

Authoritarian Persuasion at Home and Abroad: The Partial Effectiveness of Foreign Influencers in Propaganda Work

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Abstract

How do authoritarian regimes make propaganda persuasive? This study evaluates the impact of foreign influencers in propaganda. Social media videos and state broadcasts from countries such as Russia and China often feature sympathetic Westerners, yet their effects on audiences remain unclear. We conducted two survey experiments with 4800 respondents in China and the United States. Participants viewed soft propaganda videos in which either an American or a Chinese influencer described their feelings of freedom in China. The results reveal that foreign influencers did not persuade Chinese audiences but Americans evaluated pro-China messages more favorably when delivered by a fellow American. This suggests foreign influencers improve perceptions of authoritarian rule among their co-nationals, but not within such regimes. Our findings show how autocracies can build global support through foreign influencers, which, given heightened geopolitical competition and the emergence of social media as a dominant news source, has implications for democratic resilience.

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Keywords

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Introduction

In mid-2020, British father-and-son YouTubers Lee and Oli Barrett, based in Shenzhen, began to attract a large international audience by documenting what they framed as the everyday realities of life in China (Paul, 2020). They produced a number of viral videos emphasizing the modern infrastructure, lack of homelessness, and general sense of safety in China. One of their most popular uploads was entitled *CHINA... is it as SAFE as People Say?* Garnering over a million views on YouTube, the video highlighted Lee's amazement at seeing young women walk alone safely in Chinese cities at night.¹ In just two years, their channel would draw hundreds of thousands of subscribers and nearly 30 million total views — growth that only accelerated as their explicitly pro-China stance became more pronounced (Mozur et al., 2021).

The Barretts are part of a broader class of foreign influencers: non-citizen content creators who monetize lifestyle, travel, or political content on social media platforms for large online audiences. In China, such figures often selectively amplify positive portrayals of Chinese society, presenting themselves as authentic, apolitical, and culturally curious outsiders. The phenomenon is not unique to China nor confined to the present. During the Cold War, the term “useful idiot” was coined to describe foreigners who, knowingly or not, advanced the propaganda of Communist regimes. We view foreign influencers as the digital-era iteration of this longer-standing phenomenon. Unlike ordinary foreign residents or tourists who occasionally share their impressions online, influencers are professionalized content producers who pursue audience growth and the monetization of content (Abidin, 2016). In this sense, they differ from ordinary citizens whose online presence is incidental rather than career-oriented, as influencers receive payment for their content both directly from platforms and indirectly in the form of all-expense-paid junkets.² And unlike journalists or diplomats, foreign influencers derive credibility from their ‘relatability’ or outsider status, typically operating on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, or Bilibili. The boundary between foreign influencers and foreign journalists is, in practice, often porous: some figures who look and act like influencers are in fact employed by, or closely tied to, authoritarian state media.³ For the purposes of this study, however, we treat journalists as distinct from foreign influencers, reserving the latter term for non-citizen content producers whose prominence derives primarily from their activity on digital platforms rather than their formal employment by media outlets.

According to one recent policy report, there are dozens of Western social media influencers posting regularly from China today, some of whom have tens of millions of followers domestically and millions more on overseas platforms (Ryan et al., 2023). The intent of authoritarian regimes to amplify sympathetic foreign voices is clear. The content disseminated by foreign influencers in China, for instance, echo official lines focusing on the widespread support that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seemingly enjoys, the lack of homelessness in major cities, the effectiveness of China's COVID-19 policies, and/or the normality of life in repressive contexts like Xinjiang. And the Chinese state has cultivated these figures by granting them privileged access and financial rewards through sponsored competitions for pro-regime content (Ryan et al., 2023). The resulting videos have been widely seen by millions of people both in China and abroad, and are the contemporary manifestation of a phenomenon harkening back to the Mao-era when the CCP would “borrow the mouths” (借嘴说话) of friendly foreigners like American journalist Edgar Snow to disseminate favourable coverage abroad (Thomas, 1996). It may be tempting to dismiss such content as obviously biased and lacking credibility, but on-the-ground commentary by foreign influencers has a key advantage over mainstream Western media outlets that are forced to report on China from a distance — for, as one influencer posting from Xinjiang sharply put it: ‘If you haven’t come here, don’t pretend you understand China’ (Ryan et al., 2023, p. 24).

In this paper, we theorize the phenomenon of the foreign influencer and evaluate the extent to which they improve the effectiveness of authoritarian propaganda and for whom. Authoritarian regimes struggle to engage in effective propaganda as their subjects, in environments of limited media freedom, often approach official media with a great deal of skepticism (Roberts, 2018). Overly heavy-handed and absurd propaganda efforts can backfire, leading to increased cynicism and political apathy among the general populace (Huang, 2018). Subtler “soft propaganda” techniques, like framing historical issues in regime-favored terms without explicit partisan messaging (Mattingly & Yao, 2022), or leveraging celebrities and social media influencers (Jeffreys, 2016; Sullivan & Kehoe, 2019) can make official narratives more palatable to an otherwise skeptical domestic audience. Indeed, soft authoritarian propaganda can be strikingly effective at altering the opinions of overseas audiences (Mattingly et al., 2025). Building on this literature, we theorize that foreign intermediaries are a useful tool for authoritarian regimes to amplify the effects of soft propaganda precisely because foreign media is generally seen as biased against China (Huang & Yeh, 2019; Truex, 2016), and any favourable foreign commentary can therefore be held up by a regime as particularly impartial and credible (Fang, 2022). However, integrating the literature from social psychology on out-group persuasion, we theorize that foreign influencers are particularly useful in persuading fellow foreigners

given their shared national identity and the fact that foreigners are less exposed to such propaganda in general. To evaluate the effects of foreign influencers, we therefore need a design that simultaneously compares propaganda's effects on domestic versus foreign audiences while also varying whether the messenger is a compatriot or an outsider.⁴

To do so, we conducted two identical pre-registered online survey experiments with approximately 4800 respondents in mainland China and the United States in which we randomly exposed participants to soft propaganda videos featuring either an American or Chinese influencer discussing positively the extent of freedom they feel exists in China. To our knowledge, this is the first study that compares the effectiveness of the same propaganda message on foreign and domestic audiences and it is also the first study that tests how the nationality of a messenger alters the effectiveness of authoritarian propaganda. We find two things. First, American audiences are generally considerably more susceptible to persuasion than Chinese audiences regardless of influencer identity. Second, the American influencer is more effective at persuasion relative to the Chinese influencer but for American audiences only.

This article contributes to our understanding of influence operations by authoritarian regimes and, specifically, how the use of foreign intermediaries can amplify the effectiveness of such operations. In addition to contributing to the aforementioned literature on Chinese propaganda, we build upon prior studies in international relations on authoritarian influence operations (Bush & Prather, 2022; Carter & Carter, 2021; Corstange & Marinov, 2012; Golovchenko et al., 2020; Goodman, 2022; Mauk & Gromping, 2024; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Tomz et al., 2020; Tomz & Weeks, 2020); and the effectiveness of public diplomacy (Brazys & Dukalskis, 2019; Goldsmith et al., 2021; Green-Riley, 2022; Mattingly & Sundquist, 2023; Rhee et al., 2024). We show that foreign influencers are somewhat useful to authoritarian regimes — they may not be effective at convincing domestic audiences already saturated with official narratives, but they can successfully reshape the perceptions and attitudes of fresher and more credulous audiences back at home.

