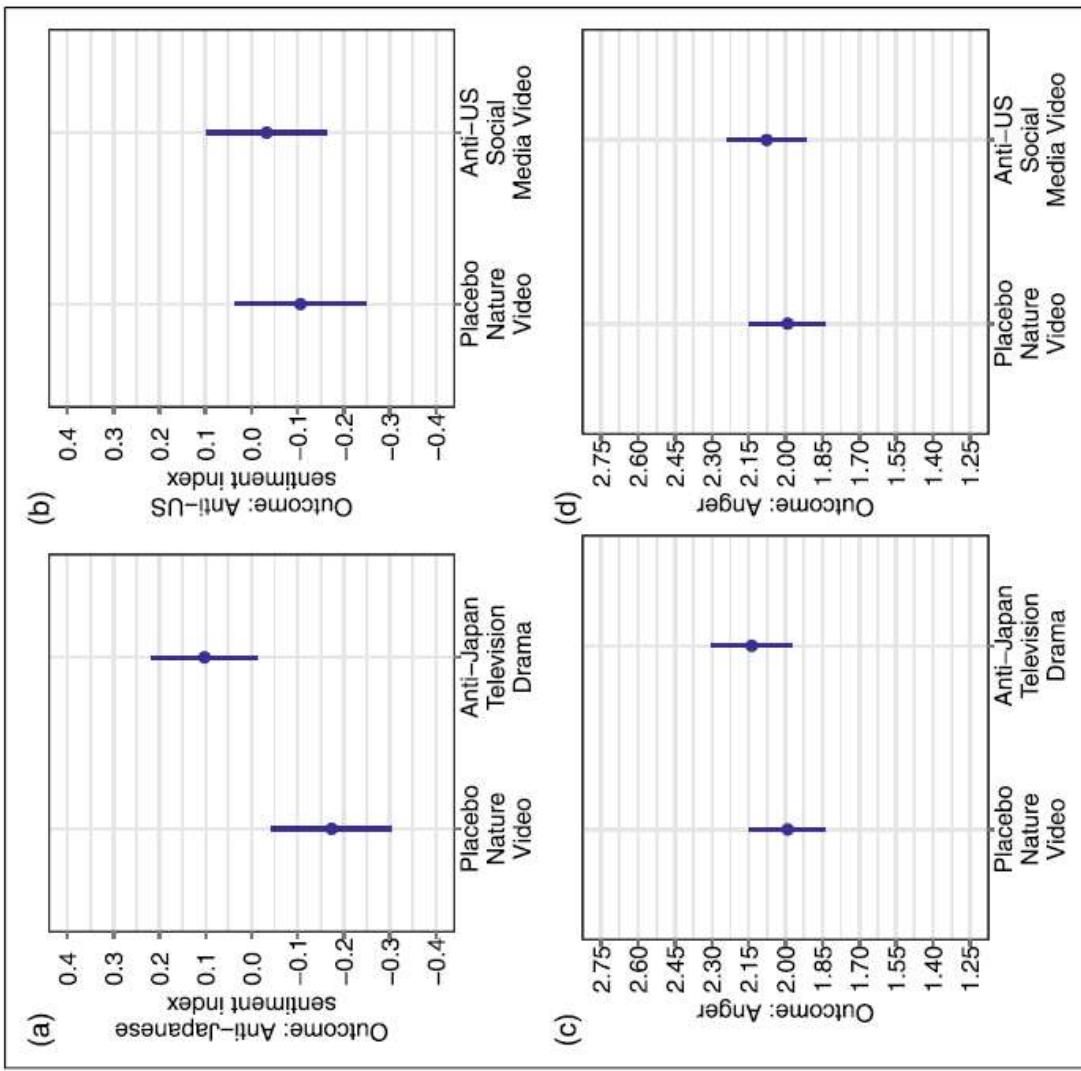


**Figure 2.** Treatment effects of propaganda on anti-foreign attitudes index created through PCA (see text). The index has been standardized within each round. Comparison groups include no video (Round One) and a placebo video (Round Two). Each dot represents one respondent. Bars show 95% confidence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

- 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.

# Do the effects of soft propaganda endure?

- 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.



