

# Is the CCP's External Propaganda Effective? Reflections on a Transnational Study

Shu-Ting Liu

Policy Analyst

Division of Defense Strategy and Resources

Topic: Cognitive Warfare, CCP Politics

## 1. News Highlights

U.S. Company Graphika released a report on February 7, 2023, indicating that pro-China organizations are using AI-generated deepfake news anchors to make propaganda videos and spread pro-China views on social media for the CCP, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The videos are low quality and receive no more than 300 views, and thus are “spammy” according to the report.<sup>1</sup> As the CCP's external propaganda continues to evolve, its effectiveness also attracts much attention.

In recent years, *China Global Television Network (CGTN)* has put in extra effort to promote the CCP's governance performance. Some comments point out that *CGTN* only cares about quantity rather than quality, and thus China's external propaganda is ineffective.<sup>2</sup> However, according to a recent transnational study, after watching the propaganda videos by *CGTN*, the percentage of the audience who believe the China Model is superior to American democracy has increased from 16% to 54%, especially among

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1. “Pro-Chinese Actors Promote AI-Generated Video Footage of Fictitious People in Online Influence Operation,” *Graphika*, February 7, 2023, <https://reurl.cc/3ODjNV>.

2. “Despite High Ambition, China's Media Influence Operation Is Far from Successful,” *The Diplomat*, May 28, 2023, <https://reurl.cc/338D09>.

respondents in Africa and Latin America.<sup>3</sup> The study shows the effectiveness of China's external propaganda is worth re-evaluating.

## 2. Security Implications

### 1. People believe in the CCP's governance performance

Past studies on China's external propaganda mainly focus on the CCP's propaganda system and channels<sup>4</sup> or how they use the latest technology for propaganda.<sup>5</sup> However, this transnational study explores the audience's response after watching the official propaganda videos of the U.S. and those of the CCP and discovers that the audience changes their perception of the CCP not because they are exposed to a large quantity of the CCP's propaganda but because the content

is somewhat attractive. Specifically, after receiving the propaganda from *CGTN*, the audience lower their perception of the U.S. democracy and the government's performance while show more positive perception of China, with three times as many people acknowledging the CCP's performance compared to the democratic system. The study thus believes that governance performance, especially economic performance, is the most attractive factor in the China Model instead of its values.

This transnational study concludes that the U.S. should take a proactive approach and strengthen the appeal of its political system when communicating with other societies. Given that some respondents are influenced by the CCP's propaganda and believe the CCP can bring economic growth and social stability, this insight is valid and applies to

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3. "Chinese State Media Persuades a Global Audience That the 'China Model' is Superior: Evidence From A 19-Country Experiment," *OSF*, 22 August 2022, <https://osf.io/3h2bu/>; This transnational study, jointly published by scholars at Yale University and the University of Groningen, selects random propaganda content from China Global Television Network and U.S. Department of State for global audiences from 19 countries across all 6 continents, including Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Columbia, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the United Kingdom. The countries in this survey cover a wide range of levels of development from high-income to low-income countries and political systems, including autocracies, semi-democracies, and democracies.

4. Shambaugh, David, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy," *Critical readings on the communist party of China*, 4 Vols. Set. Brill, (2017), pp. 713-751.

Taiwan as well. In response to the CCP's propaganda war or cognitive warfare, the Taiwanese government has to highlight its governance performance and should not underestimate China's propaganda and its influence just because the general public seems to accept democratic values.

## **2. The audience is subject to the influence of the CCP's unexpected modern propaganda**

When it comes to the significant attitude change after watching China's propaganda videos, the transnational study points out that the audience generally has an unfavorable impression of China, so it's easier for them to develop a positive impression after receiving the CCP's propaganda. In contrast, the U.S., a mature democracy and economy, has a higher starting score and is prone to the ceiling effect.<sup>6</sup> This may mean that respondents do not necessarily value governance performance over values, but they may be susceptible to the CCP's propaganda due to a lack of understanding and low

expectations of the CCP.

From there, we can see why the main form of the CCP's united front work toward the Taiwanese society is inviting Taiwanese people to China. By showcasing China's rapid economic development, modernization, advanced technology, and affluence, the visit will leave a direct and positive impact on the Taiwanese people, who may develop a favorable attitude toward the CCP. In contrast, it is not easy to present the benefits of the democratic system and values in a material or concrete way, as they are ideologies embedded in everyday life, and this may reduce the effectiveness of democratic countries' effort in promoting themselves.

## **3. Trend Observation**

### **1. The CCP will continue to promote its system superiority to developing countries**

As previously discussed, whether

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5. Bolsover, Gillian, and Philip Howard, "Chinese Computational Propaganda: Automation, Algorithms and the Manipulation of Information about Chinese Politics on Twitter and Weibo," *Information, communication & society*, 22(14), (2019), pp. 2063-2080.

6. The ceiling effect refers to the limit of pursuing knowledge. When the limit is reached, the increase of knowledge slows down and stagnates.

people value governance performance over values or they are impressed by the achievement of modernization due to a lack of understanding of China, these both render the CCP's propaganda to have certain advantage in that China's system is described as responding to people's needs, having capable leaders, and enjoying political stability and economic growth. Therefore, the CCP shall promote such campaigns in Third World countries, including many of Taiwan's diplomatic allies. If democratic countries such as the U.S. and Taiwan want to compete with the CCP's propaganda effectively, simply emphasizing the values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights is not enough. Elaborating on how the democratic system can provide long-term political stability and social progress with the least sacrifice and inclusive economic growth shouldn't only be the domestic objectives of democratic countries but a crucial part of external communication.

## **2. Transnational comparisons may mitigate the influence of the CCP's propaganda**

This transnational study asserts that people may put more emphasis on a government's performance. As

this point wasn't valued in the past, it may reflect western scholars' general disbelief in the CCP's political system and the effectiveness of the CCP's propaganda. Meanwhile, this research also acknowledges that the respondents' cognitive change can be temporary, which could be a direct response to stimuli. Either way, the CCP's external propaganda needs to be studied more systematically in the long term.

This transnational study also points out that after watching comparisons of propaganda between China and the U.S., the respondents no longer view China more positively and the U.S. more negatively. In other words, when the respondents are exposed to the CCP's propaganda solely, they are more likely to accept its claims, but in a cross-comparison scenario, the respondents have a chance to compare and analyze. This may mean the comparison can encourage people's reflection and decrease the influence of the CCP propaganda to a certain degree. Thus, democratic countries can use strategic communication such as objective comparisons and show their willingness to reflect and improve, to serve as a counteractive approach and lower the influence of the CCP's

propaganda.

(Originally published in the 73<sup>rd</sup> “National Defense and Security Biweekly”, February 17, 2023, by the Institute for National Defense and Security Research.)

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