These findings suggest that scholars may have been overly sanguine about the limited success authoritarian media have had in Western democracies to date (Eady et al., 2023; Kurlantzick, 2023; Varrall, 2020). While exposure to authoritarian propaganda generally can shift foreign opinion (Mattingly et al., 2025; Mauk & Gromping, 2024), researchers have also been encouraged by the nonetheless small foreign audiences for traditional outlets like *CGTN* or *RT* and the relatively limited influence of disinformation bots beyond the already highly disaffected (Eady et al., 2023; Mader et al., 2022). Yet, social media influencers have found considerable success on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, which have become dominant sources of news for

Western publics. The Chinese Communist Party's flagship newspaper has itself seemed startled by its own success when it ran a commentary entitled "How did China become cool?" in May 2025 about the surprising traction that narratives like those produced by the Barretts have gained among young Westerners ([The Economist, 2025](#)). By early 2026, the viral "Chinamaxxing" trend — in which young Westerners adopted Chinese lifestyle aesthetics on TikTok and Xiaohongshu — suggests that discourse about China among Western youth online has already rapidly shifted in a positive direction.⁵ Policymakers and scholars would do well to recognize that an open social media landscape is fertile ground for social media influencers to successfully reshape the perceptions of co-nationals about the nature of life under authoritarian rule.

The plan for the rest of the paper is as follows. First, we will review the history of propaganda in the People's Republic of China and why the government there has recently turned to enlisting foreign social media influencers in its propaganda work. We will then theorize how the nationality of a messenger and their audience is likely to affect the effectiveness of authoritarian propaganda. We will then present our two pre-registered survey experiments showing that foreign influencers are useful in convincing American, but not domestic Chinese audiences of Chinese government messaging. Finally, we will conclude with a brief discussion of the future of authoritarian propaganda in an age of social media consumption and geopolitical competition.

Making Propaganda Work: The CCP's Domestic and International Strategies

Propaganda has long been a cornerstone of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) system of control and governance ([Schurmann, 1968](#); [Teiwes, 1979](#); [Yu, 1964](#)). In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, the CCP faced an especially tarnished domestic and global image. To counter this, domestically the CCP launched a successful campaign to build anti-Western nationalism ([Wang, 2014](#)). Internationally, the CCP's initiatives included expanding state media's international reach and promoting China's economic achievements ([Brady, 2008](#); [Shambaugh, 2013](#); [Stockmann, 2012](#)). Under Xi Jinping's tenure (2012-present), the CCP's efforts to control the narrative both domestically and internationally have redoubled; the progressive tightening of news control domestically ([Waight et al., 2025](#)) has been complemented by newly aggressive efforts to "tell China's story well" abroad ([Huang & Wang, 2019](#); [Jacob, 2020](#); [Repnikova, 2022](#)).

The dilemma for the CCP, as for other authoritarian regimes, is that its tight media restrictions also make any favourable coverage less credible to domestic and Western audiences. China's leaders today face a savvy and cynical

domestic audience who express a great deal of skepticism towards official outlets like *Xinwen Lianbo* or the *People's Daily* (Roberts, 2018). Overly absurd or “hard” propaganda in official outlets fails to convince domestic audiences (Huang, 2018). The CCP’s shift towards heavy-handed “wolf warrior” diplomacy has also generated backlash overseas (Martin, 2021; Mattingly & Sundquist, 2023), with survey data revealing a growing negative perception of China in Western countries over the past decade (Silver et al., 2020). These backlash effects oblige the CCP to rely on softer and more subtle approaches if it wants to successfully build support for its political model (Mattingly & Yao, 2022; Repnikova & Fang, 2018), and effectively combat Western criticism for its policies on contentious issues like Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and COVID-19.

The involvement of foreign influencers to disseminate pro-regime content online reflects a confluence of two such soft propaganda tools. First, the CCP relies on internet celebrities or “wanghong” (网红) to amplify pro-regime messages on the internet. Given that celebrities are ostensibly non-partisan and can reach a large audience, they are powerful interlocuters for party messages (Jeffreys, 2016; Sullivan & Kehoe, 2019). For instance, in March 2021 thirty of China’s top celebrities cut ties in unison with Western brands they accused of “smearing” cotton produced in Xinjiang, and promoted the hashtag “I support Xinjiang’s cotton” (#我支持新疆棉花) on Weibo. This hashtag had just been created by the *People's Daily* and celebrity endorsement helped it garner more than 5 billion views.⁶ More broadly, pro-regime content in China today is increasingly produced in a decentralized way, reflecting a turn towards ‘participatory persuasion’ dynamics in which non-state content creators collaborate—implicitly or explicitly—in propaganda work (Repnikova & Fang, 2018). Within this system on social media, algorithms surface the most effective and engaging messages from internet celebrities and influencers, giving pro-regime narratives wider distribution while financially rewarding pro-regime content creators (Incerti et al., 2026; Lu et al., 2025).

Second, the party has also long used foreign writers and broadcasters to present a positive image of itself at home and abroad. As Western media is often seen as biased against China and the CCP, amplifying positive Western voices can deflect such criticism and be used to present a more “unbiased” view of the country’s political development. Edgar Snow, an American journalist who gained unprecedented access to Communist leadership in the 1930s, exemplified this approach with his sympathetic portrayal of Mao Zedong and the Communist movement in “Red Star Over China,” which significantly shaped Western perceptions of the then little-known guerilla movement (Thomas, 1996). Throughout the rest of the Mao-era, the CCP continued to cultivate relationships with foreign intellectuals, journalists, and political figures who could offer favorable accounts of China’s development including American journalist Anna Louise Strong; British-American

journalist Felix Greene; and French writer Han Suyin. Through their writings, broadcasts, and public appearances in the West, such writers shaped a positive narrative of China under Mao that proved influential among Western leftists (Brady, 2003).

Friendly foreigners have also been used to improve the Party's image domestically. Foreign academics are frequently quoted in Chinese news media to externally validate the Party state's track record or achievements (Fang, 2022). Meanwhile, white Westerners, whose singular distinction is their fluency in Chinese, are frequently given a great deal of prominence on state television. This phenomenon began with Canadian performer Mark Roswell (大山) in the late 1980s and has continued more recently with foreigners like American Charlotte MacInnis or Marie Smurthwaite gaining wealth and fame from their appearances on game shows like Avenue of Stars (星光大道), China's Got Talent (中国达人秀) and Sinophiliac (同乐五洲) (Sullivan & Wang, 2024).⁷ The phenomenon of foreigners learning to love China is appealing propaganda for the CCP as it provides an implicit endorsement of China's socio-political model. For instance, in 2021 the CCTV disseminated the documentary series titled "Falling in Love with China" (爱上中国), comprising seven episodes each of which followed a foreigner who had developed a deep affection for China and who alternately expressed amazement at China's political stability, social harmony, and economic prosperity. It is worth remembering that most people in China have not met a foreigner themselves, making such media a potentially powerful tool for reshaping perceptions of how people from foreign countries regard life in China.