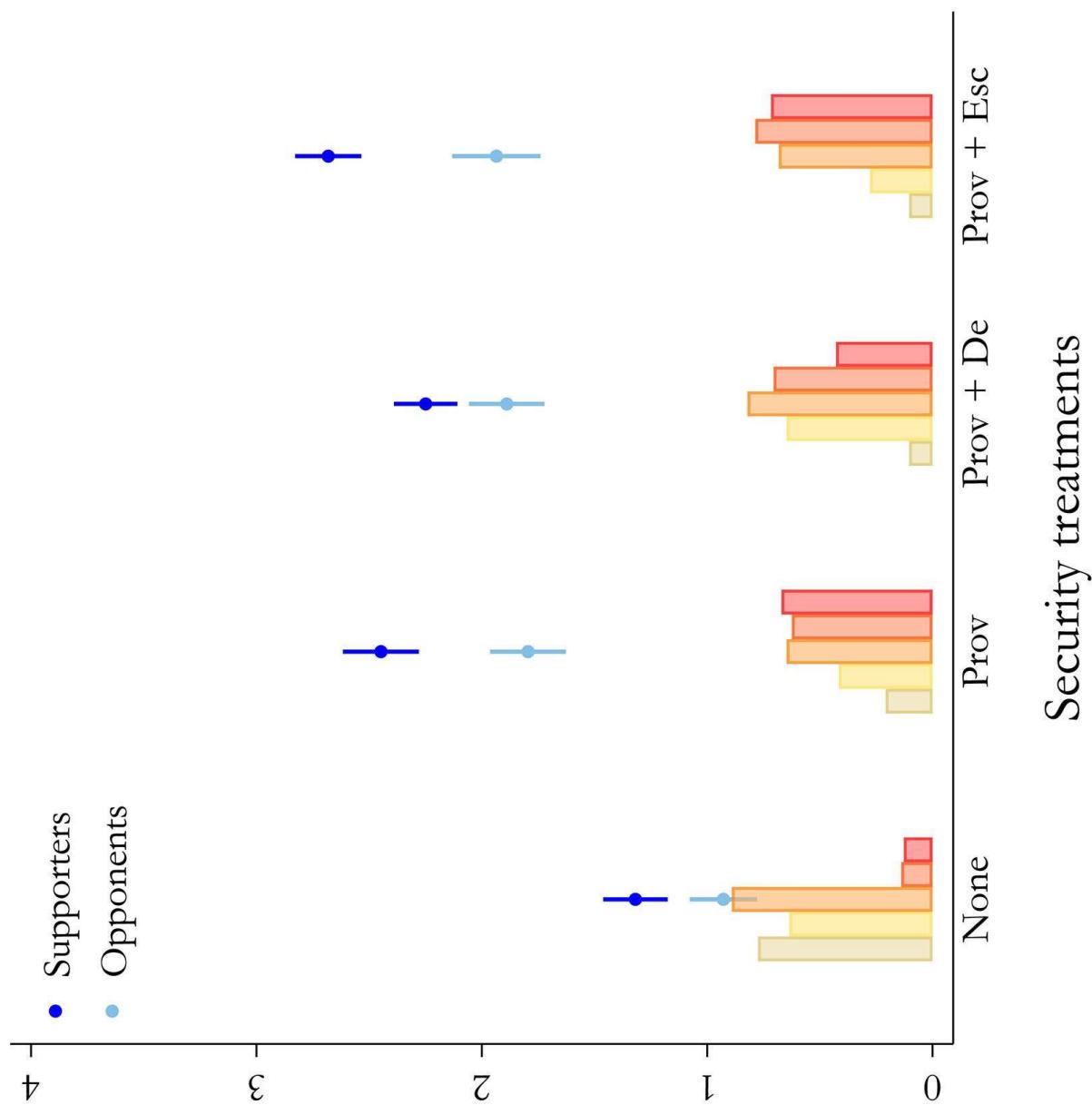
**Figure 3.** Treatment effects measured 5 to 7 days after initial exposure. Each dot represents one respondent. Bars show 95% confidence intervals for the mean for each condition.

- Suthan Krishnarajan, Jakob Tolstrup, Pre-war experimental evidence that Putin's propaganda elicited strong support for military invasion among Russians. *Sci. Adv.* **9**, eadg1199(2023).