The growing prominence of foreign influencers online (外国网红) therefore represents the confluence of two distinct soft propaganda tools — internet celebrity and 'borrowing the mouth' of foreigners. As part of Xi Jinping's emphasis on maintaining China's "cultural confidence" (文化自信) in the wake of growing Western criticism, the Chinese government has actively cultivated a group of foreign influencers, dubbed "foreign mouths", "foreign pens", or "foreign brains", who have been promoting pro-China narratives online over recent years.⁸ These influencers, vloggers and social media personalities like American Jerry Kowal, Italian Rachele Longhi, Mexicans Maximiliano J Carrera Camacho and Noelia Rodriguez Pascual, and Israeli Raz Gal-Or are financially incentivized through competitions like "My China Story" (第三只眼看中国), media tours, and commercial opportunities to create content that aligns with Chinese Communist Party messaging. Through various competitions, the CCP encourages foreigners to create and disseminate content that aligns with party narratives. Prizes for these competitions range from 1000 to 100,000 RMB (Ryan et al., 2023), effectively serving as a recruitment tool to attract talent and generate a large volume of media submissions. For instance, the "China and I" competition,

organized by the State Council Information Office, has attracted around 430,000 short video entries from across the globe (Ryan et al., 2023). These competitions not only serve as platforms for content creation but also facilitate networking events that connect organizers with participants. This structure helps foreign influencers expand their audiences both in China and abroad while receiving compensation for pro-CCP content. Furthermore, major Chinese tech companies like ByteDance and Tencent actively promote this content through their recommendation algorithms and featured placements. These companies treat the foreign influencers' videos as premium content, helping them reach a wider audience (Ryan et al., 2023).

In response to directives from Xi Jinping emphasizing innovative foreign propaganda,⁹ party-state media also actively promotes the personal brands of Western influencers on international social media platforms. This strategy enables the downranking of content from state-affiliated sources while allowing pro-Beijing narratives to be disseminated through individual accounts, circumventing restrictions typically imposed on state-sponsored content. For example, Longhi visited Tibet in 2021 and produced a series of videos centering on Tibetan life and the happy experiences of Tibetan children at China's notorious boarding schools. These videos received half a million views on YouTube and another half a million on domestic video platform Xigua (Figure 1). Her series won an award from the Tibetan government and



Figure 1. Examples of foreign influencer videos. Note: The image displays screenshots taken from Western (YouTube) and Chinese (Bilibili) video-sharing platforms.

Sourced from <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1qt41187G9/?spmfrom=333.999.0.0>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZkpd2CWULo>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbMuV2N2aKc>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEaBbHkRtVU>.

Accessed August 14, 2024.

received much praise from Chinese netizens for daring to show the “real Tibet” to foreign audiences. Another video centering on the freedom that influencer Jerry Kowal felt upon arriving in Shanghai in 2021 (Figure 1) went viral and accumulated more than 477,000 “likes” and more than 5.1 million views on Bilibili.¹⁰ The normality of life in Xinjiang, the effectiveness of China’s COVID-19 policies, and the lack of homelessness or crime in major Chinese cities are common themes of foreign influencer videos.

Foreign influencers are clearly designed to make China’s propaganda more relatable to overseas audiences, evade content being explicitly labelled as state media, and reinforce nationalist sentiments domestically. But the effectiveness of these figures at achieving these varied goals remains questionable. Chinese netizens, often cynical and savvy to online propaganda dynamics, have accused foreign influencers of essentially praising China for money, a practice they derisively term as cracking the “wealth password” (财富密码). There is clearly a tension, then, between the government’s recent cultivation of foreign influencers and the cynicism that such cultivation has instilled among domestic audiences. Chinese propaganda officials are also uncertain about the impact of these new foreign influencers, with one recently anonymously commenting to a Western journalist that the “actual effect of leveraging the foreign influencers for propaganda has always been questionable”.¹¹ Given this uncertainty, we will now turn to more precisely specifying the conditions under which foreign influencers are likely to amplify the persuasiveness of government propaganda.

Theorizing Variation in Propaganda Effectiveness

Under what conditions is government propaganda effective at reshaping public attitudes? Classic propaganda theory distinguishes between conversion, where information produces attitude change, and reinforcement, where messages strengthen existing views without measurable change (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2019). Two conditions principally determine whether propaganda results in conversion or reinforcement: novelty, the extent to which the information is new rather than already saturated, and credibility, the perceived trustworthiness of the messenger. Novelty matters because persuasion research shows that messages providing new information are more effective than those reiterating known facts (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Credibility matters because trusted sources are more persuasive (Druckman, 2001; Hovland et al., 1953; Sternthal et al., 1978). Together, novelty and credibility jointly determine the outcome of propaganda. Conversion is most likely when propaganda messages are novel and credible. In the absence of either novelty or credibility, propaganda tends to reinforce existing views with no measurable effect.

This framework provides a way to assess how audience and messenger identity together likely shape the impact of the CCP's propaganda. For Chinese audiences, who have direct experience with their society and are frequently exposed to government messaging, narratives about China being "free", for instance, do not present novel information and thus may have limited to no persuasive impact. In contrast, Western audiences, often exposed to critical portrayals of China in their domestic media, may find these pro-China narratives to be new and unexpected. This asymmetry suggests that Chinese government messaging about the level of freedom its citizens enjoy will be, all else equal, more impactful among foreign audiences than domestic ones. And, indeed, consistent with this expectation, [Mattingly et al. \(2025\)](#) find that Chinese government propaganda is effective at reshaping perceptions of its political model abroad. All else equal, we expect that the same soft propaganda message is therefore likely to be more effective at shifting attitudes among Western audiences than among domestic Chinese audiences due to novelty.

Messenger identity, on the other hand, affects credibility. The effectiveness of in-group versus out-group persuasion has been a subject of extensive research in social psychology and communication studies.¹² Generally, in-group members — people who share similar identities and backgrounds with their audience — are found to be more persuasive due to greater perceived trustworthiness ([Balliet et al., 2014](#); [Hewstone et al., 2002](#)). Hence, we should expect that, all else equal, political messages delivered by a Westerner will be more effective at convincing fellow Westerners and messages delivered by a Chinese person will be more effective at convincing fellow Chinese people ([Table 1](#)).

However, national identity also affects perceived credibility when it comes to government propaganda. Studies on source credibility have consistently shown that high credibility sources are more persuasive in opinion change ([Druckman, 2001](#); [Hovland et al., 1953](#); [Sternthal et al., 1978](#)). And Chinese messengers may struggle with credibility among Western audiences, particularly if they are seen to be associated with the CCP. Studies from the United States suggest that foreign voices have generally small effects on public opinion ([Entman, 2003](#); [Page et al., 1987](#)), particularly if foreign

Table 1. The Effectiveness of Soft Propaganda by Audience and Messenger Identity.

Messenger identity	Propaganda audience	
	Western audience	Chinese audience
Western	Strong	Weak
Chinese	Moderate	None

messengers hail from unfriendly countries with a perceived anti-American agenda (Hayes & Guardino, 2011). This reflects the bias that audiences have towards culturally proximate messengers more generally (Ksiazek & Webster, 2008); even in highly polarized contexts where trust in media is generally low, broadcasters like *RT* or *CGTN* struggle to gain the trust of Western audiences due to perceived cultural distance (Kurlantzick, 2023; Morales, 2021). Given greater trust in fellow Westerners and Western source credibility, we expect there to be a gap in persuasiveness between Western and Chinese messengers in propaganda targeted at Western audiences (Table 1).