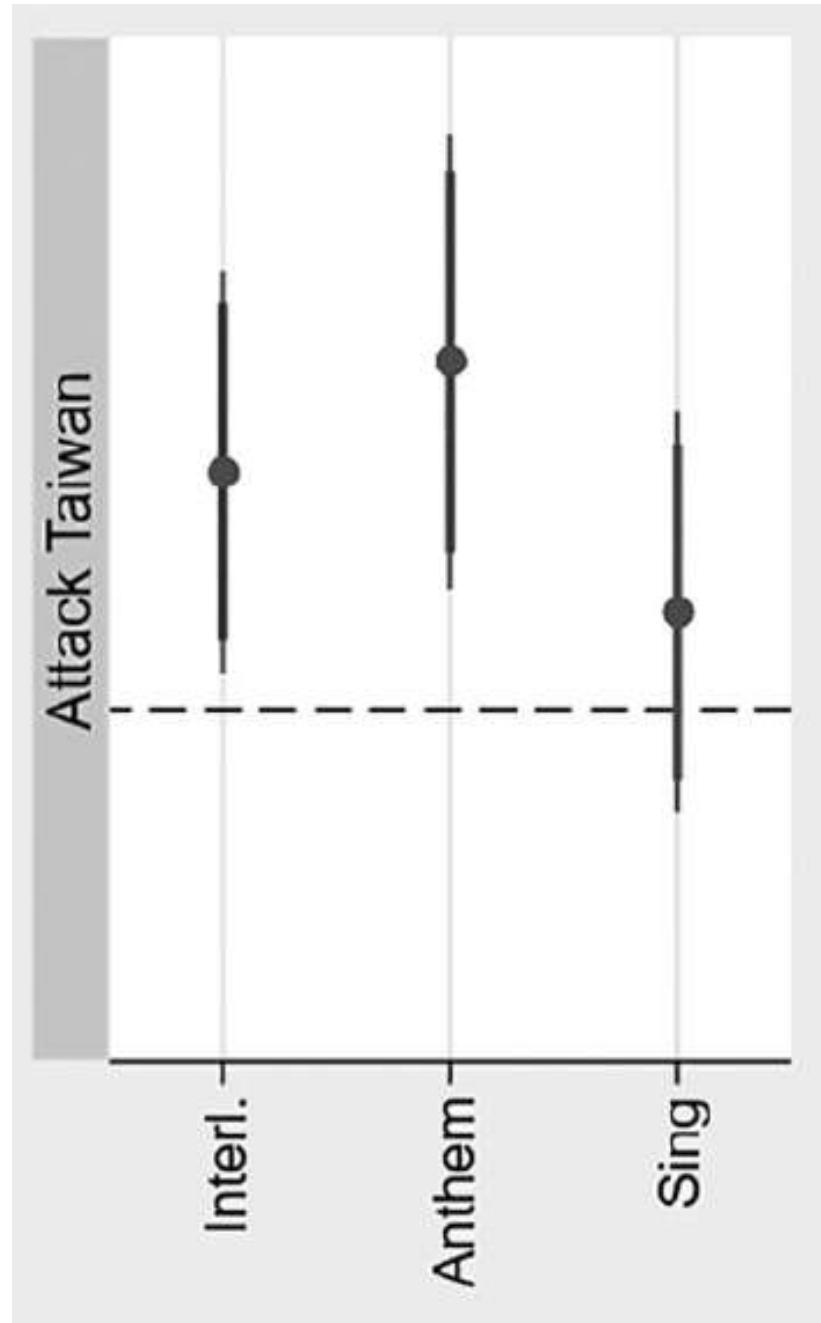
## Propaganda that mobilizes

A COMPARATIVE  
PERSPECTIVE

- In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The Putin regime used extensive and aggressive propaganda to win public support for the war.
- But can this propaganda really convince ordinary people? Using the unique timing of a survey experiment fielded a year before the invasion, they provide the first experimental evidence of the effectiveness of this propaganda among Russian citizens.



- Vignette treatments containing information on threats similar to stories running in Russian media around the time of the invasion in combination with statements from President Putin show that propaganda was highly effective.
- Even mild treatments were enough to increase support for military aggression against neighboring countries among Russians from around 8 to 48% and up to 59% among Putin's supporters. Thus, the Russian president had good reason to believe that he could control popular opinion when he decided to launch a war against Ukraine.



# Is Taiwan the next Ukraine?

Liu and Shao 2023:

Headline findings:  
Nationalist propaganda increases people's support for taking Taiwan by the military force.

# Is Taiwan the next Ukraine?

Propaganda songs, on average, increased support for the war with Taiwan by 3.3% (Ttest results: 4.1% and 0.13 standard deviation).

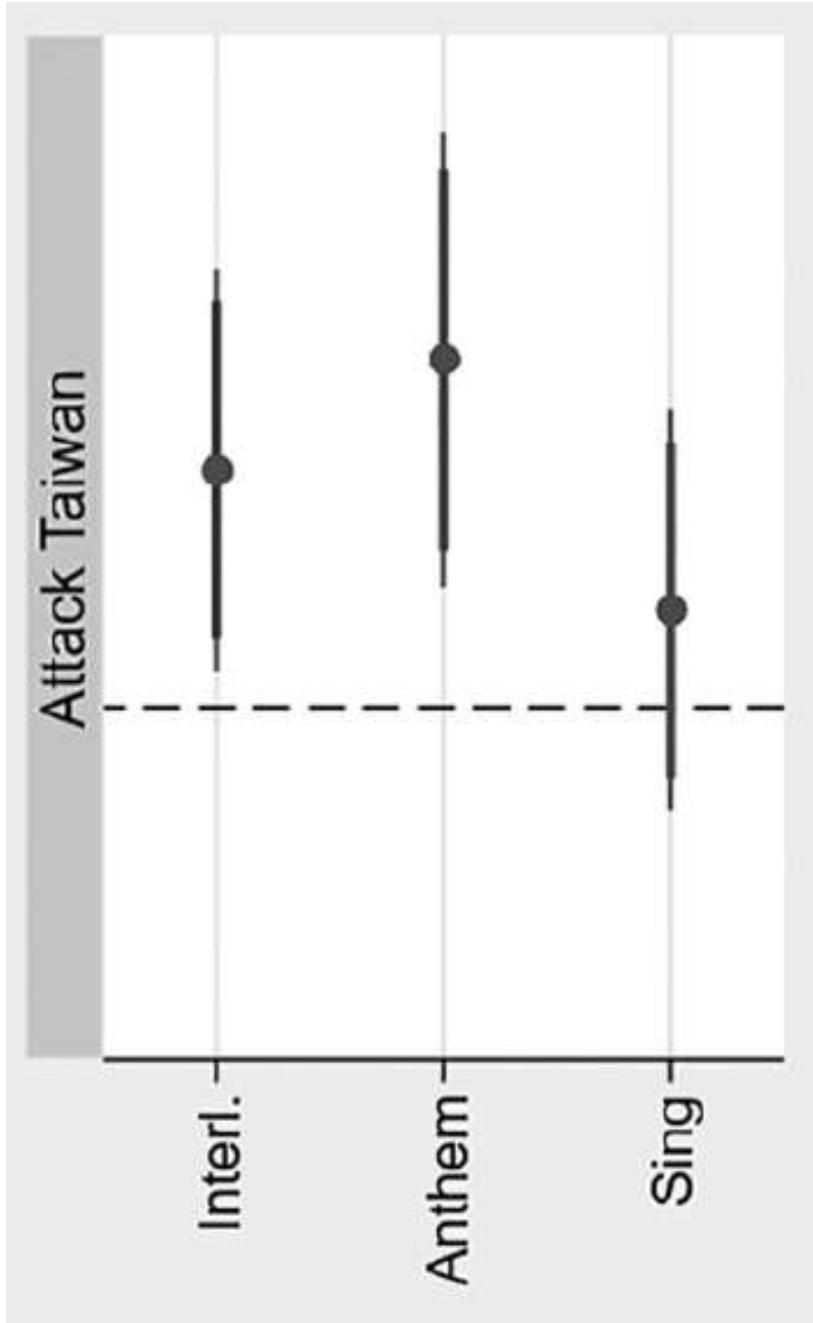


Figure 1: Treatment effects of propaganda music [1]Interl. = the Internationale; (2) Anthem = the National Anthem of China; and (3) Sing = Ode to the Motherland (aka Sing for the Motherland)]

# Is Taiwan the next Ukraine?

Both types of nationalist propaganda can increase support for the Taiwan war.

People exposed to treatment groups are also more supportive of defense budget increases, more likely to join the military themselves, more likely to support their family members in joining the military, and willing to donate more income to the war.