Among Chinese audiences, it is less clear whether Westerners or Chinese messengers will be more persuasive. Scholars have argued that Chinese society has historically been characterized by a pro-Western bias due to European colonization and the West's more "advanced" status (Johansson, 1998). Moreover, out-group members can still be influential messengers if they express a position that diverges from the audience's expectations (Nicholson, 2011), as a Western messenger who adopts a pro-CCP position does. Hence, we hypothesize that Westerners may be regarded as more credible and therefore be more effective at persuading Chinese audiences of the government's position than a Chinese messenger.

However, it is also possible that Westerners have no greater credibility than Chinese messengers with Chinese audiences. The Chinese government has recently intensified efforts to promote patriotic and nationalistic pride (Chen et al., 2019; Qian et al., 2017; Wang & Wang, 2018), so it is unclear whether any pro-Western bias continues to exist, with recent polls indicating strikingly negative views held towards the West among Chinese citizens.¹³ Indeed, contradicting the notion that Chinese audiences are biased towards Westerners, Ji and Bates (2021) found that Chinese participants generally favored health messages from Chinese, not Western, sources. Hence, our theoretical expectations for Chinese audiences are more mixed. We expect that propaganda messages delivered by a Westerner to be more persuasive than by a Chinese messenger given that they are expressing a position that diverges from the audience's expectations but, due to in-group bias, this gap may be less pronounced than among Western audiences. Table 1 illustrates these theoretical expectations about how messenger identity and audience together interact to shape the impact of authoritarian propaganda.

Research Design, Data, and Methods

To test these theoretical predictions, we ran two pre-registered¹⁴ studies on Americans and Chinese online audiences randomly varying exposure to a short-form video designed to imitate TikTok or YouTube content highlighting positively the extent of freedom and personal safety that an influencer feels exists in China.¹⁵ Our experimental treatment reflects how soft authoritarian

propaganda operates — not through outright falsehoods, but by selectively emphasizing genuine positive aspects of society to justify the broader political system.¹⁶ Our videos were designed to replicate the conventions of influencer content, not journalistic reporting. Unlike journalist-produced news, there was no narration by a journalist and also no “vox pop” style interview in which ordinary people respond to questions. Instead, the speaker addressed the viewer directly in the first person, presenting a personal account in the style typical of short-form influencer videos on platforms such as TikTok or Bilibili.

Our preregistered hypotheses in both experiments were (i) whether propaganda delivered by an American influencer effectively improves how audiences perceive China compared to a control video (H1), (ii) whether propaganda delivered by an American influencer is more effective than propaganda delivered by a Chinese influencer (H2). In our preregistration, we specified these main hypotheses and the use of average treatment effects to assess the impact of propaganda videos on the outcomes. As an omission, we did not pre-register the specific method for comparing the two American and Chinese messenger conditions. We report simple one-tailed t-tests of mean outcome differences between the two treatment conditions, which for transparency we report as exploratory because this is a non-preregistered method for testing our preregistered theoretical expectation.

The message content is the same across both treatment groups, and we randomly varied the nationality and stated city of origin of the influencer across two treatment arms with a control group watching a nature video.¹⁷ The Chinese influencer spoke Chinese and the American influencer spoke English and both treatment videos included captions in Chinese and English. Both the American and Chinese influencer in the videos are women with the same hair color and clothing and approximately the same age. The Chinese influencer is Chinese and the American influencer is a White American. The videos were recorded consecutively at the same location. To demonstrate comparability across conditions, we conducted an additional audio–visual analysis. Anonymized stills from both videos are reproduced in [Appendix B](#). We assessed the frames for similarity in geometric and acoustic features and these analyses show no systematic differences in visual appearance or prosodic delivery across the two videos, indicating that the difference in messenger—not production values—drives any observed effects. Full results are presented in [Appendix D](#). Please see [Appendix B](#) for English and Chinese video transcripts. Our experiment did not include a manipulation check for perceived messenger nationality, which we recognize as a limitation. While multiple reinforcing cues made national misperception unlikely — the American influencer spoke English, is White, and explicitly stated she was from Santa Barbara, while the Chinese influencer spoke Chinese and stated she was from Hunan Changsha (see [Appendix B](#)) — we cannot definitively rule out that some participants perceived the messengers’ identities in ways we did not intend. For instance, some participants

may have categorized the American messenger as Asian American or multi-racial rather than White. Such misperception could have attenuated the estimated difference between the foreign and domestic messenger conditions, as race adds a further dimension of perceived similarity or difference between messenger and audience.

We acknowledge that our experiment employs a bundled treatment combining multiple influencer characteristics — language, ethnicity, and nationality — within a single condition. This design choice precludes us from isolating the effect of each attribute, which we recognize as a limitation. However, we deliberately adopted this bundled approach to maximize realism. In the real-world context this study is designed to mirror, these characteristics generally, though not exclusively, co-occur.¹⁸ Accordingly, our experiment is designed to evaluate the overall persuasive power of the stereotypical foreign influencer rather than parsing the impact of each of their component traits in isolation. Thus, although bundling precludes disentangling individual mechanisms, it strengthens realism and external validity by faithfully reflecting how audiences generally encounter foreign influencers. This follows standard guidance that external-validity-enhancing realism can justify bundled manipulations in population-based survey experiments (Mutz, 2011). Additionally, we chose the video's theme (personal safety, crime and freedom) to align with narratives commonly employed by female influencers in analogous campaigns, further anchoring the treatment in real-world practice,¹⁹ though we note that any persuasive effects we document are likely to be smaller in more polarized issue domains like national security (Eady et al., 2023) or in any domains where the information provided is less novel.

Online survey samples compare favorably with nationally representative samples for experimental estimates (Coppock & McClellan, 2019). Importantly, experimental estimates obtained from online quota and non-probability samples closely match those obtained from probability samples, demonstrating that causal effects estimated via randomized experiments on these samples typically generalize to the broader population of interest (Berinsky et al., 2012; Coppock, 2019; Coppock et al., 2018; Coppock & McClellan, 2019; Mullinix et al., 2015; Peyton et al., 2021). We followed best practices to ensure data quality in online survey sampling including bot screening, multiple attention checks, and the exclusion of respondents with outlier survey completion times (Berinsky et al., 2014; Peyton et al., 2021; Ternovski & Orr, 2022).²⁰ Finally, because the treatments contain politically sensitive content, we also considered participant welfare. Our discussion of these ethical trade-offs and decision not to debrief with censored materials in order to avoid putting the Chinese participants at risk appears in [Appendix C](#).

Sample 1: China

We recruited approximately 2400 participants from 30 provinces in mainland China in January 2024.²¹ We approached several reputable Chinese survey companies and went with the company that allowed us the greatest latitude to ask about political issues. In [Appendix E](#), we report the balance summary statistics for each treatment group and control group in the U.S. and China experiments.²² The results confirm that there is a good balance between the treatment and control groups across both experiments. This online sample tends to skew towards college-educated young women ([Appendix Table E](#)) but, as [Coppock \(2023\)](#) shows, information treatment effects tend to be homogeneous so the effects we find are likely to generalize to the broader Chinese population. We will validate this by testing for treatment heterogeneity based on demographic factors like education, age, and gender within our sample.

After completing the attention checks and standard demographic questions,²³ we measured participants' general favorability toward Americans and Chinese people and their expectations about how positive or negative people from these two groups tend to be about China. We also asked about participants' news exposure, trust in state and foreign media, and political knowledge.²⁴ After watching the treatment videos, which was required to progress in the survey, participants were asked a series of outcome questions described below.