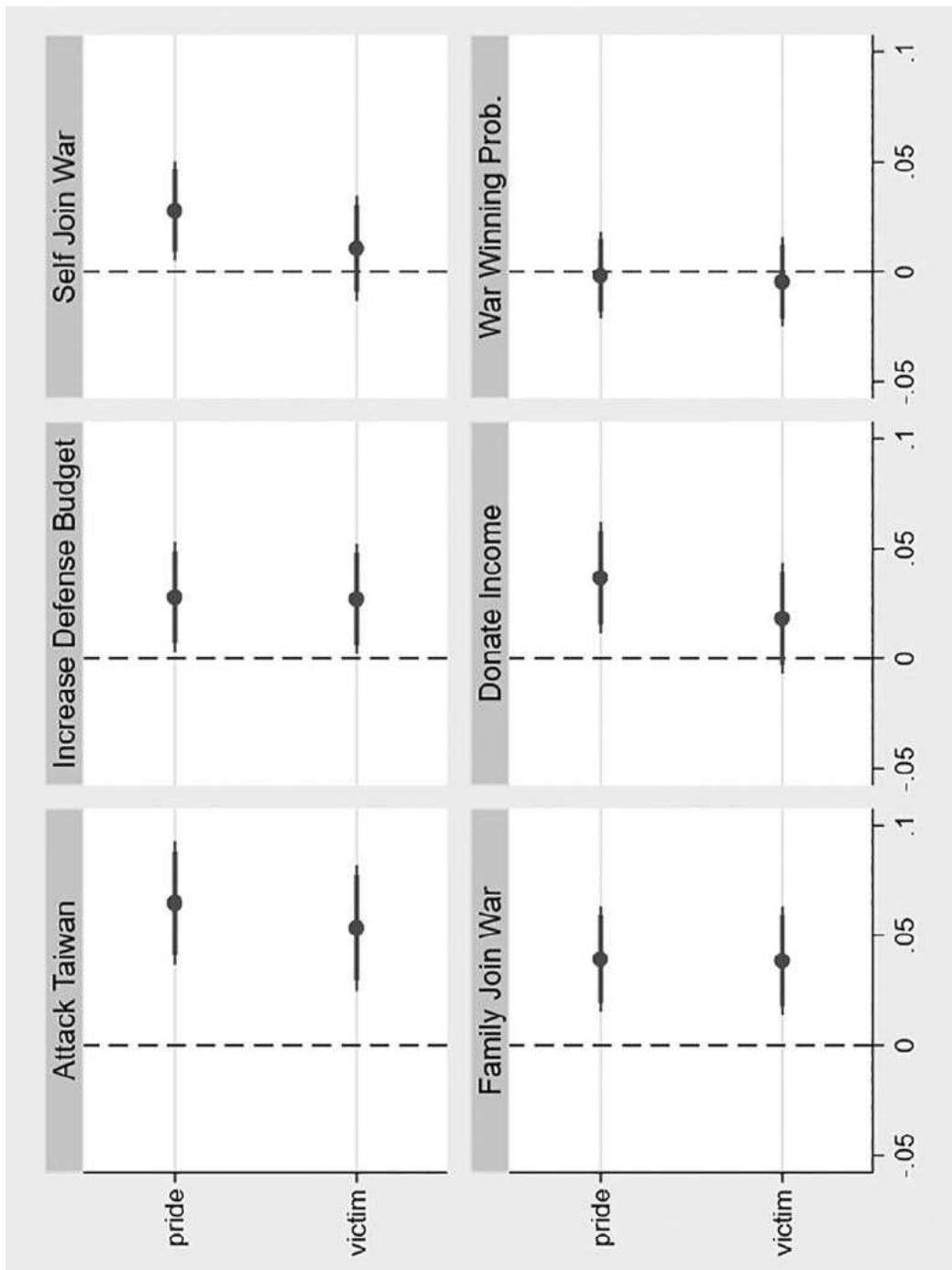
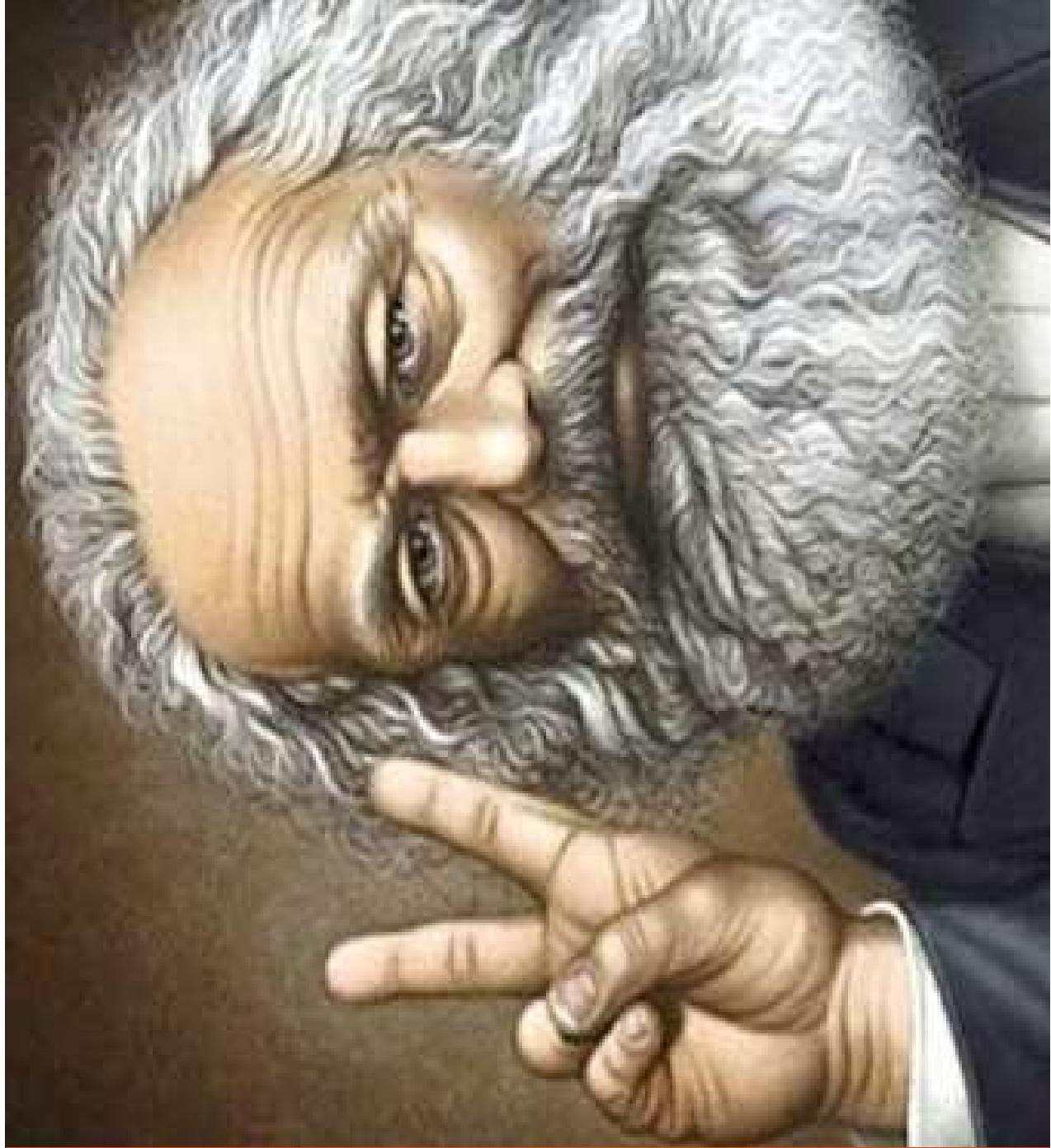