Sample 2: United States

Replicating the experiment in China, in May 2024, we conducted a pre-registered survey experiment among 2400 Americans through Cint with a sample designed to roughly approximate the overall US population on census margins and political partisanship. We chose to replicate the study in the United States given its importance for democratic resilience and also because 81% of Americans have an unfavourable view of China; the fourth highest level in the world ([Silver et al., 2025](#)). Chinese propaganda is generally more effective in non-Western countries where there is lower baseline hostility towards China ([Mattingly et al., 2025](#)). By running the study in the United States, we can be reasonably confident that any persuasive treatment effects that we find for foreign influencers there are likely to replicate or be even greater in most other countries.

The same pre-treatment questions were administered to our American sample, with an additional question to capture whether participants have ever traveled to China. Following the treatment videos, which were the same as in China, participants were surveyed on a series of relevant outcomes.

Outcome Measures

The main challenge in conducting a simultaneous study of propaganda effects in China and the West is that certain topics related to China's political model and support for Western liberal democracy are currently too sensitive to survey domestically. As such, we created three separate sets of outcome questions — one set specific to China, one set specific to the United States, and one set shared between both countries. See [Appendix A](#) for details.

For both countries, we asked respondents about China's image in the world using the survey instruments developed by [Huang \(2025\)](#). We included multiple questions about how the world perceives China's level of freedom, its economic model, and its geopolitical reputation, among other things. Each question ranges from 0 to 100. These items show high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$ for US respondents, $\alpha = 0.92$ for Chinese respondents).

For China only, we asked a series of questions about nationalism, patriotism and national self-image. These measures are based on items from [Pan et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Sinkkonen \(2013\)](#), with the patriotism items showing good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.78$) and nationalism items showing lower reliability ($\alpha = 0.56$). To simplify the presentation, and as treatment effects do not vary across the component questions, we combined these questions into a single variable named "national sentiment" in the main paper. Average treatment effects for each individual variable and diagnostics are available in [Appendix I.1](#) and [Appendix G](#).

Finally, for the United States only, we measured perceptions of life in China and China's political system through a battery of questions based on [Mattingly et al., \(2025\)](#), including respondents' perceptions of freedom, personal safety, political responsiveness, and democracy in China on a 7-point Likert scale ($\alpha = 0.88$). In addition, we asked respondents about their preferences between the China and U.S. political models, threat and frenemy perceptions of China, and support for cooperation between China and the U.S.

To streamline the presentation of our findings, we used principal component analysis (PCA) to combine related measures. Most combined measures show high internal consistency (α ranging from 0.78 to 0.92), though the nationalism items have lower reliability. Although presenting our results in PCA form was not pre-registered, doing so serves purely to aid in the concise communication of all of our pre-registered outcome measures, which remain consistent whether examined as individual measures or as combined components. Complete results for individual items are available in [Appendixes I, I. 2, I.1, and G](#).

Results

Chinese Audience

Our experiments reveal differences in how soft propaganda videos featuring American and Chinese influencers impact Chinese and American audiences. Within the Chinese sample, we find no evidence that propaganda featuring the American influencer is more effective than propaganda featuring a Chinese influencer. Contrary to our expectations, the American influencer does not significantly improve perceptions of China's global image, national self-image, nationalism, or patriotism compared to the control group (Table 2, Models 2 and 4).

In fact, our results suggest that if anything, the American influencer may be slightly less persuasive than the Chinese influencer for domestic audiences. The Chinese influencer treatment had a positive effect on two questions capturing nationalism and patriotism,²⁵ whereas the Western influencer had no effect or slightly negative effects on all individual questions.

These results are the same when controlling for a range of demographic and attitudinal variables, including gender, age, education, income, English proficiency, travel experience, media trust, and political knowledge (Table A17, Appendix J). The lack of effectiveness of the Western influencer persists

Table 2. Treatment Effects of Soft Propaganda Videos on Main Outcome Variables: China's Image (Models 1 and 2), Perception of China's System (Model 3), and National Sentiment (Model 4). Models 1 and 3 Target the U.S. Audience, While Models 2 and 4 Target the Chinese Audience. We Estimate the Average Treatment Effects (ATE) Using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) With HC2 Robust Standard Errors. These PCA Measures Are Exploratory — See Complete Results for Each Pre-registered Individual Item in [Appendixes I, I.2, I.1, and G](#).

	Shared questions – China's image		Perceptions towards China's system	National sentiment
	US	Chinese	US	Chinese
Intercept	-0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.30*** (0.03)	-0.00 (0.04)
American messenger (Foreign influencer)	0.10** (0.05)	-0.05 (0.05)	0.54*** (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)
Chinese messenger	0.03 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.38*** (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)
Num. obs.	2400	2368	2400	2368
RMSE	1.00	1.00	0.97	1.00

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .1$.

across different subgroups of the Chinese population, indicating the absence of heterogeneous treatment effects within the broader Chinese population.²⁶

In sum, we find no evidence that exposure to either propaganda video significantly altered Chinese respondents' perceptions of their country's global standing or national self-image. This suggests that Chinese audiences are relatively resistant to soft propaganda about the extent of freedom, democracy and personal safety that exists in China, regardless of influencer identity.

One possibility is that these null effects reflect a lack of trust or credibility in the videos. However, supplementary evidence suggests otherwise: 94% of Chinese respondents affirmed that the videos accurately depicted China and 93% trusted the content of the videos. Another possibility is that evaluations of China's global standing and national sentiment are already so high that they leave little room for upward movement. Yet the descriptive statistics suggest that this ceiling effect is unlikely. The mean ratings of China's image were 72.3, 73.2, and 73.3 (on a 0-100 scale) for the American influencer, Chinese influencer, and placebo video, respectively. The corresponding means for national image were 78.4, 78.5, and 79.8 (on a 0-100 scale), for nationalism 3.83, 3.87, and 3.83 (on a 5-point scale), and for patriotism 4.5, 4.5, and 4.5 (on a 5-point scale). These values indicate high but not maximal baseline agreement, leaving room for persuasion. Taken together, the null effects we observe are more plausibly attributable to prior exposure to similar narratives or widespread pre-existing agreement, rather than disbelief, lack of credibility, or ceiling constraints.

American Audience

In stark contrast to the Chinese sample, we find (i) strong evidence that authoritarian propaganda is effective and (ii) the Western influencer (in this case, an American praising China) is additionally effective at reshaping American perceptions of China. Americans who viewed the propaganda videos showed significantly more positive perceptions of China across multiple dimensions compared to the control group including perceptions of China's global image (Table 2, Model 1) and support for China's political model (Table 2, Model 3).