Figure 2: Treatment effects of the pride and victim narratives about Taiwan.  
Pride = Taiwan issue is connected to ‘China’s Dream’ and the ‘Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’. Victim = the Taiwan issue has been a lingering source of humiliation in modern Chinese history.



Propaganda  
that coerces

HIP-HOP SONG OF KARL MARX

# Propaganda that coerces

- Propaganda often is not used for indoctrination of pro-regime values and attitudes, as is traditionally understood, but rather to signal the government's strength in maintaining social control and political order.
- Chinese college students with more exposure to state propaganda in the form of ideological and political education are not more satisfied with China's government system, but are more likely to believe that the regime is strong in maintaining social control and less willing to participate in political dissent.

Huang, Haifeng.  
"Propaganda as signaling."  
*Comparative Politics* 47.4  
(2015): 419-444.

# HUANG 2018

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.

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.

# THE BELT AND ROAD IS HOW



Propaganda that signals to foreign audiences

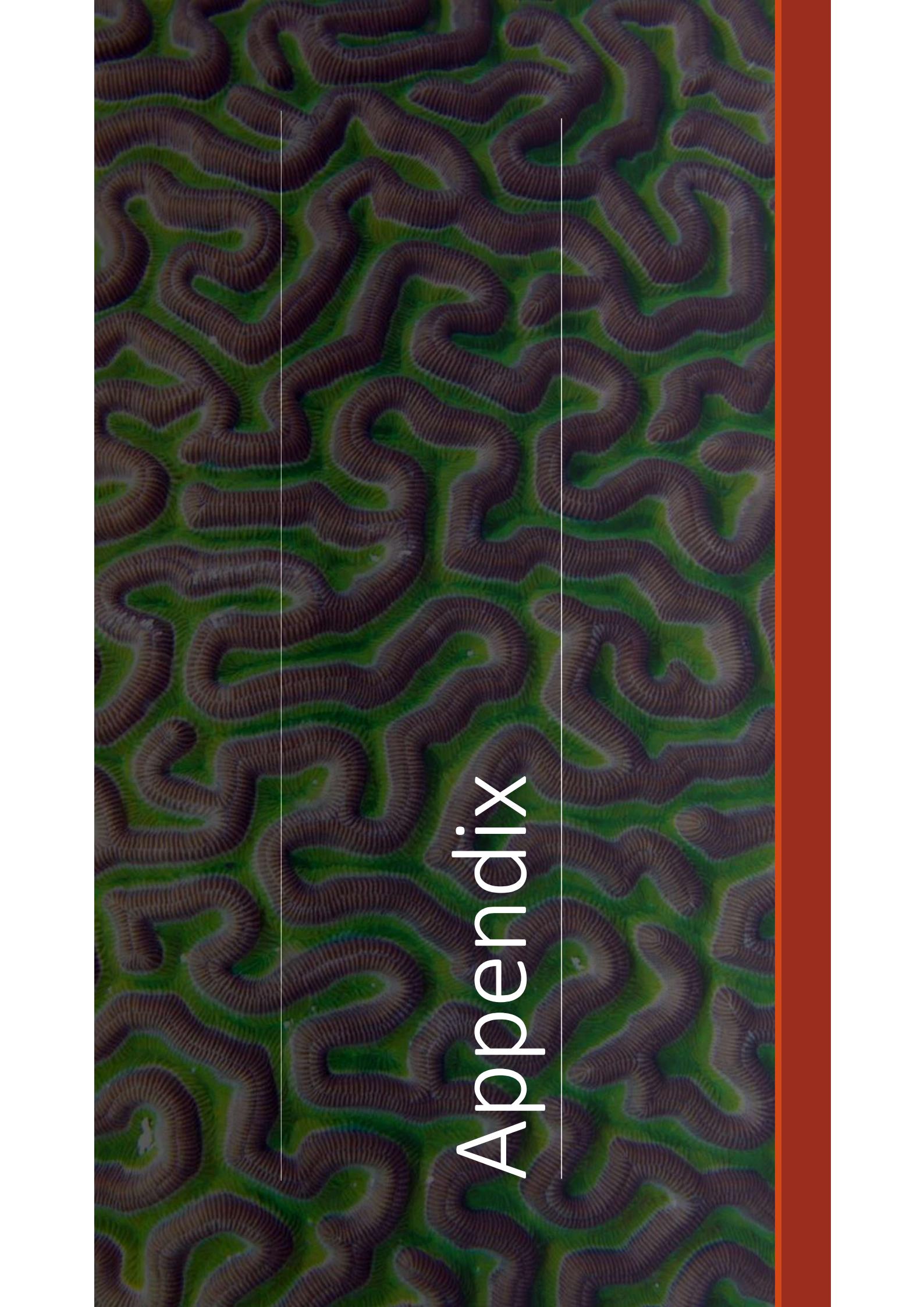
CHILDREN FROM BELT AND ROAD COUNTRIES SING OUT THEIR GRATITUDE

# THE MINISTRY OF TRUTH

A BIOGRAPHY OF  
GEORGE ORWELL'S 1984

Thank You!

YOUR QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS  
ARE WELCOME!