Moreover, we find that the American influencer is more persuasive than the Chinese influencer for U.S. audiences. While the Chinese influencer also improved some American perceptions of China compared to the control group, these effects were consistently smaller than those of the American influencer. The additional persuasive impact of the foreign messenger compared to the Chinese messenger, for instance, is approximately 0.16 standard units ($p = .0008$) for perceptions of China's system (Table 2, Model 3 and Figure 2). Using exploratory one-tailed t-tests, we find that participants exposed to the foreign influencer evaluated China's image slightly

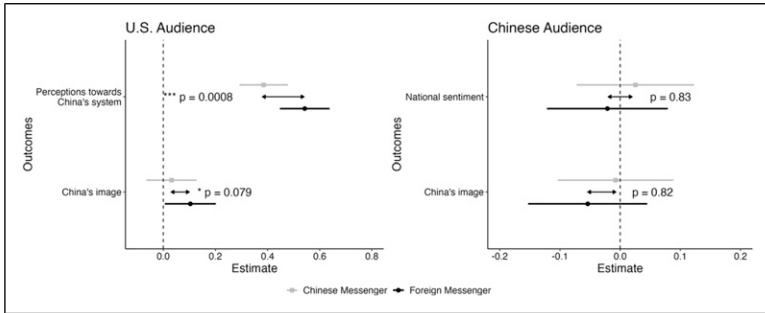


Figure 2. Average treatment effects on the main outcome variables. The left panel shows results for the U.S. audience and the right panel for the Chinese audience. Reported p -values are from exploratory one-tailed t -tests of whether videos featuring a foreign influencer yield higher scores than those featuring a Chinese influencer. The black point estimate represents the difference between the American messenger video (black) and the placebo video, while the grey point estimate represents the difference between the Chinese messenger video (grey) and the placebo video. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

more positively than those exposed to the Chinese influencer ($p < .1$). When evaluating perceptions of China's political system, Americans exposed to the foreign influencer reported significantly more positive evaluations than those exposed to the Chinese influencer ($p < .001$). By contrast, there are no statistically significant differences between influencer conditions for either outcome among Chinese respondents. We report these results in [Appendix H](#).

These results are robust to controlling for a wide range of demographic and attitudinal variables, including race, partisanship, age, education, income, travel experience, media consumption habits, and prior attitudes towards China ([Table A18](#)).

To better understand what is driving the improved perceptions of China among American audiences, we will now turn to the individual components of our composite measures. [Figure 3](#) provides a detailed breakdown of treatment effects for each specific question related to perceptions of China.

The effect of soft propaganda is most pronounced in reshaping American perceptions of personal safety and freedom of speech in China. Exposure to the video featuring the foreign influencer improved American perceptions of personal safety in China by 1.07 standard deviations ($p < .001$) and perceptions of freedom of speech by 1.01 standard deviations ($p < .001$). These are substantively large domain-specific effects. The foreign influencer was also highly effective at improving perceptions of government responsiveness ($\beta = 0.71, p < .001$), levels of democracy in China ($\beta = 0.43, p < .001$), and China as a leading economic power ($\beta = 0.42, p < .001$).

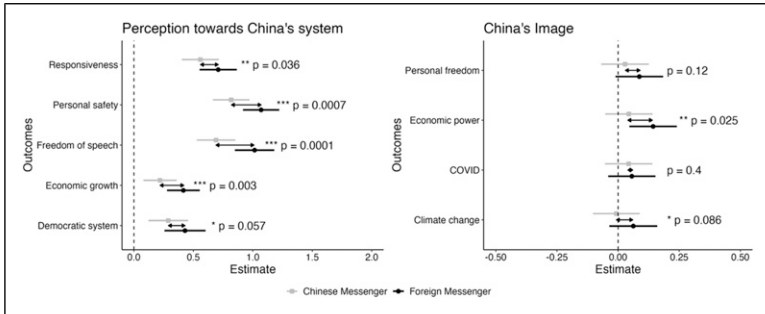


Figure 3. Average treatment effects on perceptions towards China's system and China's image for each individual question. Perceptions towards China's system are measured on a 7-point Likert scale. China's image questions are rescaled to a range of 0–1 for easy interpretation. The black point estimate represents the difference between the American messenger video (black) and the placebo video, while the grey point estimate represents the difference between the Chinese messenger video (grey) and the placebo video. Reported p-values are from exploratory one-tailed t-tests of whether videos featuring a foreign influencer yield higher scores than those featuring a Chinese influencer. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Importantly, across all four dimensions measured, the American influencer consistently outperformed the Chinese influencer in persuasiveness. This difference in one-tailed tests was most pronounced for perceptions of personal safety (mean difference = 0.25, $p < .001$) and freedom of speech (mean difference = 0.33, $p < .001$). However, the Chinese influencer also had generally large effects on American perceptions in these domain areas. This indicates that much of the persuasive effect of the videos stems from the novelty of the message itself, with messenger identity amplifying—rather than being the main driver of—the overall persuasive impact.

Interestingly, while the videos significantly altered specific perceptions of China and its political system, they did not significantly change overall American feeling thermometer ratings towards China (Table A16). This suggests that the propaganda's effects were domain-specific rather than generating a general halo effect. This indicates that American attitudes towards China are multifaceted and that individuals can update beliefs about specific aspects of the country without necessarily altering their overall affective orientation.

As a placebo test, we also asked about perceptions of China's handling of COVID-19 and climate change—topics not mentioned in the videos. We found no significant effects on these outcomes (see Appendix I.2), increasing confidence that our results reflect genuine persuasion rather than demand effects.

Subgroup analyses revealed that the persuasive effects of the American influencer were consistent across almost all subgroups. In general, the effects

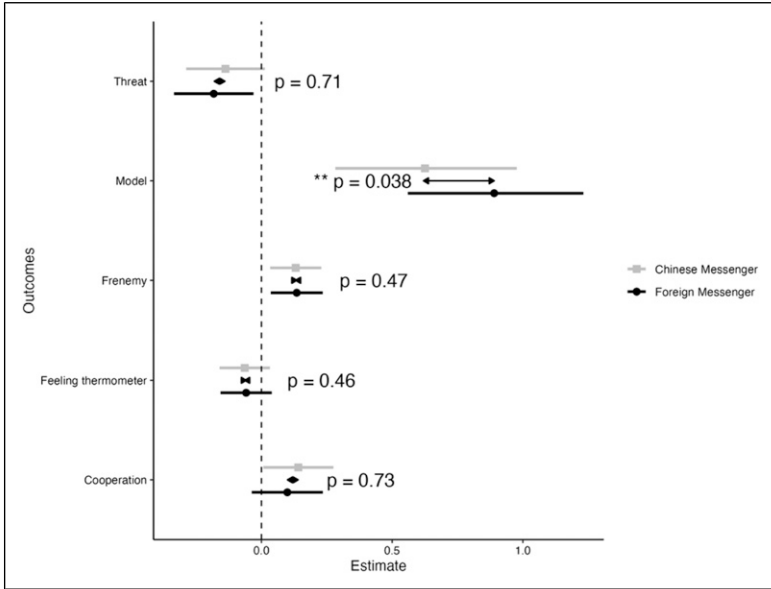


Figure 4. Estimated treatment effects on Americans' threat perception of China (higher values signify more threat), preferences between the Chinese and U.S. models, frenemy perception (higher values indicate a closer view of China as an ally), feeling thermometer, and willingness for cooperation (higher values reflect a greater willingness to cooperate with China). We employ logistic regression for the binary choice between the U.S. and China models. For other dependent variables, we use ordinary least squares (OLS) with HC2 robust standard errors. Reported p-values are from exploratory one-tailed t-tests of whether videos featuring a foreign influencer yield higher scores than those featuring a Chinese influencer.

of the American influencer are stronger than those of Chinese influencer. The only exception is among participants who identify as Asian. For Asians, the effect of the Chinese influencer is actually stronger than that of the American influencer, although this difference is not statistically significant. We report this subgroup analysis in [Appendix K.2](#).