# Appendix

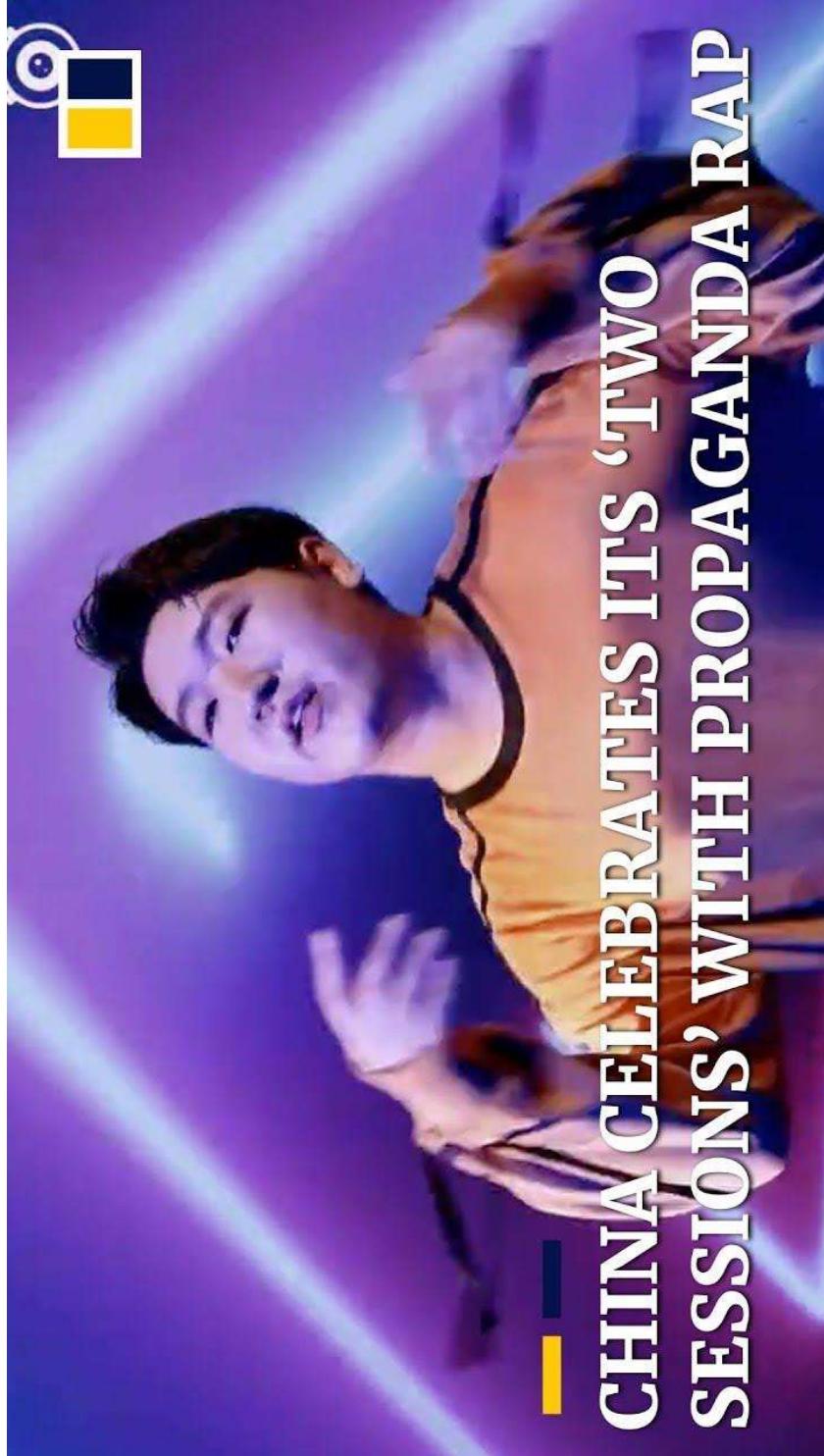
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# Propaganda that pacifies nationalists

ANECDOTE: NANCY PELOSI  
AND SU-35

# Propaganda that diverts attention

ANECDOTE: URUMUQI FIRE  
AND 吳亦凡



— CHINA CELEBRATES ITS ‘TWO SESSIONS’ WITH PROPAGANDA RAP

CHINESE TWO SESSION RAP