In contrast to the Chinese sample, American participants exhibited lower levels of trust in the video's content and its depiction of China. Only 27% of American respondents believed that the video accurately reflected conditions in China, and only 31% reported trusting the video's content. This suggests that the persuasive effects observed among American participants are likely driven by a combination of factors. First, the messages provided novel and unfamiliar information to audiences whose baseline perceptions of China are typically negative. Second, despite baseline skepticism, enough participants found the messages sufficiently credible or plausible to prompt belief updating.

Finally, we explored the effects of the foreign influencer on Americans' preferences between the China and U.S. models, threat and frenemy perceptions of China, and support for cooperation between China and the U.S. In the absence of the video treatments, American participants are significantly more likely to prefer the U.S. model. However, watching both the foreign and Chinese influencer videos significantly increases the likelihood of participants preferring the China model over the U.S. model (Figure 4). As a baseline, only a small number of Americans — 56 participants — preferred the China model in the control group. However, this increased by 68%—94 participants after viewing the video featuring the Chinese influencer, and by 109%—117 participants after the video featuring the foreign influencer. Additionally, watching both the American and Chinese influencer videos significantly increases the perception of China as a frenemy and decreases the perception of China as a threat (Figure 4), though we do not find evidence here of differences in effects between the American and Chinese messenger. This again suggests that foreign influencers are particularly effective at changing perceptions of life under China's political model rather than reshaping feelings towards the country more generally. These results are reported in Appendix I.2.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides novel evidence on the effectiveness of foreigners in amplifying the persuasiveness of authoritarian propaganda. Foreign influencers are effective tools for amplifying authoritarian propaganda but only among fellow foreign, not domestic Chinese, audiences.

A natural question is whether the null results observed in China stem from prior exposure to similar propaganda messages or from skepticism about the credibility of the specific message used. Although we cannot definitively adjudicate between these possibilities, the evidence suggests that lack of credibility is unlikely to be the primary explanation. An extremely high (93–94%) proportion of Chinese respondents affirmed that the videos accurately depicted conditions in China and reported trusting the video's content. Nor do the results appear to be driven by ceiling effects: mean scores of China's image and national sentiment, while high, were not at their maximum levels (e.g., 72–73 on a 0–100 scale for China's image). Taken together, the null effects we observe are more plausibly attributed to lack of novelty and prior exposure to similar narratives (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019), rather than to disbelief, distrust in the message, or ceiling effects. Moreover, our experimental results suggest foreign influencers may be slightly less effective at shaping domestic Chinese opinion compared to Chinese influencers. This contradicts the notion that Chinese citizens have an inherent pro-Western bias or view foreign voices as more credible. It appears the Chinese public is indifferent to foreigners praising

China, likely due to message saturation. The CCP's efforts to cultivate foreign influencers will thus likely have limited impacts on domestic public opinion.

However, for American audiences, we find strong evidence that the CCP's propaganda messages are significantly more effective. Among American audiences, the persuasive effects likely reflect a combination of factors: the videos provided novel, counter-stereotypical information about China, and despite high levels of skepticism about the accuracy of the videos, were viewed as sufficiently credible to prompt belief updating. Indeed, reflecting the benefits of cultural proximity for source credibility and persuasiveness, we find that the videos are significantly more persuasive when delivered by a fellow American. This aligns with social psychology research on in-group persuasion and suggests foreign influencers can be quite effective at reshaping external perceptions of authoritarian regimes. The effect sizes we observe are nontrivial; exposure to pro-China propaganda from an American influencer, for instance, improved perceptions towards freedom of speech and safety in China by 34% and 31%, or almost 1 point on a 7 point scale ([Appendix Table A15](#)). The effectiveness of the foreign influencer likely stems from their ability to challenge pre-existing American beliefs about life in China. By presenting a first-hand account that contradicts standard Western media narratives about repression in China, the American influencer prompts a powerful re-evaluation of life under authoritarianism.

These results suggest that the existing literature may have been overly sanguine about the resilience of foreign publics to Chinese influence efforts. Although foreign publics have been shown to be somewhat susceptible to misinformation (e.g., [Mader et al., 2022](#); [Mattingly et al., 2025](#); [Mauk & Gromping, 2024](#)), scholars have also suggested that the small overseas viewership of official state media outlets like *CGTN* and limited power of bot networks also suggests that external propaganda efforts have had limited effects to date ([Eady et al., 2023](#); [Kurlantzick, 2023](#); [Varrall, 2020](#)). Yet this focus on traditional state media may be missing a crucial aspect of China's evolving influence strategy. The growing output of foreign social media influencers suggests that China has found a potent channel for its messaging that bypasses the limited audience of official state media. By subsidizing and amplifying the output of sympathetic foreign voices on social media platforms, China can reach foreign audiences that may never tune into *CGTN* or read the *China Daily*, but who are highly susceptible to persuasion from seemingly independent, relatable voices. Any assumption that the currently limited audience for authoritarian state media equates to limited influence fails to account for the changing landscape of information consumption in a world where people increasingly use social media as a news source.

Now that we have established that foreign influencers can be more persuasive in propaganda work, researchers should now ask whether they are more effective in the distribution game, i.e. whether their content is more

likely to capture attention, shares, and algorithmic amplification (Incerti et al., 2026). In an online attention economy, persuasive power hinges not only on messenger credibility but also on visibility and reach (Webster, 2014). On Chinese social media platforms, algorithms and engagement loops elevate the most resonant content, ensuring that pro-CCP messages are circulated widely (Lu et al., 2025). Foreign influencers like the Barretts have demonstrated remarkable success on social media platforms, and this success potentially reflects systematic advantages in both persuasiveness and reach. The power of such influencers to significantly alter perceptions of freedom, safety and democracy in China among American audiences in this study suggests that the effects of authoritarian soft propaganda may already be more widespread than previously recognized.

Our findings therefore underscore the need to reassess how we conceptualize and measure the reach and impact of authoritarian influence campaigns in the digital age. With a recently growing geopolitical division between democracies and autocracies (e.g. Ikenberry, 2024; Kroenig, 2020), the free social media landscape in liberal democracies is fertile ground for authoritarian regimes to undermine support for liberal democracy from within. This threat, in turn, highlights the need for democratic societies to build resilience against such influence efforts. The ironic goal of improved social media literacy education would be to make citizens living *outside* authoritarian regimes as cynical and indifferent to authoritarian propaganda as people living *within* such regimes.

There are some obvious limitations to this study that future research could address. First, we have focused here on short-term attitude changes from brief propaganda videos. Longitudinal studies could examine how these effects decay over time or differ with repeated exposure. Second, our experiment used a single pair of American and Chinese influencers — future work should test whether the results generalize across a wider range of figures including, for instance, Chinese-Americans who are currently a key target of the CCP's external influence campaigns (To, 2012). Future work could also compare the effectiveness of influencers to journalist narrators in order to assess whether the persuasive impact reflects the influencer's perceived authenticity as an everyday voice rather than the content of their message. Third, research that incorporates a broader range of topics (e.g., economic development, human rights violations in Xinjiang) could also provide a more comprehensive understanding of where foreign influencers are most persuasive. Fourth, future research could take language into account. In our experiment, the American influencer spoke English, and the Chinese influencer spoke Chinese. Future studies could examine whether Chinese audiences are more persuaded by a foreigner who speaks Chinese, or American audiences are more persuaded by a Chinese influencer who speaks English. Fifth, our China sample skews toward younger, female, and more highly educated respondents. Although our analyses show no systematic heterogeneous effects across observed

subgroups (Figure A12 and Figure A13), the skewed composition may still constrain generalizability and some subgroup sizes may have been too small for understanding heterogeneity. We therefore caution against generalizing these results too far beyond the typical online Chinese population. Finally, studies in other country contexts beyond China and the US would naturally be valuable for assessing the broader applicability of these findings.

As information warfare and influence operations increasingly move into the social media sphere, the strategic use of social media represents a powerful tool for reshaping global perceptions of authoritarian regimes. More research is needed on how platform affordances and algorithmic content distribution affect the reach and impact of such soft propaganda efforts. Future work should also explore how audiences might be made more resilient to influencer-delivered propaganda. Well-designed corrections can reduce belief in false or misleading claims and ‘pre-bunking’ inoculations can build resistance to propaganda (Chan et al., 2017; Pennycook et al., 2020; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019, 2020). Applying these tools to the specific context of foreign influencers could help counteract the persuasiveness we document here. In any case, liberal democracies would do well to be cognizant of the power of foreign influencers as they seek to counter authoritarian influence campaigns into the future.

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Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the UCLA Institutional Review Board (#22-000386 and #24 000352).

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Data Availability Statement

Replication materials and code can be found at [Liang and McNamee \(2026\)](#).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Barrett (2021, March 25). *China... is it as safe as people say?* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbMuV2N2aKc>.
2. As one Canadian creator in China explained to the New York Times, he was “doing a job,” comparing his work to being a pitchman for local tourism: “Are there fees for what I do? Of course . . . I’m putting the videos out to hundreds of thousands of people.” Lee Barrett made a similar acknowledgment: “They [the state] pay for travel, they pay for accommodation, they pay for food However, they don’t tell us what we have to say by any means” (Mozur et al., 2021).
3. On Russia’s RT, notable foreign intermediaries include George Galloway, a former British MP, and Max Keiser, an American broadcaster; on Iran’s Press TV, they include Lauren Booth, Tony Blair’s sister-in-law; Yvonne Ridley, a British journalist; and Ken Livingstone, the former Mayor of London; on Venezuela’s TeleSUR, they include American journalists Abby Martin, Laura Flanders, and British political commentator Tariq Ali. These individuals serve as hosts, contributors, or frequent guests, and offer radical critiques of the West.
4. Additionally, Ryan et al. (2023) show that the chief audience for Western influencers posting from China are generally on domestic platforms like Douyin and Bilibili. For this reason, it is necessary to know not just whether foreign messengers can sway foreign publics, but also whether they also shift domestic opinion which is the environment where their largest audiences are often located.
5. Koetse, M. (2026, February 7). Chinamaxxing and the “Kill Line”: Why two viral trends took off in the US and China. *What’s on Weibo*. <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/chinamaxxing-and-the-kill-line-why-two-viral-trends-took-off-in-the-us-and-china/>.

6. Gan, N. (2021, March 26). Chinese celebrities rush to defend Beijing's Xinjiang policy by cutting ties with international brands. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/chinese-celebrities-xj-cotton-intl-hnk>.
7. Smurthwaite, an American musician who initially moved to China to teach English, recently reflected: "if you were a foreigner, it was easy to score a gig onstage." Smurthwaite's band gained fame for singing Red Communist songs on TV whose lyrics she later acknowledged she and her fellow band members barely understood. See, Xie, W. (2016, April 6). For foreigners, Chinese talent and reality shows offer a chance to hit it big. *Global Times*. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/977433.shtml>.
8. As Du Guodong from China Newsweek stated, the goal is to "make foreign influencers truly work for us and gradually become an important force in China's international communication" (Ryan et al., 2023).
9. E.g., People's Daily. (2013, August 21). "Xi Jinping: Embrace the big picture, grasp the overall momentum and focus on the major issues; strive towards better publicity and ideological work" (Chinese translation: "习近平:胸怀大局把握大势着眼大事努力把宣传思想工作做得更好"). *People's Daily*. <https://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0821/c64094-22636876.html>.
10. The same video received 38,000 "likes" and 1 million views on Youtube.
11. Kyngge, J. (2023, November 24). Friendly foreign influencers win growing following in China. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/c6d4689e-a564-4c46-bf0e-d7444733cf8e>.
12. According to social identity theory, individuals classify themselves into "in-groups", or people like them, and "out-groups", based on particular characteristics (Turner et al., 1987) and these groups provide individuals with a sense of belonging and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Individuals generally exhibit "in-group favoritism" which means that they have more positive attitudes and behaviors towards in-group members compared to those perceived as an out-group (Balliet et al., 2014; Hewstone et al., 2002).
13. E.g., "Chinese People Think China Is Popular Overseas. Americans Disagree.", *The Diplomat*, November 4, 2021. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/chinese-people-think-china-is-popular-overseas-americans-disagree/>.
14. This study was pre-registered with AsPredicted at <https://aspredicted.org/hz9te.pdf> and <https://aspredicted.org/8b8f6.pdf>. The first preregistration documents survey experiment in the United States, and the second preregistration reports the China experiment.
15. Replication materials and code can be found at Liang and McNamee (2026).
16. The video's discussion of greater personal safety in China, for instance, reflects real experiences reported by many American visitors. However, such factual observations are embedded within a narrative that uses these benefits to rationalize authoritarian control and redefine the meaning of freedom. While urban safety at night is indeed higher in China than in the US, for instance, comparable levels of safety exist in liberal democratic societies like Japan, Taiwan, and Australia,

- demonstrating that public safety does not necessarily require curtailing civil liberties. Similar points can be made for low COVID-death rates, modern public transportation, or lack of homelessness.
17. The balance summary statistics in [Appendix E](#) indicates that randomization was successful in both experiments.
 18. As a notable exception to the co-occurrence of language, ethnicity, and nationality, for instance, Da Shan is a white Canadian famous for speaking Chinese fluently.
 19. See, for example, Luca & Rachele 路卡和瑞丽, “中国是一个安全国家吗?带你看看凌晨的中国”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEDwAmm6Ofc>. Max y Noelia, “How Safe Is It To Live In China? China VS The World!” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WvOPC2e2IA>.
 20. The main finding remains consistent after accounting for both speeders and slower.
 21. The power analysis indicates that, with a sample size of approximately 700 per condition, the study would be able to detect an effect size of 0.2 standard deviations. See [Appendix L](#).
 22. The balance summary statistics show that the Standardized Mean Difference (SMD) across all variables is smaller than 0.25 (Lyall, 2010).
 23. We asked respondents about their gender, age, residence, education, hukou status, political affiliation, income, marital status, and English proficiency.
 24. Political knowledge was measured by basic questions about the identity of Chinese and American political leaders.
 25. “If people from other countries learned from Chinese people, the world would change for the better” ($\beta = 0.08, p < .05$). and “I feel proud and lucky to be Chinese” ($\beta = 0.06, p = .06$). See [Appendix I.1](#).
 26. We conducted subgroup analyses across gender, age, education, income, English proficiency, political knowledge, and travel experience. We found null results in all subgroup analyses ([Figure A12](#), [Appendix K.1](#)).

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